

## Heritage Voices: Language - Yiddish

### About the Authors

#### Eli Pick, Heddy Lichtenstein, and Davida Newman

##### Eli Pick



My name is Eli Pick, and I am a nursing home administrator in Chicago, Illinois. I was born in Israel, and my first language is Modern Hebrew. When I three years old, my family moved to Chicago where I grew up. My mother is from Russia and speaks Russian, Yiddish, English, and Hebrew. My father was from Poland and he spoke Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish, and some Russian. Both my parents worked in Chicago when we moved there. As a result, I spent most of my time with my maternal grandparents while my parents were at work. Because my father did not speak much Russian, the common language between my grandparents and my parents was Yiddish. My grandmother spoke to my brother and me in Yiddish; at school we spoke English and, at home with our parents, we spoke Hebrew until we learned enough Yiddish from our grandmother to talk to our parents in Yiddish as well. Over time, Yiddish became the language we used for communication at home with our grandparents and parents while we spoke English outside the home.

The Jewish people have been around for thousands of years. The language of origin for Jews is biblical Hebrew. However, due to historic events such as persecution, war, conquest, and enslavement, Jews were forced to learn the languages of their new homes and often were forbidden from speaking Biblical Hebrew. Not only were they forbidden from speaking the language of their ancestors, but they were also forbidden from practicing certain professions. As a result, Jews were often segregated from the rest of society and had to travel to earn a living. What emerged was an amalgam of languages that became a common language in which Jews living in different countries could communicate with each other, Yiddish. This is the same reason why Yiddish became the common language in my family—my father and my mother were from different countries in Eastern Europe.

When I was younger, I felt uncomfortable speaking any language other than English outside the home because I wanted to fit in as an American. I was often embarrassed when I would go out with my parents or grandparents. However, as I became a young adult aware of all the different languages and cultures in America, I began to appreciate my ability to speak multiple languages and to recognize my unique heritage.

Unlike many of my contemporaries, I am able to understand Yiddish references and jokes which are common in many movies and comedic routines. For example, in the movie *Young Frankenstein*, the matron of Frankenstein's castle is named Frau Blucher. Anytime that someone says her name in the movie, there is a horse neighing afterwards. Most people don't understand why. However, in Yiddish (and in German) Blucher means glue. The horse is neighing in fear of going to the glue factory.

## **Meet Heddy Lichtenstein (mother) and Davida Newman (daughter)**

### **Heddy Lichtenstein**



My name is Heddy Lichtenstein, and I am the marketing and outreach director for a residence for blind and visually impaired adults in Chicago, Illinois.

I was born in Plock, Poland, in 1946, the first Jewish child born of Holocaust survivors in our town. My parents' first language was Polish. They were also fluent in Yiddish, German, Russian, and Liturgical Hebrew.

We left Poland for Sweden when I was seven months old. The plan was to stay for a short time, but our stay was extended four years because of the United States immigration quotas. Although my parents spoke Polish to each other and within their survivor community, they spoke to me in Swedish and Yiddish. Yiddish was always used when voicing endearments, and it comforted me, making me feel loved and nurtured, inspiring in me a love of its rhythms and tones.

When we came to the United States in 1951, my parents worked several jobs so they could save money to open a jewelry store. My father was a watchmaker by trade. They took evening English classes to prepare themselves, but unlike many immigrant families, they spoke to me in English. This made me happy as I wanted, more than anything, to assimilate and be like everyone around me. My parents continued to speak Polish to each other especially when they didn't want me to understand what they were saying. They still spoke to me affectionately in Yiddish, using it to describe and illustrate in ways they couldn't in English.

Between the ages of seven and twelve, I spent my summers at a Workman's Circle (Arbiter Ring) summer camp. I was immersed in Yiddishkeit ("the state or quality of being Jewish; Jewishness"; Webster's New World College Dictionary, 2009). I loved the songs, which we performed weekly for visitors, some playful and happy, others, soulful, and expressing the pain of the Jewish experience. I still remember how wonderful it was feeling a part of something so meaningful.

My father read the *Jewish Daily Forward* every day as well as the *Chicago Sun Times*. He often sent me to the newsstand to purchase his papers. I always hid the *Forward* inside the *Sun Times*. I felt ashamed that my family was different; my parents had accents, were over-protective, and even read a Yiddish newspaper. Ironically, I now subscribe to the English language version of the *Forward*. My discomfort kept me from actually learning to speak Yiddish, something I profoundly regret today.

