



22

The Yiddish Conundrum: A Cautionary Tale for Language Revivalism

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For those who cherish the goal of preserving small, endangered languages, some developments (and lessons) from the case of Yiddish might be illuminating, though not in the sense of some straightforward measure of ‘success’ or ‘failure’. There is no consensus on the interpretation of the current curious—and contentious—situation. If the issues raised might serve as a point of departure for debate on its implications for other languages, particularly the potential damage from exaggeratedly purist ‘corpus planning movements’ as well as potentially associated ‘linguistic disrespect’ toward the majority of the living speakers of the ‘language to be saved’, then this chapter’s modest goal will have been realized. Moreover, the perils of a sociolinguistic theory overapplied by a coterie with access to funding, infrastructure, and public relations need to be studied.¹

Ultimately, the backdrop for study of the current situation is the pre-Holocaust status quo ante of a population of Yiddish speakers for which estimates have been in the range of 10 to 13 million native speakers.²

Nowadays, on the one hand, millions of dollars a year are spent on ‘saving Yiddish’ among ‘modern Jews’ (secular and ‘modern Orthodox’) and interested non-Jews. People may be academically, culturally, literarily, musically, sentimentally, ideologically, and otherwise attracted. The number of Yiddish-speaking families these efforts have generated is in dispute, but it is under a

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dozen. A high proportion of *those* hail from a postwar movement of normativist language revision, on the *Ausbau* model of Heinz Kloss. This conscious process has taken their variety ever further from native Yiddish speech of any naturally occurring variety while retaining a steadfast, profound commitment to actually using the language in daily life. Lavish subsidies provide for a newspaper, magazines, myriad programs, and a few large architectural edifices dedicated, one way or another, to 'saving Yiddish'. In academia, endowments have provided a number of positions that are ironically known in the field as 'poetry fellowships' in so far as their incumbents may try to be 'Yiddish writers' while under no pressure to produce successful doctoral programs that would be generating new generations of scholar specialists who can themselves write and teach *in* the language (say for advanced courses). In the case of some Yiddish chairs, the elderly East European-born donor 'had the chutzpah to go ahead and die', leaving his or her children amenable to a program's 'rapid enhancement' via conversion from the low-student-number ('failing') Yiddish to the 'higher student takeup' ('winning') menu of 'Judaic Studies' or 'comparative Jewish literature' courses.³ Much of the current 'language movement' is focused on 'Yiddish products' in English (and other national languages) *about* Yiddish that have engendered fundraising campaigns for buildings and centers, without seriously attempting to produce new speakers, let alone writers. This has been made possible by what I have called massive American-style PR driven 'delinguification' of Yiddish (Katz 2015: 279–290). The satire, 'A conference of Yiddish savers' by Miriam Hoffman, the last major actual Yiddish author born in Eastern Europe before the war, now based in Coral Springs, Florida, continues to delight readers from all sides of the argument (Hoffman 1994). Note that none of this is to suggest that any of these efforts are 'wasted'.

On the other hand, there are somewhere between half a million and 1.1 million Haredim ('ultra-Orthodox Jews'), the vast majority of them Hasidim, for whom Yiddish is the primary family language 'from cradle to grave'.⁴ These groups, deriving from an eighteenth century passionately religious movement, have, as if truly by miracle, constructed vast and viable Yiddish-speaking communities, characterized by large and stable families. They do not generally focus on 'language per se' but rather on the imperative, as they see it, of maintaining their true Judaism as a veritable civilization that includes strict religious adherence to the inherited norms as well as attire, language, and compact neighborhoods rooted in continuity with pre-Holocaust East European Jewish life. Needless to say, in the face of modernity, this requires a principled and voluntary separationism from others (esp. non-religious Jews). They hold firm (and currently politically incorrect) beliefs concerning, for

example, the age of the world, Jewish ‘chosenness’, infallibility of their sect’s *Rebbe* (*rébā*, or grandrabbi-by-heredity), childbearing and child-rearing focus of women’s purpose, literalness of the world to come and messiah, in many cases staunch anti-Zionism, and much more, that can make modern acculturated Jews cringe (even though Hasidim are among the most non-violent groups in history and generally have little interest in initiating conflict with outsiders). For their part, many Hasidim do in fact look down on modern Jews as a fleeting species, inevitably soon to be lost via assimilation, intermarriage, and further (as they see it) reductionism of Judaism to some ‘weekly religion’ or ‘culture’ or ‘hobby’.⁵ One scholar, who worked with a worldwide count of around 250,000 back in 1995, estimated eight to ten million Yiddish-speaking Hasidim by 2075 (Eisenberg 1995: 1–2).

These then are the two groups of ‘Yiddish involved Jews’ who barely speak to each other, a phenomenon long observed by people who have seen Jews from both groups ‘pass each other by with barely a hello, or none at all’ on the streets of say New York, London, or Jerusalem. This chapter aims to look, in broad contours, at ‘what got us here’ followed by a modest proposal or two for a not-so-modest change of attitude in the ‘modern Yiddishist’ camp, and thoughts on the lessons for other language revival and revitalization movements.

First, however, a word must be said about the *third* group of Yiddish speakers, the one with ‘no direct Yiddish future’ but with the most precious preservable past in the sense of nuance and authenticity of language: the (very) aged Yiddish speakers internationally who were born in Eastern Europe and came to some kind of linguistic maturity before the Holocaust. Estimates vary widely, ranging from 100,000 to 550,000.⁶ Outside of the Hasidim among them, very few of their progeny speak any Yiddish. They, who can most intactly speak the pre-genocide language are human treasures from whom students in the field of Yiddish can still learn so very much. Late in the proverbial day as it is, they should be recorded and interviewed and of course morally supported and given the opportunity to enjoy frequent and joyful conversations in their native language, to the end of their days.⁷

The Storyline of ‘What Got Us Here’

The Yiddish language arose around 1000 years ago when the Jews who had migrated from the Near East (and other parts of Europe) to the Germanic-speaking lands of central Europe rapidly formed compact and sustainable communities, which assumed an international position in rabbinic law, lore,

and literature.⁸ The language arose in the generation of settlement via an intricate fusion between the Northwest Semitic elements (Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic) that the migrants brought with them, taking the majority component and most of the grammatical machinery from the onsite medieval urban German dialects they found.⁹ They called their new land *Ashkenaz* and its inhabitants *Ashkenazim* (sg. Ashkenazi).¹⁰ It was not too long before these words came to refer rather to Jewish civilization and Jewish people of this provenance, making way for the terms to become effectively mobile. When the Crusades and other calamities of medieval Christian intolerance induced many to flee eastward, they continued to be the Ashkenazim, albeit now of Eastern Europe, which itself then became the new Ashkenaz. As the late Max Weinreich, master historian of Yiddish, put it, 'geography was transformed into history'. Weinreich developed the notions Ashkenaz I (in the 'original' west of the Yiddish-speaking area) versus Ashkenaz II (in its 'early migration land' east), where, moreover, Yiddish acquired a substantial Slavic component (see Weinreich 1973: I, 5–6).

For the last 1000 years or so, the traditional (premodern) linguistic structure of Ashkenazic society has been one of *Internal Jewish Trilingualism*: three Jewish languages coexisting in generally complementary distribution with respect to function and status, in addition to working knowledge of the local co-territorial non-Jewish languages in daily life (see Katz 1985, 2007: 45–77). There was Yiddish, the one vernacular for all Ashkenazim, which arose at the outset of Ashkenaz. From the early centuries onward, it increasingly occupied the literary vacuum left for women generally (and most men, too) whose knowledge of the two sacred languages inherited from the Near East, Hebrew and Aramaic, did not suffice to, say, enjoy an unread book. It is one thing to recite a prayer (with whatever level of understanding of the text) and another to enjoy a 'good new read'. Though not vernaculars, Hebrew and Aramaic were nevertheless far from dead languages. In addition to being recited and studied, new works continued to be written in both languages: the prestigious Hebrew for community documents, Bible commentaries, and codices of law, among others; Aramaic, more prestigious still, for commentaries on classic works of Talmud and Kabbalah. The same rabbinic scholar who spoke only Yiddish at home, and taught only in Yiddish, would write a community missive and Bible commentary in Hebrew and might (if he could) write a Talmudic or Kabbalistic work in Aramaic.¹¹ The history of Ashkenazic trilingualism is replete with fascinating 'mishaps' and ensuing conflicts that included rebellious experiments to translate the Kabbalah into everyday Yiddish, to use the vernacular for sacred prayer or legalistic works, or to 'go too far' in adopting raunchy medieval romances for earlier Yiddish literature

(see Katz 2015: 19–109). All three were always written in the right-to-left Jewish alphabet, and with the rise of Jewish printing in the fifteenth century, there arose, to be standardized by the early sixteenth century, sharply distinct fonts for classical texts ('meruba' or 'square'), rabbinic commentaries ('Rashi') and Yiddish ('mashkit'). To this day, people familiar with only the classic 'square' Hebrew alphabet need to invest some surprisingly substantial time to come to grips with reading the others.

Nowadays, something approaching that primeval Ashkenazic Jewish Trilingualism survives in various incarnations in certain Hasidic communities. The centuries when it was the firm, exclusive, by-definition linguistic definition of Ashkenaz ended in the eighteenth century with the 'campaign against Yiddish' in Germany among the 'first modern European Jews'. By then, and there, in 'the west' (from the viewpoint of Yiddish history), the language had been much weakened (both by migration and attrition to partially cognate local German). Its great cultural centers had long been in Eastern Europe. Still, this campaign, which created the proud participant in the surrounding general culture, retaining what he or she wishes to retain of Jewish belief and identity, was to be the fuse that led to a chain of sociolinguistic events whose effects ultimately go to the heart of today's Yiddish Conundrum, an intriguing interplay of ideology and lifestyle with aspects of the precise kind of Yiddish promoted. The 'Berlin Enlightenment' as it is called in Jewish historiography, painted Yiddish as a corrupt, ugly jargon that prevented Jews from being accepted as full and true Germans (see Katz 2015: 189–200). The movement adopted many anti-Semitic tropes, including those which called Yiddish a secret language with the twin purposes of cursing Christianity and cheating Christian neighbors in everyday commerce (see Katz 2015: 177–188).

In Eastern Europe of the early nineteenth century, what with its compact Yiddish-speaking population of millions, the Berlin Enlighteners' followers were literally laughed out of town squares when they arrived talking their German and telling people to stop talking Yiddish (they didn't call it that of course, they called it *Zhargón* and worse). Some of them called for Russian (or Polish, Hungarian, and other national languages) to replace Yiddish. The result was the dismal bordering on the comic. What did happen was something quite different and substantially more creative. While the 'hardest' and most prestigious of the three Ashkenazic languages, Aramaic, was 'left alone' to continue its Talmudic and Kabbalistic life in writing, the other two, Yiddish, everyone's native language among the millions of East European Ashkenazim, and Hebrew, studied in rudimentary fashion by a vast majority of the Jewish population, were instead rapidly mobilized for modern culture.

This became the eastern version of Jewish Enlightenment: the use of Hebrew and Yiddish for modern European genres, including novels, poems, essays, plays, political pamphlets, and more. By the end of the nineteenth century, Hebrew and Yiddish literature in Eastern Europe had both produced a proud corpus of modern works.

By the century's latter years, a political rift was growing. A modernized Hebrew (in writing only) was becoming largely the language of the Zionists and nationalists, who increasingly dreamt of actual, physical return to the ancient homeland of the Land of Israel (then Palestine of the Ottoman Empire) and, eventually, to its revival there as the everyday spoken language. In a sense, they were politically, in the spirit of nationalism, and national sovereignty in a homeland of one's own, 'of the political right'. Yiddish, by contrast, was rapidly becoming the language of here-ism, dedicated to remaining in place and building a new liberal multicultural society that would replace the autocratic Czarist empire (the narrative diverged in some respects in the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Increasing use of Yiddish in print became associated with an alphabet soup of political movements that included anarchism, communism, social democracy, socialism, territorialism, and by century's end, the specifically Jewish socialist (and eventually Yiddishist) movement called Bundism. In short—'of the political left'. But not only of the left. Also for much of the apolitical 'silent majority' by simple virtue of its being the universal Jewish vernacular. A Yiddish language movement, that rapidly became known as Yiddishism, rose up. Its symbolical highpoint was the 1908 Chernowitz Language Conference held in then Bukovina (today's Chernivtsi in western Ukraine). Attended by major writers and intellectuals, it proclaimed Yiddish to be a national Jewish language (see Reyzen et al. 1931; Fishman 1987; Katz 2007: 265–274; 291–293).

But What *Kind* of Yiddish? Symbology of Words, Style, Spelling

And here we come, in the later nineteenth century, to a major split in *the type of Yiddish to be used*, setting off the direct chain reaction of events that has fed into the twenty-first century 'Yiddish situation'. Traditional, religious Yiddish literature had been cultivating, from the early nineteenth century, a new East European-based literary language that gracefully synthesized the major dialects into a de facto standard in which countless Bibles, prayer books, works on Jewish ethics, and other popular religious books appeared. The old Western

Yiddish standard was discarded (by the early nineteenth century), followed by the gradual abandonment of the mashkit type font, with new Yiddish religious works appearing in square Hebrew and with full Hebrew diacritic vowels (giving Yiddish the ‘same look’ as a sacred Hebrew text).

In the later part of the century, the revolutionary movements, deeply anti-religious, developed major Yiddish publishing projects and began to evolve a ‘centering’ of the very *notion* Yiddish (see Katz 1994). Results ultimately grew to include, by the start of the twentieth century, a bona fide infrastructure that grew exponentially during the time of World War I. It comprised new and modern schools, book and journal publishing, newspapers, and youth movements, and other trappings of modern languages that were truly impressive for a stateless language movement associated with controversial (and often quite dangerous) counter-state tendencies. But these movements were in most cases not about to base their *kind* of published or public ‘revolutionary Yiddish’ on the vernacular of everyday religious folks, much less so on the native Yiddish of those pious books. The revolutionary movements sought to create a new, modern Jew who would be a secularist European, and in the desires of many, atheist or at least agnostic. And that meant ‘a new kind of Yiddish’.

This was a cultural revolution against tradition. It didn’t even help that the greatest of the literary masters of the late nineteenth century, the real backbone of the societal rise of Yiddish in terms of the creation of enduring literary treasures, Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem-Yankev Abramovitch, ±1835–1917), Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitch, 1859–1916), and Y.L. Peretz (1852–1915) were honing, refining, and splendidly preserving the genuine folk language in the medium of a new literary language.¹² Secular as *they* might have been in aspects of daily life, the vast majority of these classicists’ *works* were rooted in the milieu of traditional Ashkenazic civilization.

By contrast, the very revolutionary movements that built the infrastructure for Yiddish as a modern language also, in a sense, disfigured that language by ridding it of vast number of native words and constructions and replacing them with ‘equivalents’ from the language of Marx and Engels and large numbers of revolutionary pamphlets—modern German (which was *not* a co-territorial language in the Russian Empire, where the bulk of their work transpired). To be sure, traditional Yiddish *had* perfectly good words for a vast array of sophisticated societal institutions, but they were in use for the traditional religious civilization. With hindsight, political and cultural will might have been mobilized to recycle some of them for the new world they were building on the model of their non-Jewish counterparts’ societal movements.¹³ But where any linguistically or sociolinguistically comprehensible rhyme-and-

reason (comprehensible to *us*, in the twenty-first century, that is) crumbles is in the fate, in the hands of the socialist movements, of Yiddish items that derived from older *Germanic* roots; they were just too folksy compared to cognate 'modern European' forms of standard German.¹⁴ But to complete the picture, there were also reams of imports of words and phrases for concepts that were verily new for traditional Ashkenazic society.¹⁵ This can only be fathomed by moderns if we keep in mind how exotic (from the Western standpoint) Ashkenazic civilization actually is. Because all of Ashkenazic life is in one way or another concerned with religion, Yiddish, for example, never even needed a 'separate word' for '(Jewish) religion' though it has a sophisticated vocabulary for nuances of belief and practice alike.¹⁶

But if the developers of the Germanized modern Yiddish assiduously retained the Yiddish alphabet, almost as some unconscious mystic talisman of a tie to the ancients that would just not be severed, they were determined to give it a big-time facelift. While retaining the square Hebrew font, the Germanizers did away over time with the vowel diacritics, except for one or two that are really helpful.¹⁷ That was just setting the (graphic) table. The feast itself was—orthography. A large percentage of Yiddish words of Germanic origin would be orthographically Germanized, creating a new Yiddish publishing image that was increasingly a mirror of German spelling. For example, the silent *hey* ('h') was introduced in positions where it had not been used in Yiddish (on the model of where German has 'h', thus *yor* 'year' was respelled, in Jewish characters, as *yohr*). Most pervasive was the silent *áyin* (ױ, used for 'e' in Yiddish spelling). For the better part of a millennium, 'n' and 'l' sounds functioned as syllables in themselves, and had no *áyin* preceding them: hence (to use Latin letter transcription): *zogn* ('to say'), *himl* ('sky').¹⁸ And so, in an ancient Near Eastern, Northwest Semitic alphabet, the equivalents of nineteenth-century Eastern Yiddish *zogn* and *himl* got respelled to *zogen* and *himel* in a change affecting numerous words on any given page.

For the summary purposes at hand, we can take the silent *áyin* as a symbol of orthographic Germanization. Meantime, the great writers, led by the 'triumvirate' or 'classicists' of modern Yiddish literature, Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz, continued to adhere to genuine Yiddish vocabulary and grammar and to forge more and more standard literary Yiddish from the dialects. Nevertheless, they all adopted the new Germanized spelling leading to (for moderns) the 'hybrid look' of genuine, deep Yiddish, being molded into a major European literary medium, but with the Germanized spelling of the press and pamphlets of the day. That remains the 'face' of virtually all pre-World War I editions of the finest works of Yiddish literature. But any text can be readily respelled. It is the actual language that remains the thorny part.

By the early twentieth century there were two competing literary Yiddishes, the native standard evolving from the dialects in the hands of creators of belles lettres, and the ever more *Dáytshmerish*, or ‘Germanized Yiddish’ of the rapidly growing daily press, both in Eastern Europe and internationally.¹⁹ Like all dichotomies of the sort, this one too glosses over many complex and intermediate varieties in the spirit of ‘the best generalization available is better than none’. A growing number of writers, particularly poets of the older generation, were getting ‘tied up’ in *Dáytshmerish* too, though some younger talents showed varying degrees of determined resistance.

Then came the potent reaction. It came right along with the creation of modern Yiddish linguistics (philology as it was then called; in Yiddish: *di yidische filológya* in the warm and proud sense of a field of scholarship for the benefit of a living Yiddish speaking nation). The field was created almost singlehandedly by the remarkably talented Ber Borokhov in Vilna (today’s Vilnius) in 1913, via two foundational works. One was an essay called ‘The Aims of Yiddish Philology’ and the second a huge annotated bibliography of Yiddish studies covering the preceding four hundred years, both in Yiddish, in some sense in the first academic Yiddish style ever forged (Borokhov 1913a, b; see Katz 2007: 274–278; 2008). They were the symbolic era-launching bookends of the first major anthology of academic Yiddish studies to appear in the spirit of the new Yiddishist movement. Called the *Pinkas*, or record book, it was edited by Sh. Niger (1883–1955), a major Yiddish literary historian, critic and author who later settled in New York. The book has kept its position, over a century later, as the foundational work not only for modern Yiddish studies, and particularly linguistics, but also in the social, cultural and political rise of Yiddish internationally. Borokhov called for the establishment of a Yiddish language academy, a dream largely realized when the Yivo (a Yiddish acronym for the words for ‘Yiddish Scientific Institute’) was founded in Vilna, in 1925, by scholars working in his spirit (the city was by then Wilno in the interwar Polish Republic).

On the major issue of language reformation, Borokhov, in one devastating blow, brought a conceptual end to the conceptual ‘era of *Dáytshmerish*’. In English translation:

Because the three elements, German, Hebrew and Aramaic, and Slavic, fulfil differing functions in the language, the hybridity of Yiddish does not hinder its development. Quite to the contrary. It has enabled our language to become ever richer in words and means for expressiveness. There is to be found, however, a fourth element, introduced by our intelligentsia, the youngest of all, which contradicts the structure of the other elements and is virtually incapable of comple-

menting them. That element is called 'Dáytshmerish'. It is ruining our language and is actually dragging it down to the level of an 'ugly Zhargón'. Let us therefore take the time to analyse it. (Borokhov 1913a: 11)

Borokhov's works appeared, at his insistence, in his radical reformed new spelling (unlike the rest of the volume which used the standard *Dáytshmerish* spelling).²⁰ Borokhov died young, in 1917, at the age of 36. But when the post-World War I Yiddish school systems and cultural institutions got underway in Eastern Europe, in their largest numbers in the huge interwar Polish Republic (which then included parts of today's eastern Lithuania, western Belarus, and western Ukraine), his spelling rapidly became, in virtually all its major features, the new Yiddishist standard for education and literary publications and remains so to this day. Its details were further codified at a major school conference, and in a volume published in Vilna by master Yiddish scholar Zalmen Reyzen (1920). The universal acceptance of the basic principles of this spelling around the world, by very diverse literary and educational circles, has remained 'Borokhov's miracle' even if one of his lines stirs controversy to this day: 'As a foundation, I take the pronunciation of the region of Vilna' (Borokhov 1913a: 18).

While the Borokhovian reforms were never challenged in modern Yiddish culture, they served as a basis for further factional reforms that were ever more radical, anti-traditional, and anti-religious in the years following World War I. In the United States and other countries, left-wing poets experimented with respelling words of Hebrew and Aramaic origin according to the phonetic system, making all Yiddish words 'equal'. This reform was to become the basis of the Soviet system, imposed by law under Stalin in the late 1920s throughout the USSR, which went much further still by banning the five word-final forms of letters, as well as the 1000-year-old 'silent alef' and replacing it with a series of diacritics that were supposed to become as 'mandatory' as those of French or Polish but were (and remain) a pain to those who know the traditional language. One of the more ubiquitous images of that reform was the introduction for the first time in a thousand years of three consecutive *vovs*, (resulting from *v+u* and *u+v* sequences) that to this day remain, even when 'fixed' with a diacritic, the symbol of anti-religious, anti-traditional sentiment. When in the late 1930s, Yiddishist politics in Poland took a sharp leftward turn, the Yivo institute in Vilna introduced its final prewar spelling rules, which took up the Soviet system's diacritics but not its 'naturalization' of Semitic words as a kind of 'compromise'. However both those features, the phonetization of traditionally sacred Hebrew and Aramaic origin words, and the imposition of the 'Soviet diacritics' in lieu of the silent alef, would remain

anathema to the eye and sensibilities of the majority of speakers and writers (of whatever politics or ideology) outside the USSR's legal straightjacket. Indeed, New York's famed Communist Yiddish daily, the *Fráyhayt*, would stick to the Borokhovian spelling rules on most issues notwithstanding its radical politics, rendering spelling a consensus issue, by and large, among the secular Yiddish speaking factions.

In Eastern Europe after World War I, Yiddish achieved minority status rights in a number of the new East European states, most prominently, as noted, Poland, whose Jewish population numbered over three million. Although the daily Yiddish press throughout the region obstinately stuck with much *Dáytshtmerish* language and spelling, the Yiddish school systems, literary and educational publishing houses, and cultural organizations virtually all adopted modern Borokhovian Yiddish norms and spelling. Even in the absence of government forces in all these countries, the forces of 'the published word' were centripetally moving toward consensus.²¹ Many of the words derived from New High German that had become synchronically Yiddish over half a century or so of linguistic history in fact enriched the language by providing nuanced stylistic and semantic variants complementing words of older vintage, irrespective of etymology, within the unitary synchronic structure that is Yiddish.²²

Left versus right, secular versus religious, modernist versus traditionalist 'language problems' were in large measure solved by centripetal forces of language in society that came into play in the interwar Yiddishist (i.e. consciously pro-Yiddish) communities around the world. One irony is that for *some* religious school systems, the *Dáytshtmerish* spellings with the silent *áyin* and all the rest, that had a half century earlier been the symbol of anti-religious revolutionary fervor, were now, in post-World War I Eastern Europe, symbols of traditional religious conservatism entailing distance-keeping from the secular Yiddishist infrastructure. Yes, the same silent *áyin* that had 'just' (as history goes) been the anti-religious face of Yiddish publishing, rapidly became its pro-religious face once the secularists ceremoniously banished it.

In a large swath of Yiddish society, it became accepted that modern educational institutions and literary publications used modern spelling and avoided those *Dáytshtmerish* words that were by then culturally offensive, while so many others were integrated, modified, and rapidly found their place in the economy of Yiddish semantics and culture. A word considered to be a *Daytshtmerizm* ('Germanism' or 'Daytshtmerism', plural *Daytshtmerizmen*, 'Daytshtmerisms') might become a staple of the press but be avoided in the classroom. In any case, many, linguistically speaking, nineteenth-century borrowings had become so Yiddishized that they ceased to be, synchronically

speaking, Daytshmerisms. In fact, ironically, some of the daily concepts of modern Yiddishist life revolved around words that were part of the ‘New High German component’ of the language that had over half a century become integral, uncontroversial words acceptable to writers of every stripe. By the 1920s, every group on the planet that used Yiddish for societal life accepted without thought *bavéung* (‘movement’), *klas* (‘class’), *tsáytung* (‘newspaper’), *zítzung* (‘meeting’). It goes without saying that the same was true for *kultúr* and *literatúr*. Sure, the small circles of Yiddish linguists, professional and amateur, could then, as now, have their fun figuring out the relative age of a Yiddish word by its sound structure. All old *u* sounds had shifted to *i* sounds in the southern dialects, but not in words of nineteenth century or later vintage, which entered centuries after the sound shift was complete. But that was and is a matter for observers’ metalinguistic fun, with zero to do with the current life of these words in the language, other than occasional satire, say making fun of purportedly poor quality stuff with transient hit words such as ‘kiltír’ and ‘literatír’ that have taken on a life of their own. Writing from America for a prestigious Yiddish literary journal in Vilna in 1928 on the contemporary aims and achievements of Yiddishism, Yiddish educator Leybush Lehrer placed the issues of Daytshmerisms and spelling in their ‘new-found places’ at the very bottom of the roster of hot-button questions of the day (Lehrer 1928: 414).

A special case was Soviet Yiddish. Until Stalin’s shutdown of Yiddish culture, the Soviet Union financed a Yiddish infrastructure in regions with large Yiddish-speaking populations, particularly the USSR’s Belorussian and Ukrainian republics. For all the stultifying effects of growing government clampdowns on freedom, permanent cyclical intrigue entailing ‘mandatory professional destruction’ of one’s own teachers and mentors, the Soviet Union enabled the publication of many major works of Yiddish literature in addition to funding schools, theaters, and research institutions through much of the interwar period. There are various studies of Soviet state-mandated radical reform of vocabulary, spelling, and more (see e.g. Erlich 1973; Estraiikh 1999). But there is, from the sociolinguistic point of view, one ‘posthistorical’ issue that would rise again in the later twentieth century in, of all places, North America. For a small postwar group of Yiddish normativists, the 1920s–1930s Soviet Yiddish phenomenon of ‘language decisions by diktat of the law’ became a sociolinguistic, and indeed, a psychological, model for a kind of normativist Yiddish ‘authority’.

The Postwar Yiddish Crisis

In the history of Yiddish-related polemics, the ‘Holocaust debate’ has been, and largely remains, whether the (as history goes) abrupt murder of some five and a half million Yiddish speakers on the native territory of the language in Eastern Europe was or was not ‘a death blow’ to the vernacular (‘living’) language. The relative few who escaped the genocide’s choke-hold and migrated to Western countries were able to join rapidly linguistically assimilating, increasingly prosperous communities of pre-catastrophe emigres hailing from Eastern Europe. One important section of the survivors settled in a newfound state created just for this minority. The State of Israel was in fact built with an essential component of its ideology being the revival of a rival ancient language (in part via a campaign of hate and destruction against the erstwhile language of that state’s founders). A formula for ‘language death’ has seldom been more extreme, more deadly, or more persuasive. As countless academics, pundits, and educators would put it more gently, ‘the era of Yiddish was gradually coming to its end’.

The prime desire of the immigrant generations of East European-born Jews in the United States (or Canada, Britain, Australia, South Africa, as well as France, Argentina, and various others), whether they came before the war, or as Holocaust survivors, was to build a good and tranquil life where their children and grandchildren could thrive on a level playing field with anyone else and rise to the highest positions of personal success and achievement. Anecdotal, and sometimes not only anecdotal, that could mean, say, sweat-shop toiler immigrants worried that their children might have some slight trace of a foreign accent or mannerisms in places like America that would hinder them becoming a doctor or lawyer or ‘at least an accountant’. That fear was naturally transferred to the new generation itself.²³ It was also the case that two major pan-Jewish edifices were growing by leaps and bounds in the creation of educational, cultural, political, and other institutions. One was a reinvigorated, modernized Jewish religion in its many and diverse groupings and sub-groups. Another was the sheer inspirational power of the new State of Israel fighting for its existence against a vastly larger array of local enemies sworn to its destruction. Then comes the clincher. Both religion-based and Israel-centric Jewish life had the Hebrew language, which in its own variety of historic incarnations spanned the millennia from the most ancient Biblical texts to the living language of the newly minted Israelis. That in turn made for popular American intra-Jewish comparisons between the image of the Israelis who rapidly mastered the arts of war, as set against those alleged ‘ghetto Jews

back in the old country who went like sheep to the slaughter', including their own many murdered relatives. Then, in societally monolingual America, for many decades after the war, home to the world's largest Jewish community, the very sound of Yiddish often became offensive. The very sound of *oy* diphthongs in everyday words and vaudeviled *oy-oy-oy* expressions became a source of cringing by American-born Jews. For Jews who *did* want their 'own language' (though not, to be sure, as an added vernacular for daily life), it could be only some kind of Hebrew. For those who centered modern Israel as 'what makes Jewish life tick', there were trips to Israel, an inspiring new country that spoke Hebrew, or to be more precise Israeli, a new, stable, and creative official language of a nation-state.²⁴ An extensive array of Jewish day schools arose in the United States, with fulsome programs in both general ('English') and Jewish ('Hebrew') studies in which Yiddish was not only boycotted but subjected to systematic degradation. So much so that children whose Jewish names were given to commemorate deceased relatives, including those who perished in the Holocaust, might have those names mocked by the teacher and replaced with modern Israeli names (e.g. *Gitl* (f.) being force-changed to *Tova*, *Alter* (m.) to *Ilan*).²⁵ Needless to say, their graduates were not aware that a world-class literature was produced in the language of their heavily European-accented parents or grandparents. On top of everything else, there was a political obstacle. Coinciding with the McCarthy era and its aftermath, the postwar period was permeated with a political environment in which the vast majority of secular Yiddish writers, teachers, and cultural leaders, who had been brought to modern secular Yiddish culture as part of a wider socialist 'all-people-are-equal' ethos, were decidedly far to the left of the Western mainstream. For example, the two feuding centers for the older generation of secular Yiddish writers in New York City were 175 East Broadway, home to the *Jewish Daily Forward* (in Yiddish: *Fórverts*) stalwart of the Yiddish *rékht* ('rightists'), and 35 East 12th Street, address of the *Fráyhayt*, home to the *línk* ('leftists'). Deep into the late twentieth century, the Forward's masthead sported on either side of the paper's name the Yiddish translations of 'Workers of the world, unite!' and 'The liberation of the workers depends on the workers themselves'. And that was the 'right-wing' paper.

The range of devastating setbacks other than the Holocaust includes Stalin's destruction of Soviet Yiddish culture that culminated with the murder of the last truly great Yiddish writers on 12 August 1952; the vicious campaign in Palestine, then Israel, to root out the language, not only by attacks on writers, kiosks, and publishers, laws against daily newspapers, but also, and critically, on massive investment in a campaign of degradation and delegitimization²⁶; and finally, massive, rapid voluntary shift to English,

French, Spanish, and other national languages, characterized in the United States, home to the largest non-European Yiddish cultural infrastructure, by an especially negative take to anything Yiddish. In America, that negativism was encouraged by some of the largest and most successful communal, educational, and political Jewish organizations. The two extant and weak Yiddish-speaking sectors were (in American terms) of the far left (the older generations of readers of socialist publications) and the small numbers of ultra-Orthodox Hasidim and other East European Haredim, (in cultural terms) of the far right. Nobody foresaw that the Hasidim were ‘quietly’ creating hundreds of thousands of new Yiddish speakers. When the news was eventually brought home, sometimes in the 1990s, sometimes more recently, it was a kind of thunderbolt.

East European Yiddish writers, journalists, publishers, teachers, actors, and other cultural activists in all these countries of migration did not by any means ‘give up the ghost’. To the contrary, they became pillars of exceptional moral and intellectual fortitude who continued creating to the very last days that their health or life permitted (it is just that they did not, with a tiny percentage of exceptions, pass on even the language to their children). East European-born Yiddish educators maintained four distinct secular Yiddish (supplementary, afternoon, and Sunday) school systems in the United States for as long as they could through to the mid-twentieth century or beyond; these school systems generated sophisticated periodical publications (see Freidenreich 2010; Praver Kadar 2016). There were the Yiddish dailies, weeklies, monthlies, and quarterlies that survived to different points in the waning years of the last century.

Various proud international points on the map of secular Yiddish survived until the turn of our millennium, with the retirement, severe illness, or death of the last avatars of Yiddish culture in each. It would be invidious to attach years to cities, but in the field, there was a general consensus about which ‘disappearances’ by the limitations of the human life span led to the loss of a city on the map of secular Yiddish culture. There were no serious ‘language corpus’ or ‘normativism issues’ among the otherwise highly variegated Yiddish culturists born in Eastern Europe. To be sure, there was ongoing variation in various details, but it is fair to say there was a standard lexicon, a standard orthography and an aura of normalcy (that itself included the daily press vs. literary publishing dichotomy). This community tried hard to forget that every last one of them came to Yiddish before Hitler ever invaded Poland and that the proverbial *málekh hamóves* (‘angel of death’) was inching ever closer to each beloved secular Yiddish culture icon.

The 1960s Rise of Pro-Yiddish Sentiment and Activity

By the 1960s, some change was underway concerning the status of secular Yiddish being the exclusive preserve of prewar persons. The New Left, the Hippies, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the counterculture scene, coupled with Black is Beautiful, knowledge of the Holocaust, successful translations of a few Yiddish writers into English, and (for some, a strange juxtaposition) the Six-Day War with its eye-patched image of Moshe Dayan all led, in ways yet to be studied, to a renewed interest in a 'native' Jewish culture that was 'closer' than Israelites in ancient Egypt or the new State of Israel far away in the Middle East. Pride in previously prejudiced ethnicity took off among some baby boomers, for whom Yiddish was suddenly 'cool'. There was also the conglomerate effect of beloved East European-born parents 'starting to die' in large numbers and their bereaved children realizing that they barely knew a word of the language of their daily newspapers, magazines, books, and of the destroyed world of their East European childhood. A new academic openness to Minority Studies also enabled the phenomenon of what came to the older generation to be a 'salve to the soul': *Yidish in di universitétn* ('Yiddish in the universities'; see Prager 1974).

But if 'unlucky Yiddish' had ever had 'one great stroke of luck' it was in the fortuitous departure from Vilna, in the summer of 1939, of master Yiddish historian and co-founder of the Yivo, Max Weinreich (1894–1969). He at City College, and his son Uriel Weinreich at Columbia University, would 'double-handedly' establish Yiddish language studies on a high academic level that was at the same time based on overt secular Yiddishist ideology, sadly a rather rare juxtaposition in the field in later twentieth-century North America. The *yidishístn* ('Yiddishists') tended to be 'shouters about their love for Yiddish' and the serious academics with interest in things Yiddish tended to be *sanskritístn* ('Sanskritists') who firmly believed that the academic study of Yiddish should not be compromised by sentiments about a 'dying language'. Still in his early twenties, Uriel Weinreich published the first (and for many decades the only) viable Yiddish textbook for American elementary university Yiddish courses, *College Yiddish* (Weinreich 1949). He was to become one of America's leading general theoretical linguists, a standing that he proudly applied to the benefit of Yiddish studies wherever possible. The Weinreichs, father and son, assisted by a number of East European origin Jewish academics in New York City, especially Sol Liptzin, established a viable Yiddish Studies tradition synthesizing the striving for high academic standards with love of Yiddish. While

Max Weinreich was completing his magnum opus, *History of the Yiddish Language*, Uriel was publishing dozens of brilliant works in general linguistics that succeeded in inspiring a number of non-Jewish linguists to Yiddish questions; some would personally go on to learn to speak Yiddish too.²⁷

Uriel Weinreich predeceased his father by a couple of years. After his death, Columbia University and Yivo, in partnership in 1968, launched the intensive Uriel Weinreich summer program that became the ‘mother of Yiddish summer programs’, an institution emulated at various times by summer programs at Oxford, Paris, Tel Aviv, Vilnius, Warsaw, and Weimar, among others, that have arguably had more success in transmitting language skills than many ‘Yiddish 101’ classes. But the rise of a small group of baby boomer scholars and activists who would become ‘Yiddishists’ in the sense of actually speaking and writing the language was largely the work of a Chernowitz-born, Bronx-based Yiddish lexicographer and master language teacher, Mordkhe Schaechter (1927–2007), who was becoming, from the late 1960s, the most successful Yiddish teacher in North America in the sense of producing students in advanced courses who would go on to speak and write *in* Yiddish and who would remain dedicated to the cause of Yiddishism. They were generally affiliated with the group *Yugntruf* (‘Call to Youth’), which is also the name of their magazine, founded in November 1964. Those affiliated with the magazine and the club became known as ‘Yugntrufists’.

Normativist Purism in the Spirit of Heinz Kloss’s *Ausbau* Theory

There was, however, one highly contentious issue. The Yugntrufists, under the influence of Dr. Schaechter, an uncompromising normativist and purist, became, in the eyes of the Yiddish writers and teachers of New York and beyond, ‘language fanatics’ for lexical purism (‘permanent war on the Daytshmerisms’) and the precise Soviet-impacted radical ‘Yivo spelling’ rules that were anathema to most of the world of Yiddish (and virtually all those of traditionalist or religious orientation). Instead of embracing and learning from the world of Yiddish writers, the mini-movement’s publications and activities often lambasted the leading Yiddish writers and publications for using what they were calling Daytshmerisms and for refusing to adopt the unpalatable spelling rules. One of the jokes among New York Yiddish editors was that you could tell that a magazine was on its deathbed when it was pressured to change its spelling just before going under. What was unfathomable

to many was that Uriel Weinreich's posthumously published *English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary* (Weinreich 1968), had two levels of black marks, black circles (= 'of doubtful admissibility in the standard language') and black triangles (= 'inadmissible in the standard language'), both categories including many vocabulary items used by the most famous Yiddish writers. But black marks can be ignored. The dictionary also included a huge number of neologisms not marked by any symbol, which became known as 'fake words' that would engender hilarity from native speakers. Part of them were there to replace 'newly forbidden' Daytshmerisms, others to provide equivalents to terms in English. One unsolved mystery is that Uriel Weinreich's own Yiddish writings were not at all of the stylistic ilk of his posthumous dictionary; it was a view he mysteriously came to at the end of his life. For a critique and analysis, see Katz (1991, 1993: 161–252).

Despite this flaw, that advanced users could readily isolate, Uriel Weinreich's dictionary remains an irreplaceable masterpiece of modern lexicography and semantic precision, in which the author's genius shines through 'many times on every page'. It was also beautifully published by McGraw Hill and Yivo, enhancing the prestige of Yiddish. The Yúgntrufists, who edited the magazine *Yúgntruf*, and their mentor, Dr. Schaechter, who edited the magazine *Afn Shvel*, continued through the 1970s and 1980s to ban ever more common Yiddish words, while introducing ever more neologisms (though it had been a century since anyone went looking for Yiddish words in German dictionaries; this was turning into a linguistic hunt of lexical items of nineteenth century, rather than earlier vintage). Bad-spiritedness periodically came to the fore in periodic polemic broadsides against writers and editors in *Afn Shvel* and circulars from an associated 'enforcement committee'. But for some readers of the older generation not directly involved, the newfound 'liveliness' around Yiddish itself brought its own spiritual, and occasionally comic, relief.

For the baby boomers, the rub was that instead of becoming inspired pupils of the last generation of Yiddish writers and educators born before the Holocaust, the only (howsoever small) group of young North American-born secular Yiddishists who spoke and wrote in Yiddish declared a cultural war on the older generation. One low point of the period came early on, during the one and only public picketing action conducted by Yúgntruf. It was not against the Hebrew day schools that boycotted Yiddish, not against the American Jewish organizations that excluded Yiddish, and not against any municipal or other agencies that had programs in minority languages that left Yiddish out. They picketed the two leading *Yiddish* daily newspapers, both on East Broadway, on New York City's Lower East Side, on the 23rd and 26th of April 1970 in a protest centered on vocabulary and spelling! The triumphalist

account of the humiliation of New York's last Yiddish newspapers, ergo of their writers and staffs, appeared in the magazine *Yugntruf's* September 1970 issue (no. 20), with photos and self-heroizing articles about how they were somehow 'saving true Yiddish' (Orenstein et al. 1970).

The movement's 'higher academic guru' was the late and prolific master sociologist of language, Professor Joshua A. Fishman (1926–2015), who was himself a prime founder of the very field of modern Sociology of Language. In an array of superb works, he accomplished a vast amount, not only academically but also in inspiring interest in Yiddish, among many other weaker and threatened languages. He is one of the towering inspirations to current initiatives around the world to save from threatened extinction smaller languages. It is no diminution of Professor Fishman's permanent contributions that some of the theoretical underpinnings of his work on the language that meant most to him have been controversial. Frankly, they now need to be debated openly with the benefit of a half century of subsequent language history to analyze. The fact remains that Professor Fishman and Dr. Schaechter were among the first (and tiny group) of non-Hasidic, conscious Yiddishist idealists, who built families so committed to Yiddish as a living language that a half century later their grandchildren and great-grandchildren continue to maintain Yiddish as the language of the home, with numerous descendants deeply active in things Yiddish, wherever in the world they may have settled. It is also important to note that Prof. Fishman never engaged in the attacks on Yiddish writers and editors that have tarred the record of some of his followers. Moreover, Fishman, as a master scholar, separated his support for the New York normativists from his scholarly appraisals of empirical reality. When it came to his thoughts on 'which population to monitor most closely (from the point of view of variance in connection with ongoing sociocultural processes', his reply to his own rhetorical question was clear: 'I would select the ultra-Orthodox in the United States and in Israel' (Fishman 1981b: 746). Moreover, those who follow Prof. Fishman's works on Yiddish have never forgotten his most famous footnote about a situation where the folks 'living out' the normativists' dreams were the normativists' minute circles themselves which they would then report on as supposed successes. He naturally put it more diplomatically: 'However, at the same time, the world of Yiddish-in-print has shrunk to such an extent that the circles of the remaining planners and the circles of those who still publish in Yiddish criss-cross much more fully [...]' (Fishman 1981a: 56).

This newfound American Yiddish normativism that was pitting the few young adherents of the secular language against the surviving older writers did not come from some individual whim of several families. It came right from

a serious and internationally known sociolinguistic theory intended to facilitate, not undermine, the revitalization and survival of weak languages. That was the *Ausbau* theory of minority language development of German linguist Heinz Kloss (1904–1987). Kloss distinguished, in his study of smaller minority languages, between *Abstand* languages that had natural distance from their powerful competitors and *Ausbau* languages that were somehow too close to their powerful competitors and needed to be *made further* by sociolinguistic intervention. Kloss introduced these concepts in 1952, and they became widespread in the English speaking world of sociolinguistics with his 1967 paper on the subject (see Kloss 1952, 1967). Fishman and Schaechter openly cited the model of the German linguist as theoretical underpinning for their new Yiddish mini-movement in the late twentieth-century Bronx (see e.g. Schaechter 1980: 212; Fishman 1981a: 56–57).

The application of the German linguist's *Ausbau* thinking to late twentieth century North American Yiddish continues to strike some observers as eerie. As noted earlier, it had been around a century since anyone tried to 'enrich' Yiddish through modern German. Those days had been long over in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. Why would it be made an issue now in America? Moreover, after the Holocaust, and after the growing recognition of Yiddish literature internationally in the later twentieth century, hardly anybody was calling Yiddish 'bad German' as had earlier generations of German Jews and Zionists and anti-Semites; and if anyone still felt that way, who cared? They were certainly not going to care about 'some more words being changed'! The 1960s Yiddish (lexicon, grammar, orthography—the works) of the great writers living in the United States, including Isaac Bashevis Singer, Chaim Grade, and dozens of others was a stable, sophisticated highpoint in the 1000-year history of Yiddish.

For most East European-born native speakers of Yiddish, including the writers, editors, teachers, and cultural leaders, the assault on their form of Yiddish was a rude shock (see Katz 1993: 37–45). Among those who dared 'reply to the professors' were Avrom Golomb (1967), Kh. Sh. Kazhdan (1973), M. Stekin-Landau (1992), and most famously, the master Yiddish satirist Abraham Shulman, in numerous columns in the Yiddish *Forward* (*Fórvverts*) that still await being collected and republished. Looking back, one of the most meaningful protests was the one known team-up of a prewar cultural figure with a much younger American-born scholar (Gutkovitsh and Tsukerman 1977). The dean of Yiddish scholars in Israel, Dov Sadan, asked in one of his books: 'One of [the] weapons [in the normativism campaign] is the 'Yúgntruf' organization. But one has to ask oneself, whether a youth group, as the operational unit for a normativist and purist philologist [...] is not too modest in what it asks for itself and of itself' (Sadan 1979: 257; cf. Katz 1992: 44).²⁸

By the mid-1990s, those few of New York's secular Yiddish publications and institutions that had long-term funding, in a few cases many millions of dollars, deriving from 'the good old days', were faced with the disappearance of the last generation of prewar East European-born editors, directors, educators, and leaders. In the absence of their own progeny or pupils, they had to turn, usually over the objections of the aged and ailing mohicans still in office, to two groups of baby boomers to take over. Seeking early on to avoid the Yugntrufists, they turned first to veterans of the Soviet-sponsored Moscow magazine *Sovétish héymland* who were on occasion specially brought to America, Britain, or Israel in the 1990s, and in later years, often in conflict with them, the Yugntrufists. The ex-Soviets, beyond their understandable satisfaction and joy at finding solid careers in the field of Yiddish upon touchdown in the West in the 1990s, also sometimes had an agenda of rehabilitating and trying to redefine for history the role of Soviet Yiddish literature, mores, and culture for the future Western canon of the field (sometimes including their own mentor from the 1980s, the Soviet regime's high-level informer and chief tormenter of Yiddish writers, Aron Vergelis). In the twenty-first century, the Yugntrufists began to obtain some of these jobs and have proven, again, to be the only true stalwarts of Yiddishism in their environment. One may agree or disagree with the late Dr. Schaechter, but his descendants continue to speak and write Yiddish. The most recent and most important accomplishment is the recently published and very weighty *Comprehensive English-Yiddish Dictionary Based on the Lexical Research of Mordkhe Schaechter* (CEYD; Schaechter-Viswanath and Glasser 2016). It is a work of love and dedication to the late normativist. At the same time, its purist bent led to the omission (in a massive volume) of many everyday words the compilers consider to be Daytshmerisms, including the unmarked, everyday Yiddish words, for example, *doubt* (n. and v.), *examine*, *hopeless*, *immortality*, *invent*, *loss*, *moderate* (adj.), *point of view*, *pronunciation*, *visit* (n. and v.). At the other end of the spectrum are the large numbers of 'made-up words' (proposed neologisms). These do not empirically become 'Yiddish' because they are in a normativist dictionary. They mislead the language learner into usages that native speakers find hilarious. The project will remain for sociolinguistics a warning of what can be wrought by language normativism and purism, or 'corpus planning' that reigns unchecked in the situation of a much-weakened language environment. Even the most sympathetic academic reviewer to date has noted that:

The proportion of terms from various domains (agriculture, astronomy, botany, various crafts and industries, zoology, etc.) is significantly higher in CEYD than in any other Yiddish dictionary. [...] In CEYD we find Yiddish equivalents for

such English words as *aardvark*, *aardwolf*, *gnu*, *kraal*, *mahout*, *sausage tree*, names of all the vitamins from vitamin A to K, etc. [...] Having overfilled the book with terms of all kinds, the CEYD editors ran out of space for other lexicographic data, even if they are felt to be missing. [...] The label for a neologism is absent. CEYD introduces lots of new Yiddish words such as ‘elevator operator’ *liftnik*, ‘gypsy cab’ *privátnik*, ‘jogger’ *láyflər*, ‘spam’ *blitsmist*, etc. How can a CEYD user know that a word found in this dictionary is an accepted long-used Yiddish word and not a new lexical coinage? (Moskovich 2017: 122, 123)

Some observers have argued that the normativists have indeed made one neologism popular in the circles of Yiddish clubs, and those who enjoy inserting bits of Yiddish in their Latin-letter emails: *blits-post* for ‘email’ (it was duly featured in the headline of the *New York Times* article on the dictionary; Berger 2016). But even this ‘success’ has proved disturbing for native speakers. First they enjoy their *ímeyl*. Second, some are made uneasy by derivatives of *blitz* in the wake of its World War II use for forming nominal compounds. Native speakers use it only, as a noun on its own, in its old sense of ‘lightning’.

The Yiddish Conundrum

And that, finally, takes us to the current Yiddish divide that is its conundrum. Hasidic communities are producing dozens of weekly newspapers, magazines, and publish many new books each year. One of its family magazines, *Máyləs* (or *Má:ləs* in the southern dialects that dominate the Hasidic scene), edited in the Hasidic enclave of Monsey, New York, is arguably one of the best young people’s magazines in Yiddish of any period.²⁹ With the advent of the internet, more and more Hasidim are quietly enjoying more and more in Yiddish from other circles. Times have changed. Some of these communities are now so confident of their cultural security that they do not ‘fear’ the ‘influence’ of secular Yiddish linguistic norms as they did half a century ago.

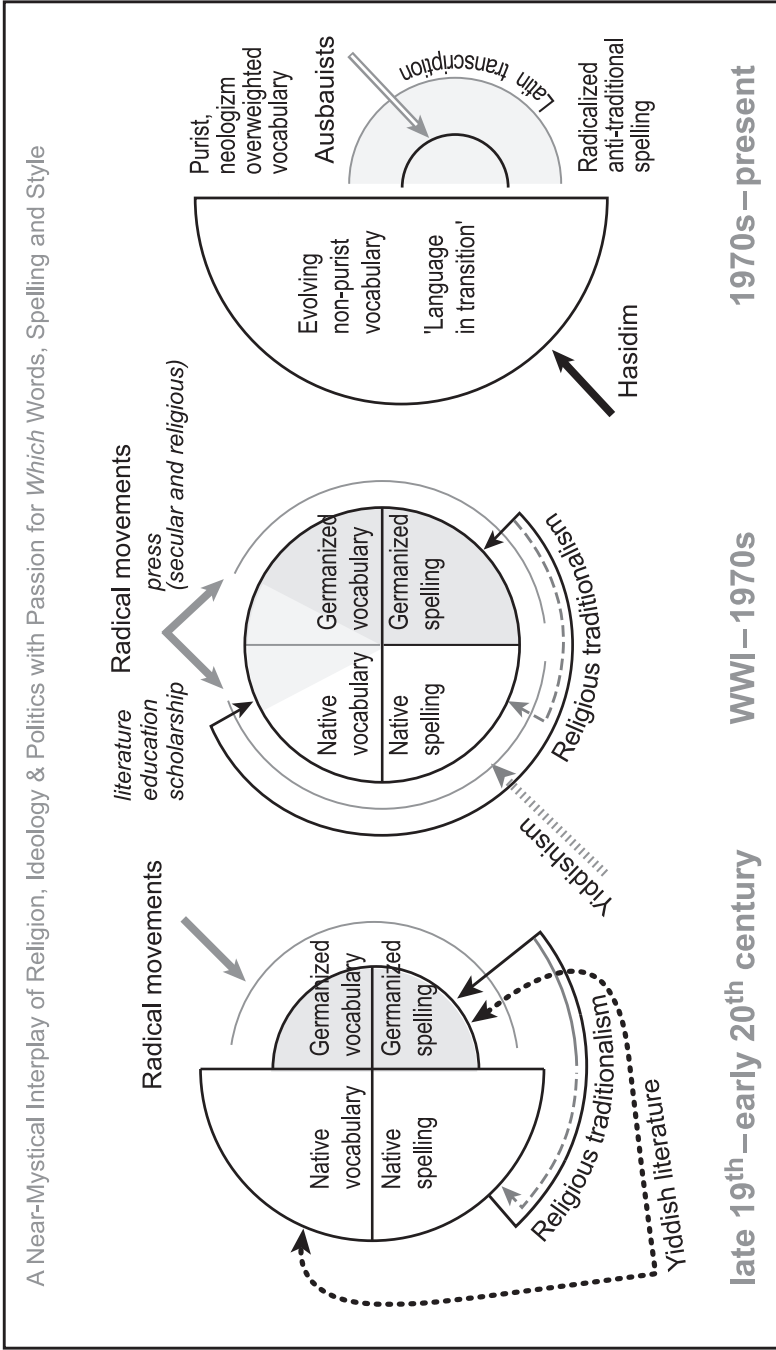
The proverbial Wall of China comes, curiously, from the other direction. ‘Modern people’ who love Yiddish, study Yiddish, want to actually speak and communicate in Yiddish, and not just enjoy translations, music, dance, and some entertaining words and phrases, will need to overcome the hasidophobic and haredophobic attitudes of modern Jewry, including some of the leading ‘secular Yiddishists’, and seek out means to communicate with *some* among the hundreds of thousands of living people who speak the Yiddish language. If they cannot see that a living language in living communities with a vast and growing published output is not infinitely more important than the corpus

planners' aversions to banned words, need for new words, and universal implementation of radical spelling reform that is offensive to the mass of living speakers, there is a profound problem. Incidentally, a number of millennials are now starting to overcome the baby boomers' prejudices. Those who have sought Hasidic friends and Yiddish mentors have rapidly found them.

It can be instructive to imagine, what might scholars think, a hundred years hence, about Yiddish professors, teachers, editors, lexicographers, and attempted poets who would have nothing to do with the only communities that spoke the language in their own time? At the time of writing, there is the news, perhaps for the first time, that a Hasidic scholar has finally been given the opportunity to make some of these points in one of the Jewish linguistics journals. In her significant new paper, Chaya R. Nove notes 'that Hasidic Yiddish dialects, the only ones that were directly transmitted by native speaking European immigrants and successfully maintained by four subsequent generations, have been essentially excluded from the Yiddish linguistics literature'. She courageously makes explicit reference to the biases *within* academia, including 'anti-Hasidic prejudice' and 'a more specific anti-Hasidic bias, inherited from secular Yiddishism and intensified by new resentments'. Provocatively, and correctly, Nove alludes to the degree to which these biases have snuffed out professional linguists' and sociolinguists' own storied 'acknowledgment of heterogeneity and new methods for analysing and quantifying variation and change' (Nove 2018: 120–122; cf. Katz 2006: 472; cf. summaries of this paper's perspectives in Figs. 22.1 and 22.2).

