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Sacred Speech and Written Word: Hebrew–Yiddish Diglossia in Hasidic Homiletics

Daniel Reiser

Department of Jewish Thought, Herzog College, Jerusalem 9426223, Israel; danielre@herzog.ac.il

Abstract: This article examines the complex linguistic phenomenon of Hebrew–Yiddish diglossia within Hasidic homiletic literature, particularly focussing on sermons from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While previous scholarship has emphasised Hebrew's dominance in Hasidic written works, this study demonstrates how Yiddish has played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting Hasidic teachings. Through analysis of primary sources, three distinct models of Hebrew–Yiddish integration are identified: parallel texts in both languages within the same volume, limited Yiddish passages integrated within predominantly Hebrew texts, and a complete amalgamation where the languages become nearly inseparable. Analysis indicates that Hasidic authors and editors deliberately preserved Yiddish elements to maintain the authenticity of the tzaddik's original oral teachings while adhering to Hebrew's traditional status in religious literature. This linguistic practice elevated Eastern Yiddish's cultural position concurrent with similar (but different) developments in Haskalah literature. Furthermore, the study demonstrates how Hasidic literature's incorporation of spoken Yiddish into sacred texts contributed to the language's legitimisation as a medium for religious discourse. This examination offers new perspectives on linguistic hierarchies in religious Jewish texts and illuminates how Hasidic literature developed innovative solutions to balance authenticity and tradition in religious writing.

Keywords: Hebrew–Yiddish diglossia; Hasidic homiletics; Jewish languages; religious discourse; Eastern European Jewry; linguistic authenticity; oral–written transmission

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1. Yiddish and Hebrew

Hebrew or, as it is known among Yiddish speakers, *loshn koydesh* (the holy tongue) is the language of Jewish sources: biblical language, the language of the sages (Mishnah and Talmud), prayer language, and the rabbinic language used in religious writings from the Middle Ages to the present day. Yiddish, on the other hand, is a Jewish language that began developing during the Jewish settlement in Ashkenaz, from approximately the ninth century onward (Katz 2010; Kahn 2016, pp. 644–47). Modern Yiddish has a broad medieval German component, along with Hebrew, Aramaic, and Slavic elements. It is important to note that Jewish society in Eastern Europe was effectively multilingual, operating simultaneously in several languages: the state language where Jews lived, *loshn koydesh*, and Yiddish (Weinreich 2008, pp. 247–314; Harshav 1990, pp. 8–24).[1]

Max Weinreich (1894–1969), a foundational scholar of Yiddish linguistics, viewed *loshn koydesh* as representing traditional Judaism and discussed its importance as a component of Yiddish (Weinreich 2008, pp. 252–58).[2] According to Benjamin Harshav (1928–2015), a prominent scholar of Yiddish and comparative literature, "The crucial component of Yiddish, what gives it its 'Jewish legitimation' is Hebrew" (Harshav 1990, p. 51).[3] In other

words, the main reasons Yiddish is considered a Jewish language are its Hebrew component, the fact that it was spoken by Jews and not Gentiles, and its use of Hebrew letters.[4]

Chava Turniansky (b. 1937), a leading expert on old and early modern Yiddish literature, demonstrated that whilst Yiddish originated as an exclusively oral medium, with Hebrew maintaining primacy in religious textual production, this linguistic hierarchy underwent a significant transformation. The sixteenth century witnessed the emergence of Yiddish as a written language, thereby disrupting the previously distinct functional demarcation between Hebrew's literary domain and Yiddish's oral sphere. Consequently, Ashkenazi society found itself navigating a complex diglossia wherein two written languages served as vehicles for Jewish textual creation (Turniansky 1980; 1996, p. 184; 2009).[5] Hebrew remained the primary language of religious and intellectual writings intended for scholars, and Yiddish was used in writing addressed to a broader readership. But both Yiddish and Hebrew were used by authors in works dealing with sacred and mundane matters, suggesting that the distinction between the two languages was not a rigid ideological divide between writings on holy matters versus profane subjects. The choice of language was based more on whether the intended audience consisted of learned scholars or the general community. In other words, the addressee was the defining factor in determining the language of the composition and not a distinction between sacred and secular (Turniansky 1994; 1996, pp. 184–86).[6]

In the wake of this broad cultural and linguistic transformation, the Yiddish sermon—in both oral and written forms—mediated between the scholarly intellectual culture and that of the broader community.[7] The position of Yiddish as an intermediate cultural bridge led to other stylistic differences between Hebrew and Yiddish writings on the very same subject. Rather than the learned tenor and higher linguistic register of written Hebrew, Turniansky suggests that "Yiddish bears, in most cases, a unique and popularising style and character of religious-ethical instruction, conveyed through simple expressions that seem universally accessible" (Turniansky 1996, p. 184).

