

Librarian's Lobby
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Yiddish Books part 2
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The history of the Yiddish language

This is a very brief review of the history of Yiddish as it relates to Yiddica¹ bibliography. The exact origins are unknown as language develops slowly and early written records are non-existent. Judeo-German probably started in the 9th or 10th century among Jews who spoke who moved from French speaking areas to German speaking areas. While in France they spoke Judeo-French and Judeo-Italian. These Judeo languages are descendants of Judeo-Latin spoken by Jews in the 1st century. The earliest written "Yiddish" is from Rashi's commentary in what he refers to as "La'az." For a discussion of the definition of a Judeo language and how it is distinguished from the vernacular of the surrounding non-Jews see "Jewish Interlinguistics: Facts and Conceptual Framework," by Paul Wexler in *Language*, Vol. 57, No. 1. (Mar., 1981), pp. 99-149. Page 105 has some ideas on the definition of a Jewish language.²

Here's is my idea on the development history of Yiddish. This expands the chart prepared by Max Weinreich. See footnote 2.

0. Pre-Yiddish sources (ca. 1st century - 9th century) Aramaic → Judeo-Latin → Judeo-Italian, Judeo-French. The Jews of Babylonia spoke Aramaic and this language became the common language of the Middle East. The period was before Jews lived in German speaking areas. Very few documents from this era exist.
1. Pre-early Yiddish (ca. 9th -12th centuries) The period of transition when the Jews of the Germany speaking area changed languages. Very few documents from this era exist.
2. Early Yiddish (ca. 1100– ca. 1250). The period of Ashkenaz I in the basins of the Main, Upper Rhine, and Upper Danube.
3. Old Yiddish (ca. 1250– ca. 1500). The period of Ashkenaz II that marks the movement Eastern Europe.
3. Middle Yiddish (ca. 1500– ca. 1700). A period of merging Western and Eastern Yiddish, the beginning of printing. The Slavik languages influenced Yiddish.

¹ *Yiddica* is a real word. It means books written in Yiddish. *Hebraica* are books written in Hebrew; *Judaica* are books written by and about Jews. Usually *Judaica* is used for books in Latin letters, but this is always the case.

² Here are a few books on the history of the Yiddish language: Herzog, Marvin I. et al., ed., *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Folklore, and Literature* (Philadelphia : Institute for the Study of Human Issues, c1980); Katz, Dovid, ed. *Origins of the Yiddish language : papers from the First Annual Oxford Winter Symposium in Yiddish Language and Literature, 16-17 December 1985 (Oxford, England : New York : Pergamon Press, 1987)* ; Steinschneider, Moritz. *Jewish literature from the eighth to the eighteenth century. with an introduction on Talmud and Midrash* (New York : Hermon Press, 1965.); Weinreich, Max. *History of the Yiddish Language* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1980).

4. New Yiddish (ca. 1750 - 1850). The period of emancipation, the flowering of literary tradition.

5. Modern Yiddish (ca. 1850 - 1939). The development of the Yiddish short story, novel, press, poetry, and theater.

6. Post modern Yiddish (1940 - present) The Holocaust and death of the majority of native Yiddish speakers, the revival of Yiddish in American, Yiddish of the Hasidim, study of Yiddish in universities, the transition of native Eastern European Yiddish to American Yiddish or Yiddish influenced American English.

The earliest Yiddish works were translations of the Bible such as *Shmuel bukh* published in Cracow, 1593 (a religious epic poem that circulated long before printing); prayer books for women called *Tehinah*; *Drashes* (rabbinic sermons or commentaries) and *Tse'edah u-re'edah* (a paraphrase translation-commentary of the *Humash*).

Modern Yiddish literature began when works of imagination (novels), poetry, and newspapers began to appear in the mid-19th century. It is widely thought that the 1864 publication of *Dos Kleyne Menshele* (אַ לעבענסבעשרייבונג פֿין יצחק) (*The Little Man*) by Mendele Mokher Sefarim, 1835-1917³, was the first such work. Other early writers include: Isaac Leib Peretz, 1851 or 2-1915; Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinowitz, 1859-1916); Israel Axenfeld, 1787-1866; Solomon Ettinger, 1800-1855; Shomer (pen name of Nahum Meir Shaikewitz, 1849-1905); and Isaac Meir Dick, 1814-1893.

