

# THE SEMANTIC ASPECT OF SLAVIC-YIDDISH LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE IN THE LIGHT OF CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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## **Summary**

Despite the fact that numerous Slavic borrowings which were historically incorporated by Yiddish belong to a set of comparatively well-described features of the language, the accuracy of many available descriptions was often sacrificed to either all too speculative theorization or overtly non-linguistic ideologizing, and so their true scope and versatility remain to be established. Viewing the matter in hand against a vast linguistic and culture-specific context, the author arrives at the conclusion that considerable cross-cultural differences between Yiddish and the co-territorial Slavic languages can only be adequately described on the basis of an interdisciplinary approach, involving both Slavic and Jewish historians, ethnographers, philologists and folklorists as well as other specialists in the field.

**Key words:** Yiddish, language contact, language interference, cross-cultural differences, loan words, Jewish, Gentile.

The existence of numerous Slavic elements which were historically incorporated by the West Germanic Yiddish language is not a linguistic novelty and belongs, instead, to the set of most well-described features of the language. After a long-lasting and not in the least unanimous recognition of their *de facto* availability in Yiddish, the Slavic elements became part and parcel of the language's literary standard and a subject-matter for linguistic research carried out by numerous if mostly Eastern European scholars. Due to their exploratory activities Slavic components of the language were almost exhaustively described and classified in terms of their quantity (J. Joffe), the concepts expressed (J. Joffe, M. Shulman), etymology (J. Ohr, K. Lubarsky, H. Shklyar), structural peculiarities (A. Landau, R. Lotzsch, E. Falkovich), and even ideological potential (M. Gitlits, E. Spivak). Among more recent works on the subject one must mention the publications of A. SOROKINA, seeking to generalize the data collected by her predecessors. And yet despite the seeming versatility of the aspects described, the problem under consideration remains as significant as ever.

An explanation for such a state of things emerges from the fact that in the eyes of many 20<sup>th</sup> century researchers of the problem matters of linguistic description were too indispensably, and quite deliberately, connected with those of, initially, advocating the linguistic *status quo* and later on with matters of language planning and standardizing (See ESTRAIKH). Thus, as is the case with many finer aspects of the language (connotation, stylistic value, language etiquette etc), the accuracy of such descriptions was often sacrificed to the ideological and pragmatic values of class-consciousness and functionality as manifested by neutralization, simplification, and unequivocalty (See ERLICH and GREENBAUM). Besides, the basically descriptive scientific patterns of positivism and structuralism allowed little penetration into the speakers' psychology, not infrequently resulting in the acceptance of a vocabulary variant as "obsolete," "dialectal," "characteristic of one's idiom," or "general literary" on the sole ground of frequency of occurrence – more often than not in works of literature. The integral influence of these factors sometimes made it hard to correctly see the very nature of the language contact which, though contrary to the opinion of some subtler scholars (see WEINREICH U. for one), was only limited to borrowed lexemes, morphemes and, less commonly, to clichés. In view of that, the objective of the present paper is not to provide another description of Slavic elements in Yiddish remaining within the same old and largely disputable paradigm, but to formulate the problem anew with due regard to the linguistic and, which seems equally important, extralinguistic context of Slavic-Yiddish interference.

Way back in 1957 in his classical report "Language Contact" E. HAUGEN introduced the then revolutionary notion of biculturalism as distinct from bilingualism. According to him, a language contact can take place in such four typical contexts as a) bicultural bilingualism; b) bicultural monolingualism; c) monocultural bilingualism; and d) monocultural monolingualism, each of them shaping its linguistic nature in different ways (see S. 63-64). Following these distinctions, Haugen brought forward his own classification of types of language interference, the latter falling into imported lexemes, loanshifts, induced creations etc. When viewed from the standpoint of the present the author's approach may seem slightly

outdated, the idea of two languages coexisting within one culture being somewhat unlikely to win support unless properly specified<sup>1</sup>. And yet, no matter how obviously promising, suchlike tendencies in theoretical linguistics have never had much impact on Yiddish studies, their mainstream remaining firmly structuralist.

