theories and methodologies

Reading Jewish

SAMUEL J. SPINNER

HOW DO YOU READ JEWISH? THE QUESTION SOUNDS ODD. WHY IS IT THAT READING JEWISH IS CATACHRESTIC IN A WAY THAT READING GERman is not? The obvious answer is that German is a language while Jewish is not. Yet there are Jewish languages. Hebrew is one, of course, and linguists describe many more, from Ladino (the language of the Iberian Jewish diaspora) to Krymchak (the ethnolect of a group of Crimean Jews). There is also Yiddish, the language of most European Jews for roughly the millennium preceding the Holocaust; now it lives on primarily in Hasidic communities around the world. Yiddish means Jewish; and in a sense, knowing how to read the former (i.e., decipher the Yiddish language) can imply knowing how to read the latter (i.e., decipher Jewish identity). This has been the belief of many Jews from the late nineteenth century to the present who accept the idea that language is central to national identity. Strangely, in this period the reverse notion has also been active: that knowing Jewish implies knowing Yiddish. This paradox—that you can read a language without knowing it—was catalyzed by a modernist approach to the intersection of Jewish language with Jewish identity. But it was also grounded in facets of the history and philology of Yiddish reading that opened a path to literacy through illiteracy.

What Arjun Appadurai called "the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization" (295) continues, unabated, to challenge the viability of minority—and even majority—languages in the face of the anglophone cultural juggernaut. The degree to which other languages survive, let alone flourish, is thus often the yardstick for successful resistance to a malign globalization. Nevertheless, minority subjectivity can be asserted in a hegemonic language—for example in autoethnographic texts, which negotiate a balance between heterogenization and homogenization through "a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror" (Pratt 35). Indeed, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari minor literature must be written in a major language—this is the source of its politics of resistance (16–18). Join-

SAMUEL J. SPINNER is the Zelda and Myer Tandetnik Assistant Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture at Johns Hopkins University. He is completing a book on primitivism in Yiddish and German culture that examines the relation of literary, visual, and ethnographic figurations of Jewish identity in modern Europe. He is also at work on a book addressing the influence of museums on the literary representation of the Holocaust.

© 2019 SAMUEL J. SPINNER
PMLA 134.1 (2019), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ing together autoethnography and minor literature is a figuration of the relation of minor to major and indigenous to imperial languages as one of loss. The loss is real. But I would like to describe some ways in which the loss of literacy is not only a story of loss—of the atrophy or decimation of forms of identity. In fact, illiteracy can be as potent and productive a cultural force as literacy. The positive assertion of an identity is a matter not only of what you can read but also of what you can't. Further, illiteracy can produce other forms of literacy, as when, for example, the inability to read Yiddish becomes the ability to read Jewish.

To illustrate the paradoxes at work here, I'll share two brief anecdotes. A few years ago I led a book club focused on Yiddish literature in translation. Most of the attendees were well-educated American Jews, but I had no reason to think that any would be able to read the works, let alone speak, in the original language. Yet when they introduced themselves at our first meeting, several said that they knew Yiddish. I responded excitedly, in Yiddish, and quickly found that none of them knew more than a few words. Although they knew Yiddish was a language—they were there, after all, to read books originally written in it—speaking the language was not their measure of knowing it.

My second anecdote, which transpired on a flight from Munich to New York, is an inversion of the book club scene. The passengers were mostly Germans setting out on holiday and American Hasidic Jews returning home from vacation. I was seated beside a Bavarian couple who were shocked when they realized that they could understand what the Yiddish-speaking Hasidim were saying. A thousand years of Jewish otherness in Europe had created an expectation of unassimilable exoticism. But the linguistic reality—Yiddish is a Germanic language and has a relatively high degree of mutual intelligibility with German—confounded it. The Bavarian couple knew that they couldn't understand Jewish; they didn't realize that they could understand Yiddish. The members of my book club, conversely, thought that because they knew Jewish, they also knew Yiddish.

Franz Kafka captured both of these aspects of knowing Yiddish in a lecture he delivered before a reading of Yiddish literary texts in Prague in 1912. Kafka's audience was likely made up mostly of German-speaking bourgeois Prague Jews who were, so Kafka believed, possessors—as he was—of a Jewish identity devoid of engagement with or knowledge of Jewish culture and tradition. In his "Letter to His Father," Kafka castigated his father for bequeathing him this hollow Judaism, but in this talk he wished to reacquaint his audience with this part of their heritage and to encourage their identification with it. Kafka's central point was that although his audience of secular Jews believed they did not know Yiddish, they really did. He offered an idiosyncratic explanation for the intelligibility of Yiddish to his audience. Yes, he acknowledged, Yiddish is historically and linguistically related to German. But comprehension of Yiddish is actually a matter of unlocking something within:

> You begin to come quite close to Yiddish if you bear in mind that apart from what you know there are active in yourselves forces and associations with forces that enable you to understand Yiddish intuitively. . . . [I]f you relax, you suddenly find yourselves in the midst of Yiddish. But once Yiddish has taken hold of you and moved you—and Yiddish is everything, the words, the Chasidic melody, and the essential character of this East European Jewish actor himself—you will have forgotten your former reserve. Then you will come to feel the true unity of Yiddish, and so strongly that it will frighten you, yet it will no longer be fear of Yiddish but of yourselves. You would not be capable of bearing this fear on its own, but Yiddish instantly gives you, besides, a self-confidence that can stand up to this fear and is even stronger than it is. (266)

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The confidence of this assertion was not mitigated by the fact that Kafka did not know Yiddish. His concern was neither the denotative meanings of Yiddish words nor the communicative potential of the language as a whole. Kafka's aim was to mobilize the connotative powers of Yiddish as a catalyst for the revitalization of bourgeois, German-speaking Jews like him—alienated religiously from Jewish tradition and socially from the majority of European Jews living in eastern Europe.

Of course, for many European modernists language involved just what Kafka describes: intuition, spirituality, emotion, and the link between words and music. Kafka's emphasis on these traits is nevertheless surprising given the beginning of this speech, in which he describes with a measure of specificity some historical and grammatical features of Yiddish and displays a mildly academic approach at odds with the mysticism and universalism he invokes at the end. We also know that Kafka did not approach all languages in this way: he seriously endeavored to learn Hebrew, as evidenced by the notebooks in his archives filled with painstakingly transcribed Hebrew words (Bodenheimer). For Kafka, Hebrew was a language to be learned in the usual manner: a language to be written and a language to be read. Yiddish was something else entirely.

Perhaps Kafka's approach to Yiddish diverges from his approach to Hebrew because Hebrew's ancient history and sacred status outweigh the vernacular and relatively recent tradition of Yiddish. Hebrew casts a shadow over Yiddish, and not only because of the large number of Hebrew words in the Yiddish language or the fact that it is written in Hebrew letters. Yiddish was always secondary to Hebrew; Yiddish was the vernacular language of European Jews for about a millennium, and Jewish men maintained an unusually high level of literacy throughout this period, but their literacy was not intended to be in Yiddish. Jewish boys learned how to read Hebrew letters to decipher the Hebrew prayer book and the Torah, not to read Yiddish. However, although the majority of Jewish men did indeed learn to read Hebrew, most could barely understand it and did not possess more than the basic Hebrew reading skills that many women also acquired (Turniansky 8–9). Men and women thus both possessed, if in unequal proportions, the ability to read Hebrew letters mechanically, which gave them the ability to read Yiddish, their vernacular. Nevertheless, Yiddish literacy retained a secondary status succinctly expressed in the name for the special cursive typeface used to print Yiddish books until the early nineteenth century: *vaybertaytsh*, or "women's Yiddish."

Vaybertaytsh is a compound word consisting of the word for women (*vayber*) and an archaic word for Yiddish (*taytsh*). *Taytsh* is of course cognate with the German *Deutsch* and stems from a time when Yiddish was felt to be the Jewish form of German. The name *vaybertaytsh* derived from the fiction that Yiddish books, though almost exclusively written by men,[1] were for a female audience. The assumption was that men occupied themselves with the holy writ in its original language and had no need of translations or popular works in the vernacular. But despite the myth of universal male Hebrew literacy among Ashkenazi Jews, men needed Yiddish books as much as women did. Illiteracy (in Hebrew) opened a door to literacy (in Yiddish).

Use of *vaybertaytsh* declined in the early nineteenth century[2] and was followed within decades by another Yiddish literary phenomenon involving the relation of literacy and illiteracy, namely the rise of *daytshmerish*.[3] *Daytshmerish* is a literary register featuring heavy germanization of all aspects of written Yiddish, including lexicon, syntax, and tenses (Fishman 73–74; Krogh). This germanization and its stakes are inscribed into the very words for *reading* in Yiddish, of which there are two: *leyenen* and *lezn*. *Leyenen* refers to

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

all kinds of reading, secular and religious; *lezn* is used solely for secular reading. *Lezn* is rarely attested in Yiddish until the nineteenth century, when it was imported from the modern German *lesen* (Weinreich A440). It seems to have emerged for two reasons. First, a word to denote strictly secular reading in the light of its rapid expansion among eastern European Jews was newly useful; second, *lezn* was part of a wave of words imported into Yiddish from New High German in the nineteenth century. Although most such German words were used, as *daytshmerish*, strictly in literary works, many—like *lezn*—entered the spoken vernacular.

The introduction of German words (and even syntax) into Yiddish was enabled by the significant mutual intelligibility of Yiddish and German. It was motivated by the status of German as a prestige language in Jewish central and eastern Europe, even in those areas where German was not the lingua franca. For Yiddish-speaking Jews, German was a language of aspiration and mobility—social, professional, and intellectual. As a consequence, *daytshmerish* emerged as a tool for the popularization of these aspirations, associated most commonly with the *Haskalah* (the Jewish enlightenment). As a literary phenomenon, *daytshmerish* both reflected and promoted the ideology of *Bildung*—secular education as the path to individual and communal improvement. Since formal secular education was largely out of the question for nineteenth-century European Jews, it was reading—reading *daytshmerish*—that could accomplish this civilizing process. For those who could not or would not read books in German, *daytshmerish* was the next best thing. As the Yiddish critic Shmuel Niger—perhaps the first to use the word—wrote, *daytshmerish* is "not so much a language as the desire for a language: it is used by those who do not want to use Yiddish but cannot use German" (49). In other words, *daytshmerish* is simultaneously the aspiration for illiteracy in Yiddish and the reality of illiteracy in German.

Lezn thus emerged as an expression of the desire to unlearn *leyenen*. But the distinction between religious and secular reading that *lezn* embodied did not automatically privilege the latter. The secularization of Jewish writing and reading practices was not a matter of complete transformation. Indeed, the myth of *Bildung* purposely obscures the extent to which traditional and modern, religious and secular, Jewish and non- or un-Jewish modes of reading were imbricated and hybridized throughout the history of secular Yiddish literature. The *Haskalah* never purported to rid the Jews or their literature of Jewishness. To the contrary: many of the works of Ayzik Meyer Dik—the celebrated mid-nineteenth-century Yiddish popularizer of the *Haskalah*—were likely taken by their readers to be unexceptional examples either of the popular literature or of the didactic literature they were familiar with (Roskies 853). This was by design: literature was a Trojan horse for writers like Dik, stealthily introducing the *Haskalah* to readers who might otherwise be resistant (Parush). Paradoxically, the *daytshmerish* of such writers was likely felt to be at home among the more traditional features of their works even as it sought to suppress them; the mere linguistic presence of this germanized language was meant to bring readers closer to German and thus closer to *Bildung*. *Daytshmerish* was meant to replace the vernacular of their surroundings with the lingua franca of their aspirations.

Despite its lofty pretensions, *daytshmerish* was already seen by the late nineteenth century as wrongheaded and even as a sign of cultural inferiority (Fishman 73–74). Niger's characterization from 1912 shows as much. The rejection of *daytshmerish* coincided with and was largely prompted by the growing acceptance of Yiddish as a literary language. Yiddish was correspondingly promoted as a—even the—national language of the Jews, a

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press



FIG. 1
Typeface and illustration by El Lissitzky, from Moyshe Broderzon's *Sikhes khulin: Eyne fun di geshikhten* (Khaver, 1917, p. 1). Image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3438272. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

proposition that was famously debated at the Czernowitz Conference of 1908. Literacy in Yiddish was now seen as something desirable.

But for many it was too late. The emancipation of Jews across western and central Europe in the nineteenth century had accelerated the abandonment of Western Yiddish, which was increasingly a vestige of a preindustrial, preemancipatory age. Even in eastern Europe, by the first decades of the twentieth century large numbers of European Jews were more comfortable in various European vernaculars than in Yiddish. So if the traditions of European Jewry—mediated for a thousand years by Yiddish—and the modern cultural and national projects that engaged them were to have a place in modern Jewish identity, it would need to be with, and not only despite, illiteracy. Or, as Kafka argued, it would demand a new understanding of illiteracy as an opening up rather than a closing off.

One example will have to suffice. The Soviet avant-garde artist El Lissitzky (1890–1941) achieved renown for his contribution to the development of abstraction in art as well as for his typography. But the earliest phase of his career was devoted to Jewish, primarily Yiddish, artistic work. He illustrated and designed the typeface for numerous Yiddish

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

books produced in collaboration with writers of the Yiddish avant-garde. Two such books in particular are noteworthy for their sophisticated typographical design. *Sikhes khulin* ("Idle Chatter"; 1917), a pastiche of an early modern chapbook by the Yiddish poet Moyshe Broderzon, features illustrations and typography by Lissitzky (fig. 1). The script is in a mock-scribal style, claiming an antique authenticity through the visual rhetoric of the "distressed genre" (Stewart); this script also contributes to its ironic presentation—the text is profane, through and through. Another book by Lissitzky is a rendering of the poem *Khad gadye* (1919) from the Passover seder liturgy (fig. 2).[4] Despite its ritual setting, the poem has a modest charm derived from the fact that it is a cumulative counting folksong featuring animals, the Angel of Death, and God (*Had gadya*). This antique