As an adult, I have taken Yiddish classes, which have given me an appreciation of Yiddish literature and humor and the opportunity to relate to others with a love for the language. I have relished passing on my love of Yiddishkeit to my children, especially now that my parents are deceased. Like them, I'm able to express certain emotions more clearly in Yiddish. Yiddish connects me to those who came before me and those who follow me. It is an expression of everything Jewish people experience; the feelings that cannot be translated into any other language. When I hear Yiddish, I feel my parents' love.

### **Davida Newman**



My name is Davida Fraya Newman. I am a 24-year-old Jewish female, born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. As a grandchild of Holocaust survivors from Poland, the importance of remembering and maintaining my culture has been ingrained in me by my mother and grandmother since birth.

This culture is largely represented through the speaking of Yiddish in the home, although the language was not taught to me directly. My parents and grandmother used Yiddish as a sort of secret language. It's what they would use if they wanted to speak privately without my sister and me understanding, although there were a few words and phrases which were available to us.

I am incredibly proud of my exposure to Yiddish. I make a conscious effort to use Yiddish words in my everyday conversations with Jews and non-Jews alike. With other Jews, the use of Yiddish is a way to connect. With non-Jews, it's a way to educate without being didactic, through the sharing of my culture which I hold so dear, with all its cute and hilarious nuances.

The words I've learned in Yiddish are not mere replacements of English words. When I speak about a book, I do not insert the Yiddish word for book just for the sake of using Yiddish. Instead, I use Yiddish in places where it communicates what I'm trying to say in a more idiosyncratic and efficient way than an English term could provide.

People are very receptive to this kind of speech. For instance, my roommate had a haircut that I didn't like, because her beautiful jaw bone was covered by these chunks of hair that grew in front of her ears. There is no better word to describe these than "shvanses." I said to her, "You would look so beautiful without those silly shvanses!" Soon after this discussion, she cut them off.

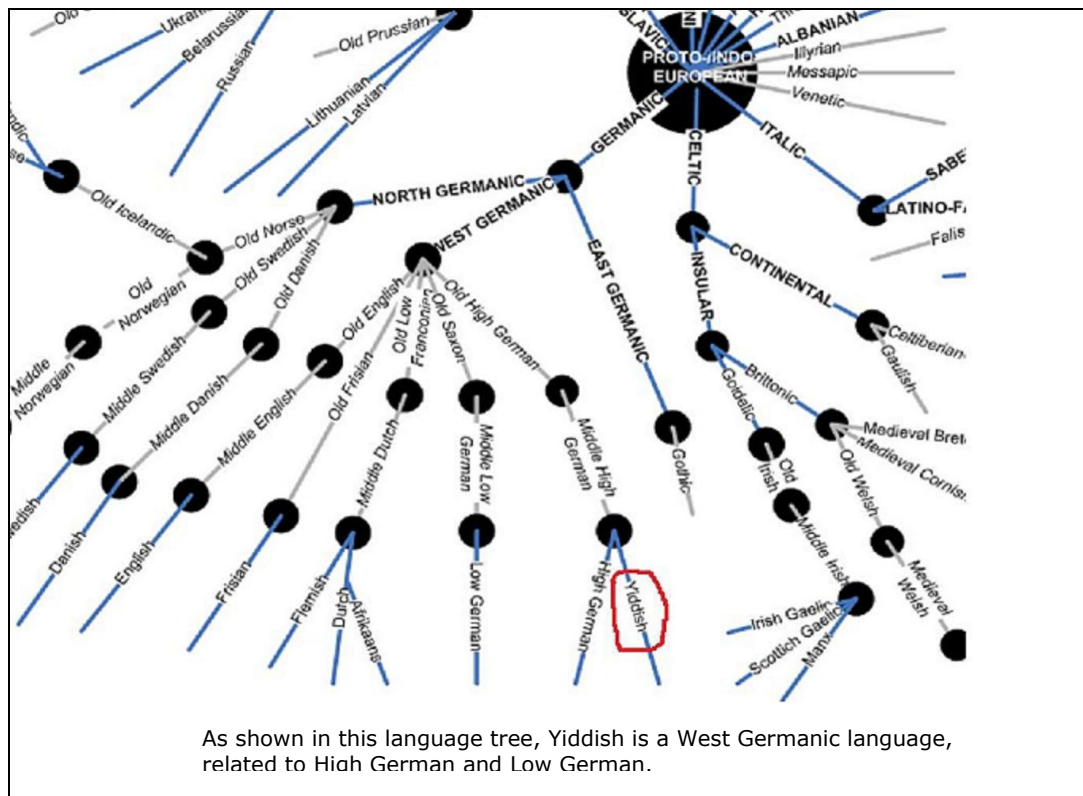
People are usually interested in learning these words and express a sense of admiration for the fact that I belong to and take pride in a definitive culture, that I have roots, and that these roots have their own language. I particularly enjoy the onomatopoeic quality of Yiddish words. They are more visceral, instinctual, specific, and interesting than any English word that could be used in their stead.

