

# JOURNAL OF SEMITIC STUDIES

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derived from underlying relative clauses, and if so, to identify the types of subordinate clauses in terms of their specific syntactic-semantic conditions," or again (p. 101), on modality, "Will a Persian hostess ever say to a guest *šomâ bâýad az in širini boxorid* 'you must eat this cake', as might her American counterpart?" Is this really the "state of the art", or what the future of Persian linguistic studies will be all about?

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SOLOMON A. BIRNBAUM, *Yiddish. A survey and a grammar*, Manchester University Press, 1979. Pp. xii+400. Price: £ 30.

Solomon A. Birnbaum is one of the century's pioneering giants of Yiddish linguistics and philology. His achievements include the first sophisticated synchronic grammar of spoken Modern Yiddish (1918), the first descriptive study of the Hebrew and Aramaic component in Yiddish (1922), the first near-comprehensive comparative classification of Yiddish vocalism (1923) and the first key breakthrough in the reconstruction of Old Yiddish phonology by means of brilliant graphemic deduction (1932). *Yiddish. A survey and a grammar* (henceforth *YSG*) contains revised and up-dated versions of most of Birnbaum's major works on Yiddish of the past sixty years and a number of new ones as well, all appearing in English in a single handy volume. Although beautifully produced, there unfortunately are a great number of typographical errors, many of which are corrected in the author's typescript *Errata* which should be obtained by all who use the book. The publishers owe it to Professor Birnbaum to publish and distribute an exhaustive listing of corrections.

Measured against Borokhov's (1913a) ambitious outline for a proposed history of the Yiddish language, Birnbaum's *YSG* gracefully complements Max Weinreich's (1973) *History of the Yiddish language*. Overlap is averted by the sharp diversity of the works of these two masters of Yiddish in research orientation, point of view and methodology. *YSG* begins with a sociological and linguistic survey of the various Jewish languages (pp. 3-15), the cultural structure of traditional Ashkenazi (Yiddish speaking) Jewry (pp. 16-30), and the sociocultural history of Yiddish (pp. 33-43). These sections provide the nonspecialist with a brief but profound survey of Yiddish within the context of Jewish languages and of Jewish languages within the context of world languages. Popular misconceptions and prejudices are cited and authoritatively refuted. Chapters are devoted to determining the age of Yiddish at about a thousand years (pp. 44-57), the linguistic elements of Yiddish (pp. 58-81), their synthesis (pp. 82-5) and further evolution internal to Yiddish (pp. 86-93). Transcending the usual tabulations of morphological fusion (e.g. *pójar* 'peasant' < German + feminising morpheme *-tə* < Aramaic giving Yiddish *pójartə* 'female peasant'; *pónam* 'face' < Hebrew + pluralising umlaut/suffixal *-ər* < German giving Yiddish *pénamər* 'faces'),<sup>1</sup> Birnbaum cites instances of cultural synthesis, e.g. Yiddish *xámər* 'fool' < Hebrew *hāmôr* 'donkey'. "In the Arab orient, the donkey is an important animal and its name is not synonymous with stupidity. In the Bible the

<sup>1</sup> Yiddish examples are here cited in phonemic transcription of their Standard Yiddish forms.

Messiah himself is pictured as riding on one. The reason for the fall in the prestige of the donkey in Y[iddish] seems clear: it is a case of synthesis, an oriental form wedded to an occidental meaning" (p. 83).

Birnbaum's classification of Yiddish dialects (pp. 94-105) is considerably more in concord with the empirical evidence of Yiddish dialectological research than Prilutski's (1920: 79, nos. 5-6) scheme, accepted also by M. Weinreich (1958: 164, n. 11). Most of the isoglosses sever Northeastern ("Lithuanian-White Russian") Yiddish from both Central ("Polish-Galician") Yiddish and Southeastern ("Ukrainian") Yiddish. Birnbaum is clearly justified in rejecting the grouping of Southeastern Yiddish with Northeastern Yiddish on the basis of a single isogloss (p. 98, n. 3). Readers familiar with other descriptions of Yiddish should be made aware of the author's differing terminology. Birnbaum's "East Yiddish, North" corresponds with the *Northeastern Yiddish* of the literature, his "East Yiddish, South East" with *Southeastern Yiddish*, his "East Yiddish, South West" with *Central Yiddish*, his "Central Yiddish" with U. Weinreich's (1964) *Transcarpathian Yiddish*. The now defunct Yiddish dialects of Central Europe are known as West(ern) Yiddish in all schemes.

Appendices to the Survey consist of Birnbaum's defence of the view that the language of the Cambridge Codex of 1382 (cf. Fuks 1957, Marchand 1959, M. Weinreich 1960a) is Old Yiddish rather than Middle High German (pp. 106-111); an extensive proof that the Yiddish digraphs ן (double *vv*) and ן (double *yud*) are orthographically inherited from the Semitic alphabet rather than extensions of European models (pp. 112-26); tabulation of the systematic correspondences between Yiddish vowels and those of the stock languages using Yiddish as the point of departure (pp. 127-34); a listing of major Yiddish toponyms (pp. 135-41). The chrestomathy (pp. 143-89) includes seventy-six specimen Yiddish texts in Latin letter transcription spanning eight centuries. Birnbaum's mastery of the reconstruction of phonology from graphemic structure is evident throughout the premodern texts included. A number of highly original suggestions are made on difficult issues. Birnbaum proposes (p. 149) that the mysterious raphe over the gimel in < גִּמֵּל > in the oldest known complete Yiddish sentence (dated 1272) marks consonantal nongemination rather than spirantisation to voiced velar fricative  $\gamma$  (cf. M. Weinreich 1963: 91). From the literary point of view, Birnbaum succeeds in spanning a wide array of genres and themes encompassing the far flung development of Yiddish literature over the past eight centuries. Included are extracts from the Cambridge Codex of 1382 (no. 1), a 1396 medicinal document on blood letting (no. 7), a sixteenth century Sabbath poem (no. 15), the 1541 Bovo d'Antona of Elijah Levita (no. 20), Witzgenhausen's 1677 Bible translation (no. 22), a nineteenth-century lullaby (no. 42), a twentieth-century paper on biochemistry (no. 74), as well as numerous selections from classic and postclassic masters of Modern Yiddish poetry and prose.

The Grammar (pp. 191-307) is masterly. It contains a wealth of systematically-culled materials from the spoken language often omitted by other grammars. The mighty expressive potential of Yiddish is imparted through the positing of categories to mirror the facts of spoken Yiddish. Birnbaum is apparently the first to provide the student of Yiddish with detailed directions for writing the Yiddish alphabet (pp. 198-9), whose script differs in a number

of details from that employed in modern Hebrew. Items cited in the grammar for illustrative purposes are carefully selected to reflect Yiddish specificities, e.g. *natsjonalizm* is glossed “cultural ethnicism” – its usual meaning for twentieth-century Yiddish speakers – rather than “nationalism” (p. 219).

The magnificent Bibliography (pp. 309-88) comprises 1,247 entries. It is topically arranged, but items within each topical section are chronologically ordered, thereby providing valuable insights into the history of the field. The bibliography of *YSG* is the greatest single advance in the bibliography of Yiddish linguistic research since the appearance of Borokhov’s (1913b) *Biblyotek*. Throughout *YSG*, the author’s disagreements with other Yiddish scholars are discreetly stated (e.g. p. 82 n. 1; p. 98 n. 3; p. 112 n. 1; p. 339 n. 2) but he does not hesitate to use the whip where it has been richly deserved (p. 352 n. 1).

