Summary. The term “Lithuanian” Yiddish popularly refers to the dialectal varieties of the Yiddish Language which were spoken not only in today’s Republic of Lithuania, but also in northern Poland and most of Belarus. This variety is known in Yiddish dialectological studies as Northwestern Yiddish. This article reviews two main facts of Northwestern (“Lithuanian”) Yiddish: the vocalism of the accented syllable and the two-gender system. The former is introduced using Weinreich’s system, a combined synchronic-diachronic approach which allows a quick overall comparison among all Yiddish varieties. The linguistic data support the hypothesis, already put forth in my 2005 doctoral dissertation, of a double substrate in Lithuanian Yiddish: a Judeo-Slavonic and a Judeo-Lithuanian substrate. After a quick overview of the (historical) geographical extension of Lithuanian Yiddish (sect. 1), Max Weinreich’s “diaphonemic” system is introduced, and applied to Lithuanian Yiddish (sect. 2.1). Sect. 2.2 presents some examples of Lithuanian Yiddish. These examples show the most interesting facts which characterize the Lithuanian variant of the Yiddish language as opposed to the other variants. Although the Standard Yiddish phonological system is based on the Lithuanian Yiddish one, there is an interesting difference, namely, the increased frequency of the diphthong ej which corresponds to Standard Yiddish oj in words with diaphonemes 42 and 44. This could also point to the influence of the Lithuanian language, where ei is a frequent diphthong, and oi is almost absent. Sect. 2.3 reviews the hypothesis of a Judeo-Slavonic influence in Lithuanian, which caused the loss of vowel length opposition. The two-gender system of Lithuanian Yiddish and the hypothesis of a Judeo-Lithuanian substrate is presented in sect. 3, and, finally, sect. 4 closes the article with some final observations.

Keywords. Lithuanian Yiddish, Judeo-Slavonic, Judeo-Lithuanian, dialectology, diaphoneme, historical phonology.

Introduction

The Yiddish term lite, though it can be used to refer to the Lithuanian state of today, generally indicates the geographical extension comprehending today’s Lithuania and (most of) Belarus, and the Polish region of Białystok¹. The borders of the larger lite are also the borders of the North-Western Yiddish

¹ We can say tif lite, lit. “Deep Lithuania,” to refer unambiguously to the present-day Lithuanian state. Belarus was traditionally called raysn, today rather vaysrusland.
CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LITHUANIAN YIDDISH

dialectal area – this dialect is known traditionally as litvisher yidish, that is, “Lithuanian Yiddish.” A substantial Jewish migration to lite could begin after Grand Duke Vytautas issued his 1388 Privilege to the Jewish Community in Brest. This migration took to Lithuania the Jewish-German dialects which developed as Lithuanian Yiddish. But Jewish communities in Lithuania must have existed before 1388: according to Lewin (2000), “the first Jewish settlers in Lithuania – merchants from southeastern Europe – seem to have arrived in the twelfth century.” What language did they speak? A hypothesis put forth in Zamblera (2007) is that there could have been two groups of pre-Yiddish Jewish communities in the Grand Duchy, one speaking (Judeo-) East-Slavonic, the other (Judeo-) Lithuanian. The Judeo-Slavonic hypothesis is not new, cf. Wexler (1991), Kleiner and Svetozarova (2000). The Judeo-Lithuanian hypothesis is almost a logical consequence of the former: if there were Slavonic-speaking Jewish communities in the Grand Duchy, there could as well have existed Baltic-speaking ones. There is some linguistic evidence, which will be briefly reviewed in this article.

These hypothetical pre-Yiddish communities were rapidly assimilated linguistically by the Yiddish-speaking newcomers, and Lithuania became one of the main centres of Yiddish culture: after the Lublin Union of 1569 recognized the right of non (ethnic) Lithuanians to settle in the countryside and to own land, Jewish communities could be formed in small towns, and the typical Yiddish-speaking shtetl culture began to develop in lite, and thrived till the Holocaust.

As far as the major cities are concerned, the cultural importance of Vilnius, both in religious and secular culture, grew to such an extent that the standard, literary Yiddish pronunciation (the one that is taught today in Yiddish courses) is based on Lithuanian Yiddish, particularly in its Vilnius variant, though there are two important features of Lithuanian pronunciation which have not been accepted in the standard, and are marked as dialectal. These are the so-called shabesdiker loshn and the diphthong /ej/ in correspondence of the Yiddish diaphonemes O₂

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2 The South-Western Yiddish dialect is known as poylisher yidish, that is, Polish Yiddish.
3 In 1507, the Privilege was extended to the whole of Grand Duchy. Cf. Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė, 2002, p. 57-64.
4 The Baltic-speaking territory must have been much more extended in the 14th century than it is today, covering, for example, much of today’s Belarus. Cf. Dini (1997), Zinkevičius (1984-1995). Slavonic dialects have gradually diffused northwards at the expense of Lithuanian. The process has continued until recently: in northern Belarus there are still (or there were until some years ago) Lithuanian dialectal islands; while in some parts of Southeastern Lithuania Slavonic dialects have superseded a previously spoken Lithuanian dialect. Cf. Zinkevicius (1993).
6 shabesdiker loshn consists in a confusion of the phoneme /š/ with /s/ (both are realized as /s/), and /ž/ with /z/, both realized as /z/. There are parallels in both Polish (so-called mazurzenie, Stieber, 1973) and Lithuanian dialects (Zinkevičius, 1966, p. 147-148). The name shabesdiker loshn means “Shabbat language” and is ironic: in Hebrew, to speak a “Shabbat Hebrew” ivrit shel shabbath means to use a very high register, using also the rules of the classical language which are normally disregarded in common speech.
7 The use of the concept of “diaphoneme” in Yiddish dialectology is reviewed in sec. 2.1.
and $O_4$. The latter characteristics is still typical of Lithuanian Yiddish, and is still
used by native people which have learnt Yiddish by their parents, as the present
author has verified in Kaunas as late as October 2012.

As the various Yiddish dialects differ mainly in their tonic-syllable vowel
systems, in the remaining of this article we shall first of all briefly review the
system of Lithuanian Yiddish. This will also be useful as an introduction for the
reader not acquainted with Max Weinreich’s “diaphonemes,” which are a very
effective system for describing a set of “dialects” or closely related languages
whose differences are found mainly in the phonological system. It was deved-
loped purposely for Yiddish dialectology, but it could be very useful in describ-
ing dialects with a similar situation (e.g., the Italian ones). After the overview
of Lithuanian Yiddish vocalism, whose main characteristics (the loss of quantity
opposition) is generally ascribed to the effect of language-contact with Slavonic,
we will briefly mention the main morphological feature of Lithuanian Yiddish, the
Lithuanian-like two-gender system (all other dialects, as well as Standard Yid-
dish, have also the neuter gender, like German), and consider the possibility of
a Lithuanian substrate.

The accented vowel system of Lithuanian Yiddish

The vowel diaphonemes

Sapir (1915), a milestone in Yiddish linguistics, gives an account of the historical
development of the phonetic system of Yiddish from its Middle High German ances-
tor. More recently, a very interesting approach has emerged in Yiddish dialectol-
ygy. This system, developed by Max Weinreich\(^8\) (1960, 1973, cf. also Katz 1983,
1988) describes the tonic vocalism of the Yiddish dialects using a system of
diaphonemes, represented with capital letters (A, E, I, O, U) and a subscribed
index. These diaphonemes, as Weinreich (1977) says, are “algebraic symbols”
which summarize phonemic oppositions with different dialectal realization but
a common (Proto-Yiddish) source. The numerical indexes have the following
meaning:

1: Original short vowel;
2: Original long vowel (that is, long in the Middle High German or Hebrew-
   Aramaic source for that word);
3: Original short vowel in an open syllable, which gets generally lengthened
   in Yiddish and patterns with 2;
4: Diphthong, that is, vowel followed by semivowel $i$ or $u$;
5: This index is used only for diaphoneme E, to distinguish an open (ε) and a
closed E, which pattern differently in some dialects.

\(^8\) The great Yiddish scholar, born in (today’s) Latvia, founded the YIVO Institute for Jewish
Research in 1925, in his Vilnius apartment. The YIVO was moved to New York in 1938.
So, for example, $O_1$ means “original short o”, while $I_3$ means “original short i in open syllable, which has been lengthened and patterns with original long i.” Giving a diachronic interpretation to the diaphonemes, we can consider the following as a hypothesis of the Proto-Yiddish tonic vowel system:

### The hypothetical Proto-Yiddish vowel system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>ā</td>
<td>ā</td>
<td>ā &gt; ā</td>
<td>āj</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>ē</td>
<td>ē</td>
<td>ē &gt; ē</td>
<td>ēj</td>
<td>ē (ε)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>ĭ</td>
<td>ĭ</td>
<td>ĭ &gt; ĭ</td>
<td>ĭj</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>į</td>
<td>į</td>
<td>į &gt; į</td>
<td>įj</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>ū</td>
<td>ū</td>
<td>ū &gt; ū</td>
<td>ūj</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Describing a variety of Yiddish, for example, Standard Yiddish, we can write “o$j$ /$U_4$,” meaning the diphthong /o$j$/ of the Standard Yiddish phonological system which stems from Proto-Yiddish *a$u$ (U₄), while Standard Yiddish “o$j$/O₂,” indistinguishable from the former from both a phonological and a phonetic point of view, stems from Proto-Yiddish *ō (O₂)⁹. Lithuanian Yiddish also has “o$j$ /$U_4$,” but responds with ej to O₂ and O₄, which are both o$j$ in Standard Yiddish.

There is also a more practical system to relate a phonemic entity (vowel or diphthong) of a Yiddish variety to the diaphoneme it represents: we assign a number to each diaphoneme (1=A, 2=E, 3=I, 4=O, 5=U), and write, for example, o$j_{54}$ for “o$j$ /$U_4$,” e$j_{42}$ for “ej /O₂.” In o$j_{54}$, for example, the first number of the index (5) stands for the diaphoneme U; the second number (4), for the structural features described above (diphthongized).

1. Thus, to say that Standard Yiddish has the diphthong o$j_{42/44/54}$ means that:
2. Standard Yiddish has the diphthong /o$j$/;
3. This diphthong has three different Proto-Yiddish sources:
   A. 42 (diaphoneme O₂, that is, Proto-Yiddish ō),
   B. 44 (diaphoneme O₄, that is, original diphthong ŏu),
   C. 54 (diaphoneme U₄, which is original diphthong a$u$).
3. The three different /o$j$/ are systematically related to the three outcomes of O₂, O₄, and U₄ in all the other Yiddish varieties.

In this way, we can give a very compact description of the (accented) vocalic system of every Yiddish dialect, which is at the same time synchronic and diachronic, and relates each described variety, in a systematic way, to all the other. Let us look, for example, at the phonemic systems of, respectively, Standard,

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⁹ /o$j$/ is written oy in YIVO transcription, which has become traditional when Yiddish is written in Latin letters. In dialectological studies, however, it is common to represent the semivowel with the grapheme <j>.
Lithuanian and Polish Yiddish. The Standard Yiddish system is almost identical to the Lithuanian Yiddish variety, while the Polish system is vastly different (preserving more phonemic opposition from an earlier stage of the language), as the following tables show:

**Table 2**

The phonological system of Standard Yiddish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>i</th>
<th>i</th>
<th>u</th>
<th>/i/</th>
<th>e</th>
<th>/ej/</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31/32</td>
<td>22/24</td>
<td>21/25</td>
<td>12/13/41</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>42/44/54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**

The phonological system of Lithuanian Yiddish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>i</th>
<th>i</th>
<th>u</th>
<th>/i/</th>
<th>e</th>
<th>/ej/</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31/32</td>
<td>22/24/42/44</td>
<td>21/25</td>
<td>12/13/41</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4**

