Yiddish-English Transliteration
YIVO style

A JewishGen InfoFile[*]

October 26, 2015

1. What follows is a simplified version of the romanization (transcription) convention developed by YIVO[1]. It is easy to use, once you have gotten the hang of it — not a daunting task. The scheme is quite straightforward, and it provides a uniform way to write — any — Yiddish word in any Yiddish dialect; if you can say it, you can write it, and be sure that your readers will know just how you're saying it. What more can be asked of a transcription scheme? Mendele subscribers are encouraged to use the YIVO system, in the interest of clear communication; but it is not a requirement for submissions.

2. The first column in the Tables (1 and 2) below provides the Hebrew symbols of Yiddish letters; the second column gives the Yiddish (Hebrew) names of corresponding letters and letter-combinations; the third column gives their approximate sound equivalents, for the most part in English (be warned that some of the English examples will be interpreted differently by native speakers of English from various dialect regions); and the forth column illustrates the transcription with Yiddish words. Writers not familiar with the Yiddish alphabet can ignore the first two columns altogether.

3. Note that the consonants and most of the vowels are pronounced in much the way that some other European languages pronounce them. There are a few

---

[*]A comment (by Marcel Herbst) on typographic conventions used in this note (lifted from the internet — with a few alterations on my part [using Uriel Weinreich, *College Yiddish*, YIVO 1979(1949) and Herman Galvin and Stan Tamarkin, *The Yiddish Dictionary Sourcebook*, Ktav Publishing House 1986]; source: Mendele Yiddish Language and Literature Mailing List. V. 4.170 [19Aug95], `http://sunsite.unc.edu/yiddish/mewais.html`, provider: Mark H. David (`mhd@world.std.com`)). This note will refer to Hebrew (Yiddish) text, Hebrew (Yiddish) transcribed (transliterated) text, phonetic sounds (or diphthongs), and English text. Hebrew (Yiddish) text, or Hebrew characters, are presented as they are, i.e. אַלף, בייט, גימל, et cetera. Hebrew (Yiddish) transcribed text is presented in capital letters, i.e. ALEF, BEYT, GIML, et cetera. Phonetic sounds (or diphthongs) are *emphasized*.

[1]There are several orthographic versions of Yiddish and transcription rules, the most prominent of which (in the Western world) has been standardized by YIVO. It makes sense today to apply these rules in Western countries irrespective of the native language (English, German, French, etc.)

Table 1: Vowels and Diphthongs

letter:	letter name:	sound equivalent:	romanized:
א	SHTUMER ALEF	(silent)	
אַ	PASEKH ALEF	*a* as in 'father'	A as in GAS (street)
אָ	KOMETS ALEF	*o* as in 'sort'	O as in YORN (years)
ו	VOV	*u* as in 'put'	U as in UN (and)
וּ	MELUPM VOV	\<dito>	\<in conjunction with וו>
י	YUD	*i* as in 'fit'	I as in IN (אין)
יִ	KHIREK YUD	*i* as in 'fish' (fish)	I as in YIDISH (ייִדיש)
יי	TSVEY YUDN	*ey* as in 'grey'	EY as in EYNIKL (grandchild)
ײַ	PASEKH TSVEY YUDN	*y* as in 'sky'	AY as in FAYER (fire)
וי	VOV YUD	*oy* as in 'boy'	OY as in MOYL (mouth)
ע	AYEN	*e* as in 'end'	E as in ENTFER (answer)

possible exceptions, arising out of dialectal differences. For example: the Yiddish word for 'good' is always spelled GIML-VOV-TES, and the Table 1 shows that the Standard pronunciation of the VOV (except when it's at the end of a syllable) is like the *u* in English 'put'; so the Standard pronunciation is *gut*, rhyming with English 'put'. But the dialects of many native speakers call for pronouncing this VOV *i*, and these speakers would say the word as *git* (and transcribe it as GIT); such variants are welcome on Mendele.

4. The diphthongs may require some thought at first; EY romanizes the sound in 'Hey!' or 'grey'; AY stands for the sound of the *ay* in 'Mayan' or the *y* in 'my'; and OY transcribes the *oi* sound in 'oil' or 'noise' (so the familiar expression of complaint or pain or surprise is romanized OY VEY, and the Standard Yiddish for "my mother" is written MAYN MAME.)

5. Note that the SHTUMER (silent) ALEF has no sound equivalent or transcription. In Yiddish, it is written at the beginning of words before the vowels and diphthongs pronounced *u, oy, i, ey*, and *ay*.

Some General Points[2] Each letter (or letter combination) in the third column of Tables 1 and 2 has a specific sound. Remember that the YIVO scheme is meant to be efficient, unambiguous and easy to use; unnecessary letters just confuse the reader. So:

6. No double consonants; they don't tell you anything. Write: ALE, ALEMEN, BOBE, FEDER, GOT [God], SHABES, YIDISH (and not: ALLE, ALLEMEN, BOBBE, FEDDER, GOTT, SHABBES, YIDDISH).

---

[2]Adapted from Zellig Bach, Mendele 4.102.

Table 2: Consonants and Consonant Clusters

letter:	letter name:	sound equivalent:	romanized:
ב	BEYS or BEYZ	*b* as in 'ball'	B AS in BREM (eyebrow)
בֿ	VEYS or VEYZ	*v* as in 'heavy'	V in MAZL-TOV (congratulations)
וו	TSVEY VOVN	<dito>	V as in VURSHT (salami)
ג	GIML	*g* as in 'give'	G as in GORNISHT (nothing)
ד	DALED	*d* as in 'done'	D as in DORF (village)
ה	HEY	*h* as in 'hot'	H as in HUNGERIK (hungry)
ז	ZAYEN	*z* as in 'zebra'	Z as in ZUMER (summer)
ח	KHES	*ch* as in *achtung* (G.)	KH as in BOKHER (young man)
כ	KHOF	<dito>	KH as in KHAPN (to catch)
ך	LANGR-KHOF	<dito>	KH as in ZIKH (oneself)
ט	TES	*t* as in 'time'	T as in TUML (noise)
תּ	TOF	<dito>	T as in TOYRE (Torah)
י	YUD (bef. a vowel)	*y* as in 'yet'	Y as in YAGDES (berries)
כּ	KOF	*k* as in 'kill'	K as in KOSHER (kosher)
ק	KUF	<dito>	K as in KAMF (struggle)
ל	LAMED	*l* as in 'lake'	L as in LUFT (air)
מ	MEM	*m* as in 'mark'	M as in MENTSH (person)
ם	SHLOS-MEM	*m* as in 'mark'	M as in SHOLEM (peace)
נ	NUN	*n* as in 'neck'	N as in NUDNIK (bore)
ן	LANGR-NUN	*n* as in 'neck'	N as in SHEYN (pretty)
ס	SAMEKH	*s* as in 'self'	S as in SAMET (velvet)
שׂ	SIN	<dito>	S as in SOYNE (enemy)
ת	SOF	<dito>	S as in TOES (error)
פּ	PEY	*p* as in 'pack'	P as in PONIM (face)
פֿ	FEY	*f* as in 'fence'	F as in FRISH (fresh)
ף	LANGR-FEY	*f* as in 'fence'	F as in HELF (help)
צ	TSADEK	*ts* as in 'fruits'	TS as in NAYNTSIK (ninety)
ץ	LANGR-TSADEK	*ts* as in 'fruits'	TS as in SHEYGETS (male Gentile)
ר	REYSH	*r* as in 'French'	R as in ROYT (red)
ש	SHIN	*sh* as in 'show'	SH as in SHANDE (shame)
זש	ZAYEN SHIN	*s* as in 'measure'	ZH as in ZHUK (beetle)
דזש	DALED ZAYEN SHIN	*j* as in 'jump'	DZH as in DZHEZ (jazz)
טש	TES SHIN	*ch* as in 'chair?	TSH as in KVETSHN (squeeze)

7. Excise the puste (empty) h's, since they provide no additional information: No 'h' after the stressed vowel in words of German origin. Write: AMOL, YOR, GEYN, SHTEYN (and not: AMOHL, YOHR, GEHN, SHTEHN). And no h's after the final vowel in words of Hebrew or Slavic origin; they don't add any information either. Write: KHALE, KALE, KHEVRE, METSIE, TAKE (and not: KHALEH, KALEH, KHEVREH, METSIEH, TAKEH).

8. Skip the SHTUME (silent) e's: Write: BISL, FARGESN, GUTN, LAKHN, ZISN, SHTETL (and not: BISEL, FARGESEN, GUTEN, LAKHEN, ZISEN, SHTETEL.

Further Comments (by Marcel Herbst) Transcription (between Hebrew [H] and Latin [L] alphabets) is a delicate matter not yet fully developed (to my knowledge). The problem is that the mapping ψ between H and L is not one-to-one (the mapping $\psi : H \to L$ is single valued, i.e., each Yiddish (Hebrew) letter is assigned a corresponding single Latin character, but the converse mapping, $\psi^{-1} : L \to H$, is not: some Latin characters are mapped to more than one Yiddish (Hebrew) character. YIVO transcription is compatible with ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) Codes, which provided first for a 7-bit (2^7 = 128 characters), and later on for a 8-bit (2^8 = 256 characters) encoding of characters. The introduction of OpenType (in the 1990s) extends this range to 16-bits (2^{16} = 65,536 characters), providing for the full support of Easter European Latin (accented) alphabets and ligatures. Hence, a new (YIVO) encoding based on OpenType would greatly facilitate (or even solve) the (automatic) transcription of Yiddish from Hebrew to Latin script (and vice versa). Two problems will have to be addressed: (i) the representation of certain consonants at the beginning (STUMER ALEF) and end of a word (LANGR-KHOF, SHLOS-MEM, LANGR-NUN, LANGR-FEY, LANGR-TZADEK), and (ii) combinations of characters to represent diphthongs. Raphael (Refoyl) A. Finkl, a professor at the Computer Science Department of the University of Kentucky (Lexington), has programmed (unsing Perl) a pretty accurate transcription software (from Latin to Hebrew, and vice versa), called the די ייִדישע שרייַבמאַשינקע (DI YIDISHE SHRAYBMASHINKE — see http://www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/yiddish/makeyiddish.html).