Loan words in the English of Modern Orthodox Jews: Yiddish or Hebrew?[1]

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1. Introduction

(1) Examples of sentences with loan words

a. You're going *stam* for the music and not for the social scene. ('only') [Hebrew, Yiddish]
b. We had a little *maxloket*. ('argument') [Hebrew, (Yiddish)]
c. Nu, what's the *nafkℴ minℴ*? ('practical difference') [Aramaic, Yiddish]
d. But that's the whole *Ik↔r*! ('central point') [Hebrew, Yiddish]
e. They have class *dafkℴ* on Saturday mornings. ('specifically, with intent, to spite someone [no exact English correlate]') [Aramaic, Yiddish, Hebrew]

For over two-thousand years, wherever Jews have lived, they have created sentences like these, using varying forms of the language spoken by their neighbors or by their ancestors' neighbors and incorporating loans from previous Jewish languages. This paper looks at a local Jewish language, the speech of Ashkenazic Modern Orthodox Jews in America, and discusses the interaction of its Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic borrowings. The quotes above include words that exist in Yiddish, in Modern Hebrew, and in the textual languages of Hebrew and Aramaic.[2] Which of these should be considered the lending language? The answer is: all three. In answering this initial question, I came upon other issues, including the existence of alternate pronunciation norms stemming from various affiliations and the importance of spoken languages in the transmission of textual borrowings.

The data in this paper were gathered in 1997, during four months of field work in a community of modern Orthodox college students at Columbia University in New York. (Modern Orthodox Jews are distinct from the ultra-Orthodox, as they are more integrated into non-Jewish society, and distinct from non-Orthodox Jews, as they adhere to strict observance.[3]) Loan words are prevalent in their speech in both religious and secular settings. Many of these loans stem from the Germanic, Slavic, and Romance components of Yiddish, but the majority (about 85% of my corpus) are of Old Hebrew or Aramaic origin. The

speakers of Modern Orthodox Jewish English consider the textual languages, especially Old Hebrew, to be the main source of their borrowings. When they talk about how "Jewish" someone's speech is, they usually discuss the number of Hebrew words they use. What they do not realize is that many of these words also exist in the Old Hebrew and Aramaic component of the language spoken by their great-grandparents, Yiddish. These textual words are not necessarily or only textual borrowings.

1.1 Previous literature

Some of the dictionary-style books about Jewish English make their own assumptions about etymologies. In Steinmetz's lexicon, *Yiddish and English* (1987), most of the etymologies he gives are Yiddish, a few are Modern Hebrew, and none are textual Hebrew and Aramaic. He points out the importance of the yeshivahs ('Jewish learning institutions') in disseminating Jewish English, but he does not mention the possibility of textual borrowings. In *Frumspeak: The First Dictionary of Yeshivish* (1995), Weiser assigns a Yiddish etymon only to words that do not exist in Hebrew, and a Hebrew etymon to every word that does. But it seems that he is merely giving the original etymology, not determining which language was the source of borrowing. He does accept a textual component independent of Yiddish, as he says, "Yeshivish borrows Semitic words [Hebrew and Aramaic] because those words call to Yeshivish people from books. It borrows Yiddish words because its speakers respect their forebears" (Weiser 1995:xx). Glinert's *Joys of Hebrew* (1992) posits a combination of three languages in the formation of Hebrew borrowings in English today: Yiddish of the immigrant generation, Modern Hebrew of Israel, and elements from the "ancient sources" (Glinert 1992:7-8). I agree with this formulation, and in this paper I show, by exploring sources of contact and issues of phonology, morpho-syntax, and semantics, that the loans in question were borrowed from an inextricable combination of Yiddish, Modern Hebrew, and textual Hebrew/Aramaic.

2. Sources of contact
2.1 Yiddish

The participants in my study are almost all the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Yiddish-speaking Jews who immigrated to America from Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, only two of the 50+ participants could carry on a simple conversation in Yiddish. Some have contact with Yiddish via their grandparents, and their parents likely had more. Lexical and other influences from Yiddish have been passed down for three to four generations.

