As the home to one of the world’s largest populations of Jews, America has been intertwined with Jewish language. Phrases like “klutz” and “schtick” have become commonplace in the vocabulary of people throughout the nation. The presence of Jewish language can even be seen in every crevice of American pop culture. Books, movies, songs—whatever the medium, Jewish language can be found in it. Even in unassuming sitcoms, Jewish language makes a cameo. One such series is Frasier which highlights the show’s namesake, Frasier Crane and his exploits as a radio show. A majority of the show’s episodes are detached from Jewish culture; however, one offers a powerful point of analysis in which Jewish language and its interesting relationship with pop culture and America in general can be examined. The episode in question is “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Moskowitz”, the 10th episode of the sixth season of the show. In it, Frasier goes on a date with a Jewish woman named Faye under the assumption that he is a Jew himself. However, Faye realizes that Frasier is not Jewish, forcing the pair to hide his true identity from Faye’s mother in true sitcom fashion. While the actual Jewish language used in the episode is minimal (due to Frasier’s actual background), the episode dialogue offers important insights into the linguistic dynamics and intricacies of Jewish language in America.

The Jewish language used in the episode is very sparse, with most consisting of small words interlaced between phrases as an effort made by Frasier and his compatriots to seem Jewish. However, of the little Jewish language we do hear, most of it consists of common
Yiddish phrases. This makes sense as Yiddish has cemented itself as one of the more prominent Jewish languages in America due to the large amounts of Ashkenazic immigration to the country. As these groups of Jews began acclimating to the cultural and linguistic tendencies of the United States, their descendants shifted towards using English with some Yiddish influence. A trend among later generations in this group which can be seen in the episode is discussed by Sarah Bunin Benor in her article, “Jewish English in the United States”. She states that these Jews use “non-distinct English for out-group communication and English with some Yiddish and Hebrew words, and sometimes other influences, for in-group communication” (Benor 416). This mechanism is called diglossia in which different languages are used by a speaker when speaking to different groups. In the case of the Frasier episode, Frasier attempts to exploit this (deliberately or not) by using bits of Jewish language, also known as loanwords, throughout his speech to create a veil of Jewishness. In the book, Hebrew Infusion: Language and Community at American Jewish Summer Camps, Benor defines loanwords as “a word or phrase from one language routinely used within another language, whether or not the speaker is bilingual, and it is generally integrated into the phonological system of the matrix language” (Benor, 145). Frasier’s emulation of such a style is fairly crude due to his actual background, consisting of hamfisted Jewish loanwords and stereotypical phrases which fall in alignment to the scope of someone who is not actually Jewish.

Frasier and Co’s use of Jewish loanwords highlights the concept of language contact. Due to Frasier not actually being Jewish, he is forced to utilize what little Yiddish or Hebrew he knows in order to cover himself. However, the language he uses and how he uses it is indicative of his true nature. For example, Frasier and his brother Niles mainly rely on nouns in language. Throughout their dialogue with Faye and her mother, they use terms such as “Mohel”, “tsuris”,
“kugel”. This is of note due to the significance of nouns in cross language contact. As stated in the book, *Language Contact*, nouns are more prominent “among borrowed lexical word class”, with their high borrowability being a “a product of their referential function” (Matras 167). Often these terms are used as labels for foreign entities such as religious or cultural referents for which there is not proper terminology in the borrowing language. Being nouns, it is easier to place these words into the borrowed language as it does not require major syntactic adjustments. Phonologically, Niles integrates these words quite naturally, maintaining his intonation and pronunciation throughout his sentences. In addition to nouns Frasier and his friends use common interjections such as “L’chaim”, “Mazel Tov”, and “Oy Vey!” which highlights another facet of this language dynamic. As mentioned by Benor in her video lecture “Pastrami, Verklempt, and Tshoot-spa: Non-Jews’ Use of Jewish Language in the United States”, these phrases have been commodified and marketed to many of the non-Jewish residents of the United States (Benor). In turn, these phrases have been cemented as signifiers of Jewishness among many non-Jews. As such, it makes sense that someone who is relatively disconnected from the Jewish community would utilize such phrases in their attempt to emulate their perception of a Jewish person. From looking through the lens of language contact, it is clear why Frasier says the things he says.

As mentioned before, Frasier's Yiddish is very much lacking; thus a majority of the episode is conducted in English. However, those morsels of Jewish language that he tries to shoehorn into his vocabulary highlight another very interesting topic discussed in linguistics: post-vernacularity. To those uninitiated in such terminology, post-vernacularity refers to engaging with language outside of it being used as a means of communication. In his book, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, Jeffrey Shandler, mentions that post vernacularity means increasing
emphasis on “the symbolic value invested in the language apart from the semantic value of any given utterance in it” in relation to Yiddish (Shandler 4). While Frasier’s Jewish facade may seem shallow, it highlights a very important symbolic meaning of Jewish language: as a marker of identity. As use of Yiddish in a more pragmatic way has declined over recent years, post-vernacular use of Yiddish has risen. As such, the ideological and cultural significance of Jewish languages have been emphasized. In the case of Frasier, his crude use of Jewish vocabulary makes sense when looking through a post-vernacular lens. In order to attempt to make himself appear Jewish, Frasier utilizes Jewish phrases and verbiage to act as markers for his false identity. In this scenario, the conversational value of the words Frasier uses is not necessarily important; rather, what they signify is. Jewish language is not just a tool for Jews to communicate with each other. Instead, it has been a symbol of what it means to be Jewish, or in the case of Frasier, what he thinks it means to be Jewish.

This post-vernacular ideology is common throughout modern Jewish communities in America. This is evident in Hebrew summer camps which emphasize Jewish identity through language over actual communication. As evidenced in Hebrew Infusion: Language and Community at American Jewish Summer Camps, these camps do not rigorously teach the ins-and-outs of Hebrew to campers. Instead, they often engage with them through the use of loanwords and activities such as songs and skits (Benor, 148). Even the signage of these camps infused Hebrew into the English environment, which serves to reinforce the meta-linguistic ideas perpetrated through this form of language use. By splicing Hebrew and English language and marking these spaces as such, these camps have to cultivate a distinctly Jewish-American identity. This reveals the deeper meaning of language in general. Language is more than just a set of phonological sequences that one iterates. It is just as much of a part of culture like food and
religion. Even if the children at these camps are not fluent in Hebrew, the use of Jewish language reinforces and emphasizes a common Jewish identity that many cannot relate to. Unfortunately for Frasier, this means his disguise won’t be lasting for much longer.
Bibliography:


