

The German and Non-German in Yiddish

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Yiddish is best described by Leo Rosten when he wrote:

Yiddish is the Robin Hood of languages. It steals from the linguistically rich to give to the fledgling poor . . . It has displayed immense resourcefulness, immenser resilience, and immensest determination-not-to-die-properties . . . I think it a tongue that never takes its tongue out of its cheek. (qtd. in *Joys* xviii)

Indeed, Yiddish displays the characteristics of Robin Hood. The Ashkenazic people's many wanderings produced a language far more open, far more mixed than most. Journalist Charles Rappaport claims, "I speak ten languages-all of them in Yiddish" (qtd. in *Joys* xviii). Among those ten languages Rappaport refers to, is German.

Today, scholars of various backgrounds dispute the amount of influence German has had on the development of the Yiddish language. While some scholars claim that German has had minimal influence on Yiddish, others say it is the core resource of the language. Modern

Yiddish and modern German are both derived from the same source: Middle High German, but they have developed separately for at least one thousand years (Geipel 11, 12). An examination of Yiddish in light of both its German and non-German components is essential to understanding the language in its present form.

Yiddish evolved from a series of wanderings by the Ashkenazic Jews (*Britannica*). These Jewish emigrants spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and Old French. When they migrated to the towns along the Rhine River, they added German to their language and wrote their new vernacular with Hebrew characters (Waterman 119). With the slaughter of the Jews during the First Crusade and the devastation of the Black Plague, the Ashkenazic Jews split into two migrating groups.

The first group went to southern Germany, Austria, Bohemia, and northern Italy. Their written language is known as Western Yiddish. Unfortunately, Western Yiddish died out in the Medieval Yiddish Period which spanned from 1500-1750 (*Joys of Yiddish* 524, 525). This resulted from an assimilation into the German language and an 18th Century movement in Germany to purify their language and culture (*Britannica*).

Fortunately, Eastern Yiddish was not touched by this movement and survived to become the prevailing form of Yiddish spoken today. Eastern Yiddish was developed by the second migratory group. This group of Ashkenazic Jews received an invitation to go to Poland with the guaranteed social status of traders. While in Poland, the Ashkenazic ran into an older settlement of Polish-speaking Jews. The Polish Jews welcomed the Ashkenazic into their society and eventually adopted Yiddish as their own

language (*Joys of Yiddish* 525). As Abraham Menez said, “Since the golden age of Jewish life in Babylonia, Jews had never felt as much at home in a country as they did now in Poland” (qtd. in *Joys of Yiddish* 525).

Under these desirable conditions, Eastern Yiddish thrived and developed into three dialects: Southeastern (Ukrainian-Romanian), Mideastern (Polish-Galician-Eastern Hungarian), and Northeastern (Lithuanian-White Russian) Yiddish (Harshav 79). Formed as a result of the boundary between Poland and Lithuania, these three dialects differ in their pronunciation, although Northeastern Yiddish is looked to as the standard form of Yiddish pronunciation and spelling. According to Benjamin Harshav “Every speaker of one dialect can (if he wants) easily understand speakers of other dialects by merely adjusting the vowel equivalents in his mind” (79, 80).

Daniel Nuriyev compared Northeastern Yiddish to Southeastern Yiddish, showing some of these vowel equivalents:

Vowels	Northeastern	Southeastern
a > o	hant	hont
o > u	dos	dus
u > i	du	di
e > ey	geven	geveyn
ay > a	shraybyn	shrabn
o > oy	geborn	geboryn
loss of “r”	darf	daf

German speakers might also make small adjustments

in their minds to make Yiddish comprehensible. The vocabulary of Yiddish is said to be 72 percent German, 18 percent Hebrew, 16 percent Slavic languages, 5.60 percent Romance languages, and 3.55 percent English.* In other words, Yiddish lexis is derived from a predominantly German source (Rosten 10). German speakers will probably not find it difficult to understand the Yiddish folk song, Yome Yome:

YOME, YOME ZING MIR A LIDELE,
 VOS DOS MEYDELE VIL;
 DOS MEYDELE VIL A POR SHIKHELEKH
 HOBN,
 MUZ MEN GEYN DEM SHUSTER ZOZN!
 NEYN, MAMESHI, NEYN!
 DU KENST MIKH NISHT FARSHTEYN,
 DU VEYST NISHT, VOS IKH MEYN!

YOME, YOME, ZING MIR A LIDELE,
 VOS DOS MEYDELE VIL;
 DOS MEYDELE VIL A HITELE HOBN,
 MUZ MEN GEYN DER PUTSERKE ZOZN!
 NEYN, MAMESHI, NEYN!
 DU KENST MIKH NISHT FARSHTEYN,
 DU VEYST NISHT, VOS IKH MEYN!!

YOME, YOME ZING MIR A LIDELE,
 VOS DOS MEYDELE VIL;
 DOS MEYDELE VIL A KHOSNDL HOBN,
 MUZ MEN GEYN DEM SHADKHN ZOZN!
 YO, MAMESHI, YO!
 DU KENST MIKH SHOYN FARSHTEYN,
 DU VEYST SHOYN VOS IKH MEYN

* Note that the percents do not add up to 100. Rosten realizes this, but at the same time assures his readers that the figures are valid.

Herein, one finds a German-rich vocabulary with words such as vos (was), das Meydele (das Mädchen), vil (will), meyn (meine), kenst (kennst), nisht (nicht), farshteyn (verstehen), veyst (weisst), and shoy'n (schon) to name a few.

However German speakers should be careful when directly translating Yiddish words into German. As Maurice Samuel points out

Germanic words and phrases have slipped into Jewish life and undergone transformations of meaning corresponding to exclusively Jewish experiences. There are countless folk locutions in which every separate word recalls its original Germanic meaning, while the phrase as a whole is unintelligible in German. (67)

To illustrate, Samuel gives the example of dreyen mitn grobn finger. If this phrase were to be literally translated from German, it would mean “to turn with the thick finger.” But figuratively translated, it means “to beat around the bush, argue evasively, dishonestly.” The figurative meaning relates to Talmudic study and comes from the “traditional down-and-up semicircular scooping motion made with closed fingers and extended thumb by an excited expositor of a knotty problem” (67). This example demonstrates the uniqueness of the Yiddish language in that it can synthesize the literal and figurative meanings of words from two different cultures.

Arguably, “synthesis” can also describe Yiddish grammar. Depending on who you ask, Yiddish may or may not be considered to have a predominantly German syn-

tax governing its grammar. Salomo Birnbaum, when comparing German and Yiddish, claims that “the systems of stress and syntax differ exceedingly” (Birnbaum II 10). Benjamin Harshav has a slightly different slant on this issue. He writes

In Yiddish none of these [Hebrew-Aramaic, German, Slavic] languages are represented in its pure form or in its full range. What we have in Yiddish is a slanted selection from the source languages. For example, it is not German syntax per se that dominates Yiddish sentences but those German syntactical components which entered the Yiddish language. (43)

In other words, Yiddish syntax adopted German qualities that were adapted over the years when contacts were made with other languages and cultures. Harshav proposes that “[t]he syntax of Yiddish is derived from spoken, rather than written German, and has limited its options mostly to what seems acceptable in Hebrew or Slavic. Thus, Modern Yiddish uses a straightforward word order . . .” (67).

Looking at the following table provided by *Yiddish Grammar*, it is obvious that modern German and Yiddish are similar in their most fundamental syntax and morphology.

But perhaps one of the largest differing elements that Birnbaum was pointing to was that Yiddish does not utilize the simple past tense like German does. John Geipel, the author of *Mame Loshn: The making of Yiddish*, notes that like several German dialects, “Yiddish has lost the preterite tense and expresses past action by combining the past participle of the verb with an auxiliary (to have

Yiddish

German	Yiddish	German	Yiddish
ich bin	ikh bin	ich bin krank gewesen	ikh bin krank geveyn
du bist	du bist	ich war krank	ikh bin krank gevoren
er ist	er iz	er ist krank gewesen	er iz krank geveyn
sie ist	zi iz	er war krank	er iz krank gevoren
es ist	es iz	ich habe gegessen	ikh hob gegessen
wir sind	mir zaynen	er hat gegessen	er hot gegessen
ihr seid	ihr zayt	wir haben gegessen	mir hobben gegessen
sie sind	zey zaynen	sie haben gegessen	zey hobben gegessen

or to be)” (88).

For instance, in German, one would say, *er war krank* (He was sick) using the simple past tense, whereas its Yiddish equivalent would either be *er iz krank geveyn* (he was sick) or *er iz krank gevoren* (he got sick) using the auxiliary + past participle, or narrative past form. Although the Yiddish *iz geweyn/geworen* is parallel to German’s *ist gewesen* (narrative past), there is no grammatical equivalent in Yiddish for *waren* (was), German’s form of “to be” in the simple past.

Nevertheless, the Yiddish language was greatly influenced by German morphology as seen in Yiddish’s use of the suffix *-l*. Geipel explains, “[t]he diminutive suffix *-l* one of the most indispensable features of Yiddish-is typical of south German and Austrian speech” (32). The usage of the *-l* suffix in Yiddish is not unlike the usage of the *-l* suffix in south Germany and Austria and the *-chen*

suffix in northern Germany. For example, the Yiddish language makes use of this diminutive suffix for several purposes, such as to create a more affectionate form of address (32). “Applied to personal names, the suffix has produced such diminutives as Yankl, Yekl, Yukl, Kobl, and Kopl, all affectionate forms of Jacob” (32). Similarly, adding the *-chen* suffix to a name in German adds endearment. This is seen when examining the difference between Peter and Peterchen, Peterchen being the more affectionate form of address.

Unlike the usage of the diminutive suffix *-l*, the issue of adjective declensions gives examples of disparities between Yiddish and German. In German, inflected forms of adjectives are used to modify nouns with a definite or indefinite article. For instance, in *das gute Buch*, *gut* takes an *-e* ending for a definite article and in *ein gutes Buch*, *gutes* takes an *-es* ending because it modifies an indefinite article. But according to Daniel Nuriyev, in Yiddish the standard rule stipulates that adjectives with an indefinite article do not take on an ending. For instance, “a big blackboard” is said *a groys tovl* and “a big city” is said *a groys shutut* (Nuriyev). In these examples, the root form of the adjective (*groys*) remains unchanged.

Adjectives used with nouns with definite articles do, however, receive a declension. For example, a masculine singular noun would get an *-er* ending added to its adjective as in “the big blackboard” *der groyser tovl* (Nuriyev). An *-e* adjective ending would be added to a feminine, neutral, or plural noun as in “the big city” *di groyse shtut*, “the big land” *dus groyse land*, and “the big tables” *di groyse tovl*n (Nuriyev). However, Daniel Nuriyev is

uncertain of the applicability of the rules due to variant uses of grammar in different regions. As he writes

I hear people using these endings [-er, -e] with the indefinite articles too. I've read in Russian Yiddish Grammar Books that these endings should be used in masculine, feminine, and plural only, but not neutral. Maybe it is a matter of dialects. (Nuriyev)

However, Geipel writes, this generalized or non-standardized Yiddish is promoted by YIVO because it is usually intelligible to all Yiddish speakers at least in its written form. He also asserts that the notion of creating a standard Yiddish, accepted by all dialect areas is “an unobtainable ideal” (17).

Whereas the German language experiences variation among its various dialects, there is little dispute about standard grammar rules due to the efforts of standardization. Duden regiments this standard through regularly published rulebooks to assure that a standard language is maintained. In contrast, Yiddish is known as an open language. John Geipel validates this assertion when he states, “Compared with the procrustean rigidities of German syntax, that of Yiddish is highly flexible...” (11)

To describe Yiddish structure, Joseph Waletzky in his study, *Topicalization in Yiddish*, observes, “[i]n sentences where the speaker does not wish to emphasize any one sentence unit, the usual order is S-V-O; but under suitable conditions almost any constituent of the sentence may precede the inflected verb” (237). This point is well illustrated in Yiddish's use of negation, double negation, and multiple negation.

In a study recorded by Christopher Hutton, native Yiddish speakers were asked to translate the phrase, “I didn’t eat anything.” The result produced 9 different variations; among them were:

- (1) ikh hob gornish(t) gegesn
- (2) ikh hob nish(t) gegesn gornish(t)
- (3) ikh hob gornish(t) nish(t) gegesn
- (4) ikh hob nit gegesn gornish(t) nit.

In example (1), the negation *gornish(t)* is placed before the final verb, and in example (2), the negation *nish(t)* and *gornish(t)* comes before and after the final verb. Example (3) shows a double negation *gornish(t) nish(t)* before the final verb and example (4) shows a double negation *gornish(t) nit* after the final verb as well as a negation *nit* before the final verb.

In German, such flexibility is unknown. Most German speakers would give the following translation for the same English sentence as *ich habe nichts gegessen*. In this sentence, *nichts* would be considered a negation pronoun, taking the position of the direct object, or 3rd position of the sentence following the initial subject and verb (Duden 716-717). In essence, it would appear that Yiddish has adopted certain German elements and adapted them to suit its own carefree spirit.

Undoubtedly, the language of Yiddish is a carefree Robin Hood of sorts, exposing the linguistic borrowings of its wanderings in its vocabulary and grammar, particularly that of the German language. Although scholars do not agree on the magnitude of German’s influence on Yiddish, it is clear that German has had more influence

on Yiddish than any other of its source languages. Recognizing the German and non-German elements in Yiddish proves invaluable to the study of this remarkable language.

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