Yiddish rules

Written in relation to the paperback edition (2007) of Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire: the Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (New York: Basic Books, 2004)

Menke Katz wrote some fine words in his poem 'A Yiddish Poet', published in 1965:

My mother tongue is as unpolished as a wound, a laughter, a love-starved kiss... When I first read this, I was struck by the word 'unpolished'. As a linguist, I'd never use this word about a language. It suggests that some languages are superior to others. More useful on the world stage some of them may be. Spoken by more people some of them may be. But to say that one language is intrinsically inferior compared to another is just plain nonsense. And to dismiss languages or dialects by calling them rude names says more about the namer than the named.

Yiddish English has attracted quite a bit of rudeness, as labels such as *Yinglish* and *Yidgin* show. But those who use such names are committing two huge errors. They're forgetting the crucial role that languages and dialects play in expressing a community's historical identity. And they're ignoring the remarkable influence Yiddish has had on other languages.

Many loan words have come into English from Yiddish. Some of them are so naturalized that their origins are forgotten - such as *bagel*, *nosh* and *glitch*. Others, because of their distinctive sounds or spellings, retain their Yiddish resonance - as with *mensch*, *kvetch*, and *chutzpah*.

Yiddish has even altered the letter balance in one part of the English alphabet. Formerly you'd see next to nothing under *SHM-* or *SCH-*. Now we have quite a list - *spiel*, *shmaltz*, *schlock*, *schmuck*, and many more. Dictionary-writers find them a pain to handle, because of their alternative spellings. Is it *schlock, shlock, shlok...?*

What's unique in the history of English is the way Yiddish has given the language a new sound pattern. English loves reduplicated words, such as *helter skelter* and *willy nilly*. Now we have a dismissive reduplication using *shm-*, as in *pretty-shmitty*, and thousands more. There's nothing like this elsewhere in the language.

Languages borrow words from each other all the time. Grammar not so often. And this is where Yiddish has had most influence. Especially common is a strategy which brings the important words to the front of a sentence, as in 'Worries you have', 'A Brad Pitt he isn't', and 'On you it looks good'. It even influences aliens. Yoda, in *Star Wars*, speaks like that: 'Full of the force I am'.

It would take a book to go through all the ways Yiddish has affected English grammar. One of the chapters would certainly be on the distinctive use of *should*: 'You should worry', 'I should live so long'. Another would be on questions: 'So what else is new?', ' What's to know?', 'What's with you?' Another would be on commands: 'Go figure it out!', 'Don't ask!', 'Enjoy!' Then there are the idioms. Oy vey, such idioms! 'I need it like a hole in the head', 'Give me a for instance', 'He bought it for a little nothing'. Enough, already.

Dovid Katz, Menke's son, gives his book *Words on Fire* a subtitle: *The Unfinished Story of Yiddish*. He's talking about Yiddish as a language in its own right, of course. But for me there's no better evidence of its ongoing relevance than the impact it has had on the world's number 1 lingua franca.