



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“You want I should make research
Yiddish syntax in the English Language”
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About 120 years ago, millions of Jews, fleeing the pogroms and political upheavals of Eastern Europe, arrived in the New World. They came from different backgrounds, had different customs, and ate different foods. However, they had one thing in common: their language. Before 1948, Yiddish was the Lingua Franca of Jews from Vilna to Bialystok to Warsaw to New York to Buenos Aires and beyond. Of course, in all of these places, the Jews had to speak the local language as well as Yiddish, and in places like Vilna they might have had to speak many or all of: 2 dialects of Yiddish, Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian.

In *di fareynikte shtatn*, the United States, the immigrants had to learn a new national language, *English*. They were fast studies, but they learned this new language in the way most immigrants do: from other immigrants. They learned to speak English in a way that later became the classic “Jewish” way to speak. In other words, they spoke English as if it was Yiddish. This dialect of English, and it is a dialect of English, is the subject of this paper.

I should add, of course, that real, every-day Yiddish is not dead. In Hasidic communities in the United States, Israel, and elsewhere, and in many Yeshivas, Yiddish is still the language of daily life. But in most places, most of the time, Yiddish is neither spoken nor understood as a vernacular.

But first, an important disclaimer: the lovable and wonderful Yiddish accent, much more noticeable than the word order, is **not** what I will be talking about. When I quote someone saying something like “we took us an apartment,” I am noticing that most first language English speakers would not emphasize the verb “to take” by using the reflexive “we took us,” and I am warning you now that I will not even mention again the fact that the whole sentence was said in a cheery Polish Yiddish accent reminiscent of very tasty latkes.

I know what you’re asking yourselves: Why? Of all things, why the speech patterns of English when spoken by former Yiddish speakers? The answer is quite simple.

When I first started thinking about my bar-mitzvah, I remembered that another student had learned Modern Hebrew as part of the bar/bat-mitzvah process, and for a while I considered doing this myself. But then a thought struck me: Why Hebrew? Hebrew, a language to which I had no connection. Why not, I thought, learn Yiddish, the language that my family had spoken in the old country, the language that was truly the language of my heritage.

When I first started learning Yiddish, I was confronted with a serious problem: What order should I put the words in? If you have never studied a foreign language, you may not understand how much difference it makes. Here, as an example, is the sentence “Are you hungry,” compared with another sentence that uses the same words: “You are hungry.” An even better example is the difference between “The cat ate the mouse” and “The mouse ate the cat.” But when I concentrated, I felt like I had

heard the Yiddish word order somewhere before: *di alte yidn*, the elderly Jews, spoke English the same way I was learning to speak Yiddish.

And so I decided to look into the speech patterns of the first Yiddish speaker I could think of, my great-great-aunt Blima, who was born in Bizoin, Poland, in 1917 and came to this country in the late 30s. She speaks English, Yiddish, and a little Polish. Luckily, I had already interviewed her about family history, and had recorded the interview, so I just had to find the tapes and transcribe them verbatim. Having done this, I noted several sentences which were, although clear and understandable, not colloquially normal. I took these sentences to my Yiddish tutor, Joe Dobkin, and he helped me figure out which sentences were correct in Yiddish and which ones were probably just ordinary mistakes. By the time I finished I was amazed at how much of what she said was word-for-word translation from Yiddish, even some things that I hadn't even noticed as unusual earlier because I was used to them.

One of the most striking things about Blima's use of English was preposition use. Yiddish has several prepositions, but most of them can be replaced by 3 of them, namely *fun*, *far*, and *bay*, roughly translated as from, for, and for the cause of or in the opinion of. To take an example familiar to everybody, the now-common English phrase "OK by me" is a direct translation from the Yiddish *gut bay mir* and conveys the meaning of *bay* fairly accurately. A good example of this from my transcript of Blima's interview is the sentence "I was the youngest from all of them." In standard English most people would say "I was the youngest **of** all of them." In Yiddish however, *of* and *from* are the same word.

