

1 Introduction

1.1 Aim and scope

This book provides an overview of the Yiddish language and Yiddish linguistics. It is aimed at general linguists, Germanic linguists, scholars in Yiddish and Ashkenazic studies, and scholars in general Jewish studies. It seeks to strike a balance between breadth and depth of coverage of the main issues in Yiddish linguistics: the linguistic structure, history, dialectology, and sociolinguistics. The Yiddish data are presented in a format compatible with general and theoretical linguistic discussion, accessible to linguists regardless of their individual theoretical bent. However, the task is not to engage general theoretical debate; rather, theory is used only as a tool for presentation and its place in the exposition is minimized.

There is a need for such an introduction to Yiddish linguistics. Max Weinreich's monumental *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh* (1973)¹ provides a sweeping social history of Yiddish; however, it is not a grammar (historical or otherwise). The detailed grammars available (e.g., Zaretski 1926; Mark 1978) do not present the history or dialectology of the language. Birnbaum (1979a) in many respects provides both history/dialectology and a grammar;² however, his grammatical section is essentially a reference grammar. While individual shorter works have dealt with specific problems of Yiddish phonology, morphology, and syntax, there was – with one exception – no book-length study which attempted to look at the overall structure of Yiddish systematically, with general linguistic issues in mind. Zaretski (1926) stands alone as the one serious attempt to present a theory-oriented comprehensive Yiddish grammar, though his focus is on syntax and morphology, with only limited discussion of the phonology. Prilutski (1940) provides comprehensive discussion of Yiddish phonology and phonetics.

This book uses Yiddish as the point of departure. It is not a comparative discussion, where Yiddish is seen primarily in terms of other languages (e.g., German). This was once the case, but the field has developed and

¹ Partial translation appeared as M. Weinreich (1980).

² See also Weissberg (1988).

2 Introduction

matured.³ In the core grammar chapters (phonology, morphology, syntax) the general point of departure is modern Standard Yiddish (StY). Modern StY is largely a “common-ground” variety of Eastern Yiddish in which many of the most dialect-marked features are dropped (§7.5.1).

Several systems are employed in the present book to represent Yiddish (see “Notes on transcription and symbols”). For the most part, Yiddish data are given in romanized form. This is a regrettable necessity for reaching a broader readership. Linguistic handbooks from one hundred years ago (written for example in German, English, French) routinely included words or passages in Greek, Hebrew, Russian, etc. – often within a single book, even on the same page – without apology to the reader. However, such practice is less common today. In the present book, linguistic data are given in a modified IPA rather than in YIVO romanization. This was done in order to preserve some distinctions which are lost in YIVO romanization (e.g., /ə/ and /e/ are both rendered as <e> in the YIVO system). The use of phonetic symbols is of course necessary in discussion of phonological issues. The use of this phonetic romanization has been maintained in discussions outside the phonology for the sake of consistency in the presentation of data. The YIVO romanization, while not Yiddish orthography, does convey the regularity and systematicity of Yiddish orthography. However, the decision has been made here to use IPA-based symbols, precisely because this is a book focusing on linguistic issues, many of which are phonological. YIVO romanization is used for all bibliographic references and for Yiddish terms used in English. In some instances where an author’s name has a familiar English version, this is used; e.g., *Weinreich* vs. *Vaynraykh*.

1.2 Yiddish

Yiddish arose as the indigenous language of Ashkenazic Jewry, likely some 900–1,200 years ago, via contact with indigenous varieties of medieval German in German lands. Over the next few centuries the home territory of Ashkenazic Jewry came to cover the second-largest territorial expanse (after Russian) of any language/culture area in Europe. In the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, a sizable Ashkenazic diaspora arose, giving rise to Yiddish-speaking colonies beyond Europe, in North and South America, Palestine/Israel, Australia, and South Africa.

In modern times, both in the European home territory and in the Ashkenazic diaspora, Yiddish served as the language of the Ashkenazic masses in everyday life, at home, in theatre, cinema, literature, politics, journalism, in

³ See Strauch (1990), and Frakes (1993) for discussion.

schools – both secular and religious – and more.⁴ Immediately prior to the Nazi German genocide of the Second World War, the number of Yiddish speakers was estimated at 11–13 million, making it the third largest Germanic language at the time (after English and German).⁵ Of the 6 million Jews murdered in Germany's genocide, approximately 5 million were Yiddish speakers. Today, Yiddish speakers are to be found chiefly in centers such as New York, Israel, Melbourne, Montreal, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and elsewhere. Birnbaum (1979a: 42) estimated the number of speakers in 1979 to be more than 5 million. Many of these may be assumed to be Holocaust survivors who have since passed away. The number of Yiddish speakers today is growing – probably in the neighborhood of some several hundred thousand to over a million – largely due to the birth rate in current Yiddish-speaking (typically, orthodox) communities. Many of these active communities have a Yiddish-language press; some have day schools in Yiddish. In Hasidic communities, traditional learning takes place in Yiddish, and Yiddish is strong as the language of home and everyday life. Yiddish-language radio programming in its heyday during the 1950s and 1960s drew large audiences in New York and other major Jewish urban centers in America. In recent decades, the field of Yiddish and Ashkenazic studies in colleges and universities has grown significantly, at both the undergraduate and graduate level. In accord with the practice common in Yiddish scholarship, the ethnographic present is used in discussion of Yiddish data, dialects, etc.

Yiddish developed a highly structured system of dialects, a modern literature, a standard language, and more – all without the support apparatus of a nation-state. Although Hebrew has served as the common sacred language of all Jewish communities throughout the world, more Jews have spoken Yiddish as their native language than have spoken Hebrew natively, and for a longer span of time. Furthermore, dating from the eighteenth century, Ashkenazim constituted the majority of the Jews in the world (the overwhelming majority beginning in the nineteenth century), and from the mid nineteenth century until the Holocaust Yiddish was the native language of the majority of the world's Jews (see chart in M. Weinreich 1980: 173).

1.3 Framing the object of investigation

To focus on a given language is to frame that language within a point of view; e.g., “German” as opposed to “Dutch,” “Russian” as opposed to “Ukrainian.”

⁴ To varying degrees, in varying times and places, portions of Ashkenazic Jewry in modern times have adopted non-Jewish vernaculars, either as a second language, or as a primary language; see §7.

⁵ Birnbaum (1979a: 40–42) arrived at a figure of approximately 12 million in 1931, and compares this with the following contemporaneous numbers: Czech – 7 million; Greek – 6 million; Rumanian – 12.5 million; Dutch – 12 million; Croat(ian)-Serbian – 10.5 million.

4 Introduction

Classification as “language” vs. “dialect” (of that “language”) depends on extralinguistic factors. However, that is part of what linguists do – they focus, somewhat arbitrarily, on a given language variety, and from there describe its history, structure, etc. In this framework sister dialects are subordinated within the superstructure of the “language,” and the agenda becomes one of describing the dialects on the terms of the greater “language.” At the same time, the language of focus may be seen from other perspectives – externally, e.g., Dutch in terms of German or Germanic; or typologically: SOV vs. SVO languages, agglutinating languages, etc. Furthermore, language diachrony may be viewed in terms of *stammbaum* evolution (genetic), and/or contact-induced developments. An introduction to the linguistics of a given language must balance the need for a “full picture” (of both internal and external factors) with the need to narrow the focus to the object of attention itself.

Yiddish has significant lexical and structural similarity with German; thus, Yiddish has traditionally been – and often still is – viewed by many in terms of German. However, while comparison is important, it must not be the basis for analysis. Rather, Yiddish is primarily to be described and analyzed in terms of the patterns within Yiddish itself. As a secondary task, we may compare the two systems and seek to understand and describe the nature of the complex historical and sociolinguistic relationship(s) between Yiddish and German.

Fundamental to the centering of Yiddish is the recognition of Ashkenazic Jewry as a society distinct both from other Jewries and from coterritorial non-Jewish populations. “Mapping out” the historical and perceptual geography of Ashkenaz, M. Weinreich (1980) distinguishes Ashkenaz from Germany. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries (CE), Jewish references to Ashkenaz meant the lands of Germans, i.e., non-Jews (*Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1971: III, 720); only later did the term *Ashkenaz* come to refer to Jews in or from the German lands, their culture, their Judeo-German language today called Yiddish, etc. Weinreich’s ideological point is clear (Jacobs 1998): while Yiddish-speaking Jewry had an established sense of the geographic – as reflected, for example, in culture-internal division into geographic districts in the Council of the (Four) Lands (mid sixteenth century to 1764) – it had never possessed or ruled over its own nation-state in its European homeland. Use of the term *Ashkenaz* within a Yiddishist framework implies a fundamental recognition of the reality of Ashkenazic Jewish autonomy – geographic, cultural, and linguistic.

In the history of continental Ashkenaz⁶ there occurred over time a shift in the center of gravity – demographic, cultural, and linguistic – from Central Europe to Eastern Europe (M. Weinreich 1980: especially 3–4). Weinreich

⁶ The term *continental Ashkenaz*, to my knowledge, was coined in D. Miller (1990).

calls the early period when the center of gravity lay to the west *Ashkenaz I*, and the later period of eastern Ashkenazic predominance *Ashkenaz II*. Again, the focus is endocentric – on the changing circumstances within Ashkenaz primarily from a culture-internal perspective rather than in terms of the secondary external influences.

1.4 Development of Yiddish studies

The history of the investigation of Yiddish shows a clear path of development – dating back to the sixteenth century – from an exocentric to an endocentric enterprise (see Borokhov 1913; M. Weinreich 1923a).⁷ The earliest descriptions of Yiddish are found as appendices to the Hebrew grammars (written in Latin) by Christian Semitists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yiddish was seen as an interesting “sideline” or as a “bridge to Hebrew” (Katz 1986: 23), and thus not of primary or direct interest to the authors or their readership. Self-instructional handbooks of Yiddish (written in German) by Christian authors date from the sixteenth century and later. The handbooks contained practical information useful in business transactions, including specialized (Hebrew-origin) vocabulary used in the horse- and cattle-trade. Thus, the interest in Yiddish was a medium to facilitate the real goal – business with Jews.

The next wave of Yiddish studies consisted of pedagogical works produced by Christian missionaries and their teachers. Here, too, the interest in Yiddish was direct, but not in Yiddish *qua* Yiddish but as a means for converting Jews to Christianity. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the production of anti-Semitic works (by Germans as well as by apostates) in which Yiddish speech was described or portrayed (with varying degrees of accuracy). The nineteenth century also saw the production of criminological research on Yiddish, as a by-product of police interest in thieves’ cant and other marginal speech varieties. Beginning in the late nineteenth century there arose an interest – academic, social, and political – in the investigation of Yiddish for its own sake, by Jews and non-Jews. The groundwork for the serious academic investigation of Yiddish arose earlier in the nineteenth century in the founding of the Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden, which marked the beginning of modern Jewish studies. As Borokhov (1966[1913]: 76–77) notes, however, many of these highly assimilated Jews (in the Verein) approached Yiddish as corrupt German. Thus, it remained for the generation of the blossoming of modern Yiddish studies in the early twentieth century to establish the study of Yiddish for its own sake and on its own terms.

⁷ For summary discussion of the history of Yiddish linguistics, see Katz (1986). The present outline is drawn from Jacobs and Lorenz (1998: 191–192).

1.5 Jewish languages and Jewish interlinguistics

Wexler (1981a: 99), in the abstract of his seminal paper on Jewish interlinguistics, writes: “Since the 6th century B.C., Jews have created unique variants of many coterritorial non-Jewish languages with which they came into contact; Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, Spanish, Persian, and German are just a few examples.” The investigation of Jewish languages within a Jewish interlinguistic framework dates back to the nineteenth century.⁸ While Wexler (pp. 104–106) classifies four types of Jewish-language genesis, the most common type is development along a diachronic chain of Jewish languages. The first shift was from Hebrew⁹ to Judeo-Aramaic (= Targumic). Subsequently, a portion of the Judeo-Aramaic-speaking population shifted to Judeo-Greek; later, Judeo-Latin likely arose on a Judeo-Greek substrate, and so forth. Of course, this chain view is a simplified representation of complex sociolinguistic realities. Not all speakers took part in a given shift. For example, some Hebrew speakers remained during Judeo-Aramaic times. Furthermore, only a portion of Judeo-Romance speakers – namely, those who settled in the Rhineland in approximately the ninth–tenth centuries CE – shifted to a German-based Jewish language.

The four types of Jewish languages which Wexler distinguishes are as follows: (A) Those arising via an uninterrupted chain of Jewish languages; Yiddish provides an example of this type. (B) Those languages spoken by Jews “in the absence of any significant Jewish substratum” (Wexler 1981a: 105); these become identified as Jewish by “default” – that is, at one point the Jewish and non-Jewish variants were essentially identical, but either the non-Jews moved away, leaving this linguistic turf to the Jews (e.g., Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic), or the Jewish speakers migrated to a different region, where their speech variety was perceived of as typically Jewish, even though it was not so perceived in its original home territory. (C) Calque languages developed within Jewish culture areas for systematic translation of Biblical texts or exegesis. These are not spoken languages, but, rather, follow a specific pattern of morpheme-by-morpheme translation; this results in texts which are systematically cleansed of Semitic lexicon and morphology, but which echo the original Hebrew or Aramaic syntax or phrasing (§7.7.1). (D) This denotes instances where the Jewish speech is (virtually) identical to non-Jewish speech, except that in the former, Jews “introduce occasional Hebrew-Aramaic or Jewish elements” (p. 106). Wexler sees these as transitory situations, where a Jewish language is undergoing language death (and, at the same time, possibly signaling the first stages in the birth of a new Jewish language); examples here are the German and Dutch speech

⁸ Wexler (1981a: 100); see his extensive bibliography for references.

⁹ While the first Jewish shift (among the first Jews) was likely from Canaanite dialects to Hebrew, the linguistic evidence for this is beyond our reach.

of Jews undergoing shift from Yiddish, but retaining some Hebrew-Aramaic [HA] origin lexemes.

Hebrew and Targumic occupy a unique position in the chain of Jewish languages in that they are common to all subsequent type A languages. Hebrew and Targumic are also unique in that they may serve as ongoing sources of linguistic enrichment, due to their status as the languages of sacred texts, liturgy, official documents such as certificates of marriage and divorce, wills, property transactions, and the like. Yiddish contains elements from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Judeo-Greek inherited via the chain of language shift; these elements are substratal. However, new elements may be added adstratally to Yiddish, via the presence of sacred texts in Hebrew and Judeo-Aramaic, whereas Judeo-Greek does not serve as an ongoing source of new enrichment in Yiddish.

The term *Loshn-koydesh* לשון קודש ‘the language of sanctity’¹⁰ is used in Yiddish scholarship to refer to the HA component found in subsequent Jewish languages; thus conflating reference to the two distinct (though closely related) Northwest Semitic languages into a single term.¹¹ The terms *Loshn-koydesh* / HA further conflate those elements which are substratal, those which were at one time adstratal in a predecessor Jewish language (but substratal in subsequent Jewish languages), and those added adstratally in the Jewish language under discussion. Where linguistic evidence for the distinctions is available, distinctions may be made (§2.5). Typical in traditional Jewish diaspora societies is a situation of internal Jewish bilingualism – the ongoing symbiosis of *Loshn-koydesh* and the Jewish vernacular within a Jewish speech community (M. Weinreich 1980: 247–314). In this situation Jewish social competence requires linguistic competence not only in the Jewish vernacular, but in *Loshn-koydesh* as well. The latter entailed some knowledge of Hebrew, and, with additional education, Aramaic.

In the scenario traditionally accepted in Yiddish scholarship, Yiddish arose via the following chain of vernaculars: Spoken Hebrew – Judeo-Aramaic – Judeo-Greek – Judeo-Romance – Yiddish. In this scenario, the Slavic component entered Yiddish adstratally, and basically only in part of the Yiddish *massif*. A rough chronology of the links in the chain may be given as follows (M. Weinreich 1980: 247). Hebrew was the only spoken language of Jews until 586 BCE, which date marked the beginning of the Babylonian exile and the beginning of the shift to (Judeo-) Aramaic. Hebrew gradually declined as the

¹⁰ Cf. Hebrew לשון הקודש which contains the definite article *ha*; its absence in Yiddish is likely due to rhythmic reasons; see §2.8; Jacobs (1991).

¹¹ On the case for not conflating the two, see Katz (1985: 98; 1993: 47). The grammars of the two are distinct, as are their sociolinguistic roles within traditional Ashkenazic culture. Phonologically, both the Hebrew and Aramaic elements underwent identical pre-Yiddish developments (§2.4.2). The terms *Loshn-koydesh* and HA are used in the present work in accordance with general practice in Yiddish linguistics, and for ease of reference and space-economy.

spoken language of Jews in the Babylonian exile, with Judeo-Aramaic becoming predominant (± 500 –200 BCE). For the most part, Hebrew died out as a vernacular in Palestine between *c.* 200 BCE and 300 CE. However, alongside Judeo-Aramaic as the vernacular, Hebrew remained in sacral and liturgical functions, and thus served as a source of enrichment within Judeo-Aramaic, both spoken and written. The influences worked in both directions; for example, Aramaic influences are found in the Hebrew of later portions of the Bible. The symbiosis in internal Jewish bilingualism became established from this time onward as a characteristic feature of Jewish civilization. The tradition arose whereby a sacred passage was read first in Hebrew, and then in the *targum* “translation.”

Internal Jewish bilingualism continued as subsequent language shifts created new Jewish languages. The *Loshn-koydesh* texts (and oral recitation or citation from these) continued as potential sources of enrichment in later Jewish languages, while Judeo-Greek and subsequent Jewish languages did not / could not fill that function. Furthermore, it can be argued that acrolectal *Loshn-koydesh* may have served to reinforce the survival and transmission of (merged) HA-origin words in the later Jewish vernaculars, giving these a boost in ways that Judeo-Greek origin words, for example, lacked. Commencing in the fourth century BCE, Judeo-Greek emerged via the shift of some speakers of Hebrew and Aramaic. This was followed by the shift of some speakers of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek to Judeo-Latin in the first century BCE (Wexler 1981a: 110). The exact nature of a purported Judeo-Latin is unclear. However, the important point is that the next link in the chain toward Yiddish consisted of Jewish varieties of Romance. M. Weinreich (1980) provides detailed discussion of the long history of Jewish varieties of Romance languages. He suggests that these varieties took part in daughter-dialect-specific developments (toward “Italian” and “French”) while at the same time maintaining their distinctness from these. Weinreich posits a shift from two varieties of Judeo-Romance – Western (Judeo-Old French) and Southern (Judeo-Old Italian) in Loter in approximately the ninth or tenth century – to a Germanic-based language, thus creating Yiddish. Wexler (1991) supposes a different chain, whereby Yiddish arose on a Judeo-Slavic substrate, which in turn he posits arose on Judeo-Aramaic and Judeo-Greek substrates (see §2.1.6). In either scenario, Yiddish arose through language shift, as part of a continuous chain of Jewish vernacular speech. This view of Jewish linguistic continuity and adaptation is the context in which scholarship within the field of Yiddish linguistics comprehends the Yiddish language.

2 History

2.1 Approaches to the history of Yiddish

Historically, three main types of approaches have been taken concerning the origins of Yiddish. Each approach arose within the intellectual and ideological contexts of its time. Furthermore, there is a path of development among the approaches, with partial transitions evident. The first type of approach may be called essentialist, or alinguistic. This approach views Yiddish as being, for example, “corrupted Hebrew” or “corrupted German” (e.g., Wagenseil 1699). Here, the proponents were not particularly interested in linguistic developments, but rather in questions concerning the “natural” language of group X. This fits in with general pre-modern views of language. With the emergence of modern linguistic science in the nineteenth century and beyond, there arose two main opposing approaches to the origins of Yiddish. One approach saw Yiddish origins via divergence from German – that Jews once spoke “pure” German, and subsequently split off from German. The convergence approach sees Yiddish as never having been identical to German. Our present interest lies in contrasting the two linguistic approaches.

2.1.1 *The age of Yiddish*

Some linguistic data provide evidence for dating developments. For example, Birnbaum (1979a: 56) claims that Yiddish uniform [x] in, e.g., *bux* – *bixər* ‘book-s’ ([x] vs. [ç] in relevant varieties of German) suggests a pre-MHG source (thus, before *c.* 1050 CE). On the other hand, there is much other evidence for ongoing German influence upon Yiddish extending over several centuries (M. Weinreich 1928). Thus, the criteria for determining the age of a language do not consist solely in terms of a static count of linguistic features.

2.1.2 *Divergence*

The divergence approach arose earlier than the convergence approach. It claims that Yiddish was a variety of German, essentially identical to a non-Jewish

variety or varieties, with the possible exception of lexical items specific to Judaism. Among Jewish scholars, much of this approach traces to the school of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* [WdJ] ‘Science of Judaism,’ which arose in Germany in the early nineteenth century. While WdJ is a direct intellectual parent of modern Yiddish studies, including Yiddish linguistics, it should be seen in the context of its time and place. It arose in the wake of the *Haskole*¹ ‘Jewish Enlightenment’ of German Jewry. German Jewry was acculturating and assimilating to emerging German cultural and linguistic norms. While attempting to look scientifically at things Jewish (that is, with the tools of linguistics, anthropology, etc.), these were modern German Jews engaged in a modern German/European enterprise. The terms of investigation, and thus also the frames of reference, were modern European ones. The modern European political paradigm recognized and valued canonical categories such as “France,” “French,” “German(y),” etc. Distinct co-existing and coteritorial populations were increasingly consigned to ethnic minority status within the dominant nation-states. Dialect speech and minority languages became marginalized, accompanied by a push toward a unified standard language to serve the nation, within the framework of the nation-state. Thus, the works of *Haskole* figures and others associated with WdJ disparaged Yiddish, which was seen as a stumbling block on the way to full acculturation (see Frakes 1993: xx on M. Weinreich 1993[1923]: 229ff.). For example, Rée (1844) is of a piece with this approach. The head of a Jewish school in Hamburg, he describes the peculiarities of Jewish speech vis-à-vis normative German, and the steps taken to rid pupils of Jewish features in their speech.

The divergence approach to Yiddish origins stems from this milieu. This approach posits a logical series of developments. The speech of the *Ostjuden* (the Ashkenazim in Eastern Europe, i.e., the Eastern Yiddish [EY] speakers) is seen as a language originally German subsequently corrupted by influence from Slavic and other coteritorial non-German languages. As opposed to EY, the speech of German Jews is viewed as “purer.” The “Jewish peculiarities” of Jewish German are attributed to external factors, e.g., corruption by *Ostjuden* fleeing back to Germany after the Chmielnicki pogroms of 1648–1649; the social oppression of ghettoization within Germany itself in the thirteenth century; and so forth. While the anti-Yiddish agenda of the WdJ is clear, their works do provide us today with valuable linguistic data (see M. Weinreich 1993[1923]: 231ff.).

The divergence approach is exocentric; German constitutes the frame of reference. At each stage of its development the divergence approach has continued to deal with Yiddish in terms of German. In the earliest stage of scholarship,

¹ This is the Ashkenazic pronunciation. While the *Haskole* arose in Ashkenaz, the modern Israeli Hebrew pronunciation *Haskala* is frequently encountered (and the spelling *Haskalah*).