

Sabrina Lowney

SLAV 425 A

24 January 2017

Language Commentary 1

### The Significance of *Kvetch* In Ashkenazi English

Although Ashkenazi English is not a distinct language, Ashkenazi Jews form a distinct American subculture, and as such, Ashkenazi modes of speaking differ from those of Standard American English and the dominant culture they represent. Ashkenazi English diverges from the standard primarily in cultural values and ways of looking and responding to the world, and also, to a lesser extent, in lexicon. One of these lexical items, the verb *kvetch*, is particularly noteworthy because it is both lexically distinct and forms a core part of Ashkenazi culture. Therefore, I have chosen the verb *kvetch* as the focus of this paper.

*Kvetch* is present in many, if not most, English dictionaries, as *kvetch* has been partially adopted into Standard American English—by “partially” I mean that it is a fringe word that most non-Jewish people have heard, but only a few non-Jews actually use and understand. In English dictionaries, *kvetch* is invariably described with some form of “to complain incessantly.” Merriam-Webster, for instance, defines it as “to complain habitually.”

In her book, *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words*, Anna Wierzbicka explains the meaning of the verb *complain* as follows, using natural semantic metalanguage:

- (a) I say: something bad is happening to me
- (b) I feel something bad because of this
- (c) I want someone to know about this

In addition to the above definition, I would add that people feel negatively about complaining. If, for example, a teammate in someone's group project was not contributing, that someone might go to the teacher. If this situation were to present this "someone" in a positive light, one might say that they "informed the teacher," or "told the teacher," rather than using the more negative "complain," which conjures up images of acting immaturely.

However, *kvetch* in Ashkenazi English does not mean "complain," habitually or otherwise, and it is not negative or immature. Rather, *kvetching* forms a fundamental base of pessimism upon which Ashkenazi culture rests. As Michael Wex says in "Born to Kvetch," "[Kvetching] is not only a pastime, not only a response to adverse or imperfect circumstance, but a way of life that has nothing to do with the fulfillment or frustration of desire" (Wex 2). Jews do not wear rose-colored glasses, and as a long-loathed minority we are all too aware of our limited control over our society and our circumstances. *Kvetching*, as Wex says, is "a way of exercising some small measure of control over an otherwise hostile environment" (Wex 2). It is also a way of bonding with other members of our community; like gossip, *kvetching* is a way to affirm interpersonal ties and connect with other people over shared or similar situations.

The primary purpose of *kvetching* is to make the person doing the *kvetching*, the *kvetcher*, feel better via bonding with another person. This is accomplished in one of two fashions; firstly, the *kvetcher* could *kvetch* in order to let off steam, so that they don't have to expend the energy to bottle up their emotions, and with the goal that the listener will feel sympathetic towards them and their plight. This helps bond the *kvetcher* and listener by strengthening interpersonal ties through the communication of emotions.

Secondly, the *kvetcher* could *kvetch* in order to elicit commiseration. This is similar to the first way, but here the listener is meant to *kvetch* as well about some comparable issue. Thus, interpersonal bonds between the *kvetcher* and the listener are strengthened through shared adversity—even if that adversity is something minor. As Wex points out, “While answering one complaint with another is usually considered a little excessive in English, Yiddish tends to take a homeopathic approach to kvetching: like cures like and kvetch cures kvetch” (Wex 4). The ideal response to a *kvetch* is another *kvetch*, which then itself may provoke another *kvetch*, a circle of *kvetches*, a conversation, or even better, an argument that is steeped in *kvetching*.

*Kvetching* can be about something bad that happened, regardless of whether that bad thing has since been solved, or something bad that could happen or that people say is going to happen. *Kvetching* is based in dissatisfaction with the way things are as compared to how they could be or are supposed to be, along with pessimism that is rooted in the knowledge of history; Jews are acutely aware that our history is, like the children’s book, a series of unfortunate events, and we know that it will likely continue being so. What is one to do about it? Well, *kvetch*; as Peggy Orenstein says in her memoir “Waiting for Daisy,” “I’m a Jew—I consider kveching my birthright, a way to connect to those I love, to communicate.” When one gives voice to their worries, complains, and dissatisfactions, they are opening themselves up to feeling bolstered by the support of their family and their community.

With all of this in mind, I have attempted to create a suitable definition for the verb *kvetch*, as Wierzbicka did for *complain*, using natural semantic metalanguage. It is as follows:

*kvetch*

- (a) someone (X) thinks something like this:

- (b) something bad happened to me
- (c) I feel something bad because of this.
- (d) I want Y to know about this.
- (e) X thinks like this:
- (f) if Y knows about this
- (g) Y will say something to me
- (h) I will feel good because of it
- (i) X says something to Y because of this.
- (j) Y says something to X because of this.
- (k) X feels something good because of this.

Component (a) describes the “mental” basis for *kvetch*. Component (b) accounts for how *kvetching* is a response to some external factor, while component (c) shows that this external factor causes X to feel something negative, such as worry, disappointment, or dissatisfaction. Component (d) shows that *kvetching* has the goal of communication—one cannot *kvetch* alone. Components (e) through (j) reflect the interpersonal nature of *kvetching*, and leave open a variety of ways that Y can respond that would qualify as affirming bonds and interpersonal ties. Lastly, component (k) shows that the goal of *kvetching* is for the *kvetcher* to feel better.

To summarize, although *kvetching* is a fringe term in Standard American English, it is very different from the Ashkenazi term. This Ashkenazi verb is very important to Ashkenazi culture and is important to understand if one wants to comprehend the Ashkenazi worldview and patterns of communication. I firmly believe that if Wierzbicka was to study Ashkenazi culture, she would affirm that *kvetch* is a key word, and one that cannot easily be translated.

Works Cited

"Kvetch." *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 25 Jan. 2017.

Orenstein, Peggy. *Waiting for Daisy: A Tale of Two Continents, Three Religions, Five Infertility Doctors, an Oscar, an Atomic Bomb, a Romantic Night, and One Woman's Quest to Become a Mother*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2007. Print.

Wex, Michael. *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All Its Moods*. New York: St. Martin's, 2005. Print.

Wierzbicka, Anna. "Australian Key Words and Core Cultural Values." *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.