

# HISTORY OF YIDDISH STUDIES

Edited by  
Dov-Ber Kerler

Winter Studies in Yiddish  
Volume 3

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# HISTORY OF YIDDISH STUDIES

## Winter Studies in Yiddish Volume 3

Papers from the Third Annual Oxford  
Winter Symposium in Yiddish Language and  
Literature, 13–15 December 1987

*Edited by*

Dov-Ber Kerler

Sir Laslie and Lady Porter Fellow in Yiddish Studies at the Oxford  
Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies and Lincoln College, Oxford



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# A LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY CASE OF *KATOVES*

by

Dovid Katz

Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies  
and  
St Antony's College, Oxford

## I

### INTRODUCTION

From time to time in the history of Yiddish linguistics, authors have for this or that reason not signed their name to their work. During the eighteenth century, a number of converts to Christianity compiled Yiddish dictionaries and handbooks, often in an anti-Semitic spirit. One Mr "Christoph/Gustav/Christian", for example, published his dictionary in 1727, and, not being short of variations on the name, published revised editions under the name "J.C.U.L." (1735), and "C.G.C. L.L.O" (1735), and more. Others include "Philoglottus" (1733) and "Bibliophilus" (1742). An altogether different case is that of the redoubtable Ludwik Zamenhof, creator of Esperanto, whose articles on the explosive issue of abandoning Yiddish script and replacing it with a proposed system of Latinization, appeared under the name "Dr X" in the inaugural issue of A. Litvin's Vilna journal, *Lebn un visnshaft* (Dr X 1909). One can only speculate as to whether the giveaway editor's note was worded with Zamenhof's permission. It begins: "The author of this article, a famous linguist, is known not only to a great part of the Yiddish readership, but more than in the Jewish world – to the whole of cultured humanity, by virtue of his reformatory works in the field of language [. . .]" (A. Litvin 1909). Soon thereafter, "Dr X" published chapters of his Yiddish grammar in the same journal (Dr X 1910). It must be remembered that Zamenhof's revolutionary 1887 pamphlet, *Langue internationale*, too, appeared under the immortal pseudonym "Dr Esperanto" (although opposite the title page of that classic work, are two versions of the "adresse de l'auteur": "à Monsieur le Docteur L. Samenhof pour le Dr Esperanto à Varsovie" and, "Al sinjor, o Dr, o L. Zamenhof' por D-r, o Esperanto en Varsovi, o").

Rather more recently, in the late 1980s, and with entirely different goals, a new and mysterious writer in the field of Yiddish linguistics, also a commentator on Judeo-Romance and Judeo-Slavic linguistics, began to publish highly uncomplimentary reviews of other scholars' work in these fields. Like some of his forebears, he has no qualms about variation in his name. When pointing out the alleged failings of scholars of Jewish Romance languages, he is "Pavel Slobodjans'kyj". When donning his Yiddish hat, he is "Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj". Acknowledgement must be granted for the success of the hoax. Even the editor of *Language*, the flagship of modern linguistics, commits herself in writing to his existence and authorship. She reports that he is a recent Soviet immigrant to the United States whose whereabouts

and address must be kept secret. After a storm of protest, she publishes a "correction" regretting that his review in *Language* did not acknowledge "the extensive assistance of Paul Wexler – including translation from the original Russian text and consultation about the content – in the preparation of the review", thereby touching on the sensitive subject of a lost Russian *Vorlage*, and, of course, the precise genetic, historical and epistemological relationship between Paul Wexler and the twin Slobodjans'kyjs, Pavel and Pavlo, and indeed, the merry trio of Pavel, Pavlo and Paul.

The inaugural volume of the *Winter Studies in Yiddish* series was *Origins of the Yiddish Language* (=Katz 1987a), comprising papers from the first annual Oxford winter symposium, held in December 1985. The book was reviewed by Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj in the December 1988 issue of *Language* (=Slobodjans'kyj 1988). Unlike the other reviews in the issue, the author's institutional affiliation and postal address are lacking. His place of abode is listed as "Waltham, Massachusetts", where he is, however, unknown to the local population. The reviewer, who seems not to care very much for the Yiddish linguistics programme at Oxford, decries the work of most contemporary Yiddish linguists while praising the theories of Paul Wexler which are treated as mainstream thought.

This paper is concerned, firstly, with the substantive issues arising in the Slobodjans'kyj-Wexler affair: the notions COMPARATIVE JEWISH LINGUISTICS (§2), JEWISH INTERLINGUISTICS (§3), the illustrative case of Yiddish /katóvəs/ (§4) and the difference in approach between Yiddish linguistics and Wexler's "Jewish interlinguistics" (§5). Secondly, the record to date of Slobodjans'kyj's publications is summarized in Appendix 1, followed by annotated samples from the *Language* review in Appendix 2. Trivial as these matters are, they will no doubt merit a humorous footnote in the history of Yiddish studies, and what more appropriate forum to expose them than a volume on that very subject.

