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THE CHILDREN OF HETH
AND THE EGO OF LINGUISTICS
A STORY OF SEVEN YIDDISH MERGERS

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ABSTRACT

The accepted history of Yiddish, based on historical and literary records, places its origin in the Rhineland, in the far west of the German speaking area. The Germanic parts of Yiddish, however, point to dialects much further east. This has been explained through a 'Principle of Exchangeability', whereby ongoing contact with other German dialects on the long trek eastward obliterated earlier forms. Unambiguous evidence may be gleaned from the Semitic elements in Yiddish, which have no European cognates. Modern Yiddish dialects show no trace of the old Rhineland merger of Semitic /ħ/ with /h/. The standard model explains this by reversal of merger, and invokes additional reversals to explain the modern Yiddish oppositions /s/ vs. /š/, and five long vs. five short vowels in Semitic-origin items. Reversal of unconditioned merger is untenable. Where seven such reversals are needed to sustain a historical model, it should be abandoned. The comparative method, which takes empirically confirmed modern data as its point of departure, is superior to the writing of language history as a corollary of external or literary history.

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in the age of the interdisciplinary ideal. Linguistic, historical, literary and archaeological evidence are meant to assist each other in the common quest for 'what really happened' in a bygone age. Like most 'equal partnerships', this one too is equal only in name. 'Matter' prevails over 'sound'. The pieces of paper discovered by the

historians and literary chroniclers, and the pieces of all else uncovered by the archaeologists are given primacy by human instinct, and by the empiricist tradition. Trouble is, historical linguistics is equally rooted in empiricism, and, of course, sound is matter too. Saussure proudly hailed the superiority of the evidence of reconstruction, which takes as its point of departure the empirically confirmable modern dialects, over paper trailing with its thousand and one doubts (Saussure 1916:297–300).

Nevertheless, historical linguists often take as their starting point the 'truth' of the historians and literary chroniclers, and regard linguistic evidence as the tool for filling in the gaps. In cases of conflict, some will take historical evidence as the given, principles of historical linguistics as the variable. Surely, this results from insecurity and lack of self-confidence of the field, and, yes, researchers tend to become part of a collective unconscious of their discipline.

2. ACCEPTED HISTORY OF YIDDISH

About a century ago, the comparative method was first applied to the history of Yiddish (Şaineanu 1889; Landau 1896). After being established as a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense by Mieses (1908) and Borokhov (1913), historical Yiddish linguistics became one of the priorities of the Yivo (the Yiddish Scientific Institute), set up in Vilna (Vilnius) in 1925, and moved to New York during World War II. In fact, Max Weinreich, a cofounder of the Yivo, was the century's leading historian of Yiddish. His posthumously published four-volume history of the language is the standard work (M. Weinreich 1973).

The European period in Jewish history came into its own around a thousand years ago. The custom of the day was to dip into the Hebrew Bible for names that could, for various reasons, apply to the new Jewish communities. In the Iberian Peninsula it was *Sefarad* (cf. Obadiah 20); in France, *Tsorfas* (cf. I Kings 17:9–10, Obadiah 20); in the Slavonic area, *Knaan* (cf. Canaan, Genesis 9:18–27). The Jewish civilization on German speaking lands, destined to become the geographically and demographically most extensive Jewish culture area in Europe, was known as *Ashkenaz* (cf. Genesis 10:3,

Jeremiah 51:27). Each name signifies culture, custom and language as much as territory, and in the case of Ashkenaz, the discongruity with Germany became vast as Ashkenaz spread south into Italy, north into Holland, and through much of the Slavonic and Baltic territory of eastern Europe.

It seems clear from Jewish history and literature that Ashkenaz started out in the Rhineland, to the far west of the German speaking area, where around the year 1000, a new centre of rabbinic authority had been established in the environs of Speyer, Worms and Mainz. These three cities entailed an internal Jewish juridical unit, and were known collectively by their Hebrew acronym SHUM. The 'founding father' of Ashkenaz was Rabeynu Gershom (c. 960–1028) who issued an edict forbidding polygamy, thereby symbolically bringing Jewish law into the West. It is also known that national Jewish tragedies, including the Crusades from 1096 onward, the Black Death of 1348–1349 and ensuing slaughters, and many local persecutions continually led Ashkenazim (as members of the group are called) to migrate eastward, ultimately to the Slavonic and Baltic lands. Moreover, various Polish and Lithuanian kings encouraged immigration, hoping the new commerce would shore up their economies.

It has therefore been agreed that Yiddish originated in the Rhineland, whence it travelled with the Ashkenazim on the great trek eastward. Correlation with history is confirmed by culture. The cultural establishment of the civilization is the rabbinate, a term that does not do justice to the wide variety of juridical, textual, philological, folkloristic, homiletic and kabbalistic treatises the rabbis wrote. At the inception of Ashkenaz, most of the great rabbinic figures and academies were indeed in the Rhineland, the part of Ashkenaz Jews called *Loter*, apparently after one of the Lothairs of the Holy Roman Empire. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many leading personalities are found much further east, in Regensburg, Rothenburg (ob der Tauber), Prague and Vienna, some of them indigenous, some migrants from Loter. From the sixteenth century onward, the leading centres are in Poland and Lithuania. All very neat, west to east, Rhine to Danube to Dnieper, history, culture and language, and an interdisciplinary love-feast.

What is more, Yiddish linguistics, which has had to combat

various prejudices, was all too happy to have a pedigree tracing Yiddish to the glorious birthplace of Ashkenaz, Loter. For icing on the cake, there is a handful of Romance-origin lexical items and proper names in Yiddish, jibing with historical reports that medieval Rhineland Jewry itself derived from emigrants from the Romance lands. Much is to be learned from a study of the conscious and unconscious political, social and cultural goals of specialists in the history of individual languages (see Frakes 1989; Katz 1990).

