Introduction

A Jewish Language in a Christian World

In a famous passage from his autobiographical work *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe recalls his impressions as a young boy from the *Judengasse* in his hometown, Frankfurt. Together with the crowdedness and filth of the Jewish quarter, it was "the accent of an unpleasant language" that attracted his attention, leaving "a most displeasing impression" on the young Goethe.[1] Despite this somewhat unfavorable reaction to Yiddish (or "*das barocke Judendeutsch*," as he called it), Goethe, not yet thirteen years old, decided to learn the language. He soon realized that deeper acquaintance with Hebrew was needed, and started taking Hebrew lessons from the rector of the Gymnasium—assuring his tutor that his sole intent was to read the Old Testament in its original language.[2] As for learning the Yiddish language itself, the young Goethe could of course take private lessons from a convert, as he in fact did in the summer of 1761. But he could also make use of the vast linguistic and philological corpus on Yiddish that had been consolidating in the German lands since the beginning of the sixteenth century and that consisted of works prepared by *Christian* authors for a *Christian* readership.[3] These included theoretical depictions and analyses of the Yiddish language, grammars and textbooks, dictionaries, bibliographies of Yiddish writings, literary surveys, and translations from and to Yiddish.

The Christian literature on Yiddish, written and published in the German-speaking world from the beginning of the sixteenth century and into the second half of the eighteenth century, stands as the focal point of this book. The Yiddish that was the subject of Christian works during that period is referred to today as "Western Yiddish" (also known as "Jewish-German" or "Judeo-German"), as opposed to the

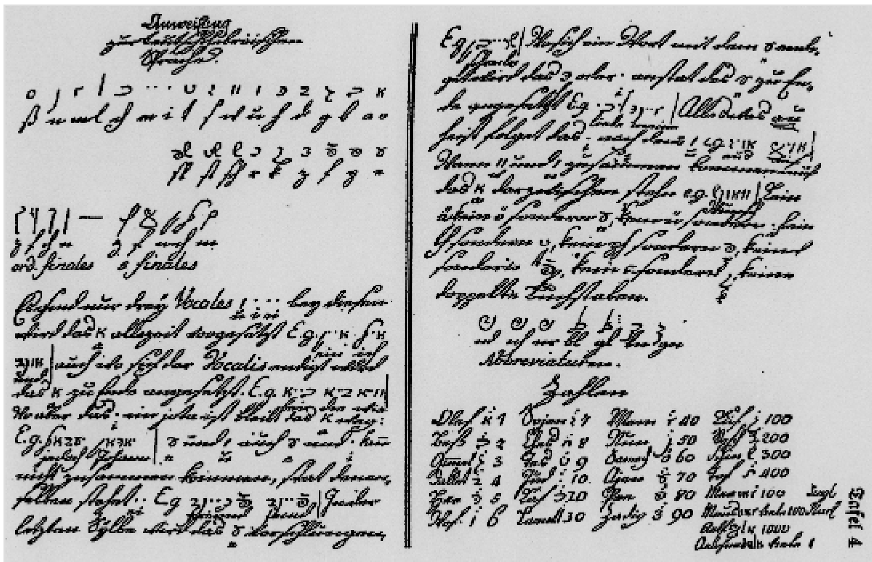

Figure I.1. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Anweisung zur teutsch-hebräischen Sprache" (ca. 1760). Reprinted from *Der junge Goethe: Neue Ausgabe in sechs Bänden besorgt von Max Morris*, vol. 1, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1909.

"Eastern Yiddish" of the east-European Jews.[4] In the period under discussion, Western Yiddish served the Ashkenazi communities of Western and Central Europe as the spoken language, and together with *loshn-koydesh* ("the language of sanctity," namely Hebrew-Aramaic), also as a written language. Unlike Eastern Yiddish, which contains a considerable Slavic component, Western Yiddish was composed almost entirely from German and Hebrew-Aramaic components. Linguistically speaking, therefore, Western Yiddish was much closer to German than modern Yiddish, which developed from the eastern dialects.

