Project
MUSE®

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Do American Jews Speak a "Jewish Language"? A Model of Jewish Linguistic Distinctiveness

SARAH BUNIN BENOR

EXCERPT FROM an online discussion group:[1]

> *Posted by: [Satal] Apr 10 2005, 07:01 AM*

We didn't have a shalom zochor. The baby is temeni [*sic*] like his father and will have a Brit Yitzchak the night before the bris in Yerushalayim.

> *Posted by: [lebnir] Apr 11 2005, 07:24 PM*

what is a brit yitzchak?

> *Posted by: [Satal] Apr 12 2005, 04:28 PM*

Its also called Zohar. The men sit up reading Zohar to protect the child the night before the bris from mezikin.
BTW the bris was today and his name is [Natan].

> *Posted by: [Mira] Apr 12 2005, 04:31 PM*

We call it a vach nacht.
[Natan] is a beautiful name—lots of nachas.

---

1. <http://www.hashkafah.com/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=14&t=9028>. "Hashkafah.com is a great way to meet people from around the world and discuss divrei Torah, exchange ideas and viewpoints, or simply have a nice chat." Translations: shalom zochor (Friday-night celebration for baby boy), temani (Yemenite), Brit Yitzchak (covenant of Isaac), bris (circumcision ceremony), Yerushalayim (Jerusalem), Zohar (kabbalistic text), mezikin (harm), vach nacht ("watch night" from the German Jewish tradition), nachas (pride/joy).

Throughout history Jews have tended to speak and write distinctly from their non-Jewish neighbors. The resulting language varieties have often been referred to as Jewish languages. There has been a great deal of research on Jewish languages whose origins lie in medieval times, especially Yiddish, Judezmo (also known as Judeo-Spanish or Ladino), Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Italian, and Judeo-Provençal. But how do the speech and writing of contemporary American Jews compare structurally to these Jewish languages of the past? This essay argues, first and somewhat surprisingly, that Jewish American English exhibits most of the features common among diaspora Jewish languages and, second, that studying contemporary Jewish languages can contribute to our understanding of historical Jewish languages.

The language of American Jews might be analyzed through several different comparative lenses: the language of American ethnic groups or other minority groups around the world; the language of religious life; or even professional jargons that use specialized terminologies. In this essay I use the lens of comparative Jewish linguistics, also known as Jewish interlinguistics or Jewish intralinguistics,[2] a small field that sees Jewish

---

2. E.g., Solomon Birnbaum, *Yiddish: A Survey and a Grammar* (Toronto, 1979); Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, translated from Yiddish by S. Noble and J. Fishman (Chicago, 1980); David Gold, "Jewish Intralinguistics as a Field of Study," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30 (1981): 31–46; Paul Wexler, "Jewish Interlinguistics: Facts and Conceptual Framework," *Language* 57.1 (1981): 99–145; Chaim Rabin, "What Constitutes a Jewish Language?" *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30 (1981): 19–28; David M. Bunis, "A Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Judezmo and Yiddish," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30 (1981): 49–70; Joshua A. Fishman, "The Sociology of Jewish Languages from a General Sociolinguistic Point of View," in *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages*, ed. J. Fishman (Leiden, 1985), 3–21; Moshe Bar-Asher, "Behinot be-heker leshonot ha-Yehudim ve-sifruyotehem," *Pe'amim* 93 (2002): 77–89; Jean Baumgarten, "Langues juives ou langues des juifs: Esquisse d'une définition," in *Linguistique des langues juives et linguistique générale*, ed. F. Alvarez-Péreyre and J. Baumgarten (Paris, 2003), 15–41; Frank Alvarez-Péreyre, "Vers une typologie des langues juives?" in *Linguistique des langues juives et linguistique générale*, ed. F. Alvarez-Péreyre and J. Baumgarten (Paris, 2003), 397–421; Frank Alvarez-Pereyre, "Hebrew and the Identity of the Jewish Languages," in *Vena Hebraica in Judaeorum Linguis: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on the Hebrew and Aramaic Elements in Jewish Languages*, ed. Sh. Morag et al. (Milan, 1999), 15–37; Benjamin Hary, "Jewish Languages, Are They Sacred?" in *Lenguas en contacto de la Antiguedad a la Edad Media*, ed. P. Bádenas de la Peña et al. (Madrid, 2004), 225–44; John Myhill, *Language in Jewish Society: Toward a New Understanding* (Clevedon, 2004); Bernard Spolsky and Sarah Bunin Benor, "Jewish Languages," in *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, ed. K. Brown, (2nd ed; Oxford, 2006), 6:120–24; Sarah Bunin

language varieties around the world and throughout history as worthy of comparative analysis. My analysis is also influenced by recent work in variationist sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology,[3] which sees variation as central to language and as an important element in how individuals construct their multiple identities.

Several researchers of comparative Jewish linguistics have excluded Jewish English and other post-Enlightenment Jewish languages from their analyses.[4] For example, Paul Wexler, in the article that brought comparative Jewish linguistics to the attention of a general linguistic audience, wrote:

> Widespread shifts to non-Jewish languages throughout the world and to revived spoken Hebrew in Israel are now resulting in the obsolescence of contemporary Jewish languages and putting an end to 2600 years of Jewish language creation.[5]

Despite this general trend, several researchers have included Jewish English in comparative Jewish linguistic studies.[6] The present essay adds to this body of research, demonstrating that most of the common components of Jewish languages are part of Jewish American English. For the differences I found, I offer historical explanations, including three watersheds in Jewish life: Emancipation, Enlightenment, and the birth of the State of Israel. These historical events caused major changes in Jews' religiosity and identification as Jews, leading to changes in language and other cultural practices. At the same time, my analysis shows

Benor, "Towards a New Understanding of Jewish Language in the Twenty-First Century," *Religion Compass* 2/6 (2008): 1062–1080.

3. E.g., William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia, 1972); Penelope Eckert, *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice* (Oxford, 2000).

4. E.g., Birnbaum, *Yiddish*, Weinreich, *History*, Bunis, "Comparative," Alvarez-Péreyre, "Typologie."

5. Wexler, "Interlinguistics," 99.

6. Rabin, "What Constitutes?"; Gold, "Intralinguistics"; Fishman, "Sociology"; David Gold, "Jewish English," in *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages*, ed. J. Fishman (Leiden, 1985), 280–98; David Gold, "On Jewish English in the United States," *Jewish Language Review* 6 (1986): 121–35; Sol Steinmetz, "Jewish English in the United States," *American Speech* 56.1 (1981): 3–16; Leonard Prager, "A Preliminary Checklist of English Names of Jewish Lects," *Jewish Language Review* 6 (1986); Chaim Weiser, *Frumspeak: The First Dictionary of Yeshivish*, (Northvale, N.J., 1995); Sam Weiss, "A Jewish Language in the Making: Review of *Frumspeak: The First Dictionary of Yeshivish*," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 138 (1999): 180–87; Spolsky and Benor, "Jewish Languages."

that some of the linguistic differences between contemporary American Jews and premodern Jews are in degree rather than kind. In short, this essay points to crucial continuities between pre- and post-Emancipation Jewish communities that are often overlooked in historical accounts.

The arguments here are based on my ethnographic and sociolinguistic fieldwork among Orthodox Jews and my informal observations among non-Orthodox Jews over the past ten years. The Orthodox communities of my research include a Modern Orthodox group in New York,[7] a Chabad Hasidic group in Northern California,[8] a "Black Hat" non-Hasidic ("Yeshivish Modern") group in Philadelphia,[9] and a traditional Sephardic community in Seattle. The data for English among non-Orthodox Jews come from Jewish periodicals and websites and from individuals' speech and writing I observed around the country, especially religiously engaged Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Jews in Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia. My methods included participant observation, interviews—both to elicit speech samples and to explore individuals' ideologies about language, and quantitative and qualitative analysis of written and spoken language. While this combination of methodologies is clearly possible only in contemporary (rather than historical) analysis, the data they yield offer us new ways of looking at historical language situations.

The methods I used combined with what we know from previous literature lead only to a basic understanding of the linguistic diversity of American Jews; further research involving surveys, interviews, and comparative analysis of recorded speech in diverse settings is necessary to fill in the gaps in our understanding.[10] Similarly, sociolinguistic research on

---

7. Sarah Benor, "Yavnish: A Linguistic Study of the Orthodox Jewish Community at Columbia University," *Iggrot ha-'Ari: Columbia University Student Journal of Jewish Scholarship* 1.2 (New York, 1998): 8–50; Sarah Benor, "Loan Words in the English of Modern Orthodox Jews: Hebrew or Yiddish?" *Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistic Society's 25*th *Annual Meeting, 1999*, ed. S. Chang et al. (Berkeley, 2000): 287–98.

8. Sarah Bunin Benor, "Sounding Learned: The Gendered Use of /t/ in Orthodox Jewish English," *Penn Working Papers in Linguistics: Selected papers from NWAV 29*, ed. D. Johnson and T. Sanchez (Philadelphia, 2001): 1–16; Sarah Bunin Benor, "*Talmid Chachams* and *Tsedeykeses*: Language, Learnedness, and Masculinity among Orthodox Jews," *Jewish Social Studies* 11.1 (2004): 147–70.

9. Sarah Bunin Benor, "Second Style Acquisition: The Linguistic Socialization of Newly Orthodox Jews" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2004).

10. I am currently working on a large-scale survey, along with Steven M. Cohen, that examines correlations between elements of Jewish American English speech and various social dimensions, including religiosity, density of Jewish so-

Jewish communities around the world would add to our knowledge of
contemporary Jewish language practices.

A NEW APPROACH TO JEWISH LANGUAGE

Wherever Jews have lived, their speech and writing have differed from
those of their non-Jewish neighbors. The differences have been as small
as the addition of a few words from Hebrew or another Jewish language
and as large as a completely different grammar and lexicon. The wide
range of Jewish linguistic practice calls for a new understanding of Jew-
ish languages. Rather than requiring the presence of specific features or
components for a language to be considered Jewish, I argue that it is
more useful to analyze the speech and writing of any given Jewish com-
munity in contrast to that of local non-Jews. Researchers can describe
each community's *distinctly Jewish linguistic repertoire*, defined as the
linguistic features Jews have access to that distinguish their speech or
writing from that of local non-Jews. And then they can compare the
repertoires of Jewish communities across time and space.

