

YIDDISH

FACT SHEET

Origins of Yiddish

The early history of Yiddish is debated, most scholars concur that Yiddish was born of migration from Western Europe to Eastern Europe, though some argue that it was born of Slavic-speaking Jews who moved westward. The time in which this occurred is also debated, though it is likely between the Crusades and the Black Death (from 11th century CE to mid-13th century CE). Yiddish is descended from Middle High German, and has been influenced by many Slavic languages as well as Hebrew and Aramaic.

Yiddish and English

Many words have made their way from Yiddish into American English through migration of Yiddish-speaking Jews to the United States. Words like 'bagel', 'kosher', 'schmear', and 'kvetch' are identifiably Jewish, but many other Yiddish words like 'mishmash', 'klutz', and 'glitch' have fully assimilated into American English.

Ways to Learn Yiddish

There are many resources available for anyone who wants to learn Yiddish:

- The Oxford School of Rare Jewish Languages, YIVO, The Worker's Circle, and many universities offer Yiddish courses online and in-person.
- [The Yiddish Book Center](#) offers free online educational materials.
- [YiddishPop](#) offers free short videos accompanied by vocabulary and grammar exercises.

Dialects

The main dialectical divide in Yiddish is between Western and Eastern Yiddish. Western Yiddish went functionally extinct through assimilation by the end of the 19th century. Eastern Yiddish has three main dialects, often referred to as Northeastern or Litvak, Southeastern or Ukrainian, and Mideastern or Polish.

Vitality and Endangerment

Though Western Yiddish is extinct, and Eastern Yiddish has lost many speakers to assimilation and genocide over the past two centuries, Eastern Yiddish is thriving in Hasidic communities in the US, Israel, and elsewhere, as it is transmitted from parent to child. There are an estimated 950,000 speakers in 2023, compared to 8,000,000 in 1900.

Yiddish Literature

While Yiddish was used for literary works starting in the 14th century, there was a flowering of Yiddish literature during the Haskalah (Enlightenment) and the 19th century. Prior to that, Hebrew was considered the appropriate medium for serious writing. The three founders of modern Yiddish literature are Sholem Aleichem, Y. L. Peretz, and Mendele Moykher-Sforim. Other notable authors include Isaac Bashevis Singer, Chava Rosenfarb, Chaim Grade, and Avrom Sutskever.

To learn more about the history of Yiddish, check out jewishlanguages.org/eastern-yiddish, or head to the Jewish Language Project on YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook.