

Ghil'ad Zuckermann. *Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Reviewed by Norman Simms

This is a very important technical and contentious book, yet it is also a very funny, punny tome. It is technical in its approach to linguistics and language history, contentious because it argues that modern Hebrew spoken in Israel today is not the continuation of ancient or medieval Hebrew but rather a language created by secular European, mostly Yiddish-speaking Jews who pioneered the settlement of Palestine at the close of the nineteenth century, and only then became a spoken language, Israeli. *Revivalistics* is also technical in the way it looks at revived languages elsewhere, such as Aboriginal tongues that have lain dormant since native speakers were silenced and then were awakened like Sleeping Beauty into something new and modern or as New Zealand Maori brought into the post-colonial world after almost dying out with its population and then blending regional dialects, creating a lexicon for the new urban age of mechanization, and adapting to the dialectical era and the culture shaped by American Black rappers and political activists. And it is a funny punny book (as might be seen if Hebrew characters were used, especially the *feh/peh* (פ) letter which only needs a dot in the middle (like a belly button) to go from one to the other sound. The volume is chock-a-block with jokes, or what my father used to call “amusing anecdotes” based on the different intonations, voicing of non-vowel written *ivrit*, and other verbal confusions, situational mix-ups and deliberate obfuscations.

At the very beginning of the twentieth century, the first known native speakers of the new version of Hebrew were born, the *loshen kodesh* or sacred language of the Jews having become in the Second Temple Period a learned, usually only read (and read aloud) language ever after, whereas the *mama loshen* or mother tongue would be, depending on where the child was born, Aramaic or some blended, caked and *mish-mosh* language, such as Yiddish or Judeo-Español, or any of scores of others in Europe, the near or Middle East, Asia, Africa or “beyond”, as Zuckerman so quaintly puts it. While discussions are articulated in the jargon of linguistic and related social sciences, the examples pop out as personal reminiscences of the author, rabbinical *witzenschaft*, and schoolboy humour. Which often remind me of what my gang of *nudniks* (annoying creatures or *vilde chaya*) and *vancen* (bedbugs) did in Brooklyn when we used our imperfectly-learned Hebrew lettering to send secret messages around the classroom in some sort of English words, so neither the girls nor the teachers would know what we were communicating, if we were saying—in these cryptic silent epistles—anything at all.

As for the situation in New Zealand, I recall many years ago, when the so-called Maori Renaissance was just beginning, that some of my colleagues at the university were sitting at a table in the cafeteria. They had received a contract from a major publisher to prepare a Maori-English dictionary for use in schools. They were given templates for this task. There were a series of lined drawings of various things—cars, motorcycles, kitchens, zoos and so forth—and there were blank spaces in which the names were to be entered. Everyone was laughing and having a good time as they tried to think up what to call different parts of an airplane engine, electrical appliances for use in the home, exotic animals and so forth. Sometimes they merely imitated the common or specialized English terms, sometimes they thought of archaic Polynesian words that could be redefined for the new context, and sometimes they made up words using particles of existing words or phrases. I do not recall how they tested the results,

whether by surveying Māori students in their classes, asking their children to try out the new words on their friends, or trying to include these terms in the *waita* (songs) and *haka* (dance chants) they often composed for public performance. I think they would have learned a lot from Ghil'ad Zuckermann and *vice versa*.

The old story went—coming from George Bernard Shaw (although it may have been Oscar Wilde or even someone else)—that America and Britain are two nations separated by the same language. Now Zuckermann tells us that Israel is a nation that only has one thing holding it together, language, and the rest is difference—social structures, religion, politics and morals. The language in common, though, is not a revived or updated Biblical or medieval Hebrew, whether deriving from Yiddish-speakers in Ashkenaz or Ladino (or Judeo-Español) from Sepharad or some other Jewish melded tongue: it is a new modern European language called Israeli. And it is one that is expanding in its lexicon to meet with high-tech digital advances, re-inventing its Hebrew and Yiddish grammar, and creating its own way of thinking, feeling and manipulating reality.

Zuckermann tells a lot of jokes because that is how languages, spoke, written and felt deep in the *kishkas*, work: through puns, calques, portmanteau words, borrowings from other languages, playfulness and wit. It is not just that ambiguities and ambivalences can be pinned down by context and analogy, but that the plasticity of speech, emotional expressions, intimate whisperings on the pillow, infantile rage and political necessity require ambiguity and ambivalence. Otherwise nobody ever could get along with anyone else and especially not with oneself.

I recall a German-Sri Lankan poet once telling me that she could only taste a strawberry properly when she used the German word *die Erdberre*; no other term could be as delicious, luscious, sweet and warm. Maybe that's why some other poet said that poetry is what is left over after translation. Words are more and other than meanings and communication: they are sounds, feelings in the mouth, shapes, colours and sizes of letters in the memory of pages; they are echoes of similar rhythms, tunes, tones, patterns, designs. Biblical Hebrew has a relatively small number of words, since it comes down to us in one anthology of texts—liturgical poems, epic poems, courtly chronicles, sermons, proverbs, admonitions, speculative essays, etc.—and most of those words are used only once. Factoring in rabbinical texts and poetry, secular romances and novels, a very few number of autobiographies and political tracts, there is still a relatively small vocabulary compared to the major world languages. Yet already Israeli has built up a much larger word-hoard through its written and spoken practices. Amazingly, there are translations of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnigen's Wake* for Israeli readers, not to mention Shakespeare, Proust, Rabelais, Cervantes and other great formative works of literature. That takes a lot of playing around and inventiveness, and a language flexible, reliable and rich enough for that to happen.

Back in the 1980s, while on study leave in the USA, I heard about a group that was collecting Yiddish books and phonograph recordings because, as the speakers of this language began to die off, their children did not want the books and records left to them. These children did not know Yiddish and couldn't care less about the culture they represented. Similarly, schools, libraries and museums were starting to dump their unwanted collections. Thus, visiting a friend who lived near Amherst (Massachusetts), I went to a large old derelict building where I was told there was something really interesting to see. Inside the building, several storeys of a dark and dingy former factory, there were piles and piles of books spilling all over the floor, some still in rotting cardboard boxes, and suitcases and baskets of record albums and singles.

Aaron Lansky and a small crew of helpers had been going around the USA and Canada picking up these unwanted treasures. A young woman guided me around and explained that all these volumes would have to be sorted, catalogued and given proper storage. When I walked out, there were tears in my eyes, and I told my friends near Lake Wyola that it was because there, in that dingy building, was a whole Jewish civilization that no one wanted. Well, I was wrong, at least in part. Within a few years, those piles—and many many more collections from public and private estates—were not only sorted, but also organized into basic sets of Yiddish literature, philosophy, science and political writings, as well as music collections, that were offered free to major university and public libraries. More than that, the number of helpers that Lansky and the original crew drew to themselves, increased, and they were teaching each other and newcomers Yiddish, speaking it among themselves, and creating social circles in many towns and cities across America and Canada where people could learn, speak and begin to create in Yiddish.

After I returned to my exile from the Exile in New Zealand, the connections to this interest in Yiddish grew a bit thin. Distance, age and health got in the way, as well as my own formal scholarly interests and obligations, but I did continue to subscribe to the Forwards (which still an insert section in Yiddish back then), purchased the main novelists and short story writer, and read the monthly magazine of the Yiddish Revival group.

The best that I could do (and maybe some people may recall this) I wrote a few collections of semi-autobiographical short fiction (*The Almost Very True Stories of Boro Park*), in which the narrator and the characters spoke a kind of Yinglish because I then did believe, for a while, that English was becoming the new Yiddish for American Jews. New York City had become part of and then expanded upon the secular culture and political branch of East European Yiddishkeit—not just having newspapers, publishing houses, legitimate theatres, vaudeville stages, Coney Island comedy centres, discussion groups, but giving home to talents who moved back and forth across the Atlantic; and when the heart of the Old Countries was ripped out by Nazi murderers, the communities in the New World continued to grow—and if the performers and audiences stopped being primarily identified as Yiddish for Yiddlim, their voices could still be heard on radio, movie screens, television and in the dining halls of the Borscht Belt. Maybe they changed their names, and the Marx Brothers and the Three Stooges, “Uncle Milty” Berle, Jack Benny... and their faces, jokes and ideas continued inside American English themes, images and comic *schticks*. Sometimes we don’t recognize their tunes in Christmas songs or Broadway musical melodies, but they are there. Maybe this is an example of what Zuckermann means by linguaphagia, one language eating up another; if it the old *mama loschen* is not immediately recognizable, think of Proust and just take a *shmeck* of the breath afterwards, knishes (potato and kasha) sold from a little pushcart near my school, half-sour pickles out of wooden barrels, fresh bagels right out of the oven, crisp bialies and onion roles, corned-beef on rye, steamy kishka, chicken soup with globs of fat, *luckshen* or *knadlech*...

This mishmash speech in my little memory-stories was not really how my parents, relatives, family friends and neighbours spoke, but something like it—they sometimes actually did speak Yiddish to one another, or larded their English with many Yiddish expressions, and certainly had the intonations, rhythms and concepts of that “djargon” that sounded very different to the speech of teachers, radio announcers and movie actors. I thought it was possible to recreate the atmosphere and mentality of those days of my childhood in the 1940s and 1950s by using a somewhat stage-parody version of Yinglish. It seemed to me, too, that this was a mission assigned to me by history, at least I understood it through grandparents And parents:

that when they left the Old Country, they left their own parents, neighbours and culture behind them in order to become modern secular Americans, and that they could ensure the stresses and humiliations of the New World as revels provided there always was a loved, nostalgic Old World to depend on. Thanks to the Holocaust or *Shoah* (or *churban*—the disaster which was the word they used), the people, things, feelings and ideas they had left behind and resisted all their lives were gone. It was therefore my sacred I that was lost—like all those Yiddish books and records piled up in the factory building in Amherst. Nu, so it looks now, *nebech*, like this was something that didn't succeed.

It would have been so nice to have had Gh'ilad Zuckermann and his jargon, too, the neologisms and portmanteau terms of talknology, ethnomythology, etc. But *genuk ist genuk!* Where I have gone in one direction and am now an *alta kaka* not capable of much except cheering him on from the side-lines, he has gone on in his life and in his book to help salvage, reinvigorate and restore other languages, like Aboriginal speech in Australia.

The last half of the book focuses on Zuckermann's work to help revitalize the language of the Barnjarla people. The tone of the book and the mode of rhetorical argument change there, as the author outlines the programme he set up, the organizational skills he used to engage with the men and women who worked with him to put these plans into action, and the political and legal means needed to bring it to a stage where success is on the horizon. The main rationale for revitalize a dormant "Sleeping beauty" language like Barnjarla is that it helps a depressed, beaten-down population to regain its sense of self-dignity and to pursue their lives with a sense of optimism. While Zuckermann comes back again and again to the model of the Israeli experience, and while occasionally brings up efficient and efficacious programmes used amongst the Maori of New Zealand, the Sami of Scandinavia and other minority cultural groups, what everything comes back to is the way he is able to rouse the enthusiasm and the direct the energies of people he works with. What he is doing is to save the crazy world from itself, give back a mentality to those who have been pushed or slid off the edge, and that makes him a *mensch*, a proper human being.