

# Yiddish grammar

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The morphology and syntax of the Yiddish language bears many similarities to that of German, with crucial elements originating from Slavic languages, Hebrew, and Aramaic.

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## Nouns

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### Gender

Yiddish nouns are classified into one of three genders: masculine (זכר *zokher*), feminine (נקבה *nekeyve*) and neuter (נייטראַל *neytral*). To a large extent, the gender of a noun is unpredictable, though there are some regular patterns:

- nouns denoting specifically male humans and animals are usually masculine, and nouns denoting specifically female humans and animals are usually feminine
- nouns ending in an unstressed schwa are usually feminine
- nouns built on most of the common abstract-noun suffixes, such as *-ונג* *-ung* and *-הײט* *-hayt*, are feminine
- diminutive nouns with the suffix *-l* are neuter in the standard language
- loanwords are generally assigned masculine gender by default unless they end in a schwa, in which case they are usually feminine.

### Case

There are three cases in Yiddish: nominative, accusative and dative. The nominative case generally refers to the subject, the accusative to the direct object and the dative to an indirect object. Nouns themselves are normally not inflected for case, and case is indicated by the inflection of a related definite article or adjective. In a few situations, case inflection of the noun is optional or obligatory, including certain kinship terms (טאטע *tate* 'father', מאמע *mame* 'mother') and the words ייד *yid* 'Jew' and הארץ *harts* 'heart'. In those cases, masculine nouns take the ending ן- *-n* in the accusative and dative singular, and feminine and neuter nouns take ן- *-n* only in the dative singular.

Yiddish does not have a genitive case. However, when the possessor is a human or occasionally other living beings, possession may be indicated with a suffixed ם- *-s* (like English possessive *'s*). Otherwise, possession is normally indicated by the preposition פֿון *fun* 'of'.

Another genitive-like construction, the quantitative, is used to describe quantities of objects: פֿול גלאַז הייסע טיי *a ful gloz heyse tey* (a full cup of hot tea); גרופע יונגע מענטשן *a grupe yunge mentshn* (a group of young people). The quantity is simply followed by the object described. This construction may not be used if the object has a definite article: פֿול גלאַז פֿון דער הייסער טיי *a ful gloz fun der heyser tey* (a full cup of the hot tea).

## Plural

There is a very large number of nouns with irregular plural forms, including *-es* (these are usually nouns of Slavic origin), and *-er* with umlaut (e.g., מאן *man* 'man', cf מענער *mener* 'men'; קינד *kind* 'child', cf קינדער *kinder* 'children'), or umlaut alone (e.g., האַנט *hant* 'hand', cf הענט *hent* 'hands'). Some words do not change in the plural (e.g., פֿיש *fish* 'fish'). Many words of Hebrew origin form plural with *-im* and plural words of Hebrew origin which end in *-ות*- are pronounced *-es*. Many plural forms of words are accompanied with a stem vowel mutation.

## Article

The definite article agrees in gender, number and case with the noun it is used with, and in some cases indicates the gender, number and case of the noun.

	Masculine	Neuter	Feminine	Plural
Nominative	דער <i>der</i>	דאָס <i>dos</i>	די <i>di</i>	די <i>di</i>
Accusative	דעם <i>dem</i>	דעם <i>dem</i>	דער <i>der</i>	
Dative				

The indefinite article is אַ *a*, which becomes אַן *an* before a word (e.g. a noun or adjective) beginning with a vowel. Yiddish, like English, does not have a plural indefinite article.

## Adjectives

Attributive adjectives—that is, those that directly modify a noun—are inflected to agree with the gender, number and case of the noun it modifies, while predicate adjectives remain uninflected. For example, one says דער גוטער מאן *der guter man* 'the good man', but דער מאן איז גוט *Der man iz gut* 'The man is good'. When an adjective is used absolutely—that is, to stand as the head of a noun phrase as if it were itself a noun—its ending changes as if it were followed by a noun: דער מאן איז אַ גוטער *Der man iz a guter* 'The man is a good [one]'. Neuter singular attributive adjectives have no case ending unless their noun phrase is introduced by the definite article.

	Masculine	Neuter		Feminine	Plural
		Definite	Absolutive		
Nominative	גוטער <i>guter</i>	גוטע <i>gute</i>	גוטס <i>guts</i>	גוטע <i>gute</i>	גוטע <i>gute</i>
Accusative	גוטן <i>gutn</i>	גוטן <i>gutn</i>	גוטער <i>guter</i>		
Dative					

The ending *-n* becomes *-en* after an *m*, or a stressed vowel or diphthong; it becomes *-em* after *n* and, as an exception, in the adjective *nay* (new).<sup>[1]</sup> Yiddish is slightly simpler than German in that German *-m* and *-n* are both *-n* in Yiddish (or, in the case of the definite article, *dem*), and Yiddish does not have a genitive case. The "definite" and "absolutive" versions of the neuter gender are a relic of the strong vs. weak adjective endings of German (*das gute Bier* vs. *gutes Bier*).