Another locus of contact is the yeshivah. Almost all of the participants went to private Orthodox schools through high school and spent a year *learning* ('studying Jewish texts') in yeshivahs in Israel before college. The language of

instruction in these schools is usually some variety of English, and the texts are all in Hebrew or Aramaic. However, as Fishman points out (1985:15), yeshivah students learn Yiddish words and calqued Yiddish expressions from their instructors, who studied Talmud in Yiddish. According the participants in this study, some of their teachers knew Yiddish, and those who did not likely had teachers who did. The contact with Yiddish is indirect but significant.

2.2 Textual Hebrew and Aramaic

At this point, it is important to distinguish between the Whole Hebrew Element (WHE) and the Merged Hebrew Element (MHE), terms coined by Max Weinreich (1980:352). WHE is the Hebrew/Aramaic Jews read or recite while praying, learning, or participating in other rituals. MHE is the Hebrew/Aramaic component of their spoken language, which is the focus of this paper. The Hebrew and Aramaic words that have been integrated into Jewish English, whether or not they can also be considered Yiddish loans, comprise the MHE.

The participants in this study encounter the WHE daily in the prayers they recite and the biblical and rabbinic texts they study. Interestingly, I did not find any borrowings that exist solely in the liturgy. Study seems to contribute more loans. Both women and men in this community set daily or weekly times to *learn* traditional texts in the original Hebrew and Aramaic.

2.3 Modern Hebrew

Most of the informants had Israeli Hebrew teachers in elementary and secondary school, and they had minimal contact with Israelis during their post-high school year in Israel. In addition, many of them took part in Zionist youth groups and camps that made use of Modern Hebrew words, such as:

(2) Modern Hebrew loans

a. *tiyul* ('trip, hike, esp. in Israel') [not in Yiddish]
b. *madrix, madrixa* ('counselor, trip leader, tour guide') [also exists in Yiddish but means 'spiritual guide']
c. *shabʿaton* ('institutional gathering for the duration of Sabbath (esp. youth groups)') [not in Yiddish except in a set phrase]
d. *kipa* ('skullcap') [not in Yiddish]
e. *ivrit* ('Modern Hebrew') [in Yiddish too, but only as a recent borrowing from Modern Hebrew]

3. Context of loan use

Many of the loans are used in everyday speech and do not have a Jewish-specific usage (see (1)). But the majority refer to customs and concepts specific to Jews. Below are seven of these areas of borrowing, with examples. (a)-(e) are areas that would likely be discussed in a family setting: (a) ritual garments, (b) traditions, rituals, (c) dietary laws, (d) synagogue, and (e) life cycle events; and

(f) and (g) are school-related: (f) Jewish learning, and (g) Jewish law and values. All of these words exist in textual Hebrew or Aramaic, and most also exist in Yiddish and Modern Hebrew, with varying pronunciations.

(3) Some categories of borrowings

a. ritual garments
- talIs ('prayer shawl')
- tfIlIn ('phylacteries')
- cicit ('ritual four-cornered undergarment or its fringes')
- kip℘ ('skull cap')

b. traditions, rituals
- moci ('blessing over bread')
- shal↔shud↔s ('third meal of Sabbath')
- mInh℘g ('tradition')
- zmir↔s ('songs sung after a Sabbath meal')

c. dietary laws
- kosh↔r ('ritually acceptable, has a rabbinic approval')
- treyf ('not kosher')
- toyv↔l ('immerse in ritual water to render kosher')
- kash↔r ('render kosher')

d. synagogue life
- dr℘sh℘ ('sermon')
- sf℘rIm ('Jewish religious books')
- mInx℘ ('afternoon prayer service')
- m↔xic℘ ('partition between men's and women's sections')

e. life cycle events
- brIs ('circumcision ceremony')
- l↔vay℘ ('funeral')
- x℘s↔n ('groom')
- yIx↔d ('period of seclusion for the bride and groom following the marriage ceremony')

f. Jewish learning
- nafk℘ μιv℘ ('practical difference')
- kal v↔xomer ('*a fortiori*, all the more so')
- shi↔r ('lesson')
- p℘s↔k ('sentence of text')

g. Jewish law and values
- mid℘ ('good personality trait')
- ℘s↔r ('forbidden')

- mut↔r ('allowed')
- maxmir ('strict in observance')

These words were borrowed from some combination of Yiddish, textual Hebrew and Aramaic, and Modern Hebrew, as I will demonstrate by examining the phonology, morpho-syntax, and semantics of the loans.

4. The Hebrew/Aramaic Words: Phonology, Morpho-syntax, and Semantics
4.1 Phonology

The Hebrew phonology of Yiddish speakers, known as the Ashkenazic tradition, differs greatly from the Hebrew phonology of Israelis today and of other groups of Jews around the world. The Modern Orthodox Jews in my study have phonological input both from the Ashkenazic tradition and from Modern Hebrew. They hear Ashkenazic Hebrew in the prayers (WHE) and everyday loan words (MHE) of their grandparents and sometimes parents, who were taught this style in European or American Jewish schools. But after the establishment of the State of Israel, Modern Hebrew pronunciation became the norm in American Jewish education (outside of the Ultra-Orthodox community). The changing educational standards have impacted both the WHE and the MHE of American Jews.

What is the difference between Ashkenazic and Modern Hebrew pronunciations? Two conspicuous differences are stress and [s]~[t] variation. Ashkenazic Hebrew stresses most words penultimately, and Modern Hebrew stresses most words ultimately. Some variations that occur in Modern Orthodox Jewish English are:

(4) Variation in pronunciation: stress

Mod. Orth. Jew. Eng.	Yiddish	Mod. Heb.	('gloss')
shí↔r ~ shiúr	shí↔r	shiúr	('lesson')
hal℘⇔x℘ ~ halaxá	halóx↔	halaxá	('Jewish law')
dI⇔kduk ~ dIkdúk	dI⇔kduk	dikdúk	('grammar')

Another difference is the rendering of the Hebrew letter that was [T] in Tiberian Hebrew. In Ashkenazic Hebrew it is [s], and in Modern Hebrew it is [t]. Therefore, some variations in Jewish English include:

(5) Variation in pronunciation: [s]~[t]

Mod. Orth. Jew. Eng.	Yiddish	Mod. Heb.	('gloss')
maxlókes ~ maxlóket	maxlókes	maxlóket	('argument')
sháb↔s ~ shabát	sháb↔s	shabát	('Sabbath')

cI⇔cIs ~ cicít   cI⇔cIs   cicít   ('ritual garment, fringes')

These variations occur even within idiolects. For example, one subject, in the same conversation, used two pronunciations of the Hebrew month February/March: [℘dár] ~ [℘⇔d↔r].

Why is there so much variation in the English of Modern Orthodox Jews? I posit that there are alternate influences stemming from two joint ideals: religiosity and Zionism. The Ashkenazic pronunciation represents the speech of their ancestors in Eastern Europe and of their more religious contemporaries, the Ultra-Orthodox, and the Modern Hebrew style represents commitment to Israel. Since both ideals are important to most Modern Orthodox Jews in America, it is common to find influences from both Ashkenazic Hebrew and Israeli Hebrew in the same individual's speech. Of course, there are limits on the speakers' consciousness of these influences. Here are some more examples of variation that stems from joint influence. It is not uncommon to hear both alternate forms from the same person, even within the same utterance.

(6) Joint influence

Mod. Orth. Jew. Eng.	Yiddish	Mod. Heb.	('gloss')
kíp℘ ~ kipá	---------	kipá	('skullcap')
ivrít ~ I⇔vrIt	------[ivrít]	ivrít	('Modern Hebrew')
mI⇔ny↔n ~ mInyán	mI⇔ny↔n	minyán	('prayer quorum, gathering')
mI⇔nh℘g	mI⇔n↔g	mInhág	('custom')
tór℘	tóyr↔	torá	('Pentateuch, Jewish wisdom')

What can pronunciation tell us about the origin of the loan words? Can we automatically conclude that any word with Ashkenazic stress was borrowed from Yiddish? No. Some counter-examples are the words [kíp℘] and [I⇔vrIt], two Hebrew words that do not exist in Yiddish and in Jewish English are sometimes rendered with Ashkenazic stress, while in Israel they are [kipá] and [ivrít]. Of course, these pronunciations may also be influenced by the predominance of penultimate stress in English.

Can we automatically conclude that any word with ultimate stress was borrowed from Hebrew? Again, no. A counter-example is Jewish English [mInyán], as compared to Yiddish [mI⇔ny↔n] and Modern Hebrew [minyán]. In Hebrew, Yiddish, and Jewish English this means 'prayer quorum of ten males', but in Yiddish and Jewish English it also means 'place of prayer gathering'. So we see that it borrows semantic material from Yiddish and phonological material from Modern Hebrew. [mInyán] exists in alternation with the Ashkenazic pronunciation [mI⇔ny↔n], which is more common in Jewish English.

Because of this variation, which exists even within idiolects, we cannot draw conclusions about sources of borrowing by looking at the phonology. It would not

make sense to say that [mI⇔ny↔n] is a Yiddish borrowing and [mInyán] is a Hebrew borrowing, especially when they are uttered within the same sentence. However, it is possible to conclude that the word [mI⇔ny↔n]~[mInyán] has two sources; it is both a Yiddish and a Hebrew loan.

Now the question arises: where does textual Hebrew fit in? While languages often borrow lexical items from written languages, it is not so likely that phonological material is borrowed from textual Hebrew. Speakers do not have ready access to ancient pronunciations. An exception might be the Jewish English word [mI⇔nh℘g]. It is not the same as the Modern Hebrew [minhág] or Yiddish [mI⇔n↔g]. Although its Jewish English usage and penultimate stress are similar to Yiddish, it cannot be a straight Yiddish borrowing because of the presence of the [h]. This may be a joint Yiddish-Hebrew borrowing and an example of textual influence, where the speakers try to say the word as they know it is written. Even a textual language can have some influence on the phonological realization of a loan word.

4.2 Morpho-syntax

The Yiddish language, during its development in Europe, created a number of innovations in words derived from Hebrew. Does Jewish English maintain these Yiddish innovations? Here are some examples of what happens to words whose forms have innovations in Yiddish.

(7) Variation in form

Mod. Orth. Jewish English	Yiddish	Old+Mod. Hebrew	('gloss')
shal↔x m℘n↔s ~ mishloax manot	shal↔x mon↔s	mishloax manot	('Purim gifts')
shal↔shud↔s ~ suda shlishit	shal↔shud↔s	s↔uda shlishit	('3rd meal')
tsni↔sdIk ~ tsanu℘	tsni↔sdIk	tsanua	('modest')

Both forms exist in Jewish English, although the Yiddish forms are more common. It is likely that Jewish English borrowed both the Yiddish forms and the Modern Hebrew forms.

What happens to plurals that differ in Yiddish and Hebrew when they are borrowed into Jewish English?

(8) Variation in plural (the singular forms are given in *italics*)

Mod. Orth. Jewish English	Yiddish	Old+Mod. Hebrew	('gloss')
shab℘sIm ~ shabatot ~ shab↔sIz	shabosIm	shabatot	('Sabbaths')
shab↔s ~ shabat	*shab↔s*	*shabat*	*('Sabbath')*
taleysIm ~ talitot ~ talIsIz	taleysIm	talitot	('prayer shawls')
talIs ~ talit	*talIs*	*talit*	*('prayer shawl')*

batey mIdrash ~ beys medr↔shIz   bot↔ mIdroshIm   batey   midrash   ('study halls')

beys medr↔sh ~ beyt mIdrash   *beys medr↔sh*   *beyt midrash*   *('study hall')*

As you can see, for most of the words, the English list includes both the Yiddish and the Hebrew forms, as well as its own innovation, the English plural marker [Iz]. This variation shows the combined impact of Yiddish and Hebrew on the morphology of loan words in Jewish English.

Another impact of Yiddish on the Hebrew/Aramaic component of Modern Orthodox Jewish English is verb formation. The Jewish English verbs *pask↔n* ('render a religious decision'), *kash↔r* ('render kosher'), and *toyv↔l* ('immerse in ritual water to render kosher') are borrowed from the identical Yiddish words, which are variations of Hebrew loans. Also, in Modern Orthodox speech, the periphrastic construction is common:

(9) Periphrastic constructions using Hebrew words (Format: *Jewish English construction*, ('gloss'), "sample sentence, (recorded in the Columbia Orthodox community, spring '97)," [*Yiddish correlate*])

a. *to be m↔kab↔l* ('to accept'): "I'm not m↔kab↔l that." [*m↔kab↔l zayn*]
b. *to be m↔kar↔v* ('to introduce non-religious Jews to the principles of Orthodoxy'): "Being m↔kar↔v is the same as practicing kiruv ['outreach']." [*m↔kar↔v zayn*]
c. *to be kovey↔* ('to set, establish'): "I'm kovey↔ a certain time to learn every day." [*koyvey↔ zayn*]
d. *to be yoci* ('to be discharged of an obligation'): "You are yoci me." ('your obligation [to fulfill a commandment] is discharged via me') [*yoyc↔ zayn*]
e. *to be m↔samey↔x* ('to entertain, esp. at a wedding'): "We do all that shtIk to be m↔samey↔x the xatan v↔kal↔." ('we do all those routines to entertain the groom and bride.') [*m↔samey↔x zayn*]

These constructions sound strange to most non-Orthodox Jews, especially when used with objects. They are borrowed directly from the Yiddish periphrastic construction, which adds the verb *zayn* ('to be') to a borrowed Hebrew verb: *m↔kab↔l zayn, m↔kar↔v zayn, m↔samey↔x zayn*. We can see the joint influence of Hebrew and Yiddish in (c) and (d), where the words are placed in a construction borrowed from Yiddish but are rendered partly with Modern Hebrew phonology: *kovéy↔* (Yid *koyvéy↔*, ModHeb *kovéa*) and *yóci* (Yid *yóyc↔*, ModHeb *yocî*).

4.3 Semantics

In Yiddish, a number of Hebrew borrowings differ in meaning and in use from their Hebrew etymons. The continued use of these new meanings in Jewish English demonstrates the impact of Yiddish:

(10) Loans whose usages likely come from Yiddish

JewEng word	Yiddish and JewEng meanings	Textual Hebrew meaning
a. kId↔sh	'Sabbath social; wine blessing'	'sanctification, wine blessing'
b. n℘vi	'prophet, Book of Prophets'	'prophet'
c. tor℘	'Pentateuch, Jewish wisdom'	'Pentateuch'
d. seyfer	'Jewish religious book'	'book'
e. shulx↔n	'table on which the Torah is read'	'table'
f. g↔m℘r℘	'Talmud, [incl. Mishnah]'	'commentary on the Mishnah'
g. maz↔lt℘v	'congratulations'	'good luck'
h. moci/hamoci	'name for blessing over bread'	'(word in blessing over bread)'

The Modern Hebrew versions of words (a)-(e) have only the right-hand meanings. Modern Hebrew also includes the left-hand usages for (f)-(h), although they are likely borrowed from Yiddish, as are many usages in Modern Hebrew. Both Yiddish and Modern Hebrew are possible sources for (f)-(h), but (a)-(e) should be seen as Yiddish borrowings, at least in usage.

