

Stability and instability among Jewish languages and alphabets¹

Abstract. Jewish languages, except for Hebrew, are varieties of other languages but have independent standard versions and independent dialect systems. They are typically written in the Hebrew alphabet. I would like to suggest that when the official language of a country is the same as the coterritorial spoken language, Jewish language shift takes place.

There was a shift from Aramaic to Greek or Judeo-Greek in the eastern Mediterranean in the early days of the Roman Empire, followed by a switch to Latin in the western half of the Roman Empire. Jews speaking Judeo-French lost their language after Jews were expelled from France in 1394.

Ashkenazic Jews did not lose their language when they left German-speaking areas but continued to speak Yiddish in the kingdom of Poland-Lithuania. Similarly, Sephardic Jews continued to use Ladino in the Ottoman Empire, but when Turkish switched to the Latin alphabet, Ladino did as well. After 500 years of being written in Hebrew (Aramaic) characters, Ladino today is written in the Latin alphabet, even in Israel.

Such a shift also occurred after the destruction of the First Temple, when Jews switched from Hebrew to Aramaic. Alphabet switch took place as well. What we now call the Hebrew alphabet is actually the Aramaic alphabet. The original Hebrew alphabet is used today only by the Samaritans, who at this time in history are not considered Jewish

1. Alphabets and identification. Alphabet shift is not generally thought of as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. Often, when speakers of one language shift to another language with a different alphabet, the change in alphabets is merely a result of the adoption of the new language. Immigrants from Russia, Korea, Iran, or any other country typically learn English when they arrive in the United States and frequently start speaking English most of the time, and of course, writing English in the Latin alphabet instead of using the Cyrillic, Hangul or Arabic writing

systems. In the case of Jewish languages, however, a change in alphabets may be the first indication that a new language is being created.

Jewish languages, except for Hebrew, are varieties of other languages but have independent standard versions and independent dialect systems. Yiddish is a variety of German; Ladino is a variety of Spanish; Shuadit is a variety of Provençal, etc. They are typically written in the Hebrew alphabet, at least in part for religious reasons. "The concept of the divine origin and character of writing is found everywhere, both in ancient and modern times, among civilized as well as among primitive peoples. In the main it is due to a widespread belief in the magic powers of writing" (Gelb 1963: 230). Hebrew is a language associated not only with a particular religion but with a particular alphabet. When religious texts were written in languages other than Hebrew, the Hebrew alphabet was used to maintain the connection to religion. The earliest texts in Yiddish, Shuadit, and Ladino were prayers written in the Hebrew alphabet, even before the languages were recognized as independent.

Sometimes, the same language is written in two different alphabets because of religious differences. In China, for example, the Hui minority (Chinese-speaking Muslims) at one time wrote their variety of Chinese using Arabic letters (personal communication from Professor Jiang Jing at Hebei University). Florian Coulmas writes, "The ideological and, more specifically, religious associations of different scripts are well known The linguistic differences between Serbian and Croatian are relatively minor, and most scholars therefore refer to one language, Serbo-Croatian" (1989:261, n.1). However, Serbian is written in the Cyrillic alphabet because its speakers are primarily Orthodox Christians, while Croatian is written in the Latin alphabet since its speakers are primarily Roman Catholics.

Max Weinreich is generally credited with the line "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy" (1945: 13), although Weinreich did not claim credit for this definition, writing that he had heard it from someone identified simply as a teacher in a Bronx high school. Be that as it may, now that Serbian and Croatian have their own armies and navies, they are no longer referred to as one language as they were when Coulmas wrote in 1989. As languages, the two are essentially defined by their choice of alphabet.

In the case of Jewish languages, however, the use of Hebrew letters was part of a process that led to the development of languages with distinctive identities. The use of a different writing system led to the standardization of borrowings from Hebrew, other dialects, and other

languages. Thus, *ganef* (thief), from Hebrew, is part of the vocabulary of standard Yiddish but is merely slang if used in German.

