Variation in Jewish English intonation
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Intonation in Jewish English may have had influence from Yiddish (Weinreich 1956; Benor 2004). However, previous studies of Jewish English intonation have been either nonsystematic or not explicitly focused on variation according to exposure to Yiddish, so the current case for Yiddish substrate influence is weak. This study aims to give a more formal description of one particular phrase-final rise-fall in Jewish English, and, by looking at variation according to exposure to Yiddish, give better evidence for its influence on Jewish English intonation.

The contour that has been given the most attention is a phrase-final rise-fall, noted by both Weinreich (in Yiddish and English) and Benor (in Jewish English). This study looks at one rise-fall that matches these previous descriptions in English (a rise to a peak on a stressed syllable, followed by a fall to the speakers’ midrange), ToBI transcribed as L+H* !H-L%, in the speech of 11 non-Orthodox Jewish women from the New York City metropolitan area. The speakers had have varying degrees of exposure to Yiddish: 4 were bilingual, 3 were monolingual in English, but heard Yiddish while growing up either at home or in the wider community, and finally, 4 had very little exposure to Yiddish. Sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with the women, including a section intended to elicit dramatic narratives, as the contour has been previously described as being used in “dramatic transitions”. Data has been analyzed from this narrative section of the interview.

Neither the phonology nor the pragmatics of the rise-falls in the data currently analyzed differ either among the women, or from descriptions of the L+H* !H-L% contour in standard English. However, there is variation in the phonetic realization of this contour in two measurements.

The first is in the low/high scaling difference. Measurements were taken at the valley (L2 in figure 1) and peak (H1) of the rise. Rise-falls from speakers with more Yiddish exposure (the bilinguals, and those with Yiddish in the home or in their neighborhood) show greater scaling differences than those from speakers with little Yiddish exposure.

The second difference is in the tonal center of gravity (TCoG) of the contour, previously found to affect English speakers’ perception of rises in particular (Barnes 2010). TCoG is a measure of the distribution of fundamental frequency (f0) in the contour, calculated as the sum of f0 times time divided by the sum of f0 at each point along the curve between the two inflection points (L2 and L1 in figure 1). Rise-falls from the speakers with more Yiddish exposure have TCoG following the peak of the rise more often than the rise-falls from speakers with less Yiddish exposure.

A more thorough study of Yiddish intonation will be necessary to firmly establish Yiddish as the source for this variation; however, the fact that these measures vary according to Yiddish exposure strongly suggests Yiddish substrate influence for this contour, potentially from the rise-fall described by Weinreich.

![Figure 1](image-url)