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## Diachronic and Synchronic Aspects — “Translatability”

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### Article abstract

On traite des emprunts au yiddish dans l'anglais américain. Les circonstances entourant ces emprunts sont évoquées, puis les types d'emprunts ou de transferts (lexical, syntaxique, phonologique, etc.) sont décrits. De nombreux exemples sont présentés. On étudie ensuite le transfert prosodique ainsi que les autres phénomènes paralinguistiques. L'article se termine par une réflexion sur les problèmes et les répercussions du phénomène de l'emprunt.

# AFFECTIVE BORROWING FROM YIDDISH IN COLLOQUIAL AMERICAN ENGLISH

Diachronic and Synchronic Aspects — and “Translatability”

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## **Résumé**

*On traite des emprunts au yiddish dans l'anglais américain. Les circonstances entourant ces emprunts sont évoquées, puis les types d'emprunts ou de transferts (lexical, syntaxique, phonologique, etc.) sont décrits. De nombreux exemples sont présentés. On étudie ensuite le transfert prosodique ainsi que les autres phénomènes paralinguistiques. L'article se termine par une réflexion sur les problèmes et les répercussions du phénomène de l'emprunt.*

In his October 7, 1990 column “on Language”, appearing in the *New York Times Magazine*, William Safire quoted Representative Les Aspin of the US Congress as having accused the Secretary of the Treasurer and the Secretary of State of “shnorring” for funds. This illustrates dramatically the extent to which Yiddishisms have penetrated informal American English discourse. On December 24, 1986 a television commentator described Voyager’s flight as having transpired without “glitches”. Canadian English as well has come to include Yiddish loans in relaxed styles, and high government officials may be heard utilizing it in radio and TV interviews.

The fascination with Yiddishisms in informal registers of American English particularly, is all the more interesting to students of language contact when they realize that borrowings from the hundred or so immigrant languages here are fairly infrequent, save for some from German, French, Spanish and to some extent Italian. In addition, Yiddish was until fairly recently not regarded as prestigious, and some of its own speakers may still be heard to declare that it is not even a language but rather a grammarless “jargon”. Our purpose here is to examine English-Yiddish borrowing both diachronically and synchronically from a sociolinguistic viewpoint.

First of all, it is important to note that the English-Yiddish case does not correspond to classical contact situations, in which two languages, spoken by roughly the same number of persons, are in competition. The Jewish group makes up less than three percent of the US population — some 5,700,000 souls in all. Most of these are second and third generation descendants of Yiddish speakers from Central and Eastern Europe, who were generally bilingual in Yiddish and the host language, be it Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Hungarian or some other tongue. The next largest group have been Jews from Germany, most of them dominant-German in speech. Finally, the Spanish and Portuguese Jews migrated to America from the Balkans and elsewhere, where their descendants had fled after expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492. The latter are called Sephardim, in contrast to the first two groups, known as Ashkenazim, with whom we are in this study dealing.

By now most of the American Jewish population is English-dominant, although a number of *Yiddishist* families strive hard for maintenance of the ancestral language in the

family (and often, neighborhood), while the ultra-Orthodox, including the Chassidic groups such as the Lubavitscher, also maintain Yiddish as the principal tongue. For all the groups mentioned, of course, Hebrew serves as the language of ritual and religion.

Yiddish itself began to develop almost a millenium ago, as Jews left German-speaking lands, mostly at the invitation of Slavic monarchs and princes who were interested in their ability to develop industry and commerce. For the most part, the structure and lexicon of Yiddish reflects, however, Middle High German of the Frankfurt-Am-Main area. In addition, it shows heavy influence from Slavic languages in phonology, lexicon, syntax, and semantics, as well as from Hebrew, the language of ritual throughout the centuries. Throughout his book *Language in Contact*, Weinreich offers examples of loans in Yiddish from the many languages encountered by Jews in their endless peregrinations. It is, with little doubt, a contact language *par excellence*.

Borrowing from Yiddish on the part of English does not correspond very well either to Bloomfield's *cultural* and *intimate* borrowing (1946: 1-2), nor indeed to most other categorizations to be found in the extensive literature on the loan process. What distinguishes it particularly is that it does not occur in order to fill gaps, as with scientific-technological innovations, in what Bloomfield termed *intimate borrowing*, nor does it follow an "upper" to "lower" trajectory with "secondary" languages borrowing from the "dominant" one, or English. Loans from Yiddish, on the contrary, are utilized to add a certain effect, or better, affect, to the discourse, including humor of various types, impudence, derision, hyperbole, diminution, daring. There is, in other words, a striving for a sort of *shock effect*, and by now a kind of urban/suburban "chic" attached to the use of Yiddishisms. In his recent book, *Yiddish and English* (1984: 2), lexicographer and linguist Steinmetz has this to say:

*English slang, however, is an area of language that is in constant need of fresh forms to replace old forms that have become standard or obsolete, and Yiddish loans seem to fill this particular need eminently in slangy or informal American speech.*

I have previously introduced the term *affective borrowing* for one in which the process aims at "affect" rather than the filling of gaps in terminology for cultural innovations (Ornstein 1983). This, it would appear, corresponds more closely to the situation being discussed here. One might add to the above that the "lower" to "higher" trajectory (no ethnic slurs intended) is not new in the annals of language contact. Numerous languages have borrowed from the speech of stigmatized social and occupational groups, as well as from the argot and cant of the underworld, and speakers of specialized slang of different sorts. The writings of Partridge, Mencken, Maurer, Wentworth and Flexner, to name a few, need no introduction here. In the last two decades, another ethnic dialect, Black English, has also become a popular borrowing source.

