

Universität Stuttgart

Annekatriin Geider

Institut für Linguistik: Germanistik

HS: Die Syntax der Nebensätze in den germanischen Sprachen

S. Vikner

SS 2000

Yiddish Word Order

Table Of Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	1
2. The Simple Sentence and the Extraposition of NP's to the Right	2
2.1 Tense Expressions and the Positioning of Objects.....	2
2.2 Two Approaches Toward the Underlying Order.....	3
2.3 A Major Difference Between Yiddish and German.....	4
2.4 Extraposition of Heavy NP's	5
2.5 Can Extraposition be Obligatory?.....	6
3. Embedded Sentences and the Complementation Cycle.....	6
3.1 Infinitival Complements.....	6
3.2 Equi-NP Deletion	7
3.3 A Difference Between Yiddish and German.....	7
3.4 Required Verb Fronting in Yiddish?.....	7
3.5 Applying the Rule	8
3.6 The Impact on Modal Verbs.....	14
4. NP Climbing	15
4.1 Leftward Movement.....	15
4.2 What Grammatical Process Has Applied?	16
4.3 Climbing Before Focus Or Focus Before Climbing?.....	17
4.4 Possible Positions for a Definite Object and the Interacting Rules.....	17
5. Verb-Subject Structures in Yiddish.....	18
5.1 Narrative Sequences.....	18
5.2 Rightward Extraposition of the Subject	19
6. The Position of the Subject in the Underlying Word Order of Yiddish.....	19
6.1 The Verb-Second Condition	19
6.2 Three Possible Word Orders in Yiddish	20
6.2.1 SOV	20
6.2.2 SVO	20
6.2.3 VSO	21
7. Conclusion	22
8. Bibliography	23

1. Introduction

In her article “Accounting for Yiddish Word Order Or What’s a Nice NP Like You Doing in a Place Like This?“, Beatrice L. Hall is concerned with the study of Yiddish word order, i.e. what underlying word order will serve best for the various possible surface structures of the Yiddish language.

Although Yiddish, being a continental West Germanic language, shares a common origin with Modern Standard German and is thus likely to be understood to some degree by a German speaking person, the author points out that Yiddish is clearly different from German. Not only do these two languages have different historical and social backgrounds, they can also be shown to be different by examining relevant grammatical rules. The author provides various examples of these grammatical differences and compares the Yiddish sentence structures with the corresponding structures of other Germanic languages, mostly with German.

A fleeting glimpse of the surface structure of Yiddish sentences seems to invite the inference that Yiddish allows for a much greater variation in word order than Standard German does. Consequently, a person approaching Yiddish might be misled into the assumption that Yiddish word order is almost as free as that found in Latin or Greek for example. However, the author states that one cannot arrive at a Yiddish surface structure without obeying a complex series of rule interactions and rule options, whether being applied or not. In other words, a sentence will turn out to be ungrammatical or infelicitous if at any point of constructing the sentence the wrong series of rule options is chosen, both in constituent movement and in stress and intonation.

The text I will deal with is concerned with the examination of the interaction of syntactic rules and options in Yiddish. The author also offers insight into the intonation pattern of the Yiddish language. Finally, the author argues in favour of an underlying VSO order for the Yiddish language. The aim of this paper is to summarize the author’s examinations and thereby to make clear why an VSO order for Yiddish might be the most reasonable choice . I will abbreviate ‘direct object’ as ‘DO’ and ‘indirect object’ as ‘IO’.

2. The Simple Sentence and the Extraposition of NP's to the Right

2.1 Tense expressions and the Positioning of Objects

To begin, the author states that the basic facts of Yiddish syntax resemble to a great degree those of other Germanic languages. The surface word order of simple present tense sentences is SVO:

- (1) Avrom zet Soren.
Abraham sees Sarah.
- (2) Avrom git Soren a matone yedn sables.
Abraham gives Sarah a present every Saturday.

The author points out the fact that, contrary to the other Germanic languages, all Yiddish verbs including *zayn* 'to be' and *hobn* 'to have' no longer maintain the simple past tense.

On the other hand, the construction of the periphrastic past tense in Yiddish mirrors that in German, i.e. *zayn* is used as the auxiliary verb with strong intransitive verbs, whereas *hobn* is used with transitive verbs:

- (3) Avrom hot Soren a matone gegeben.
Abraham gave Sarah a present yesterday.
- (4) Avrom iz in Kasrilovke geven.
Abraham was in Kasrilovke.

The author points to a striking difference here between Yiddish and other Germanic languages for Yiddish also allows for the following constructions:

- (3a) Avrom hot Soren nextn gegeben a matone.
b) Avrom hot a matone nextn gegeben Soren.
c) Avrom hot Soren a matone gegeben nextn.
d) Avrom hot gegeben Soren a matone nextn.
- (4a) Avrom iz geven in Kasrilovke.

Moreover, in Yiddish, pronominalized objects must occur to the left of the main verb:

- (5a) Avrom hot es ir dan gegeben
Abraham gave it to her then.
- b) *Avrom hot Soren dan gegeben es.

- c) *Avrom hot a matone dan gegebn ir.
- d) *Avrom hot gegebn es ir dan.
- e) *Avrom hot gegebn ir es dan.
- f) *Avrom hot es ir gegebn dan.
- g) ?Avrom iz geven dortn.

Concerning these sentences, the author points to the necessity of a closer examination. In these cases, Yiddish is parallel to German in that it requires an obligatory switch of order concerning pronominalized and non-pronominalized DO and IO NP's.

2.2 Two Approaches towards the underlying order

The author then provides two different approaches as to the underlying order. It might be argued that the order IO – DO that is found in case both objects are full NP's is the underlying order, and that it is the act of pronominalization which causes a switch in order.

On the other hand, it could also be argued that the actual underlying order is found when both objects are pronominalized, and that there might be a rule in Yiddish, similar to the one in English, concerning Indirect Object Movement; the latter being blocked if both NP's are pronominalized and, additionally, if the IO receives contrastive stress. Consider the following example:

(6) Ix hob dos bux *Avromen* gegebn.

I gave *Abraham* the book.

