פֿאַרקווירן אייער ייִדיש / Queering Your Yiddish

A workshop for Shtetl Philly 🌺🐐

Led by Joshua Raclaw

About this text

The materials in this document draw on a number of existing resources for queer and trans-inclusive Yiddish, most notably Sasha Berenstein's List of Yiddish Transgender/Nonbinary Terms, the Yiddish Trans and Gender Expansive Vocabulary compiled by Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky and Sasha Berenstein, and the *Undzer Mishpokhe* Queer Yiddish curriculum supplement designed by Rebecca Araten, Ethan Nosanow Levin, Carolyn Beard, and Alona Bach. I am grateful for the incredible work these individuals have already done.

The materials here presume your familiarity with Yiddish grammatical cases (nominative, accusative, dative) and their declensions, as well as familiarity reading the alef-beys. As we go through this document together, I always invite you to stop to ask any questions about these topics if anything about them is unfamiliar or raises questions for you!

The materials currently presented here reference the use of Yiddish in environments where English is otherwise the dominant language; other communities of Yiddish speakers may have other linguistic practices not discussed here, and future editions of this document will hopefully be able to include such practices as well.

Introductions and initial reflections

What is your name?

ווי הייסטו?

(איך הייס _____ / מע רופֿט מיך _____.)

What do you live? Where are you from?

ווּ ווינסטו? פֿון וואַנען שטאַמסטו?

(איך ווין אין _____. איך שטאַם/קום פֿון _____.)

How long have you been learning Yiddish?

ווי לאַנג לערנסטו זיך ייִדיש?

(איך לערן זיך ייִדיש שוין _____.)

What has your experience been learning and using queer or trans-inclusive Yiddish? Have there been any noticeable gaps, either that you noticed in the moment or upon reflection now in using Yiddish to talk about queer topics and/or people?

DAY ONE

Pronouns in Yiddish

English equivalent	Nominative	Accusative	Dative	Possessive Pronoun
she/her/her*	זי	זי	איר	איר
he/him/his*	ער	אים	אים	זײַן
they/them/their*	זיי	זיי	זיי	זייער
fae/faer/faer*	פֿיי	פֿער	פֿער	פֿייער
--	עז	זים	זים	זיר

Table 1: Yiddish pronouns across all three cases as well as their possessive forms

*While in English we may say she/her/hers as the “full” declension of the feminine pronoun, this is not the most accurate translation into Yiddish: to say something is “hers” in Yiddish requires some further declension than what is provided in the final column of this table.

The pronouns ער and זי

The pronouns זי and ער have been traditionally used in Yiddish to refer to women and men (respectively), and they might also be used by Yiddish speakers of other genders. They might also be one of a number of pronouns that a speaker uses: as in English, someone’s preference in Yiddish may be for others to use multiple pronouns (like זי/זיי or עז/זיי) or any pronouns with them. What that actually looks like in practice can vary!

Traditionally in Yiddish, words and phrases like עמעצער (“someone”) or אַ מענטש (“a person”) can be used to referring to people generically rather than to a specific person. Both terms are grammatically masculine and so call for the use of ער/אים in subsequent reference. The phrase אַ ייִד (“a Jew”) has been similarly used in Yiddish, though the term often also refers specifically to a man (and can be found contrasted with the feminine ייִדענע, a term that has derogatory undertones in some but not all Yiddish-speaking communities). Here too the word ייִד is grammatically masculine and so calls for the use of ער/אים in subsequent references.

The pronoun מען (“one”) can also be used in these kinds of generic references, though it serves other functions as well. Notably, each of these words, phrases, or pronouns are used in places where English speakers might instead use singular *they*.

When pronouns are unknown

So what does the Yiddish speaker do when a specific person's pronouns are unknown? In English, this is also a function of singular *they*. In queer Yiddish circles, some speakers opt to use the pronouns **זיי** or **עז/זים** (discussed below) when referring to a person whose pronouns aren't known. In these cases, care should be taken to not rely on this strategy with someone whose pronouns are known (which can be heard as echoing the practices of those who, for example, use gender-neutral pronouns to avoid using **זי** with transfeminine people). Alternatively, other Yiddish speakers might simply avoid using pronouns altogether with someone whose pronouns are unknown.

Singular **זיי**

Outside of the traditional masculine and feminine pronouns, some Yiddish speakers have adopted the use of the English singular *they* as a *calque* in Yiddish—that is, a borrowing with a word-for-word translation—to create singular **זיי**. Though *they* has a history of being used in English with singular antecedents whose gender is unknown (e.g., "a *person* chooses *their* own path") since at least the 1300s, the use of singular *they* as a person's given pronoun is a very recent innovation in English. Yiddish historically has not used **זיי** in the singular as English has, but just as Yiddish has historically undergone changes due to influences from its speakers' many varied linguistic repertoires, so too has English influenced its pronoun system when it comes to singular **זיי**. Note that singular **זיי** declines the same as when used in the plural, so you would get sentences like:

> די מענטשן זענען דאָ, זיי זענען שפּעט ("The people are here, they are late")
>
> יהושע איז דאָ, זיי זענען שפּעט ("Joshua is here, they are late")

Case	1st person		2nd person		3rd person			
	singular	singular	singular	singular	singular			plural
					MASC	FEM	NEUT	
Nominative	איך	מיר	דו	איר	ער	זי	עס	זיי
Accusative	מיך	אונדז	דיך	איך	אים			
Dative	מיר		דיר			איר	אים	

Table 2: Yiddish pronouns, in which **זיי** uniquely remains **זיי** in all grammatical cases

Case	1st person		2nd person		3rd person			
	singular	singular	singular	singular	singular			plural
					MASC	FEM	NEUT	
Nominative	Ich	Wir	Du	Ihr	Er	Sie	Es	Sie

Accusative	Mich	Uns	Dich	Euch	Ihn			
Dative	Mir		Dir		Ihm	Ihr	Ihm	Ihnen

Table 3: German pronouns, in which *sie/ihnen* decline similarly to other pronouns

It can be noted that as a pronoun, זיי is fairly *kvir* (“queer”) in its declension: it is the only Yiddish pronoun presented here that uses the same form in all three cases (see Table 1). This is especially notable when compared to the German pronoun system, which overlaps in many ways with the Yiddish system, though the German equivalent to זיי (*sie/ihnen)* declines much like other pronouns. Given the overlap with 3rd person singular feminine *sie/ihr* in the nominative and accusative cases, *sie/ihnen* is not legible as a nonbinary pronoun in German—and to be sure, trans and nonbinary German speakers have not adopted it as such, though some German speakers have simply borrowed English *they* for this purpose. Yiddish is, to my knowledge, relatively unique in its calquing (rather than borrowing) of English *they* as a nonbinary pronoun.

Neopronoun עז/זים

Another pronoun with increasing use is the neopronoun עז/זים, coined (per Sasha Berenstein) in 2008 by Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky at Yiddish New York. The neopronoun combines elements of the traditionally masculine and feminine pronouns: the nominative form עז combines parts of זי + ער, and as with ער, its accusative and dative forms are the same. In the accusative and dative, the pronoun זים combines elements of זי + אים, while the possessive pronoun combines parts of איר + זיין. Various other languages have combined the traditional masculine and feminine forms to create novel nonbinary pronouns, and עז/זים is ours.

Neopronoun פֿיי/פֿער

Another Yiddish neopronoun is פֿיי/פֿער, a borrowing of the English pronoun fae/faer (though a number of speakers draw additional connections between this pronoun set and the Yiddish word *feygele*/פֿייגעלע). As with עז/זים, the pronoun has one form for the nominative case (פֿיי) and another form for both the accusative and dative case (פֿער). As a possessive pronoun, פֿיי declines to the form פֿייער.

Animate עס/אים

Just as English speakers may use it/its pronouns, Yiddish speakers may use עס/אים. In spoken Yiddish, these can sound very similar to the neopronouns עס/אים!

A note on possessive pronouns

The possessive forms for these pronouns all decline for number, though not for case: we would describe one cat as *zeyer kats* (זייער קאַץ) or *zir kats* (זיר קאַץ) or *feyer kats* (פֿייער קאַץ), but multiple cats as *zeyere kets* (זייערע קעץ) or *zire kets* (זירע קעץ) or *feyere kets* (פֿייערע קעץ).

Genitung: Translate the Yiddish

פַּיי האָט ליב זײַן הונט

עז זעט זירע עלטערן

זי גיט פַּער אַ בייגל

זיי גיין שפּאַצירן מיט זים

פַּייער טאָכטער קען אירע זין

איר טאָכטער טאַנצט מיט פַּייערע קינדער

זייערע חבֿרים מיינט אַז זיר שוועסטערקינד איז שיין

Genitung: Practice with pronouns

Let's talk about five people, whose pronouns are included in parentheses: **Hershl/ער)הערשל(**, **Zisl/זי)זיסל(**, **Ezra/עז)עזרא(**, **Zelda/זיי)זעלדה(** & **Faigy/ פַּיי)פַּייגע(**. Translate each sentence below into Yiddish, but substitute each person's name for the right pronoun!

