Chapter 11

Yiddish in the 21st Century:
New Media to the Rescue of Endangered Languages

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers the first scholarly analysis of teaching the Yiddish language in the digital age, and argues that new media have a tremendous potential for rescuing endangered languages. It investigates the pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of using digital technologies in teaching languages, as well as the ensuing challenges for teachers and students. A brief overview of the history of the Yiddish language and culture is followed by examination of such new digital platforms as Yiddishpop.com, Mapping Yiddish New York, The Grosbard Project, Yiddish audio and visual materials available online, such as videos, sound archives, online newspapers and dictionaries, as well as distance learning opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

A widespread misconception claims that Yiddish is a dying language (Young, 2014). Interestingly, it has been considered dead or dying for the last two hundred years (Portnoy, 2012), even when 11-13 million people spoke it at the eve of the Second World War (Weinreich, 1972; Birnbaum, 1979, pp. 40–41; Jacobs, 2005, p. 3; Katz, 2011;). Although UNESCO (Moseley, 2010) officially classifies Yiddish as “definitely endangered,” its prospects are not as grim as one would expect for a diaspora language. But at the same time, it cannot be denied that the number of Yiddish speakers worldwide has dramatically decreased in the post-Holocaust era. The contemporary numbers oscillate between conservative estimates of 600,000 (Shandler, 2006, p. 203; Mills, 2000) and a more optimistic reckoning of 1–3 million Yiddish speakers (Dovid Katz, 2015, p. 295; “Ethnologue, Yiddish, Eastern,” 2015; Moseley, 2010). However, despite the gloomy prognoses for the future of Yiddish, recent developments in new media integration within the Yiddish language classrooms have provided Yiddish language and culture a new life online. It can be argued that the Internet and new media have tremendous potential for rescuing endangered languages. Following a brief overview of the history of Yiddish, this article discusses the use of new

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media in Yiddish language teaching, and addresses the following questions: What are the pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of using new media in teaching languages? What are the challenges for teachers and students? And, finally, how can the Yiddish experience be used in other less commonly taught languages?

1. A SHORT HISTORY OF THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

1.1. The Language

Yiddish, the vernacular language of the Ashkenazic (Central and East European) Jews, traditionally categorized as a Germanic language, is a fusion language (M. Weinreich, 1973) that combines characteristics from the Semitic, Germanic, and Slavic language families. It emerged in the tenth century in the Rhineland or Bavaria regions (Dovid Katz, 1987; Wexler, 1991) in Germany, but as a result of the migration of its speakers to Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, it underwent a substantial process of Slavicization. Thus, the modern Yiddish language consists of three main vocabulary components: German, Hebrew-Aramaic, and Slavic (Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Czech, Slovak, etc.), and its syntax and underlying structure are influenced by Slavic patterns. Yiddish is written in the Hebrew alphabet (right to left); but unlike Hebrew, which uses an abjad writing system (a consonantal script of 22 letters with vowels marked diacritically), Yiddish uses a phonemic orthography, in which all vowels are represented by separate symbols. Several other studies are recommended for more information on the history and linguistic structure of the Yiddish language (Birnbaum, 1979; M. Weinreich, 1973; J. E. Fishman, 1991; Jacobs, 2005; Dovid Katz, 2004;).

1.2 Literature and Culture

The earliest evidence of written Yiddish dates back to 1096, in the form of lists of names of Jews from Mainz, Germany, who were murdered during the First Crusade (Jacobs, 2005, p. 50). The first written sentence in Yiddish is found in a 1272 prayerbook from Worms; the earliest Yiddish texts feature adaptations of European romance chivalric epics, as well as Biblical and Talmudic explorations and moralistic tractates circulated in manuscripts since 1382 (Dovid Katz, 2004, p. 82). The first Yiddish book was printed in 1543 in Krakow, Poland (Jacobs, 2005, p. 50), and was followed by a surge in Yiddish publications of both religious and secular texts, including such best-sellers as Tsene-rene, or the so-called “women’s bible,” which appeared in over two hundred editions since the earliest extant 1622 edition (Dovid Katz, 2004, p. 87).

The rise of modern Yiddish literature dates back to the mid 19th century with its “golden age” occurring in the 1920s and ‘30s in Poland, the Soviet Union, and the United States, the three largest Yiddish-speaking centers prior to 1939. Although Yiddish literature developed in a relatively brief period of time, it quickly attained the status of a European literature. By the early 20th century, Yiddish culture flourished worldwide: the Yiddish press published hundreds of titles daily around the globe; Yiddish theater and film enjoyed the time of their highest glory; and networks of Yiddish schools were established in the United States and Europe (Freidenreich, 2010; Eisenstein, 1950; Shmeer, 2004). The YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institute) Institute for Jewish Research, established in 1925 in Vilnius, Poland (now Lithuania), pioneered Yiddish research and played an important role in creating and promoting the
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