Translating Covid-19 information into Yiddish for the Montreal-area Hasidic community

Zoë Belk, Lily Kahn, Kriszta Eszter Szendrői, and Sonya Yampolskaya (UCL)

In this paper we will discuss our ongoing work translating Covid-19 information into Yiddish for the Hasidic Jewish[1] communities of London and the Montreal region, with a focus on the latter. We will first examine the sociolinguistic context underpinning the need for these translations and then discuss the actual translation process itself, which necessitated careful consideration of linguistic and cultural issues particular to the needs of the Yiddish-speaking Hasidic community. It is hoped that our documentation of this translation project will draw attention to the ways in which the Humanities disciplines of translation studies and linguistics can be harnessed directly in an attempt to mitigate the current Covid-19 emergency, and will provide a case study of how Arts and Humanities scholarship can contribute to broader society in ways that might not be immediately obvious or predictable.

For the past year we have been working on an AHRC-funded research project on contemporary Hasidic Yiddish based in UCL Linguistics and Hebrew & Jewish Studies. Yiddish, the traditional language of Eastern European Jews, had around 10-12 million speakers before World War II, but is today considered an endangered language. However, among many of the world's estimated 700-750,000 Hasidic Jews (Biale et al. 2018) it remains a daily language (Isaacs 1999: 13; Comentez 2006: 58), with major Yiddish-speaking Hasidic communities in New York, London, Antwerp, Jerusalem, Bnei Brak, and Montreal (see Wodziński 2018). Present-day Hasidic Yiddish exhibits striking linguistic differences from the traditional pre-war Eastern European dialects of the language as well as from its standardised variety (see e.g. Krogh 2012, 2018; Assouline 2017; Sadock and Masor 2018; Belk, Kahn, and Szendrői 2020). Nevertheless, despite the intriguing differences in its structure, and its central role in the contemporary Yiddish world, very few studies exist on Hasidic Yiddish grammar or language use. Our main aim is to change this situation by providing the first in-depth description of the grammatical and sociolinguistic features characteristic of the Yiddish used by Hasidic communities worldwide, and an analysis of their implications for linguistic theory. Our research team consists of four UCL-based linguists and three research assistants who are native speakers of Hasidic Yiddish from Stamford Hill and Israel.

Since the project began we have been focusing on collecting linguistic and sociolinguistic data from Yiddish speakers in the main Hasidic centres worldwide, with extended fieldwork conducted in London's Stamford Hill, the New York area, and Israel. The Covid-19 pandemic put an abrupt stop to our work as we suddenly found ourselves unable to conduct interviews. Moreover, two of our team members were unexpectedly stranded in Canada at the beginning of the pandemic. We expected that we would spend the lockdown working on written materials and analysing data that we had already collected. However, like everything with this pandemic, things moved very quickly and we soon found ourselves with an unexpected role to play during the crisis.

All around the globe, Covid-19 has affected various groups of people unequally even within one country. Especially in the beginning, Hasidic communities appeared to be quite vulnerable to the pandemic in contrast with average numbers in the UK, USA, Israel, and Canada (see for instance Bateman 2020; Baxter 2020; Goldstein 2020; Hutton 2020, Stack 2020). Hasidic communities are generally extremely tight-knit and members frequently avoid secular sources of information, especially online media. Given the fast-moving situation, health and police guidance started to appear in several waves on online forums which many in the Hasidic community do not have access to. In any community, it is natural that such inconvenient rules can be better adhered to if the authorities provide clear and transparent guidance as to why they have been put in place. We thus decided that we had a role to play in making such advice available in an accessible format, and immediately contacted the NHS, the Metropolitan Police and Hackney Council with an offer to provide them with a Yiddish translation of their Covid-19 guidance for the Stamford Hill Hasidic community. All three institutions were enthusiastically supportive of our endeavours.

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[1] This term refers to adherents of the Hasidic spiritual movement, which is a Haredi (strictly Orthodox) Jewish group following different rabbinic dynasties which trace themselves back to various geographic locations in Eastern Europe.

Our team members in Canada were uniquely placed to provide similar assistance to Hasidic communities there. They heard that, due to an acute outbreak of Covid-19, a Hasidic community in the Montreal area was going to be subject to a lockdown order, closing the neighbourhood off from the surrounding region (see Shingler 2020). This extreme and unprecedented situation understandably caused concern among the residents of the community in question, and these team members contacted public health authorities in the area offering their assistance in translating relevant guidance.