English equivalent	Nominative	Accusative	Dative	Possessive Pronoun
she/her/her*	זי	זי	איר	איר
he/him/his*	ער	אים	אים	זײַן
they/them/their*	זיי	זיי	זיי	זייער
fae/faer/faer	פַּיי	פַּער	פַּער	פַּייער
--	עז	זים	זים	זיר

Table 1: Yiddish pronouns across all three cases as well as their possessive forms

Ex. Zisl bakes Ezra a pie □ **זי** באַקט **זים** אַ פּיי

a. Faigy sees Zisl and gives Zisl a gift

b. Ezra does not know Zelda's name

c. Hershl walks with Ezra and Ezra's dog

d. Zelda eats bagels with Faigy

e. Zisl likes Ezra but Zisl does not like Ezra's cat

f. Ezra and Ezra's mother sing with Faigy and Faigy's aunt

(aunt □ די מומע, די טאַנטע; dog □ דער הונט; gift □ די מתּנה; name □ דער נאָמען)

Sharing pronouns

There are a few ways to share pronouns in Yiddish. In English we often say “my pronouns are…” and Yiddish can use that same grammar to introduce your pronouns. I more often say “my pronoun is…” since זיי just has a single declension. People using either Yiddish neopronoun might share both the nominative and accusative/dative forms for people less familiar with them. In Yiddish, as in English, we can also just say “I use ____ pronoun”:

My pronoun is…	מײַן פּראָנאָם איז…
In Yiddish, my pronoun is…	אויף ייִדיש איז מײַן פּראָנאָם…
My pronouns are…	…מײַנע פּראָנאָמען זענען
In Yiddish, my pronouns are…	אויף ייִדיש זײַנען מײַנע פּראָנאָמען…
I use the pronoun *zey*	איך ניץ דעם פּראָנאָם” זיי “
I use *zi* and *fey* pronouns	איך ניץ די פּראָנאָמען זי און פֿיי
I use any pronouns	איך ניץ אַלע פּראָנאָמען
I use multiple pronouns but prefer *ez/zim*	איך ניץ פֿאַרשיידענע פּראָנאָמען, אָבער מיר איז ליבער” עז/זים “

Table 4: Different ways to share the pronoun(s) you use in Yiddish

Gendered nouns in Yiddish

Gendered articles, gendered suffixes

The standardized variety of Yiddish (*klal Yiddish*) that is taught in most classroom settings has three grammatical genders: feminine, masculine, and neutral. Dialects like Northeastern Yiddish have only two genders, but maybe also seven genders, while dialects spoken in contemporary Haredi communities may not mark gender at all, but the discussion that follows will focus on the klal Yiddish that many new speakers learn.

As with many other Western Germanic languages, *grammatical gender* (a classification system for nouns) is typically marked through the definite article rather than on the noun itself. The grammatical gender of a given word may diverge from the *social gender* of the people normatively associated with it: Thus, the Yiddish word for "woman" may be grammatically feminine, as with the word *di froy* (די פֿרוי), though it may also be grammatically neutral, as in the synonym *dos vayb* (דאָס וויב). Similarly, while the Yiddish word for "son" is grammatically masculine (*der zun*; דער זון), the word for "boy" is grammatically neutral (*dos yingl*; דאָס יינגל). Each of these articles further vary by case:

Case	Singular			Plural
	MASC	FEM	NEUT	
Nominative	דער	די	דאָס	די
Accusative	דעם			די
Dative		דער	דעם	די

Table 5: Gendered definite articles in Yiddish, which vary by gender and case in the singular

While nouns themselves are not typically marked for gender in Yiddish, some notable exceptions exist. Nouns referring to occupations normatively receive a feminizing suffix when referring to a woman, and so the generic word for "teacher" (*lerer*/לערער) is used to refer to either a man or a person of unspecified gender, while suffixes like -ין or -קע are added to mark the referent as a woman (forming the words *lererin*/לערערין or *lererke*/לערערקע, respectively). This kind of asymmetry, in which the "unmarked" form is the same as the masculine form, is a potential issue for Yiddish speakers who wish to avoid being gendered in the masculine.

The same issue is present in certain kinship terms, such as how the word *kuzin* (קוזין) can either refer to the general category "cousin" but can also refer specifically to a male cousin, while a -קע- or ע- suffix is normatively added when referring to a female cousin to produce the forms *kuzinke*/קוזינקע or *kuzine*/קוזינע. Rather than simply adding a feminizing suffix to an unmarked masculine form, the Yiddish term for nephew is *plimenik*/פלימעניקwhile the term for niece is *plimenitse*/פלימעניצע. Other familial terms have heteronormativity baked into them in different ways: a common Yiddish term for parents is tate-mame/טאַטע־מאַמע while grandparents are *zeyde-bobe*/זיידע־באָבע, and a common term for an engaged couple is a *khosn-kale*/חתן-כלה (which can become a verb meaning "to become engaged" when preceded with וועלן). We'll discuss queering these kinds of kinship terms further on.