Fig. 2

A lithograph by El Lissitzky in *Khad gadye* (1919); reproduced in *Had gadya*. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

text, however, is given a strikingly avant-garde typography and design by Lissitzky. Both books are written in Hebrew letters, but the letters spell Yiddish words in the first book and Aramaic words in the second. Both Yiddish and Aramaic are, in a sense, Jewish languages but are closely related to vernaculars widely spoken beyond Jewish communities. And it seems that Lissitzky didn't really know either language. Two pieces of evidence lead to this presumption. First, Lissitzky misspelled the title *Khad gadye*, using a *he* instead of an *aleph* at the end of *gadye*—a strange mistake given the near-universal familiarity of the poem among Jews. Second is a letter in Yiddish by Moyshe Broderzon (the author of *Sikhes khulin*) to Niger, to which Lissitzky appended a postscript—in Russian. In this postscript, Lissitzky celebrates the "new Jewish book" and the Yiddish cultural landscape in which it features (Moss 76). But he also apologizes to Niger for not writing in Yiddish: "I ask you to endure me in Russian." How strange to celebrate Yiddish culture in a postscript to a Yiddish letter from a Yiddish poet to a Yiddish critic—in Russian! Perhaps Lissitzky didn't know Yiddish well enough to write even a few lines in it. But he certainly knew Jewish well enough to design typefaces for it and to illustrate books written in it. Sometimes illiteracy is just as potent as literacy.

Not

1. The first known book in any language written by a Jewish woman was the Yiddish *Meynekes Rivke* (*Meneket Rivkah*; 1609), by Rivka Tiktiner of Prague.

2. Fishman outlines several explanations for the elimination of *vaybertaytsh* (69–70).

3. The etymology of this idiosyncratic word is unclear; it seems to be a turn-of-the-century neologism. See Fishman 78n3.

4. The poem is in Aramaic, the language of the Talmud, which is written in Hebrew letters.

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 7, no. 2, June 1990, pp. 295–310.

Bodenheimer, Alfred. "A Sign of Sickness and a Symbol of Health: Kafka's Hebrew Notebooks." *Kafka, Zionism, and Beyond*, edited by Mark H. Gelber, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2004, pp. 259–70.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan, U of Minnesota P, 1986.

Fishman, Joshua A. "Why Did Yiddish Change?" *Diachronica*, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 1985, pp. 67–82.

Kafka, Franz. "An Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language." Translated by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins. *Reading Kafka: Prague, Politics, and the Fin de Siècle*, edited by Mark Anderson, Schocken Books, 1989, pp. 263–66.

Krogh, Steffen. "Daytshmerish toyg nit! Germanismen im Ostjiddischen von 1800 bis heute." *Jiddische Sprache und Literatur in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, edited by Suse Bauschmid et al., vol. 3, Peter Lang, 2012, pp. 27–31.

Lissitzky, El. *Had gadya: The Only Kid: Facsimile of El Lissitzky's Edition of 1919*. Edited by Arnold J. Band, Getty Research Institute, 2004, www.getty.edu/publications/virtuallibrary/089236744X.html.

Moss, Kenneth Benjamin. *"A Time for Tearing Down and a Time for Building Up": Recasting Jewish Culture in Eastern Europe, 1917–1921*. 2003. Stanford U, PhD dissertation.

Niger, Shmuel. "Daytshmerish." *Lebn un visnshaft*, 1912, vol. 2, no. 11–12, pp. 49–55.

Parush, Iris. *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*. Translated by Saadya Sternberg, Brandeis UP, 2004.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*, 1991, pp. 33–40.

Roskies, David G. "Yiddish Popular Literature and the Female Reader." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 10, no. 4, Mar. 1977, pp. 852–58.

Stewart, Susan. "Notes on Distressed Genres." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 104, no. 411, Winter 1991, pp. 5–31.

Tiktiner, Rivka bat Me'ir. *Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women*. Edited by Frauke von Rohden, translated by Samuel Jacob Spinner, Jewish Publication Society, 2009.

Turniansky, Chava. "Yiddish and the Transmission of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe." *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2008, pp. 5–18.

Weinreich, Max. *History of the Yiddish Language*. Edited by Paul Glasser, translated by Shlomo Noble with Joshua A. Fishman, vol. 2, Yale UP, 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press