The Hasidic community of Kiryas Tosh, near Montreal, Quebec, Canada comprises approximately 3,000 people, the majority of whom are Yiddish-speaking. It is geographically separated from its neighbours, with only one road in and out. Moreover, many in the community find written Yiddish more comfortable and accessible than written English. It is clear that a strong flow of information is a key means for all of us to shift our daily routine drastically to this new emergency mode of living, and that communication between public health authorities and the Hasidic community in Kiryas Tosh would gain clarity if it were conducted via Yiddish.

We decided to translate the official guidance into colloquial Hasidic Yiddish, a generally spoken variant of the language employing vocabulary, grammar, and expressions that are perhaps surprising to the eyes of a trained Yiddishist, who is accustomed to the literary version of the written language. Our translation process was a team effort, with one native speaker of Israeli Hasidic Yiddish and one linguist producing the first draft, which was then checked with the other members of the team. Two of these are native speakers of Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish, who scrutinised the text to make sure that it reflected vocabulary and usage characteristic of Hasidic Yiddish in an English-majority setting rather than that of Israel.

Although there is a high degree of linguistic similarity between the various Hasidic Yiddish-speaking communities around the world, there are also a number of noteworthy differences. Some of these raised interesting questions during the translation process. For example, although Hasidim in Stamford Hill are exposed to English on a regular basis, the linguistic context in Kiryas Tosh is more complicated. Yiddish is used as a lingua franca throughout the Hasidic world, and for many North American speakers (particularly men) Yiddish is the primary language. Hasidim in the Montreal area tend to be educated in Yiddish for religious subjects and in French for secular subjects, particularly at the primary school level. However, there is a lot of community contact between Hasidim in the Montreal and New York areas, so many people acquire Hasidic English as an additional language. Notably, Montreal does not have any Yiddish-language publications of its own, so Yiddish media in Montreal tend to be published in the New York area, reflecting linguistic trends of those communities.

Although Yiddish has a rich literary tradition, today it is largely used as a spoken or colloquial medium in Hasidic communities. Technical and medical vocabulary tends to be borrowed from English in English-majority countries, and from Hebrew in Israel. Thus, our Israeli team member sometimes employed Hebrew-derived vocabulary, while our Stamford Hill team members were often unfamiliar with these and would instead use a Germanic equivalent, or in certain cases an English loanword. However, we were wary of reflecting contemporary Hasidic usage in this respect, because English loan words are not necessarily accessible for all Hasidic Yiddish speakers: some speakers speak very little English, either because they have moved to Kiryas Tosh from a non-English majority country (typically Israel or Belgium), or because their education has not exposed them to very much English. We therefore needed to strike a balance between using words derived from historical and non-Hasidic varieties of Yiddish, which might not be used very often if they relate to technical or medical terminology, and using English or Hebrew borrowings, which might be more precise but might equally exclude a number of potential readers. One way we tried to solve this problem was by providing a translation of technical and medical vocabulary in Yiddish and its equivalent in English in parentheses. This approach was informed by our field research, in which we found that use of chains of synonyms is a typical discourse tool for oral and especially written forms of modern Hasidic Yiddish. Thus, in our translations we provided Yiddish terms such as גריפע *gripe* 'flu' and פיבער *fiber* 'fever' alongside their English equivalents in parentheses. Hasidic speakers use both traditional Yiddish words and English borrowings for these concepts (often depending on sociolinguistic factors such as speaker gender and linguistic history), and providing bilingual synonyms increased the much-needed clarity of the instructions.

