

# Describing Yiddish Word Order Using Topological Fields

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**ABSTRACT.** The Topological Model proposes a treatment of word order by dividing the sentence into positions (fields) instead of considering the syntactic relations between words/constituents, thus enabling the capture of the particularity of the word order of the Germanic languages. Yiddish displays many of the Germanic characteristics; this paper proposes therefore an application of the Model to account for its word ordering and considers the legitimacy of such a treatment for the Yiddish language.

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Topological Model was introduced by the Germanic Grammatical tradition, West Germanic as well as Scandinavian (Drach 1937; Diderichsen 1966, for instance), for the description of word order. It has proven itself to be an efficient tool that enables the capture of the fact that these languages have a relatively free word ordering while obeying strict syntactic constraints at the same time. It has thus also been used in formal frameworks such as HPSG (Kathol 2000; Müller 1999), Dependency Grammars (Debusmann and Duchier 2001; Gerdes and Kahane 2001, among others) or TAG (Kinyon et al 2006, for instance).

Following the suggestion of Kathol (2000), this paper proposes an adaptation of a topological model for the Yiddish word order. Indeed, this language is part of the Germanic family and shares many of the Germanic characteristics regarding its word order configuration (V2 phenomenon, Scrambling). A topological treatment seems therefore natural to consider. However, we will see that the resulting account, although perfectly possible, appears more complex than necessary considering the data, thus raising the question of the adequacy of the use of topological fields for a language like Yiddish.

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The paper is organised as follows: in section 2, I expose the Topological Model and its use in the Germanic languages, section 3 gives a description of the Yiddish data, in section 4 an adaptation of the Topological Model is proposed in order to account for the Yiddish data and section 5 concludes the paper with a discussion on the legitimacy of the use of Topological Fields in Yiddish.

## **2 The Topological Model and its use in the Germanic Languages**

The topological model was born out of the observation that the Germanic word order is better accounted for in terms of positions within a sentence rather than considering the constituency relationship between the elements. Indeed, the Germanic languages are characterised by the fact that they have a semi-free word order. Each sentence has, therefore, several potential orderings where some elements (e.g. the verb) occur in restricted positions, accordingly to strict syntactic constraints inherent to the language. On the other hand, others (e.g. the arguments) may occupy different places, depending on how the information is structured.

The Germanic tradition thus gave an account of word order by dividing the sentence into positions (topological fields) that are linked to constraints restricting the type of the elements liable to occupy them. The main idea is that the restrictiveness of the constraints associated with each field shows the role of syntax in the word ordering: the more the constraints are restrictive, the more it reflects an inherent property of the language, which the syntax should account for. On the other hand, if the constraints are weak or inexistent, then the ordering is due to factors other than syntax.

This gives rise to the possibility of considering the Germanic sentences in terms of patterns, preventing the grammar from multiplying linear constraints that are not due to the language itself, but to the needs of communication.

### **How does the Topological Model work?**

The Topological Model predicts that the words/constituents of a sentence are distributed into ordered fields. The use of the different fields is defined according to the type of the sentence. In addition, words are placed in fields depending on two types of constraints:

- 1) on the number : the fields may be constrained by the number of elements/constituents that they host
- 2) on the nature/syntactic function of the constituents that the field may host.

It should be outlined that if a field is not required, it is not considered to be an empty space. Rather, the sentence pattern is given without the field. Furthermore, the topological fields are the only ordered elements in the grammar. This means that the constituents are ordered with respect to their placement in fields.

Consequently, if several constituents are placed in the same field, their order is not determined by the grammar.

The topological fields required for each language are defined as a function of the number of positions needed in order to describe the target language.

### 3 The Yiddish Data

#### Placement of the verb

Like the other Germanic languages (except for Modern English), Yiddish displays the so-called V2 phenomenon in matrix clauses: the inflected verb is placed in second position, the first position being occupied by a constituent that is then topicalised, with the exception of the subject, which is the default constituent in this position. This is shown in example (1).

(1)

- a. **hobn** gezen dem film nekhtn  
the children.NOM have seen the film.ACC yesterday
- b. gezen **hobn** di kinder dem film nekhtn
- c. dem film **hobn** di kinder gezen
- d. nekhtn **hobn** di kinder gezen dem film
- e. \*nekhtn di kinder **hobn** gezen dem film

‘The children saw this film yesterday.’

One may notice in (1)a-d that the first position is not constrained with respect to the nature of the constituent, nor its function<sup>2</sup>. Concerning the number of constituents, however, the ungrammaticality of example (1)e shows that only one constituent may precede the verb.

Nevertheless, this pattern is not the only one available for some types of sentence: the finite verb may also be in first position (henceforth V1) in the case of imperative sentences, polar interrogatives and ‘consecutive’ declarative sentences (i.e declarative sentences that express the logical or temporal consequence of what was said previously, see (2)b). Example (2) illustrates some of these possibilities:

(2)

- a. **hobn** di kinder gezen dem film nekhtn?  
have the children.NOM seen the film.ACC yesterday

‘Did the children see this film yesterday?’