3. COMPONENTS OF YIDDISH

Yiddish comprises a Germanic component (the majority component in both lexicon and grammatical machinery) inextricably interlinked with a Semitic component (comprising several thousand lexical items and a largely distinctive phonology and morphology). Their joining is governed by highly specific structural 'fusion formulae' which are valid for all known varieties of the language. There are the few Romance items. Eastern Yiddish has a prominent Slavonic component but its virtual absence in the west marks its relative recency and the inopportuneness of using it for reconstruction of the early history of the language. Synchronically, all the variously derived parts of the language form a single and unique structure, far removed from the source languages. At the same time, their continuing structural specificities mark off the 'synchronic components' of Yiddish.

4. GERMANIC EVIDENCE

Noyakh Prilutski, the master of Yiddish dialectology of pre-World War II Warsaw, demonstrated that 'it is impossible to find a Yiddish dialect that will in all its major phonetic features agree with this or that German dialect' (Prilutski 1917:289). Nevertheless, scholars have pressed the search for partial congruence both with dialects and overall areas. Gerzon's (1902) neogrammarian-style Heidelberg doctorate concluded that the preponderance of agreement was between Yiddish and East Central German (Thuringia, Upper Saxony and Silesia) citing, among others, pan-Yiddish cognates of Middle High German (MHG) *pf*, *ph*: with /f/ initially, /p/ medially and finally, e.g. MHG *phert* 'horse', *epfel* 'apple', *kopf* 'head',

Yiddish *ferd*, *epf*, *kop* (Gerzon 1902:131). Mieses's treatise opted for Bavarian (Mieses 1924:270), and his evidence has recently been taken up and supplemented by King (1979:7; 1986:7–9; 1987). It includes, among others, apocope of final unstressed vowels of nouns, e.g. MHG *vröude*, *köpfe*, *tage*, Yiddish *frejd* 'happiness', *kep* 'heads', *teg* 'days'. Fischer and Birnbaum came to the conclusion dictated by the evidence: that the Germanic part of Yiddish comprises elements characteristic of both Bavarian and East Central German (Fischer 1936:77–85 = Bin-Nun 1973:77–85; Birnbaum 1954:63–67).

In a 1979 paper, King asked what nobody had dared ask before: 'Where is the Rhineland? Where is "Loter"? To the linguist qua linguist there is not really much to say about this: Yiddish bears hardly any trace of having been derived from or influenced by a dialect from the Western part of Germany, i.e. by the Rhineland' (King 1979:7). Mieses and King are the only Yiddish linguists to have proposed alternative settlement histories based on the evidence of the language (Mieses 1924:269–318; Faber and King 1984:408–422; King 1986).

But Max Weinreich had his mind on bigger things: the overall history of Yiddish as an integral component of the cultural history of Ashkenaz. Whatever feature he might be discussing in the Germanic component of Yiddish, there was always one premise: 'After all, it is in these areas [the Rhineland] that the Yiddish language arose' (1973:II, 96). Without pulling a single Rhineland feature out of his hat, Weinreich came up with a principle that in a stroke deals with the incompatibility. It is his 'Principle of Exchangeability' (*princíp fun ójsbajtəvdikàjt*), by which any German dialect feature in Yiddish was susceptible to replacement by other German dialect features over time (1973:II, 97–98). It is a generalization of Fischer's claim of a 'rolling back of western German elements by Bavarian'. Fischer had followed up by postulating a later series of East Central German replacements of Bavarian features (Fischer 1936:79 = Bin-Nun 1973:79). It is not easy to dispute such claims, except in so far as a thorough study of the Germanic component (not yet carried out) might well find not a single *exclusively* Rhineland (western German) feature, in which case the principle would be found to defy all probability.

5. ROMANCE EVIDENCE

The trickle of Romance, e.g. *bénčn* 'bless', 'say the grace after meals', *čólnt* 'hot Sabbath dish', *léjənən* 'read', is augmented by Romance origin Yiddish names attested from 1096 onward, including male names *búnəm*, *šnéjər*, and female *špríncə*, *jéntə* (cf. *benedicere*, *calēnt-*, *legere*; *Bonhomme*, *Senior*; *Esperanza*, *Gentile*). In line with a Romance prehistory feeding into a Rhineland genesis and historic march eastward, Weinreich posited a 'Laazic component in Yiddish', *Laazic* being the old name for Jewish variants of medieval Romance languages (M. Weinreich 1955–1956; 1973:II, 50–74). He conceded, however, that the notion is justified by 'pedigreed genealogy' (1973:II, 50).

6. INHERENT SAFETY OF THE SEMITIC EVIDENCE

The Semitic component in Yiddish comprises thousands of lexical items attested in Hebrew and (Jewish) Aramaic, and appears, in analogous structures, in all varieties of the language. In fact, the joining of Semitic and Germanic is critical to the definition of Yiddish. Uniquely in Yiddish, the Semitic component has no cognate stock language in Europe. There could not have been any continuing impact or contamination from Semitic dialects in central or eastern Europe because there were none (hence no 'Principle of Exchangeability'). Reconstruction is stark and uncluttered.

There is overwhelming consistency of correspondence between the Semitic components of Yiddish dialects, and the way they combine with the Germanic component within each variety (see U. Weinreich 1958:223; M. Weinreich 1960). This points toward a protolanguage (see Katz 1985:95–96; 1986:236–238; 1987:48–50). But on the face of it, that Semitic proto-component could have been anywhere. Here medieval rabbinic treatises, written in Hebrew or Aramaic, come to the rescue.

7. THE CHILDREN OF HETH

The Maharil (acronym of Yankev ben Moyshe Molin, c.1360–1427), the spiritual leader of Ashkenaz in his generation, noted a

difference in custom concerning the *tfiln* ('phylacteries') worn by observant Jewish males during weekday morning prayer. *Tfiln* comprise two boxes containing sacred texts, held by leather straps, one worn on the head, the other on the non-dominant arm. The question before the Maharil concerned the positioning of the opening (through which the strap is threaded) of the arm phylactery.

The *bnej éstrajx* ['Children of Austria'], and all the regions of the *bnej xes* ['Children of *xes*'] position the opening toward the hand; and we, the *bnej rínus* ['Children of the Rhine'], and all the *bnej hes* ['Children of *hes*'] position the opening toward the body [...]

(Maharil 1556:6a)

The Maharil, a native of Mainz who studied in Austria, conceptualized 'Austria' as a subset of *bnej xes*, and 'Rhine' as a subset of *bnej hes*. He uses the terms *bnej xes* and *bnej hes* for two parts of Ashkenazic Jewry, east and west, and it is safe to assume that his usage was not born the day before. Rabbinic style does not treat the latest slang as legal terminology in a book of authoritative responsa on Jewish law and custom.

The foremost rabbinic leader of Ashkenaz in the mid-fifteenth century was Isserlin (Yisroel ben Pesakhye, 1390–1460), an easterner born in Regensburg. His pupil Yosselin (Yoysef ben Moyshe, c. 1423–1490), recounts the following:

On one occasion, Yom Kippur [The Day of Atonement] fell on a Monday and he [Isserlin] would say the blessing over the new moon at the end of the Sabbath, prior to Yom Kippur, and I recall that he told me his reasoning, for he said: 'I want to take the credit for fulfilling this commandment with me to the Day of Judgement [i.e. Yom Kippur]', and, thus I was told that the rabbis of the *bnej xes* who preceded him did this also, but the *bnej rínus* did not want to bless the new moon before Yom Kippur, because, they say, it occurs during the Days of Awe [ten days of penitence preceding Yom Kippur] and the days of Awe are days in which we fast, and the new moon must be blessed when one is happy.

(Yosselin, MS of 1475, in Freimann 1903:70)

Who are these 'Children of *xēs*'? As it happens, there are Children of Heth in the Bible, the source of so many other medieval Jewish geoethnic designations. Genesis 23 recounts Abraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpelah from the Children of Heth (*bānēj hēθ*), sometimes translated 'Hittites' (e.g. in the King James version).

¹And the life of Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. ²And Sarah died in Kiriath-arba – the same is Hebron – in the Land of Canaan; and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. [. . .] ⁷And Abraham rose up, and bowed down to the people of the land, even to the children of Heth. ⁸And he spoke with them, saying: 'If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar, ⁹that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he hath, which is in the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in the midst of you for a possession of a burying-place.' ¹⁰Now Ephron was sitting in the midst of the children of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the children of Heth, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying: ¹¹'Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that is therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it thee; bury thy dead.' ¹²And Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. ¹³And he spoke unto Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying: 'But if thou wilt, I pray thee, hear me: I will give the price of the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there.' ¹⁴And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him: ¹⁵'My lord, hearken unto me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that betwixt me and thee? bury therefore thy dead.' ¹⁶And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the hearing of the children of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant. [. . .] ²⁰And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a burying-place by the children of Heth.

Genesis 23 (after Hertz 1968:80–82)

Why in the world would part of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry be identified with Abraham's grave suppliers? The plot thickens; *xes* is also the name of the eighth letter of the Yiddish alphabet. Its etymon in classical Hebrew, *hēθ*, is homophonically both 'Heth (father of the Hittites)' and 'eighth letter of the Hebrew alphabet (representing [h])'. Ancient homonymy paved the way for a medieval pun.

Table 1 summarizes the three 'h sounds' of classical Hebrew and Aramaic: 'plain' glottal /h/, pharyngeal /ħ/ (which behaves phonologically as one of the [+low] consonants in the language) and velar /x/ (originally an allophone of /k/ via Northwest Semitic postvocalic spirantization). The phonological system of both classical Hebrew and Aramaic, codified in the late first millennium on the western shores of the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias), is known as TIBERIAN. The elaborate system of vowel and accent diacritics, added to the largely consonantal classical text, is a phonological system not limited to the biblical canon. For the reader's convenience, angle-bracketed transliterations of the Hebrew graphemes will be used in this paper, by the code ה = ⟨h⟩, ח = ⟨ħ⟩, כּ = ⟨x⟩.

Table 1: Tiberian /h/, /ħ/ and /x/

Grapheme	Transliteration	Name of letter	Realization
ה	⟨h⟩	hē	[h]
ח	⟨ħ⟩	hēθ	[ħ]
כּ	⟨x⟩	x+f	[x]

Luckily, rabbinic literature also divulges that pronunciations of classical *hēθ* were geographically differentiated in old Ashkenaz. The Maharil is quoted by his pupil Zalmen of St. Goar as citing interchangeable ⟨h⟩ and ⟨ħ⟩ in certain Hebrew words as evidence (possibly folkloristic or humorous evidence) 'for the Children of the Rhine and some other countries who pronounce ⟨ħ⟩ as ⟨h⟩' (Zalmen of St. Goar 1556:111a).

Isserlin, discussing the appropriate spelling, in a writ of divorce, of the diminutive forename *ré⟨ħ⟩alə* 'Rachael [lovingly]', speaks of 'the land of Austria and the other countries where ⟨ħ⟩ is pronounced as

⟨x⟩', contrasting with the 'Children of the Rhine and the other countries [where], like them, people pronounce ⟨ħ⟩ as ⟨h⟩' (Isserlin 1519:§231).

Medieval sociolinguistics comes into play when Yosselin, a native of the [h] territory, recalls the tolerance of his Regensburg born master Isserlin who told him 'You don't have to pronounce ⟨ħ⟩ although it is the custom to do so in our city' (MS 1475, in Freimann 1904:40). Clearly, from Isserlin's point of view, easterners 'pronounce' ⟨ħ⟩ (by virtue of their [x] realization), while westerners (who have [h]), 'don't'. Presumably the *bnej hes* lost ⟨ħ⟩ altogether wherever [h] cannot occur, i.e. syllable-finally. In the fifteenth century, the Maharam Mintz wrote about a 'name that comes from the state of Saxony where they read ⟨ħ⟩ as ⟨x⟩' (Maharam Mintz 1617:32b).

The ethnographic notions 'Children of *hes*' and 'Children of *xes*' thus derive from an old Ashkenazic isogloss setting off a western area where /ħ/ merged with /h/ (and /x/ remained as before), from an eastern area, where /ħ/ merged with /x/ (and /h/ remained as before). These developments are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Fate of Tiberian /h/, /ħ/ and /x/ among the *bnej hes* and the *bnej xes*

<i>bnej hes</i> (Rhine area)			<i>bnej xes</i> (Danube area)		
h	ħ	x	h	ħ	x
↙	↘	↓	↓	↙	↘
	h	x	h		x

The Ashkenazim of old coined the 'phoney letter' ⟨hes⟩ to represent the western [h] realization of old ⟨ħ⟩. The easterners who thought their [x] realization was 'correct' went on using the historical spelling ⟨hēθ⟩, reading it *xes*. In western-origin manuscripts, one encounters the phoney spelling ⟨xēθ⟩, coined to illustrate (from the western viewpoint) the 'incorrect' eastern [x]. The western (Rhine) and eastern (Danube) conceptualizations of the letters, their realizations, and each other's realizations, are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Medieval Ashkenazic conceptualizations of Tiberian /h/, /ħ/ and /x/

Classical letter	<i>bnej hes</i> name of letter and pronunciation	<i>bnej xes</i> name of letter and pronunciation
⟨h⟩ (hē)	<i>hej</i> = [h]	<i>hej</i> = [h]
⟨ħ⟩ (ħēθ)	<i>hes</i> = [h]	<i>xes</i> = [x]
⟨x⟩ (xōf)	<i>xōf</i> = [x]	<i>xōf</i> = [x]
phoney letter	<i>xes</i> = [x]	<i>hes</i> = [h]

The connection with the biblical Children of Heth may be the earliest attested instance of Yiddish humour. To start with, there is the pun of the letter of the alphabet and the biblical Heth, for westerners both *hes*, for easterners both *xes* (in Yiddish; in reading from the Bible, the Ashkenazic Hebrew form would have a long vowel). Then, there is the Hebrew *bənēj* construct form, often used for nation names, e.g. *bənēj jisrōʔēl* 'Children of Israel' 'Israelites', *bənēj jisṁāʔēl* 'Children of Ishmael', 'Ishmaelites', and indeed, *bənēj ħēθ*, 'Children of Heth', 'Hittites'. To juxtapose 'Children of' with the name of a letter of the alphabet invokes a sense of the ridiculous, all the more so when it is the other fellow's 'mispronounced' letter. Moreover, Genesis 23 has its own, biblical, humour. Ephron the Hittite (i.e. the 'son of Heth') goes from generously offering Abraham the burial plot gratis (verse 11) to kindly agreeing to accept four hundred shekels of silver for it (verse 15). Martin Durrell has suggested a link also to *Hesse*, which for much of the Middle Ages was included in the bishopric of Mainz. By virtue of Apocope, which affected all old German-derived nouns in Yiddish, the Yiddish name of that territory would have been – *hes*.

In modern varieties of Yiddish, western as much as eastern, Tiberian /h/, /ħ/ and /x/ pan out precisely as among the *bnej xes* of old. Table 4 provides an illustrative corpus of forms illustrating initial, medial and final /ħ/. Currently spoken varieties of Yiddish are invariably part of EASTERN YIDDISH, comprising Mid-

Table 4: Modern Yiddish reflexes of Tiberian /ħ/

Tiberian	NWY	MWY	SWY	MEY	SEY	NEY	Gloss
ħázír	xázər	xázər	xázər	xázər	xózər	xázər	'pig'
ħuspō	xócpə	xúcpə	xúcpə	xícpe	xícpe	xúcpə	'chutzpah'
jəħíʔél	jəxíəl	jəxíəl	jəxíəl	jəxíəl	jəxíəl	jəxíəl	'Jehiel'
páħað	páxət	páxət	páxət	páxət	páxəd	páxəd	'fear'
kóah	kóuəx	kóəx	kóuəx	kójax	kójax	kéjax	'strength'
pésah	péjsəx	pésəx	péjsəx	pájsax	péjsax	péjsax	'Passover'

eastern Yiddish (MEY, popularly 'Polish') on the territory of ethnographic Poland and parts of Hungary and Czechoslovakia; Southeastern Yiddish (SEY, 'Ukrainian') on the territory of ethnographic Ukraine, Bessarabia, and Rumania; and Northeastern Yiddish (NEY, popularly 'Lithuanian') on the territory of ethnographic Lithuania, Latvia, and Belorussia. The no-longer spoken varieties of WESTERN YIDDISH comprise Northwestern Yiddish (NWY), in The Netherlands and northern Germany; Midwestern Yiddish (MWY) in central Germany; and Southwestern Yiddish (SWY) in Alsace, Switzerland, and southern Germany. Luckily, there is a centuries-old philological literature on Western Yiddish, especially on the phonology of the Semitic component, and there are ample modern recordings through the third quarter of the twentieth century.

