Lawrence Rosenwald, Multilingual America

CHAPTER 3

# *More than an echo, or, English in Yiddish in America*

## THREE PREFATORY NOTES

Language encounters between Europeans and Native Americans were represented in writing almost exclusively by Europeans. Language encounters in Louisiana between White francophone slave-masters and Black creolophone slaves were represented in writing almost exclusively by Whites. But language encounters in America between immigrants and residents are different; they have been represented in writing mostly by the immigrants themselves.

There is something to regret in that; any encounter takes two, and understanding it means exploring both perspectives. But there is more to rejoice at. Too often we have to see language encounters through the languages of the more powerful: invaders, colonizers, and slave-masters. Here we can see them through the languages of the aspiring citizen, the refugee, the petitioning outsider, the "homeless, tempest-tossed," the alien.

The linguistic experiences of Jewish American immigrants were chiefly represented in literature in two languages, Yiddish and English. The present account focuses almost exclusively on literature written in Yiddish. Why?

The first reason is practical. The territory is vast, and mapping both the English and Yiddish regions would be a vast undertaking. The English domain, moreover, has been fully and brilliantly explored. Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, for example, arguably the greatest Jewish American language novel and certainly the most ambitious and the greatest in English, has been the object of fine studies by Werner Sollors and Hana Wirth-Nesher.[1] Wirth-Nesher's recent book, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature*, is an illuminating account not only of Roth's book but also of a good number of other distinguished Jewish American writers in English.

[1] Both in Hana Wirth-Nesher (ed.), *New Essays on Call It Sleep* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).





The second, deeper reason is conceptual. Writing in Yiddish rather than English, or the reverse, has no single, determinate meaning for Jewish American writers. Writing in Yiddish need not mean fidelity or authenticity or parochialism, nor writing in English opportunism or cosmopolitanism or betrayal. But the fact of writing in one or the other language is not meaningless. Other things being equal, the Jewish American writer writing in English has taken one step towards assimilation – I use the term not negatively but in the joyous, complex sense given it by a recent essay of Michael Kramer's[2] – towards Americanness. In Jewish American writing in English, Yiddish is the Other. The reverse is true of writing in Yiddish. Other things being equal, the writer is one step farther from assimilation, one notch more strongly identified as an immigrant, a Jewish outsider, a person about to make a choice about assimilation and Americanization rather than one carrying out a choice already made. America itself is one notch stranger, more bewildering. English, not Yiddish, is the Other.

> From one door comes the sound of Lithuanian Yiddish, from another Polish Yiddish; in one hallway a man and a woman are conversing in the Yiddish of Volhinia and, in another, a woman is cursing in the Yiddish of Galicia . . . More often Americanized Yiddish is heard, and very frequently Yiddishized English, seasoned with the coarse language of the streets, and not infrequently the noble diction of Shakespeare and Byron and, sometimes, even the beautiful literary Russian of Turgenev.[3]

My utopia in the world would be the sort of place the American Yiddish writer Leon Kobrin is describing here, with all its realized and potential linguistic polyphony. My utopia in literature would be a work that justly and richly represented such a place. Kobrin doesn't do quite that, since the various languages being spoken in the tenement house are named rather than dramatized. But naming is a good first step. Even by itself it evokes the linguistic plenitude of the Jewish American immigrant world: Yiddish and English; the Americanized Yiddish and Yiddishized English that result from their encounter; the multiple dialects and registers within Yiddish; the multiple registers within English, from lowest to highest; even, as a kind of complicating adornment, the presence and literary nobility of Russian. Kobrin's vignette suggests the sort of linguistic material that a great Jewish

[2] Michael Kramer, "The Art of Assimilation: Ironies, Ambiguities, Aesthetics," as yet unpublished.

[3] Leon Kobrin, "The Tenement House," in Henry Goodman (ed. and trans.), *The New Country: Stories from the Yiddish about Life in America* (New York: YKUF, 1961), p. 31. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this anthology will be given in the text.

American language fiction would seek to animate.[4] It thereby helps create a high standard of literary judgment – a standard of judgment I have tried to keep firmly in mind in writing the present essay, both the general considerations on Jewish American writing in Yiddish with which it begins, and the extended analysis and celebration of Sholem Aleichem's *Motl the Cantor's Son* with which it concludes.

## WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

The portrait of American English in American Yiddish literature is a portrait of something existing in the real world, namely, the linguistic relations between American English and American Yiddish. We cannot understand or judge the portrait without knowing something about what it's portraying.

Some data regarding those linguistic relations are furnished by glossaries. The most important is Abraham Cahan's *Verter-bukh far nit amerikanishe lezer* ("A Dictionary for Non-American Readers"), a glossary of English elements in American Yiddish that Cahan appended to the second volume of his autobiography, published in 1926. It fills almost twelve double-columned pages, and no other glossary is on its scale. But there are other glossaries to supplement it. Some are smaller than Cahan's but equally explicit – for example, the list of ninety-four *farenglishte verter* ("Englished words") that the editors of the 1921 Folksfond edition of Sholem Aleichem put at the end of volume XXI, to explain the English-based terms in "Mr. Green Gets a Job" and "A Tale with a Greenhorn." Some are less explicit – for example, the English words that Cahan italicizes in his novel *Yekl*, characterizing them as "the five or six score English words and phrases which the omnivorous Jewish jargon has absorbed in the Ghettos of English-speaking countries."[5] Many are wholly implicit: the sets of English-based words that

[4] Kobrin seems to like this sort of image. In "The Pest," he writes that "the words of the Russian *Dubinushka*, of the Bundist Pledge and of popular Yiddish theater songs mingled under the clear blue sky and then blended with the passionate outcries of the relaxed picnickers and the joyful sounds of the pavilion . . . *Od lo ovda tikvoseynu*, came the words of the Zionist anthem, ardently sung by a duet, a man and a woman" (ed. and trans. Max Rosenfeld, *New Yorkish and Other American Yiddish Stories* [Philadelphia: Sholom Aleichem Club Press, 1995], p. 72; page numbers for subsequent quotations from this anthology will be given in the text). See also Kobrin's "A Common Language," in Max Rosenfeld (ed. and trans.), *Pushcarts and Dreamers* (Philadelphia: Sholom Aleichem Club Press, 1967); page numbers for subsequent quotations from this anthology will be given in the text.

[5] Abraham Cahan, *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom, and Other Stories of Yiddish New York* (New York: Dover, 1970); *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1896); *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), p. 38. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from the Dover anthology will be given in the text.

Unlike most of the literary texts considered in this essay, *Yekl* was written in English. That should, in theory, rule it out of consideration, since the point here is to get a sense of how English is imagined in Yiddish. But the situation is complicated. Though written in English, *Yekl* marks and comments on English elements in its characters' Yiddish speech. That by itself makes it distinctly more like a Yiddish-language fiction than an English-language one. Moreover, Cahan wrote *Yekl* both in English and in Yiddish. I quote the English version for convenience (the Yiddish one was never published in book form), but the Yiddish-language one provides pretty much the same data. See on this Aviva Taubenfeld's excellent "'Only an L': Linguistic Borders and the Immigrant Author in Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* and *Yankel der Yankee*," in Werner Sollors (ed.), *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 144–65.



particular writers in Yiddish use in their narratives of American life, or put into the mouths of their characters in American scenes.

These glossaries make up a significant lexicon. How is it to be read?[6] One approach, probably the dominant approach as long as American Yiddish was a flourishing language, was to consider the English-based lexicon as raising a question about the nature of good or correct Yiddish, and then to argue for or against the use of these words just as English-language usage critics do today. The advocates of Americanized Yiddish include Cahan himself, his contemporaries H. L. Mencken and George L. Wolfe, the noted lexicographer Alexander Harkavy, and at least two eminent critics of Yiddish literature, Shmuel Niger in Cahan's time and Benjamin Harshav in ours.[7] They all argue for a lively, demotic, egalitarian Yiddish, and against a set of claims they characterize as purist and elitist. "Though Dr. [Chaim] Zhitlowsky and his fellow Yiddishists may rail against [the] potato-chicken-kitchen language," writes Mencken, "it is the Yiddish of the overwhelming

[6] In the ensuing analysis, the glossaries will be treated collectively. In fact they differ considerably. We can see this even by comparing their titles. Cahan's, "A Dictionary for Non-American Readers," denies legitimacy to any argument against the use of the words it records. They are, it suggests, simply part of the Yiddish spoken in America; readers of Yiddish in other countries may not be familiar with some of them; this glossary is therefore provided. Cahan thus positions himself as an expert guide to an unfamiliar but uncontested vocabulary. The Folksfond title more frankly calls the words *farenglisht* ("Englished"), and reveals their ambiguous status. They are Yiddish, yes, they are written in Hebrew characters, they are used by the leading Yiddish writer. But they are also "Englished," they have been transformed, they have been made more English and therefore less Yiddish; they have, then, become peculiar and unfamiliar, not just to a non-American reader of Yiddish, but to any reader of Yiddish anywhere.

[7] See H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York: Knopf, 1937); George L. Wolfe, "Notes on American Yiddish," *American Mercury* 29 (August 1933), pp. 473–79; Alexander Harkavy, *Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary*, introduced by Dovid Katz (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1928, repr. New York: Schocken, 1988); Shmuel Niger, "Lomir zey kashern" ("Let's make them kosher"), *Yidishe shprakh* 1 (1941), pp. 21–24; Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Page numbers for subsequent quotations from these works will be given in the text.

majority of American Jews" (634).[8] Niger compares suspect words to immigrants detained at Ellis Island, and pleads, "lomir zey kashern" (21; "let's make them kosher"). Harkavy does just that, including such words in his dictionary without any invidious classification of them.

The issue, for these writers, is how a language depicts the outside world, that is, the world as something external to the language the writer uses to depict it. That is why Cahan writes at the beginning of his autobiography that he will use a different Yiddish for the first volume, which recounts events in Europe, than for the subsequent volumes, which recount events in America.

> With the exception of the first volume, these "pages" are written in American Yiddish – the Yiddish in which I have been accustomed to speak and write for more than forty years.
>
> In the first volume, such a language would be unnatural, because there the story is about the old country.[9]

He thus implies that European and American Yiddish will inevitably differ, and that the differences between them will result simply from the different situations they are used to describe. A similar conception animates Niger's argument for accepting the Americanism *trobl*, that is, "trouble":

> How long will we continue to have "*trobl*" with . . . a word like "*trobl*" itself? How long will we continue to have it enclosed in quotation marks, as if in some sort of linguistic Ellis Island? There are cases when we have, not *tsores*, not *dayges*, not *zorgn*, not even *unongenemlikhkeytn*, but rather just *trobl*. So let us stop being ashamed, and just say that we have *trobl*. (22)

Those on the other side, those who insist, in Wolfe's phrase, "on a Yiddish pure and undefiled," have in mind a different goal: not depicting the outside world, but maintaining the language's internal integrity:

> [They] are vitally interested in the perpetuation of Yiddish wherever Jews are. They ridicule the indiscriminate use of English loan words. From the platform, in the press, and in conversation they deplore the development of a bastard Yiddish in America. They call it the potato-chicken-kitchen language, the barbaric language, the language of the streets, and so forth. "When one thinks of Yiddish in America," says Dr. Ch[aim] Zhitlowsky, the theoretician of the Yiddishist movement, in the *Day*, "one must not forget that we have here two brands of Yiddish. One brand is the wild-growing Yiddish-English jargon, the potato-chicken-kitchen language; the other brand is the cultivated language of Yiddish culture all over the world." (Wolfe, "Notes on American Yiddish" 478)

[8] Mencken got his information and opinions on these matters from Cahan; he is not offering an independent competent judgment on Yiddish usage. But even his second-hand views matter. He was a more widely known language critic than any of the Yiddish-language writers, and the prestige of his unborrowed views about English gave credibility to his borrowed views about Yiddish.

[9] Abraham Cahan, *In der alter heym* ("In the old country"), *Bleter fun mayn lebn* ("Pages from my life"), 5 vols. (New York: Forward Association, 1926), vol. I, p. 3, my translation, as are all translations not otherwise identified. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text.



