

READINGS IN THE SOCIOLOGY
OF
JEWISH LANGUAGES

EDITED BY

JOSHUA A. FISHMAN



LEIDEN — E. J. BRILL — 1985

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HEBREW, ARAMAIC AND THE RISE OF YIDDISH

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Beyond Jewish Interlinguistics

The fashion of the day in Jewish language science is Jewish Interlinguistics. The field is a child of Yiddish Studies and its founder was Mises (1915) who stressed religion as the common language creating force across the board. He was followed by Birnbaum (1942), and with a substantial widening of the sense of "religion" to encompass sociocultural heritage and an autonomous civilization on the territory of another, by Weinreich (1953: 492-493; 1967; 1973: I, 48-183; III, 33-156). From the viewpoint of the history of ideas, it is noteworthy that Mises was in many ways responding to the "Hebrewcentric" approach, which tended to disparage other Jewish languages as products of a ghetto mentality (cf. Loewe 1911). Here is the crossroad where the modern historical sociology of Jewish languages meets with their scholarly investigation, especially at the level of the almighty paradigm. It is obvious that Jewish Interlinguistics has contributed immeasurably to research on languages spoken by Jews and has a lot to offer general historical linguistics. The most potent single contribution is the Max Weinreich (1959: 563; 1973: I, 32-33) fusion model, an elaboration of Borokhov's (1913a: 9) farsighted observations. Weinreich, looking at language x from "within", that is to say from the viewpoint of language x itself, distinguishes the (synchronically speaking native) *component* within x from the *stock language* from which that component etymologically derives, a subset of which is the *determinant*, that form of the stock language, which by reason of historical accident (cotemporality or coterritoriality), could have become part of x. Studies of the impact of Hebrew upon various Jewish languages have benefited considerably from Weinreich's (1954: 85-87) dichotomy of *whole Hebrew* (as determinant) vs. *merged Hebrew* (as component). The Weinreich paradigm, in the best tradition of Saussurian structuralism, dealt an eminently deserved mortal blow to the chauvinism of "purity" associated with viewing Jewish (or for that matter, any) languages from the perspective of some other structure (e.g. the major non-Jewish stock language or Hebrew).

It is time to reach for the post Jewish Interlinguistics era. Having

successfully exploited the fusion model and embarked on an exciting search for Jewish languages through time and space, it may be wise to pause for a moment of critical reflection, keeping in mind Susskind's (1965: 1) warning that "not everything written in Jewish letters is a Jewish language". It is time to stop pretending that "Jewish languages"—real, hypothesized, or imaginary—are in any sense "equal" by the empirical parameters of (a) documentation by modern scholarship of native speakers, (b) indisputable attestation in older monuments, or (c) indirect evidence beyond a reasonable doubt (e.g. clear references to the lost language by contemporary observers). In each case, the degree of structural autonomy from the relevant non-Jewish language is a major issue. Some proposed Jewish languages are age old structures, while others are the products of comparative reconstruction, and still others are hypothesized from the phonetically ambiguous nonevidence of a handful of items written in the Jewish alphabet, and brought into the world of science by heavy artillery linguistic or sociolinguistic terminology. To put it in a nutshell, the time has come to start emphasizing the *differences* between languages spoken by Jews. The accounting for all Jewish language phenomena by a paradigm, no matter how attractive for model-hungry scholars, may not be possible after all. Even Wexler (1981: 137), whose state of the art report is masterly, concedes that Jewish Interlinguistics, collectively, has empirical validity deriving from "membership in a chain of language shift leading back to Hebrew" which he deems "tantamount to proposing a fourth parameter in comparative linguistics" [the first three being genetic affiliation, areal contiguity and random selection]. But do most "Jewish languages" participate in a chain of language shift dating back to ancient Hebrew? And even if they did, what makes it a "new parameter" any more than the pedigrees enjoyed by, say, all the languages participating in a chain of language shift dating back to Sanskrit, or Greek, or Latin?

Turning from the rough contours of the field to Jewish languages themselves, it soon becomes evident that there is an aspect of Jewish Interlinguistics that overlaps with comparative linguistics, and that aspect covers the methodology employed in comparing *any* set of two or more languages: the genetic relationships between Jewish languages, beyond the often touted handful of single words from the spheres of traditional Jewish life that turn up in interesting ways across intra-Jewish cultural and linguistic frontiers. This means, of course, invoking the classic nineteenth century methodology of *comparativism* over the principal tool of Jewish Interlinguistics—*parallelism*. It is not only a matter of the superiority of a proven scientific method over a stylish (and often enlightening) practice (although surely that too), but the appropriateness of a method to a given problem that is at issue.

