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YIDDISH AND ASL: A LOOK AT LINGUISTIC PREJUDICE

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eth-no-cen-trism (ěth'no-sěn'trīs'əm) *n* . 1. Belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group.

- From *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*

Ethnocentrism - the very word leaves a bad taste in our mouths. The remaining flavors remind us of Hitler's xenophobic campaign against the Jewish people, blacks having second-class citizenship in South Africa, and white supremacists burning crosses on the lawns of minority citizens. Whenever one ethnic group considers itself to be superior to (and therefore more deserving of the good things in life than) another group, the result always has the same flavor- that of bitter tears, wounded hearts, and broken bodies. In recent times, there has been a consciousness-movement aiming to cure the primitive kill-or-be-killed instinct , replacing it with what Covey calls the "abundance mentality"¹ - the realization that the world is big enough for all of us.

Yet ethnocentrism wears other guises. One of those guises is the myth of linguistic superiority. This is the notion that somehow the *language* of one group is superior to the language of another. "A belief," says *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*,

that some languages are intrinsically superior to others is widespread, but has no basis in linguistic fact ... The view of modern linguistics is that a language should not be valued based on the political or economic influence of the speakers.²

Two languages that have suffered due to the superiority myth are Yiddish and American Sign Language (ASL). Both languages have suffered accusations that they are not "real" languages, both have

¹Covey, S. *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*. Cassette Seminar.

²Crystal, D. *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*. Cambridge University Press. 1987. p. 7

been marked as being "detrimental to thinking", both have had efforts made against them to stamp out the undesirable languages. Only in recent times have efforts been made to understand the nature of the languages.

At the outset it needs to be mentioned that both ASL and Yiddish are full, rich languages in their own rights. They possess morphology, phonology and syntax -- the essential "building blocks" of language. Both languages have rich, dynamic vocabularies which serve the needs of their language communities, and as we shall see, the languages in question have received the stamp of approval from the academic community.

It is a human tendency to deny the existence of things which, if admitted, would compel a person to change his or her belief system. Next to entropy, inertia is the ruling law in the universe. If speakers of language A can show that language B is in fact *not* a language, then the question of linguistic superiority is moot - and that is exactly what was tried with Yiddish and ASL. In the early 1930s the *Encyclopedia Britannica* stated that

[Yiddish is] essentially a folk tongue. It eludes all strict grammatical analysis, though efforts are being made to bring about some system to its written form.³

In the nineteenth century, many epithets were used in reference to Yiddish, among them being: *hittserne taytsh* (wooden German), *kugl loshn* (pudding language), *shulhoyf-loshn* (synagogue-courtyard language), and *zhargon*⁴. In the minds of the "purists", Yiddish was just corrupted German- the very name for the language is an Americanization of *jüdisch-deutsch* (Jewish-German). Such an offshoot from the pure German language must never be admitted as a real language, the scholars said. It must be remembered that J.G. Becanus (1518-72) stated that German was the language that Adam spoke in Eden, and that the Old Testament was translated from German to Hebrew some time after the Tower of Babel incident.⁵ The Jews were tinkering with the sacred.

³Geipel, J. *Mame Loshn: The Making of Yiddish*. West Nyack. p.11

⁴Weinreich, M. *History of the Yiddish Language*. Trans. S. Noble. Chicago, U. of Chicago Press. p. 285

⁵*Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language* . p. 7

ASL has also had its detractors. To many people, both the uninitiated and the professionally ignorant, ASL is simply "English on the hands", a mere argot made up of manual signs and poor English grammar. In his autobiography, *Deafness*, the deaf English poet David Wright referred to the sign language used in his schoolboy days as a "dumb-crambo" - and so are all sign languages, according to the detractors of ASL. Poor analyses of ASL lead to the erroneous conclusions that

... ASL consisted of unordered, mimetic gestures and was incomplete, inferior, situation-bound and concrete. Such terms represented not only a lack of understanding of manual language, but an oral language bias, from which it is exceedingly difficult to escape.¹

The iconic nature of many ASL signs would lead one to the mistaken conclusion that ASL is simply a sophisticated pantomime system.² In the older literature, sign language was seldom referred to as *la langue gestuel*, but rather as *la mimique* or *les gestes*³ - for *langue* implied "tongue". Without the tongue, there could be no language.

Language has been considered to be the wellspring of thought. Since language permeates our thoughts, our dreams, our reasoning processes, it was concluded that anyone who did not speak a "true" language must not have any intelligence. Parents who taught their children a non-language were doing their children a gross disservice - they were raising idiots. In 1786 David Friedländer wrote:

[Yiddish is] so wild and lawless that it cripples the minds of the children to make them incapable even of thinking straight. How could they expect their neighbors to respect them, when they didn't even speak like human beings?⁴

With ASL, the issue was mostly involved with the question of speech. In the area of deaf communication the two prevailing schools of thought are: 1) the oralists, who argue that speech and lip-reading are to be the *sole* means of communication (even among

¹Wilbur, R. *American Sign Language and Sign Systems*. Baltimore, University Park Press. 1979. p. 3.

²*Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*. p. 7

³Cuxac, C. *Le Language des Sourds*. Paris, Payot. 1983.

⁴Susskind, N. "A Partisan History of Yiddish". Printed in *Language & Communication* Vol. 7. G.B., Pergamon Journals. 1987. Supp. pp. 127-134

the deaf themselves!)¹, and 2) The manualists, who advocate the use of a signed system, whether or not speech was ever learned.