As with any translation, we sometimes had difficulty finding an appropriate Yiddish translation for certain English or French words. One example is the word *community*, which has several possible translations in Yiddish. In English, this word can be used as an abstract noun denoting a group sharing certain social, religious, ethnic or other characteristics, or in the more concrete sense of the locality inhabited by such a group. In Yiddish, *community* is most readily translated as קהילה *kehile,* a word from the Hebrew-Aramaic component of the language. However, this word is strongly associated with the Haredi (strictly Orthodox) Jewish religious community, rather than a social group in general. Thus, it is inappropriate to translate a sentence such as 'movement into and out of your community is restricted' using קהילה *kehile*, as it suggests that entry into the (conceptual) Haredi religious community is restricted. In such instances where the concrete meaning of *community* (i.e. 'locality') was required, we used the word דערפל *derfl* 'village' (which is the term that inhabitants of Kiryas Tosh use for their locality). An alternative, געגנט *gegnt* 'area, neighbourhood', was used when a more general locality was intended, e.g. Kiryas Tosh and the neighbouring secular city of Boisbriand. Additionally, קהילה *kehile* is inappropriate when talking about groups other than Haredi Jews, so another alternative was needed when referring to social groups outside of Kiryas Tosh. In such instances, we used געמיינדע *gemeynde* 'community', which comes from the Germanic component of Yiddish and is less strongly associated with the Haredi community. Thus, when referring to communities outside of Kiryas Tosh that were also affected by quarantine orders, געמיינדע *gemeynde* was preferred over קהילה *kehile*. These issues provide insight into the roles of the Hebrew-Aramaic and Germanic components of Yiddish, as well as the intricate pattern of connotations of such a high-frequency English word.

As well as these regional and gender-based challenges, there were also interesting issues relating to the formulation of understandable Yiddish versions of certain key terms. For example, the phrase 'social distancing' has only recently come on the radar of English speakers, and lacks a recognised Yiddish counterpart. In this case, the team used the Yiddish phrase מענטשלעכע דערווייטקייט *mentshlekhe dervaytkayt* 'personal distancing', which conveys the sense of the original and has a relatively transparent meaning. We also favoured this term because the word מענטשלעך *mentshlekh* 'personal, human, humane' has the connotation of behaving decently and considerately, which is a key concept in Hasidic society. One particularly memorable discussion involved arguably the most important word of the entire translation, 'cough'. There are two variants of this verb in Yiddish, הוסטן *hustn* and היסן *hisn*, both of which are in use in the Hasidic world. Different members of the research team, as well as other Hasidic

Yiddish speakers with whom we consulted, had particularly strong opinions about which was the correct one to use, and it was important to come to a satisfactory solution for such a crucial word in the context of the information we were trying to convey! In the end, we adopted הוסטן *hustn* due to impression that it was more widely recognised, and also employed the strategy of providing the English equivalent in parentheses.

In addition to the linguistic issues concerning the translation, there were also cultural factors to be taken into account. One of the main priorities for our translation process was to ensure that the Yiddish text we produced was culturally appropriate to the Hasidic community in question and did not contain any renderings which might be insensitive to the concerns of the target audience (see e.g. Nida 1964; Nida and Taber 1969; Vermeer 1989; Bassnett and Lefevere 1990; Pym 2010; and Toury 2012: 17-34 for discussion of cultural considerations in translation). Translating an order sealing off a whole community was intimidating, especially since Hasidim often feel threatened by the secular communities surrounding them. Additionally, for Hasidic Jews the ghettoes of the Holocaust are a very real and recent cultural memory. We were therefore acutely aware that we needed to be very careful with the tone of the quarantine notice. We worked hard to find ways of expressing the guidance and rules contained in the health authority's communications that were clear and easy to understand without frightening community members or straining relations between Kiryas Tosh and their secular neighbours. In our translation, we emphasized that Kiryas Tosh was one of several communities experiencing such an acute outbreak of Covid-19 and therefore subject to strict orders controlling movement into and out of the area. Additionally, while words like 'contrôles policières' might sound concerning in French but understandable in the context of a global pandemic, telling a Hasidic community that entry and exit to their community would be controlled by police checkpoints is downright terrifying. Therefore, instead of translating 'police checkpoints', we warned that police officers would be positioned at the entrance to the community to make sure that public health orders were being followed. During and after the translation process, we were also in contact with members of the Kiryas Tosh community and with public health officials to explain each group's concerns. We found that both groups were keen to work together and were understanding of the issues at hand.

It has been a very moving experience producing these translations, and even more so to finalise the translation of the notice opening the community at the end of their quarantine (see Laframboise 2020). We were truly honoured to be able to help during such a difficult time, and we hope that the translations not only helped keep people safe, but also served as a bridge for communication between Kiryas Tosh and their secular neighbours.

