# What Constitutes a Jewish Language?

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Self-names like 'Yiddish' and 'Judezmo' bear evidence to the tendency of speakers of Jewish languages to believe that theirs is the only Jewish language. This results from the natural habitat of a Jewish language as the form of speech used within the Jewish community, as opposed to the language used by the majority among which the Jews live and which is also used by Jews in contacts with that majority. In that milieu the Jewish language is unique, and there is no reason for the naive speaker to assume that Jews in other countries have Jewish languages of their own. When confronted with a Jew from abroad, such a speaker will, on the contrary, assume that the latter speaks the non-Jewish language of the country from which he comes. Confrontations of sizable groups of speakers of two or more Jewish languages have taken place only in recent times in America and in Israel and have on the whole not resulted in manifestations of 'Jewish-language brotherhood'. The term 'Jewish languages' in the plural and as a class of languages was created by modern scholarship. Being a scientific artifact, we are entitled to ask on what distinctive features membership of the class is based. We may also ask whether Jewish languages are a unique set within the languages of mankind or a subset of a larger class, each consisting of several languages similarly distinguished and having similar features in common.

The question of what makes a given language a Jewish language is not the same as the question of the origin of Jewish languages. It is a matter of history that the Jews spoke in the first millennium B.C.E. a language of their own, which we call Hebrew, and around 200 C.E. ceased to speak it, and that long before the final abandonment of Hebrew speech, Jewish groups both outside and inside Palestine had adopted for speaking within the community languages identical or very similar to those of other populations living in those areas (not always majority languages), and that, as they migrated into further countries, they repeated the process, so that at any time in history after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. they were divided into geographic units that could not communicate freely with each other in their everyday speech. In certain cases, such as those of Yiddish and Judezmo, historical and social

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The first page of the 1 Xešvàn 5679 – 7 October 1918 issue of Alexandre Benghiatt's *El Messerrett* ('Joy'), a 'political and literary newspaper' published in Izmir from 1897 to around 1924.

In the article reproduced here (right-hand column, paragraph 2, lines 1–3), Benghiatt proclaims: '*El Messerrett ez un zurnal para ser meldado de akeos ke no konosen otra lingwa mas ke el judezmo*' ('*El Messerrett* is a newspaper meant to be read by those who do not know any language but Judezmo').

circumstances inhibited the process of linguistic adaptation to new surroundings (which in any case seems even before generally to have taken about two generations) and thus arose languages which were in a sense doubly 'Jewish': they were completely different and not mutually intelligible to their actual surroundings, and at the same time became increasingly distinct from the language spoken in the country where they had been formed by a normal adaptation process centuries before. As a result, Yiddish in Eastern Europe was also distinct from the language of the German minority, and Judaeo-Spanish in Northern Morocco (Hakitiya) was distinct from the language of Spanish merchants and settlers in that country.

It is those highly individuated languages which generally come to our mind when we talk about Jewish languages. Clearly much of our ideas about the character of a Jewish language is shaped by investigation of the distinctive features of this type. However, for a long time now research has extended also to a number of languages less individuated, genetically connected with the language of the majority of their respective countries. It is thus clear that for the linguist those are also Jewish languages. This raises the question of the minimum requirements for calling a form of speech by this name.

There are three possible extensions of the class. One is to consider whatever a Jew speaks to his family and to his Jewish friends a Jewish language. This would include ancient Hebrew, Modern Hebrew, the Russian or German spoken by Jewish immigrants in New York, as well as the language spoken by fully anglicized Jews among themselves. There would be many such 'languages' which are indistinguishable from the language of the present or former non-Jewish surroundings, except for the use of Jewish terms for Jewish religious objects and institutions, though it is doubtful whether this can be taken as a distinguishing feature, as in many areas such words are also well known to the non-Jewish population. In principle, such a definition would mean that a complete list or description of Jewish languages would include the languages of all countries where Jews live or lived. Such a definition appears to me of little use, not only because it includes so many items distinguished by zero features, but also because it would make the set of Jewish languages part of an almost unlimited class of sets including such items as Christian, Islamic, etc., languages, but also vegetarian languages, poker players' languages, and the like, all of which are marked by a separate nomenclature with the in-group, and occasionally become markedly different from the language of their surroundings.