#### ENGLISH-YIDDISH BORROWING IN ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Although there is considerable overlap, it appears helpful to regard American English borrowing from Yiddish in two periods, the Early and the Recent.

**Early Period** — occasional Hebraisms crept into English and other European languages in the sixteenth century, and even earlier. The best-known of these was *ganef thief*, *rascal*, which appears, together with some other Hebraisms, in *Liber Vagatorum*, or *The Rogues' Book* printed in German in Augsburg. At any rate, evidence exists that this term, and some others, reached English indirectly from *Rotwelsch*, or underworld slang.

Borrowing from Yiddish, however, did not begin in earnest until the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, a very large immigration from Germany, both Gentile and Jewish, had taken place earlier in the century (continuing through successive waves of immigration).

According to Steinmetz, a trickle of words entered English on both sides of the Atlantic. These included terms like *kosher ritually clean, proper*, and its antonym *tref not kosher, improper*, *Rosh Ha-Shanah New Year*, *Yom Kippur Day of Atonement*, *meshuge crazy*, *mezuma money, cash*, as well as *shekels money, coins*, and *tokhes buttocks, backside*. Steinmetz opines that these could have come, at least in part, through Gentile Germans using colloquial Yiddishisms. He points out that all these terms were known to German schoolmasters in Baltimore in the late nineteenth century. In addition, he correctly points out that Yiddishisms are part of the colloquial stock of both German and Dutch (Steinmetz 42-43).

It was not, however, until after 1880, as Steinmetz notes, that *seminal contact* began to occur between Yiddish and English. The bloody pogroms instigated by Czar Alexander III in Russia, as well as similar events in Rumania, forced tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants to stream into the United States, and New York's Lower East Side emerged as a center of Yiddish language and culture, as did the East End of London. Steinmetz comments, "Yiddish words mixed with English became a familiar sound to New Yorkers and Londoners alike" (p. 44).

During the 1890's the Anglo-Jewish writer Israel Zangwill produced a number of books and plays dealing with life in London's East End, although George Eliot's literary hit about Zionism, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), had appeared earlier. It took longer before the first novels appeared in the United States on Jewish themes. Apparently the first of these was *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), written by Abraham Cahan, editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. A host of writers, both Jewish and Gentile, produced works which helped to make Yiddish language and culture better known. These included: Sinclair Lewis, Edna Ferber, Ben Hecht, Ludwig Lewisohn, and subsequently, Meyer Levin, Jerome Weidman, Irwin Shaw, Saul Bellow, Chaim Potok, E.L. Doctorow, Herman Wouk, as well as translations of such writers as Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Jewish-American humorists have also done much to popularize Yiddishisms. Among these are Milt Gross, Lenny Bruce, Sam Levenson, Jack Benny, Harry Golden, George Burns, Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Woody Allen, and others (Steinmetz 49).

The popular writings of H.L. Mencken contributed greatly to make Yiddishisms better known, as well as to chronicle and record these. A number of editions of his *American Language* appeared, as well as second Supplements. Mencken received much of his information on ethnic language contributions to English from editors of immigrant language publications. For Yiddish, it was Abraham Cahan, who supplied him with much of the data.

Mencken strove mightily to identify the exact vocational and social domains from which neologisms presumably came. He ascribed to the Prohibition Period of the 1920's such terms as *ganef* (apparently re-borrowed several times), and *meshuge crazy*, *kosher reliable*, *Yentz to cheat, screw*, (*<yentzen to have intercourse*). He was well aware of the role of the workplace as a powerful transmitter of new terms. One of the most important of these was the garment industry, located in the Lower East Side. Although frankly sweatshops in most cases, Jewish immigrants, a number of whom already had skills in this area, could secure employment there, no matter how unpleasant the surroundings. At any rate, for instance, Mencken (1948: 754) identifies *shmus* (also *shmoose, shmooze*) to *chat* as originating in the needle trades domain, and defines it as "Idling Around and Talking Shop". By now the meaning has been generalized (and may have previously been more so than Mencken realized), as merely signifying to *chat*. Regarding the immensely popular *shlep* (also *schlepp*), to *drag*, he indicates that it originated with Installment House Salesman talk, and glosses it as *to move furniture around* (Mencken 1948: 757). At present, the term is quite generalized in the sense of *to drag*, and is widely used in

such combinations as *to shlep around*, meaning *to run around*, in a manner connoting unwanted activity which requires considerable effort. By semantic extension also, *shlep* is utilized as a noun to indicate a person or an undertaking colloquially referred to as a *drag*. Other workplace areas touched upon by Mencken embrace a wide range of retailing activities, including peddling, from which Yiddishisms passed to English.

