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Scholars Debate Roots of Yiddish, Migration of Jews

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TRYING to trace the ancient roots of a modern language is always a maddeningly ambiguous and uncertain enterprise. With Yiddish, the language of the Ashkenazic Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, the task is even harder because of the horrifying fact that most of the speakers were exterminated in the Holocaust.

As a result, the study of Yiddish origins -- and especially the touchy issue of its relationship to German -- has sometimes been criticized as one in which rational analysis has been overwhelmed by emotion. But a number of recent studies are now being welcomed by linguists as evidence that the field is turning into a solid science.

"There are now signs that the history of Yiddish is becoming a scientific enterprise instead of the mythological exercise it used to be," said Dr. Jerrold Sadock, a linguist at the University of Chicago.

By trying to reconstruct the original Yiddish, linguists hope to explain the origins of this rich language, in which a largely Germanic grammar and vocabulary is mixed with Hebrew and Aramaic, and sprinkled with words from Slavic and ancient Romance languages. The question they hope to answer is whether Yiddish began in Western Europe and spread eastward, as the common wisdom holds -- or whether, as an increasing number of scholars now believe, its origins lie farther east. One linguist has recently argued that Yiddish began as a Slavic language that was "relexified," with most of its vocabulary replaced with German words.

Archiving over these questions is the central mystery of just where the Jews of Eastern Europe came from. Many historians believe that there were not nearly enough Jews in Western Europe to account for the huge population that later flourished in Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and nearby areas.

By reconstructing the Yiddish mother tongue, linguists hope to plot the migration of the Jews and their language with a precision never possible before. It has even been suggested, on the basis of linguistic evidence, that the Jews of Eastern Europe were not predominantly part of the diaspora from the Middle East, but were members of another ethnic group that adopted Judaism.

"Yiddish is widely perceived as a very special language," said Dr. Alexis Manaster Ramer, a linguist at Wayne State University in Detroit. "If this is correct, the explanation might lie precisely in the historical uniqueness of the circumstances which produced Yiddish. "

The revival of the field is due, in part, to a mammoth project at Columbia University to map the dialects of Yiddish, plotting precisely where on the European continent the many variations were once spoken. After decades of preparation, "The Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry" began appearing in 1992, with volume one. The third installment was recently sent to the printers and is due out next year from the publisher Max Niemeyer in Tübingen, Germany. At least seven more volumes are planned.

This accumulating evidence is being eagerly seized by linguists intent on tracing the roots of Yiddish. "The atlas is a fabulous tool for doing this kind of work," said Dr. Robert D. King, who holds the Audre and Bernard Rapoport Chair of Jewish Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Work on the project began in the early 1960's after Dr. Uriel Weinreich of Columbia University and his wife, the folklorist Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, began an effort to interview some 600 Yiddish-speaking immigrants in Israel, the Alsace region of France, the United States, Canada and Mexico. When Dr. Weinreich died in 1967, the project was taken over by Dr. Marvin Herzog.

"The atlas is of monumental importance to the field of Yiddish studies," said Dr. Neil Jacobs, a linguist at Ohio State University in Columbus. The detailed interviews, each lasting some 15 hours and including more than 3,000 questions, provide an usually exact picture of both Yiddish dialects and culture. The atlas is so precise that it can show the line of demarcation separating Eastern European Jews who sugared their gefilte fish from those who did not, or between those who ate tomatoes and those who considered them "tref," or unclean, because of their blood red color. The linguistic information is just as precise -- charting, for example, differences in the pronunciation of the word "flaysh," or flesh.

The emergence of this rich lode of information is expected to provide the kind of hard evidence that linguists need to separate hypothesis from speculation.

For centuries it was widely assumed that Yiddish was just broken German, more of a linguistic mishmash than a true language. Even the language's own speakers called it "Zhargon," meaning jargon. In the early 20th century, linguists found evidence that Yiddish and modern German were of equal stature -- parallel offshoots of the same Germanic mother tongue. The other components of Yiddish were explained as superficial borrowings grafted onto an essentially Germanic language.

After the horrors of World War II, some Jewish scholars set out to distance Yiddish from German and show that it was a unique cultural creation of the Jews. The main champion of this view was Dr. Max Weinreich, the father of Uriel Weinreich and the driving force behind the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which began in Vilna, Lithuania, and is now in Manhattan. Noting that Yiddish includes a few words from Old Italian and Old French, Dr. Weinreich argued that it began as a Romance language that was later Germanized. In this view, Yiddish was invented by Jews who had arrived in Europe with the Roman army as traders, later settling in the Rhineland of western Germany and northern France. Mixing Hebrew, Aramaic and Romance with German, they produced a unique language, not just a dialect of German.

Pushed eastward by the religious zealotry arising from the medieval Crusades and the Black Plague, which fanatical Christians blamed on the Jews, the speakers of Yiddish re-established themselves in Poland and surrounding areas, where the language picked up its Slavic content. According to this now dominant theory, there were very few Jews in Eastern Europe before the great immigration from the west. Yiddish is seen as a largely Western European phenomenon.

As appealing as this theory has been to Jews who wish to divorce the language from that of their Nazi persecutors, corroborating linguistic evidence has been sparse. Even more troublesome are demographic studies indicating that during the Middle Ages there were no more than 25,000 to 35,000 Jews in Western Europe. These figures are hard to reconcile with other studies showing that by the 17th century there were hundreds of thousands of Jews in Eastern Europe.

"You just can't get those numbers by natural population increase," Dr. King said. In a paper published in 1992, he argued that the origins of Yiddish were not in the Rhineland but eastward along the Danube -- in Bavaria and as far east as Hungary and the Czech and Slovak lands. From there, he argues, the language radiated both westward, into the Rhineland, and eastward into Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and other areas.

Dr. King bases his conclusion on work he began in the 1980's with Dr. Alice Faber, a linguist now at Haskins Laboratories in New Haven, Conn. Dr. King and Dr. Faber found no significant similarities between the Yiddish of Eastern Europe and the dialects of German spoken in the Rhineland. They uncovered a few similarities between Yiddish and East Central German, spoken as far east as Poland. (For example, German diphthongs like ie and uo were compressed in both languages, so that "knie" (knee) was rendered "kni." But the most striking resemblances were between Yiddish and Bavarian, a dialect of German. " Yiddish resembles nothing more closely than medieval Bavarian," Dr. King said.

For example, both Bavarian and Yiddish differ from German in that they have lost a pronunciation rule called final devoicing. Germans pronounce "Tag" (day) as though it ended in k and "Rad" (wheel) as though it ended in t. But in Yiddish and Bavarian the two words are pronounced "tog" and "rod." Another example: the words "Blume" (flower) and "Gasse" (street) are pronounced with two syllables in German but with one syllable in Bavarian and Yiddish. Bavarian is the only major German dialect that, like Yiddish, has undergone these two kinds of transformations.

Dr. King concedes that a western origin for Yiddish is still possible: Jews migrating from the Rhineland may have lingered in the Danube region long enough for their language to significantly change. But he is skeptical that essentially all traces of Rhineland German could have been so completely erased.

Contrary to the common wisdom, Dr. King believes there must have already been a large population of Jews in Eastern Europe who had lived there since biblical times, coming up from the Middle East as traders speaking Hebrew and Aramaic. The Yiddish language and culture of the Danube region then diffused eastward, he says, influencing this existing population.

Historians scarcely noticed these early pioneers, Dr. King speculates, because they did not have the leisure to develop the strong scholarly tradition that existed farther west. "The legacy of pre-Crusade Jewish life in Western Europe was a tradition of learning, of the rabbinate, of the community," Dr. King said. "The legacy of early Jewish life in the Slavic East was very largely the bones of its dead."

Some scholars believe the roots of Yiddish, and even the Ashkenazic people themselves, lie much farther east. In his 1976 book, "The Thirteenth Tribe," Arthur Koestler made the startling suggestion, never taken seriously by linguists, that the Eastern European Jews were not really Semitic -- that they were largely descended from the Turkic Khazars, who converted en masse to Judaism in medieval times.

More recently, Mr. Koestler's controversial thesis has been revived and expanded in a 1993 book, "The Ashkenazic Jews : A Slavo-Turkic People in Search of a Jewish Identity" (Slavica Publishers), by Dr. Paul Wexler, a Tel Aviv University linguist. Dr. Wexler uses a reconstruction of Yiddish to argue that it began as a Slavic language whose vocabulary was largely replaced with German words. Going even further, he contends that the Ashkenazic Jews are predominantly converted Slavic and Turkic people who merged with a tiny population of Palestinian Jews from the Diaspora.

While few linguists are convinced by this radical hypothesis, the notion of a Slavic origin for Yiddish is being taken as a serious challenge to the field. "Even if he is not absolutely right," said Dr. Jacobs, "we are forced into a discussion of the issues he has raised."

In another reconstruction of proto- Yiddish, Dr. Manaster Ramer at Wayne State has uncovered evidence that some of Yiddish's Slavic words -- like "nebbish," referring to a pathetic individual -- were part of the original language that grew into modern Yiddish. He has also found traces of western German dialects. But his analysis casts doubt on the hypothesis that Yiddish is an offshoot of Bavarian.

Dr. Manaster Ramer said that while traces of Bavarian were found in the Yiddish spoken in Eastern Europe, they did not show up in Western Yiddish, once spoken in western and southern Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Alsace, or in medieval texts. He proposes that the Bavarian influence entered the language after Yiddish speakers had migrated eastward.

Linguists hope that in the next few years data like those gathered for the Columbia University atlas project will help them zero in on the Yiddish homeland.

GRAPHIC: Map: "Birth of Yiddish: Three Theories" shows a map of Europe indicating three possible origins of Yiddish. (pg. C10)