We could learn much by examining the semantic shades and syntactic usages of every loan word in Jewish English. We might create a list, comparing all possible meanings and usages in textual Hebrew and Aramaic, Yiddish, Modern Hebrew, and Jewish English. Perhaps then we could draw more conclusions about the origins of each individual loan. Until that is done, it will be impossible to say definitively whether certain words were borrowed from Yiddish or Hebrew. This is the case with the five examples given in (1):

stam ('only')
maxloket ('argument')
nafk℘ min℘ ('practical difference')
Ik↔r ('central point')
dafk℘ ('specifically, with intent, to spite someone [no exact English correlate]')

While all of them except *maxloket* are phonetically more similar to Yiddish than Modern Hebrew, there are no morphological or semantic clues to help us answer the question. *Nafk℘ min℘* and *maxloket* appear frequently in the Talmud and are used to some extent in Yiddish, and *dafk℘* and *stam* are extremely common in Yiddish. All except *nafk℘ min℘* are used frequently in Modern Hebrew. These are yet more examples of the intertwining of the three determinants in the creation of Jewish English loan words.

5. Conclusion

All of the languages of contact – Yiddish, Modern Hebrew, and textual Hebrew and Aramaic – have been crucial to the formation of a Hebrew and Aramaic component in Modern Orthodox Jewish English. Yiddish provides intergenerational dissemination, specific usages and shades of meaning, and some phonological and morphological norms. Textual Hebrew and Aramaic contribute to the maintenance of many words, through education and religious traditions, and even somewhat to pronunciation norms, based on Modern Hebrew phonology. Modern Hebrew contributes pronunciation norms and some lexical borrowings. The ideals of Zionism and religiosity lead to variation between Modern Hebrew influence and Yiddish influence.

This paper raises issues for general linguistics. First, it gives an example of the complexity of etymological identification for loan words. We might find the same problems in other languages that have multiple sources of contact. Some contemporary examples are North African Jews in France, many of whom speak French with loans from Judeo-Arabic, textual Hebrew and Aramaic, and Modern Hebrew; and Sephardic Jews in Turkey, many of whom speak Turkish with loans from Judezmo (Ottoman Judeo-Spanish), textual Hebrew and Aramaic, and Modern Hebrew. The extent of these influences calls for research.

Second, this paper deals with the question of how a language (via its speakers) borrows from texts. If a community without any input from Yiddish or another spoken Jewish language picked up Hebrew and Aramaic texts and made them a part of their regular study routine, would they eventually borrow words from those texts into their everyday speech? In the case of Jewish English, spoken languages are crucial to the dissemination of textual loanwords. In addition, religion and education play a major role in the maintenance of these words. This situation might be compared to learned Latin borrowings in English, to Sanskrit borrowings in languages of Hindus and to Classical Arabic borrowings in languages spoken by Muslims. Another comparison is the deaf community, in which their regular language of communication, ASL, has contact with written English.

By analyzing this incipient variety of Jewish English, we can better understand how spoken and written lending languages interact. Using the speech of Modern Orthodox Jews in America as a model for Jewish language genesis, we might conclude that Hebrew and Aramaic words in other Jewish languages were actually borrowed partially from their previous Jewish languages.[4] This study sets the stage for future analysis and cross-linguistic comparison of borrowing situations, especially in languages of the Jews.

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[2] Throughout the paper, textual Hebrew and Aramaic are often dealt with as one language, based on the Yiddish concept *loshn koydesh* ('holy language; Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic').

[3] See Heilman & Cohen (1989) on Modern Orthodox Jews' joint identities as 'cosmopolitans and parochials'.

[4] See Weinreich (1980), a foundational text in Jewish linguistics, for an introduction to the various components of Jewish languages. Also see Fishman (1985) and Benor (1999) about the sociology of Jewish languages and Gold (1985) and Steinmetz (1981) on Jewish English.