Episode Book

EPISODE #6668

Hebrew's Guttural et and Ayin Didn't Vanish Together

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SYNOPSIS

Mainstream Israeli Hebrew didn't lose its guttural et and ayin—the Ashkenazi founders of spoken Hebrew never had them to lose. Tracing the sociolinguistics from 1880s Yiddish-speaking revivalists to Roey Gafter's fieldwork in Tel Aviv and Rosh Ha'ayin, this episode unpacks how demography and ethnic prestige shaped modern pronunciation. Even as the Academy of the Hebrew Language prescribed the Oriental accent, the street walked away—and new research by Yehudit Henshke reveals that et and ayin aren't even fading at the same rate.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a sound in Hebrew that most people speaking it today cannot produce, and a letter most of them cannot hear. Daniel wants to talk about that. His prompt came in with what he calls "the lamentable loss of the guttural ayin and chet," and he doesn't hide his disdain — mainstream Israeli Hebrew has let ayin collapse into aleph and et into khaf, and he wants to know how that happened, who kept the old pronunciation, what prestige and the Academy and broadcasting had to do with it, and whether there's any road back.



Herman

And it's a good fight to pick, because the research on this is surprising. The story everybody tells — the gutturals got lost — turns out to be wrong in a way that changes what we'd even mean by getting them back.



Corn

I'll say up front, the twist is good. The loss was never a merger, the stereotype about who speaks this way is bigger than the reality, and the two sounds are not dying at the same rate. So Daniel's lament turns out to be two different laments, one of which may not be a lament at all.



Herman

Before we get into how it happened, let's be precise about what these sounds actually are. Classical Hebrew had two pharyngeal consonants. et is the voiceless one — you tighten your throat, the air scrapes through. Ayin is its voiced sibling. In maagal, circle, that middle consonant is a true pharyngeal ayin; in maar, tomorrow, the first sound is a true pharyngeal et. Distinct phonemes. If you swapped them you'd be speaking with an accent, not changing the word, but they were as different as p and b.



Corn

And today?



Herman

Today et and fricative kaf are the same sound for almost everyone — khaf. And ayin is either a glottal stop or nothing at all, which is aleph's job. Two mergers. The pharyngeals survive mainly among older Mizrahi speakers, and even there unevenly.



Corn

There's a small surviving function, though, that I find charming — the ayin isn't quite dead even in mainstream speech.



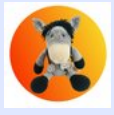
Herman

Right, the disambiguation thing. Take baali, my husband, and ba li, I want — wait, more like "it's coming to me." Spoken fast, both can come out sounding near identical. Speakers will sometimes sharpen that ayin into a real stop just to keep the two apart. So the letter kept one job: standing in the doorway when it matters.



Corn

A sound working only overtime shifts. Relatable.



Herman

That's roughly it for the phonetics. The rest of the episode is the sociolinguistics, which is where it gets strange. Because this isn't just a sound change — it's a story about who got to define correct Hebrew, and what happened when the entire country ignored them.



Corn

Start with the reframe, because it changes everything downstream. The standard story is "Hebrew lost its gutturals." Roey Gafter, who's done the best fieldwork on this, has a line I want to get right: a phonemic merger in the classic sense never happened for Ashkenazis — the earliest revitalizers already had only the merged phoneme.



Herman

Meaning the Ashkenazi founders of spoken Hebrew never had the distinction to lose. They grew up on Yiddish. Yiddish has no pharyngeals. When they built modern spoken Hebrew in the 1880s onward, they brought one kh-sound and one glottal-or-nothing. There was no moment where the community sat on et and let it slip. They arrived at the revival without it.



Corn

So the obituary is written for someone who was never in the room.



Herman

For that population, exactly. The people who had the sounds were the ones whose mother tongues had them — Arabic speakers, mainly, and Yemenite Jews most famously. So the accurate framing is non-transmission. The feature didn't erode; it never got handed to the new native-speaker base.



Corn

Now the demography, because that's the mechanism.



Herman

Zuckermann cites a census from 1916 to 1918 — over sixty-one percent of Ashkenazi children in the Yishuv spoke Hebrew, versus under nineteen percent of Sephardi children. Which sounds backwards from what you'd expect if you pictured the revival as a Sephardi project — and it matters enormously, because children are where a language's phonology gets set. The new native generation was overwhelmingly Ashkenazi. Ben-Yehuda himself — born Perelman, Belarusian, native Yiddish speaker. He wanted Hebrew with, as Zuckermann puts it, Semitic grammar and pronunciation, like Arabs. What he got was a language whose sound system was shaped by every language the revivalists actually spoke.



Corn

Zuckermann has a name for the general law, doesn't he.



Herman

The Congruence Principle. The more revivalists speak contributing languages with a specific linguistic feature, the more likely that feature is to prevail. Yiddish had no pharyngeals. Arabic did. There were far more Yiddish speakers building the new speech community. Done.



Corn

Here's the control case I love, though — the resh. Same mechanism, zero moral weight. Nobody writes laments about the resh.



Herman

And it's the same story in miniature. Ben-Yehuda based his standard on Sephardi Hebrew and recommended the alveolar trill — the rolled r, tip of the tongue, Spanish-style. The early Ashkenazi immigrants spoke Hebrew with the r of their native languages, the uvular one, the French-sounding rasp at the back. Today nearly all Israeli Jews say resh that way. The one Sephardi feature the founder personally prescribed is the one thing the street reversed.



Corn

So when Daniel feels disdain about the gutturals, the honest question is — where's the disdain for the resh? Because it's the same mechanism. The gutturals just carry an ethnic charge the resh doesn't.



Herman

That's the uncomfortable mirror, yes. The resh shows you it was never about carelessness or neglect. It was demography doing what demography does.



Corn

And that gets us to who actually kept the sounds. And here's where the stereotype has outrun the reality.



Herman

Gafter again, and this is his headline corrective: despite the common perception that speaking with et and ayin is something Mizrahim do, many if not most of them do not. His formulation is careful — not all Mizrahim use pharyngeals, but if someone uses pharyngeals, they're likely to be Mizrahi. The inference only runs one direction.



Corn

A Venn diagram where everyone assumes the small circle is inside the big one, and it's mostly outside it.



Herman

Mostly outside. And he's got the data. Summer of 2012, he recorded sixty-six interviews — forty-three in Tel Aviv, twenty-three in Rosh Ha'ayin — and coded about forty-three hundred tokens. In Tel Aviv, Ashkenazi speakers categorically do not pharyngealize. Not a bit. Some Mizrahim do, but only the older ones, and even their rates top out around twenty-five to forty-five percent. The young ones, near zero.



Corn

Twenty-five to forty-five percent, in the ethnic group the whole country identifies with the sound. That's the stereotype's gap right there.



Herman

Then you drive to Rosh Ha'ayin and the picture flips completely. Twenty-three interviewees, all of Yemenite descent — it's a town founded by the 1949-1950 Operation Magic Carpet immigrants, about thirty-eight thousand people. There the older speakers are almost categorical — seventy, eighty, ninety-plus percent — and even some of the younger speakers have high rates. Same language, same decade, an hour down the road.



Corn

So community density is doing the work that the country's imagination attributes to ethnicity.



Herman

That's the natural experiment. In a town where nearly everyone's grandparents came on the same planes from Yemen, the sound survives transmission. Scattered through Tel Aviv, it doesn't. And that's also why the stereotype anchored on Yemenites specifically — they get read as the most authentically Mizrahi of the Mizrahim, the ones who kept the most of the old world. There's a Jacky Mekayten song from 1988, "I'm from Rosh Ha'ayin," where he sings it outright — I speak with et and ayin, clearly a Yemenite, the unchanged original.



Corn

"The unchanged original" — a pop song doing population genetics.



Herman

Now here's the freshest data, and it's what splits Daniel's premise in half. Yehudit Henshke had a paper come out in September in the Journal of Semitic Studies — the pharyngeals in contemporary Mizrahi Hebrew, built on a corpus of two hundred eighty-seven speakers, nearly all native Israeli Mizrahim, born everywhere from 1932 to 2009, recorded between 2014 and 2018.



