

Reading between the “Stars”: Comparing the Horoscope Pages in British and Bulgarian Women’s Magazines

Desislava ZAREVA
New Bulgarian University

Abstract

This article is a brief introduction of a research project focusing on the analysis of a specific media genre – the horoscope as it appears in women’s magazines published in the UK and Bulgaria in the year 2000 and a decade later, between 2011- 2013. It is divided into two main parts, the first one discussing the research aims and methods employed, the second outlining some of the results that are available at the moment of writing.

Keywords

horoscope, CDA, identity, women, magazines

The research

Several factors have provoked my keen interest in the horoscope as a media genre. The first and most important is the increased availability as well as the variety of horoscopes published in the Bulgarian press after the social changes in the late 80’s of the 20th century. The growing popularity of similar texts is noted in many of the former socialist states as well, which results in a growing body of research on astrology and its different aspects (Wodak 1997, Campion 2004, Furthmann 2006, Fehérváry 2007, Alekseev 2010). However, there are still areas that require a more in-depth analysis with regard to the nature of the horoscope as a media genre, its changing status in the Bulgarian culture and the meanings assigned to it in a more global context of media production and consumption.

The second factor is my personal interest in the horoscopes published in the media and my habit of consulting the “stars” column regularly – a practice shared by many women worldwide and extensively discussed in literature (Fichten and Sunerton 1983, Blackmore and Seebold 2001, Fehérváry 2007). My initial desire to seek both “wisdom” and entertainment (as most female readers claim to do) has been replaced by a more academic interest in how the horoscope works: e.g. why it is so much “loved” by the media, how it is cast, if its content and structure depend on the author or on the

publishing policy of the media, if there is a particular stock of images and linguistic devices writers tend to employ and if these differ across cultures. As an attempt to find some answers, a small scale research was carried out in 2000 based on examples from the Bulgarian and British press with a focus on women's magazines (Zareva 2013, Zareva forthcoming a.). Its outcomes constitute the starting point for the current study of the horoscope.

In brief, the aim of the research is to question the assumption that the horoscope in the media is easily recognizable as a specific media genre with its own structure and discursive characteristics; prove it or refute it on the basis of empirical language data from Bulgarian and British printed and electronic media targeting female audiences. More specifically, I set out to identify the elements that constitute the horoscope as a mass media discourse genre in its own right; the recurrent patterns in language use both in British and Bulgarian texts; account for any culture (as well gender) specific values that seem to be projected in the horoscopes from my corpus; and compare the outcomes in the two cultures.

My corpus comprises a total of 713 horoscopes. It should be pointed out that for the purposes of this research Meyer's broader understanding of the term "corpus" seems appropriate, so what is referred to as a "corpus" in this paper should be "considered a collection of texts or parts of texts upon which some general linguistic analysis can be conducted" (Meyer 2004: xi-xii). However, corpora do not presuppose a random collection of texts for further linguistic analysis, rather they should be "carefully created so that those analyzing them can be sure that the results of their analyses will be valid" (Meyer 2004: xiv). Corpus linguistics as a research methodology available to language analysts has established certain principles for data collection and processing ensuring that reliable corpora are designed. Some of these informed the creation of this corpus.

To begin with, the choice of items is determined by the main research question, namely identifying the structure and the discursive characteristics of the horoscopes as a media genre mainly focusing on the recurrent patterns in language use both in British and Bulgarian texts. Hence the corpus comprises horoscopes collected from two different types of mass media: paper and online magazines published in two different cultural contexts: British and Bulgarian. The choice of

entries is limited to examples from press targeting female audiences in both countries. Finally, since the research focuses on the structure and the discursive features of horoscopes as a media genre, full texts are included.

Secondly, my corpus should be viewed as a special-purpose one, being “intended for more specific uses such as the analysis of a particular genre” (Meyer 2004:44), so it comprises items that best correspond to the working definition of the horoscope as being one of the popular media genres.

Thirdly, it should be considered a balanced one in that it aims to include equal numbers of items from the British and the Bulgarian media. In addition, it seeks to cover examples from women’s magazines targeting different female readership groups (e.g. similar age group; similar social status, etc.) in both countries. Finally, whenever it is technically possible it comprises examples of printed and online texts from international brands (e.g. British and Bulgarian editions of *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Grazia*, etc.) released in both countries.

Though the corpus consists of items collected at two distinctive time periods (year 2000, 2011-2013) it still can be categorized as a synchronic one, as it falls within the acceptable time-frame of five to ten years.