In addition to vernacular Yiddish, traditional Yiddish speaking communities use Hebrew and Aramaic for academic, educational, liturgical and literary purposes. The phonological system used for both languages may collectively be called ASHKENAZIC (see Katz in press 2). Although not vernacular, Ashkenazic is frequently uttered in praying, studying, quoting, and declaiming. Each Yiddish dialect area is also an Ashkenazic dialect area. Thus, Northwestern Yiddish is by definition coterritorial with Northwestern Ashkenazic (NWA), Midwestern Yiddish with Midwestern Ashkenazic (MWA), and so forth. An illustrative corpus of Tiberian /ħ/ forms and their reflexes in Ashkenazic is provided in Table 5. Transcriptions follow Formal Ashkenazic which preserves Tiberian stress. In

Table 5: Modern Ashkenazic reflexes of Tiberian /ħ/

Tiberian	NWA	MWA	SWA	MEA	SEA	NEA	Gloss
ħérev	xérev	xérev	xérev	xéjrev	xéjrev	xérev	'sword'
ħizqijjôhū	xizkijôhū	xizkijôhū	xizkijôhū	xizkijûhī	xizkijûhī	xizkijôhu	'Hezekiah'
jáħað	jáxad	jáxad	jáxad	jáxad	jáxad	jáxad	'together'
məħakké	məxaké	məxaké	məxaké	məxakéj	məxakéj	məxaké	'waits'
jištabbáħ	jištabáx	jištabáx	jištabáx	jištabáx	jištabáx	jištabáx	'be praised'
vajjišláħ	vajišlák	vajišlák	vajišlák	vajišlák	vajišlák	vajišlák	'(he) sent'

Popular Ashkenazic, the Semitic component rule of Penultimate Stress Assignment is applied (giving, e.g. *vajišlák* for the final item). This does not affect the question at hand.

The empirical evidence of both the vernacular (Yiddish) and the sacred languages (Ashkenazic) is in agreement with the *bnej xes* of old Ashkenaz, i.e. classical /ħ/ and /x/ are merged as unitary [x]. Not a trace of /ħ/ > [h]. We know of an erstwhile /ħ/ > [h] area only in virtue of the numerous medieval rabbinic mentions and the evidence of Rhineland rhyming of historical ⟨ħ⟩ and ⟨h⟩ in liturgical Hebrew and Aramaic poetry (see Han 1723:4b, §21; Rapoport 1829:105).

8. A PURPORTED REVERSAL OF MERGER

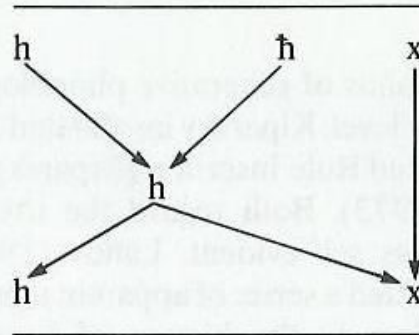
In his 1958 paper on the *bnej hes* and *bnej xes* of Ashkenaz, Max Weinreich proposed the following scenario: (1) In the earliest history of Yiddish, before c. 1100, 'one has to do with *bnej hes* almost exclusively'; (2) From c. 1100 to c. 1250, the *bnej hes* predominated 'overwhelmingly'; (3) From c. 1250–c. 1500, the *bnej xes* arose onto the arena of Ashkenazic history by virtue of the fourteenth century Danube centers of learning; (4) The [x] realization in later Yiddish is to be explained by a conscious, normative realignment of lexical items whereby [h] < /ħ/ was disentangled from [h] < /h/, and merged with [x] à la *bnej xes*; (5) The disentanglement and realignment were brought about by a 'Babylonian Renaissance', whereby Babylonian teachers brought Tiberian norms of Hebrew pronunciation into Ashkenaz in the thirteenth century; the [x] of the easterners was a more acceptable realization of ⟨ħ⟩ than the [h] of the westerners; (6) Yiddish names such as *ícik*, *réla*, *símə*, and the verb

mékḳ 'erase', which lack a consonantal reflex of classical ⟨ḥ⟩ escaped reversal of merger because they were not identified with their etymons (cf. proposed etymons *jishōq*, *rōhél*, *šimḥō*, *√mḥq*); (7) Germanic component *égdiš* 'scorpion' is another *bnej hes* relic, lacking a reflex for ⟨h⟩ (cf. Middle High German *egedehse*). (8) Finally, the *bnej hes* ~ *bnej xes* configuration in Yiddish corresponds with German dialect variation. In the series *Fuchs* 'fox', *Ochse* 'ox', *wachsen* 'grow', etc., German dialects on Yiddish *bnej hes* territory have [s] (< [hs]); those on *bnej xes* territory have [ks].

To begin with Weinreich's final arguments, I can see no link between *bnej hes*, *bnej xes* and German dialectology. Both *bnej hes* and *bnej xes* had /h/ and /x/ phonemes, albeit with a different lexical distribution. Northwest Semitic consonants that did not have phonetic support in the central European base of articulation disappeared from both Yiddish and Ashkenazic: /ʔ/ and /ʕ/ were lost, /ɣ/ merged with /g/; /ð/ with /d/; /w/ with /v/; /t̪/ with /t/; /q/ with /k/; /θ/ with /s/; /s/ was affricated to /c/ i.e. [tʰ] and preserved as a distinct phoneme. So, to put it bluntly, /ḥ/ was doomed. Unlike the others, however, it was not 'lost the same way' throughout Ashkenaz. By the Rhine, it merged with /h/, by the Danube with /x/, in both cases a development internal to the Semitic component of Yiddish. Germanic component *égdiš* 'scorpion' is no *bnej hes* relic, just an expected reflex of something akin to Middle High German ⟨*egedehse*⟩, possibly via simplification of awkward cluster [xš] or [xs] > [š]. The cluster would have been rendered more awkward by Apocope leaving it in the same syllable (cf. modern German *Eidechse*). Incidentally, *égdiš* was cited by Birnbaum on the pages of this journal, in support of his ideas on the age of Yiddish (Birnbaum 1939:39). The verb *mékḳ* (< Hebrew stem *√mḥq* plus Germanic infinitivizing -ḳ) is probably a case of good old-fashioned assimilation [xk] > [k]. The personal names are probably genuine *bnej hes* relics.

The major thrust of the Weinreich argument is a proposed reversal of the unconditioned merger of /ḥ/ with /h/. He posits disentanglement of /h/s, whereby /h/ < /ḥ/ remains /h/, while /h/ < /ḥ/ becomes /x/. Thus in the thirteenth century, according to Weinreich's model, the *bnej hes* form **húcpə* 'chutzpah' would have become **xúcpə*, but **hóžə* 'chutzpah' would have stayed **hóžə* (cf.

Table 6: Purported reversal
of unconditioned merger



Tiberian *ħuspō*, *ħāṣzō*). The reversal-of-merger scenario is illustrated in Table 6.

The fallacy of the analysis (disentanglement of /h/ < /ħ/ from historical /h/) lies in its untroubled assumption of reversal of an unconditioned merger, generally considered impossible (see Hoenigswald 1960:117; Bynon 1977:31). The issue of irreversibility of merger was of course thrust to the forefront earlier this century by Halle's claim that generative phonology allowed for preservation of underlying distinctions that did not show up on the surface, and for these distinctions to turn up later on. Halle was proposing Rule Insertion and Absolute Neutralization, the synchronic grammar authenticity of which implies reversal of historical merger:

The two possibilities [. . .], that of adding rules to the grammar at places other than the end [= Rule Insertion] and that of maintaining a phonemic distinction in the dictionary even when the distinction is not directly present in any utterance [= Absolute Neutralization] suggest that phonemes that have fallen together at one stage in the evolution of a language may at a later stage emerge again as completely distinct entities. The point being made here is not only that phoneme types that have merged at one stage may reappear at a later stage, but that the re-emerging phonemes correspond precisely to their historical antecedents which had previously coalesced. The latter development has

usually been regarded as impossible on theoretical grounds, yet if our theory is correct, such developments are anything but impossible.

(Halle 1962:70)

These particular claims of generative phonology have not stood up. On the synchronic level, Kiparsky invalidated Absolute Neutralization, King invalidated Rule Insertion (Kiparsky 1973:24, 29, 82; 1978:34–35; King 1973). Both regard the irreversibility of unconditioned merger as self-evident. Labov (1974) went for the chimera itself, and tackled a series of apparent mergers, starting with the 'notorious problem in the history of English: the [Halle's] reported merger of *ea* words with long \bar{a} and their later separation to merge with long \bar{e} '. Labov argues that there were in fact two varieties, 'a middle-class pattern opposed to an upper-class pattern' (1974:834). He exposes claimed reversals as (a) near-mergers misreported as mergers or (b) cases where varieties with the merger coexisted with varieties without it. Later unmerged forms derive from earlier unmerged forms. In short, 'reversals' were either not mergers to start with, or not undone.

Assuming, however, that somebody wanted to go on believing that unconditioned merger could be undone, he would have to accept that reversibility is in principle not capable of empirical confirmation, and quite literally has to be 'believed in'. It is impossible to prove for any period in the past that (a) X truly merged with Y in everybody's speech, and that (b) at a later time, Y split *de novo* into old X and Y, or indeed, into any two phonemes with the lexical distribution of old X and Y. As Labov puts it, 'to reverse a true merger, a population would have to learn without error the original membership of each word in the merged class' (1982:56).

All said and done, it is true that merger is in principle irreversible only 'within the system'. The impact of conscious efforts to match up to writing systems could have some impact (see Garde 1961:39–40). In the case at hand, I could see, in theory (if there were hard evidence for it, which there isn't), some process of restoration for the sacred Hebrew and Aramaic (i.e. Ashkenazic), but not for the Semitic component in Yiddish, used by the entire population, including the most uneducated. Had this occurred in the vernacular, there would

be an army of forms slipped through the net, as well as rampant hypercorrection. In fact, there are no relics outside of a few proper names, and no traces of hypercorrection.

Language contact with a non-merging prestigious variety could have even more impact (on the interrelationship between language contact and genetic linguistics, see now Thomason and Kaufman (1988)). But if a true merger is truly undone under the impact of another variety, it would be one of a multitude of things to be done and undone, and we would, in other words, be talking about 'variety replacement' or 'language replacement' (see below, section 11). The salient point is that when a historical linguist needs something as unlikely as 'reversal of merger' to make the central postulate of the history of a language stick, he should think twice and remember that every claimed reversal has been proven fallacious. As we shall see, in the case of Yiddish, it is more than one reversal of merger that is presumed.

9. A SECOND PURPORTED REVERSAL OF MERGER

The thirteenth century normative Hebrew phonologist, Yekusiel of Prague (known also as Zalmen Hanakdn), noted that the *bnej hes* have another characteristic feature:

We also know that there are some Ashkenazim who pronounce ⟨h⟩ and ⟨ḥ⟩ the same, and likewise ⟨š⟩ and ⟨ś⟩.

(Yekusiel 1395:[189b])

The ⟨ś⟩ Yekusiel refers to (Tiberian שׁ, *śīn*) was merged with ⟨s⟩ (Tiberian שׂ, *sāmex*), in unitary /s/, before the birth of Ashkenaz. This /s/ phoneme stands in opposition to /š/ (Tiberian שׂ, *šīn*). Yekusiel is commenting upon Rhineland merger of /s/ and /š/ which had spilled over from the vernacular into the pronunciation of Hebrew and Aramaic (hence his complaint). Because ⟨ś⟩ and ⟨š⟩ are graphically distinguished only by a dot (to the left for ⟨ś⟩, to the right for ⟨š⟩), Yekusiel was better able to make his point graphically using ⟨ś⟩, rather than ⟨s⟩, to represent /s/.

By the thirteenth century, then, it was known to Yekusiel that those Ashkenazim who had merged /ḥ/ with /h/, i.e. the *bnej hes*, had also merged /š/ and /s/. Unlike /ḥ/, which is limited to the

Semitic component, /š/ and /s/ are heavily represented in the Germanic component. At a stroke, Yekusiel solves the old mystery of why a single grapheme, װ ⟨š⟩ (= /š/ in unpointed texts), is used almost exclusively for both historical /š/ and /s/ in old Yiddish writing (see Shtif 1928:143–146; Timm 1987:272–273; Shmeruk 1977:75; Kerler 1988:227–228). Evidence of the merger in early Ashkenazic Hebrew manuscripts is also well established (see Gumpertz 1953:39; Eldar 1978:101–103). There is one modern dialect, Northeastern Yiddish, which also merges historical /s/ and /š/, but that merger is much more recent and resulted from Slavonic or Baltic impact in eastern Europe. In other varieties of Yiddish, there is no trace of a merger. Thus, the Tiberian /s/:/š/ opposition in *séfer* ‘book’, *sōné* ‘enemy’ vs. *šōté* ‘fool’, appears in Northwestern Yiddish *séjfer*, *sóunə* vs. *šótə*, Mideastern *sájfer*, *sójnə* vs. *šjətə*, etc. The analogous MHG opposition in *ezzen* ‘eat’ vs. *leschen* ‘extinguish’ appears in NWY, MEY *ésn* vs. *lésn*. As Uriel Weinreich put it:

The distribution of sibilants in the Germanic component of Yiddish and that in German dialects are almost perfectly correlated. It must therefore be concluded, even without recourse to written documents, that in general Yiddish the distinction between hissing and hushing phonemes goes back to a period when the contact with the German vernaculars had not yet been severed.

(U. Weinreich 1952:365)

This could be accounted for in the Rhineland theory only by positing a *second* reversal of unconditioned merger, whereby the unitary voiceless sibilant deriving from historical /s/ and /š/, ‘happened to split’ into /s/ and /š/ exactly where they appear in thousands of Semitic and Germanic cognates.

10. FIVE ADDITIONAL PURPORTED REVERSALS OF MERGER

Finally, there is extensive manuscript evidence (from wholly promiscuous use of the relevant Tiberian vowel diacritics) that the Hebrew and Aramaic used in the Rhineland in the early part of this millennium had a system of five vowel phonemes, /i, e, a, o, u/

(Yalon 1937-1938:62-66; Eldar 1978:16-32, 37-43; Katz 1987:53, 56). Known varieties of the Semitic component in Yiddish, and of Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic, exhibit a ten-vowel system, contrasting five tense vs. five lax vowels, corresponding with the Tiberian pairs, /i:/ vs. /i/, /e:/ vs. /ɛ/, /ɔ:/ vs. /a/, /o:/ vs. /ɔ/, /u:/ vs. /u/. In Ashkenazic the oppositions are maintained throughout, in Yiddish, in open syllables only. Table 7 illustrates the five pairs in Tiberian, in the Rhineland system, and in modern Northwestern Yiddish (NWY) and Mideastern Yiddish (MEY). S represents the merged Rhineland voiceless sibilant.

The accepted theory accounts for these five contrasts in modern Yiddish dialects by positing a series of *five* further reversals of merger, whereby /i/, /e/, /a/, /o/ and /u/ all split into long and short

Table 7: Tense-lax vowel contrasts in Tiberian, the Rhineland Semitic component in Yiddish

Tiberian	Rhineland	NWY	MEY	Gloss
/i:/ vs. /i/ nīḥō middō	/i/ *nīhə *mída	/i:/ vs. /i/ nīxə mída	/i:/ vs. /i/ nīxə mída	'agreeable' 'habit'
/e:/ vs. /ɛ/ ḥéšeq héseḏ	/e/ *héSəx *héSət	/ej/ vs. /e:/ xéjšəx xésət	/aj/ vs. /ej/ xájšəx xéjsət	'eagerness' 'kindness'
/ɔ:/ vs. /a/ pōšūt paštúθ	/a/ *páSət *páStəs	/o:/ vs. /a/ pōšət páštəs	/u:/ vs. /a/ pūšət páštəs	'simple' 'simplicity'
/o:/ vs. /ɔ/ ḥóšex ḥoxmō	/o/ *hóSəx *hóxmə	/ɔu/ vs. /ɔ/ xóušəx xóxmə	/ɔj/ vs. /ɔ/ xójšəx xóxmə	'darkness' 'wisdom'
/u:/ vs. /u/ ʔasūθō məšuggōʔ	/u/ *aSúsə *məSúgə	/u:/ vs. /o/ asúsə məšógə	/i:/ vs. /i/ asísə məšígə	'Bless you! (upon sneezing)' 'crazy'

counterparts, producing contrasts in precisely the same lexical items in which classical Tiberian had them. It is high time Coincidence joined Free Variation in the line-up of self-deluding devices used to mask wrong analysis.

The five purported splits that resulted in reversal of mergers are said to have been conditioned by Open Syllable Lengthening, a documented sound shift inspired by the analogous German process (see Tshemerinski 1913:61–63; Veynger 1913:79–81; Birnbaum 1934:28–29, 60; 1979:60–65; M. Weinreich 1973:II, 124, 334). Max Weinreich carried things further by proposing that five vowels turned into ten vowels in a case of ‘convergence’ between Germanic factors (Lengthening) and his hypothesized ‘Babylonian Renaissance’ during which Babylonian teachers supposedly carried the Tiberian vowels to medieval Ashkenaz, displacing the population’s native five-vowel system (M. Weinreich 1973:II, 274, 334).

Let us leave Babylonia to the Babylonians and address the alleged application of Open Syllable Lengthening instead. As far as purported reversals of merger go, I cannot accept that Lengthening could ever by coincidence have supplied long vowels in thousands of words exactly where Tiberian has them, and the very ‘belief’ that this could happen is symptomatic of the predicaments Yiddish historical linguistics has erected for itself, all because of the perceived need to match up with the historical record of the birth of Ashkenaz in Loter, by the Rhine.