Any group--political, professional, religious, etc.—may have lexical items reflecting its own needs. Jewish communities have words for holidays and religious practices. These words may be borrowed by surrounding communities. For example, English dictionaries list the words *shiva* 'seven-day period of mourning', from Yiddish *shive*, from Hebrew *shiv`a* 'seven'; *kvetch* 'to complain', from Yiddish *kvetshn* with the same meaning, from German *quetschen* 'to squeeze'; *schmo* 'dull person' from Yiddish *shmok* 'penis' possibly from Old Polish *smok* 'grass snake'. The use of a few specialized words is not enough, however, to define a variety as a language. Perhaps we should introduce a different criterion: A language is a dialect with its own writing system. The choice of a separate alphabet is one of the ways that the speakers of a dialect choose to define their speech as a separate language. "The interrelation between speech and writing and their mutual influences are very strong. ... Writing is more conservative than speech and it has a powerful restraining influence on the natural development of the speech" (Gelb 1963: 223).

Translations into Jewish languages of parts of the Bible and of the daily prayers appeared in the 14th century and later in various parts of Europe. An early example is a woman's prayer book, translated from Hebrew into Judeo-Provencal (Cecil Roth Collection, University of Leeds), which includes the unique prayer: "Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, king of the universe, who made me a woman" (Jochnowitz 1981). The prayer is shown here in Hebrew script with a transliteration in italics beneath it:

- (1) בנדיג טו שנט בנדט נושטרי דיב ריי דלשגלי קי פיש מי פינה
 bendig tu sant bendet nostre diew rey delsegle ki fis mi fena

Other translations from the original Hebrew designed primarily but not exclusively for women appeared in Judeo-Italian and Yiddish. Here is a blessing in Judeo-Italian from the *Tefillot latini* (Bologna 1538):

- (2) פירדונה אנואי פטטרי נוסטרו קי פיקמו אי מקלה אנוי קי נוסטרו קי ריוולמו
 Perdonah 'anoi patre nostro ke pekamo 'e maħlah 'anoi re nostro ke revelamo

‘Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned, and pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed’

The *Tsenerene* (a Yiddish pronunciation of the Hebrew *tsena u-re'ena*, the feminine plural imperative meaning 'come out and see') is a translation of the Pentateuch with comments. It was published in the late 16th century. The choice of the Hebrew alphabet not only reflects the religious nature of these early writings, but it also indicates that Jewish women in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries—a time of widespread illiteracy—knew how to read and understand Hebrew, or at least knew how to sound out the letters.

The writing of these religious texts constitutes defining moments in the standardization of Judeo-Provencal, Judeo-Italian, and Yiddish. A standard orthography for each of these languages, using the Hebrew alphabet, was established; a standard language grew out of a combination of regional features not found together in any non-Jewish dialect. Jewish languages were written exclusively in the Hebrew alphabet until the beginning of the 20th century, when certain alphabet shifts took place.

2. Language shift. Perhaps Jewish language shift antedates the existence of a Jewish community. The Bible tells us that Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 11:28). His dates are unknown, and many doubt his existence. Ur, in any event, was a Sumerian-speaking city until it became an Akkadian-speaking city after being conquered by Sargon in approximately 2340 B.C.E. When Abraham left his country, we are told that he left Haran, not Ur (Gen. 12:4). Haran seems to be the same place as Padan-aram, where Abraham's relatives lived (Gen. 25:20). Did Abraham learn Hebrew when he moved to a place inhabited by Canaanites? There is a verse in the Bible that suggests that Jacob's uncle Laban spoke Aramaic. A heap of stones where an oath is sworn is called *Jegar-sahadutha* in Aramaic by Laban and *Galeed* in Hebrew by Jacob (Gen. 31:47). Both names mean 'heap of witness.' I find it striking that the Book of Genesis presents us with evidence of the connection between a migration and a language shift. Jewish language shift is apparently as old as the Jewish people, if not older.

Long before the alphabet shifts of recent centuries, there was a complex pattern of language shift and language stability among speakers of Jewish languages. There are many factors determining whether or not language shift takes place in a community, especially if the

community is transplanted. A determining factor, I believe, is whether or not the surrounding language and the official language of the country are the same. In a country where most people speak the dominant language of the country in their homes, Jews speak the dominant language or a Jewish language that is a variety of that language. Thus, Jews speak English—or Jewish English—in America, French in France, Hungarian in Hungary, etc. In the Russian Empire, on the other hand, where the official language was Russian, Jews were likely to live in towns where their neighbors spoke Ukrainian or Lithuanian or Polish or Moldavian or some other language that wasn't Russian. In such a situation, the Jews spoke Yiddish. In big cities like Kiev and Odessa where the local language was Russian, Jews switched from Yiddish to Russian.

After World War I, Russian spread into towns and villages where it had not been spoken before. As this happened, Jews switched their language to Russian. Poland had been divided between Austria, Germany, and Russia since 1795. When an independent Poland came into existence after World War I, Jews began to use Polish more and more.

In 1848, the Austrian Empire became the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hungarian became the official language in Hungary, in what is now Slovakia, and in Transylvania, now a part of Romania—all areas where there were many Hungarian speakers. Jews who lived in areas where there were enough Hungarian speakers to insure that Hungarian was the lingua franca of the community switched from Yiddish to Hungarian. In communities where there were no speakers of Slovakian or Romanian, Yiddish was forgotten.

This situation was reversed in the United States. Hasidic Jews who were speakers of Hungarian in Europe are speakers of Yiddish in Brooklyn. Solomon Poll (1965) reports that Hasidic men from Hungarian-speaking countries speak Yiddish among themselves but women speak Hungarian. An analogous situation among Lubavitcher Hasidim existed a generation ago, where the men and boys spoke Yiddish, the women spoke Russian, and the girls spoke English (Jochnowitz 1968). Together, they all spoke Yiddish. In the Soviet Union, they all spoke Russian. In America, Russian is dying out among the children, although Yiddish is very much alive.

In a Hasidic community, many of the men simply belong to the Hasidic world, but the women live both in the Hasidic world and in America, where most citizens speak English. The Yeshiva students live only in Williamsburg or Crown Heights, neighborhoods that are analogous to towns in Belarus or Transylvania. In Hasidic sections of Williamsburg, the Jews speak

Yiddish; their neighbors speak Spanish. The situation is somewhat different in Crown Heights, where more English is spoken by the neighbors. Furthermore, Lubavitcher young men, unlike other Hasidic young men, go out on the streets and, using English, try to persuade Jewish passers-by to put on *tefillin* if they are men, and to make the blessing over the *lulav* and *esrog* during Sukkot. Consequently, English is used more often in Crown Heights than in Williamsburg.

Even those Lubavitchers who speak English frequently are totally literate in both Yiddish and Hebrew, and so there has been no alphabet switch among these Yiddish speakers.

The rebirth of Yiddish among Hasidim in Brooklyn is surprising. Even more surprising is the birth of Modern Hebrew, a language that once had no native speakers, in the area that is now Israel. Hebrew was neither the official language of a state, since Israel did not yet exist, nor the language of the surrounding people. To the extent that people knew Hebrew, it was from reading the Bible, the prayers, and other holy books. The script was so associated with this sacred material that there was no possibility that Hebrew would undergo alphabet switch.

3. Yiddish in eastern and central Europe. In 1386, Queen Jadwiga of Poland and Grand Duke Jagiello of Lithuania got married. A new country, Poland-Lithuania, which also included Belarus and much of Ukraine, came into existence. Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Belarussian, German, and other languages were spoken in Poland-Lithuania. There wasn't one single official language. Jews who had come from German-speaking areas and who spoke Yiddish continued to speak Yiddish. There was no Jewish-language switch for six or seven hundred years.

We know much less about language switch among the ancestors of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Germany. Jews were expelled from France in 1394, and as far as we know, most went to Germany. Paul Wexler points out that "the small Judeo-French component of Western Yiddish was acquired after the spread of the latter from the southeast to the southwest German lands" (1988: xvii). Judeo-French speakers seem to have switched languages quite rapidly, perhaps because there was a Jewish population that was already speaking Yiddish when the Judeo-French speakers arrived. The exception may have been in the Rhine Valley, about which Wexler says, "French Jews preserved Judeo-French in this area perhaps until the 1500s" (137). We must stress the word "perhaps." Whenever it was that the switch from Judeo-French to Yiddish occurred, it did not involve a change in alphabets. The creation of Judeo-French involved switching the

writing system of French to the Hebrew alphabet, but the switching from one Jewish language to another did not require the changing of alphabets.

We may assume that French Jews spoke Judeo-French rather than French, and that Jews in Germany spoke Yiddish rather than German. Before the 18th century, religion dominated life, and words for rites of passage would have been words of Hebrew or Aramaic origin. Thus *khosn*, *kale*, *hasene*, *mishpokhe*, etc. were always used among French or German Jews in the Middle Ages for 'groom,' 'bride,' 'wedding,' 'family,' etc. whether or not we have documentation for these words. This is probably also true for words referring to unpleasant aspects of life: 'thief,' 'fear,' 'funeral,' etc., which, as a general rule, are of Hebrew origin in Jewish languages. Borrowings from Hebrew and Aramaic are always spelled according to traditional practices and do not reflect the way they are pronounced in Jewish languages.

If Judeo-French disappeared when its speakers moved into an area with speakers of a different Jewish language, Yiddish, the same is not true of Jews who fled Spain after the expulsion of 1492 and went to the Ottoman Empire. The Jews in Greece who spoke Judeo-Greek, also called Yevanic, were overwhelmed by the speakers of the language called Ladino or Judezmo or Judeo-Spanish or Jidyó or Spanyol. (I will use the name "Ladino" because it is now the most familiar name for both the written and the spoken language.) Judeo-Greek survived in the city of Ioannina (Janina) and neighboring towns in northwestern Greece until World War II. Elsewhere, Judeo-Greek speakers switched languages and merged with the new arrivals from Spain.

The Ottoman Empire, like Poland-Lithuania and Russia, was a multilingual empire. Ladino coexisted with Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian, Serbian, and a number of other languages. Ladino speakers maintained their language almost without exception until the 19th or 20th centuries. Ladino is still spoken and is taught in the United States and Israel. Some Ladino speakers switched to French if they studied in the schools of the Alliance Israelite Universelle; nowadays, many have switched to Turkish, which has been the official and dominant language in Turkey since the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

Not all Jews who left Spain in 1492 went to the Ottoman Empire. Some went to Morocco, where a Judeo-Spanish variety called Hakitia still survives, although barely. Some went to Portugal, where they were baptized in 1497 whether they agreed to convert or not, and were declared Christians and therefore subject to the Inquisition. They did not dare speak Ladino

or anything but Portuguese in Portugal. Eventually, some Portuguese New Christians found their way to Holland. According to B. N. Teensma, "The Portuguese-speaking Marranos traveled mainly to northeastern Europe; in the last decade of the sixteenth century they reached Amsterdam. ... In Amsterdam they returned to their ancestral faith and received instruction in Mosaic Law and Hebrew" (1993: 137). Their language evolved: "Of course the Sephardim adopted loan words for new and previously unknown concepts encountered in their new surroundings—Hebrew words for topics dealing with religious and organizational matters, Dutch words for all sorts of social phenomena" (138). Then, surprisingly, Teensma goes on to say that "in less than 150 years their language declined in spelling, syntax, and style into an ever more complicated, inaccurate, and corrupt instrument, which was for this very reason doomed to extinction" (147). To me, Teensma seems to be describing the creation of a Judeo-Portuguese language. The reason it did not survive in Holland, I would venture to say, is that the official language and the majority language were the same. Furthermore, Portuguese Jews had been Christians for a few generations and did not know how to use the Hebrew alphabet—a prerequisite for establishing a Jewish language.

