

Jewish Languages

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Introduction

Ethnic and religious groups use language as one means of constructing and expressing their distinctness from other groups. Jews are no exception. Wherever Jews have lived – from Baghdad to Brooklyn, Amsterdam to Odessa – they have spoken somewhat differently from their non-Jewish neighbors. These differences have been as small as the addition of a few Hebrew words and as large as a vastly different lexicon, syntax, and phonology. Therefore, the term “Jewish language” refers to any linguistic variety spoken by Jews that differs to some extent from the non-Jewish language(s) around it. The field of Jewish language studies examines the distinct linguistic practices of the Jewish people around the world.

Jewish languages generally exist in a situation of triglossia with the local non-Jewish language(s) and with a liturgical combination of Hebrew and Aramaic (Weinreich, 1980; Rabin, 1981; and Fishman, 1985). The Jewish language is used mostly for intra-community speech and sometimes for writing. Speakers also generally have at least some knowledge of the co-territorial non-Jewish languages and use them in their interactions with non-Jews. Hebrew and Aramaic have played a very important role in Jewish

life. Biblical and rabbinic literatures are studied regularly in their original languages, and daily prayers are conducted mostly in Hebrew and Aramaic. Hebrew is also used for contemporary rabbinic and liturgical production, as well as some other literary functions.

Jewish languages have been documented in many parts of the Jewish diaspora: Yiddish (sometimes referred to as Judeo-German), Judeo-Spanish (also called Ladino, Judezmo, Dzhudezmo, Jidyó, Spanyol, Spanyolit), Judeo-Greek (Yevanic, Romaniyot), Judeo-Italian (Italkic, including local varieties like Judeo-Venetian), Judeo-Portuguese, Judeo-French (Zarphatic, Western Loez), and Judeo-Provençal (Shuadit) in Europe; Judeo-Arabic (Yahudic), Judeo-Aramaic (Targum, Kurdit), Judeo-Persian (Jidi, Parsic, Judeo-Tadjik, Judeo-Tat, Bukharan), Judeo-Georgian (Gurjuc, Gruzinic), Judeo-Crimean Tatar (Krimchak), and Judeo-Berber in the Middle East, North Africa, and the former Soviet Union; Judeo-Malayalam in India; and Jewish English (Yinglish, Yeshivish) in the New World. Some of the larger and better-studied cases are described in separate sections below.

Scholarship

The scholarly recognition of a phenomenon of Jewish languages goes back to the beginning of the 20th century, when Yiddish became the object of serious academic study. Mises (1915) presented the first large-scale exploration of Jewish linguistic varieties. In late 1970s and early 1980s, Jewish languages

started to be studied intensively, following the publication of two major studies of Yiddish that discussed them in a historical context (Birnbaum, 1979; Weinreich, 1980). Around this time, scholars in Israel and the United States edited symposia (Rabin *et al.*, 1979), collections of articles (Paper, 1978; Fishman, 1985; Gold, 1989) and a short-lived journal (Gold and Prager, 1981–1987). More recently, there has been a wave of renewed interest in the subject, as evidenced by the Jewish Language Research Website (www.jewish-languages.org) and the Jewish Languages Mailing List (www.jewish-languages.org/ml).

History

The presumed monolingualism of the early kingdoms of Israel and Judah gave way, in the centuries after the Babylonian exile in the 6th century B.C., to a Hebrew-Aramaic bilingualism (Chomsky, 1957). By the end of the Temple period 2000 years ago, these languages were supplemented by a widespread knowledge of Greek, which was used with distinctive Jewish features (Wexler, 1985). Thus, Judeo-Aramaic and Judeo-Greek were the earliest Jewish languages that existed in a diglossic relationship with Hebrew.

Judeo-Aramaic was a Jewish adaptation of the major language of wider communication of the Middle East in the millennium before the Common Era. It grew into an important spoken and written Jewish language in Palestine and in the Jewish Diaspora in Babylon, where it was the main language used in the Babylonian Talmud (Greenfield, 1978; Katz, 1985). Among Jews as well as other inhabitants of the region, it was generally replaced by Arabic as a spoken language as a result of the spread of Islam, but it has continued to the present day as a Jewish language in more isolated regions such as Azerbaijan (Garbell, 1965) and Kurdish Iraq (Sabar, 2002).

The third partner in Palestinian trilingualism was Judeo-Greek, widely adapted in Hellenic colonies in Palestine and used by Diaspora Jews throughout the eastern Mediterranean and later in Italy. Judeo-Greek, also called Yevanic, was replaced in most areas starting in the 4th century. An exception is the communities of Romaniote Jews in Greece, which used Judeo-Greek until the influx of Sephardic Jews in the 16th century, when Judeo-Spanish became the majority language of Jews in Greece. Pockets of Judeo-Greek speakers maintained their language in Ioannina, Chalkida, and elsewhere until they were destroyed in the Nazi Holocaust. Few speakers survive today.