The second possibility is to consider as Jewish languages those speech forms (and occasional written forms) used by Jews intra-communally, which are linguistically distinct from the form of language spoken all around the community and by members of the community when communicating with outsiders. If we define 'form of language' as not including specialized terminology,

this definition would free the set from the many cases of otherwise identical language in the mouths of Jews. The definition refers by implication to minority groups in a linguistically more or less homogeneous area only and would thus exclude from the set of Jewish languages both ancient and modern Hebrew but would still include the majority language of the country they left, as well as cases identical with the majority language of the country they left, as well as cases like Jews in North Africa who spoke French within their own circle. Jewish languages would be a subset of minority languages, a well-recognized and much-researched category, though it is likely that methods of researching such languages would give little leeway for finding out the specifically Jewish features of that subset. However, the main difficulty of this definition is that linguists have not succeeded, and are unlikely to succeed, in defining the quantity or type of features which make a speech form linguistically distinct. Linguists are agreed that where we have areas with speech of close genetic relationship, sharing the majority of grammar and vocabulary, there is no linguistic decision of whether we have dialects of one language or two different languages. This question is decided on the sociolinguistic level, by the attitudes of the speakers at a given moment in time. The uncertainty of estimating the latter part of the nineteenth century as to whether Yiddish was distinct from German, as well as in antisemitic statements during the present century that German when used by Jews, even outside the community, had recognizable features which amounted to 'corruption of the German language'. The list of what Jews and non-Jews consider as linguistic features marking a Jew makes a fascinating study, but I doubt whether a sound theory of Jewish languages can be based on it.

The third possibility is to define a Jewish language as one which is used in a diglossia relation with Hebrew (in combination with the forms of Aramaic used in religious literature). As is well known, a diglossia situation does not require all members of the language community to be expert in the understanding and active use of the 'upper' language. In most observed cases, only a small elite is actually in that position, but this group gives the tone, and through it elements of the upper language permeate into the speech of the unlearned. This is the key to one of the most familiar features of Jewish languages, the employment of Hebrew-Aramaic words not only for religious terminology but also for many items of everyday life, including Hebrew substitute names for 'unmentionable' things, and, in some cases at least, the penetration of Hebrew prepositions and adverbs into the expression of logical connections between sentences. It is also the reason why so many Jewish languages were written with Hebrew characters; and in fact the use of Hebrew characters would be a secondary, but not necessary, mark of a Jewish language. But the main mark would be the special atmosphere

of a Jewish language, with its openness toward Hebrew-Aramaic, making it possible at will, and according to the religious education of speaker and listener, to introduce added elements in the form of quotations and allusions from Hebrew-Aramaic texts. Defining Jewish languages in this way is in accord with common belief and intuition, as it excludes Jewish speech forms more or less identical with the majority language and the language of Jewish immigrant groups when identical with that of non-Jewish immigrants from the same country. It recognizes the endeavors of circles in America and elsewhere to create for themselves a 'Jewish language' by introducing Hebrew elements, including modern Hebrew, into their English, etc., speech, since our definition does not require the non-Hebrew basis of the Jewish language to be grammatically different from the surrounding majority language, regarding difference as a result of the social situation, not as a precondition.

An interesting implication of this definition is that it would exclude Classical Biblical Hebrew of the First Temple period but would include not only modern Hebrew but also Mishnaic Hebrew, which was probably spoken since 539 B.C.E. and which began to be written in the first century C.E. Again this classification coincides with popular intuition. A striking confirmation of this is the custom, prevalent in the early days of modern Hebrew literature, to employ Mishnaic Hebrew as a literary substitute for Yiddish in a literature which was basically written in Biblical Hebrew, as was done by Abraham Mapu in his novel *The Hypocrite* to characterize the speech of the orthodox, and by Mendele Mokher Sefarim and later by Isaac Dov Berkovitz to provide a general atmosphere of the Jewish *Shtedl*.

The Jewish languages would thus form a subset of the class of diglossia situations. There seems to be no term for a group of languages standing in diglossia to one 'upper' language. In imitation of the German term *Sprachbund* for a group of related or unrelated languages which have undergone a great deal of parallel development, we might term such a group a 'diglossic federation' and say that the Jewish languages constitute such a federation. Other diglossic federations are the Catholic languages of the Middle Ages, the Hindu and Buddhist languages, with Sanskrit as 'upper' language, and the Islamic languages.' In each of these federations we find languages genetically remote from the upper language side by side with languages cognate with it — in our case Jewish Aramaic and Judaeo-Arabic — and daughter languages of the upper language, as we have in Mishnaic and modern Hebrew. It is not accidental that the three diglossic federations we mentioned were tied together by religions and that they all flourished mainly in the Middle Ages. There seems to be a connection between diglossia and a certain type of traditionalism. Maintenance of the upper language is linked with a traditional, text-oriented school system and respect for literary learning. Unlike the classes of languages compared in discussing the first two possibilities,

from which one can opt out only by abandoning the language, it is possible for an entire linguistic community to opt out of diglossia, and out of the diglossic federation, usually by the process of incorporating a large quantity of the lexicon of the upper language and closing-up against the rest. Modern Hebrew has largely done so with regard to Biblical Hebrew, and similar tendencies with regard to Hebrew-Aramaic have been observed in Yiddish. Strictly speaking, a language which would accomplish such a process would cease to be a Jewish language, just as English ceased to be a 'Christian' (Catholic) language and entered another type, that of the languages in which the Christian religion is only represented by terminology and which cannot be said to constitute a diglossic federation.

It is normally the lower language of the diglossia which opts out of the diglossia situation and takes over the registers for which the upper language was previously employed. In Europe this process was connected with the rise of the middle class and with the emergence of language-based nationalism. It would be of great interest to study this process of emancipation from diglossia in other areas, e.g., India, and to discover the social factors which there contributed to it. However, for reasons of social and ideological pressure against the dismantling of the diglossic federation, it can happen that the upper language takes over the registers formerly occupied by the various lower languages, and thus the community emancipates itself from the diglossic situation by 'reviving' and refitting the common part of the diglossia. The only example in which this process reached its final stage is the revival of Hebrew. However, it may well be that the diglossic federation of Arabic colloquials, with literary Arabic as the upper language, is at present in the middle of a process by which the literary language penetrates increasingly into everyday speech (Meiseles, 1975) and a colloquialized form of literary Arabic will ultimately replace the colloquials, except, of course, in Malta, which in the nineteenth century opted out of the Islamic languages and raised its colloquial to the status of national language, written with Roman characters.

I would suggest the term 'emancipated language' for the result of the opting-out process and 'pre-diglossic language variety' for those cases of Jewish speech in which the language of the majority, or of the country from which the group emigrated, is enriched by Jewish terms taken from Hebrew-Aramaic or from Yiddish while otherwise being indistinguishable from that of other speakers of the same social class. We may describe Jewish languages as a transitional state between the pre-diglossic variety and the emancipated language of a Jewish group. Whether these transitions take place depends, of course, on the social history of any particular Jewish group, its wanderings and its relations to the majority group in the country concerned.

It was the Hebrew-Aramaic superstructure that enabled Jews in their wanderings to change spoken languages, and in some cases, even written

languages, without changing their culture, turning the newly adopted language of their new surroundings immediately into a Jewish language and setting into motion a course of increasing disconnection in linguistic development between the surrounding language and its originally identical Jewish counterpart. Indeed we can observe instances where terms coined to translate Hebrew-Aramaic concepts were taken over from the former Jewish language into the new one, e.g., in Judaeo-German the Romance terms *cholent* and *oren* 'to pray'. We also find cases in which the former spoken language is preserved as a kind of semi-holy language in the process of learning the Hebrew-Aramaic sacred texts through word-by-word translation, as happened in Canada and the U.S. with Yiddish (where in some areas children are still taught Yiddish in order to be able to translate from Hebrew into Yiddish) and among Iraqi Jews in India with the literary form of colloquial Arabic peculiar to Iraqi Jews. An earlier instance of the same tendency was the retention of the duty of studying the Aramaic translation (Targum) to the Pentateuch long after Aramaic[2] ceased to be spoken as a Jewish language.

The lower languages of a diglossia situation belong to the type of 'home languages' as opposed to languages of general culture. Such languages, because of being associated with childhood and with the more intimate and relaxed aspects of human life, are distinguished by the affection of their speakers and their belief that only in that particular language can a person express all shades of feeling, make jokes and generally be 'himself'. They are said to require no effort in expressing oneself, cf. the Yiddish saying: 'other languages one talks, but Yiddish talks itself', and appear to their speakers immensely rich. I. Bashevis-Singer is reported to have stated in a lecture at the Sorbonne after his Nobel Prize, on Dec. 17, 1978, that he had no doubt that Yiddish is the richest language in the world.

