יִידיש

The Yiddish Language — *by Zachary M. Baker*

Printed	Cursive	English
א	lc	silent
ב	૭	b
בֿ	૭̄	v
ג	૮	g
ד	૩	d
ה	૧	h
ו	l	u
ז	૮	z
ח	૧	kh
ט	૯	t
י	'	y/i
כ	૭	k
כ	૦	kh
ך	૬	final kh
ל	૬	l

Printed	Cursive	English
מ	૪	m
ם	૧	final m
נ	ل	n
ן	l	final n
ס	o	s
ע	૦	e
פ	૭	p
פֿ	૭̄	f
ף	૭	final f
צ	૩	ts
ץ	૩	final ts
ק	૧	k
ר	૧	r
ש	૯	sh
שׂ	૯̇	s

Printed	Cursive	English
ת	૧	t
תּ	૧	s

Variants & Combinations

Printed	Cursive	English
אַ	lc̠	a
אָ	lc̣	o
וּ	ḷ	u
וו	ll	v
וי	'l	oy
יִ	:	i
יי	''	ey
ײַ	"	ay
זש	૦ઠ	zh
דזש	૦ઠ૩	dzh
טש	૦૯	ch

Yiddish, the vernacular of Ashkenazic Jews, uses the Hebrew alphabet in a form adapted to reflect its diverse components. Like other languages employing that alphabet (such as Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and of course Hebrew), Yiddish is written from right to left. The basic Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, plus forms of five letters that are used only at the end of words. There is no distinction between upper- and lower-case forms of letters in Yiddish. Most Yiddish written documents employ cursive script, as opposed to the "square" letters found in printed texts.

The underlying structure of Yiddish and most of its vocabulary is Germanic (deriving from Middle High German); Yiddish also contains Romance elements, a substantial Hebrew/Aramaic component, and an extensive Slavic vocabulary. The three principal dialect regions of Yiddish in Eastern Europe are Central ("Polish" and "Galician"), Northeastern ("Lithuanian"), and Southeastern ("Ukrainian"). Standard Yiddish, the basis for the transliterations shown in the accompanying alphabet table, largely reflects Northeastern Yiddish pronunciations.

Yiddish employs a spelling system that, in Uriel Weinreich's words, "is based on an integration of two underlying patterns." Words deriving from the non-Hebrew/Aramaic components of the language are rendered phonetically, "in a system with excellent overall correspondence between sounds and letters.... Another part of the vocabulary, of Hebrew-Aramaic derivation, on the whole retains the traditional spelling used in those languages." Because Standard Yiddish Orthography was codified as recently as 1936 (by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, in cooperation with the Central Yiddish School Organization in Poland), variant spelling systems will inevitably be encountered in Yiddish texts.

Standard Yiddish Orthography distinguishes between different letters through the use of diacritical marks. Since non-standard Yiddish spelling usually omits diacritics, no distinction is made there between the letters ב *[b]* and בֿ *[v]*; ײ *[ey]*, ײַ *[ay]*, and יִ *[yi]*; כ *[k]* and כ *[kh]*; פ *[p]* and

פ *[f]*; שׁ *[sh]* and שׂ *[s]*; תּ *[t]* and ת *[s]*. In non-standard Yiddish, therefore, the pronunciation of some letters and letter combinations can be inferred only by context.

In standard Yiddish, the silent א is normally employed only at the beginning of a word (e. g., אין *[in]* = "in"), while in non-standard Yiddish, the silent א will be encountered in other positions as well (e.g., [non-standard] וואו *[vu]* = "where," vs. [standard] וווּ). In non-standard Yiddish, ב *[b]* may sometimes be written בֿ; also, ע *[e]* may be inserted before a final ל *[l]* (e.g., [non-standard] זעקעל *[zekel]* vs. [standard] זעקל *[zekl]* = "pouch") or ן *[n]* (e. g., [non-standard] האָבען *[hoben]* vs. [standard] האָבן *[hobn]* = "to have"), and פ used in place of either פּ *[p]* or פֿ *[f]*.

Since Hebrew/Aramaic words in standard Yiddish use traditional, consonantal spellings (i. e., with vowels omitted), their pronunciations can be arrived at only by consulting an authoritative dictionary such as Weinreich's (cited below). Ashkenazic Hebrew — as opposed to Sephardic, or Israeli — serves as the basis for the pronunciation of Yiddish words (including names) deriving from Hebrew and Aramaic, e. g.: אמת *[emes]*, not *[emet]* = "truth"; אָדם *[odem]*, not *[adam]* = "Adam." The Hebrew/Aramaic component of Yiddish employs six letters that are not encountered elsewhere in Yiddish: בֿ *[v]*, ח *[kh]*, כ *[k]*, שׂ *[s]*, תּ *[t]*, ת *[s]*.

(**Note:** In Soviet Yiddish orthography, beginning in the 1920s, these six letters were eliminated and words of Hebrew/Aramaic origin spelled phonetically, e. g.: עמעס *[emes]* = "truth," rather than אמת. Final Hebrew letters were often eliminated in Soviet Yiddish as well, e.g.: לעבנ *[lebn]* = "life," rather than לעבן.)

Yiddish has five basic vowels, pronunced much like those in other European languages. Some letters and letter combinations representing vowels and diphthongs vary in pronunciation, depending on dialect. Examples include: זאָגן *[zogn]* (NE Yiddish) vs. *[zugn]* (C and SE Yiddish) = "to say"; פּוטער *[puter]* (NE Yiddish) vs. *[piter]* (C and SE Yiddish) = "butter"; ברויט *[broyt]* (C and SE Yiddish) vs. *[breyt]* (NE Yiddish) = "bread"; פֿלייש *[fleysh]* (NE and SE Yiddish) vs. *[flaysh]* (C Yiddish) = "meat."

Yiddish consonants are for the most part similar to those used in English, with the notable exceptions of ח and כ *[kh]*, pronounced as in Scottish "loch," and ר *[r]*, produced with the tip of the tongue or the soft palate.

Yiddish is an inflected language, possessing nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive cases. As with German, Polish, and Russian, three genders are employed in Yiddish: masculine (דער מאַן *[der man]* = "the man"), feminine (די פֿרוי *[di froy]* = "the woman"), and neuter

Sources:

Hebraica Cataloging: A Guide to ALA/LC Romanization and Descriptive Cataloging. Prepared by Paul Maher. Washington, D. C.: Cataloging Distribution Service, Library of Congress, 1987.

Weinreich, Max. *History of the Yiddish Language.* Translated by Shlomo Noble, with the assistance of Joshua A. Fishman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Weinreich, Uriel. *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968 [reprinted by Schocken].