

Foreign lexical items in the lexicon of modern Yiddish

Yiddish, the traditional language of the Ashkenazic Jewry, has long been spoken as a minority language in most of the Central and Eastern Europe without much official recognition, let alone regulation, and as such has been in constant intensive contact with the languages of majority, hence it is no surprise that its lexicon consists of several major elements. Besides various German dialects that have contributed to the core High Germanic component, Slavic languages have also left a significant mark. Outside of this, for cultural reasons, there was also a strong influence from within the group of speakers of Yiddish that has led to the creation of the Semitic component consisting of loans from Hebrew and Aramaic.

Throughout the years, there have been several rather narrowly focused articles on elements belonging to the Slavic component, how they came to be and how they got adapted (see e.g. Swoboda 1980 or Wexler 1980), but the question of how sizeable the components really are has mostly remained in estimates of 70-20-10 to 85-12-3 percent for Germanic, Semitic, and Slavic component respectively (Jacobs 1994) with the exception of Mark (1954) who, in his survey focused on the Hebrew element, came to the surprisingly low number of 5.38 %. This fluctuation is, understandably, to be expected depending on the nature and origin of the text analyzed.

In the proposed presentation, I will present the data gathered and examined during research in progress where I analyze entries from modern dictionary and text resources of secular nature. The main objective of my investigation is to provide more precise proportions of foreign components in the general lexicon of modern Yiddish by their origin and then to further describe the loanwords in terms of their links to specific semantic fields and level of incorporation into the grammatical system. The reason why I believe this approach will work better now than ever is for three reasons: 1) the YIVO standardization of the literary language, despite being a matter of controversy, has to at least a certain extent, caught on, 2) the new comprehensive dictionaries should provide each of those foreign components in an extent that reflects real stabilized usage in the written language while eliminating possible ad hoc loans among bilingual speakers & 3) the internet in combination with an influx of new learners of Yiddish basing their knowledge on the resources from the two previous points provides a place for dialect leveling in terms of vocabulary at least in the written language.

References

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