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THE SEVEN GENDERS OF YIDDISH

Every beginning student of linguistics learns, among other facts of
life, that the number of genders in a language is not necessarily zero
or two or three. And yet, our linguistic horizon is so strongly dominated
by two- and three-gender noun systems, and the problem of how new genders
originate remains so intriguing, that it is somewhat startling to find,
right under our Germanic lamppost, a nominal system with genders in excess
of three. It is my purpose here to outline the structure of a Yiddish
dialect which seems to have four noun genders. I am thinking of the North-
eastern variety of Yiddish, current in Lithuania, Latvia, and Belorussia
until the extermination of the European Jews in World War II, and surviving
among emigrants from those areas. After analyzing the workings of this
system, I will attempt to suggest some historical and general problems
which emerge when it is compared with three-gender systems.

If you refer to the first page of the handouts, you will find listed
the criteria which serve to establish the four gender categories. Obviously
the system is not well defined. In contrast with most dialects of German,
for example, the form of the definite article in the nominative case does
not by itself yield all the categories we are after.

The first distinction is between singular and plural, for it is only
in the singular that the gender distinctions are maintained: as in German,
French, or Danish, they are neutralized in the plural. The criterion for
defining the number of a noun is the singular or plural suffix of the
verb that is in concord with it. We will be concerned, then, with the
behavior of nouns which take a singular verb.

Among the singular nouns, we next separate a "mass gender" from several
count genders. The grammatical criteria for the mass gender are: a zero
indefinite article; a definite article, di, uninflected for case; and the
plural form of any possessive adjective which might modify such a noun. A
singular noun of the mass gender is thus very similar in its behavior to
any plural noun: the mass singular mayne gelt 'my money' looks just like
the plural, mayne bikher 'my books'. But by the crucial number test--
namely, the form of the concordant verb--gelt is singular, not plural.

In the subdivision of the count genders, I have introduced a termi-
nology which might be used temporarily without direct reference to the
historical Germanic system. Hence the novel terms 'andric' and 'gynic'.
In all the count genders, the verb as well as the modifying possessive
adjectives are singular in form, and a is the indefinite article. The
differentiation begins with the definite article: the andric nouns take der
in the nominative and dem in the oblique case, while the gynic and inter-
mediate nouns take di in the nominative and der in the oblique. But if the
article is immediately preceded by a preposition (and if no adjective
intervenes between the article and the noun), a new split takes place. The
masculine article may be reduced to -n and contracted with the preposition:
'on the table' af dem tish alternates freely with afn tish. The gynic
article remains invariant as der. But the intermediate article, which
resembles gynic der in its free form, is also subject to optional contractions:

'on the foot' may be <u>af</u> <u>der</u> <u>fus</u>, but also <u>afn</u> <u>fus</u>. This is not true of gynic nouns.

As I said before, the system is ill-defined. That is to say, not only does it lack a single criterion for all the genders, but there are few distinctive forms of morphemes for any one gender. No wonder that the system has been hard to discern. There was, of course, little difficulty in noticing that the historical neuter had disappeared; you will have observed that there is no definite article <u>dos</u>, corresponding to the neuter of the other Yiddish dialects, or to the <u>das</u>-gender of German dialects. This fact led to the preliminary conclusion (by Sapir, for example), that NE Yiddish was a two-gender dialect. In 1926 Reyzen pointed out the peculiarity of the mass nouns as a quasi-plural. I am now proposing the further step of splitting the so-called "feminine" into a gynic and an intermediate class, depending on the reducibility of the article in certain prepositional constructions.

Are we justified in calling these categories "genders"? Before considering this question, let us glance as the distribution of the NE Yiddish noun vocabulary among the several categories. Please turn to page 2 of the handouts.

As you see, the andric gender of NE Yiddish contains a number of nouns which are semantically marked as being designations of males. Some of these andric nouns are additionally marked in a formal way, by means of affixes which are automatically andric. The first four examples in the left-hand column illustrate this group. Other andric names of males have no formal mark—see the top of the right-hand column—and some that end in unstressed e, e.g. <u>zeyde</u> 'grandfather', even conform to the canonical shape typical of gynic nouns. However, the semantic feature of maleness remains. There is also a large group of andric nouns without any semantic feature of maleness. Some are grammatically defined: the prefix <u>ge-</u>, the suffix <u>-izm</u>, the zero form of the bare verb stem in <u>shprung</u>, <u>gos</u>, place a noun automatically in the andric class. Also in this dialect, all infinitives when used as nouns are andric: <u>der esn</u>, <u>der lebn</u>. But then there is a large residue of nouns which are andric for no semantic or formal "reason."

The capital letters next to each noun indicate its gender in other Yiddish dialects. In the overwhelming majority of cases, this is also their gender in standard Yiddish (the literary language, a 3-gender system) and corresponds to the gender of their Germanic, Hebrew-Aramaic, and Slavic etyma. Offhand there might be a temptation to identify the NE Yiddish andric with the general masculine gender, because insofar as these noun classes are semantically correlated with maleness, they do correspond. (The suffix morphology of adjectives and determiners is also identical.) But notice that where there is no semantic motivation—and in such words as <u>kind</u> 'child' and <u>ferd</u> 'horse' despite the semantic motivation—this one-to-one matching breaks down.

Similar comments apply to the gynic gender. Some of the nouns which belong to it are semantically marked as names of females; of those, some but not all have characteristic suffixes or stem shapes. There are also some non-females with typical gynic forms; and some (though not many) gynic nouns without either semantic or formal characteristics (although <u>heym</u> and <u>bord</u> do seem to be examples). The correlation with the historical and standard Yiddish feminine is not bad; but it is far from being one-to-one, as we will see when we turn to the intermediate group.

This is a good point for remarking that while the historical and standard 3-gender system utilizes the diminutive suffix as a sure-fire morphological criterion of neuterness, the NE dialect has adopted a different rule, reminiscent of French and the Slavic languages, according to which a diminutive belongs to the same gender as the base form. In NE Yiddish, the diminutive suffix therefore does not count as a grammatical mark of gender.

The intermediate gender, shown on page three of the handout, seems to be a residual class. It has no semantic features, no affixes, no phonemic stem shapes which are specific to it. Here the lexical correspondences with

the categories of the 3-gender systems run particularly wild.

The last class, which I have called mass gender, has the best semantic characterization of all. All nouns which belong to it are names of substances, or they label entities as if they were substances. In addition, several suffixes draw nouns to this class. But the correspondence with the historical genders is again rather disorderly.

Many nouns occur both in the mass gender and in one of the count genders. Such words as kez, ayzn, erd, when used in the mass gender, imply substances: cheese, iron, earth. But when used in the appropriate count gender, they imply shaped objects: a loaf of cheese, a piece of iron, the earth (in the sense of the planet, or the ground under our feet). If all mass nouns had a count gender as well, there would perhaps have been no more reason to set up a separate mass gender in NE Yiddish than there is, let us say, in English. This syntactic mass construction would then have been entirely derivative from the count genders. But there are nouns, such as rayz 'rice' or mel 'flour', for which it would be difficult if not impossible to determine a count gender; they are irreducibly mass nouns.

These lists demonstrate, I believe, that no automatic conversion formula can be devised for subsuming the three- and four-gender patterns into a single diasystem. Since the standard language, as used in the literature and in the press, has rejected the neuterless NE pattern as a provincialism (with leeway for gender fluctuation only in a relatively small number of nouns), every literate member of the NE dialect community must, in effect, develop control of both a four- and a three-gender system. Because the systems are not reducible to each other, there is a sense in which the title of this paper—the Seven Genders of Yiddish—can be taken quite seriously.

The very imperfect correlation of the four genders with formal or semantic features appears to be typical of most gender systems in the world. Such surveys as the one by Hjelmslev in Travaux de l'Institut de Paris (1956) and by Fodor in Lingua (1959) show that more "rational" gender systems are quite exceptional. It might be objected that the Yiddish noun classes are too weakly defined to be called true genders. But again, they are exactly what we would expect of a young system. How else should a distinction develop, except as a specialized distribution which gradually sprouts a paradigm of specialized morphological formants? In the Romance languages, the "ambigen" gender of Rumanian, the "nomi sovrabbondanti" of Italian appear to have emerged in a similar way, and they too have so far failed to develop any specialized morphology.

Concerning the history of the queer NE system, I can only indicate some of the problems before us. Among the questions that need to be investigated are the following:

How is the loss of the historical neuter related to the emergence of the new genders, intermediate and mass?

What, if any, is the relation of the gender upheaval to the loss of the dative-accusative case distinction in the same dialect?
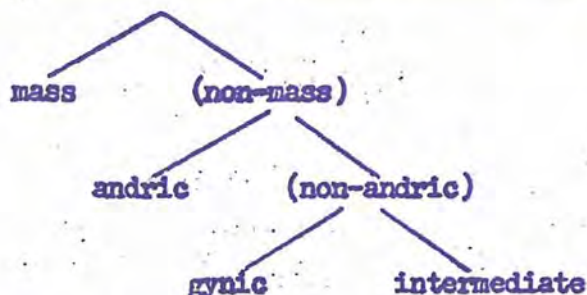
What is the relation between the reorganization of the genders as a grammatical system and the changes in gender membership of particular nouns?

Is the development due to internal causes, or has there been influence from other languages?

It was Sapir who first formulated the parallelism between the loss of the old neuter in NE Yiddish and the drastic shrinkage of the neuter in the partly co-territorial Lithuanian language by a shift of neuter nouns to the masculine. This idea was later taken up by Jakobson. But it is useful to recall that the Lithuanian language has had virtually no phonetic or lexical influence on Yiddish, and it is extremely unlikely, under these circumstances, that it should have effected such a radical change in Yiddish grammar. Moreover, this theory

would not explain the major shifts of masculine nouns to the intermediate gender or the development of a mass gender—innovations far more remarkable than the loss of the old neuter. Influence from Belorussian has also been hinted at as a possible cause. Now, it is true that the merger of unstressed o and a has deprived the Belorussian feminine/neuter opposition of some of its morphophonemic distinctiveness, but the neuter as a category in Belorussian, as far as I can make out, remains safe and sound. In general, Slavic or other co-territorial explanations of Yiddish deviations from German must fulfill the same requirements of cogency as any other historical argument; they cannot be used as a deus ex machina. In a Low German dialect east of Hamburg, the rise of a mass vs. count paradigm on the remains of the collapsed masculine-feminine distinction was also once attributed to Slavic influence, and although it was demonstrated in 1939 that this explanation was completely baseless, references to this supposed example of Sorbian influence on German can still be encountered in scientific journals.