The significant lexical and structural similarity with German led to conflicting approaches to Western Yiddish in modern linguistic research. One approach, advocated especially by the German-Jewish scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in the nineteenth century, saw Western Yiddish as essentially German in Hebrew letters, with the exception of lexical items derived from the Hebrew-Aramaic component. The other approach, promoted by Jewish Yiddishists at the beginning of the twentieth century, saw Western Yiddish as a language in its own

right. According to this view, Yiddish was never identical to German, but already from its early, medieval stages constituted a distinct language. Although the view of Western Yiddish as a type of German can still be found among contemporary scholars, especially those who approach the Jewish language with the tools of German linguistics, it is the view that sees Western Yiddish as a language in its own right that is most widely accepted in present-day Yiddish linguistics.[5]

Until the Jewish eastward migration during the late Middle Ages, Western Yiddish was basically the only existing Yiddish. The eastern dialect that emerged in the new settlements developed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries as a fundamentally new variety of Yiddish. Subsequently, this period is characterized by the coexistence of two major Yiddish dialects. The literary language, however, which served both west and east-European Yiddish readers, remained on a Western Yiddish basis well into the eighteenth century. It was only in the later decades of the century that this language was gradually replaced with a literary Yiddish based on the eastern dialects, which eventually developed into Modern Literary Yiddish.[6]

The transition from the western to the eastern dialect as the linguistic infrastructure of literary Yiddish was part of a more profound transformation in the history of German Jewry: the linguistic shift from Yiddish to German from the late eighteenth century onwards. Resulting in the gradual decline of Western Yiddish and its eventual demise as the main language of the German Jews, this linguistic transformation was engendered by the two interrelated processes of Jewish emancipation and acculturation. As a prerequisite for full emancipation, Jews were required to abandon their unique language and replace it with German. This demand was also promoted inside the Jewish community, most notably among the *maskilim* and the economic elite, who supported a certain degree of Jewish integration into German culture and society. For many of the *maskilim*, the transition from Yiddish to German was also a means for reforming and regenerating Jewish culture from within.[7] At the same time, profound and fundamental changes in the intellectual and cultural climate of the German world were being brought about by the Enlightenment, exerting considerable influence on the Christian discourse on Yiddish as well. These changes included the rise of new theories and ideologies regarding language, culture, *Volk*, and nation;

the process of secularization and the decline of theology as a dominant component of European thought; and the emergence of new perceptions of the Jew and his place in German society.[8] All these developments in both the German and German-Jewish contexts brought about a new chapter in the Christian preoccupation with Yiddish. The late decades of the eighteenth century thus mark the concluding point of this book.

Christian Interest in Yiddish in Early Modern Germany

Christian concern with Yiddish should be seen on the one hand as part of a wider interest in Jews and Judaism in early modern Germany, and on the other hand as part of a general interest in questions relating to language and linguistics at the time. Although the Jews constituted only a very small part of the total German population, they attracted attention well beyond their actual number and prominence. From the mid-fifteenth century, Renaissance Humanist scholarship, and later on the Reformation and the Protestant imperative to read the Bible in its original languages, gave rise to what came to be known as Christian Hebraism, the preoccupation of Christian scholars with Hebrew and Jewish studies. In addition to biblical Hebrew, Christian enterprises in Jewish studies also included postbiblical Hebrew, Aramaic, rabbinical literature, and the Cabbala. Another offshoot of Christian Hebraism was the growing interest of Christians in contemporary Jews, their customs, rituals, and way of life, noticeable in the German lands from the turn of the sixteenth century. Driven mainly by curiosity, but not without strong polemical overtones, the most explicit manifestation of this interest was the new genre of Christian ethnographic writing on Jewish ceremonies and everyday life. Anti-Jewish polemics and missionary impulses, which underlay Christian-Jewish relations from the very beginning, continued to play a major role in shaping Christian attitudes toward the Jewish minority throughout the early modern period. With the Reformation, the newly founded Protestant Church reemphasized the importance of winning over converts from Judaism as part of its rivalry with Catholicism and the wish to present itself as the true confession. Reaching an unprecedented scale with

the rise of Pietism in the late seventeenth century, the revival of the *Judenmission* in the German territories further enhanced the attention of broader circles in the Christian population to the Jewish minority living in their midst.

The engagement of Christians with the Hebrew language and Jewish texts, their interest in contemporary Jewish culture, and the ever-present ambition to bring about Jewish conversion—these interrelated factors directly contributed to the rise of Christian Yiddish scholarship in early modern Germany, and exerted considerable influence on its main characteristics and on the course of its development. Another driving force that stood behind this new interest was the early modern concern with language, linguistics, and philology in general, and with questions regarding vernaculars, dialects, and foreign languages in particular. Early modern Europe experienced an unprecedented degree of what may be termed "linguistic awareness," leading modern historians to refer to the period from the mid-fifteenth century onwards as the age of the "discovery of language."[9] This period saw a dramatic increase in the study of languages, their structure, history, and the relations between them, as well as in the dealings with issues we would classify today as sociolinguistics, such as the functions of language in the social and religious domains, and the role of language as a marker and definer of group identities. In addition to the pronounced concern of Humanists with the study of the classical languages—Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—an exceptional and hitherto uncommon attention was given to the different European vernaculars. The medieval perception of the spoken languages as lacking grammatical rules and as being inadequate for the realms of scholarship and high culture gradually gave way to a new appreciation of the vernacular. The various European languages became the object of theoretical reflection and linguistic treatment. They underwent a process of codification and standardization, and with the aid of the newly invented printing industry infiltrated new domains, which until then had been under the exclusive reign of the omnipotent Latin. These included the large-scale production of literature in the European vernaculars, their increasing use as vehicles of scholarship and pedagogical instruction, and even the acceptance of vernaculars as languages of administration and international relations. Of special importance, in the Protestant territories, was the penetration of the vernacular

into the religious domain, replacing Latin as the language of Scripture, prayer, and the transmission of religious knowledge.

Emerging at the beginning of the sixteenth century among Jewish as well as Christian scholars, the first linguistic treatments of Yiddish appeared at about the same time as those of other European vernaculars. Indeed, it is in this context of the growing attention to vernacular languages, their codification, and their potential as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge that the linguistic and philological interest in Yiddish must be appreciated.[10] Above all, however, the interest in Yiddish should be examined in the light of the specific form that the early modern linguistic awareness took in the German lands, where practically all the linguistic treatises on Yiddish known to us were published. During this period, a significant gap existed between the unsatisfactory state of the German language and its inferior position among the European vernaculars, on the one hand[11]; and on the other, the rising importance of the language in the eyes of many German scholars, especially Protestants, both as the language of Luther's Bible and as a means for defining German identity in the face of political and religious divisions. This unfavorable situation initiated an intensive enterprise of language cultivation in German academic and literary circles; it also exerted considerable influence on the way German scholars perceived and evaluated other languages, including the language of their Jewish neighbors.

Christian Yiddishists and Their Texts

Within the German lands, Christian interest in Hebrew and Judaism, as well as in the rising vernacular, was predominantly Protestant. It is therefore not surprising that early modern Christian involvement with Yiddish, too, was first and foremost a *Protestant* phenomenon. It had its roots in the Reformation era and in the work of reformers, and during the ensuing two and a half centuries was dominated by Protestant scholars.[12] It was also, as noted above, essentially a *German* phenomenon. Although large communities of Yiddish-speaking Jews and Yiddish publishing centers existed in different parts of Europe (such as Poland, Italy, and the Netherlands), Christian interest in Yiddish was almost exclusively confined to the German-speaking world. With very

few exceptions, the Christian writings on Yiddish were written by German scholars, and were published in the German-speaking lands (especially in Leipzig, Halle, Basel, Nürnberg, Wittenberg, and Frankfurt am Main). Accordingly, the language that dominates these writings, besides Latin, is German. That the Christian literature on Yiddish was mainly a German phenomenon might be explained by the German roots of the Jewish language. Yiddish originated in the German lands as a result of the encounter of Jews with the medieval German dialects; from its beginning it contained a major German component and was for centuries the spoken language and one of the written languages of the German Jews.[13] The linguistic and territorial proximity of Yiddish and German in the early modern period was well acknowledged by the German Christian authors and played a significant role in their writings on Yiddish. Moreover, the similarity of Yiddish to their own language, and the implications of this similarity from a cultural, social, and national perspective, was probably responsible for the Jewish language attracting the attention of predominantly German-speaking authors.

Most of the Christian authors discussed in this book came from the heart of the academic and ecclesiastical establishment of the time: many held positions as professors of theology, Hebrew, and Oriental languages at the leading German universities; others served as preachers, ministers, and superintendents of the Protestant Church. Hebrew lecturers and censors, professional missionaries, school headmasters, and even a couple of police inspectors also participated in the Yiddish enterprise. About a quarter of the authors who could be identified were converts from Judaism. Although in general there were no essential differences in the literature on Yiddish between the writings of converts and those of born Christians, certain characteristics of the genre were indeed shared mainly by converts (though not exclusively). In particular is the tension inherent in the converts' writing on Yiddish to a Christian audience: on the one hand, they used their proficiency in Yiddish and their intimate acquaintance with its literature in order to position themselves as experts on Jewish matters in the service of their new coreligionists; on the other hand, they attempted to distance themselves from the Jewish language and culture as an indication of their true conversion.

The sources reveal a high level of interaction among the Christian authors, initiated by personal contacts or more commonly by acquaintance

with the writings of previous or contemporary authors. References to other authors in the field, long quotations from the works of predecessors, and instances of plagiarism are very common in this literature. This is true for the linguistic presentations of the language, where one often finds the same examples, the same categories and formulations, sometimes even the same mistakes copied from one author to another. It is also true for the main ideas and perceptions regarding the Jewish language, its literature, and its Jewish speakers that come forward in these writings. This is of course not to disregard the differences between the writings of different authors or the development in the Christian literature on Yiddish during the two and half centuries under discussion. Many authors differed, for example, in the question of the close relation between Yiddish and German: some considered Yiddish as no more than German with Hebrew characters, while others emphasized the differences between the two, giving more weight to the Hebraic component in the Jewish language. This basic point of disagreement also led to different opinions regarding how easy it in fact was for German-speakers to learn Yiddish, and most notably, to what extent one could consider Yiddish a language in its own right. Another controversial issue, which had far-reaching implications for the later debates on Jewish integration and emancipation, was the question of why the Jews spoke Yiddish in the first place, and not "normal" German. While some authors related this to the external or objective circumstances of the Jewish experience in early modern Germany (most notably, the fact that Jews were not educated in German schools), others claimed that the Jews deliberately cultivated a language of their own, or that they were simply not capable of speaking "proper German." As far as the entire body of Christian writings on Yiddish is concerned, a diachronic perspective reveals an unmistakable shift at the turn of the eighteenth century towards a more popular literature on the Jewish language. Written mainly in German instead of Latin, the newer literature addressed broader sections of the Christian population and paid more attention to the *spoken* language, in addition to the written one. Eighteenth-century works on Yiddish were also more extensive than those produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as elaborated discussions on the nature of Yiddish, its literature, and its Jewish speakers replaced the more strictly linguistic presentations of the earlier period.

Despite the fact that the cultural phenomenon of "Christian Yiddishism" is almost 500 years old, the literature produced during its first 250 years, from the Reformation to the Enlightenment (which twentieth-century Yiddishist Ber Borochov classified as *primitive filologishe shriftn*, to distinguish from the "modern" literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries),[14] has received only limited consideration in modern historical research. Since the writings of early modern Christian Yiddishists deal with the Jews' *language*, they have mainly attracted the attention of modern linguists and philologists of historical Yiddish. The most thorough and comprehensive work on the literature on Yiddish so far is Max Weinreich's *Geschichte der jiddischen Sprachforschung* (1993), which is in fact a later edition of his dissertation from 1923.[15] Most recently, Yiddish scholar Jerold C. Frakes published a history of the scholarly linguistic literature on Yiddish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, entitled *The Cultural Study of Yiddish in Early Modern Europe* (2007).[16] However, both Weinreich and Frakes (despite the latter's claim to present a *cultural* analysis of early modern Christian Yiddishism) are mainly concerned with the linguistic and philological aspects of the Christian writings. Like other modern researchers of Yiddish, they focus on the technical aspects, the means and methods of the research in Yiddish linguistics, while attempting to evaluate the accuracy of the early modern linguistic presentations and hence their reliability as sources in the study of historical Yiddish.

In contrast to the linguistic-philological perspective that characterizes the few existing studies on early modern Christian literature on Yiddish, the present book uses a historical-cultural point of view, which aims to define the place of the Jewish language in the different, albeit intertwined, theological, cultural, economic, and social discourses of the early modern period. An approach of this kind can be found in Sander Gilman's *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (1986), in which the author discusses the discourse on the Jewish languages—both Hebrew and Yiddish—in the German world from the Middle Ages into the second half of the twentieth century. However, not only does Gilman dedicate a very small part of his work to the early modern period; his work also lacks a more substantial historical infrastructure. Thus, although highly interesting, Gilman's work is not always sufficient as far as the historical research is

concerned. Other important works in the field, most notably Jeffrey A. Grossman's *The Discourse on Yiddish in Germany: From the Enlightenment to the Second Empire* (2000), explore the cultural phenomenon of Christian Yiddishism in later periods. However, one cannot fully understand the Christian engagement with the Jewish language and culture in modern Germany without a deeper acquaintance with its earlier stages. Indeed, a comprehensive study of the Christian engagement with Yiddish culture in *early* modern Germany, as offered in the present book, is indispensable for a better understanding of the broader theological, cultural, and social discourses on Jews and Judaism, not only in the early modern period but in Germany of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well.

Through depiction and analysis of the Christian texts on Yiddish in the context of their historical background and ideological framework, the book discusses two major questions. The *first* question—Why Yiddish?—relates to the various motivations for Christian preoccupation with the Yiddish language and literature in early modern Germany. In addition to the above-mentioned interest both in Jews and Judaism and in language and linguistics at the time, Christian engagement with Yiddish resulted from the recognition that proficiency in the Jewish language was important and even beneficial for various groups in the non-Jewish population. The existence of a Jewish minority in the German lands, and the fact that interactions between Jews and Christians were relatively common even during the early modern period, certainly played an important role in motivating Christians to acquire the Jewish language. The involvement with Yiddish out of pure interest and as "art for art's sake," as in the case of the young Goethe, was a rare phenomenon in the overall field of Christian Yiddishism. Instead, the Christian authors explicitly and recurrently emphasized the practical uses of Yiddish for Christians, probably in order to promote the dissemination of their Yiddish handbooks and dictionaries, as well as to justify their writing on a Jewish language that, unlike Hebrew, enjoyed neither the status of holiness nor a scholarly value.

The first and second parts of the book are dedicated to the various practical reasons for the Christian interest in the Yiddish language and

literature, and accordingly, the different audiences at which the Christian texts on Yiddish were directed. Although a clear-cut categorization of these texts is not always possible, a general distinction can be made between the uses of Yiddish for theological purposes and its uses for more secular objectives, especially in the economic and social spheres.

The Christian occupation with Yiddish for theological purposes, which had a more scholarly orientation, is discussed in the first part of the book. After a general introduction on the place of Christian Yiddish scholarship in the broader context of early modern Christian Hebraism, the following chapters focus on what motivated Hebraists, theologians, and Orientalists to engage in Yiddish. This includes, in the first place, the Christian ambition to utilize the Jewish language and literature for missionary purposes and anti-Jewish polemics, discussed in the first and second chapters. By using Yiddish in both oral and written mission, the missionaries aimed to approach the Jews from a position of familiarity and even friendliness, and to make the evangelical literature accessible to Jewish readership. Acquaintance with contemporary Jewish literature in Yiddish was also considered advantageous for the missionary purpose. Viewed as a valuable source of information about Jews and Judaism, Yiddish literature was considered a useful means for achieving a well-informed and hence effective mission, and especially for repudiating Judaism by turning the Jews' own sources for polemics against them.

The third chapter in this part focuses on the idea that proficiency in Yiddish could serve Christians as a valuable instrument to penetrate the inner Jewish world and expose its secrets, so as to gain a tighter control on this minority. Driven by the conviction that deep hatred of Christ and Christians stood at the heart of Jewish belief and practice, Protestant theologians and reformers sought effective ways of defending Christian religion and society in the face of a perceived Jewish threat. In their eyes, this threat consisted primarily of the blasphemies (*Lästerungen*) and anti-Christian expressions believed to have been present in Jewish literature, prayer, and daily discourse. The image of Yiddish as the Jews' "secret language," used to conceal Jewish affairs from Christian eyes, made familiarity with Yiddish an important tool for Christians, who wished to effectively expose and censor all Jewish blasphemies against the Christian religion and its adherents. Finally, while the above motivations for the interest of Christian scholars in

Yiddish should be seen as part of their concern with Jews and Judaism, the fourth chapter presents the Protestant ambition to utilize the Jewish language for intra-Christian purposes, specifically for supporting theologians in their attempt to gain proficiency in Hebrew and an accurate reading and understanding of the Hebrew Bible.

A more popular orientation characterizes the Christian writings on Yiddish discussed in the second part of the book. Its title, "Yiddish in the Service of Jewish Deception," indicates the common notion of the time, according to which the Jews used their special language for illicit and even criminal purposes. The image of Yiddish as a secret language, which came forward in the Christian discourse on Jewish blasphemies and anti-Christian expressions, is thus extended from the religious domain into the more secular sphere of social and economic relations. The first chapter in this part (Chapter 5) is concerned with Yiddish manuals and textbooks intended for Christian businessmen and merchants who had business interactions with the Jews. Teaching basic Yiddish necessary for conducting business affairs, these manuals aimed not merely to facilitate commercial transactions between Jews and Christians, but rather, as made explicit by many of the authors, to help Christians defend themselves in the face of Jewish deception.

The image of Yiddish as the Jews' secret language was significantly reinforced by the fact that Yiddish was not only the language of the Jewish merchants but also the language of the large Jewish underclass of paupers, vagrants, beggars, and criminals. The association of Yiddish with criminality, discussed in Chapter 6, was nourished to a large extent by the linguistic affinity between Yiddish and *Rotwelsch*, the secret language of the German underworld at the time. The idea of Yiddish as the language of thieves gave rise to "criminological" research on the Jewish language, intended mainly, though not exclusively, for policemen and government officials in charge of the public order. As shown in the last sections of the chapter, civic authorities too, especially bureaucrats and jurists, were encouraged to master the Yiddish language in order to better control the Jewish minority.

Given the ways in which the association between Yiddish and the alleged Jewish subversiveness was depicted in the Christian literature, the conclusion of this part raises the possibility that Yiddish was viewed not merely as a secret language but rather as what we would term today an

"antilanguage." The language of an "antisociety," an antilanguage is an extreme version of a non-standard social dialect, deliberately created by socially inferior and marginalized groups antagonistic to the dominant society. In many of the Christian texts, Yiddish is presented as a language of a social conflict, used by the Jewish minority either in the form of passive resistance, in order to maintain and defend their particular social reality, or in the form of an active or even offensive opposition to Christian social and religious order.

As the discussion on the practical uses of Yiddish for Christians suggests, knowledge of the Jewish language and literature was viewed as a necessary tool to exert control over the Jews in the German lands. Knowledge of Yiddish could be translated into a passive or defensive form of control, such as defending Christians against Jewish blasphemy, deception, or criminality; or into an active or even aggressive form of control, such as missionizing among the Jews or using their own sources for polemics against them.

But the interest of Christian authors in Yiddish exceeded the practical uses of the language. By defining and representing Yiddish culture to Christian readers, the Christian authors were in fact taking part in a broader discourse on Jews and Judaism in early modern Germany. It was a discourse that both expressed and helped maintain the existing power relations between Jews and Christians, and the marginal place of the Jews within German culture and society. This form of "discursive" or "ideological" domination becomes especially evident when we examine the ways in which the Christian authors depicted the Jewish language and literature in their works.

