

**‘The Yiddish modal system between Germanic and Slavonic. A case study on the borrowability of modals’**

18.8.2008

**Björn Hansen / Sandra Birzer (Regensburg)**

**Abstract**

The article deals with the modal system in Yiddish and addresses the question whether it shares typological features with Germanic or with Slavonic systems. The first section of the contribution contains a first description of the category of modals from a cross-linguistic perspective. In the second part, it will be shown that despite the strong Slavonic influence on the Yiddish language system as a whole, Yiddish modals clearly show morpho-syntactic features typical of the Germanic languages. There are no borrowings from Slavonic. From a semantic point of view, however, the system differs considerably from all other Germanic languages including German. These findings are explained by the hypothesis that modals are more easily borrowed if they add a new feature to the recipient modal system rather than if they replace one of the recipient language’s original features.

*Az me ken nit vi me vil,  
darf men veln vi me ken.*

**0. Introduction**

Yiddish is an independent Germanic language which developed in close contact with varieties of (Middle High) German, Hebrew, Slavonic and to less degree Romance languages. In the present article we would like to describe the Yiddish modal system and address the question whether it shares typological features with Germanic or with Slavonic systems. As the Yiddish modals have not yet been studied in detail we would like to give a first description which takes both semantic and syntactic features into account. The article is organised as follows. First, we shall briefly discuss the state of the art in the research on modals in Yiddish and on the Slavonic component. Section 2 describes the category of modals from a cross-linguistic perspective. It demonstrates the essential semantic and morpho-syntactic properties of modals in contrast to lexical items with modal meanings. In section 3 we give a first semantic and syntactic description of the modals in Yiddish. The fourth section is dedicated to a comparison with Germanic and Slavonic which takes morphological, syntactic and semantic

features into account. Section 5 summarizes the results and offers some explanations of the findings in terms of language contact theory. We will point out the relevance of innovations for the borrowability of modals.<sup>1</sup>

## **1. The state of the art**

### **1.1. Modal verbs in Yiddish**

The term ‘modal’ is well established in Germanic linguistics. In every handbook of English or German one finds special chapters about ‘modals’ or ‘modal verbs’ and special studies are also available. In grammars and studies of Yiddish, however, modals have not been paid equally much attention so far. One reason for this may be that grammaticography of the Yiddish verb is much more concerned with questions of aspect and conjugation classes than verb functions.

Birnbaum’s description of the Yiddish verb concentrates on morphology (1979, 260-291), i.e. on conjugation classes, but, interestingly enough, he does not single out auxiliaries as such, although all of them display either irregular conjugation (e.g. *zayn* ‘to be’) or a defective present paradigm, namely -Ø suffix in 3P.SG (among others, all modals). Some basic information on the contextual usage of those Yiddish modals that can also be used for marking verb mood is given in the corresponding chapter (cf. Birnbaum 1979, 269-271).

Mark (1978, 270-280) is the only grammarian to dedicate a whole chapter of his grammar to auxiliaries. He underlines the difficulties of drawing a clear line between modals and TAM-auxiliaries: *darfn*, *muzn*, *megn*, (*nit*) *torn*, *veln*, *lozn*, *kenen* are considered as ‘classical’ modal verbs, yet the auxiliaries *zoln*, *lozn*, *voltn*, *flegn*, used as mood markers, may also be considered modal verbs (cf. Mark 1978, 270).

Jacobs (2005, 216-217) divides the Yiddish modals into a core, to be found in all varieties of Yiddish, and a periphery containing such modals as *kern* ‘ought; might; may’ to be found only in some varieties. Important for our study, Jacobs indicates an “[e]xceptional use of -*t* suffix with a modal [...] in the construction *es vil-t zix* (+DAT mir, dir, etc.) ‘I/you/etc. want,’ a calque from Slavic” (2005, 216). This may be

---

<sup>1</sup> All Yiddish examples needing in transliteration have been transliterated with the YIVO system; examples that were already transliterated have remained unchanged.

considered a hint that, despite the Germanic looking surface, Slavonic has exercised some influence on the Yiddish modal system.

As far we can see, the only major work dedicated to Yiddish modals is Eggenesperger (1995). The author gives a corpus-based description of the modal *zoln* and the conditional marker *wolt*. His analyses take both the semantic and the syntactic characteristics of these two modals into consideration. Of special interest are the findings concerning the differences in meaning found in main and subordinated clauses. Eggenesperger convincingly shows that the different usages of *zoln* can be accounted for by the interaction of different morphological and syntactic factors.

## **1.2. Research on Slavonic elements in Yiddish**

Yiddish is considered to be a fused language (cf. Jacobs 2005, 17-22) with German, Slavonic and Hebrew-Aramaic elements as well as a very limited number of Romanisms such as *leyenen* ‘to read’ and *bentshn* ‘to bless’.

The Hebrew-Aramaic element pertains mainly to the lexicon in the sense that Yiddish displays quite a lot of “learned” loanwords and idioms from Hebrew-Aramaic (cf. Eggers 1998, 214-215; Wexler 1991). The average percentage of Hebrew-Aramaic elements in a Yiddish text is 5.38 percent (cf. Mark’s results cited in (Dyhr / Zint 1988, 31) and varies according to whether the text deals with specifically Jewish issues that involve a large number of loanwords from the ritual language. Another reason for a varying percentage of Hebrew-Aramaic elements is the audience addressed: words from Hebrew-Aramaic may be replaced by Germanic or Slavic elements if the author fears the audience to be incapable of understanding the Hebrew-Aramaic components. Hebrew-Aramaic exerts some influence on morphology (cf. Krogh 2001, 13-14; Birnbaum 1979, 82-83) for inflection; (Jacobs 2005, 197-198; Birnbaum 1979, 84-85) for word formation. Referring to Thomason’s (2001, 70-71) borrowing scale, this implies fairly intensive language contact, and one might pose the question whether Hebrew-Aramaic influence on the modal system has to be assumed; the more so, since Yiddish displays Hebrew-Aramaic modal adverbs such as *efsher* ‘maybe, possibly’. However, the Hebrew-Aramaic influence is not as substantial as these facts imply at first glance: the inflectional endings borrowed from Hebrew-Aramaic do not replace the

inherited ones, but rather coexist with them, forming doublets. The Hebrew-Aramaic lexeme *ponim* ‘face’ forming its plural *ponimer* ‘faces’ with the Germanic inflectional ending *-er* may serve as evidence. The same is also true for modal expressions: *efsher* may be replaced by its doublet *s iz meglekh az* ‘possibly (lit. it is possible that)’. Since no such doublets occur for the Yiddish core modals, an investigation of Hebrew-Aramaic influence on the modal system can be discarded.

Slavonic has left its imprint on Yiddish in several ways. The Slavonic influence is most subtle in the cases where Germanic forms display typically Slavonic functions or usage patterns.<sup>2</sup> Yet there is a wide range of overt Slavonic elements in Yiddish phonology (cf. Birnbaum 1979, 76-78), morphology, syntax and lexicon as well. Due to lack of space, only the most important ones shall be mentioned.

Yiddish morphology adapts a large number of Slavonic word formation affixes (cf. Geller 1994, 95-103; 111-117, Eggers 1998, 306-308), e.g. the productive suffix *-ev-* is used for verb formation (pl. *gospodar-ow-ać* / rus. *gospodstv-ov-at* ‘to rule’ → yid. *balebat-ev-en* ‘to rule’), or the suffix *-ink-* for gradation of adjectives (germ. *dünn* ‘thin’ → yid. *dininker* ‘thinish’). The inflectional inventory of Yiddish remains stable, although an optional vocative is added to the nominal declension according to the Polish model, cf. pol. *mamuniu* ‘Mummy’ → yid. *mamenyu* ‘Mummy’ < *mame* ‘Mum’ (cf. Geller 1994, 102). In the Slavonic languages prefixing of verbs is used to mark aspect; by calquing these prefixes in different ways Yiddish establishes an – at least rudimentary – aspectual system (Geller 1994, 106-108; Eggers 1998, 310-312; 321-331; Jacobs 2005, 221-222; Birnbaum 1979, 271-273). Ingressive is transmitted with the help of *nemen zikh + tsu + infinitive* (lit. ‘to take oneself to’), paralleled by Pol. *wziąć się* (lit. ‘to take oneself to’) and Rus. *brat’sja za* (lit. ‘to take oneself to’): *Bald hot zi genumen trakhtn derfun...* ‘Soon she started thinking about that...’ Semelfactivity, expressed in Slavic with the help of a suffix (Rus. *krik-nu-t* ‘to make a

---

<sup>2</sup> Among others, Eggers (1998: 230-240) describes, how in Polish Eastern Yiddish the usage of the personal pronouns *ir* ‘you (2Pl)’ and *ets* ‘you (dual)’ is modelled on the usage of the personal pronoun *wy* ‘you’ in Polish dialects: if *wy* is used as an honorific address, the Polish verb takes the 2Pl ending *-cie*, and Yiddish correspondingly uses the pronoun *ir*; if dialectal Polish *wy* is used to address a pair of people, the verb takes the dual ending *-ta*, and Yiddish uses the dual pronoun *ets*, originally a Bavarian feature. Later, the honorific usage of *ir* became replaced by the syntagma *a yid* ‘(lit.) a Jew’, a form of address working after the Polish model of *pan* ‘Sir’, a noun with pronominal usage when used as a form of address. Consequently, *ir* replaced *ets* as a means of general address to 2Pl.

cry'), is rendered with the help of *gebn / ton a* + substantive: *gebn / ton a skrip* 'to make a creak (lit. to give / do a creak)', *ton a geshrey* 'to make a cry (lit. to do a cry)'. The relative freedom of Yiddish word order may be accounted for by Slavonic influence, since word order in the Slavic languages is much freer than in German. Among others, adjectives may be postponed after the noun; para- and hypotactic sentences display the same word order (cf. Eggers 1998, 313-318<sup>3</sup>); *gerundivn* – specialized infinite secondary predicates with anterior or simultaneous meaning are also typical of the Slavonic languages (so-called adverbial participles or gerunds). The possibility of quite extant subject and object pro-drop (cf. Jacobs 2005, 262-262) also displays a parallel to Slavonic.

The percentage of Slavic loanwords and calques in Yiddish cannot be numbered precisely, yet they belong to certain domains: clothing, food, plants and animals, housekeeping, body parts, family etc. (cf. Eggers 1998, 319-321; Geller 1994, 81 and Wexler 1991).

## **2. Modals as a cross-linguistic category**

Due to the lack of space, we shall not be able to cover all types of expressions with modal meanings. Therefore, we concentrate on the category of modals, i.e. on modal elements, which have undergone a grammaticalization process; they express the basic notions of 'necessity' and 'possibility'<sup>4</sup> and show syntactic properties of auxiliaries. Modal is a gradient category; there are prototypical and peripheral instances. We propose to determine modals by locating them on a grammaticalization chain extending from content words to fully-fledged modal auxiliaries. This approach is compatible with Heine (1993, 70) who defines auxiliaries as "linguistic items covering some range of uses along the Verb-to-T(ense)A(spect)M(odality) chain". An auxiliary "is no longer

---

<sup>3</sup> Not every item Eggers labels as syntactic feature must necessarily be regarded as such, for example the forms of the analytical comparatives und superlatives could also be referred to morphology.

<sup>4</sup> Due to the lack of space, we are not able to discuss the controversial question whether volition has to be considered part of the semantic space of modality or not. In this article, we will exclude verbs of volition.

a fully lexical item, but not yet a grammatical inflection either, and it is likely to exhibit properties that are characteristic of the intermediate stages” between fully lexical items and inflectional forms (Heine 1993, 86). We can define modals in the following way:

A fully-fledged modal is a polyfunctional, morphologically autonomous expression of modality which shows a certain degree of grammaticalization. ‘Polyfunctional’ is understood as covering a domain within the semantic space of modality. A fully-fledged modal functions as an operator on the predicational and/or the propositional level of the clause.

A modal occurs with main verbs in the predicate position and opens one and only one argument position, which is filled by a lexical verbal stem. A modal does not select its own nominal arguments but influences the encoding of the arguments of the verbal form. We assume that modals form matrix coding constructions in the sense of Van Valin (2005).<sup>5</sup>

Modals are to be located at the ‘grammatical periphery’ and tend to form a kind of fully analytical paradigm of the verb. Typical modals are polyfunctional in the sense that they express no less than two types of modality. One usually distinguishes dynamic, deontic and epistemic modality. Modals are polyfunctional, while so called modal content words, i.e. words with modal meaning which are not subject to an auxiliarisation process, have only one modal meaning. Let us compare the fully-fledged modal Yiddish *kenen* ‘can’ with the lexical phrase *bekoyekh zayn* ‘to be capable’. The former can express ‘capability’ (dynamic) (1), ‘objective possibility’ (dynamic) (2), ‘permission’ (deontic) (3) and ‘perhaps’ (epistemic) (4), while the latter is confined to ‘capability’ (5):<sup>6</sup>

(1) <i>nor</i>	<i>[di</i>	<i>keners]</i>	<i>kenen</i>	<i>beemes</i>	<i>opshatsn</i>
only the	expert.PL		can.PRS.3PL	indeed	appreciate.INF
<i>dem</i>	<i>umfarglaykhlekhn</i>			<i>dergreykh</i>	
the	tremendous.DAT/ACC			accomplishment.DAT/ACC	
<i>fun dem</i>	<i>verterbukh.</i>				
of the	dictionary.DAT/ACC				

,Only experts can indeed appreciate the tremendous accomplishment of the dictionary.’

(2) <i>me</i>	<i>ken</i>	<i>es</i>	<i>nemen</i>	<i>tsu</i>	<i>hilf</i>	<i>kedey</i>
---------------	------------	-----------	--------------	------------	-------------	--------------

<sup>5</sup> Another term would be ‘raising constructions’. For a more detailed analysis of the syntax of modals cf. Besters-Dilger/Drobnjaković/Hansen in prep.

<sup>6</sup> The examples are taken from the mailing list ‘Mendel’, except ex. (4) which goes back to our questionnaire on LINGUIST List (s. ch. 3.1)

you can.PRS.3SG it take.INF to help in order to  
*durkhtsufirn a neytike diferentsirung.*  
 accomplish.INF a necessary.ACC differentiation.ACC  
 ‚One can take it as a help in order to accomplish the necessary  
 differentiation.’

(3) *du kenst geyn.*  
 you can.PRS.2SG go.INF  
 ‚You may go.’

(4) *Es ken zayn az Peter hot geharget*  
 it can.PRS.3SG be.INF that Peter killed.PST.3SG  
*dem man.*  
 the man.ACC  
 ‚Peter may have killed the man.’

(5) *Di melodye bin ikh leyder nisht bekoyekh*  
 the melody.ACC be.PRS.1SG I unfortunately not capable  
*tsu transkribirn in a blitsbrivl.*  
 to transcribe.INF in.PREP a e-mail  
 ‚Unfortunately, I am not able to transcribe the melody in an e-mail.’

In our analysis we will exclude lexical elements with modal meaning: adjectives like *mekhuyev* ‘obliged’, sentence adverbs like *efsher* ‘perhaps’ or nouns like *meglekhkayt* ‘possibility’.

### 3. Yiddish modals in comparison to Germanic and Slavonic

#### 3.1. The collection of data

As there is no comprehensive work on modals in Yiddish, we had to do some pioneering work. To get an overview of the possibilities for expressing modality in Yiddish, in a first step U. Weinreich’s *English-Yiddish Dictionary*, and M. Šapiro’s *Russian-Yiddish Dictionary* were checked for translations of English, respectively Russian modals. These data were counterchecked in the reverse direction and completed by Y. Niborski’s *Dictionnaire Yiddish-Français*.

In a second step, a corpus, representing the style registers journalistic, scientific, belle lettres, drama for spoken language, was compiled and analysed for modal verbs. Most of the corpus body was taken from the internet, only some belle letters texts were used in a printed version. Due to the fact that the internet is a low-threshold medium, we came across a high variety of dialectal features on personal websites, which made it necessary to treat examples from such websites with caution.

Furthermore, a questionnaire on Yiddish modal verbs was worked out and distributed via the mailing lists Linguist List and Yiddish Forum.<sup>7</sup> Native speakers of Yiddish were asked to translate 18 sentences containing modal verbs from English to Yiddish and to comment on the choice of the corresponding Yiddish modal verb.<sup>8</sup>

According to our definition the class of Yiddish modals comprises *darfn*, *muzn*, *megn*, *nit torn*, *kenen*, *zoln*, and at the periphery *kern*. Due to its syntax we have to exclude the verb *veln* ‘to want’ which usually is considered part of the category ‘modale verbn’:<sup>9</sup> it does not form matrix coding constructions, but functions as a control verb.