## II

### COMPARATIVE JEWISH LINGUISTICS

The comparative study of Jewish languages has a long and proud tradition, in spite of the relative paucity of work prior to the twentieth century. The founder of the field was the thirteenth century Hebrew phonologist Zalmen Hanakdn ('Zalmen the Expert on Hebrew and Aramaic Vowel Marks and Accents'), as he was known amongst Ashkenazic Jews (see Elye Bokher 1538: 77). He is also known as Yekusieyl Hakoyheyn ben Yehudo/Yekuthiel Hakohen ben Yehuda, the acronym, Yahbi, and as Yekusiel of Prague, although his place of origin is uncertain. He identified linguistic habits of three distinct medieval Jewish culture areas, using the terms ASHKENAZ (for the German area), TSORFAS (French area) and KENAAN (Slavic area), ascribing specificities in pronunciation of Hebrew to the impact of the relevant non-Jewish vernaculars (Yekusieyl Hakoyheyn ben Yehudo 1395: 189b). Centuries later, the Christian theologian and Yiddish grammarian Chrysander contrasted Jewish vernaculars known to him (Chrysander 1750: 5–6).

As it happens, the modern study of comparative Jewish linguistics was, for sociological and historical reasons, a direct offshoot of Yiddish studies. Yiddish linguists, working in the face of centuries-old prejudices against the language, came to see both the historical evolution and the synchronic structure of Yiddish as models which

could be useful for unbiased investigations of other Jewish diaspora languages which had also been subject to prejudice. The scholarly pedigree, is, in brief, as follows. Scholars inspired by the German-Jewish Enlightenment had it that Jewish diaspora languages were “jargons”, “products of a ghetto mentality”, “bastardized languages” and more (see now Frakes 1989; Katz 1990). In distilled and modified form, this mode of thinking was summarized in Loewe’s *Die Sprachen der Juden* (Loewe 1911). The pioneering, and forward-looking, young Yiddish scholar Matisyohu Miseses replied with his own book, *Die Entstehungsursache der jüdischen Dialekte* (Miseses 1915) in which he argued that these languages were manifestations of linguistic creativity, had sound and stable structures, boasted semantic wealth and were the unique products of the culture of traditional Jewish religious life. Expanding upon the notion “religion” to include the entire social and cultural structure of the individual Jewish civilizations concerned, Solomon A. Birnbaum (1942; 1979: 3–15) and Max Weinreich (1953: 492–495) established the paradigm for comparing Jewish languages with each other and with their non-Jewish cognates.

The elaborate technical paradigm for comparative Jewish linguistics was established by Max Weinreich in his chapter “Yidish in gerem yidishe leshoynes; Ashkenaz in gerem yidishe eydes” (‘Yiddish within the framework of Jewish languages; Ashkenaz within the framework of Jewish subcultures’), which appeared in his *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh* (M. Weinreich 1973: 1,48–183; 3,33–156). It is the most authoritative and comprehensive statement to date, and proposes a detailed paradigm that is as invaluable for its discovery procedures as it is for its caution.

This last notion, caution, is indispensable. Typical concerns of the field are structural parallelism (as in combining of Semitic stems with affixes derived from the non-Jewish stock language, e.g. Yiddish /kášərŋ/, Judezmo /kašrár/ ‘make kosher’, see Bunis 1975: 13) and sociological comparison (e.g. the degree of prestige enjoyed, and functions fulfilled, in contrast with the local non-Jewish language and with Hebrew and Aramaic). The different Jewish languages do not by and large lend themselves to joint reconstruction; they represent diverse language stocks on different territories and have separate histories. There are two exceptions. Most importantly, the Semitic components of Jewish languages, which derive from Hebrew and Aramaic, are cognate and present fine material for comparative reconstruction (see Katz 1978; Bunis 1980). Then there is the small handful of items that do in fact turn up in interesting ways across Jewish language borders, e.g. Western Yiddish /t(e)filá/, Judezmo /təfilá/, both for ‘prayerbook’, in contrast to both classical Hebrew /təfillá/ and Eastern Yiddish /tfilə/ ‘prayer’ (Bunis 1975: 13).

### III

#### “JEWISH INTERLINGUISTICS”

The term “Jewish interlinguistics” has become ambiguous. For some, it is synonymous with comparative Jewish linguistics (see §2). For Paul Wexler, it is the name of “his” discipline, proposed in Wexler 1981 and elaborated in Wexler 1987a and 1987b. It will be used here in this second sense. Wexler’s “Jewish interlinguistics” takes comparative Jewish linguistics as its point of departure, although the accreditation to Max Weinreich for formulating the paradigm of that field is somewhat obscurely acknowledged at the end of footnote 3 of Wexler’s “Jewish Interlinguistics: Facts and Conceptual Framework” (Wexler 1981), the

foundation and formulation of which come from Max Weinreich's 1954 "Prehistory and Early History of Yiddish: Facts and Conceptual Framework", and from Weinreich's *Geshikhte* (1973: 1,48–183; 3,33–156).

Wexler's Jewish interlinguistics does not, however, stop where comparative Jewish linguistics, or for that matter, any branch of historical or comparative linguistics, stops. Rejecting the cautions of historical linguistics in favour of sensationalist theories, it bypasses the need for consistent correspondences over a respectable corpus of items. Instead, fanciful etymologies are proposed for a handful of items, and presented to the nonspecialist reader as fact, and these then themselves become the "evidence" for substrata of known languages, principally Yiddish, and for the claim for genetic ties between Yiddish and everything from Greek to Iranian to "Judeo South Slavic".