As mentioned earlier, the scope of the corpus is limited to 713 items, which may appear to be a restricted number especially if some valid generalizations need to be made about the genre of the horoscope. However, a larger scope would have been time- and effort-consuming for a single researcher to process in great detail, so my intention has been to compile a comparatively detailed yet manageable collection of texts that represent the kind of linguistic and non-linguistic devices one is likely to encounter when reading a horoscope page in a Bulgarian or British women’s magazine.

Finally, further selection criteria that have been applied to the media are the availability on both markets (whenever magazines published in 2000 were not in circulation in 2011-2013, they were replaced with some that best match in terms of content, target audiences, etc.); mission statements and slogans as an alternative source of information about magazines’ policies and target audiences and price, for cases when official information about distribution and circulation is not publicly available.

The three main research methods employed in this study are Content Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Corpus Linguistics. The Content analysis is used to identify the significance each publication assigns to the horoscope, while CDA allows looking at the horoscope as a discourse that is produced, circulated, distributed and consumed in society, i.e. analysing it within a broader framework of a particular context. Corpus linguistics as a method aids the creation of the corpus on the one hand and enables the identification of the key linguistic items used by the horoscope writers in both cultures on the other.

I would like to discuss CDA in more detail as, for a number of reasons, it proves to be the most appropriate research method for my study.

First of all, CDA has been in use for about three decades: it emerged in the late 1980s and since then has become one of the most influential and visible branches of discourse analysis (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 447) and nowadays is an established research method with a lot of followers (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000, Wodak & Meyers 2001, Baker & Galasinski 2001).

Secondly, despite the variety in formulation of the main goal, there seems to be an agreement among the CDA scholars that they aim to analyse the “opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak & Meyers 2001: 2). And since CDA “aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)” (Wodak & Meyers 2001: 2), that, to a great extent, also defines the domains of research CDA deals with: among these are political and economic discourses, ideology, racism, immigration, dimensions of identity, literacy, education, media discourses, advertising and promotional culture etc. (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 451-452). Some of these – media discourses and identities – coincide with the subject of my own investigation.

Thirdly, CDA allows the use of personalised models for analysis depending on the focus of the research (for a detailed discussion see Wodak & Meyers 2001: 14-30). Moreover, CDA “can be conducted in, and combined with any approach and subdiscipline in the humanities and the social sciences” (Van Dijk 2001: 96). This, on the one hand, gives researchers freedom of choice while selecting

the “right” research method. On the other, that task can prove challenging and the research outcomes can be easily put to question.

Two other general CDA issues seem relevant to the aims of my research project: the multidisciplinary nature of this approach and its reliance on certain branches of linguistics (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 447-450). I cannot but agree with van Dijk’s observation that

the complex, ‘real-world’ problems CDA deals with also need a historical, cultural, socio-economic, philosophical, logical or neurological approach, depending on what one wants to know (Van Dijk 2001: 97).

Yet, the main focus in CDA falls on the linguistic realization of the discourse. As he puts it,

whatever other dimensions of discourse CDA deals with, CDA as a specific form and practice of discourse analysis obviously always needs to account for at least some of the detailed structures, strategies and functions of text and talk, including grammatical, pragmatic, interactional, stylistic, rhetorical, semiotic, narrative or similar forms of verbal and paraverbal organization of communicative events
(Van Dijk 2001: 97).

CDA as a research method is discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Zareva forthcoming) with all aspects that inform the creation of my own personalized framework for analysis taken into consideration. What I offer here is the framework itself, which provides the basic stages of my corpus analysis and the tools I applied in the process.

Table 1. Framework for critical discourse analysis of horoscopes from British and Bulgarian women’s magazines

A.	Structuring stage
1.	General characterization of each magazine/website from the corpus: ownership, position on the market, readership, circulation;
2.	Overview of the type of discourses in each of the selected media (both Bulgarian and British) explicitly dealing with the following two domains: a) what women value, and b) astrological issues.

