

Yiddish and German noun phrases: a contrastive approach

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1 Yiddish and German

“Of all the Germanic languages, Yiddish looks least Germanic: it uses a Hebrew alphabet and is read from right to left, and its grammar and lexicon have undergone considerable influence not only from Hebrew and Aramaic [...] but also from various Slavic languages.” (Jacobs et al. 1994:388)

“Although no one doubts the early and intimate tie between Yiddish and German, a lively debate is still going on as to the exact relationship between the two [...]” (Fishman 2004:213)

2 Attributive adjectives

Standard German

(1)a	<i>der gut-e</i>	<i>Mann</i> /	<i>ein</i>	<i>gut-er</i>	<i>Mann</i>
	the good-NOM.SG.M.WEAK	man	a	good-NOM.SG.M.STRONG	man
(1)b	<i>die gut-e</i>	<i>Frau</i> /	<i>eine</i>	<i>gut-e</i>	<i>Frau</i>
	the good-NOM.SG.F.WEAK	woman	a	good-NOM.SG.F.STRONG	woman
(1)c	<i>das gut-e</i>	<i>Kind</i> /	<i>ein</i>	<i>gut-es</i>	<i>Kind</i>
	the good-NOM.SG.N.WEAK	child	a	good-NOM.SG.N.STRONG	child
(1)d	<i>die gut-en</i>	<i>Menschen</i> /	Ø	<i>gut-e</i>	<i>Menschen</i>
	the good-NOM.PL.WEAK	people	Ø	good-NOM.PL.STRONG	people

Standard Yiddish

“[F]rom the German perspective the Yiddish adjectival paradigm is a mixture of so-called ‘strong’ endings (nom. m. sg. and dat. f. sg. -er and pl. -e), ‘weak’ endings (nom./acc. n. sg. -e) and endings which fit either system. If it were not for the nominative/accusative neuter singular -e and the greater syncretism, one could say that Yiddish has generalized the strong inflection.” (Jacobs et al. 1994:405)

(2)a	<i>der/a gut-er</i>	<i>man</i>
	the/a good-NOM.SG.M	man
(2)b	<i>di/a gut-e</i>	<i>froy</i>
	the/a good-NOM.SG.F	woman
(2)c	<i>die/Ø gut-e</i>	<i>mentshn</i>
	the/Ø good-NOM.PL	people

- (3) *dos gut-e kind / a gut kind / a kind a gut-s*
 the good-NOM.SG.N.WEAK child a good-Ø child a child a good-NOM.SG.N.STRONG

“Interestingly, a strong neuter ending (in *-s*) is possible too, but only when the adjective is predicative and preceded by the invariable indefinite article *a* [...]” (Jacobs et al. 1994:405-406)

- (4) *dos bukh iz a gut-s* (Jacobs et al. 1994:406)
 the book is a good-NOM.SG.N.STRONG
 ‘the book is a good (one)’

3 Morphological development

Middle High German

	masc.	fem.	neutr.
Sg.	Nom.	st. <i>guot, guoter</i> – w. <i>guote</i>	st. <i>guot, guoteʒ</i> – w. <i>guote</i>
	Acc.	<i>guoten</i>	st. <i>guote</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>
	Dat.	st. <i>guotem(e)</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>	st. <i>guotem(e)</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>
	Gen.	st. <i>guotes</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>	st. <i>guotes</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>
Pl.	Nom.	st. <i>guote</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>	st. <i>guotiu</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>
	Acc.	st. <i>guote</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>	st. <i>guotiu</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>
	Dat.		<i>guoten</i>
	Gen.		st. <i>guoter(e)</i> – w. <i>guoten</i>

Table 1: Middle High German adjective forms

New High German

	masc.	fem.	neutr.
Sg.	Nom.	st. <i>guter</i> – w. <i>gute</i>	st. <i>gutes</i> – w. <i>gute</i>
	Acc.	<i>guten</i>	st. <i>gutes</i> – w. <i>gute</i>
	Dat.	st. <i>gutem</i> – w. <i>guten</i>	st. <i>gutem</i> – w. <i>guten</i>
	Gen.	<i>guten</i>	<i>guten</i>
Pl.	Nom.		st. <i>gute</i> – w. <i>guten</i>
	Acc.		st. <i>gute</i> – w. <i>guten</i>
	Dat.		<i>guten</i>
	Gen.		st. <i>guter</i> – w. <i>guten</i>

Table 2: New High German adjective forms

Yiddish

	masc.	fem.	neutr.
Sg.	Nom.	<i>guter</i>	st. <i>gut, guts</i> – w. <i>gute</i>
	Acc.	<i>gutn</i>	st. <i>gut, guts</i> – w. <i>gute</i>
	Dat.	<i>gutn</i>	st. <i>gut, guts</i> – w. <i>gutn</i>
Pl.	Nom.		<i>gute</i>
	Acc.		<i>gute</i>
	Dat.		<i>gute</i>