The National Yiddish Book Center claims to have 15,000 Yiddish titles in its collection. When viewing the library catalogs of the largest Judaica collections, we can find more titles, but there is no way to be certain of the number of Yiddish works that were published. This is because of poor bibliographic control (no central authority to record each publication)⁴ and Yiddish books sometimes having Hebrew titles or multi-language title pages. The most current of bibliographic item numbers for OCLC are 56,903 in Yiddish and 312,196 in Hebrew. RLG⁵ has 70,610 titles in Yiddish and 439,330 in Hebrew (out of 45 million titles).

The *Jewish Book Annual*, which started publication in 1942, has a long history of promoting Jewish books in English, Hebrew and Yiddish. Each volume has articles in three languages and bibliography of books published. For many libraries this has been used as an acquisitions tool. In the first volume opens with an article by Jacob Levine⁶ pointing out how

³ His given name was Shalom Jacob Abramowitz. He was born in Kapuli, White Russia and also wrote in Hebrew. *Dos Kleyne Menshele* originally appeared the Yiddish weekly, *Kol me-Baser*. It also appeared as a 52 page book published in Odessa in 1864 without a publisher name on the title page.

⁴ The Library of Congress and the national libraries or other countries act as central control of the literary output of a country. Through copyright deposit these libraries can make a record of almost all publications. Yiddish books did not always have wide distribution. Indeed it is only in the past 40-50 years that English books have gained wide public distribution channels. Yiddish books were often published by the author for a small group. However some books had sales in excess of 200,000 copies.

⁵ RLG (<http://www.rlg.org>), Research Library Group, a co-operative of research libraries, has been allowing Hebrew script entry since 1988. OCLC includes all types of libraries and has been allowing Hebrew script entries since 2004. OCLC and RLN merged on July 6, 2006.

⁶ "די יידן דאס יידישע בוך", יעקב לעווין Levine, Jacob. "The Jews and the Yiddish book."

the soul of the Jewish people is found in Yiddish. Moshe Startkman⁷ in an article in the same volume talks about 60 years (1882-1942) of Yiddish literature in America. He talks about four milestones in the history of Yiddish literature in America: 1870 the beginning of the Yiddish press; 1978 the publication of the first Yiddish book (*The song of gold*, by J. Z. Sobel *שיר הזהב לישראל הזקן*)⁸; 1882 the first Yiddish-English text book by B. Goldgor and P. Mirowitch (*דער אמעריקאנער*); and finally in 1886 the first American-Yiddish dictionary by Alexander Harkavy (*די יידיש טייטשע שפראך*)

In volume 3 (1944-45) Solomon Kerstein wrote an article in the Yiddish section, entitled, "יידישע ביבליאטעקן און ביכער-קאלעקציעס אין אמעריקאנער יידישע און אלגעמיינע קולטור-אינבטיטוציעס" "Jewish libraries and book collections in America." The second part of the article appeared the following year in volume 4. He surveys the following libraries, Jewish Theological Seminary (New York), Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati), Jewish Institute of Religion (New York), Dropsie College (Philadelphia), Yiddish Scientific Institute (New York), Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological College and Yeshiva College (New York), College of Jewish Studies (Chicago), Bet Midrash LaTorah [Hebrew Theological College] (Chicago). The article describes the collections, but does not break down the numbers by language for most of the libraries.

Today there are more libraries with significant collections of Hebraica and Yiddica. These libraries include universities such as Yale University, Harvard, Columbia and University of Southern California (UCLA), Jewish institutions and Jewish communal libraries.

Yiddish language and literature are expressions of the Jewish *neshama* (soul or spirit). Yiddish reveals the linguistic, religious and cultural differences that make it a distinctive special feature of the Jewish people. Yiddish is the language of Jewish feeling that has a long and glorious history.

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⁷ Starkman, Moses. "פון פאפולער וויסנשאפט ביז וויסנשאפט 1882-1942 שטארקמאן, משה." "From popular science to science literature in Yiddish in America 1882-1942.

⁸ It is interesting that the title of the first book is in Hebrew. This would cause a bibliographic difficulty because someone scanning titles would not realize the book was not in Hebrew.