- *Make a list of articles (and other items including images and advertisements) dealing with topics of women's values and astrology.*
- *Make a summary of the themes covered by the horoscopes in each magazine; pay attention to frequency of their appearance; pay particular attention to absence of themes.*
- *Allocate single themes to thematic areas (by assigning themes to broader categories and sub-categories: e.g. relationships, leisure, work, health, etc.)*

B. Fine analysis stage: text-oriented analysis

1. Analysis of the graphic layout
 - *Graphic layout, including pictures and graphs (where available);*
 - *Headlines, headings, subheadings (where available);*
 - *Structure of each horoscope in units of meaning;*
2. Linguistic analysis: levels of language
 - *Vocabulary, idioms, sayings, clichés, borrowings, syntactic structures*
 - *Collective symbolism, metaphorism;*
3. Linguistic analysis: textual functions
 - *Examples of ideational function: transitivity (participants; processes)*
 - *Examples of interpersonal function: mood, metalanguage, modality and forms of address;*
 - *Examples of textual function: logic and composition, cohesion (reference, conjunctions, ellipsis, lexical cohesion), theme-rheme, given-new;*

C. Concluding stage: concluding interpretation of the entire discourse strand investigated with reference to the processed material used (structure and fine analysis/analyses).

1. Ideological statements based on contents.
 - *What kind of understanding of expected women's behaviour underlies the set of horoscopes?*
 - *What notion of women's values does the set of horoscopes convey?*
2. Other striking issues coming out of the analysis.
3. Interpreting the horoscopes within the same culture (Bulgarian; British)
4. Interpreting the horoscopes across the two cultures (Bulgarian vs. British).

Some outcomes

I now turn to some of the findings my research has led to so far.

They should not be considered final as parts of the corpus are still in the process of investigation.

- 1) Horoscopes do constitute a regular and easily recognizable rubric in all the magazines in both cultures. Though they may vary in content, layout or authorship, the horoscopes occupy a specially designated space

in each issue, regardless of the year of publication. Among the magazines from the corpus only one of the Bulgarian ones stopped publishing the horoscope both in the paper and the online editions. Typically, the horoscope is signposted in the content page under headings such as “in every issue”, “regulars” etc. and occupies the last pages of the medium.

2) As already mentioned, the layout may vary across magazines and years of publication but the rubric is made distinctive and is easy to recognise. Among the most widely employed visual means are: use of different typeface, font and colour for headings, subheadings and advertised telephone lines; use of graphic images of the horoscope signs, photos, grids for each separate entry, etc.

3) Size may vary as well, the most common number of words being 50 – 150. However, there are editions where horoscopes occupy up to 10 pages, including lunar cycles, day-to-day predictions for each sign, together with some beauty tips and health advice.

4) Functions the horoscopes appear to fulfill are: flattering the reader, giving advice, warning, reproaching, as well as giving some predictions about possible future events.

5) Linguistic means range from astrological jargon, abstract vocabulary, personality adjectives to concrete nouns and action verbs, usually depending on the personal style of the horoscope writer and the policy of the magazine. These are the items that yield major differences in both cultures. However, this is also the aspect which has not been fully analysed yet and the data available at the moment is insufficient to comment on.

6) Among the most common grammatical items found in the horoscopes from both cultures are present and future forms of the verbs, if-clauses, passive voice, modal verbs, and imperative verb forms. Here too, further research needs to be carried out in order to provide a fuller picture.

7) In terms of common topics the following seem to frequent the horoscopes in both cultures: marriage, family, health, work; luck, self-control, self-reflection, self-development, spending money, going out, parties and clubbing, fine food and drinks, change and SEX. The prevalence of some at the expense of others seems to depend on the target audiences of each magazine, for example all editions of *Cosmopolitan* (Bulgarian and British, paper and online, from years 2000 and 2011/2013) favour sex and sexual activities as a main topic.

8) Favoured qualities female readers of horoscopes may like to identify with are: being pro-active and taking the initiative in any sphere

of life, self-reliance; keeping fit; taking care of appearance; straightforwardness; imagination; honesty.

