Yiddish

Yiddish is the historic language of Ashkenazic (Central and East European) Jewry, and is the third principal literary language in Jewish history, after classical Hebrew and (Jewish) Aramaic. The language is characterized by a synthesis of Germanic (the majority component, derived from medieval German city dialects, themselves recombined) with Hebrew and Aramaic. The word for the sun (*zun*) comes from Germanic, the word for the moon (*levónə*) from Hebrew, and the word for 'probably' is from Aramaic (*mistámə*). The most basic fusion formula entails the insertion of a Semitic root into Germanic grammatical machinery, evident in such verbs as *khásmən(ən)* ('to sign') and *táynən* ('to claim', 'express the view').

Frequently words whose previous incarnations in the donor languages are dictionary synonyms become nuanced variants within Yiddish with a capacity for fine-tuned expression, particularly in things Jewish. Hence *gest* (from German) are any kind of guests, *órkhim* (from Hebrew) are usually poor visitors who need to be given Sabbath or holiday hospitality, and *ushpízn* (from Aramaic) are the seven biblical figures, from Abraham to David, who are believed, in Jewish mysticism, to visit the Sukkah during the holiday *Súkəs* (Sukkoth, Feast of Tabernacles).

During the second half of the history of the language, a Slavic element (largely from neighboring Polish, Belarusian, and Ukrainian dialects in Eastern Europe) was acquired, providing a new layer. Famously, Yiddish words for god include the universal deity, *got*; the more personal deity interested in human fate, *der éybərshter* (from Germanic); one called out to in second person (or in third, as an exclamation) *rebóynə-*

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shəlóyləm (from Hebrew); the more philosophical *rebóynə deálmə* (Aramaic); and, the emotional, homespun god invoked by Slavic-derived endings in *tátenyu zísinker* and *gótenyu*. The process of recombination among the three core components of modern Yiddish has continued apace. There is a smattering of Romance from early times, including the verbs *bentshn* ('to bless') and *léyənən* ('to read'), where Romance-derived roots fuse with Germanic endings.

There were approximately thirteen million Yiddish speakers on the eve of World War II. That number was drastically reduced by the Holocaust, and its aftereffects largely prevented the emergence of continuing speech communities among the scattered survivors. Stalinist repressions in the Soviet Union, the Hebraist campaign against the language in interwar Palestine and early modern Israel, and massive voluntary cultural assimilation to English and other Western languages in countries to which Jews emigrated further eroded the demographic base.

Concurrent with the demise of the largely modernist-oriented Yiddish-speaking base, there has been in recent decades a major, and (for most observers) unforeseen rise in the number and rapid growth of Hasidic and other East European-oriented "ultraorthodox" (haredi) Jews who speak the language continuously and transmit it to their large families worldwide, and whose volume of published work in the language grows each year.

Origins and Early Period

Scholars energetically debate the origins of Yiddish. The broadest consensus holds that the language arose about a millennium ago, when the first continuous Jewish settlers on Germanic-speaking territory creatively combined parts of their earlier languages with their new neighbors' Germanic, giving birth to the earliest form of Yiddish that went on to spread across much of Central and Eastern Europe with Jewish migrations. Scholars have tended to locate the origins of Yiddish in the Rhineland, particularly in the cities of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz, which were major early centers of Ashkenazic culture.

From the 1970s onward especially, more linguists, using evidence from both Germanic and Semitic components, began opting for a more easterly Danube-region origin, around Jewish centers in Regensburg, Nuremberg, and Rothenburg. There are dissenters who claim a slightly later origin, positing a period of Jews speaking German first and Yiddish later, while other more fanciful theories (involving Khazars, Sorbians, Greeks, and others) continue to enliven the debate.

By all accounts, Yiddish was from very early on the universal spoken language of Jews in the Germanic-speaking territory known as Ashkenaz in Jewish culture. It was one

of the major new European Jewish cultures that arose in medieval Europe. The others include Seforad (Sepharad) on the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal); Tsorfas (Tsarfat) on French soil; Knaan (Kenaan, Canaan) in the Slavic lands; Loe(y)z in Italy; Yovon (Yavan) in Greece; and Hogor (Hagar) in Hungary. These names were taken from the Bible in instances of classic Jewish linguistic playfulness, whereby ancient words are recycled to cover a contemporary reality (on the basis of phonetic similarity, a traditional association, humor, or some combination thereof). In Genesis 10:3, Ashkenaz appears as one of the grandchildren of Japheth, the son of Noah from whom (Indo-)European peoples are traditionally descended.

Ashkenazic scholars and rabbis, by and large, became immersed in rabbinic (and mystical) interpretation of ancient sources and the extensive regulation of everyday life by laws, customs, and traditions. Emphasis was on study of the Babylonian Talmud. Some everyday Yiddish words in the realm of logic derive from Aramaic, among them *avádə* ('definitely'), *ádərabə* ('to the contrary' or, emphatically, 'Of course!'), and *dáfkə* ('necessarily').

The name *yidish* for the language (or its written form) is attested in dated documents from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onwards, though its popular use is presumably older. The oldest known references to the language in Hebrew manuscripts mention *b'loshn Ashkənaz* ('in the language of Ashkenaz') from the eleventh century and *bilshoynéynu* ('in our language' or 'in our usage') from the thirteenth. In Yiddish writings of subsequent centuries, the language is frequently called *taytsh*, a dual-layered reference to both an older form of the word for German (modern Yiddish *daytsh*) and, simultaneously, the word for translation or explanation that characterizes the tradition of using Yiddish to translate and explain difficult Hebrew and Aramaic words or texts. The related verb *taytshn* can mean to translate, to explain, and, in older usage, to render into Yiddish and thereby make a matter clear. Another name for the language (or its written form) was the compound *Yidish-taytsh*.

Within traditional Ashkenazic society, Yiddish, although the universal vernacular, was one of three Jewish languages. This internal Ashkenazic trilingualism ("internal" because Ashkenazim had working knowledge of their Christian neighbors' language, too) included two nonvernacular languages that were nevertheless very much alive in the sense of being studied, uttered in prayer, and used in the writing of new works. These are the previous two major Jewish languages, Hebrew and Aramaic. The written genres of the three were largely complementary. Hebrew was used for letter writing, community documents, biblical commentaries, and a variety of other works. Aramaic was often reserved for the two highest endeavors in the eyes of the society: legalistic tracts on Talmud and kabbalistic works on Jewish mysticism. Yiddish was universal, Hebrew restricted, and Aramaic still more restricted to a small elite of learned males. In that sense, there was much more prestige attached to knowledge of Hebrew than to Yiddish, and more to Aramaic than to Hebrew. But the ease with which the languages interacted makes it important not to impose concepts of social prestige anachronistically.

From earliest times, Yiddish was written using the same alphabet as Hebrew and Aramaic. Semitic alphabets, historically speaking, have only consonants (many, including Hebrew and Aramaic, eventually developed systems for indicating vowels via diacritic marks). The loss of some ancient consonants in actual pronunciation "freed up" a number of letters to function in Yiddish as European-style vowel-letters, most famously *ayin* for *e*; *alef* for *a* and *o* sounds; and various combinations of *yud* and *vov* for diphthongs. Some of these devices were further developments of Aramaic-era usages.

In Yiddish, the consonant-only Semitic script evolved into a vowel-plus-consonant European-type alphabet that provided a good (eventually, for modern standard Yiddish perfect) phonetic match between letter (grapheme) and sound (phoneme). Words of Hebrew and Aramaic origin continued, however, to be spelled historically. They also maintain a unique sound pattern within the language; words are usually accented on the syllable before the last (the penult), rather than on the root syllable as in the Germanic parts of the language. This gives parallel rhythms of fixed versus jumping stress. For example, the Germanic component *éynikl* ('grandchild') pluralizes to *éyniklekh* ('grandchildren') with root-fixed stress, versus the Semitic component *shádkhen* ('matchmaker'), which pluralizes to *shadkhónim* with jumping stress.

Eleventh-century "glosses" (translations of "hard words" into the vernacular) are early manifestations of a written tradition that used Yiddish to explain Hebrew and Aramaic texts. The oldest known complete Yiddish sentence, dated 1272, occurs in an illuminated festival prayerbook manuscript known as the Worms Machzor (*Vórmser mákhzer*); the words contain a blessing for the person who will carry the book to the synagogue. Its text is written into the hollows of a large calligraphic Hebrew word. Formerly in Worms, Germany, it is now kept at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem.

A second kind of early Yiddish literature is often called "secular," consisting of reworkings and adaptations of popular European motifs, usually knightly romances in their Germanic incarnation. The oldest dated collection of Yiddish works, both specifically Jewish and from the European repertoire, is the *Cambridge Codex*, dated 1382. This incomplete manuscript contains a Yiddish version of the medieval Germanic epic *Dukus Horant* (of the Hildebrand cycle), and also classical Jewish motifs (such as the Binding of Isaac story from Genesis), rendered in European epic style. In fact, the integration of ancient Jewish content with contemporary European form is a metaphor for the East-West synthesis that characterizes Yiddish per se. Among its eventual literary products were the *Shmuel-bukh* and the *Mlokhim-bukh*, which retell the sagas of the biblical books of Samuel and Kings as tangled knightly tales.

By the early sixteenth century, Old Yiddish literature had its first known literary master, Elye Bokher (known in the Christian world as Elijah Levita, c. 1469-1549), a native of German territories who had moved to the Italian peninsula. His masterpiece, *Bovo d'Antona* (Bovo of Antona) was written in the first years of the century, but

appeared in 1541. It is a highly original reworking, replete with Jewish humor and satire, of an Italian epic itself closely related to the English *Sir Bevis of [South]hampton*. Elye Bokher was also a leading Hebrew and Aramaic linguist, a teacher of Christian humanists, and a prolific author of philological works. One of his dictionaries, *Tishbi*, published in 1542, founded the perennially popular field of Yiddish etymological speculation. Its derivations for *mekn* (erase) and *katóvəs* (making fun) are generally still thought to be correct.

Ashkenazic Relocation to the East

The medieval period was marked by Ashkenazic migration eastward across Europe. *Ashkenaz* shifted in meaning from the name of a place to a name for a people (or to a "movable" place, applicable to wherever a segment of that people would relocate). The Slavic and Baltic countries of Eastern Europe were becoming, from the Jewish cultural point of view, not only an eastern branch of Ashkenaz, but ultimately the *new* Ashkenaz. The migration of Rabbi Yankev Polak (Jacob Pollack) from German lands, first to Prague and then Cracow early in the sixteenth century, is a convenient marker enabling some historians to designate the time around 1500 as the period in which Ashkenazic rabbinic authority was transferred from western Ashkenaz (Central Europe) to eastern Ashkenaz (East Central and Eastern Europe). Additionally, it was a period of eastward shift of the "core land" of Yiddish.

Yiddish printing is usually considered to have started around 1526. That year saw the publication, in Prague, of a Passover song in Yiddish in the Haggadah of Gershom Kohen. Widespread Yiddish publishing got underway in the 1540s. The first known printed books include Bible concordances, works of morals and ethics, long epic poems (based on ancient Jewish or more recent European sources), and multilingual dictionaries. This diversity gives us a sense of the variegated and multicultural milieu of traditional Ashkenaz. Yiddish publishers, editors, and proofreaders of the mid-sixteenth century set a pattern for published Yiddish that lasted until the early nineteenth century. In order to sell books widely, they devised a "lowest common denominator Yiddish" that would not be identifiable with any one dialect area.

This "dialect neutrality" principle meant that vibrant colorful variants of both the western and eastern dialects were shut out of Yiddish literature (they are known to scholars from personal letters, Christian works, and the "reconstructive" evidence of living dialects from later times). For example, Western Yiddish *étə* (father) and Eastern *tátə* were suppressed in favor of "neutral" *fótər*. Along with this pan-Yiddish standard language-in-print came the special Yiddish type font, known as *máshkit* or *méshit*, or simply *váybər-taytsh* (literally women's translation, because of the many classic works published in Yiddish versions, ostensibly for women but also widely read by men). Ashkenaz, which had three Jewish languages, became a "three-typeface" society, too, in

the sixteenth century: square Hebrew characters for classical texts in Hebrew and Aramaic; the so-called Rashi font for rabbinic commentaries; and *máshkit* for Yiddish.

A distinctive kind of Yiddish was cultivated for Bible and prayerbook translations, using archaic, wistful words that imparted a tone of sanctity and distance from everyday usage, for example *lugn* (to look) and *náyərt* (only), distinguished from everyday *kukn* and *nor*. This style heavily influenced the first Yiddish women poets, from the sixteenth century onward, who were the principal founders of original (not translated) Yiddish poetry. Their poems, called *tkhínəs*, were pietistic and personal supplications to God. Eventually, some authors in Eastern Europe tended more toward East European Yiddish. In the 1590s, using a language that was delicately veering eastward, Yankev ben Yitskhok Ashkenazi wrote the most durable Yiddish book of all time, the *Tsénə-rénə*, a retelling of favorite parts of the Bible with millennia of homiletic and moralistic material gracefully interwoven into the narrative.

By the seventeenth century, Eastern Europe was becoming the center of Yiddish writing, even if the style of language and font used, and the more frequent places of publication, were still western. *Bovo d'Antona* was renamed *Bovo bukh* or *Bovo maysə* ('The Tale of Bovo') in the east. Similarity to the Eastern Yiddish word for grandmother, *bóbə*, gave rise to the popular expression *bóbə maysə* (grandma tale), in the sense of a made-up story, which is how the rabbinically learned establishment wanted to portray any kind of fiction.

In the eighteenth century, Yiddish was collapsing on German-speaking soil as Jews began to acculturate. Coupled with a growing preference for German, the Haskalah's bitter campaign against Yiddish, late in the century (it called the language a barbaric *Zhargón,* or jargon, unsuited for the use of modern Europeans), rang the death knell of Western Yiddish. Nevertheless, a few small pockets of Yiddish speakers in these regions were discovered as late as the middle of the twentieth century.

In Eastern Europe, by contrast, Yiddish was becoming more robust than ever. The sheer numbers of speakers, numbering millions by the nineteenth century, and usually concentrated in compact settlements, combined with other factors to facilitate substantial growth of the language and its culture. These factors included a dearth of social and educational prestige attaching to the local non-Jewish language in many cases; the unrelatedness of local languages and dialects to Yiddish; and above all the successful preservation of Ashkenaz as a civilization in the full sense of the word, rather than a mere religion or background as could be perceived (or misperceived, depending on one's viewpoint) in the west.

In the east, the original Germanic and Semitic components were enriched by a Slavic component, which gave the language a new layer. In the language of the last century and a half, for example, the German-derived word *víkhtik* ('important') contrasts with the Semitic-derived *khóshəv* (referring to human, social, or intellectual importance), and both differ again from Slavic-derived *vázhnə* (which can have an intimate tone, a

nuance of something fleetingly important, or a gently ironic force). All three language families came into play in *shvartsəméyənik* (member of the Black Hundreds, the antisemitic organization supported by the Russian tsar that fomented pogroms in 1903 and 1905); it came to be used more generally for a lowlife or gang member. Whoever coined the word simply followed the natural pattern of the language, suffixing Slavic-derived *-nik* to *shvártsə méyə* ('black' from Germanic + 'hundred' from Hebrew).

In social and spiritual realms, Yiddish acquired a kind of sanctity for the Hasidic movement that arose in the eighteenth century. Two classic texts of Hasidism appeared in Yiddish, as well as Hebrew, around 1815: *Shivkhey ha-Besht* ('Praises of the Baal Shem Tov') and the *Sipúrey máysəs* ('Telling of the Tales'), a collection of stories by the Baal Shem Tov's great-grandson, Nakhmen (Nachman) of Bratslav (1772-1811), often referred to as "Bratslaver" (from the Yiddish, Nakhmen Breslever = Nakhmen of Breslev/Bratslav). Hasidism thereby provided a novel link in an evolving chain of concepts: spoken language; language for popular literature; sacred language; modern European language. Nakhmen of Bratslav's mystical, symbolist tales raised the art of Yiddish storytelling and presaged the rise of Yiddish fiction.

Yiddish in Modern Europe

Hasidism enhanced the status of Yiddish among the three languages of Ashkenaz. A new layer of sacred words that derive from Hebrew or Aramaic came into the everyday language, for example, *dvéykəs* (literally, a cleaving; reinvigorated as a form of Hasidic rapture and cleavage to God); *histálkəs* (disappearance, adapted to refer to the death of a Hasidic holy person — a *tsádik* or rebbe).

By the early nineteenth century, Hasidic authors, editors, and printers were actively "easternizing" written Yiddish, bringing it closer to the spoken language. The process was accelerated, as fate would have it, by their sworn adversaries, the Berlin-inspired Jewish Enlightenment proponents known as *maskílim*. The very modernizers who wanted to bring East European Jewry into the culture of mainstream Europe discovered that their tracts in Hebrew, Russian, or German could properly be read only by very few. They duly began to publish (or circulate) tracts in the vernacular, Yiddish, on everything from hygiene and medicine, to the discovery of America, to barbed polemics against Hasidism. Despite themselves, they were thereby molding Yiddish into a potent modern vehicle of communication. They brought knowledge of various Western languages and the major Western genres to the linguistic workshop.

As the nineteenth century progressed, various camps discarded the archaic and wooden written language, as well as the special *máshkit* font that came to be associated with it. These groups experimented with a number of stylistic strategies. These included importations from modern German for such Western concepts as education (*dertsíung*, as

eventually Yiddishized from *Erziehung*) and freedom (*fráyhayt,* from *Freiheit*). Yiddish had words for similar concepts, but they refer to specifically traditional Jewish realia, for example, *khínekh* (traditional Jewish education) and *bəkhírə* ('free choice' in a religious and philosophic sense, particularly with reference to good and evil). Unlike modern Hebrew, which often changed the meaning to adapt to modern Western concepts, Yiddish usually keeps the old Jewish meaning and borrows (or invents) something for the new. Some stylists turned to local East European Yiddish as a linguistic wellspring. Early in the nineteenth century, for example, the term *zúkh-tsetl* (lit. 'search-list') appeared in the sense of an index to a book.

Many nineteenth-century authors considered the northern (Lithuanian) pronunciation to be "more correct" (based on an older attitude toward standard Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic pronunciation and various conservative sound-symbol correspondences, particularly for vowel quality). Even southerners began to standardize (and sometimes hypercorrect) on the basis of the northern forms. But in vocabulary, syntax, and style, the richest forward-looking written Yiddish was emerging from the southern (non-Lithuanian) areas, principally Ukraine. The diverse strands were flowing into a new written language that would be crystalized into a medium for a modern European literature.

Around the same time that Nakhmen of Bratslav's traditionalist Hasidic tales appeared (posthumously), the Enlightenment proponent Menachem Mendl Lefin (1749-1826) published his translation of Proverbs into rich, local Ukrainian Yiddish. It appeared in Tarnopol around 1813 and led to a bitter polemic over Lefin's use of modern Yiddish for such a lofty endeavor. Shortly after its appearance, Tuviah Feder (1760-1817) wrote a Hebrew satire set in "Heaven Above," in which the deceased founder of Haskalah, Moses Mendelssohn, expresses disbelief that his erstwhile disciple could have betrayed "the cause" by rendering Solomon's Proverbs into the unworthy language of the masses. After a bitter literary fracas (and a payoff), Feder's pamphlet was withdrawn and did not appear in print until 1853, long after the deaths of the various people involved. Handwritten copies were, however, widely circulated.

A developmental line can be followed linking the Hasidic Nakhmen of Bratslav, the maskilic Lefin, Nakhmen's rebellious pupil and the eventually anti-Hasidic writer Yisroel Aksenfeld (1787-1866), Yiddish poet and dramatist Shloyme Ettinger (1803-1856), and others. It was a line that led to an epoch-making breakthrough, when Hebrew didactic writer Sholem-Yankev Abramovitsh, later known by his pen name Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele the Bookseller, after his main persona) became the first highly sophisticated modern Yiddish writer. On 24 November 1864, in the Odessa Yiddish weekly *Kol meváser*, Mendele was "born" with the first installment of his first modern novel in Yiddish.

Mendele's novels were crafted in an exquisitely synthesized new literary language based on two major Yiddish dialects (his native Lithuanian and his adopted Ukrainian),

drawing "archeologically," but surgically, from the well of archaisms, Hebrew and Aramaic elements in the spoken language, popular Hebrew and Aramaic sacred texts, Slavic words that had made their way into Yiddish, and a limited array of modern Germanisms (often Yiddishized), principally to convey modern European concepts. As his style developed during the last decades of the nineteenth century, many of Abramovitsh's editorial decisions came to mold the language of the Yiddish literary works of the generations of writers to follow. Modern literary Yiddish is at once closer to the spoken language and in a relationship to that spoken language that is broadly analogous to that of the major European literary languages and their dialect varieties.

The "formula for standard Yiddish" was strengthened by Mendele's two principal followers, humorist Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinowitz; 1859-1916) whose principal dialect was Ukrainian Yiddish, and Y. L. Peretz (1851/2-1915) who brought Polish Yiddish to bear. Subsequently, it became more straightforward for any competent Yiddish stylist to write in a standard literary Yiddish that nevertheless "inclines" to one of the three major modern Yiddish dialects: Lithuanian (Northeastern to Yiddish linguists), Ukrainian (Southeastern) and Polish (Mideastern Yiddish; or to some, CentralYiddish).

The historic, social, and religious levels of Yiddish are frequently self-evident to speakers of the language. For example, the archaic *kínign* ('to rule') has its place in various folk styles, translation conventions, and pietistic poetry. The older *asífə* ('convocation of rabbinic scholars or community elders') contrasts with the imported *konferénts* ('conference'), which contrasts again with an especially important gathering, called a *kongrés* (which can be satirized via the reduplicative *konogrés*). The older Germanic-derived *kunts* ('trick') contrasts with the new German borrowing *kunst* (art). The harshest commands can be softened by appropriate insertion of the unstressed Slavic-derived particles *to* and *zhə*, for example, *to kúm-zhə* ('Then come, won't you please now?').

