Variable rules vs. variable grammars in the history of Yiddish

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One of the classic questions of Germanic syntax concerns the position of the inflected verb in its clause.[1] In this paper, I address this question with particular reference to the variation and change in the syntax of inflected verbs that have taken place in the history of Yiddish. In Early Yiddish, we find variation between three types of subordinate clauses. In the first type, the inflected verb is in clause-final position, as shown in (1). The inflected verb is underlined.

(1)
a. ven der vatr nurt doyts leyan <u>kan</u> (Anshel, ca. 1534, 11)
if the father only German read can
'provided that the father can read German'

b. ds zi droyf givarnt <u>vern</u> (Bovo, 1507, 39.6)
that they there-on warned were
'that they might be warned about it'

The second type exhibits what I will refer to as Su-INFL word order; that is, inflected verbs appear in clause-medial position, immediately after the subject. This clause type is illustrated in (2). Again, the inflected verb is underlined.

(2)
a. dz zi <u>verdn</u> bṣhirmt fun irh bitrh peyn
(Purim-shpil, 1697, 876)
that they are protected from their bitter pain
'that they are protected from their bitter pain'

b. ven mn <u>hibt</u> shme isral an (Ashkenaz un polak, ca. 1675, 141)
when one lifts Shma Israel on
'when one starts to recite the Shma Israel (the Jewish credo)'

The reason that I use subordinate clauses as examples is that the variation illustrated in (1) and (2) is neutralized in root clauses. This is because root clauses in Yiddish (as in all other Germanic languages except English) are

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[1]This is the written version of a talk delivered at NWAV 17, Universite de Montreal, Quebec, Canada in October 1988. The work reported here is part of a dissertation in progress on the diachronic syntax of Yiddish; it is based on the examination of 2160 subordinate clauses from 34 Early Yiddish sources, dating from ca. 1400 to 1800, and another 378 subordinate clauses from 5 Modern Yiddish sources. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the many helpful conversations that I have had with Anthony Kroch and Ellen Prince concerning the topic of this paper. The responsibility for all errors rests with me.

subject to the verb-second constraint, according to which the inflected verb must be the second constituent of its clause, regardless of whether the first constituent is the subject. In most Germanic languages, the verb-second constraint is observed only in root clauses, but in Yiddish, it has come to be observed in subordinate clauses as well (Maling and Zaenen 1981, Diesing 1988). This means that Yiddish allows a third type of subordinate clause, illustrated in (3), which exhibits what I will refer to as XP-INFL word order. The clause-initial position can be occupied by a fronted constituent, as in (3a), or by the lexical expletive es, as in (3b).

(3)

a. das in zeyn her tsihn iz eyn goyh tsu ihm gikumin
(Court testimony, ca. 1648, 174)
that in his here pulling is a Gentile-fem to him come
'that in his wanderings a Gentile woman came to him'

b. ub es geyt enk keyn ihudi ab
(Court testimony, ca. 1648, 157)
whether it goes you no Jew off
'whether you aren't missing a Jew'

Many discussions of diachronic syntax assume that variation of the type illustrated in (1)-(3) reflects the application of optional syntactic rules applying to a single underlying phrase structure and that syntactic change represents the reanalysis of derivationally complex ("opaque") derived structures as less opaque structures (Lightfoot 1979). This paper, on the other hand, attempts to establish that the variation that we find in Early Yiddish among the three word order types illustrated in (1)-(3) reflects variation among three distinct grammatical systems (Kroch 1988). I begin by arguing that while some instances of the word order illustrated in (2) can be derived from an INFL-final phrase structure by rightward movement, there are others which cannot be so derived. I conclude from this that the variation between (1) and (2) cannot be reduced to applying optional transformations to the output of a single phrase structure component. Rather, the variation between (1) and (2) reflects the variation between two distinct phrase structure options: the original INFL-final phrase structure of Germanic, which has remained prevalent in the history of German and Dutch, and an INFL-medial phrase structure innovation that has become categorical in English and the Scandinavian languages (den Besten 1986:241). Next, I motivate the distinction in Early Yiddish between Su-INFL subordinate clauses as in (2) and XP-INFL ones as in (3), a distinction which may at first g'ance seem superfluous since the word orders in (2) and (3) are both consistent with the verb-second constraint. I present two pieces of evidence supporting the distinction. The first piece of evidence is based on the distribution of lexical and empty expletive elements in the history of Yiddish, while the second concerns the difference between the two main dialects of Yiddish.

