Rethinking the Dictionary:
Holocaust Dictionaries in Global Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This article is an attempt to shed new light on dictionaries in the context of comparative literature, thinking of them not only as a tool necessary for working in the field, but as an object worthy of the field's imaginative, interpretive, and cross-cultural methods. As a starting point, we focus on the strange case of Holocaust-Yiddish dictionaries. Seeming outliers of lexicography, these texts challenge us to recognize the ethical, emotional, and even spiritual potency of the genre. Inspired by these challenges, we then revisit a diverse set of prominent dictionary texts: the Oxford English Dictionary, an interwar lexicon of Yiddish jargon, the Chinese Erya, and the Hebrew-Arabic *Ha-Egron*. This comparative journey reveals a productive tension within the genre: while the dictionary promises to organize and categorize language, it can often reveal that which is unknowable in speech and in experience.

THIS ARTICLE IS AN ATTEMPT to shed new light on dictionaries in the context of comparative literature, thinking of them not only as a tool necessary for working in the field, but as an object worthy of the field's imaginative, interpretive, and cross-cultural methods. We initiate this quest by focusing on a seeming outlier in the family tree of lexicographic texts: dictionaries produced during and after the Holocaust, which were aimed at recording and glossing the strange new terms that Nazi violence had introduced into the Yiddish language. These dictionaries of Khurbn Yiddish (Yiddish of the Holocaust) defy typical expectations of the genre in many ways: they convey impassioned urgency, rather than cool studiousness; they highlight porousness in language, rather than order; and they testify to the ethical faults of nationalistic language projects, rather than supporting them.

For these very reasons, Khurbn Yiddish dictionaries can motivate new questions about lexicography as a mode of textuality. Inspired by the unexpected aspects of the Khurbn Yiddish dictionaries, we revisit a diverse set of prominent dictionary texts: the Oxford English Dictionary, an interwar lexicon of Yiddish jargon, the Chinese Erya, and the Hebrew-Arabic work *Ha-Egron*. Through this comparative journey, which includes nonmodern, non-Western, and nonsecular projects, we seek to illuminate aspects of dictionary projects that are sometimes overlooked. In animating the interpretive, emotional, and literary value of dictionaries, we place them closer to creative literature than is commonly conceived.[1] The breadth of these examples, each one discussed in a brief and illustrative manner, is meant to foster a sense of worldliness in connection to lexicography and to show surprising points of conversations between these distant texts.

Our exploration begins in the year 1945, a watershed moment for almost every social and intellectual field, including comparative literature. Emerging from total war and genocide at this moment, the world began a long process of redrawing borders, resettling peoples, enfranchising and disenfranchising refugees, reinventing legal concepts, and asking what Western culture might mean, or might have ever meant, in light of the human carnage it had just produced. It was in this context that Erich Auerbach famously completed *Mimesis* in Istanbul: his attempt to remap Western literature, with an emphasis on its locality and its mutability.[2]

In this same year of instability, in June of 1945 to be precise, an emaciated and self-described *muzlman* (Muselman) named Israel Kaplan stood before an audience of other ailing survivors and refugees at the Schwabing Hospital in Munich and delivered an ambitious speech in Yiddish entitled "The Transformation of Our Folk-creativity (*Undzer folkshafn in gevandl*)." For him, the rehabilitation of language and the rehabilitation of body were inseparable. With a swollen, bandaged head, Kaplan embarked on a sweeping overview of the history of "folk-creativity," literature from below, a speech that resembled Auerbach's *Mimesis* in its attempt to craft a sense of cultural coherence from a position of deep alienation and loss. Kaplan started his narrative with Johann Herder's notion of the "voices of the peoples" (*Stimmen der Völker*),[3] moved through the contributions of Jewish cantors and wedding performers, and then to modern writers like Sh. Ansky, whose renowned play *The Dybbuk* was inspired by ethnographic research,[4] as well as the folklore project of Haim Nachman Bialik and Alter Droyanov.[5] Having unfurled centuries of literary, musicological, and social developments, Kaplan crowned his speech with a rallying cry to his audience of convalescent survivors and refugees: "People can bear witness.... Help save our inheritance!"[6]

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[1] This last objective is informed by Howard D. Weinbrot, who explored not only "how dictionaries can illumine poems, but how poems can illumine dictionaries." See Howard D. Weinbrot, ed., *New Aspects of Lexicography: Literary Criticism, Intellectual History, and Social Change* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), ix; as well as Zohar Weiman-Kelman, "Eroto-philology: Sex, Language, and Yiddish history," *Orbis Litterarum* 74, no. 1 (2019): 58–69.

[2] Erich Auerbach and Edward W. Said, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature—New and Expanded Edition,* vol. 78, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[3] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Völkerlieder* [Folk poems] (Leipzig, Germany, 1779), later published under the title, *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* [The voices of peoples in songs] (Leipzig: Reclam, 1968).

[4] See Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[5] Alter Droyanov, *Sefer Habdiha Vehahidud* [The book of jokes and wit] (Frankfurt: Omanut, 1922).

[6] Israel Kaplan, notebook entitled, "Geto un katset folklor" [Ghetto and camp folklore], private collection of Shalom Eilati, 4, 6.

It may not be surprising that Kaplan, a university-trained historian and published feuilleton author, would urgently seek some sort of literary and intellectual order in 1945, even while still recovering his basic bodily functions. What one may find surprising is the specific nature of this valuable "inheritance" that he so hoped to preserve and elevate—as well as the form through which he hoped to do so. In his lecture notes, Kaplan exemplifies what he means by folk-creativity with a list of Yiddish neologisms coined in the camps and ghettos, with no written definitions[7]: "*klepsi-klepsi* [theft, drawn from the Greek *klepto*][8], *afn skoverode* (Auschwitz) [to the crematoria],[9] *yazde in koymen* [driving into the chimney, verb from Polish], *organizirn* [literally 'to organize,' here theft],[10] *muzlman* [an emaciated prisoner],[11] *vitamin* [special protection], *mmuu-tfrruuu* [beef and horse-flesh, imitating animal sounds],[12] *kneplekh* [literally buttons, here golden coins],[13] *yush-nik* [literally pig-feed, the name of a soup in some camps]."[14] For Kaplan, this motley cluster of semi-obscenities, lingual hybrids, crude metaphors, and onomatopoeias epitomized the very lexical material that demanded preservation. That is, in order to regain a sense of cultural and lingual coherence, he strove to showcase and systematize terms of *incoherence*—words that troubled the borders between Yiddish and other languages, between sound and word, human and animal.

Following this brief list, which seems to have been a part of his lecture, Kaplan's notebook turns into the first draft of what would become a dictionary—forty-three handwritten pages, tightly packed with roughly 760 terms, similar in nature to the above list. Kaplan began publishing these terms, with full glosses included, one year later under the title "Dos folksmoyl in Nazi-klem" (The people's mouth under the Nazi yoke) as a serial column in the journal for which he was founding editor, *Fun letstn khurbn* (From the last catastrophe) and then later, in 1949, as a book by the same name.[15] Based on all the written traces he left behind, Kaplan conveyed that something about lexicography was critical to his healing process.

It might seem unintuitive to us today that someone would find it urgent, in the wake of collective catastrophe and personal near-death experiences, to write a dictionary—and a dictionary of such a strange, painful argot at that. Yet, Kaplan was not alone in experiencing this lexicographic urge. Much like him, other intellectuals were also hard at work on dictionaries of Khurbn Yiddish at this moment.[16] A Polish-Jewish cultural activist from Lublin named Nachman Blumental, who had survived the war years in the unoccupied Soviet Union, started gathering

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7 This list appears in Kaplan, "Geto un katset folklor," 5. Individual words appear with definitions in published sources.

8 David Diamant, "Folklor in di lagern" [Folklore from the camps], *Parizer shriftn* 2–3 (1946): 74; Nachman Blumental, *Verter un verterlekh fun der Khurbn tkufe* [Words and phrases from the Holocaust period] (Tel Aviv: I. L. Peretz, 1981), 284.

9 Israel Kaplan, *Dos folksmoyl in nazi-klem* [*The people's mouth under the Nazi yoke*] (Munich: Central Commission of Liberated Jews in the American Zone in Germany, 1949), 49; Blumental, *Verter un verterlekh*, 216.

10 Kaplan, *Dos folksmoyl*, 28; Blumental, *Verter un verterlekh*, 31.

11 Kaplan, *Dos folksmoyl*, 47; Blumental, *Verter un verterlekh*, 181.

12 Kaplan, *Dos folksmoyl*, 20; Blumental, *Verter un verterlekh*, 187.

13   Kaplan, *Dos folksmoyl*, 24; Blumental, *Verter un verterlekh*, 285.

14 Kaplan, *Dos folksmoyl*, 20; Blumental, *Verter un verterlekh*, 141–42.

15 Kaplan, *Dos folksmoyl*, republished by the same name in 1982 (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighter's House); parts published earlier in *Fun Letstn Khurbn* [From the last catastrophe], 1946–48. For more on Kaplan's postwar publishing activities, see Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) as well as the recent English translation of his Holocaust dictionary: Israel Kaplan, *The Jewish Voice in the Ghettos and Concentration Camps: Verbal Expression under Nazi Occupation*, ed. Zeev W. Mankowitz, trans. Jenny Bell and Dianne Levitin (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2018).

16 For more on other Khurbn Yiddish lexicography projects, see Hannah Pollin-Galay, "'A Rubric of Pain Words': Mapping Atrocity with Holocaust Yiddish Glossaries," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 110, no. 1 (2020): 161–93.

and researching Khurbn Yiddish words almost immediately upon his return to Poland in 1944. His work would be published as a serial dictionary between 1956 and 1964,[17] then reprinted as a book in 1981—both under the title *Verter un Vertelekh fun der Khurbn Tkufe* (Words and phrases from the Holocaust period). Working separately from Kaplan and Blumental, the Soviet linguist Elye Spivak published a glossary of a similar sort in 1946, calling it *Di shprakh in di teg fun der foterlendisher milkhome* (*The Language in the Days of the Great Patriotic War*).[18] In addition to these extensive efforts, there were at least ten shorter glossaries which appeared in Displaced Persons publications as well as appendices to early history books.[19] Even before this burst of postwar Yiddish glossing, Jews had initiated the work of recording and glossing neologisms while in the ghettos, even while these terms were still coming into being.[20]

As another example of a postwar project, a Polish-Jewish survivor named Shmuel Weintraub published a serial dictionary in the Yiddish DP newspaper *Undzer Shtime* (Our voice) in 1946, entitling it "*Dos Blutike Verterbukh fun Golus Hitler*" (The bloody dictionary of the Hitlerite exile). In a manner similar to Kaplan's dictionary, Weintraub's tidy lexicographic format—lists of headwords with glosses—belies the unruly nature of the words presented. Consider one particularly perplexing entry, the word *karakha*.[21] This term was, as far as we can judge, a true neologism—not a recognizable borrowing from another language, or a preexisting Yiddish word that was given a new meaning. What is more, *karakha* does not even resemble Yiddish on the level of phonetics. It is a strange new arrangement of sounds, its odd shape poetically reflecting the strange world from which it came. Weintraub defines the word as something that the *kapos* (camp functionaries) would shout "at poor, exhausted camp people," ordering them to "carry out their movements at lightning speed, never resting for a moment."[22] The word archives the bodily experience of camp life, painful to the point of being bizarre, otherworldly, just like those three misplaced syllables *karakha*. The term's odd qualities, the manner in which it rent open verbal and bodily norms, stood in tension with the orderly format of a typed lexicographic list.

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17 The full series appeared in *Yidishe shprakh* [Yiddish language]*,* 16, no. 1–19 (1956–64), and was reprinted as Blumental, *Verter un vertelekh*.

18 Elye Spivak, *Di Shprakh in di Teg fun der Foterlendisher Milkhome (Etyuden)* [The language in the time of the patriotic war] (Kiev: Farlag fun der visnshaft-akademye fun USSR, 1946).

19 Shmuel Weintraub (Vayntroyb), "Dos Blutike Verterbukh fun Hitler Goles" [The bloody dictionary of the Hitlerite exile], *Undzer Shtime,* January 1, 1946: 16–18, February 20, 1946: 21–23, and March 17, 1946: 18 (Bergen Belsen); D. Greisdorf, "Vilner Geto Verterlekh" [Vilna ghetto dictionary], *YIVO Bleter* 30, no. 1 (1947): 134–35; M. I. Faigenbaum, "Geto Verterlekh un Anekdotn" [Ghetto expressions and anecdotes], *Fun letstn khurbn* 6 (1947): 72–76; Shmuel Glube, "Geto un Katset Verterlekh" [Ghetto and camp expressions], *Fun letstn khurbn* 10 (1948): 131–36; Yerahmiel Bryks, "Verter Geshafn in Lodzer Geto" [Words created in the Lodz ghetto], *Tsukunft* 52, no. 2 (1948): 402–04; David Diamant, "Folklor in di Lagern" [Folklore from the camps], *Parizer folklor* 2–3 (1946): 70–74; I. Rozenbaum, "Verterlekh fun Lodzer geto" [Expressions from the Lodz ghetto], *Fun letstn khurbn* 3 (1946): 68–71; Mordechai Smid, "Mifolklor ha-shoah" [From the Shoah folklore], *Yeda-Am* 1 (1948): 28–29 (in Hebrew but glosses Yiddish terms); Yosef Gar, *Umkum fun der yidisher Kovne* [The extermination of the Jews of Kowno] (Munich: Farband fun Litvishe Yidn, 1948), 414–18; Rokhl Auerbach, *Varshever Tsavoes* (Tel Aviv: Yisroel Bukh, 1974): 354–55. For more, see Pollin-Galay, "A Rubric of Pain Words."

20 E.g., Shimon Huberband produced a list of new words in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942, Ringelblum Archives, Ring I/109 (Lb. 457, 992). Mf. ZIH-77, USHMM-8, "Milkhome folklore." A group of intellectuals created an "Encyclopedia of Ghetto Lodz" during the war, which included new words and definitions: Adam Sitarek and Ewa Wiatr, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Ghetto: The Unfinished Project of the Łódź Ghetto Archivists,* trans. Katarzyna Gucio, Łukasz Plęs, and Robert M. Shapiro (Łódź, Poland: University of Łódź, 2016).