The importance of introducing additional extralinguistic dimensions for the purpose of more adequate language contact descriptions can be illustrated by the lexeme *борщ* – ‘borscht’ as borrowed from Ukrainian (Russian, Polish) into such languages as English and Yiddish. In the former case, the word penetrated the English word-stock in its original meaning, the flavor of foreignism largely preserved, and is now commonly defined by dictionaries as ‘a Russian or Polish soup made with beetroot and usually served with sour cream.’ In this particular case of language interference the final result is modified by the corresponding cultural context: *borscht* hardly fits the culinary tradition of either the British or the American and is interpreted as an exotic dish characteristic of some faraway Slavic cuisine. In terms of language interference theory the word *borscht* as borrowed by the English language should be called an “imported” lexeme.

The same process of borrowing a most ordinary lexeme turns out to have had quite different a result in case with Yiddish. As is common knowledge, one of the principle oppositions observed within Jewish culture is that between the Jewish and the non-Jewish, the latter also known as the Gentile. This helps arrange outer influences in the way that is found acceptable in terms of preserving Jewish identity and preventing cultural and religious assimilation. From the standpoint of culinary traditions preserving Jewish identity means following the laws of kashruth which results in the corresponding modification of borrowed non-Jewish recipes. As a result of these prescriptions, *באַרשטש* – ‘borscht’, though very soon becoming a popular Jewish meal, was cooked with due caution which most non-Jews found puzzling or ridiculous. If cooked with meat it was supposed to be served without sour cream, but if cooked with sour cream (usually in larger quantities than those approved of in the original recipe) it

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<sup>1</sup> Compare the concept of “the Way of the SHaS” as a clue to Jewish cultural history introduced in WEINREICH M. (P. 175-246). See also CARLEBACH.

was usually eaten cold. Adding to this, in some Jewish families *borscht* might have been occasionally eaten cold even if cooked with meat, the reason being the ban to light fires on Saturday. Moreover, if cooked without meat it became a very cheap nutrition, its price turning it into a popular meal among the poor but simultaneously making it look far less tempting to more well-to-do Yiddish speakers. As a result, the newly borrowed lexeme developed a transferred meaning of ‘something liquid and sour (esp. wine of inferior quality, vino)’ and became part of the set expression *וועלוועלער פאר באַרשרש velveler far borshtsh* – “cheaper than borscht”, ‘very cheap, dirt cheap.’ In time this new “puzzling” sense of the word caused the appearance of the Ukrainian expression *гарячий, як єврейський борщ (у суботу)* – “as hot (‘hot-tempered’) as Jewish borscht (on Saturday),” its humorous effect based on the aforementioned culturally-conditioned peculiarities. And finally, already recognized as distinctly Jewish, the lexeme penetrated American English within the humorous term *the Borscht Belt* – ‘a resort area in the Catskill Mountains frequented chiefly by Jewish people of eastern European origin’ (Oxford dictionary). Thus, the word *באַרשטש* as borrowed by Yiddish shares the qualities of both an imported lexeme and a loanshift, this particular type of borrowings being comparatively rare and lacking its due theoretical specification. Other examples to be considered in this same context may be *זויערטע אוגערקע zoyerte ugerke* – ‘soused cucumber’, having also developed its peculiarly Yiddish meaning of ‘bedraggled hen, wet rag’ (Cf. *мокрая курица*); *טאַלמודיסט Talmudist* – “a person versed in the Talmud,” ‘pedant, doctrinaire,’ the corresponding Russian word having presumably originated from the Communist party discourse of the 20s and then borrowed back into Yiddish, *נאַטשאַלניק nachalnik* – ‘(ironic) boss,’ the word’s ironic connotations not observed in Russian on any regular basis, *פּיסקאַטש piskach* – ‘loudmouth,’ its negative connotations largely determined by the Slavic origin of the lexeme *פיסק pisk* – ‘mouth’ (Cf. dialectal Ukrainian *нусок* – ‘mouth’ versus literary Ukrainian *нусок* – ‘face (esp. unpleasant)’) which was re-interpreted by the speakers of Yiddish as closer to ‘snout, muzzle’ etc.

Another culturally-conditioned case of a language contact may be illustrated by the Yiddish lexeme *יוון yovn*, being an old Hebrew borrowing

with the meaning of ‘Greek (and in this way Gentile).’ A partial homophone of the Russian (Ukrainian, Byelorussian) proper name *Иван* sometimes also used in its transferred meaning to denote a common man, the Yiddish word underwent a change of meaning and became commonly used to denote a Russian soldier (especially unfriendly towards Jews as was often the case). As the new meaning was firmly fixed in the language, the lexeme became part of set expressions such as אלע יוונים האָבן איין פנים *ale yevonim hobm eyn ponem* – “all Russian soldiers have one face,” ‘all anti-Semites are the same, Gentiles will be Gentiles’; יונישע תורה *yevonishe toyre* – “the Gentile Torah,” ‘foul language, blackguardism’; ווי א יוון אין *vi a yovn in suke* – “like a Russian soldier in a Succoth tabernacle,” ‘strange, puzzling, out of time’ etc.