Sometimes, though, the "Yiddishists" make more complex arguments. Consider Max Weinreich's remarkable 1941 essay, "Vegn englishe elementn in undzer kulturshprakh" ("On English Elements in Our Culture-Language"). Weinreich begins by noting that what is at issue is not just vocabulary but also grammar. He then establishes a troubling association between the use of English vocabulary and that of non-standard grammar – that is, between something Cahan and Niger are defending and something they would surely disdain. He investigates and annihilates the argument that new English words are introduced only to describe new American phenomena.

His demolition work finished, Weinreich makes some surprising maneuvers. He argues for the legitimacy of certain English-based phrases that are clearly not introduced for that reason. Is it correct to use *trobl*? There is, says Weinreich, no single answer. Making the right choice depends on context. Accordingly, he distinguishes among speech registers – for example, "correct Yiddish"; "the American Yiddish culture-language," "general literary Yiddish"; and among speech situations – for example, a private conversation among friends, a speech at a meeting, a newspaper article, an editorial, a scholarly book. He reflects thoughtfully on what usage might be appropriate in each register and situation.[10]

Compared with most English-language usage debates, these Yiddish debates are more intelligent, less dogmatic, less self-righteous. But they have an important limitation: the writers' focus on whether particular words should be used kept them from investigating what happened when they were used. Perhaps it was good that speakers and writers of American Yiddish were using this or that individual English-based word or group of

[10] Max Weinreich, "Vegn englishe elementn in undzer kulturshprakh," *Yidishe shprakh* 1 (1941), pp. 33–46. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text.

An extreme position on these matters is that of Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose 1943 "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America" was, David Roskies writes, "so controversial in its cultural pessimism that it carried a disclaimer from the editors. What Singer argued is that Yiddish as a modern secular language was dead" (David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996], p. 281). For Singer's essay, see "Problemen fun der yidisher proze in Amerike," *Svive* 2 (March–April 1943), pp. 2–13, and the English translation, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America," trans. Robert Wolf, *Proofiexts* 9 (1989), pp. 5–12.

words. Perhaps it was bad. In any case, they were using them. What were the consequences?

Emerson wrote, "a new fact makes a new system." A new word is a new fact. A whole vocabulary of new words is an abundance of new facts, a collective new fact on a large scale, and the system has to change to accommodate it. Uriel Weinreich brilliantly describes the process in *Languages in Contact*.[11] Even at the level of the individual word, he writes, "the consequences of a word transfer or a word reproduction on the miniature semantic system . . . of which the new word becomes a member are as much a part of the interference as the transfer or reproduction themselves" (53). At the highest level,

> every enrichment or impoverishment of a system involves necessarily the reorganization of all the old distinctive oppositions of the system. To admit that a given element is simply added to the system which receives it without consequences for this system would ruin the very concept of system. (1)

Consider, as an example of how the process works in a particular case, the case of the word "smart." There is a perfectly good Yiddish word of approximately the same meaning: *klug*. *Klug*, though, is less likely than American English "smart" is to refer to people who ruthlessly exercise their intelligence for their own interest.[12] So what happens when "smart" comes into Yiddish? Weinreich states the three possibilities: "confusion in usage, or full identity of content between the old and the new word"; the discarding of the old word; and "specialization in content" – that is, the development of a felt difference between the old word and the new, in reference or style or both (55). In the case at hand, the first possibility was

[11] Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970). Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text. See also on this subject the writings of Joshua Fishman, especially *Yiddish in America*, Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics, publication 36, *International Journal of American Linguistics* 31:2(2) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965); and Sol Steinmetz, *Yiddish and English: A Century of Yiddish in America* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1986).

This English-in-Yiddish bilingualism is related to, but also distinct from, the long history of what Max Weinreich called "Jewish internal bilingualism," i.e., the bilingualism constituted by the simultaneous presence in some Jewish communities of two specifically Jewish languages – Yiddish and Hebrew. See Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble, assisted by Joshua A. Fishman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 257–314.

[12] The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that "smart," in the morally ominous sense of "quick at devising, learning, looking after oneself or one's own interests," is in its later use chiefly American; the *Dictionary of Americanisms* defines "smartness" as "extreme cleverness or shrewdness, especially to one's own advantage." When Dickens's Martin Chuzzlewit asks the scoundrel Colonel Driver whether "smart" is "American for forgery," he is getting at this connotation (Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* [New York: Penguin, 1986], p. 326).



not realized; this, Weinreich says, "is probably restricted to the early stages of language contact." Nor was the second; Yiddish retains *klug* till this day. What happened was the realization of the third possibility, specialization in content: "smart" took on the sense of "unethically intelligent," and *klug* was restricted to the legitimate uses of intelligence. A similar distinction seems to have arisen between English-derived *biznes* and standard European Yiddish *gesheft*; as George Wolfe writes, "*business* is reserved for an enterprise of a questionable character; otherwise the purer and dignified *gescheft* is employed" (474). Max Weinreich substantiates this, writing that the word is usually used "with a flavor of scorn" (40).[13]

The two examples are strikingly similar: the Yiddish word is honorable, the English one is not. A wider sampling yields a more complicated portrait. The English elements gathered in the glossaries focus most strikingly on the commercial world. Almost every list has the word "business."[14] The Folksfond list adds a few idioms that put that word to use: "attending to business," "settling the business," "business-broker." Cahan's list adds "busy," "business card," and "businessman." Other words name particular aspects of business: "advertisement," "agent," "appointment," "boss," "cash," "commission," "deposit," "expenses," "job," "salary," "shop," "success," "trade," "wages." Some words describe particular businesses and occupations: "bookkeeper," "bricklayer," "butcher," "custom tailor," "druggist," "garbageman," "laundry," "newsboy," the almost omnipurpose "operator," "peddler," "stationery," "waiter." It is no accident that Cahan cites *makhn a lebn* ("making a living") as the first phrase that gave him a taste – and a sour taste, at that – of American Yiddish: "when I would hear a phrase like '*er makht a lebn*,' I'd barely keep from gnashing my teeth."[15]

[13] Wolfe writes *gescheft*, I write *gesheft*. My own transliterations of Yiddish words are mostly in accord with YIVO guidelines. When I quote other writers, I quote their transliterations as I find them.

[14] Most words taken from the glossaries will be given in the standard spelling of the English words they are derived from. Their Yiddish spelling is interesting, especially as reflecting the New York pronunciation of English at the time when the glossaries were compiled, e.g., "furniture" rendered as *foyrnitsher*; but reproducing it here would slow the argument.

[15] Cahan, *Bleter*, vol. II: *Mayne ershte akht yor in amerike* ("My first eight years in America"), p. 109. For a published English translation, see Abraham Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, trans. Leon Stein, Abraham Conan, and Lynn Davison (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969) p. 242.

Why Cahan had such a negative reaction to the phrase isn't clear, though the context suggests that what he disliked was both the grammar of the expression and its implicit greediness. After the sentence quoted in the text, we read, "I remember this expression specifically, and also the expression, 'he is worth ten thousand dollars'."

A related group of words evokes the sharp and slippery uses of commercial intelligence. "Smart" is of course one of them. Others are "bluffer,"[16] "bargain," "scheme," and "trick." Other words in the same group have a different relation to sharp business; they are not terms for describing it but part of the verbal repertory of those who practice it, elements in the repartee of con men: "leave it to me," "never mind," "sport" (in the sense of a "good fellow"). Sholem Aleichem's Mr. Baraban the Business Broker, scheming to ruin a young man by selling him a laundry instead of a stationery store, deploys the first of these phrases expertly:

". . . *leave it to me*, I'll give you a better *business*, a *laundry* in the Bronx, you'll work *regular* hours and live like a king!" . . .
"What will that cost?"
I tell him, "a bargain at a thousand dollars, but *leave it to me*, I'll get it for you for eight hundred." (Sholem Aleichem, "A Tale with a Greenhorn" 254)[17]

But American English-in-Yiddish also has a vocabulary of resistance to business – that is, for describing the world of labor and union organizing. Cahan's list is especially rich in these: "association," "chairman," "dues," "grievance committee," "handbill," "headquarters," "labor," "labor day," "labor lyceum," "lock-out," "picket," "rank and file," "strike," "trade and labor alliance," "trade union." ("Union" itself does not appear there, though both Cahan and many other writers use the word frequently.) A related group of words describes the political institutions that those who sought to resist the pressures of business would have to understand: "assemblyman," "association," "board of education," "district attorney," "governor," "legislature," "nomination," "politician," "Tammany," "trial," "vote." Another related group describes the grimmer side of immigrant life, especially working-class immigrant life: "breadline," "gambling house," "jail,"[18] "pawnshop," "prison," "riot," "sack" (in the sense of "to fire"), "sweater" (in the sense of a sweatshop boss), "sweatshops."

[16] A particularly interesting example. *Blofer*, "bluffer," is glossed by Cahan as *ligner*, "liar." Fair enough, if what matters is only to understand what the word refers to. But using the former in place of the latter means emphasizing deceitful craft over moral dishonesty.

[17] In translating Yiddish literary passages for this chapter, I have usually used italics to indicate words that are in English in the Yiddish original. I have also sometimes used italics for Yiddish words that I have chosen to retain in the English translations. In theory, this risks creating ambiguity. In practice it seems not to.

[18] In "Notes on American Yiddish," *Journal of English and German Philology* 37 (1938), J. H. Neumann suggests that "jail" gets used in American Yiddish because, for "words for which there exist in Yiddish many local and dialectal terms, . . . American Yiddish substitutes a single English word understood by all" (412). Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text.



These are the principal categories.[19] They evoke conflicting aspects and values of immigrant life, not just its American-style commercial villainy. But they consistently define English-in-Yiddish as belonging to secular life rather than sacred, daily life rather than ceremonial, and, though less consistently, public life rather than private. No glossary proposes to replace *khazn* with "cantor," *khosn* with "bridegroom," *kheyder* with "religious school." Rather these Yiddish words, and others like them, regularly turn up in another sort of glossary, that is, the glossaries of Yiddish words retained in English-language narratives. The glossary of Mary Antin's *Promised Land*, for example, includes not only these words but also *dayen* (a judge in a religious court), *goles* (exile, diaspora), *khumesh* (Pentateuch), *lamdn* (scholar), *mikve* (ritual bath), *treyf* (ritually forbidden).[20] To describe religious and ceremonial life, immigrants held fast to Yiddish even when they had turned to writing in English.

The few exceptions to the generalization strengthen it. Consider the word "reverend." For once, Cahan's definition suggests skepticism: "someone venerable; used of a rabbi, a cleric, chiefly of a rabbi or another *klekoydesh* [Yiddish term for a Jewish cleric] in 'modern' dress" – that is, a sartorially assimilated rabbi. J. H. Neumann notes that "rabbi" itself "invariably means a reform or conservative minister, not an orthodox rabbi of the old school" (413). Sholem Aleichem's Huck Finn-like Motl the Cantor's son cheerfully sharpens the skepticism:

A *rov* [European Yiddish for "rabbi"] has to be able to *pasken shayles* [give authoritative responses to technical and practical legal questions]. And yet, there are *rabonim* [plural of *rov*] in America. Here they're called "reverends" – at home they were butchers. My brother Elye met a *moyl* [a ritual circumciser], a *reverend*, whom they call for brisses. At home he was a tailor, in fact a ladies' tailor! Elye says to him: "can it be?" He answers: "America!"[21]

Yiddish borrows American English words to refer to the religious world when it wants to describe second-rate clerics and religious impostors.

None of this is surprising. Its being unsurprising, though, does not make it neutral, nor keep it from having wide-ranging consequences. It is one thing to take two nearly synonymous words, one borrowed and

[19] The glossaries do describe other areas of life as well, e.g., the geography of New York City, the public schools, the architecture and furnishings of a tenement house.

[20] Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (New York: Penguin, 1997), pp. 289–94.

[21] Sholem Aleichem, *Motl Peyse dem khazns*, ed. Khone Shmeruk (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1997), p. 241. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text.
Note that Motl has a certain admiration for the way people can, as he believes, learn absolutely anything in America. It's the writer and reader who are skeptical.

one traditional, and distinguish between them by specializing both. It is another thing to do this with two languages. When we step back from the particular American encounter between English and Yiddish, we know perfectly well that English has a rich vocabulary for talking about religious practice and ceremony, and Yiddish a rich vocabulary for talking about daily life, heroic labor, and rapacious management. When Yiddish writers borrow English terms for describing the secular life and retain Yiddish ones for describing the religious life, when writers in English reverse the process, both languages risk being diminished in their self-sufficiency and splendor. Casting English as a secular language is stereotyping it. So is casting Yiddish as a religious one.[22]

## STEREOTYPES AND LANGUAGE TRAITORS

Many images of English in Yiddish writing simply dramatize the stereotypes the glossaries imply. Cahan's *Yekl* tells us that America is the land where "*a shister vet a mister un a mister vet a shister*" (25; "a cobbler [*shister*] becomes a gentleman [*mister*, i.e., the English word "mister"] and a gentleman a cobbler") – that is, an English word speaks of success, a Yiddish one of labor.[23] Leon Kobrin's "*Aktyorn*" ("Actors") makes the same sociolinguistic point more flamboyantly:

> The cashier of the theater, who spoke only English when "business was booming" and only Yiddish when "business was rotten" – he too, hearing what the actors were saying, stuck his black curly head out of the booth whenever he saw me and greeted me enthusiastically in English: "A double-G!" he predicted, which meant, I assumed, Good with a capital G. (*New Yorkish* 54)

Numerous American Yiddish fictions present a class of Jewish language traitors: villains who use English villainously, on its own or through the incorporation of English terms into their Yiddish, immigrant companions to history's Doña Marina, Cooper's Magua, Mercier's De Lauzun, Cable's

[22] This scheme, in which Yiddish is religious and English secular, is ironically related to an aspect of the Jewish internal bilingualism mentioned above, in which Hebrew is religious and Yiddish secular. Figuring out how that relation works is beyond the scope of this essay.

For a sharp-tongued critique of a similar position regarding a different language pairing, see Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004): "Speakers of Lakota object to a 'thingness' about English because it allegedly reifies spiritual meanings into objects. The 'sweat house,' for example, is a wooden translation for a mystical ceremony called *inikagapi* ('with it they make life'). But the contrast between sacred Lakota and secular English is bogus. It ignores the heated mystical tradition in Standard English, where, for instance, communion means much more than wafer eating. The Lakota case shows only that one tradition doesn't easily understand another" (xviii–xix).

[23] I take this point from Taubenfeld, "'Only an L'," p. 151.



Palmyre.[24] If the glossaries associate English with what is secular and commercial, the stories, some of them at least, more sharply associate English with what is wicked.

Sometimes these characters are evoked only briefly. The quickest learner of English among the greenhorns depicted in Chaver Paver's *Tsen Landslayt* ("Ten Landsmen")[25] is the one criminal, Berele the Pickpocket: "on the way from Ellis Island to his brother Herschel's house on Prospect Avenue in the Bronx, Berele Pickpocket learned a few English words: 'Hello, how are you, thanks, all right'" (*The New Country* 95). Miriam Raskin's Lily, in "In the Shadows," appears only as "a young, pretty girl who spoke only English, [and] seemed to have become extremely attractive" (*New Yorkish* 85); her English and her attractiveness together endanger the relation between the sympathetic protagonist Annie and the poet Isaac Lev. Tashrak's James Pussy ("[I] thought to myself that his Jewish name probably was Zushe Katz" [*The New Country* 120]), with his English name, English vocabulary, and mildly fraudulent real-estate "bargains," would be a successful language traitor if he were smarter; instead, the narrator to whom Pussy makes his pitch decides, at his wife's suggestion, that he himself will turn real estate agent, and concludes the story by offering to sell the reader "half of New York!" (124) The landlady in Jonah Rosenfeld's "Americanized" is made sinister and alien by three traits: being fat, having frequent sex with her husband, and speaking English, which the disgusted narrator cannot understand.[26]

[24] Immigrant characters of this sort are not restricted to Yiddish. I myself first came across the type in *Die Emigranten*, an anonymous 1882 German play from St. Louis, and I have read of other examples in Scandinavian-language immigrant fiction; see Orm Overland, "From Melting Pot to Copper Kettles," in Werner Sollors (ed.), *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 55, and my "Language Traitors, Translation, and *Die Emigranten*," in Winfried Fluck and Werner Sollors (eds.), *German? American? Literature? New Directions in German-American Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 250–56.

[25] *Landslayt* are groups of Jewish immigrants in America who come from a single *shtetl* in eastern Europe.

[26] Other, related characters in these stories are marked not by their English nor by the English words in their Yiddish, but by other aspects of their Yiddish speech. These are sometimes simply incompetent speakers of the language, e.g., Avrom Reyzn's "The American Europeans": "she would not voice her opinions in Yiddish because she feared they would laugh at her pronunciation" (*The New Country* 211); sometimes speakers of the language with a more egalitarian, less respectful politeness code; sometimes speakers whose particular version of the language suggests a general rejection of Judaism, as in Kobrin's "Door #1": "'it seemed to me,'" says the protagonist Moishe of his two sons, "'these were two Polish priests who had come for us – and to listen to their Yiddish! It sounded to me like Stephan, the policeman, talking. Don't you remember, we surely thought at that time, that they had actually gone over?'" (186).

Sometimes the portraits are richer. Consider Sholem Ash's[27] "American," a "biznes-man" long in America, traveling with a group of green immigrants to New York. One of the immigrants is a pianist, a virtuoso with grand ambitions. But then the businessman gets hold of him:

*Well, Mr. Paderevski, I want to tell you something . . . kunst, shmunst* ["art, shmart"]. We've heard this sort of thing before, and with your piano-playing there you're not going to surprise anyone. *No, sir.* America needs *business, and that's all*![28]

Then, with a wealth of convincing detail and an abundance of English, the businessman proposes an alternative scenario: not New York but a city in the Midwest, say Memphis or Kansas City; not a grand public concert, but private lessons, friendships with the ladies, connections with the local "*reverend*" and his pretty daughter, good clothing, perhaps a concert in a private house at a "*five o'clock dinner*," a music school ("it's a *business*!"); at the end, money in the bank, a car, a house, a young wife and two children playing in the garden.

Ash's intelligence here lies in the precise details and the sadly realistic conclusion. The young man is no hero. He does not turn away from the American's appeals to assert the cause of art. Instead, he is seduced by them: "suffused with joy, a song in his heart, the young man listened to the American's speech, and it resounded in his ears like the most beautiful of concerts."

Jake in Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* is a language traitor on a bigger scale, and *Yekl* as a whole is a story about language treason.[29] The better a character speaks English, and the more English elements a character incorporates into his or her Yiddish, the more assimilated the character is, and the worse his or her behavior. Jake is the protagonist, a Yiddish-speaking Jew come to America to make a living. Gitl, his Old World wife, is the person in relation to whom the other characters' behavior can be charted. Jake's co-worker Mr. Bernstein cannot speak English, and speaks a Yiddish mostly free of English elements; he continues to say the traditional blessing over bread, and in the end he seems likely to become Gitl's new and faithful husband. Jake's neighbor Mrs. Kavarsky speaks some English and incorporates some English elements into her Yiddish; she is Gitl's friend and supporter against

[27] "Ash" is the scholarly transliteration of Ash's name. But it is more usually transliterated as "Asch."

[28] Sholem Ash, *Der amerikaner* ("The American"), recorded by Chaim Ostrowsky on *Jewish Classical Literature* (New York: Folkways Records, 1960). I have been unable to find the story in printed collections of Ash's works.

[29] For a wonderful commentary on *Yekl* from a different but equally language-centered perspective, see Hana Wirth-Nesher's *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 32–51.



Jake, but she also presses Gitl to stop covering her hair in the traditional way, and in a burst of passion first combs, then cuts Gitl's unfashionably long hair with scissors and curling iron – which Gitl experiences as "instruments of torture" (67), though the result is "a pair of rich side bangs" (67). Jake himself speaks a Yiddish thick with English elements, and likes speaking English.[30] He delays purchasing tickets to bring Gitl and their son Yosselé to America, preferring boxing-matches and dances and his "general life of gallantry" (25). He does bring them in the end; but then he deserts them, albeit remorsefully, for the thoroughly Americanized Mamie Fein, arranges for both rabbinical and civic divorces, and leaves with Mamie for Philadelphia. Mamie, who speaks English "like one American born" (52), takes Jake away from Gitl and feels no remorse at all.

This linguistic pattern is dramatized in a pivotal scene in which Mamie comes to reclaim Jake from Gitl, and in which her strategies for reclaiming him are enacted in and facilitated by the use of English. Before the scene, Jake seems to be working his way back into his marriage; afterwards, he's clearly moving away from it. Mamie enters, "preceded by a cloud of cologne odors" (49). She exchanges English greetings with Jake, which Gitl tries unsuccessfully to participate in. When she speaks to Gitl in Yiddish, she deliberately makes herself unintelligible, speaking

> with an overdone American accent in the dialect of the Polish Jews, affectedly Germanized and profusely interspersed with English, so that Gitl, whose mother tongue was Lithuanian Yiddish, could scarcely catch the meaning of one half of her flood of garrulity. (49–50)

The actual actions of concealment and betrayal are then performed in English. Mamie has lent Jake $25. Gitl does not know of the loan, which implies an intimacy between Mamie and Jake that Jake has concealed. Mamie threatens in English to tell Gitl of the loan "in Jewish" (50) – that is, in Yiddish; but the threat is itself an intimate conspiracy with Jake, in that it takes place in Gitl's presence but without her comprehension. Then Jake, fearing justly that their continuing to speak in English will make Gitl uneasy, makes a crucial concession:

> "For Chrish'[31] shake, Mamie!" he entreated her, wincingly. "Shtop to shpeak English, an' shpeak shomet'ing differench. I'll shee you – ver can I shee you?" (51)

[30] Cahan's exact rendering of that English in its Yiddish-influenced grammar and pronunciation makes it hideous and nearly unintelligible on the page – so hideous, in fact, that one wonders whether he intends the repellent orthography to be a critique of the language it is representing.

[31] Jake's allusion to Jesus here suggests a religious assimilation that Cahan probably wants us to read as running in parallel with his linguistic assimilation. (My thanks to my colleague Bill Cain for calling my attention to this point.)

Speaking English thus enables Jake and Mamie both to conceal their previous relationship and to arrange for its continuation.

The subtlest of these language traitors is Sholem Aleichem's Mr. Baraban the Business Broker. What makes him subtle is partly his virtuosic scheming. He settles on a victim, a young man with a pretty wife and $1,000 that the wife has brought to the marriage. The young man wants to buy a business, a stationery store. Mr. Baraban, in envy (his wife is "a freak to look at and a Xantippe besides"[32]) or in motiveless malignity, sets out to ruin him. He sells him a laundry instead of a stationery store, and at an inflated price ($800); terrifies the young man by making him believe that another laundry is opening around the corner; buys the laundry back from the young man, for $500 (minus a broker's commission!); then entices the young man into buying a laundry again, to compete with the laundryman from whom Mr. Baraban had acquired the original laundry in the first place. A fierce competition arises between the two laundries; the young man goes broke and is put in jail; and Mr. Baraban finishes the comedy by finding the young man's wife a lawyer, to help her sue her husband for her dowry, for a divorce, and for support payments until the divorce comes through.

The other thing that makes Mr. Baraban subtle is his self-presentation. His language itself is familiar, a particularly vigorous, three-card monte style of Americanized Yiddish.

> "What's the use to you," I say, "of *bothering* yourself with a *stationery-store*, eighteen hours in twenty-four, peering about in case a *schoolboy* runs through to get *candy* for a *penny* and so forth? So *leave it to me* – I'll get you a better *business*, a *laundry* in the *Bronx*, you'll work *regular* hours and live like a king!" (254)

When we first meet him, though, what he is doing with this language is shamelessly crusading against the unregulated passion for American-style business. Mr. Baraban's opening monologue could be a critique of Sholem Ash's *Amerikaner*:

> You say: America is a country of *business. Never mind.* That's the way it has to be. But *after all*, going to get married and selling yourself for *biznes* – that, surely, *excuse me*, is a *khazeray* ["piggishness," general negative term derived from the traditional Jewish prohibition of eating pork]. I'm not preaching a moral, but I'm telling you, it's a *fact*, ninety-nine percent of all greenhorns get married here for *business* – and that bothers me, and when I meet a greenhorn like that, he's not getting away without something to remember me by, *leave it to me.* So let me tell you a story . . . (253)

Sholem Aleichem knows that the most skillful language traitors present themselves as righteous critics of all the rest.

[32] Sholem Aleichem, "A mayse mit a grinhorn" ("A Story with a Greenhorn"), in *Ale verk fun Sholem-Aleichem*, 28 vols. (New York: Sholem Aleichem Folks-Fond, 1921), vol. XXI, p. 257. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text. Published English translations by Goodman, in *The New Country*, and by Ted Gorelick, in Sholem Aleichem, *Nineteen to the Dozen* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998).



## MEANS OF RESISTANCE

These images of English-in-Yiddish are so powerful that they almost seem inevitable. In fact they are tendentious, and the vision they imply is an oversimplification. Speaking English, let alone simply incorporating English elements into one's Yiddish, does not mean abandoning Jewish religious values for American commercial ones. (Cahan himself was an advocate of Americanized Yiddish but an opponent of assimilation.) Speaking European Yiddish does not mean adhering to Jewish values. Being American does not mean holding exclusively commercial and secular values; being Jewish does not mean holding exclusively ethical and religious ones.

A wonderful sketch by the humorist Moshe Nadir, called "I: As Echo," hints at a more complex view. The bohemian narrator takes a job with a friend, a farmer and country resort-keeper. A competing resort-keeper, seeking to attract nature-lovers, has hired a man to provide a picturesque echo. The narrator's friend hires him for the same purpose, at "$2.40 a day plus free laundry."[33] The narrator finds a hiding place by a picturesque bridge and waits. A wandering nature-lover happens by, then shouts a few phrases in the hope of hearing them echoed. The narrator imitates the nature-lover's first phrases almost perfectly. But soon he finds the job growing burdensome; and when the nature-lover calls out, "how are you doing?" the narrator steps out of his part and answers, "*thank you*! I'm *all right*. How are you doing yourself?" (58) He is, predictably enough, fired, and sent back to the city on the first available train.

Nadir's sketch is a genial parable about linguistic assimilation, and a lens for looking at the fictions so far discussed. Those fictions are concerned with the bad effects of what Nadir's sketch teaches us to call being an echo. They present the unreflective, mechanical, docile imitation of English words and phrases – that is, the echoing of them – as both profitable and corrupting. It

[33] Moyshe Nadir, "Ikh – als viderkol," in *Zeks bikher* (New York: Yidisher Farlag far Literatur un Visnshaft, 1928), p. 55. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text.

is profitable because it enables one to get ahead in anglophone America. It is corrupting because, the stories imply, echoing American English means echoing American commercial values.

Nadir knows the truths these stories know. His sketch, too, makes the association between echoing and commercial success. Before becoming an echo, the narrator is poor and unemployed. While being an echo, the narrator is paid $2.40 a day plus free laundry – a modest but not minimal salary at the time. After being an echo, the narrator is poor once again, with no prospects in sight. The sketch also resembles the stories in suggesting that being an echo isn't finally very satisfying. It's going too far to call the narrator a man of principle, who rejects the job of being an echo because it degrades him. Nadir's sketch doesn't sound such earnest notes. But something in the narrator – artistic boredom, vain eagerness to speak in his own voice, sheer impudence – pushes him, and pushes him quickly, to give up a good salary and situation.[34]

But Nadir knows other truths as well. In the stories, the implicit alternative to echoing English seems to be not to speak it at all – that is, to hold on to Yiddish against English as a means of holding on to Jewish ethical and religious values against American secular and commercial ones. This would be, in the terms of Nadir's sketch, either to refuse the job in the first place, or, on finding out what it entailed, to resign from it with dignity and nobly bear the privations of honest poverty – that poverty which, as Anzia Yezierska's autobiography reminds us, "becomes a wise man like a red ribbon on a white horse."[35]

That is not what Nadir's narrator does. He enjoys the prospect of $2.40 a day and free laundry. He enjoys echoing – for a while, at least. He continues to like certain aspects of echoing, for example, the form of call and response. What he doesn't like is always having to be an exact echo. Let him be free to improvise a little – enough, say, to make echoing into conversation, into two Jews talking – and he will be perfectly happy. This would be, in the terms of the stories, not to reject English but to play with it, to speak it but to speak it in one's own voice.

Where do we see this richer possibility realized? Sometimes in the language itself. A good example is *olraytnik*, with the Slavic suffix "nik" joining

[34] Maybe, of course, what pushes him to give up his salary and situation is the nature-lover's invitation: "how are you doing?" Even the nature-lover, that is, is asking for conversation more than he's asking for an echo. (My thanks to my friend and colleague Margery Sabin for this acute observation.)

[35] The epigraph to Anzia Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (New York: Persea, 1987); identified as a "ghetto proverb." The oldest form of the proverb known to me is differently gendered: "Poverty is becoming to a Jewess, as a red ribbon on the nape of a white horse," quoted by Akiva, Leviticus Raba 35:6.



the American idiom "all right." The American idiom itself, says the *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, means "excellent, great; (of persons) dependable, trustworthy, friendly." The Yiddish word means pretty much the opposite. Cahan's glossary, often aimed at neutralizing the emotional or ethical charges of English elements in American Yiddish, defines "all right" simply as "*gut, rekht*" ("good, correct"). Weinreich's scrupulous dictionary makes the matter clearer; an *olraytnik* is an "upstart, philistine, parvenu." An English word of praise has been transformed into a Yiddish word of satire.

Writers of literature let us watch such transformations and resistances take place. Sometimes they do that simply by showing us characters who hold opinions about particular English words – that is, who do not receive them as inevitable facts:

> The teacher teaches the class the skill of spelling "night," which is almost like the Yiddish "*nacht*" but which has that extra "g" in the middle: "Sister," which means "*shvester*," is a pleasure to spell, without any extra letters at all. But "knife," with the unnecessary "k" right smack at the beginning! (Chaver Paver, "Gershon," *Pushcarts* 213–14)

When the words are charged with meaning, the process of having an opinion about them is more intense, as in Chone Gottesfeld's "A Pleasure to Have a Beard," where "one old man, who had been in America a long time, interpreted the word ["kike"] in this way: 'kike is a word which a greenhorn who chews chewing-gum calls a greenhorn who does not yet chew gum'" (*The New Country* 230). Sometimes, to hold off the pressure of English, immigrants simply invent words. In Jonah Rosenfeld's "Vreplamrendn," for example, the narrator's landlady insults him in English, which he cannot understand; but he defends himself with "vreplamrendn," which she cannot understand, and prevails: "her eyes flared with such dislike for me that my sides almost burst with the laughter exploding inside me, and I repeated the word so I wouldn't forget it, in order to have it ready for similar situations" (*Pushcarts* 180).[36]

Sometimes it seems that simply reading English, rather than only speaking it, is enough to make one an unservile student of American values. Avrom Reyzn's story, "Mama Goes to the Library," presents us with Bessie, a thoroughly Americanized girl who regards her Yiddish-speaking mother as an embarrassment, so much so that when she's being visited by a girlfriend, she won't even ask for a snack for fear that her mother will speak to her

[36] Note, though, that in Kobrin's "A Common Language," *eylembeylemyamtsedreylem* is a means of attack (*Pushcarts* 34 and throughout the story).

in Yiddish. A thoroughly predictable generational split. But Bessie is also a reader, and loves taking English books out of the library. This fascination with the reading of English makes her less hostile to her mother, readier to join in fellowship with her when she too starts going to the library (though to take out Yiddish books). The sketch ends, not with some squabble or irremediable split, but with Bessie taking a didactic pride in her mother's literacy: "[Bessie] even talks about it with her *boy*, with whom she ventures to go for a *walk* as far as *Jackson Park* . . . Henry, did you know that my mother goes to the library? . . . and she looks at him triumphantly."[37] Or consider again Mr. Bernstein in Cahan's *Yekl*. We first see him "intent upon an English newspaper," (3), and looking up an occasional word in a "cumbrous dictionary" (3).[38] He does not speak English well; but his reading seems to have given him a richer sense of America and more complex American ambitions than Jake has, who speaks English but does not read it. And what he suggests to Jake, towards the end of the first scene, is not that Jake reject American values but that he study them:

> "Look here, Jake; since fighters and baseball men are all educated, then why don't you try to become so? Instead of *spending* your money on fights, dancing, and things like that, would it not be better if you paid it to a teacher?" (7)

Appropriately enough, it is Bernstein and not Jake, but also Bernstein and not some Old World rejector of America and American English altogether, who is about to be Gitl's New World husband when the novel ends.

A more playful form of resistance is making puns. It would be wrong to make too much of this, but also wrong to ignore it. George Orwell's remark about dirty jokes describes these puns too: "a dirty joke is not, of course, a serious attack on morality, but it is a sort of mental rebellion, a momentary wish that things were otherwise."[39] It is no accident that Cahan's Gitl makes the one pun in *Yekl*:

> "Don't say varimess," [Jake] corrected [Gitl] complaisantly; "here it is called *dinner*."
>
> "*Dinner*. And what if one becomes fatter?" she confusedly ventured an irresistible pun. (38)[40]

[37] Avrom Reyzn, *Gezamlte shriftn*, 14 vols. (New York: Frayhayt Publishing Association, 1928), vol. XIV: *Tsvishn grenetsn: ertseylungen*, pp. 137–38.

[38] Wirth-Nesher writes, "it is tempting to see the avid reader as Cahan himself, who learned English by devouring works of literature, just as Bernstein is intent on his American newspaper" (Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English* 44).

[39] George Orwell, "The Art of Donald McGill," in *A Collection of Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981), p. 114.

[40] The sound of the English "dinner" is similar to that of the Yiddish *diner*, which means "thinner."



Jake is in a good mood, and this is one of his more amiable moments with Gitl. But what he is doing is imposing a word, the right word, the American word. Gitl defends herself by pointing out the wrongness, or at any rate the comic absurdity, of that right word; how, after all, can a meal that makes one fatter be named by a word that means "thinner"? She is not resisting the need to learn the English word, just refusing to treat it as a fact of nature.

A comrade of Gitl's in this line is Sholem Aleichem's Brokhe, in *Motl the Cantor's Son*. Like Gitl, Brokhe is allied with the Old World; like Gitl, but more aggressively, Brokhe expresses that allegiance in a pun on an English word. The word is "window," brought into Yiddish as *vinde*. "There's another word that my sister-in-law can't stand," says Motl. "That word is *vinde*. A vinde is what they call a *fentster* here. To which Brokhe says, 'wind and woe to all who speak so'" (240). Brokhe doesn't like the neologism, and resists it with a pun – a rhyming pun, in fact. *Vinde* is like *vind*, "wind," and that reminds her of the idiom *vind un vey*, "wind and woe"; she quotes it, then finishes the line with a rhyme, thus turning *vinde* against itself.

Or consider Henry Roth's Bertha in *Call It Sleep*,[41] striving to resist the tyranny of her brother-in-law Albert. That tyranny is not exclusively the tyranny of assimilation; Albert is a troubled and abusive man, and would be troubled and abusive anywhere. But assimilation seems to be one of the things his tyranny demands; even in the first scene, he is unable to contain his anger at his newly arrived wife and son's distinctively European attire, and throws his son's hat into the water. And Bertha's resistance, like that of Gitl and Brokhe, is associated with puns (and to some extent with dirty jokes as well):

> "In Veljish," she continued, "they say that 'kockin' will clear the brow of pain. But here in America – didn't he call it that? 'Kockin'? – will clear the mouth of pain."
> [Albert's] newspaper rustled warningly.
> "Cocaine?" said her sister hastily.
> "Oh, is that how you say it?"
> 'Kockin,' as [Albert's son] David had learned long ago, was a Yiddish word meaning to sit on the toilet.[42]

The point here is double. Gitl and Brokhe and Bertha stand out in their respective stories for holding to some Old World values, and their irreverent

[41] An English-language text, of course, but the example is too good to resist. For a related pattern in a German American play, see my "Language Traitors, Translation, and *Die Emigranten*," pp. 255–56.

[42] Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), p. 160.

puns on words used zealously by enthusiastic Americanizers express those allegiances. But by punning on the words, rather than simply refusing to use them, they remain free. Nadir's narrator could echo the nature-lover, or refuse to echo him. He finds instead a third choice: to talk with him. And that, really, is what Gitl and Brokhe and Bertha are doing with their puns: finding a way to talk back to American English, instead of simply and oppressively being talked at by it.[43]

## MOTL THE SOCIOLINGUIST IN AMERICA

These other modes of representing the encounter between English and Yiddish are ordered, dramatized, and illuminated in a single great work of literature: the American scenes in Sholem Aleichem's *Motl the Cantor's Son*. The remainder of this essay is a reading of that work.[44]

The American scenes of the book are only its second half. It begins in Kasrilevke, the meticulously invented *shtetl* where so many of Sholem Aleichem's stories take place. The opening scenes tell us of Cantor Peyse's illness and death, and introduce us to his wife and two sons: nine-year-old Motl, the narrator, and his older brother Elye. The following scenes recount Motl's life as an orphan; Elye's marriage to Brokhe; the bankruptcy of Brokhe's father and consequent impoverishment of Peyse's family; Elye's ingenious but unsuccessful attempts to make money (by making and selling *kvas*, ink, and mouse powder); and the family's decision to go to America. We meet, in these scenes, not only the principals but also a large cast of richly delineated secondary characters: Elye's friend Pinye and his wife Teybele; Brokhe's father Yone the Baker and his wife Rivl; Motl's neighbor Fat Pessi and her husband Moyshe the Bookbinder.

[43] The fact that Bertha, Brokhe, and Gitl are all women makes one wonder whether this mode of resistance is somehow characteristically female. It is not *exclusively* female; Sholem Aleichem's Motl and Roth's David Schearl participate in it. But many adult males seem deeply at odds with it.

[44] See on *Motl* Sidra Ezrahi, "By Train, by Ship, by Subway," in *Booking Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Hillel Halkin, "Translator's Introduction" to *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl & Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor's Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Rhoda S. Kachuk, "Sholom Aleichem's Humor in English Translation," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 11 (1956–57), pp. 39–81; Dan Miron, "Bouncing Back: Destruction and Recovery in Sholem Aleichem's *Motl Peyse dem khazns*," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 17 (1978), pp. 119–84; Khone Shmeruk, "Sholem Aleichem un amerike" ("Sholem Aleichem and America"), *Di Goldene keyt* 121 (1987), pp. 56–77; and Seth Wolitz, "Sholem Aleichem's *Motl peyse dem khazns* and its Haggadic Masterplot" (regrettably unpublished manuscript, kindly sent me by the author). Of these distinguished essays only Shmeruk's and Halkin's touch on the linguistic questions treated in this chapter, and Shmeruk's remark still holds good: "it would be worthwhile to describe and study this phenomenon thoroughly" (69).



The final scenes of the first part show us Peyse's family, plus Pinye and Teybele, on their picaresque and indirect journey: over the border to Brod, to Lemberg, to Cracow, to Vienna, to Antwerp, and finally to London. The sequence concludes with Motl's justifiably anguished question: "Master of the universe! when will we ever be in America?" (164)

What matters here about the sketches of the first part is how they prepare the characters for the quasi-Platonic dialogues on language in the second. All the characters belong to a community where language matters. Everyone in that culture, Motl tells us on a couple of occasions, has both a name and a nickname. All the principal characters love to talk. When they seek help from emigrant aid agencies, they are asked to tell their story; and invariably each of them wants to do the telling, each insists on doing the telling, each does in fact do the telling, each in a different way but all with gusto. When they are reunited in New York, they talk themselves hoarse on the subway taking them to their new home, despite the strain on their voices and the impossibility of being heard.

Each principal character has a vividly defined individual relation to language. Pinye is a language enthusiast. He likes new places and new languages, learns them quickly, speaks Russian, has a reputation as a satiric poet (Motl quotes some of his verses), reads novels, uses big and formal words and resounding names. Motl says of him, "he can flood you with speeches" (186). (Motl likes this: "I like our friend Pinye just for his speeches" [234].) He is always stopping to look into a book or scribble some notes, and goes to newspaper offices to try to sell poems or articles.

Brokhe is a language skeptic, that is, a critic of linguistic innovation. Her speech is plainer than Pinye's (though she has a Homeric laugh and a great stock of proverbs), she distrusts new places and new languages, refuses to learn them, says they're absurd. She is quick to criticize, as Motl points out: "Is there some particular thing that's supposed to please her? She finds a flaw in everything" (188). She is especially quick to criticize new languages:

> [English] is even worse than German. Brokhe says three Englishmen should drop dead for every single German. She says, how on earth can there be a street called *vaytshepl*, and coins called *aypeni*, *tapeni*, *tripeni*. (159)[45]

Yet Brokhe also speaks with great force, reveling in language even as she detests languages. In one critical situation, when a member of the traveling group is lost, and the situation has to be explained to an official, the remaining members of the group choose her as their spokesperson: "after

[45] The street is Whitechapel, and the coins are "ha'penny" (which Brokhe hears accurately as pronounced with a Cockney accent), "tuppenny," and "threepenny."

a good bit of time spent arguing, the bottom line was that the speaking should be done by my brother Elye's wife Brokhe" (214).

Elye's less vivid relation to language lies between these two extremes. He is Pinye's constant antagonist, so we presume that he shares Brokhe's skepticism about new non-Jewish languages rather than Pinye's enthusiasm for them. This accords with his being Jewishly learned – that is, with his having a linguistic expertise that, unlike Pinye's, reaches into the Jewish past rather than out to the Gentile present. He, and not Pinye, leads the Yom Kippur prayers on board the ship to America. But he is more curious than Brokhe is about the Gentile present; he is curious enough about new languages to get into a fight with Pinye over the German pronunciation of the Yiddish word *khrayn* ("horseradish").

The richest portrait is Motl's. He is nine or so – some four years younger than Huck Finn, that other great boy narrator of a great language novel, though just the age that Huck seems in the illustrations for Twain's book. Motl's relations to language are strikingly mixed. He has a lively curiosity and an exact ear. He's linguistically playful; the first sentence of the novel presents him inventing a name for a calf. He likes nonsense sounds, and sound generally – he takes great pleasure, for example, in the cacophony of the horse market (36). He puzzles over the fact that his employer, Old Luria, doesn't say *du* to him (170). He notes the differences between Yiddish and German, and between what women talk about and what men talk about (185). He reproduces with a playwright's precision whole dialogues conducted by his elders (59), performs some of these dialogues with his friends (144–46), is quick to learn *kaddish* by heart, zestfully (and a little cruelly) reproduces Yossi the Rich Man's inability to make a /sh/ sound (330), invents variants on the rhyme his brother Elye makes up for him to sell *kvas* with. Even his nickname is oral: Motl with the Lips, or just Lips (19). One of his favorite formulae implies a desire for verbal precision: "he's a baker. He's called Yone, Yone the Baker. That is, he doesn't do the baking himself. He only buys flour and sells bread" (41). He knows – and it is a liberating knowledge in this context – that "everything in the world is custom" (22).

On the other hand, Motl is a curiously limited understander of language. He is, in particular, repeatedly confused by the metaphorical and paradoxical language of idioms and proverbs:

> [Elye's prospective father-in-law] is a baker, and is called Yone the bagelbaker. He bakes bagels. "May you lie in the ground and bake bagels." That's what Pesye says, probably for a joke. But maybe she really means it? I don't understand – how can you lie in the ground and bake bagels? Who will buy them there? (34)[46]

He is equally perplexed by "a lot of water will run down the hill [before Motl gets married]" (35); "you can't spit your soul out"(48); "even to be unlucky, one must have luck"(66); "has no gall in her" (79); and, most poignantly, "stealing across the frontier" (98).

Probably Motl's excellence as a witness is increased by his limitations in understanding. What we understand, or think we understand, we often overabstract or overgeneralize. We say, "she talked like a man with a lisp," and then, unlike Motl, we do not – and perhaps cannot – reproduce the speech that this condition generates, because our belief that we understand the phenomenon diminishes the intensity of our attention to it. Motl can hear so well because his curiosity is unhampered by his understanding.

In the first part of the book, all these traits have a psychological interest rather than a sociolinguistic one, because the challenges the characters are facing are not challenges of language. Initially, Motl and company are living in a familiar linguistic world; the challenges they face are dealing with the Cantor's death, staying solvent, keeping the family together. Later, the linguistic situation is less familiar; they are traveling from one unfamiliar country to the next, observing and responding to the new languages they encounter. But their principal goal is not learning languages; it is getting to America.

When they arrive in America, the linguistic aspects of their situation are crucial. English is the language of the world they have come to inhabit. Dealing with it is an essential rather than an ornamental part of their experience, and their various dealings with it reveal their various styles of learning to live in America: Elye and Pinye's endless, revelatory debates over etymology; Brokhe's stubborn, playful resistance to American Yiddish; and Motl's eclectic fashioning of an authentic Jewish American linguistic self.

## ELYE, PINYE, AND ETYMOLOGY

Motl and his family talk and argue about the etymologies of English words from the moment they arrive at Ellis Island. In fact, Ellis Island itself is the first object of their analysis:

[46] Presumably Motl cannot figure out "may you lie in the ground and bake bagels" partly because it is associated with death. Here too he reminds us of Huck Finn, who famously says, "I don't take no stock in dead people."

. . . We're in America! That is, they say we're in America. America we haven't actually seen yet, because we're at the moment still in *Kestel-gartel*. That is, it used to be called that. These days it's not called *Kestel-gartel* any more, it's called *Elyes Ayland*. And why *Elyes Ayland*? "Because the patch of land belonged once to an Elye, who was a fool from head to belly." That's what our friend Pinye says to make a rhyme, the way he likes to do. (183)

This is not the richest of the book's etymological discussions, partly because everyone's in agreement; it does suggest, though, how etymological invention can reflect resistance to American injustice. Pinye doesn't like Ellis Island because, he says, they detain the poor emigrants and let the rich ones in – and that, he says, is unworthy of America, the free land where all must be equal. He expresses his anger by taking possession of the word that denotes the establishment he's angry at. He recognizes "-land" and a proper name, conjuring up, from a false understanding of the "s" of "Ellis," a possessor named Elye – which happens, not coincidentally, to be the name of his favorite debating partner, Motl's brother – and then taking possession of "Elye" by making him a fool. In the absence of this etymological play, *Elyes Ayland* is scarier and more enigmatic. The punning etymology cuts it down to size.

The same dynamic animates most of the book's etymological scenes, but these scenes are richer because the etymologies are contested, and because the competing attitudes towards etymologies are linked to competing views of America. Take an early argument about *tsobhey* and *eleveyter* (i.e., "subway" and "elevated").[47] Elye derives *eleveyter* from *leyter*, "ladder," and *tsobhey* from a call used to get oxen moving – something like, say, "giddy-up." Pinye says that that's ridiculous; oxen crawl, whereas the *tsobhey* flies. Elye says that's the point, that in America things fly, that flying is in fact what America is about. Then Brokhe breaks in and says she doesn't like the whole business – that is, the means of frighteningly rapid transport that the words refer to. She expresses her view with a proverb: "lift me not up and throw me not down" (219). Motl, taking no position on the etymological question, takes a position on the practical one; he would like nothing better, he says, than to be riding the subway and elevator all day long.

Here we see Elye and Pinye in their typical roles. Elye invents etymologies, and Pinye criticizes them.

[47] It is a mark of Motl's exact hearing, and of Sholem Aleichem's commitment to having his character hear exactly, that Motl reports here, not the English words as English-speakers know them ("subway" and "elevated"), not the English words as Yiddish immigrants came to use them (*sobvey* and *eleveyted* in Abraham Cahan's glossary), but deformations of those English words such as newly arrived immigrants would be likely to utter and hear: *tsobhey* and *eleveyter*.



We know already that Elye is also the most Jewishly learned member of the family, the one who leads services on ship for Yom Kippur. We know also that he is skeptical about America. We know that Pinye is less learned Jewishly, more learned in the ways and languages of the secular world, readier to admire the lands through which the family travels, more enthusiastic about America. He makes great speeches in praise of America, argues with those who criticize it, learns English quickly, stuffs his Yiddish with English words. Making etymologies is associated here with a rootedness in the Old World, rejecting them with an allegiance to the New.

When we seek the etymology of a word in a new language on the basis of words in our old language, we are insisting that the word, and the new language in general, make sense on our terms. We want to understand the word or phrase we're learning, not just take it as given. This desire can hinder us in learning the language. But it is a powerful desire, and Sholem Aleichem's decision to associate it with skepticism about America is artistically right. Wanting to understand is a gesture of resistance, not just one of contemplative curiosity.[48] It says, I can't just accept this new word; I have to figure out how it works, why it is the way it is. It is not a refusal to use the word – that seems to be Brokhe's position, to be explored later – but a refusal to use it unexamined. As an expression of the need to examine, to analyze, it belongs more to skeptics than to enthusiasts.

All of this is vividly dramatized in a later comment of Moyshe the Bookbinder's. Elye and Pinye, on the same side for the moment, are trying to figure out the word *dayningrum* ("dining room"). *Bedrum* ("bedroom") they understand – there are beds in it. (Yiddish *bet* is close enough to English "bed" to make the etymology transparent.) But *dayningrum*? They rack their brains trying to understand. Then Moyshe, who probably doesn't understand either, intervenes:

Why are you wearing yourselves out for nothing? As long as I'm a *balebos* in New York, God be thanked, and my children are all working, with God's help, and we're making a living in America . . . (227)

Which is to say, words don't matter if one is, to use the single most revelatory American Yiddish idiom, making a living. (Motl acutely notes Moyshe's

[48] It may be significant that "subway" and "elevated" are etymologically transparent for native speakers of English – unlike, say, "automobile" or "pistol." "Why is the thing we're riding in called the 'elevated'? Because it's elevated above the ground etc." With regard to these particular words, that is, the etymological knowledge Elye seeks is not utopian but realistic.

new verbal authority and freedom. In Europe, he was meek and silent. In America, he is a new man. America lets him speak about the unimportance of speech.)

These debates between Elye and Pinye lead to some wonderful moments. Consider their conversation about *brekfish*, that is, "breakfast." Elye thinks it's from *fish*; he points out that one does, after all, eat "fish or herring" at that meal. Pinye objects – why not *brekhering*? Elye has a good answer – what, after all, is a herring if not a fish? Pinye has one remaining strategy – let's go out and ask an old hand, he says. And they do: why, they ask, do Americans call *onbaysn* (European Yiddish for "breakfast") *brekfish*? The old hand responds as follows:

> The guy looks at them and says, "who told you that for *onbaysn* we say *brekfish*?" "Well, what do we say?" "*Brekfest*! *Brekfest*! *Brekfest*!," he shouts three times right in their face, and calls them dumb greenhorns. (244–45)

They thus learn the word's pronunciation. But the quest to figure out its etymology is thwarted; in the end, having lost its one intelligible component, the word is even more mysterious than when they started.

Both characters' positions are flawed. The flaw in Pinye's position is obvious: it keeps him from scrutinizing things. Elsewhere Sholem Aleichem satirizes his trust in what he reads – for example, his belief in the rags-to-riches stories of America's robber barons, his belief that Charlie Chaplin is dumb, his general reliance on novels for historical information. In these scenes we see his unthinking trust in what he hears; the new words mean what they mean, and his acceptance of them keeps him from finding out how they mean. He has no alternative to offer to Elye's impatient curiosity. He is simply echoing English.

But Elye's view is equally narrow. He is eager to understand, but only on the basis of what he knows already; he is not ready to learn anything new. He sees in some English word a part that he recognizes, or thinks that he recognizes, and doesn't think he needs to inquire about the part that he doesn't recognize. (Just as here he derives *brekfish* from *fish*, so later he derives *foyrnitsher* ["furniture"] from *tsher* ["chair"].[49]) He is, in a way, making English the echo of Yiddish. Neither he nor Pinye is open to the possibilities this encounter of languages presents.

[49] Probably Sholem Aleichem forgot the earlier exchange when he wrote the later one. But the repetition of the incident suggests the importance of the theme.



## BROKHE AND NEOLOGISMS

We turn with relief to Brokhe's caustic but lively conservatism, which we first encounter in a scene that both mocks and justifies it. The whole family are in the subway for the first time, on the way to Yone the Baker's house. He tells them that at the next *steyshn* ("station") they'll have to *stapn* ("stop," "get off"). The family do not understand, Yone translates, and Motl's mother asks, "since when did you start speaking the local language?" (222). Yone's wife Riveleh answers, "you'll start speaking it in a week yourself. Because if you go out in the street and ask where the *katsef* [European Yiddish for "butcher"] is, you can go *katsefing* from today till the day after tomorrow, and no one will answer you . . . you'll have to say '*butsher*'." To which Brokhe replies, "may they be sick for so long! . . . they can swell up and burst, for all I care, I'll still say *katsef, katsef, katsef*."

Brokhe's position is parochial. But there is something poignant in the image of a woman forever intoning *katsef* in the street, and something tyrannical in Riveleh's prediction of that event. It is not, after all, as if Brokhe were proposing to ask where the *katsef* was on a street in Madrid, or even in Gentile New York. The street where she is going to go is a street where everyone speaks Yiddish. The first thing Motl notices about the street, in fact, is that "the signs are in Yiddish, and all sorts of Jewish [*yidishe*] things are on display . . . probably a Jewish city" (223–24). So the imagined unwillingness of these Yiddish-speakers, all of whom probably know the word *katsef*, to admit that knowledge, is as extreme as Brokhe's parochialism, and goes some way towards justifying it.

The even-handed ambiguity of this early scene prepares us for a dazzling later one:[50]

> [Elye and Pinye] come home every day exhausted and hungry. And we sit down to have **vetshere**. Here it's called *sahper* ["supper"]. Brokhe hates that particular word, the way a good Jew hates pork. There's another word that my sister-in-law can't stand. That word is *vinde* ["window"]. A vinde is what they call a **fentster** here. To which Brokhe says, "wind and woe to all who speak so." Today she can't bear to hear people say *stahkings* ["stockings"]. You'll never guess that *stahkings* are socks. Or for example, what would you say about the word *dishez* ["dishes"]? It

[50] Discussed above, p. 101. See also Kenneth Wishnia, "'A Different Kind of Hell': Orality, Multilingualism, and American Yiddish in the Translation of Sholem Aleichem's *Mister Boym in Klozet*," *AJS Review* 20:2 (1993), pp. 333–58. Wishnia notes that the scene does not appear in the first published translation of the whole work: Sholem Aleichem, *Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son*, trans. Tamara Kahana (New York: Henry Schuman, 1953). Hillel Halkin bravely translates it, and brilliantly, though not precisely enough for my purposes here.

On the translation of multilingual works generally, see below, pp. 122–45.

seems that **posude**, Brokhe says, is a lot prettier. Or what can be simpler than a **lefl** ["spoon"]? Wrong. They won't buy it. With them it turns out that a **lefl** is a *spun*. It's not for nothing that Brokhe says her **vertl** ["proverb"] (she has her own **vertlekh** ["proverbs"]): "America is a country, *steyk* is a **maykhl**, fork is a **gopel**, and *Eynglish* is a tongue." (240)[51]

Elye and Pinye are here at an early point in a sequence that recurs often in the book. They have begun to work in a shop with great hopes, with a sense of new possibilities. But now, as previously with other new experiences that offered the same sense, the possibilities are going just a bit sour. The work exhausts them and leaves them hungry. Later, the situation will get worse: they will find out that they are being exploited and cheated; they will leave the shop to go on strike; and the strike, another provider of utopian possibilities, will also go sour. But there will be no pogroms, they will not be beaten up or shot by strikebreakers, they will not go to jail; they will make some money, even though it is less than they deserve. This shifting, realistic sequence of hope and disappointment is the context for Brokhe's linguistic soliloquy.

We learn first that Brokhe hates the English word "supper" (heard by Yiddish ears as rhyming with "shopper" rather than "upper") the way an observant Jew hates pork. This puts Brokhe in a bad light, for two reasons. First, the intensity of her dislike is out of proportion to its object; "supper" doesn't carry an ideology, and nothing in the word has a charge anything like the charge that pork carries for Jews. Second, Brokhe's intense dislike is juxtaposed to one of Motl's favorite and most reasonable formulae – that is, *do heyst es x.*, "here it's called x." He is simply describing what happens, and that makes Brokhe and her linguistic conservatism seem willful.

The argument over "vinde" is more complicated. For one thing, though the word itself doesn't carry much of a charge, it became, as Benjamin Harshav notes, the object of considerable controversy:

> A notorious case was **VINDE**, adopted in America from the English "window" instead of the German-stock **FENTSTER. VINDE** became a symbol of barbarism to the purists but there is no objective reason why the European Yiddish *vinde* for "lift" (which came to Yiddish from Russian) should be more legitimate than its homonym derived from the English "window." (65)

So Brokhe isn't the only person upset by this particular word. More important, though, is that, as noted previously, Brokhe's objection to *vinde* is

[51] For this complicated passage, and other translations in this chapter, a complicated typography is used. Yiddish words that I have chosen to retain in the English translation are printed in bold. English words used in the Yiddish original are printed in italics. Necessary explanations of both sorts of word are given in brackets.



witty rather than spiteful. She puns on *vinde* ("window") and *vind* ("wind"), adroitly transforming the familiar Yiddish phrase *vind un vey* ("wind and woe," something like "alas and alack") into a punning rejection of the English-based neologism. So if she's a linguistic purist, she's a purist who takes a lot of pleasure in the creative manipulation of the language, and that makes her position more interesting. Nor is she the sort of purist Harshav is taking aim at – not a writer, not in the ideologically charged sense a Yiddishist; just a skeptic about linguistic innovation who cares about language and uses it well.

This makes her more interesting to Motl, who shifts his position in relation to her. He notes that "today" she can't bear *stahkings*, implying perhaps that her position is shifting, perhaps that she's just capricious. But then his own position and mode of analysis change. *Stahkings* is not just the way they say it here – it's something mysterious, maybe something absurd: "you'll never guess that *stahkings* are socks." The same for *dishez* – Motl puts an open question to his presumably European reader, rather than offering the neutral notation that "here it's called x." And in answering the question, he starts moving towards Brokhe's viewpoint. "It seems that **posude**, Brokhe says, is a lot prettier." This is a more reasonable position – a legitimate esthetic preference rather than an untenable religious one, and one that Motl, by the syntax of the sentence, is less distant from.

He's still less distant from the next verbal judgment; in fact, Brokhe has at least nominally disappeared from it: "Or what can be simpler than a **lefl**? Wrong. They won't buy it [*loynt zey nit*]. With them it turns out that a **lefl** is a *spun*." It's Motl, now, who takes up the cause of ordinary Eastern European Yiddish words, and who finds the words of Americans peculiar and arbitrary. He also suggests that American motivations regarding words are commercial. Americans, he says, don't like *lefl* because *es loynt zey nit* – literally, "it doesn't pay them." Accordingly, he concludes the passage by explicitly associating himself with Brokhe, with her skepticism about America and American English, and also with her verbal ability: "It's not for nothing that Brokhe says her **vertl** (she has her own **vertlekh**)."[52] It is one thing to quote proverbs. Brokhe does this a lot, and when she does

[52] Why exactly does Brokhe's remark qualify as a *vertl*? In a personal communication, Dovid Braun suggested two parallels for Brokhe's remark: *odem a mentsh, un katshke drey zikh/ ruk zikh* ("Adam: a man; Duck: turn about"); and *purim iz nit keyn yontev, kadokhes iz nit keyn krenk* ("Purim is no holiday, and cholera no disease"). The point in both is that the truth of the first statement, and the formal parallel between the first statement and the last, lead one to expect the last statement to be true; but it isn't, and that's the comedy. America is a country, but English may or may not be a language. (Purim is a holiday in some senses of the word, but not in the legal one; it entails no work restrictions, and is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.)

it she's usually dramatizing both the conservatism and the taste for pungent language that Sholem Aleichem associates with proverb-quoters – for example, Menakhem-Mendl's wife Sheyne-Sheyndl. It's another thing to invent proverbs. Quoting proverbs presents people as conservative. Inventing proverbs makes such conservatism almost innovative.