The following is a sampling of concepts characteristic of the Alice in Wonderland brand of "Jewish interlinguistics" (page references are to Wexler 1987a): "Spanish-Yiddish" (ix); "Judeo-Greek saturated with Judeo-Iranian" (x); "Just as Western Judeo-Greek was supplanted by Judeo-Latin (and Judeo-Berber in North Africa?), I suppose that Eastern Judeo-Greek was supplanted by Judeo-Slavic" (7); Grecisms "entered Yiddish through direct contact with Greek speakers" (28); "In the Balkans, where the direction of language shift was reversible, Judeo-South Slavic might also have been superseded in certain locales by Judeo-Greek" (230); "The presence of Judeo-Greek patterns of discourse in German, Hungarian and Czech also corroborates the theory of a Greek connection in Central Europe" (230); "[. . .] Iranian elements and Irano-Turkic (?) corpus of Hebrew anthroponyms that appear in Western Yiddish" (233); "One Yiddish Iranianism is also found in the East Slavic languages, which raises the possibility that the Asian components in the Jewish languages might have been received through a non-Jewish Slavic intermediary" (60).

Yiddish words of unknown origin are habitually invoked in support of these fantasies. A characteristic case is Yiddish /dáv(ə)nən/ 'pray', for which many unconvincing etymologies have been proposed (and exposed, see Birnbaum 1987). One of the more plausible is Kosover's (1964: 363–364), a Middle High German etymon, *dœnen* 'sing', backed up by Yiddish manuscript evidence. But Wexler proclaims Mieses's (1924: 238) playful parallel with a Persian word as THE etymology and a new pillar of "Jewish interlinguistics" is born: the "Judeo-Iranian substratum of Yiddish" (Wexler 1987a: 80; cf. 61–69). Elsewhere, /dáv(ə)nən/ is regarded as a "Judeo-Slavic or Balkan Judeo-Greek Iranianism" (1987b: 139). At this rate, there will soon be a Judeo-Martian substratum of Yiddish.

One is reminded of Malone's masterly exposé of similarism in the guise of cognatism. Malone demonstrated that via similarism one could "demonstrate" genetic relationship between Hebrew and Maidu, a Californian Amerindian language (Malone 1973: 208–209). Wexler's Jewish interlinguistics goes rather further. Rash etymologies of isolated items are presented as truths, and are then used to demonstrate genetic relationships between languages that are unrelated, non-coterritorial, non-contiguous, non-contemporary, unconnected historically, and in some cases, never existed but are themselves postulated on the basis of the same languages. In short, it is a textbook case of circularity exacerbated by a lack of candour concerning the weight of the evidence.

Basic linguistic methodology presumes *a priori* primacy of derivations from varieties that are coterritorial and cotemporal with the recipient language;



derivations that participate in otherwise demonstrable patterns of shift. Wexler, however, invokes the following methodology:

Even Yiddish Grecisms that have surface cognates in Palestinian Hebrew, Judeo-Aramaic or German might still be regarded as direct borrowings from Judeo-Greek or indirect borrowings through Judeo-Slavic.

(Wexler 1987a: 29)

#### IV THE CASE OF *KATÓVƏS*

Let us consider the centrepiece of evidence for Wexler's proposed Greek (!) substratum in Yiddish (Wexler 1987a: 31–33, 1987b: 135). Of course there are many Yiddish words of ULTIMATE Greek origin, just as in most European languages. But these items entered Yiddish via the Greek components in Hebrew, Aramaic, German, Slavic, etc, rather than by way of linguistic timeship and spaceship. The key proof for Wexler's Greek Connection is Yiddish /*katóvəs*/ 'kidding around', 'humour', 'pulling of pranks'. The word occurs most frequently in the modern language in the prepositional phrase /*af katóvəs*/ 'as a joke', 'for the fun of it', and in the verbal phrase /*tráybn̩ katóvəs*/ 'fool around', 'play tricks' (cf. M. Weinreich 1926: 221, no. 55). Wexler adopts Joffe's entertaining Greek etymology *katábasis* 'descent' in the religious connection of 'the antiphonal singing done by the two halves of the quire stepping down the floor of the church' (Joffe 1927: 134; 1959: 77–79). To his credit, Joffe stressed that this was, in his view, the etymon of the etymon, not the source; for that he posited a Russian intermediary. In any event he did not take himself too seriously.

I am sure [. . .] my theory [. . .] will bring forward other additions, comments, suppositions and jokes, – well, I shall wind up no better or worse off than the others [who have proposed etymologies of /*katóvəs*/].

(Joffe 1927: 129)

Joffe's derivation was disproven by Prilutski (1926–1933: 293–297) on solid phonological grounds. To Wexler's readers, however, /*katóvəs*/ is a "Judeo-Italian or Balkan grecism" (Wexler 1987b: 138). In more fanciful mood, it is "a Yiddish Judeo-Grecism borrowed directly or through a Judeo-Slavic intermediary" (Wexler 1987a: 31). In more fanciful mood still "the Grecism might have entered Yiddish from Judeo-Greek directly or indirectly via Judeo-Slavic in the Sorbian-German or Czech lands" (Wexler 1987a: 32).

It is methodologically illuminating to contrast Wexler's etymology (setting aside for the moment the grandiose inferences drawn therefrom) with one that is four and a half centuries old. The late fifteenth and early sixteenth century linguist and poet Elye Bokher (Elijah Levita) proposed in his *Tishbi* (Isny, 1541) that /*katóvəs*/ is a Hebraic construction within Yiddish from Semitic radical *ktb* 'write', coined to describe contemporary graffiti:

For in times gone by, comics and parable makers secretly wrote their words on the doors of the homes of the rich or in busy streets, in order that the identity of the

writer not be known and so the custom is in Rome to this day, and these things are called /katóvəs/ [. . .]

(Elye Bokher 1541: [96])

Synchronic juxtaposition of the notions 'writing' and 'jest' in /katóvəs/ survived in the eighteenth century variety of Western Yiddish known to the eminent rabbinic scholar and anti-Sabbatean historian Yankev Emden. That is evident from the following passage (which may even apply to certain modern reviews in learned journals):

And another abuse of writing [. . .] is what the masses call /katóvəs/, writings of mischief and trouble by gossipmongers, jokers and mockers. [. . .] They do their work in a place of darkness and in secret, in order that the originators of such dishonest defamations [. . .] known as *pasquil* [. . .] not be known. They paste in the night that which is written and sealed in the day [. . .]

(Emden 1748: 329a, b)

Both Zunz (1865: 497) and Grünbaum (1882: 491) know of usages of /katóvəs/ for a certain writing game or puzzle. These attestations tend to corroborate the veracity of Elye Bokher's etymology, but not of its implicit structural and methodological principles, which are at issue here. Elye Bokher's derivation is backed up by an amply attested paradigm of Yiddish abstract nouns of the shape /CaC(C)óCəs/ which derive from Hebrew /CaCCóCūθ/ via the usual application of stress shift, posttonic reduction and assorted consonantal shifts. Some are presumed to be Yiddish neologisms by analogy with extant items (see Mark 1958). Some may have actually been inherited from Aramaic /CaCCóCūθ/, often apocopated to /Ca(C)óCūθ/ in Jewish Aramaic. An illustrative corpus of /CaC(C)óCəs/ forms in Yiddish and their paradigmatically related agentives, is provided in Table 1.

A conspicuous disparity is the lack of an agentive corresponding with /katóvəs/ in present-day Yiddish. As is evident from Table 1, agentives related paradigmatically to /CaC(C)óCəs/ are most frequently of the shape /CáCCŋ/ (< classical Hebrew /CaCCóCn/), and sometimes of the shape /CáC(ə)C/ (< /CaCóC/). The missing agentive did exist, however, in older Yiddish and was supplied by Elye Bokher himself. His etymology of /katóvəs/ appears in fact at the entry /kátəv/ in his dictionary, where it is defined as "a man who is a master of comedy and maker of parables", i.e. a comedian (Elye Bokher 1541: [96]). He derives the Hebrew agentive from Arabic *kātib* 'scribe, secretary'. Yiddish /kátəv/ is amply attested. Friedrich (1784: 255) offers <Katew> as the term for *Scherzer* in his Northern Transitional Yiddish. Tendlau (1860: 52) defines <Katef> (with characteristic Western Yiddish final devoicing) as 'Spaßvogel, Witzling' in nineteenth century Midwestern Yiddish. It was also borrowed into the German underworld language (Avé-Lallemant 1858-62: 4,554). In the later guise of /kátəvnik/, with Slavic-derived suffixal *-nik*, it is attested in modern Eastern Yiddish. Y. M. Lifshits (1869: 421) equates /kátəvnik/ with /katóvəs-maxər/ 'joke maker', glossing /kátəvnik/ with Russian *šut* 'jester' (Lifshits 1876: 181). Harkavy (1925: 438) has 'jester, joker'.

Agentives in the paradigm pluralize via suffixation of *-im* and stress shift triggered by the penultimate stress rule of the Semitic component of Yiddish, yielding

Table 1  
Yiddish /CaC(C)óCəs/ nouns and their  
corresponding agentives (illustrative corpus)

ABSTRACT	AGENTIVE
akšónəs 'stubbornness'	ákšŋ 'stubborn fellow'
gablónəs 'haughtiness'	gádlən 'braggart'
kacónvəs 'butcher trade'	kácəv 'butcher'
kapcónəs 'poverty'	kápcŋ 'poor man'
lamdónəs 'learning'	lámdŋ 'learned man'
pazrónəs 'squandering'	pázrən 'squanderer'
šadxónəs 'matchmaking'	sádxŋ 'matchmaker'
šamóšəs 'beadleship'	šáməs 'beadle'
xanfónəs 'flattery'	xánfŋ 'flatterer'
xazónəs 'cantorship'	xázŋ 'cantor'
-----	
katónvəs 'humour, kidding'	? (= 'comedian?')