In other cases, when no homophonous lexeme seemed fit for the substitution, clichés were introduced. For instance, the Yiddish name for the Ukrainian town *Біла Церква* – “White Church” is שווארץ טומאה *shvarts tume* – “Black Dirt (moral, spiritual),” the case being obviously suggestive of the difficulties faced in the process of Jewish-Ukrainian cross-cultural interaction.

Such bitterly ironic modifications of meaning seem typical of the language in view of its general semantic peculiarities (See MATISOFF), and yet the existing dictionaries of Yiddish register but a very scarce number of such words and expressions. Some more examples of the sort, this time relating to Yiddish-English interference, may be borrowed from American Yiddish slang as described by WEX: קראץ מייך *krats mikh* – “scratch me”, ‘Christmas,’ (the association between the two notions based on mere partial homophony); *Yeaster* – ‘Easter’ (the component *yeast* implying the notion of rising, in this particular case – ‘rising from the dead’), די גריין־הגא *di grin khoge* – “the green horror”, ‘Whit Sunday’ (the lexeme *khoge*, etymological meaning ‘horror, something horrible,’ is used as a bitterly ironic substitution for the Hebrew lexeme *חג khag* – ‘holiday,’ the former adopted by speakers of Yiddish on a regular basis to denote a non-Jewish holiday, the association between the two being both semantic and phonetic; the component גריין – ‘green’ probably added after the Slavic fashion (Cf. *зелені свята*).

One more lexicological problem in Yiddish which demands due attention is connected with the secondary meanings of borrowed lexemes as determined by their origin. An illustration of its essence may be provided by the Yiddish lexemes נאָפל *nopl* (Cf. Nabel), פּופּיק *pupik* (Cf. *nynok*), and פעמפּיק *pempik* (Cf. *pepek*). Despite the initial identity of meanings which characterized the aforementioned words when parts of the corresponding languages, their meanings in Yiddish are neither identical, nor sufficiently synonymic. The Germanic lexeme נאָפל *nopl* – ‘navel’ is not only stylistically neutral, but is principally used to denote the part of the human body, whereas the word פּופּיק *pupik*, though possible to be used as a colloquial term for the same, has its primary meaning modified to ‘gizzard’. The meaning of the Polish borrowing פעמפּיק *pempek* has been modified so considerably that it no longer means ‘navel’ but is used in colloquial language to denote either a ‘paunch’, or a ‘paunchy person.’ The same concerns the lexeme כאָלערע *cholere* – etymological meaning ‘cholera,’ which, following the standards of the source language, is mostly used as an exclamation (‘Damn it!’) etc<sup>2</sup>.

However, in time the cross-cultural tensions gradually decreased which brought about new tendencies in the semantic development of Yiddish word-stock. Alongside with relocation to bigger cities as new places of their permanent residence both at home and in other countries many Jews began to see their past in *shtetls*, small towns with their population largely Jewish, in more or less nostalgic colors, thus interpreting the Slavic elements in Yiddish as a bridge to that forgotten past (See SAMUEL, P. 113 - 136). For instance, in the sonnets of Bukovinian poet M. Freed – notwithstanding the distinctly “literary” nature of the genre – Slavic elements are frequently used as perfectly interchangeable with Germanic lexemes: וואָראָנע, וואָראָ קראָ, *vorone, kro* – ‘crow’; וואָלקן, כמארע, *khmare, volkn* – ‘cloud’ (the difference in meaning similar to that between the Russian words *облако* and *туча* neutralized descriptively); שקאָפּע *shkape* – ‘jade, nag’ and פּערד *ferd* – ‘horse’ etc. Moreover, some of the lexemes implying presumably “Gentile” notions lose their pejorative connotations and

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<sup>2</sup> Both these and other such-like examples are abundantly presented by WEX.