References

- Alekseev, V. (2010) Алексеев В. (2010) *Звезды не лгут? Астрология: научный и богословский анализ*. Издательство Посох.
- Barker, C. and D. Galasinski (2001) *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis. A Dialogue on Language and Identity*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Blackmore, S. and M. Seebold (2001) "The effect of horoscopes on women's relationships", *Correlation*, 19 (2), 17-32.
- Blommaert, J. and C. Bulcaen (2000) "Critical Discourse Analysis", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 29, pp. 447-466, Annual Reviews Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/223428> (22/11/2010 06:10h).
- Campion, N. (2004) *Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement: The Extent and Nature of Contemporary Belief in Astrology*, Bath Spa University College.
- Fehérváry, K. (2007) "Hungarian Horoscopes as a Genre of Postsocialist Transformation", *Social Identities*, 13:5, 561 – 576.
- Fichten, C. and B. Sunerton (1983) "Popular Horoscopes and the 'Barnum Effect'", *The Journal of Psychology*, 114, 123-134.
- Furthmann, K. (2006) *Die Sterne lügen nicht: eine linguistische Analyse der Textsorte Pressehoroskop*, Göttingen: V&R Unipress.
- Meyer, C. (2004) *English Corpus Linguistics. An Introduction*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Van Dijk, T. (2001) "Multidisciplinary CDA: A Plea for Diversity", in Wodak and Meyer, M. (ed) (2001), pp.95-121.
- Wodak, R. (eds.) (1997) *Gender and Discourse*, London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Wodak, R. and M. Meyer (eds.) (2001) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Zareva, D. (2013) "Values: Written In The Stars; Promoted By The Media", *20th ICC Annual Conference "Language, Identity and Culture in Language Education" Conference proceedings, edited volume*, pp. 143-151, ICC the international language association, URL: <http://www.icc-languages.eu/media/documents/>
- Zareva, D. (forthcoming a.) "What's in Your Stars: The Horoscope as a Media Genre", Sofia: Sofia University.
- Zareva, D. (forthcoming b.) "Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis of Horoscopes from British and Bulgarian Women's Magazines", Sofia: New Bulgarian University.

◆ REVIEWS ◆

1. Wex, Michael. *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All Its Moods*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006, xiii + 303 pp.

by Raluca-Ioana ANDREI

The book written by Michael Wex, a Canadian professor, novelist and translator specialised in Yiddish, paints a portrait of the Yiddish language with emphasis on the way it reflects Jewish thinking, culture and religious practices. As a consequence, the analysis deals both with linguistic aspects, focusing mainly on vocabulary structures, and also with important elements of tradition and culture which, according to the writer, have helped shape the language itself. The book is divided into 13 chapters and commences with a presentation of the context in which Yiddish has developed and then elaborates on the different instances and environments the language is used in and how it behaves in each of those cases. Every chapter of the book has a title that usually contains an expression or idiom from Yiddish and an explanatory subtitle, clarifying the topic. It is also worth mentioning that the register is semi-formal (and sometimes informal), since despite dealing with academic matters, it is meant to make the Yiddish language accessible to an unversed readership as well.

The analysis is preceded by two sections, Acknowledgements (p. ix) and Introduction (pp. xi-xiii), the latter clarifying on the references used. It is hence established that the transliteration system used is the one developed by the YIVO⁶² and also mentions the dictionaries the author has referred to⁶³. Also, it is in this section that the writer accounts for his choice to structure his work as a “series of

⁶²*Yiddisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (The Yiddish Scientific Institute)* founded in Vilna, Lithuania in 1925 and relocated in New York in 1940, dealing with research on Yiddish linguistics and the cultural history of Jews in Eastern Europe, Germany and Russia

⁶³ The small number of existing Yiddish dictionaries and the differences between them calls for clarification

portraits rather than a biography”, as a different approach would have proved “depressing”.

Chapter 1, “Kvetch. QueC’est? – The Origins of Yiddish” (pp. 1-27), is introduced by an anecdote that, according to the writer, lies at the heart of the philosophy behind the Yiddish language. On a train ride from New York to Chicago a man sits across from a Jew (who could speak Yiddish) who starts whining and complaining about being thirsty. Not being able to withstand the noise any further, the man brings the Jew two cups of water from the nearby water cooler and after drinking both cups, the latter resumes complaining about how thirsty he had been until the man brought him the drinks. The author uses this anecdote to argue that complaining (kvetching) embodied by the well-known Yiddish interjection “oy” has its roots in the Bible and is a sort of a survival mechanism for the “chosen people”, a nation exiled since the beginning of its history. “Judaism is defined by exile and exile without complaining is tourism, not deportation” (p. 6). Complaining is, thus, a constant reminder of misplacement. The following sections of the chapter provide basic details about Jewish culture: the Talmud, a very brief history of the Yiddish language, its connection to German and influences from Hebrew and Slavic languages, explained both through examples and through analysing of the key cultural differences between Jews and the gentiles⁶⁴.

In the second chapter, “Six Feet Under. Baking Bagels – Yiddish in Action” (pp.29-46), the author further develops on how Yiddish was formed and how its influences merged with Jewish culture and tradition to create the resulting language. He begins by arguing that the Slavic influences of Yiddish are important evidence that the vernacular is not just a dialect of German, as some linguists have claimed. Furthermore, he describes how Slavic words evolved in Yiddish according to the region they were used, as well as how they were adapted according to the register. Together with translations of famous works that have been assimilated into the culture and the philosophy the lies at its heart, Yiddish sets itself apart from German in almost all aspects except grammar and form. Also, this chapter provides a classification of the main “areas of Jewish life” that

⁶⁴ Term for non-Jews, mainly used in the historical and geographical context of Yiddish for Christians

inspired the language and in what way they have done so (pp. 39-46): Phenomena, Literal Meanings and Religious and Traditional Life.

Chapter 3, “Something Else to Kvetch about –Yiddish Dialects” (pp. 47-57), is the last chapter that analyses the history of the language. It introduces and describes the three main dialects of Yiddish: *galitsyaner* (mainly in what is now Romania, Hungary and parts of Austria, Poland and the Ukraine), *poylish* (the rest of Poland) and *litvish* (Lithuania, the Ukraine)⁶⁵. Wex further accounts for the diversity of the language explaining the influences it was subjected to from the languages spoken in these Eastern European territories. Therefore, the way pronunciation varies from one dialect to another is confusing for native speakers.⁶⁶

The following two chapters, Chapter 4 “Pigs, Poultry and Pampers –The Religious Roots of Yiddish” (pp. 59-90) and Chapter 5 “Discouraging Words –Yiddish and the Forces of Darkness” (pp. 91-115), discuss the connection between language and spirituality. Religious imagery extends, in the case of the Jewish people, to the material world as well. To prove this, the author analyses the phrase used for toilet paper, *asheryotserpapir* (“the paper of He who has created”) connecting it to the Talmud. Another idea that is emphasized in this section is that of segregation. In order for the Jews to maintain their identity in the world of *gentiles*, it is important for them to separate themselves not only through practices and traditions, but through language as well. *Havdole, or lehavdl*, the term for separation, is used also in mid-sentence to separate things that are different (p. 62). Further examples are provided to illustrate how the same concept has a special name according to whether it belongs to the Jewish world or not. Moreover, when it comes to evil, another important aspect of Judaic spirituality contributes to the shaping of the Yiddish language: the power attributed in the Torah to names and to the idea that the concept or the object expressed cannot be separated from the name. As a consequence, the way the language deals with the dark forces is by describing them in antithesis, which, at the other end of

⁶⁵ It is hard to define the borders of each dialect, since the borders in Europe have shifted dramatically throughout history.

⁶⁶ However, the academic form of the language as it is taught today in Universities is *litvish*, mainly because the YIVO was founded in Vilna (now Vilnius).

the spectrum, makes its speakers seem indifferent and unenthusiastic about the joys of life.⁶⁷

One of the most famous aspects of the Yiddish language, curses, is examined in Chapter 6, “You Should Grow Like an Onion – The Yiddish Curse” (pp.117-139). Michael Wex explains how curses are elaborated differently by speakers of the vernaculæ: rather than wishing an enemy all the worse in the world, one wishes them the best and then hopes that it is all spoiled, that the cursed will not be able to enjoy it: “May God help you, you should always be healthy and strong, and always be asking what the weather is like outside” (p.131) is most likely a wish for someone to be alone for their entire life, or even to suffer from mental illness. Such associations represent, however, the more playful, harmless side of Jewish curses. There are also some curses that are more serious and some that are more straightforward, although equally creative (“may your eyes crawl out of your head”, p.136 –from a series of curses referring to the body).

Chapter 7, “If It Wasn’t for Bad Luck –Mazl, Misery and Money” (pp. 141-158), takes a step further into the material world, as it looks at vocabulary that deals with money and luck. The Yiddish-speaking Jewish world is characterised by poverty, the author argues, and so a great deal of its lexicon consists of words, phrases and idioms that can be used to describe life in poverty (*pauper*, *begging*, *bad luck*, etc.). Wex also mentions at the end that there were also wealthy people speaking the language, yet the majority (who were extremely poor) were the ones who played a more important role in shaping the language.

