# The impact of Yiddish on the English language

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*An overview of lexical borrowing in the variety of subject areas and spheres of life influenced by Yiddish over time*

## Introduction

Yiddish has served the English language as a comparatively minor donor language of words and meanings over the course of time. However, Yiddish has provided English with a number of borrowings[1] that have become fairly common in present-day usage. This paper provides a rounded overview of the different lexical domains to which Yiddish contributed in the form of new words and expressions over the centuries, which has been relatively neglected in existing studies.[2] The focus of linguistic concern is on those Yiddish-derived terms that have become established in current English.

The findings presented in this paper are based on the analysis of a comprehensive lexicographical sample of 290 Yiddish borrowings retrieved from Murray et al.'s (1884–) *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (hereafter, OED) and the electronic form of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged* (Gove, 2007; hereafter *Webster's Unabridged*). At present, the *OED* is undergoing its first complete revision. The *OED* can be consulted online at <http://www.oed.com>, consisting of the Second Edition from 1989 (commonly referred to as *OED2*), the 1993 and 1997 *OED Additions Series* (hereafter, OED ADD Series) and a plethora of revised and new lexical entries which are part of the Third Edition of the *OED3*. The *OED Online* is updated every three months with additional linguistic data.[3] The digitalized version of *Webster's Unabridged* corresponds to the Third Edition of the dictionary, to which several new words and meanings are being added at regular intervals. It currently represents the largest comprehensive dictionary of American English. Both the electronic *OED* and *Webster's Unabridged* include

a search option which allows the identification of Yiddish-derived items in English: *Advanced Search: entries containing 'Yiddish' in 'Etymology'*.

As I show in thie current paper, the collection of Yiddish borrowings identified in this way encompasses a number of lexical items which are mainly documented in American usage. An essential proportion of Yiddish borrowings were taken over into American English as a result of the Yiddish-speaking population in the United States. Durkin (2014: 364) points out that:

> Yiddish loanwords may often be perceived as Americanisms by speakers of other English varieties, because of the considerable international social and cultural impact of Jewish communities in the United States (especially in New York), although there may be long histories of use within Jewish communities elsewhere (e.g. in London). This perception is probably true to the extent that it is primarily the use

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of these words in some varieties of US English that has led to their familiarity to non-Jewish English speakers elsewhere.

The sample of Yiddish borrowings collected from the *OED* and *Webster's Unabridged* also consists of a number of lexical items which ultimately go back to other foreign languages, such as German, Hebrew, or Polish. It should be noted that the different words and meanings were categorized with the assumption that Yiddish is the immediate donor language. An example is the borrowing *klezmer*, which refers to 'a Jewish instrumentalist', or, in a more specific use, to 'a member of a band of folk musicians in eastern Europe hired to play at Jewish weddings and gatherings' (*Webster's Unabridged*). By the means of metonymy, it can also be used to designate the type of music which is performed by such a band. The word was classified as an adoption of the Yiddish *klezmer*, despite the fact that its Yiddish source originated in Hebrew (see *OED3*).

It seems noteworthy that the dictionaries consulted record the romanized forms of the words of Yiddish origin. The different letters of the Yiddish-derived items have been transcribed into the English alphabet, as is the case with *klezmer*, originally spelt כליזמר or קלעזמער according to the Semitic alphabet. Quite a few Yiddish borrowings have several different spelling variants in English. In these cases, I provide the orthographical form which is identified as the most common spelling in the *OED* and in *Webster's Unabridged*.

## Subject areas and spheres of life influenced by Yiddish

The number of Yiddish-derived words and phrases[4] included in the *OED Online* and in *Webster's Unabridged* amounts to 290 lexical items. I grouped the different borrowings into six general domains and their related subfields. The division of several technical terms was a consequence of their categorization in the two dictionaries. However, the major assignment of the Yiddish borrowings is my own. The diagram below shows the proportions of the various borrowings in the six major subject areas.

