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## ON THE ORIGIN OF ENGL. S(C)HNOOK

In the middle of this century, American dictionaries of English began to record the word *s(c)hnook*. A decade or two later the word appeared in British dictionaries as well. H. Wentworth and S. B. Flexner illustrate its usage with the following citation: 1949: *Don't be such an apologetic schnook*.<sup>1</sup> The year 1949 might be taken as a kind of conventional date of the appearance of this neologism in English.

At the beginning nearly all dictionaries mark *s(c)hnook* as slang. However, if one can rely on the evidence of some dictionaries of the seventies and eighties, one might believe that the word tends to become stylistically neutral as it is presented without any label.<sup>2</sup>

Opinions vary concerning the origin of *s(c)hnook*. A number of dictionaries indicate that its origin is unknown<sup>3</sup>. Other dictionaries assume that it might be of Yiddish origin<sup>4</sup>. Still others indicate that it goes back to the Yiddish word *shnok* / *shmok*, which, in its turn, has developed from the German *Schmuck* directly or via the Slovenian *šmok*<sup>5</sup>.

These treatments of the etymology of *s(c)hnook* seem dubious if one takes into consideration the impact of Lithuanian Yiddish upon the formation of the literary variety of the eastern Yiddish dialects in general and the influence of Lithuanian

<sup>1</sup> Dictionary of American Slang/Comp. and ed. by H. Wentworth, S. B. Flexner. N. Y., 1960. (The same — in the Second supplemented edition of 1975).

<sup>2</sup> The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language. New College Edition/Ed. by W. Morris. Boston, 1975. Oxford American Dictionary by E. Ehrlich et al. N. Y., 1980. The American Heritage Dictionary. Second College Edition. Boston, 1982. Chambers 20th Century Dictionary. New Edition/Ed. by E.M. Kirkpatrick. Edinburgh, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language. Springfield, Mass., 1981. The World Book Dictionary/Ed. [by C. [L. Barnhart, R. K. Barnhart. Chicago, 1976. Vol. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language. Second College Edition/Ed by D. B. Guralnik. Cleveland, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language/Ed. by W. Morris. Boston, 1970. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language. The Unabridged Edition. N. Y., 1981. Chambers 20th Century Dictionary. New Edition/Ed. by E.M. Kirkpatrick. Edinburgh, 1983.

on Yiddish in particular<sup>6</sup>. The list of about 400 Lithuanian loan-words in Lithuanian Yiddish, made up by Ch. Lemchenas in the nineteen-thirties, records *snuke*, *šn(i)uk*, *snuck(al)e*, found in contemporary spoken Yiddish in various parts of Lithuania. The word was also recorded in Couronian (Kurland) Yiddish by Z. Kalmanovič. The literary variant of these forms is *šnuk*. The loan-word goes back to the Lithuanian *snukis* "muzzle, snout"<sup>7</sup>.

This must have been one of the most widespread Yiddish Lithuanianisms, current also outside the territory of Lithuanian. It was already recorded in 1916 in Jüdisches Wörterbuch, compiled "mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der gegenwärtig in Polen üblichen Ausdrücke." It is of interest that this small dictionary of about 8,000 entries presents the word in two forms — first, *snuk*, a form, nearer to the Lithuanian pronunciation, and, second, — *šnuk*<sup>8</sup>. It is also found in the Yiddish-Lithuanian dictionary containing about 12,000 entries<sup>9</sup>. The fact that the word is recorded in small dictionaries manifests its frequent occurrence in speech.

The loan-word was recorded in the Estonian Yiddish of Tartu, by P. Ariste, among a score of Lithuanianisms<sup>10</sup>. It is also found in the Yiddish-Russian and Russian-Yiddish dictionaries, published in Minsk and Moscow resp.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the listing of *s(c)hnook* in a dictionary, published in New York, attests its currency outside the boundaries of eastern European Yiddish<sup>12</sup>.