Let me begin by considering the subordinate clause in (2a). Nothing in principle prevents us from deriving (2a) from an INFL-final phrase structure via two independently motivated processes of rightward movement. First, the order of the inflected verb verdn with respect to its participial complement bshirmt could be the result of verb raising, a common and much-studied phenomenon in the syntax of West Germanic (Evers 1975, den Besten and Edmondson 1983). Briefly, verb raising permutes the underlying order of auxiliary verbs and their untensed

complements. In the continental varieties of West Germanic, including Early Yiddish, the underlying order of such verb sequences is head-final. Verb raising gives rise to sequences in which auxiliary verbs precede their complements, as in English. The process of verb raising is illustrated in the two examples in (4), where I have underlined the inflected verbs and bracketed the raised infinitival forms.

(4)
a. dz ikh oykh azu fil muz [gebn]
(Court testimony, ca. 1463, 48)
that I also so much must give
'that I too have to give so much'

b. az men drey ihudim oys irr herbrg hat [ginumn]
(Court testimony, ca. 1613, 104)
that one three Jews from their inn has taken
'that they took three Jews from their inn'

Second, the clause-final position of the PP in (2a) could be the result of extraposition, which is independently motivated in Early Yiddish by tokens like (5). Again, I have underlined the inflected verbs and bracketed the extraposed PP's.

(5)
a. di ir reyke gebn hat [an meyn visn]
(Court testimony, third quarter of 1400's, 31)
that her Reyke given has without my knowledge
'that Reyke gave her without my knowledge'

b. dz ikh reyn verde [fun der ashin] (Purim-shpil, 1697, 1004)
that I clean become of the ash
'that I may become clean of the ash'

Given the availability of the rightward movement processes illustrated in (4) and (5), a token like (2a) might therefore be derived from an INFL-final phrase structure as illustrated in (6).

(6)
a. Underlying structure:
dz zi fun irh bitrh peyn bshirmt verdn

b. Derived structure:
dz zi t_i t_j verdn bshirmt$_j$ [fun irh bitrh peyn]$_i$

However, not all instances of the Su-INFL word order illustrated in (2) are derivationally ambiguous. For instance, consider (2b), which contains the particle verb anhebn 'begin'. In order to derive (2b) from an INFL-final base, we would have to assume the derivation shown in (7), where both the direct object and the particle an undergo rightward movement.

(7)
a. Underlying structure:
ven mn shme isral an hibt

b. Derived structure:
ven mn t_i t_j hibt [shme isral]$_i$ an$_j$

While the rightward movement of NP's is attested in Early Yiddish, though not common, particle movement is ungrammatical.[2] Rather, particles in Yiddish generally immediately precede verbs that they are in construction with, as shown in (8). The particle-verb combination is underlined.

(8)
a. ven eynr fun uns tuht irn veyn <u>an</u> <u>rirn</u>
(Purim-shpil, 1697, 383)
if one of us does their wine on touch '
if one of us touches their wine'

b. biz di nshmh iz im <u>oys</u> <u>gingin</u> (Court testimony, 1639, 189)
until the soul is him out gone
'until his soul departed from him'

c. da zi gut ... hat <u>lib</u> <u>giht</u> min ven di andrn umut
(Preface to Shir ha-shirim, 1579, 5)
since them God has dear had more than the other peoples
'since God loved them more than the other nations'

As has been standard in the literature since Koster 1975, I conclude on the basis of the adjacency of the particles and the uninflected verb forms in (8) that particle stranding as in (2b) is due to leftward movement of the inflected verb. The inflected verb moves from its underlying position immediately following the particle into an underlyingly empty clause-medial INFL position, as shown in (9).

(9)
a. Underlying structure:
ven mn [$_{INFL}$e] shme isral an hibt

b. Derived structure:
ven mn [$_{INFL}$hibt]$_i$ shme isral an t_i

It is possible to construct arguments parallel to the one that I have just given on the basis of the distribution of expressions involving the Hebrew-Aramaic

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[2] In the Early Yiddish data that I have examined, 24 out of 227 NP's (11%) in unambiguously INFL-final clauses have undergone movement to a postverbal position. I have found two instances of particle movement, both in poetry, out of a total of 212 potential instances (1%). The latter figure is in the same range as the relative frequency attested in natural speech for ungrammatical phenomena such as English resumptive pronouns (Anthony Kroch, pers. comm.); hence, I do not take it to jeopardize the validity of the generalization that particles do not undergo movement.

(loshn koydesh) component of Yiddish, the distribution of unstressed pronouns and the distribution of sentential negation (cf. den Besten and Moed-van Walraven 1986 for Modern Yiddish), though time constraints prevent me from presenting them here. Each of these arguments leads to the same conclusion: namely, that at least some instances of Su-INFL word order cannot be derived from an INFL-final phrase structure. In the Early Yiddish data that I have examined, 73 Su-INFL clauses out of a total of 718 (10%) are unambiguously INFL-medial by the above-mentioned criteria. Therefore, the variation between (1) and (2) in Early Yiddish cannot be reduced to the variable application of optional rightward movement processes. Rather, in at least some cases, it reflects variation between two grammatical systems that are distinct at the level of underlying syntactic structure.

I turn now to the variation between Su-INFL and XP-INFL subordinate clauses as in (2) and (3), respectively. Since the word order of both of these clause types is consistent with the verb-second constraint, one might want to treat them as being generated by one and the same grammar--for instance, the grammar proposed by Diesing 1988 for Modern Yiddish. According to Diesing's analysis, subjects originate within VP and the underlyingly empty clause-initial position, which corresponds to Spec(IP), is filled by the movement of some constituent, either the subject or a non-subject, or by the insertion of the lexical expletive es. The variation between (2) and (3) then reduces to the choice within a single grammar of which (if any) constituent to move to clause-initial position, as illustrated in (10).

(10)

a. Underlying structure
$[_{Spec(IP)}{}^{e}]\ [_{INFL}{}^{e}]\ [_{VP}{}^{Su}\ V\ \ldots\ Non\text{-}Su\ \ldots]$

b. Derived structure

i. Subject-initial verb-second clause
$[_{Spec(IP)}{}^{Su_i}]\ [_{INFL}{}^{V_j}]\ [_{VP}{}^{t_i}\ t_j\ \ldots\ Non\text{-}Su\ \ldots]$

ii.a Non-subject-initial verb-second clause, First position filled by movement
$[_{Spec(IP)}{}^{Non\text{-}Su_i}]\ [_{INFL}{}^{V_j}]\ [_{VP}{}^{Su}\ t_j\ \ldots\ t_i\ \ldots]$

ii.b Non-subject-initial verb-second clause, First position filled by insertion of lexical expletive
$[_{Spec(IP)}{}^{es}]\ [_{INFL}{}^{V_i}]\ [_{VP}{}^{Su}\ t_i\ \ldots\ Non\text{-}Su\ \ldots]$

In Modern Yiddish, where subordinate clauses are categorically verb-second, there is in fact no reason not to adopt this analysis. In what follows, however, I will argue that in Early Yiddish, the variation between Su-INFL and XP-INFL subordinate clauses cannot always be treated in this way, but that it reflects the variation between two distinct INFL-medial grammars. The first grammar, which is the same system that we find in English or Vata (Koopman 1984), does not give rise to XP-INFL subordinate clauses. The second grammar, which has become obligatory in Modern Yiddish, is the one described in (10). Let me emphasize that from the perspective I am adopting, what at first glance appears to be the crucial difference between (2) and (3), namely the distinction between Su-INFL and XP-INFL word order, becomes something of a red herring. This is because Su-INFL subordinate clauses are ambiguous between two derivations: a

non-verb-second one on the basis of the grammar that does not allow XP-INFL subordinate clauses and a verb-second one on the basis of the grammar that does, cf. (10b.i).

My first piece of evidence for the distinction between the two INFL-medial grammars is structural and comes from the distribution of empty expletives in sentences that contain subject gaps. In Modern Yiddish, empty expletives can occur to the right of the inflected verb, but not in the clause-initial position to its left. This contrast is illustrated in (11) and (12), where the position of the empty expletive is indicated by e. As above, the inflected verb is underlined.

(11)
a. az mir iz e yedue ...
that to-me is known
'that I know ...'

b. az mir dakht e zikh ...
that to-me seems REFL
'that it seems to me ...'

c. a melamed, vos em iz e gegangen zeyer shlekht
a teacher that him is gone very badly
'a teacher who was very poor'

(12)
a. *az e iz mir yedue ...
that is to-me known
same as (11a)

b. *az e dakht zikh mir ...
that seems REFL to-me
same as (11b)

c. *a melamed, vos e iz em gegangen zeyer shlekht
a teacher that is him gone very badly
same as (11c)

The reason that the clauses in (12) are ungrammatical is that they violate the verb-second constraint, which requires not only that the first position in a clause be filled, but that it be filled by a phonologically realized element. Inserting the lexical expletive es in first position in the clauses in (12) renders them grammatical, as shown in (13).

(13)
a. az es iz mir yedue ...
that it is to-me known
same as (11a)

b. az es dakht zikh mir ...
that it seems REFL to-me
same as (11b)

c. a melamed, vos es iz em gegangen zeyer shlekht
a teacher that it is him gone very badly
same as (11c)

In Early Yiddish, we find verb-second clauses like those in (13) in which a lexical expletive fills the clause-initial position. Some examples are given in (14).

(14)
a. ver es iz antlafin gvarn (Court testimony, 1648, 207)
who it is escaped become
'whoever escaped'

b. dz es zal zikh ibr zi dr brmn hs"i (Vilna, 1692, 213)
that it shall REFL over them pity-take God
'that God shall take pity on them'

But we also find subject-gap clauses of precisely the type that is excluded in Modern Yiddish, as shown in (15).

(15)
a. vi e zeynn da avek kumn eyn par yungi leyt
(Court testimony, 1627, 131)
how are there away come a couple young people
'how a couple of young people disappeared there'

b. dz e iz mir ydue (Court testimony, 1643, 197)
that is to-me known
'that it is known to me'

c. dz e zoyln zikh dran kern manin un' veybr oykh ali leytn
(Duties, 1716, n.p.)
that shall REFL thereon turn men and women also all people
'that men and women, also all people, shall take heed of this'

From the existence of clauses like those in (15), I conclude that speakers of Early Yiddish had access to a grammar that gave rise to non-verb-second INFL-medial clauses as distinct from the verb-second ones in (14). In connection with the results established earlier, this means that Early Yiddish usage reflects variation among three distinct grammatical systems.

Even if one accepts the idea that word order variation can reflect variable grammars rather than variable rules, one might balk at this conclusion and attempt to reduce the number of grammatical systems that were in variation in Early Yiddish from three to two. In particular, one might attempt to derive the sentences in (15) from the independently motivated INFL-final base. An INFL-final analysis of these clauses, however, is ruled out since it would involve the rightward movement of unstressed pronominal forms like da, mir and zikh. In my Early Yiddish data, I have found only one instance of such rightward movement, out of 95 potential instances (1%). The pronoun in question moves to a position after an infinitival verb form; this sort of movement is very rarely attested in Modern Yiddish as well. I have come across no instance of the type of movement that we would have to assume in order to derive the examples in (15)

from an INFL-final base, namely pronoun movement to a position following an underlyingly clause-final inflected verb.

I have taken the position that subject-gap subordinate clauses that contain clause-initial empty expletives as in (15) are generated by a non-verb-second grammar, in contrast to those that contain lexical expletives. It might be argued, however, that the requirement that I have imposed on verb-second clauses, namely that the clause-initial position be filled by a phonologically overt element, is too strong, since the traces of relativized subjects count for first position throughout the history of Yiddish. Some Modern Yiddish examples are given in (16).

(16)

a. oyfn sofke vos t iz geshtanen in dem tsimer
(Royte Pomerantsen, 1947, 144)
on-the couch what is stood in the room
'on the couch that was in the room'

b. a mayse vos t hot zikh take mit im getrofn
(Royte Pomerantsen, 1947, 146)
a story what has REFL indeed with him met
'a story that really happened to him'

Therefore, relaxing the requirement in question, one might argue that a single verb-second grammar generates the clauses in both (14) and (15) after all, with a variable rule governing the realization of the clause-initial expletive as empty or lexical. This is not an analysis that can be dismissed out of hand. For instance, the variation between the lexical expletive Pad and the empty expletive in Icelandic subordinate clauses, which as in Yiddish obey the verb-second constraint, may be the result of such a variable rule. However, in the case of Yiddish, a convincing case can be made against the variable-rule approach.

The relevant evidence comes from the diachronic development of INFL-medial subject-gap clauses as in (14) and (15). For each of my sources, I have recorded the number of such clauses that are not verb-second and the number that are. As shown in Table 1, the sources divide into three groups. For each of these three groups, I also give the average percentage of XP-INFL subordinate clauses in general as well as the average percentage of INFL-final subordinate clauses.

Table 1
Correlation of clause-initial expletive with word order type

	Number of INFL-medial subject-gap clauses		Percentage of subord. clauses	
Sources dating from	Non-verb-second	Verb-second	XP-INFL	INFL-final
1507-1740	12	-	-	47%
1624-1834	8	17	6%	34%
1800-1947	-	30	14%	-

Clearly, in the first group of sources, subject-gap subordinate clauses cannot be expected to obey the verb-second constraint, since these sources do not yet contain verb-second subordinate clauses (see below). But both the second and third group of sources do allow verb-second subordinate clauses, and we might expect to find variation between non-verb-second and verb-second INFL-medial subject-gap clauses in both of them. However, while we find variation as expected in the second group, we find only verb-second INFL-medial subject-gap clauses in the third.