Here, the implication of the stressed NP *Avromen* is that this NP is being compared or contrasted with another NP. The author states that both underlying structures are possible. However, Hall also points out that, in her view, there are no compelling reasons to choose one order in preference to the other. Hall claims that whichever order is chosen, this order is arbitrary and, additionally, one is forced to formulate an ad-hoc rule that is required nowhere else in the grammar to account for the other structure.

The most important point concerning the sentences in (3) to (6) is that the unmarked word order is

(7) Subject – Aux – IO – DO – Adv – Verb.

Consequently, all other word order are therefore marked to some extent.

(8) **Marked Word Order** (in this context)

Certain variants of word order can only felicitously be followed by some conjuncts and not others.

Therefore, a sentence like

(9) Avrom hot Soren nextn gegebn a bux...

Abraham gave Sarah a book yesterday

might be followed by

(10) ... un haynt a kus

... and today a kiss,

but not by

(11) (!)¹ ... ober leyenen, hot er es aleyn geleyent.

... but as for reading, he read it himself.

Thus, for each variant in (3) to (6) there is a felicitous context which triggered the transformation that put the NP into a stressed or marked position. The author points out that the only neutral order is that in (7). All variants, then, have been constructed via extraposition.

2.3 A Major Difference between Yiddish and German

One major difference between Yiddish and German grammar has been elaborated so far, namely that Yiddish, unlike Standard German, freely allows extraposition of full NP's and adverbials to the right of a verb in sentence-final position. The author argues that any other analysis seems untenable to her, since claiming that the NP's are base-generated after the verb and moved leftwards would ignore not only the unmarked nature of preverbal position but also the marked nature of postverbal positions. Hall also points to the significant fact that beside the switch in order of DO and IO with pronominalization, the only possible order for pronouns is the unmarked order for full NP's.

¹ The symbol (!) is used by the author to indicate a well-formed structure which is used infelicitously in a given context.

2.4 *Extraposition of Heavy NP's*

So far, the author provided sentences exhibiting extraposition to the right with simple NP's. In these sentences, extraposition was applied absolutely optional on the sentence level. Yet there is one case where the application of extraposition is variably obligatory, namely in the case of heavy NP's.

(12) **Heavy NP**

An expanded NP which has either one or more adjectives or relative clauses associated with it.

Since there is considerable variation from speaker to speaker it is almost impossible to state the exact nature of this condition. Hall provides one variable, namely the amount of exposure of a Yiddish speaker to German: The higher his exposure is, the heavier the non-extrapolated NP he will accept. Consider the following sentences:

(13) *Ix hob dem alten man gezen.*

I saw the old man.

(14) *Ix hob dem alten man mit dem bord gezen.*

I saw the old with the beard.

Sentence (13) is judged by the author who is a native speaker of Yiddish to be quite acceptable, sentence (14) is considered by the author to be still fine unextrapolated, though extraposition without contrastive stress is a viable option as well. Hall remarks that in her idiolect a sentence like

(15) *Ix hob gezen Avromen.*

I saw Abraham.

sounds odd unless the NP *Avromen* receives contrastive stress. Hall formulates a rule, although possibly subjective, which reads that as far as 'light' NP's are concerned, extraposition is possible only if some other element occurs between the AUX and the verb. Thus, a sentence like

(16) *Ix hob nextn gezen Avromen.*

I saw Abraham yesterday.

is perfectly grammatical, although the NP *Avromen* does not receive contrastive stress.

2.5 Can Extraposition Be Obligatory?

Further discussing the optional stylistic variable Heavy NP Extraposition, Hall states that it is difficult to find cases where extraposition is obligatory. Consider the following sentence:

(17) ?? *Ix hob dem alten man mit dem langen bord vos hot mit mayn korev Berelen
gearbet gezen.

I saw the old man with the long beard who worked with my relative Berele.

According to the author, most Yiddish speakers are supposed to judge this sentence unacceptable unless extraposed. Apart from length, there is another factor that accounts for the ungrammaticality: in sentence (17) the fact that the NP ends in a verb requires extraposition. Accordingly,

(18) Ix hob dem alten man mit dem langen bord vos arbet mit mayn korev Berelen
gezen.

is judged to be much more acceptable by the author, lacking extraposition.

3. Embedded Sentences And the Complementation Cycle

3.1 Infinitival Complements

Yiddish sentences with *hobn* and *zayn* parallel those in German. The unmarked order is

(19) Subj – Aux – (NP) – (NP) – (Adv) – Verb (past participle)

In Yiddish., this order is also used when the auxiliary verb is a modal such as *veln*, the function of which is to mark the future, *viln* ‘to want’, *muzn* ‘must’, *kenen* ‘can’, etc, or if the auxiliary verb is an aspectual verb such as *onfangn* ‘to begin’ or *oyfhern* ‘to stop’. Both modals and aspectuals have their commanded verbs be infinitives. NP objects of such sentences may be extraposed over the infinitives. Thus it is possible to say

(20) Ix vil dem alten man zen.

I want to see the old man.

(21) *Ix vil zen dem alten man.*²

3.2 *Equi-NP Deletion*

Moreover, in Yiddish, as in German, it is impossible to have the infinitive in a complement sentence unless Equi-NP deletion has been applied.

(22) **Equi-NP Deletion**

In a sentence with two clauses, where there is a noun phrase in the matrix clause which is co-referential to a noun phrase in the embedded clause, the noun phrase in the embedded clause may delete.

Consider the following sentences:

(23) *Er vil az ix zol geyn.*

He wants me to go (lit: He wants that I should go)

(24) *Er hot faynt vos ix studir ruis.*

He dislikes the fact that I study Russian.

