

Standard Yiddish

Ane Kleine

University of Trier
AneKleine@web.de

Yiddish is, since Max Weinreich's fundamental work (Weinreich 1973, 1980), referred to as a fusion language in which components of different languages form a comprehensive synthesis. As Yiddish arose in early Ashkenazic communities in German speaking territories from the 10th century onwards, German contributes the most to its component multiplicity. From the start, some Hebrew-Aramaic and Romance elements inherited from the pre-German period were incorporated in the Yiddish language and remained along with the Hebrew script – though Yiddish to this day clearly bears the marks of its genetic origin as a West-Germanic language. The migration of a large number of Jews to Eastern Europe after the pogroms of the 13th and 14th centuries gave way to an enormous influence of the Slavic speaking environment on the rising Eastern Yiddish (as opposed to Western Yiddish, being the variety of the language that was retained on German speaking territory) and hence added a fourth component. In response to the emancipation, Yiddish lost ground in the Western sphere and substantially disappeared in Germany at the end of the 18th century, whereas in Eastern Europe, the number of Yiddish speakers increased rapidly, and gradually the language became regionally differentiated. The pre-war Eastern Yiddish speaking territory may be divided as follows: Northeastern Yiddish (Lithuania, Latvia and Belorussia), Southeastern Yiddish (Ukraine, Rumania and Eastern Galicia) and Central Yiddish (Poland and Western Galicia). The great migratory movements at the turn of the century spread the Yiddish language to the far corners of the earth, with several vernaculars being the source of a fifth component. The persecutions and the genocide through the Nazi-regime led to the annihilation of a vast number of Yiddish speakers, all but completely destroying the language in its historical territory and giving proportionally more importance to the rapidly evolving varieties of the new emigration countries.

In the course of the 20th century a standardized language developed as a supraregional formation. One may distinguish two large overlapping regional variants of the 'Standard Yiddish' pronunciation: the 'literary pronunciation' (*LITERARISHER AROYSREYD*) and the 'orthographic pronunciation' (*ORTOGRAFISHER AROYSREYD*). The differences are limited to particular words, in which the former differs from the usual realization of the written form, whereas the 'orthographic pronunciation' adheres to the letters.

The description given here is based on instrumentally aided acoustic analyses of the speech of an Argentinean male Yiddish teacher in his early fifties, who is a native speaker of the Central Yiddish dialect, but who speaks 'Standard Yiddish' on the recordings.

Consonants

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatalized	Velar	Uvular	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d		tʲ dʲ	k g		ʔ
Nasal	m		n		nʲ	ŋ		
Trill-Flap-Tap			r ɾ					ʀ
Fricative		f v	s z	ʃ ʒ	sʲ zʲ	χ ʁ		h
Approximant					j			
Lateral approximant			l		ɭ			

A striking feature of the consonantal system is the series of palatalized segments - common in Slavic languages rather than in Germanic ones, which is doubtlessly due to the Slavic impact on Yiddish and, accordingly, often to be found in loanwords of Slavic origin.

Plosives and fricatives

Voiceless plosives are unaspirated or might occur with slight aspiration, mainly in final position, whereas voiced plosives are fully voiced in all positions. The status of phonation may be affected by chain assimilation, voiceless segments becoming voiced in the neighborhood of voiced consonants and vice versa. The glottal stop [ʔ] functions as an intervocalic separator only.

Affricates

There is a series of affricates in Yiddish. They may occur voiceless as combinations of [t] and [s] or [t] and [ʃ], forming [ts] and [tʃ], along with the corresponding palatalized variants [tsʲ] and [tʃʲ], as well as voiced in the combinations [d] plus [z] and [d] plus [ʒ], forming [dz] and [dʒ], along with the corresponding palatalized variants [dzʲ] and [dʒʲ].

Laterals and nasals

'Standard Yiddish' does not make a phonologic distinction between the pre-palatal nasal [n] and the velar nasal [ŋ], the appearance of which is restricted to its collocation after the velar plosives [k] and [g] in syllabic realization. Hence, we find [n] and [ŋ] as occasional allophone variants according to context. The phonologic discrimination between the alveolar [l] and the palatalized lateral [ɭ] seems to be have become less common.

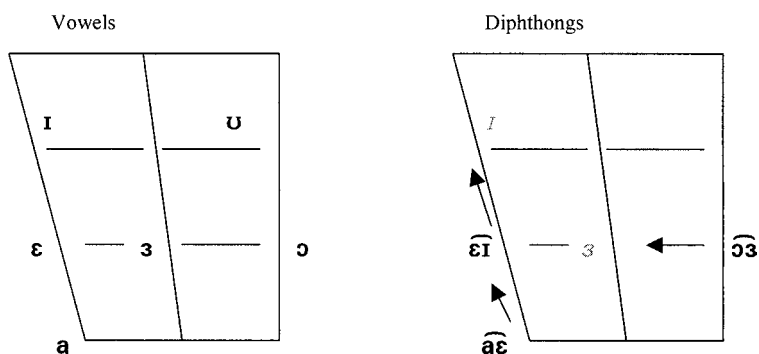
Trill-Flap-Tap

In 'Standard Yiddish' [r/ɾ] and [ʀ] are admissible variants of one phoneme according to speakers' preferences, habitually occurring only with a single contact of the articulator at the place of articulation.

Examples

p	ʃtup	שטופ	push (1sg.)	s	saχ	סך	much, plenty
b	ʃtub	שטוב	house	z	zaχ	זאך	thing
t	'talʌs	טלית	tallith (shawl)	ʃ	'ʃabʌs	שבת	Sabbath
d	'dalʌs	דלות	poverty	ʒ	'ʒabʌs	זשאבעס	frogs
f	'ʔʌfŋ	אופן	way, manner	s	sin	ש	Sin (letter)
v	'ʔʌvŋ	אויבן	oven	ʃ	ʃin	ש	Shin (letter)
k	kræz	קרייז	circle	m	mes	מת	dead body, corpse
g	græz	גרייז	mistake	n	nes	נס	wonder
kŋ	'kʌkŋ	זקן	old man	ʌm	'ʔʌʌʌm	צלם	cross
ŋ	'kʌŋ	זאגן	say	ŋ	'ʔʌʌŋ	צײלן	count
ʌ	'fertʌ	פערטל	quarter	ʌ	'ʔʌʌʌ	ראייה	piece of evidence
ŋ	'fertŋ	פערטן	fourth (decl.)	χ	'χæʌʌ	חיה	animal
ʌ	'kʌʌ	קארע	bark	χ	χʌt	חטא	sin
ŋ	'kʌŋ	קארן	corn	h	hʌt	העט	so far
nk	'zinkʌn	זינקען	sink	ʔz	halʔz	האלדז	neck
ng	'zinkʌn	זינגען	sing	ʔs	halʔs	האלט'ס	hold it! (imp.)
ʌ	'kʌʌ	כלה	bride	r/r	'mʌʌʌʌʌd	מורד	rebel
ʌ	'kʌʌ	קאליע	spoiled	ʌ	'mʌʌʌʌd	מולד	new moon

Vowels



'Standard Yiddish' does not distinguish long from short vowels. There are five vowels, [a, ɛ, ɪ, ɔ, ʊ], of roughly equal length in stressed syllables, three falling diphthongs, [æɪ, ɛɪ, ɔɜ], and a variety of non-distinctive neutral vowels around [ɜ] in unstressed position. However, the diphthongs may reach a higher articulatory target position (towards [ɪ]) due to coarticulatory phenomena or emphasis. According to the acoustic analysis, [ɪ] exists in two slightly variant states (more open vs. more closed). They are not distinctive and may alternate in the same word (possibly a relic of an older opposition).

Examples

a	zax	זאַך	thing	a	an	אַן	an (undef. art.)
ʊ	zux	זױך	scarch (1sg.)	i	in	אין	in
ɪ	zix	זיך	oneself	ɔ	ɔn	אָן	without
ɔ	zox	זאָך (געלע)	jaundicc	ʊ	ʊn	און	and
ʊ	gut	גוט	good	ɛ̃	ɛ̃n	אײן	one
ɪ	gɪt	גיט	gives	æ̃	æ̃n	אײן (שלפּט)	(vb part.) falls asleep
ɔ	got	גאָט	God	i	'plɪtɔ	פּליטע	cooking stove
ɛ̃	gɛ̃t	גײט	goes (3sg.)	ɛ̃	'plɛ̃tɔ	פּליטה	refugee (fem.)
a	'kafɔ	קאַפּ	question	ʊ	nʊn	נון	nun (letter)
ɔ	'kafɔ	קאַפּ	difficult	æ̃	naɛn	נײַן	nine
a	'kalɔ	כּאַל	bride	ɛ̃	nɛ̃n	נײַן	no
ɛ̃	'kɛ̃lɔ	כּלײ	dish	ɔ̃	'fɔ̃gl	פּײַגל	bird
ɔ	krɔm	קראָם	shop	ɛ̃	'fɛ̃gl	פּײַגל	birds
ʊ	krum	קרום	wry, curved	ɛ	'ɛfn	עפּן	open! (imp.)
ɔ	'tovl	טאַװל	blackboard	ɔ	'ɔfn	אָפּן	open
æ̃	'tæ̃v	טײַװל	devil	ɔ̃	'ɔ̃fn	אױפּן	way, manner

Stress

In 'Standard Yiddish' there is [ˈ] primary stress and [ˌ] secondary stress but the latter seems to be less prominent than in German presumably due to Slavic influence, e.g. [aˈrɔbɛrgɔgɔsɔn] אַרײַבערגעגאָסן 'overflow (perf.)'.

