



INTRICACIES OF YIDDISH

■ By Elan Drescher

Last August it was reported that a number of Olympic athletes were being treated with heated glass cups. The *Canadian Jewish News* observed that this cupping therapy is alluded to in a well-known Yiddish saying, 'It will help like cupping a corpse', one of many Yiddish expressions of futility. A *CJN* reader from Montreal wrote to correct what he thought to be an error in the translation. According to him, it should be 'It will help like a dead cupping'; that is, it is the cups that are dead (because they have no suction). The reader adds that this was a common expression in his home when he grew up.

It turns out that the reader's translation is wrong ('dead wrong', according to another *CJN* correspondent), but I can understand where he's coming from. I also grew up in a home where Yiddish was spoken, and I also heard many phrases whose general meaning I understood, but which I would not have been able to accurately translate word for word. The expression in question is a particularly nice example of how Yiddish sentence construction differs from English, in ways that could easily mislead a listener with a shaky grasp of Yiddish grammar. The Yiddish expression is given in (1), with a word-for-word English gloss:

(1) *Es vet helfn vi a toytn bankes.*

It will help like a dead cupping glasses.

We can see how someone might conclude that that the expression refers to 'a dead cupping', as if *a toytn* were an adjective modifying the noun *bankes*. But this cannot be right. In Yiddish, an adjective must match a noun that it modifies in (a) number, (b) gender, and (c) case. *A toytn bankes* fails on every count: (a) *a toytn* is singular, but *bankes* is plural (the singular is *banke*); (b) *toytn* is masculine, *bankes* is feminine; and (c) *toytn* is in the dative case, but *bankes* is a subject and requires an adjective in the nominative.

To obtain a more accurate English translation we must depart from the Yiddish word order, as in (2):

(2) It will help like cupping glasses help a dead person.

A key to correctly parsing the expression in (1) is to realize that Yiddish can leave out words in places where English cannot, and can order words differently from English. Thus, *bankes* is the subject of an omitted, but understood, second *helfn* 'help', and *a toytn* is the object of this verb. Also, *a toytn* can stand alone, unlike the English phrase 'a dead', which we would have to add something to: 'a dead person', or 'a dead body', or 'a dead one'.

Making the Yiddish expression even more complicated, the object *a toytn* has been moved in front of the subject *bankes*. Yiddish has a freer word order than English in this respect. Yiddish word order has actually influenced some Jewish dialects of English (or 'Yinglish'), which have a construction that has been called Yiddish Movement. Examples are given in the mini-dialogues in (3), where fronted objects are underlined:

(3) a. Q: How's your son? A: Don't ask. A sports car he wants.

b. Q: Would you help him? A: Are you kidding? A finger I wouldn't lift for him!

Returning to our Yiddish expression, once we see how it's constructed, we can appreciate that it has an economy and complexity that contribute to its charm. It is the intricacies of a language, of which even native speakers may not be consciously aware, that are most liable to be lost in translation.