## MOTL

But not so innovative that we can take Brokhe as a model for dealing generously and openly with America. For that, the only plausible model – pun unintended but inevitable and suggestive – is Motl.

The adult participants in the disputes, whether over etymologies or over neologisms, always take the same roles. They are frozen in their predictable attitudes. Motl is an improviser. He moves from role to role, and looks to be in the process of developing a sensible synthesis – not an echo, and not silence. We can see that even in the passage just discussed. The shifting attitudes towards Brokhe, the revelation of her as being both benightedly conservative and poetically innovative, are Motl's attitudes and revelation; it is his pragmatic movement from particular judgment to particular judgment that the passage is dramatizing.

Motl in America retains his sharp *Sprachgefühl*. He hears and exactly reproduces some of the words spoken by the Italians he meets on Ellis Island (208–9), and the hampered pronunciations of a good-hearted woman who consistently speaks as if she had a stuffed-up nose (271). He is fascinated by, and brilliantly reproduces, the quasi-linguistic sounds of the machines of New York (216). He zestfully notes competing Yiddish pronunciations of the English-derived word *foyrnitsher* (274).

In America, Motl has a wider linguistic field to play in. Consider his role in the debates over etymology. His overall position is a reasonable compromise. He stands with Pinye on America and on ethics. On etymologies, however, he stands with Elye. He is an enthusiast for America, as Pinye is, but an inquisitive and critical one; he wants to know what and how things mean, rather than applauding them on faith. And he's a much better etymologist than Elye. He's more ingenious, but also more attentive to linguistic probabilities. He derives *bos* ("boss") from *balebos* – literally "master of the house," but defined in Weinreich's dictionary as "proprietor, owner; host; boss, master; landlord" (245). What could be more probable? Certainly not the true etymology (from Dutch *baas*)! Elsewhere Motl wants to understand the word *vatsh* ("watch," i.e., the noun denoting a timepiece). He notes about the object that it is small, indeed that its smallness



is among its defining traits. He thinks, reasonably enough, that on this basis the word should be a diminutive, and asks why it isn't *vatshl* (244). (The final /l/ in Yiddish marks a diminutive.) He wants to understand the word *titsher* ("teacher"). He has, of course, no access to the Middle English root of the modern English word. But in working out a false etymology for it he makes a brilliant and plausible pun. *Titshen* in Yiddish means to poke or prod. Teachers in Jewish schools were notorious for what we might call physically abusing their students. Motl, presuming the same is true of American teachers, derives *titsher* from *titshen*: a teacher is a prodder! (255) Unlike Elye's etymologies, this makes perfect sense, accounts for the whole word, and illuminates a whole culture.[53]

Motl is also a gifted and undogmatic translator. Most of the time, we see him translating individual words, often introducing them, as noted, with the reasonable and unpolemical formula, *do heyst es* ("here it's called . . ."). That formula makes him seem quick and knowledgeable, but passive. In other passages we see him dealing with sentences, and dealing with them imaginatively and idiomatically. In the fourth section of "The Gang at Work," for example, Motl tells us about his friend Sam, who works for a box-maker. The box-maker promises to teach the friend about the business, and says to him, *Du zay nor a gud boy, vest du zayn olrayt* (228; "just be a good boy and you'll be all right"). Motl says, "in our language that means, 'be a *mentsh* and you'll eat in the sukkah'" (228). Is a *mentsh* a "good boy"? Not exactly. To be a *mentsh* is something all Jews aspire to be – decent, humane, kind. It's a bigger term than "good boy," representing a higher and more normative goal. But there's something audacious and apt in Motl's rendering the one term with the other, some sort of linguistic resistance to the commercial values implicit in the original phrase. The second part of the translation reflects a similar process. We know already that *olrayt* is a quasi-commercial term. (One possible translation of the original is, "be a good boy and you'll end up on easy street.") To eat in the sukkah is something different, referring as it does to the fulfillment of a religious obligation as well as to a moment of leisure and plenitude. It would be going too far to claim that this brief, improvised translation of Motl's makes a bridge between American virtues and Jewish ones. But

[53] Consider also in this connection Motl's brief, wonderful reflections on the difference between the Yiddish *gaz* ("gas") and the English "gas" (transcribed in Yiddish as *gez*): "Here they don't say *gaz*, but '*gez*.' That is – as far as stinking is concerned, it stinks just the way *gaz* does with us, but you can't say *gaz*. You have to say *gez*. Exactly the reverse. And if at home it was called *gez*, here they'd probably say *gaz*" (245). Motl makes both a linguist's point and a satirist's point on the fact of variation for variation's sake.

that's certainly the direction it's going in – which, in the context of his usual straightforward and deferential translations, again makes Motl a figure of remarkable cultural flexibility.

## VENTRILOQUISM

Many of these themes and characters are set in counterpoint in a wonderful scene towards the end of the book, where Motl and his family go to the movies to see Charlie Chaplin. They are accompanied by a new character – new, at any rate, in the American scenes, and certainly having a new meaning in the American context. His name too is Motl – Big Motl, to distinguish him from Motl the narrator. Motl and his friend Mendl run into Big Motl in the street; they talk; they agree to go the movies; Elye and Pinye join them for the expedition; at the movies, Big Motl, who is a ventriloquist, plays a ventriloquist's joke on Motl's brother Elye, calling him an idiot in a voice that seems to come from the cellar and the ceiling; and Elye decides he'll never go to see Charlie Chaplin again.

Big Motl is small Motl's possible future. He has been in America longer than Motl and his family have, knows more facts about it, is more of an enthusiast for it. (He is not like Pinye, though; he doesn't have a theory about America. He's just becoming American, quickly and adeptly.) His Yiddish is more Americanized than small Motl's is. His salary is higher, too. Small Motl and his friend Mendl together make $1 a week, sometimes a dollar and a quarter; Big Motl makes $3 – 60 cents more than the narrator of "I: As Echo," though minus the free laundry.

Big Motl is also small Motl's guru, linguistically as well as in other ways. We can see this even in small Motl's first statements to him; these are fuller of American terms than are most of his statements, as if to say, "see – I can be an American too!" He says, "we *deliver* . . . *newspapers*. We carry papers to our *customers*, before we go to *school*. And when we leave *school*, we help with *attending* the *bizness*. We have a *stand* on the *corner* and we **makhn a lebn**" (287–88). And Big Motl recognizes what small Motl is doing, saying, "Hey, you already speak great English" (288). But not great enough – and certainly not with as many American terms as Big Motl's speech has. Furthermore, Motl still has his Old World name, as does his friend Mendl. Big Motl does away with both of these names: Motl becomes Max, and Mendl becomes Mike. This may not seem portentous, and the conversation about the name-change isn't charged with meaning. But Motl always refers to his friends and his family by their name and epithet, seldom



using pronouns; and after 250 pages of *mayn khaver mendl* ("my friend Mendl"), *mayn khaver mayk* ("my friend Mike") is an earthquake.

Big Motl is also associated with Charlie Chaplin. It's Big Motl who proposes going to see Chaplin's movies, it's Big Motl who does a virtuosic Chaplin imitation at the theater, and it's because of being insulted by Big Motl that Elye (though he doesn't actually know that Big Motl is doing the insulting) won't go to see Chaplin again.

The association with Chaplin matters. Sholem Aleichem was an admirer of American movies, and was eager to have some of his stories filmed. Moreover, he seems to have wanted them filmed in a Chaplinesque style. His son-in-law Benjamin Waife-Goldberg recalls how Sholem Aleichem discussed the subject:

> We both roared repeatedly as he improvised the action [of one of the European scenes in *Motl*] on the silent screen. He laughed fully, freely, heartily. I have never seen him laugh so much and so boisterously. I have never laughed so much on one occasion in my life. If a stranger saw us then he would think we were touched in the head. Two men sitting and bursting into laughter, like two kids at a Charlie Chaplin movie.[54]

Sholem Aleichem wrote warmly and perceptively of Chaplin:

> Chaplin has the ability to fill many hearts with joy, particularly children's hearts; without children's laughter the world couldn't exist. Charlie's image fascinated me. Everything about him is grandiose: the small moustache, the excessively large, worn-out shoes, the wide, ragged trousers, the tight frock-coat, the tattered derby, the crooked cane, the bizarre walk. This image in itself is a genuine work of art. No one has ever created anything of the like, neither with pen, nor with brush.[55]

The great Yiddish poet Perets Markish wrote that "in the character of his comic elements, Sholem Aleichem is close to Charlie Chaplin. In essence, Sholem Aleichem's little man, just like Charlie, takes the road of his misfortunes."[56] Being associated with Chaplin gives Big Motl a lot of prestige; for Sholem Aleichem, Chaplin was a great and authentically American artist.

[54] Marie Waife-Goldberg, *My Father, Sholom Aleichem* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), p. 292.

[55] I owe this citation to Esther Vaysman, who identifies its source as follows: "this quote comes from the journal *Tsaytshrift* 14 (Paris, 1956), 147–50. I found it in a collection of essays entitled *Sholom Aleikhem: Pisatel' i Chelovek* ("Sholom Aleichem: the Writer and the Man"; Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1984), compiled and edited by M. S. Belen'kii."

[56] My thanks again to Esther Vaysman for the Markish citation, which also comes from Belen'kii, *Sholom Aleikhem*.

For further, fascinating remarks on the topic, both by Esther Vaysman and by Louis Fridhandler, see the archived issues of the Yiddishist mailing list *Mendele*, vols. 9.016 and 9.020, at http://shakti.cc.trincoll.edu/~mendele/toc09.htm. I'm grateful to both correspondents for so generously helping me figure out what one great artist meant to another. A fascinating essay might be written on the subject; such an essay could investigate whether Chaplin's partly Jewish ancestry

Big Motl is no more respectful of stuffy dignity than Chaplin was, and his chief activity in this scene is poking fun at Motl's brother Elye. He does this by means of ventriloquism. A comic version of the ghost of Hamlet's father, he projects his voice first down into the cellar, then up into the ceiling. And what his ventriloquized voice says to Elye is the one word, "idiot" (a Yiddish word as well as an English one, and having the same meaning in both languages).

It is irresistible to see his mocking ventriloquism as a figure of how the miraculous bilingualism of immigrant children would present itself to a dogmatic and stiff adult. To the older immigrants, the younger ones must seem to have some magical gift for doubled speech, displaced speech. Speaking English, that is, is *like* ventriloquism. This is, moreover, ventriloquism where the second voice appears to come, not from a puppet, but from the ground or the air. It is more anarchic and less contained than making a puppet talk – not so much an echo, we might say. And what that ventriloquized voice says, again and again, is, "you are an idiot."

Elye's questions are poignant: "Why doesn't he answer hello? Have you gotten so big in America that it's already beneath your dignity to say a Yiddish word?" (289)[57] The answer is yes; Big Motl has in fact gotten so big, and Elye's humiliation is real. But here, as elsewhere in Sholem Aleichem's vision of America, that real humiliation isn't the end of the story, or even the heart of it. That is partly because, as Sholem Aleichem knows but Elye doesn't, having dignity does not necessarily mean speaking Yiddish. In an earlier scene, asked what it means to speak "vi a mentsh" (267), like a *mentsh*, Elye says, "a mentsh redt oyf yidish" ("a *mentsh* speaks Yiddish").[58] Elye has made, and continues to make here, a too rigid association between a language and a mode of behavior; his humiliation is partly the result of this, and partly the result of a related inability to laugh at himself or to appreciate the satiric genius of a Chaplin or a *boykhreder*. Motl and Mendl, we hear repeatedly, can hardly contain their laughter.

There is something more than laughter here, something spooky and magical in the ghostlike mobility of Big Motl's ventriloquized voice from beneath the cellar to above the ceiling, and in the way that the ordinary

plays any role in this relationship, either as regards Chaplin's art or as regards Sholem Aleichem's response to it, and also the importance of Chaplin's being a performer in silent (though captioned) comedy.

