

Describing Yiddish word order using topological fields

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In this paper, the notion of ‘topological fields’ will be explored to give an account of Yiddish word order. I will show why the use of such a notion seems appealing for the description of the Yiddish word order phenomena and I will explore Yiddish data to define which topological fields are needed.

The notion of topological fields was introduced by the Germanic grammatical tradition (Drach (1937), Diderichsen (1966) among others). It allows a description of constituent order in terms of position within the clause instead of using syntactic relations. Indeed, in the Germanic languages, constituents are ordered as a function of the places they may occupy in the clause. For example, one of the word order phenomena characterising these languages is the so-called V2 phenomenon: the finite verb is placed in frontal position (first or second) in matrix-clauses. The first position, if occupied, is not restricted to a special constituent: any topicalised constituent may be placed in this position on condition that there is only one constituent. It thus seems more efficient and economic to describe this phenomenon by saying that these languages have a clause pattern with a specific field reserved for the inflected verb rather than using linear precedence.

Yiddish also shows word order phenomena characteristic of the Germanic languages: i) it exhibits the V2 phenomenon, ii) the order of constituents is partially free (Scrambling: Ross (1967)). It thus seems natural to give an account of these phenomena using topological fields, as proposed by Kathol (2000). However, the language is specific within the Germanic family in the fact that these word order phenomena are generalised : first, the V2 phenomenon is not only attested in matrix clauses, it occurs in all types of clause (as in Icelandic). I will therefore argue that only one field is needed for the inflected verb (in contrast to the other Germanic languages which have two).

Second, Yiddish displays a notably freer order after the second position. In German, objects and dependants can permute freely but they always precede the lexical verb if the latter is not in second position. In contrast, Yiddish exhibits data where objects/dependants occur either before or after the lexical verb, whether they be full elements or pronouns.

I will thus show that a topological account of Yiddish word order leads to the use of fewer topological fields. Indeed, it seems that only three different positions in the clause are necessary: one for the finite verb, an optional first position for topicalised constituents and another field for all the remaining constituents.

References

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