

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Yiddish: Turning to Life by Joshua A. Fishman

Review by: Robert D. King

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## REVIEWS

**Yiddish: Turning to life.** By JOSHUA A. FISHMAN. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1991. Pp. xii, 522. Cloth \$110.00.

Reviewed by ROBERT D. KING, *University of Texas at Austin*

A few linguists, like a few other scientists, are known and admired for their dedication to 'lost' causes—working to preserve a vanishing language in a mass culture, as Jacques Cousteau strives to protect sea life against pollution or as Jane Goodall fights to preserve chimpanzee populations from the onslaught of ever-expanding human populations. Joshua Fishman is a twentieth-century linguistic hero in a profession that doesn't normally lend itself to heroism. He has spent his life not only in energetic research and scholarship but in tireless dedication to an IDEA—the idea that a language (Yiddish) and its culture should not die. Linguists are among the few people in the whole world (apart, sometimes, from the speakers themselves) to whom this conviction matters—REALLY matters—and even then it does not always matter enough.

F is widely respected for his work on 'language maintenance and language shift, language and ethnicity/nationalism, language planning, bilingual education, [and] the Whorfian assumptions with respect to language and cognition' (1). But F, like his contemporary Uriel Weinreich (with whom F founded and edited a Yiddish journal *Yugntruf* 'Call to Youth' at the end of the Second World War), has led a parallel life as Yiddishist (where his name is 'Shikl' Fishman) of which most people otherwise familiar with his sociolinguistic research are unaware. To say that he is a 'Yiddishist' is not to say that he writes about the Yiddish language—that alone does not make you a Yiddishist. To call F a Yiddishist means several things: that he is consumed by an abiding conviction that the Yiddish language possesses worth and beauty; that Yiddish is the key to the richness of the Jewish past as well as an essential link between generations—*di goldene kayt* 'the golden chain' is a recurring rhetorical theme in Yiddish letters; and finally that the retention of a vital component of Jewishness ('Yidishkayt') demands the continued use of Yiddish against the drift of a world largely ignorant of or hostile to the language and indifferent to its fate.

As F tells us, most of his 'sociolinguistic endeavors, covering more than a quarter century, have been intellectually and emotionally motivated' by his interest in Yiddish (1). F's cradle language was Yiddish and his upbringing was enriched by a bounty of Yiddish and Yiddishism, so it was natural that Yiddish supplied linguistic examples and illustrations in his professional publications from the beginning. But a conscious turning to Yiddish as integral theme in his work dates from 1969 and was due to the influence and example of Max Weinreich, Yiddishist, doyen of Yiddish linguistics, father of Uriel Weinreich, and a great man of indomitable will. At his death in 1969 Max Weinreich had completed his monumental sociocultural and linguistic history of the Yiddish language, *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh*. F was invited to aid in the translation into English (*The history of the Yiddish language*), and the expe-

rience left 'an indelible impression' on his subsequent career (4). The Yiddishist merged with the linguist, and the result, as they say, is history—the history of most of his scholarship over the last quarter century.

The nineteen pieces in this collection range from 1965 to the present, with several chapter introductions written especially for *YTL*. Four of the articles are in Yiddish: an 'additional reward', F says, for those who read Yiddish and also for those who have not had an opportunity 'to see what the language looks like in print and to realize that even today ... there is something ... to be gained from learning it' (9). *YTL* is divided into five subsections according to which F organizes his interests: (1) 'Yiddish and Hebrew: Conflict and symbiosis'; (2) 'Yiddish in America'; (3) 'Corpus planning: The ability to change and grow'; (4) 'Status planning: The Tshernovits Conference of 1908'; and (5) 'Stock-taking: Where are we now?' The largest single contribution is 'Yiddish in America', printed first in 1965 as an *IJAL* publication. It was a pioneering and remarkably comprehensive account of a minority language in America, and it remains today our most valuable sociolinguistic treatment of the Yiddish language in America.

The selection of articles included is very broad. *YTL* will appeal as much to the cultural historian as to the sociolinguist or sociologist of language. Those articles that have the most to say to the linguist as linguist will probably be: 'Nothing new under the sun: A case study of alternatives in language and ethnocultural identity'; 'Yiddish in America'; 'The phenomenological and linguistic pilgrimage of Yiddish: Some examples of functional and structural pidginization and depidginization'; 'Modeling rationales in corpus planning: Modernity and tradition in images of the good corpus'; 'Attracting a following to high culture functions for a language of everyday life: The role of the Tshernovits Conference in the rise of Yiddish'; and 'The lively life of a "dead" language'.

An entire subsection deals with the First Yiddish Language Conference, held in 1908 in Tshernovits (Czernowitz), a modest trans-Carpathian town now located in Ukraine. The driving force behind the Conference and its principal organizer was Dr. Nathan Birnbaum, about whom F has written a warmly evocative biography, both moving and analytical (1987). The practical consequences of the Tshernovits Conference have been much debated, but it was at the very least a watershed symbolic event in the long and arduous march of the Yiddish language towards equality, dignity, and respect. F is right to assign so much importance to the Conference and to Nathan Birnbaum (who, incidentally, coined the word 'Zionism'), for after Tshernovits nothing would ever be quite the same for Yiddish, for Yiddish-speaking scholars and intellectuals, and for Yiddish literature. The Yiddish language had arrived. The language was on the move from L(ow) to H(igh); and if Hebrew or Russian or German thought they had a monopoly on H functions in Jewish life, well, they would now just have to move over and make way for this pushy new upstart that had grown up in the small towns (shtetlekh) of eastern Europe in a complicated environment at once warm and nurturing on the inside yet inhospitable and threatening from without.

F draws implications from the Tshernovits Conference that will prove valuable for linguists and others apprehensive about the outlook for what a recent issue of *Language* called 'endangered languages' (Hale et al. 1992). Tshernovits tells a cautionary tale for linguists resolved to see a threatened language endure.

After reading *YTL*, I found that a phrase kept insinuating itself into my thoughts as I arranged them for this review: 'I decline to accept the end of Yiddish'. That exact phrasing I couldn't find in the book, and it took some time to realize that I was thinking of the famous declaration from William Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech. Joshua Fishman is light years removed from William Faulkner in heritage, sensibility, and values, but reading F on Yiddish evokes the memory of Faulkner's defiant optimism concerning humankind: 'I decline to accept the end of Man ... I believe that Man will not merely endure: He will prevail'. Substitute 'Yiddish' and you will know how Joshua Fishman feels about the fate of the Yiddish language.

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Linguistics Department  
 University of Texas  
 Austin, TX 78712-1196

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**Erving Goffman:** *Exploring the interaction order*. Edited by PAUL DREW and ANTHONY WOOTTON. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988. Pp. vi, 298. \$40.00.

Reviewed by R. P. McDERMOTT and JOHN BAUGH, *Stanford University*

Assume the social world to be a concert. In their descriptions of that world, linguists might focus on the notes and chords, anthropologists on the score and its interpretation, psychologists on the thought processes of the participants, sociologists on the statuses available to each, and economists on the box office. To such a scene, Erving Goffman brought an unusual and special focus. G's social actor always arrived late for the concert and was forced to wander up and down the aisles in search of a seat. 'Impression management' under difficult circumstances is the 'primal' social task for G, and embarrassment or its avoidance the primal outcome of social activity.

From 1953 to 1983, G produced eleven volumes and a handful of papers from the perspective of a person on the periphery, a person somehow irrevocably