21 Weintraub, "Dos Blutike," February 20, 1946, 23.

22 Ibid.

The content of these dictionaries and dictionary-like texts raises many questions about how extreme torment changes the way that people communicate and about why these Yiddish-speaking victims decided to memorialize rather than eliminate the mark of genocide on their language. But, for now, we wish to pause these inquiries in order to contemplate the genre to which these prisoners, refugees, and survivors turned in their moment of personal and cultural need during and immediately after the Holocaust: the dictionary. In searching for a means to bear witness, in selecting among an array of textual genres available at the time, what might the dictionary have offered genocide survivors like Israel Kaplan and Shmuel Weintraub on a formal level?

At first glance, it might be tempting to answer, "not a whole lot." As Umberto Eco writes of the genre, "We presuppose a local dictionary every time we want to recognize and to circumscribe an area of consensus within which a given discourse should stay."[23] Eco's assessment only underscores the oddity of Khurbn Yiddish dictionaries. It is strange to think that Holocaust survivors would want discourse to *stay* as it had been for them in the camps and ghettos or to circumscribe language as it had been for them under Nazi rule.

Beyond this inertial attribute of dictionaries, pointed out by Eco, the place of lexicography in European history would also seem to render it an odd tool of expression for Holocaust victims. Benedict Anderson connects the expansion of dictionary-making to "new impulses for vernacular linguistic unification" of the nineteenth century, a time that he describes as "a golden age of vernacularizing lexicographers, grammarians, philologists and literateurs."[24] But Israel Kaplan and his peers were using the dictionary to testify to their experiences as *victims* of European nationalism, rather than its progeny. Instead of affirming the importance of "vernacular unification," their Khurbn Yiddish dictionaries showed the violent results of this impulse to unify language, since that often led to attempts to unify race as well—a danger suggested by Anderson's choice to use the term "vernacular," which means "spoken" as well as "racially indigenous."[25] Moreover, Khurbn Yiddish dictionaries did not seem to support lingual unification of any sort, even that of the sub- or translational Yiddish language,[26] which they punctured and stretched at will in order to insinuate this new set of eccentric, grotesque terms inside it. Even with regard to their own language, that is, these Yiddishists subverted the notion of clear-cut boundaries.

Given all this, it is tempting to describe the work of Kaplan and his peers as a quirky aberration from the thing we know as the dictionary. Alternatively, however, we might see this aberration as an opportunity to reassess the norm. In this reassessment, we ask if the strange lexicographic experiment of Khurbn Yiddish lexicography can draw out aspects of dictionary-making that often fall beneath the radar. That is, perhaps the emotional investment, the porousness, and the statelessness of Khurbn Yiddish lexicography might render these qualities visible in other dictionaries as well.

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[23] Umberto Eco, "Dictionary vs. Encyclopedia," in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 85.

[24] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 77. Saul Noam Zaritt discusses the word "vernacular" in a similar spirit in *Jewish American Writing and World Literature: Maybe to Millions, Maybe to Nobody* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2–3.

[25] Zaritt, *Maybe to Millions*, 71.

[26] Cecile Esther Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture: Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 185. See also Jeffrey Veidlinger, ed., *Going to the People: Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 1–23, as well as the chapter by Sarah Ellen Zarrow, "'Holy Sacred Collection Work': The Relationship between YIVO and Its Zamlers," 146–63.

As the first destination on our lexicographic tour, we wish to consider a fictionalized dictionary that appears at a critical moment in David Damrosch's work *Comparing the Literatures.* In a discussion of literature arising from experiences of exile and immigration, Damrosch relays a portion of the novel *The Translator,* by Leila Aboulela. [27] In it, a Sudanese translator living in Scotland, named Sammar, confronts a vocabulary problem. "She wants to find her favorite spice, *habbahan*" writes Damrosch, "but the word isn't included in her Arabic-English dictionaries. 'She must walk around the supermarket, frantically searching for something she could not ask about, and she was a translator, she should know…At last she found the *habbahan.* It existed, it had a name: whole green cardamom.'"[28]

On a most basic level, Damrosch's reading of Aboulela's reading of a dictionary demonstrates how the genre can, indeed, participate in the interpretive chain of comparative literary discourse. Moreover, this lexicographic narrative helps articulate a tension, a duality, that was also embedded in the Khurbn Yiddish projects. On the one hand, it is the dictionary that has enabled Sammar's journey into the new cultural territory of Scotland. As a translator, she has embraced the dictionary as a way of life: she believes that Scottish and Sudanese people can and should speak to each other. Yet, the dictionary becomes especially meaningful to Sammar precisely when it fails. There is a hole in the dictionary where *habbahan* ought to be and that hole is what enables Sammar to articulate an important truth about her life as an émigré. According to Aboulela's narrative, the dictionary is a text that invites the immigrant into a new cultural landscape, but also signifies the limits of that same invitation.

