

## Language Acquisition in German and Phrase Structure Change in Yiddish

Joel C. Wallenberg  
University of Pennsylvania

There is a long tradition stretching back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century of implicitly assuming a relationship between language change and child language acquisition in the notion of “reanalysis”. Recently, studies such as Yang (2000) have developed formal models of language acquisition and expanded them to model how new syntactic variants can arise among children and be maintained in adult speech communities, formalizing the notion of “grammar competition” (Kroch 1989). However, there have been very few empirical studies of language acquisition that can be linked to specific, well-documented cases of grammatical change. This project investigates the relationship between acquisition and change in a study of the West Germanic verb-raising construction (cf. Wurmbbrand 2004 and references therein), relating it to the major phrase structure change in the history of Yiddish: the change in the headedness of TP (Santorini 1992, 1993). Just as acquirers of modern German produce some Tense-medial clauses before converging on the target Tense-final grammar (Fritzenschaft et al 1990, Gawlitzek-Maiwald 1997), we suggest that children acquiring Early Yiddish produced some Tense-medial clauses as systematic errors while attempting to acquire Tense-final TPs with verb-(projection)-raising. It is these errors which eventually escaped into the language of adult speakers and ultimately led to modern, uniformly Tense-medial (left-headed TP) Yiddish.

Using a set of diagnostic elements, Santorini (1992, 1993) shows that pre-modern Yiddish (c.1400-1850) experienced a period of variation as it changed from a German-like Tense-final grammar to its current Tense-medial grammar (see also, Kroch & Taylor 2000, Pintzuk 2005, Pintzuk & Taylor 2004, Pintzuk & Haeberli 2006), in which speakers produced Tense-medial TPs, Tense-final TPs without verb-raising, and Tense-final TPs with verb-raising, such as ex. 1 (note the preverbal position of negation). Fritzenschaft et al (1990) give evidence that children acquiring South German produce Tense-medial subordinate clauses at a low rate as they acquire the target Tense-final grammar (note the post-verbal negation in 2 and weak pronoun *sich* in 3). This suggests that children learning verb-raising varieties of West Germanic go through a stage in which they mistakenly deduce a Tense-medial grammar on the basis of Tense-final input sentences with verb-raising. If this is correct, then acquirers of South German briefly reproduce the change from Tense-final to Tense-medial phrase structure that occurred in Yiddish (cf. the modern Yiddish ex. 4).

This study demonstrates that this connection is far more than superficial, by showing that the early Yiddish Tense-final verb-raising grammar posed a serious problem to language-learners and was ripe for syntactic change. To the diagnostics in Santorini (1992, 1993) we add preverbal objects as a diagnostic for Tense-final clauses, which Wallenberg (2008) shows cannot be derived by scrambling. Using the parsed corpus of early Yiddish, we arrive at a more accurate estimate of the rate of verb-raising in early Yiddish Tense-final clauses than was possible in Santorini (1993). This estimate turns out to be higher (~75%) than expected (see Pintzuk & Haeberli 2006 for a similar result for Old English), and is plausibly high enough to cause confusion to learners of a Tense-final grammar. We will argue that the high frequency of verb-raising, combined with plausible contact with Romance and Slavic varieties, allowed the syntactic acquisition-errors in Early Yiddish to escape into the adult grammar in a way that they could not for modern verb-raising Germanic varieties (e.g. Dutch, Swiss German).

This paper lends concrete support to the idea that internal factors can drive language change, and prompts researchers to ask the following question: even if language contact is

uncontroversially involved in a case of language change, as it seems to be for Yiddish, can contact propel syntactic change without favorable internal pressures?

- (1) ...dz **es** di mtsreym **nit** zaltn zehn  
that **it** the Egyptians **not** should see.  
“That the Egyptians shouldn’t see it.”  
(Leib bar Moses Melir’s *Book of Esther*, date: 1589)
- (2) ...dass du hast **net** die meerjungfrau  
that you have **not** the mermaid  
“...that you don’t have the mermaid.”  
(from Benny, 3 years 1 month old; Fritzenschaft et al 1990: 76)
- (3) ...wenn des dreht **sich** was tut ’s dann?  
if it turns **REFL** what does it then  
“if it turns, then what does it do?”  
(from Benny, 3 years, 2 months, 26 days; Gawlitzek-Maiwald 1997: 137)
- (4) Ikh trakht az Hayim hot **im** nekhtn nit gekoyft.  
I think that Hayim has **him** yesterday not bought.  
“I think that Hayim didn’t buy it yesterday.”

- Fritzenschaft, Agnes, Ira Gawlitzek-Maiwald, Rosmarie Tracy, and Susanne Winkler. 1990. Wege zur komplexen Syntax. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 9, 1 and 2: 52-134.
- Gawlitzek-Maiwald, Ira. 1997. *Der monolinguale und bilinguale Erwerb von Infinitivkonstruktionen: Ein Vergleich von Deutsch und Englisch*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Kroch, Anthony. 1989. Reflexes of grammar in patterns of language change. *Language Variation and Change* 1: 199-244.
- Kroch, Anthony & Ann Taylor. 2000. Verb-complement order in Middle English. In S. Pintzuk, G. Tsoulas, and A. Warner (Eds.), *Diachronic Syntax: Models and Mechanisms*, 132-63. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pintzuk, Susan. 2005. Arguments against a universal base: evidence from Old English. In *English Language and Linguistics* 9.1, pp. 115-138. Cambridge University Press.
- Pintzuk, Susan and Eric Haeberli. 2006. Head-final structure in Old English root clauses. *Diachronic Issues in Generative Syntax* 9, University of Trieste.
- Pintzuk, Susan and Ann Taylor. 2004. The loss of OV order in the history of English. In A. van Kemenade and B. Los (Eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of the History of English*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Santorini, Beatrice. 1992. Variation and change in Yiddish subordinate clause word order. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 10: 595-640
- Santorini, Beatrice. 1993a. The rate of phrase structure change in the history of Yiddish. *Language Variation and Change*, 5: 257-283.
- Wallenberg, Joel. 2008. Scrambling and Phrase Structure in Early and Modern Yiddish. Paper presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> *Diachronic Generative Syntax (DIGS) Conference*, August 8, 2008. Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.
- Wurmbrand, Susi. 2004. West Germanic verb clusters: The empirical domain. In Katalin É. Kiss and Henk van Riemsdijk eds., *Verb clusters: A study of Hungarian, German, and Dutch*, p. 43-85. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Yang, Charles. 2000. Internal and external forces in language change. *Language Variation and Change*, 12,3: 231--250.