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О роли идиша как языка национальной идентичности

Yiddish and Jewish ethnic and national identity

Who owns a language? Whom does she represent? Who does she belong to? In the wake of nationalism languages became the prime attributes, markers and shapers of national identity, ethnic and cultural allegiances and effective sense of belonging. Yiddish -- a German(ic) language linguistically, a Semitic -- Hebrew and Jewish-Aramaic -- culturally and since the 13th move of Ashkenazi Jews from German-speaking to Slavic-speaking lands -- an overwhelmingly Slavic geographically, earned by 1880s the de facto status of a specifically JEWISH language in Eastern Europe to a large degree even in those regions which were dominated by German high culture, and by German-speaking administrative and political structures.

This was a remarkable development for in previous generations and regions the Ashkenazi vernacular (which originated almost 10 centuries ago) was barely considered a language in its own right regardless of the fact that it has already developed various literary, educational, and public use functions among Ashkenazi Jews and precisely because it partook in a commonly accepted triglossic system serving as the vernacular counterpart of the higher status "literary" Hebrew and the even higher "highly learned" Aramaic. In German-speaking lands it also served as the JEWISH vernacular vis-a-vis the non-Jewish one, i.e. German.

The latter clearly marked distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish was perhaps a precursor of sorts for the future sociolinguistic evolvement of Yiddish into an ethnic-specific and de facto a national language. The additional slavization of the "folk language" in Eastern Europe and its cutting free from the German dominated sphere in much of its territories added to it being locally perceived as a particularly Jewish language, i.e. One which is used, overwhelmingly and nearly exclusively by and among Jews; similar, perhaps very close to, but principally different from Christian German; in other words, a JEWISH language which synchronically at least (to use the term anachronistically) is belonging to them and is therefore de facto for all intents and purposes owned by them.

The story of recognition of the language by its own native speakers is somewhat less straightforward. The elites, since the late 18th century the proponents of Jewish Enlightenment that originated in Berlin, wouldn't for the most part view it even as a "folk language" FOKSHPRAKH. Yet some of them in the East were avid creators of, and sometimes industrious contributors to, the early forms of MODERN Yiddish literature throughout the 19th century. Even the name of the language, YIDISH, while traceable back to the 15th century, was never widely used nor even tolerated until the late 1880s.

The often cited Russian Imperial census of 1897 listed Yiddish speakers as the sixth largest ethnic (or national?) group comprising over 5 million speakers, several thousands of whom were even non-Jews (at least from the viewpoint of their declared confession). Around the same time, some 9 years earlier to be more precise, one of the older Jewish literary masters, Sholem

Abramovich (born in the later 1830s) was proclaimed "the grandfather of modern Yiddish literature" by a younger rising literary star, Sholem Aleichem. It was in fact also then that the older "grandfather" figure chastised Sholem Aleichem and other Yiddish authors for using "Yiddish daych" and especially "zhargon" convincing them instead calling it pure and simple: YIDISH.

The English spelling appearing in American English publications since at least 1855 contributed later to the actual distinction between *jüdisch* and *Jiddisch* in German. In Yiddish itself, however, to this very day there persists a kind of a self-understood commonality between both notions thereby making the translators' task of disambiguation between "Yiddish" and "Jewish" not all that simple.

The built-in ambiguity of the word *yidish* is hardly coincidental. Once the appellation YIDISH became widely acceptable within and without it became firmly and in effect inalienably connected with the notion of *Jewishness* – in Yiddish: *yidishkayt* – which is in turn itself a semantically loaded term that can mean, ranging from historical, fundamentalist, and nationalist to progressive and liberal perspectives as: (a) "the Jewish way of life" (popularly and less adequately referred to as "Jewish Religion"), (b) later on, as a nationalist term of essentially belonging to the Jewish (Yiddish?) nation, and (c) as socially and politically progressive movement inspired and informed by the Biblical and "commonly accepted" principles of ethics and justice.

As Bernard Lewis has noted in 1972 (cf. his 2004 collection, *From Babel to Dragomans*) it is, as a matter of fact possible to talk of a "Yiddish Nations" in pre-20th century Eastern Europe. He also makes the astute observation that the rise of the "Hebrew" nationalism, i.e. Zionism would probably be impossible without the sense of Jewish nationhood developed by the native Yiddish-speakers of Eastern and Central Europe (a process that began perhaps some time since the late 16th century).

The split, or better still the rift between Hebrew and Yiddish – the undoing of the traditional Ashkenazi Jewish diglossia contributed to the independent growth of each one of the Jewish languages. Yet the traditional Ashkenazi culture, whereby Hebrew was The language of The literature continued to loom large even in in much of the most secularized and modernized Yiddishist world (minus the Communists who were at least "technically" anti-Yiddishists).

In a relatively recent Russian interview with the great contemporary pianist, one can read Evgeny Kissin saying the following about the importance of both Yiddish and Hebrew: "Есть такая еврейская поговорка: кто не знает иврита, тот не образован, а кто не знает идиша, тот не еврей." A quick search for that saying's source yielded the following:

דער וואס קען ניט קיין לשון קודש איז אן עם הארץ, און דער וואס קען ניט קיין יידיש איז א גוי

der vos ken nit kin lóshn-kòydes iz an amórets un der vos ken nit kin yidish iz a goy

The Yiddish original is more expressive as well as cruder: "He who doesn't know the Holy Tongue is an ignoramus, he who doesn't know Yiddish is a goy". The author of this saying is believed to be one of the major and principal ideologues of the so-called Yiddishist movement,

Chayim Zhitlovsky (1865-1943). The uncomplimentary word “goy” actually does not connote here ‘a Gentile’ (or a Christian) directly, but refers to a Jew who is fully assimilated and is therefore by all appearances non-Jewish. The specific Yiddish expression *goy gómur* or *a pólner goy* never describes a Gentile, but a Jew who is in a way even more Gentile than a Gentile (cf. “holier than the Pope”) by dint of total lack of traditional education and by chosen or circumstantially imposed rejection of (or nonparticipation in) the Jewish way of life.

Indeed, the recognition of Yiddish as *the* Jewish language from the outside was an important factor in supporting internal recognition. There are numerous sources and references to non-Jews who spoke Yiddish as well as its native speakers (among others in the writings of the earlier mentioned Chayim Zhitlovsky). On the one hand, there is a widespread saying about someone whose Yiddish is not up to scratch, namely: *er ret yidish vi a goy* (he speaks Yiddish like a Gentile). On the other hand, on many occasions different informants would claim that various non-Jewish Yiddish speaker from their past used to speak it “as well as we are speaking it among us” or even “better than us”. No doubt many a native speaker took great pride in the fact that his native albeit politically insignificant “minority” language was nonetheless socially or culturally attractive enough for a member of the majority group to learn it and to learn it so well.

Now, back to the question who owns a language. Due to dominant sociolinguistic “perceptions” curtesy of the German Jewish Enlightenment (since the closing decades of the 18th century), one could easily claim (and some indeed did claim) that even though the so-called Ostjuden severely corrupted what was presumed to be an originally “pure” German therefore even their corrupted *jargon* (famously in Heinrich Grätz’s formulation: “eine halbtierische shprache”) is perhaps not entirely their own language, but at best a kind of severe (and Slavic inflected) cacophony of their making.

And yet it is, perhaps, that bit of “of their own making” that makes at least synchronically justified the (re)claiming of the speakers’ direct ownership over that particular “cacophony”. In the East even some of the proponents of the Enlightenment, most of whom refusing to recognize Yiddish as a “proper” language would perhaps concede that this thoroughly “corrupt” and Slavic inflected “kind of German” was in fact exclusively specific to East European Jews and therefore it was synchronically (to use the term anachronistically) owned by them. The later, 20th century notion that a Diasporic Jewish language was often a combination of both, adoption and adaptation of a non-Jewish dialect, allows the reclaiming by its speakers and in fact creators ownership over the adapted and therefore structurally, semantically and above all socio-culturally reshaped linguistic medium.

By the 1880s due to a number of geopolitical, social and ideological factors the Jewish “jargon” of Easter Europe which was allegedly a severe (and among others also Slavic inflected) “corruption” of early modern German became not only a clear marker and nearly inalienable characteristic of “Polish” and “Russian” Jews, but as a viable and to many acceptable vehicle for Jewish national creativity and a major aspect of national identity (with a number of other “national” cultural attributes and spheres, e.g. music, cuisine, even architecture and already developed vernacular as well as budding refined modern literature and theater).

Fas forwarding to Summer 2006. A Romanian woman, Maria Chirilau (1932-2010), born in in Mihăileni, northeastern Romania, a few kilometers from the Ukrainian border lived all her life in her native town and was a fluent speaker of both Romanian, her native tong, German, her father's native language and Yiddish, which until the Second World War was a predominantly Yiddish-speaking town. In an interview taken with her in 2006 she told her interviewers (in a perfect and idiomatic local Yiddish) that: “In her prewar childhood years $\frac{3}{4}$ of the town’s population was Jewish and nearly all it inhabitants – local Romanians, ethnic Germans and Ukrainians spoke Yiddish with various degree of fluency.” When asked about her family’s cuisine in prewar Mihăileni her answer was very clear and simple: *Indz, zolt ir visn, ba indz hot men gigesn yidish!* (lit. You should know that [in general] we [at our non-Jewish home] used to eat Yiddish [i.e. the Jewish cuisine]).