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“We’ve Been Through Worse”: The Impacts of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ Jewish Language in Seattle

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Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ Jewish language in Seattle, Washington, focusing on the challenges and opportunities the pandemic and subsequent virtualisation produced for queer Jewish speech communities and Religious Heritage Language users. The study identified and coded prominent COVID-19-related themes in thirty-four semi-structured interviews conducted in autumn 2020 with LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ members of the Seattle Jewish community. Many queer participants, as well as cis-heterosexuals desiring to ally themselves with the LGBTQ+ community, engaged with expanded opportunities for queer Jewish community and Religious Heritage Language learning through digitised gatherings and social media, although adoption of new behaviours like including one’s pronouns in one’s name on video calls was mixed. Participants also incorporated extant modes of religious and cultural meaning-making, historical knowledges, and inherited trauma in interpreting the pandemic and concurrent sociological and environmental challenges of 2020. Nineteen participants described a perceived negative correlation between age and queer language use, sometimes linking this to negative correlations between age and technological literacy. Both queer and cis-heterosexual participants expressed optimism about increased intergenerational interaction effected by learning-from-home and virtual learning. While much remains unknown, these findings suggest potential integration of creative and resilient queer Jewish adaptations to COVID-19 life and discourse into post-pandemic communities.

Keywords

LGBT linguistics, religiolinguistics, collective trauma, trauma linguistics, Jewish languages