Nove's perspicacious observations relate to a phenomenon we may call 'Envy of Hasidism' on the part of secular Yiddishists, academic and non-academic alike, who have been pursuing linguistic purism in a (truly admirable) mini-circle of determined speakers, though at times, in the realm of research (on rather more risky ground), taking themselves to be the speech community to be studied. Hasidism, by contrast, has produced hundreds of thousands of native Yiddish speakers whose children can at times understand substantially more of a given page from the Yiddish literary classics of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, or Bashevis Singer but have no interest at present in looking at this literature (cf. Katz 2007: 379–392; 2015: 291–304). Nove threw down the gauntlet in 2018:

For Yiddishists, the humiliating sting of failure, tinged with envy, may have provoked more anti-Hasidic resentment than did its history of secularism. That these black-clad Hasidim with no connection to Chernowitz, no knowledge of Sholem Aleichem, and no desire to participate in secular culture would become the de facto stewards of the language they had fought so hard to save may have been too much to bear. (Nove 2018: 128)



visualization by Giedre Beconyte

Fig. 22.1 150 years in the life of Yiddish




Hasidic (Ultra-Orthodox)	Modern
 <p>Heading for a million speakers and growing</p>	<p>(a) born prewar: several hundred thousand and disappearing (b) born postwar: under a dozen families that speak Yiddish at home, thousands of devotees with variable knowledge</p>
 <p>Hasidic traditionalist preserving prewar Jewish civilization in near totality</p>	<p>Variigated but heavily liberal and secularist (with few modern-Orthodox) and including non-Jews. Exaltation of modern Yiddish literature as core Jewish treasure</p>
<p>Yiddish</p> <p>Native language; the natural spoken language with no generally stated policy. As object of linguistic study ignored by most Yiddish linguists</p>	<p>Spectrum ranges from in-depth study of the language per se to delinguification into a feel, taste, or art form with yearning “to save Yiddish”. An ultra-normativized variety native to no dialect is studied. Ongoing campaigns against Yiddish words considered to be ‘dayishmerisms’ with vast numbers of neologisms declared to be ‘Standard Yiddish’ by group leaders. Insistence on one radical version of spelling but with increasing use of Yiddish in Latin-letter transcription</p>
 <p>Around a dozen major weeklies & monthlies; dozens of books per year</p>	<p>Handful of lavishly subsidized publications featuring reprints of classic literature, or (sometimes lame) attempts at poetry and other creative writing. For scholars: successful programs to digitize thousands of classic works</p>

Fig. 22.2 The two kinds of contemporary Yiddish

Paradoxes abound. Around 99 percent of the ‘secular Yiddish writers’ whom the secular Yiddishists so cherish, themselves grew up in Eastern Europe in the depth of the deeply religious, ultra-Orthodox civilization that would in our times be referred to as ‘Haredi’ (often Hasidic). An overwhelming majority of the most beloved works of the great secular Yiddish authors are actually set in that premodern traditional East European Ashkenazic society. There is a direct linguistic continuity between the Yiddish of the great writers of the last century and a half and the living Hasidic Yiddish of the next century and a half. That is in itself, coming after the Holocaust, a remarkable phenomenon worthy of study by linguists and sociolinguists alike for a long time to come.

Implications for Language Revivalism, Revitalization, and Normative Planning

For several centuries, the study of diverse aspects of Yiddish has proven fruitful for wider linguistics and the social sciences. This is not because of any mystical Yiddish fount. It is because of the highly unusual, exotic (and in the twentieth century extraordinarily tragic) trajectory of a language without a country that has meant so much to such diverse groups of left and right, religious and secular, traditionalist and avant-garde, always in stiff competition not just with the onsite national languages but with the two older classic languages of the same people. The use of the ancient Semitic alphabet has added an appreciable array of artful aspects. We have seen how the letter known as silent *áyin* that symbolized radical socialism in one generation morphed into a symbol of religious traditionalism once the radicals had abandoned it.³⁰

In our own time, the case of Yiddish may contribute to the study of resilience for minority languages.³¹ It is a case that can serve as a warning beacon for the dangers of application of sociolinguistic principles in actual language movements, especially in the case of weak languages, all the more so where the sociolinguists have the resources, while the vast number of native speakers are old and weak. When sociolinguists and their language-activist pupils wage war on the older native speaker generation of ‘a language in danger’, their work can be counterproductive. Instead of becoming icons to be emulated, the last native speakers (even great writers acclaimed in English translation) are rendered exemplars of some allegedly defective form of the language (in the case at hand: vocabulary and spelling).

Within the realm of language planning, the greatest potentially damaging elements are unnecessary and unwanted corpus planning, especially the brands of normativism that entail purism, an insistence on counter-empirical degrees of uniformity in writing and speech, or policies of ‘confronting’ English or other world languages with neologisms that are laughable to native speakers, the more so when they appear unmarked in dictionaries for technical fields nobody is using the language for. The cumulative effect of such policies can be the setting up of a language czar’s office to bring down, rather than raise up, the remnants of the population that still speak the endangered language.

The next Yiddish lesson here, so to speak, entails the capacity to take good news as good news. When a little-considered group of speakers emerges with an unpredicted demographic big bang, it is an occasion for sociolinguistic and language-revitalizationary celebration. The unexpected advent of hundreds of thousands of new Yiddish speakers in compact communities became instead the normativists’ new target for ‘what is wrong’ rather than the revivalists’ celebration, coupled with the true linguist’s joy in having novel bona fide language development to study, document, and analyze.

But the Ausbauists’ purism and fear of similarity to some other language is only one side of the current Yiddish conundrum. The other is ideology and worldview. The revolutionary, secularist, radical politics fervor that drove earlier generations of Yiddishists is long gone. Its heirs, mostly modern secular liberals, a handful modern Orthodox, now isolate their ersatz Yiddish as a symbol of resistance to the linguistically real Yiddish of hundreds of thousands who are deeply religious and are continuing the very religious life that gave rise to the birth and life of Yiddish in the first place.

What can that mean for the best-intentioned practitioners of language revivalism and revitalization? It can send a signal to well-intentioned saviors to be much more careful before engaging in activities that undermine—rather than support—the future of the very language they are ‘saving’. Preserving endangered languages is no easy feat; in fact, persuading young people to raise their families in a small, endangered language of their forebears instead of one of the great bulldozer languages of the nation-state and of the internet is extraordinarily difficult, as revivalists know and appreciate.

The solution can be fathomed from the biblical Judgment of Solomon (I Kings, 3: 16–28). The truest language revivalists will strive to strengthen the survival, status, and future of the empirically real vernacular varieties of the small, threatened language before them. Even if recent linguistic history has moved in a direction other than that of their own and their mentors’ language planning choices. Even if the communities of native speakers steadfastly hold

worldviews and beliefs characteristic of the first thousand years of the history of Yiddish speaking people.

Notes

1. Sincerest thanks to Gabrielle Hogan-Brun and Bernard Spolsky for valuable comments to earlier drafts of this paper and to Preeti Rawat for her unusually valuable editing queries and comments during production. None of them bears responsibility for views or errors. Disclosure: The author published (in Yiddish) a pro-descriptivist, anti-normativist tract on Yiddish stylistics a quarter century ago (Katz 1993).
2. Figures for Yiddish speakers for the 1930s include Solomon A. Birnbaum's 11,875,000 (Birnbaum 1979: 41) and Max Weinreich's 10,690,250 (M. Weinreich 1940: 25, basing himself on Lestschinsky 1936); Weinreich adhered to these figures to the end of his life (see in his magnum opus, completed 1969, at 1973: I, 171; III, 146). Other estimates range up to 13 million. Much of the discrepancy is due to questions on how to reckon with several million East European Jewish emigrants around the world who were native speakers but rapidly shifting to other languages.
3. This humoristic formulation of the emblematic tale of the Yiddish university chair benefactor is owed to the late Prof. Gershon Winer (1922–2003), whose buoyant posthumously published memoir (Winer 2009) is instructive on these questions.
4. Estimates for the 2018 number of native Yiddish-speaking Haredim include 500,000 (Chaya Nove, 22 April 2018); 525,000 (Barry Kosmin, 19 April and 14 May 2018, personal communications); 1.1 million (Sergio Della Pergola, 24 April and 11 May 2018, personal communications; Jewish Data Bank, 24 April 2018, personal communication). Specialists are often agreed about the inadequacy of census data. For the United States, Samuel Heilman (24 April 2018, personal communication) advises: 'Best estimates are from US Census and then double'.
5. Among the many works on Haredim, one that stands out is Noah Efron's (2003). For more discussion see my chapters, 'The Future of Yiddish' in Katz (2007: 367–398) and the section 'The Hasidic Future of Yiddish' in Katz (2015: 291–300).
6. Estimates range from 100,000 to 200,000 internationally (Della Pergolla, 11 May 2018, personal communication) to 550,000 (Kosmin, 19 April and 14 May 2018, personal communications). Needless to say, this number is rapidly plummeting toward inevitable demographic zero, with the sharpest drop-off among the oldest, that is, those with maximum prewar linguistic maturity.
7. I have begun in a very minor way to post on YouTube extracts, recorded over a quarter century, of the last in-situ Yiddish speakers in the Lithuanian lands (Northeastern Yiddish), even as the larger collection looks for a permanent

home (Katz 2018a). One of the academic goals has been a modest in-progress language atlas (Katz 2018b). Thankfully, there are major institutional projects that have preserved very much, both audio (the Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry, or LCAAJ) and video (among them, AHEYM at Indiana University).

