

## BOOK REVIEWS

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SARAH B. BENOR, *Becoming frum: How newcomers learn the language and culture of Orthodox Judaism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012. Pp. xvii, 288. Pb. \$27.95.

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*Becoming frum: How newcomers learn the language and culture of Orthodox Judaism* is an insightful linguistic and ethnographic account of the ways in which non-Orthodox Jews (known as BTs, from the Hebrew *ba'alei teshuva*, 'those who return/repent') acquire language and other embodied practices as a means of gaining entry and acceptance into the enclosed and tightly bounded world of American Jewish Orthodoxy. Benor's valuable study demonstrates how this process is linguistically mediated and provides a rich commentary on the linguistic dimensions of religious socialization.

Trained as a linguist with an expertise in Jewish languages, Benor brings the thoughtful eye and ear of her discipline to the task, offering readers a careful look into American Jewish Orthodoxy's prescripts, discourses, and cultural practices. Her study, primarily based on fieldwork conducted between 2001 and 2002 at an outreach center and in an Orthodox community outside of Philadelphia, reveals how BTs learn and utilize a multilingual repertoire as they negotiate their membership along various axes of Jewish Orthodoxy. As part of the growing scholarship exploring Orthodox Jewish communities and their interface with secularity and modernity, Benor shines a light on the variable experiences of the wannabes and FFBS (frum from birth), as well as on the latter's missionary work targeted at nonaffiliated or marginally affiliated Jews. Focusing on these outreach efforts, including Hebrew lessons, public and digital educational lectures, and the hosting of BTs in the homes of established members of the community for the Sabbath and other religious holidays, Benor convincingly demonstrates that becoming a speaker of American Jewish Orthodoxy is not only a multilingual achievement ensconced in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English language ideologies, but is also a primary means by which religious knowledge, expertise, and legitimacy are instantiated, performed, and assessed.

Benor devotes her introduction (which serves as chapter 1) to a discussion of the three-stage trajectory BTs take as they move towards what FBB refer to as a

Torah-led lifestyle. Starting at a peripheral stage, BTs begin to increase their observance of Jewish laws and customs. Then in the community stage, they decide to relocate and live among Orthodox Jews. For some, the cultural apprenticeship continues to the next stage in which BTs participate in short- and long-term residential study programs at yeshivas or seminaries located in the United States and/or Israel. At each point of inflection, Benor highlights how teachers, community members, and children socialize BTs into the linguistic, aesthetic, spiritual, embodied, and affective practices of American Jewish Orthodoxy.

Benor's reflexivity as a liberal Jew and woman is evident throughout chapter 2, in which she offers an honest account reflecting the visceral tension between the objectives of the community to bring her closer to particular ways of practicing Judaism and her own objective of gaining access to the community and producing empirical research. The remainder of this chapter describes her methodologies, which included ethnographic observations, recorded samples of naturally occurring interactions, interviews, and matched-guise tests used to identify which linguistic features were associated with BTs or FFBS. This is a strong chapter for those interested in learning how ethnographic and sociolinguistic research can inform one another. My only regret here is that I found myself wanting to know more about the outreach center, given its centrality as a site of cultural mediation and socialization.

With wonderful ethnographic attention to everyday speech events, chapter 3 explores how American Jewish Orthodoxy is formed within regimes of values and self-discipline, material culture, and consumption. Benor highlights how rigid adherence to *halacha* (Jewish religious law) is communicated and actualized through metapragmatic talk regarding 'correct' ways of publicly displaying and practicing Judaism, including decisions regarding appropriate clothing, men's head coverings, women's hair styles, food preferences, home decorations, the choice of children's names, leisurely activities, and music selections. Benor perceptively shows that these aesthetic, embodied, and ideological practices are a form of cultural capital that BTs need to acquire in order to 'blend in' as religious insiders. Although not defined by the author as such, these semiotic acts of enregisterment (Agha 2006) presuppose an iconic and indexical link between the body, language, and materiality that enable BTs to re-signify their daily practices as frum-ish.

Chapter 4 is a must read for sociolinguists interested in understanding the features of the American Jewish Orthodox linguistic repertoire. Benor's sharp insights as a linguist of Jewish languages yield rich rewards, especially in her discussion of the type and frequency of loanwords derived from textual Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, or Israeli Hebrew. Along with periphrastic verbal constructions (e.g. *to be mevatel*, 'to waste time'), she shows that Orthodox Jewish English speakers incorporate a number of Yiddish influences, including the transfer of Yiddish phrasal verbs into English, the use of the word *should* according to the syntax of the Yiddish *zoln* (e.g. *I want that you should have this*), the saliency of Yiddish-influenced prepositions *by* and *to* (e.g. *we are eating by them*), and the following of Yiddish word order (e.g. *you will be studying all day Torah*). This chapter amply discusses how

Orthodox speech styles differ from General American English with regard to phonology, intonation, speech rate, and the avoidance of profanity.

Chapter 5 examines the ways in which BTs learn how internal variance among Orthodox Jews (ranging from Black Hat to Modern Orthodox) is produced through men's and women's distinctive language competencies and ideologies. This boundary work is further explored in chapter 6 which offers a glimpse into the ways in which individual BTs exhibit agency through selective participation in the frum world. The examples of BTs choosing to avoid particular Orthodox linguistic features in their talk in order to accentuate their pasts and to authenticate their transitional positionality is particularly insightful, as it shows the ambivalences, tensions, and dynamics at play in the process of becoming frum. At stake in these examples are definitions of successful socialization and the use of language to resist or transform what Orthodox Jewry sounds and looks like. Chapter 7 explores BTs meta-linguistic interactions, demonstrating how BTs ask questions, use translation strategies, mimic and teach correct usage, and engage in self and public repair work.

The penultimate chapter is, to my mind, one of the most valuable of the book, in that it focuses on the linguistic strategies BTs deploy in a desire to differentiate themselves. Focusing on BTs' pronunciation, grammar, usage, and word choice, Benor shows that BTs engage in hyperaccommodation in which they go beyond the linguistic norms of the FFBS, as well as punctiliously avoid any activities (e.g. listening to secular music, reading secular books) that reflect their pre-observant lives. Some BTs even intentionally choose to maintain aspects of their previous selves in an effort to avert charges of inauthenticity. Benor's close attention to BTs' overzealousness is especially rewarding when she analogizes BTs' language practices to the physical act of bungee jumping; both entailing, as I read it, a degree of risk, faith, commitment, overreaching, and ultimately a readjustment to a point of comfort (and safety). One might consider this a form of *hiddur mitzvah* (the enhancement or meticulous observance of a religious commandment beyond its formal demands), but what this phenomenon also suggests is that BTs' (often extreme) actions and verbalizations are actively, if not consciously, socializing FFBS and playing a role in the Orthodox community's 'slide to the right'.

Benor's work reminds us that though they are characterized by their enclosure within tight cultural enclaves and defined by geographic concentration, endogamous kinship patterns, and their distinct forms of dress and speech, Orthodox Jewish communities are never fully closed off from the outside world. There are no plastic table coverings, like those described in chapter 3 to portray Orthodox commensality and domestic sociability, which completely seal off the Orthodox community and make it impenetrable to broader cultural influences. Surrounded by the insuppressible nature of social media and the internet, these communities are engaged in a moral panic that has engendered strategic efforts to safeguard traditions of knowledge and defend against a perceived encroachment of secularity (Fader 2013). Paradoxically, while BTs reaffirm and consecrate the authenticity and legitimacy of Orthodoxy on the totem pole of Judaism, they also represent

the contagion of modernity. This fear is further underscored in the final chapter that reveals that BTs may never fully pass as FFBS, may always have a degree of outsider status, and are even subject at times to FFBS' prejudice or discrimination. In this sense, *ba'alei teshuva* may be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a hierarchy that prioritizes biology over choice—though in fact, as this book demonstrates, both BTs and FFBS are continually engaged in performing and reaffirming their identities through social interactions. These reflections are not theorized in Benor's study, but her book sets the stage for future scholarship on BTs (and other religious novices) as mediating agents that not only legitimize and reproduce the traditional world but also transform it.

*Becoming Frum* provides a wealth of ethnographic and linguistic data that will prove extremely useful in the study of adult language socialization and religious education. To be sure, this book has already impacted Jewish scholarship, as is attested to by the many accolades it has received from the field of Jewish studies. It deserves more attention in sociolinguistics and applied linguists in that it opens the door for a closer examination of the language socialization processes of missionization efforts in American society, and the bidirectional aspects of adult language socialization in religious communities. Written in an accessible and engaging tone, this book delivers an important contribution that should appeal to undergraduates, graduate students and scholars of linguistics, sociolinguistics, Jewish ethnography, and American religion.

## REFERENCES

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ZHU HUA, *Exploring intercultural communication: Language in action*. London: Routledge, 2014. Pp. xvi, 280. Pb. \$39.96.

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The importance of intercultural communication (IC) as a field of study is beyond question. Its importance is corroborated by the vast body of literature that has