

MULTILINGUALISM. Throughout most of their history, the Jews were a multilingual nation, both in fact and as part of their identity consciousness. As small Jewish minorities moved from one land and culture to another, they carried with them their multilingual library of texts. Jewish multilingualism in Eastern Europe was influenced by the nature of the Jewish historical experience, by the Jews' own myth of origins, and by the exceptional historical situation of the Jews in Eastern Europe between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. An exuberant multilingualism was widespread among the first generation of Jews from Eastern Europe who broke out of small-town (*shtetl*) existence, went to the cities, and immigrated to Western Europe, America, or Palestine. Multilingualism was a moving force in the total transformation of the Jews in the modern age, affecting their place in geography and history, their education, choice of professions, behavior, and consciousness.

The number of languages spoken by Jews in the modern age and mentioned in Jewish memoirs and conversations ranged from five to seven and, in special cases, to 13 or 15. The standard set would include Yiddish and Hebrew, Polish and Russian, German, perhaps French, and the New World language, English. Individuals who attended yeshivas or had private tutors could read Aramaic; graduates of a humanistic gymnasium would know ancient Greek and Latin. In particular cases we may add other languages, that is, Lithuanian (Emanuel Levinas), Italian (Vladimir Jabotinsky), or Czech (Siegfried Kapper). Those who immigrated to South America learned Spanish or Portuguese; knowledge of Polish and Russian made reading Ukrainian poetry easy; and in Palestine, many Jews studied Arabic. Those multilinguals had at least some sense of the grammar, vocabulary, and poetry of several languages, drawn from at least three language groups: Germanic, Slavic, and Semitic.

This phenomenon was not unique to intellectuals. Many Jews of the period of mass emigration were born in the Pale of Settlement before the Revolution of 1917, moved to a city in Eastern Europe (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vilna, Warsaw, Odessa), emigrated to Germany, then to France, then to America, and at some point tried out Palestine. Some went from Ukraine to Canada or the United States, moved from there to the Soviet Far East to build a Jewish state in Birobidzhan, went on to Moscow, and eventually to Israel. Other itineraries wound up in South America, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Uzbekistan.

In medieval Europe, the same phenomenon prevailed on a smaller scale. Whether because of persecutions and expulsions or because of opportunities grasped combined with a lack of "rootedness," Jews experienced unease staying in one place, and frequently traveled between territories and languages. Their very existence in the Christian world was defined by the religious opposition: Jew vs. Christian. It might be said that in this way, Jews acquired a critical perspective of biculturalism and bilingualism, as well

as a sense of cultural relativity, flexibility, and irony. Mediation was typical of Jews, who tended to specialize in the exchange of goods (trade), signs (languages), and signs of goods (money).

Basic Concepts. Multilingualism is the knowledge of more than one language by a person or within a social group; it assumes the ability to switch from one language to another in speech, in writing, or in reading. Other terms describing this phenomenon include bilingualism, polylingualism, plurilingualism, diglossia, and languages-in-contact. Multilingualism may be personal, social, or intersubjective. Personal multilingualism refers to the knowledge and verbal behavior of an individual, not necessarily shared by the whole community. Social multilingualism refers to the communicative practices of a nation, tribe, or other social group that sustains two or more languages. When Shmuel Niger, the prominent Yiddish literary critic, wrote *Di tseyshprakhikayt fun undzer literatur* (The Bilingualism of Our Literature; 1941), he did not imply that every Jew reads both Hebrew and Yiddish, but, endorsing a concept of Bal-Makhshoves, maintained that there is a larger, national entity (“our literature”) that includes both branches, even though by that time the two were quite separate. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Yiddishists would not include Hebrew in “our” literature (the literature of “the people”) and Hebrew culture in Palestine would not include Yiddish. Niger’s book was itself a statement of cultural politics, an attempt at saving Yiddish literature as part of Jewish culture. Indeed, by that time, most speakers of one Jewish language didn’t know or didn’t read the other. [*See the biographies of Niger and Bal-Makhshoves.*]