8. Survey works in English focused on Yiddish, with sections for both the general and the more specialized reader, include Birnbaum (1979), Katz (2007, 2015), and M. Weinreich (2008). The major current survey of the Jewish languages more widely is Spolsky (2014).
9. I have argued for Aramaic being the direct, living Semitic linguistic link between Near Eastern antiquity and the earliest Yiddish in Europe; these topics are not relevant to the issues here considered (see references in Katz 1985).
10. On the origins and history of the terms *Ashkenaz*, *Ashkenazi*, *Ashkenazim*, see Katz (1998).
11. Some twentieth-century secular Yiddish linguists, occasionally far from the two sacred languages, somehow decided (incorrectly) that Hebrew and Aramaic in Ashkenaz had ‘merged’ into a hodgepodge often called Hebrew-hyphen-Aramaic (see Katz 1985, 2007: 45–77).
12. It was Mendele above all who synthesized a powerful standard literary language from within, with generous acceptance of living Semitic- and Slavic-derived elements, and the internal Germanic component development, of Yiddish without, so to speak, looking in foreign dictionaries for solutions (see Prilutski 1928; M. Weinreich 1928).
13. A ‘lesson’ could have been a *shiyar*, a congress an *asifā*, a poster on the wall a *kol-kóyrā* (these three being Yiddish words derived from Hebrew). ‘Probably’ could have remained *mistámā*, ‘certainly’ — *avádā*, and ‘dispute’, — *plúgtā* (these three, from Aramaic, have survived). But these Semitic-derived words, for the Yiddish-as-a-modern-language developers, reeked of the despised world of their childhood. Even everyday words like *tákā* (‘really’), *bóbā* (‘grandmother’), *késhānā* (‘pocket’), of Slavic origin, were often deemed too homey and earthy and replaced from the German dictionary.
14. Examples include everyday words like ‘yesterday’ (Yiddish *nékhtn*), ‘obvious’ (*basháympárlákhh*), and ‘inexpensive’ (*vólvvl*). If any final nail in the coffin were needed, multitudes of Yiddish words of Germanic origin were themselves ‘fixed-up’ into the modern German version. For Yiddish words for ‘day’ and ‘days’ (*tog* and *teg*), ‘(to) fly’ (*flíān*), or ‘inkwell’ (*tíntār*) came ‘replacement words’ with the supposed ‘feel of Europe’, Yiddish letter variants of, say, in the order cited, *gestern*, *offensichtlich*, *billig*, *Tag*, *Tage*, *fliegen*, *Tintenfass*.
15. These include *Kultur*, *Literatur*, *Presse*, and *Theater*. They were simply adopted from German and put into Yiddish script. In the case of the first two, the relatively rare final-syllable stress gave them extra modernist cache. One of the problems, unexpectedly for some today, arose in the case of the word for ‘language’. Older Yiddish, by the usual sound laws, had *shprokhh* for ‘language’

(in the northern, ‘Lithuanian’ lands, with the usual o > u shift giving *shprukh* in the southern ‘Polish’ lands). But this word had acquired secondary meanings of a set formula uttered to drive away illness or demons. That left the way clear for Hebrew-derived *loshn* (duly, via o > u, in the southern dialects, *lushn*) to become the unmarked word for ‘language’, which it did. But it too, besides its Hebraic associations, has its intricate cultural nuances in Yiddish, including in some usages ‘style’ or ‘way of phrasing something’, not to mention its very ‘Hebraic-within-Yiddish’ plural (*lashéynās* in the north, *lashóynās* in the south). So, one needn’t be much of an analyst to figure out what the newly empowered revolutionary stalwarts of modern secular Yiddish culture did. They took the German word *Sprache*, and simply spelled out [*shprákhə*] in Yiddish letters. Here, the nativists who gave modern Yiddish *rəligyø* for ‘religion’ (to replace German derived *religyón*) would be deleting the final *shewa* giving the modern Yiddish doublet *shprakh* (same in all dialects) versus *loshn* (long-standing dialectal divide intact) with an array of intricate nuances that are part of the pleasures that await the twenty-first century student of Yiddish.

16. A Jew who keeps the laws and commandments with special care might be known as an *érlakhør yid* (‘honest person’, lit. ‘honest Jewish person’). One who takes extra care to obey every detail of the ancient law might be a *mákpəd*, and what it is they are adhering to might be called *Di Tóyrø* (‘The Torah’), *di mítsvəs* (‘the Commandments’), or just plain *Yidishkayt* (‘Jewishness’).
17. For example, the markers for the letter *álef* that distinguish between *a* and *o* and are retained to this day, one of their many legacies to the Yiddish of the future. They had actually taken this feature from the earlier German-Jewish practice of transcribing German in Jewish characters in a system based on Yiddish orthographic convention.
18. For some decades earlier in the nineteenth century, there had been growing use in religious books of the letter yud (*i*) here, giving the spellings *zógin* and *hímil*.
19. The origin of the term *Dáytsbmerish*, which has become a rather precise term for the concept ‘of nineteenth-century-origin Germanized Yiddish provenance’, continues to be debated. To date, nobody has refuted Naygreshl’s proposal (citing Prof. A. A. Roback as its source) that the term arose in Vienna in the mouths of Yiddish-speaking Jews of Galicia poking fun at the language of the Moravian Jewish community in the city (*daytsh* + *mérish* with eventual stress shift); see Naygreshl (1955: 367–368).
20. The silent *áyin* is thrown out, except following certain consonants and combinations (principally: *m*, *n*, *ng*, *nk*), where some dialects retain a reduced vowel. He even had the audacity to respell the name of the language, *Yiddish*, using double *yud* (giving [yídish]) rather than initial *álef yud* (giving: [ídish], which had been a favorite of Lithuanian Yiddish editors following their native phonology that features a word-initial *yi* > *i* rule).

21. There would be no more *gestern* instead of Yiddish *nekhtn* (for ‘yesterday’), or *mond* for Yiddish *lávónə* (‘moon’), or *nahe* for *nóənt* (‘near’), or *umzónst* for Yiddish *umzíst* (‘for nothing’). But over the decades, masses of the words that had been *Dáytshmerish* in the late nineteenth century had *become* part and parcel of virtually all registers of Yiddish. Sometimes in Yiddishized form: *shprákhə* was, as noted earlier (note 15), partially nativized to *shprakh*, giving Yiddish such doublets as *shprakh* (‘language’) versus *shprokh* (‘incantation’), *másə* (‘mass’) versus *mos* (‘measure’), *vékhtlakh* (‘weekly’) versus *vókhədik* (‘characteristic of unremarkable weekdays’), *kunst* (‘art’) versus *kunts* (‘trick’).
22. Such cases include the nuances distinguishing (with the new variants provided first) *ráyə* and *nəsíə* (‘trip’), *gift* and *sam* (‘poison’), *baáyñflusn* and *mashpíə* *zayn* (‘influence’), *rayf* and *tsáytik* (‘mature’, ‘ripe’), *rund* and *káyləkhədik* (‘round’, ‘circular’) among many others. For a discussion of the distinct nuances, see Katz (1993: 219–228).
23. I recall from my own Brooklyn youth some Jewish boys deeply worried that their pronunciation of ‘words like *big*’ betrayed a ‘hidden Yiddish accent’ (as they put it), referring to a higher level of final-consonant voicing among some first-generation-born Americans than in ‘Walter Cronkite English’. Moreover, there are many differences between different countries. In multilingual Montreal, for example, Yiddish fared rather better than in most monolingual American cities.
24. *Israeli* is increasingly not ‘Hebrew’ but a dynamic new national language in the Mideast. While most in the field have avoided such research, Ghil’ad Zuckermann has highlighted it with a mass of linguistic evidence; see Zuckermann (2008). See also Zuckermann’s important work on language revitalization (e.g. in Zuckermann and Amery 2015).
25. See Katz (2007: 345).
26. See Katz (2007: 310–323).
27. See Katz (2007: 357–358) on the storied case of Professor Robert D. King.
28. See Hutton (1993) on Yiddish normativism vis-à-vis the notion of authenticity.
29. The magazine’s own transcription: *Mallos*. A recent visit to a Brooklyn kiosk in the Hasidic enclave of Boro Park yielded purchases of an array of Hasidic Yiddish magazines, including *Di Baləbóstə*, *Der Blik*, *Bnóys Tsíyen*, *Dóyrəs*, *Famílyə*, *Der Flam*, *Kínder Blik*, *Kínder Tsayt*, *Di Líkhtikə Heym*, *Máyləs (Máləs)*, *Der Momént*, *Der Óytsər*, *Der Shtern*, *Di Vókh*. These and others, published in magazine format, are separate from the selection of hefty weekly newspapers also on offer at the kiosk. On these, and the rising internet presence of Hasidic Yiddish, see Waldman (2018).
30. Most Hasidic Yiddish publications have dropped the silent *áyin* in recent decades. Once it had lost its status as a marker of traditionalist religiosity vis-à-vis the secularists’ publications (because the secularists’ papers and magazines have mostly disappeared), that silent *áyin* lost its symbolic value (it had

been, before World War I, a hallmark of anti-religious secularism, and then became, in the interwar and postwar period, the symbol of religious publications when the secularists jettisoned it). A cursory examination shows that many now drop the *áyin* even when the modern standard spelling keeps it (after the consonants determined by Borokhov in 1913 and codified in Reyzen 1920), making some current Hasidic Yiddish spelling ‘more orthographically radical than the once radical spelling of the secularists and the modern standard literary language of the twentieth century’. A future *Sociolinguistic History of the Silent Yiddish Áyin* will be a rewarding project.

31. See Bradley (this volume) for the positive approach of Resilience Thinking.

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