Modern literary Yiddish became a medium for conveying a quintessentially European Jewish civilization. Irrespective of whether someone is traditionally pious or modernistically antitraditionalist, or on one of the proverbial 66,000 rungs of the ladder, the nuances are only imperfectly rendered in any other language. A *rov* can only be what is today called a very traditional Orthodox rabbi in English; a *rabíner* is a modern rabbi; *rábay* is a satiric term for an ignorant modern rabbi. A modern woman rabbi can respectfully be called *rabínerin* or lampooned as a *rébetsin* (traditional term for the *rov*'s wife). A traditional Christian priest is a *gáləkh*, a term that can have negative overtones; it contrasts with the respectful modern-vintage *gáystləkher* (literally 'spiritual person'). And the same *yóntəf* that signifies a traditional Jewish holiday can be extended to modern nonsectarian holidays in positively viewed countries (such as the Fourth of July in the United States). But a strictly denominational Christian holiday stays a *khógə* (from the Aramaic) and, as often happens, the modern neutral word (less colorful, not very evocative, and rarely used) comes from modern German (*fáyer-tog*). The Slavic-derived

verb *právən* ('celebrate') can be used for marking any solemn or happy occasion, imparting a sense of imminent occasion.

Yiddish in the Twentieth Century

An infrastructure was needed if the most were to be made of the new critical mass comprising population of speakers, enhanced linguistic sophistication, and the diversity of modern-genre literary, social, and political endeavors. A model existed in the form of the language component of nineteenth-century nationalisms: the smaller nations of the region were rapidly developing their own languages in the face of centuries of domination by one empire or another. In the absence of the trappings of statehood (not least compulsory schools and the higher institutions needed to train their teachers), the potential for modern language development could be stymied.

This was largely overcome in the case of Yiddish thanks to the incorporation of a pro-Yiddish ideology into the platforms of a number of widespread political movements and organizations. These were all grounded in the secularist and humanist ideals of the age. While most Zionists tended toward a revived Hebrew, many of the diasporist movements sought to work toward pluralist democratic societies in which minorities could develop "high culture" in their native language. These included many stripes of socialists, anarchists, (eventually) Communists, and (prominently) the Jewish Labor Bund. The political might of the Bund and other organizations, in some cases loosely enough aligned so as to encourage cross-party and nonparty participation, led to the establishment of school systems from kindergarten to (eventually, in the interwar period) university level, and publications ranging from daily newspapers to highbrow literary works.

By the early twentieth century, the social, literary, and political base for systematizing the societal rise of Yiddish was rapidly expanding, and its champions included leading intellectuals from outside the usual constituency. One such new arrival from the ranks of Zionists, Natan (Nosn) Birnbaum (1864-1937), organized an international Yiddish language conference at Chernowitz (Czernowitz, Chernovtsi, now Chernivtsi) in 1908, which proclaimed Yiddish to be "a national language of the Jewish people" and provided inspiration in the field for the rest of the new century. Y. L. Peretz, Matisyóhu (Matthias) Mieses, and Ester (Malke Lifshits / Esther Frumkin) were among the primary personalities of the event.

Some members of political movements who were profoundly committed to the development of Yiddish culture opted to detach Yiddish and politics, at least partially, so that new cultural institutions could have a worldly, nation-state flavor and wide participation, enabling Yiddish to be the vehicle of expression for the diverse sectors of contemporary Jewish society. A number of individual Bundists set up the infrastructure

of modern Yiddish culture. Boris Kletskin founded his Yiddish publishing house, the *Vilner Farlag fun B. A. Kletskin* in Vilna around 1910. It went on to become one of the most prestigious presses, issuing academic and literary works that reached European standards. One of its first major books was the *Pínkəs* (1913), a scholarly collective volume in which Ber Borokhov (1881-1917), himself a founder of Labor Zionism, crafted the new academic discipline of Yiddish Studies.

Max Weinreich (1894-1969), a young Bundist, also turned to philology, and, after earning his doctorate (on the history of Yiddish studies) at the University of Marburg, settled in Vilna where he became the key founder of the YIVO in 1925. Other secularists from a variety of socialist persuasions joined the new endeavor. Zalmen Reyzen (1887-1940/41), in addition to editing one of Vilna's best Yiddish dailies and cofounding the YIVO and (co)editing various of its scholarly publications, produced a four-volume encyclopedia (his *Leksikón*, 1926-1929), that provided biographies and bibliographies of some 2,000 Yiddish writers, cementing the notion of a serious modern Yiddish literature. Kletskin expanded to Warsaw in 1925, where he set up the weekly *Literárishe bléter*.