3.3 *A Difference between Yiddish and German*

Here, a striking difference between Yiddish and German is pointed out: in Yiddish, tensed verbs do not move to occupy a sentence-final position; such movement would result in ungrammatical sentences:

(23a) **Ix vil az er geyn zol.*

(24a) **Er hot faynt vos ix ruis studir.*

3.4 *Required Verb Fronting In Yiddish?*

To answer the question about the underlying order and the transformations of the Yiddish language the author points out that an underlying SOV order as proposed for German is absolutely unjustified for Yiddish. As it is, there are **no** tensed SOV sentences in Yiddish, neither main clauses nor embedded ones. Hence, it could be argued that Yiddish might be indeed underlyingly SOV, but is no longer able to maintain the surface possibility of SOV with finite verbs. For this argument the reader is referred to the *Penthouse Principle* developed by Ross (1973). This would require in Yiddish a rule such as Verb Fronting:

² The author gives two different spellings for 'old'; *altn* and *alten*.

(25)	NP	NP	V	oblig	
	1	2	3	→	
	1	3	2	0	

This rule, however, as Hall herself states, does not explain why the verb has to move. In fact, it is almost impossible to account for the set of verbs to which this rule would apply, since this set covers both all finite verbs (auxiliaries or main verbs) and modals. In Yiddish, it is possible to say

(26a) Ix muz dem man zen.

I must see the man.

(26b) Ix hob gemuzt dem man zen.

I had to see the man.

However, if another underlying order is assumed, either SVO or VSO, the rule can be formulated much simpler, and the conditions can be stated more naturally. Suppose the underlying word order is verb initial. The rule would then be

(27)	V	NP	NP	X	
	1	2	3	4	→
	0	2	3	4	1

condition: 1= non-finite

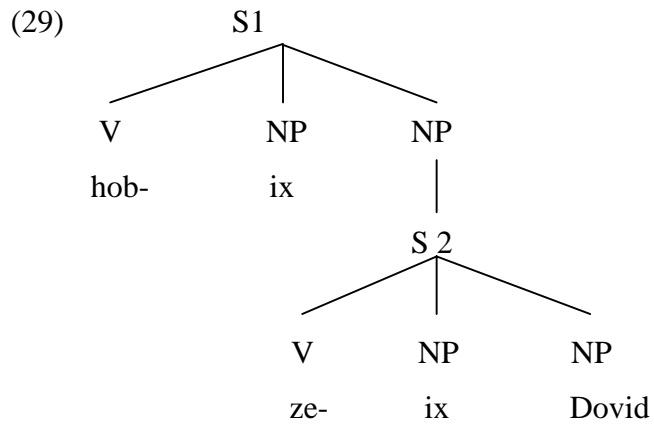
However, the other points out that this rule too poses a problem in that it does not apply to the non-finite forms of modals and aspectuals. For the special treatment of these verbs the author refers to Ross (1969).

3.5 Applying the Rule

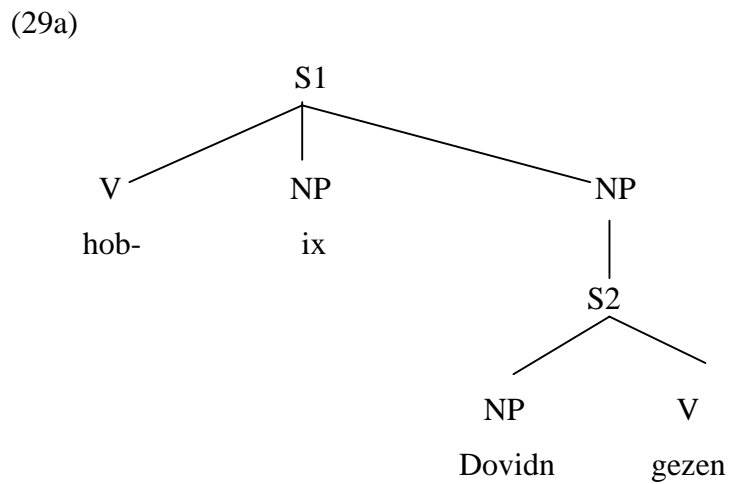
In order to visualize the blockage of the rule in (27) Hall presents sample sentences in tree structures. First, an example of a non-blocked application is presented:

(28) Ix hob Dovidn gezen.

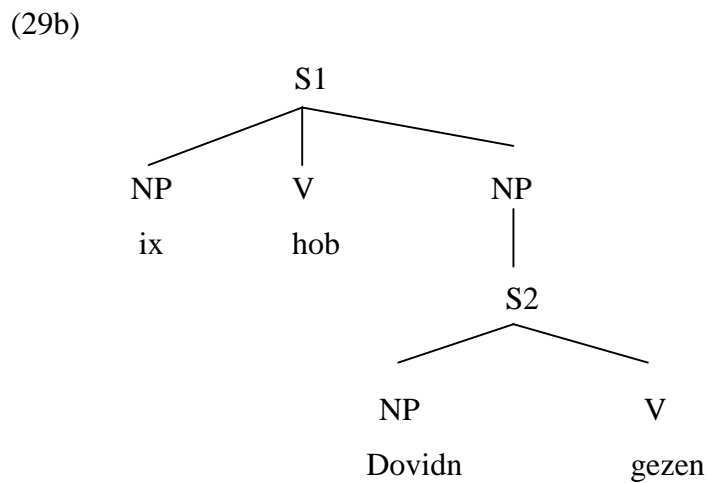
I saw David.



Applying Equi-NP Deletion, case marking and non-finite Verb-to-the-End to S2 will result in