The situation of Yiddish in Holland is not exactly analogous to that of Portuguese. Marion Aptroot tells of us that she believes that the major factor is emancipation, and writes that "the individual consciously decides to abandon Yiddish in favor of the majority language because of social and economic opportunities offered by the majority culture. The transition period, however, has not been described, although anecdotes abound" (2002:201-202). My own experiences with language shift among various minorities in the United States lead me to believe that change is hardly a conscious decision; children simply prefer to speak the language of their peers. Dutch elements entered Yiddish, as was the case with Portuguese. Aptroot writes, "In the 18th century, Dutch Jews were more or less conversant with Dutch, which led to an interesting Hollandization of Dutch Yiddish. The position of Yiddish as vernacular, however, remained secure" (204). It may have been secure in the 18th century, but in the 20th, it was very marginal indeed; as for Portuguese, it was gone without a trace. Jews whose ancestors had been Christians in Portugal for a century or more probably found it easier to assimilate into the surrounding society than to maintain a language associated with their forced conversion..

Other Jews from Spain or Portugal went to Italy, especially to Leghorn and Ancona. Since Italy already had a Jewish population that spoke Judeo-Italian, Ladino and Portuguese

speakers switched languages. Jews from Spain and Portugal found it natural to adopt the Jewish language of their new country. Learning a new Jewish language and using the same alphabet did not present a problem.

4. Non-religious language switch. What did Jews speak in the Roman Empire? In the Eastern Empire, they spoke Greek or Judeo-Greek. In the Western Empire too, there were apparently many who spoke Greek. There had been Greek settlements in Italy and Sicily before the Common Era, and there are still communities of Christians who speak Greek. Greek was also a learned language studied by educated Romans. For whatever reason, there are tombstones in Venosa, in southern Italy, written in Greek, generally spelled with the Greek alphabet, in addition to others in Judeo-Greek, Latin, Judeo-Latin, and Hebrew. Excavations are still going on in Venosa, according to a report in *The New York Times* (May 15, 2003). The presence of these Jewish cemeteries is the major evidence that there was a Jewish community in the area.

The Greek-language Septuagint, the first translation of the Hebrew Bible, dates from about 250 B.C.E. This suggests that the translation was needed by Jews who had switched languages from Hebrew or Aramaic to Greek. The switch was total. Learning a new language in this case meant learning its alphabet. The relationship between religion and writing discussed in the citations by Coulmas and Gelb above apparently did not apply.

If alphabets are associated with religion, they can also be associated with secularism. When Turkish became a secular country, it switched alphabets to the Latin alphabet, which was considered secular. Ladino in Turkey was ordered by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk to change alphabets as well, which is why Ladino is written with the Latin alphabet today in Israel after five centuries of being written in the Hebrew alphabet, usually using Rashi script, a style of letters that is analogous to italics.

But is the contemporary Hebrew alphabet, often called “Hebrew square script,” really Hebrew? If we look up alphabets in any encyclopedia, we see an old type of Hebrew writing that can be read today by some linguists, archeologists, and historians. What is used today and has been used for over two millennia to write Hebrew is the Aramaic alphabet, which, according to William Chomsky, "has been in vogue only since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (c. 430 B.C.E.)" (1957: 80). During the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites learned Aramaic and even used its alphabet when writing Hebrew. One may assume that the Israelites considered the

difference between the two writing systems to be merely stylistic. The change was not a major one, since the names of the letters are the same, occur in the same order, and represent the same sounds. The Aramaic letters look rather different, however—much more elaborate and artistic.

According to David Diringer, Hebrew square script, "although mainly based on the Aramaic alphabet, seems to have been strongly influenced by the early Hebrew alphabet" (1968:202). Thus, Hebrew, the holy language, is written with the letters of a second language, Aramaic, which became holy as well, since it is the language of the Gemara, the second and major part of the Talmud, and of familiar prayers and songs like Kaddish and Had Gadya. The old Hebrew script is still in use among the Samaritans, who "took it over in their Pentateuch and have used it with certain embellishments ever since" (Chomsky 1957:84). It is ironic that the alphabet so intimately identified with Jewish identity and religion is now used only by the Samaritans, people who, at this time in history, are not considered Jewish.

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ENDNOTE

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