In the realm of pure scholarship, however, a number of the most remarkable achievements were by individual researchers working in relative isolation from the modern Yiddish movement, most famously two Galician Jews: Alfred Landau (1850-1935), a lawyer in Vienna, over many decades; and during his brilliant doctoral research at Heidelberg University in 1930s Germany (!), Jechiel Fischer (later, in Israel, Bin-Nun, 1911-1983).

Between the two world wars, the Jews of Eastern Europe who had earlier been divided between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires found themselves in an array of new republics on the non-Soviet side of the border. In Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, and, particularly in the republic with the largest Jewish population, Poland (whose borders then included much of historic Jewish Lithuania, including Brisk/Brest, Grodno, Pinsk, and Vilna), the majority-culture spirit of a previously repressed folk language coming into its own inspired analogous developments among Jews. Yiddish school systems thrived and Yiddish literature flourished.

In the early Soviet Union, Yiddish became a government-supported language and literature, and the state financed school systems, advanced research institutes, and literature (and in some areas, Yiddish-enabled courts, post offices and other public institutions). But Soviet rule, after some years of freedom in the earlier 1920s, made for a highly "straightjacketed Yiddish" with dictates on spelling (banishing in the late 1920s the historic spelling of Semitic-origin words and the ancient word-final forms of five letters), vocabulary, and, most importantly, content. Then, in the 1930s, Stalinist orders closed most of the extant institutions. In the purges of 1937, leading Yiddish writers and cultural leaders were arrested and executed; later, in a postwar purge, the most famous surviving authors were murdered in 1952.

In addition to large centers in Poland and its neighboring countries, there were smaller concentrations of émigré speakers and literary centers further west in Europe, most prominently in London (the Whitechapel district) and Paris (the Marais or "Pletsl"), and, in the 1920s, in Berlin and Vienna. Yiddish communities (apart from those in the United States) were active in Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, Montreal, Toronto, Montevideo, and elsewhere. In interwar Palestine and then in Israel, the Hebraist movement had succeeded in debunking Yiddish to the point where the majority of the population had little respect for it. In many ways, interbellum New York was the de facto capital of Yiddish culture, though Warsaw retained the symbolic crown for literature, and Vilna for scholarship.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the cultural affinity of most American and other Western Jews was for the emerging State of Israel and Israeli Hebrew. Moreover, Yiddish often had an image of "greenhorn" lack of sophistication and lowbrow humor; its use was associated with failure to climb on board the American socioeconomic ladder of success. Starting in the 1960s, attitudes toward Yiddish began to change, influenced by several factors including the gradual death of the last masters (and of Yiddish-speaking parents and relatives) that evoked nostalgia for the "old country"; growing consciousness (and knowledge) of the Holocaust; a recognition that Israeli Hebrew was now secure and that its proponents need not "fear" Yiddish; the changing evaluation in the United States of black and other ethnic cultures; and, an emerging cultural and scholarly consensus that saw a great world literature in Yiddish prose, poetry, and drama in 150 years that can schematically be dated from 1850 to 2000. The Nobel Prize awarded to Isaac Bashevis Singer in 1978 was a prime watershed in reversing the tendency to stigmatize the language in the major Jewish communities that themselves hailed almost entirely from Yiddish-speaking East European Jewry.

Scholarly interest finds expression in various academic contexts. These include programs in Judaic, Semitic, Germanic, and Slavic studies, and cross-cultural, areal, and minority studies programs, among others. Versions of the refined literary language (often alas artificial, and over-normativized away from the bona fide usage of native speakers by overzealous American scholars) continue to live on among small circles of dedicated devotees, mostly in academia (or its fringes). The scholarly survival of Yiddish, and its ongoing potential for the future, can be traced, in part, to the happy circumstance that Max Weinreich was in Western Europe in August 1939, preparing to attend the international congress of linguists in Brussels. World War II broke out in Poland on 1 September 1939. He and his son Uriel eventually made their way to New York, where Max became, at City College, the first professor of Yiddish in the United States. Uriel Weinreich (1926-1967) was the founder of university-level Yiddish Studies in America, and was instrumental both in introducing language courses (for which he wrote the first modern textbook in English, *College Yiddish*, 1949 and many editions since), and in establishing the notion that Yiddish is a unique language from which modern linguistics can glean vital insights. Yiddish as an object of theoretical linguistics continues to draw Jewish and non-Jewish scholars to serious study of the language and its culture.

Yiddish Dialects

All native Yiddish spoken today derives from one (or a combining of several) of the East European dialects of the language. East European Yiddish — modern Yiddish — can first be divided into a "North" and a "South." Northeastern Yiddish, the dialect of the North, is popularly called Lithuanian Yiddish (simply Litvish in Yiddish), and its speakers are known as Litvaks (*lítvakəs*). Its territory encompasses what is today Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, and portions of northeastern Poland, northern and eastern Ukraine, and western Russia. The South (comprising perhaps three-quarters of all Yiddish speakers) is itself divided into two major subdialects: Southeastern (so-called "Ukrainian") and Mideastern (so-called "Polish") Yiddish. Southeastern Yiddish includes Volhynian, Podolian, and Bessarabian-Romanian varieties; they are readily distinguishable from each other. A version of its sound system became the basis for standard Theater Yiddish (while the literary and academic standard closely tracks the Lithuanian dialect of the north, minus a few famous exceptions). The most populous dialect is Mideastern ("Polish") Yiddish, which covers what was Congress Poland, western Galicia, and much of the Hungarian lands.

The most systematic differences between the dialects are in their systems of stressed vowels. The North, more conservative in vowel qualities (and therefore retaining sounds perceptually closer to their Semitic or Germanic origins) has, for example, *zogn* ('say'), *zukhn* ('look for'), *zeyf* ('soap'), and *zayd* ('silk'). The south (Polish type) uses *zugn*, *zīkhn*, *zayf*, and *zād*. The same relationships (the linguist's "consistent correspondences") hold for words of Hebraic origin: for example, the Lithuanian *kóvəd* ('honor'), *búshə* ('disgrace'), *séyfər* ('[traditional sacred] book'), *dáygə* ('worry') versus the Polish *kúvəd*, *bīshə*, *sáyfer*, and *dāgə*. In most (by no means all) instances, the northern dialect (*Litvish* or Lithuanian) rings standard to modern academic or cultural Yiddishists, while southern varieties ring "dialectal" bearing in mind from the outset that dialectal does not by any means imply substandard.

The southern dialects retain differences in vowel length (quantity), a feature lost among the Litvaks. For a Litvak, *zun* can mean 'sun' or 'son' and *betn* can be 'beds' or the verb 'to ask'. But southerners distinguish *zin* for 'sun' from *zīn* for 'son', and *betn* for 'beds' from *beytn* for 'ask'. And there is one very nonstandard Lithuanian Yiddish vowel realization: *ey* (as in *they*), where the standard variety has *oy*: hence northeastern (Litvak) *téyrə* ('Torah') and *léyfn* ('run'), for southern and standard *tóyrə* and *lóyfn*. Moreover, much traditional Lithuanian Yiddish collapses the hushing and hissing consonants ("confusion of *sh* and *s* sounds"), a feature most Litvaks have tried to overcome in recent generations. Because the historic Yiddish writing system marks vowel quality rather than quantity, the relative conservatism of Lithuanian Yiddish in preserving older vowel qualities had made way for the one-to-one match between letter and sound for standard Yiddish pronunciation.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, it became evident that in sharp contrast to the Lithuanian-based standard pronunciation of twentieth-century Yiddish culture, and the academic revival of the last century's final decades, the Yiddish of the future has begun to emerge largely from southern-based Hasidic communities such as Bobov, Munkatsh, Vizhnits, and Satmar, with a minority Lithuanian Yiddish dialect preserved in some communities (most prominently, Lubavitch and certain communities of Jerusalem-based haredim). It is a vibrant post-East European Jewish language, newly in flux in the new millennium, and with population concentrations in North America, Israel, and Western Europe.

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There are some Yiddish words used in English language context. An English sentence that uses these words sometimes is said to be in Yinglish (or Hebronics). However, the primary meaning of Yinglish is an anglicism used in Yiddish. This secondary sense of the term Yinglish describes the distinctive way certain Jews in English-speaking countries add many Yiddish words into their conversation, beyond general Yiddish words and phrases used by English speakers. In this meaning, Yinglish is not the same as Yiddish definition: 1. a language related to German that is spoken by some Jewish people 2. in or relating to Yiddish. Learn more. Translations. Click on the arrows to change the translation direction. Bilingual Dictionaries. English–French French–English. English–German German–English. English–Indonesian Indonesian–English. English–Italian Italian–English. English–Japanese Japanese–English.