Another interesting thing is word order: "We told them not to come back 'till with God's help we come all to America" seems fine until we come to the last part, "we come all." This demonstrates one of the most interesting rules of Yiddish syntax: in any clause, the verb must be the second element. What this means is that in Yiddish it would be incorrect to say "we all come" because the verb is the third element. Blima is making the common mistake of using an important Yiddish concept when speaking English.

But one important question remained: was this a personal oddity of Blima's, or was it really a trend that could be found in many former Yiddish-speakers? It seemed simple enough to find out. I would simply find interviews and transcripts that somebody else had compiled and analyze them. But there were two things that made it harder.

The first of these difficulties is that Yiddish was spoken very differently in different places. Until about 1800, there were 4 main dialects of Yiddish: Western, *poylish*, *galitsianer*, and *litvish*, which were spoken in Germany, Poland, Galicia, and Lithuania, respectively. The Western dialect slowly died out. In 1925, an organization called YIVO was founded in Vilna, now Vilnius, Lithuania. It moved to New York City after WWII. From its founding it tried to establish a standard dialect, *klal shprakh*, which was a sort of scholarly blend. I decided to use only Polish Jews for my study, in order to make it more uniform.

The second, much harder difficulty is that there simply isn't that much material available. Remember, I needed the recorded voices or verbatim transcripts of former speakers of Polish Yiddish. Lorin Sklamberg, the sound archivist at YIVO showed me transcripts of "Voices of the Shoah: Remembrances of the Holocaust," which includes interviews with Holocaust survivors. I copied the pages with Polish Jews on them, and, after thanking Lorin Sklamberg, I went back to school. For the next few weeks, I searched through about 20 pages of Polish Jewish interviews, and brought a page or two of sentences to my Yiddish tutor, Joe Dobkin.

The sentences with Yiddish word order were all the same structure I had noticed in Blima's speech: "I was six weeks in Auschwitz." "They bombed 2 miles away the I.G. Farben Company." Although they stem from different rules of Yiddish syntax, these and Blima's are the same in that they are literal, word-for-word translations of Yiddish.

The use of present tense in a past tense sentence is a little more complicated. Consider the sentence "They didn't even know us, but they knew we *are* Jews." The use of the present tense word "are" after the past tense "knew" reflects the Yiddish rule that present tense be used after such verbs as "know," "say," or others, even when they appear in past tense.

But the most common Yiddishism was the use of an extra pronoun. For example, in the sentence "The Poles, they could smell a Jew from a mile away," the word "they" would probably be left out in standard English. In Yiddish, however, it simply adds color and emphasis to an otherwise neutral sentence. When he says "The Poles, they," the speaker emphasizes the role of the Poles by essentially repeating them. Or how about "Any injustice, it hurts us"? Once again, the injustice is considered the most important part of the sentence.

Of course I found other Yiddishisms, which were interesting even though they did not show up very much. For example the much-used and -loved "should," as in "they want we should go on the march." This is called the subjunctive case in Latin and Spanish, where it has a different conjugation. In Yiddish, it is represented by "should."

I also noticed what one might call "plural trouble" in several sentences. In Yiddish one can say "there is" instead of "there are", with the result that one finds sentences like "But there was about 700 or 800 people."

For an example of the way Yiddish can affect English, consider the joke in which an elderly Jewish couple, on their way to a vacation, get into an argument about the correct pronunciation of the island they are to visit: he was sure it was Havaii, but she maintained it was Hawaii.

As soon as they get off the plane, they run over to the first person they see. "Hi there," says the husband. "Would you mind telling me how you pronounce the name of this island?"

"Havaii"

"Thank you"

"You're velcome"

One other source I used was Art Spiegelman's Maus, which contains quotations of his father, Vladek Spiegelman, who was born in Czestochowa, Poland. His Yiddishisms remind me of Blima's, with sentences like "How is going the comics business?" and "I visited a couple of times to her." Once or twice he forgets to change an adjective to an adverb (there is no difference in Yiddish), like in the sentence "She [...] held *strong* my legs." This is a slightly complicated sentence, so let's break it down Yiddishism by Yiddishism: First, of course, is word order; I would use "She held my legs strong." Then there's the adjective/adverb thing: "She held my legs strongly." And perhaps "strongly" is not as accurate as "firmly:" "She held my legs firmly."

And so, with the help of my mentor, Richard Mann, Lorin Sklamberg at YIVO, and Joseph Dobkin my Yiddish tutor, I made a discovery about the English spoken by former Polish Yiddish speakers. But I also discovered something more important: I discovered an entire community. I learned a lot, but I also met an enormous number of people with similar interests.

Yiddish, as I had not previously known, is not just a language. Yiddish is a community of intellectuals, professionals, amateurs, klezmer musicians, linguists who happened to wander in and found themselves unable to leave, and native speaking immigrants. One might well say that by studying Yiddish and by going to some of the social gatherings, one enters another world. The setting itself might be a room one has been in hundreds of times, and yet when that room is temporarily inhabited by the Yiddish Revival community, it feels entirely new. I had spent months trying to explain to people what I was trying to do and why it was relevant, and almost no one understood. But when I walked into the publishing party for Jeffrey Shandler's new book, Adventures in Yiddishland, suddenly everyone could understand my ideas with only one or two sentences of introduction. Many people I talked to immediately told me their own opinions about the subject, and told me who else I should get in touch with.

One of the first people in the Yiddish world who I was able to talk to was Alicia Svigals, a klezmer violinist who founded The Klezmatics and will be playing at my party. We talked over the phone about her theories of the way Yiddish affects English speech. What she had noticed was more about the way 3rd or 4th generation descendants of Yiddish speakers speak. One of the most interesting things she had noticed was that Yiddish, whether in the form of Yiddish-structured English or in the form of Yiddish words used in an otherwise English sentence, is usually used to tell a joke, to emphasize something, or to talk about something political. Plenty of people who say "Nu? What do you think about the war?" would never think of saying "Nu? Did you go to the bank?"

I am reminded here of the joke in which four old Jewish men are sitting in a New York coffee house. After a few minutes' silence, the first man groans and says "Oy."

The second man nods: "Oy vey."

The third shrugs, saying "Nu?"

The fourth, angrily, shouts, "If you fellows don't stop talking politics, I'm leaving now!"

Yiddishisms occur when the speaker is thinking hard about the subject and has little mind left for syntax or vocabulary. People often use their first language when they concentrate.

Jeffrey Shandler, a professor of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University, wrote Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture, for which I attended the publishing party. His opinion is that because Yiddish is no longer a commonly spoken language, it has developed an important symbolic value.

Maybe Yiddish is still a way of making a connection. After all, I use Yiddish words with my Jewish friends to make a connection: if I say that a teacher is crazy, I mean just that. If I say that a teacher is *meshuge* then I am also saying that this is between me and you, let's talk about him behind his back.

The question I've been asked the most times throughout this project is quite a simple one: Why? Not just why am I doing this project, but why even this language. Of all the languages to learn, why should I learn Yiddish? Partly, of course, it's a matter of communication. You'd be surprised how nice it is to have a language in which I can talk to my grandparents without my parents understanding me. But there's another reason, something I only realized when I had been studying Yiddish for almost a month. When you really learn a language, you understand its people. For example, learning Spanish gives me a lot of insight into Spanish and Latin American culture. And in learning Yiddish, I am also learning about a culture, my own. I have become, in my own mind at least, more "Jewish." I can sense Yiddishisms. I can even sense *yidishkayt*, Jewishness. I feel closer to relatives like Blima. By learning Yiddish, I have learned more than I had ever hoped to learn about myself.