Transcription of recorded passage

a mɔl a mɔl 'hɔbˈmɪ zɪx der 'tsɔfn vɪnt un dɪ zun gɔ'krɪkt ver sɪzfun zɛ̃ 'ʃtarkɛr hɔd̥zɪr̥bavɪzn afn veg a dʊrɣ'gɛ̃ɪ'ɛr 'æ̃ngɔhɪlt in a 'varɔmɔn 'fʊtɛr 'hɔbˈmɪ zɛ̃ der 'tsɔfn vɪnt un dɪ zun hɛ̃ɪst es 'tsvɪʃn zɪx 'ɔ̃b̥gɔmaxt az der 'ʃtarkɛrɛr ved̥zæ̃n der vɔs vet 'nɛ̃ɪd̥m dem 'dʊrɣgɛ̃ɪ'ɛr 'ɔ̃s̥tsʊtɔn dem 'fʊtɛr hɔd̥ɛr 'tsɔfn vɪnt gɔ'numɔn 'blɔzn mɪt 'alɔ 'kɔ̃zɔs nɔr vɔs mɛr ɛr hɔt gɔ'blɔzn alts 'tʊfɛr hɔd̥zɪv der ʃpa'tsɪrɛr 'æ̃ngɔhɪlt in dem 'fʊtɛr 'tsʊm sɔf hɔd̥ɛr 'tsɔfn vɪnt zɪx 'ʊntɛrgɔgɔbˈmɪ un mɛr nɪʃt gɔ'kemft 'demɔlt hɔd̥ɪ zun mɪt 'ɪrɔ 'fræ̃ndlɛzɔ 'ʃtraln dɛr'varɔmt d̥ɪ lʊft un sɔt nɪʃt'gɔ'dɔ̃z̥ɛrt mɛr vɪa pɔr mɪ'nʊt hɔd̥ɛr 'dʊrɣgɛ̃ɪ'ɛr 'ɔ̃z̥gɔtɔn dem 'fʊtɛr hɔd̥ɛr 'tsɔfn vɪnt zɪv̥gɔ'mʊzt 'mɔ̃dɔz æ̃n az dɪ zun ɪz̥ 'ʃtarkɛr funɪm

Orthographic version

אָ מאַל, אַ מאַל האָבן זיך דער צפֿורווינט און די זון געקריגט, ווער ס'איז פֿון זיי שטאַרקער. האָט זיך באַוויזן אויפֿן וועג אַ דורכגייער אַינגעהילט אין אַ וואַרעמען פֿוטער. האָבן זיי, דער צפֿורווינט און די זון, הייסט עס, צווישן זיך אַפּגעמאַכט אַז דער שטאַרקערער וועט זיין דער, וואָס וועט נײַן דעם דורכגייער אויסצוטאָן דעם פֿוטער.

האָט דער צפֿורווינט גענומען בלאָזן מיט אַלע כוחות, נאָר וואָס מער ער האָט געבלאָזן, אַלץ טיפֿער האָט זיך דער שפּאַצירער אַינגעהילט אין דעם פֿוטער. צום סוף האָט דער צפֿורווינט זיך אונטערגעגעבן און מער נישט געקעמפֿט.

דעמאָלט האָט די זון מיט אירע פֿרײַנדלעכע שטראַלן דערוואַרעמט די לופֿט און ס'האָט נישט געדויערט מער ווי אַ פּאַר מינוט, האָט דער דורכגייער אויסגעטאָן דעם פֿוטער. האָט דער צפֿורווינט זיך געמוזט מודה זײַן, אַז די זון איז שטאַרקער פֿון אים.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Yitshkok Niborski, Simon Neuberg, Erika Timm, Jens-Peter Köster and Sabine Weber for their support, comments and suggestions.

References

- WEINREICH, M. (1973). *geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh. bagrifn, faktn, metodn*. New York: YIVO.
- WEINREICH, M. (1980). *History of the Yiddish Language* (translated by S. Noble & J. A. Fishman). Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.