Origins of Yiddish

Jewish Interlinguistics went rather rapidly from positing Laazic (or Loez) as the Jewish language correlate of Old French and/or Old Italian to considering it a matter of fact that "Yiddish develops on a Judeo-French and Judeo-Italian basis", and is "heir to both Judeo-French and Judeo-Italian" (Wexler 1981: 112, 117). The hard evidence for this sweeping assertion lies in the trickle of all too well known Yiddish lexical items of ultimate Romance origin, e.g. *béntshtn* "bless, say the grace after meals", *léyenen* "read". Unlike Romance origin proper names, these items are attested late and may well have been borrowed by Yiddish "horizontally", e.g. by contact with Jews in Romance speaking lands, or in some cases by German dialectal mediation, in either case long after the birth of Yiddish. Weinreich, a staunch proponent of the Romance origin theory (cf. 1954: 78; 1955-1956; 1973: I, 42, 334-353; II: 50-74, III: 344-381; IV, 67-108), concedes that his "Laazic Component" is chiefly justifiable on grounds of "pedigreed genealogy" (1973: II, 50). It isn't that Jewish Interlinguistics came up with the Romance origin theory of Yiddish. It is, in one form or another, centuries old and was alluded to by Levita (1541: [164]). It is intimately bound up with the notion that Yiddish developed in the Rhineland (where medieval Ashkenazic Jewry was closely in touch with Romance Jewry), and that the first speakers of Yiddish were migrants from parts of France and Italy. Now students of the Germanic Component in Yiddish, while debating among themselves whether East Central German (Gerzon 1902) or Bavarian (Mieses 1924) was of greatest significance in the formation of Yiddish, would readily agree that scarcely anything in the Germanic Component in Yiddish points to the Rhineland (cf. Mieses 1924: 269-318; King 1979: 7-8). As for the nineteenth century efforts to detect a notable French influence in Old Yiddish texts (cf. Jost 1850: 323; Güdemann 1880: 273-280), I can only repeat Shtif's assertion that not even a microscope would help find the alleged "French connection" in Old Yiddish (Bal Dimyen 1913: 317). If one were to hypothesize a birthplace for Yiddish, to the limited extent to which monogenesis can be conceived, that would be in concord with both German dialectology and known centers of medieval Jewish population and culture, one would probably come up with the city of Regensburg as the cradle of Yiddish.

The next issue to confront is the origin of the Semitic Component in Yiddish. Clearly, Yiddish arose in Central Europe and yet the language has thousands of items of obvious Semitic origin. Yiddish is by no stretch of the imagination coterritorial or even contiguous with any Semitic speaking community, let alone a community of speakers of the relevant

varieties of Hebrew and Aramaic. How, when and from where did Semitisms flow into Yiddish? The oldest and most widely accepted theory is the *text theory*, according to which the vast majority of Semitisms in Yiddish entered over the centuries from the frequently studied texts of the Pentateuch, Talmud and later rabbinic writings, and the regularly recited texts of canonical prayer. Paradigmatically, the text theory arose by analogy with the impact of Latin upon the European vernaculars. Historically, it originated in the writings of sixteenth and seventeenth century Christian scholars of Yiddish. Schadeus (1592: [140-141]), citing the parallel of Latin and French borrowings in chancery German, proposed that Jews incorporate Semitisms "partly out of habit and partly to prevent Christians from understanding them", thereby setting the groundwork for the conscious incorporation theory underlying the text theory. Buxtorf (1603: 152) likewise cited noncomprehension as a conscious motivation, and added (1609: 657) that daily use of Semitisms was a means to teach children Hebrew. Perhaps the first to make the explicit claim, even if in primitive terms, that Semitisms in Yiddish derive from *texts* was Schudt (1714-1718: II, 281). Chrysander (1750: 3), with characteristic originality, put forward three explanations for the Semitic Component: firstly, love for the Hebrew language; secondly, the Jewish inclination to be different and finally, noncomprehension.

The text theory has, on the whole, been accepted by modern Yiddish scholarship. Wiener (1904: 305) cites "predilection for Talmudic and exegetic studies" as having "introduced a large number of Hebrew and Aramaic words into the vocabulary of the learned and thence into that of daily life". Fischer (1936: 113 [= Bin-Nun 1973: 113]) distinguishes the Semitic Component, entering from religious writings, from other parts of Yiddish gleaned from the language of living speakers. A twentieth century curiosity in the history of Yiddish linguistics is Shtif's about-face. Without delving into the actual sources of the Semitic Component, he at first held it to be of considerable antiquity in Yiddish (Bal Dimyen 1913: 320-321; Shtif 1922: 189). After settling in the Soviet Union, Shtif (1929: 12-13, 16) went beyond the normative calls of his colleagues for eradication of the Semitic Component from modern literary Yiddish. He argues that the "Hebrew occupation in Yiddish" was a late phenomenon resulting from the increased power of the rabbinic class that led to replacement of earlier "real" Yiddish words (i.e. Germanisms). He was forcefully rebutted by Weinreich (1931; cf. also Spivak 1934).

The text theory has been most meticulously developed by Weinreich. Like its other modern adherents, Weinreich (1928: 15; 1939: 49; 1940: 30-31) allows that a certain religious terminology was used by the earliest Yiddish speakers. But the Semitic Component, in his view, resulted by

and large from the specific interaction of Ashkenazic Jews with their traditional texts—"From the sacred books there flowed into the language words, phrases, sayings and proverbs pertaining to the most varied spheres of life" (1973: I, 222). Analyzing the linguistic mechanism involved, he stressed that it was "not from mouth to ear but from the sacred book or through quotations from the sacred book" (1973: II, 264). Five major categories of texts are distinguished, three major sources—Bible, Talmud, Liturgy—and two minor ones—Kabbalah and Chassidism (1973: I, 222, 229). The model is illustrated in Figure 1. The technical