The field of entertainment has almost from the beginning of immigration been one in which many Jewish people have been involved. This ranged from vaudeville, stand-up comedy, to humorous roles on stage and screen. It is from this domain that a plethora of racy Yiddishisms have entered English.

**Recent Period** — the World War II experience had brought into close contact Americans of the most varied backgrounds. In the 1960's, Civil Rights drives and changed social atmosphere brought a strong interest in the search for roots and the new concept of "ethnicity". Ethnics, tired of suppressing their individuality in the presumed "Melting Pot", came out of the closet, so to speak. It was, to employ Fishman's term, a period of *reethnification*. Jewish-Americans and other hyphenated ethnics now began to have access to vocations and pursuits from which they had been subtly or otherwise excluded.

The workplace generated a new stream of Yiddishisms, or reinforced others previously introduced, but hardly integrated. Heavier Jewish involvement in the field of communications, including the print and spoken media, and public relations, insured a flow of Yiddish neologisms.

At the same time, Steinmetz suggests that the Yiddish loan process had been "drying up" somewhat during the 1940's, when over 200,000 new Jewish immigrants, among the post World War II "displaced persons", or D.P.'s, began to arrive on these shores. Usually well educated, they were also interested in preserving Jewish religion and other aspects of the ancestral culture.

The Yiddishisms that one may associate with the Recent Period include such terms as *zafrik plump*, *buxom*, *curvaceous*, *nash snack*, *bite*, the very popular *chutzpah* (more properly *khutspe*), and *maven* (more properly, *meyvn*), or expert. In its original Hebrew, *khutzpah* had only the negative sense of *gall*, *nerve*, but by semantic extension it has acquired the positive connotations of *daring*, *brass*, *fortitude*. In their study on language contact in Mesoamerica, Campbell, Kaufman and Smith-Stark (1986: 530-570) bring evidence from a number of situations that semantic shift is most likely to take place in the secondary or "subordinate" language. This is also well supported by the contact situation in the US Southwest, where Chicano Spanish, as a secondary (although often numerically greater) language, reflects numerous shifts. For instance, the standard Spanish *vibora viper* has been extended to mean any sort of reptile, and particularly *snake*; the standard Spanish *averigüarz* to *find out*, *investigate*, has shifted to *to argue*.

A prime example of shifts is extension to verbal function of *bar mitzvah* (more properly *bar mitsve*), *confirmation of Jewish boy at age 13*, in such a statement as "He was *bar mitzvahed* last week." Analogically, *bat mitzvah* (or its Yiddish equivalent, *bas mitzvah*), *confirmation of a Jewish girl*, a custom originating in America, produces a similar usage and extension, as in "She was *bat mitzvahed* two years ago."

Semantic shift appears to be an ongoing process, particularly in conditions of longtime language contact. For example, the German *schmuck ornament* developed in Yiddish into the scatological term for *male organ*, and figuratively to *jerk*, accompanied by a shift of the vowel /u/ in German to Yiddish /ə/. Thus this taboo word is pronounced /shmök/. Third generation Jews and non-Jews are often unaware of the scatological sense of this and other terms.

Steinmetz notes in this period a tendency to take liberties with morphosyntax and to utilize loans in functions proscribed or uncommon in the donor language. He also

perceives an increased use of loan blends or hybrid loans. As he indicates also, the advertising industry became aware of the popularity of Yiddishisms and proceeded to use them widely in advertising (p. 57). He lists such examples as *Kosher Nostra*, the name of a restaurant, and reference to Woody Allen, by a writer for *Book Digest*, as *sly shleprecaun*. Blends, of course, thrive over an extended period of bilingual contact, and are often contrived on the spot by bilingual persons, seeking jocular effect, and to display their own inventiveness. This area has been exhaustively mined by such popular writers as Rosten, Spalding, journalists like Safire, and understandably, by comedians of all sorts.

From the linguistic point of view, it should be noted that the genealogical affiliation of Yiddish with English as a Germanic language is one of the factors favoring acceptance and use of Yiddishism. On the phonemic level, there are only two consonants not present in English. The first of these is the velar fricative /kh/, which is resolved in loanwords by realizing this as either /h/ or /k/. The other is /r/, rendered in Yiddish as either an apical or uvular trill, depending upon dialect. In Jewish English, this is resolved in most cases by recourse to American English retroflex *r*, as is also done with Yiddishisms in English. Vowels, as often occurs, are more complex. Yiddish simple vowels are rendered in Jewish English and loans often with a glide, as in *kosher* realized as /kowshər/. In unstressed position, both languages converge, in realizing vowels frequently as *shwa*, as in *ganef* /ganəf/.

