

# INTRODUCTION

Russia's vast territory is known historically as an expansive cultural crossroads, and its language subsequently reflects qualities of the diversity of this contact. One prominent example is the closely intertwined relationship between ethnic Russians and eastern Ashkenazi Jews throughout Russian history.

Although in Imperial times Jewish settlement in Russia was largely restricted to a certain (formerly Polish) geographical area known as the Pale of Settlement, elements of Yiddish and Hebrew linguistic influence still found a place in Russian vernacular. Jews played prominent bilingual and bicultural roles alongside Russians throughout the nation's history, and Jewish elements became a thread in the fabric of Russian language and society.

Just as American English sometimes displays a smattered mix of Yiddish words, so does Russian. Jews living in Russia not only developed a unique Judeo-Russian ethnolect (an in-group dialect of an otherwise standardized language) among themselves, but aspects of this ethnolect had an outwardly residual influence on standard varieties of Russian as spoken by the country as a whole.

# STANDARD RUSSIAN: A LINGUISTIC OVERVIEW

The Russian language is an East Slavic language spoken mainly in Russia, as well as other countries of the former Soviet Union and places where a large post-Soviet diaspora exists (for example, the USA and Israel). Spoken as a native language by approximately 250 million people worldwide, Russian speakers constitute about 9% of the global populus. Due to its status as a post-Soviet lingua franca, Russian is the most widely spoken Slavic language as well as one of the most geographically widespread languages on the Eurasian continent.

However, despite the widespread prevalence of the language, Russian exhibits strikingly fewer examples of dialects than most other languages spoken globally. This is largely due to the disappearance of Russian regional dialects, which began in the 19th century and was exacerbated by the processes of mass interregional mixing, industrialization, and linguistic standardization campaigns in the 1930s. However, pockets of dialectal exceptions exist, visible within distinguished ethnic, economic, or regional groups. Judeo-Russian (and its child varieties of Odesa Russian and Fenya) is a prominent example of such dialectal deviation.



## «ПО ФЕНЕ БОТАТЬ»

That which follows is a short selection of several categorized examples of the Judeo-Russian origins of Fenya, and the relevance of the same terms in everyday contemporary Russian.

(1) Words from Yiddish, used in Fenya, understood by Russians as having criminal slang connotations:

**Жлоб (zhlob):** From Polish *złob* via Yiddish *זשלאָב (zhlob)*, originally meaning "trough". Used in Fenya to negatively describe a greedy or boorish person.

**Шмон (shmon):** From Hebrew *שמונה (shmona)* via Yiddish, meaning "eight" (despite the coexistence of the Germanic Yiddish *acht (ahkt)*, also meaning "eight"). Originally used in reference to the daily cell searches in the Odesa prison at 8:00am, but took on the broader meaning of an unexpected police raid or frisk.

# EXAMINING JEWISH SOCIO-LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE: «ОТ ТАЛМУДА ДО ТЮРЬМЫ»\*

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\*"From Talmud, to prison"



## JUDEO-RUSSIAN: ETHNOLECTUAL GENESIS AND SOCIAL DIFFUSION

The notion of Jewish ethnolects is based on the premise of inter-linguistic contact. As an ethnic group expelled from the Levant at the beginning of the first millennium via Rome, Hebrew and Aramaic speaking Jews came into contact with many diverse languages, including German, Spanish, Arabic, and Persian, among others. However, due to a tendency to remain unassimilated from neighbouring cultures, Jewish communities often formed "unique variants of many coterritorial non-Jewish languages with which they came in contact." [1]

This premise holds true for Judeo-Russian, but another deeply fascinating layer of complexity exists atop simple inter-linguistic contact. While Jews were present in Slavic lands in the 9th century, some 300 years before the arrival of Yiddish-speaking Jews from Germanic Europe, there is little evidence of a Jewish ethnolect of purely Slavic influence (one example is Knaanic, a Judeo-Slavic language which may have been spoken in western Slavic regions during the Middle Ages). Judeo-Russian is instead attributed to the later influence of Yiddish (aptly described as a consolidated "Judeo-German"), an ethnolect already in its own right, brought to Slavic lands by the eastern migratory trajectory of Jews. [2]

However, the influx of Yiddish-speaking Jews into Russia was a gradual and insular event. Often organized into distinctly separate societies, little contact with the surrounding culture was necessary, and Yiddish, not Russian, was preserved as the dominant language of the Jews. The imposition of the Pale of Settlement (fig. 1) and homogenous steel (village) life only consolidated this isolative tendency. [3] Despite this social insulation, there was a tendency in the 19th century for certain "upwardly mobile" Jews to reject the limitations of the shtetl and adopt the usage of Russian. Moreover, Russian was a useful language to be proficient in when living in the Russian Empire; this is reflected in an 1897 census which shows between 16-30% of Russia's Jews having some ability to navigate Russian as a second language (only 1.3% claimed Russian as a mother tongue). [4]

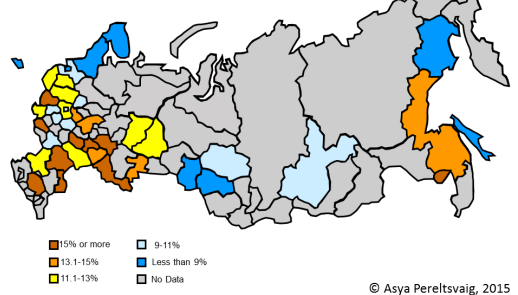
Throughout the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, urbanite Jews adopted the use of Russian more and more. One 1910 census of St. Petersburg shows that 42% of Jews there claimed Russian as a mother tongue. [5] When the Pale was abolished after the Russian Revolution,

Jews had further ability and reason to integrate into Russian society; proficiency in Russian became a social necessity, not a convenience. [6] At this point, a subtle but distinct ethnolect began to emerge within the Russian Jewish community. Exemplified both by the integration of Yiddish vocabulary into Russian speech (see examples below), and a tendency to use Yiddish intonation and word-for-word renditions of Yiddish idioms and sentence structure translated into otherwise "Russian" speech\*, this ethnolect was culturally insular. While an ethnic Russian might hear this speech and recognize it as "Russian", Judeo-Russian as it developed possessed cultural and linguistic allusions which may be challenging to comprehend in full. [7]

As the Jewish population adopted Russian (albeit their own, distinct version of the language), the everyday usage of Yiddish began to decline (fig. 2). In turn, contact with Russians meant linguistic cross-pollination for both populations. As a result, Judeo-Russian's unique vocabulary did not remain an isolated linguistic phenomenon; via avenues such as the Russian criminal underground, the Gulag system, and simple inter-group mixing in cities with significant Jewish populations, qualities of Judeo-Russian found its way into non-standard varieties of the language spoken by ethnic Russians themselves. [8] Due to various circumstances, words of Yiddish origin became incredibly commonplace within «Феня» (fenya), a Russian criminal vernacular (also referred to as a sociolect). Even one Russian term for Fenya itself, Блатной жаргон (blatnoi zhargon), has linguistic roots in Yiddish. Furthermore, the variety of Russian which was spoken in Odesa has certain linkages to Yiddish grammatical, phonological, and idiomatic influences (alongside an additional Ukrainian influence). [9]

\* (for example, the previously unknown idiom БОЛЬНОЙ НА ГОЛОВУ corresponds to the Yiddish phrase קאפ אויפן קראנק, both literally meaning "sick on the head") [10]

Speakers of Yiddish (as native or second language), as percentage of total Ashkenazi Jewish population (1989 census, data from Tolts 2012)



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**Чмо (chmo):** From Yiddish *שמוץ (shmoiz)*, meaning "penis". Used in Fenya as a way to denote "jerks, traitors, and people without a moral code" (even in the world of thieves).  
**Фреер (frier):** From German *frei* via Yiddish *פריי (froy)*, meaning "free". Used to denote a person who is uninvolved in criminal networks and has not been to prison. By extension, the term is used to indicate potential "suckers" of criminal schemes.  
**Ботать (botat):** From Hebrew *בטוּר (bitur)* via Yiddish, meaning an "expression" or "utterance". Used in Fenya to denote the verb "to talk", particularly in cant language not understood by the non-criminal world. Also used as a slang form of the verb "to work", as it has phonetic similarity to Russian's *работать*.  
**Блатной (blatno):** From Yiddish *בלאט (blat)*, meaning a "sheet of paper". Used in Fenya to mean "that which is related to cronyism, thuggery, criminal society, or criminal connections". In everyday Russian, it is understood as "connections, which may benefit someone under-the-table" (often in the workplaces or competitive education circles). Examples include *Блатной жаргон* (blatnoi zhargon), meaning "criminal jargon", or *блатная экономика (blatnaya ekonomika)*, meaning "black market". Russian adjectival suffixes -ой and -ая modify the original Yiddish loanword.

(2) Words from Yiddish, which were used in Fenya, but are now a part of everyday Russian slang vernacular:

**Ксива (kšiva):** From Yiddish *כתובה (ktsiva)* meaning "documents". Understood in Fenya and wider Russian circles to mean "papers, acquired through some shady means or for some shady purpose".  
**Ничух (nišfuk):** From German *nicht* via Yiddish *נישט (nishtr)*, meaning "nothing". Used in Fenya to mean something tasty, stolen, or gotten for free/under the table. In everyday Russian, the term is used as a means of expressing "great" or "super", often in response to a question.

**Хохма (hokhma):** From Hebrew *חוכמה (chokhmah)* meaning "wisdom", via Yiddish (where the word meant both "wisdom" and "a joke"). Used in Fenya and in Russian slang generally to mean "a joke"; interestingly, unrelated to Russian *хохотать* "to laugh loudly", despite phonetic similarity.  
**Хальява, на хальяву (hal'yava):** From Hebrew *חלב (chalev)* via Yiddish, meaning "milk". Used first in Fenya, and later in youth/student slang to denote "freebies", or "something gained by pure luck and/or cunning".

(3) Words from Yiddish that sound like a pre-existing Russian word; recognizable to most Russians, but not overly used outside of criminal contexts:

**Мусор (musar):** In standard Russian, a common term with Slavic roots meaning "garbage" or "trash". However, adapted from the Hebrew *מוסר (mosar)*, referring to breaking Mesirah (Jewish codes of conduct) and meaning an "informer" or "reporter". Used in Fenya originally as a derogatory term to denote police informers, but used currently to refer to the police generally (fig. 3) or to call the police "trash" as a clever double meaning!  
**Малина (malina):** In standard Russian, from Proto-Slavic \*malina, originally meaning "raspberry". However, later adapted from Hebrew *מלון (malon)*, via Yiddish. Original meaning: "hotel, dwelling". Used in Fenya slang to refer to a hideout or secret location.

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