The *second* question in the book concerns how the Christian texts depict and represent the Yiddish language. Far from being neutral, matter-of-fact linguistic presentations, the Christian depictions of Yiddish were often shaped by their authors' views of the Jewish culture and religion, as well as by underlying ideological motivations and agendas. These relate to certain issues in Christian-Jewish relations, such as the attempt to define the place of the Jews in German society, but also to intra-Christian discussions and debates, such as Protestant-Catholic polemics or the efforts to standardize and purify the German language.

The various presentations of the Yiddish language in the Christian writings are discussed in the third part of the book. Chapter 7 focuses

on the attempts of the Christian authors to define and explain the Yiddish language vis-à-vis its relation to German. The striking linguistic similarities between the two languages on the one hand, and the differences between them on the other, often led to the denunciation of Yiddish as a "corrupt German." However, although the authors formulated their criticism on Yiddish within linguistic categories, *extra*-linguistic considerations relating to the users and uses of Yiddish as a distinct Jewish sociolect within German society decisively shaped the image of the language in these texts. Another important factor discussed is the stance of the authors toward their own German language, to which they compared the German of the Jews. The importance attached to the German language as a major constituent of German national consciousness, and the efforts to cultivate the language and purify it from foreign elements, were central motifs in the discourse on language in early modern Germany; this possible influence on the way German authors perceived the Jewish-German language should not be overlooked.

The Christian concern with the relation between Yiddish and German was also manifested in the discussions regarding the use of Yiddish for the composition of missionary literature, explored in Chapter 8. Although the importance of writing to the Jews "in their own language" was constantly emphasized in the works on missionizing in Yiddish, some of the most important "Yiddish" missionary writings were in fact written in German with Hebrew letters, or at least in a very "Germanized" version of Yiddish, not necessarily suitable for Jewish readers. As we shall see, the attempt of Christian missionaries to "Germanize" the Jewish language resulted mainly from their negative opinions of Yiddish, which they considered not adequate enough for serious theological writings; it also resulted from their wish to avoid what they considered to be a "Judaization" and hence corruption of the German language.

The final chapter of the book (Chapter 9) is dedicated to how the Christian authors depicted the relation between Yiddish and Hebrew. The central argument in this respect was that Hebrew, after being replaced by Yiddish, was no longer the language of the German Jews. In order to establish this point, the authors elaborate on what they refer to as the German Jews' "great ignorance" of the Hebrew language, manifested in the Jews' inability either to speak or to read the language in

a satisfactory manner. The chapter attempts to elucidate the complex matrix of motivations that stood behind the Christian discussions on this topic. Apart from the direct theological criticism of the Jews for failing to understand their Hebrew prayers or to read the Bible in its original tongue, the separation between the Yiddish-speaking Jews and the Hebrew language enabled the Christian authors to create a debased image of Jewish-Ashkenazi culture and religion, in contrast to which they could affirm and emphasize their own theological and cultural superiority. The conclusion to this part of the book highlights some of the most important continuities and transformations in the discourse on Yiddish and its relations to both Hebrew and German in the transition from the early modern period to the late eighteenth and nineteenth century.

By exploring why Christians were preoccupied with Yiddish and how they depicted the Jewish language and literature in their writings, I wish to demonstrate that early modern Christian Yiddishism has had implications beyond its purely linguistic and philological dimensions. As part of a broader theological, cultural, and social discourse on Jews and Judaism in early modern Germany, the Christian texts on Yiddish reveal not only the way their authors assumed the unique perspective of language to perceive and define the subjects of their works, but also the way they perceived and defined their own language, religion, and culture in contrast to those of the Jews. A close study of these texts and their underlying ideological motivations provides a further dimension to Christian-Jewish relations in early modern Europe, while shedding light on broader linguistic, theological, cultural, and social concerns in the work and thought of early modern Christian authors and their intellectual environment.