

Jewish languages in German fiction (from the 16th century to present)

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DFG-Project: Western Yiddish in the (long) 19th century: Sources, sociolinguistic situation and grammatical phenomena

The main idea behind my poster is to illustrate how the forms and functions of Jewish languages in German art changed over time, ranging from the fake of Hebrew to imitation Yiddish in fiction, and, most recently, film. Initially, the imitation of these Jewish languages was used as one of several means of characterizing Jews in a pejorative way, among other attributes like, e.g. hook nose or cleverness in financial affairs. However, literary Yiddish (or literary Hebrew, for this purpose) is the only anti-Semitic device that is somehow, though vaguely, rooted in everyday perception. What is more, literary Yiddish came to be used as an artistic device by Jews themselves, which means that its semiotic function changed quite fundamentally over time. From the 16th century onwards, we can find Jewish characters in German literature whose speech differs from Christian figures. While the imitation of Yiddish or Hebrew language structures was originally intended as a means of anti-Semitic deformation, it came to be used for quite different purposes as soon as in the late 19th century. The same linguistic markers now figured in Jewish literature, mainly in humorous burlesques about the eastern Jewry. The Poster presents one aspect of my PhD-project, which is to analyze and describe the imitated languages and compare them to actual language use. Literary or fictional texts can be seen as an interesting window into how Jewish languages were actually perceived by speakers of German varieties. Confronting the language of Jewish characters as depicted in fictional texts with what we objectively know about their language structure can shed light on lay concepts of these varieties, but it also offers some clues as to which grammatical forms of Yiddish were more salient than others.