The phonological affinity of Lith. *snukis*, Yid. *šnuk* and Engl. *s(c)hnook* raises no doubts (the interchange of *s* and *š* has already been indicated by H. L. Strack and Ch. Lemchenas). The semantic relationship, however, is more complex:

Lith.	"a term. relating to an animal"		
Yid. a)	"	"	"
b)	"	"	"to a person" (in contemptuous use)
Engl.	"	"	"

<sup>6</sup> In der Entstehung der jiddischen Schriftsprache kam den östlichen Mundarten eine besonders grosse Rolle zu, vor allem dem sogenannten Litwakischen, d. h. Litauisch-Jiddischen, ... C. J. Hutterer. Die germanischen Sprachen. Budapest, 1975. S. 353.

<sup>7</sup> Lemchenas Ch. Lietuvių kalbos įtaka Lietuvos žydų tarmei. Lietuviškieji skoliniai. V., 1970. P. 117. 124. Sabaliauskas A. Lietuviški (baltiški) žodžiai kitose kalbose // Baltų kalbos ir jų tyrinėjimo metodai. V., 1978. P. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Jüdisches Wörterbuch von H. L. Strack. Leipzig, 1916. These and other Yiddish words in this paper are cited in Roman characters transcribed from the Hebrew alphabet.

<sup>9</sup> Mertis A., Greifas L. Žydiškai-lietuviškas žodynas. V., 1940.

<sup>10</sup> Ariste P. // Baltistica. 1970. T. 6, sąs. 2. P. 251.

<sup>11</sup> Рожкинд С., Шкляр Г. Еврейско-русский словарь. Минск, 1940; Лернер Р. Я. и др. Русско-еврейский (идиш) словарь. М., 1984.

<sup>12</sup> Thesaurus of the Yiddish Language by H. Stutchkoff/Ed. by M. Weinreich. N. Y. 1950.

The semantic evolution is difficult to follow in greater detail because the above-mentioned dictionaries of Yiddish give only one meaning of *šnuk* — “snukis, рыло, Schnauze, etc.” It should be borne in mind that these are mainly small-size dictionaries, recording usually only the main meaning of Yiddish words. Nevertheless it is worth noting that this loan-word is widely used in the curse phrase *chazerše šnuk* (literally “swine snout”)<sup>13</sup>. Cf. also P. Ariste: *šnuke* “Schnauze” (das Wort kommt hauptsächlich als Schimpfwort *xazerse šnuke* “Schweinrüssel“ vor)<sup>14</sup>. The same is the meaning and usage of *chazeršer šnuk*, familiar to speakers of modern Lithuanian Yiddish. A similar semantic development and symbiosis of the primary and the metaphorical meanings can be seen in the Russian *морда*, German *Maul*, English *mug*, etc.

English dictionaries record the meaning current in contemporary English usage: “a stupid, or easily deceived, suggestible person, etc.” It is noteworthy that in this meaning *s(c)hnook* is much closer to the Yid. *šnuk* than to the vulgar *šnok/šmok/Schmuck*, suggested by some dictionaries as its ultimate source. The diminutive forms *smucke* and *smuckale*, recorded by Ch. Lemchenas, are very similar in their usage to the Engl. *s(c)hnook* with its connotation “somewhat affectionate, implying that the person is more to be pitied than scorned and a realization that a person may seem foolish because he is meek, gentle and idealistic”<sup>15</sup>.

It may be noted in passing that *šmok* “penis” (from German *Schmuck*) is also familiar to Lithuanian Yiddish<sup>16</sup>. Its usage, however, is strictly differentiated from *šnuk*. The former is treated as a very vulgar curse-word, while the latter is quite neutral in this respect. According to some informants — speakers of present-day Lithuanian Yiddish — *šnuk* means “a person, who is importunate, not pleasant, poking his nose into other people’s affairs, miserly, etc.” in its figurative usage. The English meaning of *s(c)hnook* must have developed from these or similar earlier metaphorical meanings of the Yid. *šnuk*.

Thus, the affinity of form and the similarity in meaning lead to the conclusion that *s(c)hnook* was adopted into English from the Lithuanian *snukis* via Yiddish *šnuk*.

<sup>13</sup> Lemchenas Ch. Op. cit. P. 117.

<sup>14</sup> Ariste P. Op. cit. P. 251.

<sup>15</sup> Dictionary of American Slang, sub *schnook*.

<sup>16</sup> Hence the Lithuanian curse-word *šmokas*, found in some dialects.