Before I have children of my own, I'd like to learn enough Yiddish to use it the way my parents used it with me. It is important to me to pass on this language to them, to imbue their childhood memories with special and unique sounds that set them apart from others, and make them feel that they belong to something special, ancient, and beautiful, just as my parents did for me.

## About the Yiddish Language

Yiddish is a member of the West Germanic language branch of the Indo-European family. The basic grammar and vocabulary of Yiddish are Germanic so it has a lot of words and syntax that is similar to that of German (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2005). However, Yiddish is its own language. Yiddish is the vernacular language of the Ashkenazic Jews.<sup>1</sup>

### Yiddish Family Language Tree



*Yiddish Family Tree*. Adapted with permission from [The Proto-Indo-European Language Tree](#). (1996 – 2008). InterSol, Inc.

The word “Yiddish” is derived from the German word for “Jewish.” Before World War II, it was the main language of the Ashkenazi Jews and was spoken by around 11 million of the world’s 18 million Jews (Rich, 2004). Currently, it is estimated that there are only a little over 3 million speakers worldwide, around 150,000 of those in the United States (Gordon, 2005; United States Census, 2006). Yiddish is more than 1,000 years old (Rourke, 2000), and it started primarily as an oral language. The first Yiddish documents lead scholars to believe that the language was born out of a need for words that didn’t exist in biblical Hebrew. As a result, words from other languages were borrowed and adapted (Rich, 2004).

<sup>1</sup> Ashkenazi Jews from eastern France, Germany, and Eastern Europe, and their descendants. Most Jews in America are Ashkenazic. Jews from Spain, Portugal, the Balkans, North Africa, the Middle East, and their descendants are called Sephardic Jews. They have their own language called Ladino, which is a hybrid of Spanish and Biblical Hebrew.

There are several different varieties of Yiddish, but the most common one today is that of Eastern Europe, which originated east of the Oder River through Poland, extending into Belarus, Russia (to Smolensk), Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Rumania, Ukraine, and pre-state British-Mandate Palestine (Jerusalem and Safed) (Gordon, 2005).

## **Phonology**

The phonology of the Yiddish language has several distinctive features from English. For example,

- i. The voiceless velar fricative [x] and the alveolar and uvular trills [r] and [ʀ] are phonemes in Yiddish
- ii. Regressive voicing assimilation (e.g., before verb suffixes *-t*, *-st*, /xapt/ 'grabs' and /šrajbt/ 'writes' → [xapt], [šrajpt]; /rufst/ and /pruvst/ → [rufst], [prufst] (Yiddish Phonology, 2006; Jacobs, 2005, p. 120)
- iii. The stops [t] and [d] are pronounced as dental rather than alveolar stops
- iv. The dental fricatives [θ] and [ð] are absent from the language
- v. Vowels: Yiddish has five main vowels, [i], [ɛ], [a], [ɔ], and [ʊ] along with the unstressed vowel [ə], which is often realized as [ɛ]
- vi. Diphthongs: Yiddish has three diphthongs [ɛi], [ai], and [ɔi]

## Writing System

Yiddish began by transliterating words written with the Germanic alphabet into the Hebrew alphabet. To this day, Yiddish is written with characters based on the Hebrew alphabet, which is read from right to left rather than from left to right like English. However, in the United States, Yiddish is sometimes transliterated with letters from the English alphabet.

These are the characters that make up the Yiddish alphabet or the "alef-beyz" after its first two letters:

ז	ו	ו	ה	ד	ג	ב	א	א	א		
zayen (z)	melupm vov (u)	vov (u)	hey (h)	daled (d)	giml (g)	beyz (b)	komets alef (o)	pasekh alef (a)	Shtumer alef (silent)		
ן	נ	ם	מ	ל	ך	כ	י	י	ט		
langer nun (n)	nun (n)	shlos mem (m)	mem (m)	lamed (l)	langer khof (kh)	khof (kh)	khirek yud (i)	yud (y; i)	tes (t)		
ש	ר	ק	ץ	צ	ף	פ	פ	ע	ס		
shin (sh)	reysh (r)	kuf (k)	langer tsadek (ts)	tsadek (ts)	langer fey (f)	fey (f)	pey (p)	ayen (e)	samekh (s)		
Used primarily in Hebrew and Aramaic loan words:						ת	ת	ש	כ	ה	ב
						sof (s)	tof (t)	sin (s)	kof (k)	khes (kh)	veyz (v)
Letter Combinations:		יי	יי	וי	טש	דזש	זש	וו			
		(ay)	(ey)	(oy)	(tsh)	(dzh)	(zh)	(v)			