Table 3: Yiddish adjective forms

Examples of strong adjectives in “weak” distributions in German

Middle and Early New High German

- (5) *der listig-er* *man* (Paul 2007:356)
the cunning-NOM.SG.M.STRONG man
'the cunning man'
- (6) *diser lasterlich-er* *bube* (Behaghel 1923:189)
this depraved-NOM.SG.M.STRONG boy
'this depraved boy'

„Die Niedersachsen / Märker / und teils Schlesier behalten in den Beyständigen die männliche Endung **er** / samt dem unbenannten *es* / wenn gleich **der** und **das** vorstehet / als: **der großer Gott** / vor / **der große Gott** magnus Deus, **das einiges Werk** / vor **das einige Werk** / opus unicum, so ihnen aber die Meißner / Thüringer und Franken samt andern nicht nachthun / sondern bey der Regel bleiben [...]“ (Stieler 1691:56)

Typical of 17th century Northern German and Silesian (see Solms/Wegera 1991:225)

Silesian

- (7) *ein jeder* *redlich-er* *Mann* (Weinhold 1853:135)
one each-NOM.SG.M.STRONG honest-NOM.SG.M.STRONG man
'each honest man'
- (8) *die weich-e* *Thränen* (Weinhold 1853:135)
the soft-NOM.PL.STRONG tears
'the soft tears'

„Im NAPl. steht die starke Form mit -e viel häufiger als die schwache.“ (Gusinde 1911:117)

Maintenance of the strong vs. weak-distinction in Western Yiddish

Northwestern Yiddish (Friesland)

- (9) *an chadeschmonig-er* *Gallach* (Reershemius 2007:65)
a protestant-NOM.SG.M.STRONG priest
'a protestant priest'
- (10) *der mies-e* *Ben Odem* (Reershemius 2007:64)
the rotten-NOM.SG.M.WEAK man
'the rotten man'

Southwestern Yiddish (Switzerland)

- (11) *ə seɪn-ə* *jontəf* (Fleischer 2005:175)

a beautiful-NOM.SG.M.STRONG holiday
‘a beautiful holiday’

- (12) *də letʃt* *sabəs* (Fleischer 2005:216)

the last-Ø[=NOM.SG.M.WEAK] Sabbath
‘last Sabbath’

- loss of the strong vs. weak-distinction seems to be an Eastern Yiddish trait
- consistent with Slavic
- the trend to give up the strong vs. weak-distinction is a long-term tendency of German(ic); it might be somewhat more prominent in Silesian than in other German varieties and it is almost accomplished in Eastern Yiddish, but not in Western Yiddish

4 Postposition of attributive adjectives and possessive pronouns

German

- (13) *gotes stimna hlud-a* (Old High German (Isidor); see Behaghel 1932:199)

God’s voice loud-NOM.SG.F.WEAK
‘God’s loud voice’

- (14) *Röslein rot*

rose(DIM) red-Ø
‘red rose’

- (15) *o bruder mein* (Early New High German; Behaghel 1932:209)

oh brother my-Ø
‘oh my brother!’

- preposition is much more widespread
- for adjectives postposition is especially prominent if the adjective is longer than the noun (*Gesetz der wachsenden Glieder*; Behaghel 1932:199)
- for possessive pronouns postposition is especially prominent as a “vocative” (see Behaghel 1932:209)
- postposition never co-occurs with an article; after Old High German there are no examples with overt inflection

Yiddish

“One noteworthy feature of the nominal group is that adjectival modifiers which may occur prenominally [...] may also occur postnominally in an NP–NP structure [...]” (Jacobs et al. 1994:408)

Adjectives

- (16) *di oygn di grin-e* (Jacobs et al. 1994:408)
the eyes the green-NOM.PL
'the green eyes'
- (17) *to vivlio to kokkino to megalο* (Modern Greek; Alexiadou/Wilder 1996:303)
the book the red the big
'the big red book'
- (18) *dos land dos farboten-e* (Weinreich 1958:382)
the country the forbidden-NOM.SG.M.WEAK
'the forbidden country'
(“more solemn than *dos farbótene land*”; Weinreich 1958:283)
- (19) *a gut kind / a kind a gut-s*
a good-Ø [= NOM.SG.N] child a child a good-NOM.SG.M.STRONG
'a good child'
- (20) *a sheyn meydl / a meydl a sheyn-e* (Jacobs et al. 1994:408)
a beautiful-Ø [= NOM.SG.N] girl a girl a beautiful-NOM.SG.F
'a beautiful girl'
- (21) *Agreement Hierarchy*
attributive > predicative > relative pronoun > personal pronoun (Corbett 2006:270)

“Changes favouring forms with greater semantic justification proceed from the right of the hierarchy.” (Corbett 2006: 270-271)

