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NOTIONS OF YIDDISH

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'A language' is a social, psychological and political notion. Socially, the term implies group identity and a sense of belonging ('speak the same language'). Psychologically, the word evokes self-confidence, collective ego and a sense of security. Politically, it implies power and authority (nations have 'languages'). The old adage that 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy' is not far off the mark.

In the usual historical progression, the political victors or the powers that be in a society create 'The Language' from the myriad varieties actually spoken and written, give it a name, standardise it, and teach it to successive generations. The policy becomes a success when a population accepts 'its language' as one of the natural givens of the universe, along with the sun, the moon and the stars. The incredible degree of political manipulation required has been exposed and chronicled by Roy Harris, with special reference to the rise of the notion 'English'.[1]

The circumstances which come into play in the history of Yiddish are inherently different from those of most documented languages. Yiddish may therefore offer an intriguing case history of what can happen where there is a highly elaborate verbal and written culture, but no army, no navy, and steep competition from other languages.

Yiddish is unique to the Jewish civilization known as Ashkenaz, which rose along the banks of the Rhine and the Danube around a thousand years ago. Until the eighteenth century, all Ashkenazim were by definition Yiddish speakers. The notion Ashkenaz, originally a geographic concept akin to 'Germany', became a Jewish cultural concept encompassing all of the territories of central and eastern Europe settled by Ashkenazim. During the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that territory stretched from Amsterdam at its northwest and Italy at its southwest, deep into Russia in the east, making for one of the largest speech territories in the history of Europe. But that is linguistic history. Here I shall attempt to chart the course not of Yiddish but of the notion 'Yiddish'. This essay is affectionately dedicated to Dr David Patterson, who convinced me some years ago that to establish Yiddish studies at Oxford would serve to enhance that notion internationally in the late twentieth century. But that is a matter for twenty-first century Yiddish scholarship.

Ashkenaz had (and in traditional, principally, hasidic communities, continues to have) not one, not two, but three Jewish languages (all in addition, of course, to varying degrees of command of one or more local non-Jewish languages). The internal trilingualism of Ashkenaz comprises Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic.[2] Yiddish was everybody's native language and the universal vernacular used in the intimacy of the home at one end of the language-use spectrum, and in the *yeshivah* and rabbinical court at the other. In contrast with Christian Europe, there were no Hebrew or Aramaic speaking schools or academies to parallel Latin-speaking schools. In short, only Yiddish was spoken. Hebrew and Aramaic were prayed, recited, quoted, declaimed and written.

The ability to write Hebrew (as opposed to the ability to read from the Pentateuch or the prayer book) was limited to a small minority of educated males who used it in communal documents, responsa, works on Jewish law and custom, and so on.

The ability to write Aramaic was even more limited to a smaller minority of top scholars who wrote treatises on the two culturally 'highest' endeavours in the eyes of the society in question: talmudic works on the intricacies of Jewish law, and kabbalistic works on Jewish mysticism.

It would be tempting to use trendy sociolinguistic concepts, such as High (or 'H') and Low (or 'L') to characterize the functional and conceptual interrelationships, but to do so would miss the point. We want to discover, or at least to hypothesise, how these notions were viewed through the eyes of the society in question. To start with, the presence of 'High' does not imply the presence of 'Low'. Yiddish was universal, Hebrew more limited and used for more prestigious purposes, Aramaic more limited still, used for more prestigious purposes still. But these highs did not correspond to any lows. The everyday vernacular, with stylistic differentiation, of course, was used by the simplest member of society and the greatest scholar alike.

The point of all this is that Ashkenazic trilingualism was natural. No governments, no language academies, no armies and no navies. The roles of Hebrew and Aramaic were inherited from the ancient near east into Ashkenaz.

The new vernacular, Yiddish, an intricate linguistic fusion of these Semitic elements with a uniquely modified Germanic component, was 'just spoken' and 'just written'. Initially, it did not have a fixed name.

Sadly, no records of the vernacular survive from the earliest centuries of Ashkenazic settlement. There are, however, proper names from 1096 (appearing in martyrs' lists following the first Crusade), a single sentence dated 1272 (in the famed Worms festival prayer book, now in Jerusalem), and an extensive literary manuscript dated 1382 (the Cambridge Codex, brought to England by Solomon Schechter as part of the Cairo Genizah collection). These and other monuments tell us precious little of attitudes toward the vernacular.