The *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) movement, which advocated for Jewish integration into the state, marginalised Yiddish and viewed it as an inferior, popular, irrational, and unesthetic language. "State languages"—such as Russian in Russia, Polish in autonomous Poland, and German in the Austrian Empire—were perceived in completely opposite terms—as elevated, profound, creative, and pure languages (Bartal 2007, pp. 32–34; Frieden 2012).[8] Yiddish was viewed as a corrupted German dialect, reflecting the low cultural state of its speakers, and was mockingly called "jargon" (Novershtern 2000, p. 14; Baumgarten 2002, p. 160).[9] However, paradoxically, the Haskalah movement used this "jargon" language to spread enlightenment to the masses: "Thus the *maskilim* wrote comedies in Yiddish, wrote satirical poems in this language, and even published newspapers in which popular science articles were published. Almost against their will, the *maskilim* wrote in the despised language to convince the Jewish population to change its culture and cease using that despised language… The Haskalah was the ancient maternal ancestor of modern Yiddish literature, precisely because it used it in order to eliminate its use" (Bartal 2002, p. 124; See more Bartal 2005, pp. 98–101; Novershtern 2000, pp. 19–21; Baumgarten 2002, pp. 169–71). However, the Haskalah movement did not seek to eliminate the diglossia equation altogether but only to change it. The spoken language was supposed to be the state language instead of the "corrupted" Yiddish, while the literary language was supposed to be biblical Hebrew, to be used for literary and scientific writing (Bartal 2002, pp. 124–26).[10]

2. Literary Yiddish and Spoken Yiddish

In addition to the linguistic and cultural phenomenon of traditional diglossia, i.e., Yiddish alongside Hebrew, there was another, less familiar linguistic phenomenon: the

development of diglossia within Yiddish itself—a literary language alongside a spoken language. The migrations of Ashkenazi Jews to Poland from the thirteenth century until the beginning of the Enlightenment period brought about linguistic change. Alongside the Western dialect, an Eastern European dialect developed with a significant Slavic linguistic component. Thus, Eastern European Yiddish (Eastern Yiddish) and Western European Yiddish (Western Yiddish) existed side by side until the decline of Yiddish in Western Europe in the eighteenth century, when Western Yiddish almost ceased to be a spoken language (Weinreich 2008, pp. 116–20, 281–81). However, Eastern Yiddish did not eliminate Western Yiddish in Eastern Europe. While Eastern Yiddish was spoken, writing—even in Eastern Europe—remained in Western Yiddish. This created a situation of diglossia within Yiddish: a literary language (besides Hebrew) alongside a spoken language, a phenomenon that existed from the Middle Ages until the eighteenth century (Weinreich 2008, pp. 284–85; Turniansky 2006, pp. 62–63, 75).[11]

Western Yiddish effectively became a shared print language and the language of instruction for elementary school students in both Western and Eastern Europe. While spoken Eastern Yiddish continued to develop and change naturally, similar to any language, the written language remained relatively conservative and was not significantly influenced by external changes or linguistic developments. Moreover, Shlomo Noble (1905–1986), a pioneering Yiddish language education researcher, demonstrated in his research on the *Khumesh-teitsh* (Pentateuch with Yiddish translation) that the language of instruction created a new literary Yiddish that emerged from the needs of translation (from loshn koydesh to Yiddish). The Khumesh-teitsh preserved archaic words and even created new verb forms in an attempt to match verbs to nouns. For example, when translating the Hebrew noun מלך (meylekh, "king"), it used "kinig" (from German König), then created a new verb, "kinign", to match the Hebrew verb למלוך (limlokh, "to reign"). Such constructed verbs were characteristic of this translation tradition, though absent from spoken Yiddish. Additionally, the Khumesh-teitsh invented new words to enable various meanings that would reflect the different classical interpretations of *Onkelos* or *Rashi* and, more so, to translate Hebrew words that had been integrated into Yiddish. The Hebrew component in spoken Yiddish, which was organically integrated into everyday speech patterns through centuries of use by Yiddish speakers, posed a challenge for Khumesh-teitsh translators. While Yiddish speakers seamlessly incorporated Hebrew words into their daily conversations without conscious translation, Khumesh-teitsh translators viewed any untranslated Hebrew word as a deficiency, since their goal was to provide a complete Germanic rendering of the Hebrew text. Therefore, the Khumesh-teitsh incorporated German words that did not exist at all in spoken Yiddish instead of Hebrew words. Over the years, the spoken language changed whilst the meaning of many words in Yiddish that appeared in the Khumesh-teitsh became archaic (Nobl 1943).[12] Thus, Jews in Eastern Europe spoke one Yiddish language and read another. A teacher in an Eastern European *Heder* (a traditional primary school) did not always understand the Yiddish in the Khumesh-teitsh and needed to translate—if he knew how at all—the literary Yiddish of the Khumesh-teitsh into the spoken Yiddish of his pupils.[13]

3. Linguistic Revolution: Elimination of Diglossia Within Yiddish

A linguistic revolution occurred in the nineteenth century. The literary production of the Haskalah movement in Yiddish differed fundamentally from medieval literary creation. We are not discussing content, as stylistic and content differences are clearly expected—each creation reflects its temporal context—but rather an unprecedented linguistic innovation. Until the nineteenth century, Yiddish literary works in Eastern Europe employed Western Yiddish—literary Yiddish—whilst the Haskalah movement cre-

ated written literature in spoken Yiddish (Kahn 2016, pp. 650–54). Indeed, the Haskalah did not seek to eliminate diglossia but rather to transform its two components (biblical Hebrew should replace *loshn koydesh*, and the state language should replace Yiddish).[14] However, it eliminated the diglossia within Yiddish. For the first time, written literature was created in spoken Eastern Yiddish, and literary Western Yiddish was abandoned. No longer were there spoken Yiddish language and literary Yiddish language; henceforth, the spoken, popular, and purportedly inferior language ascended to a cultural level and became a literary language.[15]

Over the years, Eastern Yiddish achieved cultural recognition in its own right, in particular in the wake of the literary works of the three classic Yiddish writers, Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, 1835–1917), Sholem Aleikhem (Sholem Rabinovitz, 1859–1916), and Y. L. (Yitskhok Leybush) Peretz (1852–1915), known as the grandfather, father, and son, respectively (Novershtern 2000, pp. 36–44).[16] Mendele Moykher Sforim, widely considered the founder of modern literary Yiddish, did not invent a new Yiddish but, rather, utilised spoken Yiddish. He effectively eliminated the diglossia within Yiddish and created one language (Bartal 2014).[17] This can explain the orthographic differences between Western and Eastern Yiddish. Western Yiddish maintained a unified writing system. In contrast, Eastern Yiddish lacks a single, accepted system to this day. Writing in the spoken language is the primary reason Eastern Yiddish lacks a unified orthographic system, as each writer writes according to how they hear the language.

However, the Haskalah movement was not solely responsible for eliminating diglossia within the Yiddish language, for transforming Eastern Yiddish into a literary language, and for elevating the cultural status of Eastern Yiddish. This revolution also occurred through the contribution of the Hasidic movement,[18] as I will show next.

4. The Hasidic Sermon: Hebrew and Eastern Yiddish

From 1780, when the first Hasidic book, *Toldoth Yaakov Yosef*, was published, until the closure of Jewish printing houses by Russian authorities in 1836, only three Hasidic books were printed in Yiddish: *Sippurei Ma'asiyoth* (1815) by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav; *Shivhei ha-Besht* (1815–1816),[19] and *Poke'ah 'Ivrim* (1832) by Rabbi Dov-Ber, the second Rebbe of the Habad Hasidic dynasty.[20] The first of these works was published in a bilingual edition—Hebrew on the top of the page and Yiddish below; the second was published almost simultaneously in different Hebrew and Yiddish versions; and the third was printed strictly in Yiddish (Doktór 2013).

Ken Frieden (b. 1955), a scholar specialising in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, argued that the limited publication in Yiddish demonstrates that Hasidism neither embraced Yiddish nor viewed it as having religious or literary value (Frieden 2012).[21] Israel Zinberg (1873–1938), the influential historian of Jewish literature, and Meir Wiener (1893–1941), a notable historian of Yiddish literature, suggested that these Hasidic writings in Yiddish from the early nineteenth century should be understood as a means of spreading the Hasidic ethos among the masses (Wiener 1945, pp. 29–38; Zinberg 1960, p. 173; cf. Lieberman 1981). Indeed, at first glance, it appears that the vast majority of Hasidic literature—particularly Hasidic sermons—was published in Hebrew and, therefore, Yiddish holds no significance beyond serving as a means of dissemination.

Conversely, David Roskies (b. 1948), a prominent cultural historian of Eastern European Jewry and Yiddish literature, emphasised the oral dimension of the bilingual edition of *Sippurei Ma'asiyoth* (1815), which preserved the original Yiddish text as spoken by Rabbi Nahman alongside a Hebrew translation. He argued that in Jewish tradition, the transcription and subsequent transformation of the Oral Torah into the Written Torah endows the former with canonical status. Therefore, Roskies maintained that the publication of Rabbi

Nahman's stories in writing represented a critical moment that transformed both the cultural significance of the stories and the status of Yiddish, the language in which they were told (Roskies 1995, pp. 29–31). He asserted that Yiddish had previously been intended for the simple people, while Hebrew was the prerogative of the educated, as evidenced by pre-nineteenth-century Eastern European publications. Yet in Rabbi Nachman's case, Roskies noted that "for the first time, the oral quality of the text was the measure of its authenticity" (ibid., p. 31). The attempt to preserve Rabbi Nahman's original words and vocal style required the scribe to reduce the register of the Hebrew from a high literary style to a simple language capable of reflecting the original oral style. At the same time, the Yiddish text was not intended merely for "simple people" but, rather, served as testimony to the *tzaddik*'s (i.e., the Hasidic leader, the *rebbe*) original words. Since the authenticity of oral style stands at the centre, the status of the language in which the tzaddik spoke—Yiddish—is elevated (ibid.).

Dov Ber Kerler (b. 1958), an expert in Yiddish dialectology and literature, described the decline of Western Yiddish as a language of literary creation among Western European Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (although it continued to be spoken, in limited circles, even in the twentieth century) and identified the beginnings of modern Yiddish literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. Kerler argues that Hasidism as a whole played an important role in adopting modern Eastern Yiddish as a literary language (Kerler 1999, pp. 19–20). The rich research literature to which Kerler refers points to Hasidism's contribution to the foundation of modern Yiddish literature and its establishment through Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav's stories, folk tales, and the place of Yiddish in Hasidic culture (Reisen 1923, pp. 107–10; Niger 1985, pp. 112–17, 210; Zinberg 1936, p. 203–27; Wiener 1940, pp. 29–30; Shmeruk 1978, pp. 175–76).

However, the unique and solitary nature of *Sippurei Ma'asiyoth* precludes drawing broader conclusions about the Hasidic movement as a whole. An examination of the language of Hasidic sermons—research that has hardly been conducted—testifies more comprehensively to the adoption of Eastern Yiddish in Hasidism and to a fascinating integration of Yiddish and Hebrew. Contrary to the assumption that the vast majority of Hasidic literature was published in Hebrew, examination of the "Hebrew" sermons in Hasidism reveals otherwise. To understand this phenomenon, we must first examine how Hasidic sermons were created and transmitted.

The *tzaddikim* (Hasidic leaders) delivered their sermons orally on Sabbaths, holidays, and special occasions before their Hasidic audiences. Subsequently, the sermon was written, translated, edited, and printed by the Hasidim who heard the sermons, not by the *tzaddikim* themselves. Therefore, it is not unusual that many Hasidic homiletic books were not published during their authors' lifetimes but after their deaths. Moreover, whilst the sermon language that emanated from the *tzaddik*'s mouth was Yiddish, the written language of the sermons published by the Hasidim was usually Hebrew, as was customary in sacred literature.[22] However, it should be noted that even in their Hebrew writings, the Hasidim tended to incorporate Yiddish words and sentences, sometimes sparingly and sometimes extensively.