- postponed adjectives are nominalizations (viz. article)
- the neuter form ending in *-s* is restricted to nominalizations
- semantic agreement makes it seem unlikely that postponed adjectives are on a par with preposed attributive adjectives (grammatical agreement)

Silesian

“Adjektiva werden oft nachgestellt, um das zugehörige Ding stärker zu betonen [...]”
(Menzel 1972:41)

- (22) *a hōd a haus, a hipš-əs* (Hanke 1913:27)
he has a house, a pretty-ACC.SG.N.STRONG
'he has a house, a pretty one'
- (23) *'s wår a Maa-idla, a hibsch-es* (Peuckert 1950:52)
it was a girl a pretty-ACC.SG.N.STRONG
'it was a pretty girl / it was a girl, a pretty one'
- (24) *Doas ies derr a Madla, a hibsches* (Metzel 1972:41)
that is you a girl a pretty-ACC.SG.N.STRONG
'that's a pretty girl'

Possessive pronouns

Yiddish

- (25) *mayn khaver*
my-Ø friend
'my friend'
- (26) *der khaver mayn-er* (Yiddish)
the friend my-NOM.SG.M.STRONG
'my friend'
- (27)a **mayn-er khaver*
*my-NOM.SG.M friend
'my friend'
- (27)b **der mayn-er khaver*
*the my-NOM.SG.M friend
'my friend'

"[A]ny noun phrase may in fact occur in second position, whether it includes an adjective or not, so long as it can be understood predicatively [...]" (Jacobs et al. 1994:408)

- (28) *eyner a yid a melamed* (Jacobs et al. 1994:408)
one a Jew a teacher
'one (who is a) Jew/guy (who is) a teacher'

German linguistic islands in Eastern Europe

- (29) *die Nachbarn unsr-e* (Lück 1929:22)
the neighbors our-NOM.PL.STRONG
'our neighbors'
- (30) *das Vermögen unsr-es* (Lück 1929:22)
the property our-NOM.SG.N.STRONG
'our property'

5 Determiner doubling

Yiddish

- (31) *mayn-e a shvester* (Javobs et al. 1994:406)
my-NOM.SG.N a sister
'a sister of mine'
- (32) *in eynem a tog*
in one a day
'in one day'

6 Predicative adjectives

Old High German

- (33) ... *Inti sat-e uuvrdut* (Tat. 121,18; Fleischer 2007a:283)
... and replete-PL.M.STRONG became
'and you became replete'

Highest Alemannic (see Fleischer 2007b)

- (34) *er / si / es isch jung-e / jung-i / jung-s*
he / she / it is young-SG.M.STRONG / young-SG.F.STRONG / young-SG.N.STRONG
'he/she/it is young'

Standard German

- (35) *der Mann ist gut / die Frau ist gut / das Kind ist gut / die Menschen sind gut*
the man ist good-Ø the woman is good-Ø the child is good-Ø the people are good-Ø
'the man/woman/child is good / the people are good'

Yiddish

- (36) *der man iz gut / di froy iz gut / dos kind iz gut / di mentshn zaynen gut*
the man ist good-Ø the woman is good-Ø the child is good-Ø the people are good-Ø
'the man/woman/child is good / the people are good'
- (37) *der man iz a gut-er / di froy iz a gut-e /*
the man is a good-NOM.SG.M the woman is a good-NOM.SG.F
dos kind iz a gut-s
the child is a good-NOM.SG.N.STRONG
'the man/woman/child is good'
- (38) *die mentshen zaynen gut-e*
the people are good-NOM.PL
'the people are good'

"I shall follow e. g. Weinreich (1971, 308), Katz (1987, 87), and Lockwood (1995, 112) in taking the agreeing form [...] to be a nominalisation." (Vikner 2001:403)

- (39)a **eyn oytobus iz grin-er* (Vikner 2001:403)
(39)b *eyn oytobus iz a grin-er* (Vikner 2001:403)
'one bus is (a) green'

- (40) *di mame iz krank* (Mark 1978:215)
the mother is sick-Ø
'mother is sick (now)'

- (41) *di mame iz a krank-e* (Mark 1978:215)
the mother is a sick-NOM.SG.F
'mother is sick (i.e. a sick woman)'

“This is suggestively reminiscent of the differentiation of “long” and “short” forms of the adjective in East Slavic: cf. Russian *ja bolen* and *ja bol’noj*.” (Weinreich 1958:383)

7 “Semi-predicative” adjectives

- (42) *der bokher iz gegangen a hungeriker [...]* (Lockwood 1995:112)
the boy is gone a hungry-NOM.SG.M
‘the boy went away hungry / as a hungry one’

8 Conclusion

- nominalizations are much more prominent in Yiddish than in German
- postpositions of adjectives and possessive pronouns are possible in Yiddish, but only if nominalization is involved
- pragmatic factors seem to play an important role

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