This new approach to Jewish language is in line with the recent con-
structivist trend in the analysis of language and social identity:[11] people
have access to an array of stylistic resources, and they deploy various
combinations of these resources as they present themselves to others.
Language (along with other sociocultural practices) enables people to
perform and perceive broad social dimensions like ethnicity, social class,
age, and gender, as well as membership in more localized social networks
and communities of practice. Through selective deployment of their rep-
ertoires, individuals are able to align themselves with some people and
distinguish themselves from others. Similarly, individual Jews have ac-
cess to an array of stylistic resources, including a distinctively Jewish
repertoire, and they deploy various combinations of these resources as
they position themselves in relation to other Jews and to non-Jews. By
using certain resources in certain situations and with certain audiences,

---

cial networks, Jewish education, generation from immigration, and ancestral or-
igin.

11. E.g., R. B. Le Page and Andrée Tabouret-Keller, *Acts of Identity: Creole-
Based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity* (Cambridge, 1985); Eckert, "Linguistic
Variation"; Nikolas Coupland, *Style: Language Variation and Identity* (Cambridge,
2007); Judith Irvine, "'Style' as Distinctiveness: The Culture and Ideology of
Linguistic Differentiation," in *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation*, ed. P. Eckert and
J. Rickford (Cambridge, 2001), 21–43; Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, "Lan-
guage and Identity," in *Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. A. Duranti (Ox-
ford, 2003), 369–94; Catherine Evans Davies, "Introduction," in *English and
Ethnicity*, ed. J. Brutt-Griffler and C. E. Davies (New York, 2006), 1–15.

they can present themselves not only as Jews but also as certain types of Jews.

As I explain in detail elsewhere,[12] the notion of a distinctive repertoire avoids four common problems that have arisen in previous definitions of "Jewish language":

1. Criteria for membership in the category "Jewish languages" (such as presence of a Hebrew/Aramaic component, use of Hebrew-based orthography) may not be universal.
2. Neither linguistic nor sociopolitical criteria enable us to distinguish systematically between a language and a dialect.
3. Any attempt to define "a Jewish language" ignores inter- and intra-speaker variation.
4. Some non-Jews use Jewish language or elements thereof.

And this construct changes the central question of comparative Jewish linguistics from "Does Jewish community X speak a Jewish language?" to "How and to what extent does excerpt of speech or writing X make use of a distinctively Jewish linguistic repertoire?"

Along with this understanding of Jewish language comes the notion of a continuum of Jewish linguistic distinctiveness.[13] Close to the left side of the continuum would be the written evidence we have of Judeo-French, which is quite similar to Old French, except that it uses Hebrew-based orthography and incorporates a small number of words from Hebrew and other Jewish languages.[14] Also at this end of the spectrum would be the English of secular American Jews several generations removed from immigration who use only a few Yiddish and Hebrew words not common among the general public, like *shmutz*, *matzah* ball, and *bris*.[15] Close to the right side of the continuum would be, for example, Yiddish spoken in Argentina—a language whose grammar and lexicon are a mixture of mostly Germanic, Slavic, and Semitic influences, differing completely from the local Spanish.

---

12. Benor, "New Understanding."

13. See Gold, "Intralinguistics," Prager, "Checklist."

14. Raphael Levy, "The Background and Significance of Judeo-French," *Modern Philology* 45.1 (1947): 1–7; Kirsten A. Fudeman, "'They Have Ears, But Do Not Hear': Gendered Access to Hebrew and the Medieval Hebrew-French Wedding Song," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96.4 (2006): 542–647; Menahem Banitt and Cyril Aslanov, "Judeo-French," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. M. Berenbaum and F. Skolnik (2nd ed; Detroit, 2007), 11:545.

15. I spell loanwords according to norms common in the communities.

By no means does this new conceptualization of Jewish language render the last century of research erroneous or irrelevant. Rather, it enables a more realistic representation of the data and facilitates comparison across Jewish communities around the world and throughout history. If we consider glottonyms like "Judeo-Arabic," "Judeo-Provençal," and "Jewish Argentine Spanish" to refer to stylistic repertoires rather than to bounded linguistic systems, then we can more accurately compare the speech of various groups of Jews. Similarly, in an effort to connect past and future work on the subject, we might still refer to these stylistic repertoires as "Jewish languages," as long as we recognize that the term is an abstraction.

It is important to note that the norm throughout Jewish history has been communities that have migrated to a new land and taken on a variety of the local language, infusing it with distinctive Jewish features. Eastern Ashkenazim and Balkan Sephardim are among the few Jewish communities that have maintained a language for centuries after a migration. Because Germanic-based Yiddish and Hispanic-based Judezmo are not varieties of the Slavic and Balkan languages with which they are in contact, they are qualitatively different from most other Jewish languages. Yiddish and Judezmo might still be seen as Jewish linguistic repertoires (on the distinct pole of the continuum), but they call for slightly different tools of analysis than Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Malayalam, and so on, which exist alongside Arabic, Persian, Italian, Malayalam. I argue that as long as a Jewish language is spoken in the same area as its non-Jewish correlate, its development may be influenced by that correlate, and it should be analyzed in relation to that correlate. It is likely that scholars who consider Jewish language genesis to be a phenomenon of the past do so partly because they are looking to Yiddish and Judezmo as models of Jewish linguistic practice. In fact, Yiddish and Judezmo—while certainly central historically and fascinating linguistically—are actually exceptions in Jewish linguistic history. This point is an important foundation for the analysis that follows.[16]

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMPONENTS

With this new understanding, we can address the central question: how does the distinctive repertoire of "Jewish American English" compare to the distinctive repertoires of diaspora Jewish communities of the past? To address this question systematically and through a sociolinguistic lens,

16. See details in Benor, "New Understanding."

we must first determine a number of social and linguistic traits that were common among diverse groups of Jews in premodern times.[17] Just as these social traits (numbered) are not required for a given community to be considered part of the Jewish people, the linguistic traits (lettered) are not required for inclusion in the comparative analysis of "Jewish languages."

1. Some degree of interaction with local non-Jews
   a. Coterritorial non-Jewish base language
2. Observance of religious laws and customs (including ritual, prayer, lifecycle events, holidays); reverence for and study of a canon of biblical and rabbinic texts
   a. Vernacular used in diglossia[18] with liturgical Hebrew/Aramaic:[19] recitation of blessings and prayers, text study (especially men)
   b. Hebrew/Aramaic component in spoken and written language
   c. Translation of Hebrew texts into the vernacular, often word-for-word
   d. Writing in Hebrew/Jewish characters
3. Ancestral migration
   a. Previous Jewish language component(s)
   b. Geographic dialect features displaced
4. Identity as distinct from local non-Jews
   a. Other distinctive features
   b. Avoidance of non-Jewish features seen as religious
   c. Secretive/humorous/derisive ways of talking about non-Jews
   d. Recognition of language as distinctly Jewish

While parts of this list may seem self-evident, it is only by examining these traits systematically that we can learn how a given Jewish community fits into history of Jewish linguistic distinctiveness. In the sections that follow, I examine the extent to which American Jews exhibit these social characteristics and their linguistic manifestations. And I show how

---

17. This list is compiled from many articles on individual Jewish languages, as well as much of the comparative research cited above, with my own emendations.

18. Diglossia (Charles Ferguson, "Diglossia," *Word* 15 [1959]: 325–40) means the use of a vernacular language alongside a standard or high-prestige language (see Fishman, "Sociology," for a model of diglossia in Jewish language communities).

19. My term liturgical Hebrew/Aramaic is synonymous with others' use of *lashon kodesh*. Note that liturgical Hebrew/Aramaic differs significantly from Israeli Hebrew.

this type of investigation is impossible without analyzing variation among American Jews.

1. Some degree of interaction with local non-Jews

Given the high rates of Jewish involvement in American public life and marriage between Jews and non-Jews, it is clear that Jews have a high degree of interaction with non-Jews, perhaps higher than at any point in history. Jews are not restricted from professions, educational institutions, or public office, as they were in previous eras. And according to the 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS 2000),[20] only 52 percent of American Jews report that half or more of their close friends are Jewish. Certainly in most Jewish communities of the past there were many business relationships and some social relationships between Jews and non-Jews, but the current American situation is unprecedented. This integration is reflected in language.

a. co-territorial non-Jewish base language

For most American Jews, the coterritorial non-Jewish base language is local varieties of English.[21] The overwhelming majority of American Jews are able to speak and write in general American English with few or no distinctively Jewish features, and they use Hebrew and Yiddish influences mostly for in-group speech, as well as to index their Jewishness in the presence of non-Jews. An exception to this norm is some strictly Orthodox Jews, especially Hasidim, whose first language is Yiddish and/

---

20. Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz, Steven M. Cohen, Jonathon Ament, Vivian Klaff, Frank Mott and Danyelle Peckerman-Neuman, *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population* (New York, 2003): Accessed at <http://www.ujc.org/content_display.html ?ArticleID=60346>. Demographers have pointed to many problems with NJPS 2000 (Charles Kadushin, Benjamin T. Phillips, and Leonard Saxe, ''National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01: A Guide for the Perplexed,'' *Contemporary Jewry* 25 [2005]: 1–32; Leonard Saxe, Elizabeth Tighe, Benjamin Phillips, and Charles Kadushin, ''Reconsidering the Size and Characteristics of the American Jewish Population: New Estimates of a Larger and More Diverse Community'' [Waltham, Mass., 2007]). I use NJPS data here with this caveat, because it is the best source available on religious and social patterns among American Jews.

21. And since most American Jews are of European origin and are seen as white, most speak varieties of English similar to non-Jewish European Americans. Research is needed on the speech of black Jews, including the Israelite groups in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia.

or who are not able to use English completely free of distinctively Jewish features.[22]

In his history of Yiddish, Max Weinreich distinguishes between the "stock language," which is German as spoken by non-Jews, and the "determinant," which is the German that Jews had access to.[23] For most American Jews, the stock language and determinant are identical, as Jews have complete access to American English. Weinreich says that the non-Jewish determinant is never used *in toto* in Jewish languages.[24] This is not the case for Jewish English and perhaps for other post-Emancipation Jewish languages (although, as I discuss below, certain non-Jewish religious words may be avoided).

2. Observance of religious laws and customs (including ritual, prayer, lifecycle events, holidays); reverence for and study of a canon of biblical and rabbinic texts

In contrast to premodern Jews around the world, a majority of American Jews do not observe religious rituals on a regular basis. As Table 1 demonstrates, a majority participate in religious observance that occurs annually (1–3), and a minority participate in observance than occurs more frequently (4–6).

Table 1: Religious observance among American Jews*

Activity	% of NJPS respondents who report doing it
1. Light Hanukkah candles	72
2. Attend a Passover seder	67
3. Fast on Yom Kippur	59
4. Light Shabbat candles usually or always	28
5. Attend a Jewish religious service monthly or more	27
6. Participate in adult Jewish education	24

* NJPS 2000.

Despite these low numbers (in contrast to premodern communities, where observance is assumed to be almost universal), it is important to recognize that about a quarter of American Jews do participate in private

22. Ayala Fader, "Reclaiming Sacred Sparks: Linguistic Syncretism and Gendered Language Shift among Hasidic Jews in New York," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 17.1 (2007): 1–22.

23. Weinreich, *History*, 350.

24. NJPS, 167.

or communal religious life on a monthly, weekly, or daily basis. This group of religiously engaged Jews includes a majority of Jews who identify as Orthodox (who comprise about 10 percent of American Jews), as well as a small percentage of Jews who affiliate with other denominations (or no denomination). This distinction between Jews who are and are not religiously engaged is important for the current study, as it has linguistic manifestations.

a. Vernacular used in diglossia with liturgical Hebrew/Aramaic: recitation of blessings and prayers, text study (especially men)

There is a great deal of variation among American Jews in the use of liturgical Hebrew/Aramaic. About 73 percent of Jewish adults in America have had some Jewish education,[25] mostly in supplementary religious schools that teach only enough Hebrew to recite prayers. Only 12 percent of American Jews have attended Jewish day schools,[26] where Hebrew prayers and texts are usually taught in a more substantial way. Therefore, it is likely that a majority of American Jews have had some exposure to Hebrew prayers—and may even recite them a few times a year—but do not understand much of what they are reciting. Lewis Glinert, in his study of British Jews,[27] refers to this phenomenon as "Hebrew as quasilect," where speakers know a bit of a language but do not understand much and do not use it for regular communication.

At the same time, a large percentage of religiously engaged Jews do have strong knowledge of Hebrew, and many recite blessings and prayers and study traditional texts on a regular basis. Among Orthodox Jews, boys and men study biblical and rabbinic texts in the original Hebrew and Aramaic weekly or daily, and girls and many women study Hebrew texts regularly.[28] In addition, among a small percentage of non-Orthodox Jews, Hebrew text study is a weekly or monthly activity.

Contemporary American Jews are continuing the tradition of Hebrew-vernacular diglossia. Orthodox and Conservative congregations pray mostly in Hebrew. While many Reform congregations recite only major prayers in Hebrew and use a good deal of English liturgy, the trend within the movement is toward more Hebrew. While text study sessions

---

25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Lewis Glinert, "Language as Quasilect: Hebrew in Contemporary Anglo-Jewry," in *Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile,* ed. L. Glinert (New York, 1993), 249–64.
28. In some Modern Orthodox communities Aramaic Talmud study has become common for women.

of the liberal denominations are often in translation, Orthodox Jews and some non-Orthodox scholars study biblical and rabbinic texts in the original languages. This situation is comparable to that of many Diaspora Jewish communities of the past, where the religious elites studied texts in the original, and, when women and unlearned men did study, they often used vernacular translations. While the percentage of Jews who pray and study regularly may be smaller today than in most communities of the past, the practice of diglossia continues.

However, when we look at the production of written religious language, we see a major difference between contemporary American Jews and past communities. For many centuries, Hebrew was the language of choice for those writing biblical commentary and other works of Jewish philosophy, law, and lore. For the most part this is no longer the case outside Israel. With the exception of Orthodox *teshuvot* (responsa), most American Jewish religious writing is in some variety of Jewish English. Many volumes of biblical commentary and contemporary midrash have been published in English, and the vast store of religious discourse on the Internet is in English. Even the Conservative movement in America writes its *teshuvot* and *takanot* (amendments to Jewish law) in English — with Hebrew abstracts.[29]

Many Diaspora Jewish communities of the past used Hebrew for business contracts, epistolary contact, the creation of new liturgy (such as *kinot* for Tisha b'Av), and even belles lettres (e.g., Yehuda Halevi, Y. L. Gordon, Y. L. Peretz). Due to various historical changes, American Jews' use of Hebrew is much more limited. With the exception of *ketubot* and *gitin* (documents certifying marriage and divorce), contracts are generally written in English, following the legal norms of the United States. This reflects the post-Emancipation loss of Jewish communal autonomy. Also, because English is widely known around the world, written communication between international Jewish communities is generally done in English, and the use of Hebrew is limited to some communication with Israelis. The early twentieth century saw a flowering of American Hebrew belles lettres, but it was mostly a continuation of Eastern European Hebraism.[30] The existence of the State of Israel has changed the meaning of Hebrew writing in the Diaspora. Now writing in Hebrew is seen as an act of cultural connection to contemporary Israel, rather than connection

29. Rabbi Danny Nevins, personal communication, August 2007.

30. Alan Mintz, "A Sanctuary in the Wilderness: The Beginnings of the Hebrew Movement in America in *Hatoren*," in *Hebrew in America*, ed. A. Mintz (Detroit, 1993), 29–67; Ezra Spicehandler, *"Ameriqa'iut* in American Hebrew Literature," in *Hebrew in America*, 68–104.

to local, international, and historical Jews. The small amount of Hebrew literature written in America today is generally penned by and for Israelis.[31]

At the same time, American Jews are continuing some of the written Hebrew practices common in communities of the past—with modern twists. Some religiously knowledgeable non-Orthodox couples create their own Hebrew or Aramaic *ketubah* to reflect their blend of traditionalism and gender egalitarianism. A good deal of new, feminist-oriented liturgy is written in Hebrew, as are some religiously oriented songs. In addition to these contemporary resonances of liturgical Hebrew, Israeli Hebrew also plays an important role in American Jewish culture, such as in performances of American plays translated into Hebrew at Jewish summer camps and day schools.

While Hebrew was more central to Jewish cultural production in centuries past, we see that it does still play a role in contemporary America. As in the past, these cultural products are created by Jewish elites—those with high levels of Judaic knowledge. One major difference is that contemporary American producers of Hebrew writing include a large percentage of women. In fact, while we might say that levels of knowledge and use of Hebrew/Aramaic *among men* are lower now than in most Jewish communities of the past, we see the opposite trend among women: contemporary American Jewish girls and women likely have more access to Hebrew than at any time in the past. We cannot know this for certain, as we do not have recordings of women praying and studying in ancient and medieval times. Our knowledge of the past must involve some degree of speculation.

To give one example of a gender difference, Kirsten Fudeman's study of a medieval macaronic French/Hebrew wedding song reports that male and female guests likely had differential access to the Hebrew verses. The text she analyzes was likely written by a man, and the Hebrew parts were likely geared toward a male audience.[32] But how much Hebrew would there have been in a comparable song written by and for women? We do not know, because no such text exists from that period. Our knowledge of medieval Jewish language is limited by the documentary evidence that we have—formal and informal writing in both Hebrew and the local vernaculars of Europe and the Middle East; most of that documentary evidence was created by men who were likely at the top of their communities

---

31. See *Hador: The Hebrew Annual of America*, ed. L. Hakak, 2006–present. The Hebrew periodical *Hadoar* ceased publication in 2004 after eighty-three years.

32. Fudeman, "Ears."

in learnedness and socioeconomic status. Much of the evidence we have for modern Jewish languages, such as journalism and belles lettres in Yiddish and Judezmo, was also created by men,[33] although we do have access to more gender diversity in printed and handwritten documents. These evidentiary problems dissipate when researchers have access to spoken language, enabling analysis of the diversity within each community. It is only research on contemporary society that can lead to a deep understanding of linguistic variation according to gender. A number of recent studies on language in contemporary Orthodox communities have highlighted the importance of sociolinguistic variation according to gender.[34] Based on this growing body of research we might assume similar variation in Jewish languages of the past. Our study of the present helps us to ask questions about the past, some of which can never be adequately answered.

b. Hebrew/Aramaic component in spoken and written language

How do these orientations toward religious observance and Hebrew/Aramaic diglossia manifest in everyday speech? As we might expect, there is a great deal of variation in the use of Hebrew and Aramaic loanwords.[35]

---

33. See Ora Schwarzwald, "The Influence of Internal and External Text Features on the Hebrew Words of Judeo-Spanish" (Hebrew), *Balshanut 'Ivrit* 50.51 (2002): 121–33, on the dearth of women's writing in Judeo-Spanish and the requisite assumption that women had less access to Hebrew/Aramaic; and see evidence of Judeo-Spanish women in Israel using traditional Hebrew loanwords not used by men in Michal Held, "'*Ven, te kontare mi 'storia / Bo'i, asaper lakh et sipuri*': The Personal Narratives of Judeo-Spanish Speaking Women Storytellers—An Interdisciplinary Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 2004), to be published by the Ben-Tzvi Institute.

34. E.g., Bryna Bogoch, "Gender, Literacy, and Religiosity: Dimensions of Yiddish Education in Israeli Government-Supported Schools," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 138 (1999): 123–60; Miriam Isaacs, "Haredi, Haymish and Frim: Yiddish Vitality and Language Choice in a Transnational, Multilingual Community," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 138 (1999): 9–30; and Dalit Berman-Assouline, "Linguistic Maintenance and Change in Israeli Haredi Yiddish" (Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 2007), on Yiddish/Hebrew in Israel. Joan Abraham, "Perceptions of English Learning in a Hasidic Jewish Sect," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 138 (1999): 53–80, on Yiddish/English in England. Fader, "Reclaiming," on Yiddish/Hasidic English in Brooklyn. Benor, "*Talmid Chachams*," on Jewish English in California.

35. A loanword is a word originating in one language used within another language. Jewish English includes loanwords from Yiddish, textual Hebrew, textual Aramaic, and Israeli Hebrew, and in many cases it is impossible to determine only one source, as with chutzpah, davka, and matzah. See Benor, "Loan Words."