Next, Agreement and Subject Fronting are applied to S1, resulting in

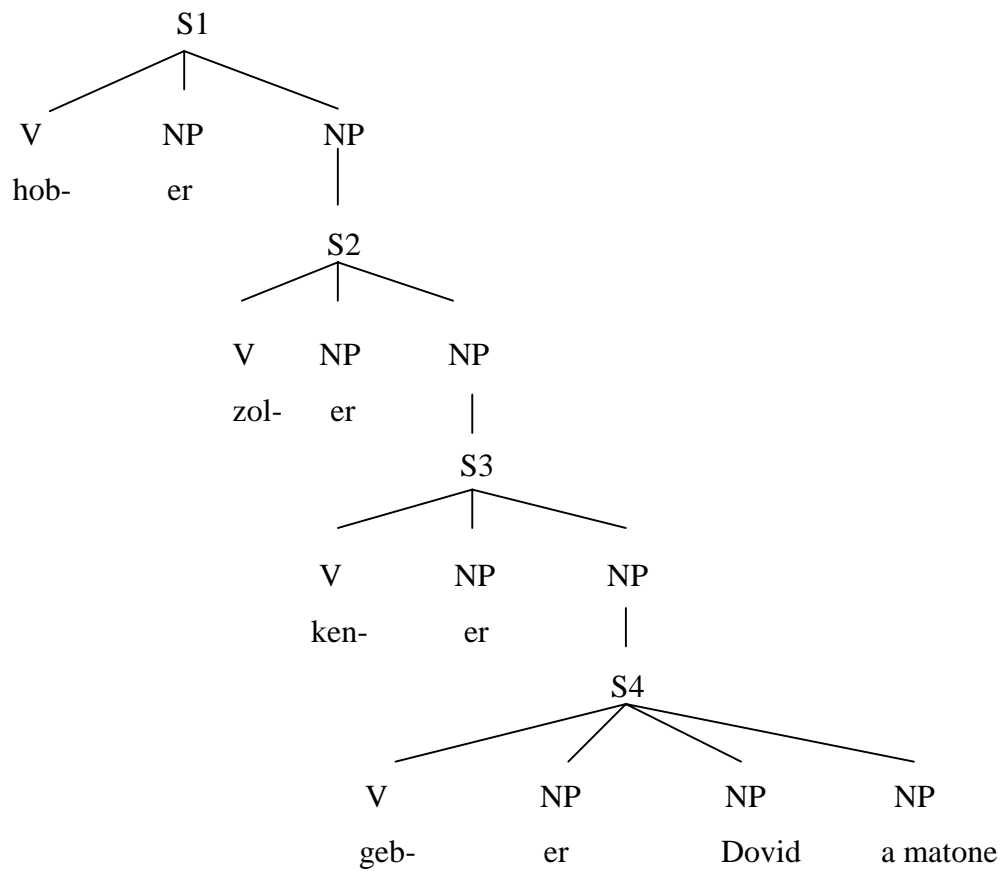


In sentences containing modals or aspectuals the rule of Non-Finite Verb-to-the-End is blocked, as can be seen on the following example:

(30) Er hot gezolt kenen Dovidn a matone gebn.

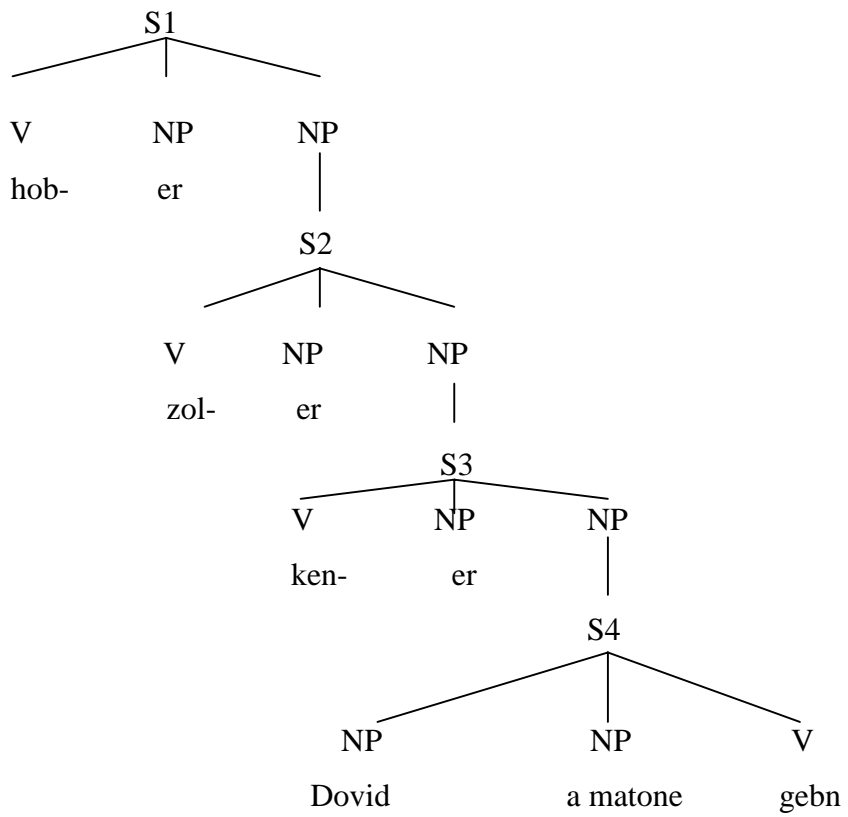
He should have been able to give David a gift.

(31a) underlying representation:



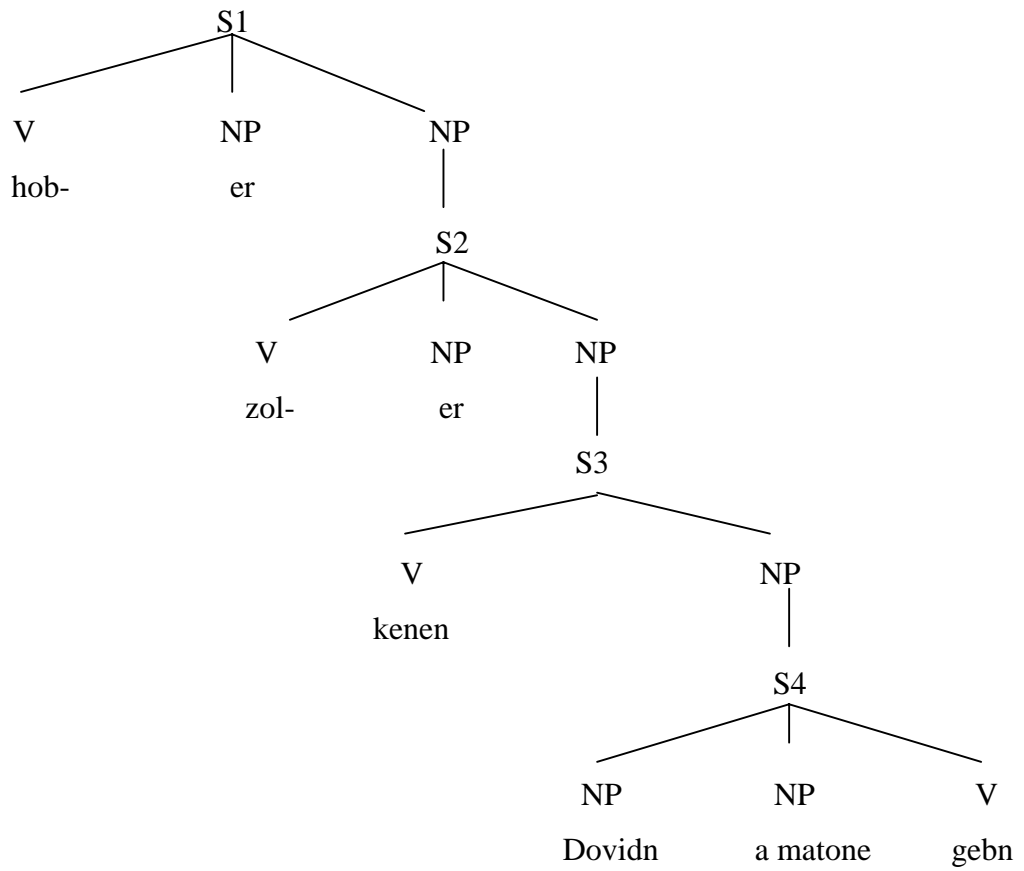
Application of Equi-NP Deletion and Non-Finite Verb-to-the-End to S4 will result in