Yosef Klausner, who occupied the chair in Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, wrote a multivolume *History of Modern Hebrew Literature* that included detailed biographies of all the Hebrew writers. Yet he ignored the Yiddish texts that most of them had written. Writing about Mendele Moykher-Sforim, the founder of both Yiddish and Hebrew modern literatures, Klausner discussed the Hebrew novels but not their original Yiddish versions. Klausner was a nationalist Zionist and strove to realize the formula of one language on one land by one Hebrew (rather than Jewish) nation. Much earlier, Mendele Moykher-Sforim had countered this restrictiveness: “I like to breathe with both my nostrils” (Yiddish and Hebrew). Yet for both Niger and Klausner, Jews who wrote in non-Jewish languages, like Kafka or Freud, were not part of “Jewish” literature.

In modern times, Jewish society in Eastern Europe supported the use of Yiddish, Hebrew, Aramaic, Russian, German, and Polish. All these languages could be active in a single community and even in a single family, but not all individuals knew every one of them. Many women and men, especially of the lower classes, knew only Yiddish and some “Goyish” (the local dialect). Economically active men knew some German as the lingua franca of trade, as well as the languages of Jewish learning, Hebrew and

Aramaic. Yet the society as a whole was familiar with the entire set of five or six languages, creating what can be described as a third, intersubjective kind of multilingualism, a usage that is spread among many individuals in a given society, but not obligatory for every one of them.

In discussions of multilingualism we face three entrenched stereotypes. First, people tend to base their description of language on the spoken word; hence bilingualism is described as *speaking* in two languages. Yet much of culture is preserved in writing, as is the case with the Jewish religious library, and an acquired written language may be overwhelmingly richer than the spoken language. Hebrew and Aramaic texts were the source of all Jewish knowledge. But they were taught in the spoken language, Yiddish, resulting in a multilingualism based on three languages in two different media (speech and print). A second, related stereotype is the Romantic idea of authenticity in language, a *mother tongue* that is “imbibed with mother’s milk.” Yet this “natural” acquisition of a language in childhood is modified by important learning processes on all stages of life.

A final stereotype is embedded in nation-state ideology promoting the ideal of “one nation, one land, one language.” Political or cultural authority worked to enforce this unity, identifying ethnic and political boundaries with language borders. If the ideal of national unity did not match the linguistic facts, that ideal was imposed on deviant persons or groups. In the twentieth century, Yiddishists sought to impose a unified “standard language” on various dialects, mainly by means of the school system and mandatory unified spelling. Similarly, in Palestine in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Sephardic pronunciation was imposed on immigrants who were fluent in various Ashkenazic dialects of Hebrew. Yet the assumption of an overlapping identity of nation, land and language is an essentialist fallacy. In history, these three categories are most often asymmetrical. The identity of language, ethnic group, nation, and state is an ideal, an instrument for homogenizing larger social groups, and a goal of nationalist and cultural movements.

The Structure of Multilingualism. No society or state has just one language, nor can language be isolated from culture. Societies are multilingual because of minorities that live within the dominant language group, and also because the official language itself presides over numerous dialects. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, many linguistic and cultural communities had their own territories in a common state, dominated by German. Language cannot be isolated from culture, because every language is a repository of values, images and memories: the semiotics of culture. The boundary between the semantics of language and the semiotics of culture is blurred, so that multilingualism shades into multiculturalism.

The boundaries between dialects and languages are fuzzy too. There is often a gradual shading from one dialect to the next, until a new language appears on the map. In Jewish life, the different dialects of Yiddish caused

animosity between Litvak, Galitsianer, and Polish Jews, yet those did not crystallize as languages because of the overarching power of a common religion, alphabet, and nationalism, and the shared experience of antisemitism.

Societies are multilingual in different ways. To begin with, the participant languages can relate to each other horizontally or vertically.

In Horizontal Multilingualism the participant languages are parallel to each other in their use. The category subdivides into several modes:

1. *Bilingualism* proper: two alternative languages are co-extensive. The languages share either the same territory or the same mind. In bilingualism, two languages are synonymous and interchangeable, and are used depending on the addressee and situation.
2. *Diglossia*: two languages are complementary. They are both necessary for a person's verbal behavior but fulfill different communicative functions, covering different semiotic domains. Thus, the immigrant language is used at home, often with one's spouse or older people, while the dominant language is used at work or with one's children.
3. *Lingua franca*: a basic vehicle of communication among separate language communities. A lingua franca establishes bilingual relations with each local language, and diglossia relations when the semiotic functions are complementary (official business vs. home).

