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"TRANSLINGUALISM TODAY: A REVIEW OF NAOMI BRENNER'S *LINGERING BILINGUALISM*"

Yaaov Herskovitz and Shachar Pinsker

Naomi Brenner, *Lingering Bilingualism: Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literatures in Contact* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 320 pages, $30.00 (paper).

"איין לשון איז ניט אַלעמאָל געווען גענוג פֿאַר אונדז."

"One language was never enough for us."

So wrote the Yiddish critic Shmuel Niger in 1941 when trying to characterize Jewish literature in a book entitled *Di tsveyshprakhikeyt fun undzer literatur*, which was translated into English by Joshua A. Fogel as *Bilingualism in the History of Jewish Literature*.[1] The threat of World War II in Europe and the pressure of monolingualism in America, the Soviet Union, and Palestine infused Niger's book with a sense of urgency. He tried to achieve a number of goals, the first of which was to supply a historical overview of bilingualism in Jewish literature. More importantly, his book was a passionate plea for the continuation of a Jewish bilingual literary practice and called

[1] Shmuel Niger, *Di tsveyshprakhikeyt fun undzer literatur* (Detroit: Louis Lamed Foundation for the Advancement of Hebrew and Yiddish Literature, 1941); Shmuel Niger, *Bilingualism in the History of Jewish Literature* (New York: University Press of America, 1990).

for an end to the Hebrew-Yiddish quarrel (*riv ha-lshonot* in Hebrew, *shprakhnkamf* in Yiddish). Written in the late 1930s in the United States, Niger's book came across as a desperate, final attempt to fight a battle which was already lost. By that time, the bilingual option in Jewish literature was already non-existent, and this is precisely why Niger needed to write a book-length defense. Or so the story goes.

This story is in need of reexamination, and that is what Naomi Brenner sets out to do in her new book, *Lingering Bilingualism: Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literatures in Contact* (Syracuse University Press, 2016). Not surprisingly, Niger's book on Jewish bilingualism appears a number of times in *Lingering Bilingualism*. In addition to discussing Niger's bilingual philosophy, Brenner also uses his work as a critic, editor, and translator as an example of bilingual literary activity that continued into the 1940s and beyond. In doing so, she demonstrates convincingly that "one language" was, and continued to be "never enough for Jews."

It should be clear that Brenner's book is not the first attempt to deal with these issues, which early and mid-twentieth century scholars and critics debated. In fact, this new book is only the latest example in the growing subfield of Hebrew-Yiddish literary studies. In recent decades, the question of the dynamic relations between Hebrew and Yiddish literatures was explored from different vantage points by Benjamin Harshav, Itamar Even-Zohar, Dan Miron, David Roskies, Chana Kronfeld, Naomi Seidman, Ken Frieden, Jeremy Dauber, and others.[2] So, what is the *khidesh*? What does Brenner's book add to this conversation?

Previous scholars have focused their attention on the Yiddish-Hebrew bilingualism that flourished in Jewish literatures written in Eastern Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries while claiming that, following the Czernowitz conference in 1908 and the collapse of traditional Eastern European Jewish life during World War I, this bilingual option was greatly diminished or abandoned. In his 2010 book, *From Continuity to Contiguity,* Dan Miron stressed the downfall of the pre-World War I consensus, which was "symbolized by the bilingualism of major Hebrew-Yiddish writers such as Abramovtish and Peretz." This demise, writes Miron, "set both Hebrew and Yiddish literature free, each to follow its own trajectory."[3] According to Miron, the "integral bilingualism" of Hebrew and Yiddish, whereby both literatures served similar functions for the same community, was unsustainable after World War I and the Russian Revolution, when Jewish public space was "torn asunder."[4] This historical timeline of Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism is shared by scholars such as Itamar Even-Zohar, in spite of the different theoretical approaches and conceptual

[2]Jeremy Dauber, *Antonio's Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004). Itamar Even-Zohar, "Polysystem Theory." *Poetics Today*. 1 (1979): 287-310. Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[3] Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 171.

[4] Ibid., 295.

frameworks ("polysystem theory," "contiguity") each scholar employs to describe the shift.

One of Brenner's goals in her new book is to show that the upheavals of World War I indeed precipitated a dramatic shift in Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism, but certainly not the end of these dynamics. She writes that "[i]nstead of marking the demise of Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism, I argue that the interwar period was a time of profound transition in Jewish-language literature, as Ashkenazi Jewish culture expanded beyond Eastern Europe to new sites in Palestine, Western Europe, and the Americas" (13). Thus the book highlights the continued bilingual production in the interwar period, while expanding the temporal (and geographical) horizons of the subfield of Hebrew-Yiddish literary studies.

Along with this temporal expansion into the interwar period, Brenner renames the phenomenon, and compels us to rethink the nature of Yiddish-Hebrew bilingual dynamics. Brenner suggests using the term "translingualism," a concept which has become popular in recent years, for example in Steven G. Kellman's book *The Translingual Imagination* (2000). In Brenner's use, the term is derived from two distinct fields: on the one hand, the field of contact linguistics (conceptualized by Uriel Weinreich and others), and, on the other hand, from East-West dynamics of Asian and European literatures (explored by scholars such as Lydia Liu). Brenner sees this term as a promising avenue to explore and discuss Jewish literatures: "In adopting the term 'translingualism', I emphasize the movement across languages, that is to say, the movement of people, ideas, and institutions across linguistic boundaries" (15-16). In this, Brenner follows, once again, the intuition of Niger, who wrote about a group of Jewish writers in the 1930s for whom "the heritage of both linguistic spheres can be felt in everything—be it written in Hebrew or Yiddish. Their Yiddish had within it something of Hebrew, and not just something linguistic; their Hebrew had certain elements from the Yiddish, and (again) not just linguistic." Translingualism highlights transactions, translations, and even "literary collisions," all part of a Yiddish-Hebrew literary arena undergoing drastic changes. One example of a "literary collision" is the events following Sholem Asch and Peretz Hirshbeyn's visit to Palestine in 1927, when both Avraham Shlonsky and Eliezer Shteinman attacked Bialik's famous remark on the "marriage" between the languages that was "made in Heaven." Brenner shows how even such contentious moments between the burgeoning Hebrew and Yiddish literary establishments were part of a productive and creative process for both.

With the change in terminology and the focus on the interwar period in Brenner's book, a new set of writers and texts emerges. Many scholars who work in the subfield focus on the most prominent examples such as Abramovitsh, who has become an emblem of the phenomenon of Jewish bilingualism. Indeed, Niger noted already in 1941 that "Yiddish helped Mendele invent his new and elastic Hebrew *nusakh*; and Hebrew blood often flows in the arteries of Mendele's Yiddish prose."[5] Abramovitsh's example was then further discussed by, for example, Harshav, Even-Zohar, Miron, Seidman, and Frieden. The gallery of writers Brenner offers is somewhat different: Zalman Shneour, Y.D. Berkovitch, Rokhl Feygenberg, Avraham Shlonsky, Dovid Bergelson, Rachel

[5] Niger, *Di tsveyshprakhikeyt fun undzer literatur,* 113.

Wischnitzer-Bernstein, and others. Although most of these writers were born in Eastern Europe, they lived and worked in New York City, Tel Aviv, Berlin, and Paris during the interwar period. It is not a coincidence that in an attempt to redefine the terms and method of engaging bilingual literary dynamics, the scope and possibilities are broadened and the characters are less known, or less associated with the canonical parameters of Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism. To use Chana Kronfeld's recent articulation, a "joint literary historiography" (which is not a regression to a simple embrace of Baal Makhshoves' 1918 slogan: "Two Languages—One and Only One Literature"), allows a reevaluation of writers who are typically viewed as belonging to one or the other of these Jewish literatures."[6]

Another aspect of translingualism that Brenner foregrounds is the question of space. For instance, in the first chapter Brenner discusses the Hebrew-Yiddish periodical *Rimon/Milgroym*, emphasizing how relationships between the languages are both local and global, at once both geographically contained and unbounded. *Milgroym/Rimon*, which was edited and produced in Berlin but whose writers and readers for the most part lived elsewhere, used the city itself as a local site of assembly to produce a translingual and transnational literary object. These periodicals, argues Brenner, are at once of *a* time and place, but also of multiple spaces and of intersections of these spaces and languages. The case of *Milgroym/Rimon* has parallels in such publications as *Kol mevaser/Hamelitz* in nineteenth century Odessa and other locales throughout the Jewish publishing world, but none as intensely and simultaneously bilingual as the Berlin publication.

Brenner's book, then, redefines the "what," and expands the "when," "who," and "where" of Jewish translingualism, but perhaps it doesn't do enough. The temporal expansion Brenner highlights is important, but it is also in some sense a reproduction of the arbitrary historical cutoffs of previous scholarship. Why not trace translingualism farther into the second half of twentieth (and for that matter the twenty-first) century? Why not trace translingualism back to nineteenth-century Jewish literatures? The demise of the Yiddish reading public in World War II is a hard reality, but Brenner herself shows in the postscript of the book that translingualism is alive and well in the writings of Avot Yeshurun, a poet who was born in Poland but lived and wrote in Tel Aviv until his death in 1992. Both the theoretical and temporal gestures of Brenner's book may be applied beyond the interwar period and perhaps will further reshape our reading of Yiddish and Hebrew literature.

We might want to consider how translingualism can help us to understand a writer like Yossl Birshtein, who continued to write in Hebrew and in Yiddish while living in Israel from the 1950s until his death in 2003. More significant than Birshtein's bilingual production is the fact that even when he "switched" to publishing most of his short stories and novels in Hebrew, and became more well known as a "Hebrew writer,"

[6]Chana Kronfeld, "The Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish," Joshua Miller and Anita Norich (Eds.), *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

Yiddish continued to function as the foundation and impetus of his Hebrew texts. Classic and modernist Yiddish literature continued to be the main literary model and intertext for Birshtein's Hebrew writing, which he often then translated (back) into Yiddish. We might think also of Israeli writers such as Aharon Appelfeld, Ya'akov Shabtai, and David Grossman, whose "native tongue" was not Yiddish, and yet Yiddish is often the unacknowledged (or partially acknowledged) subtext of their Hebrew writing. This dynamic, which continues today with recent work by Matan Hermoni and others, is part of what Jeffrey Shandler calls "post-vernacular" Yiddish culture. By contrast, when reading the work of Yiddish writers in Israel—Avrom Sutzkever, Rivka Basman, Zvi Eizenman, Avrom Karpinowich, and others—we would do well to explore the place of Hebrew in their Israeli-Yiddish work. The work of Gabriel Preil, who wrote Hebrew and Yiddish poetry in the US among dwindling modernist Yiddishist and Hebraist groups, but was read and admired in Israel mostly in the postwar period, is another interesting case of translingualism and not only bilingualism.[7] Thus, the translingual dynamics that Brenner explores in the interwar period can be very productive in analyzing the work and texts of writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Another example of Hebrew-Yiddish dynamics which gains a new significance through the lens of translingualism is that of Aharon Reuveni. Reuveni is a writer who is thought to have clearly defined Yiddish and Hebrew periods in his career, writing Yiddish prose while in the United States and switching exclusively to Hebrew after immigrating to Palestine in 1910. Yet, even a decade after this move, Reuveni wrote his magnum-opus, the trilogy *Ad yerushalayim*, first in Yiddish and only then translated it into Hebrew, though he would never publish the entire Yiddish version. Still, the Yiddish original remains fused into the narrative of the Hebrew novels; first and foremost the Yiddish original is present through the tension and shifts between the languages, which becomes a central theme of the Hebrew text. The case of Reuveni shows how translingualism recalibrates our understanding of Yiddish-Hebrew literary production, where the movement into Hebrew prose is not a movement away from Yiddish, but rather a shift which produces a bifurcated text that demands a different kind of reading.[8]

Brenner's focus on translingual dynamics could also give scholars new tools to understand and analyze the work of early and mid-nineteenth century Jewish writers. We might think of such writers as Reb Nahman, R. Nathan Sternharz, Joseph Perl, Yitshak Ber Levinzon, Menahem Mendel Lefin, Ayzik Meyer Dik, and many other Hasidic and maskilic writers who are not necessarily associated with the bilingual production of Abramovitsh. Thinking about translingualism in nineteenth-century Jewish writing can move us away from the question of "language choice" to charting

[7] See the pioneering work of Yael Feldman, *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1986).

[8] A somewhat similar iteration of these language dynamics can be found in the translingualism of Jacob Steinberg. See Elhanan, Elazar. "The Price of Remorse: Yiddish and the Work of Mourning in Jacob Steinberg's Hebrew Poetry." *In geveb*, September 2015: http://ingeveb.org/articles/the-price-of-remorse-yiddish-and-the-work-of-mourning-in-jacob-steinbergs-hebrew-poetry.

movement across linguistic boundaries, to confronting issues of translation (between Hebrew and Yiddish as well as from German, Russian and Polish), and to analyzing the politics of self-translation.[9]

Indeed, much of what can be conceived of as Jewish translingualism is bound up with the practice of self-translation, a process which is fairly common in the realm of Jewish literatures. Jewish writers often have the facility to translate their own work from one Jewish language to the other, and in and out of Jewish languages. Studying self-translation compels scholars to rethink concepts of originality, adaptation, and transmission, unhinging the literary text from romantic concepts of the single completed work of art.[10] *Lingering Bilingualism* deals with such acts of self-translation in several chapters, most notably in the chapter on Shneour and Berkowitz. The cases of Reuveni, Birshtein, and Preil show that self-translation may be a gateway into further exploration of translingualism, enabling the questioning of the relative values of original and translation, their independence as texts with separate goals and audiences, *and* their codependence as partners in a complex field of literary dynamics.

As Brenner notes time and again, her book is about language and movement: "Movement between two or more languages on individual, textual, institutional and social levels." Thus, translingualism "[s]potlights the literary transversals, transactions and translations between these two languages" (16-17). This movement is apparent from the get-go, especially in the title of the book. Yet "lingering" carries with it an uneasiness. What are we to feel towards something that "lingers," that stays longer than expected? Has Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism outstayed its welcome? Is lingering bilingualism merely a diminished form of bilingualism—or is it a new hope, a new horizon for Hebrew-Yiddish writing and reading? *Lingering Bilingualism* invites us to ask these questions as it reframes the story of Hebrew-Yiddish literature. Brenner's book reimagines some of the protagonists, turning points, and movements—as well as the highs and lows—of a shifting narrative, but there is still much that can and should be done. The subfield of Hebrew-Yiddish Studies is on the rise; Brenner's book, and Jewish translingualism more broadly (which, of course, includes contact with other Jewish and non-Jewish languages), promise much for future scholarship.

[9] This is a direction explored recently in the new book by Ken Frieden, *Travels in Translation: Sea Tales at the Source of Jewish Fiction* (Syracuse University Press 2016).

[10] See Sara Kippur, *Writing It Twice: Self-Translation and the Making of a World Literature in French* (Northwestern University Press, 2015) and Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015)