Knowledge of Yiddish and Hebrew in Canada: The Current Picture

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The significance of language retention for ethnicity and the survival of ethnic identity is a topic of great interest and some confusion in the relevant literature, but there is broad agreement that the use of an ethnic language is an important component of ethnicity today (see Herberg 1989, Chap. 5). While it is not entirely clear what the causal relationships are between ethnic identity, the use of special languages, and the social-institutional structure of ethnic communities, it is necessary to know the ethnic-language situation in studying the strength and prognosis of ethnicity in any community. This paper presents a broad overview of the language situation for the Jews of Canada, examining "hard-data" relating to Yiddish and Hebrew there, thus providing scholars in the areas of ethnicity, Judaica, and related fields some specific information about these languages; interpretations will be made by each reader in terms of his/her needs and interests.

Studies of Jewish ethnicity tend to take into account either or both languages which have been engaged in an unofficial competition for the educational and other resources of the Jewish community during the past century or two. We are not discussing the struggle between proponents of Hebrew versus those of Yiddish, or the relative investment in one language or another as a measure of Zionist commitment, etc.; we are only going to examine certain facts in relation to the knowledge and study of these languages in Canada during the 1980s. (On the politics, poetry etc., see Orenstein, 1981.)

The kinds of information relevant to assessing the knowledge of a particular language are many indeed (popular versus scholarly use, school versus community, etc.), so it is best to list the categories of variables that, taken together, help us measure knowledge of the languages in question. One can group the indicators of language knowledge that are available for looking at Yiddish and Hebrew in Canada into the following five areas:

(1) Reports (in the census of Canada, every five years) on mother tongue;
(2) Reports (in recent Canadian censuses) on the language usually employed in the home;
(3) Statistics on the study of these languages in schools, both public and Jewish;
(4) Academic and literary scholarship, as known by books, lectures, and other products of such scholarship;
(5) Cultural activities or informal study of the languages (by adults not in a school setting).

Thus, a full picture should be based on many, or all, of the above categories, and we shall present some data on each. While we cannot, obviously, present a complete account of all the many aspects of Yiddish and Hebrew use in Canada, it is possible to approach full treatment in looking at census data on both mother tongue and home language, while our description of the school and community language activities must necessarily be more of a sampling rather than a systematic review of all programs.

As noted in my 1984 report on Yiddish (Davids, 1984), the Canadian census provides high-quality data on both mother tongue and home language which enable us to build a highly credible portrait of Hebrew and Yiddish knowledge, either based on speaking these languages at home in the previous generation–which shows up as the mother tongue of census respondents now–or in terms of current language usually spoken at home, which in turn generates the mother tongue responses of the next generation. Let us begin with this demographic information, and proceed later to the school and community perspectives on our topic.

In this paper we shall use the following abbreviations: HL = Home Language, i.e. the language usually spoken at home as reported by census respondents; I = Ivrit, which is Hebrew in the original; MT = Mother Tongue, the language first spoken in childhood and which is still understood today; Y = Yiddish.

As we know (Orenstein 1981, p. 312; Davids 1984, p. 91-92), there has been a vast decline in the number and percentage of Jews reporting Yiddish to be their mother tongue since the censuses before World War II, when 96% of Canadian Jewry were listed as being of Yiddish mother tongue. The quantitative decline of Yiddish usage over the ensuing half century has been outlined in my 1984 essay, and the table below carries forward the story by looking at 1981 and 1986 data for both Hebrew and Yiddish mother tongue. (Data on Hebrew are available only in the past few Censuses so the IMT time series is much smaller than the YMT.)

Table 1 contains key information regarding Yiddish and Hebrew mother tongue in the three major centers of Jewish life in Canada, as well as national totals for the country. As one can see, the number of Ivrit mother tongue respondents in Canada has barely changed between 1981 and 1986; Toronto shows a slight increase of IMT (Ivrit Mother Tongue), while Winnipeg shows a small decrease, but the total number in Winnipeg was never substantial in the first place. On the other hand, the YMT figures (Yiddish Mother Tongue) show considerable decline between 1981 and 1986, continuing the trend shown by data for earlier years (Davids, 1984). Montreal's YMT population declined by about 25% from what it had been in 1981, and the

TABLE 1. HEBREW AND YIDDISH MOTHER TONGUE IN CANADA, SELECTED CITIES, 1981 AND 1986[a]

	Language	All Canada	Montreal	Toronto	Winnipeg
1981	Hebrew	7,500	2,350	3,550	225
	Yiddish	31,500	12,200	12,500	2,870
1986	Hebrew	7,550	2,350	3,750	200
	Yiddish	22,650	9,000	9,400	1,960

a. Figures rounded to nearest 50 except for Winnipeg.
Sources: Statistics Canada, 1986; Census Reports 93-102 and 93-156.

same thing happened in Toronto. Looking at Winnipeg, however, which has long considered itself a bastion of Yiddish language and culture, the decline between 1981 and 1986 was close to a third; whereas there was still some room in Montreal and Toronto for fluctuations in the number of Yiddish speakers, without threatening totally the viability of Yiddish cultural activities, Winnipeg does not have this luxury. It seems that the possibility of sustaining any kind of Yiddish communal life and activity in Winnipeg is approaching the point of no return.

In the long run, the IMT population of Canada may remain stable, while the YMT population continues to decline. Thus, it is possible that in ten or twenty years the Yiddish-speaking population in Canada will be about the same size as the Hebrew- speaking population. The table needs to be interpreted in the context of other information on Canadian Jewry (Davids, 1985); it indicates that Toronto is the dominant Jewish community in Canada from a linguistic standpoint as well as otherwise.

Moving on to consider home language, we examine Table 2. Table 2 presents 1986 home language totals on both Hebrew and Yiddish, and one sees immediately that there is a large difference between the substantial populations reporting Yiddish or Hebrew mother tongue and the much smaller numbers which continue to speak Hebrew and Yiddish in daily life now, thus perpetuating them as living languages. The Ivrit home language numbers from Montreal and Toronto together constitute almost all of the IHL population in Canada (89%). This is even more so when we add up the YHL numbers in Montreal and Toronto, which constitute 94% of the YHL total in Canada. It is obvious that there are no meaningful Yiddish-speaking communities in Canada outside of greater Montreal and Toronto, which are sustained as places where Yiddish is still actively spoken both by the concentration of Jewish seniors in them and by the increasing Hassidic populations in and around Toronto and Montreal (see the appropriate remarks in Davids 1984, pp. 90, 96-98).

TABLE 2. HEBREW AND YIDDISH AS MOTHER TONGUE OR HOME LANGUAGE IN CANADA, (MONTREAL AND TORONTO), 1986[a]

		All Canada	Montreal	Toronto
Mother tongue	Hebrew	7,550	2,350	3,750
	Yiddish	22,650	9,000	9,400
Home language	Hebrew	2,800	900	1,600
	Yiddish	6,650	4,100	2,150

a. Rounded to nearest 50.
Sources: Statistics Canada, 1986 Census Report 93-102; Summary Tabulations (unpublished), Table LA 86B 02 A and B.

Considering the ratio between mother tongue and home language, we find that the IHL population in Canada is approximately 37-38% of the IMT population, which suggests that Hebrew is abandoned (not being used on a daily basis at home) by many who are familiar with it as mother tongue, like other non-official languages. The strength of Hebrew in Toronto is a little bit greater than the national or

Montreal picture but the difference, comparing the ratio of IHL to IMT numbers, is not great.

Looking at the Yiddish situation, the picture is a bit more complex. Whereas 29% of the national YMT population reports itself as speaking Yiddish at home in 1986, the numbers are quite different if we contrast Toronto with Montreal. Whereas the YHL population in Toronto is some 23% of the YMT population there, suggesting a poor retention of Yiddish for the next generation, the YHL group in Montreal is almost half as large as the YMT group; 46% of the YMT population in Montreal continue to use Yiddish at home. This suggests a relatively strong future for Yiddish in Montreal, but essentially nowhere else in Canada.

As age data (which we shall refer to a little later on) also suggests, these numbers indicate a substantial ultra-orthodox group in and around Montreal which–as was pointed out in my earlier essay–will persist in using Yiddish on an ongoing basis because they reject the languages and cultures alternative to it. It seems that hundreds of Hassidic homes continue to use Yiddish on a regular basis in and around Montreal, whereas that number is substantially smaller in the Toronto area and essentially non-existent throughout the rest of Canada.

We next look at a little statistical information on age groupings among those of Yiddish mother tongue versus those of Hebrew mother tongue. To the extent that a large percentage of any language's population is in the childhood ages, one can predict a longer future for that language. Where, however, the bulk of a language's speakers are seniors, the long-term prognosis is much poorer. What we find is that 7% of all Canada's YMT population are aged 0 to 14 years, while 68% are people aged 60 and over. This "seniorization" of Yiddish is much stronger if we look at Ontario separately, where only one percent of the YMT population are reported as being under the age of 15, while 72% of Ontario's YMT population are age 60 and up (Data from Census report no. 93-102, Table 3).

Looking at Hebrew, however, one finds no such age concentration. Both for Canada and for Ontario, the IMT population aged 0-14 yrs. is about 16% of the total IMT population, and the IMT seniors are 11-12%. Thus, the Hebrew mother tongue population of Canada has a fairly normal age distribution (see Davids, 1985; Table 1) with a somewhat larger group of children than of seniors, in strong contrast to the Yiddish situation (where over two-thirds of the YMT population are age 60 and up).

Having completed our brief demographic review, we now turn to other information regarding the knowledge and study of Yiddish and Hebrew in Canada. All Jewish schools teach some Hebrew, although at varying levels of proficiency and commitment; Yiddish is studied by a minority. In Toronto, which contains close to half of all Jewish children in Canada, we find that the Jewish day school enrollments in 1988-1989 totalled over nine thousand students, if we add the elementary and high school figures. Approximately 88% of the 9,000 we have referred to were enrolled in elementary day schools, while some 12% were enrolled in grades nine to twelve. Thus, there were over nine thousand students in the greater Toronto area studying Hebrew systematically in the school year referred to, while a substantial minority of them (around 1,200) were also given regular Yiddish instruction. Hebrew and Yiddish are also studied in supplementary schools, but these tend to have a weak effect, in the long run, on language knowledge and use. The

greater Toronto total for supplementary schools in 1988-89 was about six thousand students, of whom a substantial number have a basic acquaintance with Hebrew and/or Yiddish (Board of Jewish Education, 1988).

In the past decade, many Canadian public schools have supported teaching of/in languages such as Hebrew and Yiddish, where demand from families warranted such classes; this is done under the "Heritage Languages" rubric, which permits public schools to support study of languages other than English and French if parents express a desire to have their children receive such instruction. The Public Boards of Education throughout Ontario enrolled over 5,000 pupils in Hebrew "Heritage Language" classes during 1984-85, and the Roman Catholic "Separate" schools had almost 250 additional Hebrew students (Ontario-Ministry of Education). Although the extent of language fluency that may result from heritage language programming is usually quite limited, it is understood that exposure to such instruction in the public school population has important psychological and cultural benefits even when mastery of the languages in question is not attained. Although we cannot pursue this here, Schoenfeld (1982) has explored the meaning of the Heritage Language program for Jewish education and Jewish identity in Canada.

What remains to be discussed here is some (fragmentary) picture of cultural activities in Yiddish and Hebrew which occur on a community level, i.e. aimed at adults. It may be noted that both Hebrew and Yiddish are studied at institutions of higher learning in many major cities, and both are available at various universities in Canada. For example, the Yiddish committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress has labored mightily to support formal Yiddish instruction at the University of Toronto, where in 1989-90 there were three separate courses on Yiddish being given: an introductory level, an intermediate level, and a survey of Yiddish literature. All three courses were officially housed in Toronto's department of Germanic languages.

The formal Judaic studies programs on many major campuses reach out to the off-campus community, and many of these Judaic studies programs are instrumental in providing speakers, actors and musicians who give Yiddish and/or Hebrew performances or lectures to both campus and non-campus audiences.

"Keren Hatarbut", an independent adult learning center for modern Hebrew in Toronto, currently serves about 300 students (teenagers to seniors) in its three levels of instruction. Many are gentiles (Klinger, 1989). There is a great deal of informal educational activity available in Toronto and in Montreal related to Yiddish. Whereas synagogues and other religious bodies take more responsibility for Hebrew instruction, Yiddish cultural activity remains generally secularist and continues along the general paths of such activity in the recent past (See Orenstein, 1981). Regular activities in support of Yiddish in the Toronto area include an annual folk music concert, usually held in July; a memorial evening for the Soviet-Jewish writers assassinated in the Stalinist purge, which event is usually held in late summer; a lecture and the sale of books in and on Yiddish at the annual Jewish book fair, held in Toronto every November. The other activities sponsored by "Friends of Yiddish" and similar organizations also attract substantial audiences, and pride themselves on appealing not only to seniors who were raised in Yiddish but also to younger people who are the children and grandchildren of those many families which unselfconsciously spoke Yiddish in Canada and thereby preserved shtetl culture. Toronto's

"Friends of Yiddish Group" has over two hundred paying members–they meet regularly to converse in Yiddish and to conduct other activities in support of the languauge and culture that they treasure. Recently, this group staged a "*Shtetl Chassene*" (a traditional East European Jewish wedding), which was a great success (Lustgarten, 1989).

Montreal's Jewish Public Library is an important center for Yiddish activities, and it too (often in cooperation with McGill University or other cultural institutions) carries on creative adult-education work in this area. Several private foundations now provide ongoing financial support for Yiddish research, teaching and public activities in Montreal (Canadian Jewish Congress, 1989).

Herewith, we conclude our picture of some of the things being done by people involved with Hebrew and Yiddish in Canada. Although there may have been greater numbers speaking Yiddish in the past, it is clear that the story of Yiddish-related activities in Canada is far from over. As for Hebrew, both the Jewish educational system and the ongoing migratory flows between Canada and Israel assure us that Ivrit will remain part of Canada's cultural scene for a long time to come.

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