(31b)

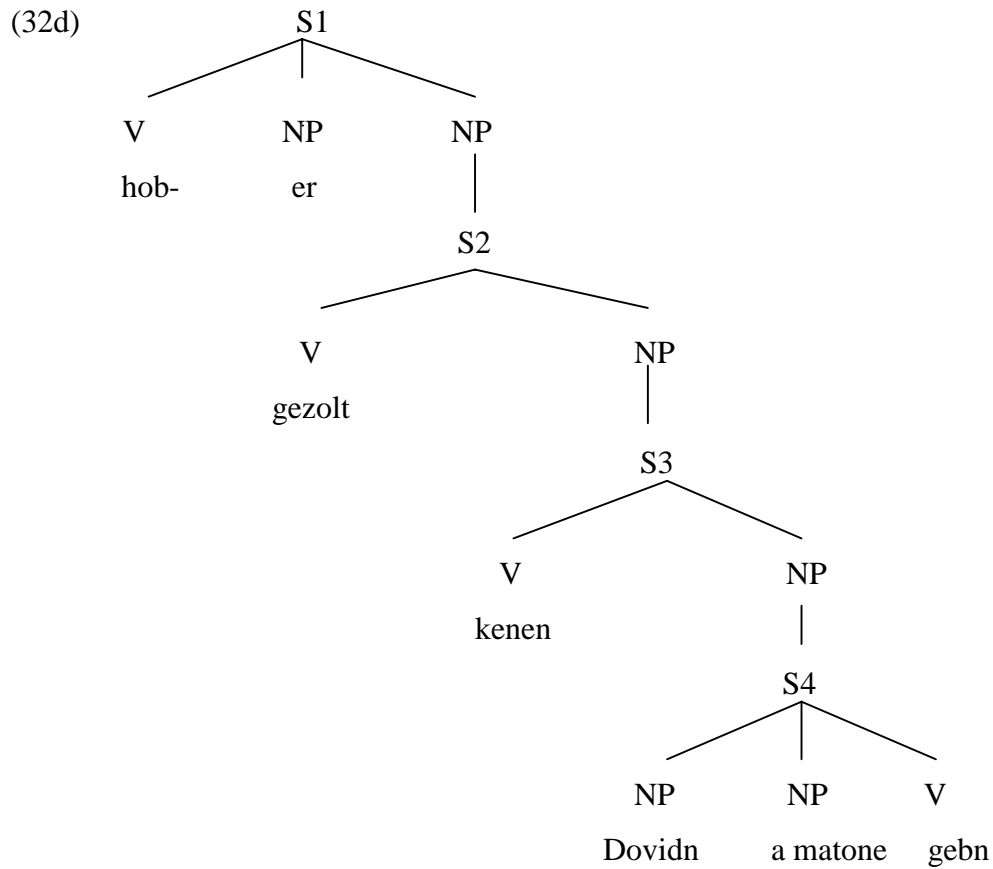


Next, Equi-NP Deletion is applied to S3, but *not* Non-Finite Verb-to-the-End:

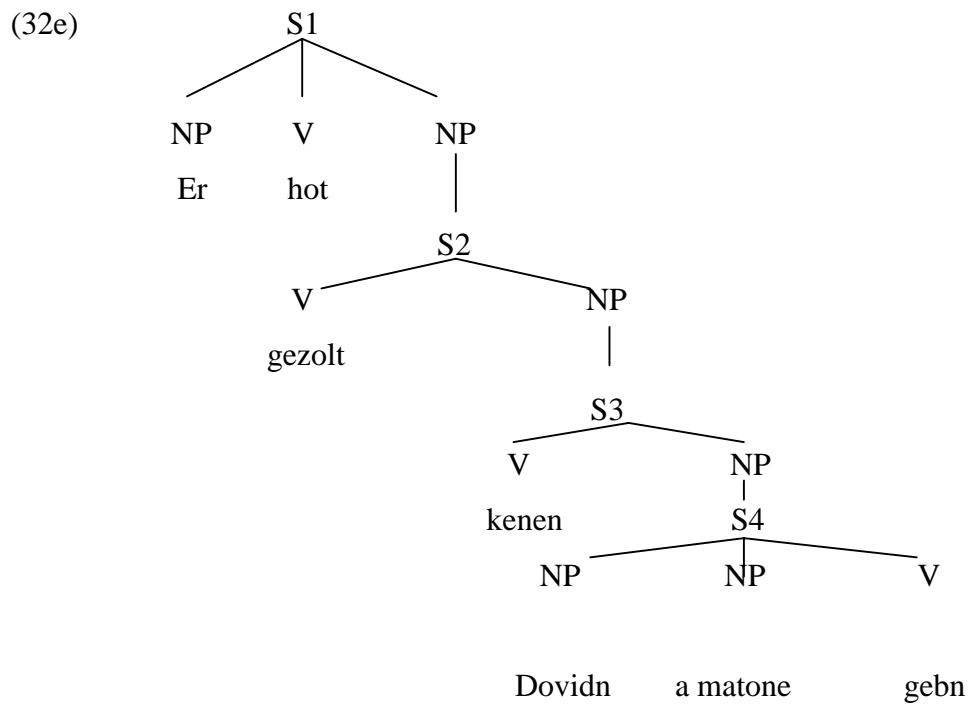
(31c)