[57] What I am translating as "hello" here is, ironically enough, *sholem aleichem*, the author's pen-name; its literal sense is "peace be with you," its idiomatic sense is that of a friendly greeting after an absence.

[58] The continuation of the scene is wonderful: "the *boss* asks him another question: 'and if I speak English, does that make me a monster?'" Elye answers, "could be."



word gradually becomes an incantation – at first, Big Motl just says *idiot*, in two syllables then in three, saying finally to Elye, *bekoz dos zent ir aleyn take der i-di-ot!* . . ." (292; " *because* you yourself are in fact the i-di-ot"). The ventriloquism – that is, the bilingualism – of immigrant children inflicts pain on immigrant adults. (The adults must sometimes regard their children as language traitors.) But that same ventriloquism, that same bilingualism, is also a source of wild laughter, rich invention, and dizzying success.

## TWO CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

(1) *Motl* is a great language novel because Sholem Aleichem had a fine ear, linguistic curiosity, inventiveness, irreducible talent. But other causes were in play as well, matters less of talent than of temperament and artistic choice.

One might expect the great dramatization of the encounter between English and Yiddish to turn up in a work of realistic fiction. In practice, though, realistic fiction does a surprisingly bad job in this area. Many of the great language fictions belong rather to the romance (Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*), the sensational novel (Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, but also Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* and George Du Maurier's *Trilby*), the modernist novel (Roth's *Call It Sleep*, but also Joyce's *Ulysses*), and the novel of magical realism (Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*). In practice, the conventions of realistic fiction seem to get in the way of the difficult, exacting, momentum-slowing task of representing the multilingual world. So Sholem Aleichem, who didn't write well in realistic genres, who preferred and was much better off in the monologue, the sketch, the children's story, the traveler's tale, the letter, was the beneficiary of his own limitations here. However we define *Motl*'s genre – the satirical sketch, the children's story, the picaresque novel – it posed fewer obstacles than the realistic novel would have done to the author's interest in complex linguistic representation.

*Motl* was also the beneficiary of its author's comic temperament, even more so perhaps than his European fictions were. A great American Yiddish language story almost has to be comic. Not because there were no grim aspects to the encounter between English and Yiddish, of course. The United States has a way of making languages disappear. As Kenji Hakuta writes, "at the rate of change observed in other nations, it would take 350 years for the average nation to experience the same amount of [language]

loss as that witnessed in just one generation in the United States."[59] Certainly that trend is related to some of the less benign aspects of the American response to immigrant and autochthonous cultures. The melting pot is a crucible, in which distinctive cultural traits are burned away. Hillel Halkin puts the situation very well:

> If Motl – who once told us in Kasrilevke, in one of his few expressions of visceral Jewishness, of his hatred for pigs – has not already eaten his first New York ham sandwich, can we doubt that this is only a matter of time? . . . Internally, there is nothing we can detect in him – no inelasticity of self, no allegiance to his father's memory – to keep him within the Jewish fold . . . Motl is the happy ending of the eastern European Jewish tragedy, the rise after which there is no longer any fall. But he is also the end of Sholem Aleichem's world, his face lifted to the kiss that will kill it benignly at the same time that it is being murdered brutally in Europe.[60]

But nothing in the Jewish experience of American immigration is comparable to the European pogroms that preceded it or the European slaughter that followed it. Motl himself doesn't understand what "pogrom" means, and to make sense of America he doesn't have to. Cynthia Ozick's grudging remark, that America "is a good diaspora, as diasporas go," is on the mark.[61] The great story of that diaspora must therefore be a comic one – not ignorantly optimistic, but cheerful in tone, and animated by imaginative excitement. That it should fall to the greatest Jewish comic artist to write that story is almost inevitable.[62]

Finally, Sholem Aleichem chose a narrator of the right age. Motl himself tells us why: he says, "America is a country that was just made for the sake of children" (224). He means most immediately that in America there are people on the street who keep your older brother from hitting you, and that school is free and compulsory rather than forbidden. But he is also getting at a deeper truth: not just that America is a land made for children, but also that it is not a land made for adults, that is, immigrant adults. Sholem Aleichem knew that. It is probably why, as Khone Shmeruk puts it, "the gates of 'the blessed land' had to stay shut to his two great *adult* characters."[63] Shmeruk is thinking of Sholem Aleichem as an altruistic

[59] Kenji Hakuta, *Mirror of Language: The Debate on Bilingualism* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), pp. 166–67.

[60] Halkin, "Translator's Introduction," pp. xxv–xxvi.

[61] Cynthia Ozick, "Towards a New Yiddish," in *Art and Ardor* (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 170.

[62] Seth Wolitz has persuasively suggested that *Motl*'s master narrative is the Passover Haggadah. If that is true, then America cannot be Egypt and slavery, but must be the wilderness or even Canaan. Neither the wilderness nor Canaan is paradise, but they are not Egypt either, and no American Pharaoh is commanding the slaughter of Jewish children.

[63] Shmeruk, "*Sholem Aleichem un amerike*," p. 65 (Shmeruk's emphasis). The two adult characters in question are Tevye the Dairyman and Menakhem-Mendl.



artist, unwilling to expose his characters to the degradation of American immigrant experience. We might also think of him, though, as a more self-centered, Joycean artist, simply wanting to describe a charged scene through the consciousnesses capable of best registering it – as Joyce himself had done in "The Sisters" and at the beginning of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; as Mark Twain had done in *Huck Finn*. Shmeruk's formulation is perhaps richer than he knew: "among the emigrants, the future belongs only to the young, to those who have come at an age when they can free themselves from the old and take in the new words" (74). America is a land for children. That means, we presume, a land where children can live well. But it also means a land that only children – among immigrants, at any rate – can understand well. The greatest Jewish American language fiction in English, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, reveals its world through the vision of the child David Schearl. The greatest Jewish American language fiction in Yiddish, Sholem Aleichem's *Motl*, reveals its world through the vision of the child Motl. If we believe that artists become great partly through understanding the deep meanings of truisms, then we might claim that a part of Sholem Aleichem's greatness lay in understanding just what is meant when we say that children can assimilate languages in ways that adults cannot.

(2) It is both heartbreaking and fascinating to imagine how American Yiddish literature might have dealt with English in the generations after Sholem Aleichem. Heartbreaking because imagining that future is all we can do; and because that future's never being realized was the result, not only of what happens to immigrant languages in America, but also of the effect on all Yiddish writers everywhere of the mass murder of European Jews – Yiddish-speaking European Jews numerous among them. Fascinating because before the effects of the Shoah began to be fully felt, enough innovative work had been done to suggest the promise of what in the end did not happen.

Aaron Tsaytlin's "A Monolog in pleynem yidish" is, in a grimly punning way, a dead end: the English-saturated Yiddish of the Holocaust survivor can't lead anywhere; the English is there only because Yiddish is dying:

> O, Warsaw . . .
> I am, you say, a little bit dead myself?
> *well*, I'll tell you, **lantsman**;
> you are – *between us* – a little bit right.
> *Because* today, every Jew is a little bit dead,
> a corpse, not sleeping nights.
> They say: "Maidanek . . . all burned . . ."

*Really,*
*I can't understand, I can't.*
Honestly *plain* burned?[64]

Lamed Shapiro's 1931 novella *Nuyorkish*, on the other hand, suggests how Yiddish in America might have become as cosmopolitan a language as English itself, as able to depict English as English was to depict Yiddish. Consider this characteristic passage, a dialogue between Jewish Manny and Gentile Jenny, whom Manny wants to call "Dolores":

She looked at him uncertainly.
"I'm an American girl."
"Sure," he said reassuringly, "a real American girl. But say it yourself: Do-lo-res. Now that's a name with a ring to it. You know what? I'm going to call you 'Dolores'!"
She was suddenly pleased and stretched her hand across the table and put it over his.
"*Olrayt*![65] Dolores, if that's what you want. Ha ha ha! Dolores! . . . but what should I call you?'
In tone, they had gone over to *du* or the informal "you" in Yiddish, although modern English does not have particular words corresponding to the formal "*ir*" or informal "*du*."[66]

Manny and Jenny are, Shapiro tells us, speaking English. They are the principal characters in the story, and they are speaking English all the time. Shapiro is not, then, describing a language encounter in the world; the encounter takes place between the language of the narrator and the language of the characters. Shapiro is using Yiddish to represent English in somewhat the same way as Roth is using English to represent Yiddish (or Hemingway English to represent Spanish); not as ambitiously, but as thoughtfully and exactly. How does one render a change in "tone" in English, conveyed by intonation or tempo? By means of a resource Yiddish has but English does not – that is, the distinction between the formal pronouns and the familiar, a distinction that Shapiro uses skillfully and expressively.

The most ambitious project of this sort is Sholem Ash's 1946 *East River*,[67] maybe the last great American Yiddish work aiming to represent American

[64] Aaron Tsaytlin, *Gezamlte lider* (New York: Matones, 1947), vol. I, p. 91.
[65] In transliterated English in Shapiro's text.
[66] Lamed Shapiro, *Nuyorkish un ander zakhn* ("Nuyorkish and other matters") (New York: Farlag Aleyn, 1931), pp. 13–14. For a translation of the story see Lamed Shapiro, "New Yorkish," trans. Lawrence Rosenwald, in *The Cross and Other Jewish Stories*, edited, with an introduction by, Leah Garrett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 198–212.
[67] The title is significant. Yiddish has *taykh* for "river" and *mizrekh* for "east," but Ash uses neither, choosing rather to transliterate the English name of the body of water into Yiddish – anglicizing and stretching Yiddish from the outset, we might say.



life – and, most challengingly, American Christian life. A central plot-line of that sprawling New York novel, which reaches from pigeon-flying to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, is the story of a mixed marriage. Jewish Irving Davidowsky marries Catholic Mary McCarthy, has a child with her and leaves her; Mary, a serious Catholic and at the same time deeply fond of Irving's father Meyer Wolf, raises her son Nathan (Nat) in a mix of Christian and Jewish values, texts, and practices. At one point she goes, not implausibly, to confession, and Ash has to figure out how to describe that process in a language not having a large vocabulary for talking about Christianity. He describes the absolution Mary seeks from the unseen priests by the Hebrew term *slikhe umekhile*, "penitential prayer and pardon," audaciously and inventively evoking a Jewish prayer, the *avinu malkeinu* repeatedly recited during the Days of Awe, to describe a Christian ritual.[68] Later, when Meyer Wolf hands Nat a piece of bread, he asks him why he's not reciting the blessing, and Mary and Nat recite not the Hebrew blessing over bread, but the Lord's prayer – which Ash must also figure out how to translate (447). Meyer Wolf's response is surprisingly open-minded: "What he understands, he likes, and he thinks that it is after all like a Jewish prayer . . . He hears the child say, 'our father in heaven' – it is after all like, and yet unlike, what we say: *avinu shebashomayim*."

Ash's interest in Christianity had made him notorious; *The Nazarene*, the first of his three christological novels, published in English in 1939 but not in Yiddish until 1943, "involved him," as Sol Liptzin tells us, "in unending controversies with Jews who felt betrayed in their hour of utmost need by his apparent apostasy."[69] But *East River* was something different – not a christological novel, simply an ambitious attempt to represent Jewish life in New York in its entirety, and thus in its relations with everything in its vicinity. Ash was pushing Yiddish to extend to the whole territory of American life, even those areas most remote from it. A strange enterprise, in some ways; we expect immigrant writers in immigrant languages to represent the experiences of immigrants, not to write the Great American Novel. But a language used for literature in America that does not seek to cover the whole territory is provincial. Ash on a larger scale was doing what Shapiro was doing in *Nuyorkish*, transforming an immigrant language into a national one. A promising and necessary development, and a great novel; but for the reasons stated, not a new beginning but the end of a line.

[68] *Ist River* (New York: Laub, 1946), p. 330. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text. See on this passage, and on some other aspects of Ash's novel, my "Four Theses on Translating Yiddish in the 21st Century," *Pakn Treger* 38 (Winter 2002), pp. 14–20.
[69] Sol Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish* (Middle Village: Jonathan David, 1985), p. 153.

# MULTILINGUAL AMERICA

## *Language and the Making of American Literature*

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