The phonological system of Polish Yiddish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>i</th>
<th>i</th>
<th>u</th>
<th>/i/</th>
<th>e</th>
<th>/ej/</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32/52</td>
<td>31/51</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42/44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Examples of Lithuanian Yiddish**

The following tables show some examples of Lithuanian Yiddish, taken from Sapir (1915):

---


11 I have maintained Sapir’s transcription, writing however j for the semivowel in the diphthongs aj, ej, oj, as is today generally done in Yiddish dialect description, cf. Katz (1983). I have also added the diaphoneme. In the “English” column, the meaning of the Yiddish item is given, which is not necessarily the same as the M.H.G. meaning.
CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LITHUANIAN YIDDISH

Table 5

Diaphoneme A in Lithuanian Yiddish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lith. Yiddish</th>
<th>M.H.G.</th>
<th>Diaphoneme</th>
<th>Lith. Yiddish realization</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 gast</td>
<td>gast</td>
<td>$A_1$</td>
<td>$a_{11}$</td>
<td>guest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 maxn</td>
<td>machen</td>
<td>$A_1$</td>
<td>$a_{11}$</td>
<td>make</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 harts</td>
<td>hërze</td>
<td>$A_1$</td>
<td>$a_{11}$</td>
<td>heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 tog</td>
<td>tac (gen. tages)</td>
<td>$A_3$</td>
<td>$o_{13}$</td>
<td>day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 tot</td>
<td>stat</td>
<td>$A_3$</td>
<td>$o_{13}$</td>
<td>town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 girotn</td>
<td>geräten</td>
<td>$A_2$</td>
<td>$o_{12}$</td>
<td>saved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 do</td>
<td>dā</td>
<td>$A_2$</td>
<td>$o_{12}$</td>
<td>here</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows the diaphoneme A, which generally continues a M.H.G. $a$. In example 3, however, Yiddish has $A_1$ in correspondence to M.H.G. $ë$, as is generally the case before $r$+consonant (in other contexts, the normal reflex of M.H.G. $ë$ is $E_1$).

In examples 4 and 5, we find the diaphoneme $A_3$ (realized as /o/ in Lithuanian Yiddish, but, for example, as /u/ in Polish Yiddish) in correspondence to MHG short $a$, in a closed syllable.$^{12}$ All known Yiddish dialects show $A_3$ in these two words. As Katz (1982, xvii) explains, “the Germanic component of Yiddish is not congruous with any one German dialect, while each Yiddish dialect remains systematically relatable to any other Yiddish dialect.” In the case of the exceptional $tA_3g$ instead of the expected $tA_1g$, Sapir explains that this probably happened because of an analogical leveling in the paradigm: both dative singular and nominative plural were $tage$ in M.H.G., and in these forms short $a$ regularly corresponds to the Yiddish diaphoneme $A_3$ because of the open syllable.$^{13}$

Table 6 shows the reflexes of M.H.G. short $e$. Before a tautosyllabic $n$, $E_1$ is $ej_{11}$ in Lithuanian Yiddish.

Diaphoneme E in Lithuanian Yiddish

| 8 lext | slëht | $E_1$ | $e_{11}$ | ugly |
| 9 mentš | mensche | $E_1$ | $e_{11}$ | man, person |
| 10 ejnikl | enikel | $E_3$ | $e_{13}$ | grandson |
| 11 brejngen | brengen (dial.) | $E_1$ | $ej_{11}$ | bring |

$^{12}$ Recall that $A_3$ corresponds to an etymological short $a$ in an open syllable.

$^{13}$ As for Yiddish final -$g$ in $tog$, versus M.H.G. $tac$ with final -$c$, Sapir explains it also as an analogical development due to paradigm levelling, and not as a failure to desonorize a final -$g$. As Sapir acutely observes (1915, p. 255-256), “that this explanation is correct as indicated by such words as $op$ ‘away’ (M.H.G. $abe$), where no paradigmatic levelling could take place and where final $b$ became $p$, according to regular German phonetic law.”
To the M.H.G. rounded vowels ü and iu, Yiddish responds with and I₁ and I₁₂, which represent also original i and, respectively, ĩ, as table 7 shows:

### Diaphoneme I in Lithuanian Yiddish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blind</th>
<th>Blint</th>
<th>I₁</th>
<th>I₁₁</th>
<th>Blind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Blind</td>
<td>Blind</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Mil</td>
<td>Mül</td>
<td>I₁</td>
<td>I₁₁</td>
<td>Blind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Tsajt</td>
<td>Zit</td>
<td>I₂</td>
<td>I₂₂</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Majz</td>
<td>Miuze</td>
<td>I₂</td>
<td>I₂₂</td>
<td>Mice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Short M.H.G. o and u remain in Lithuanian Yiddish, as we can see from the examples in Table 8:

### Diaphonemes O₁ and U₁ in Lithuanian Yiddish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dort</th>
<th>Dort</th>
<th>O₁</th>
<th>O₁₁</th>
<th>There</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Dort</td>
<td>Dort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Vortsl</td>
<td>Wurzel</td>
<td>O₁</td>
<td>O₁₁</td>
<td>Root</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Shtub</td>
<td>Stube</td>
<td>U₁</td>
<td>U₁₁</td>
<td>House</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The diphthong /ej/ in Lithuanian Yiddish: Sapir (1921, p. 194) comments about “good evidence to show that there are general phonetic drifts toward particular sounds,” exemplifying with Modern Greek, where “the vowel i is the historical resultant of no less than ten etymologically distinct vowels (long and short) and diphthongs of the classical speech of Athens.” Lithuanian Yiddish exemplifies this kind of “drift” towards the diphthong ej₁, which corresponds to four diaphonemes and to many more M.H.G. distinct phonemes (Table 9):

### Different origins of the Lithuanian Yiddish diphthong ei

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tejn</th>
<th>Šnej</th>
<th>Klejn</th>
<th>Brejt</th>
<th>Brejt</th>
<th>Ejvn</th>
<th>Grejs</th>
<th>Bejm</th>
<th>EJg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Stēn</td>
<td>Snē</td>
<td>Klein</td>
<td>Breit</td>
<td>Brōt</td>
<td>Oven</td>
<td>Grōz</td>
<td>Boum</td>
<td>Ouge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>Snow</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Bread</td>
<td>Broad</td>
<td>Oven</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>Tree</td>
<td>Eye</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, Lithuanian Yiddish has oj in correspondence of a M.H.G. long ū, which become diphthongized in Yiddish (U₄), as Table 10 shows:

---

14 And perhaps this has some relation to the frequency of the diphthong ei in Lithuanian.
Table 10

Diaphoneme $U_4$ in Lithuanian Yiddish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Phoneme</th>
<th>Standard Yiddish</th>
<th>Lithuanian Yiddish</th>
<th>M.H.G.</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>hojz</td>
<td>hūs $U_4$</td>
<td>oj $U_4$</td>
<td>house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>mojz</td>
<td>mūs $U_4$</td>
<td>oj $U_4$</td>
<td>mouse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>mojl</td>
<td>mūl $U_4$</td>
<td>oj $U_4$</td>
<td>mouth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>hojt</td>
<td>hūt $U_4$</td>
<td>oj $U_4$</td>
<td>skin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we have seen, Standard Yiddish also has $oj_{54}$, as well as $oj_{42}$ (M.H.G. $\ddot{u}$) and $oj_{44}$ (M.H.G. $ou$). In this way, as Birnbaum (1979, pp. 100-101) observes, Standard Yiddish merges two phonemes that Yiddish dialects keep distinct. The same has happened in Modern German where both M.H.G. $\ddot{u}$ and $ou$ have become $au$, as shown in Table 11 (I have written $oj$ as $oy$ in Standard Yiddish, following the standard transcription):

Table 11

Standard Yiddish and German vs. Yiddish dialects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modern German</th>
<th>Standard Yiddish</th>
<th>Polish Yiddish</th>
<th>Lithuanian Yiddish</th>
<th>M.H.G.</th>
<th>Diaphoneme</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haus</td>
<td>hoyz</td>
<td>houz</td>
<td>hojz</td>
<td>hūs</td>
<td>$U_4$</td>
<td>house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baum</td>
<td>boym</td>
<td>bojm</td>
<td>bejm</td>
<td>boum</td>
<td>$O_4$</td>
<td>tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taub</td>
<td>toyb</td>
<td>toub</td>
<td>tojb</td>
<td>tūb</td>
<td>$U_4$</td>
<td>dove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taub</td>
<td>toyb</td>
<td>tojb</td>
<td>tejb</td>
<td>toub</td>
<td>$O_4$</td>
<td>deaf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The loss of vocalic quantity: the Judeo-Slavonic hypothesis

According to Wexler (1991), the Yiddish language was originated by the superposition of a Germanic superstrate on a Slavonic (Sorabian) substrate. Judeo-German speaking Jews, moving towards Eastern Europe, merged with a pre-existing local Jewish population, which spoke some form of (Judeo-) Slavonic. The newcomers soon became the overwhelming majority, thus assimilating linguistically the local community, which learned (Judeo-) German with their Slavonic “accent.” If Wexler’s hypothesis is correct\textsuperscript{15}, we can speak not generally of a Slavonic “influence” on Yiddish, but, more precisely, of a Slavonic \textit{substrate}.

In Zamblera (2005, 2007), I tried to adapt Wexler’s hypothesis to the linguistic reality of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Moving to \textit{lite}, Judeo-German speaker come into contact with speakers of both Baltic (Lithuanian) and Slavonic languages (especially East-Slavonic). Kleiner and Svetozarova (2000) ascribe the loss of vocalic length in Lithuanian Yiddish to an East-Slavonic influence\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. also Jacobs, 2005, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{16} In this connection it is interesting to observe that Polish Yiddish preserves phonemic vowel length, and Polish still had it in the 15th century, cf. Stieber, 1973, p. 71.
Now, loss of phonemic length seems a typical effect of substrate: the phonological system of the (Slavonic) mother tongue influences the way in which the sounds of the acquired language are perceived. This means that Yiddish (Judeo-German dialects) was learned by Slavonic-speaking people, and these could only be local Jews. Alternatively, in order to explain a phonological influence of this kind, we should admit that Jews moving to Slavonic-speaking countries massively learned the local language, to such an extent that their Germanic speech resented their influx.

In *lita*, however, not only Slavonic, but also Baltic (Lithuanian) was spoken. As far as the loss of vowel length is concerned, a Lithuanian influence is excluded – it should have rather had the effect of preserving vowel length. An effect of Lithuanian influence, as we have seen before, could be seen in the frequency of the diphthong /ej/ in Lithuanian Yiddish, which also represents diaphonemes O₂ and O₄ (in other dialect /oj/; in the Lithuanian language, /ei/ is common, /oi/ is almost absent). However, a very clear example of the Lithuanian influence could be seen in the morphology, in the two-gender system of Lithuanian Yiddish.

**The two-gender system and the Judeo-Lithuanian hypothesis**

Standard Yiddish, and most Yiddish dialects for that matter, has a three-gender system. Lithuanian Yiddish has a two-gender system; substantives which are neuter in Standard Yiddish appear as masculine or feminine. Cf. some examples, where the gender of the corresponding Lithuanian substantive has been indicated (all these nouns are neuter in Standard and Polish Yiddish):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yiddish</th>
<th>Gender (Lith. Yid.)</th>
<th>Lithuanian</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yingl</td>
<td>m.</td>
<td>berniukas (m.)</td>
<td>little boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meydl</td>
<td>f.</td>
<td>mergaitė (f.)</td>
<td>little girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kind</td>
<td>m.</td>
<td>vaikas (m.)</td>
<td>child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vayb</td>
<td>f.</td>
<td>moteris (f.)</td>
<td>woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vaser</td>
<td>f.</td>
<td>vanduo (m.)</td>
<td>water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>broyt</td>
<td>f.</td>
<td>duona (f.)</td>
<td>bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lebn</td>
<td>f.</td>
<td>gyvenimas (m.)</td>
<td>life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two-gender system of Lithuanian Yiddish has an internal structural coherence: substantives which belong to the neuter gender in other varieties of Yiddish do not simply “become” of the same gender of the corresponding Lithuanian substantive, as the (very few) examples above suffice to show (moreover, the above cases in which the gender *is* the same are suspect on
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semantic grounds). The two genders are distributed according to an internal semantic restructuring of the gender system, as explained in Jacobs (2001). I have used the word “becomes” between quotes because we need not assume that these substantives were originally neuter in Lithuanian Yiddish, and at a later stage lost their neuter gender to become either masculine or feminine. It is possible that such substantives have never been neuter in Lithuanian Yiddish, that is, that since the very beginning the Yiddish spoken in lite has had a two-gender system.

Again, this could make sense if, after Yiddish was brought in lite by Jewish emigrants from outside, it was learned by Lithuanian-speaking people. And this can only make sense if those Lithuanian-speaking people were local Jews already settled in Lithuania, which assimilated to the Yiddish-speaking majority and learned Yiddish with only two genders from the very beginning. This particular morphological feature of the local (and, possibly, prestige) community could have spread to lite as a whole, as well as the vocalic system without phonemic length could have spread from the speech of the ex-Judeo-Slavonic speakers. In sum, the hypothesis put forth in Zamblera (2007) is that Lithuanian Yiddish could have been formed on a double substrate: Jewish-Slavonic and Jewish-Lithuanian17.

Two final observations

Lemchenas (1970) is a very important study which the author presents a wealth of Lithuanian borrowings in the local dialectal Yiddish. Could at least some of these words, instead of being borrowings, have remained in the speech of Lithuanian Jews from a Judeo-Lithuanian substrate? If this be the case, such lexical items should show a phonological structure going back to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. A thorough examination of Lemchenas’ material from this point of view could shed new light on the matter, and prove to be important for Lithuanian dialectology too.

There is another important thing to do in for linguists with interests in Yiddish: Lithuanian Yiddish is not yet a dead language. There are still people, mostly in Vilnius and Kaunas, who have learnt Yiddish from their parents of Jewish-Lithuanian descent, and, having not attended any Jewish school (there being no more in Lithuania in the Soviet period), speak dialectal Lithuanian Yiddish. A documentation of their speech, the last echoes of what was once a thriving European language, is imperative before it is too late.

The great linguist Edward Sapir, whose name is often cited in this article, was the first-class grammarian of languages which would have passed away without

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17 Perhaps it is a related fact that some Slavonic dialects originated on a Lithuanian substratum also show loss of neuter gender. There is a vast literature on these cases, reviewed in Zamblera (2005).
being recorded (an outstanding example is his 1922 Takelma grammar). May this be an example for us to work for the preservation of an important Lithuanian heritage\textsuperscript{18}.

References


\textsuperscript{18} Though this is another theme, there is an interesting observation about Sapir’s 1922 Takelma grammar (written in 1911 as his doctoral dissertation, with Franz Boas as an advisor). Takelma has a prosodic system very similar to that of Lithuanian: length opposition in vowels, a free accent independent of length, and a system of two intonations in the long vowels, ascending and descending (cf. Sapir, 1922, p. 15–22). Sapir explicitly chose to represent the intonation as in Lithuanian, writing the *falling*, and the *rising* intonation. Later scholars who analyzed Sapir’s Takelma material (e.g., Hymes, 1990) have generally departed from Sapir’s Lithuanian-like usage.

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**LIETUVIŲ JIDIŠ KALBOS KULTŪRINĖ IR LINGVISTINĖ ANALIZĖ**


Minėtasis balsių ilgumo opozicijų netekimas jidiš kalboje tradiciškai aiškinamas remiantis slavų kalbų įtakos hipoteze. Pabaigoje patiškiama dviejų giminių sistema ir žydų–lietuvių substrato hipoteze ir apibendrinamosios pastabos.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos.** Lietuvis jidiš, judėjų-slavų, judėjų–Lietuvos, dialektologija, diafonema, istorinė fonologija.