The following list allows a comparison to be conducted between the numbers and proportions of the borrowings in a variety of subject fields with their related subgroups. Areas with a fairly high percentage of Yiddish-derived words and senses succeed domains where the influx of Yiddish was weaker. For each lexical domain,

some representative examples of words of Yiddish provenance are provided:

(1) LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS (three borrowings, i.e. 1.0%), for example, *Yiddish*, n. (1871); *mameloshen*, n. (1968).

(2) CRIMINALITY (six borrowings, i.e. 2.1%), for example, *ganef*, n. (circa 1839).

(2.1) Drugs (three borrowings, i.e. 1.0%), for example, *schmeck*, n. (1932).

(3) ENTERTAINMENT AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES (12 borrowings, i.e. 4.1%)

(3.1) Music (one borrowing, i.e. 0.3%), for example, *klezmer*, n. (1908/first recorded in the *OED* in 1929).

(3.2) Hotel business (three borrowings, i.e. 1.0%), for example, *tummler*, n. (1965/ first attested in 1966 in the *OED*).

(3.3) Sports and games (eight borrowings, i.e. 2.6%), for example, *stuss*, n. (1912); *bagel*, n. (first documented as a sports term in 1974).

(4) GASTRONOMY (51 borrowings, i.e. 17.6%), for example, *matzo*, n. (1650); *gefüllte fish*, n. phr. (1892); *bagel*, n. (1908/first recorded in the *OED* in 1919); *matzo brei/matzo brie*, n. phr. (1949); *ingberlach*, n. (not dated); *kichel*, n. (not dated).

(5) FAITH AND RELIGION (53 borrowings, i.e. 18.3%), *frum*, adj. (1859); *yarmulke*, n. (1903); *shalach monos*, n. phr. (not dated).

(6) PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY LIFE (145 borrowings, i.e. 50%)

(6.1) Clothing (five borrowings, i.e. 1.7%), for example, *kapote* (not dated).

(6.1.1) Accessories (eight borrowings, i.e. 2.6%), for example, *moloker*, n. (1890).

(6.2) Means of payment (seven borrowings, i.e. 2.4%), for example, *finnip*, n. (1839).

(6.3) Trade and selling (eight borrowings, i.e. 2.6%), for example, *to hondle*, v. (1921); *schlockmeister*, n. (1965).

(6.4) Love and sexuality (11 borrowings, i.e. 3.8%), e.g *to yentz*, v. (1930); *zaftig*, adj. (1937); *bashert*, n. (1975).

(6.5) Communication (25 borrowings, i.e. 8.6%), for example, (*that's*) *all one needs*, phr. (1965); *meh*, interjection (1992).

(6.6) Society, human behaviour and characteristics (81 borrowings, i.e. 27.9%), for example, *meshuga*, adj. (1868); *luftmensch/luftmensh*, n. (1907); *schlump*, n. (1948).

20 (i.e. 6.9%) Yiddish borrowings recorded in the *OED* and in *Webster's Unabridged*, cannot be clearly categorized into a particular lexical domain.

This is valid for *tsores*, for instance, which was adopted from Yiddish in 1901. It denotes '[t]rouble(s), worries' (*OED2*), just like the Yiddish source term *tsores*, the plural of *tsore* 'woe', 'trouble', itself derived from Hebrew. According to the *OED2*, the borrowing is confined to colloquial American English.

The field of LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS encompass the smallest number of Yiddish borrowings. The words *Yiddish* and *mameloshen* are typical examples. From *Webster's Unabridged* it emerges that the former was adapted from the Yiddish *yidish* in the phrase *yidish daytsh*, 'Jewish German', which ultimately goes back to Middle High German. The borrowing has been documented since 1871 in English. *Mameloshen* is restricted to Jewish usage, designating 'a mother tongue' (*OED3*), notably Yiddish.[5] Its earliest recorded usage in the *OED3* dates from 1968.

The domain of CRIMINALITY equally includes a relatively small percentage of adopted lexical items. Most of them are slang terms occurring in American English. This is true for the borrowing *ganef*, for instance, which was borrowed from Yiddish in circa 1839 as a term for 'a thief, a rascal' (*Webster's Unabridged*). Similarly, the related field of drugs contains various slang terms, such as *schmeck*, which refers to 'a drug' or, in a more specialized sense, to 'heroin' (*OED2*). The item was taken over from the Yiddish *schmeck*, literally 'a sniff', in the earlier decades of the 20th century, i.e. in 1932.