Jews who are highly engaged religiously, especially Orthodox Jews, use hundreds of loanwords in their everyday in-group speech about Jewish topics, and even more when engaged in text study. An example is an e-mail sent by a Conservative rabbi to a list of Jewish leaders (underlines are mine):

> Shalom, Hevreh.
> This year at my shul, balabatim will be davening musaf on the high holidays. They (and I) are curious about how precisely hazzanim and shlichei tzibor have traditionally handled the logistics of falling kor'im during aleinu—and, for the baal musaf on YK, the avodah service—i.e., what happens to their mahzor, what about the lectern, how are they helped up, etc. I'd appreciate a quick conversation with someone who can answer these questions. Please let me know asap.
> Todah,
> [Rabbi Larry Green][36]

Most American Jews would not understand this e-mail. Because Rabbi Green was writing to a group of religiously engaged Jews, including many rabbis from various denominations, he felt comfortable using a large number of loanwords, even where English equivalents would have conveyed his message sufficiently. In discussing this issue with Jews who are not religiously knowledgeable, he likely would make different choices.

We see a similar split in loanword use when we examine a quote from a nineteen-year-old Chabad Orthodox man in Northern California studying Talmud with his brother:

> Whenever you're shayach, then you can be an eyd; whenever you're not, you're not. So why does Rashi say? That's cause dina d'malchusa dina. It's because they're—even if not dina d'malchusa dina, Rashi says later cause al din hu nitstavu bney noyach. The goyim are shayach to dinim; they're not shayach to gitin. That's why it's good.[37]

---

36. Names are pseudonyms. Translations: shalom (hello), hevreh (group of friends), shul (synagogue), balabatim (lay people / homeowners), davening (leading / praying), musaf (additional service), hazzanim (cantors), shliche tzibor (prayer leaders), falling kor'im (bowing to the floor), aleinu (*upon us* prayer), baal musaf (musaf leader), YK (Yom Kippur—Day of Atonement), avodah (service), mahzor (holiday prayer book), todah (thank you).

37. Translations: shayach (connected), eyd (witness), Rashi (an eleventh-century rabbinic commentator), dina d'malchusa dina (the law of the land is the law), al din hu nitstavu bney noyach (all children of Noah [i.e., non-Jews] are commanded to follow this law), goyim (non-Jews), dinim (laws), gitin (laws of divorce).

This quote is unintelligible to most people who have little or no Talmud knowledge (most Orthodox women and most non-Orthodox Jews) but quite common among Orthodox men.

For Jews who engage in traditional text study, the use of Hebrew/ Aramaic loanwords is not limited to the study domain. The following are sentences I heard from highly learned and religiously engaged Reform Jews in Los Angeles:

1. "These are <u>machlekot leshem shamayim</u> [debates for their own sake / for God's sake]."
2. "It doesn't matter—it's <u>bediavad</u> [after the fact] now."
3. "We have to restructure it so we get a <u>nafka mina</u> [practical outcome]."
4. "If you're going, then <u>kal vachomer</u> [all the more so] I should go."

Any Jew who uses sentences like these either engages in traditional text study or (as is the case with many Orthodox women) spends time with people who do.

This transfer of Hebrew and Aramaic loanwords from rabbinic texts to the study of those texts and then to everyday speech parallels the incorporation of loanwords into other Jewish languages. While many textual loanwords in these languages spread to Jews who have no exposure to rabbinic texts (e.g., *davke* in Yiddish), others are used almost solely by scholars. Researchers of historical Jewish languages must be careful in their assumptions of who used which loanwords in times past. It is possible that the phrase *al ahat kama ve-khama*, for example, was widespread among medieval Judeo-Arabic-speaking Jews, but it is also possible that its use was limited to scholars and unheard of among women and less learned men.

INTEGRATION OF HEBREW/ARAMAIC LOANWORDS

It is clear that Jewish English is following the pattern of loanword use common in Jewish languages around the world. The same is true for the integration of those loanwords into the grammatical structure of the local language, as I demonstrate below. However, when we look closely at loanword integration in Jewish English, two important points emerge: (1) Yiddish (the previous Jewish language) plays a major role, and (2) because of conflicting norms from and ideologies surrounding Israeli Hebrew and Yiddish/Ashkenazic Hebrew, there is a great deal of variation, especially according to denomination, learnedness, and orientation toward Israel. I speculate that these two points may have also been rele-

vant for the genesis of other Jewish languages. They can be generalized
as follows: (1) a previously spoken Jewish language may affect which
Hebrew words are used and how they are integrated,[38] and (2) different
subgroups of any Jewish community (based on waves of immigration,
learnedness, etc.) may have conflicting norms of Hebrew usage. While
further research is necessary to test these two hypotheses in other Jewish
languages, this section demonstrates these trends in Jewish American
English.

Phonology

As in other Jewish languages, Hebrew loanwords are integrated into the
phonological (pronunciation) systems of the base language with a few
minor exceptions. All Hebrew words are rendered with English phonol-
ogy with the addition of the [x] phoneme, as in *hag* (holiday) and *halakhah*
(Jewish law). This sound comes from Yiddish and Israeli Hebrew, but
in Jewish English it is generally pronounced a bit closer to the front of
the mouth. American Jews may also use this sound in a few non-Jewish
loanwords, like "Bach" and "Xavier."

Conflicting Ashkenazic and Israeli norms lead to variation, as in words
like *Súkkos / Sukkót* (Feast of Tabernacles) and *al regel achát / al regel áches*
('on one foot'). The use of [s] vs. [t] for the Hebrew grapheme (*tav*) is a
major marker of one's location along the non-Orthodox to Haredi contin-
uum. Those closer to the Haredi pole use mostly the Ashkenazic variant
[s], and those closer to the non-Orthodox pole use mostly the Israeli/Seph-
ardi variant [t]. Aliza Sacknowitz compared the speech of members of two
Orthodox congregations in suburban Maryland.[39] Members of the Haredi
congregation were almost twice as likely to use the Ashkenazic [s]:

Table 2: [t] vs. [s] by Synagogue Affiliation*

	% of [tav] realized as Ashkenazic [s]
Darchei Shalom (Haredi)	72 (N = 210)
Torah Congregation (Modern Orthodox)	40 (N = 194)

* Ibid., 253.

---

38. For example, see Weinreich, *History*, and Gold, "Recent American Stud-
ies," 53, on the likely role of Judeo-French/Judeo-Italian voicing of Latin inter-
vocalic /k/ in the realization of Hebrew <u>sheketz</u> as <u>sheygetz</u>.

39. Aliza Sacknowitz, "Linguistic Means of Orthodox Jewish Identity Con-
struction: Phonological Features, Lexical Features, and the Situated Discourse"
(Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2007).

Individuals' phonological choices are often influenced by their ideologies about language and its connection to socioreligious categories, such as Zionism and religiosity.

Morpho-syntax

Like other Jewish languages, Jewish English has various strategies for integrating loanwords into English sentences. Adjectives and adverbs derived from Hebrew nouns are used with English suffixes, such as <u>aggad</u>ic and <u>halach</u>ically. This parallels Hebrew loanwords in Jewish languages around the world, such as Yiddish <u>peysekhd</u>ik (kosher for Passover) and Judezmo xenoso (charming). Nouns can be pluralized with morphology from English, Yiddish, or Hebrew (e.g., <u>Shabboses</u>, <u>Shabbosim</u>, or <u>Shabbatot</u>). Those who are more religiously engaged and learned tend to use the Hebrew or Yiddish plurals, but I have often heard English plurals even among learned Orthodox Jews.

Like Yiddish and Judezmo, Jewish English has two ways of integrating Hebrew verbs: direct and periphrastic (with a helping verb). Directly integrated Hebrew-origin verbs generally stem from nouns or adjectives:

Orthodox (from Philadelphia research):
1. "That's what you use to <u>kasher</u> [render kosher] the sink."
2. "He said he <u>paskens</u> [makes a legal decision] by him [according to his opinion]."

Non-Orthodox (from Los Angeles research):
1. "I was <u>bar mitzvah</u>ed at that temple."
2. "I've already <u>drash</u>ed three times this year" [presented a biblical interpretation/explication].

The Orthodox examples exist in a similar form in Yiddish, and the non-Orthodox examples are unique to Jewish English. The latter list exemplifies the same process of how some Hebrew loans (usually nouns) in Yiddish became directly integrated verbs. This is important to the comparison of past and current Jewish languages, as it shows that both involve the dynamic and creative integration of Hebrew loanwords into the structure of the spoken language.

Another way that Hebrew words can become verbs in English is periphrastically. Exhibiting influence from Yiddish, both transitive and intransitive verbs are used in their present-tense masculine forms following the inflected English verb "to be":

Orthodox:

1. "It might <u>be meorer</u> [arouse] the tayva [lust]." (an unmarried man explaining to me why he planned not to hold hands in public with his future wife)
2. "That's another way we'<u>re mekayem</u> [fulfill] the mitzvah [commandment]." (a rabbi teaching a class)

I have rarely heard periphrastic loan verbs among non-Orthodox Jews. This may be because Orthodox Jews are closer to the generation of immigration or because some still have contact with Yiddish, especially in the yeshivas. But periphrastic verbs are such an important part of Orthodox Jewish English that even Jews who grow up non-Orthodox and become Orthodox as adults often acquire them.

In summary, Hebrew loanwords are common in the speech of religiously engaged Jews, especially in the domain of religious life. They are integrated into English in ways similar to other Jewish languages. Yiddish plays a major role in their semantics, phonology, and morphosyntax,[40] and there is a good deal of variation in their use according to learnedness, generation from immigration, and orientation toward Israel.

c. Translation of Hebrew texts into the vernacular, often using word-for-word renderings

Jewish communities around the world have elaborate traditions of translating the Bible and liturgy from Hebrew into the vernacular. Since the early modern period, many of these communities have employed the technique of word-for-word translation, in which the Hebrew word order is mimicked even when it sounds unnatural in the target language.[41] American Jews of all denominations do publish many English translations of Hebrew texts, especially the Bible, the Haggadah, prayer books, and much of the rabbinic canon. In contrast to early modern Jews around the world, American Jews do not have an elaborate tradition of word-for-word translation, which might look like this: "In the beginning created God to the heavens and to the earth."