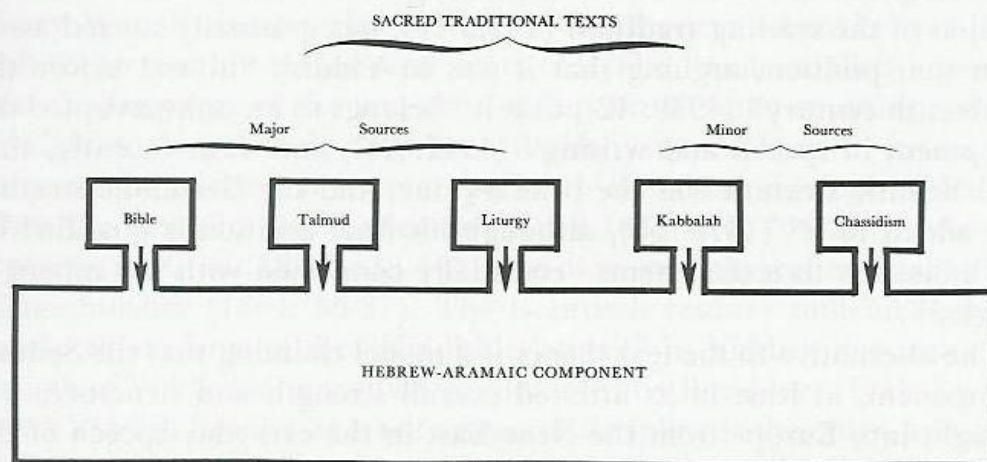


Figure 1. Max Weinreich's Model for the Origins of the Semitic Component in Yiddish

terminology of Talmudic discussion is considered separately (1973: I, 229-230) and might be included as a subcategory of Talmud. But Weinreich carries the text theory a stage further by seeking to identify the exact *passage* from which a given word allegedly entered Yiddish, a notion that had been alluded to previously (cf. Golomb 1910: 8; Borokhov 1913c: no. 341). He derives, for example, *álpi* "according to" from Genesis 45:21, *bekórev* "soon" from Ezekiel 11:3, *beróygez* "angry" from Habakkuk 3:2 and *tkhíles* "initially" from II Samuel 21: 9 (1973: I, 227; III, 232-234). Carrying the text theory a stage further still, he even proposes tentative statistics (albeit with reservations)—39 Yiddish items from Genesis, 28 from Exodus, 11 from Leviticus, 5 from Numbers and 12 from Deuteronomy (1973: III, 234).

A parallel tradition in modern Yiddish Studies has posited an origin of greater antiquity. Mises (1915: 32, 1924: 219) considers the Semitic Component to be of a very early origin within Yiddish. Rubshteyn (1922: 22-23, 26, 33, 38-40) contends it entered the language in the earlier portion of the Middle Ages in consequence of Jewish participation in international trade to facilitate communication with non-Ashkenazic com-

munities and to enhance the social prestige of the trader in distant places where use of Hebrew and Aramaic words would be a commercial asset. Bloomfield (1932: 229), without being specific, suggests that Yiddish "be examined for a substratum" on the grounds that "its deviation [...] is not, one infers, to be explained by separation since the late Middle Ages". Allony (1971) attempts to identify a select corpus of items in Yiddish with the Jewish dialect spoken in Palestine in the tenth century. Birnbaum, who initially adopted the text theory (1922: 5) as accounting for the lexical inventory of the Semitic Component, while assuming some phonological traits to have come from the generation to generation transmission of the reading tradition (1922: 17), has gradually steered away from that position, arguing that it was in Yiddish "in and before the fourteenth century" (1939: 42), that it "belongs to an uninterrupted development in speech and writing" (1942: 64), and most recently, that "the Semitic stratum was the primary one, and the Germanic stratum was added to it" (1979: 58), although his final position is qualified by the limitation to lexical items "essentially connected with the sphere of religion".

The alternative to the text theory is a model claiming that the Semitic Component, at least in its attested overall strength and structure, was brought into Europe from the Near East in the everyday speech of the settlers who were, retroactively speaking, the first Ashkenazim. It would then have fused with the local medieval German dialects at once. However modified and developed, the Semitic Component was uninterruptedly transmitted in the usual manner of generation to generation linguistic transmission. This view may be called the *continual transmission theory*, proposed in detail elsewhere (Katz 1979; 1982). The specificity of Yiddish vis-à-vis medieval German is not exclusively contingent upon the Semitic Component. The cooccurrence of attested German dialectal features in a uniquely Yiddish structure would have made Yiddish a separate linguistic entity at a very early time. In fact, it has been shown that the configuration of the Germanic Component in later Yiddish is not congruent with any one German dialect (cf. Landau 1896: 58; Pri-lutski 1917: 289-290). The unique combination of dialect features in the Germanic Component would have been enhanced by further early development internal to Yiddish, by differential borrowing and the use of Semitisms for religious concepts. Nevertheless, the resolution of the origin of the Semitic Component would be an inestimable tool for helping determine the age of Yiddish, at least broadly. On one hand, the primeval Semitic Component (continual transmission) would be incontrovertible evidence of fusion "on touchdown". On the other, it is debatable whether any Germanic language spoken by Jews without the Semitic Component

can be called *Yiddish*, which by definition includes as two panterritorial and pantemporal elements the Germanic and Semitic Components (cf. Katz 1982: §2.4).

Like all other major issues in the origins of Yiddish, the age of the language is sharply contested. Modern Yiddish scholarship has, however, almost unanimously discarded the proposals of nineteenth century German-Jewish scholars that Yiddish is as recent as the sixteenth century (Zunz 1832: 438), arose in consequence of the flight of Jews westward following the massacres of 1648-1649 in the Ukraine (Güdemann 1887: 105; 1888: 296-297; 1891: xxii-xxiii), or in consequence of the Thirty Years' War (Steinschneider 1898: 76). One modern school believes Yiddish to be roughly a thousand years old. The "millennialists" contend that the language of the very first settlers on German speaking soil differed from that of their neighbors. As irony would have it, it was first proposed by celebrated German police chief and criminologist Friedrich Christian Benedict Avé-Lallemant (1858-1862: III, 204-207), who was replying to Zunz (1832: 438-443) and was soon thereafter attacked by Steinschneider (1864: 36-37). The twentieth century millennialists are nearly all students of the "Yiddishist school" in Yiddish linguistics, the branch of Yiddish language science founded by Borokhov (1913a) which views Yiddish Studies as a self centered discipline rather than a satellite of Germanic studies. Borokhov himself (1913a: 4) cautiously maintained that the language "is probably not younger than six or seven hundred years", but Mieses (1915: 30) was soon to argue that Yiddish arose as soon as Jews settled in what was to become Ashkenaz. Rubshteyn (1922: 8), Shiper (1924; 1933) and Tsinberg (1935: 22-28) all opted for an early origin, but Birnbaum (1929: 270) is the first twentieth century scholar to specifically propose that Yiddish is about a thousand years old, a position he took after several modifications in the course of his work on the history of Yiddish (discussed in Birnbaum 1982). In his Marburg University doctoral dissertation, Weinreich (1923: I, 65) set the age of the language at "at least seven to eight hundred years". Later, in the outline of the history of Yiddish placed before the Fifth International Congress of Linguists in Brussels in 1939, he asserted that the beginnings of Yiddish must be assigned "to the time when the uninterrupted history of the Jews in Germany starts, that is, to about 1000 A.D." (1939: 49), bringing him into agreement with Birnbaum. The modern opposition to the millennialists maintains datings anywhere from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Consisting largely of Germanists, the school's founder is Jechiel Fischer (1936: 39-40, 61 [= Bin-Nun 1973: 39-40, 61]) who suggests the thirteenth century as the period of linguistic events leading up to the development of Yiddish, and the fourteenth as the time of development

of Yiddish. With various modifications, Fischer was followed by Susskind (1953: 106), Beranek (1957: 1961, 1963–1964) and Marchand (1965: 250). Given the total lack of early linguistically reliable texts, the vistas explored on the origins of the Semitic Component can help rewrite substantial portions of the early history of Yiddish. Suffice it to say that the text theory presupposes *secondary fusion*, ergo a relatively late origin of the language as a whole, while continual transmission presupposes *primary fusion*, hence an early origin (“Yiddish on touchdown”).

Methodology

Nearly all the strategies needed to fathom the origins of the Semitic Component are in the realm of technical historical linguistics, and therefore outside the limitations set by the editor of the present volume. Nevertheless, an enumeration of the types of methods used to reach the conclusions put forward may be of interest to social scientists and others concerned with Yiddish Studies, a field of increasing fertility for interdisciplinary approaches.

1. *The apriori scenario.* Without claiming to prove anything, it is worthwhile and even necessary to begin examining the issue anew with no reference to the theories previously put forward. The overwhelming majority of Semitic Component lexical items is very well attested in pre-Ashkenazic texts, i.e. in Hebrew and Aramaic writings emanating from the Near East and predating the European period in Jewish history. If, say, the Yiddish word *pónem* “face” (in whatever phonetic form) is attested in Classical Hebrew spoken by Israelites some three thousand years ago, and the Yiddish word *mistáme* “probably” is attested in (Jewish) Aramaic spoken by Jews some fifteen hundred years ago, then the simple explanation would appear to be that the items survived in the speech of Jews from Hebrew, through Aramaic and into Yiddish. The text theory, on the other hand, would have to have it that these and thousands of other words “died” along with ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, and were then “resurrected” from sacred texts during the history of Yiddish. The “resurrection of the dead” model is illustrated in Figure 2. The continual transmission model, with the dotted lines representing the language shifts from Hebrew to Aramaic and from Aramaic to Yiddish, is depicted in Figure 3. Continual transmission is the normal state of affairs in the histories of languages and the burden of proof should surely lie squarely with the text theory.

2. *Structure of the Semitic Component.* A hypothetical Semitic Component in Yiddish comprising, say, nouns for religious and traditional Jewish concepts would point in the direction of “horizontal” borrowing from

