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**Yiddish: Biography of a Language**, by Jeffrey Shandler, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. xii + 246, £18.99 / \$27.95 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-19065-196-1

The author deserves much credit for helping professionals in language studies get over an exaggerated fear of anthropomorphising, when in fact so much about language and, indeed, the way people(s) look at their own and other languages, is truly biography-based. Moreover, his sharp style is well suited to the biography model, and I hope it will inspire some readers to actually study Yiddish, a dynamically controversial minority language.<sup>1</sup> In fourteen chapters – from ‘Date and Place of Birth’ right through to ‘Life Expectancy’ – Shandler’s admirable rephrasing of topics in terms of biography does no damage to the facts.

The book’s weaknesses, by contrast, stem from the author’s distance from the actual Yiddish language and an over-reliance on English sources: ‘as this book is written for readers of English, sources cited are in that language wherever possible, as a guide to further study’ (3). While a guide to further reading in English would be useful, an author of a book on a language would benefit from a solid grasp of the sources in that language, even as a biographer needs profound insight into an individual. Yiddish linguistics, philology and literary history are areas where publications in the language itself have reached international standards. A lively 1990s debate about descriptivism vs. normativism in modern usage is mischaracterised, because the author deigns to understand it from a paper in English *about* the debate (195, n28). A prominent table (on page 42) contrasts a Standard Yiddish past-tense construction with *zayn* (‘to be’) with alleged North-eastern Yiddish *hobn* (‘to have’); in fact only a small area within that dialect has the feature, and a typical speaker of the dialect would react with utter bemusement.

In a note just before the first page, Shandler writes that ‘Standard Yiddish, as established by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research beginning in the 1930s, provides the basis for the Yiddish grammar, lexicon, orthography, and phonology presented in this book.’ The few late 1930s spelling reforms by Yivo – then an historical compromise with Soviet Yiddish spelling in a robust anti-traditionalist spirit – were never accepted by the vast majority of Yiddish writers and educators before the last pre-Holocaust born generation died out. There are fine books on Standard Yiddish, most famously Yudl Mark’s *A Grammar of Standard Yiddish*. But these are in Yiddish. For Standard Yiddish in print, one should look at the language of Celia Dropkin, Chaim Grade, Rokhl Korn, Kadia Molodovsky, Joseph Opatoshu, Zalman Shneour, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and other literary masters. The author is perhaps over-accepting of the (admirable) Yiddish club *Yugntruf*’s singular take on these matters. He doesn’t mention the possibility that it was not productive for them in 1970 to picket the surviving daily Yiddish newspapers over matters of spelling and purism of vocabulary on New York City’s East Broadway – instead of learning with love and respect from the last pre-war generation of literary writers. Shandler, however, sees therein some grand triumph, reporting that the one surviving secular Yiddish paper ‘eventually’ acceded to their demands. He neglects to mention that that was almost thirty years later, just when the last pre-Holocaust-born editors died or suffered grave final illness, and the heavily subsidised (i.e. failing) paper was kept alive as a kind of ‘statement’ which is itself a noteworthy cultural fact.

At the same time, the author’s intimate acquaintance with the multitude of cultural phenomena that use the *word* ‘Yiddish’, or relate to it, is truly fascinating. The book’s great asset is a deep knowledge and understanding of the *notion* of ‘Yiddish’ in America today and, even if it was not the author’s intention, it is a major contribution to fathoming the evolution of the notion.

One of the most successful chapters ('Gender') cites characterisations of Yiddish (and its publications) over centuries, and Shandler's comments about equal-rights secular groups feeling an attachment to Yiddish – especially to its nineteenth- and twentieth-century secular revolutionary expressions – are powerful. Again, occasional slips lurk in 'Yiddish-Yiddish' phenomena. For example, he uncritically accepts the conclusion of an English paper on Hasidic Yiddish that 'Yiddish is definitive of Hasidic masculinity' (69). But in many Hasidic girls' schools, where Talmudic studies are excluded, there is considerably more time allotted for Yiddish language texts and study. The best (and indispensable) dictionary of modern Hasidic Yiddish, *Yidish verter oytser*, is by Baila Roth of New York state – and the second best, which appeared in Israel, is also by a woman author. The best Hasidic Yiddish family magazine, *Máyles*, was founded and is edited by Sarah Jungreis. In the historical chapters, the book is often strong on generalisations, but slips up on detail. Contrary to the author's claims, Y.M. Lifschitz's nineteenth-century dictionaries – while masterpieces of Yiddish lexicography (particularly of Southeastern or Ukrainian Yiddish) – did not 'introduce enduring principles of Yiddish spelling' (77). None of its innovations were ever adopted by anyone.

The author's contention that early nineteenth-century East European Yiddish folk spelling used *nekúdes* (diacritics) plus the modern German inspired 'silent *ayin*' are wrong, as is his prime example: 'הָאַפֿען' vs. Standard Yiddish 'הָאַפֿן' (75). In fact, modern standard Yiddish and its spelling come straight from the nineteenth-century religious translations of sacred texts; they use 'הָאַפֿן' or 'הָאַפֿן' (with older Yiddish zero or *yud*, the former variant matching the modern standard). As it happens, Shandler reproduces elsewhere (on page 123) a splendid example: the facsimile of a page of a Hasidic tale in a 1902 reprint. Howlers could have been avoided by having a Yiddish-Yiddish scholar look the work over before publication. One of these is the remark (on page 132) that the Soviet spelling of *apikóyres* (אפיקורעס – 'heretic') contrasts with 'the traditional spelling אפיקורות'. In fact, the Aramaic etymon is אפיקורס (with historic universal *s* as final consonant) derived from Epicurus, the Greek philosopher. It is not correct that only writers and groups 'affiliated with the Communist party' (78) used phoneticised spelling of Semitic-derived elements. This was also the practice of *Inzikhístn* (introspectivists), among others, in an era of grand and radical interwar literary experimentation.


The author is quite right to note that only four volumes of the Yiddish-Yiddish *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish language* (by Joffe and Mark) have appeared in print. It is important to add that, at his death in 1975, Yudl Mark left index cards for the entire dictionary. Debates that Shandler describes in other contexts are among the reasons that further volumes did not appear. Some said subsequent volumes must include English, some insisted on Hebrew, and others said the work must shift to every last detail of the holy 'Yivo spelling'. One hopes that scholars will put the entire dictionary online, and publicising its existence is a constructive step towards that end.

Unlike many scholars, Shandler has no problem mentioning the actual violence against Yiddish writers and culture in Palestine/Israel that was part of a campaign to destroy the language in the Holy Land. Turning to the current state of affairs, he also has the courage (and it takes courage in mainstream Jewish circles) to assert, correctly, that Modern Hebrew 'has relatively few speakers outside of Israel' (177). I would love to see his response to the more radical assertion that outside Israel there is not a single Jewish family on the planet – none of its members having lived in or come from Israel – that uses Hebrew in daily life. Given the author's talent for fearlessly discussing 'difficult issues' in persuasive prose, and for wading into controversial issues, he leaves readers wishing for more (perhaps not a bad thing!). Substantive issues include the continuing boycott of Yiddish as a serious subject by nearly all Hebrew day schools in America, and the continued under-representation (ignoring, belittling and abusing) of the language in mainstream Jewish culture – whether of the Hebrew/Israel-centric or the modern religious varieties. These topics could be investigated further by this talented author with a gift for writing about subjects about which others are often reticent.

Shandler's welcome contribution to these important debates moves the field forward, and should inspire more enquiry – but readers must beware of 'delinguification'. (I leave the biographical-biological correlate thereof to the reader's imagination.)

## Note

1. I was persuaded by some readers of drafts of my own *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (2004, revised ed. 2007) to replace biography-derived terms – and so I am pleased to see them put to such fine use by Shandler.

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