This feeling of having a language of unlimited resources is no doubt partly due to the 'home language' being what Basil Bernstein called a restricted code, used for socially circumscribed activities and to a large extent in phatic communication, combined usually with much non-verbal communication and implication, in a relaxed atmosphere. In the case of diglossia, however, there is an objective cause for such a feeling: the diglossic speaker has at his disposal two languages, not one. The upper language of the diglossia is not someone else's language but is his own in the same way as the colloquial, just as for an uneducated English speaker the literary language is his, though he may understand it imperfectly and be unable to handle it actively. In this a diglossic home language is different from a home language existing under the tutelage of an adjacent language of higher culture, spoken by another ethnic group, and therefore alien, though indispensable for certain activities. The diglossic speaker can use the words and phrases of the upper language to an extent limited only by his personal knowledge of it, thus in effect unlimited.

Even malapropisms in the use of Hebrew material, such as those committed by some of Sholem Aleykhem's heroes, only serve to show the sense of proprietorship of those speakers. Since by common agreement in the society in question, the upper language is not only prestigious but also 'rich', as proved by its many synonyms, the potential wealth of expressions within reach of the speaker seems indeed unbounded.

That the diglossic speaker viewed the upper language as his own is also shown by the fact that new words could be formed in the upper language from its own resources. Medieval Latin, Sanskrit and other upper diglossia languages acquired quite a percentage of their vocabulary after they ceased to be spoken. The existence of Hebrew words which were used in Yiddish context before entering original Hebrew texts has been noticed long ago and has formed the subject of a number of studies (e.g. Mark, 1957–1958). Recently a dictionary of Hebrew words created by Yemenite Jews, and probably for the most part originally used in Yemenite-Arabic contexts, has been published (Ratzhaby, 1977–1978). There were, of course, also creations by scholars, originally intended for the purposes of Hebrew texts, and some of which never found employment in Jewish-language contexts except, perhaps, in learned discussion. The group does not include words of the lower language taken over bodily into the upper one to denote objects for which there was no Hebrew term and which have to be classed as ordinary loans, the same way as words taken from the official language of the country. But it was the popular creations of Hebrew words by speakers of Jewish languages which bestowed upon some registers of Hebrew a distinctly local color.

The spelling of such words as *kabtsen* (QBṢN) 'beggar' or *khaloshes* (ḤLŠWT) 'nausea, swoon' according to the spelling rules of Hebrew and not those of Yiddish, shows that to Yiddish speakers the words they themselves had invented were still Hebrew words. In fact, such words, along with all inherited Hebrew and Aramaic words, remained part of the upper language and were only used in, but not incorporated into, the spoken Jewish language. Their listing in Yiddish, Judezmo, etc., dictionaries, though necessary for practical purposes, gives a wrong impression, as would the inclusion of scientific terminology in standard English into the dictionary of a British or American dialect in an area where many of the men are employed in science-based factories. It is the very essence of diglossia that the two languages remain apart on the linguistic level (de Saussure's *langue*) although in actual speech and in some cases in actual writing (*parole*) elements of the one permeate the other to such an extent that words of the lower language may go out of use and be replaced by words from the upper language, e.g., in euphemisms.

As nobody in a diglossia society speaks the upper language at home, it is no one's mother tongue and has to be learnt. Since its study takes up a great

deal of what school teaching is available in each of the diglossic societies, there is a tendency to equate a high degree of active and passive fluency in that language with being educated (as distinct from learned). This is strengthened by the fact that traditional school methods taught language mainly by texts, so that command of the language meant also close acquaintance with the standard texts, which were chosen for their religious or moral significance. These texts were almost always from the early period of the language, for the most part the period when it was spoken and not yet part of a diglossia. Nevertheless, they included in all cases here discussed an earlier and a later period of the language, and in the case of Greek and Latin the central religious works dominated the initial stages of education, later and contemporary works in the upper language being read as part of advanced education or privately. In none of the cases discussed was there ever instruction in, or even study of, the pupils' contemporary form of the upper language. The duality or multiplicity of source periods of the model led to inconsistencies and duplications which, combined with the natural drift of a language in use, caused the upper language as written or spoken at one's time to be different from that found in the sources studied at school.