In Chapter 8, “Bupkes Means a Lot of Nothing” –Yiddish and Nature” (pp. 159-173), the author attempts to dismantle the myth surrounding the lack of vocabulary related to nature in the vernacular. This is widely believed mainly because of the lack of descriptions of natural landscapes in the literature, yet Wex argues that because Yiddish literature had to go “from Chaucer to James Joyce in the space of about sixty years”, it had to bypass a lot of steps that other writing cultures had centuries to develop. He dedicates the rest of this chapter presenting vocabulary for fauna and flora and the way in

⁶⁷ The traditional “Eh” that answers questions like “How was the movie?” is positive in Yiddish (p. 91).

which it changed once most of the Yiddish speaking cultures moved to the United States and Canada.

Another important aspect of material life, food, is discussed in Chapter 9, “Making the Tsimmes – Food. Kosher and Treyf” (pp.175-196). After presenting ways to describe food that is *kosher* – prepared according to the Jewish Law – and *treyf* – non-kosher, the author proceeds to analyse names of the major food groups – meat, dairy and what is in-between and also names used for various traditional dishes. The reoccurring theme of the connection between the material and the sacred is as present in issues concerning food as it is in any other aspects of Jewish life. The strict culinary rules (no mixing dairy products and meat, waiting between meals containing either of them, etc.) are colourfully described in the language of the *kvetch*.

The final section of the book is comprised of the four last chapters: “A Slap in the Tukhes and Hello –Yiddish Life from Birth to Bar Mitzvah” (pp.197-220), “More Difficult than Splitting the Red Sea – Courtship and Marriage” (pp. 221-248), “Too Good for the Goyim – Sex in Yiddish” (pp. 248-264) and “It Should Happen to You – Death in Yiddish” (pp.265-286). In this section, Wex looks at life, from birth to death, and at how language and culture intertwine. It is both a description of Jewish traditions and practices and of the lexicon that describes them, analysing the education a person receives, the processes and traditions involved in marriage and courtship, the words and idioms used to express ideas connected to intimacy and affection and the connection between sex and death (which, as the author comically notes, preceded psychoanalysis).

Born to Kvetch has caused some controversy in the academic world due to its lack of political correctness and occasional vulgarity, yet as Dovid Katz declared in a review for the *Jewish Chronicle*, “If you don’t have the stomach for real Yiddish, steer clear”⁶⁸. Hence, the book attempts to offer its readership an authentic image of the language that is in danger of disappearing, despite having been so widely spread until the Second World War, merely a century ago.

One respect in which the book proves a total success is the author’s ability to bring the Yiddish language of Eastern European

⁶⁸ <http://www.thejc.com/arts/books/20760/born-kvetch-yiddish-language-and-culture-all-its-moods>.

history closer to the world of today, through a semi-formal, semi-academic style filled with pop-culture references (“a classic episode of *The Dick van Dyke Show*” – p.159). However, this choice of register represents both an advantage and a disadvantage. Considering the fact that basic aspects of Jewish tradition are explained, the targeted readership is not expected to know too much about *Yiddishkeit*, yet I feel that one must be at least somewhat acquainted with the Jewish sense of humour in order to be able to fully grasp Wex’s subtle ironies. This notwithstanding, while the humorous side of the book is exquisite, the academic explanations sometimes seem devoid of the substance required by a text offering information. Consequently, a reader enthusiastic about Jewish Culture is often left with a “says who?” or “says where?” series of questions, left unanswered due to the absence of a bibliography.

One further merit of *Born to Kvetch* lies in how well the author manages to select examples that illustrate his point and also contribute to authentically characterising the Yiddish language (for example, *darfn vi a lokh in kopf*, “I need it like a hole in the head” p.85). After explaining why the Jews *kvetch*, he essentially illustrates just how far the complaining and whining can extend, to virtually all walks of life, to both material and spiritual existence. Much like the thirsty man in the anecdote at the beginning of the book, Yiddish speakers are never satisfied and, if they are, the “oy” merely turns into an “eh”.

All in all, Michael Wex’s book caters for readers hoping to learn about the Yiddish language, yet also in need of a break from the stiff academic style. Although, in retrospect, this provides a more Jewish and perhaps genuine feel of the language, it fails to offer substance in the form of biographical information. If there is one thing that *Born to Kvetch* embodies, it is the refusal of Yiddish speakers to be like everybody else, their unique, *kvetchy* view of the world, which entails bits of wisdom served in a traditionally rule-bending style.

References

- Weinreich, Uriel. *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English dictionary*. New York: Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, 1968. Print.
- Katz, Doved. “Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All Its Moods.” *The Jewish Chronicle*. N.p. 8th October 2009, n.d. Web. 23rd April 2014.