The chief argument brought against the use of sign language was what Laurent Clerc called the "God's breath flim-flam"². The argument was that since God formed man in his own image, and since God could speak ("... and God *said* , Let there be light..."), in order for man to follow the creator's design, he had to speak. Amman, the Swiss founder of the "German method" - which was really the same old oralist method in a new package - summed up the proposition as:

...creatures formed in God's Image ought out of necessity to be able to speak, and in this respect resemble their Creator.³

It is difficult to grasp the effect these kinds of statements had on the Jews and the Deaf. They made their languages abominations - dirty secrets to be tucked away in dark corners. Instead of systems for expression and communication, they became debasing elements, keeping man from his divine potential. Such corruptions could never be allowed to remain unchecked.

History is replete with people who have tried to rid humanity of "corruption" - self-appointed prophets determined to work towards the breeding of the perfect race. On the scale of a Hitler, the evil is glaringly clear. The Jews are systematically ostracized from society as a prelude to genocide. There are subtler means of slavery, however. During the Arab occupation of Persia, the Persian language was suppressed. Only the valiant efforts of a few poets and writers prevented the Arabic idiom from supplanting Persian. This is known to every Iranian schoolchild: *if you proscribe the language of a people, that people will scatter and die* . Cut off a generation from using their parental language, and you have killed that culture as surely as you would have by sending the members of that culture to Dachau. In the case of Yiddish, it was simply fuel that was added to the fire of anti-semitism: *the Yiddish language hampers thought, therefore Jewish people are deficient, therefore they are harmful to*

¹Schein. J. *Speaking the Language of Sign*. New York, Doubleday. 1984 p.60

²Lane, H. *When the Mind Hears*. New York, Random House. 1984. p. 101

³*Ibid*.

racial purity. Perhaps the sentiments against ASL and Yiddish are the results of xenophobia.

Alexander Graham Bell was a eugenicist. He was born of "older" American stock (i.e. English or German) - a group who demanded restrictive immigration to the States, language uniformity, and eugenic reduction of the "unfit" in American schools. The deaf conveniently fell into the category of "unfit" for the reasons described above, in addition to the fact that they did not have the use of their ears. He viewed Sign Language as a "useless and pernicious" device¹. From the money Bell made by inventing the telephone (an accident - he was trying to invent a hearing aid for his deaf wife) he aided the cause of the oralists. Backed by nearly unlimited wealth, these "benefactors" obtained the power they needed to all but expunge ASL from the school system.²

In the end, both attempts at suppression failed. The languages and the peoples survived, though the languages sustained grievous injuries. Although most enlightened institutions accept Yiddish and ASL as languages in their own right, there are many others who, for bureaucratic or other reasons, deny this truth. The most outdated sources are quoted to sustain their point of view. Any research produced contrary to their opinions is dismissed as *poor scholarship* and *partisan*.³

For there has been research, new and exciting. In 1959, Max Weinreich's *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh* (History of the Yiddish Language) is a masterful work describing the evolution and structure of Yiddish. Solomon Birnbaum's *Yiddish* (1979) is also a scholarly work about the Yiddish language. ASL research began in 1965 with William Stokoe's *Dictionary of American Sign Language based on Linguistic Principles* - the first dictionary based on a phonological analysis of ASL. At the Salk Institute, Ursula Bellugi's research showed ASL to be full, rich language in its own right with poetry, humor, and other qualities that spoken languages possess⁴. The validity of Yiddish and ASL has been demonstrated beyond all

¹*Speaking the Language of Sign* p. 63.

²Lane, H. *The Deaf Experience*. Harvard U. Press. 1984. p. 12

³A friend of the author, on conversation with a Dean in the College of General Education at BYU, heard the Dean remark that "deaf people do not have a culture worth serious intellectual consideration."

⁴Klima E., and Bellugi. *The Signs of Language*. Cambridge, Harvard U. Press. 1976.

doubt to linguists. The opinion of a small group of scholars, however, is unlikely to change centuries of prejudice in a hurry.

Is prejudice being overcome? The open-mindedness professed by most Northern Americans is easily challenged when faced with a foreigner whose command of English is less than fluent. We quickly become impatient with another's fledgling attempts to speak a language we have spent a lifetime practicing. The overt racism once evident in America is now replaced with a more covert linguistic discrimination. Out in the world there are people capable in every skill but spoken English, and they are constantly denied decent employment because of the "poor impression" that is made at the job interview. A case in point: two fully qualified deaf technicians work for a local Utah software company. When customers see that the technicians are using sign language, the customers no longer feel safe leaving their computer equipment with the technicians. There exists an impression that if the English used by a speaker is less than perfect, the speaker must in some way be deficient. We live in a country where mediocrity is tolerated, as long as we understand the mediocrity in fluent English.

Yiddish and ASL are not the only languages that have been in this plight- English was once considered a language fit only for the uneducated¹. There are scores of instances where opinions are passed on the expressive media of whole cultures. If we wish to consider ourselves as a free nation, we must accept a more tolerant view of the languages found in this country today. Only then can we deserve the title of "a kinder, gentler nation."

¹*Speaking the Language of Sign* p.8. Thomas More was a valiant defender of the English Language: "That our language is called barbarous is but a fantasy..."