/akšónim/, /gablónim/, /kabcónim/, etc. Expected /katónvim/ is in fact attested in the responsa of the fifteenth century scholar Maharam Mintz (see Maharam Mintz 1617: 58b). He uses a variant spelling deriving from Aramaic  $\sqrt{qt}b$  'cut', 'destroy'; that spelling also occurs in the anonymous moralistic treatise *Seyfer mides* (1542: 10b) and elsewhere. One folk etymology derives /katónvəs/ from the occurrence of  $\sqrt{qt}b$  in the well-known phrase /qéteven məriři/ which has had the meanings 'bitter destruction', 'trouble-making devil', and 'deadly plague' (see Deuteronomy 32: 24). Another, less sophisticated, folk etymology related it to Hebrew /tōv/ 'good'. With his usual humour, Elye Bokher gently debunked it, remarking that these etymologists "don't distinguish between evil and good" (Elye Bokher 1541: [96]). A variety of Semitic spellings is attested (see Prilutski 1926 – 33: 297).

Finally, the geographic variants of /katónvəs/ match the paradigm, as illustrated in Table 2, where NEY = Northeastern Yiddish (Lithuania, Latvia, White Russia); MEY = Mideastern Yiddish (Poland, parts of Hungary and Czechoslovakia); SEY = Southeastern Yiddish (Ukraine, Bessarabia, Rumania); NWY = Northwestern Yiddish (Netherlands, northern Germany); MWY = Midwestern Yiddish (central Germany); SWY = Southwestern Yiddish (Alsace, Lorraine, Switzerland, southern Germany). Classification of Yiddish dialects is after Katz (1983). In view of the

Table 2  
Geographic variants of Yiddish /CaC(C)ʔCəs/ nouns

NEY ɔ	MEY, SEY u	NWY ɔ	MWY ɔ ~ ɔu	SWY ɔu ~ ɔ
akšónəs	akšúnəs	akšónəs (B)	*akšónəs	*akšúnəs
gablónəs	gablúnəs	*gablónəs	*gablónəs	*gablúnəs
kacónəs	kacúnəs	*kacónəs	*kacúnəs	kacónəs (W1, P, M) <sup>1</sup>
kapcónəs	kapcúnəs	kabcónəs (B)	*kabcónəs	*kabcúnəs
lamdónəs	lamdúnəs	lamdónəs (B)	lamdónəs (G) <sup>2</sup>	lamdónəs (Ph)
pazrónəs	pazrúnəs	*pazrónəs	*pazrónəs	*pazrúnəs
šadxónəs	šadxúnəs	šadxónəs (VP, B)	šadxónəs (Se)	šadxónəs (Ws, W1, P, GG)
šamóšəs	šamúšəs	*šamóšəs	*šamóšəs	*šamóšəs
xanfónəs	xanfúnəs	*xanfónəs	*xanfónəs	*xanfúnəs
xazónəs	xazúnəs	xazónəs (VP, B)	*xazónəs	xazónəs (W1)
-----				
katónəs	katúnəs	katónəs (B)	katónəs (T), katóufəs (St)	katúnəs (Ph)

1 Ws provides the variants *kacónəs* and *xacónəs*; G has *gəzónəs*. In Western Yiddish dialects, the item often glosses 'butcher shop' rather than 'butcher's trade'.

2 St has the phonologically Germanized <lamdenes> = *lámdenəs* (?).

demise of Western Yiddish dialects (NWY, MWY, SWY), and our inability to glean Yiddish phonology from traditional Semitic orthography, some of the phonological representations for these varieties represent reconstructions, and asterisks are provided. Luckily, however, there are some items for which twentieth century fieldwork has documented pronunciation from residual traces of the spoken language, or, where eighteenth or nineteenth century Latin-letter transcriptions (convertible to phonemic transcription) are available. NWY data are from Voorzanger and Polak 1915 (= VP), Beem 1970, 1975 (= B); MWY data from Selig 1792 (= Se), Giehl 1829 (= G), Stern 1833 (= St), Tendlau 1860 (= T); SWY data from Philoglottus 1733 (= Ph), Weiss 1896 (= Ws), Weill 1920 (= W1), Porgès 1921 (= P).

Elye Bokher's etymology of /katóvəs/ is not the only one nor is it necessarily correct. A sizeable literature has grown up around the word (see e.g. Zunz 1832: 440; 1865: 497; Grünbaum 1882: 491; Perles 1884: 177; Voorzanger and Polak 1915: 170; M. Weinreich 1923: 81; Joffe 1927: 130–1; Prilutski 1926–33: 293, 297; Y. Lifshits 1930: 44; Ben-Chaim 1958–1959; Fraenkel 1958–9; Beem 1967: 118, no. 448). Elucidation of his derivation serves to illustrate the difference between an etymology constructed within historical linguistics (long before the rise of the explicitly formulated nineteenth century comparative method) and with no ulterior motive, and one culled from similar letters in nonsimilar dictionaries (long after the establishment of the comparative method and its cautions) as a basis for proving a theory which one believes in irrespective of evidence.

## V

### YIDDISH LINGUISTICS AND 'JEWISH INTERLINGUISTICS'

The cause of Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj's onslaught would appear to be my 1985 critique of Jewish interlinguistics, which included the following (although it cannot account for Pavel's attack on Judeo-Romance scholars; there must have been other scores to settle there).

