

Yiddish in English

Kron

Yiddish, the language spoken by the Jews of Eastern Europe, derives from the German of the Middle Ages, with the addition of many Hebrew and Aramaic words, but it has absorbed many other words and expressions from the native cultures of the countries where the Jews have settled. Since Hebrew is the traditional means of expression of learned Jews, Yiddish tends to be a folksy, colorful language that expresses the day-to-day concerns of the common people. After World War I, when many Jews were forced by political upheavals to emigrate, the United States became a center of Yiddish literary activity. The integration of this population into the American mainstream occurred so rapidly that many people who employ Yiddish terms do not even recognize their source.

Yiddish is earthy, blunt, emotional, and direct. Therefore, in many contexts it serves an expressive purpose that no English word can quite approximate. Be careful, however, since Yiddish is rarely appropriate in a formal context.

You will probably be familiar with many of the words in this selection of Yiddish expressions, and if you muse long enough over those you don't know, you will probably discover that many of them are precisely the words you've been looking for to describe the little frustrations of everyday life.

chutzpah (KHōōt'spə, hōōt'-) gall; nerve; brashness.

golem (gō'ləm) robot; lifelike creature.

gonif (gon'əf) a thief, swindler, crook, or rascal.

haimish (hā'mish) homey; cozy.

klutz (kluts) clumsy or awkward person.

kvell (kvel) be delighted; take pleasure.

kvetch (kvech) complain, whine, nag; crotchety person.

macher (mä'KHər) wheeler-dealer; big shot.

maven (mā'vən) expert; connoisseur.

megillah (mə gil'ə) tediously long story; rigmarole; complicated matter.

mensch (mensch) admirable person; decent human being.

meshuga (mə shōōg'ə) crazy; mad; nutty.

nebbish (neb'ish) nobody; loser; hapless person.

nudge (nŭj) nag; annoy or pester; a pest or annoying person.

nosh (nosh) snack; nibble.

schmooze (shmōōz) chitchat; gab; gossip.

schlemiel (shlə mēl') unlucky person; misfit; failure; awkward person.

schlep (shlep) drag or lug around; trudge; a slow, awkward person; a tedious journey.

schlock (shlok) shoddy merchandise; junk.

schmaltz (shmälts) mawkishness; sentimentality; mush.

schmatte (shmä'tə) rag; article of cheap clothing.

schmutz (shmōōts) dirt; garbage.

schnorrer (shnôr'ər) sponger; parasite.

schnook (shnōōk) pathetic person; sucker, easy mark; lovable fool.

shtick (shtik) comic routine; special interest or talent.

tchotchkes (choch'kəz) knickknacks; baubles or trinkets.

tzimmes (tsim'əs) fuss, to-do; uproar, disturbance.

tsuris (tsōōr'is, tsûr'-) worries; woes; afflictions.

yenta (yen'tə) busybody; gossip; nosy old woman.

zaftig (zäf'tik, -tig) juicy; plump; voluptuous; curvy.

Enough words already!

Yiddish, based on German dialect combined with words from Hebrew and Slavic languages, was spoken by Jews in central and eastern Europe before World War Two. It is still used in Israel and parts of Europe and the USA, especially New York, and has added an extra tang to English speech.

THE most familiar Yiddish word may be **nosh**, 'to eat greedily', used in English since the late 19th century and deriving from Yiddish *nashn*. Foods worth noshing include **bagels** (ring-shaped bread rolls), **lox** (smoked salmon), **matzos** (crisp biscuits of unleavened bread), and that staple of huge American-style sandwiches, **pastrami** (seasoned smoked beef).

The opening *sch-* is characteristic of Yiddish words, including **schlep** (to go or move with effort), **schlock** (inferior goods or material, rubbish), **schmaltz** (excessive sentimentality, literally 'dripping, lard'), **schnozz** (the nose), and **schtick** (an attention-getting routine or gimmick). Most of these date from the early or mid 20th century, although **schmooze**, 'to chat intimately and cosily', is from the 1890s.

Yiddish words often express a certain attitude—**oy vey!** (oh dear!), enough with the **kvetching** (moaning and complaining) already! This use of **already** to express impatience is influenced by Jewish speech, and is a translation of Yiddish *shoyn* 'already'. It is an example of the way Yiddish has exerted a subtle influence on English. If you say you **need something like a hole in the head** (used in English since the early 1950s), you are translating the Yiddish expression *tsu darfn vi a lokh in kop*. Other familiar idioms that are translations from Yiddish are **it's OK by me** and **get lost!**, both of which are first found in the USA.

Chutzpah is almost untranslatable—'extreme self-confidence or audacity' is probably the closest approximation. A **klutz** is clumsy, awkward, or foolish and a **nebbish** is a feeble or timid man, while a **schmuck** is foolish or contemptible—the word literally means 'penis', as does **putz**, also used to mean 'a stupid or worthless person'. On a more positive note, a **maven** is an expert or connoisseur, and a **mensch** a man of integrity and honour.

Although Yiddish is today associated particularly with New York, it has also influenced the speech of Londoners. Cockneys tell each other to keep **schtum** or silent, and call bad things **dreck** or rubbish and good ones

***KOSHER**—a Hebrew word that was spread by Yiddish-speakers.

The *-nik* in words like **beatnik** is another Yiddish contribution to English. It was originally used in Russian to form words for people of a particular

kind, and was taken up by Yiddish-speakers in the USA. Today we have terms such as **kibbutznik**, a member of a kibbutz or communal farm in Israel, and **refusenik**, a Jew in the Soviet Union who was refused permission to emigrate to Israel, or more generally a person who refuses to follow orders or obey the law. The beatniks were part of the subculture associated with the **beat generation** of the 1950s and early 1960s (*see* BEAT).

See also GAZUMP, GLITCH, SLAP, SMACK

glitch [1960s] Although nowadays a glitch can be any kind of hitch or snag, the word was originally used by US electronic engineers in the 1960s to mean 'a sudden surge of electrical current'. Astronauts began using the word to talk about any sudden malfunction of equipment. It may derive from Yiddish *glitsh* 'a slippery place'.

Yiddish words

Yiddish is a language based on German dialect combined with words from Hebrew and from Slavic languages. It was spoken in Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe before the Second World War. It can still be found in Europe, is spoken in Israel, and was once quite common amongst Jewish immigrants in London, where it has influenced cockney slang. It was taken by immigrants to the USA, particularly New York, which is why it has made many contributions to American English.

Yiddish is rich in words opening with consonant groups, particularly *sch-* as in **schlep** [E20th] 'to haul or drag'; **schlock** [E20th], which goes back to German *Schlake* 'dross'; **schmatte** [M20th] for inferior cloth or clothing in general from the Yiddish for 'rag'; **schmaltz** [L18th], originally cooking fat but transferred to mean excessive sentimentality; **schmooze** [L19th] from *schmuesn* 'talk, chat'; **schtick** [M20th] originally meaning 'part, piece'; **schtum** [M20th] 'quiet'; and **schmuck** [L19th] which although it is used to mean a fool is actually an extended use of *shmok* 'penis, prick', as is **putz** [E20th]. Other consonant groups are found in **dreck** [E20th], the Yiddish for 'filth, rubbish', and **kvetch** [M20th] 'to criticize or complain', while **klutz** [E20th] comes via Yiddish from German and shares a history and origin with English clot (*see* CLOUD).

While Yiddish has a genius for insults, it has also given us some positive words such as **maven** [E20th] for an expert or enthusiast ultimately from Hebrew *mēbīn* 'person with understanding, teacher'; **mensch** [E20th] 'a man of integrity and honour'; and **chutzpah** [M19th] from *khutspe*, which can be negative or positive depending on whether it is 'impudence' or 'audacity.' While *kosher is the Hebrew word for food prepared according to Jewish law, Yiddish has given us its use as a more general term of approval.

In the world of food Yiddish has given us **nosh** [L19th], **bagel** [L19th], **lox** [M20th] from the German for salmon, and **pastrami** [L19th], which ultimately goes back to Turkish for 'pressed meat'.

Yiddish has also given us some distinctive turns of phrase, mostly literal translations into English. **Oy vey** is literally 'oh dear', and **already** to express impatience translates Yiddish *shoyn*. To **need something like a hole in the head** translates the Yiddish expression *tsu darfn vi a lokh in kop*, while **OK by me and get lost** are also based on Yiddish turns of phrase.

See also **MOCKER, SLAP, SMACK.**

Yiddish

The majority of the Yiddish words that are used in English originated in American English, particularly the variety spoken in New York. These words were brought by the nearly three million Yiddish-speaking Jews who emigrated to North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Nosh is a Yiddish word, as are such items of food as *bagel*, *gefilte fish*, *latke*, *lox*, *matzo*, and *pastrami*. Yiddish also boasts a colourful range of words with a disparaging or somewhat negative meaning. These include *kibitz*, *klutz*, *kvetch*, *nebbish*, *nudnik*, and a host of expressive words beginning with the letters *sch-*, such as *schlep*, *schlimazel*, *schlock*, *schlub*, *schmaltz*, *schmear*, *schmuck*, *schnook*, and *schnorrer*. More approving in meaning, though, is *chutzpah*, which, while it suggests shameless audacity or effrontery, also contains an element of admiration.