Even so, elements of word-for-word translation can be found in several domains of American Jewish life. Bible teachers and students in Jewish

---

40. See Benor, "Loan Words," for more details.
41. Benjamin Hary, "Egyptian Judeo-Arabic Sharh—Bridging the Cultures of Hebrew and Arabic," in *Judaism and Islam—Boundaries, Communication and Interaction: Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, ed. B. Hary et al. (Leiden, 2000), 395–407; Hary, "Sacred."

schools sometimes translate the Hebrew one word or phrase at a time, as do some prayer books. In English translations of prayers and blessings, the Hebrew word order is sometimes imitated, even if it does not sound natural in English, as in "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the universe."[42] In formulaic speech, Hebrew phrases are sometimes translated verbatim, such as the phrase said about a deceased person: "May her memory be for a blessing" (< *zikhrona livrakha*). Similarly, there are direct translations of Hebrew phrases throughout American Jewish culture, such as the Conservative singer Sheldon Low's 2006 album *On One Foot* (< *al regel ahat*),[43] Naama Goldstein's novel *The Place Will Comfort You* (2004) (< *ha-makom yenahem etkhem*), and Dara Horn's novels *In the Image* (2003) (< *be-tselem*) and *The World to Come* (2006) (< *'olam ha-ba'*). In an academic article, Horn argues that this practice of using "coded" Jewish religious references is becoming more common in American Jewish literature.[44]

d. Writing in Hebrew/Jewish characters

While Jewish languages that began in antiquity or the Middle Ages were almost always written in Jewish characters, Jewish English is generally written in the same alphabet as English. Certainly Jews' increased integration into society plays a role in this change,[45] as do American Jews' comparatively low levels of Hebrew knowledge. But I argue that another reason is even more important: increased literacy rates throughout the developed world. Especially before the spread of the printing press, literacy in holy and vernacular tongues was generally limited to the elite, particularly Christian and Muslim clergy,[46] and the masses tended to have little access to written language. Jews were no exception—they tended not to be educated in the (Latin, Arabic, etc.) orthography of the local language. Those Jews who wrote their vernacular language tended to use Jewish characters, based on the Hebrew and Aramaic texts they studied.[47] In contemporary Western society, rates of literacy and formal edu-

---

42. This wording may also be influenced by Christian blessings.

43. From a talmudic story (bShab 31a) in which Hillel sums up the Torah to a prospective convert while standing on one foot.

44. Dara Horn, "The Future of Yiddish—in English: Field Notes from the New Ashkenaz," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96.4 (2006): 471–80.

45. Gold, "Jewish English," 294.

46. Weinreich, *History*.

47. There are several exceptions to this. (Judeo-) Greek-speaking Jews learned to read and write Greek and still used Greek letters during the Roman Empire, as we see on Jewish tombs in Roman catacombs. (Judeo-) Arabic speakers in the Golden Age of Spain used both Arabic and Hebrew letters. And

cation are comparatively quite high. Latin (or Cyrillic, etc.) letters are accessible to anyone with an elementary education, and they are no longer seen as the domain of clergy. Post-Emancipation Jewish languages are generally written in their local orthographies. Even some languages that began in the Middle Ages have shifted to Latin letters in the past century (e.g., Judezmo in Turkey, around the time Atatürk mandated that Turkish transition from Arabic to Latin orthography).

This orthographic shift has important implications for defining a work of literature as Jewish. A work written in Jewish characters (e.g., Judeo-Arabic or Judeo-Persian) can clearly be identified as "Jewish" literature even if it has no overtly Jewish content.[48] Its orthography renders it accessible almost solely to a Jewish audience. This is not the case in Jewish English literature. Even a work by a Jewish author with Jewish themes is still accessible to non-Jews because of its use of English orthography. The use of loanwords and grammatical constructions from Hebrew and Yiddish may make the work slightly less accessible or more foreign to those less proficient in Jewish English, but it can never be as inaccessible as a work written in Jewish characters.

Although Jewish English is written in English letters, Hebrew orthography still plays a few roles for American Jews. When Hebrew (and sometimes Yiddish) words are inserted into an English text, they are sometimes rendered in Hebrew letters, as in the advertisement from the Haredi newspaper *Hamodia* (Fig. 1) and the excerpt from *Pirkei T'fillah*, lessons published by Torah Aura for Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist religious education (Fig. 2).

While this practice of switching orthographies mid-sentence is common, especially in Orthodox circles and in educational domains, the norm is for loanwords to be rendered in English characters. There is no consensus on how most Hebrew/Yiddish words should be spelled, but there have been attempts at standardization.[49]

Another way that Hebrew characters exist in American Jewish life is in isolated English words written in Hebrew letters, often to express Jewish identity in a non-Jewish domain, such as American universities (Fig. 3) and politics (Fig. 4).[50]

---

speakers of medieval (Judeo-) French wrote in Hebrew letters but may have learned to read Latin/French orthography (Levy, "Background," 6).

48. Gold, "Recent," disagrees with this generally held understanding, arguing that a text is not in a Jewish language if its sole distinctive trait is the use of Jewish characters.

49. E.g., Steinmetz, *Dictionary*.

50. On the commodification of Yiddish among American Jews, see Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006).

Figure 1: Ad from *Hamodia*, 2002, showing Hebrew and Yiddish words inserted in English text

A third way that Jewish orthography plays a role is the use of faux Hebrew lettering: English letters are formed using similar-looking Hebrew letters, sometimes fragmented or upside down. Jeffrey Shandler describes this phenomenon as "typefaces that imitate the calligraphic curves and large serifs of the traditional *alefbeys*."[51] He continues: "This device marks the words as distinctively Jewish while integrating them into a more widely familiar communicative code. The use of these fonts thus resembles 'kosher-style' cuisine, preserving manner while altering, even subverting, substance."[52] Because this font style allows for English readability (with some difficulty, perhaps) while marking a word or phrase as Jewish, it is used in the realm of commodification, such as the

51. Ibid., 156.
52. Ibid.

centers on the idea that God is stronger than death.

The גְּבוּרוֹת is a place where some modern Jews have changed the סִדּוּר. In a number of סִדּוּרִים the phrase מְחַיֵּה הַמֵּתִים is replaced by מְחַיֵּה הַכֹּל (The One Who-Gives-Life-to-All), or מְחַיֵּה כָּל חַי (The One Who-Gives-and-Renews Life).

In the same way that the אָבוֹת וְאִמָּהוֹת, the first prayer in the עֲמִידָה, tells the story of שָׂרָה and אַבְרָהָם and their experiences of God, the גְּבוּרוֹת grows out of stories of רִבְקָה and יִצְחָק.

Figure 2: Excerpt from Torah Aura Productions' textbook *Pirkei T'fillah: G'vurot*, 2006, showing Hebrew words inserted in English text for pedagogical purposes

Figure 3: Brown University Hillel t-shirt, c. 2000

Figure 4: Barack Obama bumper sticker in Hebrew letters, 2008

production of *tshatshkes* and the advertising of Jewish events. As can be seen in figures 5 and 6, the use of faux Hebrew lettering is sometimes combined with other Jewish iconography, such as Stars of David and *peyos* (Jewish men's sidelocks).

Figure 5: He'brew beer bottle, showing faux Hebrew lettering

In sum, Jewish characters do not play as central a role in the writing of Jewish English as they did in Jewish languages of the past. Even so, distinctively Jewish orthography is still evident in a few areas of American Jewish popular culture.

3. Ancestral migration

a. Previous Jewish language component(s)

Analyzing Jewish languages gives us insight into the migration patterns of Jewish history. The migration of Jews from what are now France and Italy into Germanic lands is reflected in the remnant Romance component of Yiddish (e.g., *bentsh* 'bless' from Judeo-Italian, *tsholent* 'warm Sabbath food' from Judeo-French). And Judezmo includes elements from ancestral Judeo-Greek (e.g., *melðar* 'study/read Torah'). Jews in America continue this tradition, but since the massive wave of immigration is so

Figure 6: Postcard advertising comedy events in Los Angeles, 2006, showing faux Hebrew lettering

recent, the previous Jewish language component is much larger than in older Jewish languages.

Groups of Jews have immigrated to the United States since 1654 and continue to do so today. The majority of American Jews descend from Yiddish speakers who immigrated to the U.S. between 1880 and 1924, and a minority descend from Jews who immigrated in other periods and spoke other (Jewish) languages. Yiddish and, to a much smaller extent, other ancestral languages are reflected in loanwords used in Jewish English. For example, the excerpt quoted at the beginning of this essay includes linguistic influences from Jewish communities from Eastern Europe, Germany, Yemen, and Israel. For recent immigrant groups (e.g., Persian, Syrian, and Russian Jews), ancestral languages still play a major role in everyday life. But American Jews three or more generations removed from immigration have to a great extent assimilated to the American Jewish linguistic norm: influences from the main ancestral language, Yiddish. The predominance of Yiddish influence is felt even in some communities that identify as Sephardic.

SEPHARDIC JEWS IN AMERICA

Some Sephardic communities in America maintain elements of their main "previous Jewish language,"[53] Judezmo (generally known as Ladino).

53. This phrase is from Weinreich, *History*.

Many Sephardic synagogues incorporate some Ladino blessings and prayers into their mostly Hebrew services,[54] and some Sephardic families sing Ladino songs at their Passover seder. Some third-generation Sephardic Americans incorporate Ladino phrases into their English (e.g., *bívaz* 'you should live [response to a sneeze]' and *Pésah alegre* 'Happy Passover'), and some Sephardic synagogue publications include bits of Ladino. For example, one Seattle congregation calls its newsletter *La Boz* and includes Ladino section titles ("*En La Famia* [in the family] — Milestones of Our Members" and "February *Meldados*: *Que Reposen en Gan Eden*" [anniversaries of deaths: [those] who are resting in the Garden of Eden]). This newsletter also includes Ladino names of foods (*borekas, bulemas, biscochos, panizikos, quajado de spinaka*) and other loanwords, such as *Munchos y Buenos* (many good [years]), *Fruticas* (Tu Bishvat — holiday of the fruits), and *kahal* (synagogue). A few leaders of this congregation told me that they are committed to keeping Ladino alive, and they use the synagogue newsletter to further this goal.[55]

However, this use of Ladino in contemporary American Sephardic communities seems to be the exception rather than the norm. Consider this excerpt from the website of a Sephardic-identified congregation in Southern California, known as SSV (underlines are mine):

> After <u>Mincha</u> we have <u>Seudah Shleshit</u>, <u>dvar Torah</u>, and conclude with <u>Arvit</u> and <u>Havdalah</u>.
> Many guests comment of their <u>Shabbat</u> at SSV as one of the best they have experienced. If you are looking to find a <u>shul</u> where you can fit in, <u>hold</u> to whatever level of observance you are comfortable with and want to learn and grow in <u>Yiddishkeit</u> . . . then SSV is a must for you.[56]

This quote shows the influence of Yiddish (or, more directly, Ashkenazic Orthodox English) on the Jewish English of an officially Sephardic institution. While the Hebrew words do use Sephardic norms (<u>Seudah Shleshit</u> rather than <u>Shaleshudes</u>, <u>Arvit</u> rather than <u>Maariv</u>, <u>Shabbat</u> rather

---

54. In addition, many Ashkenazic-dominated congregations have incorporated *Non Komo Muestro Dio* — the Ladino *En Kelohenu* — into their Shabbat morning services.

55. This paragraph is based on research I conducted in Seattle in 1999.

56. <http://jscon.org/shabbat.php>, accessed February 2007. Translations: Mincha (afternoon service), seudah shleshit (third meal of Shabbat), dvar Torah (speech about Torah), Arvit (evening service), Havdalah (service separating Shabbat from the week), shul (synagogue), Yiddishkeit (Jewishness).

than <u>Shabbos</u>), the passage also includes Yiddish-origin words common in Jewish English: <u>shul</u> and <u>Yiddishkeit</u>, as well as an influence from Yiddish in the word <u>hold</u>. The only Ladino-origin word on the entire website was likely borrowed from Israeli Hebrew: <u>Chanukyot</u> (Hanukkah candelabra). While some Sephardic Jews do incorporate elements of Ladino into their English, they are likely just as influenced (if not more so) by the Yiddish-influenced English of their Ashkenazi peers. This is compounded by the fact of mixed Sephardi-Ashkenazi marriage: many descendents of Sephardim today also have Ashkenazi ancestry. As Gold observed a generation ago, "Sefardic English is slowly disappearing, as its users move closer to Ashkenazic and non-Jewish English norms. It is thus important to record as much as possible as soon as possible."[57] The maintenance of elements of ancestral languages other than Yiddish certainly calls for immediate research. The rest of this section focuses on the most influential "previous Jewish language" for American Jews: Yiddish.

LEXICON

Jews several generations removed from immigration still use hundreds of Yiddish words about everyday life.[58] This is especially true in New York and other cities with large Jewish concentrations, although a number of Yiddish words are now used in Southern Jewish communities that were until recently dominated by German-origin Jews.[59] In addition, a number of Yiddish words in the domain of religious life are becoming *more* widespread: Yiddish words are being used by Jewish adults whose parents did not use them. This can be attributed to the recent trend of young Jews turning to more traditional religious observance—both those who join Orthodox communities (*ba'ale teshuvah*)[60] and those who participate in and lead non-Orthodox communities. These young Jews use Yiddish words for which their Reform, Conservative, or secular parents had little use—such as <u>milchik</u> (dairy [product]), <u>bentsh</u> (say Grace after Meals < 'bless'), <u>cholent</u> (slow-cooking Sabbath food), and <u>tish</u> (celebration for groom and/or bride preceding a wedding ceremony < 'table')—and they

---

57. Gold, "Recent American Studies," 78.

58. See several popular lexicons, especially Steinmetz, *Yiddish and English* and *Dictionary*.

59. Cynthia Bernstein, "Lexical Features of Jewish English in the Southern United State," in *Language Variety in the South III: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. M. Picone and C. Davies (Tuscaloosa, forthcoming).

60. Orthodox Jews use many more Yiddish loanwords than non-Orthodox Jews, and this serves as an important means of social distinction, especially among *ba'ale teshuva*, who often straddle both worlds (see Benor, *Second*).

use words for which their parents tended to use English equivalents, such as <u>leyn</u> (read Torah < 'read'), <u>daven</u> (pray), and <u>shul</u> (synagogue < 'school'). While the overall number of Yiddish words used in Jewish English may be decreasing, there are some Yiddish words that are becoming more entrenched among religiously engaged non-Orthodox Jews.

In Orthodox circles, Yiddish loanwords are quite common, and Yiddish influence is also evident in phonology, syntax, lexical semantics (especially in loan translations of Yiddish phrases), and intonation. Some examples are included here—all from native English speakers who have little or no proficiency in Yiddish:[61]

Phonology

Final devoicing (wron<u>gk</u>, bear<u>dt</u>), an influence from some dialects of Yiddish.

Syntax

Tense: present (+ already) for present perfect:

- "<u>I'm a BT</u> fifteen years, and I don't say that" ("I have been a BT").
- "I know someone <u>who's already frum</u> for 20 years" ("who's been religious").

Post-verbal adverbial phrases:

- "You'll be stuck studying <u>all day</u> Torah."
- "I was able to pick up <u>pretty well</u> the lingo."

Lexical semantics

Phrasal verbs used with the meaning of their Yiddish correlates:

- give over "communicate, impart" < Yiddish *geb iber*
- speak out "say aloud, utter" < Yiddish *red oys*

"by" used like Yiddish *bay* ("at," "at the house of," "according to the opinion of"):

- "Are you eating <u>by</u> Rabbi Fischer?"
- "I *pasken* (rule halachically) <u>by</u> him."

---

61. See Benor, *Second*.

"hold" used like Yiddish *halt*: ("be located," "accept, believe in"):

- "Who am I to judge where they're <u>holding</u> religiously?"
- "If you <u>hold by</u> Reb Aron, . . ."

Intonation

Orthodox Jewish English includes some distinctive intonation patterns, influenced both by Yiddish and by traditions of Talmud study. These include chanting intonation used during Talmud recitation and translation, quasi-chanting intonation (especially in if-then sentences), and high-falling pitch boundaries and rise-fall contours that separate introductory and embedded clauses in a complex sentence.[62]

Why are non-lexical Yiddish influences so much more common among Orthodox Jews? There are two reasons: (1) because English-speaking Orthodox communities have seen a continual influx of Yiddish speakers, especially refugees from the Holocaust, and (2) because their relatively more insular social patterns are more conducive to the maintenance of Yiddish influences even among fourth- and fifth-generation American Jews.[63] Yiddish influences are such an important part of Orthodox Jewish identity that newly Orthodox Jews incorporate many of these Yiddish influences into their verbal repertoire.[64]

In short, American Jews (especially Orthodox) do exhibit influences from a previous Jewish language, both in the realization of Hebrew/Aramaic loanwords and in other domains of Jewish English. In Jewish languages that have been around for centuries (such as Yiddish and Judezmo), the previous Jewish language component has been reduced to only a few words, especially in the religious domain. It remains to be seen how long Yiddish influence will remain in Jewish English. I do not foresee the end of Yiddish influence any time soon, as Yiddish is still used in some Haredi communities in the United States.[65]

---

62. See Uriel Weinreich, "Notes on the Yiddish Rise-Fall Intonation Contour," in *For Roman Jakobson*, ed. M. Halle (The Hague, 1956), 633–43; Samuel Heilman, *The People of the Book: Drama, Fellowship, and Religion* (Chicago, 1983); Zelda Kahan Newman, "The Jewish Sound of Speech: Talmudic Chant, Yiddish Intonation, and the Origins of Early Ashkenaz," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 90.3/4 (2000): 293–336; Benor, *Second*.

63. See discussion of the conditions conducive to the formation of ethnolects in Anna Verschik, "Jewish Russian and the Field of Ethnolect Study," *Language in Society* 36.2 (2007): 213–32.

64. Benor, *Second*.

65. Isaacs, "Haredi"; Fader, "Reclaiming."

b. Geographic dialect features displaced

In some Jewish languages, regional features are found outside of their normal regions, a phenomenon Benjamin Hary refers to as "displaced dialectalism." For example, Jews around Italy use features of other regional dialects, while non-Jews do not, such as the Central Italian seven-vowel system and the Southern Italian plural *li donni* 'the women' (cf. standard Italian *le donne*). This displaced dialectalism is evidence of historical Jewish migrations within Italian-speaking lands.[66]

Displaced dialectalism does exist in Jewish American English: some Jews around the country exhibit phonological influence from New York English. Rebecca Knack shows how Jews in Grand Rapids, Michigan, are not participating in local sound changes as much as non-Jews and, in some cases, are using vowels closer to those heard in New York.[67] And in my research in Orthodox communities around the country, I heard a distinctive nonraised pronunciation of prenasal /æ/ in words like "candle" and "fan."[68] This phonological feature is likely a reaction to the New York raising of the /æ/ sound in several environments. It is now common in New York among Orthodox Jews of all ages and was found there among Lubavitch Jews in the 1960s.[69] In Orthodox communities in California and Philadelphia I heard the nonraised /æ/ frequently from children and adolescents, as well as from adults who had lived in New York. It seems that New York pronunciation has made its way into Jewish speech around the United States due to historical and current migration patterns through the Jewish hub of New York.

4. Identity as distinct from local non-Jews

While some historical Jewish communities became more similar to their non-Jewish neighbors over time, others became more distinct. The process of becoming distinct demographically and residentially involved the use of distinctive linguistic features not related to religious or ancestral difference, especially archaisms. While it is too early in the history of immigration for Jews in America to exhibit many archaisms,[70] they do have a number of other distinctive linguistic features.

---

66. Hary, "Sacred," 229–30.

67. Rebecca Knack, "Ethnic Boundaries in Linguistic Variation," in *New Ways of Analyzing Sound Change*, ed. P. Eckert (San Diego, 1991), 251–72.

68. Benor, *Second*.

69. George Jochnowitz, "Bilingualism and Dialect Mixture among Lubavitcher Hasidic Children," *American Speech* 43.3 (1968): 188–200.

70. The nonraising of prenasal /æ/, discussed above, can be analyzed as a conservative variant and, therefore, an archaism.

a. Other distinctive features

<div align="center">LEXICON</div>

There are a number of English words that have distinctive meanings in Jewish English, not influenced by Hebrew or Yiddish, including <u>MOT</u> (Member of the Tribe, i.e., a Jew), <u>continuity</u> (Jews having Jewish children; the overall number of Jews not decreasing), <u>naming</u> (ceremony to give a Jewish baby girl her name), <u>text</u> (excerpt of Jewish writing, usually biblical or rabbinic) and <u>text study</u>, as well as movement names like <u>Reconstructionism</u>. Even though these words are formed completely from English lexical material, they are not generally understood in the same ways by non-Jews or by Jews unfamiliar with religious or communal discourse.

<div align="center">PHONOLOGY</div>

At the end of a word the /t/ sound can be released with a burst of air (righ<u>t</u>!, no<u>t</u>!) or glottalized (righ[t]', no[t]'). Americans who frequently release their /t/s are often seen as intelligent or learned, as we see in research on girls who consider themselves nerds, for example.[71] Research has found frequent word-final /t/ release among Orthodox Jews, especially men,[72] and religiously engaged Reform Jews in New York.[73] This is likely related to the desired trait of learnedness in these Jewish communities.