Some proposed Jewish languages are age old structures, while others are the products of comparative reconstruction, and still others are hypothesized from the phonetically ambiguous nonevidence of a handful of items written in the Jewish alphabet, and brought into the world of science by heavy artillery linguistic or sociolinguistic terminology [ . . . ]

The accounting for all Jewish language phenomena by a paradigm, no matter how attractive for model-hungry scholars, may not be possible after all. Even Wexler (1981: 137) [ . . . ] concedes that Jewish interlinguistics, collectively, has empirical validity deriving from "membership in a chain of language shift leading back to Hebrew" which he deems "tantamount to proposing a fourth parameter in comparative linguistics" [the first three being genetic affiliation, areal contiguity and random selection]. But do most Jewish languages participate in a chain of language shift dating back to ancient Hebrew? And even if they did, what makes it a "new parameter" any more than the pedigrees enjoyed by, say, all the

languages participating in a chain of language shift dating back to Sanskrit, or Greek, or Latin?

Turning from the rough contours of the field to Jewish languages themselves, it soon becomes evident that there is an aspect of Jewish interlinguistics that overlaps with comparative linguistics, and that aspect covers the methodology employed in comparing *any* set of two or more languages: the genetic relationships between Jewish languages, beyond the often touted handful of single words from the spheres of traditional Jewish life that turn up in interesting ways across intra-Jewish cultural and linguistic frontiers. This means, of course, invoking the classic nineteenth century methodology of *comparativism* over the principal tool of Jewish interlinguistics – *parallelism*.

(Katz 1985: 86)

Yiddish linguistics will continue to serve the study of other Jewish and non-Jewish language phenomena, to benefit from such study, and to contribute to general linguistic theory. Debate and discussion, conducted fairly and forthrightly, epitomize a healthy academic discipline. Paul Wexler the Slavist was welcomed with open arms into the ranks of Yiddish linguistics, and we look forward to many valuable contributions from his pen in the years to come. Let's leave "dirty tricks" to politicians and /katóvəs/ to pranksters.

## APPENDIX 1:

### MR SLOBODJANS'KYJ'S PUBLICATIONS (TO JANUARY 1990)

Following a number of questions from readers concerning Mr Slobodjans'kyj's review of *Origins of the Yiddish Language* in the December 1988 issue of *Language*, the editor, Professor Sarah Grey Thomason, undertook to investigate doubts concerning its authorship, but declined to publish a reply. In a statement dated 10 April 1989, which she circulated widely, she offered the following assurances:

Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj does exist. He comes from the USSR and speaks English with a strong accent and without perfect grammar. I have been unable to contact him directly (he is no longer in Massachusetts), but I did undertake an investigation which left me absolutely convinced on this point. I spoke to Paul Wexler on the telephone, and the rest of my information comes from him. He says that he first met Slobodjans'kyj in the Soviet Union some 25 years ago; that Slobodjans'kyj had no academic career because of political difficulties with the Soviet government; that Slobodjans'kyj came to the U.S. several years ago; that he, Wexler, suggested that Slobodjans'kyj write the review; and that he consulted with Slobodjans'kyj about its content and then translated it into English.

And thus did the editor of *Language* vouch for Slobodjans'kyj's existence, accent and grammar, and most importantly, for his authorship of the review. Assuming this version of events to be true to the letter, would it have been appropriate for Wexler to "suggest", "consult with" and "translate" a review of a book in which he, Wexler, is a participant, when the review attacks nearly all the other papers while praising his own work, all of this in secret, with no acknowledgement or accreditation to Wexler for his kind efforts?

In reply to enquiries (including our own – we wanted to invite Mr Slobodjans'kyj to the next winter symposium), the editor explained that his mailing address was secret (what ever happened to *glasnost* in Massachusetts?). After copies of a letter of protest were sent to the officers and committees of the Linguistic Society of America, she printed the following “correction” in her column, “The Editor’s Department”:

In *Language* vol. 64, no. 4 (December 1988), the review by Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj of *Origins of the Yiddish Language*, ed. by Dovid Katz, should have contained a note acknowledging the extensive assistance of Paul Wexler – including translation from the original Russian text and consultation about the content – in the preparation of the review. The review received by *Language* contained no such note; the editor learned of the need for one only after the review was published, first through correspondence from Dovid Katz and numerous associates of his and then from discussions with Paul Wexler and other experts on Yiddish. The editor regrets the omission.

(Thomason 1989: 921)

And thus did the editor of *Language* commit to print the Slobodjans'kyj mythology, hook, line and sinker, down to the (lost?) Russian original. The readers of *Language* were left to infer that the only mishap in this affair was the failure of Mr Slobodjans'kyj (!) to include an acknowledgement to Wexler. Clearly, Professor Wexler would have been distressed at not being credited for his exertions, and would have been the first to lodge a protest.

The editor of *Language* is now aware of the following three aspects of this case. Clearly her first concern will be for editorial propriety and the reputation of *Language* and the Linguistic Society of America, and she will, no doubt, use her “Editor’s Department” to clear up this matter in the near future.