Yiddish is written in Hebrew characters, and there is considerable dialectal variation in American Yiddish speakers, depending on the place of origin of those immigrating here — two of the reasons that Yiddishisms are rendered in often confusing ways. I have often attempted to figure out a new word unknown to me in reading some journal, only to realize that it was merely an outlandish spelling of a Jewish Yiddish neologism. In general, there are two main dialects of Yiddish, the Eastern (including Polish, Ukrainian, Rumanian, Hungarian) and the Northeastern (including Lithuanian, Latvian, Byelorussian). As most speakers are descendants of those coming from Eastern areas, those approximations of that dialect appear to predominate. As an example, one may take the word for *trouble* realized as *tsore* in the Northeastern and *tsure* in the Eastern variety. Nevertheless, English spellings of Yiddishisms are quite chaotic, with, for example, *hanuke* rendered as *khanuka*, *hanukah*, *hanuka*, *hanukah*, *chanuka*, *chanukah*, and so forth. Confusion is compounded, moreover, as those who attempt to write Yiddishisms follow their impressionistic notions of how these ought to be spelled. Few Yiddish words end in any vowel but *shwa*, but Steinmetz notes an alternate pronunciation for final *shwa* in Yiddish loans has developed. This is /i/, according to him, under influence of the English diminutive *y* (as in *Daddy*), *veggies vegetables*, so that one hears /zeydi/ instead of /zeydə/ *grandfather*. One may also observe, for /yent/, *female gossip monger*, and *shiksa* (for shiksə) *Gentile girl*, a less frequent pattern. In response to this orthographic chaos, therefore, the YIVO has devised the American National Romanization of Yiddish system, followed by Steinmetz and other scholars, and which I have mostly adhered to here, except for some items in which usage has “consecrated” certain spellings.

#### THE CONTEXTS OF BORROWING

The emphasis in this section is on the varying types of borrowings or transfers, to use Clyne’s terminology (1972: 8ff.), from Yiddish found in American (and to some extent, British) English, be they lexical, syntactic, phonological, or otherwise. In the previous section, concern was mainly with the circumstances of the loan process.

The literature on the loan process is little short of staggering, particularly as it affects the lexicon. Despite this, perhaps the most difficult theoretical problem is that of determining the extent of integration of a loan taken from another language. Both

Hasselmo (1969) and Mackey (1970) have recourse to measurement techniques for assessing integration, based on acceptability, and translatability, as assessed by their subjects or consultants.

Weinreich (1953: 64-65) presents an elaborate tabular scheme of the possible types of interference (his term for borrowing), divided into phonic, grammatical (morphological and syntactic) and lexical areas. Clyne (1967: 217-225) utilizes the Prague School dichotomy of *center vs periphery* of the recipient languages, and sets up a scale of 0-100% to measure integration of English loans or transfers in Australian immigrant German.

Finally, it is not accidental that the fascination with Yiddishisms has not only resulted in their expanded use in varying grammatical and syntactic ways, but also in a plethora of writings on Yiddish and Yiddishisms. A best seller, in the Recent Period, has been Leo Rosten's *The Joy of Yiddish* (1968), followed by his *Rosten's Treasury of Jewish Quotations* (1972) and *Hooray for Yiddish* (1982). A number of other popularizations, of varying merit, followed this, as a sort of vogue was established. A series of articles and a book *The Taste of Yiddish* (1980) by Lilian Feinsilver, have been of special value from the lexicographic viewpoint. A number of writings by the late Max and Uriel Weinreich, father and son, must be considered seminal from the linguistic viewpoint, and the extensive publications on Yiddish by Joshua Fishman, as, for example, his *Never Say Die: An Introduction to the Sociology of Yiddish* (1982), provide insight and interpretations for the sociolinguistics of the language. Likewise, the journal *Yidishe Shprakh* and other publications of the Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO) touch upon influences of Yiddish on other languages, and vice versa. David Gold, editor of the *Jewish Language Review*, at the University of Haifa, Israel, deals with Yiddish lexicography and interrelations of all Jewish languages.

For our purposes here, I feel that Yiddish loans can be regarded in a three-way classification: 1) Non-integrated 2) Semi-integrated 3) Fully integrated. The first category would cover items utilized with moderate frequency, and perhaps discussed in such collections of Yiddishisms as Rosten's *The Joy of Yiddish*, in special "lexicons" such as Wentworth and Flexner's *Dictionary of American Slang*. In addition, these might appear in *American Speech* in its section "Among the New Words", in *Verbatim*, or discussed by such popular journalists as William Safire in the *New York Times Magazine* in his column "On Language", or finally, in the files of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE), at the University of Wisconsin. Here, under the direction of Frederick Cassidy, an investigation is in progress of the English spoken in 1,002 communities throughout the US, and the diffusion of Yiddishisms also receives attention<sup>5</sup>. The third category would cover items such as *kibitz*, or *shlemiel*, which are so widely diffused that they are readily understood by a majority of American English speakers. Here, it might be added, future research projects could follow the approach of submitting individual items to three judges or so for their reactions, or following the more elaborate system of "panels", utilized by the *American Heritage Dictionary*, combined with fluency counts based on representative spoken and written samples of American English. In any event, the Category three items might be in standard dictionaries, but there is no assurance of this. Frequency of usage, in my view, should be the main criterion. A diagram of the loan transmission process may be seen in Appendix A.