In Vertical Multilingualism, languages enter hierarchical relations with each other in a three-tiered structure. The levels can be described as follows:

1. Local dialects, professional idiolects, or languages of origin, indicating a person's home language or professional attachment.
2. The standardized national language, where all differences are neutralized. From this common base, the speakers can move to any dialect or professional idiolect or to any text in the past.
3. A *supra-language* for international communication, usually the language of a current or former colonial or cultural power. Whereas lingua franca covers the intellectually lowest levels of culture and immediate interpersonal communication, the supra-language covers the highest levels of science and culture and is complementary to the national languages. Printed Hebrew serves this function for scattered Jewish communities around the globe.

Each tier in this hierarchy can have several options. There can be several interacting local languages, several competing national languages and several competing supra-languages (as English competes with Russian in the states of the former Soviet Union). At the present time, intellectual life worldwide uses the supra-language (mostly English) for reading and writing, while creative writing and national culture are in the national language.

Within this complex horizontal and vertical grid of languages, languages in contact with one another influence each other. A large scholarly

literature investigates these influences. Many societies maintain a perennial struggle against foreign words introduced into their national language, while at the same time incessantly importing them to utilize the knowledge and cultural distinctions that other languages have obtained. The rapid growth of modern Yiddish and modern Hebrew was enmeshed in this process.

Relations between Languages and Their Users. A state of multilingualism may be achieved *naturally*, when a person grows up with two parents speaking different languages, or is a member of a minority, or lives in a multilingual community. It may also be *acquired* later in life, through immigration or learning.

Participant languages may be associated with different communicative media: conversation, writing, reading, and symbolic systems can use different, and not necessarily overlapping, languages. Thus, in the Jewish religious tradition, the law is given in Hebrew texts, its discussion and explication in Aramaic texts, and the process of interpretation, study, and education takes place in spoken Yiddish (or spoken modern Hebrew, English, etc.).

The functional relations between complementary languages in a multilingual situation are determined both by the implied addressee (learned discourse in Latin or Hebrew vs. family correspondence in the vernacular) and by semiotic domain (religious texts vs. daily life, or scientific discourse vs. social interaction). Except for cases of bilingualism proper, there is asymmetry among the participant languages. Usually one of the languages becomes a *base language* that provides the syntactic frame for the multilingual discourse. From this base, speakers may depart into other languages, invoke historical layers of the “same” language, quote texts scattered in geography and history, or unfold professional and scientific idiolects. The earliest base language may be a person’s first language, the so-called mother tongue (in Yiddish, *mame-loshn*), intimate and emotive. But with time, the relationship may invert and an acquired language may take its place as the base language of an individual or a whole society.

We may distinguish among the base languages of an individual, a society, and a text. Not every individual shares the base language of the society and an individual may write a text that is not in his own base language. The principle of *mirroring* describes the constant attempt of individuals to mirror the base language of a society by eliminating asymmetries. On the contrary, following the principle of *asymmetry*, a creative text or a social group may deviate from the standard language and, in the process, create new asymmetries.

The scope of a person’s knowledge of each language may vary greatly, along the following scale: (1) mastery of the language with its textual tradition and a large, pan-historical vocabulary; (2) grammatical competence in the contemporary language and confidence in its use; (3) elementary

communication; and (4) traces of that language in the form of words and expressions included in the syntax of another.

Both Yiddish and Hebrew grew immensely in the last century through the acquisition of large semiotic domains from other languages. At first, the original term was included in the language, then a substitute, based on a Hebrew or Yiddish root, was often invented. Thus, in Hebrew, “culture” was first called *kultura*, then it became *tarbut*. Even when the foreign word is preserved, there are modes of secondary adaptation. Yiddish coined *tragedye*, *komedye* with penultimate stress, as in Russian, rather than the German stress on the last syllable of these words and the English on the first. This process occurred subconsciously in the Jewish languages in the centuries before 1800 as vocabulary was absorbed from Polish and Ukrainian, while in the modern age, a large international vocabulary was absorbed primarily through Russian. This vocabulary tended to appear first in the Yiddish context of political speeches, essays on political and social issues, and newspaper articles, from where it was often adopted by Hebrew.