(1) *Pavel* Slobodjans'kyj struck previously, with a review of I. Benabu and J. Sermoneta's *Judeo-Romance Linguistics*, published in *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie* (Slobodjans'kyj 1987). In that effort, the editors and contributors to the volume are treated with not such a lot of respect (e.g. “the articles [. . .] display blatant ignorance and misunderstanding of linguistic theory and the relevant literature”, p. 522). Pavel makes two exceptions, however, one of whom is, lo and behold, Paul Wexler: “Except for Bunis and Wexler, the articles are unoriginal in approach” (p. 522). After attacking each of the other contributors in turn, Wexler's contribution is characterized as follows:

The concluding paper by Wexler paints the field of Judeo-Portuguese for the first time in very broad strokes – including Judeo-Portuguese's contacts with South American, Asian and other Jewish languages. [. . .] The comprehensive bibliography, partly annotated, makes the article a valuable contribution (a few lines were omitted on 193).

(Slobodjans'kyj 1987: 526)

How considerate of Slobodjans'kyj to correct the typos in Wexler's paper!

(2) Professor Wexler, understandably concerned by the esteem in which the Oxford Programme in Yiddish is held by its parent institution, was kind enough to send a copy of *Pavlo* Slobodjans'kyj's *Language* review to the president of the Oxford

Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, with a covering letter dated 30 January 1989. The letter reads:

Forgive me enclosing relatively unpleasant reading, but facts are facts. The first volume [of the *Winter Studies in Yiddish* series] was quite a disappointment but I look forward to seeing future volumes on a higher level. The writer of the review is a recent Soviet emigré to the States. I am in Wisconsin for a semester leave. While it is pleasant, it cannot compare with all that Oxford had to offer back in 1985. Trust all is well with you, the Centre and your family. All best regards for 1989. Yours, Paul Wexler.

(3) Pavel/Pavlo/Paul Wexler-Slobodjans'kyj was at long last unmasked by Max Niemeyer Verlag of Tübingen. A recent Niemeyer volume, edited by Paul Wexler, was to contain a review by *Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj* of my *Grammar of the Yiddish Language* (Katz 1987d). Niemeyer issued the following statement, dated 12 July 1989: "Niemeyer will not publish this review under any other than its true author's signature. We shall find out the author's identity. Otherwise the article will not be published". After an investigation, Niemeyer reported in August 1989 that "Professor Wexler gave us some explanation as to Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj's identity which one may believe or not. He has, however, no objections that the review of your book appear under his, Paul Wexler's name". In a letter of 8 September 1989, Niemeyer reported that it had insisted Wexler allow a reply to the review to appear in the same volume. Apparently, that proposal did not attract an enthusiastic response from Pavlo, Pavel or Paul. In a letter of 27 September 1989, Niemeyer reported that the review was withdrawn.

In Professor Thomason's cosmology, now the official policy of *Language* and the Linguistic Society of America, it surely would be for Slobodjans'kyj, not for Wexler, to allow the Niemeyer review to be published under the name "Paul Wexler". And why would he wish Wexler to take the credit for his own contribution? And how could the prolific Wexler bring himself to usurp a piece written by his good friend, the long-suffering Soviet emigré Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj?

## APPENDIX 2:

### SAMPLINGS FROM MR SLOBODJANS'KYJ'S REVIEW OF *ORIGINS OF THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE*

P. 761:

Of the fourteen papers, five are totally or predominantly irrelevant to the topic.

The five cited papers are "Negation in Yiddish and Historical Reconstruction" (Christopher Hutton); "The Origin of the *o* Vowel in Southeastern Yiddish" (Jean Jofen); "Transgressing the Bounds: On the Origins of Yiddish Literature" (David Neal Miller); "The Origins of Yiddish Printing" (Moshe N. Rosenfeld); "A Partisan History of Yiddish" (Nathan Susskind).

P. 761:

Of the nine germane papers, three have essentially been published previously



(Birnbaum 1954–71, 1985, and Marchand 1965) or published in greater detail elsewhere (Kerler 1987).

Professor Marchand's paper represents two decades of work since his 1965 paper. His inclusion in the list would appear to be a personal slur. Kerler published a *Yiddish* version (Kerler 1987) of his paper in a Jerusalem literary annual *after* it appeared in *Origins*. That version is in no greater detail; the page sizes are smaller and there are therefore more pages, but Pavel/Pavlo must have still been wearing his pre-*perestroika* standard issue Soviet spectacles. The publication of one part of Birnbaum's paper elsewhere had been unauthorized. The late Professor Birnbaum, then in his late nineties, expressed his wish in writing that the authorized version appear in *Origins of the Yiddish Language*.

P. 761:

The editor's preface describes the history of Y linguistics (in brief) and praises the Oxford Programme in Yiddish (at length).

Of the 211 lines in the preface, 39 introduce the reader to Yiddish linguistics and 16 summarize the history of Yiddish studies at Oxford.

P. 762:

Kerler [. . .] makes no mention of the view [. . .] that Yiddish deviated from German due to a Judeo-East Slavic substratum.

Language X' does not "deviate" from X because of substratum L, which by definition was there to start with; to suggest otherwise is muddled thinking. Western Yiddish, on German language territory, which shows a multitude of consistent correspondences with Eastern Yiddish, has no Slavic component. It cannot therefore have "deviated" from German because of "Judeo East Slavic", one of Wexler's many imagined languages. In a survey of major trends of thought on the origins of Yiddish in Pre-World War II Soviet Russia, Kerler is prudent to ignore the far fringes of the 1980s.