The following list of lexical items is meant, more than anything, to be illustrative of Yiddishisms of some currency. Most of the items would fall under the second category, as semi-integrated, and be followed by a smaller percentage in the third, or fully integrated category. Relatively few belong to the non-integrated group. Altogether, the list is representative, it appears to me, if we may use this terminology here, of the basic lexical stock of Yiddishisms in our language.

## BELIEFS REGARDING THE NON-TRANSLATABILITY OF YIDDISHISMS

Individuals who venture to discuss the “meanings” or “equivalents” of Yiddishisms current in English (or any other modern language) will inevitably encounter among native speakers firmly ingrained attitudes that most terms, especially those classifiable as idioms, are simply impossible to translate. From generation to generation, a belief has been transmitted that Yiddish is unique, and singularly difficult to render into English, French, or whatsoever target language.

When this writer has questioned Yiddish native speakers regarding this attitude, it mostly turns out that the latter feel that the experience of living as a Jew in countries predominantly non-Jewish, has endowed Yiddish with special semantic nuances that can only be rendered through gross approximations in the translation process. Unfortunately there have been, as far as this worker knows, no carefully controlled translation experiments which might shed light on the validity of this belief which belongs more than anything to para-language. Even such an interjection as “*Nu*”, borrowed from Polish (and Russian), more or less equivalent to “So” or “Well” is regarded as full of special nuances.

Perhaps one of the best and most succinct syntheses of such a belief, virtually a mystique, regarding Yiddish may be seen in the *New York Times* of February 17, 1975 in the item titled “Seminar Considers Whether Yiddish is Alive and Well and Living in the US”, by reporter Irving Spiegel (p. 19). The forum was indeed devoted to the question of whether Yiddish could be translated at all. Most participants asserted that this was all but impossible. Nevertheless, there were those like Prof. Ruth Wisse of McGill University, who held that, “while individual works of Yiddish literature could be converted into English and other idioms, *they may be about the Old World but they don’t transmit it — not the experience.*”

## CONTEXTS OF BORROWING FROM YIDDISH

Examples of Yiddish borrowings will here be given, from Lexicon, Syntax, Phonology and Discourse. The degree of integration varies, but most items, according to the criterion employed in this study, belong to categories two and three, that is, as being semi- or fully integrated into colloquial American English.

## LEXICON

**alrightnik** — parvenu, uppity immigrant

**ay, ay, ay** — my, my!, good

**bobkes** — very little, nothing, beans

**bubele, bubbele** — sweetheart, dear, my friend

**chutzpah, hutzpah** (more properly *khutspe*) — nerve, brass, impudence, aggressiveness, *guts*

**drek, dreck** (vulgarism) — junk, inferior goods or production Yid. *drek excrement*

**farblondzhet** — lost, mixed up

**farchadet** — confused

**fonfe** — to mutter, double-talk **fonfer** — one who mutters, double-talks

**flack** — public relations person, press agent, journalist

**ganef** — thief, rascal

**gelt** — money

**glitch** — error, slip, mistake

**Gotenyu** — Dear God!

**goy** (masc.), **goye** (fem.), **goyim** (pl.) — Gentile

**handl, handel** (n. and v.) — business, to deal, bargain

**hu-ha** — commotion, hullabaloo

**kibitz, kibbitz** — kid, tease, joke, needle



*kishke* — gut, intestine, fortitude, stuffed derm  
*klots, klotz, klutz* — inert person, piece of wood  
*kvetsh* — complain, nag, complainer, nagger, *sourpuss*  
*maven* (more properly, *mevven*) — expert, connoisseur  
*megile* — long story  
*mentsh* — decent human being  
*meshuge, meshige* — crazy, *nuts*; *meshugener* (masc.), *meshugene* (fem. and pl.) —  
 crazy person(s)  
*mezuma* — money, *dough*  
*nash, nosh* (n. and v.) — snack, bite, eat, grab a bite  
*nebekh, nebech, nebish* — pathetic person, loser  
*nu* — well, so then  
*nudnik* — bore, nuisance, pest *nudzh* (n. and v.) bore, nuisance, pester, bother  
*oy!* — Oh! Oy yey! Woe is me! Heavens!  
*paskudnyak, paskudnik* — scoundrel, *rat*  
*putts* (vulgarism) — jerk, obnoxious, person Yid. slang *male organ, jerk* (pron. pəts)  
*shalom, sholom* — greetings, hello, peace  
*shames, shamus* — detective, private eye, caretaker, right-hand person,  
 beadle of synagogue  
*sheygets*, (pl.) *shkotsim* — Young Gentile woman, Jewish boy who does not behave  
*shikse, shiksa* — Young Gentile woman  
*shlemazl, shlemazel* — unlucky person, ne'er-do-well, loser,  
*shlak, shlock, schlock* — inferior goods, production  
*shlep, schlep* — drag *shlepper* — ne'er-do-well, loser, tramp  
*shlub, shlob* — jerk, *dope*  
*shlump* — dowdy person, slob  
*shmegege* — foolish person, nobody  
*shmate* — rag, clothing  
*shmo* — jerk, fool, idiot Yid. (vulgarism) *shmək* — *male organ*  
*shmok, schmuck, shmuck* — jerk, fool, idiot  
*shnorrer* — beggar, bum, chiseler (solicit freebies<sup>5</sup>)  
*shnuk, shnook, schnook* — jerk, fool  
*shtik, shtick* — act, bit, trick, routine  
*shtus, shtoss* — nonsense  
*shtup, shtip* — push, have intercourse (*lay*), easy conquest  
*shvartser* (masc.), *shvartse* (fem. and pl.) — Black person(s)  
*toches, tuches, tukis, tuckus, tochas, dokus* (vulgarism) — rump, backside,  
 derrière, *effort*  
*tsimes, tsimmis* — fuss, hullabaloo, compote, pudding  
*tsore, tsure* — trouble, worry  
*tuml, tumel, tummel* — commotion, fun  
*tumler, tumeler, tummler* — *fun person*, life of the party, M.C.  
*tush, tushie, tushy* (jocular) — *fanny*, rump, backside dimin. of *tokhes*  
*yente, yenta, yentl* — busybody, gossip  
*zaftik, zaftig* — buxom, curvaceous, juicy  
*zhlob* — oaf, yokel, jerk