Similarly, Equi-NP Deletion, but not Non-Finite Verb-to-the-End operate on S2:



Finally, Agreement and Subject Fronting apply on S1:



Having a closer look at S2 and S3 where Non-Finite Verb-to-the-End failed to operate, the author points to the observation of Pass-Over-Blocking

(33) **Pass-Over-Blocking** (author's term)

Non-finite Verb-to-the-End movement would require that the verb pass over a verb the subject of which had been deleted by Equi-NP Deletion.

The author admits that there is no ready explanation for *why* this blockage of movement occurs. Consider the following sentence:

(34) Der onhoyb fun di harhandlungen iz frier geplant geven oyf montik.

The beginning of the negotiations was earlier planned for Monday.

In such sentences, the blockage seems to require not only Equi-NP Deletion of the subject, but also the lower verb to be an infinitive. In this context, Hall points out that the same blocking is found in Dutch, and that a similar rule operates in such different languages as Kurdish, and Soso.

3.6 *The Impact on Modal Verbs*

So far, the author followed Ross in treating all auxiliary verbs as transitive main verbs. In the cases of *hobn*, *zayn* and *veln* the author's assumption is not crucial for the argument of interest since the same result can be achieved by Subject Raising. However, the situation is different when modal verbs are involved. Hall states that if the failure of *kenen* to pass over *gebn* is due to Equi-NP Deletion, then the failure of *gezolt* to pass over *kenen* must be also due to Equi-NP Deletion. The author argues that if *kenen* is thus shown to be transitive, then *zoln* must be transitive as well since both are modals. In other words, assuming that the condition on blocking is indeed Equi, and further assuming that modals are intransitive, a sentence like

(35) *Er hot *kenen* *gezolt* Dovidn a matone *gebn*.

should be possible, contrary to fact. In this sentence, *gezolt* passed over *kenen* but was blocked, as *kenen* was, by the Equi-NP Deletion in the lowest clause.

So far, the author tried to show that under the assumption of an underlying VSO or SVO structure, complementation structures in Yiddish are based upon a unitary explanation. On the other hand, if an SOV order is assumed, then stating the conditions on verb fronting (which

would involve the reverse of Pass-Over-Blocking) would require that the rule apply to both all finite verbs and also to aspectuals and nonfinite modal verbs. However, these verbs do not form a natural class.

4. NP Climbing

4.1 Leftward Movement

(36) **NP Climbing** (author's term)

The effect of NP-Climbing can be described by causing object NP's of the lowest verb to 'climb' into what would be the object position of the topmost verb.

Movement of any constituent, be it NP or adverbial, from the prediacte to a clause-initial position in order to achieve focus or emphasis is an ability that Yiddish and German have in common. In both languages, such a constituent is not required to be a member of the highest clause just so long as the process of complementation is one where the lower clauses have lost their subjects via Equi-NP Deletion. Consider the following sentence:

(37) Arabis hob ix soyn a lange vayle gemeynt onfangen studiren.

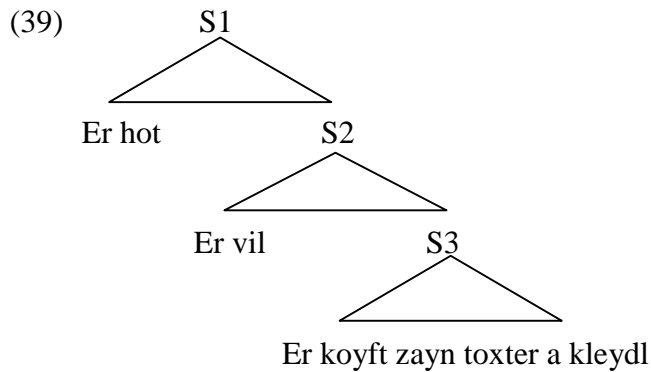
I have long menat to begin to study Arabic.

Such a sentence shows that in Yiddish, as well as in German, the order *X-Verb-Subject* is the result of fronting any constituent before the verb. Yiddish, however, additionally provides another type of leftward movement, as can be seen from sentences like the following:

(38) Er hot zayn toxter a kleydl gevolt koyfn.

He wanted to buy his daughter a dress.

The above sentence is perfectly suited to show that, regardless of what underlying structure has been selected, the constituents *zayn toxter* and *a kleydl* can only be interpreted as DO and IO of the verb *koyfn*. Thus the underlying structure must be



Which is parallel to the sentence

(40) *Di mame vil az der tate zol zeyer toxter a kleydl koyfn.*

The mother wants the father to buy their daughter a dress.

4.2 What Grammatical Process Has Applied?

The author points out that the DO and IO have undergone leftward movement via a grammatical process. Hall argues that this process cannot be Raising since none of the NP's grammatically became a member of the higher clause, what is, however, the ultimate effect of Raising. The author also claims that Leftward Extraposition could not have been applied due to the following reasons:

First, the only possible positions in a Yiddish sentence that can be focused are either clause-initial or clause-final. In sentence (37), however, neither *zayn toxter* nor *a kleydl* are stressed.

Second, this particular leftward dislocation results in exactly the opposite of focus since NP's having undergone this movement are semantically least-marked.

Third, Yiddish allows for two or more constituents to be extraposed to the right, but only one constituent is ever allowed to be focused leftward to clause-initial position. Sentence (37), however, shows that both NP's have been dislocated leftwards.