In this multilingual situation, an international network of words, idioms, and other expressions emerged, that have equal significations (semantics) but different signifiers (sound structure, morphology, lexical roots). This layer of multilingual discourse, embedded in all Jewish languages, was enhanced by the international nature of the *genres of discourse*: the particular language of a sonnet, an item in the newspaper, an editorial, or a romantic letter is international within the framework of Western culture. Culture is anything but the monolingual existence of isolated monolithic social groups; we can speak of a unity that crosses languages, bringing them together in a single semiotic discourse.

Multilingualism in Jewish History. The Jewish national myth is not based on one cradle or homeland, but on a bipolar pattern. From one place Jews are either exiled or flee to another, opposite place, either positive (Exodus) or negative (Exile). The foundational event of this territorial bipolarity is recorded in Genesis 12: the Lord sends the father of the Jewish nation, Abram, from his native Mesopotamia “to the land I will show you,” the land of Canaan. Jewish readers often perceived this chapter as a Zionist message, sending Abram to the Promised Land. Yet it also represents the first expulsion of the Jews as a nation, for the Lord commands Abram: “Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father’s house.” In the ears of Diaspora Jews, *moledet* (birthplace) meant also “homeland” in the national sense: Abram was expelled from his homeland. And *Lekh-lekho* (Go forth!) with its repeated harsh sounds, was expressive of the coarse command: “Get out!” Sholem Aleichem finishes his saga of Tevye the Dairyman with the chapter “Lekh-lekho.” The expression “we’re at the chapter Lekh-lekho” meant in Yiddish “we’re in a time of expulsions” (in Tevye’s case, the expulsion of Jews from Russian villages).

From the period of late antiquity, Jews scattered, in several stages, around the world. Like all immigrants they adopted the local spoken language, and some acquired the dominant languages of culture or power. Micah Yosef Berdyczewski (Berdichevsky), who studied the (Aramaic) Talmud at the famous Volozhin yeshiva in Lithuania, became a prominent Hebrew secular fiction writer, lived in Berlin, and wrote criticism and essays in Yiddish and German. Berdyczewski defined an essential Jewish bilingualism in his essay “Hebrew and Aramaic,” using as a metaphor the story of Jacob and Esau: ‘Two nations in your womb’ (Genesis 25:23) . . . still clash within us, and our tongue became two languages—Hebrew and Aramaic. The fact is that we deal with *two languages* which, though neighbors, are radically different from each other, not in words and expressions but in their *soul*. . . . *We are Hebrew-Aramaic in our language*” (Berdichevsky, 1987, p. 102; emphasis added). In Eastern Europe, Hebrew-Aramaic bilingualism was supplanted by Hebrew-Yiddish, with the two languages fulfilling a similar functional division.

The full complexity of Jewish multilingualism developed in the Diaspora. Jewish languages (Yiddish, Hebrew, Aramaic) were used alongside local dialects, on the one hand, and the majority language and language of power, on the other. To further complicate the picture, migrating Jews shifted from the language of their old country to the language of the new one. The four-language dictionary of Elye Bokher (Elias Levita), reflected his origins and his two homelands: he moved from Germany to Rome and Venice; became a teacher to cardinals, wrote a grammar and versification treatise in Hebrew, and composed epic romances in *ottava rima* in Yiddish.

The Jewish Diaspora was unprecedented in its preservation of a community throughout history, in spite of migration, assimilation, and repeated expulsions. In every new language territory, the second generation adopted the new, non-Jewish language, but kept traces of the previous one. The so-called “Jewish languages” (Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Greek, Judeo-German) that Jews spoke among themselves for generations were marked variants of the dominant language. The new formation was marked as a Jewish language in several respects: (1) it preserved some expressions of the earlier language, for example, the retention in German-based Yiddish of Romance words (*kreplakh*, *cholent*) and names (Yentl from Gentilla); (2) it included some Jewish cultural markers (in the same way as Jews speaking English retained references to biblical tradition, Hebrew poetry, and Jewish cuisine, as well as Yiddish words and the semantics of Yiddish proverbs); (3) it assimilated only part of the scope of the new language; and (4) it was written in the Hebrew alphabet.

