

## **Slavonic Element in Jewish American English: The Case of Human-specific Vocabulary Items**

**Anna Dziama**, University of Rzeszów, Poland  
anna.dziama@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

The paper aims at presenting Yiddish-originating lexical items that have been incorporated into the field HUMAN BEING in English, and – to be more precise – mainly in the American variety of English. The words analysed here: *nebbich*, *paskudnyak* and *schlub* have been directly taken from Yiddish, yet may be said to be of very international character, chiefly Slavonic languages such as Czech, Polish, Russian and Slovak.

### **Keywords**

Yiddish, Jewish English, Slavonic Languages, *nebbich*, *paskudnyak*, *schlub*

### **On Yiddish Language and the Slavonic Impact on Mame-Loshn**

The prevailing and most readily recognized theory of the genesis of Yiddish places the origin of this language on the banks of the Rhine and the Moselle around the 10<sup>th</sup> century. According to Weinreich (1980, p. 1-9), the language was developed by French and Italian Jews who settled in what today is known as the Rhineland (more precisely explained by Weinreich, 1980, p. 1, as the cities and regions along the Rhine and Moselle, in the area designated by the Jews as Loter). Three to four centuries later the language began to make contact with Slavonic languages, first with the western Slavonic group i.e. Czech, Polish, Slovak and Sorbic-Polabian, then Belorussian, Russian and Ukrainian. The famous linguist Uriel Weinreich presented his theory of the languages in contact for the first time in 1953 while Paul Wexler developed a contrasting theory of the rise of Yiddish which will be outlined later in this paper.

The fusion approach developed by Weinreich (1980) focuses on the system of Yiddish rather than on identifying elements as German, Hebrew or Slavonic. Since Weinreich (1980, p. 546) speaks of the Yiddish as a ‘fusion language’ it is worth pointing out the fact that in most cases the co-territorial non-Jewish language with which Yiddish speakers came into contact was one of the Slavonic languages, such as Belorussian, Polish, Russian, or Ukrainian, and hence one can speak of the Yiddish and Slavonic bilingualism among Jews which was the rule rather than the exception. This easily noticeable contact resulted in a widespread Slavonic influence on Yiddish language at every cultural and religious level. Some most common examples include:

1. A Slavonic-type rule of anticipatory (regressive) voicing assimilation, as in *fus* + *benkl* which forms *fuzbenkl* 'stool').
2. A system of verbal aspect highly influenced by the semantics of Slavonic aspect, as in the prefix *tse-* (*tsebrekhen* 'to break').
3. A number of borrowed derivational morphemes, such as the agentive *-nik* (as in *nudnik* 'bore' from *nudne* 'boring' and *paskudnyak* meaning 'foul'), and the diminutives *-tshik* (*boytshik* 'a boy', 'a young man') and *-ke* (*tchotchke* 'a small item').
4. Numerous borrowed verbs, with an especially high proportion of verbs that distinguish manner of action, such as *shushken* 'whisper', *kvitshen* 'scream' and *mlien* 'simme'.
5. Slavonic kinship terms adopted for several major categories, for example, *zeyde* 'grandfather', *bobe* 'grandmother' and *plemenik* 'nephew'.

The scholar concludes that as for Yiddish origins, a special framework is essential for any discussion of its etymological sources. Weinreich (1980) distinguishes the following three key terms, that is *stock*, *determinant* and *component* (see Jacobs 2005, p. 20). The term *stock language* refers to the external languages which are relevant for the fusion approach, i.e., German, Hebrew, Aramaic, Polish and Russian. For Weinreich (1980) the determinant is that subset of a stock language which potentially could have served as a source for elements of features which surface in the system of Yiddish. Here, the term *determinant* serves as the means of narrowing down more precisely what is meant by the term *stock*. The knowledge of geography, history and diachronic developments that affected the history of the language are essential in this case. In turn, the term *components* refers to those elements of the determinant which became part of Yiddish. As Jacobs (2005, p. 20) puts it, the term is *basically an etymological footnote concerning a given element in Yiddish. Yiddish does not consist of "scraps" of the grammars of Polish, Hebrew, German, etc. Rather, Yiddish grammar is to be analyzed in terms of its internal system.*

Significantly, Wexler (1987, 2002, 2006) challenges Weinreich (1980) and maintains that *Weinreich's model of Yiddish is essentially wrong in most of its details.* Instead, the scholar provides linguistic evidence to show that (Judeo-) Slavonic and (Judeo-) Greek elements were also present at the birth of Yiddish, and, therefore, localizes its origin to areas which were under Slavonic influence. Wexler (1987) proposed a theory that Yiddish was not a Germanic language, but rather a Western Slavonic language, whose vocabulary items were largely replaced by High German elements. One of the followers of this theory is Geller (2008, p. 19) who claims that Yiddish is a mixed language which was based on

the Slavonic roots, and then by means of the language shift was Germanized, i.e. the Slavocentric approach to Yiddish versus Germanocentric.

Wexler (2002, p. 9) speculates that Jews speaking Judeo-Serbian between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries had resisted the pressure to change to German language as they avoided conversion to Christianity. Although Germans migrated into a largely Serbian and Polabian lands, Jews living in that region made only a partial shift to German. To prove his theory valid Wexler (2002, p. 13) provides examples of evidently Slavonic terms used in Yiddish, such as *mame* 'grandmother' and *tate* 'grandfather'.

Interestingly, it is worth pointing out that on the eve of World War 2 there were about 11 million speakers of Yiddish residing, mainly on the Polish, Czech, Slovak, Russian territories. Obviously, this number was drastically reduced both by the Holocaust and by massive shifts to other primary languages (Weinreich 1953, p. 126). As Jacobs (2005, p. 2) rightly observes Yiddish in modern times, both in the European home territory and in the Ashkenazic Diaspora, served as the language of the Ashkenazic masses in every walk of life, at home, in theatre, cinema, literature, politics, journalism and in schools – both secular and religious. Yiddish became the most important means of communication among Jews when *YIVO* (*Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*, founded in 1925 in Wilno, Poland, now Vilnius, Lithuania, as the *Yiddish Scientific Institute*. The *YIVO* Institute for Jewish Research is dedicated to the history and culture of Ashkenazi Jewry and to its influence in the North and South America. Headquartered in New York City since 1940, today *YIVO* is the world's preeminent resource center for East European Jewish Studies, Yiddish language, literature and folklore as well as the American Jewish immigrant experience) was established in Vilna. It is important to stress that of the six million Jews that perished in the Nazi genocide, approximately 5 million were Yiddish speakers (see Jacobs, 2005, p. 3).

### **Yiddish Element in American English – The Development of Jewish English**

Now, let us move our discussion – across the ocean – and present a review of Jewish varieties of English. Steinmetz (1981, p. 14) defines Jewish English as [...] *a form of Yiddish- and Hebrew- influenced English used by Jews, regardless of the extent of its hybridization*. On the one hand, the spectrum of Jewish English speakers includes at one extreme those who are labelled as Modern Orthodox Jews, who are likely to be fluent in Yiddish, and – on the other hand – secularized Jews who may be familiar with Jewish English yet they tend to employ it only to a limited degree in their day-to-day communication. Gold (1985, p. 281) defines Jewish English as a cover term for a continuum of dialects whose distance from non-Jewish English (i.e., general English) varies. According to Gold (1985, p. 282),

the need to express Jewish experience is the reason why there are so many Jewish varieties of English. First and foremost, Jews are inclined to use certain lexical items to express the peculiarities of their daily existence. They use such words as *shabes clocks* 'a clock which shows when the Shabes begins and finishes', *yortsal calendar* 'anniversary' or *matse-meal* 'a brittle, flat piece of unleavened bread eaten during Passover'. Another reason for the development of Jewish English is the influence of other natural languages. Gold (1985, p. 282) states that speakers of Jewish languages, like any others, [...] *as they get older, find it even harder to acquire a native grasp of another language, hence features of other languages one knows may influence the newly acquired one [...] to impart a more Jewish character to a newly acquired language.* Gold (1985, p. 283) also claims that Hebrew and Yiddish are archistratal languages in Anglophone countries, and hence they may be potential sources of influence on the English used by Jews.

Several reasons can be discerned for the development of Jewish varieties of English in history. For example, a native speaker of Yiddish who learns English as an adult may speak English which shows some Yiddish influence. This influence is passed on to the succeeding generation and becomes fused. Hence, when a hearer becomes acquainted with a certain dialect, he or she normally begins by hearing the vestiges of a certain substratum in one's speech. In his seminal sociolinguistic work titled *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* Labov (1966) demonstrates that certain features of New York speech, such as raised intonation in words like *off* and *cough*, are more common among Jewish Americans than among Italian American and Irish Americans.

