

Notes on the Proto Vocalism of the European Hebrew and Aramaic Jewish Language Components

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of a theory of Jewish languages which accounted for their rise and survival through inner social and cultural (especially religious) forces. The theory was radical when it was formulated and was considered as a reply to H. L. Rabinowitz's (1911) contention that ghetto life and suppression were responsible for the divergence of Jewish dialects from the potential stock languages from which their respective material was drawn. One of Rabinowitz's principal objections, which was regarded as mistaken, is the notion that Hebrew and Aramaic dialects constitute a part of every Jewish language.

"All Jewish languages contain elements of Hebrew and Aramaic origin and are written in Hebrew characters. Where do these Hebrew and Aramaic elements come from?"
—S. A. Birnbaum (1942: 64)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. One of the key goals of Jewish interlinguistics has been the comparison of various features of Jewish languages for the sake of contrasting similar as well as diverging structural characteristics peculiar to each and to search for possible historical, sociological and linguistic causes. More than anybody else, Matisyohu Miseses may be credited with founding the field of Jewish interlinguistics, as his work on the Jewish languages (1915) was the first systematized construction of a theory of Jewish languages which accounted for their rise and survival through inner social and cultural (specifically religious) forces. The theory was radical when Miseses forwarded it and was construed as a reply to H. Loewe's (1911) hackneyed contention that ghetto life and suppression were responsible for the divergence of Jewish languages from the coterritorial stock languages from which their raw language material was drawn. One of Miseses's principles of Jewish interlinguistics, which has remained unshaken, is the notion that Hebrew and Aramaic (HA) elements constitute a part of every Jewish language (1915: 66-68).

1.2. The comparative study of HA components in Jewish languages can be relevant in at least two major ways. Firstly, much can be learned typologically from the varying strengths and structural roles of HA components. Scholars have long claimed that the HA component in Judezmo constitutes far less than it does in Yiddish (cf. Bernfeld 1918: 256-257; Marcus 1965: 120). Bin-nun (1973: 264-265) even used this argument in attacking Birnbaum's (1922: 17-18) claim that HA component stress in Yiddish was always penultimate (as distinguished from the largely ultimate pattern of Tiberian stress). Birnbaum believed that an ultimate pattern would have survived in Yiddish even as in Judezmo vowel-final HA component lexical items remain ultimately stressed despite the heavy Hispanic pressure. Bin-nun characteristically replied to Birnbaum by arguing that since the HA component in Judezmo had been subjected to less fusion and is less an organic part of the language than is the case in Yiddish (repeating a claim by Bernfeld, 1918: 267), one should expect less phonological development. Now the circularity of the reasoning is self evident: Since the HA component in Judezmo preserves its inherited phonological system, it is less fused; since it is less fused there has been no phonological development. In the present note we wish to reexamine critically this thesis with respect to the vowel phoneme system of Tiberian phonology (a cover term for both Hebrew and Aramaic in the Tiberian system, which was

however codified under the impact of spoken Aramaic —
cf. Moscati 1969: 68; Rosenthal 1974: 9; Schramm 1964: 18).

M. Weinreich (1973: I, 135) has rightly called for a new investigation into the quantitative and structural peculiarities of the HA component in Judezmo, cautiously rejecting the many statements claiming the Judezmo HA component to be minor and calling for a new full scale inquiry, especially on the historical plane.

1.3. The comparative study of HA components may be useful to Jewish interlinguistics (and historical linguistics generally) in a more specific way as well. When we are dealing with Judezmo and Yiddish, both of which are languages of wide geographic distribution and a thousand year history and both of which developed in Europe (albeit not coterminally), the question must arise as to whether the HA components of these two languages derive from separate traditions (multiple origins theory) or a single proto HA component which underwent subsequent diversification in each language (monogenesis theory). Aloni (1971) argued for a common origin by comparing the lexicon of the Judezmo and Yiddish HA components (relying however, excessively on dictionaries). We wish to argue for a common origin of the system of oppositional vowel phonemes in the two HA components.