If there is a Slavic factor in the history of NE Yiddish gender, its mechanism must be very different from anything that has been suggested to date. Let us consider the hierarchical structure of the genders in Yiddish. The presentation so far, based on the morphophonemics of the article, implied the following system:

```
          mass      (non-mass)
                        |
                andric    (non-andric)
                             |
                      gynic     intermediate
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But by semantic criteria (which Hjelmslev has shown to be of much greater general-linguistic interest) we have a different tree:

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   mass                               intermediate
  (fully marked)   (partly marked)    (unmarked)
                         |
                   gynic     andric
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Another way of looking at the "intermediate" gender would be to consider it fully characterized semantically as inanimate. But in either view, it appears that the semantic features of the NE intermediate correspond exactly to those of the historical neuter.

What sequence of events can we postulate in explanation of the NE gender system? If there has been external influence at work, it must have been different, and subtler in its mechanism, than the alleged exposure of Yiddish to neuterless languages. The first clue, I believe, must be sought in the fact that just as in Yiddish the inanimate feminines and masculines developed a syncretism in prepositional constructions without adjectives ("intermediate gender"), so in Polish and Belorussian, masculine and feminine paradigms are syncretized in the locative case (the prepositional case par excellence) when used without adjectives. In Polish, for example, the feminine czarn-a głow-a 'black head' and the masculine czarn-y głow have distinctive suffixes in all cases, except that in the locative of the noun alone, głow-ie and głow-ie appear alike. To put it another way: The Polish prepositional phrase na głow-ie 'on the head' can be derived not only from the actual feminine nominative,

głow-a, but also from a theoretical masculine, głow. Similarly, the Yiddish prepositional phrase afn kop 'on the head' can "lead" not only to the historical masculine, der kop, but also, by the rules of the new NE gender system, to a feminine-like (intermediate) di kop.

A second clue, I believe, is to be found in the peculiar and widespread shifting in NE Yiddish of inanimate feminines to the andric and of inanimate masculines to the feminine-like "intermediate." As Reyzen already suggested, many of these shifts have brought the gender of NE Yiddish nouns into agreement with the gender of their Slavic equivalent. Cf. the following examples:

	Historically	NE Yid.	Polish	
brik 'bridge'	F	A	most	M
moyer 'wall, etc.'	F	A	mur	M
noz 'nose'	F	A	nos	M
bord 'beard'	M	I	broda	F
kop 'head'	M	I	głowa	F
fus 'leg, foot'	M	I	noga	F

What we see, then, is a drawing-off of inanimate feminines into the andric and of animate masculines into the intermediate by a calquing mechanism on a Slavic model. In addition, the majority of inanimate feminines were included in the intermediate. This gave rise to a well-filled new gender, the intermediate, with the same semantic features (inanimateness) as the old neuter. This deprived the old neuter of its raison d'être and doomed it to extinction.

What has previously been treated as the most interesting and inexplicable innovation of NE Yiddish gender thus becomes but the last step in a structural rearrangement, the earliest stages of which had perfectly plausible Slavic roots.

To be sure, this theory does not yet throw any light on the rise of the new mass gender as a quasi-plural. But, in contrast to the Sapir-Jakobson Lithuanian hypothesis, it fits well with other indications that the NE dialect, of all the varieties of Yiddish, early underwent a maximum of Slavization (specifically, Polonization). For example, it is also the NE dialect of Yiddish which was infected by the Polish confusion between hissing and hushing sibilants.

THE FOUR GENDERS OF NE YIDDISH

		Number of verb	Number of possessive adjective	Indefinite article	Nominative definite article	Oblique definite article	Oblique definite article after prepositions*
Plural		pl.	pl.	—	di	di	di
Singular:							
	Mass gender	sg.	pl.	—	di	di	di
Count genders	Andric	sg.	sg.	a	der	dem	dem / -n
	Gynic	sg.	sg.	a	di	der	der
	Intermediate	sg.	sg.	a	di	der	der / -n

* Without an adjective intervening between article and noun.

SEMANTIC AND GRAMMATICAL CORRELATES OF NE GENDER, AND CORRESPONDENCES

WITH STANDARD YIDDISH M(asculine), F(eminine), AND N(euter)

1. Andric

	FORMALLY MARKED		FORMALLY UNMARKED*	
SEMANTICALLY MARKED	bek-er 'baker'	M	ganef 'thief'	M
	nadv-n 'donor'	M	sirozh 'concierge'	M
	nud-nik 'bore'	M	shver 'father-in-law'	M
	tsion-ist 'Zionist'	M		
			kind '(m.) child'	N
			ferd 'horse'	N
			zeyde 'grandfather'	M
			mumkhe 'expert'	M
			kalike '(m.) cripple'	M
SEMANTICALLY UNMARKED	ge-shlég 'fight'	N	tish 'table'	M
			volkn 'cloud'	M
	fanat-izm 'fanaticism'	M	khoydesh 'month'	M
			slup 'pole'	M
	shprung 'leap'	M	brik 'bridge'	F
	gos 'pouring'	M	noz 'nose'	F
			moyer 'stone house'	F
	es-n 'eating'	N	grenets 'border'	F
	leb-n 'life, living'	N		
			éynikl 'grandchild'	N
			eyer 'ear'	N
			goles 'exile'	N

2. Gynic

	FORMALLY MARKED		FORMALLY UNMARKED*	
SEMANTICALLY MARKED	néyter-in 'seamstress'	F	shvester 'sister'	F
	malke 'queen'	F	shnur 'daughter-in-law'	F
	kháverte '(f.) friend'	F	kac '(f.) cat'	F
	nyanye 'nurse'	F	tsig '(f.) goat'	F
			kind '(f.) child'	N
SEMANTICALLY UNMARKED	libe 'love'	F	heym 'home'	F
	melukhe 'state'	F	bord 'beard'	F < M
	komedye 'comedy'	F		
	sheyn-kayt 'beauty'	F/N		
	kroyve-shaft 'kinship'	F/N		
	knel-ung 'teaching'	F/N		
	klape-nish 'knocking'	F/N		
	stolyer-ay 'carpentry'	F/N		

* In contrast to the three-gender systems, the diminutive of a noun in NE Yiddish belongs to the same gender as the base form. Thus, ferd-l, brik-l, nez-l are all andric; shvester-l, kac-l are gynic, etc.; whereas in the three-gender systems the corresponding nouns are all neuter by virtue of the grammatical mark.

	FORMALLY MARKED		FORMALLY UNMARKED	

3. Intermediate

SEMANTICALLY UNMARKED				
			kop 'head'	M
			fus 'leg, foot'	M
			boykh 'belly'	M
			zok 'sock'	M
			(eyvn 'oven'	M)
			(feygl 'bird'	M)
			gas 'street'	F
			vant 'wall'	F
			shul 'synagogue; school'	F
			bime 'synagogue plat- form'	F
			vane 'bathtub'	F
			keshene 'pocket'	F
			rod 'wheel'	N
			hoyz 'house; anteroom'	N
			moyl 'mouth'	N

4. Mass

SEMANTICALLY MARKED				
	fet-s 'fat'	N	rayz 'rice'	M
	shmir-akhts 'grease; salve'	N	morer 'Passover bitters'	M
			khreyn 'horseradish'	M
	esn-varg 'victuals'	N		
			yoykh 'broth'	F
			puter 'butter'	F
			vapne 'lime'	F < N
			mel 'flour'	N
			gelt 'money'	N
			leykhets 'phlegm'	N
			varenye 'jam'	N/F

CONVERSION FROM MASS TO COUNT GENDERS IN NE YIDDISH

Mass to Andric	kez 'cheese'	M
	beyn 'bone'	M
	ayzn 'iron'	N
	vaser 'water'	N
Mass to Gynic	erd 'earth'	F
	luft 'air'	F
	matse 'matzoh'	F
	kashe 'porridge'	F
Mass to Intermediate	gloz 'glass'	N
	shtrik 'rope'	M