<div align="center">DISCOURSE</div>

Two studies have shown that an overlapping, argumentative speech style is common among Jews, especially those from New York.[74]

In short, we can find minor linguistic differences between American Jews and non-Jews apart from influences from Hebrew and Yiddish. As might be expected, Yiddish and Judezmo, the two Jewish languages that flour-

---

71. Mary Bucholtz, "Geek the Girl: Language, Femininity, and Female Nerds," in *Gender and Belief Systems*, ed., J. Ahlers et al. (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), 119–31. See other references in Benor, "Sounding Learned."

72. Benor, "Sounding Learned," *"Talmid Chachams."*

73. Erez Levon, "Mosaic Identity and Style: Phonological Variation among Reform American Jews," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 10 (2006): 185–205.

74. Deborah Tannen, "New York Jewish Conversational Style," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30 (1981): 133–49; Deborah Schiffrin, "Jewish Argument as Sociability," *Language in Society* 13 (1984): 311–35.

ished for several centuries in new lands, differ to a *much* greater extent from their non-Jewish base languages, German and Spanish. However, in some communities, Jews who speak variants of local non-Jewish languages exhibit great differences at the system level, that is, in syntax and/or phonology. In Fez, Morocco, for example, Judeo-Arabic-speaking Jews use ['] (*'ayin*) where Muslims use [q] (*kof*).[75] Jews in America speak more similarly to their non-Jewish neighbors than in several historical Diaspora communities.

At the other end of the continuum, researchers of a number of Jewish language varieties (e.g., Judeo-Persian, Judeo-French, and Judeo-Malayalam) have argued that they do not differ sufficiently from their coterritorial non-Jewish base languages to be considered Jewish languages. Some researchers refer to these languages as "X in Hebrew characters," a descriptor that may be justified in reference to the texts at hand but, I argue, is insufficient for the language that was likely used by Jews in those communities. The current analysis suggests that there may have been other, subtle differences between the Jewish and non-Jewish varieties of those languages. Perhaps a given group of Jews exhibited distinct discourse styles or a different pronunciation of a particular vowel. Although these kinds of differences did not survive in the few texts (including metalinguistic ones) that we have from those periods, we cannot assume that a time-traveling sociolinguist would not be able to document them or even that they were not discussed within the communities themselves. As David Gold argues (commenting on the suggestion that Judeo-Persian and Persian differ only in orthography), "We may ask whether we have enough knowledge *today* to discern subtle differences between all Jewish and non-Jewish lects of centuries past. If we do not, what seems to people today to be in a 'pure' non-Jewish lect may not have seemed so in days gone by."[76] It is possible that Jewish English is more different from English than Judeo-Persian was from Persian. But it is also possible that the differences we find are merely indications of our greater access to data, an inevitable trait of research on the present. Either way, it is clear that Jewish American English exhibits distinctive features not related to influences from Hebrew or an ancestral language, a trait shared by many historical Jewish languages.

---

75. David Cohen, "Some Historical and Sociolinguistic Observations on the Arabic Dialects Spoken by North African Jews," in *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages*, ed. J. Fishman (Leiden, 1985), 246–60.

76. Gold, "Recent," 28. "Lect" is Gold's umbrella term encompassing the dialect-language continuum.

b. Avoidance of non-Jewish features seen as religious

Jews around the world have often avoided words seen as too Christian or Muslim. In Yiddish the word *bentshn* (bless) was borrowed from ancestral Judeo-Italian in an effort to avoid German *segnen*, "make the sign (of the cross)." Judezmo uses an Arabic loanword *al haḍ* (lit. 'the one') for "Sunday," because Spanish *domingo* means "Lord." Similarly, Jews in America avoid certain words seen as too Christian. For example, one Orthodox outreach professional who uses very few Hebrew words in his lectures to non-Orthodox Jews told me that he uses the word <u>Tanakh</u>, because "Bible" reminds him of a Southern preacher. Similarly, rabbis are not addressed as "Reverend" or referred to as "preachers," although Reform Jews sometimes discuss the act of "preaching." The evening <u>ma'ariv</u> (or <u>'arvit</u>) service is not translated as "Vespers," and congregants are not called "parishioners."[77]

c. Secretive/humorous/derisive ways of talking about non-Jews

Jews in Christian and Muslim lands have often used euphemism, humor, and insult in their secretive words for non-Jews. Judezmo speakers in Turkey referred to Muslims as *loz vedres* (the green ones), referring to the symbolic color of Islam, and *almeshas* (plums), the key ingredient in *rakí*, a popular Muslim drink despite their prohibition against alcohol. Jewish languages have a number of words for "Mary," including the tongue-in-cheek *ði heylike bsule* (the holy virgin) in Yiddish and the offensive *la zuna* (the prostitute) in Judezmo.[78]

Because of greatly improved relations with non-Jews, Jews in America have a much smaller lexicon of words referring to non-Jews. Aside from English-origin "gentiles" and "non-Jews," several labels have been borrowed from Yiddish, especially its Hebrew component, including <u>sheygetz</u> (non-Jewish man < 'non-kosher creeping animal'), <u>shiksa</u> (non-Jewish woman), <u>goyim</u> (non-Jews < 'nations'), and <u>goyish</u> (non-Jewish-like, WASP-y). These words are common among older Jews, as well as Orthodox Jews, but many young non-Orthodox Jews find them offensive. In addition, I have heard Orthodox Jews—young and old— use the Yiddish-origin <u>Yoshke</u> (diminutive of "Jesus," which was com-

---

77. Preferences in this area are constantly evolving. The title "Rev." was once common for American rabbis; some Reform temples did once refer to their evening services as "Vespers;" I did hear an elderly docent at a classical Reform temple call her congregants "parishioners."

78. Sarah Bunin Benor, "Lexical Othering: How Ottoman Sephardim Refer to Non-Jews," in *Languages and Literatures of Sephardi and Oriental Jews: Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress*, ed. D. Bunis (Jerusalem, 2009), 65–85.

mon among East European Jews) and <u>kratsmach</u> ('Christmas', lit. 'scratch me,' an Anglo-Yiddish innovation). Finally, in halakhic discussions, Orthodox Jews tend to use the many terms available in the rabbinic literature for non-Jews, including <u>bne noah</u> ([non-Jewish] descendents of Noah), <u>Akum</u> (an acronym for *'ovde kokhavim u-mazalot* 'worshipper(s) of stars and constellations'), and <u>umot ha-'olam</u> (nations of the world).[79]

d. Recognition of language as distinctly Jewish

American Jews recognize that they speak English, and they recognize that they use distinctive features. Hashkafah.com, the source of this essay's introductory quote, has a rule: "Do not post in any language other than English."[80] At the same time, the moderators of this forum, recognizing that many posts would not be understood outside of Jewish religious circles, include a "Dictionary of Hebrew, Yiddish, and Jewish Terms." Further evidence that Jews see Jewish English as distinct comes from imitations and parodies of Jewish English. For example, the 2003 satiric movie *The Hebrew Hammer* portrays American Jews as using Yiddish and Hebrew loanwords and Yiddish grammatical constructions and makes ample use of faux Hebrew orthography and the [kh] sound in words like "Khebrew," "the 'khood," and even "Khadillac." Parodic representations like these indicate that Jews recognize distinctive features in their language.

Jews throughout history have had glottonyms (language names) to discuss their language as distinct from that of their non-Jewish neighbors. Yiddish, Judezmo, Shuadit (Judeo-Provençal), and Yahudic (Judeo-Arabic) all use local versions of the group name "Jew" (< Yehuda, Judah) as glottonyms.[81] We see a similar trend among American Jews—albeit with an important difference. American Jews use terms like "Jewish language" to refer not to all Jewish speech but only to discourse filled with Hebrew and Yiddish words or to those words themselves.[82]

---

79. See several of these in an online discussion about the halachic status of non-Jews from a forum that attracts students from Yeshiva University in New York: <http://pro.enetation.co.uk/acomments.php?user=protocols&commentid=107281710946738913&usersite>, accessed August 4, 2008.

80. <http://www.hashkafah.com/index.php?s=5ca58d33c6a35310cd63114782910888&act=boardrules>, accessed March 7, 2008.

81. Birnbaum, *Yiddish*; Fishman, "Sociology."

82. Many immigrants and their children still refer to the Yiddish language as "Jewish," a translation of "Yiddish." See discussion in Jonathan Boyarin, *Thinking in Jewish* (Chicago, 1996), 1–2.

For example, a Reconstructionist rabbinical student wrote in her blog, "Davven is Jewspeak for worship," in her explanation for the uninitiated reader of a song she wrote.[83] One Reform synagogue in Orange County, California, took the translation of "Jewspeak" further and offered a class called "Mentch, Bentch, and Kvetch: Demystifying Jewish Lingo." There are humorous ways to refer to distinctly Jewish speech, including Yinglish (a blend of Yiddish and English) and Hebonics (a blend of Hebrew/Heeb and Ebonics, coined after the Ebonics controversy of the 1990s). Orthodox Jews refer to the language used by yeshiva students as Yeshivish (as in a popular dictionary, *Frumspeak: The First Dictionary of Yeshivish*;[84] and the song "Yeshivishe Reid" ("Yeshivish Speech" by the band Journeys).

The recognition of distinctive speech can be seen in the use of subtitles in movies about Jews who are engaged in religious life, such as *Trembling before G-∂* (2001) and *Hineni* (2006). If the producers did not recognize the language as distinct and potentially unintelligible they would feel no need for subtitles. Some Anglo-Jewish periodicals have regular columns about language, sometimes using the phrase "Jewish English."[85] In short, similar to historical Jewish communities, many American Jews do recognize that their (in-group) speech is distinct from that of non-Jews, and they do have some glottonyms—serious and comic—to refer to their speech. But, unlike many Diaspora Jewish communities, they understand their out-group speech to be almost identical to that of their non-Jewish neighbors.

ADDITIONAL FEATURES

Since the birth of the State of Israel, Jewish communities around the world have had an additional potential source of linguistic influence: Modern Israeli Hebrew. Dozens to hundreds of Israeli Hebrew loanwords are common among American Jews, depending on their Israel connections. These include kipa (skullcap, albeit often with penultimate stress), kol hakavód (nice job), yófi (nice), yállah (let's go), matsáv ([political] situation [in the Middle East]), tiyúl (hike), and chavál (what a pity).