Moreover, there are many communal variations among American Jews, for example, the speech pattern of members of different religious synagogues (e.g., Orthodox, Conservative, Reform), or between religious speakers and secularized Jews. As Gold (1985, p. 283) puts it [...] *each item of Jewish English has a certain currency from the individual, generational, chronological, Jewish communal, and non-Jewish viewpoints.* The major communal line of division in Jewish English runs between Ashkenazic and non-Ashkenazic varieties, with most of the Ashkenazic varieties being Sephardic English. Interestingly, as observed by Gold (1985:284), if one needs to integrate, for example, Yiddish verbs into the tissue of American English the Yiddish infinitive ending must be dropped. Therefore, Yiddish *shepn* 'draw' or *kvetchn* 'complain' appear in English use in a modified form as *shep* and *kvetch*.

There are American Jews who communicate in vulgar varieties of Jewish English to express swearing and obscenity of various kinds (see, for example, the writings of Phillip Roth, Saul Bellow and Leo Rosten). Noteworthy, this style-shift occurs when one discusses Jewish subjects with a 'non-Jew' (gentile) or in order

to be more cryptic so that non-Jews could be hindered in understanding a thing. Significantly, normally a typical Jew tends to avoid expressions with non-Jewish connotations, such as the *Old Testament*, *B.C.* 'before Christ', *A.D.* 'anno domini'. Most speakers of Jew.E. use those varieties which are based on Eastern Yiddish which are called collectively *Eastern Ashkenazic English*. Most other varieties of Jewish English, for example the variety based on *Judezmo*, are obsolete or hardly ever used any more. Indeed, those Jewish English lexical items which were domesticated in general English are of Yiddish origin.

Moreover, according to McArthur (1992, p. 546), Jewish English is a collective term that covers several varieties of English which are spoken and written by Jews all over the world, mostly in English speaking countries. The language is marked by a range of lexical items, grammatical and other linguistic and paralinguistic elements. McArthur (1992, p. 546) informs us that *Jewish English has existed in one way or another as long as Jews have been speaking English*. At present, the most common variety of language is a type of English influenced by strong Yiddish and Hebrew admixture. Indeed, the impact of Ashkenazi Jews on mostly Northern American culture is so immense that the introduction of such neologisms as *mave* 'an expert', *schmuck* 'a stupid or foolish person', *nosh* 'a snack' and *schlep* 'to pull' is easily observable.

### **Slavonic Element in Jewish American English: The Case of Human-specific Vocabulary Items**

It is worth pointing out that English has never been a language of people isolated to the extent of not having any contacts with the world outside their own society. Baugh and Cable (1993, p. 1) put it in the following manner:

*The diversity of cultures that find expression in it is a reminder that the history of English is a story of cultures in contact during the past 1,500 years. It understates matters to say that political, social, and cultural forces influence a language.*

Following this line of reasoning, one should mention Slavonic lexical items that entered the American variety of English through the means of Yiddish as numerous Jewish American writers, comedians and scriptwriters introduced elements of Yiddish culture and words into popular American culture. Let us now concentrate on examining the semantic evolution of three words – one Czech, one Polish and one Russian lexical item – related to the conceptual macrocategory **HUMAN BEING** that are key examples of Yiddish-originating lexical items in American English (for the sake of maximum methodological accuracy of the research intended, a congruent body of semantic components have been employed. In attempting to achieve the goals of the analysis, certain elements of Componential Analysis will be set to work – in particular – the versions

developed in the earlier literature of the subject by Nida (1975) and – in a refined and modified form – by Kleparski (1986, 1990) of the Rzeszów School of *Diachronic Semantics*).

**NEBBICH (1892→present):** The majority of reference sources that have been put to use here, such as the *OED*, *MW*, *UD*, Rosten (1968), Bluestein (1998), Eisenberg and Scolnic (2006) inform us that the Yiddish lexical item *nebbich* (נעביש) (with alternative forms: *nebbish*, *nebich*, *nebbishe*, *nebbisher*, *nebbish*, *neb*) is used in the general sense ‘a nobody’ and ‘a nonentity’. As given in the *OED*, the lexical item in question is of Western-Yiddish origin employed in the sense of ‘regret’ and ‘pity’. It is used as a noun, an adjective and an adverb, and most often as an interjection, for example:

**2011** *Nebich*, the poor man. He is a great *nebich*. (object of pity).

As to the etymology of *nebbich*, Zunz (1880, p. 456) argues that it is of Polish origin. However, Grünbaum (1882, p. 394) speaks of its German roots, namely *Nie bei euch*, based on Jewish religious translations of the Torah, such as *Lam i. 12*, which Jewish commentators such as Rashi and Ibn Ezra read as ‘May such a calamity not come upon you’. Similarly, Polish Jews frequently employed the Hebrew words of that passage, *Lo ‘alekem*, in the same sense. However, the *RHD*, *MW* and *ED* also speak of its Slavonic roots, and compare it to the Czech word *nebohý* ‘poor’ also spelled with *-sh* which is probably the Western Yiddish form of the word. Wexler (1987, p. 159) discusses the etymology of the word *nebbich* possibly deriving from Old Cze *nebohý* ‘deceased’, ModCze ‘unfortunate, poor’. The lexical item in question is used chiefly in the American English slang with the sense range ‘a pitifully ineffectual’, ‘luckless and timid person’. The *RHD* records its first attestation in American English at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and informs us of its Yiddish origin used in the sense *nebekh* ‘poor’, ‘unfortunate’. Likewise, the *OED* speaks in favour of Yiddish etymology of this lexical item which continues to be used in the same sense today, as testified by the following late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century quotations:

**1892** 'Achi *nebbich*, poor little thing!' cried Mrs. Kosminski, who was in a tender mood.



**1959** It's ach a *nebish* Harry now. It's not easy for him. Other men get ill but they fight.



**1975** Mr. Antonacci is both antic and affecting as the jumpy, craven *nebbish* Honey Boy, and John Bottoms is superb in several roles.



**2001** They asked me, *nebekh*, to break the sad news.

Interestingly enough, the *OED* informs us that the word *nebbich* is also used in the adjectival form meaning 'innocuous,' 'ineffectual,' 'luckless,' 'hapless', but also as an expression of commiseration and dismay. Bluestein (1998, p. 76) provides the following definition of the semantics of *nebbich*, that is 'a nothing' and 'a loser' and quotes Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979): *And me a hungry Jewish youth, a poor nebbish with five dollars landing on Ellis Island not knowing a single individual*. Similarly, Rosten (1968, p. 264) defines the sense of the discussed lexical item as 'an ineffectual, weak, helpless, unfortunate person, a loser and a nonentity and a nothing of a person'. Also Wexler (1987, p. 159) points to the usage of this noun which serves as an interjection or used in the sense 'poor' and 'an unfortunate person as in *dos mejdel nebbich* translated as 'the poor girl'. We are also informed by Wexler (1987:159) that the lexical item in question spread from Western Yiddish to German and Dutch slang used in the sense 'nothing', 'naught', 'lost'.

Apart from the presence of such human-specific common components as [+ANIMATE] and [+HUMAN] that locate the sense of the word in the macrocategory **HUMAN BEING**, one can clearly speak of the word being associated with such diagnostic components as (αMALE), (+WEAK), (+HELPLESS) and (+INCAPABLE). Additionally, Eisenberg and Scolnic (2006:110) inform us that the lexical item is often [...] used to describe someone you feel sorry for which makes the semantics of the word associated with such negatively loaded elements (supplementary rather than diagnostic) as /+MISERABLE/ and /+PITIFUL/.

**PASKUDNYAK (1968→present):** The word (alternative form: *paskudnak*) is a /+SLANG/ marked expression used in present-day Am.E. of Yiddish provenance based on the Polish/Ukrainian adjective *paskudny*. The noun *paskudny* in Polish is used in the following senses, as confirmed by the *SJP*: 1) 'an ugly man' 2) 'a mean, 'unpleasant person' 3) [as in] *mleczaj paskudnik* 'type of edible mushroom' and 4) (*old fashioned use*) 'cattle and horse disease treated by removing of the membrane of the eye' (see Dziama, 2013). It is used in the sense 'nasty', 'dirty' and 'mean' (see the *UD*, Rosten). As for the semantics of the Yiddish word *paskudnyak*, it is not infrequently argued that it is based on the Russian word *накѣд* used in the sense 'bastard'. Likewise, in Polish the word *paskudzić* means 'to bungle,' 'mess up' or 'botch'. Also, in Polish the noun employed to express the abomination is *Paskudztwo!* 'What an ugly thing to see!'. Similarly, a related word in Russian is *позорный* which is used in the sense 'dishonorable'. Rosten (1968, p. 285) defines its sense as 'a man or a woman who is *paskudne*', hence 'nasty, mean, odious and contemptible', and – in general – the word is linked to a highly opprobrious sense. The author provides us with the following quotation from the 1960s:

**1968** I wouldn't say Hello to a *paskudnyak* like that.

The author goes on to say that this lexical item is one of the most graphically illustrative words in Yiddish as it offers [...] *the connoisseur three nice, long syllables, starting with a sibilant of reprehension and ending with a nasality of scorn. In other words, it adds cadence to contempt* (Rosten, 1968, p. 238). Also, the *UD* informs us that the word *paskudnyak* is an extremely expressive Yiddish insult [...] *the most potent and offensive insult known to man. It has so much connotation that cannot be truly defined that the closest you can come to its meaning is 'horrible person'. No other definition has the meaning, and there is no way to convey how powerful that word is and should be used with caution.* Similarly, Wex (2006, p. 155) points to the strength of this lexical item, and compares it to the sense of English *S. O. B.* In current American English *paskudnyak* is used with the strongly negative evaluative load 'oral violence' which allows us to postulate the presence of such diagnostic components as (+DISGUSTING), (+MEAN) and (+UNKIND). The sense is evidenced in the following recent context:

**2005** Hitler was a prime example of a *paskudnyak*. You'd be hard pressed to come up with others.

Interestingly enough, the lexical item in question has not been added to the *OED* records yet. Nevertheless, one may expect the term will be noticed by the English dictionary scholars as there is a growing tendency in American English works of fiction, film industry and television to use the word *paskudnyak* in the sense ‘utter ugliness’ (see, for example, Cooper’s *Prince Paskudnyak and the Giant Bats*).

**SCHLUB (1964→present):** The noun *schlub* (alternative forms: *shlub*, *zlob*, *zlub*) is used chiefly in American English as a slang appellation to convey the sense ‘a worthless person,’ and ‘a jerk’ (see the *OED*, *MW*). It comes from Yiddish, possibly modelled upon Polish *źłób* ‘a blockhead’ (see the *ED*). When we go back to the beginnings of the word, we see that its historically primary meaning is presumably similar to the Polish lexical item *źłób*, in its original sense, that is ‘a crib’ or ‘a manger’ (cf. Czech *žlab*, Slovak *žl’ab*), the sense which is associated with the presence of such elements as [-ANIMATE] and [-HUMAN] that place the sense in the sphere of **INANIMATE OBJECTS**. The metaphorical process operating here may be said to have involved the substitution of the components [+ANIMATE] and [+HUMAN] to account for the rise of the human-specific sense threads ‘a worthless person’ and ‘a jerk’. Additionally, one may speak of addition of such diagnostic components as (+WORTHLESS) and (+DESPICABLE) illustrated by the following 20<sup>th</sup> century *OED* quotations:

**1964** ‘Kaplowitz,’ I say, ‘are you a janitor or a *schlub*? I’m a janitor. And such a dirty basement I can’t stand.’

⇕

**1970** He backed out—can you imagine? Hired a couple of college *shlubs*.

⇕

**1978** After bearing two children of the real-estate *shlub*, Earl Jr.

The sense of the lexical item is colourfully and jocularly depicted in the book *From Schlub to Stud: How to Embrace Your Inner Mensch and Conquer the Big City* by a Jewish American New York Post journalist and writer Max Gross who explained in the interview:

*I don’t think that schlubs are necessarily failures in life. They’re a little disorganized [...] I think you can find them all throughout history. My father thinks*

that Kaiser Wilhelm II was a big schlub [...]he had this incredible empire [...] and he screwed it up forever (Brostoff, 2008).

### Conclusion

It goes without saying that English vocabulary is one of the most cosmopolitan lexicons in the body of all natural languages of the world. This is made evident by specialist studies on the subject, such as, for example, Rayevska (1979), Baugh and Cable (1993), but also in the introductory handbooks on language and its development such as Fromkin and Rodman (1993) and Finegan (1999).

It seems that many words in the English lexico-semantic system, and, especially – as this paper shows – American English, represent cases of borrowings inside borrowings. In other words, many American English words, such as, to list just a few examples, *bubbe*, *kalikeh*, *nebbich*, *paskudnyak*, *schlub*, *schmatte* and *trombenik* all represent borrowings from one of the Slavonic languages, though not necessarily determinable with 100% certainty. These words were taken from Czech, Polish, Russian, Slovak or Ukrainian to Yiddish and then – with various phonetic and semantic modifications that followed – enriched the vocabulary of American English from where they seem to be spreading into other language zones where English is spoken as the official language. This spread is greatly accelerated by the ramification of American culture with American film and music industries coming to the fore.

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**Contact**

Anna Dziama, PhD

Instytut Filologii Angielskiej,

35-353 Rzeszów, Al. mjr. W. Kopisto 2 B

anna.dziama@gmail.com