**Loan Translations or Calques** — in these, of course, it is not words from the donor language, but rather the pattern, particularly of compound nouns, and phrases, that is borrowed. Among common calques are:

<b>English</b>	<b>Yiddish</b>
don't ask	<i>freg nit!</i>
You should like live so long!	<i>Du zolst azoy lang leben!</i>
to break one's head, strive hard	<i>zich den kop brekhen</i>
bottom line	<i>untershte shire or shure</i>
derrière on the table	<i>tokhes ofn tish</i> T.O.T
( <i>cards on the table</i> )	
old fart	<i>alter kacker</i> A.K.

A further development, as seen in T.O.T or A.K., is the abbreviation of the Yiddish original, thus forming acronyms of the first letters of each element of the original Yiddish phrase.

**Loan Blends** — these consist of combined elements from both languages, or even a third<sup>6</sup>.

<i>meshugoyim</i>	<i>crazy Gentiles (meshuge crazy + goyim Gentiles)</i>
<i>mutertog</i>	<i>Mother's Day (Muter mother + Tog Day)</i>

**Morpho-syntax** — The most striking syntactic loan from Yiddish is, especially in emphatic speech, the placing of the object before verb and subject, thus O-V-S. Yiddish apparently borrowed this feature from the Slavic languages, in which highly inflected grammatical systems (seven cases in Polish and Czech, six in Russian) permit greater freedom of word order than in case-less languages. Examples are:

<b>English</b>	<b>Yiddish</b>	<b>Polish</b>
1) <b>That man</b> I know well	<i><u>Dem man</u> ken ikh gut</i> that man know I well	<i><u>Tego czowieka</u> dobrze znam</i> That man well I know
2) <b>Me</b> she wants to help?	<i><u>Mir vil</u> ze helfen</i> Me wants she to help	<i><u>Mnie</u> ona choe pomóc</i> Me she wants to help

This word order is by no means unknown in German, but is less frequent than in Slavic or Yiddish. It is to be noted that in Yiddish and German if the clause begins with anything but the subject, inversion of verb and subject must occur (See Gold and Ornstein 1976).

Other borrowings or transfers include the frequent use of **should** in the sense of *ought to, must, had better*, with a hortatory nuance. Ordinarily the use of **should** in this sense is sparing, as it is felt as too directive. Examples of this phenomenon may be seen in the following:

<i>Better you <b>should</b> stay home.</i>	instead of <i>You'd better stay home.</i>
<i>I <b>should</b> go home now?</i>	instead of <i>Do I have to go home?</i>

Another Yiddish to English transfer is the anomalous use of **could** as an equivalent of **can, may, to be free to**:

<i>You <b>could</b> go home now.</i>	instead of <i>You can (may, are free to) go home now.</i>
<i>My friend <b>could</b> lift 100 pounds.</i>	instead of <i>My friend can lift 100 pounds.</i>

In addition, there are various anomalous uses of adverbs in ways that call attention as not being usual for standard English. Perhaps the most frequently employed is **already**, often placed at the beginning of a phrase, as in *Already he thinks he's a big shot*, where the assertion is reinforced. Another Yiddish-influenced usage is the frequent interspersing of **so**, again especially at the beginning of a phrase, as in *So I'm telling her that*



A common witticism among Jewish people involves an exchange between a Jewish individual and his Gentile friend. The latter asks, "Why do you Jewish people always begin a sentence with a question?" His interlocutor, with a shrug of the shoulders, responds, "How else?"

**Kinesics** — the kinemes, or movements and gestures of Yiddish speakers are often subtly or otherwise reflected in Yiddish-influenced speech. These, of course, need special and detailed study, particularly with a view to determining to what extent these have been borrowed, particularly in large New York and other urban metropolitan areas with large concentrations of Jews. To the casual observer, it would seem that, in New York City, kinemes of several ethnic groups have to some degree merged. A common-sense perception by grass-roots English speakers is that in metropolitan areas, "Everyone talks with their hands." Cross-cultural research on kinesics is being carried out by Walburga Raffler-Engel, at Vanderbilt University, but I am unaware of attention paid specifically to Jewish speech.