The history of medieval Latin and of later Hebrew consists of periods during which the changes went on undisturbed, and more or less settled in what may be termed development, and periods of 'renaissance' when users went back to meticulous imitation of the earlier period of those learned at school — in the case of Jewish languages this was Biblical Hebrew — and whatever development there had been was undone, and the next stage started more or less afresh. In Arabic the interplay of development and renaissance was more complicated but had the same effect: these languages did not develop grammatically, and after periods during which normal languages would have changed out of all recognition, their present users are still able to understand the most ancient texts included in the sources without great difficulty. Since in the traditional diglossic cultures the lower languages were not studied in school and no formal grammar existed for them, the image of the unchanging language became in those societies part of the picture of the world. Development was only thought of as the adding of words to meet new needs.

The fact that 'our children can understand passages from the Bible without difficulty' has been adduced in a number of statements by Israeli literary and political personalities as one of the unique features of the Hebrew language. It is linked in some cases with concern that the language may change, in others with an assurance that Hebrew is not subject to the same laws as other languages. Some quote a saying of the late writer S.J. Agnon: 'Hebrew isn't

like German — it is a stubborn language and does not give in easily'. One reason for this familiarity of Biblical prose texts is that about 65% of the lexicon of a modern prose text consists of common words also found in the Bible; another is the persistence of the spelling (including the indication of vowels) which enables the Biblical texts to be pronounced according to present-day phonetics and phonology. But these factors are incidental, for modern Hebrew is really unique in being a diglossic upper language spoken and written in everyday life, a full-fledged national language still preserving the general appearance of an 'unchanging' language in which development only goes on to the next renaissance. In reality, its new status, now established for just over a century, has resulted in changes, mainly in informal speech but also in the written language, and there are signs that features of the spoken language have in the seventies begun to penetrate into the written style. But the awareness of these changes has been inhibited by modern Hebrew being a Jewish language with at least an ideology of diglossia. The accepted theory is that Hebrew was revived directly from the ancient sources, Bible and Mishnaic literature,[3] and therefore all questions of linguistic correctness have to be decided by reference to the usage of those sources. The only real problem of the language is supposed to be the the contradictions between the languages of the two source periods (cf. Rubin, 1970). There is the ideal of 'knowing Hebrew', i.e., a high degree of familiarity with the language of the sources and fluency in handling it actively. Writers like Agnon and Hazaz are still appreciated for their extensive use of linguistic material adapted mainly from Mishnaic Hebrew. It is still widely assumed that the best preparation for writing acceptable Hebrew is the intensive study of the Babylonian Talmud.

There is thus a theoretical persistence of diglossia, with colloquial Hebrew in the position of the lower language. As far as I know, Yitzhaq Peretz (1899-1967) was the first recognized normativist writer to advance the theory that in the spoken language deviations from the language of the sources were permissible,[4] thus introducing a clear diglossia note into the theory of normativism. As has been stated above, diglossia exists however small the percentage of those who actually have full command of the upper language, and the case of contemporary Hebrew may possibly show that the mere belief that there are some who use it is sufficient to maintain the attitudes typifying a diglossia situation and thus the character of contemporary Hebrew as a Jewish language.

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## Notes

1.  In the areas of several Islamic languages, there were Jewish languages cognate with them, such as Judaeo-Persian and several kinds of Judaeo-Arabic, and at least two

diglossic Christian languages: Egyptian Christian Arabic (with Coptic as upper language) and Maronite Arabic in Lebanon (with Syriac), while other forms of Christian Arabic are non-diglossic and are part of the communal varieties of local dialects typical for the Arab countries.

2. The Jews of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan speak dialects of the type of Modern Eastern Aramaic. They call their language 'Targum', but it has nothing to do with the language of the ancient Biblical *Targumim*, which was Middle Western Aramic.

3. The facts are that the writers of the Revival Period used, with slight modifications, either the Biblical renaissance style used in the period immediately preceding them (thus Ben-Yehuda) or the mixed style of contemporary rabbinic writings (thus Mendele Mokher Sefarim). Connection with the sources there was only insofar as both these styles were in any case replete with source quotations and allusions. The language of the first Hebrew speakers derived from the prayer book and from their acquaintance with contemporary literature.

4. *Ivrit kahalakhah* (2nd edn., Tel Aviv 1961, passim) A student of mine stated in an exam, 1977, that a certain rule applied 'only in very formal registers, but not in living everyday spoken Hebrew'. The term 'living language' is a favorite word in the ideological struggle for the emancipation of diglossia languages.

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