For the Hasidim, the tzaddik's sermon was an event equivalent to the revelation at Mount Sinai, in which the Rebbe delivers "Torah" to the listeners (Sagiv 2014, pp. 182–200; Green 2013; Idel 2002, pp. 473–78).[23] Yiddish is the language that emerges from the holy mouth of the tzaddik in which he expounds his Torah teachings, i.e., words of holiness.[24] Yet the Hasidim faced a dual challenge: while publishing the tzaddik's words solely in Yiddish might appear to diminish their sacred status by departing from the centuries-old tradition of recording religious teachings in Hebrew, certain nuances and precise meanings could only be properly conveyed in their original language (Yiddish). This tension

required a delicate balance between reverence and authenticity. Thus emerged a sermon that contains a mixture of Yiddish and Hebrew. This type of writing, which ultimately introduced Yiddish into Hebrew sacred literature, granted Yiddish a sacred status alongside Hebrew. Moreover, the Yiddish in the Hasidic sermon was Eastern Yiddish, preserving the spoken language of the *tzaddikim*; thus, sacred literature written in Eastern Yiddish emerged contemporaneously with Haskalah literature.

I wish to highlight three models of combining Hebrew and Yiddish in Hasidic homiletic literature. These models should be seen as archetypes with other sub-models; thus, in practice, there is a broader range of models and possibilities.

4.1. Yiddish Alongside Hebrew

Rabbi Aharon Perlov of Karlin-Stolin (1802–1872), the fourth Rebbe of Karlin Hasidism, was considered one of the greatest tzaddikim in the Lithuanian region. During his leadership, Karlin Hasidism flourished and established itself. His teachings, delivered in Yiddish, were written down by two of his disciples and published in Hebrew after his death in 1875 under the title *Beith Aharon* (Brown 2018, pp. 66–81).[25] This book stands as a foundational text of Karlin Hasidism in particular and of Hasidic texts in general. *Beith Aharon* includes Rabbi Aharon's sermons on the weekly Torah portion, collected Hasidic sayings in his name, and letters he sent to his followers and son.

While the main body of the book consists of Hebrew sermons, the appendices were printed in Yiddish. These Yiddish appendices include short teachings, *musar* (moral) instruction, and texts fostering spiritual awakening—all concerning matters of prayer, repentance, and Sabbath observance—together with a summary page of epigrammatic teachings titled *Milei DeRabanan* (lit., the words of the rabbis).[26] Published in multiple editions, this book comprises approximately two hundred and fifty pages of Hebrew text, with the Yiddish appendices extending to about ten pages.[27] Although this proportion clearly indicates the primacy accorded to Hebrew, the very inclusion of complete Yiddish sections in a text considered fully sacred by its readers is significant. Through this inclusion, Yiddish gained entry into the realm of sacred literature, and while it remained secondary to Hebrew, Eastern Yiddish achieved the status of a literary language worthy of multiple printed editions, thereby attaining considerable cultural prestige.

This parallel presentation format represents more than mere translation or accessibility concerns. By including complete Yiddish sections within a sacred text, the editors effectively elevated Yiddish to a language worthy of transmitting religious instruction, even while maintaining Hebrew's primary status. This practice helped establish a precedent for Yiddish as a legitimate medium for religious discourse.

4.2. Yiddish Within Hebrew

The most prevalent model in Hasidic literature is that of Yiddish appearing within Hebrew text. In this model, Yiddish appears not alongside but within Hebrew text. These sermons are predominantly Hebrew with interspersed Yiddish elements. The reasons for such linguistic integration are multiple and complex, warranting analysis beyond the scope of this article. An exemplary illustration of this model can be found in the sermons of Rabbi Israel Friedmann of Ruzhin (1796–1850), published posthumously in a book titled *Irin Kadishin*. This volume collects both his teachings, as preserved in his disciples' memories, and accounts of his dialogues with other tzaddikim recorded by witnesses to these encounters.[28] The incorporation of Yiddish often serves to preserve verbatim quotations, particularly in documenting exchanges between tzaddikim. Consider this illustrative passage where Yiddish elements appear in italics while Hebrew is translated to English:

> "And give me bread to eat and clothing to wear and I return in peace to my father's house and the Lord will be my God" [Genesis 28:20–21]. According to testimony regarding the holy Rabbi Mordechai of Chernobyl, he was present with our master, the holy Rabbi of Ruzhin, at the inauguration of the *kloiz* [study house] in Zhitomir. During the ritualistic l'chaim blessing, the holy Rabbi of Chernobyl first blessed those assembled, after which the holy Rabbi of Ruzhin offered his blessing in these words: May the blessed Lord give you *gezunt un parnose un ehrlechkayt* [health, livelihood, and righteousness]. A Hasid remarked: "Rebbe! *ehrlechkayt iz der iker* [righteousness is the essential thing]." The Rebbe of Ruzhin, turning his holy countenance towards the holy Rabbi of Chernobyl, responded thus: *er iz a shoyte* [he is a fool], explaining that when the Creator fashioned His world, He first created all that humanity would require and only afterwards created humanity itself. When the blessed Lord provides livelihood, *ken men zayn ehrlech* [one can be righteous], and thus did our father Jacob, peace be upon him, petition God: "give me bread to eat and clothing to wear" before proceeding to "I will return in peace… and the Lord will be my God". (Friedman 2009, Vayetse, p. 49)