Finally, to solve this puzzle of what grammatical process has occurred, the author suggests to assume a de-focusing advice which is found in many Indo-European languages. For the phenomenon of pronoun climbing the reader is referred to Wackernagel (1891) and to a detailed discussion of this topic in Hall, Hall and Sheerin (1973).

Hall argues that the transformation is a spontaneous movement by the lower NP into the highest possible non-marked object position. A rule is proposed by the author which, however, does not satisfy her own standards since it does not account for the fact that the

word order of a given sentence has changed but the grammatical relationships have not. Hall proposes a possible solution to this problem, but at the same time states the somewhat drastic consequences of such procedure. Sample sentences are provided which show that the proposed rule is not sensitive to the nature of the climbed NP's (full NP's or pronouns), but simply to their sequential order. In order to see the difference in word order when the objects are either full NP's or pronouns as produced by a transformation, this transformation must precede Climbing. Follow-up sentences provided by Hall show that Climbing is neither blocked nor necessitated if one NP is focused to clause-initial position. These sentences also invite the inference that Focus must precede Climbing. Consider the following sentence which belongs to the same set of sentences:

- (41) Feygln hot Yisroyl a mayse gevolt dertseyln.
 Israel wanted to tell Feygl a story.

Here, a full NP DO has climbed although the IO has not. Instead, the IO has rather been focused.

4.3 Climbing Before Focus Or Focus Before Climbing?

Hall claims that if one orders Climbing before Focus, then Climbing would have to be obligatory since otherwise the above sentence should be ungrammatical, contrary to fact. This, then, would lead to a logical contradiction in that the optional rule has to apply if and only if a second optional rule is planned to be applied later. Now consider the following sentences:

- (42a) Feygln hot Yisroyl gevolt a mayse dertseyln
 b) Feygln hot Yisroyl a mayse gevolt dertseyln.

If the order Focus before Climbing is assumed, Climbing is free to apply and one can get (42b). Having discussed the syntactic facts about Climbing, Hall additionally suggests that the semantic/rhetoric function of Climbing is a de-focusing or de-emphasizing transformation.

4.4 Possible Positions for a Definite Object and the Interacting Rules

Finally, Hall states the four possible positions for a definite object in a Yiddish sentence which contains a transitive verb used with the past tense of a modal or an aspectual verb: (a) the position immediately before the transitive verb, (b) the position immediately before the

modal/aspectual, (c) sentence-initial, (d) sentence-final. Hall states that these positions not only reveal a complex interaction but also obey a so-termed ‘mysterious way’ concerning sentence stress and intonation. The author offers a short insight into the Yiddish intonation pattern including conversational (least marked), narrative (marked by musical intonation) and logical argumentation (‘pilpul’ intonation, used in Jewish schools and secular life).

5. Verb-Subject Structures in Yiddish

5.1 Narrative Sequences

One can find one specific word order in Yiddish that is discourse-specified but nonetheless obeys explicit conditions so that it can be discussed. Hall offers a short text which shows that every non-paragraph initial sentence is verb initial, following from the condition that in a narrative sequence sentences of the same topic without a leftward focused element must be verb initial. If this rule is not obeyed the result is similar to misapplication of pronominalization. Consider the following sentences:

- (43a) *A yid iz amol gekumen bazuxn zaynr a xavr in Paris. Hot der fraynt getraxt (...)*
 Once a Jew came to visit a friend in Paris. His friend thought about (...)
- b) (!) *Der fraynt hot getraxt (...)*

In (43b), *der fraynt* seems no longer be coreferential with *xavr*. Hall claims that any speaker of Yiddish is able to distinguish intuitively between bare sentences and sequences of sentences which form a narrative unit, that is, which hang together and form a discourse unit. Narrative sequences in Yiddish obey a system of interacting rules. While the rules are not difficult themselves, the system of their interaction is quite complex:

- (a) Subjects may not be sentence-initial in the follow-up sentences.
- (b) If subjects of S1 and S2 are identical, then pronominalization must apply to the subject of S2; the use of epithets or synonyms is not allowed.
- (c) It is only possible to use a synonym if the subject of S2 is an object of S1.
- (d) Preposition of certain objects and adverbials is possible without breaking the narrative sequence.

Hall proposes a general rule that the items to be preposed most frequently tend to be personal or adverbial pronouns, but not epithets, i.e. adjectives or short phrases that are used for descriptive purposes.

Yet it is possible to use epithets quite freely in Yiddish, as opposed to English, for example. The author offers an example that shows use of an epithet. However, in this example, the follow-up sentence forms part of a thought paragraph with the first sentence and is felicitous, but lost the nature of a narrative sequence.

- (e) if S1 and S2 are in narrative sequence the intonation pattern of S2 exhibits differences from its intonation pattern that is found when S2 is logically connected to S1 but not in narrative sequence with it.
- (f) For emphasis within a narrative sequence, a non-pronominal subject in S2 (or following sentences) may be *floated*, i.e. postposed to non-second position.

Hall states that although subject postposing usually requires the dummy subject 'es' to be inserted, this is not necessary in a narrative sequence. Narrative sequencing seems to be motivated by the need to form a climax.

5.2 Rightward Extraposition of the Subject

In Yiddish, if the subject is to undergo rightward extraposition there are two possible positions to occupy: first, if a reflexive is involved, the subject is allowed to occupy the position immediately to the right of its own reflexive. Additionally, yes/no questions and declaratives with focused constituents also allow for this movement. Second, in narrative sequences, unlike yes/no questions, extraposition of the subject to clause-final position is also possible. There are also differences concerning the rhetorical effects to be found.

Beside narrative sequences, Yiddish also disposes of the usual West Germanic verb-subject structures, such as wh-questions, focused object and adverbial statements or focused adjectives, example sentences of which are provided by the author.

6. The Position of the Subject in the Underlying Word Order of Yiddish

6.1 The Verb-Second Condition

Hall claims that the argument that languages such as German or Yiddish share a condition that requires a verb-second order in declaratives is merely a misreading of the symptom as the cause. It has to be questioned whether the fact that in a vast majority of sentences the verb

occupies verb-second position is due to a condition on the verb or perhaps due to a condition on the possible positions of NP's.

