Standard Languages and Language Standards

Gramley, WS 2008-09

Yiddish
Divisions of Jewry

Sephardim: Spanish-Portugese Jews (and exiled Jews from there)

Ashkenazim: German (or northern European) Jews

Mizrahim: Northern African and Arabian Jews
"Jewish" languages

Commonly formed from the vernacular languages of the larger communities in which Jews lived.

Ghettoization and self-segregation led to differences between the local vernaculars and Jews varieties of these languages.

Linguistically different because of the addition of Hebrew words, such as *meshuga*, *makhazor* (prayer book for the High Holy Days), or *beis hakneses* (synagogue).

Among the best known such languages are Yiddish and Ladino (the Balkans, esp. Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, the Maghreb – Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal in 1492).
In biblical times the Jews spoke Hebrew, then Aramaic, later Greek (and so on).

Today Hebrew has been revived in the form of Ivrit (= Modern Hebrew).

We will be looking at Yiddish.
Yiddish (ייִדיש)

The focus on Yiddish is concerned chiefly with the period prior to the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Yiddish existed as a language with a wide spread of dialects:

**Western Yiddish**

- Northwestern: Northern Germany and the Netherlands
- Midwestern: Central Germany
- Southwestern: Southern Germany, France (including Judea-Alsatian), Northern Italy
Eastern Yiddish

This was the larger of the two branches, and without further explanation is what is most often meant when referring to Yiddish.

- Northeastern or Litvish: the Baltic states, Belarus
- Mideastern or Poylish: Poland and Central Europe
- Southeastern or Ukrainish: Ukraine and the Balkans
- Hungarian: Austro-Hungarian Empire
Standardization

The move towards standardization was concentrated most importantly in the first half of the twentieth century.

This may be seen as a part of the larger movement toward standard national languages – even though there was no national state in which Yiddish dominated or might have been seen as the major language.

With modernization of Western European society Western Yiddish declined (in favor of Standard German).

In Eastern Europe Yiddish moved toward ever greater independence and standardization.
Standardization

Selection

Eastern Yiddish, with elements from all the major dialect areas, but with more emphasis on Litvish.

Pronunciation mainly reflected the Northeastern dialect area.
Standardization

Codification

This is largely in the hands of YIVO, the Yiddish Scientific Institute.
Standardization

Expansion

Thru-out the late 19th and early 20th centuries Yiddish literature developed, esp. Yiddish theater.

Between the two world wars Yiddish was used in an expanding number of domains in parts of Eastern Europe.
**Standardization**

**Expansion**

In Eastern Europe Yiddish was becoming an important language (see authors such as Sholem Aleichem).

In Poland Yiddish was allowed a certain amount of autonomy and was used in education. Consequently, it underwent a certain degree of standardization.

YIVO (the Yiddish Scientific Institute) was founded and represented a force for Yiddish (in Europe) as opposed to Hebrew revival in Zionism.
Standardization

Expansion

Only in the Soviet Union did a state get involved in questions of standardization in regard to Yiddish.

For example in the Galician SSR and the Byelorussian SSR Yiddish was recognized as an official language.

Eventually the Hebrew alphabet was replaced by the Cyrillic in Yiddish in the USSR.
Expansion

The Soviet Union permitted a Jewish Autonomous Oblast (in 1934; see map) with Yiddish as its official language. The Soviet Jewish population was supposed to settle there. Yiddish theaters began opening in the 1970s. The newspaper "Der Stern Birbidzhaner" use some Yiddish.
"There is no standard pronunciation in Yiddish. However, the members and friends of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, New York, have strong views on the subject. They are convinced that Yiddish should not differ in this respect from the great Western languages, and so they are willing to introduce a standard one. In their publications they speak as if it were already in existence, but this is wishful thinking – acceptance of their system being restricted to their circle." (Birnbaum 1979)
"The original proponents of this 'standard' were speakers of the Northern dialect and so, without further ado and without discussing the matter or giving any reasons, they decided that their own pronunciation was the 'standard'. However, the man in the street knows nothing about it. If he happens to be a Southerner he does not exchange his rich phonemic system for the meagre one of the Northern dialect. He does not even know that this is 'supposed to be' the 'standard'. And if he is a Northerner, he goes on speaking as before, without realizing that he would need to change only one of his vowels in order to qualify as a speaker of the 'standard.'" (Birnbaum 1979)
Standardization

Acceptance

Standard Yiddish is used by few speakers as a mother tongue. However, it is the variety adopted when teaching Yiddish as a foreign language.
Decline

The Holocaust dealt the death blow to the Yiddish language and culture.

Once there were 13 – 15 million speakers of the language. Language policy in the Soviet Union worked against it, as did Zionism. In America most immigrant families with Yiddish had assimilated by the third generation.

Today speakers of Yiddish, usually Hasidic Jews, live in a world-wide diaspora.

Yiddish has official status only in Modova, The Netherlands, and Sweden today.
Current numbers of Yiddish speakers

Israel: 215,000, or 6% of the total Jewish population, as estimated by Ethnologue (1986)
USA: 178,945, or 2.8% of the total Jewish population (2000)
Russia: 29,998, or 13% of the total Jewish population (2002)
Moldova: 17,000, or 26% of the total Jewish population (1989)
Ukraine: 3,213, or 3.1% of the total Jewish population (2001)
Belarus: 1,979, or 7.1% of the total Jewish population (1999)
Canada: 19,295, or 5.5% of the total Jewish population (2001)
Romania: 951, or 16.4% of the total Jewish population
Latvia: 825, or 7.9% of the total Jewish population
Lithuania: 570, or 14.2% of the total Jewish population
Estonia: 124, or 5.8% of the total Jewish population
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yiddish)
A major phonotactic difference between Yiddish and German is that Standard (Northeastern) Yiddish allows final voiced obstruents, e.g.
רטרнерס דארי וגייטראינהר
רטרנרס
דארי וגייטראינהר
138 בלנסקי שטראוס, ניו יורק סיטי

mir keitern oikh tsu alerlay shmhus un andere – plats far 80 biz 800 mentshn.

private bolrums

ratner's deiri restoran
barimt far di beste haymishe gebeksn
Literature
### Pronouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>First Person</strong></th>
<th><strong>Sec. Person</strong></th>
<th><strong>Third Person</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nom</strong></td>
<td>ikh</td>
<td>mir</td>
<td>du</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dat</strong></td>
<td>mir</td>
<td>undz</td>
<td>dir</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Acc</strong></td>
<td>mikh</td>
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# The Definite Article

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<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Neuter</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
<th>Plural</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nominative</strong></td>
<td>der דער</td>
<td>dos דאָס</td>
<td>di די</td>
<td>di די</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dative</strong></td>
<td>dem דעם</td>
<td>dem דעם</td>
<td>der דער</td>
<td>di די</td>
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<td><strong>Accusative</strong></td>
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<td>dos דאָס</td>
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<td>have and be present tense</td>
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<td>י</td>
<td>אֵז</td>
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<td>er / zi / es</td>
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Standard orthography

Variation in the use of pointing (from none to some to complete)

Transliteration from (say) English may be left to right.

There was a belief that variation was an impediment to the recognition of Yiddish as a literary equal to the other European literary languages. Hence there this motivated the move toward standardization.