Several Yiddish borrowings which have been assumed into English belong to the area of entertainment and leisure activities. These encompass Yiddish-derived items in 'music' (for example, *klezmer*), 'hotel business' (for example, *tummler*), and 'sports and games' (for example, *bagel*, *stuss*). According to the *OED2*, *tummler* was originally and is mostly used in American English for '[s]omeone who acts the clown, a prankster', or, in a more specific meaning, 'a professional maker of amusement and jollity at a hotel or the like', as in:

> 1977 *New Yorker* 12 Sept. 86/3 A summer job as part-time social director and tummler at a hotel in Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey. (*OED2*)

*Tummler* has been attested since the 1960s in English. Its Yiddish equivalent was formed from the German verb *tummeln* 'to stir' (see *OED2*). As for *bagel*, the word was first documented as a sports term some time after its introduction into English. The word was adapted from the Yiddish *beygel* at the beginning of the 20th century, referring to '[a] hard ring-shaped salty roll of bread' (*OED2*). *Bagel* has been attested as a slang term since 1974 for '[a] score in a set of six games to love' (*OED2*). The borrowing was first used in this sense by Eddie Dibbs, an American tennis player, 'due to the similarity of the numeral 0 in the scoreline 6-0 to the shape of a bagel' (*OED2*), as is corroborated by the following usage example:

> 1974 *Los Angeles Times* 20 Sept. iii. 1/1 You see, when you get beat six games to love, it's called 'The Bagel' . . . A bagel has a hole. Zero. (*OED2*)

*Stuss* relates to 'faro in which cards are dealt by hand and the banker takes all bets on splits' (*Webster's Unabridged*). It has been documented in English since 1912. The Yiddish associate *shtos*/*stos* may correspond to the German *Stoß*, meaning 'push', 'blow' (see *OED2*, *Webster's Unabridged*).

The field of GASTRONOMY represents the third largest area influenced by Yiddish. Most of the borrowings in this domain refer to dishes. Examples are *gefüllte fish*, '[a] Jewish dish of stewed or baked stuffed fish or fish-cakes, boiled in a fish-or vegetable-broth' (*OED2*), *matzo brei* and its spelling variant *matzo brie*, designating porridge prepared from *matzo*, itself a term of Yiddish origin for '[a] crisp biscuit or wafer of unleavened bread which is traditionally eaten by Jews during Passover' (*OED3*). We also find a number of culinary terms for desserts and items of confectionary among the borrowings under consideration, such as *ingberlach*, 'a candy made chiefly of ginger and honey', and *kichel*, 'a semisweet baked product made of eggs, flour, and sugar usually rolled and cut in diamond shape and baked until puffed' (*Webster's Unabridged*). *Ingberlach* constitutes the plural of the Yiddish *ingberl* 'small piece of ginger sweet', a diminutive coined from *ingber* 'ginger'. *Kichel* is derived from the Yiddish *kikhel* 'small cake', the diminutive of *kukhen* 'cake', which ultimately goes back to Old High German. It should be noted that *ingberlach* and *kichel* are listed in *Webster's Unabridged*, but they are not recorded in the *OED*, which might be due to the fact that their usage is more common in American English. The items are not given a first attested use in *Webster's Unabridged*.

FAITH AND RELIGION constitutes the second largest domain influenced by Yiddish over time. A typical feature of this field is the comparatively high proportion of culture-specific terms from Judaism.

An example is the adjectival borrowing *frum*, '[d]evoutly observant of Jewish laws; strictly orthodox or religious' (*OED3*). The word has been attested in English since 1859. A look at the documentary linguistic evidence in dictionaries such as the *OED3* reveals that it is still in use in current English, for example:

> 2001 P. Marber *Howard Katz* ii. 98 Lou. (*referring to yarmulke*) I didn't know you were *frum.* Katz. Oh yeah, well, I've *become frum*. (*OED3*)

The above example contains an additional Yiddish borrowing to do with faith and religion. This is *yarmulke*, which was introduced into English in 1903 as a term for 'a skull cap worn especially by Orthodox and Conservative Jewish males in the synagogue, the house, and study halls' (*Webster's Unabridged*). Its Yiddish source *yarmolke* goes back to the Polish *jarmulka,* meaning 'cap'. There is also the nominal phrase *shalach monos*, which can either refer to 'the exchange of gifts or the sending of gifts to the poor at the time of the Purim festival', or, in a metonymic sense, to 'a Purim gift consisting typically of cakes, confections, fruit, wine, or money' (*Webster's Unabridged*). Like most of the lexical items in the field of faith and religion, *shalach monos* belongs to the group of Yiddish borrowings which appear to be unknown to the 'average' native speaker of English.

The field of PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY LIFE includes the largest proportion of Yiddish borrowings. The domain comprises six subfields, consisting of borrowings to do with clothing and accessories, such as *kapote*, a type of coat traditionally worn by Jews coming from eastern European countries, and *moloker*, a variety of hat. It also encompasses Yiddish-derived words referring to means of payment, trade and selling. Examples are *finnip*, which specifies five pounds or, in American English, a five-dollar note, the verbal borrowing *to hondle*, meaning 'to haggle, to bargain' (*OED3*) in Jewish usage, and *schlockmeister*, 'a purveyor of cheap merchandise, 'special offers', and the like' (*OED2*). The latter constitutes a compound formed from the Yiddish noun *schlock*, a colloquial term for '[c]heap, shoddy, or defective goods' (*OED2*), and *meister*, which either reflects the Yiddish *mayster* or the German *Meister* 'master'. It seems noteworthy that the more assimilated form *schlockmaster*, a hybrid compound, is equally recorded in the *OED2*, as in:

> 1978 M. Puzo *Fools Die* xxxiii. 388 He had signed a long-term contract with Tri-Culture and become the ace schlockmaster for Jeff Wagon.

In addition, there are borrowings related to LOVE AND SEXUALITY, such as *bashert*, a term occurring in Jewish usage for 'a person's predestined romantic partner; a soulmate' (*OED3*), the verb *to yentz*, literally meaning 'to cheat', 'to deceive' or, in a transferred sense, 'to fornicate', and the adjective *zaftig*, which is used in relation to a woman in the sense of 'plump, curvaceous, "sexy"' (*OED2*). *Zaftig* falls into the category of Yiddish-derived words which are restricted to colloquial American English, for example:

> 1981 *Gossip* (Holiday Special) 11/2 Zaftig Dolly Parton ... once described herself as looking like a 'hooker with a heart of gold'. (*OED2*)

PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY LIFE also encompasses borrowings referring to COMMUNICATION, among them a number of interjections and phrases which may make a speech or a conversation more expressive. The interjection *meh* and the phrase (*that's*) *all one needs* serve as examples. *Meh* is used to express 'indifference or lack of enthusiasm' (*OED3*), as is illustrated by the following example:

> 2012 N.Y. Times (National ed.) 1 Nov. b13/1 Who else could they root for? The Chicago Bulls? Impossible. The Boston Celtics? Unconscionable. The team in New Jersey? Meh. (*OED3*)

According to the *OED3*, *meh* might go back to the Yiddish *me*, literally 'be as it may', 'so-so'. The phrase (*that's*) *all one needs* was translated from the Yiddish *nor dos feylt mir*. The linguistic documentary evidence illustrating the typical use of this phrase in English often reflects an ironic or sarcastic tone of the speaker, as in:

> 1977 'E. Crispin' Glimpses of Moon xi. 217 'My God, it's the pigs,' said the hunt saboteuse disgustedly. 'That was all we needed.' (*OED3*)

In addition, the domain consists of a substantial proportion of borrowings relating to SOCIETY, HUMAN BEHAVIOUR AND CHARACTERISTICS, including a number of terms for INDIVIDUALS WITH NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS. An example is *luftmensch/luftmensh*, 'an impractical contemplative person having no definite trade, business, or income' (*Webster's Unabridged*). Its Yiddish source was coined from the German *Luft* 'air' and *Mensch* 'individual', 'human being'. A characteristic of this field is the comparatively high proportion of borrowings which chiefly occur in colloquial usage, such as *schlump*, '[a] dull-witted, slow, or slovenly person; a slob; a fool' (1993 *OED ADD Series*), and *meshuga*, a slang term commonly
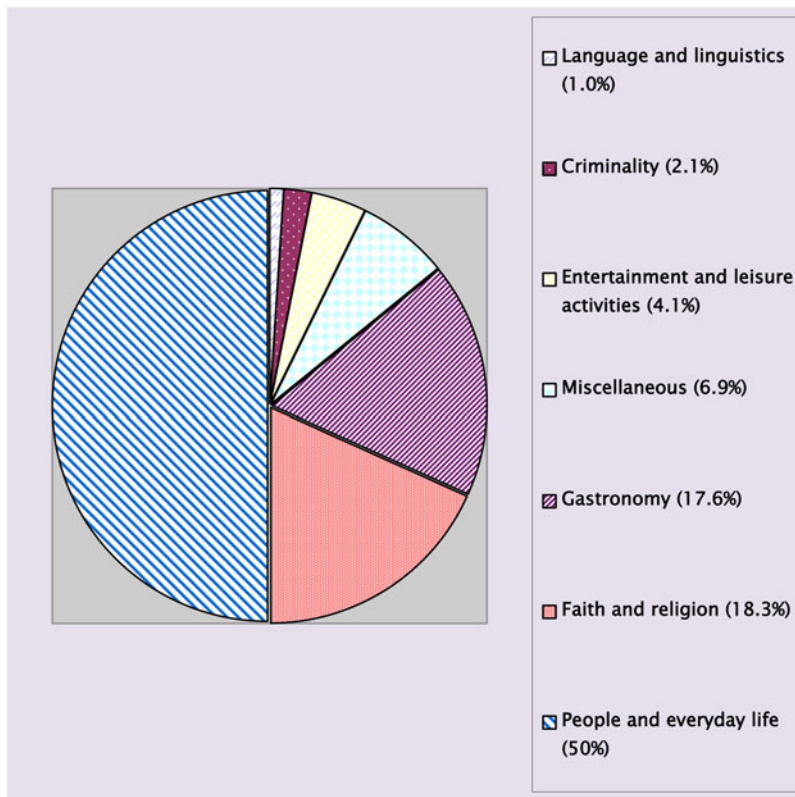
Figure 1. The proportion of Yiddish borrowings in the different subject areas

used by Jewish speakers in the meaning of 'mad, crazy; stupid' (*OED3*).

## Conclusion

This paper shows that a characteristic of the body of lexical borrowings which has been transferred from Yiddish into English over the course of time is its variety. It comprises not only specialized, technical expressions confined to Judaism, but also words which have become fairly common in present-day usage. A typical feature of the Yiddish-derived vocabulary is the considerable number of colloquial terms, which mostly occur in informal usage. The majority of these types of borrowings have meanings and connotations for which no adequate English-translation equivalent exists. One might argue that Yiddish has provided the language with a host of words that seem to be indispensable to 'modern' speakers of English.

## Notes

**1** *Borrowing* functions as the usual term for the process in which a word or a sense is transferred from

one language into another language. It can also specify the word or the sense which is borrowed in this process.

**2** For a comprehensive study of the Yiddish impact on English throughout its history, see Schultz (in preparation).

**3** For detailed information about the *OED* revision process, see Durkin (1999: 1–49).

**4** The grammatical terminology used in the present article is based on Quirk et al.'s *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (2008). For the definition and understanding of *phrase*, see Quirk (2008: 2.3ff and 2.25ff).

**5** For the semantics and usage of further uncommon Yiddish borrowings, see the corresponding information provided by the *OED* and *Webster's Unabridged*.

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