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JEWISH IDENTITY EXPRESSED IN YIDDISH:
THE HISTORY OF NEW YORK JEWS

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present New York Jews, their history and upward mobility mirrored in the Yiddish language. In the years between 1880 and 1920, New York City was home to an enormous immigrant Jewish working class, most of which was concentrated in the garment industry on the impoverished Lower East Side. Yet, many of these Jews were influenced by an energetic group of émigré Jewish intellectuals who had to master their knowledge of Yiddish in order to communicate with the rest of the Jewish New York community.

Key words: New York City, Jewish immigration, Yiddish language.

At the end of the 19th century, Europe experienced the growth of anti-Semitism, especially in the eastern part of the continent, which culminated in the pogroms in Tsarist Russia. This sparked a large-scale movement of Jewish immigration to the United States. It is estimated that between the years 1877-1917 about two and a half million Jews arrived in the United States (Steinmetz 2001:16). However, the history of Jewish immigration in the United States can be traced much earlier.

Jewish Settlement in the United States

The Jewish settlement in the United States of America is traditionally divided into three main periods (see Doroshkin 1969):
1. The Sephardic-Spanish period which lasted from the second half of the 17th century until the second or third decade of the 19th century. The newcomers were either Iberian Jews or their descendants, and the first recorded settlement of Jews
in the American Colonies dates back 1654, when a tiny barque, the St. Charles, arrived in New Amsterdam carrying a cargo of 23 Jews. Significantly, this era of Jewish immigration left no visible traces on non-Jewish varieties of English.

2. The period of Western Ashkenazim, i.e. Yiddish\(^1\) speakers and their descendants. After 1700 Jews from different parts of Europe, such as Germany, Holland, Bohemia, Poland and England, started coming and by 1776 the total Jewish population was over 2000. By 1820 the number was about 5000, most of them from Germany or places under the influence of German rulers. This era lasted until the 1870s or the 1880s and left some lexical items in non-Jewish English, like kosher and schlemiel.

3. The period of Eastern Ashkenazim settlement, i.e. Jews from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires and their successor states, from the 1870s to the present. Altogether, between 1880 and 1910 more or less 1.5 million Jews arrived in the USA, most of them Yiddish speakers.\(^2\)

The third group is most interesting culturally because these Eastern European immigrants pursued numerous cultural activities and Yiddish language served as a means of unification different groups of Jewish immigrants. This has been also observed by D.D. Moore (2012:211) who provides an example of Emma Lazarus famous poem “The New Colossus.” According to Moore, Lazarus

\[\ldots\] knew of the arrival of masses of Yiddish speaking immigrants. What she did not know was that the newcomers had begun to create the conditions for an American Jewish literature, first in Yiddish and later in English. \[\ldots\] New York become one of the main centers where a modern, secular Yiddish literature developed. New York Jews distinguished themselves especially in the areas of Yiddish poetry and journalism.

Moreover, before the New York Jewish population might be completely “Anglicized,” it scores of Yiddish-speaking immigrants settled in the New York boroughs. That was Yiddish which become an important language of public and private discourse in the metropolis. The publication of newspapers and books, maintaining theaters and being involved in the entertainment industry, establishing Yiddish academic studies emphasized the continuity of Yiddish culture.

The masses of poor Jews settled in the shabby townhouses of New York’s Lower East Side, creating the ghettos and adapting the shtetl\(^3\) culture and

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\(^1\) Yiddish is the language of Ashenazim, central and East European Jews and their descendants. It is written in the Hebrew alphabet, but has its roots in Germanic, Romance and Slavonic languages (Weinreich 1980).

\(^2\) Wells (1928:58) observed that when so many Eastern-European Jews came to America, their mother tongue, i.e. Yiddish was seen as \[\ldots\] a sort of chatter hopelessly, unintelligible and supremely comical.

\(^3\) Shtetl refers to a poor and small Jewish community or town in Eastern Europe before World War II.
Jews who left Europe to seek political freedom in America, organized political, social educational institutions as well as various trade unions and the language spoken at those meetings was Yiddish. Thus, Steinmetz (2001:17) concludes that Yiddish, in effect, was the principal language of American Jews at home and in the streets from late 1880s to the late 1920s.

Interestingly, New York City was the center of the Yiddish press with over 150 different newspapers, journals, periodicals and magazines. Likewise, many Yiddish poets and writers based in the metropolis, such as Di yunge ‘The Young’ or the Inzikhistn ‘Introspectives’ found a wide audience. Also, The Jewish-Yiddish theater was booming thanks to the works of such playwrights as Jacob Adler and Jacob Gordin. Although the Yiddishkeit in New York City was at its height at that time, the process of acculturation of the immigrants and their children to the American way of life was taking place, foreshadowing the decline of Yiddish or its transformation into Jewish English.

Yiddish transformation into Jewish English

Gold (1985a:282) states that as far as Jewish languages are concerned [...] people, as they get older, find it even harder to acquire a native grasp of another

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4 Yiddishkeit (Yiddish: yidishkeyt יידישקייט in standard transcription) literally means ‘Jewishness’, i.e., ‘a Jewish way of life’, in the Yiddish language. It can refer to Judaism or forms of Orthodox Judaism when used by religious or Orthodox Jews. In a more general sense it has come to mean the ‘Jewishness’ or ‘Jewish essence’ of Ashkenazi Jews and the traditional Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern and Central Europe in particular. From a more secular perspective it is associated with the popular culture or folk practices of Yiddish-speaking Jews, such as popular religious traditions, Eastern European Jewish food, Yiddish humour, shtetl life, and klezmer music, among other things. Before the Haskalah and the emancipation of Jews in Europe, central to Yiddishkeit were Torah study and Talmudical studies for men, and family and communal life governed by the observance of Jewish Law for men and women. Among Haredi Jews of Eastern European descent, who compose the majority of Jews who still speak Yiddish in their every-day lives, the word has retained this meaning. But with secularization, Yiddishkeit has come to encompass not just traditional Jewish religious practice, but a broad range of movements, ideologies, practices, and traditions in which Ashkenazi Jews have participated and retained their sense of ‘Jewishness’. Yiddishkeit has been identified in manners of speech, in styles of humor, in patterns of association. Another quality often associated with Yiddishkeit is an emotional attachment and identification with the Jewish people (Bridger 1976:298).

5 As reported by Steinmetz (2001:18) the first daily newspaper in published Yiddish and circulated in new York City area was Yiddishes tageblat. However, the most influential newspaper and, continuously published since 1897, is Forverts or Jewish Daily Forward. Under the leadership of the newspaper first editor Abraham Cahan, the Forverts came to be known as the voice of the Jewish immigrant and the conscience of the ghetto. It fought for social justice, helped generations of immigrants to enter American life, broke some of the most significant news stories of the century, and was among the nation’s most eloquent defenders of democracy and Jewish rights at the beginning of the 20th century.
language, hence features of other languages one knows may influence the newly acquired one [...] to impart a more Jewish character to a newly acquired language. Gold (1985a:283) also claims that Hebrew and Yiddish are archistratal languages in Anglophone countries, and they may be potential sources of influence on the English used by Jews.

First and foremost, New York Jews were inclined to use certain words to express the peculiarities of their daily existence. They used such words as Shabes clocks ‘a clock which shows when the Shabes begins and finishes,’ yortsal calendar ‘anniversary’ or maise-meal ‘a brittle, flat piece of unleavened bread eaten during Passover’. For example, a native speaker of Yiddish who learnt English as an adult may have spoken English with traces of English Yiddish. This influence was passed on to the succeeding generation. Hence, when a hearer became acquainted with a certain dialect, he or she normally would begin hearing the vestiges of a certain substratum in one’s speech. In his seminal sociolinguistic work titled The Social Stratification of English in New York City Labov (1966) demonstrates that certain features of New York speech, such as raised intonation in words like off and cough, were more common among Jewish Americans in the 1960s than among Italian American and Irish Americans.

Interestingly, in its mildest form Jewish English may be manifested in allollingual influence in the form of phonological patterns passed on from previous generation. The speaker, who probably does not know the hidden language, may even be unaware of such allollingual influence on his or her speech. The difference can be also manifested in the quality of intonation patterns and the syntactic constructions employed: constructions of Yiddish origin such as Great art it isn’t or this is coffee!? appeared in the editorial page of the New York Times (see Gold 1985a:118).

Moreover, there are many communal variations among American Jews, for example, the speech pattern of members of different religious synagogues (e.g. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform), or between religious speakers and secularized New York Jews. For example, Jewish dietary laws are universally known as kosher, but a few Sephardic Jews hold out for kasher. This well-known word can serve also as an example for geographical differences as in Jewish American English it is kosher which in Jewish British English kasher. Native speakers of Israeli Hebrew would more likely say kasher when speaking English since the word in Israeli Hebrew is kasher. To illustrate this issue further, in Jewish English to nosh means ‘to nibble’ or ‘to eat a snack between meals’; in Jew.Br.E. it is used in the general sense ‘to eat’. As Gold (1985a:283) puts it [...] each item of Jewish English has a certain currency from the individual, generational, chronological, Jewish communal, and non-Jewish viewpoints.

The major communal line of division in Jew.E. runs between Ashkenazic and non-Ashkenazic varieties, with most of the Ashkenazic varieties being Sephardic English. As observed by Gold (1985a:284), if one needs to integrate, for example, Yiddish verbs into American English the Yiddish infinitive ending must be dropped. Therefore, Yiddish shepn ‘draw’ or kvetchn ‘complain’ appear in a modified form as shep and kvetch.
There are American Jews who communicate in vulgar varieties of Jew.E. to express swearing and obscenity (see, for example, writings of P. Roth, B. Malamud and L. Rosten). Normally, style-shift occurs when one discusses Jewish subjects with a non-Jew or in order to be more cryptic so that non-Jews will be hindered in understanding a thing. Significantly, normally a Jew tends to avoid expressions with non-Jewish connotations such as the *Old Testament*, *B.C.* ‘before Christ’, *A.D.* ‘anno domini’. Instead, they are likely to use the *Hebrew Bible* when communicating with non-Jews or *Tanakh* when speaking to another Jew, *C.E.* ‘Common Era’ and *B.C.E.* ‘before the Common Era’ may be substituted for *B.C.* and *A.D.* accordingly. Typically, paralinguistic markers may be revealed in the form of gesticulation, swaying hands and body movements; it is said the Jews use hands when talking more than others. In the Arab world, to which – broadly speaking – Jewish culture is very much related, gesticulation, and – more generally – paralinguistic patterns are a part and parcel of any routine act of communication.

According to McArthur (1992:546), Jewish English is a collective term for several varieties of English which are spoken and written by Jews all over the world, mostly in English speaking countries. The language is marked by a range of lexical items, grammatical and other linguistic and paralinguistic elements. McArthur (1992:546) informs us that *Jewish English has existed in one way or another as long as Jews have been speaking English*. At present, the most common variety of language is English which is evidently influenced by strong Yiddish and Hebrew admixture. Indeed, the impact of Ashkenazi Jews on mostly Northern American culture, enhanced by New York Jewry, is so immense that the introduction of such neologisms as *maven*, *nebbish*, *nosh* and *shlep* is easily observable. McArthur (1992:546) also enumerates Judezmo-influenced English used by Sepharic Jews, a 19th century variety of Australian English, and a formal variety that uses general English words such as *academy* for Yiddish-origin *yeshiva*, *skulcap* for Yiddish-

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6 Rosten (1982:207) explains that Hebrew *maven* means ‘understanding’, but in American and English newspaper stories, editorials and advertisements the verb is used in the sense ‘an expert’ and ‘a connoisseur’.


8 Rosten (1982:234) writes that *nosh/nash, nosher, noshen* (v.) comes from German *naschen* ‘to eat on the sly’. In Jewish English it means ‘a snack’, anything eaten between meals and, presumably in small quantity. *Nosher* is a person who eats between meals or one who has a sweet tooth. The verb *noshen* means to ‘have a little bite before dinner’ or ‘to have a little something between meals’.

9 *Shlep, shlepper* or *shleper* means ‘to drag’, ‘to pull’, ‘lag behind’ and comes from German *schleppen* to drag (Bluestein 1998:147). Also, a *shlep, shlepper* is ‘a jerk’, ‘someone unkempt, rundown-at-the-heels’, ‘a beggar’, ‘a petty thief’ and ‘bum’.

10 *Yeshiva* (Rosten 1982:351) from Hebrew ‘to sit’ is a rabbinical seminary and in American English a secondary Hebrew school.
As far as Jew.E. pronunciation is concerned there are numerous phonetic features which may be traceable to the sound pattern in Yiddish. For example, the substitution of /ng/ for /n/ in present participles and other words, such as singing and singer; raising of /o/ in words like off, cough, soft; over-aspiration of /t/, confusion of /s/ and /z/ in pronouncing the plural ending -s in certain environments. McArthur (1992:546) informs us that [...] certain features of Eastern Ashenazic New York City English of the immigrant generations (c.1880-1940) are still sometimes heard: pronunciation of such words as circle, nervous, first as if [soikel], [noivas], [foist], and an intrusive /n/ in words like carpenter [carpentner], painter [paintner]. Also, a widespread feature of Ashenazic Jewish English is the replacement of Yiddish-origin word-final –e/e/, as in pastrame, khole, shmate,13 tate, Sore with –i/i/, as in pastrami, kali ‘Sabbath loaf’, shmati ‘rag’, ‘clothes’, tati ‘daddy’, Sori ‘Sarah’.

All in all, American Ashenazic Jewish English possesses numerous characteristic stylistic features, for example, pitch, amplitude, intonation, voice quality and rate of speech that reflect the influence of the Yiddish conversational style of the immigrant generations.

McArthur (1992:546) provides numerous examples of Yiddish-based constructions found in colloquial American English, boosted by New York Jewish cultural activities, such as I want you should do this; He is a boy is all ‘that’s all’; Don’t be crazy; Again with the complains! ‘Complaining again’; Enough with the talk; They don’t know from nothing ‘Don’t know anything’). Similarly, Yiddish-origin idiomatic expressions are often used and spread into Am.E.. The most frequently used and quoted by Rosten (1982:133) are, for example, Get lost!; Eat your heart out!; I need it like a hole in the head; I should live so long ‘I would need to live a long time to see that’; You should be so lucky ‘You are never going to be so lucky’. Interestingly, another feature of Yiddish frequently reflected in Am.E. is the use of rhetorical questions, e.g., Who needs it?; What’s with all that noise?; So what else is new?; What’s to forgive? Having examined Jew.E. vocabulary, one has grounds to state that several Yiddish morphological forms have become common formatives, e.g., the dismissive shm- present in hundreds of reduplications, such as Oedipus-shmoedipius, rich-shmich, value-shmalue (see McArthur 1992:546). Moreover, the agentive suffix –nik14 is frequently put to use,

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11 Yarmulke (Rosten 1982) is the small caplet worn on the top of the head by a religious Jew.
12 Mikva (Bridger 1976:163) in Hebrew means a ritual purification and cleansing bath that Orthodox Jews take on certain occasions such as before Sabbath or after menstruation.
14 Rosten (1982:233) further explains that suffix –nik, from Slavic languages, is well-ensconced in Yinglish and often lends itself to strange inventions, e.g. a sicknik someone who fancies black
e.g., beatnik, kibbutznik, peacnik, real-estatnik, spynik, noshnik, Freudnik and also the endearing diminutives –ele–l, often appended to English given names, e.g., Stevele, Rachele, sometimes with common nouns, e.g., roomele, boyele, boychickl, storele and storkele.

There are also numerous Yiddish and Hebrew terms currently employed in Jewish English. Note that some of these words clearly relate to Jewish life and Judaism, e.g., shadhn ‘a matchmaker’, hesped ‘a eulogy’, kanehore ‘preserve us from the evil eye’, halevay ‘would that it be’ and Shabbes ‘holy day’. There are also many compounds of Yiddish and Hebrew loanwords combined with English words, e.g., matse balls ‘round dumplings’, shana tova card, ‘a Jewish New Year card’, sforim store ‘a Jewish bookstore’, and lexical items formed upon general English, e.g., Jewish Star, Hebrew School. Likewise, as pointed out by Rosten (1982:22), adjectives have been used by Jews as nouns. This is due to the fact that first generation of American Jews, residing mainly on the Lower East Side, in Brooklyn, in the Bronx, in the Jewish enclaves of Chicago, Detroit or Los Angeles were converting adjectives to nouns with equanimity, e.g., a crazy, a skinny, a goofy, a silly.

Having examined certain words used by Jews of New York, one observes semantic shifts in English words, often due to the existence of homophony with terms of Yiddish provenance, e.g., learn ‘to study Torah’, from Yiddish lernen; give used in the sense ‘to take’, from gebn, as in, for example, Give a look; by meaning ‘with’ or ‘from’, as in The money is by him. Moreover, informal abbreviations for vulgarisms of Yiddish origin are found mostly in Am.E., e.g., TL ‘a sycophant’, from Yiddish tokhes lecker ‘ass-licker’; an acronym A.K. meaning alter kocker literally ‘an old defector’, ‘an old man’, ‘a constipated man’, ‘a slow-thinking man, or ‘an old codger’ (see Rosten 1982:32); pejorative terms with English components, e.g., JAP ‘Jewish American Princess’ or A.M. an acronym for able momzer which denotes ‘able bastard’, ‘someone who is very clever, competent and tough’; and Yiddish and Hebrew expressions B’H meaning ‘with God’s help’ an acronym meaning of blessed memory or YHVH which stands for the four sacred letters for the name of God and is often rendered as Yahweh, Yahveh, Yehova, Jehovah (see Rosten 1982:353).

Finally, let us turn to Yinglish15 which is an informal and often facetious term referring to English that contains many Yiddish words and expressions. At the same time, it is an informal synonym of Jewish English (of the Ashkenazic or Eastern European variety). It also denotes Yiddish words and expressions that have become

humor, a Freudnik is an uncritical acolyte of the Master. Also, homosexuals refer to heterosexuals as straightniks.

15 Although the term Yinglish has been widely recognized by linguists, Feinsilver (1979) proposes other terms, such as Endishism and Engdish, the latter one being more logical than Yiddish for the first name category (Yiddish with interpolating English) since the beginning of each classifier, i.e. Engdish, Yinglish indicates the outside influence.
part of colloquial English, an informal collective term for Yiddishisms, as well as words and expressions that blend Yiddish and English, such as borscht circuit, fancy-shmancy, a whole meglillah, a hearty mazel tov. Very frequently, the term is viewed by scholars of Yiddish as slangy and slightly disparaging (see, for example, MacArthur 1998).

**Jewish New Yorkers and Yiddish Future**

Finally, New York Jews have left their marks in many fields, including non-Jewish English. It is also believed by some, mostly secular American Jews that Yiddish is definitely not essential to Judaism and its decline or disappearance would have no effect on the ancient religion. However, it seems that Yiddish has not disappeared yet, as Yiddish language and culture have flourished in the United States of America not only as long as there were fresh immigrants whose mother tongue was Yiddish. In the 21st century, there is a remarkable renewal of interest in its roots among New York Jews which is realized by the rediscovery of Yiddish, which is promoted, among others, by the New York City based YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftiker Institut) offering scholarship in the field of Yiddish culture and language.

**References**


