

On the Slavic-influenced syntactic changes in Yiddish

Slavic influence on the phonology, morphology, and lexicon of Yiddish is well-documented (Weinreich 1980, Wexler 1987, *inter alia*). In contrast, syntactic innovations triggered by contact with Slavic languages are rarely investigated. This paper examines the extension of verb-second (V2) from root clauses to embedded clauses, as in (1), which was suggested to be Slavic-influenced by Weinreich (1958) and Santorini (1989, 1992). However, no satisfactory explanation has been offered so far for how Slavic languages—which lack V2 in either main or embedded clauses—could have engendered such a change in Yiddish. Specifically, two issues that have not been resolved conclusively are addressed here: first, what exactly is the nature of the change in Yiddish (in parametric terms: which parameter values have been reset); and second, what structures in which Slavic language(s) triggered this change.

I assume, following Santorini (1989), that the changes in Yiddish word order occurred in two stages. First, the headedness of VP and TP was switched from right- to left-headed, resulting in the emergence of VO and INFL-medial structures. This change occurred across Yiddish varieties and elsewhere in Germanic. At this transitional stage, Yiddish had V2 in main clauses like German, but its embedded clauses could have only a nominative subject in Spec-TP. The true embedded V2 pattern emerged only as a result of the second change that allowed the Spec-TP to be occupied by non-subject elements. This latter change occurred only in Eastern Yiddish, at the time when Slavic influence became evident in other components of the language. In this paper, I develop a parametric account of this change, analyzing V2 not as an “atomic” phenomenon controlled by a single parameter but rather as a result of several parameters each set a certain way. I show that only two of these parameters were reset under the influence of Slavic, while others already had V2-compatible settings before Slavic entered the picture.

Specifically, I modify the parameter system proposed by Bailyn (2004); see (2). I propose that under the influence of Slavic, the Tense domain parameter was reset from CP to TP, thus making all main clause configurations embeddable. The resetting of the Tense domain parameter necessitated the setting of the Weak NOM case parameter (which is undefined for CP-Tense domain languages). The new setting of the Weak NOM case parameter, also influenced by Slavic, allowed nominative case to be licensed “downward” in a position c-commanded by T°. This led to the possibility of subjects staying low and non-subjects raising to Spec-TP, to check the EPP. I depart from Bailyn’s system in the treatment of V-to-T raising: instead of splitting its effects between two parameters (NOM = [+T] and Kind of EPP), I propose that V-to-T raising is controlled by a single parameter. (The Kind of EPP parameter reverts to a simpler EPP parameter, which controls whether Spec-TP must be occupied.) Crucially, I show that this modified parameter system produces better results for Russian, specifically for the Generalized Inversion constructions, the linchpin of Bailyn’s (2004) analysis. Going back to Yiddish, the V-to-T raising parameter was already set “+” at the transitional stage shared by Western and Eastern Yiddish, and remained unaffected by Slavic.

This diachronic parametric account allows me to identify constructions in Slavic languages that may have triggered resetting of parameters in Yiddish. Such constructions must: (a) have the default XP-V-S order, (b) be embeddable, and (c) be implicated in contact-induced change. I demonstrate that late-medieval Slavic languages had constructions that fit that profile: oblique predicative possessive constructions, see (3). Drawing on the work of McAllen (2011), I show that both West and East Slavic languages had such constructions for at least 250 years from the beginning of contact with Yiddish, allowing for Slavic elements to gradually penetrate Yiddish. Besides shedding new light on the synchronic and diachronic Slavic syntax and offering a novel account of the Slavic influence on the syntax of Yiddish, this study has important implications for the history of Jewish-Slavic contacts in Eastern Europe.

(1) a. ... oyb [oyfn veg **vet** dos yingl zen a kats].
 whether on-the way will the boy see a cat
 '... whether on the way the boy will see a cat' [Santorini 1992: 597-598]

b. * ... oyb [oyfn veg dos yingl **vet** zen a kats].
 whether on-the way the boy will see a cat

(2) Bailyn (2004), parameter system ("IP" replaced by "TP"):

NOM = [+T]	Tense domain	Kind of EPP	Weak NOM case	Language
+	TP	XP	-	English
-	TP	XP	-	French
-	TP	XP	+	Icelandic, Yiddish
+	TP	XP	+	Russian
	TP	X°	-	Greek, Spanish/Italian
	TP	X°	+	Celtic, Arabic
	CP	XP		German, Swedish
	CP	X°		??

(3) a. dative-PPC (Old Czech; McAllen 2011: 32)
 neb mu bieše dci jediná.
 for him.DAT was daughter.NOM one.NOM
 'for he had one daughter'

b. u-PPC (Old Russian; McAllen 2011: 55)
 i braka ou nixъ ne byvaše
 and marriage at them not was.IMPERF.3SG
 'and they did not have marriage'

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