The earliest comments on the language occur in rabbinic legal treatises where the vernacular is at issue for this or that legal reason. The natural, prepolitical state of affairs is evident from the lack of rancour. Zalmen of St. Goar, faithful pupil of the Maharil (Yankev ben Moyshe Molin, c. 1360-1427), reports that his master complained about Yiddish songs on the thirteen Maimonidean principles of the Jewish faith:

> And he [the Maharil] said: As for stanzas and rhymes in *Loshn Ashkenaz* ['the language of Ashkenaz'] on the Unity [of God] and on the Thirteen Principles [of Maimonides], I wish they would not be written! For most of the ignorant people think that all the commandments hinge on this and they forego a number of positive and negative commandments, such as *tsitsis* [fringed garment worn under the shirt], *tfiln* [phylacteries], the study of the Torah and more, thinking they have fulfilled their obligation by singing these rhymes with conviction. But in these rhymes, no more is implied than the central point of the Jewish religion, and not a single one of the 613 commandments which Jews are obliged to fulfill.[3]

At first glance, the Maharil's complaint seems to suggest the existence of some sort of 'non-orthodox Yiddish culture' (to phrase it anachronistically) of which he does not approve. It is, however, the replacement that is offensive, not the linguistic medium. That is treated neutrally.

As for the name of the language, the Maharil uses *Loshn Ashkenaz*. One also encounters *leshoyneynu* ('our language'), *taytsh* ('translation language'), and, at least from 1597, *yidish* ('Jewish', 'Yiddish') as well.[4] The variety of names suggests the absence of the kind of unanimous linguistic consciousness that is implied by the political notion 'a language'. Now it is known, of course, that the linguistic variety used by the most remote tribe is structurally speaking every bit as sophisticated as Oxford English. The

primeval state of 'Yiddish consciousness' in early Ashkenaz is then one of neutral recognition of 'what it is that everyone speaks', with no champions and no opponents. Early ambiguities about the concept 'Yiddish literature' strengthen this perception.[5]

An emerging Yiddish consciousness becomes evident from the vast number of comments on specific Yiddish words or phrases in two contexts which gave the rabbis occasion to write of Yiddish. One concerns the need, according to Jewish law, to transcribe a witness's testimony in a Jewish court of law in his exact words, making way for the preservation of linguistically accurate renderings of Old Yiddish. These have often been hailed as the oldest monuments of colloquial Yiddish.[6] They stand in sharp contradistinction to 'literary works' whose authors did their best to approach local or literary German, albeit in Jewish script.[7]

The second rabbinic context entails discussion of the precise forms of personal names to be used in writs of divorce, where Jewish law demands the writ include the name used in everyday life alongside the classical Hebrew name of the individual (e.g. 'Dov known as Ber'). This concern made way for the beginnings of Yiddish dialectology.[8]

The need for guidance on the precise morphology and spelling of names in writs of divorce also led the rabbis to pioneer the standardization of written Yiddish. Principles of modern Yiddish spelling, often praised for being nearly perfectly 'phonetic',[9] go back to the sharp legal minds of the rabbis. In standardizing the spelling of a Yiddish name, Isserlin (Yisroel ben Pesakhye, c. 1390—1460) weighed and counterweighed the univalency principle (one letter for one sound) against the dialectological principle (readability in all dialect areas).[10]

The rabbis frequently had to decide, again, in writs of divorce, how to write local variants of names that differ markedly from versions popular in other areas, or from the usual written versions. The Levush (Mordechai Yafe, c. 1535-1612) recorded that female forenames Rekhlin and Freydlin turn up elsewhere as Rekhl and Freydl and took note of the variants *Leyb, Leybe* and *Leyve* of the male forname. He ruled in favour of the local variant.

> One follows the language of the people in the country in which the divorce is issued and there is no need to be concerned with the way these names or nicknames appear written in books.[11]

The Levush's ruling in favour of local morphology was balanced by his finding in favour of standardization where differences are limited to spelling. He noted, for example, that names that do not derive from Hebrew and end in a vowel, should be written with aleph word-finally.