### 3.2. Morphology and syntax

Yiddish modals share most morphological features with verbs but show a dedicated paradigm in the present tense which sets them apart from lexical verbs; they have a zero ending in the third person singular which contrasts with the usual ending – *t*:

*er muz-Ø*, *er zol-Ø* vs *er shrajb-t*,      *er zog-t*  
 he must    he shall      he write-3SG    he say-3SG

All Yiddish modals form matrix-coding constructions with a subject in the Nominative case. The modals show subject agreement with respect to person and number and combine with a ‘bare’ infinitival verb without the marker *tsu*. Lexical verbs which govern a propositional argument need an infinitive with *tsu*. Cf. the modal *kenen* ‘can’ with *trakhten* ‘to think about doing sth.’

---

<sup>7</sup> LINGUIST List of March 6, 2007 and Yiddish Forum e-mail of March 26, 2007

<sup>8</sup> We would like to thank all scholars who have filled in our questionnaire; we are especially grateful to Ewita Wiecka and to Yitskhok Niborski for their invaluable comments.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the lists of modal verbs in Mark (1978) and Jacobs (2005).



(6) *Mir kenen arbetn.*  
 we can.PRS.1PL work.INF  
 ‘We can work.’

(7) *Perelmutter trakht tsu arbetn oyf*  
 Perelmutter think.PRS.3SG to work.INF. on.PREP  
*der doziker problem.*  
 the DEM problem  
 ‘Perelmutter thinks about working on that problem.’

On the surface modals look like content words, often like verbs, but syntactically they share properties with affixes. As the modal takes over the argument structure of the main verb, it does not influence the selection of the first argument. The following features show that fully-fledged modals syntactically behave like auxiliaries:

a) modals combine with humane or inanimate subjects:

(8) *Dos kind darf blaybn in*  
 The child.NOM must.PRS.3SG remain.INF in.PREP  
*der heym.*  
 the home  
 ‘The child has to remain at home.’

(9) *Aplikatsiyes [...] darf onkumen tsu*  
 application.PL.NOM must.PRS.3PL arrive.INF to.PREP  
*der fundatsiye nit shpeter vi oktober dem 15tn, 1999.*  
 the foundation not later as October the 15, 1999  
 ‘Applications have to arrive at the foundation not later than October 15, 1999.’

b) modals combine with aivalent verbs (e.g. meteorological verbs)

(10) *Es volt gekent regenen*

it      may.SUBJ.3SG      can.PTCP.PASS      rain.INF  
*morgn.*  
tomorrow  
‘It may rain tomorrow.’

c) modal constructions allow passive transformations without change in meaning:<sup>10</sup>

(11) *Der student      darf      iberzetsn      dem tekst.*  
the student.NOM      must.PRS.3SG      translate.INF      the text  
‘The student must translate the text.’

(12) *Der tekst      darf      ibergezetst      vern.*  
the text.NOM      must.PRS.3SG      translate.PTCP.PASS      become.INF  
‘The text must be translated.’

d) modals do not assign thematic roles to the subject:

(13) *Der student      muz      iberzetsn      dem tekst.*  
the student.NOM      must.PRS.3SG      translate.INF      the text  
‘The student must translate the text.’ (= agent)

(14) *Ikh      muz      ober      visn      di      numern*  
I      must.PRS.1SG      but      know.INF      the      number.PL  
*fun      shprikhverter.*  
of.PREP      proverb.PL  
‘But I need to know the numbers of the proverbs.’ (cognizer = experiencer)

These syntactic features are due to the fact that modals have only one argument position which is filled by the main verb in the infinitive. The subject position is filled by the first argument of the main verb.

### 3.3. Polysemy patterns of modals

Yiddish DARFN is a polyfunctional element with the modal meanings ‘objective necessity’ and ‘obligation’.

---

<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact, these passive constructions are rare.

(15) (Context: The door is locked.)

*Pyotr darf rufn dem struzh.*  
Pyotr must.PRS.3SG call.INF. the porter  
'Peter has to call the porter.'

(16) *Aplikatsiyes [...] darfñ onkumen*  
application.PL.NOM must.PRS.3PL arrive.INF  
*tsu der fundatsiye nit shpeter vi oktober*  
to.PREP the foundation not later as October *dem 15tn,*  
*1999.*  
the 15, 1999  
'Applications have to arrive at the foundation not later than October 15,  
1999.'

*darfn* is not restricted to its use with a non-finite verbal form: it can also be used as a transitive lexical verb governing a nominal complement in the meaning 'to need something'.

(17) *S'iz dokh nit in koved fun*  
it be.PRS.3SG yet not in.PREP dignity of.PREP  
*a loshn akoredik tsu nemen*  
a language infertile woman.ADV to take.INF  
*fun der fremd ile mol, ven me*  
of.PREP the foreign any time if one.NOM  
*darf epes nays.*  
need.PRS.3SG something.ACC new.ACC  
'After all it does not correspond with a language's dignity to unproductively take on something foreign any time one needs something new.'

Polysemy pattern of DARFN

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. objective necessity</li><li>2. obligation</li><li>3. to need sth.</li></ol> |
|--|

MUZN covers all different types of necessity. First, it has the meaning of an internal necessity, i.e. a necessity based on the internal needs of the person referred to by the subject; cf.:

- (18) *Dos vel zayn genug far*  
 That.NOM want.PRS.3SG be.INF enough for.PREP  
*haynt, ikh muz shlofn geyn.*  
 Today I.NOM must.PRS.1SG sleep.INF go.INF  
 ‘That will be enough for today, I must go to bed.’

Second, we find instances where *muzn* denotes a necessity created by external circumstances or by an obligation.

- (19) *Aplikatsiyes muzn zayn af*  
 Application.PL.NOM must.PRS.3PL be.INF on.PREP  
*yidish un muzn bagleyt*  
 Yiddish and must.PRS.3PL accompany.PTCP.PASS  
*vern durkh a genoyem budzshet fun*  
 become.INF by a exact budget of.PREP  
*nit mer vi \$2000.*  
 not more as \$2000  
 ‘Applications must be in Yiddish and must be accompanied by an exact budget of not more than \$2000.’

Apart from that, *muzn* can have an epistemic meaning. In this case, it denotes a high degree of certainty and can be paraphrased with a sentence adverb meaning ‘probably’.

- (20) “*Dos muz zayn a brilyant!*” --  
 That.NOM must.PRS.3SG be.INF a diamond  
*hob ikh ... oysgerufn.*  
 I cry out.PST.1SG  
 “‘That must be a diamond!’” I cried out.

#### Polysemy pattern of MUZN

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. participant internal necessity</li> <li>2. objective necessity</li> <li>3. obligation</li> <li>4. high probability</li> </ol> |
|---|

MEGN is used mainly in deontic contexts to express ‘permission’. It is particular frequent in texts dealing with jurisdiction.

- (21) *Minkhner gerikht urteylt, az*  
 Munich.ADJ court.NOM judge.PRS.3SG that  
*neo-natsis megn tragn gever.*  
 neo-nazi.PL.NOM may.PRS.3SG carry.INF rifle.ACC  
 ‘Munich court judges that neo-nazis may carry a rifle.’

It can also be used in contexts of external objective circumstances enabling the action expressed by the main verb.

- (22) *Mir megn zikh lernen fun Leo Tolstoy*  
 We may.PRS.1PL learn.INF of.PREP Leo Tolstoy  
*dem badeyt fun idisher shtolts*  
 the meaning of.PREP Yiddish pride  
 ‘We may learn from Leo Tolstoy what Jewish pride means.’

*Megn* is also used as a concessive marker in the sense of ‘although’.

- (23) *Der yid meg zayn orem, dokh iz er*  
 The Jew may.PRS.3SG be.INF poor yet be.PRS.3SG he  
*zeyer raykh, vayl gaystike oytsres*  
 very rich because spiritual riches.ACC  
*hot der yid zeyer a sakh.*  
 have.PRS.3SG the Jew very many  
 ‘A Jew may be poor, yet is he nonetheless very rich, because a Jew has many spiritual riches.’

Polysemy pattern of MEGN

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. permission</li> <li>2. objective possibility</li> <li>3. concessive</li> </ol> |
|--|

NIT TORN is a negative polarity item; i.e. its use is restricted to negated contexts. The basic meaning is ‘prohibition’:

- (24) (Context: The mother does not allow the child to go to cinema)  
*Peter tor nit geyn in kino.*  
 Peter must not.PRS.3SG go.INF in.PREP cinema  
 ‘Peter is not allowed to go to cinema.’

In certain contexts, the modal gains a dynamic reading of an ‘objective impossibility’; cf.:

- (25) *A shprakh tor dokh nit*  
 a language.NOM must not.PRS.3SG yet  
*shteyn oyf an ort.*  
 stand.INF on.PREP a place  
 ‘A language yet cannot stand still at one place.’

Polysemy pattern of NIT TORN

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. prohibition</li> <li>2. objective impossibility</li> </ol> |
|--|

KENEN covers all subtypes of possibility: 1. ability, 2. objective possibility, 3. permission and 4. medium probability:

1. (Context: The child is pretty strong.)

*Dos kind ken efenen di tir.*  
 the child.NOM can.PRS.3SG open.INF the door  
 ,The child is able to open the door.’

2. (Context: The door is open.)

*Mir kenen arayngeyn in tsimer.*  
 We can.PRS.1PL enter in.PREP room  
 ,We can enter the room.’

3. (Context: The mother allows the child to go to cinema and says)

*Du kenst geyn in kino .*  
 You can.PRS.2SG go.INF in.PREP cinema  
 ‚You may go to cinema.’

4. *Kenen* can also have an epistemic function in the sense ‘perhaps’:

*Es ken zein, az tsvingen azoi mit*  
 It can.PRS.3SG be.INF that cope.INF thus with.PREP  
*tsvei shprakhn volt geven tsu shver.*  
 two language.PL be.COND. 3SG too difficult  
 ‚It may be that coping thus with two languages has been too difficult.’

Polysemy pattern of KENEN

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. participant internal possibility</li> <li>2. objective possibility</li> <li>3. permission</li> <li>4. medium probability</li> </ol> |
|---|

ZOLN shows a complex polysemy pattern which includes not only modal meanings, but reaches also into the neighbouring functional fields of evidentiality and mood. In the following, we will delimit ourselves to a rather sketchy outline of the main uses (for more details cf. Eggensperger 1995). We are aware of the fact that *zoln* deserves a much more detailed analysis which ought to focus on the semantic overlap between the notions of necessity, subjunctive, optative and evidentiality. The meaning of *zoln* 1 can be described as a weakened necessity based on someone’s uttered wish.

(26) *Ikh hob gezolt dikh unterhalten. (zoln 1)*  
 I shall.PST.1SGyou.ACC entertain.INF  
 ‚I had the duty to entertain you.’

In specific contexts, *zoln* 1 can come close to an optative reading as in:

(27) *Lang lebn zol yidish!*  
 long.ADV live.INF shall.PRS.3SG Yiddish  
 ‚May Yiddish live a long life!’

The second meaning can be labelled as evidential; here the speaker indicates that the information conveyed is based on hearsay.

- (28) *Zinger zol habn transferirt hekher a*  
 Zinger shall.PRS.3SG transfer.INF.PST higher a  
*million dolar tsu a bank-konte in*  
 million dollar to.PREP a bank account in.PREP  
*shvayts. (zoln 2)*  
 Switzerland  
 ‘Zinger is said to have transferred more than a million dollar to a bank account in Switzerland.’

As Mark (1978) and Jacobs (2005) state, *zoln* also has the function of a mood marker; i.e. *zoln 3* is used to create analytical forms of the subjunctive and the optative. *Zoln 3* is often used in subordinated clauses to indicate the non-assertion of the existence of the state of affairs conveyed. This holds for complement clauses governed by negated verbs of knowing or of non-negated verbs denoting psychological states:

- (29) *Ober dokh hobn zey nit gevust mit*  
 But yet they know.PST.3PL with.PREP  
*vos men zol im kenen helfn. (zoln 3)*  
 what one shall.PRS.3SG him can.INF help.INF  
 ‘But yet they didn’t know how one would be able to help them.’

A similar function is found after verbs denoting demands:

- (30) *... betndik Ilja Ernburg mit trern*  
 bid.CONVERB Ilja Ernburg.ACC with.PREP tear.PL  
*in die oygn, er zol unterschraybn*  
 in.PREP the eye.PL he shall.PRS.3SG sign.INF  
*dem briv.*  
 the letter  
 ‘bidding Ilja Ehrenburg with tears in his eyes to sign the letter.’



Polysemy pattern of ZOLN

- |   |
|---|
| 1. weak obligation based on someone's utterance |
| 2. hear say                                     |
| 3. subjunctive                                  |

As Jacobs (2005, 216) states, KERN/GEHERN is not found in all varieties of Yiddish. In our elicitation test (see above) it was used by only very few speakers. According to our tentative analysis we can assume an epistemic meaning ('high probability'), as it is listed in the dictionaries:

- (31) *Der grester oyftuer fun nayverter in yidish*  
The biggest discoverer of neologisms in Yiddish  
*ker zayn Maks Vaynraykh.*  
must.PRS.3SG be.INF Max Weinreich  
'The most important discoverer of new words in Yiddish is probably Max Weinreich.'

There are some usages where one might assume the meaning 'objective necessity':

- (32) (Context: The door is locked.)  
*Peter ker rufn dem struzh.*  
Peter must.PRS.3SG call.INF the porter  
'Peter has to call the porter.'
- (33) *Er hot mir opgeshindn di hoyt*  
he me.DAT cut off.PST.3SG the skin.ACC  
*vi es geher tsu zayn.*  
as it belong.PRS.3SG to be.INF  
'He cut off my skin the way as it is fashionable.'

*kern* can also be used as a lexical verb with the meaning 'to belong'.

- (34) *Ikh geher tsu yene vos*  
 I belong.PRS.1SG to.PREP those which.REL  
*fantasirn.*  
 dream.PRS.3PL  
 ‚I belong to those that dream.’

Polysemy pattern of KERN/GEHERN

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. high probability</li> <li>2. objective necessity</li> <li>3. to belong</li> </ol> |
|---|

#### 4. Yiddish modals between Germanic and Slavonic

##### 4.1. The comparison

In the following chapter, we shall compare the Yiddish modal systems with their counterparts in selected Germanic and Slavonic languages. We shall measure the degree of similarity of the systems by distinguishing the following kinds of aspects of parallels (cf. also Nau this volume):

1. material parallels, regarding sound shape;
2. morphological parallels: dedicated forms;
3. syntactic parallels: encoding of the subject and dedicated morpho-syntactic structures;
4. semantic parallels: patterns of polyfunctionality.

For determining the degree of convergence with Germanic and Slavonic modal systems we have chosen the following procedure. On the one hand, we are going to compare Yiddish with Modern German, Middle High German and for the sake of contrast English and Danish. On the other hand, we take those Slavonic languages into account with which Yiddish speakers in Central and Eastern Europe have been in contact. If we

compare Yiddish with the Germanic languages mentioned, we get the following correspondences of etymological cognates:<sup>11</sup>

Table 1: Yiddish modals and their Germanic cognates

<b>Yiddish</b>	<b>Modern German</b>	<b>Middle High German<sup>12</sup></b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Danish</b>
<i>darfn</i>	<i>dürfen</i>	<i>durfen</i>	–	<i>turde</i>
<i>muzn</i>	<i>müssen</i>	<i>müezen</i>	<i>must</i>	–
<i>megn</i>	<i>mögen</i>	<i>mugen</i>	<i>may/might</i>	<i>mätte</i>
<i>nit torn</i>	–	<i>turren</i>	<i>dare</i>	–
<i>kenen</i>	<i>können</i>	<i>kunnen</i>	<i>can/could</i>	<i>kunne</i>
<i>zoln</i>	<i>sollen</i>	<i>suln</i>	<i>shall/should</i>	<i>skulle</i>
<i>kern</i>	<i>gehören</i> (no modal)	–	–	–

From the table it follows, that all Yiddish modals have cognates in other Germanic languages. Therefore, we can safely conclude, that none of the forms is borrowed from Slavonic, Hebrew or any other language. In our analysis we will focus on the common typological features of the German, Middle High German, Danish and English modal systems. These features shall be contrasted with the systems of Sorbian, Czech, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian. Apart from that, we shall carry out a more fine-grained comparison of selected German and Danish modals. Our comparison includes the following elements:

---

<sup>11</sup> Birkmann (1987) gives an overview of the historical development of all verbs belonging to the class of ‘Praeteritopraesentia’ in Germanic. However, he does not take Yiddish into account.

<sup>12</sup> For the various spellings of the MHG modals cf. Grimm (1854-1954) and Birkmann (1987).

Table 2: The core modals of the analysed Germanic and Slavonic languages

	<b>POSS</b>	<b>¬ POSS</b>	<b>NEC</b>	<b>¬ NEC</b>
<b>Yiddish</b>	<i>kenen, megn</i>	<i>nit torn</i>	<i>darfn, muzn, zoln</i>	
<b>German</b>	<i>dürfen, können, mögen</i>		<i>müssen, sollen</i>	<i>nicht brauchen</i>
<b>Middle High German</b>	<i>kunnen, mugen, turren</i>		<i>durfen, müezen suln</i>	
<b>English</b>	<i>can/could, may/might</i>		<i>must, shall/should need</i>	
<b>Danish</b>	<i>kunne</i>		<i>mätte, skulle, turde, burde</i>	
<b>Upper Sorbian</b>	<i>móc, směć</i>		<i>dyrbjeć, měć</i>	<i>njetrjebać</i>
<b>Lower Sorbian</b>	<i>móc, směś</i>		<i>musaś, měś, trjebaś, dejaś</i>	
<b>Czech</b>	<i>móct, smět</i>		<i>muset, mít, třeba</i>	
<b>Polish</b>	<i>móc, można</i>		<i>musieć, mieć, powinien, wypada, należy, trzeba</i>	<i>nie potrzebować</i>
<b>Russian</b>	<i>moč', možno</i>	<i>nel'zja</i>	<i>dolžen, sleduet, nado</i>	
<b>Ukrainian</b>	<i>mohty, smity, možna</i>		<i>musyty, maty, povynen, naležyt', treba, slid</i>	
<b>Belo-russian</b>	<i>mjahčy, l'ha, možna</i>		<i>music', pavinen</i>	

The Middle High German and Modern German data are taken from Bech (1951), Grimm (1854-1954), Fritz/Gloning (1997) and Zifonun (1997), the Danish data are taken from Brandt (1999) and the Slavonic material from Besters-Dilger et alii (in prep.) and Hansen (2001, 2006).

#### 4.2. Morphology and Syntax

Yiddish modals show verbal morphology with a dedicated form paradigm like their counterparts in the Germanic languages. Yiddish modals differ from lexical verbs in the present tense third person singular. The same is found in English; cf.:

*er ken-Ø vs er shrajb-t*

*he can-Ø vs he write-s*

The present tense paradigm differs from German modals which in addition to the third person show a differentiating marking in the first person singular.

German: *ich kann-Ø vs ich schreib-e*

Yiddish: *ikh ken-Ø* vs *ikh shrajb-Ø*

The Yiddish paradigm also differs from Danish where the differentiating marking covers all persons and numbers.

*jeg/du/han/vi/I/de kan-Ø* vs *jeg/du/han/vi/I/de skrive-r*

‘I/you(sg)/he/we/you(pl)/they can’ vs ‘I/you(sg)/he/we/you(pl)/they write’

In contrast to Germanic, the Slavonic modals have no dedicated morpho-syntactic marking; e.g. the Polish modal *musieć* ‘must’ has the same present tense paradigm like the lexical verb *prosić* ‘to ask for’. There are, however, some modals which show very idiosyncratic features like Polish *powinien* whose inflection is characterised by a unique combination of adjectival and verbal features.

Table 3: Morphological marking of modals

	<b>dedicated morpho-logical marking</b>
<b>Yiddish</b>	<i>yes</i>
<b>German</b>	<i>yes</i>
<b>Middle High German</b>	<i>yes</i>
<b>English</b>	<i>yes</i>
<b>Danish</b>	<i>yes</i>
<b>Upper Sorbian</b>	<i>no</i>
<b>Lower Sorbian</b>	<i>no</i>
<b>Czech</b>	<i>no</i>
<b>Polish</b>	<i>no</i>
<b>Russian</b>	<i>no</i>
<b>Ukrainian</b>	<i>no</i>
<b>Belorussian</b>	<i>no</i>

As a matter of fact, Germanic is the only language family in Europe where modals have a dedicated morphological form. In this sense, the Slavonic languages represent the usual case and Germanic is typologically idiosyncratic. We can state that the morphology of Yiddish modals exhibits features typical of the Germanic languages.

As mentioned above, all Yiddish modals form matrix-coding constructions with a subject in the Nominative case and combine with ‘bare’ infinitival verbs without the

marker *tsu*. The syntax of the Yiddish modals coincides with their Germanic counterparts which also form personal constructions and govern a ‘bare’ infinitive.<sup>13</sup>

(35) Yiddish      *Mir*            *kenen*            *arbetn*.  
                          we                    can.PRS.1PL    work.INF

(36) Danish        *Vi*    *kan*            *arbejde*.  
                          We    can.PRS.1PL work.INF

(37) English        *We can work*.

In the syntax we find major differences between the Germanic and Slavonic modal systems. First, the Slavonic languages do not distinguish different types of infinitives like the bare infinitive and the infinitive with *tsu* in Yiddish. Second, whereas all Germanic modals go back to lexical verbs which underwent a grammaticalization process, all Slavonic languages except Sorbian have modals of both verbal and non-verbal origin:

- modals of verbal origin: e.g. Polish *móc* ‘can’
- modals of adjectival origin: e.g. Polish *powinien* ‘should’
- modals of adverbial origin: e.g. Russian *можно* ‘one can’

Modals of verbal origin show verbal inflection; i.e. they are marked for person, number, mood and tense (38). In contrast to that, modals of adverbial origin are uninflected and need a tense auxiliary bearing the tense and finite features (39).

(38) Russian        *Мы*    *можем*        *работат’*.  
                          We    can.2PL        work.INF  
                          ‘We can work’

(39) Russian        *Можно*        *было*        *работат’*.  
                          Possible        be.PST.3SG work.INF  
                          ‘It was possible to work.’

Modals historically going back to adjectives exhibit agreement marking both on the modal and the tense auxiliary, whereas tense and mood is marked exclusively on the auxiliary; e.g.

---

<sup>13</sup> *tsu* corresponds to English *to*, German *zu* and Danish *at*.

- (40) Russian *Ivan dolžen byl rabotat’.*  
 Ivan.NOM must.SG.M be.PST work.INF  
 ‘Ivan had to work.’

Table 4: The distribution of verbal and non-verbal modals

	verbal modals	non-verbal modals
<b>Yiddish</b>	<i>kenen, megn, nit torn darfn, muzn, zoln</i>	
<b>German</b>	<i>dürfen, können, mögen müssen, sollen, nicht brauchen</i>	
<b>Middle High German</b>	<i>kunnen, mugen, durfen, müezen, suln</i>	
<b>English</b>	<i>can/could, may/might, must, shall/should, need</i>	
<b>Danish</b>	<i>kunne, måtte, skulle, turde, burde</i>	
<b>Upper Sorbian</b>	<i>móc, směć, dyrbjeć, měć, njetrjebać</i>	
<b>Lower Sorbian</b>	<i>móc, směś, musaś, mės, trjebaś, dejaś</i>	
<b>Czech</b>	<i>mocet, muset, mít, smět</i>	<i>třeba</i>
<b>Polish</b>	<i>móc, musieć, mieć, wypada, należy, nie potrzebować</i>	<i>powinien, można, trzeba</i>
<b>Russian</b>	<i>moč’, sleduet</i>	<i>možno, nel`zja, nado, dolžen</i>
<b>Ukrainian</b>	<i>mohty, smity, musyty maty, naležyt’</i>	<i>možna, povynen, treba, slid</i>
<b>Belo-russian</b>	<i>mjahčy, music’</i>	<i>l’ha, možna, pavinen</i>

Whereas all Yiddish modals belong to a single construction type (with a subject in the nominative), all Slavonic languages except Sorbian in addition to personal constructions have impersonal ones. Here, the subject is coded either in the dative or as zero. As there is no subject agreement, the modal (complex) has the default ending third person singular neuter.

- (41) Polish *Należało pracować.*  
 Must-PST-3SG.N work.INF  
 ‘One had to work.’

