

Course: History of the Yiddish Language

Instructor: Dovid Katz (website: www.dovidkatz.net; email: dovidkatz7@yahoo.com)

Program: YIVO-Bard Winter Program on Ashkenazi Civilization

Dates & times: 10–26 January 2023. Tuesdays & Thursdays: January 10, 12, 17, 19, 24, 26. *Afternoon section: 2:30pm–3:45pm ET. Evening section: 8 pm–9:15 pm.*

Course materials:

(1) Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (2nd revised edition, Basic Books: N.Y. 2007), available gratis online:

https://www.dovidkatz.net/dovid/Contents/Dovid_Words_on_Fire.pdf.

Note: Students who choose to seek out a used paper copy are asked to make sure they acquire the second (2007 paperback) edition which is extensively corrected and contains the Notes and Bibliography sections not in the earlier editions (2004, 2005). The book's name is abbreviated as “**USY**” (‘Unfinished Story of Yiddish’) in course materials. Participants who wish to follow up issues of special interest are invited to peruse the “Notes” section of the book (pp. 399-414) which relate discussions on specific pages of the main text to further reading including an array of views, theories and approaches reflected in the bibliography (pp. 415-462).

(2) Dovid Katz, *Yiddish and Power* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke et al 2015). This book is in print and the publishers do not permit unauthorized general distribution. A number of selections in PDF format for the *exclusive use* of participants registered in the YIVO-Bard Winter Program will be made available gratis. The book's name is abbreviated as “**Y&P**” (‘Yiddish and Power’) in course materials.

Additional lists of selected materials appear below after the session synopses. Please see on pp. 5 and 6 of this syllabus.

Session 1: January 10, 2023

The rise of Ashkenaz in central Europe a thousand years ago in context of the new Jewish culture areas of Europe. Grasping the specificities of Ashkenazic civilization, including its resolute rabbinic authority, pacifism, world-to-come (and messianic) focus, and its internal trilingualism. The colorful debates on the origins of Yiddish. The Pan-Yiddish fusion phenomenon. Early Yiddish literature and the progression of (a) secular European epic poetry to (b) synthesis with biblical narrative to (c) internal religious based genres, including early women's poetry. Codification and reconfigurations in the wake of the 16th century rise of Yiddish printing for a mass readership.

USY pp. 1-130.

Also:

D. Katz, "Hebrew, Aramaic and the Rise of Yiddish" in J.A. Fishman (ed.), *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages* (1985), pp. 85-103. Online.

Also:

Added at student request: some initial readings on the Holekraysh (Hollekreisch) Western Ashkenazic baby-naming ceremony.

Session 2: January 12, 2023

The East-West divide and the gradual shift from (a) west to (b) equilibrium to (c) east. East European Yiddish and Ashkenaz in the Slavic and Baltic lands as distinct structures. Dramatic turnabouts of the 18th and 19th centuries. Anti-Yiddish stance of both German antisemitism and the nascent Berlin Jewish Enlightenment. The contemporaneous meteoric growth of East European Yiddish. The new internal Jewish divide of a "Lithuanian North" and a "Polish South," with ramifications in Jewish law, practice, folklore, and dialect. Impact of the 17th century massacres in Ukraine, the False Messiah movements, and the 18th century rise of Hasidism (and its scathing rejection by most of the North). Cultural correlates of the demographic path to a population of millions of compactly settled East European Yiddish speakers.

USY pp. 131-172.

Y&P chapters 6, 9, 10. References.

Session 3: January 17, 2023

The rapid evolution of Yiddish in 19th century Eastern Europe via religious and secular catalysts. Modification of assimilation-oriented German-Jewish enlightenment to modernization (and/or secularization) via the vernacular itself as well as of Hebrew. Rise of the new standard Yiddish language. Mid-century evolution of sophisticated fiction. Late century politization through the revolutionary movements. Their impact on the form, content and usages of Yiddish at the century's close. Emergence of modern Yiddish poetry as cultural counterforce.

USY pp. 173-238.

Y&P chapters 11, 12, 13. References.

Session 4: January 19, 2023

The rise of ideological Yiddishism and its symbolic highpoint in 1908. The various diverse streams within Yiddishism. The Hebrew-Yiddish conflict. emergence of intellectual, academic Yiddishism as a component of the language wars. The Warsaw center of Yiddish literature. The Vilna YIVO center of Yiddish research, language planning and academic publishing. The New York center of literature and press in the midst of political factionalization. The distinct history of Yiddish in the Soviet Union.

USY pp. 238-306.

Y&P chapter 14. References.

Instructor's paper on Czernowitz and religious Yiddishism (2020).

D. Katz, "On Yiddish, In Yiddish and For Yiddish: 500 Years of Yiddish Scholarship" in Mark H. Gelber (ed.), *Identity and Ethos. A Festschrift for Sol Liptzin on the Occasion of this 85th Birthday* (1986), pp. 23-36. Online.

Further reading: Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Architects of Yiddishism at the Beginning of the 20th Century* (1976; expanded 1997 edition: *Modern Yiddish Culture*)

[instructor's review].