- b. In the text preceding this sentence, the narrator goes to a village to read

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that, even though these sentences are semantically identical, they are not strictly equivalent regarding its information structure.

his poems. However, after his reading, no one reacts. The narrator interprets this absence of reaction as a sign of boredom due to the old-fashioned style of the poems he chose. The sentence is the consequence of his interpretation of the situation:

**hob** ikh aroysgetsoygn an ander bintl manuskriptn un declamirt...  
have I outtaken a different pile.ACC manuscripts.DAT and declaimed

‘So, I took a different pile of manuscripts out and declaimed...’ (Isroyl Mayofes, *Meyn kaboles-ponem in Kasrilishok*)

In Yiddish, unlike most of the Germanic languages, the V2 phenomenon does not only occur in matrix-clauses (or subordinates without conjunction), it is extended to all types of clause<sup>3</sup>, regardless of the presence or otherwise of a subordinating conjunction<sup>4</sup>:

(3)

a. jonas bedoyert az dos bukh **hob** ikh geleyent  
Jonas regrets that the book.ACC have I read

‘Jonas regrets the fact that I read this book.’ (Vikner 1995:72)

b. der lomp vos der mame **hobn** mir gekoyft iz tsebrokhn the  
lamp.NOM that the mother.DAT have we bought is broken

‘The lamp we bought for our mother is broken.’

The V1 pattern is also possible, but it is only attested in subordinate clauses without conjunction or in clauses introduced by an interrogative pronoun (here again, a V2 alternative is possible for each case):

(4)

a. ikh veys nisht far vos **hot** mendl oyfgegesn dos gants broyt  
I know not why has Mendl.NOM PART-eaten the entire bread.ACC

‘I don’t know why Mendl has finished the entire bread’

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<sup>3</sup> Although the verb is actually in third position if we take the position of the conjunction into account, this pattern is nevertheless referred to as V2 in the literature in order to show the parallelism between matrix and subordinate clauses: the verb has a fixed position and only one constituent (of unconstrained nature) may be placed between the conjunction and the verb.

Among the other Germanic languages, only Icelandic displays a behaviour similar to Yiddish. The V2 in subordinate clauses (with a conjunction) is not attested in the West Germanic languages and it occurs in very limited contexts in the other Scandinavian languages (see Vikner 1995; Kathol 2000 among others for details).

<sup>4</sup> Subordinating conjunction is understood here in a broad sense: it refers to any element introducing the subordinate clause, thus including complementisers, interrogative pronouns and relative pronouns.

- b. \*er hot gezogt az **hot** dos yingl genemt dem bukh he has  
said that has the child.NOM taken the book.ACC
- c. \*der yid mit vemen **hob** ikh geret nekhtn...  
the man.NOM with whom have I talked yesterday

The placement possibilities for the inflected verb are thus the same in matrix and subordinate clauses.

### **The placement of objects and dependents**

Yiddish, like German, is subject to the Scrambling phenomenon (Ross 1967): the objects and dependents occurring after the inflected verb permute freely between each other for communicative purposes. The different potential orderings of sentences are given in (5) and (6):

(5)

- a. tsi hot ber gegebn dos bukh mendlen?  
INTERRO has Ber.NOM given the book.ACC Mendl.DAT
- b. tsi hot ber dos bukh gegebn mendlen?  
c. tsi hot ber dos bukh mendlen gegebn?  
d. tsi hot ber mendlen dos bukh gegebn?  
e. tsi hot dos bukh ber gegebn mendlen?  
f. tsi hot dos bukh mendlen ber gegebn?  
g. tsi hot dos bukh ber mendlen gegebn?  
h. tsi hot mendlen dos bukh ber gegebn?  
i. tsi hot mendlen ber dos bukh gegebn?  
j. tsi hot ber gegebn mendlen dos bukh?  
k. tsi hot ber mendlen gegebn dos bukh?  
l. tsi hot mendlen ber gegebn dos bukh?

‘Did Ber give the book to Mendl’

(6)

- a. maks hot zeltn geleyent bikher Max has  
seldom read books
- b. maks hot geleyent bikher zeltn  
c. maks hot bikher geleyent zeltn

‘Max rarely read books.’

Note that the examples given in (5)a and (6)a reflect the canonical order. Now considering the other examples, one may notice that **all** the elements occurring after the inflected verb may permute one with another. This constitutes a major difference with German: in German, Scrambling only occurs between objects and dependents that precede the non inflected verb and does not involve the verb. In Yiddish, however, there is no such distinction between categories: the verb is subject to Scrambling, along with the other elements. This state of affairs implies that it has an identical behaviour to objects and dependents regarding its linearization. It should thus be considered that the non inflected verb has the same

status as other elements, that is to say, that it is a dependent of the inflected verb on the same level as other dependents.

## **4 The Application of the Topological Model for the Yiddish word order**

As seen in the previous section, two patterns were outlined with respect to the placement of the finite verb, the V2 and V1 phenomena.

First considering the V2 phenomenon, it has been shown that the verb is preceded by only one constituent. The nature or syntactic function of this constituent is not determined by syntactic factors but by the way the locutor wants to organise the information within the sentence. I thus propose the following topological account: two fields are required in order to describe these facts, a first field that will host the first constituent and a second field, reserved for the finite verb.