*Yiddish Alphabet. Judaism 101: [Yiddish Language and Culture](#) (2004).*

The main difference between the Hebrew and Yiddish writing systems are the vowels. In Hebrew, the vowels are represented by diacritics under and above the letters. However, the vowels are normally left off and the language can still be read. In Yiddish, however, many of the Hebrew letters have been adapted to serve as vowels as well. Vowels are always represented in Yiddish unless the word comes directly from Hebrew. In this case, the word is written in Hebrew. If a word is a combination of Yiddish and Hebrew, each part of the word is represented by its own respective language's characters.

## Culture

Yiddish is well-known for its use to convey humor and irony. It has many expressions and words that capture nuances of the human character and reflect philosophical arguments and years of persecution experienced by the Jewish people. For example, Yiddish makes a distinction between a schlemiel—a person who suffers because of their own choices or actions—and a shlimazl—a person who suffers through no fault of their own (Rich, 2004).

Yiddish newspapers and publications were common among Jews in Eastern Europe to get the word out in the Jewish communities. One of the best known Yiddish writers is the Russian Jewish writer, Sholem Naumovich Rabinovich. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, he wrote in Hebrew, Russian, and later over forty volumes in Yiddish, under the pen name, Sholem Aleichem—“Peace be upon you!” He is most famous in the United States for his stories about Tevye and his daughters upon which the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* is based. The work of another Yiddish writer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, was also adapted into U.S. popular culture. *Yentl*, starring Barbara Streisand, is loosely based on his writings about Yentl the Yeshiva Boy.

Yiddish theater and music also play an important role in Yiddish cultural tradition. Almost all Yiddish culture has its roots in the Jewish religion. Many cultural references in the arts come from sacred Jewish texts and scripture. The most famous style of music associated with Yiddish culture is called klezmer music. The style is based on synagogue melodies and instruments commonly include clarinet, piano, and violin among others.

While Yiddish literature, theater, and music are part of secular Ashkenazi Jewish culture, most ultra-orthodox Jews do not take part in these pastimes. However, the Yiddish language remains strong in Hasidic and Ultra-orthodox Jewish communities (Shamash, 2004). In these communities, Yiddish has become a first language for some, and was being spoken even when Yiddish was waning in secular Jewish communities after World War II. Today, Yiddish represents a means by which secular and religious Jews can connect.



## References

- Gordon, Raymond G., Jr. (Ed.). (2005). [\*Ethnologue: Languages of the world\*](#), Fifteenth edition. Dallas, TX: SIL International.
- Jacobs, Neil G. (2005). *Yiddish: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Rich, Tracey R. (2004). *Judaism 101: [Yiddish language and culture](#)*. Retrieved July 2, 2009.
- Rourke, Mary. (2000). [A lasting language](#). In *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved July 2, 2009.
- Shamash, Jack. (2004). [Yiddish once again speaks for itself](#): The language of the Ashkenazi Jewry is far from moribund. *Times Online*. Retrieved July 2, 2009.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2006). [Statistical abstract of the United States](#). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved July 27, 2009.
- Yiddish phonology. (2006). In [Unilang Wiki](#). Retrieved July 1, 2009.
- [Yiddishkeit](#). (2009). In *Webster's new world college dictionary*. Retrieved July 27, 2009.
- [YIVO Institute for Jewish Research](#). (2005). Retrieved July 2, 2009.

## Related Links

[Der Bavebter Yid](#)- Yiddish literary journal

Dora Teitelboim Center for [Yiddish Culture](#)- Yiddish language classes online

[Harvard Magazine Article](#) by Janet Tassel

[Joe Fishstein Collection](#) of Yiddish Poetry

[Mendele Forum](#) for Yiddish Literature and Yiddish Language

[National Yiddish Book Center](#)

[Shtetl](#)- Yiddish language and culture

[The History and Development of Yiddish](#): Jewish Virtual Library

[The Yiddish Voice](#)- Weekly Yiddish language radio show based in the Boston area

[Yiddish Music](#)- Brazilian Yiddish music Web site

[Yiddish Dictionary Online](#)

[Yiddish: Omniglot](#): writing systems and languages of the world

[Yiddish Radio Project](#)

[YIVO Institute](#) for Jewish Research

[Yugnruf Youth for Yiddish](#) – New-York based organization with Yiddish programs and classes

\*\*\*\*\*

The Heritage Voices Program Profile on Yiddish was prepared by Hannah Pick for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC.



Visit us online at [www.cal.org/heritage](http://www.cal.org/heritage)