

Slavic Languages in Contact with Yiddish and Colonist German in Eastern Europe

Until World War II, there were some regions in Eastern Europe, where speakers of Yiddish and German lived in close vicinity of each other. Yiddish was wide-spread all over Eastern and Central Europe (the eastern border being the Pale of Settlement until 1917), whereas German was only spoken in the so-called Sprachinseln. A lot of German colonists accepted the invitation of the Czars at the end of 18th century (settling along the Volga river) and at the beginning of 19th century (settling near the Black Sea).

The impact of Slavic languages on Colonist German dialects and Eastern Yiddish has often been subject of linguistic research – mostly independently of each other. There are some parallels in the development of these two Germanic languages in a Slavophone environment, but there are differences as well.

Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe began much earlier. Slavophone Jews, who already lived there, influenced the Jews who came from the West, speaking Judaeo-German, an early form of Yiddish. The Slavic impact on Eastern Yiddish was very deep, influencing not only the lexicon, but morphology, syntax and phonetics as well. Later on, Yiddish may have functioned as a role model for German in integrating Slavic loanwords and building some syntactic structures influenced by the neighbouring languages.

When German settlers arrived in Eastern Europe, Yiddish-speaking Jews were the only people they understood. Therefore, Yiddish mediation for some Slavic loanwords in East European German dialects is very likely, though it is not always possible to say with last evidence, whether a Polish or Ukrainian word took its way into colonial German via Yiddish or not. The knowledge of both Yiddish and German dialects spoken there might help to investigate it for each lexeme of interest. For example, the word *bunder* in a local German dialect of Bessarabia, which is said to be a ukrainianism, is very likely to have taken its way into German through Yiddish because the Ukrainian word *bondar'* „cooper” sounds like [ˈbʊndər] in the Yiddish dialect of that area. For many other words there is no such evidence, they might have come into German directly from the Slavic languages of the neighbourhood. One of such words is *mišajen* „to disturb”. Though it could not be found in any Yiddish dictionary, it might have been common in some local Yiddish dialect. But even if the author of the loanword-list says it is a yiddism, the word has no specific sound features which could confirm this.

Therefore one must be extremely careful when analyzing so-called yiddisms and slavisms in the German dialects formerly spoken in Eastern Europe.

In my article I am going to show some ways of providing evidence whether a word came into colonial German with Yiddish mediation or not. I hope it can contribute to a further investigation of relationships between Jews, Slavs and Germans in Eastern Europe.