Issues interrelating dialectology and standardization were bound to result in the emergence of 'prestige dialects'. The Maharil was asked how to spell the name of the river Danube in a divorce writ, with *vov* at the end, giving *Donou* or *Donau*, or with double *yud*, giving *Donay*. He had before him one writ from Austria using vov. Another, sent from Regensburg to Prague with double *yud* had been 'returned to sender' with the query 'But I have seen that the wise men of Austria write Donou! What should in fact be written?' The Regensburg rabbis sent it back confirming double *yud*, 'as we have written it'. The Maharil ruled in their favour on the grounds that 'the people of Regensburg have a more correct language than the people of Austria'. Old Yiddish thus had its 'Regensburg Yiddish' just as modern Yiddish has its 'Vilna Yiddish'.[12]

In legal literature, *Loshn Ashkenaz* became the most frequent term for Yiddish. Hence the language 'had a name' and therefore 'existed' in group consciousness, and crucially, in the consciousness of the writers who were, after all, the intellectuals and cultural leaders, to use modern words, of the society in which they lived.

From the sixteenth century onward, there was a distinct movement for the expansion of Yiddish functions into realms traditionally reserved for Hebrew and Aramaic. The chief battleground was prayer, and the argument, often quoted from the *Seyfer khasidim*, the classic work attributed to Judah of Regensburg (c. 1150-1217), was that whoever does not understand Hebrew should preferably pray in a language he understands.[13] This theme recurs in prayer and ethical works from the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The most famous introduction to a Yiddish prayerbook is probably Yosef bar Yokor's, in 1544. He went so far as to say that 'Those who want to pray in Hebrew without understanding a single word are in my view plain fools'.[14] The 1629 Prague festival prayer book contains the following introduction, printed on the reverse side of the title page:

> Prayer without meaningful intent is like a body with no soul. Therefore, when one prays before God blessed be He, and does not pray with all his heart, then that prayer is likened to a body of a person that has no life in it. Our sages of blessed memory therefore said that every Jew who wishes his prayers to be heard on the High Holy Days should read the prayers before the New Year and Yom Kippur to become accustomed to them and know what he is saying. Everyone should take as an example the case of a man who has to speak to a king (who is mere flesh and blood) concerning his life or property. He makes sure to consider carefully what he will say so that he does not stumble, and that

> he understands what it is he is saying. All the more so before the King of all kings, the Holy One blessed be He. Where the concern is every person's body, property and soul, it is of the utmost importance that a person knows what he is saying [...].[15]

Yiddish prayerbooks, and especially *tkhines* for women, were used extensively in Ashkenaz, and Yiddish did indeed 'capture' a considerable portion of the erstwhile Hebrew-and-Aramaic-only realm of prayer.[16]

One fellow went too far. He was Aaron ben Shmuel of Hergershausen who published a lame translation of the prayers in 1709. In his preface, in which he admitted his lack of Hebrew education, he argued that prayers should be in the mother tongue, citing the use of Aramaic in the Talmud. Everything about the book, including its appearance (the use of square Hebrew characters with vowel points rather than the special pre-nineteenth century Yiddish mashkit font) flew in the face of tradition. In 1830 a huge stock of copies was found in an attic. Rabbinic authorities apparently forbade its use. Viciously torn copies have also turned up.[17]

One of the most complex sagas is the century-long attempt to publish a Yiddish translation of the *Zohar*, the central work of Jewish mysticism, traditionally limited to learned Jewish males over the age of forty. Zelig, a rabbi near Lublin, began his translation in 1601. His son Yosi sought to publish it and accumulated a large number of rabbinic approbations, which were apparently lost during the Chmielnitzki pogroms of 1648 and 1649. Yosi's grandson Tsvi-Hirsh Khotsh finally published an edited version of his great grandfather's work, with the most 'secret' passages omitted, in 1711.[18]

The popular kabbalist Yekhiel-Mikhl Epshteyn devoted a chapter of his *Book of the Upright Path to the World to Come* (1704), to a spirited defense of prayer in Yiddish for those who do not understand Hebrew. His arguments include the following:

> When a man does not understand Hebrew and prays in a language that he understands with all his heart [...], such a prayer is for God, blessed be He, much more pleasing because it comes form the heart [...] One word that is understood does more good than a hundred that are not understood [...] People who do not understand Hebrew should say everything in Taytsh, for what one understands [...] one offers with complete devotion. That prayer will certainly be accepted. Moreover, women have meek hearts and are apt to start weeping immediately.[19]

On the level of psychological and spiritual sanctity, I for one believe that Epshteyn and all the others are wrong. To pray in an ancient hallowed

language, to believe in the sanctity of every word and every letter, to believe that one is praying from the same sacred text and in the same pronunciation as one's forefathers, make for a spiritual 'high' vastly in excess of using the unromantic blasé of everyday life. Sprucing up the vernacular with *you*-to-*thou* type devices cannot compete with 'the real thing', although Yiddish prayers were generally composed in a highly specific sacred Yiddish style, which came to be known as *Ivri-taytsh*. It revelled in archaisms and neologisms crafted to consciously remove the text from the everyday. The special variant used for Bible translations has been the subject of several studies.[20] There is potential for fieldwork. How many learned Jews in traditional communities, who are capable of understanding Hebrew and Aramaic, actually concentrate during most of a prayer service, on the dictionary meaning of words rather than overall devotional expression?

Some modern scholars have seen 'a movement for Yiddish' in the various defenses of prayer in Yiddish.[21] Others have disputed this, charging anachronistic application of late nineteenth and twentieth century notions of 'Yiddishism' back onto Old Ashkenaz.[22] My own feeling is that there was no pre-modern 'Yiddishist movement'. There were, rather, converging religious, social and economic factors in favour of Yiddish moving in on turf previously exclusive to Hebrew, and, like all natural languages in steady use in a community over many centuries, functions expanded in the course of things. On the front of religion, many rabbinic figures saw in prayer and ethical books in Yiddish a potential replacement for the secular books, based on medieval European epic romances, that had been so popular for centuries. Socially, many non-learned authors wanted status for themselves and for simple people, a sort of participation in sanctity beyond the carrying out of commandments. Economically, authors and publishers wanted to make profits, which by the very nature of the mass readership, would have vastly exceeded those for rabbinic books.

The anti-Semitic view of Yiddish is traditionally traced to Martin Luther's 1528 introduction to an edition of the *Liber vagatorum*. The first, undated, edition of that work appeared around 1510 under the title *Liber vagatorum. Der betler orden*. It is an anonymous guide to various sorts of beggars and vagabonds that sought to protect an unsuspecting public from deceitful beggars. It concludes with a brief vocabulary of Rotwelsch, the German underworld language, which did in fact draw heavily upon Hebrew and Yiddish. In the 1528 edition, entitled *Von der falschen Betler büeberey / Mit einer Vorrede Martini Luther*, Luther made the damning accusation that the Jewish elements in Rotwelsch demonstrate that the underworld language stems from the Jews.[23] This theme was picked up in some later dictionaries

of *Rotwelsch*, but it was not until the eighteenth century that a copious anti-Jewish literature obsessed with Yiddish emerged.[24]

Dozens of pseudonymous German anti-Semitic works of the eighteenth century, many written by apostate Jews, focused on Yiddish. They were founded upon the premise that Yiddish is some sort of 'anti-Christian plot', and they set out to 'expose' Yiddish and the 'secrets of the Jews'. One of the earliest, an undated book that appeared around 1714 by one 'J.W.' is a bilingual dialogue (in transcribed Yiddish and German on facing pages to enable the reader to follow) between a simple Jew, 'Joune' (=Youne, modern Yiddish Yoyne, i.e. Jonah) and 'Rebbe Itzick', a corrupt rabbi who progressively leads him down the path of lust, sin, and anti-Christianity. The book is replete with the heartiest curses of early eighteenth century Western Yiddish.[25] Other authors used rather more imaginative pseudonyms. The 1733 dictionary published by 'Philoglottus' concludes with an epilogue (true to form, in Yiddish and German, both in German script) condemning the contemporary Jewish faith.[26] Bibliophilus's 1742 effort ends with a series of dialogues translated from 'Hebräo-barbarisch' into German.[27] German anti-Semitism looked upon Yiddish as the embodiment of Jewish cultural barbarism, the encapsulation of anti-Christian propaganda, the backbone of the underworld language, and in practical terms, a secret language created to cheat Christians. These claims surface and resurface throughout this eighteenth century literature.