Soon after the Roman destruction of Jewish political independence in Palestine in the second century A.D., Hebrew lost its vitality. But it remained firmly

entrenched as the language of Jewish religion and literacy, its transmission supported by a religious educational system. Over the next centuries, Jews in exile picked up local languages and developed their own distinctly Jewish varieties, depending in large measure on the nature of their relations with non-Jewish neighbors. As Jews migrated, they generally lost their former language and adapted linguistically to their new land, incorporating distinctive linguistic features. However, two languages defied this trend: Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish, Jewish varieties of Germanic and Hispanic languages, respectively. These languages continued to be used even centuries after their speakers migrated to new lands, where Slavic and Balkan languages were the norm.

In the modern period, when Jews have been able to integrate more fully into some societies, the distinctness of their languages has generally diminished. Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, and other Jewish languages with long histories have lost significant numbers of speakers due to the combined effects of the Nazi Holocaust and Jews' cultural and linguistic assimilation into new societies in North America, Europe, and Israel. In the 21st century, Jews generally have full competence in the local languages, vernacular and standard. But their speech also tends to maintain some distinctive features, influenced by Hebrew and Aramaic as well as by the Jewish languages spoken by their ancestors.

Common Linguistic Features

Jewish languages tend to have a number of features in common. Structurally, they are generally based on a spoken variety of a non-Jewish language (Yiddish was based on medieval German and Judeo-Spanish on 15th century Spanish), with a large proportion of borrowings from Hebrew and Aramaic, from earlier Jewish languages, and from other contact languages (Weinreich, 1980). In addition, contemporary Jewish languages tend to be influenced by Israeli Hebrew as a result of affiliations with the State of Israel (Benor, 2004).

The Hebrew and Aramaic influences on Jewish languages are mostly lexical, but some phonological and morphosyntactic influences have been documented as well. Hebrew and Aramaic loan words are most common in the semantic fields of religious life, names of individuals and groups, and euphemism. Until recently, Jewish languages were generally written in Hebrew characters, because of common educational and literacy practices. Orthographic practices have varied, especially in the representation of vowels.

Jewish languages are often strongly influenced by a language spoken by the group's ancestors. In the case of Yiddish, the main previous Jewish language was Judeo-French. In the case of Judeo-Spanish, the main previous Jewish language was Judeo-Arabic. And in the case of Jewish English, the main previous Jewish language was Yiddish. These previous languages provide influences in lexicon, as well as other areas. In addition, the previous languages have a major impact on the use of Hebrew and Aramaic: which words are used, how they are pronounced, and how they are integrated morpho-syntactically.

Most Jewish communities have used the local language in distinctive ways in their translations of biblical and liturgical texts. These translations tend to render the local lexicon in word-for-word imitations of the Hebrew syntax. This practice is referred to in various ways, e.g., Judeo-Arabic *Sharh*, Yiddish *Taytsh*, and Judeo-Spanish *Ladino*.

The revitalization and re-vernacularization of Hebrew as part of the Zionist enterprise have produced a new situation, where modern Israeli Hebrew is markedly distinct from its earlier forms. Is this new variety to be considered a 'Jewish language'? Some have argued that it is too different from Diaspora Jewish languages to be classified with them. On the other hand, it shares many features: strong influence of the previous Jewish language (the Yiddish base is most evident in the highly modified grammar), a special place for Hebrew-Aramaic lexical items, borrowing from the co-territorial non-Jewish languages (including spoken Arabic and the widely known English), and Hebrew orthography.

The Most Widely Spoken Jewish Language: Yiddish

Distinctive linguistic features can be seen in the history of Yiddish, the most widely spoken Jewish language (Birnbaum, 1979; Weinreich, 1980; Katz, 1985; Weigel, 2002). According to the commonly accepted view (Weinreich, 1980), Yiddish was born towards the end of the first millennium A.D. when Judeo-French-speaking Jews started to settle in the Rhineland. During the more tolerant period that preceded the Crusades, these communities shifted from Judeo-French to a variety based on the German spoken in the area. This Judeo-German included elements of Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as other distinctive features. As a result of expulsion, persecution, and changing economic opportunity, many Jews migrated from Germanic-speaking to Slavic-speaking areas and brought their German language with them. In the changed social conditions, the developing Yiddish language maintained its German base while

admitting influences from local Slavic languages in lexicon, morphosyntax, phonology, and discourse. In addition, Hebrew and Aramaic elements survived from previous generations, and new ones were added, mostly through contact with liturgical and rabbinic texts. A few Judeo-French lexical elements endured.

Over the centuries, Western Yiddish disappeared as a spoken language, assimilating towards co-territorial German, except in a few areas, like French-speaking Alsace. In eastern Europe, Yiddish developed into a complex web of dialects, differing mostly in phonology but also in lexicon and grammar.

Yiddish documents have been identified as early as the 13th century, and we have examples of epic poems written in Yiddish from the time of the Renaissance. In the early modern period, Yiddish was used mostly in women's religious literature, including translations and explanations of the Bible and liturgy. The mid-19th century saw the flowering of Yiddish literature, stemming from the eastern European Jewish Enlightenment. In the early 20th century, Yiddish became the object of language planning efforts, including a standardized orthography and linguistic documentation and research.

Events of the 20th century, especially immigration to America and Israel and the Nazi Holocaust, led to a major decline in the use of Yiddish, and today it is used as an everyday language mostly by the elderly and by pockets of Hasidic Jews in the New York area, Israel, and elsewhere (current estimates of total number of speakers range from 200 000 to 400 000). Reversing language shift efforts continue in educational and cultural programs, especially in New York, Montreal, Antwerp, and Mexico City. Young non-Hasidic Jews there and elsewhere continue to use Yiddish as an everyday language in an effort at revitalization.

Judeo-Spanish

Judeo-Spanish is an Hispanic language taken by exiles from Spain after the expulsion of 1492 to northern Europe, the Balkans and Turkey (Sephiha, 1979; Malinowski, 1982; Bunis, 1993; Harris, 1994; Quintana, 2002). There has been much debate about the name of this language: in addition to Judeo-Spanish, commonly used glottonyms are Ladino, Judezmo, and Spanyol, with some scholars maintaining that Ladino should refer only to the calque (word-for-word) translation language variety.

Already in Spain, Judeo-Spanish exhibited influences from Jewish and non-Jewish varieties of Arabic, as well as other distinctive features. When Sephardic Jews migrated, elements of Turkish, Greek, Bulgarian, and other languages were added. In addition, archaisms and independent developments distinguished

Judeo-Spanish from contemporaneous peninsular Castilian. Distinctive dialects of Judeo-Spanish formed throughout the Ottoman Empire. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the high-status French language had a major impact, due to influences of religious and secular education.

Judeo-Spanish developed literary functions, including a significant religious literature, a strong oral folk literature, and a corpus of modern belles lettres. There was rapid language loss in the 19th century as a result of emigration, Westernization, and assimilation. The Judeo-Spanish-speaking community in Greece and other Balkan countries was mostly wiped out in the Holocaust. Speakers in Turkey shifted first to French and more recently to Turkish. Today, it is estimated that there are only 30 000–50 000 speakers, mostly elderly.

A North African variety of Judeo-Spanish, called Haketiya, developed in northern Morocco after the 1492 expulsion. Its speakers mostly shifted to Spanish with the establishment of the Spanish Protectorate at the beginning of the 20th century.

Judeo-Arabic

Since even before the Muslim conquest of the Arabian peninsula in the 7th century A.D., Jews have lived alongside Arabic speakers, and they have spoken Jewish varieties of Arabic (Blanc, 1964; Blau, 1981; Hary, 1992; Bar-Asher, 1998). These have included Hebrew and Aramaic influences – mostly lexical, but also phonological, morphological, and syntactic. They have also included archaisms, standardized hyper- and hypo-corrections, and other distinctive features. Judeo-Arabic varieties have been documented in Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, and Yemen. Due to the migration of Jews within the Arab world, some varieties have features in common with other varieties of Judeo-Arabic that do not exist in the local non-Jewish Arabic dialects.

In the Middle Ages, many important Jewish religious and philosophical works were written in Middle Arabic and Judeo-Arabic. A word-for-word, or calque, translation variety, called *Sharḥ*, was used for translations of biblical, rabbinic, and liturgical texts. In addition, Judeo-Arabic was used for religious and secular literary production in the 19th century.

Most Jews in Arab lands immigrated to Israel in the 20th century, acquiring Israeli Hebrew and relegating Judeo-Arabic to private use. Those who stayed in Morocco tended to shift to French, and those who immigrated to North America and France tended to shift to the local languages there. It is estimated that there are currently 400 000–500 000

speakers (Grimes, 1996), mostly middle aged and older.

A Contemporary Jewish Language: Jewish English

Also referred to as Judeo-English, Yinglish, and Yes-hivish, Jewish English is an umbrella term for the contemporary in-group varieties spoken by Jews in America, England, and other English-speaking countries (Gold, 1985; Steinmetz, 1986; Weiser, 1994; Benor, 2004). Jewish English is based on the local variety of English with many influences from Yiddish, textual Hebrew and Aramaic, and Israeli Hebrew in lexicon, syntax, phonology, and discourse. Because of the widespread literacy in contemporary English-speaking countries, Jewish English is not written in Hebrew characters. However, Hebrew loan words are sometimes inserted in their original orthography.

The varieties of Jewish English spoken by Orthodox Jews, especially those in larger, more isolated communities, are most distinct from general English, often to the point of being unintelligible to non-Jews and to non-Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Jewish English is a young language variety, and the number of speakers is growing as the Orthodox community expands. Although Jewish English is the youngest Jewish language that has been researched, it is likely not the only one that is gaining, rather than losing, speakers. As researchers explore the language of other contemporary Diaspora communities, it is expected that they will find similar distinctively Jewish linguistic practices.

See also: Bilingualism; Code Switching; Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish; Hebrew, Israeli; Language Change and Language Contact; Language Maintenance and Shift; Minorities and Language; Yiddish.

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Relevant Website

<http://www.jewish-languages.org> – The Jewish Language Research Website.