CHAPTER 16

‘Etymythological othering’
and the power of ‘lexical engineering’
in Judaism, Islam and Christianity
A socio-philo(sopho)logical perspective

Ghil'ad Zuckermann
Churchill College, University of Cambridge; Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, La Trobe University; www.zuckermann.org

1. Introduction

This chapter casts light on cross-religious interactions at the micro-level of lexis. It focuses on mechanisms of ‘etymythology’ (popular/folk-/synchronic etymology) and ‘lexical engineering’, especially within Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups. Lexical engineering reflects religious and cultural interactions and often manifests the attempt of a religion to preserve its identity when confronted with an overpowering alien environment, without segregating itself from possible influences. The result can be contempt, as in the case of rejective phono-semantic matching. But lexical engineering is not always rejective: it can also lead to a kind of ‘cultural flirting’, as in the case of receptive or adoptive phono-semantic matching. Thus, lexical engineering gives us a valuable window onto the broader question of how language may be used as a major tool for religions and cultures to maintain or form their identity.¹

I came to the topic of language and religion as a linguist who has been especially interested in language contact and historical ‘camouflage linguistics’, the study of the various forms of hidden influence of one language on another (cf. Zuckermann 2000, 2003). In particular, I have been dealing extensively with Jewish languages: Israeli (a.k.a. somewhat misleadingly ‘Modern Hebrew’), as well as Yiddish and Biblical, Rabbinic, Medieval and Maskilic Hebrew, which contributed to

1

El original es infiel a la traducción
‘The original is unfaithful to the translation’ (Borges 1943, cf. 1974: 732)
the early development of Israeli in *fin de siècle Eretz Yisrael* (‘Land of Israel’; cf. Zuckermann 2003, 2008). The Jewish experience in Europe over the past millennium has been one of cultural survivalism and isolation alternating with integration. I do not enter into a sociological discussion of the vicissitudes of this experience presently; it has been amply treated elsewhere.

In the course of my linguistic studies of Jewish languages, I have found numerous traces of this experience in a multitude of coinages in Hebrew, as well as Yiddish. These coinages were typically made by the most learned groups within Jewish society, that is to say those with the greatest exposure both to the ancient texts and those individuals with perhaps the strongest sense of cultural responsibility for how to guide their people over the perilous waters of the Diaspora.

My observation of this linguistic phenomenon within Judaism lead me, in turn, to speculate on how it might be manifested in other groups as well – for instance, Muslim and Christian, but also more recently emergent groups whose sense of shared identity and recognition by external society is not yet secure, such as the ‘Black Jews’.

In my view, a micro-analysis of a specific phenomenon, such as lexical engineering, can tell us about the whole sociological picture. *Maxima in minimis*. I believe that – as in a hologram, where the whole picture can be seen in each constituent element – individual word biographies contain micro-representations of the broader socio-cultural dynamics. Such a ‘holographic’ model of information distribution – cf. Sacks’ ‘order at all points’ view (1992) – ‘understands order not to be present only at aggregate levels and therefore subject to an overall differential distribution, but to be present in detail on a case by case, environment by environment basis. A culture is not then to be found only by aggregating all of its venues, it is substantially present in each of its venues’ (Schegloff 1992: xlv).

This chapter does not pretend to provide the reader with exact details of the identity of the lexical engineers, how many people knew about their coinages and the nature and extent of their sociological influence. Rather, I intend to introduce the phenomena of lexical engineering and etymological othering from a sociolinguistic and theo-philological point of view, keeping in mind the cultural context of the coinage. I would invite colleagues in the field of the sociology of religion to consider further potential implications of this phenomenon for their own studies.

### 2. Rejective lexical engineering

The apparent identity of what appear to be cultural units – human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems, social organizations – are maintained only through *constitutive repression*, an active process of *exclusion*, *opposition*, and *hierarchization*. A phenomenon maintains its identity in semiotic systems only if other units are represented as foreign or ‘other’ through a hierarchical dualism in which the first is ‘privileged’ or favored while the other is ‘deprivileged’ or devalued in some way.

(Cahoone 2003: 11)
Consider the following expressions, found in early, uncensored copies of the Babylonian Talmud, Sabbath Tractate, 116a:

1. גִּלְיוֹן עֹבֶן / åw εn gilyŏn ‘evil revelation-book’
2. גִּלְיוֹן יַעֲוֹן ÷ åw ūn gilyŏn ‘sin revelation-book’
3. גִּלְיוֹן אָבִן / εb = εn gilyŏn ‘stone revelation-book’

These terms all refer to the gospels and are adaptations of Greek εὐαγγέλιον euangelion (> Latin euangelium) ‘gospel’, lit. ‘glad tidings, good news; reward of good tidings, given to the messenger’, from εὖ ‘good’ + ἀγέλος ‘messenger, envoy’. (Only later did ἀγέλος come to refer to ‘divine messenger, angel’, as in the diametric opposite – note the positive connotation and the direction of the etymology – Non anglī sed angeli, si forent Christiani ‘Not Angles but angels, if they were Christian’, attributed to Gregory the Great, when he was shown English children reduced to slavery in Rome in 573 AD – cf. German englisch, currently ‘English’, originally ‘angelic’.)

(Biblical) Hebrew גִּלְיוֹן gilyôn/gillåyôn, which I translate as ‘revelation-book’, generally refers to ‘blank parchment, the margin of scrolls’, ‘writing tablet’ (cf. Syriac gelayona ‘volume’). However, the etymon of גִּלְיוֹן is the root גִּלְי (cf. גלה ‘to uncover, reveal’. Thus, גִּלְיוֹן is a good nativizer of euangelion since the latter was associated with Apocalypse (the revelation), cf. Latin apocalypse and Greek ἀποκάλυψις apokálpusis, the latter being a noun of action from ἀποκάλυπτειν, the meaning of which is exactly the same ‘to uncover, disclose’ (< ἀπό ‘off’ + κάλυπτειν ‘to cover’).

Note the structural compromise in the expressions above. For example, גִּלְיוֹן עֹבֶן גִּלְיוֹן / åw εn gilyŏn literally means ‘evil of book’ rather than ‘book of evil’. Switching places between the nomen rectum and the nomen regens – resulting in גִּלְיוֹן עֹבֶן / åw εn gilyŏn ‘book of evil’ – would have been much better semantically but not nearly as good phonetically. A similar ‘poetic licence’ occurs in Maskilic Hebrew פָּרָה עָמוד Péeyr ámid (pronounced in Polish Ashkenazic Hebrew Péeyr ámid), lit. ‘glory of pillar’, an adaptation of European pyramid. פָּרָה עָמוד Péeyr ámid, lit. ‘pillar of glory’, would have been much better semantically. ²

The phrases גִּלְיוֹן עֹבֶן גִּלְיוֹן, גִּלְיוֹן יַעֲוֹן גִּלְיוֹן, and גִּלְיוֹן אָבִן גִּלְיוֹן and Péeyr ámid are but four examples of a widespread, non-anecdotal phenomenon, which I call ‘phono-semantic matching’ (henceforth, PSM; cf. Zuckermann 2000, 2003, 2003b). I define PSM as etymological nativization in which a foreignism is matched with a phonetically and semantically similar pre-existent autochthonous lexeme/root. For the purpose of the following more specific, technical definition, as well as throughout this chapter, TL designates target language (recipient language, host language), SL denotes source language (donor language, stock language), and neologism is used in its broader meaning, i.e. either an entirely new lexeme or a pre-existent word whose meaning has been altered, resulting in a new sememe. Thus, PSM may alternatively be defined as a multisourced neologism that
preserves both the meaning and the approximate sound of the parallel expression in the Source Language (SL), using pre-existent Target Language (TL) lexical items or roots. The following figure is a general illustration of this process:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL x ‘a’</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>TL y ‘b’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>x is phonetically similar to y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y’ is based on y; a’ is based on a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More specifically, גלון גליון gilyôn, גליון גליון and גליון גליון – as opposed to פאר עמוד péeyr ámud – are what I call rejective PSMs. I define rejective PSM as politically incorrect PSM; a subversive PSM – produced by members of one religion or national group – which undermines or attacks those of another group, in some cases used for propaganda purposes.

2.1 Anti-Christian rejective PSMs concocted by Jews

Yiddish טום tum ‘cathedral’ (cf. Middle High German tuom, Modern German Dom ‘dome’) was transposed into the following:

- Medieval Hebrew תָּחוֹם tāhōm, lit. ‘abyss’ (documented with the meaning ‘cathedral’ in the late thirteenth century)
- Yiddish טומא tuma, lit. ‘abomination’ (cf. Hebrew תָּמוֹס paṭmos ‘abomination’)
- Medieval Hebrew פּיָמְיֹן pīmyōn, lit. ‘oblivion’ (cf. Rabbinic Hebrew יצא לטמיון ‘was lost completely, was gone for good’, Medieval Hebrew ירד לטמיון ‘id.’) (documented in Mainz, 1150)

Latin (dies) natalis (cf. Italian Natale, Dialectal Italian nedal) ‘Christmas (Day)’ (lit. ‘birthday’) was nativised as the following:

- Medieval Hebrew נִתְלָה nītlā, lit. ‘(being) hanged’, present form of (Biblical) Hebrew נִתְלָה nīle ‘was hanged’. Hebrew נִתְלָה nīle ‘Christmas’ is documented in the writings of Ephraim ben Isaac of Regensburg from the twelfth century and is sometimes written as נִתְלָה nīle (see Lewinsky 1975: 446a, Wexler 1993: 69). There are two possibilities:
  1. this PSM simply uses ‘hanged’ to refer to ‘crucified’ – cf. Ottoman Turkish: ‘Execution is often called Salb. Though literally meaning “crucifying” in the Ottoman kanun salb seems to be mostly synonymous with asmak “hanging”’ (Heyd 1973: 260);
  2. this PSM implies that there was a Jewish tradition according to which Jesus was literally hanged, as distinct from crucified; compare this with some medieval traditions holding that Haman (the chief minister of Ahasuerus, as stated in the Book of Esther) was not hanged (on the gallows prepared for Mordecai) but rather was crucified.
‘Etymological othering’ and the power of ‘lexical engineering’ 241

- Medieval Hebrew ניטל nitål, lit. ‘taken’ (cf. Biblical Hebrew ניטל nitål ‘was taken’), indicating that Jesus was taken from Judaism, see also חג hanititational, lit. ‘a holiday of the taken’ or ‘a holiday which was taken’ (cf. Wexler 1990: 60). Modern Hebrew ניטל nitel referring to ‘Christmas Day’ was used by Agnon (1962: 70). Even-Shoshan (1997: 1150c) and Klein (1987: 414c) claim that the etymon is Latin natalis (i.e. מיטל is a mere loanword from Latin). They ignore the co-influence of Hebrew ניטל nitål ‘taken’ or of Yiddish ניטל nitl, itself a PSM of Hebrew ניטל nitål ‘taken’, as well as Latin natalis. Supporting the hybridizational view is the existence of [i] between the [n] and the [t], cf. the possible [i] insertion in Hebrew פולין polin ‘Poland’ (see below).

The following are other anti-Christian PSMs devised by Jews:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>European</th>
<th>Medieval Hebrew</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>sacrament</strong></td>
<td>ניטל תמא</td>
<td>שקר טמא</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cf. Latin sacramentum</td>
<td>sheqer tame</td>
<td>‘lie’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(documented 1600, see Wexler 1991: 40)</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ניטל</td>
<td>תמא tame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nitål</td>
<td>‘contaminated’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>European</th>
<th>Yiddish</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>St Thomas</strong></td>
<td>ניטל תמא</td>
<td>שוקר טמא</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cf. German Sankt Thomas</td>
<td>שדוקה תמא</td>
<td>שוקר tame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>shóyt tame</td>
<td>‘St Thomas’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>‘contaminated’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>תמא tame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth noting that such forms of ‘travesty’ are not limited to cross-lingual creations. Consider the following intra-lingual cases of lexical engineering. Medieval Hebrew בית תפלה bet tipål, lit. ‘house of tastelessness’ (cf. Biblical Hebrew תפלה tipål ‘tastelessness’, Yiddish tifla), refers to ‘church’ (documented 1382, Wexler 1991: 39-40; cf. Even-Shoshan 1997: 1961b). The doublet בית תפלה bet tipål is modelled upon Hebrew בית תפלה bet taqillål ‘house of prayer’. One might say that the result was a minimal pair: בית תפלה bet tipål ‘church’ (negative, non-Jewish) and בית תפלה bet taqillål ‘house of prayer’ (positive, Jewish). Following this line, Medieval Hebrew חג hanig, lit. ‘reeling, trembling, horror’ (cf. Isaiah 19:17), refers to ‘non-Jewish holiday’, as opposed to Hebrew חג ‘(Jewish) holiday’ (cf. Yiddish יומין / yontev ‘Jewish holiday/festival’, from Hebrew חג ‘good day’). The doublet חג–חגא is an imitation of the dichotomy between Aramaic pašhô ‘Easter’ (originally also ‘Passover’, cf. Rabbinic Hebrew פסח pašach) and Hebrew פסח pašah.
‘Passover’. Consider also the Yiddish form of this manipulation: Yiddish חוג also refers to ‘non-Jewish holiday’. Similarly, Ashkenazic Hebrew kéyšakh, Yiddish kéyšakh, is based on the Hebrew root כִּסֵּה k.s.h. ‘cut down’ and refers to ‘Easter’. It is modelled upon Yiddish pasch ‘Passover’, cf. Hebrew paschah. Thus, the coinage can be conceived of as serving to differentiate between the two parallel vernal holidays.

But the Jews were not the only group to engage in rejective PSM. An anti-Christian (intra-lingual) rejective PSM produced by Muslims is каніsat alqumāma, lit. ‘Church of Rubbish’, referring to ‘Church of Resurrection’, as following:

| Arabic | Medieval Arabic | Arabic
|------|----------------|------|
| كنيسة الفقمة | كنيسة القيامة | كنيسة قورة | kanīsat alqumāma | kanīsa 'church' | kanīsat alqumāma | kanīsa 'church'
| ‘Church of Resurrection’ | ‘Church of Resurrection’ | ‘Church of Resurrection’ | (in Jerusalem) | (cf. the root) | (cf. the root) | (cf. the Encyclopedia of Islam 1978: iv:545b) |

This Arabic example leads to Jewish PSMs designed to reject Islam.

2.2 Anti-Muslim rejective PSMs concocted by Jews

Lexical engineering by Jews has not been restricted to rejecting Christianity. Consider the following anti-Muslim PSMs:

| Arabic | Hebrew | Hebrew
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>رسول</td>
<td>מסול</td>
<td>מסול</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>قرآن</td>
<td>קולט</td>
<td>קולט</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The tension between Muslims, Christians and Jews is, of course, an ancient one. However, such inter-cultural rivalries can be attested linguistically in the New World too.

### 2.3 Anti-Jewish etymology concocted by ‘Black Jews’

The rhetoric of the ‘Black Jews’, who belong to the *Israelite Church of God and Jesus Christ* (formerly known as *The Israeli Church of Universal Practical Knowledge*; address: 1941 Madison Avenue at 125th St., New York, NY 10035, USA) contains many subversive rejective etymologizations. In all their publications, there is an emphasis on the written word, typical of fundamentalists. Each claim is substantiated by references to the Old and New Testaments. As I have been particularly interested in their rhetoric, I have observed these Black Jews at one of their main propaganda centres: the intersection of Times Square and 45th Street in New York City. They gather there daily in order to persuade African-Americans and Hispanics to join their movement, preaching and distributing leaflets to their target audience (white people are welcome to listen but are not given leaflets). The Black Jews believe *inter alia* that they are the real Jews, that Jesus was black and that UFOs are the ‘Chariots of God’. They claim that the following are the real twelve tribes of Israel: Juda – the Negroes, Benjamin – West Indians, Levi – Haitians, Simeon – Dominicans, Zebulon – Guatemalans through Panamanians, Ephram – Puerto Ricans, Manasseh – Cubans, Gad – North American Indians, Reuben – Seminole Indians, Naphtali – Argentinians and Chileans, Asher – Colombians through Uruguayans, and Issachar – Mexicans.

The Black Jews believe that the Ashkenazic Jews are in fact Khazars in origin (i.e. people of Turkic origin who occupied a large part of southern Russia from the eighth century to the eleventh century). Thus, the main preacher suggested homiletically that the word *Khazar* derived from Hebrew וַיְזָרֵץ (יוֹזְרִי, 'pig' (cf. Yiddish וַיְזָרֵץוּ, 'pig') (obviously, he pronounced both with [k]). In other words, ‘white people are no more than pigs’.

On another occasion, the homilist insisted that the word *Jewish* (as used by white Jews) actually derived from *Jew* and -ish, the suffix meaning ‘round about’, ‘somewhere near’ (cf. *elevenish*) or ‘approaching the quality of, somewhat’ (cf. *yellowish*). Thus, ‘white Jews are not the real Jews, but are pseudo-Jews’.

*Schindler* (cf. Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List*, 1993; etymologically ‘shingler’) for the Black Jews is a *swindler*, justifying their belief that ‘the Holocaust is nothing compared to the tragedy of one hundred million black slaves’.

Listening to the Black Jews’ rhetoric, I was reminded of the lexicological anecdote which I have heard in Germany, according to which the German word for ‘key’ is *Schlüssel* (cf. schliessen ‘to close’), whereas the Hebrew word for ‘key’ is גֵּפֵן (cf. Israeli *maftéakh*; deriving from Hebrew גכֶתֶעֶק ‘to open’), because ‘the Jews were wandering thieves who opened the gates to farms, which had been locked by their German owners’. Consider also the etymologies linking *Jew* with *jewellery*, *German* with *germ*, *French* with *frog* (note here the influence of the French culinary delicacy
frog legs, and possibly also of *quoi quoi quoi*, reminiscent of a frog’s croaking). Consider also Russian *жидёнок* *zhidëñok* ‘Jewish child (derog.)’ (cf. *kike*), based on the model of *чертёнок* *chertëñok* ‘little devil’ and *ягнёнок* *yagnëñok* ‘lamb’ (Malkiel 1968: 232), and (the now rare) Spanish *pecadezno* ‘little devil’, modelled on (the now rare) *judezno* ‘Jewish lad’ and *morezno* ‘young Moor’ (ibid.).

Such philological rationalizations were conducted by Friedrich Nietzsche – to ground his moral theory. For example, in the highly (if perhaps fancifully) etymological First Article (Chapters 4-5) of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887) (cf. 1966: ii:774-7), Nietzsche suggested that there was a link between lexical items such as:

- German *schlecht* ‘bad’ and *schlicht* ‘plain, common’ (cf. 1966: ii:774-5) (Note that in pre-late eighteenth century Yiddish literature, נשעךט *shlekhṭ* meant ‘simple’)
- Latin *malus* ‘bad’ and Greek *mélas* ‘black’ (ibid.: 776)
- Gaelic *fin* ‘gentle, fine’ and its earlier form, which meant ‘blond’ (ibid.: 776)
- Latin *bonus* ‘good’ and *duonus* (< *duo* ‘two’) ‘duellist, fighter’ (cf. *bellum–duellum–duen+lum*) (ibid.: 777)
- German *gut* ‘good’, *göttlich* ‘god-like’ and *gotisch* ‘Gothic’ (ibid.: 777)

## 2.4 Othering and Apollonianism

The most basic motivation for rejective lexical engineering is OTHERING, defining and securing one’s own (positive) identity through (the stigmatization of) the ‘Other’. The ‘Other’ is what permits us to discover – and even constitute – the ‘self’. The self is defined thanks to the mirror reflection that the Other represents. In other words, we define ourselves through the ‘Others’.

Instead of the ‘thinking I’, epitomized in Descartes’ (1637) revolutionary phrase *Je pense, donc je suis* (*cogito ergo sum*, ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist’, a.k.a. ‘I think, therefore I am’), Lévinas (1972) begins with an ‘ethical I’. According to Lévinas, the self is possible only with its meeting of the Other. (The self is seen and defined thanks to a deep ‘shock’ which destabilizes one’s whole being until one discovers that one is defined as responsible for the Other. This discovery of oneself carries responsibility toward the Other without waiting for reciprocity. Thus the ‘Other’ constitutes the basis for ethics.) Following othering, an empowering sense of unity is created within a religious/national group, countering a perceived threat from outside the group.

Besides othering, lexical engineering can also be the result of APOLLONIANISM (see *la tendenza apollinea* ‘Apollonian tendency’, Pisani 1967: 160 and Zuckermann 2004). I use the term Apollonianism in a general sense denoting the wish to describe and create order, especially with unfamiliar information or new experience. An updated, albeit frivolous, example of this general tendency is the story about the South Dakotan who went to Athens and was happily surprised to find out that the Greeks are
fans of NASA’s projects: wherever he went, he saw the name Apollo. 6 As this anecdote shows, the ‘Apollonian tendency’ would also seem to include a significant dimension of ethnocentricity.

Specifically in linguistics, Apollonianism is manifested in justifications for the use of a word and in the craving for meaningfulness. Consider the perception of naïve young Israeli readers of the name דוקטור סוס (cf. Dr Seuss [ˈdɔktə(r) sus]), the pseudonym of Theodore Seuss Geisel, an American author and illustrator of children’s books (1904-91). Many Israelis are certain that he is ‘Dr Horse’ since Israeli סוס sus means ‘horse’. I have heard an etymology that this arises from the prevalence of animals in Dr Seuss’s stories. This ‘misunderstanding’ might correspond to Haugen’s general claim with regard to borrowing, that ‘every speaker attempts to reproduce previously learned linguistic patterns in an effort to cope with new linguistic situations’ (1950: 212).

Apollonianism often includes a significant dimension of ethnocentricity. But not necessarily. When travelling, I often ask locals trivia questions to find out what they know about world affairs. In Fiji I asked my taxi driver, who took me to Navala village: ‘Have you heard of Clinton?’ ‘Yes!’, he answered. ‘Do you know of Kennedy?’ ‘No!’ ‘How about Chomsky?’ I continued. ‘Yes!’, he said, to my great surprise (How come a taxi driver in Fiji knows Noam Chomsky?). ‘What do you know about Chomsky?’, I said. ‘It is from China’, he retorted. ‘You eat with it!’… The phonetic appropriation of Chomsky as chopsticks is Apollonian.

One may argue that othering and Apollonianism contradict each other, as othering is defining oneself vis-à-vis the other whereas Apollonianism is defining the other by appropriation to one’s own Weltanschaung and reference-point system. I propose two solutions for this alleged paradox. First, complementary distribution: lexical engineering is sometimes the result of othering and other times the result of Apollonianism. Second – and more spectacularly – Apollonianism can be seen as ripples within the ‘tsunami’ of othering. In other words, lexical engineering often encompasses both processes simultaneously.

2.5 Other motivations and effects of rejective lexical engineering

There are many other reasons for lexical engineering and etymology. The playfulness of PSMs in Hebrew, Yiddish and Israeli can be linked to the Jewish midrashic tradition of homiletic commentary on the Hebrew scriptures, in which puns, or the use of serendipitous similarity between distinct words, were employed in the service of interpretation. In later generations too, wordplay has been a conspicuous feature of Jewish oral argumentation – cf. פילפל pilpel, which should be distinguished from the universal ‘Apollonian tendency’. Producing witticisms (in both the general and the contemptuous sense of the word), which create humour at the expense of another, and often at the expense of oneself, is cherished in Judaism (known also for its self-deprecation).
Regarding the effect of rejective lexical engineering, my intuition suggests that in Judaism, theo-linguistic metaphors, etymology and lexical engineering might perform sublimation, i.e. they might release negative energy towards the 'enemy' and thus reduce or neutralize possible violence among the 'lexical manipulators'. In other words, cross words, not swords or make words, not wars. Alternatively, lexical engineering might be a symptom of pacificity rather than a cause for it. All that said, this chapter does not attempt to provide evidence for such a 'pacific claim', and the relative pacificity of the Jews throughout history can obviously be explained in other ways. Furthermore, it is hard to provide sociological insights for lexical engineering concocted in the past as there is no possibility of interviewing and surveying speakers. Still, it would be undesirable to reject 'socio-philology', i.e. socio-linguistic research of the past. Future research should analyse whether current etymological and lexical manipulations, for example by the Black Jews, really reduce possible violence among those who produce them, as well as among their listeners.

One of the main motivations for rejective PSM is ICONICITY, the belief that there is something intrinsic about the sound of names/words. The very iconicity might be the reason for refraining from translating Hallelujah and Amen in so many languages, as if the sounds of such basic religious notions have to do with their referents themselves – as if by losing the sound, one might lose the meaning. Compare this to the cabbalistic power of letters, for example in the case of gematria, the method of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures by interchanging words whose letters have the same numerical value when added. A simple example of gematric power might be the famous proverb niknas yayin yásâ sôd, lit. 'entered wine went out secret', i.e. 'wine brings out the truth', in vino veritas. The gematric value of יי 'wine' is 70 (י=10; י=10; נ=50) and this is also the gematric value of סוד 'secret' (ס=60; ו=6; ד=4). Thus, this sentence, according to many Jews at the time, had to be true.

A similar mechanism appears in the case of rejective PSMs. Consider Lithuanian Ashkenazic Hebrew בר ים ra dom (cf. Yiddish ra dam), lit. 'of bad blood' (from Hebrew בר ים ra dom 'of bad blood'). This is a toponymic rejective PSM of Polish Radom, the name of a town in Poland (approximately 100 km south of Warsaw), or of its Yiddish adaptation רדום (see Weinreich 1955: 609, Wexler 1991: 42). Thus, if a pogrom had occurred in Radom, it would surely have been rationalized by ra dam 'of bad blood'. Obviously, providing such an etymological explanation for the pogrom was regarded by some Jews as a mere play on words. However, others might have conceived of ra dam as having deep intrinsic truth, which might have been religiously and homiletically based. One should not forget that at that time it was a common belief that all languages were God-created and that Hebrew was the divine Ursprache.

In Dovid Hofshteyn’s poem Kïndershprukh (first published in 1920, cf. Shmeruk 1987: 261), Kiev is rhymed with Yiddish יי iv 'Job' (the ancient patriarch whose story forms a book of the Old Testament), from (Biblical) Hebrew ייוע bêyôn 'Job', the connotation being of distress and disaster, corresponding to the life story of the biblical Job. Such iconicity is implied jocularly in one of Amos Oz’s stories, where
a German-speaking Israeli is talking about going to the Negev (Hebrew נגב, a geographical region in southern Israel). Owing to a German-based final devoicing (although it is now established that the natural default of all speakers – not only of Germans – is final devoicing, cf. Singh 1987), instead of pronouncing נֶגֶו, she says נֶגֶף, which means ‘plague’. In reality, the Negev (especially for someone who was brought up in Germany) is a terribly hot desert, hard for living.

Yiddish צאר tsar ‘tsar’ (the Russian emperor) has sometimes been associated with (Hebrew> Yiddish צער tsar ‘grief, sorrow’, whilst Israeli צאר tsar ‘tsar’ was understood as an enemy (cf. Avinery 1946: 139) due to (Biblical Hebrew>> Israeli צָרָא צָרָא צָרָא צָרָא צָרָא צָר הַשָּׁמוֹרִים כְּשָׁר הַשָּׁמוֹרִים כְּשָׁר הַשָּׁמוֹרִים כְּשָׁר הַשָּׁמוֹרִים כְּשָׁר הַשָּׁמוֹרִים כְּשָׁר הַשָּׁמוֹרִים כְּשָׁר הַשָּׁמוֹרִים כְּשָׁר hosh šomōrīym ‘adversary and enemy’). The youth movement in Israel has sometimes been acronymized as צֶמַּעְשֶׁמֶנְסְקָה, lit. ‘The Young Guard’, was derogatorily acronymized as שְׁמֵעַ נְסִיקָה (cf. Yiddish שְׁמֵעַ נְסִיקָה and German Schmutz ‘dirt, filth’). Interestingly, this name was later adopted by the members (shmūtsnikim) themselves. This is certainly not the case with the following fin de siècle anti-American PSM:

Similarly, Israeli עם ריקני, lit. ‘empty nation’, can jocularly replace (International> Israeli עם ריקני amerikanī ‘American’. Compare this to the diametrically opposite Chinese 美国 MSC měiguó, Cantonese meiko, lit. ‘beautiful country’, a domestication of America. There are, however, also Chinese examples of rejective toponymic PSMs, used to propagandize against hostile nations. For example, the Turks were called in Classical Chinese 突厥 (MSC tūjué), consisting of 突 tū ‘attack, invade’ and 厥 jué ‘stone-launcher’ (sixth-ninth centuries). Mongol was allied with Classical Chinese 蒙古 (MSC měnggǔ), consisting of 蒙 méng ‘dark, obscure, abuse’ and 古 gǔ ‘old, locked, stubborn’ (introduced around the eleventh century but still used).

Similarly, Hawaiian Pukikí ‘Portuguese’ might constitute a xenophobic PSM deriving from English Portuguese and Hawaiian pukikí ‘strong, violent, impetuous’ (cf. Deroy 1956: 287). Note that Hawaiian k is inter alia the common replacement for English t and g (see ibid.: 243). Medieval Hebrew שללמה sāmālek ‘Amalek’, a nation epitomizing evil since the days of the Old Testament, was used to refer to hostile Armenia. Ostra (south-east of Rovno) – cf. Yiddish אוסטרה и Ostróg –
was referred to in Yiddish as "oraṭ haoreh oyṣ tøyṛor without Torah". However, by others (or by the same people in other times), it was Ashkenazic Hebrew oyṣ tøyṛor or Yiddish oraṭ haoreh ostória, i.e. ‘sign of Torah’ (cf. Bar-Itzhak 1996: 29). Hebrew haoreh, as well as Chinese 美国 ‘beautiful country; America’, lead us to a discussion of ‘politically correct’ PSM.

3. Adaptive lexical engineering

3.1 Politically correct PSM

The following are ‘politically correct’ toponymic PSMs:

- Ashkenazic Hebrew שפירא shapíro ‘Speyer’ (a town near Heidelberg) (cf. ibid.) <<
  1. Aramaic shappirā ‘beautiful’, the female form of Aramaic shappîr (Daniel 4:9) ‘handsome, pleasing, good, cheerful’ (Jastrow 1903: 1616b).
  2. Yiddish shpēyër, German Speyer (toponym).

The positive connotation of this toponymic PSM might explain its frequent appearance in many Jewish surnames appearing from the beginning of the sixteenth century, e.g. Shpiro, Shapirin, Shapira, Sapir (cf. Beider 1993: 532b).


- Ashkenazic Hebrew אדני הר adó(y)noy ‘Hrodna, Grodno’ (Weinreich 1955: 610)<<
  2. Yiddish ורגדנוי gródn, Polish Grodno, Belorussian Hrodna, Russian Гродно Gródn (toponym).

Consider Medieval Hebrew פולין pōlîn ‘Poland’. Blanc (1989: 57) claims that there is no reason for its [i] vowel, cf. Yiddish póyl, Polish Polska (polski ‘Polish’), Russian Польша Pól’sha, Italian Polonia, English Poland.10 This might lead to the conclusion that פולין is a semantically phonetic matching (henceforth, SPM) based on the Hebrew autochthonous root ליה l.y.n. ‘lodge, stay’. (As opposed to PSM, where the target language material is originally similar to the source language lexical item both
phonetically and semantically, in an SPM the target language material is originally similar to the source language lexical item phonetically but not semantically. The semantic rationalization is *ex post facto*.

Blanc mentions the well-known popular rationalization according to which ‘when the Jews came to Poland, the skies ordered them to stay there’. A detailed investigation is presented by Bar-Itzhak (1996: 30-7). However, my explanation, which may refute Blanc’s claim regarding the [i] in פולין, is that Yiddish pólyn was spelled in pre-Modern Yiddish as פולין or as פולין (cf. the current spelling פולין). Note that the pronunciation of (Medieval Hebrew) Israeli פולין by some speakers of Israeli, especially in the past, has been pólin, which resembles the German and the Yiddish forms (as distinct from polin). This pronunciation could serve to strengthen the orthographic explanation. It seems that Medieval Hebrew פולין was not an SPM *ab initio* but rather a phonetic adaptation that has been rationalized etymologically *ex post facto*. The success of the etymology is apparent among a few Israeli-speakers who pronounce ‘in Poland’ befolin – rather than bepolin – although this kind of (Hebrew) spirantization is in decline (in Israeli).

Another name for Poland is Israeli פולניה, which could be reanalysed as יהי פולניה ‘Here stays God’. However, the term might have been induced by analogy to other Israeli country names corresponding to the feminine form of the noun which refers to the person who lives in the country (or to the feminine adjective), cf. אנגליה ‘England’ versus אנגלייה ‘English (feminine)’, and רוסיה ‘Russia’ versus רוסייה ‘Russian (feminine)’. Consider also Italian Polonia ‘Poland’.

Such concoctions were very common among maskilim, followers of the Jewish Enlightenment movement Haskalah in Germany (1770s-1880s; cf. Aufklärung), led by the philosopher Moses Mendelsohn (1729-86) and the poet, linguist and exegete Naphtali Herz Wessely (1725-1805, also known as Váyzi). Thus, Maskilic Hebrew פאולא טוב פאולא טוב (Israeli poalá tavá), lit. ‘good workingman/labourer’ (an Aramaic expression appearing in the Talmud, as [pōyla tābā], cf. Jastrow 1903: 281b, 1145a), was the name some maskilim used for Poltava, a city in the Ukraine (south-west of Kharkov, east of Kiev), with a thriving Jewish community – cf. Yiddish פאולא טוב פאולא טוב. Russian Полтава Poltava and Polish Poltawa (cf. Avinery 1946: 135 and Klausner 1949: 97).

Maskilic Hebrew פָּסְנוּ חוֹזְנָה פסنو חוזנה (*po novi ze* (Israeli po naví ze), lit. ‘here (this) is my (beautiful) dwelling’, was an SPM of Yiddish פָּסֶנִי:פָּסֶנִי, the name of the town in Lithuania, famous for its Jewish centre (cf. Lithuanian Yiddish *pónivezh*) (used by Gordon 1883: 151, cf. Klausner 1949: 97). Maskilic Hebrew שָׂרְטַבֶּה שָׂרְטַבֶּה sar to(y)v, lit. ‘good ruler’, was an SPM of Russian Саратов Sarátov (the name of a city in Russia), cf. Weinreich (1955: 610fn). One of many anthroponymic positive SPMs was Maskilic Hebrew דָּבָּר פָּלָוָא דָּבָּר פָּלָוָא (Israeli rabát-peér), lit. ‘full (feminine) of glory’, for Robespierre. Compare it to various Chinese SPMs of names of famous Westerners.

A politically correct PSM word (rather than name), which gained currency in Israeli is הגא or הגאה geé ‘gay, homosexual’, as following:
Israelī גא geé ‘homosexual’ seems to override Israeli עליז alíz ‘homosexual’, which originally meant ‘gay (merry, cheerful)’ and thus constituted a calque of English gay. Note the semantic connection of the literal meaning of גא ‘proud’ to the use of English gay pride to imply an empowered homosexual community. For many lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered native speakers of English, signifiers which include the word pride immediately imply gay pride, cf. pride week (Israelī שבתת התאווה shvúa hagaavá), gay pride parade.

Israelī גא geé ‘homosexual’ is a politically correct PSM, which is in contrast to rejective PSM, which is politically incorrect. On another continuum from rejective PSM is what I call adoptive PSM. Below, in §3.3 I shall provide a religion-related example of what I mean by adoptive PSM. But first, let us briefly discuss a related philological problem.

3.2 Multiple causation versus multiple etymology

The story goes that Osama Bin Laden died and went to heaven. He was greeted by George Washington, who slapped him and yelled, ‘How dare you try to destroy the nation I helped conceive!’ Patrick Henry then approached and punched Osama in the nose. After that, James Madison entered and kicked him in the shin. He was followed by an angry Thomas Jefferson, who whacked Osama over the head with a cane. The thrashing continued as John Randolph, James Monroe and sixty-six other early Americans came in and unleashed their anger on the terrorist leader. Suddenly, as Osama lay writhing in unbearable pain, an angel appeared. ‘This is not what you promised me,’ Osama said to the angel. ‘Come on, Osama,’ the angel replied, ‘I told you there would be seventy-two Virginians waiting for you in heaven.’

This amusing anecdote brings to mind a recent case of a scholarly reanalysis of the Koranic ‘virgins’ promised to Muslim martyrs: Luxenberg (2000) suggests that حورين hūr ūrin, promised to the faithful in Suras 44:54 and 52:20 of the Koran, are not seventy-two ‘dark, wide-eyed (maidens)’, as most commonly believed, but rather seventy-two ‘white (grapes), jewels (of crystal)’. In other words, Muslim martyrs will not get virgins but sultanas(!), the latter with the meaning of white raisins. Note that in Syriac the word حور hūr, a feminine plural adjective meaning ‘white’, is associated with ‘raisin’.
If this alternative interpretation is true, or rather, if one can convince fundamentalist Muslims that it is true, it has the potential to change the course of history, at least in cases like the story of a Palestinian teenager caught in Israel with his penis wrapped with delicate white cloth just before attempting a suicide-bombing. When asked about it, he said that his mother had told him that when he arrives in paradise he would get seventy-two virgins and his penis needed to be ready.

One could consider the various analyses of Arabic ħūr to be a case of multiple etymology. Another multi-etymological lexical item is the internationalism pidgin, for which at least seven possible etyma have been offered, e.g. English business (as corrupted by Chinese; *OED*), Hebrew שידון *pidyon* ‘barter’, and Yago *pidian* ‘people’ (see Hall 1966: 7, Mühlhäuser 1986: 1, Aitchison 1981: 192, Todd 1974, Hancock 1979, Baker and Mühlhäuser 1990). Another famous example is the English expression OK, allegedly deriving from *ole korrek* ‘all correct’ or *Old Kinderhook* or Choctaw okeh, and so forth. Consider also macabre, which is traceable either to Hebrew מִנקָבָּבְיָה *makkabbi* (cf. Judas Macabré, *OED*) or Arabic مَقَافِیر maqa:bir ‘tombs, graveyards’.

In some cases, however, it is very hard to distinguish between multi-etymology and multiple causation. In other words, one should be careful not to mistake a multi-etymological lexical item for a PSM. Consider Rabbinic Hebrew פרָּקָר *påqar* ‘was heretic/irreligious/licentious, broke faith (masculine, singular)’, which has two possible sources:

1. Eponymous verbal morphemic adaptation of the name of the irreligious Athenian philosopher *Epíkouros* (*Επίκουρος*) ‘Epicurus’ (c.300 BC).
2. Metathesis of Rabbinic Hebrew פרָּקָר *påraq*, cf. Rabbinic Hebrew פרָּקָר על תורה *påraq *יול תְרָתָה ‘threw off the yoke of the Torah, became a heretic’, from Biblical Hebrew פרָּקָר *påraq* *יֹל* ‘shed responsibility’.

There are five possible analyses:

1. The etymon is (1) with (2) being a rationalization *ex postfacto*.
2. The etymon is (2) with (1) being a rationalization *ex postfacto*.
3. The etymon is (1) induced by (2).
4. The etymon is (2) induced by (1).
5. The origin is both (1) and (2), i.e. it is a PSM of *Epíkouros*.

### 3.3 Adoptive PSM: a tool for concealing the influence of non-Jewish traditions

In the following example, Wexler (1993) suggests that the Hebrew etymon is an *ex postfacto* interpretation serving to Judaize a foreign term (and tradition). In other words, his analysis is parallel to Analysis (1) above, and accordingly, if one confronts Wexler’s ‘foreign’ etymology with the traditional Hebrew etymology, the following is a multi-etymological lexical item.
• Eastern Yiddish חלה khál (Southeastern Yiddish khól) ‘braided (white) bread loaf (eaten on the Sabbath), hallah, chollah’ (cf. Western Yiddish ברכות / bärkhs ‘id.’ below; Both khál and bärkhs are mentioned in the list of lexical isoglosses between Western and Eastern Yiddish by Weinreich 1973: ii:390 and Katz 1983: 1025a) <<<

1. (Biblical) Hebrew חלה / hallà – cf. Yiddish khál, Southeastern (Ukrainian) Yiddish khól, Israeli khalá – ‘dough loaf offered to the priest in the Temple in Jerusalem’ (e.g. Exodus 29:2, 23). I believe that the etymon of Hebrew חלה is the Hebrew root חל / hall ‘hole’. However, Even-Shoshan (1997: 538a) points out that a possible etymon is the Hebrew root חלי / hall ‘sweet’, but note the dagesh in the ל of חלה / hallà, which I analyse as dagesh compensativum. The semantic explanation for the use of the root חל / hall might be the fact that the ancient hallah had a hole in it, like today’s bagel, so that it could be put in a high place in order to prevent mice and other animals from spoiling it. Biblical Hebrew חל / hall might be related to Akkadian ellu ‘pure’ (see Entsiklopédya Mikraít: iii:143), and Biblical Hebrew חלה / hallà sometimes referred to ‘unleavened bread’ (usually called in Hebrew מצה / matzáh), see Leviticus 8:26, Numbers 6:19. It is important to note that before it gained its current sememe, Yiddish חל / khal referred to the part of the (non-braided) loaf separated out for sacred purposes, a tradition known as מפריש חלה / mfrísh khalá ‘dedication/offering of hallah’.

2. Frau Holle, a goddess/witch in German folklore (recounted by the Brothers Grimm), one of whose tasks was to inspect the braids of girls during winter (Wexler 1993: 116-7) – cf. the German idiom Frau Holle schüttelt die Betten (aus), lit. ‘Mrs Holle is shaking the duvets’, i.e. ‘It is snowing’ (or, as children might say, ‘The old woman is plucking her geese’).

Figuratively speaking, Wexler suggests that the Hebrew etymon is the official stepfather of the Germanic word but not the biological father. Following this line of thought, the Jews needed this stepfather not in order to make the lexical item acceptable but rather in order to adopt officially the originally non-Jewish tradition denoted by the lexical item. The transplanted Hebrew etymon served as a passport. Like Nietzsche (see above), the iconoclastic Wexler uses philology in an attempt to kill some sacred cows, challenge our cultural mores and reveal the genuine origins of Jewish traditions and values. If Wexler’s foreign etymon is false, he can then be regarded as an etymological manipulator. Should it be true, however, it has the potential to change our perception of Jewish history (it is currently too shocking to be confronted by puritan Jewish institutions). His data are nonetheless valuable for the philologist since the Germanic (and, in other cases, Slavonic) etymon might have played a role in the creation of some of the phrases he discusses. That said, whilst Wexler seems to consider the Slavonic/Germanic etymon to be the only true origin and
the Hebrew to be a mere rationalization \textit{ex post facto}, my own tendency – being a strong believer in \textit{multiple causation} – would be to argue that \textit{both} Slavonic/Germanic and Hebrew took part in the nativization, thus constituting (adoptive) PSM. Hence, one could say that the lexical biography is \textit{mosaic}, not only \textit{Mosaic}.

4. Concluding remarks

Language is a guide to ‘social reality’.
\cite{Sapir:1949:162}

Some linguists regard any study related to popular etymology and humour as apocryphal. It is time to overcome this prejudice and to realize that humourous concoctions are indicative of personal and national attitudes, and that popular etymology shapes speakers’ perceptions and words’ connotations, and thus influences speakers’ actual lives. Since etym\textit{ology} often results in altering the meaning and associations of a word, it, in fact, changes the ‘real etymology’. Thus, it should not be overlooked even from a strict linguistic perspective, \textit{a fortiori} a cultural one.

Sociolinguistically, etym\textit{ology} is often more influential than ‘real etymology’. The English word \textit{bugger} originally denoted ‘Bulgarian’ (French \textit{bougre}, Latin \textit{Bulgarus}), referring to a sect of heretics who came from Bulgaria to France in the eleventh century. But since the real etymon (origin) is forgotten, Bulgarians don’t normally complain about the sodomite meaning of the word in English.

On the other hand, on 15 January 1999, David Howard, a white aide to Washington DC Mayor Anthony Williams, who happens to be black, used the word \textit{niggardly} – which means ‘miserly, stingy’ – in a conversation with two colleagues. Eleven days later, he resigned as rumours were spreading that he had used a racial slur. Speakers linked \textit{niggardly} to the politically incorrect \textit{nigger} and \textit{negro}, although, initially, \textit{niggardly} had nothing to do with \textit{nigger}.

A simple, non-charged example – as opposed to the cases above – is the tradition in some western Ashkenazic Jewish communities to eat cabbage soup on Hoshana Raba (the seventh day of the Sukkoth holiday, when every man’s fate for the coming year is irrevocably sealed in Heaven). The reason for this is the name of the Jewish prayer recited on this occasion, Hebrew \textit{kōl mevāser}, lit. ‘a voice announcing’, pronounced in Ashkenazic Hebrew \textit{kol mevāser}, which was playfully reinterpreted as Western Yiddish \textit{koul mit vāsər} (cf. Yiddish \textit{kul mit vāsər} ‘cabbage with water’, cf. German \textit{Kohl mit Wasser} (cf. Weinreich 1973: i:7, 192). Consider also Swedish \textit{Vår fru dagen}, lit. ‘Our Lady’s Day’, which used to be the signifier for Lady Day (25 March), the Feast of Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is allegedly the day on which the Virgin Mary was told that she was going to give birth to Jesus – exactly nine months before Christmas. Throughout time Swedish \textit{Vårfrudagen} has been reinterpreted as \textit{Våffeldagen}, lit. ‘Waffle Day’. Consequently, on that day Swedes traditionally eat waffles with jam or cream. The waffles are sometimes heart-shaped, and those who still know about the
connection with the Virgin Mary might rationalize the form in terms of the Virgin Mary’s heart.

Similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, Jimi Hendrix occasionally kissed a man on stage after singing ‘scuse me while I kiss the sky (from the song *Purple Haze*, 1967) because he was familiar with the mondegreen ‘scuse me while I kiss this guy (on mondegreens – misinterpreted or misinterpreted phrases resulting from a mishearing, especially song lyrics – see Zuckermann 2003: 248, 2000: 24). Such shifts in reality alone render popular etymology a worthy subject for research.

One might argue against the PSMs discussed above: *canis a non canendo* ‘The word *dog* is such because the dog does not sing/play’ (note the phonetic similarity between Latin ‘dog’ and ‘sing’) – cf. the ‘etymological fallacy’; or *lucus a non lucendo* ‘The word *grove* is thus named because it does not shine’. Thus, there are ugly women called *Bella* ‘beautiful’ (provided that *Bella* is not a phonetic matching of a Slavonic ‘white’, cf. the case of the ‘Red (i.e. Beautiful) Square’ in Moscow).

However, such a claim disregards the power of etymology, which in many of the aforementioned examples even results in a new lexical item.

Naphtali Herz Torczyner, who acted as the last president of the Hebrew Language Council (1942-9) and the first president of the Academy of the Hebrew Language (1953-73), wrote in 1938:

Our ancestors interpreted *ktav hanishteván* as ‘script that has been changed’ [mislinking *nishteván* with *nishtaná* ‘changed’], divided the word *pat-bag* into two and found within it the Hebrew word *pat* ‘bread’, and so on. These homiletic interpretations are far from the linguistic truth, in the same way as the interpretations of the Persian proper names in the Old Testament, so that even the name of the son of Haman the Wicked, *Parshandátá*, became a name of glory, the famous *parshán hadát* ['interpreter of religion'], for Rashi. These are nothing but rhetorical games [cf. *melitzah*, an intertextual citational style] and not part of the living and true language.

(Torczyner 1938: 8)

Whilst I completely agree that such ‘homiletic interpretations are far from the linguistic truth’, this chapter shows that such ‘games of rhetoric’ are in fact an integral part of a ‘living and true language’. In an article punningly entitled בלאשנות ובטלנות balshanút uvatlanút (i.e. ‘Linguistics and Idleness’), Torczyner – after phonetically matching his surname to Tur-Sinai (lit. ‘Mount Sinai’) – scorns laymen who think that German *privat* is derived from Hebrew *פרטי* (Israeli *pratti*) ‘private’ (see Tur-Sinai 1950: 5). While Tur-Sinai’s criticism is correct, he does not for a moment wonder whether such coincidental similarity can actually affect language itself, and not only meta-language.
Thus, Intl *private* increased the use of (Hebrew>) Israeli פִּרְטִי *pratí* ‘private’. Torczyner, as well as many other good linguists, is blinded by an indoctrinated linguistic desire to reprimand laymen for linguistic ignorance. The result is insensitivity, neglecting the fact that the subject of the matter, language, is, after all, spoken by these very laymen.

The linguistic analysis of popular etymology should not restrict itself to discussing cases of mistaken derivation because – again – popular etymology often results in a new sememe/lexeme. Most importantly, this chapter demonstrates that etymological methods are employed by educated, scholarly religious leaders. The distinction between créations savantes and créations populaires is not so categorical since many créations savantes are in fact ‘populaires’ (and many créations populaires are indeed ‘savantes’).

This chapter also shows the power of serendipity: coincidental phonetic similarity induces PSM, which might result among other things in the revival of an obsolete lexical item. Life and death – even for lexical items – are sometimes a matter of luck. Finally, then, lexical engineering reflects religious and cultural interactions and often manifests the attempt of a religion to preserve its identity when confronted with an overpowering alien environment, without segregating itself from possible influences. The result can be contempt (as in the case of rejective PSM) or ‘cultural flirting’ (as in the case of adoptive – or receptive – PSM).

Notes

1 I am grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation’s Research and Conference Center, Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, Italy, and especially to its manager Gianna Celli, for providing me with a conducive and enjoyable research environment. I also thank the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology (La Trobe University), Churchill College (Cambridge) and the University of Haifa. Finally, I am grateful to Simon Overall, Grace Brockington, Katherine MacDonald and Felicity Newman for their comments.

2 Note, however, the non-Semitic order in some Hebrewisms coined within Yiddish, e.g. יְשֵׁייחוּ bokhár ‘Yeshivah student’, cf. Israeli בָּחוֹר yeshivá. Structural compromises as in גִּילוֹן laven gilyôn and פָּרֹע עַמּוּד péeyr ámud are also apparent in Chinese. Consider Modern Standard Chinese 福特 fútè ‘blessing+special’, a domestication of *Ford*, indicating that buying this car is a serendipitous choice. Semantically, 特福 *těfú ‘special+blessing’ would have been better. The same applies to MSC 波音 bōyīn, lit. ‘wave+sound’, a domestication of *Boeing*; whereas 音波 *yīnbō ‘sound wave’ would have been a better semantic match.

3 Cf. similar claims by Koestler (1976) and Wexler (1993).

4 A similar case arose in March 2003, due to American anger over France’s refusal to support the US in its position on Iraq. On the cafeteria menus in the three House office buildings in Washington, the name of French fries appeared as freedom fries, and French toast as freedom toast (What about a freedom kiss?)
Cf. Apollinisch ‘Apollonian’ versus Dionysisch ‘Dionysian’ in Nietzsche’s works. Apollo, the beautiful sun-god of the Greeks and Romans, is symbolic of reason, whilst Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility of nature, is associated with wild and ecstatic religious rites.

The same applies to the Indian scholar who went to Rome and was happily surprised to find out that the Italians are fans of Sanskrit grammar: wherever he went, he saw Panini (Italian for ‘sandwiches’, as opposed to Pāṇini, the fifth-century BC Indian grammarian).

Cf. the story about the German Jew, a survivor of the Holocaust, who arrives in Roehampton (London) after the war, and enters a grocery store. While examining the oranges, he suddenly gets extremely upset when the grocer tells him: ‘The small ones are for juice’.

Compare these to Yiddish רָעָן nar ‘fool’, which was sometimes spelled as (Biblical) Hebrew רָעָן ‘boy’.

Cf. the same conjunction but in reverse order, וּמְגַן צֶנַּה in Ezekiel 23:24, 38:4.

English Poland may be a partial PSM since the paragogic excrescent d might have been introduced in order to imitate the existent word land, as in England.

I have met Israeli speakers who provided the etymology that the English initialism OK is an acronym of Hebrew אם כן omnâm ken, lit. ‘indeed yes’, but they were aware of the manipulative recalibration.

References


Descartes, René 1637. *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences* (Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason in the Search for Truth in the Sciences).


Nissan, Ephraim ms (2000). ‘The COLUMBUS Model’ (Part II of ‘Anticipatory Narrative Construal’).


Tur-Sinai, Naphtali Herz (see also Torczyner) 1950. ‘balshanút uvatlanút 1’ (Linguistics and Idleness 1). *Leschonenu La’am* 2 (4): 4-8.


Zuckermann, Ghil’ad 2008. *Israelit Safa Yafa (Israeli, a Beautiful Language)*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.