There is probably no hate as intense as the self-hate inspired by one's haters, and when the Ashkenazim of Germany moved toward the non-Jewish culture of their country in the late eighteenth century, they moved away from being Ashkenazim and toward being 'German Jews', or, 'Germans of the mosaic faith', and the obliteration of Yiddish became a primary goal of the Berlin-centred *Haskalah* ('Enlightenment') movement. The Western Yiddish dialects of the German speaking lands were every bit as vilified as the Eastern Yiddish varieties in the Slavonic and Baltic countries. The various older names of the language, Yiddish included, were eschewed. A name, any name, conveys notions of existence and identity, both of which were being denied, and the language came to be described by the verb *mauscheln* and the noun *Jargon*, both lifted, cheerfully and without hesitation, from anti-Semitic parlance. Both terms are 'non-names' that avoid the ethnic or geographical properties of names of languages. Even these non-names were avoided in a second stage of battle where the description is reduced to something in the order of 'poor speech'. Naphtali Herz Wessely (1725-1805) had this to say:

> We ruin our reputation among the nations by being stammerers. It is well known that even a wise man well educated in the

> sciences, who does not have a pure language, and does not know how to place his words into a sentence, is made into a mockery. All the more so the common man when he deals with officials and merchants and speaks a castrated language like us, the Jews of Germany and Poland. For he will attract mockery and scorn in their eyes, and he will be treated as a peasant and one who is despised by people. This is not the case for a man who knows how to speak properly and in good taste. He will find grace and honour in all who see him.[28]

Hopes for social and political integration were linked with linguistic assimilation, and the ultimate fate of German Jewry reflects all too tragically upon these hopes. Although most Western Ashkenazim did in fact become German speakers of the Jewish faith, pockets of Western Yiddish survived well into the twentieth century.[29]

Haskalah opposition to Yiddish was transplanted to the Hebraist movement in Eastern Europe, where, in the early years of this century, the proponents of Yiddish and those of Hebrew were engaged in the bitter language controversy (the *riv leshoynes* to the Yiddishists, *riv leshonot* to the Hebraists), which flared with particular bitterness in the years immediately following the Chernowitz conference of 1908. That conference proclaimed Yiddish to be a national Jewish language and was followed by polemics on all sides.[30]

In Palestine, and later in Israel, a massive campaign was centrally coordinated to eradicate Yiddish, which became for Hebraists an object of hate vastly in excess of the German-Jewish antipathy. Anti-Yiddish measures included laws against Yiddish newspapers and periodicals, and gangs known as *gedudei meginei ha-safah* ('Regiments of Defenders of the Language') which stoned Yiddish writers, firebombed Yiddish publishers and broke the windows of shops selling Yiddish papers.[31] One of the curiosities of the battle was the Yiddish literary journal in Tel Aviv that 'beat the law' against Yiddish periodicals, in 1929, by calling the first issue *Eyns* ('One'), the second *Tsvey* ('Two'), and the third (after the authorities got wise to the scheme), *Tsvishn tsvey un dray* ('Between Two and Three'). The Hebraist movement, alongside its astounding success in establishing modern spoken Hebrew, succeeded in creating a national feeling of shame about Yiddish, fostering notions that it was ugly, dead, a ghetto-language, did not exist, had no literature and more. The greater degree of hate stemmed from the circumstance that nearly all the scholars and cultural and political leaders who revived modern Hebrew were themselves native Yiddish speakers, whose early years had been spent in the linguistically thriving Yiddish speaking

civilization of Eastern Europe. This triggered characteristic self-hate reactions, in contrast to their German-Jewish Haskalah forebears who were born into communities where Yiddish was very weak or had largely disappeared.