P. 762:

Hutton suggests that since Eastern Yiddish retains a more conservative profile than Western dialects [. . .] they are [sic] especially important for the purposes of reconstruction. Yet this view is contradicted by evidence that many major Eastern Y isoglosses are relatively recent [. . .].

The search for archaic features in Eastern Yiddish has long proven to be fruitful (see e.g. Berliner 1898; Gerzon 1902: 83-129; Katz 1982). The presence of other more recent isoglosses in both East and West has nothing to do with the usefulness of either for reconstruction.

P. 762:

References are also made to Katz's incredible claim (see Katz 1985) that Aramaic speaking immigrants came to Germany before the 10th century [. . .].

Nowhere was the claim “before the 10th century” made. My theory postulating (Jewish) Aramaic (itself containing a weighty Hebrew component) as the only plausible linguistic source for the bulk of the lexicon and phonology of the Semitic component in Yiddish, is elucidated in some detail in Katz 1975, 1979, 1982, and 1986b. Here, at last, we seem to have the first difference of opinion between Wexler and his alter ego. Wexler (1987a: 72) has claimed there are “five reasons to suspect a Judeo-Aramaic speaking community in Western Europe towards the end of the first millennium”.

P. 763:

A Persian origin [of /dáv(ə)nən/] is explicitly rejected [by Birnbaum] on the double grounds of geographical distance from Y [ . . . ] and the lack of any other demonstrated Persian influence on Y (the editor might have alerted his readers to Y /šabaš/ ‘tip paid to musicians by the guests at a wedding’ and /šibəš/ ‘small coin, trifle’, cited by Wexler in the same volume!).

Professor Birnbaum is wise to reject the Persian etymology on both grounds. Incidentally, the first item, /šabaš/ is unattested in nearly all varieties of Yiddish; where it occurs as a localism, its genuine *local* sources need to be investigated. The second item is nearly certainly derived from Hebrew /šibbūš/ ‘blunder’ > Yiddish /šibəš/ ‘low price, pittance (i.e. commercial blunder)’ via usual sound changes (stress shift, degemination, posttonic reduction) and typical semantic shift (cf. /ḥiddūš/ ‘innovation’ > /xidəš/ ‘innovation’, ‘surprise’; /ḥillūq/ ‘division’ > /xilək/ ‘difference’, /kibbūd/ ‘reverence’, ‘hospitality’, > /kibəd/ ‘food or drink served to guests’, /šiddūx/ ‘marital match’ > /šidəx/ ‘marital match’, ‘bringing together of two people or a person and thing’, /šippūš/ ‘stench’ > /ipəš/ ‘plague’). No need to reach to Persia or Siam. These alleged Persianisms represent precisely the type of cowboy etymologies that Birnbaum counters by proposing sound methodological mechanisms for avoiding self-delusion (Birnbaum 1987: 11-140).

P. 763:

Fuks’ paper packs into 2<sup>1/2</sup> pages a farfetched theory that the Jews in Germany spoke Judeo-Latin as late as the 9th [ . . . ] or 11th [ . . . ] century [ . . . ].

Nowhere does Professor Fuks make these claims. He argues that the Romance items in Yiddish “did not *derive* [my emphasis-DK] from Zarphtic, the Northern French Jewish idiom, but from Judeo-Latin. That would, among other things, explain why the verb /bénčŋ/ ‘bless’ has retained the likeness to Latin *benedicere* instead of to French *bénir*” (Fuks 1987: 25). The late Professor Fuks’s ability to say much in few words is widely admired.

P. 764:

His title notwithstanding, Kerler’s discussion of Soviet theories on the genesis of Y is restricted to Yiddish sources. [ . . . ] Kerler ignores Slavic-language publications [ . . . ]. Kerler does not observe [ . . . ] Kerler may have chosen something of a ‘phantom topic’. [ . . . ] Kerler largely ignores Soviet chronologies [ . . . ].

None of these charges is remotely accurate, and twenty-three uninterrupted lines attacking Dr Kerler leave one almost wondering whether Mr Slobodjans’kyj doesn’t

hold some kind of vendetta against him. Suffice it here to say that the “phantom” here is not the “topic”, but rather the “reviewer”.

P. 764:

In 1979 and 1983, the Oxford Programme in Yiddish, together with Columbia University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, sponsored international conferences in Y language and literature; regrettably neither event led to the publication of proceedings.

Papers from those conferences have appeared in one volume comprising conference papers exclusively (Turniansky 1986) and in another comprising conference papers overwhelmingly (Even-Zohar and Harshav 1986).

P. 764/765:

The infelicitous combination of many inadequate papers [. . .]

One may agree or disagree with Solomon A. Birnbaum, Leo Fuks, Robert D. King, James W. Marchand, Nathan Susskind and Wolf Moskovich, but to lump their work in the category of “inadequacy” scarcely befits any serious journal, least of all *Language*.

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#### ADDENDUM

On 25 May 1990, Professor Robert Austerlitz, president of the Linguistic Society of America, announced the appointment of a special committee to investigate the Slobodjans'kyj affair. On 12 February 1991, Professor Frederick J. Newmeyer, Secretary-Treasurer of the Society, reported that the March 1991 issue of *Language* would contain an apology noting that “the Linguistic Society of America has strong reason to believe that a Yiddish language scholar named Pavlo Slobodjans'kyj does not exist”.

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