The incorporation of Yiddish within the Hebrew text in the above passage likely serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it preserves the authenticity of direct and unadorned speech, as exemplified by "er iz a shoyte". Furthermore, the word *ehrlechkayt* poses particular translation challenges due to its rich semantic field: it encompasses uprightness, fairness, and simplicity whilst simultaneously conveying notions of piety, religious devotion, and fervent observance of commandments. Moreover, the Yiddish employed by the listeners as their daily vernacular aptly aligns with the sermon's moral message, which teaches that this material world holds importance (concerning matters of livelihood and health) and that without the physical realm and quotidian existence, spiritual life cannot manifest. Similarly, the realm of Yiddish, although designated for mundane communication, carries significance in its own right, sustaining the spiritual and sacred sphere.

The sermons occasionally feature sophisticated linguistic interplay between Yiddish and Hebrew, creating what might be termed "phonological punning". Consider this illustrative example: A man approached the holy Rabbi of Ruzhin, declaring *ikh vil dienen dem bashefer* [I want to serve the Creator]. The Rabbi responded: *dem bashefer darf men nit dienen* [one need not serve the Creator], explaining that the Divine Being is *dak min hadak* [Heb. utterly abstract], while you, being corporeal, *du darfst zikh dienen* [you must refine yourself] (Friedman 2009, p. 564).

The linguistic complexity here centres on the Yiddish verb *dienen*, which carries the primary meaning of "to serve" (particularly in religious worship). The Hasid expresses his desire to serve God, but the Ruzhiner Rebbe sharply rebukes him through clever manipulation of the word's semantic field. In Yiddish, *dienen* also relates to "thinness" (*din* = thin). The Rebbe, seizing upon this double meaning, points out that one need not "make thin" (metaphysically reduce) God, who is already "most abstract" (*dak min hadak*—a medieval Hebrew philosophical term for the purely abstract or transcendent). Through this multilingual wordplay, which deliberately employs the Hebrew root *dak* (thin) to mirror the Yiddish *din*, the Rebbe delivers his stinging critique: it is not God who needs serving or refining but, rather, the coarse, materialistic Hasid himself.

One may reasonably surmise that these layers of Yiddish and Hebrew coexisted in the Ruzhiner Rebbe's original oral delivery—that is to say that the Rebbe addressed his Hasidim in Yiddish interspersed with Hebrew. The disciples who subsequently committed these words to writing sought to preserve both this bilingualism and its accompanying acerbity. Rendering the saying in Hebrew alone or Yiddish alone would have diminished

its pointed critique, forfeiting both the stylistic beauty of its phonological wordplay and the sharp wit of its delivery.

This integrative model reveals how Hasidic writers developed sophisticated strategies for preserving the authenticity of oral teaching while working within traditional textual frameworks. The preservation of Yiddish elements within Hebrew texts served multiple functions: it maintained the immediacy of the tzaddik's original expression, captured untranslatable cultural and religious concepts, and created a new hybrid form that reflected the lived reality of Hasidic religious experience. This innovative approach to religious writing contributed to the broader legitimisation of Eastern Yiddish as a literary language.

4.3. Hebrew Within Yiddish

Habad Hasidism stands unique among Hasidic movements in its approach to Yiddish publications. From its inception, it has been customary within Habad to publish entire works in Yiddish: sermons; stories; and even lengthy, profound philosophical treatises. The founder of Habad Hasidism himself bestowed sacred status upon Yiddish, and many teachings of its leaders were published in Yiddish without Hebrew translation (Rubin 2019; Reiser 2020). However, examination of this Yiddish reveals an extraordinarily extensive Hebrew component, to the extent that it sometimes becomes difficult to determine whether this is a Yiddish text with Hebrew components or a Hebrew text with Yiddish elements. The integration of Hebrew and Yiddish in Habad literature achieved a synthesis that, to the best of my knowledge, remains unparalleled in other Hasidic movements. One might say that diglossia reached its apex in this literature, where Hebrew and Yiddish "serve in admixture" (B. Talmud, Tractate Yoma 28b).

An illuminating example of this phenomenon can be found in a sermon by the sixth Habad Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880–1950). The sermon was delivered in Yiddish on Shavuot 5694 (1934) in Warsaw and was subsequently transcribed in its original language—Yiddish. The complete sermon comprises twenty-eight sections. Only Part I is presented here, with Hebrew-origin terms indicated in italics in the English translation, allowing us to examine the diglossia within this text:

> When in the course of a Hasidic discourse my father came to discuss some profound *concepts such* as in the *idea* of *hafshatah* (lit., "abstraction"), he would sometimes express himself as follows: "Once a person has understood an *idea*, he *pauses* to *contemplate* it *profoundly*, and views it *in his mind's eye* just as one looks at a *beautiful picture*". Often, he would express himself in *these words*: "When a person *laboriously exerts his body and soul* while grappling with either *a topic in the revealed levels of the Torah*, or a *concept* in the *innermost levels of the Torah*, the *subject* is still in a state of *thrust and parry* within his own mind. But once the *concept* has found a comfortable niche in his thinking, he views *this idea* just like one looks at a *painted picture*, for by now this *abstract idea* has formed an *image in his mind*, just like *an image that is seen by the physical eye*".
>
> We have already spoken of the *high degree of imagery*. A person endowed with *a sense of imagery* can picture a *concept* and experience it within himself, and this benefits one's *religious worship* considerably.
>
> Indeed, *my great-grandfather the Tzemach Tzedek* once said that a person with the *gift of imagination* has greater chances of attaining *repentance* (than another). Moreover, he can experience *love of God* and *awe* as a *sensation* in the *flesh of his physical heart*, just like *the sensations* of *physical love and fear*.
>
> In the literature of *Hasidism* one can find well-ordered *advice* on a *variety of matters—how to broaden and mellow one's intellectual capacity, how to rectify the attributes*

> *of one's character, and how to change one's nature and habits*. One of the faculties which "*the close people to us*" *and our yeshivah students* should *accustom themselves* to develop is—*imagination*.
>
> Every individual who ever studied in the *Tomhei Temimim Yeshivah* in Lubavitch certainly remembers what a farbrengen (Hasidic gathering) of *Simhas Torah* or *Yud-Tes Kislev* was like. Whoever was in Lubavitch—who heard a *sermon*, or spoke with my father *privately*, or prayed at the *holy resting-places of our saintly forebears*—ought to *visualize in his own mind* from *memory* those inspiring *sights* that he witnessed and experienced during those days in Lubavitch.
>
> Just *as thought* is *unbounded by spatial limits*, so is it *unbounded by limits of time*. One's *memory* houses visions that date back many years to one's loving and carefree childhood *period*, as it then was. And at moments of truthful and intense *introspection*, one can experience yet again the stimuli and the spiritual perceptions of bygone years. (Schneersohn 1957, pp. 313–14)[29]

While Yiddish inherently contains Hebrew elements, this text exhibits an extraordinarily extensive Hebrew component that exceeds conventional usage in Yiddish literature. Max Weinreich had noted this stylistic phenomenon, observing that rabbis and religious scholars, accustomed to *loshn koydesh* through their studies, employed a broader Hebrew component than did the general populace (Weinreich 2008, p. 230). Indeed, Weinreich considered Hasidic Yiddish a unique dialect with its own distinguishing attributes (ibid., pp. 189–92).[30] This interweaving of Hebrew and Yiddish manifests in three primary dimensions:

1. Untranslated Hebrew or Aramaic expressions and complete quotations from biblical verses and midrashic sources remain in their original language without Yiddish translation;
2. Preference for Hebrew words existing in Yiddish over their Germanic or Slavic equivalents;
3. Formation of new verbs combining Hebrew words within the linguistic and syntactic framework of Yiddish grammar (Ibid., pp. 229–41).

An examination of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn's aforementioned sermon reveals all three criteria. The text contains a pronounced and extensive Hebrew component. It includes Hebrew words uncommon in Yiddish, such as *ha'amakath-hada'ath* (contemplative depth), haskalah (in the sense of insight, not the Haskalah movement), *muskal* (conceptual), *mufshat* (abstract), *mit'akev* (pausing), and others. Furthermore, it shows preference for Hebrew words existing in Yiddish over their more common Yiddish equivalents of non-Hebrew origin, e.g., *khush* instead of *feyikayt* (capability), *hergesh* instead of *gefil* (feeling), *tsiyur* instead of *gemel* or *bild* (image), *kama* instead of *etlekhe* (several), and *kmo* instead of *vi* (like). Additionally, the text retains untranslated rabbinic Hebrew expressions and creates compound forms incorporating Hebrew words within Yiddish linguistic structures: *simkhas-torah'dikn* and *yud-tes-kislev'dikn* (pertaining to the holidays of Simchat Torah and 19th of Kislev, respectively); *ha'amakas-hada'as'dikn* (contemplative); and verbs such as *margil zayn* (to accustom), *poel zayn* (to effect), *ma'amik-da'as zayn* (to contemplate deeply)[31], and *metsayer zayn* (to envision, to visualise), including the passive form *nitstayer gevorn* (was envisioned).[32]

Habad's unique approach to language integration represents the most radical transformation of traditional Jewish linguistic hierarchies. By developing a highly sophisticated Yiddish that incorporated extensive Hebrew terminology, Habad effectively created a new religious literary language that bridged the gap between spoken and written forms. This practice demonstrated that Eastern Yiddish could function as a vehicle for complex reli-

gious and philosophical discourse, thereby contributing significantly to its elevation as a literary language.

5. Conclusions

The desire to preserve the tzaddik's original speech in Hasidic sermons illuminates the incorporation of Yiddish passages within Hasidic sermons and stories presented in Hebrew. This integration of spoken language within the written language exemplifies the living discourse and its significance within Hasidic culture. Moreover, as the spoken language was Eastern Yiddish, Hasidic literature, alongside Haskalah literature, contributed to the elevation of Eastern Yiddish's status and its transformation into a language of high cultural standing. Furthermore, Hasidic literature, which preserved the spoken language in its written documentation, constitutes sacred literature in the eyes of its originators, authors, editors, and publishers, sanctifying this integration of Yiddish and Hebrew.

I have presented three models of Hebrew–Yiddish integration: their publication side by side within the same volume; the incorporation of limited Yiddish within Hebrew texts; and, finally, their complete amalgamation to the point where the languages become inseparable. In this manner, the Hebrew–Yiddish diglossia developed within Hasidism, a phenomenon that persists to the present day.

This study's findings have several important implications for our understanding of Jewish linguistic and cultural history. First, this study challenges the traditional narrative that attributes the elevation of Eastern Yiddish solely to the Haskalah movement, demonstrating how Hasidic literature participated in this transformation through different means and motivations. Secondly, it reveals how religious authenticity concerns could drive linguistic innovation, as seen in the various models of Hebrew–Yiddish integration developed by Hasidic writers. Thirdly, it suggests that the development of modern Jewish languages was shaped not only by ideological movements but also by practical needs of religious transmission. This research opens new avenues for investigating how other Jewish religious movements may have influenced language development and how similar processes of linguistic authentication might have occurred in other religious traditions. Future research might explore how these models of Hebrew–Yiddish integration influenced later Jewish literary production or how they compare to similar phenomena in other diglossic religious communities.