The constraints associated to each field are the following:

- The first field bears a constraint on the number of the constituents it may host: it is restricted to the occurrence of one constituent. Concerning the nature or function of that constituent, no constraints are given, thus allowing all types of constituents.
- The second field is strictly constrained both in number and in the nature of the element liable to occupy it: only the inflected verb may occur in this field. I thus propose to name the field after this constraint, that is to say, the *Finite Verb Field*.

Now regarding the V1 phenomenon, following the proposal for the other Germanic languages, I consider a placement of the verb in the same field, i.e the *Finite Verb Field*. Given that the verb is the first element of the sentence, there is no need for a first field in this case. The realisation or otherwise of the first field thus enables the distinguishing of both patterns in the grammar.

Because these patterns are not only attested in matrix clauses or subordinates without conjunction, one must also consider the cases where V2 and V1 occur in a clause introduced by a subordinating conjunction. In the line of the account provided by Kathol (2000) for the Scandinavian languages, I propose a specific field for subordinating conjunctions. As for the *Finite Verb Field*, the constraint associated with this field only allows the hosting of one element, whose nature is also constrained. In other words, only one subordinating conjunction may be placed in this field, which is thus named *Subordinating Field*.

Furthermore, the restriction on the occurrence of the V1 is accounted for by the fact that the patterns available are associated with the different types of clause. The V2 is associated with all types of clause. On the other hand, the V1 is only linked to imperative, polar interrogative or ‘consecutive’ matrix-clauses and to subordinate clauses without conjunction or interrogative subordinate clauses introduced by an interrogative pronoun.

Moving now to the treatment of the elements occurring after the inflected verb, I would remind readers that the examples in (5) and (6) show that all of them are liable to permute one with another, including the non-finite verb. This state of affairs thus leads to consider all elements of the sentence as equal dependents of the inflected verb regarding their linearization.

Accounting for this is extremely simple using the topological fields: one must only state the existence of one other field, with which no constraints are associated. This assures that the number of hosts is unlimited and that all types of constituent are allowed. The free permutation is explained by the fact that the grammar exclusively provides an order for the fields<sup>5</sup>. This means that when a field hosts several elements, like the one proposed here, the order of elements within the field is random. Given that the field hosts the dependent of the inflected verb, it is naturally named *Dependents' Field*.

The following table summarises the topological account of the Yiddish word order and gives an example of each of the patterns outlined, showing which field is required for its description.

<b>SUBORDINATING FIELD</b>	<b>FIRST FIELD</b>	<b>FINITE VERB FIELD</b>	<b>DEPENDENTS' FIELD</b>	<b>POST FIELD</b>
For the subordinating conjunction only	One constituent only, nature unconstrained	For the finite verb only	No constraints on nature or number	Extraposited constituents
	Ex [5a] tsi	hot	ber gegebn dos bukh mendlen	(not discussed here)
		Ex [2a] hobn	di kinder gezen dem film nekhtn	
Ex [3b] vos	der mame	hobn	mir gekoyft	
Ex [4a] far vos		hot	mendl oyfgegesn dos gants broyt	

## 5 Discussion

In this paper, the notion of topological fields was explored in order to give an account of the Yiddish word order.

Yiddish being a Germanic Language, the Topological Model seemed to be an interesting tool to apply. The language displays the Germanic characteristic in the fact that its word order could be defined as semi-free: the placement of the finite

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<sup>5</sup> One should note that some of these dependents (NPs and PPs for instance) are also subject to linear constraints that apply to a smaller domain than the proposition. The domain discussed here being the proposition, I do not enter into details for this issue.

verb and the subordinating conjunction is syntactically constrained while the dependents of the verb are ordered as a function of the organisation of information structure. It has been shown that this type of treatment is perfectly possible and that it enables the capture of the different factors involved in the sentence linearization.

However, it is not clear that the topological account is the most simple and economic if we consider the topological fields that were defined: the patterns outlined from the data above actually show that syntax should account for two major facts, that is to say, that the subordinating conjunction introduces the subordinate clause, when present, and that the inflected verb is either in first or second position of the clause. This state of affairs could also be described with the following linearization constraint:

**(sub.conj) < (X) < finite verb < [ ]**

The constraint should be read as follows: when a subordinating conjunction is present, it is the first element of the clause. An undefined constituent may follow the conjunction, or more precisely, it may immediately precede the verb. This constituent is also described to be optional. The square brackets following indicate that any other constituent is placed after the verb. As with the topological fields, the realisation of the constituent preceding the verb depends on the type of the clause.

This thus gives rise to the questioning of the use of topological fields: if one linear constraint in the grammar gives a similar description of the Yiddish word order, the use of a tool such as topological fields, even though efficient, could reveal itself unnecessarily complex. Indeed, topological fields were introduced in the Germanic languages to avoid the multiplication of linear constraints in the grammar. Nevertheless, in the case of Yiddish, the machinery introduced with this tool appears to be heavier than the simple use of linear constraints.

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