develop, in fact, into poetic words. Thus, the word פאַסטוך *pastukh*, being an old Slavic borrowing to refer to a “non-Jewish” occupation and in this way slightly contemptuous, displays a distinct shift in meaning towards elevation, now denoting a swain rather than a shepherd (this new sense is also clearly visible in the title of Freed’s 1951 book "אַ פאַסטוך אין ניר-יאָרק" and in the poem of the same name). The word שיקסע *shikse* – ‘a gentile girl,’ still registered as “often contemptuous” in U. Weinreich’s dictionary of 1968, takes on the form of שיקסעלעך, thus modifying its meaning, both morphologically and contextually, into that of ‘lass’ or ‘damsel’. A similar phenomenon is observed in case with the lexeme גר which loses its peculiarly Yiddish meaning of ‘convert to Judaism’, taking on, instead, its original Hebrew meaning of ‘stranger’ (ZORNYTSKYI, S. 18-23).

Another aspect of Slavic-Yiddish language interference which has not yet been properly considered consists in the emergence of mixed Jewish-Slavic proverbs, popular sayings etc carried out by means of either literary translation or extended borrowing. The basic reason of such interaction must have been connected with the psychological similarity of life perception which was gradually established among the dwellers of mixed Slavic-Jewish settlements. The former case can be illustrated by such proverbs as מע שפייט אים אין פנים און ער זאָגט אז עס רעגנט *me shpayt im in ponem un er zогt az es regnt* (Cf. *ти йому плюю между очи, а він каже: «Дош, иде!»*) – “even if you spit him in the face he will tell you that it is raining”; א הונט שיקט מען ניט אין יאטקע אריין *a hunt shikt men nit in yatke arayn* (Cf. *собаку в мясную лавку не посылают*) – “a dog is not to be sent to the butcher’s”; א געשלאגענעם הונט טאָר מען קיין שטעקן ניט ווייזן *far a geshlagenem hunt tor men keyn shtekn nit vayzn* (Cf. *битой собаке только плоть покажи*) – “one shouldn’t show a stick to a beaten dog”; דערעסן ווי א ביטערע ציבעלע *deresn vi a bitere tsibele* (Cf. *надоесть хуже горькой редьки*) – “to pall as much as bitter onions” etc. On the other hand, in Sholem Aleichem’s stories about Tevye the Milkman one comes across such expressions as שטשע נע פוימאוו, א וושזע סקובע *shtshe ne poymav, a vshze skube* – (distorted Ukr.) «ще не зловив («поймав»), а вже скубе», “he has not yet caught the bird, but he is already plucking its feathers”; נע בודע או מעקיטע הראָשע אי נע בודע *ne bulo u mekite hroshe i ne bude* – (distorted Ukr.) «не було в Микити грошей і не буде», “Mykyta had no

money and he won't have any"; נע ברעשע סאָבאַקא דאַרפֿאַם נע *nekhay sobaka darom ne breshe* – (distorted Ukr.) «нехай собака даремно («даром») не бреше» – “a dog must not bark to no purpose” etc.

In view of the considerable cross-cultural differences between Yiddish and the neighboring Slavic languages, an adequate description of their interference needs an interdisciplinary approach on the part of both Slavic and Jewish historians, ethnographers, philologists and folklorists as well as other specialists in the field.

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## **Der semantische Aspekt von slawisch-jiddischen Sprachinterferenzen im Licht von cross-kulturellen Unterschieden**

### **Zusammenfassung**

Trotz der Tatsache, dass zahlreiche slawische Entlehnungen, die historisch vom Jiddischen übernommen wurden, zur Reihe von vergleichsweise gut beschriebenen Sprachbesonderheiten gehören, wurde die Genauigkeit vieler verfügbarer Beschreibungen oft durch spekulative Theoretisierungen oder nicht-sprachliche Ideologisierungen verloren. All das verlangt, den wahren Umfang dieser Entlehnungen und ihre Universalität zu bestimmen. Einen großen sprachlichen und kulturspezifischen Kontext betrachtend, kommt der Autor zum Schluss, dass erhebliche interkulturelle Unterschiede zwischen dem Jiddischen und den benachbarten slawischen Sprachen nur angemessen auf der Grundlage eines interdisziplinären Ansatzes beschrieben werden können, wobei sowohl die slawischen als auch jüdischen Historiker, Ethnologen, Philologen und Volkskundler sowie andere Fachleute auf diesem Gebiet mitarbeiten müssen (übs. von Oleksandr Oguy).

**Stichwörter:** Jiddisch, Sprachkontakt, Sprachstörungen, interkulturelle Unterschiede, Lehnwörter, Juden, Nicht-Juden.