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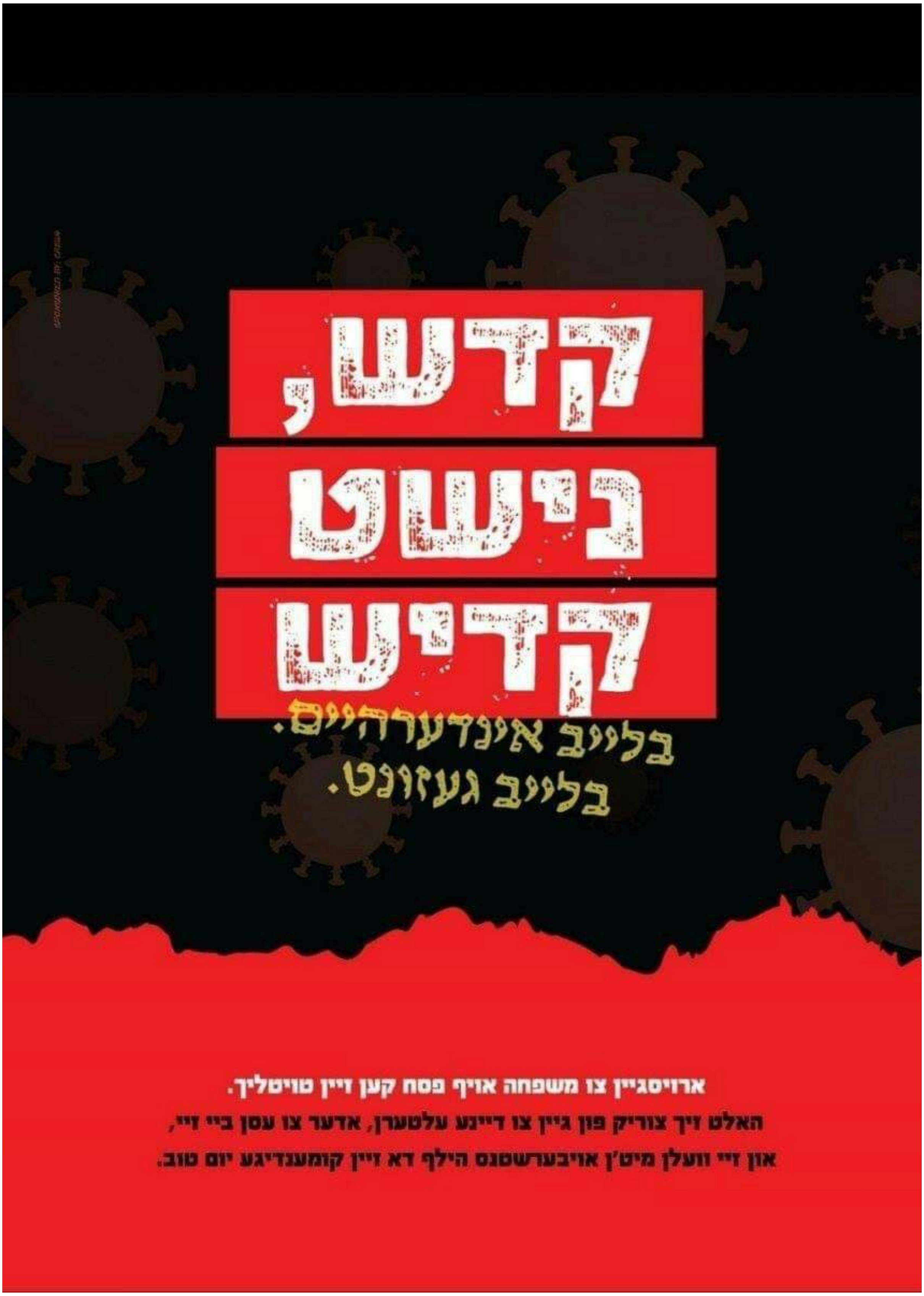
קדש,
נישט
קדיש
בלייב אינדערהיים.
בלייב געזונט.

ארויסגיין צו משפחה אויף פסח קען זיין טויטליך.
האלט זיך צוריק פון גיין צו דיינע עלטערן, אדער צו עסן ביי זיי,
און זיי וועלן מיט'ן אויבערשטנס הילף דא זיין קומענדיגע יום טוב.

Yiddish-language information poster produced for Hasidic communities before Passover, reading *Kaddesh* [an element of the Passover seder], *not Kaddish* [prayer for the dead]: *Stay at home, stay healthy.*