Over the past half century, Israeli Hebrew has had a major influence on American Hebrew pronunciation, due to increases in Zionist orienta-

83. <http://sospire.blogspot.com/2005_03_01_sospire_archive.html>, accessed February 7, 2008.

84. Weiser, *Frumspeak*.

85. E.g., Nathan Guttman, "Dancing the Hasbara," *Moment Magazine* (August 2006).

tion and an influx of Israeli Hebrew teachers in American Jewish schools. Most non-Orthodox (and some Modern Orthodox) Jewish day schools and religious schools currently teach a Hebrew pronunciation more influenced by Israeli Hebrew than Ashkenazic Hebrew (*Barúkh atá*, rather than Ashkenazic *Bórukh áto* and *Bereshít bara'*, not *Bréyshis bóro'*).

A less salient influence from Israeli Hebrew is the tongue click discourse marker, used for self-repair, hesitation, and/or disapproval. While this click is very common in Orthodox communities, it can also be heard among non-Orthodox Jews who have spent time in Israel. The examples here come from a Chabad community in Northern California:

1. "It's not as, [click] you know, as *choshuv* ('important')."
2. "It's not common, but it's [click] there are other subjects."
3. "No, but it's not [click] no, you don't understand."

As long as a significant number of American Jews spend time in Israel and/or have contact with Israeli expats, it is likely that Israeli Hebrew influence on Jewish American English will increase. And it is likely that Jewish communities around the world will also exhibit similar influence, such that future comparative Jewish linguistic studies may include Israeli Hebrew as a standard source of influence in modern Jewish languages.

CONCLUSION

We can now answer the question in the title of this essay. Yes, American Jews do speak a Jewish language comparable to Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Greek, and many other Diaspora languages. More precisely, Jews past and present have spoken a variety of the local language (with the notable exceptions of postmigration Yiddish and Judezmo), making use of a distinctive linguistic repertoire as they present themselves as Jews and as members of their larger societies. Depending on various traits, such as proficiency in rabbinic texts and proximity to ancestral migrations, Jews have varied in their use of their local repertoires. And they have used more or less of these repertoires depending on situation, audience, topic, and genre.

When we analyze the distinctive repertoire available to American Jews, we find that it does have most of the components common among other Jewish languages. It has a non-Jewish coterritorial base language (English), a Hebrew/Aramaic component, influences from a previous Jewish language (Yiddish), displaced dialectalism, other distinctive features not linked to previous languages, avoidance of non-Jewish religious features, and a recognition that Jews use distinctive language.

In addition to these similarities, we also find important differences. Jewish American English is written in the same alphabet as general American English (albeit with occasional remnants of Hebrew orthography), rendering it more accessible to non-Jews than any language written in the Jewish alphabet. The structural differences between general American English and Jewish American English are not nearly as numerous or widespread as in some Jewish languages of the past. American Jews are generally able to speak an English indistinguishable from that of non-Jews—even to pass as non-Jews, if they so choose—leaving American Jews much less vulnerable to linguistic ridicule than some Jews of the past.[86] These differences are significant enough that many scholars and lay people do not consider Jewish American English and premodern Jewish languages to be in the same analytical category. This understanding is related to the sense that historical events of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries represented a major earthquake in Jewish history, virtually destroying traditional cultural practices in Diaspora communities around the world.[87] This essay suggests that the earthquake may not have led to complete destruction or, to extend the metaphor, that contemporary Jews are using much of the original blueprints as they rebuild their own cultural structures. Certainly the emancipation of Jews in Western Europe and the New World led to Jews' greater ability to speak and write the local languages. And, because of secularization, Hebrew and Aramaic now play a less central role in Jewish life. But the analysis here shows that postmodern Jewish communities are continuing the practice of linguistic distinctiveness that has been the norm throughout Diaspora Jewish history.

This essay has also demonstrated that studying language use in a contemporary Jewish community—using the richest array of written and spoken data—contributes significantly to our theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of Jewish linguistic distinctiveness.[88] Max Weinreich made a similar point, saying that linguistic research on Yiddish, the Jewish language with the largest body of scholarship, gives us a sense of which questions to pose about other Jewish languages.[89] The current study has opened up several areas of inquiry to pursue in our research on Jewish languages of the past:

---

86. See discussion of Jews' "secret language" and *mauscheln* in Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred* (Baltimore, Md., 1990).

87. E.g., Steven M. Lowenstein, *The Jewish Cultural Tapestry: International Jewish Folk Traditions* (New York, 2000).

88. See also Gold, "Recent," 79.

89. Weinreich, *History*.

(1) **How might Jews have distinguished themselves linguistically from their non-Jewish neighbors—in addition to the differences we know about from surviving documentary evidence?** If this analysis had only examined written Jewish American English, it might have missed important features such as overlapping discourse styles, quasi-chanting intonation patterns, word-final /t/ release, and the variation between ultimate and penultimate stress. In addition, written Jewish English might suggest that archaic or never-used pronunciations like Matzo and Sukkoth are common. Because of orthographic norms, as well as the inherent differences between writing and speech, a linguistic profile based only on writing is necessarily incomplete. By examining the differences between spoken and written Jewish English, we can get a sense of what we may be missing in our understanding of past Jewish languages.

(2) **How have Jews varied in their language, especially according to learnedness, gender, and ancestral origin?** While most of our knowledge of Jewish languages of the past comes from the writings of learned men, it is likely that women and less learned men used different language, including fewer Hebraisms and perhaps other distinctive features. And following migrations, it is possible that there were competing norms of Hebrew loanword use depending on place of origin and generation from immigration. By recognizing the inevitability of sociolinguistic variation, researchers may be able to nuance their understanding of historical languages and avoid characterizing them as homogenous based on limited documentary evidence.

(3) **What role has ideology played in Jews' choices of which linguistic features or variants to use or avoid?**[90] American Jews have strong beliefs about how they speak or should speak, which English words sound too Christian, and which Hebrew pronunciations sound too religious or too secular. Certainly Jews of the past also understood linguistic variants as connected to social categories, and they likely had strong views about how they wished to be perceived. Historical data (including parodic representations and metalinguistic commentary) should be culled to gain a better understanding of how language ideology may have influenced language use and how this varied in different eras and regions, depending on the nature of contact with non-Jews, as well as subdivisions within Jewish communities.

(4) **What role did the "previous Jewish language" play, especially**

---

90. Lewis Glinert, "Toward a Sociology of Ashkenazi Hebrew," *Jewish Social Studies* 2.3 (1996): 85–114, touches on this question in his research agenda for Ashkenazic Hebrew.

in the Hebrew/Aramaic component? Because of the relative youth of Jewish American English, the previous Jewish language (Yiddish) still plays a major role—in grammatical constructions, lexical borrowing, and the integration of Hebrew/Aramaic words. It remains to be seen how much this Yiddish influence will persist after a few generations. In the meantime the contemporary American situation suggests that the early stages of medieval Jewish languages may have involved influence from previous Jewish languages, especially in the Hebrew/Aramaic component.

(5) **What role did Jews' ever-changing interaction with non-Jewish society play in the genesis of Jewish languages?** Among Orthodox and religiously engaged non-Orthodox Jews in the United States, Jewish English seems to be following the pattern of Jewish language genesis theorized by Joshua Fishman:[91] Speakers of a Jewish language (Yiddish) move to a new language territory (the United States), and Jews who interact more with non-Jews acquire a variety of the new local language (English). Gradually, this language is acquired by those who have less contact with non-Jews (Jews closer to the Haredi pole), and it is used with an increasing number of distinctive features, especially influences from Hebrew and Aramaic texts. In the case of Orthodox Jewish English, we have entered the phase where many speakers are monolingual in the local language but speak with distinctive linguistic features.

Data derived from the study of a contemporary Jewish language suggest that Jewish languages of the past may have arisen in a similar way. This offers a possible alternative to Wexler's view that several Jewish languages were created by non-Jews who became Jews.[92] In the case of American Jews, there is indeed an ideologically driven process of Judaization, but it is being carried out by Jews rather than non-Jews. While there certainly is historical evidence for proselytes and non-Jews joining Jewish communities through marriage and family connections,[93] it is possible that in the early (or later) stages of Yiddish, Judezmo, and Judeo-Arabic (etc.) Jewish speakers wanted to be seen as more distinctly Jewish than their parents and consciously began to use more distinctly Jewish linguistic features. While research on contemporary Jewish language cannot offer definitive answers about languages of the past, it can point to new, potentially fruitful lines of inquiry.

---

91. Fishman, "Sociology."

92. Paul Wexler, *Jewish and Non-Jewish Creators of 'Jewish' Languages* (Wiesbaden, 2006).

93. E.g., Hary, "Sacred."

This type of analysis can also be applied to other areas of cultural studies. For example, if we examine the "distinctively Jewish culinary repertoire" of American Jews, we find influences from religious law and custom (hallah, matzah, hamantaschen), ancestral migration (gefilte fish, matzah ball soup, knishes), and contemporary Israel (pita, falafel, hummus). Perhaps this type of analysis will help researchers seeking to understand the intricacies of distinctive Jewish food (as well as music, art, architecture, dress, and even ritual) in contemporary and historical communities around the world.

The current analysis of American Jews is only a step in our understanding of contemporary Jewish language. We need more research on Jewish English in Great Britain,[94] Australia,[95] New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa. And English-speaking Jews are not the only post-Emancipation group that calls for study. Jews are creating distinctive varieties of several European and Latin American languages, including Jewish French, Jewish Spanish, Jewish German, Jewish Hungarian, Jewish Russian,[96] and Jewish Dutch.[97] Studies of these Jewish communities may uncover similar sociolinguistic trends and teach us something about the genesis of Jewish languages. In our comparative research on Diaspora Jewish culture, including contemporary communities will not only increase our understanding of the present but also enable a more textured study of the past.

---

94. Gold, "Jewish English"; Glinert, "Language as Quasilect."

95. Michael Clyne, Edina Eisikovits, and Laura Tollfree, "Ethnolects as In-Group Varieties," in *Us and Others: Social Identities across Languages, Discourses, and Cultures*, ed. A. Duszak (Amsterdam, 2002), 133–57.

96. Verschik, "Jewish Russian."

95. See Neil Jacobs, *Yiddish: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge, 2005) on post-Yiddish ethnolects.