Corn

And the finding.



Herman

Two findings, side by side, and they don't match. For et, sixty-five and a half percent of the speakers realized only the non-pharyngeal version — the khaf. Only about a third still produce a true pharyngeal et. But for ayin — ninety-seven point seven percent realize the pharyngeal. Near categorical.



Corn

Ninety-eight percent of ayin against a third of et. In the same speakers' mouths.



Herman

Same corpus, same mouths. The two gutturals are not dying together. et is majority-lost even among Mizrahim; ayin, in this population at least, is holding.



Corn

Does she explain the asymmetry?



Herman

Not in the abstract — and I want to flag that honestly. The two figures are reported side by side, and one caution is that "pharyngeal" may be measured more generously for ayin than for et. So treat the ninety-eight as striking rather than settled. But even discounted, the direction is clear — and it means Daniel's lament is really about et. The ayin, among the people who carry it, is not going anywhere.



Corn

Because the ayin was always the easier one to keep quietly.



Herman

That's my guess, yes — it's voiced, it's less acoustically dramatic, it doesn't announce itself the way a deep et does. The et is the one you can hear across a room, which means it's the one that got heard as an ethnicity marker. And once a sound is heard as a badge, its fate stops being about phonetics.



Corn

Say the badge part plainly, because it's the prestige story underneath everything.



Herman

Matras and Schiff put it flat — the pharyngeals are considered the most obvious indicator of ethnic background, indicating Mizrahi origin. The single most recognizable ethnic sound in the language. And Gafter attributes the decline to the social prominence of the Ashkenazi variety and of Ashkenazis generally. The sound became audible as a group



Herman (continued)

membership card, and the group in question was the lower-prestige one.



Corn

There's a blog post Gafter quotes that does more damage than any statistic. Someone writing about being ashamed of being Mizrahi as a child — the dark-skinned father who spoke with guttural et and ayin never came to my school, something I was relieved about.



Herman

A child relieved their father's pronunciation didn't follow them into the classroom. That's what prestige pressure actually looks like — not a committee decision, a kid keeping a door closed.



Corn

So the street made its choice. But here's the strange part, and I confess I did not see this coming when I read up — the institutions were on the other side of it.



Herman

Completely on the other side! This is the central irony of the whole story. The Academy of the Hebrew Language chose the Oriental accent as the preferred pronunciation for Israel — et and ayin included, that was the standard for the schools and for correct speech. The official norm was the gutturals. And the language walked away from the official norm.



Corn

The academy prescribed it, the street declined the prescription. That's not how we usually tell it.



Herman

It's backwards from the usual story, where academies and national broadcasters get blamed for flattening local speech — the French model, impose Paris on the provinces. Here the institution endorsed exactly the sound the street was abandoning, endorsed it for decades, and lost. There's a researcher, Gafter, who frames it as Israeli prescriptivism taking a funny turn — the norms were modeled on Biblical Hebrew, so the pharyngeals were expected of newscasters. The very sounds being stigmatized as ethnic were simultaneously demanded as correct.



Corn

One sound wearing two uniforms — the news anchor's and the construction worker's, and somehow nobody found that odd.



Herman

Now broadcasting, because radio got there even before the Academy had its formal status. Nineteen thirty-five, the Hebrew Language Committee is meeting ahead of the launch of Kol Yerushalayim, the Mandatory-era Jerusalem station. Their most important pronunciation decision: adopt the Sephardic pronunciation, including precise articulation of the guttural consonants. And this was implemented by the announcers — the voices of the new Hebrew radio were on air pharyngealizing.



Corn

So children of the thirties and forties heard the gutturals from the most authoritative voices in the country.



Herman

From literally the most authoritative voices — radio in that era was the prestige medium, and the accent on it was the one the Academy wanted. And then the story sags. By 1964 a writer named Ben-David is documenting that the radio's Hebrew norm had slackened — his word — with disputes in the press, among teachers, and inside Kol Yisrael itself over what pronunciation should be obligatory in the schools and on the air. The Broadcasting Authority couldn't settle it internally.



Corn

An entire radio station arguing about its own accent.



Herman

So the Academy stepped in. Its journal lays out the minimum a traditional Sephardi pronunciation requires — et distinguished from kaf, ayin from aleph, plus mobile shva and strong dagesh. Then a special letter from the Academy to Kol Yisrael management, a drafted plan, and in October 1969 the Broadcasting Authority plenum approves what were literally called rules of mandatory accent. Mandatory. For the national broadcaster.



Corn

The most Israeli document imaginable — a binding regulation for how a throat should behave, and the country just went on doing whatever it wanted.



Herman

Henshke's paper says it directly — standard Modern Hebrew prescribes the pharyngeals, but General Israeli Hebrew, including radio and television, generally uses the non-pharyngeal pronunciation. The 1969 rules are the last documented prescriptive push, and broadcast Hebrew does not follow them.



Corn

Nineteen sixty-nine to now. That's a long silence from the institution that once issued binding throat regulations.



Herman

And why it failed is the interesting part. Zuckermann has a formulation I love — he calls it the do-as-I-say, don't-do-as-I-do approach. Ashkenazi Jews, who traditionally controlled the key positions in Israeli society, urged Israelis to adopt the pronunciation of Sephardic Jews, who happened to be of lower status. Read that once more and the whole thing hangs together — usually prescriptivism is an elite enforcing its own speech downward. Israeli prescriptivism was an elite enforcing somebody else's speech, a stigmatized group's speech, onto everyone including themselves. The rule-makers didn't speak the rule.



Corn

The aristocracy legislating the peasants' accent into law and then going home to their own.



Herman

Except they didn't just go home — they never spoke it in the first place. The prescription asked people to climb uphill, socially, toward a pronunciation that carried stigma in the schoolyard, and no letter to a broadcasting authority was going to outweigh that.



Corn

But hold on — stigma and prestige at the same time? You said the gutturals were demanded as correct. Those can't both be true.



Herman

They are both true, and that's Gafter's most interesting point. The pharyngeals carry an unusual combination of social meanings — at once a feature of a stereotyped ethnic group and of an older style of correct speech. They're stigmatized as ethnicity and prestigious as correctness simultaneously. Most stigmatized features of underprivileged groups fight the standard — the standard itself is the thing pushing them down. These sounds are the standard. That's why they never died as a marker even as natural production fell.



Corn

Which is why they live on as performance.



Herman

Exactly that. Parodic imitations of Mizrahi speakers in Israeli advertisements, TV judges being praised for talking with et and ayin — Gafter writes about a judge, Margalit Tsan'ani, praised precisely because she's unpolished, she's not trying to be something she's not. And the most wonderful comparison — Zohar Argov, the Mizrahi singer, against Naomi Shemer. Semitic languages put an emphasis on et and ayin — despite Shemer's vocabulary, she doesn't speak correct Hebrew like Zohar Argov does.



Corn

The woman who wrote Jerusalem of Gold, told her Hebrew is less correct than the singer's. On throat grounds.



Herman

Because the yardstick is biblical. Under the official ideology, Argov's pronunciation is the correct one and the entire Ashkenazi establishment — Shemer very much included — is speaking a relaxed, convenient approximation of the language.



Corn

The sounds survive as caricature and as virtue, and the only thing they're disappearing from is speech.



Hilbert

Medieval Pottage Facts. Most peasant households owned only one or two cooking pots, so the same pot cooked every meal. The pot did not care what went in it.



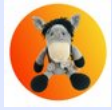
Corn

Neither, apparently, does the Academy.



Corn

So the path back. Daniel asked, and the honest answer is not through policy.



Herman

Not through policy — nothing exists. No Academy campaign, no school program, no broadcast directive aimed at restoring the pharyngeals in general Israeli speech. The 1969 rules were the last attempt, and after fifty-odd years of that silence, the institutions have clearly learned the lesson the street taught them. If prestige is the only lever that ever moved a sound change, then the question is whether the prestige has moved.



Corn

Has it?



Herman

Partly, yes. Henshke's ninety-eight percent for ayin in the Mizrahi corpus is the strongest sign that the voiced pharyngeal is alive where it lives — that's not a museum piece, that's a two thousand seventeen-era recording of people under thirty producing it. And Gafter found something subtler in his Tel Aviv data: younger Mizrahi speakers are trilling their et-khaf more — a stronger, more friction-rich version — aligning with the higher trill rates they hear around them. The sound is being re-marked, made more Mizrahi-adjacent, even as the true pharyngeal recedes.



Corn

A shadow of the sound, growing while the sound itself shrinks.



Herman

The direction of travel and the direction of prestige are pointing the same way for the first time in a while — Mizrahi culture has real status in Israel now in music, in television, in ways it didn't in 1969. But whether that prestige attaches to a consonant, rather than to a style, is the open question. Sounds are stubbornly specific.



Corn

So the honest summary is — et is going and probably not coming back, ayin is holding on among the people who carry it, and nobody is coming to rescue either one with a letter to a broadcaster.



Hilbert

It's the khaf that's gone, not the ayin. That tracks with my experience. I've been working on the ayin for a while now. The et I can do, or I've decided I can — I say amesh and it feels right, though feeling is not verification. The ayin is the problem. It keeps coming out as a glottal stop, and Herman, you know as well as I do that a glottal stop is nothing. That's just stopping. So I test myself. There's a pair I use — ir, city, and the same word said without the pharyngeal. I say both out loud and listen for whether they're actually different. Some days I'm sure they are. Most days I'm not. I've been doing this check for longer than I'll say on air. Corn went through this whole first half of the show at his usual



Hilbert (continued)

pace, so he'll understand — a thing you keep testing is a thing you haven't given up on.



Corn

The sloth defense. Proceed.



Hilbert

My aunt, my mother's sister, spoke with a real ayin. I recorded her on my phone in 2015, saying the word once. I play it back against my own attempts. The recording is the standard; my mouth is the instrument that keeps failing inspection. I never asked her how she did it. That felt like asking a fish to explain water. She's in Haifa, I could have asked her any time. There's a gap on the tape after her word, about a second, where I apparently said nothing.



Herman

What I'd want to know from that recording — and this connects to the et-khaf trill finding — is whether her ayin had any of that friction the young Tel Aviv speakers are adding. If it did, your ear may be chasing something more recoverable than you think.



Hilbert

The tape's in the cloud. I pay four shekels a month for the storage, same as always. I could tell you the invoice number.



Corn

Let the man keep his invoice number.



Corn

One detail from the pile that didn't make the main discussion — Gafter's fieldwork found that Ashkenazi speakers and Mizrahi speakers differ even in how they say the merged khaf. Ashkenazim trill it, Mizrahim use a plain fricative. So the ethnic marker didn't vanish when the pharyngeal merged — it moved one phonetic notch over. The letter lost the



Corn (continued)

distinction and the mouth kept making one anyway.



Herman

Which is the thing to sit with as we land this. The Academy prescribed the gutturals, and the street ignored them — and if that's true here, it's true for every prescriptive effort in language, everywhere. Rules can ratify prestige; they cannot create it. The deeper split is the one Daniel's lament needs to carry forward: et is going, ayin is holding. The correct question was never whether Hebrew is losing its gutturals — it's which one, for whom, and whether a sound that's ours can ever be made correct again by decree. It can't. It becomes ours or it becomes nothing.



Corn

A sound that's correct but nobody's is a sound nobody says.



Herman

I'll live with that. Thank you, as ever, to Hilbert Flumingtop at the desk — the man who stores a one-word recording like a Torah scroll. If you enjoyed this one, try episode ten thirty-seven, From Scrolls to Software; and episode eighteen sixty-one, Emergency Prep You Can Sing To. This has been My Weird Prompts, where no question is too obscure and no rabbit hole too deep. If the show earns it, leave us a review wherever you're listening — it helps people find us. We'll be back soon. See you tomorrow.

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