This type of subjectless constructions does not exist in Yiddish, because it does not allow empty initial positions in declarative clauses. It demands either an expletive, dummy subject or another constituent occupying the initial position (cf. Jacobs 2005, 223-225).

Table 5: The distribution of personal and impersonal modal constructions

	<b>personal</b>	<b>impersonal</b>
<b>Yiddish</b>	<i>kenen, megn, nit torn darfn, muzn, zoln</i>	
<b>German</b>	<i>dürfen, können, mögen müssen, sollen, nicht brauchen</i>	
<b>Middle High German</b>	<i>kunnen, mugen, durfen, müezen, suln</i>	
<b>English</b>	<i>can/could, may/might, must, shall/should, need</i>	
<b>Danish</b>	<i>kunne måtte, skal, burde</i>	
<b>Upper Sorbian</b>	<i>móc , směć, dyrbjeć, měć, njetrjebać</i>	
<b>Lower Sorbian</b>	<i>móc, směś, musaś , mės, trjebaś , dejas</i>	
<b>Czech</b>	<i>moc, muset, mít, smět</i>	<i>třeba</i>
<b>Polish</b>	<i>móc , musieć, mieć, powinien, nie potrzebować</i>	<i>można, wypada, należy, trzeba</i>
<b>Russian</b>	<i>moč' , dolžen</i>	<i>možno, nel`zja, sleduet, nado</i>
<b>Ukrainian</b>	<i>mohty smity, musyty maty, povynen</i>	<i>možna, naležyt', treba, slid</i>
<b>Belo-russian</b>	<i>mjahčy, music', pavinen</i>	<i>l'ha , možna</i>

The syntactic heterogeneity which is typical of most of the Slavonic languages sharply contrasts with the homogenous Yiddish modal system which exclusively contains personal constructions. In this respect, Yiddish shows fully converging properties with the Germanic languages, there is also a certain degree of similarity with Sorbian.

### 4.3. Semantics

In this section we are going to compare the basic meanings described in chapter 3.4. with selected Germanic and Slavonic modals. The point of departure will be the



question if the polysemy patterns coincide or not. The semantic description complies with the notions of modality's semantic map as developed by van der Auwera & Plungian (1998).

As illustrated in ch. 3.4 DARFN has the following three meanings: 1. objective necessity, 2. obligation, 3. 'to need sth.'. From a synchronic point of view it might be surprising that its German cognate *dürfen* is not an expression of necessity, but of possibility. This discrepancy is not due to language contact or any internal processes in Yiddish, but has to be explained by the fact that German *dürfen* changed its semantics. Middle High German *durfen* was a regular expression of necessity, which later in negated contexts changed its meaning into a permission reading.<sup>14</sup> Middle High German *durfen* also had the meaning 'to need sth.'. The question arises, if the same polysemy pattern is also found in those Slavonic languages which have been in contact with Yiddish. Indeed, Polish *trzeba* and Russian *nado* show an identical polyfunctionality. Only in the last decades *trzeba* seems to lose the meaning 'to need sth.' (cf. Hansen 2001, 147 ff).

We come to the conclusion that the semantics of Yiddish *darfn* shows no similarity with its Modern German cognate, but coincides with Middle High German *durfen*, Russian *nado* and Polish *trzeba* (in archaic usage). The assumption that these Slavonic elements have made possible the persistence of the Middle High German meanings is corroborated by the fact that in West Yiddish texts from the 18<sup>th</sup> century in contrast to later 'Easternized' texts, *darfn* had the permission reading (Kerler 1999, 49). This would imply that the necessity reading persisted in the East Yiddish varieties.

Yiddish MUZN is a highly polyfunctional modal which covers all types of necessity: 1. participant internal necessity, 2. objective necessity, 3. obligation, 4. high probability. The same meanings are found with the counterparts in Older and Modern German. They are also attested for the Slavonic equivalents which are German loanwords. It is worth noting that six Slavonic languages borrowed *müssen* (Polish

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Bech (1951), van der Auwera (2001), Grimm (1854-1954), Bd. 2.

*musieć*, Lower Sorbian *musas*, Czech *muset*, Slovak *musiet*, Ukrainian *musyty*, Belorussian *music*).<sup>15</sup>

MEGN has the following meanings: 1. permission, 2. objective possibility, 3. concessive. Yiddish *megn* differs considerably from its German cognate *mögen* which has neither the meaning (1), nor the dynamic meaning (2). *mögen* expresses an epistemic possibility (42), the non-modal meaning ‘to like sth.’ (43) or it can be used as an optative marker (44):

- (42) *Er mag krank sein.*  
 he EVIDENTIAL.PRS.3SG ill be.INF  
 ‚Maybe, he’s ill.’
- (43) *Ich mag kein Eis.*  
 I like.PRS.1SG DET.NEG ice cream.ACC  
 ‘I don’t like ice cream.’
- (44) *Möge Gott dir verzeihen!*  
 OPTATIVE God.NOM you.DAT forgive.INF  
 ‘May God forgive you!’

The meaning ‘concessive’, however, does coincide in both languages, as the translation (46) of Yiddish (45) shows;

- (45) *Der yid meg zayn orem, dokh iz er zeyer raykh [...]*
- (46) *Der Jude mag arm sein, so*  
 the Jew.NOM may.PRS.3SG poor be.INF so  
*ist er doch reich [...]*  
 be.PRS.3SG he yet rich  
 ‘A Jew may be poor, yet is he nonetheless very rich [...]

The meanings of Yiddish *megn* (1) and (2) were covered by Early High German *mögen*; cf. the examples from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century German which express participant external possibility including permission:

---

<sup>15</sup> For more detailed information about the borrowing of German *müssen* into the Slavonic languages cf. Hansen (2000).

- (47) Luther: *Alle die in der grafschaft zu Peitigo sizen, dieselben mugent wol farn und zihen in der herren land gen Bayrn [...] 1435*  
 ‚All those that reside in the shire of Peitigo, they can travel and go into the lords’ country towards Bavaria.’
- (48) *Sihe, da ist eine stad nahe, darein ich fliehen mag.*  
 ‚Look, there is a town near, wherein I can flee.’

Also English *may* can denote participant external possibility:

- (49) *To get to the station, you may take bus 60.*
- (50) *John may leave now.*

The analysis shows that Yiddish *megn* does differ from its German and English counterparts, but its polysemy pattern is included in the more polyfunctional English cognate. The same meanings were found in earlier periods of German. As the pattern is not attested in the Slavonic languages – there is no modal functioning as a concessive marker – we can conclude that the semantics of *megn* is typical of Germanic modals.

NIT TORN has the meanings ‘prohibition’ and ‘objective impossibility’. Modern German has no counterpart with this semantics. However, in previous periods of the history of German including Early High German the cognate verb *turren* was attested. It had the meaning ‚to dare’ and could assume a prohibition reading in negative contexts (cf. Grimm 1854-1954, Bd. 11). A similar polysemy pattern as with *turren* is found in Modern Danish *turde* which - actually being a cognate of *dürfen* - has also the meanings ‘to dare’ and in archaic speech ‘to be allowed to do’ (cf. Brandt 1999).

- (51) Danish *DR tør ikke lave satire mere.*  
 ‘D[anmarks] R[adio] doesn’t dare to emit any satiric programmes any more.’
- (52) Danish *At formen skyldes labialisering, tør anses for givet.*  
 ‘It may be taken for granted that the form is caused by labialization.’

In contrast to Yiddish *nit torn*, the Middle High German and Danish counterparts are not restricted to negated contexts. Among the languages analysed here, only Russian has a modal with the semantics of *nit torn*: the impersonal *nel'zja*. A possible influence is not excluded because, as Kerler (1999, 49) states, in Easternized texts from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *nit torn* replaced *nit darfn* in the meaning ‘prohibition’. We come to the conclusion that Yiddish *nit torn* as a negative polarity item reflects a semantic pattern which is not attested in Germanic languages. We are dealing with an independent semantic change which lead to a polysemy pattern identical to the Russian modal *nel'zja*.

Yiddish KENEN does not differ from its German counterpart *können*. It also coincides with the Slavonic cognates of Proto-Slavonic *\*mogti*. As the latter belong to the oldest modals in Slavonic we do not have to assume language contact, but independent grammaticalization processes leading to an identical polysemy pattern.

As listed in chapter 3.4. ZOLN has three main usages: 1. weak necessity; 2. hearsay and 3. subjunctive. There is a considerable overlap with Early Modern and Modern German *sollen*. The first two meanings are attested for the Modern German counterpart *sollen*; cf. the translation of example (27) above:

(53) *Zinger soll mehr als eine Million Dollar auf ein Bank-Konto in der Schweiz transferiert haben.*

(54) *Wohin soll ich gehen?*  
,Where am I to go?’

The subjunctive function, however, is not attested in German *sollen*. The West Slavonic languages borrowed the first two meanings by mapping them onto a possession verb (e.g. Polish *mieć*). *Mieć* has also developed a kind of hypothetical use which however does not coincide with the subjunctive.

As indicated in Table 1, KERN has no cognates among other Germanic modals. It is etymologically related to German *gehören* which has the non-modal meaning ‘to belong to’. In the reflexive form governing an infinitive with *zu*, *gehören* has a specific deontic meaning relating to etiquette rules. The construction is impersonal and demands the dummy subject *es*; cf.:

- (55) *Es gehört sich nicht am Tisch zu singen.*  
 It behove.3SG REFL not at.the table to sing  
 ‚It is not decent to sing at table.’

Apart from that, in spoken varieties of German we find the use of personally constructing *gehören* plus participle passive; this modal passive construction expresses a strong necessity:

- (56) *Das Gras [...] war hoch, es gehörte gemäht.*<sup>16</sup>  
 The grass be.PST.3SG high it behove.3SG PTCP.cut.PTCP  
 ‚The grass stood high, it needed cutting.’

A polysemy pattern partially overlapping with German *gehören* is found with the impersonal Polish modal *należy* which apart from the mentioned meanings can express an objective necessity. Neither German *gehören*, nor Polish *należy* can be used in the epistemic sense which is the main meaning of *kern*. Yiddish *kern/gehern* differs from both modals not only in its semantics, but also in its syntax, because it forms a personal construction with an infinitive. This leads to the conclusion that *kern/gehern* represents an element which can neither be ascribed to the Germanic, nor Slavonic component of Yiddish.

#### 4.5. The results of the contact study

The analysis has shown that the morphology and the syntax of Yiddish modals clearly follow Germanic patterns. In the semantics, however, Yiddish modals show much less convergence with their German and other Germanic counterparts. Many modals are characterised by slightly different patterns of polyfunctionality. In some cases, we are dealing with internal semantic shifts (as with *nit torn*) which might have occurred under Slavonic influence; in other cases Yiddish retains old meanings which were lost

---

<sup>16</sup> Example from Zehetner (2005)

in German. Also in these cases of semantic persistence, it is not excluded that the presence of similar patterns in Slavonic played a role (e.g. *darfn*). There is, however, no clear case of meaning transfer from Slavonic. We come to the conclusion that the modal system is based on the ‘German’ derived component of Yiddish and shows relatively limited impact of Slavonic. These findings ask for an explanation, because they have to be reconciled with the fact that there is a strong Slavonic influence on Yiddish lexis and syntax. We shall put forward the hypothesis that our findings can be explained by purely linguistic predictors of contact-induced change in modal systems, because the social factor ‘intensity of contact’ would predict a high degree of Slavonic influence.

Before offering a more general explanation for the limited Slavonic influence on the Yiddish modal system we would like to point out that the modals behave like other analytical markers of the Yiddish verb. As a matter of fact, all auxiliaries are of Germanic origin, none is a formal borrowing from Slavonic: subjunctive *zoln*, causative *lozn*, conditional *volt-*, passive *vern*, future *veln*, aspectual *flegn*, *haltn*, and *nemn* and imperative *lomir* (< *lozn*). This shows the strong tendency in Yiddish to use Germanic lexical material in grammaticalization processes. It goes without saying that in many cases the grammaticalization is functionally copying Slavonic structures, as in the case of the aspectual and conditional auxiliaries (‘ordinary contact induced grammaticalization’, see below). The question whether the general preference of Yiddish for Germanic based auxiliaries is influenced by the so called ‘hidden standard’ has to be left for future research. The hidden standard is ‘the more or less explicit application of criteria derived from N[ew]H[igh]G[erman] linguistic material to determine the acceptability of Yiddish forms for literary usage’ (Schaechter 1969, 286).

## **5. Modal systems in language contact: the role of innovations**

First, we shall have a short look at the state of research on modals in language contact. The known borrowing scales (e.g. Thomason 2001) operate with discrete dichotomies like content words vs function word and claim that the former are more easily transferred than the latter. Apart from that, it is generally hold that nouns are more easily borrowed than verbs. The categories used in the traditional borrowing scales do not take into consideration the hybrid nature of modals: on the one hand they function like grammatical markers of the verb, on the other hand they show the morphology of

fully lexical elements. For our study, we can build on the recent general cross-linguistic studies on the ‘borrowability’ of grammatical elements carried out in the framework of the Manchester Romani Project (Elšík and Matras 2006) and the project ‘Grammatical borrowing in Cross-Linguistic Perspective’ (Matras and Sakel 2007). The authors claim that modality is a functional domain that is conspicuously susceptible to structural borrowing. As they show, the Romani modal systems are characterised by massive borrowing of matter and pattern from the second languages spoken by Romani speaker. Due to the dialectal diversity and the multitude of language contacts, these Romani data are highly relevant also to other languages and allow for some generalizations. Apart from that, the findings based on Romani are corroborated by the data compiled in the book Matras and Sakel (2007) which contains descriptions of grammatical borrowing in 27 languages spread over all continents of the world. Matras (2007, 45) shows that some modal categories are more likely to be borrowed than others. The overall likelihood of modals to be affected by borrowing is expressed by the following simplified hierarchy:

necessity > possibility > volition

Necessity appears at the top of the implicative scale. It is the most frequently borrowed semantic category and possibility and volition are not borrowed unless necessity is borrowed too.<sup>17</sup> The asymmetry correlates with the fact that there were probably no dedicated necessity modals in Early Romani which seems to imply that new features are more easily borrowed than those which already exist in the receiving language.

The borrowing scale is corroborated by data from the German-Slavonic contact area. Several studies have shown that German has considerably influenced the modal systems of the West Slavonic languages (Hansen 2001, Besters-Dilger 1997). These languages have borrowed both form-meaning units and meanings, but exclusively from the field of necessity. Six Slavonic languages have borrowed the German modal verb

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also the data from the Latvian dialect Latgalian which has borrowed the two epistemic markers *može* ‘maybe’ and *muszeń* ‘certainly’ (see Nau this volume).

*müssen* (see above) and one has taken over the modal *dürfen* in the necessity reading.<sup>18</sup> A case of meaning transfer is ‘weak necessity based on someone’s uttered wish’ which was copied from German *sollen* to Polish, Czech, Slovak and Sorbian possession verbs (cf. Weiss 1987 and Hansen 2001, 2004). In these cases we are dealing with a process of what Heine / Kuteva (2003, 533) call ‘ordinary contact induced grammaticalization’, which involves the following steps: 1) speakers of Slavonic notice that in German there is a gram for the meaning ‘weak necessity based on someone’s uttered wish’; 2) They develop an equivalent gram using material available in their own language and 3) They draw on universal strategies of grammaticalization, using a verb of possession in order to develop the gram. All borrowings from German lead to innovations in the affected modal systems. Diachronic research in Hansen (2000, 2001) has shown that the Slavonic languages originally did not have dedicated modals denoting ‘necessity’<sup>19</sup>. In this situation speakers of Slavonic languages came into contact with German and readily borrowed the modal or copied the meaning. In this way, Slavonic speakers gained morpho-syntactic equivalent means of translating German modals into their native language. Via Polish the modals reached the East Slavonic languages (cf. Hansen 2000). The results of these contact-induced changes had the effect of addition of new linguistic features. There are no examples of a replacement of old native linguistic features.

We have also some data concerning borrowing processes between closely related languages. As Besters-Dilger (2005) shows, 15th century Ukrainian within a century nearly completely adopted the Polish modal system. Here, we are able to find cases where a borrowed modal supplanted an already existing one with an identical meaning. Another case of the replacement of a native modal by a synonymous borrowing is Russian *močno* or *moščno* ‘one can’ which in the 17th century was replaced by its Polish cognate *možno*. As these data show, the borrowability among closely related languages seems to differ from non-related languages.