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Notes

1 Polylingualism manifests as a societal norm across numerous cultures. Regarding the history of Jewish Polylingualism in general and the diglossia of Yiddish and Hebrew in particular, see (Fishman 2002) and (Zeitlin 1924).

2 For discussion of Hebrew orthography's application to Yiddish, see (Weinreich 2008, p. 185). For analysis of Hebrew elements as traditional markers, cf. (ibid., pp. 313–14).

3 For analysis of the syntactic–linguistic interface between Hebrew and Yiddish in medieval Ashkenaz and their mutual linguistic influence, see (Harshav 1990, pp. 51–61).

4 The definition of what constitutes a Jewish language is itself a matter of scholarly debate. Sarah Bunin Benor, for instance, has argued for defining Jewish languages as the distinctly Jewish forms of the languages that Jews have spoken and written in their communities around the world (Benor 2011), emphasising linguistic features rather than exclusively Hebrew components or

script. This broader definition encompasses varieties like "Jewish English" and other contemporary Jewish linguistic practices. However, for the discussion of historical period context in this paper, the Hebrew component and use of Hebrew script are, indeed, central to Yiddish's Jewish character.

[5] Drawing from this foundation of two parallel languages of writing and creative expression, Jean Baumgarten describes Hasidic *badkhonus* (traditional Jewish entertainment and ceremony leading) and demonstrates how the *badkhonim* (masters of ceremonies at Jewish celebrations, as well as composers of songs, verses, rhymes, and parables) in Hasidic culture relied upon a deep linguistic hybridity of Yiddish and Hebrew. See (Baumgarten 2000).

[6] Indeed, Gerald Owst, who studied English and French medieval sermons, highlighted the linguistic gap between written Latin texts and sermons delivered in vernacular English or French. He (Owst 1926, pp. 228–78) concluded that sermons written in Latin were not intended for the general public but, rather, for a limited scholarly audience of educated people and clergy, serving as raw material for their sermons. Furthermore, Naomi Seidman makes an interesting and important distinction between individual bilingualism and communal bilingualism. Individual bilingualism indicates a type of reciprocity and cognitive overlap. Although an individual uses different languages in different situations or with different people, both languages exist within them, and the speaker knows most words in both. In contrast, communal bilingualism typically involves relationships of complementarity, symbiosis, and hierarchy; the two languages seemingly divide a single linguistic territory between them, with Yiddish addressing certain social strata while Hebrew addresses others. See (Seidman 1997, pp. 1–2).

[7] The prevalent level of Jewish education proved inadequate for enabling the majority of the population to achieve proficiency in Hebrew religious texts. Given that traditional Ashkenazi society placed paramount importance on sacred study, this educational limitation catalysed the development of Yiddish—the vernacular—as a written medium; see (Turniansky 2009) and (Stampfer 1993).

[8] On the question of language as an issue that reveals and generates a broad spectrum of positions and tensions driving the Haskalah circles, see (Baumgarten 2005, p. 125).

[9] These contrasting attitudes toward Yiddish and state languages exemplify the role of language ideology–the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships—in shaping Jewish linguistic practices during this period. The Haskalah's elevation of state languages and denigration of Yiddish reflected broader ideological beliefs about modernity, progress, and Jewish integration into European society. Language ideology provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding how different Jewish movements approached the Hebrew–Yiddish relationship. See (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994; Irvine 1989).

[10] The Hebrew language was also required to undergo significant transformation. The early *maskilim* in Germany advocated a return to biblical Hebrew and called for the cleansing of *loshn koydesh* of its *Talmudic* and Rabbinic literary components, which were identified as languages that had corrupted the original and pure Hebrew. See (Bartal 2007, pp. 34–35). Regarding local languages, see (Slutsky 1977), according to which the *maskilim* in Russia promoted the use of Russian and even created a Jewish–Russian press.

[11] The phenomenon of diglossia has deep historical roots in Jewish linguistic practices. During the Second Temple period (circa 516 BCE–70 CE), whilst Hebrew maintained its status as the language of sacred texts and formal writing, Aramaic and Greek served as vernacular languages in different regions. This created a complex linguistic situation similar to the later Hebrew–Yiddish diglossia discussed here. Indeed, throughout Jewish history, multilingual practices and the distinction between written and spoken languages have been remarkably consistent features of Jewish cultural life. From the Aramaic of the Babylonian Jewish community, through Judeo-Arabic in medieval Islamic lands, to Ladino in the Sephardic diaspora, Jewish communities have frequently maintained one language for sacred and literary purposes whilst using another for daily communication. See (Spolsky 2014; Glinert 1993).

[12] For more on the *Khumesh-teitsh*, see (Gealia 1969; Turniansky 1988).

[13] On the *Heder* and its development, see (Etkes and Assaf 2010).

[14] While *loshn koydesh* refers broadly to Hebrew used in religious texts from biblical through rabbinic periods, the Maskilim specifically championed biblical Hebrew, viewing it as a purer form of the language. They sought to strip away later rabbinic and medieval Hebrew elements that characterised traditional Jewish texts, seeing these as linguistic corruptions of the biblical original. See above note 10.

