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Sociolinguistic Aspects of the Ashkenazim Language Situation in the Russian Empire at the Turn of the 19th and in the Early 20th Centuries (On the Base of Sholom Aleichem's Writings)

**Igor V. Boichuk, Irina O. Eschenko,
Elena A. Kamyshanchenko,
Elena N. Taranova, Yuliana Y. Genkin**

*Russia, 308015, Belgorod, Pobeda Street, 85
boichuk_i@bsu.edu.ru*

Abstract

The paper deals with the sociolinguistic situation of the Ashkenazi Jews in the Russian Empire at the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th century. The research is based on the works of a leading Yiddish author and playwright - Sholom (Sholem) Aleichem. His writings, besides their highest artistic value, have been found to be a relevant source of sociolinguistic information. A sociolinguistic analysis of the Ashkenazim language situation has been carried out. The main languages spoken by the Ashkenazim in the Pale of Settlement have been singled out. Their interrelation has been established. Each language played a special role in the life of the Ashkenazim at the period: Hebrew enjoyed high social prestige and alongside with Aramaic was mainly the language of religion. Yiddish was the vernacular of the Ashkenazim in the Pale of Settlement, and it had to struggle for achieving its status as a literary language. Russian, Ukrainian and Moldavian were mainly used for communication with the surrounding Gentiles. Polish remained as a fading vestige of former Polish presence in the area. German and French were the most common foreign languages.

Keywords: Hebrew, Yiddish, Aramaic, Sholom-Aleichem, Ashkenazim, Pale of Settlement, Sociolinguistics, Heder, Talmud Torah, Yeshiva.

Introduction

The life and work of the great Yiddish writer Sholom-Aleichem have always been given much attention to [1-4]. One of the features of the writings of Sholom Aleichem (1859-1916) - the Jewish Mark Twain [5: 364] - is the scrupulous authenticity in reproducing the daily life of Jews living in the so-called Pale of Settlement. However, at least as far as we know, Sholom-Aleichem's writings have never been analyzed from a sociolinguistic point of view. One should bear in mind that this author's work is also particularly important for dealing with problems of multiculturalism that have been acquiring a special significance lately [6, 7]. Although the artistic discourse of a writer is not an official document, the value of his literary works is beyond doubt and they can be considered a source of information for sociolinguistic analysis of the situation of the language groups described. Such information allows to work with quantitative data as well as to see the situation from within. This is especially true for Sholom Aleichem's writings, which can be called the encyclopedia of Jewish life, just as "Eugene Onegin" is considered an encyclopedia of Russian life of the corresponding period.

Method

This article uses the systematic and the cross-disciplinary approaches to analyze linguistic and non-linguistic information, especially related to sociological research dealing with the problem of society and language correlation. The research was made on the basis of Sholom Aleichem's writings, published with the total volume of more than four thousand pages (including the foreword and notes) in 1959-1961 by the State Publishing House of Fiction Literature in honor of the centenary of the author's birth.

Main Part

The object of our research is the sociolinguistic aspects of the language situation among Eastern European Jewry (Ashkenazi Jews), who lived only in the territory of the Russian Empire.

First of all, as the analysis of the writer's works shows, Yiddish was the main language used by the Jewish population of the Pale of Settlement at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The number of Jews living in the Pale of Settlement is estimated at one and a half million [8: 12] to five million people [9].

At the same time, Jews who lived in the territory of the Russian Empire in the period described by the author quite actively used other languages for various reasons of sociolinguistic nature. Hebrew takes the first place in the list of these languages. "Hebrew language is the language of worship, office work, and communication of Jews living in

different countries." [10: 107]. Nicholas de Lange writes about Hebrew, "Since ancient scripts are written in it, Hebrew is strongly associated with Jews" [11: 32]. E. Nustrem says about Hebrew that "The Hebrew language, as one of the oldest languages, if not the oldest, being the language of the ancient Israelites, used by God to give them his revelations, deserves special attention" [12: 371]. It is known that Jewish men knew Hebrew better than Jewish women. This fact is explained by the education system that existed in the area under consideration. All Jewish boys were obliged to attend heder (or Talmud Torah) and study advanced Hebrew. The girls did not do this and, consequently, their knowledge of Hebrew was much inferior to that of the boys. Teaching a girl to a Jewish letter was not obligatory, rather the opposite (see, for example, "Wandering Stars"). It is known that for women even the Pentateuch was published with a translation into Yiddish [13:1, 125]. This is mentioned not only in Sholom Aleichem's writings but also, for example, in the writings of Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (1852-1915) [14], who worked simultaneously with Sholom Aleichem in the Kingdom of Poland, then also a part of the Russian Empire.