That the Jews did not disappear in history may be partly due to their retention of their holy language, Hebrew, for written communication, a choice that kept Hebrew unaffected by spoken, external, and changeable vehicles. This split of communication vehicles according to media type contributed to

the preservation of the “Holy Tongue” (Hebrew and Aramaic) throughout the ages. The written vehicle originates in a complex and detailed network of religious beliefs and behavior that has its basis in a library of texts and commentaries, studied in a mandatory system of schooling. The spoken vehicle, however, absorbed cultural elements from the surrounding languages, folklore, and verbal behavior. This was not an accidental but an essential multilingualism that enabled the functioning of the Jews in a bifurcated existential situation.

Three Multilingualisms. The languages known to Eastern European Jewry were of three kinds: internal languages, external languages, and the internalized multilingualism of Yiddish.

Internal Multilingualism. The autonomous stratification of Jewish social institutions within the larger state was implemented in Ashkenaz in three internal languages, all written in the Hebrew alphabet: Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic. Yosef Klausner, a leader of the modern revival of Hebrew, maintained that Hebrew is not one language but four: Biblical, Mishnaic, Tibbonite (the Hebrew of the medieval translators of Arabic philosophy), and Modern. These Hebrew “languages” appeared in history in spurts, as isolated developments without the continuity of a spoken language. Jewish Aramaic was also at least three languages: (1) variants of classical Aramaic in the Bible and Bible translations; (2) the colloquial Aramaic of Talmudic discourse; (3) the artificial medieval Aramaic of the thirteenth-century Zohar (the classical book of the Kabbalah) and shorter texts. Aramaic was the Yiddish of an earlier millennium; it mediated between the spoken and the written world. With its demise as a spoken language among Jews, it was sanctioned as part of the Holy Tongue. Yiddish never achieved this status in print, but compensated for it in the educational process. Study was conducted in Yiddish dialogue discussing the Aramaic dialogue about the Hebrew monologues of the Bible.

From the position of Yiddish, all the historical variants of Hebrew and Aramaic are one language, *loshn-koydesh* (the Holy Tongue). Many factors cause this unity: the unique correlation of nation and religion; the validity of all variants as arbiters of both daily life and theology; their unifying Hebrew alphabet, separate from all neighboring writing systems; and the scholarly settings in which texts in all those languages were discussed as one continuum. On one page of the Talmud one encounters separate texts in biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, Ashkenazic Rabbinical Hebrew, classical Aramaic and Talmudic dialogical Aramaic, all organized as a highly controlled, graphically deployed and canonized mosaic. On a stratified page of a latter-day family Torah, one encounters biblical Hebrew, two Aramaic translations, the Rabbinical Hebrew of the major commentaries, and Yiddish translations of both the Bible and commentaries. Nevertheless, since the components of the Holy Tongue were not spoken, they kept their independence in writing, as separate genres of discourse. Aramaic was much

quoted in Yiddish, but rarely written in independent sentences and texts. Books, correspondence, community chronicles and legal proceedings were written in a Hebrew framework, with embedded Yiddish and Aramaic phrases. In some realistic Hebrew fiction in Revival period, Aramaic represented the spoken language of the characters. Yiddish realistic prose used a synthetic language, including many Aramaic expressions alongside European imports.

Selected chapters of the Torah and prayers were studied in heder, the elementary school, mandatory for all boys from the age three or four until bar mitzvah at 13. Aramaic, more difficult, was studied by teenage boys in yeshivas, the elite academies that produced certified rabbis for hundreds of communities and became the breeding ground of modern, secular Hebrew literature.

External Multilingualism. In the Middle Ages Jewish populations concentrated in Poland and Lithuania, in parts of Italy, in some German towns, and in the Ottoman empire. Few in numbers, Jews were outsiders. They kept their internal languages in writing and acquired to various degrees the spoken dialects of their neighbors as well as the “King’s language” of the state. As few medieval Jews read the Latin alphabet, they needed to write German texts in Hebrew letters.

In the nineteenth century, in the Russian “Pale of Settlement,” most Jews did not live among Russians but among speakers of local dialects or minority languages. Jews were exposed to Belorussian and Ukrainian, Polish, Russian and German. This situation encouraged the preservation of their own spoken language, Yiddish. It also required broad external competence: living on the interstices of languages and nations, Jews could communicate using Low forms (the colloquial language) as well as High (the language of power and culture). While their knowledge of those languages was incomplete and primarily oral, they nevertheless had a foothold in several languages, conspicuously belonging to several language families.

Yiddish as Internalized Multilingualism. According to the great historian of the Yiddish language, Max Weinreich, Yiddish was born in the Carolingian empire at the end of the first millennium. Indeed, from a Yiddishist ideological position in the twentieth century, there is one continuum of a spoken language going back to the tenth century.

When Jews settled in Slavic territories, in a language environment that was not similar to Yiddish, they preserved the language for many generations. The earliest Yiddish texts in Poland are from the sixteenth century. It stands to reason that Jews who lived in Slavic lands before this spoke Slavic languages, Czech or [proto-]Ukrainian. The syntax and vocabulary of Yiddish carry a Slavic impact to this day.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a unique phenomenon in Jewish history occurred: the Jews became a majority on a polka-dotted map covering the vast territories of the Russian Pale of Settlement and the

Austro-Hungarian Empire. Of course, in absolute numbers the majority population in the Pale were peasants, but the peasants were serfs, bound to their villages until 1861. Mobile, well connected through trade networks, and full of initiative, Jews constituted as much as two-thirds of the population of all towns and often a third or half of the population of cities. They built and owned most of the local small industries and banks, and dominated local and international trade. The Yiddish language served as the communication network of this nation. Its Russian and German components were a natural bridge both to the language of power, Russian (earlier, Polish), and to the languages of culture, Russian and German.

As Max Weinreich argued, Yiddish is fusion language: it uses components of several languages and melts them in one linguistic system. Thus, *shlimezalnik* (an unfortunate person) is composed of three elements: *schlim* + *mazl* + *nik* (German + Hebrew + Russian) and the general European “doctor” gets a Hebrew plural: *doktoyrim*. But this fusion is not as complete as an independent Yiddish ideology would have liked. Americans hardly pay attention to whether an English word comes from one source or another, whether *legal* and *loyal* are from Latin and French, *nation* is French, and *right* is Anglo-Saxon, or vice versa. But in Yiddish there is high consciousness of the component languages and the literature uses their differences for stylistic purposes. Yiddish speakers lived in a Hebrew library among Slavs and were also close to Germany. Because the fusion is incomplete, the different components of the language often behave according to the grammars of Hebrew, Slavic, and German. Thus, the Hebrew-origin word *mokem* (place, city) has a Hebrew plural form *mekoymes* (rather than the Yiddish plural, which would be *mokems*). Unlike English, in which the process of fusion was completed, Yiddish never had strict boundaries. While Yiddish is to some extent a language of fusion, it is also an open language; its speakers can easily roam in the reservoirs of the Holy Tongue, or turn to German, Polish, or Russian and bring in whatever concept is needed at the moment. People of learning will use more expressions from the Holy Tongue, acculturated Europeans will use more German; there is more German in the Yiddish of Łódź or Silesia and more Slavic expressions in that of Ukraine. Yiddish has a core, common to all its users, a wider circle of component-conscious words, and an open frontier into its component languages (see diagram in Harshav, 1999, p. 50).

Yiddish is by nature a multilingual language and its speakers are by definition multilingual (as poor as their grammar in other languages may be). The open borders of Yiddish, which allowed a massive influx of words from all its component languages and the modernization of the language in the modern age, also served as a bridge in the other direction. Yiddish speakers could easily adapt to speaking German (Yiddish minus Hebrew and Slavic words) and Yiddish speakers revived modern Hebrew. Thus Yiddish was the

bridge between the internal tradition and European culture, between internal and external multilingualism.

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