There is no straightforward explanation for these results given the variable-rule approach. Rather, they suggest an analysis along the following lines. I assume that empty expletives are licensed by local nominative case assignment. I assume further that the three types of subordinate clauses that are in variation in Early Yiddish differ with respect to two parameters. The first parameter concerns the linear order of INFL and VP, while the second parameter concerns the directionality of nominative case assignment by INFL. Both INFL-final and XP-INFL clauses provide unambiguous evidence for the values of these parameters. In INFL-final clauses, INFL follows VP and assigns nominative case to the left, while in XP-INFL clauses, INFL precedes VP and assigns case to the right. In Su-INFL clauses, on the other hand, even unambiguously INFL-medial ones, INFL might assign case to the right or left, depending on whether the clause in question is derived by the grammar that gives rise to XP-INFL clauses or not. Given these assumptions, the distinction between the second and third group of sources in Table 1 follows straightforwardly. The loss of INFL-final subordinate clauses in the third group of sources amounts to the loss of unambiguous evidence for the existence of leftward case-assigning INFL in Yiddish. This loss in turn leads to the loss of non-verb-second INFL-medial clauses, as clause-initial empty expletives in INFL-medial clauses cease to be licensed. In line with the assumptions stated above, empty expletives continue to be licensed in post-INFL position, as we saw in (11).

Let me turn now to the second piece of evidence supporting the assumption that there is variation in Early Yiddish between a non-verb-second and a verb-second INFL-medial grammar. This evidence, which is quantitative rather than structural, is based on a comparison of the two main dialects of Yiddish: West Yiddish and East Yiddish (the latter the precursor of Modern Yiddish). In Table 2, I track the relative frequencies of subordinate clauses as in (2) and (3) over time for both of these dialects.

Table 2
Diachronic development of potentially verb-second subordinate clauses in West and East Yiddish

Time period	West Yiddish			East Yiddish		
	Su-INFL	XP-INFL	TOTAL	Su-INFL	XP-INFL	TOTAL
1400-1489	10 (100%)	- (0%)	10	NO DATA AVAILABLE		
1490-1539	37 (100%)	- (0%)	37	NO DATA AVAILABLE		
1540-1589	143 (100%)	- (0%)	143	9 (100%)	- (0%)	9
1590-1639	6 (100%)	- (0%)	6	177 (98%)	3 (2%)	180
1640-1689	79 (100%)	- (0%)	79	104 (95%)	5 (5%)	109
1690-1739	46 (90%)	5 (10%)	51	54 (92%)	5 (8%)	59
1740-1789	54 (100%)	- (0%)	54	NO DATA AVAILABLE		
1790-1839	NO DATA AVAILABLE			285 (90%)	33 (10%)	318
after 1840	NO DATA AVAILABLE			245 (86%)	41 (14%)	286
TOTAL	375 (99%)	5 (1%)	380	876 (91%)	87 (9%)	963

Table 2 reveals a striking difference between West Yiddish and East Yiddish. Apart from one time period, the West Yiddish data do not contain any XP-INFL clauses. As it turns out, all of the XP-INFL clauses are from one exceptional text (out of a total of 23 texts), which there is reason to believe reflects Eastern usage. In the East Yiddish texts, on the other hand, XP-INFL clauses emerge in the time period 1590-1639 and their relative frequency rises steadily. The essentially categorical absence of XP-INFL subordinate clauses in West Yiddish is puzzling under the assumption that Su-INFL clauses are produced throughout the entire history of Yiddish by the same grammar that produces XP-INFL clauses. It follows straightforwardly, on the other hand, under the assumption that Su-INFL subordinate clauses in West Yiddish are the output of a non-verb-second INFL-medial grammar.[3]

In conclusion, I have argued in this paper that the variation among the word order types illustrated in (1)-(3) cannot be reduced to the application of variable rules to a common underlying phrase structure. Rather, it reflects variation among three distinct grammatical systems, which in turn can be related to two parameters: the headedness of INFL with regard to VP on the one hand and the directionality of nominative case assignment by INFL on the other.

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[3]Moreover, it suggests that the verb-second grammar that has become categorical in Modern Yiddish emerged in East Yiddish as a result of language contact with Slavic.

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