Much like Israel Kaplan and other Khurbn Yiddish lexicographers, Aboulela's character reveals the duality of the dictionary from the perspective of an immigrant and an outsider. Sammar is placed in a peripheral position in relation to Europe, to the West, and to English specifically. However, going beyond the perspectives of exiles and refugees, we can find a similar dynamic expressed by individuals purportedly positioned on the very *inside* of the English language and, by extension, of Western modernity: the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). In 1857, three members of the British Philological Society proposed creating a *Lexicon totius Anglitatis.*[29] When the project was launched, its coordinators took seriously this aim of "totality," scouring every corner of the English language for "unregistered words" that ought to be pinned down and defined.

After twenty years of labor, however, chief editor James Murray and his team discovered that this was a task far more daunting than they expected. In 1884, they released only the first fascicle of A-ANT, rather than the whole dictionary, as planned. It seems that twenty years in the lexicographic trenches shifted the editors' vision of what lexicography is or does. They now struck a different chord regarding totality in language. Consider this diagram, which appeared as part of the introduction to the original 1884 installment of the Oxford English Dictionary.[30]

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27 David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 182–83.

28 Ibid, 183; Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (New York: Grove Press 1999), 97.

29 "The Philological Society Proposal," archived documents, OED, 1, https://public.oed.com/history/archives /the-philological-society-proposal/.

30 "General Explanations," archived documents, OED, http://public.oed.com/wp-content/uploads/General -Explanations.pdf; see also A. H. Murray, *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, vol. 1: A–B* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1888), xxvi.

are less and less entitled to this appellation, and which pertain ever more and more distinctly to the domain of local dialect, of the slang and cant of 'sets' and classes, of the peculiar technicalities of trades and processes, of the scientific terminology common to all civilized nations, of the actual languages of other lands and peoples. And there is absolutely no defining line in any direction : the circle of the English language has a well-defined centre but no discernible

SCIENTIFIC FOREIGN
LITERARY
COMMON
TECHNICAL COLLOQUIAL DIALECTAL
SLANG
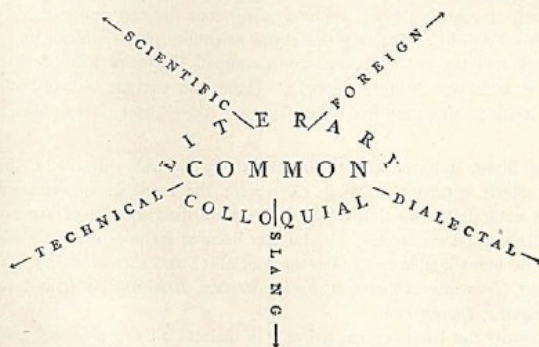
circumference *.   Yet practical utility has some bounds, and a Dictionary has definite limits : the lexicographer must, like the naturalist, 'draw the line somewhere,' in each diverging direction. He must include all the 'Common Words' of literature and conversation, and such of the scientific, technical, slang, dialectal, and foreign words as are passing into

Image available to the public in archived documents, OED,
https://public.oed.com/history/archives/the-philological-society-proposal/.

Looking at this lexical map, it seems that Murray's team did indeed seek to define a center, a vocabulary that should be defined as "common"—based upon their own notions of taste, relevance, history, and social norms. In this search for a clear, consensus-based lingual center, the editors reaffirmed the role of dictionary-making as a tool of nation-building, in the sense discussed by Benedict Anderson. At the same time, the OED team felt compelled to puncture that common center with five endless vectors radiating out from all sides: scientific, foreign, dialectal, slang, and technical. Thus, the picture they produced of the lexicographic work was both centripetal and centrifugal. Translating this visualization into words, the editors noted, "It is not possible to fix the point at which the 'English Language' stops, along any of these diverging lines."[31] Likely the most detailed dictionary of any language at its time, the OED also laid bare that the very best lingual maps have no circumference. As time has progressed, and the OED has been digitized and updated regularly, those open-ended arrows have become only more prominent.[32] The OED showed that a dictionary could be a process rather than a product, an ongoing negotiation between a desire to chart out a stable discourse and a confrontation with all that lies beyond that chart's edges. The presence of this tension becomes clearer when we read the OED alongside the work of lexicographic exiles, like Israel Kaplan or Aboulela's Sammar.

While the makers of the OED tried to focus their efforts on what they considered to be the center of language—depicted in the above diagram as "common"—there were also modern dictionaries that committed to exploring one or more of those vocabularies discarded as "divergent lines." Following one such lingual vector beyond the standardized center, the twentieth century brought about a preponderance of slang dictionaries, which made a virtue of colloquiality

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31 "General Explanations."

32   Currently, the dictionary is comprehensively revised and updated every three months, at which point new entries are added and previous entries revised (from the official OED website, https://public.oed.com/about/).

and celebrated insider code as an "expression of group identity."[33] Slang studies have a long history, reaching back into the early modern tradition.[34] Yet, slang dictionaries rose in prominence between the two world wars when "scholars began to realize the importance of documenting spoken language from a sociological perspective."[35] Slang studies also provided a favored framework for researching Yiddish, since the language was often viewed as a type of jargon to begin with. They offered some way for Eastern European Jews to participate in the lexicographic side of modern nationalist discourse—lacking the prestige or stability of a state and a land, Yiddish speakers could at least turn to slang studies, folklore, or ethnography[36] to bolster a certain national identity based on folksy authenticity.

For example, a Yiddish "folklore and philology collection" called *Ba Undz Yidn* (Among us Jews), published in 1923, contains lexicographic lists of various "Jewish jargons" collected by Y. Trivaks, including *ganovim loshn* (thieves' language), *kleyzmer loshn* (klezmer musicians' language) and *balagule loshn*[37] (coachmen's language). On the whole, the book draws pleasure from insider code—the less literary, the rarer, and the earthier the term, the better. Interestingly, while embracing and encircling slang in this manner, Y. Trivaks ultimately depicts his experience of lexicography as similar to that of the OED editors—frustratingly incomplete. In introducing his jargon lists, Trivaks apologizes for this lack of totality: "I consider my word-collections far from exhaustive. Various people will have to continue collecting and researching Yiddish jargons until we will have a proper work on this sphere (*gebit*)."[38] Note that Trivak's word choice, *gebit,* which can mean "subject matter," but also "territory," echoes Umberto Eco's description of a dictionary as a circumscribed "area." And like the makers of the OED, Trivaks strove to use lists and glosses to create a picture of totality in language but ended up revealing the boundlessness of his vocabularies. Yiddish slang, a territory imagined to be unifiable and finite like the standard English language, also proved to have no visible circumference. By extension, the ideal of authentic "folk" speech also turned into a type of endless vector when viewed through the perspective of the dictionary—an ideal that should be sought, but could not be attained.

The compilers of both the OED and the Yiddish jargon lists in *Among Us Jews* apologized that they could not draw clear borders around their lexica—or that, if those borders existed, they had not yet reached them. In keeping with the modern drive toward orderliness of time and spatial boundaries, the era of nationalism sought completion and totality in language.[39] In premodern traditions, by contrast, we may find lexicographers less apologetic about the incompletability of their task and the aporia of their subject matter. For instance, consider the world's oldest

[33] Julie Coleman, "Slang Dictionaries," in *The Oxford Handbook of Lexicography*, ed. Philip Durkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016), 327.

[34] John Considine, "The Unfinished Business of Eighteenth-Century European Lexicography," in *The Whole World in a Book: Dictionaries in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Sarah Ogilvie and Gabriella Safran (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020), 8; see also Gabriella Safran, "Dialect Joke Books and Russian–Yiddish and English–Yiddish Dictionaries," in Ogilvie and Safran, *The Whole World in a Book*, 277–97.

[35] Coleman, "Slang Dictionaries," 329.

[36] Kuznitz, *YIVO,* 8.

[37] Y. Trivaks, "*Di Yidishe Zshargonen*," in M. Wanwild, ed., *Ba Undz Yidn: Zamelbukh far Folklor un Filologye* [Among us Jews: Folklore and philology collection] (Warsaw: Pinkhes Graubard, 1923), 157–78. We learned of the existence of this book in a lecture by Avraham Novershtern, "The Underworld in Yiddish Culture," at Tel Aviv University, July 22, 2021.

[38] Ibid, 159.

[39] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1–30.

dictionary that is available for study, the Chinese Erya, written sometime between the eighth and the second centuries BCE. The very title of the work announces its own limitations. Erya translates as "Progress Toward Correctness" or "Progress Toward Perfection"—*progress toward* correct understanding, not correct understanding itself. The evocative title phrase appears all the more illuminating when contextualized within Confucianist thought, which accorded great moral importance in placing "words in accordance with actions."[40] In broad terms, literature was a tool in the Confucianist process of aligning speech with intentions and with behavior. The Erya, meant to help understand older literature, thus supported the search for harmony between language and deed. Accordingly, lexicography was located at the crossroads between intellect, ethics, and spirit.[41] As William Edward Soothill, translator of Confucian sayings, puts it, "From the accuracy or inaccuracy of a man's speech his obliquity or uprightness may be gauged."[42] Even with this added metaphysical weight, the Erya promised its readers only "progress toward" the synchronization of speech and deed. Rather than admitting the centrifugal nature of language as a flaw or an afterthought, as in the OED or the modern slang dictionary, the Erya placed this quality in acceptable tension with the aims of verbal clarity. The holes of human language, experienced and performed by the Khurbn Yiddish lexicographers and by Aboulela's immigrant translator, were embraced through the very presentation of this early dictionary.

While we leave close readings of the Erya to scholars of Chinese language and literature, we may suggest, based on translations and secondary literature, that its contents do seem to bear out this spirit of "towards." The scholar Xue Shiqi presents the following as an exemplary entry:

> A woman calls her husband's father jiu, and her husband's
> mother gu. While alive they are called junjiu and jungu. After
> their death they are called xianjiu and xiängü.[43]

In reading this word cluster, it seems that we are not meant to discover exactly what a "father" is here, but rather how "fatherness" is described from different subject positions at different moments in time. The entry performs the gap in meaning between these different words, like jiu and gu, as much as it clarifies them.

We can cite a similar approach in another premodern dictionary—one that moves us back into the Jewish tradition: the Hebrew-Arabic work *Ha-Egron,* the first systematized lexicographic project in the Hebrew language, composed by Rav Saadia Gaon in the beginning of the tenth century CE. Rav Saadia began working on the dictionary in Egypt and completed it in Iraq, an atmosphere in which Jews were able to integrate into local Arabic culture to a greater extent than earlier.[44] Thus, part of Rav Saadia's goal in writing *Ha-Egron* was to undo "the persistent passing

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40 Qiao Liqing and Min Shangchao, "A Study on Confucius' Views on Language Functions," ポリグロシア 16 (2009): 69–75; and Li Kejian, "A Study on Confucius' Views on Language," *Journal of Hexi Normal University* 6 (2002): 57–60.

41 Thomas B. I. Creamer, "Lexicography and the History of the Chinese Language," in *History, Languages, and Lexicographers*, ed. Ladislav Zgusta (Berlin: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2017), 112; Françoise Bottéro, "Ancient China," in *The Cambridge World History of Lexicography,* ed. John Considine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 53; Heming Yong and Jing Peng, *Chinese Lexicography: A History from 1046 BC to AD 1911* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

42 William Edward Soothill, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (Yokohama, Japan: Fukuin, 1910), 934.

43 Xue Shiqi, "Chinese Lexicography Past and Present," *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 4, no. 1 (1982): 153.

44 Aharon Maman, "Hebrew to c. 1650," in Considine, *Cambridge World History of Lexicography*, 186.

of speech," to borrow a phrase from Daniel Heller-Roazen.[45] In this case, he was addressing the passing from Hebrew to Arabic, or to be more precise, from a Hebrew-literate, Arabic-speaking Jewish society to one that was incorporating more Arabic into its writing as well. In his introduction to *Ha-Egron*, Rav Saadia commits to counteracting this lingual forgetting by teaching his readers rare Hebrew words that would both draw them closer to Scripture and help them to create more beautiful poetry. In his words:

> I saw that the children of Israel are not proficient in the niceties of our simple language, and all the more so regarding difficult words. When they speak, many words are wrong, and when they compose poems, they lean upon the foundations of our ancient wisdom in a minor way, while that which is neglected is more major.[46]

Keeping the needs of a poet in mind, Saadia organized *Ha-Egron* into two separate lists, one alphabetical—for help crafting acrostics—and one based on rhyming endings. Thus, users of *Ha-Egron* would not open its pages in order to find the definition of a specific word, but to find a word that could help them to complete lines of poetry, through either its rhyme or its first letter.

Intended as an aid in making new art, *Ha-Egron* itself also invites aesthetic and poetic interpretation. Here is an example of an alphabetized page, in which rarer, Scriptural Hebrew words appear on the right, followed by some form of equivalent or explanation on the left:
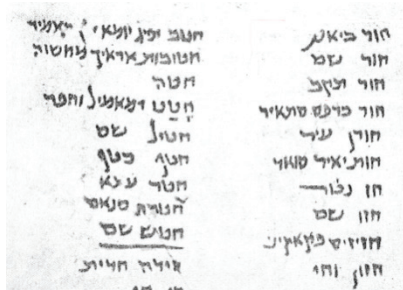

Image reprinted with permission from
The Academy of the Hebrew Language, *Ha-Egron of Se'adya Gaon*, 215.

The first four entries read, "*havar* [Scriptural Hebrew—to become pale] = *bayāḍ* [paleness, Arabic]/ *hur* [A Scriptural Hebrew name] = *shem* [name, simple Hebrew]/ *hur karpas* [a valuable cotton fabric, rare Scriptural term] = *sitāra* [hangings, Arabic]."[47] A bit further on, Rav Saadia glosses the term "*hayitz* [Scriptural Hebrew, barrier]" by providing two terms: "*bone*" (builds) which is not a definition but a neighboring Scriptural term from the Book of Ezekiel, and "*ḥawājiz*," the equivalent Arabic word for a barrier.[48] Within these examples, there are varied notions of explanation at work here. Some word pairs are inter-lingual translations; others are intra-lingual explanations; some are categorical labels; and one is a contextual reference. Thus, what binds this list together is not a consistent scientific logic, but a mode of movement between

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[45] Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (New York: Zone Books 2005), 65.

[46] Nehemya Allony, ed., *Ha-Egron of Se'adya Gaon* [The lexicon of Se'adya Gaon] (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1969), 153.

[47] Ibid, 215.

[48] Ibid, 222.

different layers of language. Each lexical entry invites readers to move from speech that is known and grounded into an elevated lingual world of artistic and religious prestige, a realm that they should join not only as passive readers, but as active creators.

Like the OED and the Erya, *Ha-Egron* did indeed have a didactic, centripetal thrust, conveying knowledge and convening a community of readers around a common cluster of valued terms. As part of this standardization, Rav Saadya used the list to establish a line where Arabic ended and where Hebrew began, inserting a small, yet meaningful empty space between the two tongues. At the same time, *Ha-Egron* contradicted its own claim of cultural and lingual separation: the very concept of the work, a dictionary of sacred terms for poets, was inspired by parallel works in Arabic from the time.[49] Its implantation in Hebrew thus ironically drew the two religions and languages closer together than before. Likewise, by including Hebrew-Arabic and Hebrew-to-Hebrew glosses side by side, *Ha-Egron* amplified the lingual hybridity of the moment.

In a parallel manner, *Ha-Egron* set out to dramatize the difference between the sacred past and the profane present. From *Ha-Egron*, readers would learn that first-hand, day-to-day knowledge was not enough to create poetry. True art required an archive, a prosthesis that could bring them closer to a holier, more beautiful vocabulary—and *Ha-Egron's* readers were invited to use the book in order to do just that. Thus, rather than entrenching the distinction between holy past and profane present, *Ha-Egron* guided contemporary poets in how to traverse that line and make the holy tongue their own, at least for a moment, and in the space of poetic verse. Simply put, tenth-century readers of *Ha-Egron* were instructed to seek *progress toward* Scriptural Hebrew. *Ha-Egron*, like the dictionaries discussed earlier, contained a vector without an edge, this time aimed at a divine moment of language past.

So how does the corpus of Khurbn Yiddish dictionaries, with which we began this essay, fit into this broader history of dictionary making? Clearly, on a historical and cultural level, the Khurbn Yiddish dictionaries composed by Kaplan and others were only a stone's throw from twentieth-century slang dictionaries like that of Y. Trivaks. However, we have brought in these other, more distant examples in order to propose a deeper semiotic possibility embedded in many lexicographic texts. While inviting people into new realms of knowledge, these dictionaries also convey an opposing message: as in the OED's endless arrows or in the missing *habbahan* from Leila Aboulela's story, a dictionary can also perform the unknown in language and in experience. That is why, perhaps, the genre can become so useful for refugees, exiles, and victims, people pushed out of the "common" center of speech and society.

For Khurbn Yiddish lexicographers like Israel Kaplan, the dictionary helped them to publicly announce the metamorphosis of their language. Elevating changes in Yiddish was a way of calling attention to the depth of their communal and personal pain. The Nazi genocide had transformed something about them. They had been ejected through the holes of civilized European lexica and they wanted the outside world to know that.

In this sense, their dictionaries do align with Eco's notion that one of the dictionary's tasks is "to recognize" a certain moment of discourse, to make it "stay." The Khurbn Yiddish lexicographers sought recognition for the torment their communities had endured as well as for the way their voices had sounded as a result of it. Arresting Holocaust language in the form of a dictionary was a way to perpetuate their memories of terrorized speech and to invite others to witness it. At the same time, in writing dictionaries, Kaplan and his peers did not promise closure. The

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49 Ibid, 151.

dictionary, as a textual genre, did not require a beginning, middle, and end, as in narrative testimony. It enabled genocide survivors to testify to their experience outside the common lexicon, to create a useful disturbance to speech as usual, without promising themselves or their audiences mastery. This seems to have been the process that Israel Kaplan sought to initiate in the tumultuous year of 1945.

My pain is an endless vector; follow it anyhow. My language is strange, come and learn it. These are statements that the dictionary enabled Kaplan and his colleagues to make. By animating this potentiality of the dictionary—that tension between filling and exposing the holes of language—the Khurbn Yiddish word lists do not so much defy lexicographic wisdom as remind us to widen our lens. They help us see how even the authors of the comprehensive OED, ensconced in the "vernacular unification" impulse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ended up revealing the leakiness of the English language—albeit with some regret. Looking beyond the modern period, we find different, more enchanted, and more porous conceptions of language that have driven people to make dictionaries over the course of history. Those models call attention to the subjective, creative possibilities embedded in the practice of listing and glossing words. These creative potentialities came to the aid of modernity's victims, like Israel Kaplan in 1945, who sought a pathway back into language. Ａ