

MATISOFF, JAMES A. *Blessings, Curses, Hopes and Fears: Psycho-Ostensive Expressions in Yiddish* (Contraversions—Jews and other differences). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. xxxi + 160 pages. Bibliography. Paper US\$15.95; ISBN 0-8047-3394-5. (Second edition with new foreword).

Do different languages produce different world views? This question has been a focus of interest for many years. Humbolt in the nineteenth century, and later Sapir and Whorf put forward the idea that different speakers experience the world differently insofar as the languages they speak differ structurally (FISHMAN 1972). The same view has been shared more recently by many other scholars. KRAMSCH (1998), for example, has verbalized the culture-language relationship with a dual function: "Culture puts its imprint on the conversational and narrative styles of the members of a social group. These styles are generally considered to form part of people's cultural identities" (51). The term "identity" is often quoted in recent work in critical anthropology and cultural studies to signify "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (NORTON 1997, 410). From this point of view, James A. Matisoff's *Blessings, Curses, Hopes, and Fears: Psycho-Ostensive Expressions in Yiddish* is a good examination of the relationship between a language, its speakers, and their thought and culture.

Matisoff, who is not a native speaker of Yiddish, but who was exposed to the language within his family since his early childhood, collected his data for this book from several sources: himself as an informant, other informants of all sorts (his mother, friends, and colleagues), and the superlative collections of Yiddish jokes and anecdotes (xxvi). Over the years, he says, his database has expanded (xxvii). In fact, this book was first published in 1979. Twenty-one years later he published the same book with almost no changes in its text "except for the correction of a few typos and a couple of minor addenda" (xx). Pointing out the scholarly concern for the emotive side of language in general and the revival of interest in Yiddish cultural and linguistic studies in recent years, Matisoff claims that this book is "as fresh as a herring plucked straight from the sea" (xiii).

Yiddish is a member of the West Germanic group of the Germanic subfamily of the Indo-European language family, and, although it is not a national language, it is spoken by about four million Jews all over the world. According to Matisoff, Yiddish is in retreat as a spoken language, yet it continues to flourish as the subject of academic study. It has a wealth of words and expressions descriptive of people's characters and relationships, which gives it a uniquely warm and personal flavor.

In addition to such supplementary sections as Preface to the Second Edition, Acknowledgements, Foreword to the First Edition, Abbreviations, Note on Transcription of Yiddish Words, Notes, Bibliography to the First Edition, and Additional Bibliography (second edition), Matisoff's book has twelve chapters. The length of each chapter varies in an unbalanced way. For example, while Chapter 2 has only one page, Chapter 7 has twenty-two pages.

In the Introduction, Matisoff places his book in the context of the American linguistic scene as a whole, where he displays a critical attitude towards prevailing rigid dichotomies such as Chomsky's "competence" vs. "performance," "grammatical" vs. "ungrammatical." To him, "variability" lies at the heart of linguistic creativity in which Yiddish speakers enjoy great freedom in trying out new variations. In the following chapter, the author exhibits his own creativity in making up new terminology while classifying and labeling the psycho-ostensive expressions.

Matisoff points out that despite their richness and variety, Yiddish psycho-ostensives seem to fall into a few large psychosemantic categories, all having to do basically with attitudes toward “good” and “evil,” which are no doubt universal concepts. It is, in fact, at this point where the reader would find the book very “familiar” and thus “relevant.” Recent critiques of culture argue that there is no social group that is not constantly infiltrated by outside influences (INGOLD 1994). Other studies (e.g., APPADURAI 1996; CLIFFORD 1992; PRATT 1991; ROSALDO 1989) have also emphasized the interpenetration and lack of strong boundaries between cultural groups. PRATT, for example, coined the phrase “contact zones” to describe “the social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world” (1991, 34). Therefore, as Matisoff clearly points out, although Yiddish psycho-ostensives are unique expressions of the Jewish experience, they reflect a common European cultural heritage and universal human feelings and responses to the world (xx). This perspective alone will prove illuminating to many readers.

The author introduces the reader to the six basic subtypes of psycho-ostensives, which all involve the speaker’s attitude toward the good things and the bad things of life. Matisoff uses the expressions *recognitive* (the relatively passive attitude of acceptance of good or evil), *petitive* (the more active attitude of seeking or desiring), and *fugitive* (the more active attitude of shunning or fearing). He also uses the Greek roots *auto* (for “self”), *allo* (for “other”), and the Latin roots *bono* (for “good”), and *malo* (for “evil”). Then, *auto-malo-recognitive* means “recognizing that evil has come to oneself,” *allo-bono-petitive* means “wishing for good to come to others,” and so forth. In the next eight chapters, the author takes these sub-categories separately and makes linguistic, semantic, and sociolinguistic explanations about the use of those psych-ostensive expressions, ranging from blessings and thanks to lamentations and curses.

What makes the book particularly interesting and enjoyable are Matisoff’s examples. In all the examples, the author first introduces the context where the particular Yiddish expressions are used. This introduction is appropriate and relevant as knowledge of language cannot be developed without at the same time developing knowledge of the sociocultural contexts in which that language occurs and its intended perlocutionary force. Then, he provides the phonetic writing of the utterance, and gives in parentheses its translated meaning. For instance, when someone wishes you well, you may graciously reply:

Fun dayn moyl in Gots óyern! (“From your mouth into God’s ears!” [i.e., “May God hearken to your wishes!”]) (41)

To a person who mentions something horrible you can say:

Zalts dir in di oygn, fefer dir in noz! (“Salt into your eyes, and pepper into your nose!”) (61)

Or when someone is leaving your house and is expected back later (whether in five minutes or five years), you should say:

Gey gezunterhéyt un kum gezunterhéyt. (“Go in good health and come [back] in good health.”) (35)

The examples also reveal how Yiddish psycho-ostensive formulas accommodate irony, euphemism, sarcasm, and innuendo:

A ziser toyt zol er hobn—a trok mit tsuher zol im iberform! (“May he have a sweet death—run over by a sugar truck!”) (84)

Zol ikh azoy lebn, vi ikh vil shuarbn. (“I swear by my life that I want to die.”) (95)

Zol er lebn biz hundred-un-tsvantsik yor—on a kop. (“May he live to be 120—without a head.”) (83)

Because ethnographically oriented research has a context-sensitive emergent quality (HOLLIDAY 1994) it is not always easy to justify the validity or reliability of ethnographic studies or the extent to which they can be generalized. Despite this, I find Matisoff’s book successful as a tool that fosters an understanding of the complex uniqueness of the described culture.

Matisoff’s work is, in general, a careful and complete study that shows clear evidence of his extensive research and consideration for his material. I noted just one error in the spelling of the word “use” (which appears as “us”) on page 12 (l. 26), which is no doubt a printing mistake. I believe this is an invaluable source for scholars and students in the field of ethnographic and linguistic studies.

On the back of the book, William Labov and Deborah Tannen are quoted praising Matisoff as a writer: clear and weighty but also whimsical and witty. I can only endorse this observation. *Lang lebn zolstu, Matisoff!*

REFERENCES CITED

- APPADURAI, A.
1996 *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- CLIFFORD, J.
1992 Traveling cultures. In *Cultural studies*, ed. C. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Trenchler, 96–116. New York: Routledge.
- FISHMAN, J. A.
1972 *The sociology of language: An interdisciplinary social science approach to language in society*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- HOLLIDAY, A.
1994 *Appropriate methodology in social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- INGOLD, T.
1994 Introduction to culture. In *Companion encyclopedia of anthropology: Humanity, culture, and social life*, ed. T. Ingold, 329–49. London: Routledge.
- KRAMSCHI, C.
1998 *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- NORTON, B.
1997 Language, identity, and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly* 31: 409–29.
- PRATT, M. L.
1991 Arts of the contact zone. *Profession* 91: 33–40.
- ROSALDO, R.
1989 *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Ülker VANCI-OSAM
Eastern Mediterranean University
Famagusta