6.2 Three Possible Word Orders In Yiddish

Hall presents the three possible word orders for Yiddish: SOV, SVO, and VSO. Hall points to the fact that taking into consideration the impact of transformational rules, it is possible to derive any Yiddish sentence from any of these orders.

6.2.1 SOV

To the author, SOV is the least attractive order because it exhibits the least similarities to any occurring surface structures. Hall argues further that under the assumption of an SOV order one would be forced to state an arbitrary condition on the verb to be the second element in a sentence in languages such as Yiddish and, presumably, German too. In the case of Yiddish, an assumed SOV order poses a further problem, namely that narrative sequences (the most rhetorically unmarked structure) must then be constructed via a highly marked rule moving the verb to clause-initial position.

6.2.2 SVO

If one assumes an SVO order, then it is necessary to maintain that there are not only conditions concerning the possible positions of NP's but also the verb-second condition on the verb. In Yiddish, it is not a totally general condition that only one constituent may precede the verb; as it is, coordinating conjunctions may precede the verb without inversion, and inversion is also neither unleashed by the complementizer *az* 'that', nor by the indirect question marker *oyb* 'if, whether', or by the relative/interrogative/indefinite pronouns *vemen* 'whom', *vos* 'what, who', *velxer* 'which' etc in case they are embedded. It might be argued that coordinating conjunctions and *az* do not form constituents of their following sentences but this argument is impossible for the relative/interrogative/indefinite pronouns.

However, an assumed SVO order still is still a problem as far as the narrative sequences are concerned, for to achieve such rhetorically unmarked sentences, a marked transformation is required to apply. Paying special attention to adverb and object preposing transformations, an assumed SVO order then is the least satisfactory since two separate transformations are required, one of which to prepose the focused element, the second to achieve postposition of the subject after the verb.

6.2.3 VSO

Hall then argues in favour of a VSO order because of numerous advantages of economy, of naturalness and also of greater explanatory power. The author points to the fact that, first and foremost, one is no longer forced to view the verb-second surface position as a condition on the verb. Hall argues further that focusing a constituent will automatically cause the verb to end up in second position. In case the focused element is an object or an adverbial, then only this element need be moved. Because the subject follows the verb under the assumption of an underlying VSO order, one does not have to move the subject.

As far as narrative sequential verb-initial sentences are concerned Hall further argues that it is the action of the verb that links S2 to S1. Hence, it is only natural to assume that the linking element be the first word of the second sentence.

Moreover, in case of yes/no questions the questioned element is the whole sentence. Hence, no element in the sentence can be further focused. Consider the following yes/no question:

(44) *Iz Xayim do gekumen nextn?*

Did Chaim come here yesterday?

To affirm this question, every single constituent must be affirmed, whereas in case of negation any one constituent may be denied. Assuming an VSO analysis both narrative sequentials and yes/no questions are the least marked sentence types and therefore allow the least transformational manipulation.

When it comes to simple declaratives containing no focused elements then one transformation has to apply which is, however, motivated both by semantic-rhetorical and phonological reasons. Moreover, Hall points out that sentences revealing subject-initial structures make an assertion about the subject in that it is at least weakly focused. Evidence herefore comes from third person pronouns. In case the subject is a full NP there is always a disjuncture after the subject, realized as a slight intonation fall on the subject. However, in verb-subject structures (narrative sequences as well as questions and sentences resulting from preposed focused constituents) this disjuncture is never possible.

Sentential adverbs may be inserted between subject and verb, whereas insertion of adverbials between a verb and a following subject results in an ungrammatical sentence. In this context, comma intonation certainly plays a role. Comma intonation is fairly widespread to be an accompanying phenomenon of dislocation. Because initial subjects can be separated via comma intonation from the following verbs and because comma intonation is not a

phonological property of the subject or of sentence-initial position, Hall argues that this seems to strengthen the assumption that the underlying word order of Yiddish is VSO.

7. Conclusion

This paper tried to sum up the observations Hall made concerning the Yiddish word order. Starting from a point where Yiddish word order seemed to be free to some extent, I hope to have shown that this was only a glance at the surface structures. As has been shown, the different structures in Yiddish are far from allowing any constituent to be positioned anywhere. Different approaches as to the underlying word order have been presented, along with their advantages and disadvantages.

In my opinion, the assumption of an underlying VSO order seems quite logical since it can account for all occurring surface structures including narrative sequences, and it also obeys the principle of economy since less transformational manipulations are needed than on the other proposed analyses.

8. Bibliography

- **Haegeman**, Liliane (1991): Introduction to Government & Binding Theory. Oxford: Basil Blackwell [2nd edn (1994)]
- **Hall**, Beatrice (1979): “Accounting for Yiddish Word Order or What’s a Nice NP Like You Doing in a Place Like This“. In: Meisel, Jürgen M. & Pam, Martin D. (eds.): Linear Order and Generative Theory. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., S. 253-287
- **Hall**, Beatrice, Hall, R.M.R. & Sheerin, L.P. (1973): “NP Climbing in Classical Greek“. Paper read at the LSA Winter Meeting
- **Maurer**, F. (1924) “Zur Anfangsstellung des Verbs im Deutschen“. In: W. Horn (ed.)
- **Maurer**, F. (1926): Untersuchungen über die deutsche Verbstellung in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung. Heidelberg: Carl Winter
- **Olsvanger**, I. (1947) Røyte Pomerantsen. New York: Schocken books
- **Ross**, J.R. (1969): “Auxiliaries as Main Verbs“. In: *Journal of Philosophical Linguistics 1*: 71-162
- **Ross**, J.R. (1973): “The Penthouse Principle and the Order of Constituents“. In: Corum, C.T., Smith-Stark, T.C. & Weiser, A. (eds.). S. 397-422
- **Wackernagel**, J.(1891): “Über ein Gesetz der indogermanischen Wortstellung“. In: *Indogermanische Forschungen 1*: 333-436
- **Webelhuth**, Gert (ed.) (1995): Government and Binding Theory and the Minimalist Program. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- <http://home.earthlink.net/~rcfriend/ESK.htm>, date of login: 18.8.2000