It cannot be overlooked that *YSG* is a pointed challenge to “standard theory” in the field of Yiddish from a number of perspectives. Espousing an ideological framework of traditionalist Jewish orthodoxy, Birnbaum rejects the nationalist Yiddishism of secularist Jewish movements of the twentieth century and its linguistic correlates in matters of Yiddish orthography, lexicon and overall standardisation. To this day, the author insists upon his “traditionalist” Yiddish orthography which was employed by the Beys-Yankev religious school system in pre-World War II Poland but is today used virtually by him alone. It is a sophisticated system combining elements of traditional pre-modern Yiddish spelling (e.g. װ rather than װ for [v̥]) with numerous diacritical devices designed to reflect the rich system of phonological oppositions of Southern Yiddish (= Central Yiddish + Southeastern Yiddish). This brings us to the major challenge of the book. Birnbaum rejects the adoption (with modifications) of Northeastern Yiddish as the basis of Standard Yiddish. Citing a 73:27 ratio of speakers favourable to the South, Birnbaum finds it “ironic that the partisans of the ‘standard’ – all convinced democrats – should ask the majority of Yiddish speakers to switch over from their own pronunciation to that of a minority...” (p. 100). Much of the standardising work challenged in *YSG* was carried out by scholars of the *Yidisher visnschaftlekher institút* (Yiddish Scientific Institute) known as the YIVO, founded in 1925 in Vilna, the heartland of the native speech territory of Northeastern Yiddish. Mainstream YIVO scholars such as U. Weinreich (1951) have pointed to the pedagogical benefits of standardising Yiddish pronunciation on a Northeastern Yiddish basis, e.g. the nearly perfect one-to-one correspondence between grapheme and phoneme in this dialect. Birnbaum’s response to this is his interdialectal orthography. Whether one agrees with the author or not, his singularly outstanding description of Southern Yiddish in *YSG* is an invaluable contribution to descriptive Yiddish linguistics and a breath of fresh air in the field of normative Yiddish grammar.

While the pro-Southern bias is welcome within a modern linguistic framework sympathetic to descriptive pluralism, it is somewhat overdone in the historical parts of the volume. The terms “Yiddish” and “New East Yiddish” are often substituted for “Southern Yiddish” (e.g. pp. 72, 96, 127). The author’s reluctance to incorporate Northeastern Yiddish evidence occasionally obscures his analyses. His argument that Yiddish *biken* “(to

bow" and *stípn* "(to) push" are more closely related to Upper German *bucken* and *stuppen* than to Central German *bücken* and *stüpfen* is opaque because Southern Yiddish has merged Proto *\*u*, *\*ü* and *\*i* as unitary *i* while other dialects of Yiddish preserve *u* < *\*u*, merging only *\*ü* and *\*i* as *i* (cf. Northeastern Yiddish *búken*, *stúpn*). To make sense of the author's argument on p. 74, the reader will have had to know that the *j* in Birnbaum's transcriptions *bjkn*, *stjpn* represents the Southern Yiddish *i* corresponding with Northeastern Yiddish *u* while his *i* represents the Pan-Yiddish *i*. In order to realise this, the nonspecialist would have to know from the table following page xii that these symbols are deciphered for Southern Yiddish on p. 203 no. 23 and 205 no. 41 respectively. He will then have to relate the first of these to the conversion table on pp. 218-19. *YSG* stands to be criticised most for pro-Southern Yiddish biases and its entangling complexity of transcriptional systems. These are not "deficiencies" as much as they are characteristic features of the style and philosophy of this great Yiddish scholar.

*YSG* contains a number of facts from Birnbaum's biography that are valuable to the history of Yiddish studies in the twentieth century. Birnbaum was the first-ever lecturer in Yiddish in a modern academic institution at the University of Hamburg in 1922 (p. 39). The first version of his dialectological classification (1918:16) was influenced by "a pre-1914 movement in Austria, which aimed at rebuilding Austria-Hungary as a structure of national cultural ... units" (p. 97, n. 2). Birnbaum coined the modern names of the digraphs in the Yiddish alphabet (p. 329, n. 1). This splendid work leaves the reader more than convinced of the author's contention that notwithstanding the monumental progress of Yiddish linguistics in our century, "what has been achieved is only a beginning in relation to what still needs to be undertaken" (p. 14).