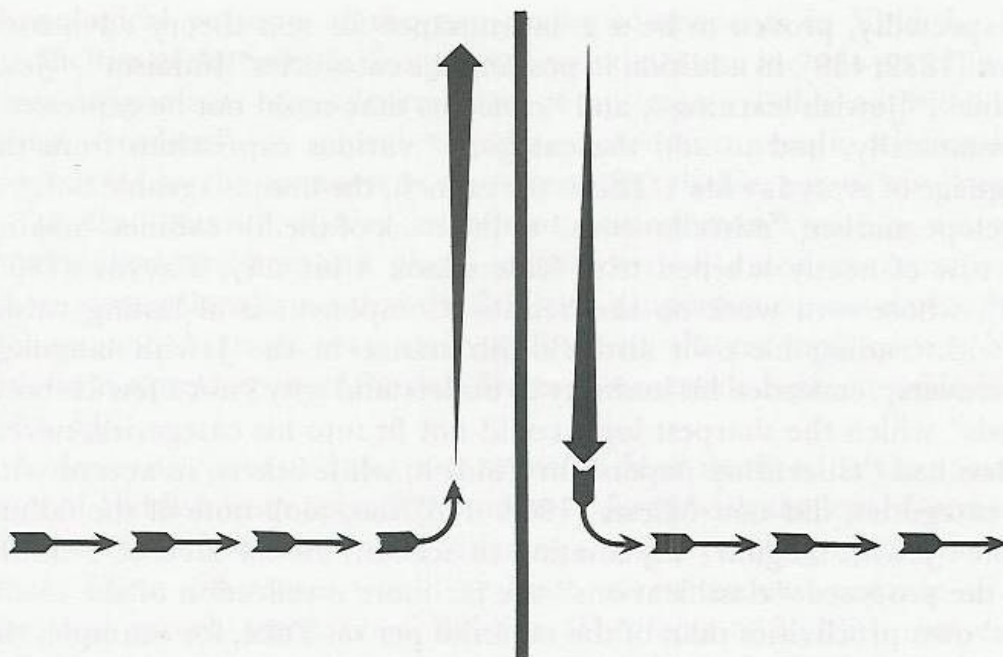


Figure 2. 'Resurrection of the dead' Model

sacred texts. The actual component, however, exhibits a large number of everyday lexical items, including adverbs (e.g. *aváde* "certainly", *kimát* "almost"), prepositions (e.g. *beshás* "during", *mákhmes* "because (of)"), verbal stems (e.g. *hárɡ(enen)* "kill", *khánf(enen)* "flatter") and invariants inflected periphrastically (e.g. *khóyshed (zayn)* "suspect", *máskim (zayn)* "agree"). The semantic diversity within the Semitic Component has, not

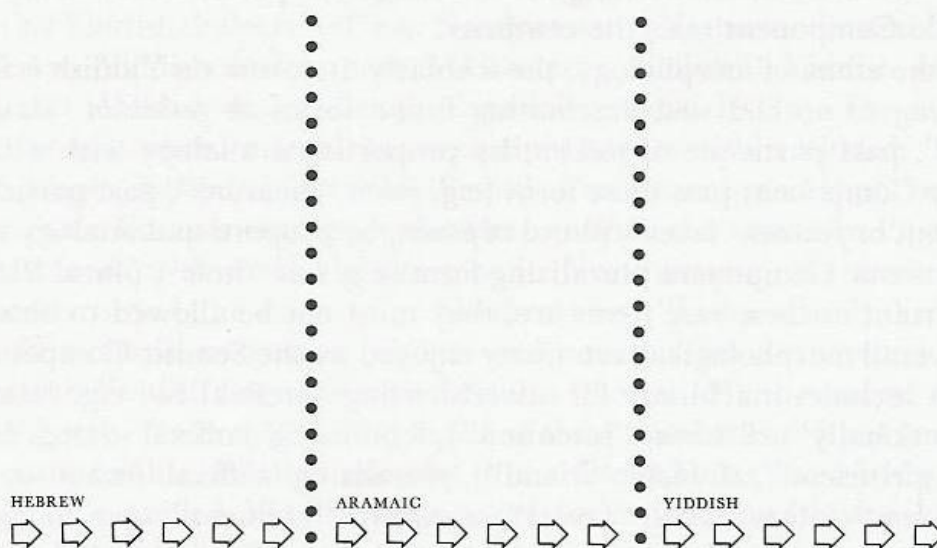


Figure 3. Continual Transmission Model

unexpectedly, proven to be a great nuisance for text theory advocates. Zunz (1832: 439), in addition to positing the categories “Judaism”, “Jewish life”, “Jewish learning”, and “concepts that could not be expressed” Germanically, had to add the category “various expressions from the language of everyday life”. This is the crunch, the unmanageable bulging envelope marked “miscellaneous” at the back of the file cabinet, making the row of neatly labelled trim folders look a bit silly. Tavyov (1903: 139), whose own work on the Semitic Component is of lasting value, notwithstanding his own anti-Yiddish stance in the Jewish language controversy, conceded his inability to understand why “not a few Hebrew words” which the sharpest logic could not fit into his categories, nevertheless had “citizenship papers” in Yiddish, while others, in accord with his categories, did not. Mieses (1908: 183) too, took note of the failure of the “Jewish religion” explanation to account for the facts of Yiddish. All the proposed “classifications” are far more a reflection of the classifiers’ own proclivities than of the material per se. Take, for example, the Semitic Component *tsófn* “north”, *dórem* “south”, *mízrekh* “east” and *máyrev* “west”. For Tavyov (1903: 135), they remind Jews of the divisions in the Land of Israel, thereby expressing Jewish nationalism, for Mieses (1908: 184) they fit into his category of abstract concepts, and for Rubshteyn (1922: 27) they reflect the travel undertaken in international trade. No semantic classifications can hold water, because the very diversity points to a linguistically transmitted Semitic Component. Sociology can help explain why blue eyes symbolize prestige in a certain society but the origins of that blue are in the realm of good old fashioned genetics. Although powerless in the face of genetic caprice, sociology can play a vital role in establishing the sociolinguistic patterns *assumed* by the Semitic Component over the centuries.

In the arena of morphology, the scholarly literature on Yiddish is fond of citing to no end such fascinating fusion forms as *geshókhtn* “slaughtered”, past participle of *shékhtn*, by proportional analogy with a Germanic Component past tense form (e.g. *méstn* “measure”, past participle *gemóstn*), or *pénemer* “faces”, plural of *pónem*, by proportional analogy with a Germanic Component pluralizing form (e.g. *lokh* “hole”, plural *lékher*). Important as these rare items are, they must not be allowed to obscure the overall morphological autonomy enjoyed by the Semitic Component, which includes machinery for adverbializing (prefixal *be-*, e.g. *bekavóne* “intentionally”, cf. *kavóne* “intention”), feminizing (suffixal *-te*, e.g. *kháv-erte* “(girl)friend”, cf. *kháver* “friend”), pluralizing (suffixal *-im* and *-s*, e.g. *malbúshim* “clothes”, *tóyves* “favors”, cf. *málbesht* “garment”, *tóyve* “favor”), and abstracting (suffixal *-es*, e.g. *akshónes* “obstinacy”, cf. *ákshn* “obstinate man”). Far more revealing to the historical linguist are the autonomous

phonological patterns of the two major components in Yiddish. The specificities of the Semitic Component sound pattern include penultimate stress assignment, engendering stress jump upon syllable addition, e.g. *tálmed* "student" vs. plural *talmídím*, systematic vocalic alternations engendered by the openness or closedness of a syllable, e.g. *méysim* "corpses," *prótim* "details", *sóykher* "merchant, businessman", with *ey*, *o* and *oy* vs. singulars *mes*, *prat* and plural *sókhrim* with *e*, *a* and *o*, respectively. These alternations prove that the Semitic Component cannot derive from Hebrew and Aramaic texts and was linguistically transmitted into Yiddish from a prelanguage (the detailed argumentation is presented in Katz 1982: §9).

