



Origins of Yiddish dialects

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To cite this article: Isaac L. Bleaman (2016) Origins of Yiddish dialects, East European Jewish Affairs, 46:2, 223-226, DOI: [10.1080/13501674.2016.1193682](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2016.1193682)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2016.1193682>



Published online: 03 Oct 2016.



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for much of the interwar era. Kuznitz comments insightfully that “the fraught relationship between politics and culture had a geographical dimension” and explains her point by noting some of the differences between Vilna and Warsaw relevant to her topic: “In Vilna, a relatively broad stratum of the Jewish population spoke Yiddish and supported cultural work in the language. Yiddish culture in Warsaw, by contrast, was politicized to a much greater extent. It was both more closely associated with the Bund and Left Poale Zion and more hostile to Zionism” (100). Another way of thinking about this issue might be that Yiddish culture was as politicized in Vilna as in Warsaw, but the relative weights of specific, relevant, Jewish political parties were very different in the two cities. The Democratic Folkspartey was founded in Vilna in 1926 (as a result of a split in the ranks of the Folkspartey) and, particularly before the death of Tsemakh Szabad (who was an ardent supporter of YIVO), had a presence in that city – and, in particular, among YIVO’s Vilna-based activists. On the other hand, this party did not pick up comparable support in Warsaw in the 1930s.

But these matters are not at the heart of Kuznitz’s work, which is concerned with the sweep of YIVO’s history, and which devotes sustained attention to YIVO’s programs, its initiatives, both its successes and its failures, and its trials and tribulations. Her book is not merely the very best secondary source, in any language, on YIVO per se. It is likely to remain indispensable to scholars interested in Yiddish studies, and more generally in the development of Jewish studies, for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Arcadius Kahan, “Der derekh fun yivo in zayn vilner tkufe,” *Yivo bleter* 46 (1980): 9–21; Dan Miron, “Between Science and Faith: Sixty Years of the YIVO Institute,” *YIVO Annual* 19 (1990): 1–15.
2. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From that Place and Time. A Memoir 1938–1947* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2016.1200877>

Origins of Yiddish dialects, by Alexander Beider, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, xxxiii + 611 pp., £125, ISBN 978-0-19-873931-9

In the field of Yiddish studies, few works loom quite as large – in terms of both scope and scholarly impact – as Max Weinreich’s four-volume *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh* (History of the Yiddish language), published by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in 1973 and translated into English in 1980 (vols 1–2) and 2008 (vols 1–4). A number of the book’s core claims have been widely circulated as the consensus view of the origins of the language: that Yiddish is roughly a thousand years old, that it was first used by Jewish communities along the Rhine who had previously spoken Jewish Romance languages, and that it has exhibited signs of linguistic “fusion” of Germanic, Semitic, and Romance features since its very inception. However, Yiddish linguists have challenged all of these views – most notably Dovid Katz, who has

proposed that Yiddish emerged in Bavaria among Aramaic-speaking Jews, and Paul Wexler, who has argued (much more controversially) that Yiddish emerged when converts to Judaism who spoke Judeo-Sorbian, a proposed Western Slavic dialect, gradually shifted to German.

Alexander Beider's hefty volume contributes to this debate by reassessing the age of Yiddish and disputing the existence of "Proto-Yiddish," the language Weinreich reconstructed as the hypothetical ancestor of all modern varieties of Yiddish. Beider proposes that Yiddish had no major systematic differences from non-Jewish varieties of German prior to the fifteenth century, and thus cannot be considered a distinct language until then. He also argues that the two primary dialects of modern Yiddish, Western Yiddish (WY) and Eastern Yiddish (EY), are not derived from a single "proto" language at all. Instead, they are derived from two distinct Germanic sources – the East Franconian and Bohemian German dialects, respectively.

The introductory chapter reviews the major questions raised in previous research on the history of Yiddish, along with the novel claims of the book. In addition to the sources of evidence commonly used in historical linguistics – e.g., variations in spelling in historical documents that can help us infer sound change – Beider relies extensively upon Jewish given names and toponyms, extending his previous work on the history of proper names. While the author (appropriately) challenges the explanatory power of classifying features of Yiddish by "component" or language of origin (section 1.3.4), he nonetheless organizes subsequent chapters of the book by these very components: German, Hebrew, Romance, and Slavic.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of key similarities and differences between historical varieties of Yiddish and German, focusing (as Beider's predecessors have) on correspondences in particular consonants and vowels. His main points – that a number of properties shared by all Yiddish dialects are actually "pre-Ashkenazic" features inherited from non-Jewish varieties of German, and that differences between WY and EY stem from their origins in different (but related) German dialects – are compelling. However, the author's conclusions are complicated by the nature of his data: his information on historical Yiddish varieties is necessarily drawn from written sources that, to some extent, probably reflect the norms of local varieties of German.¹ His information on German dialects is based primarily upon dictionaries that reflect usage spanning several centuries.

The third chapter argues that the Hebrew components of WY and EY do, however, come from a common source. Moreover, much of the variation in pronunciation that once existed diminished over time due to the adoption by Ashkenazim of a normatively correct (Tiberian) system of pronouncing Hebrew words. In the medieval period, Jews in western Germany, Alsace, and Switzerland (known in the Yiddish linguistic literature as the *Bney-hes*) still had significant differences in their pronunciation of Hebrew from that of Jews in the Danube area, Poland, and eastern Germany (known as the *Bney-khes*). One particularly interesting feature of *Bney-hes* Hebrew is the so-called "E-effect," attributed to Alexis Manaster Ramer,² where the Hebrew vowels *pasekh*, *khatef-pasekh*, and *komets* are pronounced as [e] when adjacent to the consonants *khes* or *ayen* (e.g., the name *Rehel*, a variant of Rachel, used in Regensburg in the fifteenth century). The feature was seemingly widespread – as Beider shows convincingly (section 3.7.3) – but survives today only in a limited number of Yiddish words.³

Beider's significantly shorter Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the Romance and Slavic components, respectively. In Chapter 4, Beider argues persuasively against the view that there exists a "Romance component" in Yiddish, since no definitive structural influences from Romance (e.g., the borrowing of morphology) can be found in either WY or EY. Not all the Romance-origin words in WY are attested in EY, and those that are shared relate mostly to the domain of religious practice – suggestive of borrowing between the two dialects rather

than common Romance origins. The existence of a Slavic component (Chapter 5), however, is well corroborated for EY. On the basis of historical and linguistic documentation (especially individual words and names), Beider postulates the existence of two important communities – “West Canaanites” in Bohemia and Moravia who spoke Old Czech, and “East Canaanites” in Lithuania and Red Ruthenia who spoke Polish – who shifted to what would become Yiddish. Traces of Czech and Polish (the latter becoming more prominent over time) can be seen in Czech Yiddish and EY.

The final chapter of the book summarizes the sound changes that gave rise to the subdialects of WY and EY. Three appendices provide information (a) on the linguistic features of one particular text, (b) on the status of German in the Polish lands, and (c) on issues relating to the origins of Ashkenazic Jews in general. Many of the core ideas raised in Appendix B were previously discussed by Uriel Weinreich in 1958, a crucial article that Beider may have missed.⁴

The title of the book – *Origins of Yiddish Dialects* – is a bit misleading. The differences between subdialects of EY – i.e., what most non-specialists think of as “Yiddish dialects,” and for which recordings of spoken varieties exist – are largely relegated to a brief discussion in the final chapter. Moreover, the development of Yiddish dialects following waves of mass migration from Eastern Europe to the United States, Israel, South America, and Western Europe are not discussed at all. Non-specialists may find Beider’s use of the Hebrew, Cyrillic, and Polish alphabets – often without transliterations, in the context of discussions about sound change – completely opaque. Many of the author’s diagrams schematizing the development of Yiddish varieties, which attest to his background in applied mathematics, provide more confusion than clarity.

The book also suffers from imbalances in the kinds of evidence it presents. For example, Beider explicitly lists historical syntax among the topics that are “beyond the scope of this book” (xvii).⁵ It is unclear to this reviewer how a history of Yiddish of such great length could be justified in ignoring syntactic change – sentence structure being one of the domains that the author admits are “relatively closed to external influence” (417), and therefore particularly revelatory of the language’s internal development. Beider’s reluctance to venture into areas that have received comparatively little scholarly attention – especially Yiddish’s grammatical development – leaves a major blindspot in his analysis.

In sum, *Origins of Yiddish Dialects* represents a refinement rather than a radical departure from previous approaches to the history of Yiddish. In that sense, it is a particularly welcome contribution to a small field fraught with controversy and personal rivalries.⁶ However, because of its uneven coverage of dialects and avoidance of linguistic topics beyond the realm of sound change, the book may be of limited interest even to specialist readers in Yiddish language studies.

Notes

1. At one point, the author states that because a historical document was written specifically for Jewish communal use, “no doubt exists about the words in question being parts of the everyday language of their authors” (205). The assumption that Yiddish (either written or spoken) lacked register differences at *any* stage of its development is at odds with basic principles of sociolinguistics.
2. The very large number of assertions throughout the book that are attributed to the author’s “personal communication with Manaster Ramer” (to whom the book is also dedicated) make it difficult to evaluate them properly.
3. Purported examples from EY include *bedieved* “subsequently; in retrospect,” *shekhtn* “to slaughter,” and *mekn* “to erase,” which are derived from Semitic roots that would have triggered the E-effect.

4. Uriel Weinreich, "Yiddish and Colonial German in Eastern Europe: The Differential Impact of Slavic," in *American Contributions to the Fourth International Congress of Slavists* (The Hague: Mouton, 1958), 369–421.
5. For instance, Beider does not discuss a question as fundamental as how Yiddish came to be the only Germanic language (other than Icelandic) to exhibit the "verb-second" pattern in both main and embedded clauses. This omission is particularly conspicuous considering the number of pages and footnotes devoted to topics much less relevant to the history of Yiddish dialects (e.g., Jewish given names of Greek origin). See Beatrice Santorini, "Some Similarities and Differences between Icelandic and Yiddish," in *Verb Movement*, ed. David Lightfoot and Norbert Hornstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 87–106.
6. This facet of Yiddish linguistics was recently featured in a popular exposé published in *Tablet Magazine* (Batya Ungar-Sargon, "Why the Mystery of the Origins of Yiddish Will Never Be Solved," *Tablet Magazine*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/176580/yiddishland> [accessed February 1, 2016]).

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2016.1193682>

The International Jewish Labor Bund after 1945: toward a global history, by David Slucki, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2012, 284 pp. + 10 photos, US \$53.95, ISBN 978-0-8135-5168-5

David Slucki's *The International Jewish Labour Bund after 1945: Toward a Global History* is a welcome addition to the historiography of the Jewish labor movement. The overwhelming majority of the existing studies of the Jewish Labor Bund have so far focused on the movement's early years in Eastern Europe: the "Russian Period," i.e. from the Bund's origins in the 1890s to its dissolution in the Soviet Union during the Russian Civil War (1918–21); the "Polish" period, when the Bund flourished in interwar Poland; and the Second World War, the Holocaust, and their immediate aftermath.¹ Even the Bund's "official" history, published in five volumes by its survivors in New York between 1960 and 1981, only covers the period to 1932.² Slucki, on the other hand, surveys virtually uncharted territories; his history starts in 1945, the approximate date of the Bund's death certificate for pretty much everybody else. In writing a history that *starts* in 1945 – and even more so a *global* history – Slucki's most obvious claim is that the Bund did not disappear as a movement with the almost complete annihilation of the Jewish community in Poland during the Holocaust, but rather continued to exist outside Poland, where Bundists established a network of active cultural, social, and political organizations. This afterlife lasted for several decades and, in some cases, into the twenty-first century, even though it was mostly a process of steady decay.

A global history of any topic requires, on the part of the author, a significant ability to synthesize and select and, on part of the reader, a degree of skepticism, both of them understanding that a global picture of any topic can never be complete. This is certainly the case with Slucki's book: the attempt to cover the global history of the post-1945 Bund is both ambitious and correct, but it also necessitates discarding and leaving out as much as what can possibly be included in one monograph. For this reason, the book's subtitle, "*Toward a Global History*," is honest and appropriate. For Slucki, "this study is only a beginning" (2), and I hope that some