Men, regardless of their social status and age, usually knew Hebrew quite well. As an example, we can cite the scene from "Mottel the Cantor's Son". It describes the situation when police start to take interest in Mottel, an old man gives the orphan advice in Hebrew to get out of the scene and Mottel understands him perfectly. Thus, Hebrew could also be used for cryptological purposes to make it difficult or impossible to understand the speech of Jews by Gentiles who, having lived closely with Jews, could acquire Yiddish in a sufficient degree to understand everyday oral speech. It is enough to mention Pan Milinyevsky or magistrate Romanovsky as an example.

Hebrew had a high social prestige. So, for example, in the list of Leibe Lebel'sky the matchmaker there was a potential groom whose merit was the knowledge of Hebrew. Hebrew, even among men, however, was not always fluent, as evidenced by a character from "The Kingdom of Heaven" [13: 4, 251]. When corresponding, Menachem-Mendel and Sheineh-Sheindl use traditional Hebrew greetings in the beginning and then everyday Yiddish for the main text [13:1]. The same can be said about the letter of Sender Blank [13: 6, 51]. However, letters could be written entirely in Hebrew [13: 6, 52].

However, for example, the butcher Leizer-Wolf or the contractor Padhatzur speak of the book scholarship associated with the knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic without much respect.

The sociolinguistic status of Hebrew and Yiddish around 1880 is summarized in the work "From the Fair", where it is said that one can write whether in Hebrew or in Russian, but

use Yiddish (“jargon”) only in everyday communication. Books in Yiddish can be read only by women. A man who writes or reads in Yiddish could have a reputation of ignoramus [13:3, 465]. Thus, we see that around 1880 Jews preferred to speak almost exclusively in Yiddish, but to write in Hebrew or in Russian, only not in Yiddish. Only by the end of the 20th century, the situation began to change in favor of Yiddish. Sholom-Aleichem made a titanic effort to make Yiddish "come into fashion".

It should be mentioned that Hebrew was not only the sacred language of religious literature or the language of serious literature created by outstanding Jewish writers and scholars. It was, so to speak, also a "window into the world." Thus, works of world literature (including Russian) were read in Hebrew at that time [13: 3, 374; 3, 554].

Let us return to the matter of gender affinity of Hebrew and Yiddish. As already mentioned, men knew Hebrew much better, Yiddish was absolute apanage of women, although it was used by men in everyday life. This is evidenced by the corresponding names of Yiddish *לאַשן מאמע* and Hebrew *פאָטער שפראך*. If a woman knew Hebrew it spoke about her special status, let us remember, for example, Aunt Dobrish [13: 6, 60-61].

The severe competition between Hebrew and Yiddish [14] that existed during this period is reflected by Sholom Aleichem in the chapter "Yiddishists and Hebraists" from the work "Kasrilevke Progress", included in the cycle "Inside Kasrilevke". Kasrilevke Hebraists "arrange a demonstration" against Yiddish. However, Yiddish had not less ardent supporters and defenders in the period described. Thus, despite Yiddish undoubtedly predominated in that period, Hebrew, or rather its daily usage, even in the Pale of Settlement had many ardent supporters who required to ban Yiddish in everyday life and replace it with Hebrew. That led to acute conflicts with "Yiddishists". These discussions anticipate the problem of the choice of the state language in the State of Israel that did not yet appear at the time.

Let us dwell briefly on the role of Aramaic, Semitic language close to Hebrew, which continues to play a role in Jewish worship [11: 33]. It is known that part of the sacred books of Judaism is written in different dialects of the Aramaic language [15]. Consequently, Jewish men, who received a religious education at least in the volume of heder or Talmud Torah, knew Aramaic as well.

Jews residing in the Russian Empire used numerous Russian, Ukrainian, Polish and Belarusian inclusions, which can be qualified as barbarisms. These are both individual words and whole sentences. In the works of Sholom Aleichem, Ukrainian inclusions are more common than Russian and Polish ones. Quite indicative in this respect is the speech of Zlata and Zelda during the trial in the story "Two *Purim* Gifts". Probably, a big number of Slavic

inclusions in Yiddish speech is also conditioned by pragmatic considerations - women tend to be better understood by the magistrate Milinyevsky. However, their Russian language contains a significant admixture of Ukrainian words and can be qualified as *surzhik*. Another vivid example of attempts to actively use the Russian language is Pinya's speech from the "Mottel the Cantor's Son". However, the Russian language of Pinya is as bad as the language of Zelda and Zlata [13: 3, 96-98].