2. A DOUBLE PARADOX

2.1. Virtually all Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts of Medieval Spain employ the Tiberian system of vocalization (cf. Eldar 1976) which distinguishes seven vowel colors:

i		u
e		o
ε		ɔ
	a	

Furthermore, the great Hebrew scholars of Sepharad I in their philological and grammatical treatises consistently employed the seven vowel Tiberian system, and some, notably the Ḳimḥis also recognized (or claimed) phonemic differences in vocalic length to be inherent in the Tiberian system, yielding the classical Ḳimḥian ten vowel system:

ī	ī̄	ū	ū̄
ē		ō	
	ε̄	ɔ̄	
		a	

Now the HA component in modern Judezmo has a five vowel system (cf. Crews 1962: 83) of the type:

i	u
e	o
a	

Such a five vowel system was apparently unknown to the native Hebrew philologists of Sepharad I. Thus the modern HA component in Judezmo poses a problem when confronted with the historical linguistic evidence.

2.2. The converse paradox exists vis a vis the HA component in Yiddish. The HA component in Yiddish clearly has seven distinct reflexes of the seven Tiberian vowel colors (and length distinguishing dialects such as Central Yiddish and Dutch Yiddish exhibit distinct reflexes of all ten Kimḥian vowels). Leaving aside for the moment the issue of length (which Tiberian orthography does not in any event mark, leaving any discussion speculative), we may safely conclude that the major difference between the two systems concerns the presence of four vowel heights in the Tiberian and Yiddish HA component systems vs. three vowel heights in the Judezmo HA component. But many pre-13th century HA manuscripts from

the Yiddish speech territory seem to waver between a Tiberian system and a five vowel system (as in the HA component of modern Judezmo as well as the Sephardic HA reading tradition) which was also characteristic of a non-Tiberian Palestinian system (cf. Eldar 1976). Modern Yiddish, however, fully distinguishes the reflexes of Tiberian e and ε on the one hand (cf. Yiddish téyve 'ark' vs. téve 'habit' < Tiberian tevō, tévaʕ) and Tiberian ə and a on the other (cf. Yiddish xōne '(masc.) forename' vs. xāne '(fem.) forename' < Tiberian ḥono, ḥannō).

3. STANDARD THEORY

3.1. Standard theory holds the Judezmo HA component vowel system (and likewise, the Sephardic reading tradition) to derive unequivocally from the five vowel Palestinian tradition. Cf. e.g. Morag (1971: 1125):

"Two features, however, are common to all the pronunciations known as 'Sephardi' or Oriental (but non-Yemenite); lack of distinction between pathah and gameş on the one hand (except a gameş in a closed unstressed syllable [...]), and şere and şegol on the other. These two features are characteristic of certain manuscripts possessing 'Palestinian' vocalization. A certain variety of the 'Palestinian' pronunciation is, therefore to be regarded as the source of the Sephardi pronunciation."

3.2. Standard theory on Yiddish (cf. Eldar 1976; M. Weinreich 1954; H. Yalon 1941-2; 1942-3) is agreed that the HA component in Yiddish was also originally Palestinian (i.e. was characterized by a five vowel system) and became Tiberianized only in the thirteenth century. Yalon (and Eldar following him) hold that the Yiddish oppositional reflexes of the upper vs. the lower mid vowels are the direct result of the impact of German. While following Yalon in hypothesizing a pre-Tiberian Palestinian stage in Ashkenaz, Weinreich postulates a "Babylonian Renaissance" in Central Europe of the Middle Ages during which Babylonian teachers allegedly transplanted the seven vowel Tiberian system into the Yiddish speaking area.

