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Yiddish on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This short study examines the sociolinguistic situation of Yiddish on the Internet in comparison with other languages. In particular, it describes and analyzes the language in its practical and symbolic uses on websites and mailing lists, or as cyber-vernacular and cyber-postvernacular respectively. An analysis of language choice and language use offers evidence for the increasing use of Yiddish as cyber-postvernacular. It is also argued that Yiddish as a diaspora language has more to benefit from the Internet for building speech communities even in postvernacular mode, but this potential has not been sufficiently used yet.

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1. Introduction

One of the influences globalization has been exerting over the past two decades on a growing number of languages is their increasing use as a means of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Although CMC may be increasingly audio- or video-based, it is still predominantly text-based, at least as far as Yiddish is concerned. Major types of written CMC are as follows: (1) the World Wide Web (henceforth the Web) with conventional websites, blogs and forums as three subtypes, (2) email with ordinary email and mailing lists as two subtypes, (3) newsgroups, (4) instant messaging, and (5) chat. They can also be classified as follows in terms of their typical modes of communication: (1) one-to-one communication: ordinary email, instant messaging, chat; (2) one-to-many communication: conventional websites, blogs; (3) many-to-many communication: forums, mailing lists.¹ Of these three types only the latter two can form virtual speech communities, or speech communities organized on the Internet. This study is restricted to the examination of conventional websites and mailing lists from the second and third types.

In what follows, the sociolinguistic situation of Yiddish on the Internet will be examined in view of the fact that it has never been subjected to sociolinguistic scrutiny before. Herring (1996, p. 3) writes: “Surprisingly, although text-based CMC is constructed almost exclusively from linguistic signs, linguists have been slow to consider computer-mediated language a legitimate object of inquiry.” This still holds true of Yiddish.

The following examination will focus on three aspects: (1) relative position of Yiddish in the ecological hierarchy of languages in the world on the Internet, (2) characteristics of practical use of Yiddish on websites and mailing lists, and (3) characteristics of symbolic use of Yiddish on websites and mailing lists. Practical and symbolic uses of Yiddish on the Internet, or what I call cyber-vernacular and cyber-postvernacular, are, I propose, the two most recent stages in the sociolinguistic development of Yiddish. These stages follow the four traditional stages of coteritorial vernacular, deutero-coteritorial vernacular, post-coteritorial vernacular and postvernacular.

Yiddish and other Jewish languages are often called “Diaspora languages” or “diaspora languages” by several researchers.² I would like to propose distinguishing between “Diaspora” (with a capital D) and “diaspora” (with a small d) to refer to Jewry as

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¹ For other typologies of written CMC, see Barnes (2003, p. 5), Crystal (2006, pp. 11–15), and Danet and Herring (2007, pp. 25–26).

² For example, Benor (2008, p. 1060), Efroykin (1951, p. 5), Katz (2009, p. 193), and Myhill (2004, p. 156, 2009, p. 174).

Table 1

Stages in the sociolinguistic development of Yiddish.

Stage	Territoriality	Vernacularity	Community
(1) Coterritorial vernacular	Geographically contiguous with the original non-Jewish co-territorial language	Used as a vernacular	Homeland in exile; Ashkenaz I
(2) Deutero-coterritorial vernacular	Geographically contiguous with the second non-Jewish coterritorial language	Used as a vernacular	Deutero-homeland in exile; Ashkenaz II
(3) Post-coterritorial vernacular	Geographically contiguous with no non-Jewish coterritorial language	Used as a vernacular	Diaspora par excellence; Ashkenaz III
(4) Postvernacular	Geographically contiguous with no non-Jewish coterritorial language	Used symbolically	Diaspora par excellence; Ashkenaz III+
(5) Cyber-vernacular	Virtual	Used as a vernacular	Digital diaspora; Ashkenaz IV
(6) Cyber-postvernacular	Virtual	Used symbolically	Digital diaspora; Ashkenaz IV+

a whole outside the Land of Israel, the natal homeland of the Jewish people, and to each Jewish speech community in its post-natal territory outside its “homeland in exile”³ respectively, i.e., a two-layered dichotomy of the Diaspora (vis-à-vis the natal homeland) at the macro-level vs. a diaspora (vis-à-vis a homeland in exile) at the micro-level. All the Jewish languages are Diaspora languages by definition, but not every Jewish speech community constitutes a diaspora, nor is every Jewish language a diaspora language at every stage of its development.

The speech community of Yiddish that remains in the original territory where it was formed (Ashkenaz I)⁴ is not a diaspora sociolinguistically, though it may be in the Diaspora. It will be called “homeland in exile” here. Yiddish used there exists side by side with the coterritorial non-Jewish language which supplies its lexical and grammatical core. It will be called a “coterritorial vernacular”. Yiddish began its life in this way in Germany according to the accepted theory on its genesis (Weinreich, 2008).

Speakers of Yiddish started to migrate eastward from Germany to its neighboring Slavic speaking lands in the 13th century, until by the middle of the 18th century the branch of its speech community in Slavic speaking lands (Ashkenaz II)⁵ far outweighed that in Ashkenaz I. The Yiddish speakers retained their language in these new locations, or deutero-homeland in exile, imbued with borrowed lexical and grammatical elements from its new coterritorial Slavic languages.

It is only in the next stage that a Jewish speech community and its language can be considered a diaspora and a diaspora language par excellence. When the Jewish language is transplanted to a new location, where its speech community does not turn into another deutero-homeland in exile, I call this third stage of its development a “post-coterritorial vernacular”.⁶ Mainly from the end of the 19th century speakers of Yiddish started to migrate from its homeland in exile and/or deutero-homeland in exile to North America, South America, Western Europe, Australia, South Africa and Israel (Ashkenaz III), mainly due to poverty in the Russian Empire, which had the largest concentration of Yiddish speakers in the world at that time. In Ashkenaz III Yiddish has become a true diaspora language unsurpassed in its geographic dispersion by any other Jewish language throughout the history of the Jewish Diaspora.

Yiddish has come to assume a new role as a “postvernacular”⁷ in marked contrast to an ever decreasing number of those non-haredim who have used it as a vernacular since the center of Ashkenaz shifted from Ashkenaz II to Ashkenaz III due to the Holocaust, which destroyed Ashkenaz II almost completely.

These six stages can be classified in terms of territoriality, vernacularity and community as in Table 1.

According to Shandler (2006), the main features of Yiddish as postvernacular include the following:

- Existence of “many who profess a profound, genuine attachment to Yiddish who also admit that they don’t really know the language” and “don’t see their lack of fluency as interfering with their devotion” (p. 4).
- Privileging of the secondary level of signification of Yiddish (“the symbolic value invested in the language apart from the semantic value of any given utterance in it”) over its primary level (“its instrumental value as a vehicle for communicating information, opinions, feelings, ideas”) (p. 4).
- “[T]he very fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as meaningful as the meaning of the words being uttered – if not more so.” (p. 22).
- Motivated use of Yiddish by desire/increasing use of Yiddish as an elective act (p. 24).

³ A term borrowed from Brenner (2003).

⁴ A term used by Weinreich (2008, vol. II, p. 733).

⁵ A term used by Weinreich (2008, vol. II, p. 733).

⁶ A term borrowed from Benor (2008, p. 1070), which uses it in a slightly different meaning.

⁷ To the best of my knowledge, Shandler (2000) is the first to use this term, though orally, and Kuznitz (2002) is the first to use it (independently) in print.

- “[D]istinctively performative nature” of language use/“heightened awareness of using Yiddish as a language of conversation, both on the part of the speakers - who have made a deliberate, if impromptu, choice to exchange greetings in the language - and on the part of observers, who find the exchange something to take note of and evaluate” (p. 127).
- “Yiddish is embedded rather than uttered.” (p. 141).
- “Yiddish speech has been professionalized, aestheticized, academized, and ritualized.” (p. 153).

By focusing on the two newest stages in the sociolinguistic development of Yiddish, this study sheds light on the way this diaspora language copes with a new ecosystem called the Internet, which is by nature an ideal habitat for diaspora languages, whether Jewish or non-Jewish.

2. Statistics

It is extremely difficult to measure the size of the Yiddish virtual speech community (or the virtual speech community of any other language) in absolute terms. It is, however, more important to understand it in relative terms so as to locate the position of Yiddish in the ecological hierarchy of languages in the world, especially in comparison with other languages with similar geographic distribution or demographic size. For lack of other crosslinguistic data the following four are checked for Yiddish and some other languages: (1) number of Wikipedia articles, (2) share of Wikipedia articles, (3) number of Wikipedia articles per million speakers, and (4) number of Google groups. The languages checked are: (a) two Jewish diaspora languages (Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish), (b) two non-Jewish diaspora languages (Esperanto and Romani), (c) five European majority languages with a similar number of speakers as Yiddish, (d) five European minority languages with a similar number of speakers as Yiddish. See data in Table 2.

According to this very limited data, the presence of Yiddish (as well as Judeo-Spanish and Romani) in cyberspace turns out to be very small in size even in relative terms. This limited practical use of these languages as cyber-vernaculars might be attributed to the fact that all three are diaspora languages. It does not matter whether a language has a majority or minority status; so long as it is used in geographically contiguous areas in a developed country or countries, it is likely to be widely used practically as well. Many of the speakers of these three diaspora languages presumably conduct their intellectual life, at least in those areas that are not directly related to their respective ethnic cultures, in the official languages of their respective place of residence such as Hebrew, English, Russian, French, Spanish and German, in which far more materials are available online (and offline). Another possible reason for the limited use of Yiddish as cyber-vernacular is the fact that the elderly and the haredim – the two main groups of those who use Yiddish as non-cyber-vernacular – do not use the Internet so much. In the case of Romani, like Hindi, Malay and Swahili, other factors may be involved – unfavorable socioeconomic conditions of their average native speakers. On the other hand, the widespread practical use of Esperanto, another diaspora language is conspicuous, especially in view of the fact that it is the native language of hardly anyone. Possible explanations for the unique use of Esperanto as a cyber-vernacular include: (1) the strong, even ideological, commitment of its prominent users to show to the outside world that it is a viable means of communication; (2) the fact that CMC is the only means of communication on a daily basis for many of its users.

3. Websites and mailing lists examined

Dov Sadan Project for Yiddish Studies (2009) writes as follows:

Entering the word “Yiddish” in the Google search engine in order to check the extent of interest in Yiddish in the world, one finds more than ten million “hits”. This is tangible evidence that Yiddish is embedded in the real world and testifies to the widespread interest in Yiddish today.

But one must distinguish between the practical and symbolic uses of Yiddish on the Internet. The “widespread interest in Yiddish” does not necessarily mean an equally widespread interest in the use of Yiddish as a means of CMC.

It is true that Google Web search returns more than ten million hits for the search terms װײַזש (‘Yiddish’ in standardized Yiddish orthography) and *yidish* (‘Yiddish’ in standardized Roman transcription), but only a very tiny part of them are actually *in* Yiddish.⁸ This is also the case with, e.g., Yiddish.net, which is perhaps one of the most comprehensive directories listing websites *on* Yiddish.⁹ Only a surprisingly small number of websites and mailing lists seem to exist that use Yiddish practically as cyber-vernacular.

The following are the conventional websites examined for this study.¹⁰ The list is likely to be quite exhaustive. Five websites that use Yiddish symbolically as cyber-postvernacular are also added here and examined in what follows; they are marked with an asterisk.

⁸ Only ca. 20% and 5% of the first 100 hits turn out to be webpages written in Yiddish in its orthography and transcription respectively, the rest being Hebrew (ca. 70%) in the former and English (ca. 90%) in the latter, and the share of Yiddish as a cyber-vernacular declines as one digs down the search results (accessed 2009-02-22).

⁹ <http://www.yiddish.net/>. It lists no more than ca. 70 sites, and only three are in Yiddish (accessed 2009-02-22).

¹⁰ Accessed 2009-02-23. Only those are not in maintenance mode (except for a few exceptions) are listed.

Table 2
Internet statistics.

Language		Number of Wikipedia articles (2002-10, 2005-10, 2008-10) ^a	Share of Wikipedia articles (2002-10, 2005-10, 2008-10) ^b (%)	Number of Wikipedia articles per million speakers (2007-07) ^c	Number of Google groups (2009-02) ^d
Jewish diaspora languages	Yiddish	–	–	1406	8
		150	0.006		
		5282	0.046		
	Judeo-Spanish	–	–	10,418	–
		–	–		
		1857	0.016		
Non-Jewish diaspora languages	Esperanto	3718	4.926	43,171	262
		28,111	1.099		
		104,503	0.918		
	Romani	–	–	–	–
		–	–		
		471	0.004		
European majority languages with similar size	Lithuanian	–	–	12,303	2471
		7253	0.284		
		70,748	0.621		
	Slovenian	94	0.125	22,745	1664
		17,337	0.678		
		64,761	0.569		
	Macedonian	–	–	5398	111
		2661	0.104		
		19,278	0.169		
	Latvian	–	–	6666	362
		1945	0.076		
		17,527	0.154		
Estonian	15	0.020	34,507	537	
	11,766	0.460			
	54,213	0.476			
European minority languages with similar size	Catalan	–	–	5706	2134
		18,305	0.716		
		133,214	1.170		
	Galician	–	–	7361	102
		8660	0.339		
		39,627	0.348		
	Irish	–	–	52,230	11
		1857	0.073		
		7262	0.064		
	Basque	12	0.016	33,031	67
		3382	0.132		
		30,454	0.267		
Welsh	–	–	17,290	6	
	3337	0.130			
	18,848	0.165			

^a http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Multilingual_statistics (accessed 2009-02-22).

^b http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Multilingual_statistics (accessed 2009-02-22).

^c http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia_articles_per_population (accessed 2009-02-22).

^d <http://groups.google.com/groups/dir> (accessed 2009-02-22).

- Allgemeiner [news] <<http://www.algemeiner.com/generic.asp?cat=4>>
- Birstein Project [source] <<http://www.yosselbirstein.org/>>
- Bundism.net [research] <<http://www.bundism.net/>>
- Der Bavebter Yid [periodical] <<http://cs. engr. uky. edu/~raphael/bavebter/>>
- Der Yidisher Post [news] <<http://yiddish.bravehost.com/>>
- Der Yidisher Tam–Tam [periodical] <<http://www.yiddishweb.com/tamtam.htm>>
- Di Tsaytung [news] <<http://www.ditzeitung.com/>>
- Forverts [news] <<http://yiddish.forward.com/>>
- Google Yiddish [web search] <<http://www.google.com/intl/yi/>>
- Haynt [news] <<http://www.haynt.org/>>
- Index to Yiddish Periodicals [research] <<http://yiddish-periodicals.huji.ac.il/>>
- League for Yiddish [language] <<http://www.leagueforyiddish.org/>>

- Lebns-fragn [periodical] <<http://www.lebnsfragn.com/>>
- * Living Traditions [music] <<http://www.livingtraditions.org/>>
- * National Yiddish Book Center [books] <<http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/>>
- * National Yiddish Theatre [theater] <<http://www.folksbiene.org/>>
- Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library [source] <<http://www.archive.org/details/nationalyiddishbookcenter>>
- Tugshrift [news] <<http://www.tugshrift.com/>>
- Wiktionary [dictionary] <<http://yi.wiktionary.org/>>
- Wikipedia [reference] <<http://yi.wikipedia.org/>>
- Wikisource [source] <<http://yi.wikisource.org/>>
- * Workmen's Circle [society and culture] <<http://www.circle.org/>>
- Yerusholaimmer Almanakh [periodical] <<http://yiddish-almanach.org/>>
- Yiddish Dictionary [dictionary] <<http://www.verterbukh.org/>>
- Yiddish Texts [source] <<http://shakti.trincoll.edu/~mendele/readyid.htm>>
- Yidishe Heftn [periodical] <<http://www.bernardlazare.org/publications/les-cahiers-yiddish/>>
- Yidishe Velt [news] <<http://www.ivelt.com/>>
- Yisroel Shtern Project [source] <<http://www.yisroelshtern.org/>>
- * YIVO Institute for Jewish Research [research] <<http://www.yivo.org/>>
- Yugntruf [language] <<http://www.yugntruf.org/>>

The following are the mailing lists examined for this study.¹¹

- * Mendele [Yiddish language and literature; ca. 1800 members] <<http://mailman.yale.edu/mailman/listinfo/mendele/>>
- Tate-mames [Yiddish as a family language; 63 members] <<http://groups.google.com/group/tate-mames/>>
- Yiddishland [Yiddish; 136 members] <http://groups.google.com/group/yiddishland/>

The first is probably the oldest and biggest mailing list on Yiddish, but it is meant to use the language mostly symbolically as cyber-postvernacular. The last two, which are rather new and have far less members, were established in order to use Yiddish practically as cyber-vernacular.

4. Practical use as cyber-vernacular

Written practical use of Yiddish on the Internet shows two different characteristics from its counterpart outside the Internet. First, the former shows a far wider range of gradations of writing Yiddish with or without another language, a few of which border on symbolic use, than the latter, as more possibilities of writing two languages exist in hypertexts than in non-hypertexts.

The following Tables 3 and 4 show gradations of practical and symbolic uses of Yiddish as cyber-vernacular and cyber-postvernacular respectively as attested on conventional websites and mailing lists.

Two forms of concessions can be observed on the websites and mailing lists, though they cannot be considered symbolic use yet. One is a linguistic concession to outsiders in those outreach websites that would like to interest them and make them into insiders (types 2–6); on the mailing lists one can also find a curious practice of writing the same message first in Yiddish and then in another language (type 4). The other is a concession to technology in those websites that embed whole Yiddish texts as separate documents (type 7). Yiddish only sites (type 1) are meant for insiders, i.e., they are inreach sites, including newspapers and primary sources, which can be appreciated only by those who are already insiders or at least quasi-insiders.

The second difference between written practical use of Yiddish on the Internet and outside it is that the former is rendered in a more variegated manner, including types of surrogates, such as the use of graphics for rendering Yiddish online.

Tables 5 and 6 show how Yiddish is rendered on websites and mailing lists, if they use it practically as cyber-vernacular at all.

Three kinds of compromises are observed on websites in Yiddish: (1) to transcribe in Roman script, (2) to use graphics in Jewish script, and (3) to embed as a PDF document in Jewish script. They are either for lack of up-to-date digital literacy or due to a practical consideration to save time for converting scanned documents in Jewish script to a machine-readable form.

Yiddish, like many traditional Jewish languages but unlike contemporary Judeo-Spanish, uses Jewish script orthographically. It is seldom written in Roman script when it is used outside the Internet, but once it is used on mailing lists (or email in general), it bears the characteristic of “digraphia”. Fishman (1990) employs this term to refer to the use of two typographic variants of Hebrew script used in classic Jewish sources, commonly known as “square script” and “Rashi script”. As the term “diglossia” has been expanded, I would like to expand “digraphia” to refer to the use of not only two typographic variants of one script but also two separate scripts for one and the same language. Since this phenomenon is essentially restricted in Yiddish to its use in cyberspace in the present study, I will call it “cyber-digraphia”.

¹¹ Accessed 2009-02-24. Only those that are active, have archives open to the public, and are not taken over by spammers are listed.

Table 3
Types of use of Yiddish on websites.

Type	Examples of websites
Practical use	(1) Yiddish only Algemeiner, Forward, Der Bavebter Yid, Google Yiddish, Lebns-fragn, Tugshrift, Wikipedia, Wikisource, Wiktionary, Yidishe Velt, Yiddish Texts
	(2) Mainly Yiddish and partly another language Der Yidisher Post
	(3) Primarily Yiddish and secondarily another language Yugntruf
	(4) Yiddish and another language equally Index to Yiddish Periodicals, Yiddish Dictionary
	(5) Primarily another language and secondarily Yiddish Bundism.net, Yerusholaimer Almanakh
	(6) Mainly another language and partly Yiddish Birstein Project, League for Yiddish, Yisroel Shtern Project
	(7) Another language as a frame and whole Yiddish text embedded as a separate document Der Yidisher Tam–Tam, Di Tsaytung, Haynt, Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, Yidishe Heftn
Symbolic use	(8) Another language as a frame and fragmentary Yiddish embedded Living Traditions, National Yiddish Book Center, National Yiddish Theatre, Workmen's Circle, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Table 4
Types of use of Yiddish in individual messages on mailing lists.

Type	Mendele ^a (%)	Tate-mames ^b (%)	Yiddishland ^c (%)	
Practical use	(1) Yiddish only	5	98	83
	(4) Yiddish and another language equally	10	0	1
Symbolic use	(8) Another language as a frame and fragmentary Yiddish embedded	85	2	16

^a For the period of July–December 2008; ca. 150 messages in total.
^b For the period of January–December 2008; ca. 170 messages in total.
^c For the period of September–December 2008; ca. 200 messages in total.

Table 5
Types of rendition of Yiddish on websites.

Type	Examples of websites
(1) Jewish script in a machine-readable form	Algemeiner, Birstein Project, Bundism.net, Der Yidisher Post, Forward, Google Yiddish, Index to Yiddish Periodicals, League for Yiddish, Lebns-fragn, Tugshrift, Wikipedia, Wikisource, Wiktionary, Yiddish Dictionary, Yerusholaimer Almanakh, Yidishe Velt, Yisroel Shtern Project, Yugntruf
(2) Roman transcription in a machine-readable form	League for Yiddish
(3) Jewish script in graphics	Der Bavebter Yid, Yiddish Texts
(4) Jewish script in embedded PDF	Der Bavebter Yid, Der Yidisher Tam–Tam, Yiddish Texts
(5) Jewish script in embedded graphic PDF	Birstein Project, Di Tsaytung, Haynt, Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, Yidishe Heftn, Yisroel Shtern Project

Cyber-digraphia in online Yiddish is so rampant, especially on mailing lists, as to make a number of people claim that Roman transcription for Yiddish is not only legitimate but even superior to Jewish script.¹² Bass (2008) offers perhaps the most eloquent and convincing critique of this new practice [some typos are corrected – TS]:

Transliterated [sic; to be more precise, transcribed – TS] Yiddish is so widespread in the United States, that many people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, are completely unaware that Yiddish uses the Hebrew alphabet, or was ever a written language in the first place. Transliterated Yiddish enriches the English language, while robbing ours. In its most widespread form, transliterated Yiddish is the written language of the illiterate semi-assimilated Jewry who grew up with the oral tradition, but not with the accompanying education necessary for literacy. [...] The trend of replacing the Hebrew alphabet with the Latin one is undeniably a sign of weakness. It is an example of bowing down to a dominant culture. [...] For the literate, there is now no excuse to defame our great language on the Internet by expressing it in the wretched alphabet of assimilation. Those who are too apathetic to embrace the Hebrew alphabet are an affront to the status of our people. If a language is the soul of a people, it follows that an alphabet is the soul of a language. In order for the rebuilding of our people to be complete, we cannot return to a soulless language.

The following Tables 7 and 8 show types of orthography and transcription used on websites and mailing lists.

¹² See, for example, the following threads of online discussions as two of the newest pieces of evidence as of this writing: <http://groups.google.com/group/yiddishland/browse_thread/thread/057bf5534bd26271>, <http://groups.google.com/group/yiddishland/browse_thread/thread/3ed5665e81e6f83f/>.

Table 6

Types of rendition of Yiddish on mailing lists.

Type	Mendele (%)	Tate-mames (%)	Yiddishland (%)
(1) Jewish script in a machine-readable form	0	>1	47
(2) Roman transcription in a machine-readable form	100	Almost 100	53

Table 7

Types of orthography/transcription on websites.

Type	Examples of websites
(1) Standardized orthography	Der Bavebter Yid, Der Yidisher Tam–Tam, Forward, Index to Yiddish Periodicals, League for Yiddish, Yiddish Dictionary, Yiddish Texts, Yugntruf
(2) Standardized and non-standardized orthographies mixed	Google Yiddish, Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, Wikipedia, Wikisource, Wiktionary, Yiddish Texts
(3) Non-standardized orthography	Algemeiner, Birstein Project, Bundism.net, Chasidic Classified, Der Yidisher Post, Di Tsaytung, Haynt, Lebns-fragn, Tugshrift, Yerusholaimer Almanakh, Yidishe Heftn, Yidishe Velt, Yisroel Shtern Project
(4) Standardized transcription	League for Yiddish

Table 8

Types of orthography/transcription on mailing lists.

Type	Mendele (%)	Tate-mames	Yiddishland
(1) Standardized orthography	–	>1	12
(3) Non-standardized orthography	–	0	35
(4) Standardized transcription	100	89	49
(5) Non-standardized transcription	0	11	4

The rate of Yiddish in standardized orthography is similar on websites and offline. But the use of standardized orthography declines drastically on mailing lists, mainly because many people find it difficult to enter diacritics used in it. On the other hand, when Yiddish is rendered in Roman script, standardized transcription is widely adhered to.

5. Symbolic use as cyber-postvernacular

What characterizes the symbolic use of Yiddish as cyber-postvernacular on websites and mailing lists? Five sites that can be classified as such and are examined – YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Workmen's Circle, National Yiddish Book Center, Living Traditions, and National Yiddish Theatre – are all esteemed, and some very old, organizations working in the areas of Yiddish language and research, society and culture, books, music, and theater respectively, i.e., they position themselves as guardians of Yiddish. Ironically, however, they seem to have abandoned the practical use of Yiddish in general and consequently on the Internet as well. But their abandonment is not complete; Yiddish is used symbolically on their websites, though rather sparingly. On the homepages and some or all major pages they also write the names of their organizations and the page titles in Yiddish in Jewish script but in graphics, *in addition to* English. There are few, if any, pages that use Yiddish in Jewish script in a machine-readable, i.e., searchable, manner. This symbolic use seems to imply that Yiddish has no functional value and only serves as a kind of graphic ornament that is presumably meant to give alleged authenticity as well as some visual “Jewish taste”.

The symbolic use of Yiddish in messages posted to mailing lists is a little different in its particulars. Here are three of the salient features observable there. First, participants in mailing lists start a message with a fixed greeting in Yiddish (such as *sholem-aleykhem* ‘hello’), switch to English in its main body, often with a smattering of fragmentary idiomatic expressions in Yiddish, then end it with another fixed greeting in Yiddish (such as *a sheynem dank* ‘thank you very much’). Second, they sign their message with their Jewish (Yiddish) given name instead of their (official) English one. Third, this fragmentary Yiddish embedded in English is never written in Jewish script but is always transcribed in the same script as the frame language English uses. Here again Yiddish in its symbolic use serves mainly linguistic decoration rather than true communication, i.e., the language itself is part of the message, no matter what it really conveys.

6. Summary

The Internet, especially websites and mailing lists, has a greater potential for diaspora languages like Yiddish than for non-diaspora languages for forming virtual communities, as the former have few non-virtual communities, while the latter already have communities outside the Internet. Yiddish has not fully used this potential, so the virtual community in Yiddish remains rather small. The main use of Yiddish on the Internet is symbolic, or cyber-postvernacular, i.e., one communicates about Yiddish but not so often in Yiddish, in comparison with other languages with a similar population size. In this respect

there is no essential difference between the use of Yiddish on the Internet and outside it: the symbolic use of the language as postvernacular and cyber-postvernacular is an (increasingly) dominant one.

One of the biggest contributions cyber-postvernacularity (as well as postvernacularity) can make to Yiddish is probably the fact that in this way it is liberated from “the fate of expiring with its dwindling population of native speakers”, as Shandler (2006, p. 196) writes – the fate that has been befalling the other traditional Jewish languages, which are more endangered as vernaculars, hence more in need of this new function than Yiddish. It remains to be seen how the share of cyber-postvernacular (and postvernacular) use of Yiddish will affect its time-honored vernacular use and how cyber-postvernacularity (as well as postvernacularity) will affect, reshape and/or transform it and its virtual and non-virtual speech communities.

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