THE EMERGENCE OF EMBEDDED V2 IN YIDDISH FROM THE PARAMETRIC PERSPECTIVE

This paper examines the extension of the Verb Second (V2) phenomenon from main to embedded clauses in the history of Yiddish. While V2 in main clauses is typical of all Germanic languages (except English), only two Germanic languages exhibit V2 in embedded clauses: Icelandic and Yiddish (see (1)). Yet, the two languages acquired this phenomenon at different times: Icelandic displayed embedded V2 even at the earliest stages of Old Norse prose (although in poetry it was apparently absent; cf. Þorgeirsson 2012), whereas in Yiddish “verb-second subordinate clauses … are attested from the first half of the 1600’s … only in East[ern] Yiddish” (Santorini 1989: 77). Weinreich (1958) and Santorini (1989) suggested that the emergence of embedded V2 in Eastern Yiddish was due to contact with Slavic. 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. This paper develops a parametric account of this diachronic development.

I argue that (embedded) V2 is not an “atomic” phenomenon controlled by a single parameter but rather a result of several parameters that are each set a certain way. Furthermore, I show that only two of these parameters were reset under the influence of Slavic, while the others already had V2-compatible settings before Slavic entered the picture. Specifically, I follow Santorini (1989) in assuming that the changes in Yiddish word order occurred in two separate stages. First, the headedness of VP and TP was switched from right-headed to left-headed, leading to the emergence of VO and INFL-medial structures. This change occurred across Yiddish varieties and elsewhere in Germanic. At this transitional stage, Yiddish had the 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 in Yiddish only as a result of the second set of changes that allowed the Spec-TP to be occupied by non-subject elements. To describe these changes, I modify the parameter system proposed by Bailyn (2004) and reproduced in (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. This resetting of the “Tense domain” parameter necessitated setting the “Weak NOM case” parameter (which is undefined for CP-Tense domain languages). The new setting of this 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. Yet, the parameter responsible for V-to-T movement 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 (aka “out-of-the-blue”) XP-V-S order, (b) be embeddable, and (c) be implicated in contact-induced language change. I demonstrate that late medieval Slavic languages (in both West and East Slavic groupings) had constructions that fit that profile: oblique predicative possessive constructions, illustrated in (3). (In (3b-c), nominative of the subject is replaced by the Genitive of Negation.) Besides offering a novel account of the Slavic influence on the syntax of Yiddish, this study provides support for the value of a parametric approach in diachronic syntax and makes important implications for the history of Jewish-Slavic contacts.
(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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nom = [+T]</th>
<th>Tense domain</th>
<th>Kind of EPP</th>
<th>Weak NOM case</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>XP</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>XP</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>French</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>XP</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Icelandic, Yiddish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>X⁰</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Greek, Spanish/Italian</td>
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<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>X⁰</td>
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<td>Celtic, Arabic</td>
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<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>XP</td>
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<td>German, Swedish</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>X⁰</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(3) a. dative-PPC (Old Czech, from Život Švaté Kateřiny; McAllen 2011: 32)
neb mu bieše dici jediná.
for him.DAT was daughter.NOM one.NOM
‘for he had one daughter’
b. ou-PPC (Old East Slavic, from Primary Chronicle; McAllen 2011: 53-54)
ona že reče im nyně, ou vas ně† medu ni skory
she.NOM PART said them.DAT now at you.GEN NEG honey.GEN neither fur.GEN
‘Olga said to them that at the moment you have neither honey nor fur…’
c. dative-PPC (Old East Slavic, from Primary Chronicle; McAllen 2011: 53)
velika vlast’ ego i miru ego ně† konca
great.NOM power.NOM his and peace.DAT.SG his NEG.is end.GEN
‘Great is his might, and his peace has no end.’

References: