Essay

The Language Contact of the Yiddish Language

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Abstract

Historically dubbed the international language of the Jewish diaspora, Yiddish is an influential, rich language of theatre, literature, and, most of all, history. Through extensive literature review, this essay summarises the language contact that resulted in such a language through changes in grammar, syntax, phonology, and multiple influxes of loanwords. In doing so, it hopes to paint a different picture to contemporary opinion while providing a model for language contact in general.

Keywords: Yiddish, language contact, language change, Zarphatic, Judeo-Italian, German, Hebrew, Old French, Old Italian, Middle High German, Slavic, Modern Israeli Hebrew, Biblical Hebrew

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Introduction

Language contact can affect a language in numerous ways, ranging from mere loanwords to a large-scale outcropping of languages and dialects. One can discuss loanwords to the ends of the earth: From the influx of Latin, French, and Scandinavian words into English, to Spanish words being adopted into the tonal system of Mayan languages (Oscar and Marín, 2013). However, these are merely the surface of language contact and do not reflect the field. Language contact is far more nuanced than this. The grammar, syntax, and phonology can be affected in significant ways (Yule, 2010; Dawson and Hernandez, 2022); the massive changes from Old to Middle English, where Old Norse, Latin, and French all influenced the language, resulting in a move from V2 (verb-second) word order to SVO (subject-verb-object), deflexion, and the importing of sounds such as [ʒ] (Quirk and Wrenn, 1958). Rarely does an aspect of language come from nothing. However, few will show this in a more explicit way than the Yiddish language.

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The language contact situation of Yiddish is often misconstrued as being built through wilful isolation – this is not the case. In fact, its V2 word order is dominant throughout the language (Katz, 1987), even in embedded clauses, a feature seemingly shared with Icelandic, another Germanic language that was isolated for many years. However, to only look within Germanic language contact misses the forest for the trees: When looking elsewhere, a very different picture can be observed.

The Yiddish language arose in the 9th century within the region of Lotharingia. This resulted from language contact between numerous languages, including but not limited to those of Jews of the period; this includes Romance languages (Zarphatic, Old French, and Judeo-Italian), Middle High German, various stages of Hebrew, and Slavic languages (Russian, Czech, and Polish). Each of these languages has impacted Yiddish in numerous ways. Given this impact, Yiddish has been called a "fusion" or "mixed language" by Weinreich (1956). Mixed languages form from extensive language contact between multilingual subjects, resulting in features from some of these languages becoming part of the language (Bakker and Matras, 2008). This is not to be confused with a Koiné language, which results in fundamental grammatical shifts, most notably dialect levelling (Siegel, 1985).

The Linguistic Stock

Romance languages gave Yiddish a stock in which to build its initial vocabulary (Weinreich, 1959). Weinreich (1956) gives the example of אָרן *orn*, which most likely came from the Zarphatic word *orer*, meaning to pray. Evidence in Italian was also found; לייען *leyen* "to borrow/lend", which later became לייענען *leyenen* "to learn" or "to read" as a result of redundant addition of the morphological suffix ען- (Weinreich, 1980), possibly came from the Campanian or Calabrian Italian *lejere*. Since that time, Aslanov (2013) has gone further: טייטל[1] *taytl* "date", טשאָלענט *tsholent* "servant girl", דאַוונען *daven* "to pray" (eastern dialect), indeed, these all come from Old French.

Romance languages were not the sole source of vocabulary for Jews of the earliest era of Yiddish, though. Ever since the earliest recorded cases of Jewish dialects like Zarphatic Old French, Jews have dug into the Tanakh, Talmud, and Rabbinic Hebrew literature for vocabulary (Weinreich, 1956), which is affectionately referred to as לשון־קודש *loshn-koydesh* "holy tongue" (Jacobson, 1998; Beinfeld and Bochner, 2013). Even merely saying "a lot" or "many" in the language will bring out the phrase אַ סך *a sakh*, of Hebrew origins. *Loshn-koydesh* are prescriptively written as they exist in their abjadic Hebrew appearance, omitting vowels, though exception was made with phonetic spelling in Soviet Russia (Jacobson, 1998). This results in an influx of Hebrew and Aramaic (such as למאי *lemay* "why, for what reason") loanwords, among others, uniquely inundating Jewish languages, and around 20% of Yiddish words are defined as such. This process continues to this day; most notably, עליה *alie* "Aliyah" has entered the modern Yiddish language, referring to Zionist emigration to Israel-Palestine, with the phrase עולה־חדש *oyle-khodesh*

[1] All Yiddish transcriptions will use the transcription provided by the ייִדישער וויסנשאַפֿטלעכער אינסטיטוט *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*, associated with "Standard Yiddish", also known as "YIVO". A guide can be found here: https://www.yivo.org/Yiddish-Alphabet.

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referring to new migrants. The nature of *loshn-koydesh* has also extended into their syntactic place in the Yiddish language, with Hasidic speakers changing their usage depending on their culture. Israeli speakers more familiar with the Hebrew language will wilfully use the matching gender, whereas those in New York may default to the feminine determiner די *di* (Belk, Kahn, and Szendrői, 2020).

The phonology of Yiddish makes it different to any other Germanic language. Most notably, [χ], the voiceless uvular fricative, is in active use in Yiddish, coming from Biblical Hebrew and rarely being seen in modern times, a relic of the original pronunciation of the holy tongue (Weinreich, 1959). /nʲ/, too, has unique origins, likely coming from a Slavic language, being seen in Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian (Kleine, 2003).

Out of every Germanic language, only Yiddish has the suffix -ניק *-nik*. A well-read individual may recognise this as a common Slavic suffix, and they would be right: It is the very same, and has been fully assimilated, forming neologisms such as קאָמפּיוטערניק *kompyuternik* "geek" (Schaechter-Viswanath and Glasser, 2016). Given the sheer amount of integration within eastern Europe, the origins of this suffix are unknown, most likely Polish or Russian, but nevertheless a testament to the language contact of Jews during the evolution of Yiddish. Indeed, the Slavic component of Yiddish makes up yet another 20% of the language. The -s plural of Yiddish also has uncertain origins, seemingly not coming from any one Germanic dialect, with those of an -e final possibly coming from Hebrew (Weinreich, 1956; Krogh, 2001, cited in Aslanov, 2013).

Der Khurbn: Disaster and Change

Regardless of the millennia-spanning existence of Yiddish, which defines its grammar, it remains difficult to discuss Yiddish without considering its language contact in the German Reich, and its later destruction at the hands of Adolf Hitler (Katz, 2004; Pollin-Galay, 2024). Here, we see something of a language conflict: דײַטשמעריש *daytshmerish*. This is a word used to describe borrowings from High German, or language "peppered with Germanisms" (Beinfeld and Bochner, 2013), rooted in Yiddish's nature as a language of Eastern Europe. What of saying אונד *und* instead of און *un*? That would be a דײַטשמעריזם *daytshmerizm*. Originating in the mid-19th century, this formal register of Yiddish would use more "German" language, in order to look more prestigious, normally by well-off individuals, news organisations, and occasionally in theatre (Grill and Wilhelm, 2018). Even Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916), a great poet, would write in such a way in his early work, perhaps because he and other Yiddishists still considered themselves זשאַרגאָן שרײַבערס *zhargon shraybers* (Katz, 2004), "jargon writers"? Contrast this with Solomon Blumgarten (pen name Yehoash, 1872-1927), whose translation of the Tanakh not only brought the most important texts in Jewish culture to the Yiddish diaspora, but also preserved much of the Hebrew words that defined it and was regarded as "poetic genius" and "an epoch in the word of Biblica" (Frohlich, 2017). But what defines a *daytshmerizm*? Simply put, phonology. Consider אַפּפֿעל *apfel*, clearly the German word for "apple". A Yiddish speaker would immediately reckon that something is wrong: The Eastern Yiddish עפּל *epl* being the "correct" word aside, the West Germanic *-pp- consonant cluster is unaffected in the Germanic branch Yiddish is based on,

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whereas in German proper, it moved to -pf-. Ergo, אַפּפֿעל *apfel* sounds completely foreign (Grill and Wilhelm, 2018).

As Jews were forced to emigrate due to Adolf Hitler's rise to power in the early 1930s, tensions bubbled. Come 1938, Weinreich's *Daytshmerish toyg nit* ("Daytshmerish is unfit/unacceptable") confirmed that, with the backing of *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut* (YIVO, Yiddish Scientific Institute), *daytshmerizm*s were never to be acceptable in Yiddish again (Grill and Wilhelm, 2018; Weiser, 2018). However, this is not the end of the story. The study of the Yiddish narrative of the Holocaust, of which is oft-overlooked (Smith, 2019), reveals a sociolect recently coined חורבן יִידיש *khurbn yidish* ("Holocaust Yiddish"; Pollin-Galay, 2024). True to the name, it developed within the death camps of Nazi Germany. Many of these are reflective of one's experience in the camps; פּיפּעל *pipel*, a boy who becomes a sex slave to a male superior; אויסוויז *oysveyz,* a document saying someone works in a "useful" institution; מוזולמאַן *muzulman*, a skeletal, emaciated, but still living prisoner, a *Daytshmerishizm* itself (Blumenthal, 1956, cited and translated in Pollin-Galay, 2024). By being isolated in these camps, Jews coined their own terms to describe their pain and the rapidly-changing world around them. When returning from a life where they feared the morning light, others produced dictionaries to understand what these words meant (Pollin-Galay, 2024). Many of these words were also fusions between Yiddish and German: יודענרעסערוואַט *yudenreservat*, Jew-reservation; זאָנדער־קאַרטע *zonder-karte*, a special work licence; לייַסטונג *laystung*, impossibly demanding work. But at the same time, some words would also be loaned from Slavic languages. For example, looking at Polish words, we find words such as אָפּאַסקע *opaske,* from *opaska*, Polish for band, used to refer to the required Jewish armband, or אַבלאַווע *ablave*, from the Polish word *ablave*, meaning a manhunt or roundup. Indeed, even words from other East European languages would be borrowed to describe such an abominous existence.

Yiddish Today

In modern day, Yiddish is in a unique position. Western Yiddish is effectively extinct, save for pocket communities where Yiddish-speaking Jews had not been massacred, such as Switzerland (David, 2018). Eastern Yiddish includes Ukranish and Poylish, spoken in the south, including their eponymous Ukraine and Poland, and Litvish, spoken in the north, mainly in Lithuania. Ukranish has a history of being the Yiddish of cinema, while Litvish has been used for academic works (Katz, 1987). The Yiddish of those who escaped the Holocaust has remained in New York and Israel, especially in Hasidic communities. However, with respect to Israel, Yiddish has received formidable opposition, dating back to the state's inception, resulting in conflicts between Yiddish and Hebrew speakers (Halperin, 2015; Belk *et al.,* 2020, Nove 2018). This includes suppression of analysis of Hasidic Yiddish.

Conclusion

This essay has summarised the grammatical, phonological, and syntactic impact that language contact had on the creation and persistence of the Yiddish language. To this end, we have gone through a complex history of international contact between an international culture, inside and out. The language contact of Yiddish is complex, showing a history of solidarity and a nation

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within nations, but also one of pain. To understand Yiddish is to understand that solidarity is a matter of social networks, not simple nationalism; it is to understand a history of solidarity despite repeated expulsions. The value of this understanding is obvious: History does not repeat; it instructs.

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