Characters often use distorted Russian words in their speech.

Thus, on the whole, most residents of the Pale of Settlement did not speak Russian well enough. Their Russian language was *surzhik* rather than the Russian language proper. This can be explained by the fact that Jews communicated primarily with the Ukrainian language native speakers. We should also note that full education was inaccessible to many people due to socio-economic reasons - its high cost and the percentage rate introduced in 1886.

The Russian language, the state language of the Russian Empire, was necessary at least in minimal volume to communicate with various representatives of the state apparatus and to make business (see the stories "The Seventy-Five Thousand", "Gitel Purishkevich", etc.). The idiolects of the Yiddish-speaking major contractor Padhatzur, as well as of Sonechka, who will be mentioned below, are very russified. Thus, the fluent Russian language was absolutely necessary for career growth in a number of activity areas.

In large cities, where the Russian language dominated, its importance grew. The Jews even had to write their signs in Russian [13: 3, 579].

Knowledge of the Russian language was regarded as something progressive. So, the speech of Sonechka, mentioned above, from the story "You Can't Win!" is a mixture of Yiddish and Russian. She claims that despite the reputation of Yampol as a fanatical city, they all got Russian education and were acquainted with E. Zola, Pushkin, Gorky. Thus, the Russian language is a symbol of belonging to Russian and world culture, for almost certainly Sonechka read Zola in Russian translation. The Russian language of Sonechka also leaves much to be desired. But even a daughter of a poor dairyman Tevye, Hodel, "writes and reads in Hebrew and in Russian" [13: 1, 528]. That is, the desire to learn Russian did not depend on the social and economic status of Jewish girls.

Jewish children needed the Russian language to get a secular education, because knowing only Jewish languages they could get just religious education. Often it was the Russian language that became the main obstacle in this way, and Jewish children experienced great difficulties (including psychological ones) when studying it ("Gymnasium").

Sometimes there was a mixture of the Russian language with Hebrew [13: 4, 418].

But the use of the Russian language was dictated not only by pragmatic considerations [13: 3, 540]. Besides, there were cases of the Russian language communication between the Jews [13: 3, 318]. The Jews used the Russified anthroponyms while addressing each other [13: 6, 48], [13: 4, 265].

The Ukrainian language, which did not possess the status of the state language and which was not used in the record keeping, was necessary, however, for the everyday communication with the Ukrainian peasants and petty bourgeoisie, having numerical superiority in the Pale of Settlement. Public officers, though, also spoke Ukrainian sometimes [13: 4, 381].

Thus, we can observe the certain tendency for forming creolized languages.

The characters of many works of the writer in certain situations, communicating, for instance, with the peasants, practically turn to the Ukrainian language, which proves the level of this language proficiency to be good enough [13: 4, 149].

Every now and then Tevye uses Ukrainianisms in his speech – both separate words and collocations (it must be emphasized that some of these words, e.g. בליניצעס have even been taken from the Yiddish language by the modern Hebrew [16]). It should be noted that Tevye's Ukrainian language has been russified to the certain extent, and here one can speak about *surzhik*. Slavisms are being used by Tevye even to denote the mythological characters: *domovik* (house spirit), that is the proof of the certain interpenetration of the Jewish and Slavonic cultures. Tevye speaks Russian to the official persons.

Polish inclusions are relatively infrequent, preserved from the time when the (Jewish) Pale territories were the part of Rzeczpospolita.

As to the problem of the Yiddish language dialects, it was highlighted in the story "Berel Aizik". The character of the story, who spoke the Ukrainian dialect of the Yiddish language, couldn't reach a complete mutual understanding with the Jewish woman, who used the Lithuanian dialect of the same language, due to the difference in the vocalism of these dialects. Partly we can see here the reflection of the problem of dialectal atomism of the Germanic languages in whole.

Some of the Ashkenazi Jews of the Russian Empire are known to have lived on the territory of Bessarabia. There they had to have everyday contacts with the local population – Moldavians who spoke a Romance language (see, for example, "Wandering Stars"). Naturally enough, the Jews had to know the Moldavian language for it. We can say that in

this area the Moldavian language played for the Jews the role similar to that of the Ukrainian language for the Ukrainian Jews. [13: 4, 117], [13: 4, 131].

One should mention the role of the Western European languages – German, French, and English. The French and the German languages were considered prestigious among the Ashkenazim who lived in the Pale of Settlement, and their knowledge was highly valued. The German language holds the special rank owing to its considerable similarity to Yiddish (see, for example, Mottel's reasoning on the matter) [13: 3, 104], [13: 3, 110]. Further, it is stated that mastering German for the native Yiddish speakers is easy. That is, for the Jews of the Russian Empire, who spoke Yiddish one and all at that time, mastering German was the easiest among all the Western European languages. The differences between the Yiddish and the German languages are not so big as to exclude the mutual comprehensibility, which was apprehended by the native Yiddish speakers (see the story "The German"). The knowledge of German was rather widely spread among the Jews of the Russian Empire. Thus, Sabina Spielrein and Bluma Zeigarnik, for instance, are known to have had the proficient knowledge of German, they studied in the German-speaking higher educational establishments and wrote their theses in the German language. The knowledge of French was also considered very prestigious. But learning it was much more difficult than learning the German language. That's why proficiency in French was much less widespread than in German [13: 3, 382]. One could meet the synchronous proficiency in both German and French [13: 1, 65]. Other combinations of languages were also possible [13: 1, 78-79].

A special place is occupied by the English language. It acquires a particular importance in the eyes of the Ashkenazi in connection with their increasing emigration to the USA. The English language belonging as well as the Yiddish language to the Western Germanic group is far more difficult for learning by the native Yiddish speakers than German [13:3, 158], [13: 2, 476]. The mutual comprehensibility is absent here, but, the similarity of many of the Germanic roots was certain to make the learning of the English language easier for the native Yiddish speakers. In Sholom Aleichem's books, we cannot see the evidence of the mass efforts to learn English before leaving the Russian Empire for the USA. Probably, first of all, it is related to the absence of appropriate opportunities for the people who emigrated – time, money, and the necessary basis. Thus, one could hardly imagine the presence of the sufficient number of qualified English teachers or at least available teaching materials in the Pale of Settlement. One should also take into consideration that the decision to abandon Russia was taken quickly at times, for instance, after another pogrom, and there

was no time left for studying English in advance. It should be noted that in many of his late works Sholom Aleichem uses numerous English words.

The Ashkenazim didn't have their own stable administrative-territorial units and lived scattered among the other nations of the Empire. At any moment, they could be enforced by the authorities to emigration. The main colloquial and literary language of the Jews in the Russian Empire of that period was Yiddish. A very strong position was held by Hebrew, competing at times almost equally with Yiddish and being much more prestigious. Before it had become the literary language, Yiddish competed both Hebrew and Russian for this right. A certain but rather limited part was occupied by Aramaic. Basically, only men knew both Hebrew and Aramaic. The main place for their learning was heder or Talmud Torah and further yeshiva.

Conclusion

Thus, the main idioms in different proportions operating in the language situation among the Ashkenazim of the Russian Empire in the second part of the 19th – the beginning of the 20th centuries were: Germanic Yiddish, Semitic Hebrew and Aramaic, Slavonic Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Romance Moldavian, as well as some foreign languages – German, French, and English. Yiddish was the main everyday language of the Ashkenazim and by the end of the 19th century it had considerably strengthened its position as a literary language, to a large extent owing to the activity of Sholom Aleichem himself. Dialectal atomism was characteristic for Yiddish, at times preventing the mutual understanding between the native speakers of different dialects, which is specific for many Germanic languages. Hebrew, the sacral language of Judaism, played a very significant role both in the literature and everyday life, in many ways competing with Yiddish successfully. Aramaic played the certain role as the second language of the religion. Russian was necessary to be learned as the state language of the Russian Empire, the language of public offices and records management. Ukrainian and Moldavian were the languages that the Ashkenazim knew more or less, living, respectively, in the Ukraine and Bessarabia, because these languages were necessary for them in the communication with the local people. Sometimes the Ashkenazim used the Polish language. Language proficiency in foreign languages, especially German and French was widely spread among the Ashkenazim. The English language was very important as the language spoken in the USA, the country where the Jews emigrated principally, but in the Russian Empire even if the Ashkenazim spoke it, they did it incomparably worse than they spoke the German and even French languages. Besides, a certain part was taken by the classical languages – Latin and ancient Greek, studied by the

Jewish children, who had entered the gymnasium, or by the Jewish youth who studied in the higher educational establishments. Lithuanian, Byelorussian, Lettish, and Estonian, which also played a significant part in the life of the Ashkenazim in the corresponding territories, are practically not mentioned in the works of Sholom Aleichem, as the narration of the writer's works does not take place in the territories where these languages were used.

Result

Sholom Aleichem's works, apart from their highest artistic worthiness, are also a most valuable source of socio-linguistic data. The language situation among the Ashkenazi Jews of the Russian Empire was notable for its significant complexity and diversity. The knowledge of several languages was a mass phenomenon among the Ashkenazim.

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