Session 5: January 24, 2023

Sociology of Yiddish. The phenomena of pronounced love vs. hate, support vs. degradation. Nature of these passions. Yiddish in Palestine and Israel with coverage of repression, violence, and the debates on all sides. Yiddish in the English-speaking democracies with discussion of attitudes on the part of mainstream Jewish cultural entities. Discussion of the effects of highly diverse factors on the social status of Yiddish, including the State of Israel (and Zionism/Hebraism), modern Jewish religious movements, the (often lingering) McCarthyist stigma attaching to secular Yiddishism, and, subsequently, the equally daunting image of the Haredi in the eyes of mainstream Jewry. The curious array of emotional reactions to Yiddish and to Ashkenazic Hebrew in the immediate family backgrounds of numerous contemporary Jewish communities. But why is Yiddish so controversial?

USY pp. 310-322.

Session 6: January 26, 2023

From after the Holocaust to the mid 21st century. The literary centers in North America, Israel, western Europe, Australia and South Africa. Frank discussion and analyses of the abject failure of secular Yiddish movements to bring forth new generations of native speakers. The shift to a culture of adherents, courses, clubs, events, arts, cultural activities, academia, research, and political instrumentalization (by both left and right). Effects of the foregoing on a wider non-linguistic culture and arguments over fetishization and delinguification. Debates over purism, dialect hegemony and orthography. The unanticipated rise of hundreds of thousands of Hasidic native speakers in the 21st century. The course will conclude with a survey of current Hasidic Yiddish publications, and a discussion of the future grounded in current empirical trends.

USY pp. 323-398.

Y&P chapter 15. References.

Also:

D. Katz, "Notions of Yiddish" in T. Parfitt & G. Abramson (eds), *Jewish Education and Learning. In Honour of Dr. David Patterson on his Seventieth Birthday* (1994), pp. 75-91. Online.

I. A first select bibliography for further academic reading:

Jean Baumgarten, *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature*. Edited and translated by Jerold C. Frakes (2005).

Solomon A. Birnbaum, *Yiddish: A Survey and a Grammar* (1979 or 2016 edition) [instructor's [review](#)].

Joshua A. Fishman (ed.), *Never Say Die: A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters* (1981).

Neil G. Jacobs, *Yiddish. A Linguistic Introduction* (2005) [instructor's [review](#)].

Leo Wiener, *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (numerous editions through 2021).

Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (English translations: one-volume 1980 edition or two-volume 2008 edition).

NOTE: A number of Max Weinreich's (1894-1969) major contributions in English that are at once academic, more accessible to the general intellectually curious reader, relatively short, and often as fresh today as when they were written, are in an array of collective volumes. Hopefully they will be assembled into a book in the near future. See especially:

“A Tentative Scheme for the History of Yiddish” in Vme Congrès International des Linguistes (Brussels 28 Aug. – 2 Sept. 1939). YIVO: Vilna.

“*Yidishkayt* and Yiddish: On the impact of religion on language in Ashkenazic Jewry” in M. Davis (ed.), *Mordecai M. Kaplan Jubilee Volume*, pp. 481-514 (1953).

“Prehistory and early history of Yiddish: facts and conceptual framework” in U. Weinreich (ed.), *the Field of Yiddish*, vol. 1, pp. 73-101 (1954).

“History of the Yiddish language: the problems and their implications” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 103: 563-570 (1959).

“The reality of Jewishness vs. the ghetto myth: the sociolinguistic roots of Yiddish” in *To Honor Roman Jakobson. Essays on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, vol. 3, pp. 2199-2211 (1967).

Encyclopedias: numerous entries referencing *Yiddish* in Gershon David Hundert (editor-in-chief), *Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2 vols., 2008; also [online](#)); in both major editions of *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971-1972; 2006-2007; and, sometimes dated but solid scholarship in the form of fine historical essays by

leading Yiddish scholars in *The Jewish People Past and Present* (four vols., 1946-1955).

II. Works in a more relaxed and popular style:

Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (1990).

Paul Kriwaczek, *Yiddish Civilization: The Rise and Fall of a Forgotten Nation* (2006).

Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (1968 and multiple editions).

Maurice Samuel, *In Praise of Yiddish* (1971).

Jeffrey Shandler, *Yiddish: Biography of a Language* (2020). [instructor's [review](#)].

Michael Wex, *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All its Moods* (2007) [instructor's [review](#)].

NOTES: The instructor invites participants to visit (all free and online): [Yiddish Linguistics page](#), a summary of [recent projects](#), as well as some in-progress works: An [English-Yiddish Cultural Dictionary](#); the [Lithuanian Yiddish Video Archive](#) (on youtube); [An Atlas of Northeastern Yiddish](#) (and for the possible interest of advanced students, work available online in the fields of [Yiddish stylistics](#), [Yiddish fiction](#), [Litvak studies](#), and ongoing [Bible translations](#) into Lithuanian Yiddish; also, an occasional [responsa](#) column in Yiddish).

CONTACT: Students may contact the instructor on the course and its contents via email (dovidkatz7@yahoo.com), but issues of interest to the entire group are best raised in discussion during the course's session most relevant to the topic concerned.