3. *Analogous fusion with congruent anomalies.* Had the Semitic Component entered Yiddish from texts, it would have fused with the local Germanic Component of Yiddish in very different ways, depending upon time and place. These differences would be huge, given the vast expanse of the historical speech territory of Yiddish. The facts of Yiddish, however, point in the opposite direction. Virtually all the fusional formulas by which the components of Yiddish combine are identical through time and space. Thus *khásmenen* "sign (one's name)" is as Yiddish as *le-úntershrayb* is nonsense, because the relevant fusion formula calls for Semitic Component stem, with stem vowel *a* plus Germanic Component verbalizing suffix, rather than the mathematically "equal" Hebrew-derived verbalizing (in this example, infinitivizing) prefix plus Germanic Component stem. This is as true of sixteenth century Italian Yiddish as of twentieth century Lithuanian. Starting, for the sake of simplicity, with Standard Yiddish forms, the vowel in *khólem* "dream" (Semitic Component) is the same as that in *nódl* "needle" (Germanic Component) in one as in *all* Yiddish dialects—cf. e.g. Northwestern (Netherlandic and North German) Yiddish *khólem*, *nódl*, Mideastern ("Polish") Yiddish *khúlem*, *núdl*, etc. (Yiddish dialect designations follow Katz 1983a). The same is true for any other "match" between components within Yiddish. Thus, for example, if *khóydes* "month" (Semitic Component) and *broyt* "bread" (Germanic Component) share the same *oy*, then the words for "month" and "bread" will share the same *ou* in Northwestern, the same *oy* in Mideastern and the same *ey* in Northeastern ("Lithuanian") Yiddish. The first sample pair cited (*khólem*—*nódl*) exemplifies a correspondence known to Yiddish linguistics specialists as "vowel 12", the second (*khóydes*—*broyt*)—"vowel 42". The choice of these numbers need not concern the nonspecialist. What is relevant to the discussion at hand is the very *concept* of a unified Yiddish protovowel (or, synchronically speaking a geographically multifarious diaphoneme). Had the two components fused in different ways in different times and places, there could be no

“vowel 12”, no “vowel 42” and no other *pan*-Yiddish transcomponent vowel. A given Semitic Component vowel would have fused with one Germanic Component vowel here, with another one elsewhere. The disparity of concrete phonetic realization, in accord with the long evolved sound system of each dialect, is a further indication that the items “came down the line”, rather than by interdialect borrowing, which would be betrayed phonetically. The double evidence of derivation from a proto-language—the same fusion but with differing realizations—is corroborated still further by *congruent anomalies*. These are Yiddish forms that do not correspond in the “usual” way with stock language cognates, historical surprises as it were. As it turns out, these anomalies (from the vantage point of the series of correspondences usually effective) are generally present for a given word in *all* Yiddish dialects. The comparativist knows, for example, that the classical Hebrew and Aramaic vowel called *šere* in a closed syllable gives Yiddish *e*, e.g. *shed* “ghost”, *tel* “ruin, mess”. The comparativist likewise expects *khen* for grace, but for whatever reason, it turns up with a long vowel reflex (in terms of the protosystem, vowel 22 for expected 21), in Standard Yiddish—*kheyn*. Congruently, the item turns up with the surprise vowel *everywhere*; cf. Northwestern Yiddish *kheyn*, Mideastern *khayn*, Northeastern *kheyn*. It is all a bit too much for coincidence. The evidence of Yiddish points to a proto Semitic Component which diversified over the centuries following the histories of the several dialects.

4. *Documentary evidence*. With more than a touch of romanticism, the layman usually thinks of surviving writings of a long bygone era as the faithful recorders of an early state of the language for posterity. Saussure (1916: 297–300), who called building language history on the basis of monuments the prospective method (working forwards), stressed the overriding methodological superiority of the retrospective method (working back into time), which entails, of course, the reconstruction of the prehistory of a language by the methodical comparison of its later and attested incarnations. Besides taking the history of the language back to a much earlier date, the retrospective method is theoretically far more sound. Its point of departure is the empirically real language from which reconstruction proceeds, rather than the dubious and controversial interpretation of graphic symbols whose true values are unknown. In the case of Yiddish, the limitations of documentary evidence are especially severe. Firstly, there are literally no surviving known documents in the vernacular (as opposed to Hebrew and Aramaic, and lists of proper names) dating from the earliest centuries of Jewish settlement in German speaking lands. The next step is to examine the oldest known surviving Yiddish documents, and here the historical linguist confronts a second

insurmountable obstacle. Virtually all of Old Yiddish literature was written in a highly stylized language on the model of contemporary written German, leaving little to be inferred about the Yiddish of the time (cf. e.g. Borokhov 1913b: 354; Reyzen 1920: 26; Shtif 1922: 184, 189, 191). A classic case is the 1382 Cambridge Codex, which Marchand (1959: 385-391) contends is German in his reply to Fuks (1957: xxvi-xxix), and which Weinreich (1960) and Birnbaum (1961: 19-21) insist is Yiddish. Their debate, exciting as it is, is not of direct relevance to the origins of Yiddish, but understanding the implications of each of the views is crucial. Whoever agrees with Weinreich and Birnbaum on the Yiddishness of the manuscript agrees with them *ipso facto* on the existence of Yiddish in the fourteenth century. Whoever agrees with Marchand that the manuscript is German in Jewish characters (with whatever Jewish coloring) agrees with Marchand on that and nothing more, with no implicational strings attached. So strict is the stylistic aversion to Semitisms in the document, that Germanic Component words are willfully misspelled to fill out an alphabetic acrostic (Shmeruk 1977: 75-76), to avoid using Semitisms even in the case of those letters restricted to the Semitic Component. A telling contrast from a later generation is provided by the language of Levita's (1545) Psalms translation, a work of considerable poetic sophistication, and its sharp divergence *vis-à-vis* Semitisms from the introduction and epilogue of publisher Cornelius Adelkind. The "Hebrew words" in the translation are just that, virtually all nouns restricted to the sphere of religion, i.e. loan words used for an easily recognizable literary purpose. In Adelkind's brief remarks, however, there is a normal representation of the fused Semitic Component, including noun *bókheres* "girls", adverb *bashútfes* "in partnership" and verb *gekhásmet* "signed". Needless to say, Adelkind's knowledge of Hebrew could in no way hold a candle to Levita, one of the greatest Hebrew grammarians of all time, but knowledge of Hebrew is not the issue here. What is at stake is an approximation of the spoken Yiddish of the day by Adelkind as it contrasts with Levita's highly stylized rendition of the Book of Psalms.

In fact, all of the earliest linguistically reliable Yiddish documents are to be found in nonliterary sources, and *they* all exhibit a Semitic Component lexically and structurally in concord with the well known Semitic Component of later Yiddish. This category includes private letters dating back to the mid fifteenth century (cf. Katz 1979: 23) and criminological sources dating back to the fourteenth century or earlier (cf. Katz 1981). The interdisciplinary approach notwithstanding, the cherished corpus of texts of the historian of Yiddish literature, and those of the historian of the Yiddish language, are of limited mutual interest.

Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish

Throughout the preceding discussion, I have used the term *Semitic Component* instead of the usually encountered “Hebrew-Aramaic”. The justification for this strange term (Hebrew-hyphen-Aramaic) is usually the even stranger view that Hebrew and Aramaic had somehow merged into a unitary hodgepodge in Ashkenaz (cf. e.g. Weinreich 1953: 488). While postclassical Hebrew had an Aramaic Component and Jewish Aramaic included a Hebrew Component, never have the twain merged. In fact, many leading Talmudic luminaries of Ashkenaz used the two rabbinic languages of Ashkenaz in a functionally complementary distribution. (e.g. Hebrew for a commentary on the Bible, Aramaic for Talmudic literature). The internal Jewish trilingualism of Ashkenaz is illustrated in Figure 4. There is *one* Jewish spoken language in Ashkenaz—Yiddish,

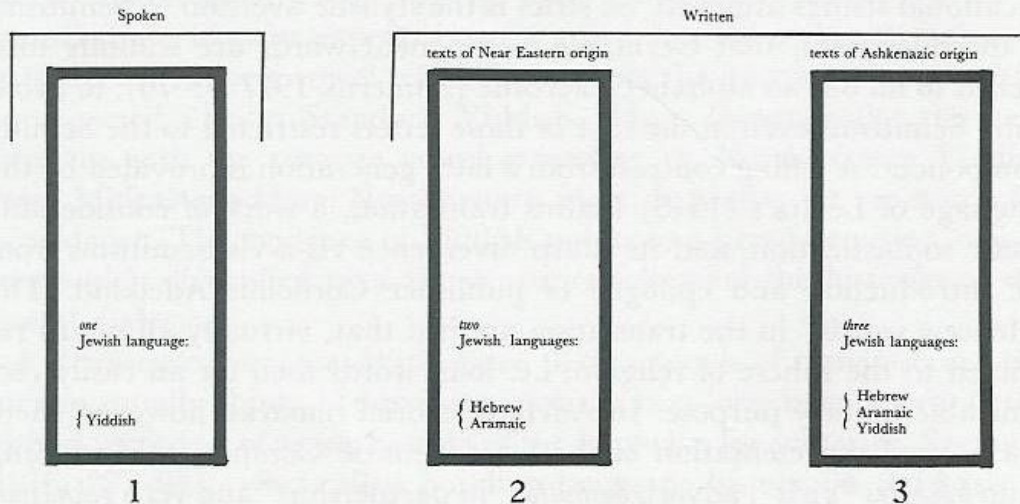


Figure 4. The Internal Jewish Trilingualism of Ashkenaz

two Jewish written languages inherited from the ancient Near East—Hebrew and Aramaic, and *three* Jewish languages written by Ashkenazim—Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish, all in addition, of course, to varying degrees of knowledge of one or more coterritorial *non*-Jewish languages. A monograph will demonstrate intriguing new interrelationships of interest to the wider study of exotic types of multilingualism. The proposed use of *Semitic* is certainly not meant to imply the possibility of Epigraphic South Arabian or any other non-Jewish Semitic language finding its way into Yiddish. It *is* meant to be general enough to allow for inquiry into the matter, rather than incorporating a conclusion into the term used to describe the object of investigation (circularity).

What is the historical relationship between Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish? If continual transmission accounts for (most of) the Semitic Com-

ponent, it can only be language material transmitted from generation to generation from Aramaic, which survived until the late first millennium AD, right to the doorstep of Yiddish. Nothing, of course, could have been conveyed in spoken language directly from classical Hebrew, unless the items concerned were frozen in outer space and ray-gunned down to Ashkenaz, a solution stretching the imagination even more than the currently accepted scenario illustrated in Figure 2. The key to solving the mystery of the Semitic Component lies in the nature of Jewish Aramaic (a far more appropriate name than the term "Targumic" proffered by "Jewish interlinguists"). Here again, Weinreich's fusion model comes to the rescue by its structural precision and conceptual clarity, which enable it to be used as easily against its author's own views as in their support. Aramaic itself contained a weighty Hebrew Component, transmitted continually from the days of classical Hebrew, although its grammatical machinery and a large part of its vocabulary were derived from the co-territorial non-Jewish Aramaic (or, for the sake of contrast, *Chaldaic*). Yiddish *apikóyres* "heretic; skeptic" and *símen* "sign" derive from Aramaic whereas in Aramaic they derive from Greek (cf. *Epikouros, semeion*); Yiddish *kúntres* "(traditional) pamphlet" and *pamálye* "(distinguished/heavenly) entourage", also from Aramaic, are part of its Latin Component (cf. *commentarius, familia*). Analogously, Yiddish *khólem* "dream" and *seykhl* "sense; intelligence" derive from Aramaic, where they are part of its Hebrew Component (cf. *hálóm, sēxel*). The absence of temporal and spatial neighborliness precludes a Greek, Latin or Hebrew element in Yiddish via continual transmission. These languages are *components of components* (or *subcomponents*) within Yiddish. The Semitic Component is, to be more specific, the *Aramaic Component* within Yiddish.

Nearly a century ago, Saineanu (1889: 53) formulated a principle with far reaching implications. He discovered that where Biblical forms underwent metamorphoses or replacement in later "rabbinic literature", it is the *later* forms that are to be found in Yiddish, e.g. *yóntef* "holiday", which, although morphologically "Hebrew" replaced the earlier Hebrew *mo^s ē ḏ* that would have given Yiddish *móyed*. Yiddish *mínheg* "custom" derives its meaning from the latest evolved form, not the Biblical sense of "charioteering". To rephrase Saineanu's principle in terms of continual transmission, Yiddish will always exhibit the *latest* pre-Ashkenazic forms, that is to say the Aramaic form, which may or may not be part of the Hebrew Component in Aramaic. The Germanic dialectological evidence against a Rhineland origin of Yiddish is reinforced by the graphemic evidence of the pointing ("vocalization") systems of Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts (Katz 1983b), and of course by the overwhelming internal evidence in Yiddish pointing to the easterly *bney khes*, those who

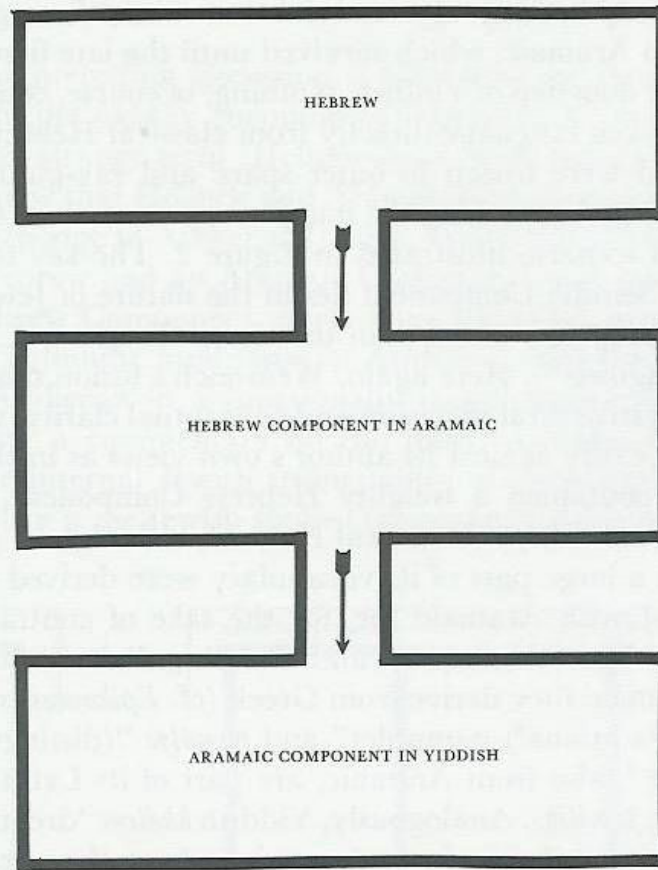


Figure 5. The Jewish Chain: Hebrew → Aramaic → Yiddish.

pronounced *kh* (= [x]), not the Rhineland westerners, the *bney hes*, who couldn't, and merged the voiceless velar spirant with *h* (cf. Weinreich 1958). That is not to say that the language of Jews in the Rhineland center had no impact on the development of Yiddish. It certainly did, as is evidenced by proper names of Romance origin and various exceptional forms in Yiddish. But Yiddish arose some thousand years ago when Aramaic speaking Jews settled in German speaking areas east of the Rhineland, and the remnants of their vanishing language fused with the local coterritorial dialects in a structurally precise and lexically unique new language that was soon to be carried to the four corners of Ashkenaz. An unbroken chain of language (Figure 5) links ancient Hebrew to Aramaic to Yiddish.

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