

Reaffirming linguistic activism:

Translating Yiddish poetry into Catalan

Golda van der Meer

vi lang kan man shteyn in a fenster
(‘Quan de temps es pot romandre
davant la finestra’)
Debora Vogel (1900–1942)

The Yiddish verse above is from a series of poems titled *3 lider fun vartn* (‘3 poems on waiting’) by the poet Debora Vogel. The verse can be translated into English as ‘how long can one stay in front of a window’. In this poem, the poet waits in her window for a lover to come from another city, but we can also interpret the line as the question of how long an author must wait to be translated. Yiddish poets are seldomly translated, even less so, women poets.

Yiddish and Catalan are two languages that have been subject to persecution in 20th century Europe. On the 25th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of linguistic rights, it is relevant to acknowledge the position of these languages today. While Yiddish is undergoing a sort of ‘revival’, several Catalan linguists have warned of the decline in the use of Catalan.

The Yiddish language has experienced a renaissance in the last few decades. Some of the examples that have helped put Yiddish to the fore include new Yiddish textbooks (*In eynem*, 2020), new translations into Yiddish (*Harry Potter*, 2020 – this translation was such a success that by the end of February 2021, the Yiddish Book Center announced that they were out of stock on their online store), livestream TV-series with Yiddish as one of the main languages (*Unorthodox* and *Shtisel*), online conferences and courses, and a new book on the biography of the Yiddish language (Shandler, 2021). The use of Catalan, on the other hand, is in decline, and Spanish nationalist parties even try to reinforce this tendency, e.g., by threatening to revoke the Catalan linguistic immersion program in schools or to shut down the Catalan regional TV channel. Thus, the language has been at the center of a debate in the Spanish and Catalan parliaments in the past few years.

Catalan as an example for Yiddish
Still, in the past decades, an interest in minority languages has flourished

in the world of academia, and (online) language schools. An example is the Official Language School of Barcelona, an institution dedicated to the teaching of languages to adults, which will offer a course of Yiddish. Teaching Yiddish to Catalan speakers in Barcelona might seem quite atypical, but Yiddish was present in the streets of Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. And even though Yiddish and Catalan come from different linguistic families, histories, and traditions, they do share certain parallelisms in views on how to standardise the language. To give an example, a conference on Catalan that took place in Barcelona in 1906 and might have served as a ‘spiritual’ precursor to the conference that took place in Czernowitz in 1908 for the Yiddish language³. Both conferences professed similar goals and techniques that could be applied to any minority language regardless of its history:

- (a) standardisation through dictionaries, grammars, dialects atlases
- (b) sensitising the population to language issues and promoting the ideas through the media, literature, and education.

As a direct outcome of the conferences, academic institutions were founded for the study of Catalan and Yiddish respectively. The *Institut d’Estudis Catalans* (‘Institute for Catalan Studies’) was founded in 1907, while the equivalent institution for the Yiddish language, *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut* (YIVO), was established in 1925. In *Oyfgabn fun der yidisher filologye* (‘The tasks of Yiddish Philology’; 1913),

Ber Borokhov uses Catalan and other minority languages and their fight for prevalence as examples that could serve the Yiddish language. In Borokhov’s opinion, people engaged in arts and culture should take the initiative in the fight for Yiddish. He illustrates this by *Els Jocs Florals* (‘Floral Games’): a poetic contest held in Catalonia during the 1880s (in what has been termed *La Renaixença* (‘The Renaissance [of the Catalan language]’)) which aimed to strengthen and encourage the language’s use via a cultural medium, poetry. Writing and reading Catalan poetry would help the language flourish, and Borokhov expressed how the same could be done for Yiddish.

“The Yiddish language has experienced a renaissance in the last few decades”

Translating to ‘make comprehensible’

Yiddish was a language belonging to the Ashkenazi Jewish communities. Since the 10th century it has developed in both Central and Eastern Europe and spread out into several regions alongside local languages. Part of its syntax and lexicon is rooted in Gothic German, but the language bears traces

³This example is taken from an article by Holger Nath in *The Politics of Yiddish* edited by Dov-Ber Kerler (1998).

from Hebrew, Latin and especially the Slavic languages as well. Some of the first texts in Yiddish were translations from Hebrew, mainly religious texts. These translations had a practical more than a literary purpose: they were a way of making the Hebrew religious texts comprehensible to the Jewish non-Hebrew reader. This phenomenon of translation was called *taytshn* ('to make comprehensible'). One of the most translated religious books from Hebrew into Yiddish is the *Tsene-Rene* (also called the 'women's bible').

Borokhov was not the only Yiddishist who advocated for the Yiddish language; linguists and Yiddish activists such as Chaim Zhitlowsky and Max Weinreich opened schools for teaching Yiddish and created Yiddish dictionaries and grammar books. Several well-known authors of the late 19th and early 20th

century Yiddish literature, such as Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916) and Mendele Mocher Sforim (1836–1917), turned from Hebrew to Yiddish in order to attract more readers. On the eve of the Second World War the Yiddish language was spoken by over more than 10 million European Jews – it became the dominant language of the Jews.

Translating as a symbolic act

At the beginning of the 20th century, endeavours to modernize Jewish life and society resulted in a wave of Yiddish translations from world literature (from Balzac to Tolstoy, from Heine to Marx, Kant, and Rousseau), and philosophical, historical, scientific, economic and political texts. This wave reached its climax around the First World War. Translations into Yiddish dropped dramatically after the destruction of the Yiddish population and the Jewish towns in Europe in the Second World War.

In the 21st century, however, translations into Yiddish have regained attention. Most of them are children's books, such as Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* or Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*. Shandler considers these new translations a symbolic act to demonstrate the "viability and vivacity of Yiddish". Thus, they counteract the misconception of Yiddish being a dead language.

Translating to innovate

The Yiddish modernist poets of the 20th century, on the other hand, understood translation as a literary mode, similar to Ezra Pound's understanding of translation, as a technique that is primarily a means of innovating the target language. Translation into a national language was already common



Portrait of Debora Vogel
by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz c.1930
Source: **Public domain**



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Golda van der Meer
Photo: Private Archive

practice in the Renaissance in Germany and France to standardise languages. For minority languages, translation became more relevant as not only the nationalization of the language was at stake, but also its prevalence. In a similar vein, linguistic activists in Catalan and Yiddish felt the urge to translate world literature into their national languages to reinforce and enrich them. For instance, the Catalan poet Josep Carner (1884-1970) vowed to translate canonical literary works to develop and enrich the Catalan language.

Translating as activism

My experience in translating Yiddish poetry into Catalan is a way of reaffirming this linguistic activism. One of the goals of a number of poets was to preserve and innovate their native language, be it Yiddish or Catalan, and so by translating from one minor language into another, I continue to preserve the languages while at the same time creating a dialogue between the two languages I have a close relation to. Yiddish reminds me of my father's library, and Catalan is my mother tongue. I grew up reading Yiddish stories and

understanding how speaking Catalan in Barcelona had not always been easy. Growing up under Franco's regime, when Catalan was a forbidden language, my mother had to learn it in clandestine schools. In fact, translations into Catalan served as a means of activism at that time. This linguistic activism in the field of culture and through translation was made to preserve the Catalan language for posterity.

Vogel's verse translated into Catalan at the beginning of this text opens up a dialogue of a language that was once there and that has been reconstituted through translation. By translating Debora Vogel, a Polish avant-garde Yiddish poet, into Catalan, I am drawing attention to the question of the place minority languages have in Europe. At the same time I am giving a voice to this form of activism in favour of these two languages seeking consolidation in a world that apparently wants to marginalize them: "vi lang kan man shteyn in a fenster" ('quant de temps es pot romandre davant la finestra'). How long, I ask, does a poet of a minority language have to wait to be translated?