Finally, certain other words, such as *khaver* (חבֿר; “friend, comrade”), follow some of these same patterns: thus *khaver*/חבֿר may refer to a man or to a person of unspecified gender, while the normative addition of a feminizing טע- suffix occurs when referring to a woman (producing *khaverte*/חבֿרטע). If you want to call someone a creep and a bore, they’re traditionally a *tshudak*/טשודאַק and a nudnik/נודניק in the masculine, but a tshudatshke/ טשודאַטשקע and a nudnitse/נודניצע in the feminine.

One strategy that queer and trans Yiddishists have developed is to use the unmarked form of a gendered noun (that is, one with no gendered suffixes applied) while using an article that ignores the word’s grammatical gender and instead reflects the person’s social gender. Thus, “the teacher” stays *der lerer*/ דער לערער for men and others who prefer being marked with the masculine, but becomes *di lerer*/ די לערערfor women and others who prefer being marked with the feminine, and *dos lerer*/ דאָס לערערfor individuals who prefer being referred to in the neutral gender. Gendered word pairs like *nudnik*/נודניק (masc) and *nudnitse*/נודניצע (fem) meet in the middle to become *nudnits*/נודניץ while taking the appropriate gendered article. This way of gendering your Yiddish does away with femininizing suffixes *as the default* when referring to a woman but it always uses them for individuals who prefer such endings be used with them: gendered language can be disaffirming for some while deeply affirming for others, and a queer Yiddish is built around that kind of affirmation.

DOS used for people historically; talk about labzik

Think and Discuss

How do you feel about the place of gendered pairs like tate-mame/טאַטע־מאַמע, *zeyde-bobe*/זיידע־באָבע, and *khosn-kale*/חתן-כלה in a queer-inclusive Yiddish?

How do you feel about the use of feminizing suffixes (like -שע- ,-ין ,קע) with yourself and/or with others that you know in Yiddish? Do you feel the same about feminizing suffixes that mark an occupation’s spouse, like *doktorshe*/דאָקטאָרשע (a doctor’s wife) or *rebitsin*/רביצין (a rabbi’s wife)?

ANTHONY OF TSVEY BRIDER USING REBITSER

GENDERING OF Z”L ETC.

Invention of yidishe froy

Genitung: Queering your nouns

The strategies described above—using an unmarked or gender-neutral form requiring require a situation where you can actually use the definite article: what are some example sentences that use the definite article as described? What are some other contexts in which fitting in the definite article can be challenging or unnatural, and what are some ways to get around that?

In your sample sentences you can make use of the following other traditionally gendered word pairs in Yiddish, using the ungendered form of the noun along with an appropriate gendered article or alternative strategy that you come up with:

der krasavtshik (קראַסאַוווטשיק), -es: handsome man
di krasavitse (קראַסאַוויצע), -s: beautiful woman

der khutspenik (חוצפהניק), -es: impudent man
di khutspenitse (חוצפהניצע), -s: impudent woman

der geler (געלער), unchanged in the plural: blonde or redhead
di gelerke (געלערקע),-s: blonde or redhead

der klezmer (קלעזמער), klezmorim (קלעזמאָרים): musician
di klezmerke (קלעזמערקע)/**klezmerte** (קלעזמערטע), -s: musician

der ligner (ליגנער), plural in -s: liar
di lignerke (ליגנערקע)/**lignerte** (ליגנערטע)/**lignerin** (ליגנערין), -s: liar

Kinship and Partner Terms (gender-neutral)

The following terms are a mix of traditional gender-neutral terms, a majority of which are used less frequently than their gendered equivalents, as well as more recent coinings:

cousin: דאָס שוועסטערקִינד, -ער
[DOS ShVESTERKÍND, -ER]

grandchild: דאָס אײַניקל, -ער
[DOS ÉYNIKL, -EKh]

grandparent: דער עלטער־געבוירער, -ס
[DER ÉLTER-GEBÓYRER, -S]

grandparents: אורעלטערן
[URELTERN]

nibling (gender-neutral version of “niece/nephew”): דאָס פלימעניץ, -ן
[DOS PLIMENITS, -N]

parent: דער געבוירער, -ס; דער אוֹפֿכאָווער, -ס
[DER GEBÓYRER, -S; DER ÚFKhOVER, -S]

parents (pl. also): עלטערן
[ÉLTERN]

partner (general): דער פּאַרטנער, -ס
[DER PÁRTNER, -S]

partner (romantic): דער געלי֫בטער (געב׳)
[DER GELÍBTER (declined)]

partner (sexual): דער געלי֫בטער (געב׳); דער בַּיִשלעפַער, ־ס
[DER GELÍBTER (declined); DER BÁYShLEFER, -S]

sibling: דאָס מי֫טקינד, ־ער
[DOS MÍTKIND, -ER]

siblings (pl. also): געשווי֫סטער
[GEShVÍSTER]

spouse: דער זיווג, ־ים
[DER ZÍVEG, ZIVÚGIM]

Genitung: Queering the family

Let's return to our five people, whose pronouns and preferred articles are now both included in parentheses: **Hershl/דער, ער)הערשל)**, **Zisl/די, זי)זיסל)**, **Ezra/ דאָס ,עזרא(עז)**, **Zelda/זעלדה (דאָס/זיי))** & **Faigy/ די/פֿייגע (פֿייגע)**. Translate each sentence below into Yiddish, but substitute each person's name for the right pronoun!

> Ex. Hershl is Ezra's partner ⇒ ער איז זיר געליבט(ער)
>
> (Since געליבטער declines, you can use געליבטער for Hershl specifically or the uninflected געליבט. Note: this sentence can sound like ער איז איר געליבטע when said aloud!)

a. Zisl and Faigy are my siblings

b. Ezra is the teacher in Hershl's school

c. Zisl's parents know Zelda's parents

d. Ezra knows my cousin and my nibling knows Ezra

e. Zelda is the baker here (בעקערקע/בעקער)

f. Faigy's parents know Ezra because Ezra is Faigy's spouse

(Baker → בעקערקע/בעקער; school → שולע)

DAY TWO

Pronomen un artikln nokh a mol!

Pronomen far mentshn

English equivalent	Nominative	Accusative	Dative	Possessive Pronoun
she/her/her*	זי	זי	איר	איר
he/him/his*	ער	אים	אים	זײַן
they/them/their*	זיי	זיי	זיי	זייער
ez/zim/zir	עז	זים	זים	זיר
fae/faer/faer*	פֿיי	פֿער	פֿער	פֿייער
it/its	עס	עס	אים	זײַן

Table 1: Yiddish pronouns across all three cases as well as their possessive forms

*While in English we may say she/her/hers as the “full” declension of the feminine pronoun, this is not the most accurate translation into Yiddish: to say something is “hers” in Yiddish requires some further declension than what is provided in the final column of this table.

We expand our list of pronouns referring to persons to include עס, which has a declination pattern the same as זי in that it shares a single form in the nominative and accusative case (עס) but declines to the form אים in the dative. The pronoun עס not only shares the same dative form as ער but also shares the same form as a possessive pronoun: זײַן.

Traditionally עס is not used in Yiddish with human referents, though a number of speakers today might use it as their sole pronoun or as part of a set of multiple pronouns (e.g., עס/זי).

Genitung: Pronomen!

Let’s talk about six people, whose pronouns are included in parentheses: **Hershl (ער), Zisl (זי), Ezra (עז), Zelda (זיי), Faigy (פֿיי), and Esther (עס).** Translate each sentence below into Yiddish, but substitute each person’s name for the right pronoun!

Ex. Zisl bakes Ezra a pie □ **זי** באַקט **זים** אַ פּיי

a. Ezra and Esther run with Faigy after school

B. Hershl knows Zisl’s grandparents

c. Zelda bakes Esther a babka

d. Ezra does not like Hershl’s sibling

e. Zisl sees Esther in the park near Esther’s house

f. Zelda’s cat is one of Faigy’s dogs friends

Artikln mit mentshn

We previously discussed some cases where Yiddish marks gender on nouns through different suffixes: words for occupations might take a feminizing suffix so that *lerer*/לערער (both the unmarked and masculine forms) becomes *lererin*/לערערין or *lererke*/לערערקע (feminine forms). Kinship terms might do the same so that *kuzin*/קוזין (unmarked or masculine) becomes *kuzinke*/קוזינקע or *kuzine*/קוזינע (feminine), as may other words like *khaver*/חבֿר (unmarked or masculine) becoming *khaverte*/חבֿרטע (feminine).

Sometimes these words follow a pattern where the masculine form and feminine form are simply different, as in the term for nephew being *plimenik*/פלימעניק while the term for niece is *plimenitse*/פלימעניצע, or how a boring or annoying man is a nudnik/נודניק while a woman is a *nudnitse*/נודניצע.

One modification to this system used by some queer Yiddish speakers (and Yiddish speakers who love them) is to use the unmarked noun form while using an appropriate definite article whose gender aligns with a person's preferred grammatical classification in Yiddish: that is, whether they want to be classified in the feminine (with an article like די), the masculine (with an article like דער), or the neutral gender (with an article like דאָס). As part of this system, we always use suffixes marking the feminine (e.g., -קע, -אין) for speakers who use those.

As a reminder, Yiddish articles vary by gender case in the singular, but are the same regardless of gender and case in the singular:

Case	Singular			Plural
	MASC	FEM	NEUT	
Nominative	דער	די	דאָס	די
Accusative	דעם			די
Dative		דער	דעם	די

Table 5: Gendered definite articles in Yiddish, which vary by gender and case in the singular

Genitung: Artikln!

With Esther oyf vakatsie, let's talk about our first five people, whose articles are included in parentheses: **Hershl (דער), Zisl (די), Ezra (דאָס), Zelda (דאָס), Faigy (די), and Esther (עס).** Here you will rewrite each Yiddish sentence with the characters swapped: Thus, in the first sentence, swap every instance of "Zisl" for "Ezra" and change any pronouns and articles as needed!

דאָ איז זיסל די בעקער, און זי באַקט זים אַ בייגל.

זיסל איז די בעסטע סטודענט אין עזראס קלאַס; עז האָט זי ליב!

הערשל איז דער שוועסטקינד פֿון זעלדאס זיווע

פֿייגע איז די קלוגסטע מענטש וואָס זעלדאס געבוירערס קענען

זיסל איז איינע פֿון די בעסטע שניידערס וואָס עזרא האָט געזען

Sharing pronouns and articles

For the strategies mentioned above to work, Yiddish speakers need to think about and share the grammatical gender(s) they'd prefer others use with them. In queer Yiddish speaking circles where this has happened, this has taken the form of describing the article you use, referencing just the nominative declension. Be aware that this practice is not widely used outside of particular queer Yiddish spaces!

I use masculine grammatical forms	מײַן אַרטיקל איז" דער " איך ניץ דעם אַרטיקל" דער "
I use feminine grammatical forms	מײַן אַרטיקל איז" די " איך ניץ דעם אַרטיקל" די "
I use neutral grammatical forms	מײַן אַרטיקל איז" דאָס " איך ניץ דעם אַרטיקל" דאָס "
I use any grammatical gender forms	איך ניץ אַלע אַרטיקלן
I use neutral and masculine forms	איך ניץ די אַרטיקלן דאָס און דער

Table 6: Different ways to share the grammatical gender forms you use in Yiddish

Adjectives in Yiddish

When adjectives decline for gender

In contrast to most nouns, adjectives are routinely marked for gender in Yiddish. While predicate adjectives like the word *gut* in the sentence *zi iz gut* (זי איז גוט; “she is good”) do not decline, attributive adjectives that directly modify a noun, such as the word *gut* in the sentence *zi iz a gute lererin* (זי איז אַ גוטע לערערין); “she is a good teacher”), decline according to case, gender, and number. Yiddish also makes frequent use of nominalized adjectives that function syntactically like nouns, as in the declined adjective *gute* in the sentence *zi iz a gute* (זי איז אַ גוטע); “she is a good one”), which similarly receive gender-marking suffixes across most grammatical cases and genders.

Attributive adjectives

Attributive adjectives are those that precede and directly modify a noun. In the singular, they decline for both gender and case. In plural, they only decline for number:

Case	Singular				Plural
	Masc	Fem	Neut		
			INDEFINITE	DEFINITE	
Nominative	-ער	-ע	--	-ע	-ע
Accusative	-ן				
Dative		-ער		-ן	

Table 7: Gendered suffixes on adjectives in Yiddish, which vary by gender and case in the singular

In the previous section, we discussed preferences for the gendered articles that others use with us, and that same preference regarding grammatical gender also carries over to how adjectives decline. In the plural, all Yiddish adjectives decline by taking a -ע suffix regardless of gender or case. In the singular, adjectives that modify a person or noun in the neutral gender do not take any suffixes when they are in the indefinite, as when they are preceded by an indefinite article (אַ, אַן) as well as a possessive pronoun (like . so when describing someone who uses זיי as a pronoun and prefers the neutral grammatical gender, you would get sentences like the following:

חבֿר **דאָס קלוגע** יהושע איז (“Joshua is the clever friend”)

חבֿר **אַ קלוג** זיי זײַנען (“Joshua is a clever friend”)

חבֿר **מײַן קלוג** זיי זײַנען (“They are my clever friend”)

Genitung: Describing people

Let’s return to our five people, whose pronouns and preferred articles are included in parentheses: **Hershl/הערשל (ער, דער)**, **Zisl/זיסל (זי, די)**, **Ezra/ עזרא(עז, דאָס)**, **Zelda/זעלדה (זיי/דאָס)** & **Faigy/ פֿייגע (פֿיי/די)**. Translate each sentence below into Yiddish, again substituting each person’s name for the right pronoun and declining each adjective correctly!

Ex. Zelda is a talented artist □ קינסטלער **טאַלאַנטירט** אַ זענען **זיי**

a. Faigy and Zisl are clever students

b. Zelda is a slow runner

c. Fayge is a good dancer

d. Ezra is a very quick baker

e. Zisl's sibling knows Zelda, the good writer

f. Zelda's friends know Ezra, the quick runner

g. Hershl's parents know Faigy, the clever baker

H. I know Hershl, the clever baker

(clever □ קלוג; good □ גוט; quick □ גיך; slow □ פאַמאַלעך)

(runner □ לויפֿער; writer □ שרײַבער)

Nominalized adjectives

While you can describe someone in Yiddish using an attributive adjective that comes before the noun, Yiddish also makes frequent use of standalone adjective forms that function similarly to nouns. We will refer to these as nominalized adjectives (here, *nominal* just means "noun").

Case	Singular					Plural
	Masc	Fem	Neut			
			INDEFINITE	DEFINITE	NOMINALIZED	
Nominative	-ער	-ע	--	-ע	-ס	-ע
Accusative	-ן					
Dative		-ער		-ן	-ן	

Table 8: Gendered suffixes on adjectives in Yiddish, including nominalized endings for the neutral gender

People and nouns that decline in the masculine or feminine take the same endings that they do when they are attributive adjectives, so you get sentences like these:

ער איז אַ **גוטער** שנײַדער / ער איז אַ **גוטער** ("He is a good tailor / He is a good one")

זי איז אַ **שטאַרקע** לויפֿער / זי איז אַ **שטאַרקע** ("She is a strong runner / She is a strong one")

הינט? זי קלײַבט אויס דעם **זיסן** ("Dogs? She is picking out the cute one")

קעץ? ער שפילט זיך מיט דער **זיסער** ("Cats? He is playing with the cute one")

When people and nouns that take the neutral gender are described by a nominalized adjective, that adjective declines differently than usual. First, the nominalized adjective declines regardless of whether it definite or indefinite. Second, as seen in Table 8, they take a different ending than usual in the nominative and accusative cases.

The sample sentences below feature people who use זיי and עז/זים pronouns and who also use neutral grammatical gender:

גוטס עז איז דאָס **גוטע** קינסטלער / עז איז דאָס **גוטס** ("Ez is a good artist / Ez is a good one")

גוטס זיי זענען אַ **גוט** קינסטלער / זיי זענען אַ **גוטס** ("They are a good artist / They are a good one")

Genitung: Describing people again

Let's return to our five people, whose pronouns and preferred articles are included in parentheses: **Hershl/הערשל (ער, דער)**, **Zisl/זיסל (זי, די)**, **Ezra/ עזרא(עז, דאָס)**, **Zelda/זעלדה (זיי/דאָס)** & **Faigy/ פֿייגע (פֿיי/די)**.

Two team captains for the Shtetl Philly dodgeball competition are choosing who they want for their team. Translate what each of them says into Yiddish, using the name in parentheses to figure out which team member they're asking for when they say things like "the strong one":

a. I choose the strong one! (Ezra)

b. I'm playing with the fast one! (Zisl)

c. Give me the big one! (Faigy)

d. I'm taking the talented one! (Hershl)

e. I have the little one (Zelda)!

F. I playwith the little one! (Zelda)***

Now translate each sentence below into Yiddish—as you have previously done, you'll substitute each person's name for the right pronoun and then decline each adjective so that you use it in its nominative form.

Ex. Zelda is not a big person זיי זײַנען נישט קיין גרויס

a. Faigy is a funny one.

b. Zelda is a clever one.

c. Ezra is not a weakling.

d. Zisl is a talented one.

Nominalized personal pronouns

Remember that when personalized pronouns (זײַן, איר, זייער, זיר, פֿייער) are used to specify a noun, they only only decline for number: so איר קאַץ becomes אירע קעץ. However, just as adjectives can become *nominalized* to function similarly to a noun, so can personal pronouns. We do the same thing in English: the personal pronoun *my* (as in the sentence *this is my cat*) can become a nominalized pronoun as *mine* (as in the sentence *this is mine*).

In Yiddish, however, nominalized pronouns are formed by taking the possessive pronoun and declining it with the same ending we add to a nominalized adjective: in the singular these vary by case and gender, though they remain the same in the plural.

Case	MASC	FEM	NEUT	PLURAL
Nominative	-ער	-ע	-ס	-ע
Accusative	-ן			
Dative	-עם	-ער	-ן -עם	

Table 9: Suffixes added to nominalized personal pronouns in all cases

Thus, instead of saying דאָס איז מײַן קאַץ (“this is my cat”) you can say דאָס איז מײַנע (“this is mine”), since קאַץ is a singular feminine word. Instead of saying איך זע מײַן הונט (“I see my dog”) you can say איך זע מײַנעם (“I see mine”), since הונט is a singular masculine word. Note that the -ן suffix used in some masculine and neutral words becomes -עם when the pronoun ends with a nasal sound, as in the pronouns מײַן, דײַן, זײַן. This is similar to how adjectives ending in a nasal that would otherwise take an -ן suffix instead an -עם, as with שיין or פֿײַן.

Genitung: Nominalization in action

Let’s return to our five people, whose pronouns and preferred articles are included in parentheses: **Hershl (ער, דער)**, **Zisl (זי, די)**, **Ezra (עז, דאָס)**, **Zelda (זיי/דאָס)** & **Faigy (פֿיי/די)**. Translate each sentence below into Yiddish,substituting each person’s name for the right pronoun and declining each adjective correctly!

Zelda has so many cats; this cat is also Zelda’s

Zisl is the baker, this babke is hers

Ezra is a good tailor who makes dresses; I have one of Ezra’s

Hershl is buying Faigy a gift, but he gives Faigy’s to Zisl

Zelda sees Faigy and asks Faigy if the cats are Zelda’s

Getting possessive

Nominalized personal pronouns can also be used to form the possessive, in which case they follow the noun rather than precede it. These formulations are used much more frequently in Yiddish than in the English translations provided here:

מײַן מאַמע (my mother) / מאַמע מײַנע (mother of mine)

מײַן זון (my son) / זון מײַנער (son of mine)

מײַן קינד (my child) / קינד מײַנס (child of mine)

An annotated list of some basic LGBTQ+ vocabulary

Gender: דער/דאָס מין, -ים; דאָס געשלעכט, -ער
[DER/DOS MIN, -IM; DOS GESHLÉKHT, -ER]

- Note that מין does not solely mean 'gender' (in the grammatical or social sense) in Yiddish but can also mean a 'type' or other categorization of a thing (like a species)

Sex: דער/דאָס מין, -ים; דאָס געשלעכט, -ער
[DER/DOS MIN, -IM; DOS GESHLÉKHT, -ER]

- I have seen געשלעכט more often to specify that 'sex' is meant, and you will also see דער סעקס used for sex (both sexual activity as well as in terms of bodily assignment)

Queer (adj.): קוויר

- Not listed as a noun in any sources, but I have seen it used in the plural (די קווירן)

Lesbian: די לעסביאַנקע, -ס

- Coined as the transliterated *lezbianke* circa 1982 by the poet Irena Irena Klepfisz in her poem etlekhe verter oyf mama loshn, very likely how this became the go-to Yiddish term, though also attested in earlier works (like here in 1954, as found by Corbin Allardice)
- Also in use is לעסבערקע with לעסביש as the adjective. Phrases like לעסבישע פֿרוי are also attested, and the noun לעסביאַנטע is attested but examples are challenging to find. Corbin Allardice notes that לעסביקע is attested in pre-war Polish Yiddish. Hinde Ena Burstin says her father used to call her a לעסביאַנער when she was younger, a label she rejected.
- Multiple sources note that לעסביאַנקע is a direct borrowing from Slavic languages, with Philip Schwartz identifying it as being from the Russian лесбиянка, and לעסבערקע being parallel to forms like the Polish *lesbijka*

Gay (adj.): גיי

- This borrowing of the English "gay" is actively in use, even outside of queer Yiddish circles, sometimes put in quotation marks to distinguish it from the verb גיין.
- Note: I have not seen גיי decline when used as an adjective.

- You might also see פֿרייל‌ער, or reclamation of the older האָמאָסעקסואַליסט

- Sara B.: said tshikave hannah pollok

Bisexual: דער ביסעקסואַליסט, -ן; די ביסעקסואַליסטקע, -ס

- Note: not included in Sasha Berenstein's list, so this is straight from Mordkhe Shaechter's dictionary, with ביסעקסואַליסטיש and ביסעקסועל as adjectives

Transgender (adj.): טראַנס…; טראַנסמיניק

Cisgender (adj.): ציסמיניק

Nonbinary: אומצווייִק

- Note: This word is recognizable in some queer Yiddishist spaces but I also regularly specify נאַנבײַנערי along with it for clarity!

Transgender man: דער טראַנסער מאַן, טראַנס מענער; דער טראַנסמאַן, טראַנסמענע

Transgender woman: די טראַנס פֿרוי, טראַנספֿרויען; די טראַנספֿרוי, טראַנספֿרויען

- Note: I include both the original terms from Sasha Berenstein (the compounds טראַנסמאַן and טראַנספֿרוי) as well as the more recent טראַנסער מאַן and טראַנס פֿרוי from Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky and Sasha Berenstein, the latter of which is more in line with the common English equivalents *trans woman* and *trans man.*

Transsexual (adj.): טראַנסעקסועל

Transsexual: דער טראַנסעקסואַליסט, -ן

- Note: Sasha Berenstein has never included 'transsexual' in the list of LGBTQ+ terms, so this is straight from Mordkhe Shaechter's dictionary.