Expanding the range of variables in the study of segmental variation in Hebrew
Roey Gafter, Stanford University

Although Modern Hebrew has been the topic of some sociolinguistic research, much is still unknown about even the most basic aspects of socially meaningful segmental variation in Israel. Previous research has demonstrated the importance of ethnicity, specifically the distinction between Ashkenazis (Jews of European descent) and Mizrahis (Jews of Middle Eastern descent), by exploring features stereotyped as “Mizrahi”: pharyngeals (Davis 1984 among others), and rhotics (Yaeger-Dror 1988, 1993). However, many meaningful distinctions go beyond an Ashkenazi-Mizrahi dichotomy. Gaining a richer understanding of the variation requires both problematizing the notion of “Mizrahi”, which is not a monolithic construct, and expanding the set of variables to include new ones, which are not stereotypically linked to ethnicity. This paper, based on ongoing fieldwork in the Tel Aviv area, analyzes three phonetic variables in a sample of sociolinguistic interviews conducted with 14 women, with a range of ethnic identities and ages. The data illustrate that while being Mizrahi plays a role in variation, the picture is more complicated and several other patterns emerge.

The first set of variables is the haryngeals, which have received the most attention from researchers. Producing the pharyngeals ([ʕ] and [ħ]) is considered a Mizrahi feature (Blanc 1968), though the extant work shows that they are in rapid decline and uncommon in the speech of Mizrahis as well (Davis 1984, Lefkowitz 2004) – most speakers merge them with their non-pharyngeal counterparts ([ʔ] and [x]). In the present data, only Mizrahi speakers used pharyngeals, but most used them infrequently or not at all, as expected by reported trends. However, with some speakers in their 30s demonstrating robust pharyngealization (100% distinction in the reading passage), the change has evidently not come to completion. Crucially, the only speakers who consistently used the pharyngeals were of Yemenite descent, highlighting the need to move beyond the cover term “Mizrahi”.

The second variable, /h/-deletion, is common to such an extent that Bolozky’s (1997) phonological description of Modern Hebrew transcribes Hebrew words without the historical /h/. Nevertheless, my speakers did produce /h/, albeit infrequently, and showed a significant formality distinction, with an average of 3% /h/ production in the interviews and 24% in the reading passage. Although meta-linguistic commentary links /h/-deletion with the stereotypical freha (a pejorative for young Mizrahi women), a multivariate analysis found no significant effects of age or ethnicity, but identified significant linguistic constraints (/h/ is dispreferred in the definite marker (p<0.05) and following a consonant (p<0.05)).

The final variable is in the domain of vocalic variation, which has not received attention in Hebrew sociolinguistics, nor does it feature in linguistic stereotypes in the speech community. The data show a pattern of lowering of /i/ among younger speakers (p<0.01), which cuts across ethnic lines. This paper demonstrates the importance of expanding the research of sociolinguistic variation in Israel. Differences found within broad ethnic categories illustrate the importance of adopting a more nuanced notion of ethnicity, and a broader analysis of new variables uncovers several other meaningful dimensions, such as style and age, in the data.