Tentatively, it would seem to me that Yiddish-influenced gestures include: frequent shoulder shrugging, flinging both hands outward and raising them, while looking upward, standing spatially closer than appears normal in the Anglo-American culture, and advancing toward the interlocutor. A good pattern for studies of this sort might be the study by John and Angela Rickford (1980: 347-365) titled *African Words and Gestures in New World Guise*. As they point out, it is important to take into consideration the *privileges of co-occurrence* of gestures with other paralinguistic features or *kinesic markers* (the latter a term introduced by the pioneer in this sort of research, the anthropologist Birdwhistell 1970).

**Discourse** — above the sentence level, discourse patterns present an intriguing but highly complex intersection of different components of language. The Yiddish-influenced English style of speaking or writing, just as the German, Italian, and Slavic are, is perhaps best perceived as a *gestalt*. In encoding his/her speech, the speaker typically utilizes discourse markers, of varying types, both from English and Yiddish, or from whatever donor language. In Yiddish-influenced discourse particularly, the frequent use of rhetorical statements, with due pauses as if anticipating confirmation, may be noted. Obviously the speaker, able to employ a whole range of markers from another language in addition to his own, possesses a repertoire capable of expressing a wider range of nuances. From the linguistic viewpoint, moreover, intercalation of Yiddishisms or whole stretches of Yiddish may occur, with the speaker switching from one language to another. With younger-generation speakers, however, this is not always possible, since there may be little or no fluency in Yiddish, but a detectable *style* still persists.

In the appendix, several examples are offered of Yiddish-influenced discourse, which, of course, by no means exhausts the possibilities. (See Appendix B and C).

#### SOME IMPLICATIONS AND PROBLEMS

This case study of American English borrowing from Yiddish has various implications for language contact study and the loan process. One of these is that the donor language community need not be a numerous one. Another is that gap-filling, relating to cultural innovations, is not a *sine qua non* for borrowing, and that *affective borrowing* is possible, which is intended to lend particular nuances to the recipient language.

The necessity for person-to-person contact, *i.e.*, a physical presence, at one time viewed as a requirement for borrowing is, moreover, minimized today by sophisticated

telecommunications and rapid travel. The print and spoken media, and the entertainment industry, particularly, serve as *conduits*, both for introducing new terms and for reinforcing their passage into common currency. Nevertheless, these neologisms undergo various degrees of integration into the recipient language, or may, like slang in general, pass into disuse altogether.

Further implications and questions arising from our consideration of the English-Yiddish loan process are:

- 1) Over time, what may be the effect upon the *deep structure* or English of the borrowings — lexical, semantic, phonological and otherwise — from the different immigrant languages?
- 2) What are the factors, or variables, favoring or disfavoring borrowing from minority languages by a majority or dominant one?
- 3) Is it possible to stratify and describe the categories of American English individuals most likely to utilize Yiddishisms, Italianisms, and the like, as well as those unlikely to do so? Are the latter necessarily located at the *grass-roots*?
- 4) As regards lexicography, is there a need for greater leniency in admitting ethnic neologisms to dictionaries, which might help better reflect the currency of high-frequency terms in both spoken and written English. Are new classificatory rubrics needed??

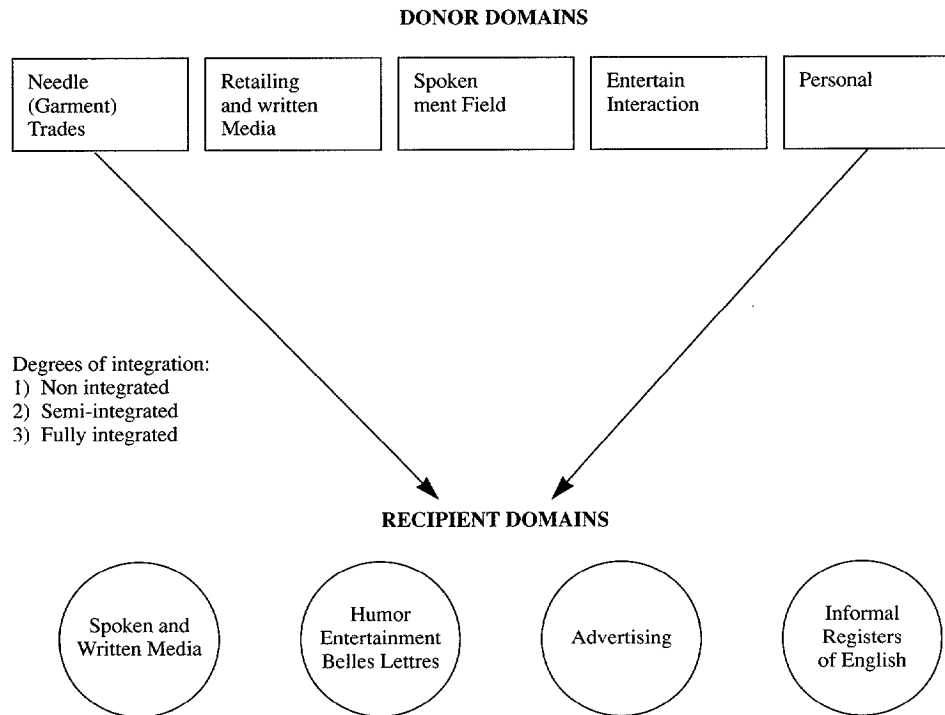
Finally, a recurring question is that of the very continuation of Yiddish as a donor language, a source of many neologisms, given the shift from immigrant languages to English. This may be an issue for futurologists, but the demise of Yiddish appears to be analogous to that of Mark Twain, prematurely reported and greatly exaggerated. Indications are that it will endure in use, and continue to add spice to colloquial American English, well into the 21st century. If not, why not?