4. OBJECTIONS TO STANDARD THEORY

4.1. In the case of Yiddish, suffice it to say that it seems hardly likely that coincidence is responsible for the opposition between şere and segol on the one hand and qameş and pataḥ on the other. These pairs give oppositional reflexes in all forms of Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic, and in the HA component in Yiddish they continue to give oppositional reflexes in open syllables (while in closed syllable position, these oppositions have been neutralized in favor of the lower vowel in each pair). The shortest path in language history (as elsewhere) between two points is a straight line, unless proven otherwise in a given instance. While it is true that many ancient Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts exhibit varying degrees of adherence to Tiberian norms (but by no means do they strictly conform to the five vowel 'Palestinian system either), the seven vowel reflexes of the seven Tiberian vowels in the living, spoken language in all likelihood represent unilinear descent from a Tiberian-type seven vowel system. Largely due to extralinguistic sociological factors, many scholars have unfortunately found it necessary to avoid at all costs seeing in Yiddish or the Ashkenazic tradition any reflex of the prestigious Tiberian system (cf. Lebensohn 1874: 18-28; Morag 1971: 1127-1130; Veynger 1913). Rejecting Tiberian origin out of hand in spite of the one to one correspondences between Tiberian and Ashkenazic vowels, a number of exotic theories have been proposed, e.g. that

the influence of German (coincidentally!) resulted in oppositions identical to those of Tiberian phonology (Yalon's view) or that the Tiberian system was imported by Babylonian (!) teachers (Weinreich's view). Weinreich's (1954) unfortunately uncritical acceptance of the Lebensohn-Yalon theory led Morag (1971: 1130) to point to Weinreich's acceptance of Yalon's tenet that the Tiberian system was a secondary development in Ashkenaz as evidence for his own acceptance of Yalon's views on German origins.

4.2. Now the HA component in Judezmo exhibits a five vowel system even as the Palestinian system does. Yet here we reject the prima facie similarity as evidence on a number of grounds:

(a) Similarity of systems constitutes evidence of genetic relationship when congruent oppositions are revealed (e.g. as in the case of Yiddish maintaining the e—ε and ɔ—a oppositions in the same positions as they are found in Tiberian cognates). Congruent neutralizations (e.g. as in the case of the Judezmo HA component lacking the e—ε and ɔ—a oppositions in all positions and the Palestinian system lacking them in all positions) are just as likely due to independent developments.

(b) As noted above (§ 2.1), there is total agreement of the Medieval Sephardic philologists on the seven vowel colors and the rich and diversified corpus of religious and secular texts of pre-expulsion Spain likewise exhibits a strictly Tiberian system.

(c) Most importantly, the Hebrew scholars who have dealt with the problem have examined the evidence from the point of view of Hebrew, atomistically abstracting "Hebrew pronunciation" from the empirically real linguistic systems of which this "Hebrew pronunciation" was and is part. There is much more to learn here from the interaction of the HA with the Hispanic component in Judezmo and with the Germanic component in Yiddish than there is from the mythical "Hebrew pronunciation" of non-Hebrew speaking Medieval Iberia and non-Hebrew speaking Medieval Central Europe. The necessary distinction here is that between Hebrew and Aramaic per se on the one hand and the fused Hebrew and Aramaic components in Jewish languages on the other. For Yiddish, this distinction was first made by Ber Borokhov (1913: 9), the founder of modern Yiddish linguistics, and was further elaborated and systematized by Max Weinreich (Whole Hebrew vs. Merged Hebrew) for Jewish interlinguistics. One is reminded of the words of Max Weinreich (1953: 495):

"But it is rather the insight gained from research into Yiddish, inadequate as it still is if measured by our ambitions, that opens new vistas of meaningful research into other Jewish languages, and not the other way around."

5. PROPOSED SOLUTION

5.1. Our own view is that the HA components in both Judezmo and Yiddish derive from the Tiberian system. Despite standard theory on the history of Yiddish (§ 3.2) it can be demonstrated with relative facility that the Yiddish HA component system directly parallels the Tiberian vowel system (§ 4.1). We shall turn to the matter of Judezmo. Although the HA component in Judezmo exhibits a five vowel system as does the Palestinian system (§ 3.1), we found the theory of descent from the Palestinian system to be unsettling on several grounds (§ 4.2).

5.2. Even a quantitatively small Hebrew and Aramaic component in a Jewish language may indeed preserve a phonological system distinct from that of the quantitatively vastly greater component derived from the coterritorial stock language (on the coexistence of divergent systems of phonology within a single language, cf. Bloomfield 1933: 447-450). Note, for example, the application of a vowel shortening rule in closed syllables in the HA component of Yiddish (causing such alternations as ššyfət 'judge' vs. pl. ššftem) despite the lack of such a rule in the Germanic Component or the ultimate stress of vowel-final HA component

lexical items in Judezmo (e.g. seōaká 'charity', tefilá 'prayer(book)') despite the lack of any such ultimate stress rule in the Hispanic component of the language for vowel-final words (e.g. álma 'soul', tristéza 'sadness').

5.3. We propose as a tentative principle of Jewish interlinguistics that despite the potential preservation of phonological HA component features in Jewish languages, phonetic features vanish when they conflict with the articulatory habits of the component derived from the coterritorial stock language. Note the loss of HA ʔ, ɣ, ð, w, h, t̪, ʃ, ʂ, ɑ, ə in Yiddish. Upon contact with the coterritorial Medieval German dialects from which Yiddish gleaned its Germanic component, these HA consonants became doomed. This claim is supported empirically by cases of language migrations available for observation. Third generation native speakers of Yiddish born in the United States, for example, may speak Yiddish fluently, but will often not be able to perfectly maintain their forefathers' phonetics, and the American impact will be most visible in such features as the realization of /r/, the palatal /ɹ/ or aspiration of word initial voiceless obstruents.

5.4. To understand why Yiddish maintained in its HA component a distinct reflex for each of the Tiberian vowels, one must

examine the vowel system of the coterritorial stock language. When doing so (cf. Grimm 1840: I), we find that the rich Medieval Germanic vocalism provided a barrage of short, long and diphthongized vowels which enabled the first speakers of Yiddish to immediately associate each of the HA Tiberian vowels with a comparable Germanic vowel. While the HA and Germanic components in Yiddish maintain a number of mutually exclusive phonological features to this day, there is no Yiddish dialect whose HA component contains phonetic units absent from its Germanic component phonetic inventory.

5.5. It is believed by Judezmo scholars that the vowel phoneme inventory of the Hispanic component in pre-expulsion Judezmo was virtually congruent with the coterritorial Spanish of the time (cf. Bunis 1974: 13-14). In fact, it is in Judezmo consonantism that Hispanists see relics of Medieval Spanish in modern Judezmo (cf. Entwistle 1948: 180-191; Spaulding 1948: 153-164). In Table I, we illustrate the Hispanic vowel system (center column) with which the Tiberian vowels (left column) came into contact. This five vowel Hispanic system derived from the earlier proto Romance (right column) system which did have two series of mid vowels, e and ɛ in the front and o and ɔ in the back. However, Romance ɛ and ɔ shifted to ye and we respectively in Hispanic (cf. Asin 1941: 149-152; Entwistle 1948: 77, 327-329; Lapesa 1942: 101; Navarro 1946: 15-45; Schane 1973: 59).

5.6. Employing the principle proposed in § 5.3 and tested vis a vis Yiddish in § 5.4, it becomes evident that the e — ɛ and ɔ — a oppositions (which constitute the key factor distinguishing the Tiberian from the Palestinian system of vocalization) could not have been maintained because the five vowel Hispanic system did not provide any phonetic option for such maintenance as illustrated in Table I. As a result of confrontation with the Hispanic component, e and ɛ merged as a unitary phoneme /e/; ɔ merged with o in unstressed closed syllables and elsewhere with a (Table II). Hence a seven vowel Tiberian type system was reduced to a five vowel Hispanic type system. The collapse occurred before the lifetime of Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167) who was familiar with the unique realization of qameṣ (ɔ) but lamented that only the Tiberian, Egyptian and African Jews could pronounce it (cf. Chomsky 1952: 33). This approximate dating jibes well with the accepted opinion of Hispanists that by the tenth century the Romance lower-mid open vowels had already shifted to rising diphthongs (cf. e.g. Spaulding 1948: 82).

5.7. We conclude therefore that the Hebrew and Aramaic components in both Judezmo and Yiddish exhibit in their vowel systems reflexes of the seven Tiberian vowels which underwent separate development in each language in accordance with the fusion undergone with Hispanic and Germanic in the unique structures of Judezmo and Yiddish (cf. Table III).

TABLE I




Tiberian Vocalism	Hispanic Component	Proto Romance
		
i	i	i
e	e	e
ε	ye	ε
a	a	a
ɔ	we	ɔ
o	o	o
u	u	u

TABLE II

Under the impact of the five vowel Hispanic Component system, the seven vowel Tiberian system collapsed to a five vowel system. Tiberian [ε] merged with [e]; [ɔ] merged with [o] in unstressed closed syllables and elsewhere with [a], resulting in the vowel system characteristic of the Hebrew & Aramaic Component in modern Judezmo.

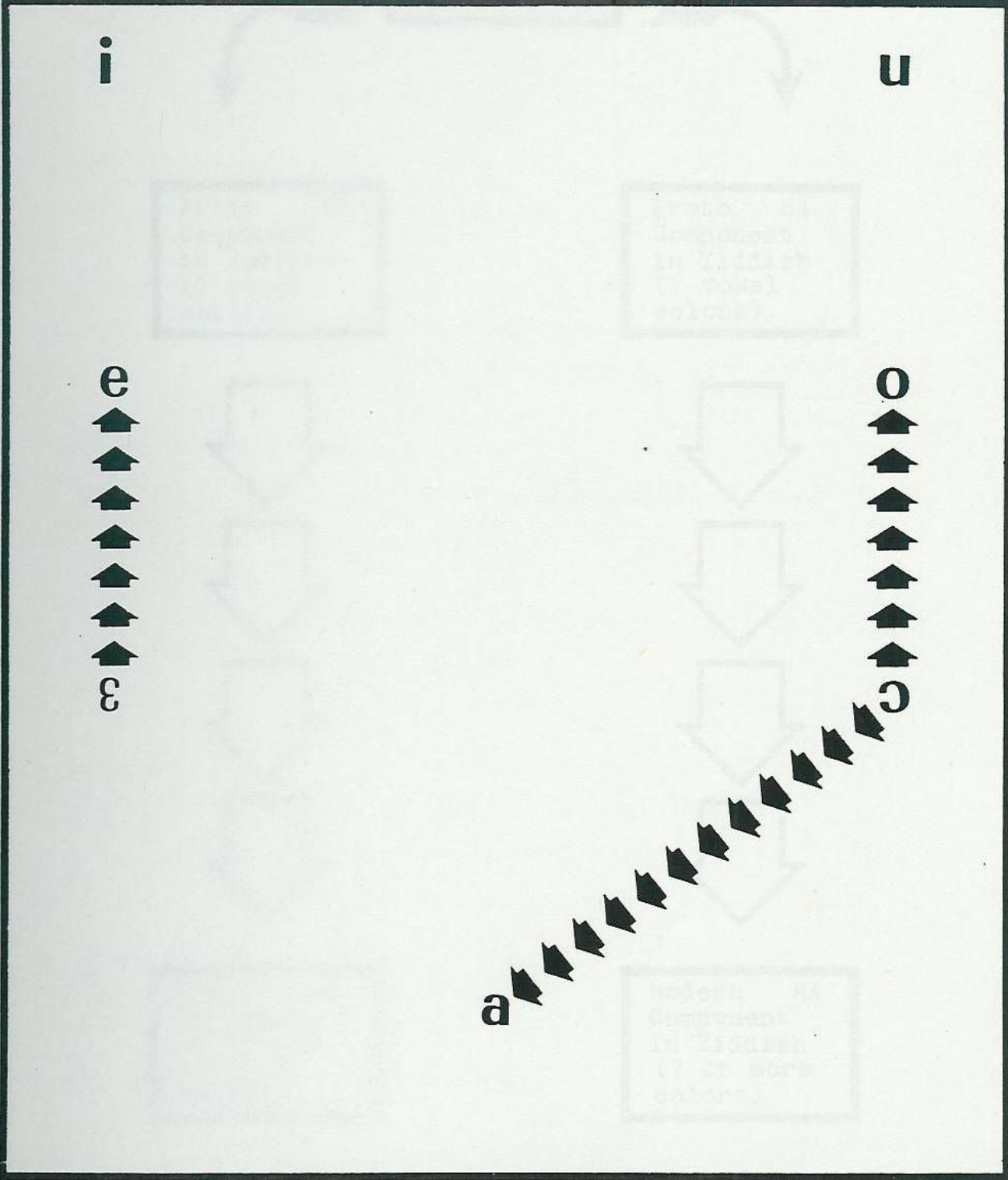
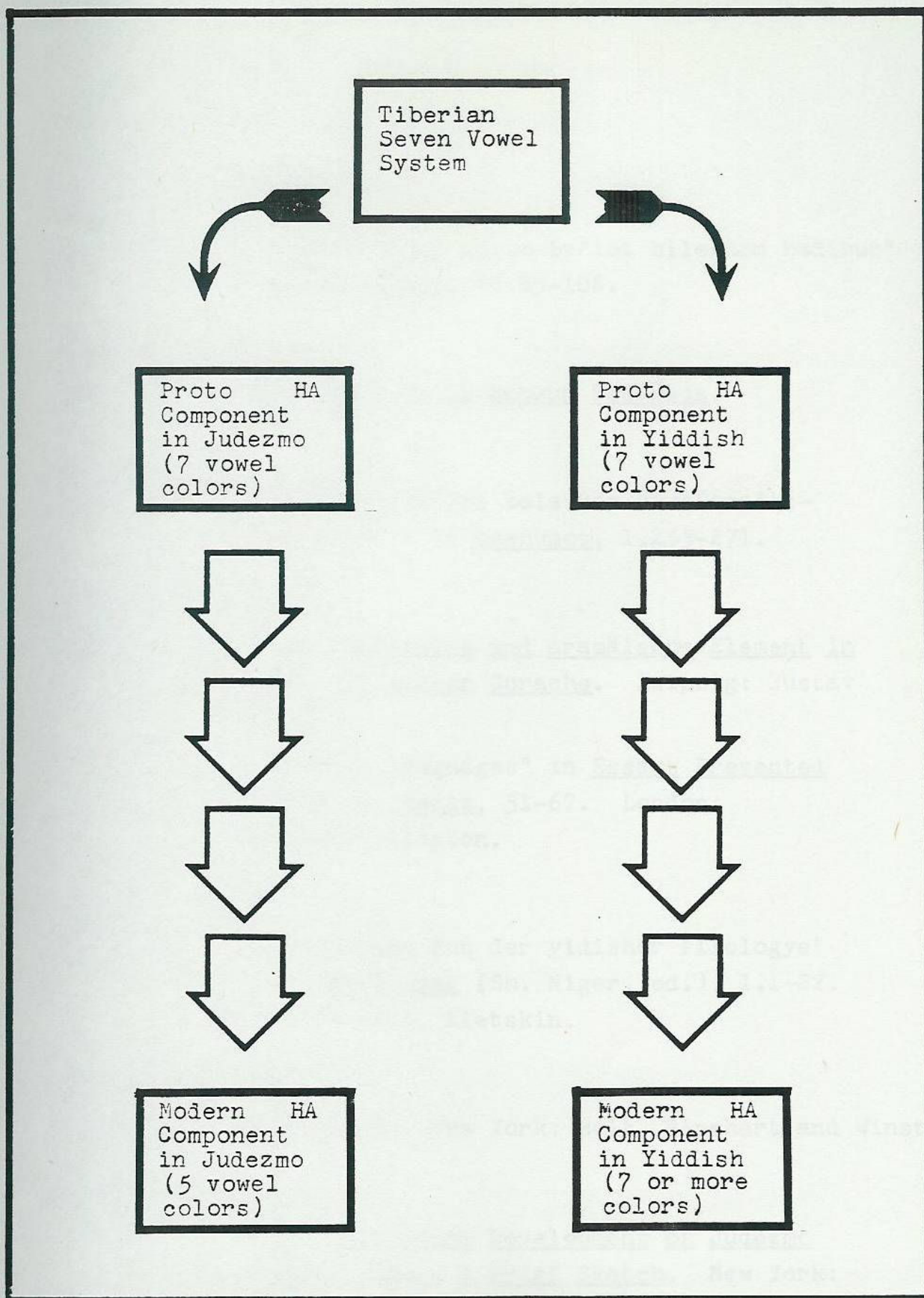


TABLE III



R E F E R E N C E S

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