

Yiddish Language was Invented by Slavo-Iranian Jewish Merchants, Scientists Say

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A new tool called the Geographic Population Structure (GPS), which converts DNA data into its ancestral coordinates, has pinpointed the origin of Yiddish speakers, according to a team of researchers led by Dr. Eran Elhaik of the University of Sheffield, UK.



Ashkenazi Jews of 19th century Eastern Europe portrayed in *Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur*, by Maurycy Gottlieb, 1878 (from *Jewish Art*, p. 199).

[The Slavic Yiddish](#) (now called universally simply Yiddish), spoken since the 9th century CE, is the language of Ashkenazic Jews, the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe.

The language consists of Hebrew, German, Slavic and other elements written in Aramaic characters. Its origin is something which linguists have questioned for decades.

The prevalent view claims Yiddish has a German origin, whereas the opposing view posits a Slavic origin.

One of the major difficulties in deciding between these hypotheses is the unknown geographical origin of [Ashkenazic Jews](#).

Now, the GPS tool has helped scientists pinpoint that the DNA of Yiddish speakers could have originated from four ancient villages in north-eastern Turkey.

The research, published today in the [journal *Genome Biology and Evolution*](#), suggests Yiddish was invented by Iranian and Ashkenazic Jews as they traded on the Silk Road.

“We conclude that Ashkenazic Jews probably originated during the first millennium when Iranian Jews Judaized Greco-Roman, Turk, Iranian, southern Caucasus, and Slavic populations inhabiting the lands of Ashkenaz in Turkey,” Dr. Elhaik and co-authors said.

“Our findings imply that [Yiddish](#) was created by Slavo-Iranian Jewish merchants plying the Silk Roads between Germany, North Africa, and China.”

The ancient villages, identified by the GPS tool, are clustered close to the crossroads of the Silk Roads and are named Iskenaz, Eskenaz, Ashanaz, and Ashkuz – names which may derive from the word ‘Ashkenaz.’

“North east Turkey is the only place in the world where these place names exist – which strongly implies that Yiddish was established around the first millennium at a time when Jewish traders who were plying the Silk Road moved goods from Asia to Europe wanted to keep their monopoly on trade,” Dr. Elhaik said.

“They did this by inventing Yiddish – a secret language that very few can speak or understand other than Jews.”

“Our findings are in agreement with an alternative theory that suggests Yiddish has Iranian, Turkish, and Slavic origins and explains why Yiddish contains 251 words for the terms buy and sell,” he said.

“This is what we can expect from a language of experienced merchants.”

The findings led the team to believe that towards the end of the first millennium, Ashkenazic Jews may have relocated to Khazaria before moving into Europe five centuries later after the fall of the [Khazarian Empire](#), and during a time when the international trading networks collapsed.

As Yiddish became the primary language of Ashkenazic Jews, the language began to acquire new words from other cultures while retaining its Slavic grammar.

“Yiddish is such a wonderful and complex language, which was inappropriately called ‘bad German’ by both its native and non-native speakers because the language consists of made-up German words and a non-German grammar,” Dr. Elhaik said.

“The linguistic data used are from Yiddish, which we assume was invented in Western Asia as a Slavic language with a largely German-like lexicon and a significant Iranian component on all levels of the language,” said co-author Prof. Paul Wexler, from the University of Tel Aviv.

“The genetic data presented here appear to corroborate the linguistic hypothesis.” ¹

¹ Ranajit Das *et al.* Localizing Ashkenazic Jews to primeval villages in the ancient Iranian lands of Ashkenaz. *Genome Biology and Evolution*, published online March 3, 2016; doi: 10.1093/gbe/evw046