[15] Dov-Ber Kerler identified traces of Eastern Yiddish in written literature as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century and demonstrated that Eastern Yiddish developed into a modern literary language starting in 1720. However, he qualifies his assertion by noting that we do not know the extent of Eastern Yiddish writing in the early eighteenth century (Kerler 1988). Indeed, it appears that the foundations for Eastern Yiddish literature were laid before the *Haskalah*; nevertheless, the meteoric rise in literary writing in Eastern Yiddish during the nineteenth century proves that the *Haskalah*–and, parallelly, *Hasidism*, as we shall see—made a decisive contribution to this rise.

[16] On the rise of modern Yiddish, see (Fishman 2005).

[17] Mendele even makes satirical observations in his books about this language that women read in the *Tsene-rene book* but do not speak (*Tsene-rene is a* Yiddish adaptation and commentary on the Torah written in 1616 and is currently still printed. It was most

popular particularly among Jewish women, since they generally did not study Hebrew religious texts directly). On the Eastern European versions of the *Tsene-rene* in the late eighteenth century and especially in the nineteenth century, see (Shmeruk 1964).

18 Its roots go back even farther. David Roskies demonstrated that Eastern Yiddish began to serve, in the nineteenth century, as a written language as well, independent of the emergence of modern Yiddish literature (Roskies 1974). Zeev Gries noted that the roots of this phenomenon were actually founded in broader European cultural processes. The Reformation and Protestantism, already in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, provided justification and tremendous impetus for printing books in spoken languages, particularly religious books. It is no coincidence that Yiddish literature took wing during the same period (Gries 1990, pp. 50–51). Gries argues (ibid., introduction) that the broad legitimacy that the Yiddish language received in the eighteenth century as a language for engaging in both sacred and secular matters is what led to its flourishing as a literary language in the nineteenth century. However, it should be noted that Yiddish creative work in the eighteenth century was in Western Yiddish. In contrast, Eastern Yiddish was used by *Hasidism* in the nineteenth century as a component in the sacred literature it created; therefore, *Hasidic* literature, in particular, played a significant role in the flourishing of modern Yiddish literature, which is based on Eastern Yiddish.

19 For a comparison of the Yiddish and Hebrew versions of *Shivhey ha-Besht*, see (Ya'ari 1964; Shmeruk 1978, pp. 214–18). They both argue that the Yiddish text is more faithful to the original Hebrew manuscript than the Hebrew printed editions. For a critique of this approach, see (Mundschein 1982, pp. 22–40).

20 The date of the first publication of this work is unknown, though the editors of the New York 1940 printing suggest that it was published in 1816/1817. Friedberg (Friedberg 1950, p. 110) argues for the earlier date of Warsaw 1805, but cf. (Lieberman 1984, p. 2) note 5. The earliest extant printing is Shklov 1832.

21 However, Frieden relies on the assumption that Hebrew was intended for sacred matters and Yiddish for secular ones—a distinction challenged by Turniansky, as detailed above. Furthermore, he did not take into account the early *Hasidic* oral culture, which minimised writing, regardless of the Yiddish language. See (Reiser and Mayse 2020, pp. 1–10). For more on *Hasidism* as an oral movement in its beginnings, see (Baumgarten 2005, pp. 537–38).

22 On the gap between the oral language (Yiddish) and the textual language of *Hasidic* sermons, see (Reiser and Mayse 2020, pp. 10–32).

23 In *Habad Hasidism,* the *tzaddikim's* sermons were called *DaCH*, an acronym for *divrei Elohim hayim* (words of the living God). This name was already given to the sermons during the lifetime of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of *Habad Hasidism*; see (Etkes 2014, p. 50).

24 Indeed, the *Hasidic* concept of the *tzaddik* sanctifies language itself. On the sanctification of Yiddish in *Hasidism*, see (Reiser 2020).

25 On the gap between the language in which these *Hasidic* teachings were originally delivered (Yiddish) and their written presentation in *Beit Aharon* (Hebrew), see (Shor 2018, pp. 693–870). See specifically (ibid., pp. 727–31, 789–90) for a comparison of Yiddish manuscripts that served as sources for the Hebrew printed sermons.

26 See the Hebrew translation of *Milei DeRabanan* in (Brown 2018, pp. 76–78).

27 It should be noted that in the Hebrew section, a few Yiddish words appear within Hebrew sermons. However, these typically function as translations of Hebrew terms. Analysis of these instances suggests that editors were concerned the Hebrew might not be sufficiently comprehensible, particularly with ambiguous terms, and, thus, added Yiddish alongside—but not in place of—the Hebrew. See, for example (Perlov 1956, Parshat Noah, p. 48, Hanukkah p. 95).

28 For this article, I used the Friedman (2009) edition that combines all previous editions with additional manuscript material.

29 The English translation is based on https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2716784/jewish/Chapter-7.htm (accessed on 27 October 2024), with some revisions I made after consulting the original Yiddish source.

30 Weinreich discusses the special connotations of the word *rebbe* in Hasidic society; the use of the second-person singular between members of the same Hasidic group, in opposition to the accepted Yiddish usage of the second-person plural; and more.

31 See (Niborski 2012, p. 301) for the form *ma'amik-zayn*, though the form *ma'amik-da'as zayn* does not appear in this dictionary.

32 On the Hebrew component in contemporary Israeli Haredi Yiddish, see (Assouline 2017; **?**, [esp. the list in pp. 63–66B12-religions-3403595, 2000b, 2010; Isaacs 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2009). See also further articles about this subject in (Isaacs and Glinert 1999). Regarding the Hebrew component in Yiddish, as well as in Hasidic communities in North America and the U.K., see (Belk et al. 2020, 2022).

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