

Variation in Hebrew (ej) – an ethnic marker no more?

The variation in Modern Hebrew between diphthongal [ej] and monophthongal [e], henceforth referred to as the variable (ej), has been historically linked to ethnicity. Peleg (1992) claims that Mizrahi speakers (i.e. Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent) tend to merge /e/ and /ej/ into [e] whereas Ashkenazi speakers (i.e. Jews of European descent) maintain a distinction between the two. This also corresponds to a common stereotype in Israel (Neuman 2012). However, Peleg (1992) also states that [ej] is in rapid decline, and that many younger Ashkenazis have merged /ej/ and /e/. Matras and Schiff (2005) report an overwhelming preference for [e] in a corpus of 40 speakers, irrespective of the speakers' ethnicity. Further work is needed to determine the current distribution of (ej) and what links it may have to ethnicity.

The present study is based on ongoing sociolinguistic fieldwork in the city of Beer-Sheva, in Southern Israel. I analyze the word list data for an ethnically mixed sample of 70 speakers, ages 19 to 75. The results show a surprisingly high rate of [ej] realizations given the previous research: about 60% of the (ej) tokens were realized as [ej]. There was no statistically significant effect of ethnicity. However, ethnicity interacts with age – among Mizrahis, but not Ashkenazis, older speakers have significantly fewer [ej] realizations. While the overall high rates of [ej] may be attributed to the reading task, the results are not simply an artefact of reading: [ej] occurs in words with no orthographic indication of the diphthong. Therefore, it appears that while older Mizrahi speakers avoid [ej], younger Mizrahi speakers have reversed the change and have adopted [ej], at least for specific styles.

A further result is the striking degree of variation between the different lexical items on the word list – spanning from 8% [ej] in the word with least diphthongal realizations to 100% [ej] in the words with the most. Indeed, much of the variation appears to be lexically arbitrary, and cannot be determined either etymologically or orthographically. In other words, what we are observing may not be a sound change per se, but rather a realignment of the lexical sets, with the [e]-[ej] distinction becoming (re-)phonemicized for certain words, rather than maintaining its social meaning as a marker of ethnicity. However, for some lexical items the association with ethnicity may be too entrenched: while most of the lexical items show the general pattern of more [ej] among younger Mizrahis, the word [tej] 'tea', which is most stereotypically associated with Ashkenazi speakers (Neumann 2012) – does not.

While the study of variation typically takes a particular lexical set as given and examines the variation therein, recent work shows that in dialect contact situations, the sets themselves may be in flux (Starr & Choo 2019). The current results further highlight the need to consider the assumptions underlying the notion of "lexical set", as the key difference between speakers may lie not in their relative rates of [ej] production, but rather in what the possible (ej) environments are.

References:

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