

Neil G. Jacobs. *Yiddish: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xix, 327 pp.

Yiddish linguistic studies are frequently blessed with originality as well as passion. What the field has needed for a long time is a copious and sober summary of the work to date, in English, for scholars and students from the field of general linguistics. Jacobs's work goes a long way toward fulfilling that need. Specialists in areas from synchronic syntax to historical phonology will quickly be able to find what interests them in Yiddish studies, as will scholars in Semitic, Germanic, and Slavic philology. The major bibliographic gap in the book—references to the second half of Max Weinreich's masterpiece *History of the Yiddish Language* (original Yiddish, 4 vols., 1973; first half in English, 1980)—can easily be rectified now that the entire work has been brought out in English by Yale University Press (2006).

The book's backbone is its large and generally excellent middle section (pages 90–284), which might be called, for nonspecialists, “aspects of the language.” It is for this extensive summary of work to date that the author and press deserve sincere congratulations.

The weaker sections—covering, not unexpectedly, more controversial terrain—on the origins and earlier history of the language at the beginning of the book (pages 9–56) and its current state, at the end (pages 285–306), are rather less solid.

The debates about the origin and early development of Yiddish are covered with insufficient perspective. For all their disagreements, the work of Solomon A. Birnbaum, Jechiel Fischer (later Bin-Nun), Robert D. King, Max Weinreich, and others constitutes a clear “mainstream of thought,” namely, that Yiddish originated in Germanic-speaking territory in the Rhine or Danube basins (or both). The “exciting” theories of Paul Wexler and Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj, to cite one example, which derive Yiddish from Greek or Sorbian origins (8, 14–15), have certainly contributed to the field. But they can be accorded due respect without being misrepresented as mainstream in a general introductory work. This entire section, incidentally, is now superseded by the more sophisticated and comprehensive overview provided in Alexander Beider's “The Birth of Yiddish” (in *Revue des Études Juives* 163, no. 1–2 [2004]: 193–244).

From a linguistic point of view, the weakest part of the book is its final section, on the recent past and the present. What the author calls “the standard language” and devotes a lot of space to describing has, statistically speaking, zero native speakers of child-bearing age. It is a kind of toy, often called “Yivo Yiddish” (patently unfair to Yivo, which has always been and continues to be a modern and tolerant institution open to diverse scholarly views). This “standard language” is purist to the extreme, “deleting” masses of universally used everyday Yiddish words and constructions as *daytshmerish* (“too close to German”) while “adding” heaps of laughable neologisms. This style has been dubbed “Bronx Yiddish” and has long drawn mirth from both native speakers and the last

generation of eastern European authors. Analogously, the Soviet-inspired 1937 Yivo spelling rules are treated as "standard," though the overwhelming majority of twentieth-century literary masters would not touch them with a bargepole, nor will any of the current (*haredi*) communities, in which Yiddish is a native language of a growing populace that includes many persons of child-bearing age who speak the language in the home. In trumpeting the supposedly triumphal march of these illusory "standards," in lexicon as well as writing system, the author refers to various (secularist) publications "switching," failing to notice that the switch has invariably transpired after a publication's circulation has collapsed and its octogenarian editors have thrown in the proverbial towel.

The views of purist-normativist scholars, including J. A. Fishman and M. Schaechter, who base themselves on Heinz Kloss's "Ausbau" theory ("building up a language that is still too close to another language"), are treated as "God's Honest Truth," and the opposing descriptivist-variationist views of J. Bar-El, J. A. Joffe, Kh. Sh. Kazdan, D. B. Kerler, Y. Luden, Y. Mark, A. Shulman, Y. Steinbaum, G. Winer, and R. Zuckerman, among others, are not even mentioned. Full disclosure: This reviewer's *Amended Amendments: Issues in Yiddish Stylistics* (Oxford: Oxford Yiddish Press, 1993) is among the works that dissent from the Kloss-Fishman-Schaechter construct. The reader is deprived of the knowledge that what is presented as truth is but one of two (or more) sides in a lively and ongoing debate.

The living Yiddish of hundreds of thousands of *haredim* (mostly Hasidim), which is on a demographic trajectory to become millions in the centuries ahead, is accorded two pages (291–93) of less than competent linguistic analysis. Throwing to the wind linguists' love of variation and language in transition, hasidic Yiddish is presented as mumbo-jumbo. The unification ("collapse") of the case system for definite articles, for example, now under way in living Yiddish, is a classic case of language in transition. The trend was noticed, and this development predicted, by the founder of modern Yiddish linguistics, Ber Borokhov, in a famous 1912 letter. Borokhov's achievements are, incidentally, undercredited throughout.

Future linguists will chuckle, seeing that instead of analyzing what is happening in living speech communities "around the corner" that are open to empirical investigation, some Yiddish linguists have preoccupied themselves with endless analysis of a "standard normative Yiddish" that is native to (virtually) nobody. It exists for a handful of academics and a rather larger number of clubs and dedicated hobbyists (mostly, nowadays, in Latin letter transcription on internet bulletins and e-mails, making for a "Yiddishism" that approaches fetishism).

But the book's weaknesses (at its compressed beginning) on origins and dialectology of the language and (at its more compressed end) on its present state must not obscure its overriding success in presenting to the world of English-reading linguists (throughout the large and highly competent middle) an excellent, copious, clear, and well-referenced overview of much of the work carried out in recent decades.

This important book could not come at a better time. After a burst of energy in the 1980s, Yiddish linguistics went into steep decline. This was partly caused

by the subsequent collapse of programs in Yiddish linguistics (including those at Bar-Ilan, Columbia and Oxford universities), which often were replaced with fine programs on modern Yiddish literature. Future historians of the field may also find that excessive internecine feuding, including a spate of malevolent pseudonymous book reviews in the late 1980s, played a part. In Judaic studies more generally, a number of power brokers seem to have felt in recent years that Yiddish linguistics inherently tilts toward the Left, the non-Zionist, the non-Hebraist (and occasionally to the "ultra-Orthodox Right") and that it is more kosher for Yiddish at the university to be a "harmless" affair of modern Yiddish literature, primarily in English translation.

Whatever its shortcomings, Jacobs's book is a genuine and notable advance. It is one of a number of recent accomplishments that augur well for a vigorous revival of Yiddish linguistics in our new century.

Dovid Katz  
Vilnius University  
Vilnius, Lithuania



Shirli Gilbert. *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 243 pp.

Shirli Gilbert's volume *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps* explores the role of musical performance as a survival tool for Jews engulfed by the Holocaust. She draws her data from four settings: the ghettos of Warsaw and Vilna and the concentration camps at Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz.

The book, which is based on archival and published music and songs, as well as literature, diaries, memoirs, and scholarly works on the Holocaust, portrays the complex nature of music as an invigorating human experience. Though it focuses on life and music during the Holocaust in the four places mentioned previously, it also discusses music with regard to memory and remembrance after the Holocaust.

Apart from offering factual accounts of daily life and survival in these ghettos and camps, Gilbert strives to help the reader gain insight into the inner lives of the inmates through their musical activities. As she says in the introduction, "The scope of musical life under Nazi internment was a remarkable demonstration of the integral role culture can play in constructing communal meaning and identity, particularly in times of crisis. My book is an attempt not to negate that role, but rather to widen the frame of reference within which it can be understood and to explore it in its myriad dimensions through detailed examination of musical life as embedded in a particular social contexts" (17-18).

The author analyzes songs that have already been published or collected by other scholars, as well as books, literary works, and other written sources. The way she handles her materials is both sensitive and moving, as well as scholarly and detailed. Gilbert succeeds in reconstructing life in the ghettos and camps she