Although Jews make up a minute proportion of Amsterdam’s population, they figure prominently in the city’s story about itself. Jews’ full inclusion in the body politic, however, has always been tenuous. In contemporary public culture, this tenuousness is mirrored by a discursive ambivalence that casts Jews as simultaneously insiders and outsiders.

This paper examines discourse of Jews in informational materials from Jewish-themed tourist attractions, including museums, tour books and other tourist-oriented publications. I analyze how a simultaneous insider-outsider identity is created through spatial, temporal, and language-oriented placement and displacement.

Temporally, these sites focus on Jewish life in the pre-World-War-II period, paying little attention to contemporary Jewish life. A second popular time period is the late 16th century, when Jews fleeing the inquisition found a safe haven in Amsterdam. Spatially, the texts focus on life in the old Jewish Quarter in the east of the city, rather than other areas where a high proportion of Jews lived and continues to live.

Tourism materials often connect the history of Jews in the city with the history of the city itself, and language – specifically Yiddish – is one of the mechanisms that makes that connection. Where in earlier eras use of Yiddish marked one as Jewish, over time Yiddish words became part of the local dialect, marking one as an Amsterdammer, and tourism materials use Yiddish words when discussing local identity. While in some ways such a semiotic shift casts Jewish life as part and parcel of Amsterdam culture, the discussions of these Yiddish words often specifically highlight Jewish life in the prewar period, simultaneously re-ethnicizing the words and displacing them from the present time. Taken together, these strategies work to portray Jewish life not as a vibrant part of the contemporary city, but rather as something rooted in the past.

Keywords: identity, ethnicity, discourse.