As Freud often pointed out, hate and love are kindred emotions given to ambiguity and, at times, interchangeability. When the ideas of the *Haskalah* moved eastward, they found their champions in the East European Pale of Settlement. Among them was Yitskhok-Ber Levinzon (Isaac Baer Levinsohn), who, like Wessely before him, cited a Talmudic parallel of those who advocated Hebrew or Greek as opposed to the Jewish Aramaic then spoken. Levinzon went on to ask: 'And so we must say in this country: 'Why Judeo-German? Either pure German, or Russian!'[32]

But history is full of ironies, and the beginnings of the use of Yiddish as a modern literary language, go back to one of Mendelssohn's pupils who went back east to spread Haskalah. He was Mendl Lefin, also called Satanover, whose anonymous Yiddish translation of the book of Proverbs appeared in Tarnopol around 1814. Unlike anything that had appeared before then, the translation was penned in the local Ukrainian dialect of East European Yiddish. For the first time, a kind of written Yiddish capable of being a modern literary language, appeared in print. Previously, Yiddish books were written in special forms of the language much more removed from everday use than the usual writing-to-speaking gap.[33] Moreover, Lefin's book appeared in square Hebrew type and, unlike Aaron ben Shmuel's experiment a century earlier, Lefin's work signalled the death knell of the old *mashkit* typeface which was psychologically associated with the premodern genres of Yiddish literature.

The *maskilim* attacked Lefin bitterly. The assault was led by Tuvia Feder who compiled a pamphlet in Hebrew, challenging Lefin to explain why he had exchanged his silk robe (i.e. German) for rags (i.e. Yiddish), and why he had hurled King Solomon's Proverbs 'into the mud'. Feder's pamphlet proceeds to a mini-drama providing a glimpse into Heaven, where an incredulous, otherworldly Mendelssohn finds it difficult to believe that his faithful pupil so betrayed the cause after his death by publishing in Yiddish. The play is entitled 'Conversation in the Land of the Living' and duly includes an intervention from the 'Voice of God'.

Various appeals to Feder from Lefin's friends, plus a hundred ruble 'reimbursement for expenses', led Feder to withdraw the pamphlet from the press. It did not appear until long after the death of the protagonists.[34] It was, however, in wide circulation in maskilic circles and attracted a reply from Yankev Shmuel Bik, who leapt to Lefin's defense. Bik compared Lefin's achievements to Benjamin Franklin's in Philadelphia, and noted that the

greatest rabbinic minds of Ashkenaz including the Gaon of Vilna 'spoke, thought, and taught' in Yiddish. He went on to argue that English and French were equally mixed and derived from various other languages.[35]

The *Haskalah* embraced modernization, participation in the culture of the country where one resided, and of course, social and political reform that would provide Jews with equal rights. It was in the context of striving for all these goals, that the strategy evolved of ridding Jews of their culture (language, clothing, and so on) while enabling them to retain their religion. What the Berlin *maskilim* could not have foreseen was that the very hated language they sought to eradicate, was itself capable of rapid transformation into a language of world literature whose works would rival or surpass those of the host nations. In all fairness, it took a *Haskalah* outlook to accomplish that feat too.

Lefin was followed, in the first half of the nineteenth century, by others who used East European Yiddish in their didactic books on everything from medicine to the story of Christopher Columbus.[36] Now these *maskilim* saw they needed Yiddish to reach the millions of Jews in the Pale of Settlement. The most momentous single turnaround from using Yiddish to 'enlighten the masses' to developing it as the language of a new literature was that of Sh. Y. Abramovitsh. The Hebrew-writing *maskil* became Mendele Moykher Sforim, known as the 'grandfather of modern Yiddish literature'. He made his Yiddish début in Alexander Zederbaum's *Kol mevaser*, in the issue of 24 November 1864, which is regarded as the symbolic birthdate of modern Yiddish literature.

Tradition has it that it was Yehoyshue-Mordkhe (or Shie-Mordkhe) Lifshitz who talked Zederbaum into launching a modern Yiddish weekly in 1862, and Abramovitsh to turning his pen to Yiddish in 1864. To the point here is that Lifshitz was the first conscious 'Yiddishist' who had in his own mind centered the notion 'Yiddish' as a cultural object inspiring love and respect. Lifshitz went on to compile the first two sophisticated dictionaries of modern Yiddish.[37]

Sublimation of hate and love relationships vis-à-vis language is of course not unique to Yiddish, but Yiddish is an unusually salient example. For the Berlin *maskilim*, Yiddish was the hated parent. For some of the east European followers of *Haskalah*, it was more of a 'logical rejection' than a true hate; hence the easterners were able to modernize and refine the language as an instrument of modern literary and cultural movements. The difference between west and east stemmed in part from the very different objective status of the language in each of the areas. In the west, Yiddish had been in demographic and literary decline well before the Berlin *Haskalah*.

In the Slavonic and Baltic lands, Yiddish was experiencing unprecedented demographic and literary growth.

The reaction to the *Haskalah* position was a pro-Yiddish stance, which was, in its own way, itself an offshoot of *Haskalah* insofar as it advocated a 'modern' (that is, Western style) culture, entailing the notions 'literature', 'education', 'press', and more. The title of Lifshitz's classic 1863 defense of Yiddish was, innocuously enough, 'The Four Classes'. After going through inanimate objects, plants, animals and humans, he shifts to the human attribute of speech and introduces his bombshell (in the terms of the day): use of the term *di yidishe shprakh* ('the Yiddish language') in a *Haskalah* newspaper. Lifshitz went on to say:

> The Yiddish language is our mother tongue [...], and in the end all I hear is people insulting her and making fun of her. People say: She is corrupt! I must confess that I do not begin to understand with what sort of logic one can call 'corrupt' a language, in which many thousands of people, an entire nation, live and thrive. It is appropriate to use the word 'corrupt' of a thing which was once better and has been ruined. But whence it is inferred that other languages were at their beginning better? Were they then given on Mount Sinai? They too, like our language, derive from various other languages. Why are they not called 'corrupt'?[38]

The movement for Yiddish gave rise to a new field of scholarship. Polemics gradually turned to linguistic science in a succession of seminal works, including a pamphlet in Hebrew by Alexander Harkavy in 1885, a study in German by Philip Mansch in 1888-1890, and finally, the sensational paper in Yiddish read by Matisyohu Mieses at the first Yiddish language conference in Chernowitz in 1908.[39] The turning point came in 1913 when the conceptual 'centering' of Yiddish was completed by Ber Borokhov, the founder of modern Yiddish linguistics. He proclaimed philology to be a 'national science', that is, the scholarly component of the sociocultural rise of Yiddish.[40] To put the finishing touch on 'modern languagehood', he declared that standard Yiddish pronunciation was based upon the dialect of Vilna, thereby codifying the dialect that has, in most of its features, become the equivalent of 'Queen's English'. And thus, in a stroke, 'Yiddish' had all the attributes of 'English' or 'French' or 'Russian'.[41]

The notion 'Yiddish' was evolved from an early history of neutrality through to functional expansion, to an object of hate and an object of love. Today the notion 'Yiddish' is often accepted uncritically but even in the

1990s, its existence is occasionally denied. The proportion of deniers in Israel is probably much higher than anywhere else in view of the relative recency of an intense campaign to eradicate the language. This last claim can only be substantiated or refuted by fieldwork.

Traditional Orthodoxy (a term intended to exclude 'neo-Orthodoxy', the combining of observance of religious precepts with linguistic and cultural assimilation) went about, and continues to go about its life, largely oblivious to many of the battles and emotions of the modernisers. The pro-Yiddish ideology of traditional (and today, principally, hasidic), Orthodox groups has two historical sources. The first is traditional hasidism with its emphasis on every person's direct communication with God and its implicit elevation of Yiddish to a status of sanctity. The Yiddish versions of two of its most treasured works became classic (Nakhmen Bratslaver's *Sipurey mayses* and the *Shivkhey habesht*, both first published c. 1815).