Be that as it may, the notion that the five Semitic component tense-lax pairs resulted from Germanic inspired Open Syllable Lengthening is untenable on independent grounds (see Katz 1977; 1986:238–248; 1987:50–57). Sample evidence for two of the sets, /ɔ:/ vs. /a/ and /e:/ vs. /ɛ/, is provided in Table 8. Data is provided from Northwestern Yiddish (NWY) and Mideastern Yiddish (MEY). Genuinely lengthened vowels contrast both with originally long vowels and with short vowels. Tiberian long vowels are cognate with Yiddish long vowels. Tiberian short vowels are cognate either with Yiddish short vowels, or, in stressed open syllabic position (the structural description of Lengthening), with Yiddish lengthened vowels. In short, Yiddish cognates of Tiberian long vowels cannot result from Lengthening. Note from the forms cited in Table 8 that Open Syllable Lengthening occurred prior to Stress Shift (by which

Table 8: Reflexes of Tiberian /ɔ:/ vs. /a/ and /e:/ vs. /ε/ oppositions in the Rhineland Semitic component and in Yiddish

	Tiberian	Rhineland	NWY	MEY	Gloss
	/ɔ:/ vs. /a/	/a/	/o:/ vs. /a:/ vs. /a/	/u:/ vs. /a:/ vs. /a/	
1. long, unstressed	ḥōšūv	*háSuv	xóšəf	xúšəf	'respected'
2. long, stressed	bōrúx habbō	*barəxhabá	bōrəxhabó	burxabú	'Welcome!'
3. short	páħaḏ	*páħet	páxət	páxət	'fear'
4. short	gannōv	*gánəf	gánəf	gánəf	'thief'
	/e:/ vs. /ε/	/e/	/ej/ vs. /e:/ vs. /ε/	/aj/ vs. /ej/ vs. /ε/	
5. long, unstressed	bəməlō	*bəmélə	bəméjlə	bəməjlə	'in any case'
6. long, stressed	bəséθer	*bəSéSər	bəséjsər	bəsəjsər	'secretly'
7. short	rəγaf	*rége	rége	rége	'moment'
8. short	ħettér	*hétər	hétər	hétər	'permission'

stress in the Semitic component of Yiddish was assigned to penultimate position). Tiberian short vowels appear short or lengthened in modern Yiddish depending upon Tiberian stress, not later Yiddish stress.

Two of the fallacies of the Lengthening analysis are illustrated in Table 8. First is the derivation of two purportedly lengthened vowels from a single source in the same environment (stressed open syllabic position), nos. 2 (*habbō̄*) and 3 (*páħaḏ*), and nos. 6 (*bəsē̄θer*) and 7 (*rēyaḥ*). The *ō* in *habbō̄* and the *ē* in *bəsē̄θer* were inherited into Yiddish, from Tiberian, as long vowels; the *a* in *páħaḏ* and *ε* in *rēyaḥ* were inherited as short vowels which were subject to Open Syllable Lengthening by virtue of stressed open syllabic position. Luckily, lengthened vowels did not in most dialects merge with originally long vowels, hence our ability to reconstruct.

The second error in the Lengthening analysis is the failure to account for the appearance of long vowels in Yiddish in unstressed syllables, in other words, where the structural description of Lengthening is not met. Note items 1 (*ħōššív*) and 5 (*bəmē̄lō̄*). In sum, the Yiddish long vowels in lexical items where Tiberian had long vowels cannot derive from the five-vowel Rhineland variety, and another set of 'mergers reversed' falls by the wayside.

11. LINGUISTIC AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Nobody on any side of this debate has suppressed evidence. As in a complicated court case, however, it is not only a question of evidence, but what to make of it, which evidence to confront with which, and for which to seek excuses when things do not match up.

For historical linguists, the overriding strength of the linguistic evidence, confirmed by the empirically confirmable modern varieties, must prevail. That is not to say that history is 'wrong'. In our case, the historians are on firm ground when they say that the Rhineland was the first great cultural centre of Ashkenaz at the turn of the millennium. It is the linguists who use history as the point of departure for the history of Yiddish who are wrong.

I propose the following alternative scenario. The early Ashkenazim in the cultural centre of Loter in the Rhineland did indeed speak a Germanic based Jewish language with a Semitic component, but

that language, 'the Rhineland Jewish language', was not Yiddish. They were not the same Germanic and Semitic elements and they did not combine in the same ways. The Germanic component was akin to Rhineland dialects of German. The Semitic component merged /ħ/ with /h/, merged /s/ and /š/, and had a five-vowel system.

At about the same time, the Jewish settlers in cities and settlements by the Danube, the Vltava and the Elbe were speaking earliest Yiddish, but their area did not boast nearly as much rabbinic creativity or authority for another few hundred years. For that reason, the historical record is sparse in these areas, but it certainly exists, and Regensburg, Prague and Magdeburg all have known Jewish settlement histories predating 1096 (see *Germania Judaica* 1:560). But even without these records, the linguistic evidence would confirm that earliest Yiddish arose in this more easterly area.

The Rhineland Jewish language became extinct many centuries ago. A trickle of its vocabulary, including proper names and Romance-origin items, survived into Yiddish. Those Rhineland westerners, the *bnej hes*, who migrated eastward begat children and grandchildren who gave up their language in favour of Yiddish, as would be expected of newcomers' children and grandchildren, who generally speak the indigenous language of the new place of abode. At some point in the history of Ashkenaz, Yiddish became the only Jewish language of the Ashkenazim, and from its native Danube basin cradle, it spread eastward, into the Slavonic and Baltic lands, and yes, westward ('backwards' from the historian's viewpoint), into Switzerland, Alsace, the Rhineland, and The Netherlands, all at the far west of the historical Yiddish speaking territory of Europe.

The historian's model views the history of Yiddish as an eastward progression. If we use rivers for expository purposes, that model looks like this:

RHINE —————> DANUBE —————> DNIEPER

The linguist's model is

RHINE <———— DANUBE —————> DNIEPER

Of course the linguist's model implies westward migration of people as well as language from the Danube (*bnej xes* country) to the Rhine

(erstwhile *bnej hes* country). It is for historians to 'find' that migration.

The case of Yiddish highlights the lengths to which historical linguists sometimes go to avoid conflict with history. Seven reversals of merger are needed to make it fit, and the field has opted for the seven reversals, rather than start up with the historians. The contribution of historical linguistics should include invoking its principles and methods, where appropriate, to challenge or modify received history, as befits a field that takes itself seriously.

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NOTE

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