#### NOTES

1. This is the first of a series of studies in progress aimed at assessing and re-evaluating the impact of ethnic or immigrant languages upon American English, both spoken and written.
2. Yiddishisms are particularly abundant or apt to appear in "sophisticated" journals such as *New York Times Magazine*, *Saturday Review*, or the *New Yorker*. They appear frequently also magazines like *Variety*, and in both spoken and written expression in the entertainment world. "Show business" has been especially influential in their diffusion.
3. Acronym for the Institute for Jewish Research, New York City.
4. In a letter to me dated July, 1982, the late Raven McDavid Jr. facetiously remarked that we could perhaps "*schnorrer*" a certain extremely expensive lexical work from a colleague who happens to possess several copies.
5. I am indebted to Steinmetz (1982: 151, fn. 7) for this information.
6. Numerous loan translations and blends are listed in the works cited by Steinmetz, Feinsilver, Rosten, and other sources.
7. Garland Cannon, in "Japanese Borrowings in English" (*American Speech*, 1981: 190-206) brings related data on borrowings from foreign sources, particularly Japanese and Arabic, and his references afford bibliography on loans from Korean, and other Oriental languages. He utilizes standard dictionaries as his base, and, to my surprise, finds that: "Borrowing has recently been declining as a major source of New English words." (p. 190)

## APPENDIX A

## TRANSMISSION PROCESS OF YIDDISH LOANS: FROM YIDDISH TO ENGLISH



## APPENDIX B

The two following samples reflect different degrees of use of Yiddishisms at the discourse level, without, of course, exhausting the possibilities. The first is taken from the domain of advertising, and was kindly furnished by an acquaintance of mine in this field, who “produced” it with a colleague (the former Jewish, the latter, non-Jewish). I have checked the conversation with three English-Yiddish bilingual business acquaintances in El Paso who have vouched for its authenticity.

**1. Two Advertising Men**

Max: *Nu, boychik*, what’s happening in this *meshugene* world?

John: Maxy, baby, how’s by you? Say, *bubele*, I think I got a good gig for us this time. No *shlock*!

Max: So, *mazel tov*, may we live so long! Run the whole *megile* past me, but do me a favor, no more jobs like the last one. That was pure *tsores*. The fella’ that hired us was 100% *paskudnyak*.

John: *Gotenyu*, was it that bad? So, give a listen already. A fellow called Morreale wants us to do a *promo* — a promotion job on a line of lady’s wear. He bought it from a guy who was a *maven* in manufacturing but not in retailing. These *shmates* got real class, and yet they got something of that “swinger” look. But real genteel.

Max: Maybe you mean Gentile?

John: Gentile, *shmentile*, what’s the difference?

Max: O.K. John, you *ganef*, what’s the *bottom line*?

John: So listen... People are tired of looking at undernourished *yentes* and *shikses* with six-inch waistlines. They want to see advertising they can identify with — not too lean, not too buxom.

Max: *Ay, ay, ay!* So we’re talkin’ “new look” for all ages?

- John: Now you're a *maven*! So we show scenes from a Bronx apartment, Chicago working-class suburb, Minneapolis duplex home, farmwife in Ohio. Also some ethnics, Italian, Jewish, Polish, Black, Hispanic. They should, pardon the expression, look *zaftik*.
- Max: Sounds like this won't be the kind of *shlep* our last job was. And I'm willing to work my *kishkes* off to make it fly. So don't sit there like a *klots*!

## 2. Selection from American Literature

(From: MOLL, Elick (1956): *Seidman and Son*, New York, Putnam, pp. 258-259)

*So she's got to sit there, Mrs. Busybody Roselle, like a German spy and run afterwards and call you, I'm out with another woman? She couldn't come over like a person? ...*

*Maybe she was embarrassed?*

*Mrs. Roselle embarrassed? A barracuda is shy?*

*Maybe after all these years you would realize there's problems. It's not enough I'm breaking my head in the place all day, working all night till one o'clock, I got to come home and have an argument with you, suspicious.*

*Stop yelling, she says. You'll wake up Jenny.*

*Morris, she says. Stop acting like a child.*

*Child, shmild, I say. I'm giving you fair warning, Sophie. Next time I come home and I find you with the cold cream on your face and irons on your head, you wouldn't have an argument. I'm going to turn right around and go to a club.*

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