As Solomon A. Birnbaum approaches his nineteenth birthday (24th December 1981), we warmly wish him many happy years of continued creativity in the field of scholarship he so faithfully helped to build with perseverance, talent and love.

Some minor remarks on specific points:

P. 14: The claim that traditional and secularist Yiddish "had begun to split up into two divergent languages" is perhaps exaggerated. P. 56: The contention that unitary Modern Yiddish *x* corresponding with German *x* and *ç* is a relic of Old High German times cannot be sustained as Proto *\*x* and *\*ç* give distinct reflexes (*x* and *ç*) in Western Yiddish (cf. e.g. Beem 1970:24, no. 5). P. 63: Western Yiddish has in all likelihood not "preserved" *holem* as *ō*. The *ō* realisations of the central portions of Western Yiddish are apparently due to secondary monophthongisation of diphthongs *ej* and *ou*, resulting in their merger with *ē* and *ō* respectively (cf. Katz 1979).

P. 64: The adherence to normalised Middle High German orthography is perhaps too rigid. As M. Weinreich (1960b: 69, 70; 1973: II, 357, 358) points out, it is likely that the types of Germanic with which Yiddish came into contact in its earliest history had diphthongised realisations corresponding with normalised *i* and *ü*. P. 68, no. 3: A number of the cited changes of articulation could be classified as phonologically regular sound shifts, e.g. Vowel unrounding, prevelar lowering. P. 69, no. CI: "New diphthongs, probably after monophthongisation of the original ones" – I cannot see the

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need to posit an intermediate monophthongal stage. P. 84, no. 1: Yiddish *gójə* 'Gentile woman' is listed as a case of synthesis (*goj* + feminine morpheme *-ə*) within Yiddish, and it has been so regarded for centuries (cf. Levita 1541) despite the attestation of גוייה in the same vein in the Jerusalem Talmud (e.g. Sanhedrin IX, 27b). P. 96: To avoid confusion with the current terminology in Yiddish dialectological studies (cf. above), it might have been best to call the area intermediate between Western and Eastern Yiddish *Transitional Yiddish*, *Middle Yiddish* or *Transcarpathian Yiddish* rather than the ambiguous "Central Yiddish". P. 97: For integration read: merger. P. 98: For morphemic read: phonemic. P. 98, note 3: The alleged identity of Southeastern Yiddish with Central Yiddish except for the *ej* || *aj* isogloss ("all the other phonemes ... tally") is exaggerated. Cf. Southeastern Yiddish *ə* vs. Central Yiddish *a* (*bənt* vs. *hant* "hand"), Southeastern Yiddish *a* vs. Central Yiddish *ā* (*hant* vs. *hānt* "today"), Southeastern Yiddish (regional) *i* vs. Central Yiddish *ej* (*libn* vs. *léjbn* "life").

P. 126: "G[erman] /ei/ (joined later by [ei] < [i]) ..." Significantly, this merger never transpired in Yiddish and the argument advanced to account for the premodern orthographic identity of the two in Yiddish is difficult. Cf. Middle High German *weiß* "(I) know" vs. *wīß* "white" merged as Modern German *weiß* but distinguished in all dialects of Yiddish – Western Yiddish *vās* vs. *vajs*/*vejs* || Central Yiddish *vajs* vs. *vās* || Southeastern Yiddish *vejs* vs. *vas* || Northeastern Yiddish *vejs* vs. *vajs*. P. 127, nos. 2-3: It is not necessary to distinguish the environments "qameš before a velar" from "qameš before pharyngeal". The former subsumes both, given that Tiberian Hebrew pharyngeal *ħ* is merged with velar *x* (< *k* via spirantisation) in all varieties of Yiddish. P. 129, nos. 54-55: The environments "qameš in closed monosyllable" and "qameš in closed syllable" can be collapsed to the latter.

P. 132, no. 138: The environment "shewa in the pre-penultimate or penultimate" is better stated as pretonic shewa.

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