In memoriam: Joshua A. Fishman (1926–2015)

A beloved teacher and influential scholar, Joshua A. Fishman, the founding editor of The International Journal of the Sociology of Language, passed away peacefully in his Bronx home, on Sunday evening, March 1, 2015. He was 88 years old. Joshua A. Fishman leaves behind his devoted wife of over 60 years, Gella Schweid Fishman, three sons and daughters-in-law, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. But he also leaves behind thousands of students throughout the world who have learned much from him about sociology of language, the field he founded, and also about the possibility of being a generous and committed scholar to language minority communities. As he once said, his life was his work and his work was his life.

Joshua A. Fishman, nicknamed Shikl, was born in Philadelphia PA on July 18, 1926. Yiddish was the language of his childhood home, and his father regularly asked his sister, Rukhl, and him: “What did you do for Yiddish today?” The struggle for Yiddish in Jewish life was the impetus for his scholarly work. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with a Masters degree in 1947, he collaborated with his good friend, Max Weinreich, the doyen of Yiddish linguistics, on a translation of Weinreich’s history of Yiddish. And it was through Yiddish that he came to another one of his interests — that of bilingualism. In 1948 he received a prize from the YIVO Institute for Yiddish Research for a monograph on bilingualism. Yiddish and bilingualism were interests he developed throughout his scholarly life.

After earning a PhD in social psychology from Columbia University in 1953, Joshua Fishman worked as a researcher for the College Entrance Examination Board. This experience focused his interest on educational pursuits, which eventually led to another strand of his scholarly work — that on bilingual education. It was around this time that he taught what came to be the first sociology of language course at The City College of New York. In 1958, he was appointed associate professor of human relations and psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and two years later, moved to Yeshiva University. At Yeshiva University he was professor of psychology and sociology, Dean of the Ferkauf Graduate School of Social Science and Humanities, Academic Vice President, and Distinguished University Research Professor of Social sciences. In 1988, he became Professor Emeritus and began to divide the year between New York and California where he became visiting professor of education and linguistics at Stanford University. In the course of his career, Fishman held visiting appointments at over a dozen universities in the USA, Israel, and the Philippines, and fellowships at the Center for Advanced study (Stanford), the East West Center (Hawai’i) the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, and the Israel Institute for Advanced Study.

Throughout his long career Joshua A. Fishman has published close to one hundred books and over a thousand articles. He has not only been prolific, but his original and complex ideas have been very influential in the academy, as well as extremely useful to language minorities through the world. His first major study of sociology of language, Language Loyalty in the United States, was published in 1964. A year later, he published Yiddish in
America. In 1968, he published the earliest major collection dealing with language policy and management, *Language Problems of Developing Nations*. In the same year, he edited and published *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, a first attempt to define the new field.

By the 1970s Joshua Fishman’s scholarship was recognized throughout the world for its importance and its relevance about the language issues prevalent in society. In 1973, he founded, and has since edited, *The International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. Under his direction, IJSL has published 232 issues expanding the field and the range of topics covered. He cared deeply about *IJSL*, personally reading every manuscript that came his way, commenting on them, writing to authors, and encouraging scholarship on small languages and emerging topics in the sociology of language.

Joshua Fishman has also edited a related book series published by Mouton de Gruyter, *Contributions to the Sociology of Language* (CSL), with over 200 titles. In both of these endeavors Fishman has encouraged young scholars to research, write and publish, supporting and contributing to the academic careers of many throughout the world, especially in developing countries. For years he replied daily to letters and e-mails from students from all over the world. His greatest motivation has been dialoguing with many about the use of language in society and answering student questions. The world was his classroom.

While conducting an impressive body of research, and being responsive to the many who asked for advice, Fishman traveled extensively, encouraging the activities of those seeking to preserve endangered languages. He will be remembered by the Māoris of New Zealand, the Catalans and Basques of Spain, the Navajo and other Native Americans, the speakers of Quechua and Aymara in South America, and many other minority language groups for his warmth and encouragement. For a quarter-century, he wrote a column on Yiddish sociolinguistics in every issue of the quarterly *Afn Shvel*. He also wrote regularly on Yiddish and general sociolinguistic topics for the weekly *Forverts*. Together with his wife Gella Fishman, he established the extensive five-generational “Fishman Family Archives” at Stanford University library. In 2004 he received the prestigious UNESCO Linguapax Award in Barcelona, Spain.

Joshua Fishman’s prolific record of research and publication has continued until today, defining modern scholarship in bilingualism and multilingualism, bilingual and minority education, the relation of language and thought, the sociology and the social history of Yiddish, language policy and planning, language spread, language shift and maintenance, language and nationalism, language and ethnicity, post-imperial English, languages in New York, and ethnic, and national efforts to reverse language shift.

His scholarly work with minority groups and with others engaged in the struggle to preserve their languages, cultures, and traditions has been inspired by a deep and heartfelt compassion that is always sustained by the markedly human tone of his most objective scholarly writing.