The second strand, especially strong among Hungarian-origin hasidim, goes back to the Khsam Soyfer (Rabbi Moyshe Shrayber / Moses Sofer, 1762-1839), who led the battle against both the reform movement and neo-Orthodoxy. In a book in Yiddish, he went so far as to say:

> And you must not think that what is written in this book reflects only hasidism. It is, as all the books we have written, no more than is written in the *Shulkhn orukh* [*Shulkhan 'arukh*, Joseph Karo's Code of Jewish Law]. We bring evil upon the world by abandoning the Yiddish language and conducting ourselves as the Gentiles. It says in the *Shulkhn orukh, in Yoyre deyo* (§175), that the Jews must be separate and separated from other peoples [...].
>
> And one must not God forbid change Yiddish names [...] (Leyb Chaim, not 'Leopold Heinrich' etc.). And in accordance with 'they did not change their language' [said of the Children of Israel in Egypt] we must not forsake our Yiddish language. Do not go, God forbid, to a rabbi or preacher who replaces the Yiddish language. From him and his children one must run as from a fire.[42]

In his Hebrew responsa, the Khsam Soyfer claimed that Jews consciously transformed their language so as to adhere to the commandment of not walking in the way of Gentiles.[43] He went so far as to compare rabbis who speak non-Jewish languages with those who would place an Asherah in the Temple.[44]

The traditionalist pro-Yiddish position is very different from the secular one (although in the history of ideas, it too must perhaps be regarded as *Haskalah* provoked).The secularist pro-Yiddish position, which came later in the nineteenth and most prominently in the twentieth century to be associated with various Jewish socialist, anarchist, communist and territorialist movements, derived from elevation of the notion 'Yiddish', in its own right, to a major component of modern Jewish culture. The traditional Orthodox position is that Yiddish is the language of the Ashkenazic Jewish way of life, and serves as a preserver of Jewish life and faith. It was most recently eloquently set out by the Sulitser Rebetsin in an American orthodox journal.[45]

Intriguingly enough, the various polarically opposed notions of Yiddish have survived, in greater or lesser degrees, even after the Holocaust, and right down to our own times. There are traditional hasidic families (a demographically increasing group) for whom Yiddish just 'exists' as the vernacular, alongside Hebrew and Aramaic and local non-Jewish languages. There are secular Yiddishists (a demographically collapsing group) who view Yiddish as the embodiment of quintessential (albeit secularized) Jewishness and Jewish values. There are some, mostly Israelis, who deny its existence. Many diaspora Jews regard Yiddish as unnecessary in the light of Hebrew and Israel. There are, as always, thousands of shades of opinion about Yiddish, ranging from love through to hate. Finally, there are several thousand young Jews and non-Jews who since the 1960s have become devotees of Yiddish. A number have taken the time, trouble and expense to master the language and one of its associated academic disciplines at university level. The trend of the 1990s seems to be toward the consolidation and expansion of Yiddish at institutions of higher learning, a development which has included the emergence of writers and teachers as well as scholars. Its future as a living language in actual speech communities is, however, secure only among Hasidim).

There is however one position that the exotic history of Yiddish seems to have eluded in modern times: neutrality.

Non-neutrality brings us back to the inherent relativity of such notions as 'a language', and the acceptance by people of 'natural objects' which are in fact constructs of political and social power. There is a usual and an unusual sequence of events. The usual sequence entails a nation state or region, wherein the population accepts that it speaks 'Xish' as a matter of the natural order of the universe.

The unusual circumstances of the rise of the notion 'Yiddish' are many. They include the absence of the nation state and political power, participation in Ashkenazic internal trilingualism, hate from outside and self-hate by its

very speakers, and ultimately (derivatively, I have argued) love and elevation to high status by select groups of its speakers and others.

The contribution of Yiddish studies to the debate on the existence and definition of 'languages' is to expose empirically, not just theoretically, the relativity and subjectivity of the concept. That one and the same variety of human speech is for one member of a group (in this case, the Jewish community in the wider sense) a highly cultured language, and does not even exist for another, demonstrates the latent ideological input to the rise and acceptance of 'a language'.

Within Jewish history, the ever-changing and coexisting notions of Yiddish are correlates of a variety of situations: the civilization Ashkenaz, anti-Semitism, Hasidism, *Haskalah*, Yiddishism, Hebraism, the Hebrew-Yiddish conflict, and a post-Holocaust reorganization of ideas whose contours will become clear only in the next century.

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