If we compare the results of the language contact German > Slavonic modal system with our findings concerning the contact situation Slavonic > Yiddish we may say that these contact situations differ in one important respect: Yiddish did not seem to have had these ‘functional gaps’ in comparison to the Slavonic languages; i.e. the

---

<sup>18</sup> Upper Sorbian *dyrbjeć*; Old Czech *drbiti* ‘must’ was replaced by *muset*.

<sup>19</sup> The notion of ‘necessity’ was expressed by lexical elements or by the semantically diffuse ‘independent infinitive’ – construction (Cf. Hansen 2001, Večerka 1996).



Slavonic modal systems had no specific functional element which could have been transferred to Yiddish as a new feature. Thus, the difference in the borrowing of modals can be ascribed to the fact that modals are more easily borrowed if they add a new feature to the modal system of the receiving language. This seems to hold for the contact between genetically non-related languages.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this article we have given a first sketch of the Yiddish modal system from a cross-linguistic perspective. Modals are defined as grammaticalized elements, which express the basic notions of ‘necessity’ and ‘possibility’ and show syntactic properties of auxiliaries. We propose to determine modals by locating them on a grammaticalization chain extending from content words to fully-fledged modal auxiliaries. This system is characterised by its verbal morphology and a dedicated paradigm of forms. Apart from that, we addressed the question whether this system shows common features with Germanic and/or with Slavonic modal systems. It turns out, that despite the strong Slavonic influence on the Yiddish language system as a whole, Yiddish modals clearly show morpho-syntactic features typical of the Germanic languages and there are no borrowings from Slavonic. From a semantic point of view, the system is characterised by its own specific features setting it apart from both Germanic and Slavonic languages. The semantic space covered by the Yiddish modals shows very few patterns which might go back to neighbouring Slavonic structures. The data thus lead to the conclusion that the Yiddish modal system as whole has only marginally been influenced by the neighbouring Slavonic languages. These findings can only be explained by recursion to linguistic factors affecting the outcome of contact-induced change. We have put forward the hypothesis that modals are more easily borrowed if they add a new feature to the recipient modal system rather than if they replace one of the recipient language’s original features. For a corroboration of this hypothesis we need more studies on the borrowability of modals.

## **References**

- Bech, G. 1951. *Grundzüge der semantischen Entwicklungsgeschichte der hochdeutschen Modalverba*. Kopenhagen.
- Besters-Dilger, J. 1997. Modal'nost' v pol'skom i russkom jazykach. Istoričeskoe razvitie vyraženiya neobchodimosti i vozmožnosti kak rezul'tat vne-mežslavjanskogo vlijanija. in: *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch* 43, 17-31.
- Besters-Dilger, J. 2005 *Modalität im Sprachkontakt. Die ukrainische Prosta Mova (2. Hälfte 16. Jh.)* in: Hansen, Björn/Karlik, Petr (eds.) *Modality in Slavonic Languages. New perspectives*. München, 239-261.
- Besters-Dilger J. / Drobnjaković A. / Hansen B. (in prep.) Modals in Slavonic languages. In: Hansen, B. / de Haan, F. J. (eds.) *Modals in the Languages of Europe*. Berlin..
- Birkmann, T. 1987. *Präteritopräsentia. Morphologische Entwicklungen einer Sonderklasse in den altgermanischen Sprachen*. Tübingen.
- Birnbaum, S. A. 1979. *Yiddish. A Survey and a Grammar*. Toronto.
- Brandt, S. 1999. *Modal verbs in Danish*. Copenhagen.
- Dyhr, M. / Zint, I. 1988. *Lubliner Jiddisch*. (Phonai. Lautbibliothek der deutschen Sprache 37) Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- Eggensperger, K. 1995. *Modale Nebenverben im Jiddischen*. Osnabrück: Universitätsverlag Rasch.
- Eggers, E. 1998. *Sprachwandel und Sprachmischung im Jiddischen*. Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris, Wien: Peter Lang.
- Elšik, Viktor, and Yaron Matras  
2006 *Markedness and language change: The Romani sample*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Fritz, G. / Gloning, T. (Hrsg.) 1997. *Untersuchungen zur semantischen Entwicklungsgeschichte der Modalverben im Deutschen*. Tübingen.
- Geller, E. 1994. *Jidisz. Język żydów polskich*. Warszawa.
- Geller, E. 2001. *Warschauer Jiddisch*. Tübingen.
- Grimm, J. / Grimm, W. 1854-1954. *Deutsches Wörterbuch I-XVI*. Leipzig.
- Hansen, B. 2000. The German Modal Verb 'müssen' and the Slavonic Languages – The Reconstruction of a Success Story. In: *Scando Slavica* 46, 77-93.
- Hansen, B. 2001. *Das Modalauxiliar im Slavischen. Semantik und Grammatikalisierung im Russischen, Polnischen, Serbischen/Kroatischen und Altkirchen-slavischen*. (Slavolinguistica 2) München.
- Hansen, B. 2004. How to measure areal convergence: a case study of contact-induced grammaticalization in the German-Hungarian-Slavonic contact area. in: Hansen,

- B. /Karlik, P. (eds.) *Modality in Slavonic Languages. New perspectives*. München, 239-257.
- Hansen, B. 2006. На полпути от словаря к грамматике: модальные вспомогательные слова в славянских языках. in: *Вопросы языкознания* 2006/2, 68-84.  
[Hansen, B. 2006. *Halfway from lexicon to grammar: modal auxiliaries in the Slavonic languages*. in: *Voprosy jazykoznanija* 2006/2, 68-84.]
- Heine, B. 1993. *Auxiliaries. Cognitive forces and grammaticalization*. New York.
- Heine, B. / Kuteva, T. 2005. *Language contact and Grammatical Change*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Jacobs, N. G. 2005. *Yiddish. A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge.
- Kerler D.-B. 1999. *The origins of Modern literary Yiddish*. Oxford
- Krogh S. 2001. *Das Ostjiddische im Sprachkontakt. Deutsch im Spannungsfeld zwischen Semitisch und Slavisch*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- Mark, Y. 1978. *Gramatik fun der jidisher klal-shprakh*. New York.
- Matras, Y. 2007. The borrowability of structural categories. Matras, Y. / Sakel. J. (eds.) *Grammatical Borrowing in Cross-linguistic Perspective*. Berlin, 31–75
- Müller, W. & F. Zarncke 1854-1861. *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*. Leipzig.
- Nau, Nicole (this volume) *Modality in an areal context: the case of a Latgalian dialect*.
- Niborski Y. 2002 *Dictionnaire Yiddish-français*. Paris
- Šapiro, M. et al. 1984. *Russko-evrejskij (idiš) slovar'*. [*Russian-Yiddish Dictionary*] Moscow.
- Schaechter, M. 1969. 'The hidden standard': A study of competing influences in standardization. in: Herzog et al.(eds.) *The Field of Yiddish*. vol. 3, The Hague: Mouton. 284–304.
- Splett, J. 1993. *Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch*. Berlin.
- Thomason S.G. 2001. *Language contact. An introduction*. Edinburgh.
- van der Auwera, J. 2001. *On the typology of negative modals*. Hoeksma J. et alii (eds.) *Perspectives on negation and polarity items*. Amsterdam, 23-48.
- van der Auwera, J. / Plungian, V.A. 1998. *Modality's semantic map*. in: *Linguistic Typology* 1/2, 79-124.

- Van Valin, R.D. 2005. *Exploring the syntax-semantics interface*. Cambridge.
- Večerka R, . 1996. *Altkirchenslavische Syntax*. Bd. III. Freiburg i. Br.
- Wexler, P. 1991. Yiddish – The Fifteenth Slavic Language. A Study of Partial Language Shift from Judeo-Sorbian to German. in: *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 91. 9-150.
- Weinreich, U. 1977. *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary*. New York.
- Weiss D. 1987 Polsko-niemieckie paralele w zakresie czasowników modalnych (na tle innych języków zachodniosłowiańskich). In: . G. Hentschel, G. Ineichen, A. Pohl Hrsg *Sprach- und Kulturkontakte im Polnischen /*. München 1987, 131-156.
- Zehetner L. 2005. *Bairisches Deutsch. Lexikon der deutschen Sprache in Altbayern*. Regensburg: Edition Vulpes.
- Zifonun, G. et alii. 1997. *Grammatik der deutschen Sprache I-III*. Berlin.