A class of pronominal adjectives, including איין *eyn* 'one', קיין *keyn* 'none', and possessive pronouns such as מיין *mayn* 'my, mine' and זיין *zayn* 'his', display behavior opposite to that of ordinary adjectives: they are inflected for gender, number and case when used predicatively but not when used attributively. (Absolutively, they behave as normal adjectives).

Adjectives normally precedes the nouns, but they may follow the nouns for stylistic purposes: פֿרוי אַ שיינע פֿרוי *a sheyne froy* or פֿרוי אַ שיינע *a froy a sheyne* ('a beautiful woman').

## Pronouns

	First Person		Second Person		Third Person			
	Singular	Plural	Singular Familiar	Polite / Plural	Masculine	Neuter	Feminine	Plural
<b>Nominative</b>	איך <i>ikh</i>	מיר <i>mir</i>	דו <i>du</i>	יר <i>ir</i>	ער <i>er</i>	עס <i>es</i>	זי <i>zi</i>	זיי <i>zey</i>
<b>Accusative</b>	מיק <i>mikh</i>	אונדז <i>undz</i>	דיך <i>dikh</i>	איך <i>aykh</i>	ים <i>im</i>			
<b>Dative</b>	מיר <i>mir</i>		דיר <i>dir</i>			ים <i>im</i>	יר <i>ir</i>	

Third person pronouns agree in gender with the noun they refer to. Thus even inanimate objects are sometimes referred to as *er* or *zi* if they are masculine or feminine respectively. Neuter nouns receive *es*.

## Verbs

Yiddish verbs are conjugated for person and number (singular and plural).

### Infinitive

The infinitive of a verb ends in ן- *-n* or, in some cases, ןע- *-en*.

### Compound verbs

Yiddish provides a mechanism that allows to use freely many Hebrew verbs and verbal constructions. Similar mechanisms exist in Persian and other Indo-European languages that incorporate heavily Semitic elements. Present tense forms of active Semitic verbs are followed by the auxiliary זיין *(zayn* 'to be'), while present tenses of passive Semitic verbs are followed by the auxiliary ווערן *(vern* 'to become'). The reflective particle זיך *(zikh)* is added, when reflective Hebrew verbs are used. Several other auxiliary verbs are occasionally used in some cases:

זיין *(to agree)* מסכים זיין *(to gain popularity)* קונה־שם זיין *(to disappear)* נעלם ווערן *(to reincarnate)* זיך נתגלגל ווערן *(to repent)* תשובה טאן *(to take revenge)* נקמה נעמען

### Present tense

The present tense of regular verbs is conjugated for person and number, as follows:

Person	Number		קויפן <i>koyfn</i> 'buy'	פאַרלירן <i>farlirn</i> 'lose'
<b>First Person</b>	<b>Singular</b>	איך <i>ikh</i>	קויף <i>koyf</i>	פאַרליר <i>farlir</i>
<b>Second Person</b>	<b>Singular Familiar</b>	דו <i>du</i>	קויפסט <i>koyfst</i>	פאַרלירסט <i>farlirst</i>
<b>Third Person</b>	<b>Singular</b>	ער <i>er</i> זי <i>zi</i> עס <i>es</i>	קויפט <i>koyft</i>	פאַרלירט <i>farlirt</i>
<b>First Person</b>	<b>Plural</b>	מיר <i>mir</i>	קויפן <i>koyfn</i>	פאַרלירן <i>farlirn</i>
<b>Second Person</b>	<b>Plural/ Polite</b>	יר <i>ir</i>	קויפט <i>koyft</i>	פאַרלירט <i>farlirt</i>
<b>Third Person</b>	<b>Plural</b>	זיי <i>zey</i>	קויפן <i>koyfn</i>	פאַרלירן <i>farlirn</i>

האָבן *hobn* 'to have' and זיין *zayn* 'to be' are conjugated irregularly as follows:

Person	Number	האָבן <i>hobn</i>	זיין <i>zayn</i>

<b>First Person</b>	<b>Singular</b>	איך <b>ikh</b>	האָב <b>hob</b>	בין <b>bin</b>
<b>Second Person</b>	<b>Singular Familiar</b>	דו <b>du</b>	האָסט <b>host</b>	ביסט <b>bist</b>
<b>Third Person</b>	<b>Singular</b>	ער <b>er</b> זי <b>zi</b> עס <b>es</b>	האָט <b>hot</b>	איז <b>iz</b>
<b>First Person</b>	<b>Plural</b>	מיר <b>mir</b>	האָבן <b>hobn</b>	זענען <b>zenen</b>
<b>Second Person</b>	<b>Plural/ Polite</b>	איר <b>ir</b>	האָט <b>hot</b>	זענט/זיט <b>zent/zayt</b>
<b>Third Person</b>	<b>Plural</b>	זיי <b>zey</b>	האָבן <b>hobn</b>	זענען/זיינען <b>zenen/zaynen</b>

## Past participle

The past participle is used extensively in Yiddish. The majority of verbs (so-called weak verbs) form the past participle by adding *ge-* גע- and *-t* ט- to the stem, e. g. געקויפט *gekoyft* 'bought'. However, strong verbs form the past participle with *ge-* גע- and *-n* ן-, accompanied by a vowel change, e. g. געהאלפן *geholfn* 'helped' from the stem העלפ- *helf-* 'help'. The vowel change is unpredictable, and there is no way to tell from the infinitive whether a verb is weak or strong.

The prefix *ge-* is omitted in past participles of verbs whose first syllable does not bear primary stress. There are two classes of verbs for which this happens: verbs with one of several unstressed stem prefixes, such as *far-* פאַר- or *ba-* באַ-; and verbs built on the stressed suffix *-ir* איר, usually used for loanwords. Thus the past participles of פאַרקויפן *farkoyfn* 'to sell' and אַבאָנירן *abonirn* 'to subscribe' are, respectively, merely פאַרקויפט *farkoyft* and אַבאָנירט *abonirt*.

## Past tense

Like other varieties of High German and unlike literary German, Yiddish does not have the inflected past tense (preterite). Instead, the auxiliary verbs האָבן *hobn* 'to have' (or זײַן *zayn* 'to be') are used with the past participle of the verb. Most verbs take האָבן *hobn*, while about 30 verbs of motion or status and some of their derivatives take זײַן *zayn*. Transitive derivatives of these exceptional verbs usually take האָבן *hobn*: איך בין *ikh bin* געגאַנגען *gegangen* ('I went') vs. איך האָב איבערגעגאַנגען דעם טײַך *ikh hob ibergegangen dem taykh* ('I walked across the river').

For example, the past tense of קויפן *koyfn* 'I buy' is געקויפט *gekoyft*, and the past tense of קום *kum* 'I come' is אין בין *ikh bin gekumen* 'I came'.

## Future tense

The future tense in Yiddish is formed with a special auxiliary verb followed by the indefinite form, not unlike English:

Person	Number		- (no standalone form)
<b>First Person</b>	<b>Singular</b>	איך <b>ikh</b>	וועל <b>vel</b>
<b>Second Person</b>	<b>Singular Familiar</b>	דו <b>du</b>	וועסט <b>vest</b>
<b>Third Person</b>	<b>Singular</b>	ער <b>er</b> זי <b>zi</b> עס <b>es</b>	וועט <b>vet</b>
<b>First Person</b>	<b>Plural</b>	מיר <b>mir</b>	וועלן <b>veln</b>
<b>Second Person</b>	<b>Plural/ Polite</b>	איר <b>ir</b>	וועט <b>vet</b>
<b>Third Person</b>	<b>Plural</b>	זיי <b>zey</b>	וועלן <b>veln</b>

Example: זאָגן *ikh vel zogn* ('I will say')

## Pluperfect and future past tense

The pluperfect is formed by the auxiliary verb **הָאָבן** *hobn* 'to have', followed by the participles of the past tense auxiliary and the participle of the verb in question: **געזאָגט געהאַט געהאַבן איך** *ikh hob gehat gezogt* (I had said); **געגאַנגען זענט געהאַט געהאַבן איר** *ir zent gehat gegangen* (you had gone).

The future past tense is formed with the future tense auxiliary followed by the auxiliary verb **הָאָבן** and the participle of the verb: **איך וועל האָבן געזאָגט** *ikh vel hobn gezogt* (I will have said).

These tenses are both very infrequent, especially in the spoken language. When the context makes the previousness of action clear, the ordinary past or future is used instead, and usually with an adverb such as **שוין** *shoyn* (already) or **פֿריער** *friër* (earlier).

## Habitual aspect

The habitual past aspect or tense is formed by a special auxiliary verb followed by the infinitive (or participle, in some dialects):

Person	Number		- (no standalone form)
First Person	Singular	איך <i>ikh</i>	פֿלעג <i>fleg</i>
Second Person	Singular Familiar	דו <i>du</i>	פֿלעגסט <i>flegst</i>
Third Person	Singular	ער <i>er</i> זי <i>zi</i> עס <i>es</i>	פֿלעגט <i>flegt</i>
First Person	Plural	מיר <i>mir</i>	פֿלעגן <i>flegn</i>
Second Person	Plural/ Polite	איר <i>ir</i>	פֿלעגט <i>flegt</i>
Third Person	Plural	זיי <i>zey</i>	פֿלעגן <i>flegn</i>

Example: **איך פֿלעג קומען** *ikh fleg kumen* (I used to come).

## Momental aspect

Two forms of the momental aspect, which expresses a one-time action, are formed by the auxiliary verbs **טאָן** (**ton**, to do) or **געבן** (**gebn**, to give) followed by an indefinite article and a verbal noun, similarly to such English expressions as 'have a look'. The verbal noun may be modified by adjectives, such as 'have a good look' in English. The form with **געבן** is more emphatic and requires the dative for the verbal noun. If the verb contains a separable prefix, it usually stands between the auxiliary and the noun.

Unlike English, such forms in Yiddish are highly systematic and may be used with virtually any verb. The nouns used sometimes appear only in the context of the verbal aspect. For example, **אַ שרײַב געגעבן**, *a shrayb gegebn*, meaning 'hurriedly or suddenly wrote', contains a noun, which one would not normally use independently, and which may be translated as 'an act of writing'.

Examples: **אַ כאָפּ אָן** *zi hot im geton a khap on* ('she gave him a grab on'); **אַ שרײַ אויס** *mir gibn a shray oys* ('we give a scream out'). Note that another form, **אויסגעשרײ** *oysgeshrey* (an out-scream), is usually used as an independent noun.

## Perfective aspect

The perfective aspect — indicating a completed action in the past or one whose completion is contemplated in the future — can be formed by adding a prefix to many verbs. For example: **איך האָב געלייענט** *ikh hob geleyent* 'I read', 'I was reading' vs. **איך האָב איבערגעלייענט** or **איך האָב דורכגעלייענט** *ikh hob ibergeleyent / ikh hob durkgeleyent* 'I read entirely', 'I read through'; **ער וועט שרײַבן** *er vet shraybn* 'he will write', 'he will do some writing' vs. **ער וועט אָנשרײַבן** *er vet onshraybn* 'he will write completely', 'he will write up', 'he will get (something) written'; **מיר לערנען זיך** *mir lernen zikh frantseyzish* 'we are studying French', 'we are taking French' vs. **מיר ווילן זיך אויסלערנען פֿראַנצײזיש** *mir viln zikh oyslernen frantseyzish* 'we want to learn French thoroughly'. The most common perfectivizing prefixes are **אויס-**, **אָפּ-**, **אַנ-**, **איבער-**, **דורכ-**, **דער-**, and **צו-** (*oys-*, *op-*, *on-*, *iber-*, *durkh-*, *der-*, *tsu-*), but there are no definitive rules for determining which prefix(es) attach to which imperfective verbs. Though not as fully developed in Yiddish as in the coterritorial Slavic languages, it is nevertheless a vital feature of the Yiddish verb system.

## Other aspects

Various other aspects, generally paralleling the complex aspect system of the Slavic languages, are formed by auxiliary verbs or prefixes, sometimes combined with the reflective particle **זיך** (*zikh*). Different aspects may be combined, if the logic of the sentence allows for it.

Examples: אָן שרייב אָן געבן אַ פֿלעג איך *ikh fleg gebn a shrayb on* (I used to suddenly start and complete writing); זיי נעמען זיך צעלאַכן *zey nemen zikh tselakhn* (they start bursting into laughter).<sup>[2]</sup>

## Negative

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The negative in a sentence with no object or predicate noun is formed by adding נישט *nit* or נישט *nisht* 'not' after the verb. If the verb is followed by an object preceded by an indefinite article, the indefinite article אַ *a* or אַן *an* is replaced by נישט *nit keyn*. This also occurs when a linking verb, such as the verb זײַן *zayn* 'to be' is followed by a predicate noun preceded by an indefinite article. The same rule applies even though there is no plural of an indefinite article.

If the verb is followed by an object preceded by a definite article, singular or plural, only נישט *nit* is added after the verb and before the definite article. With a prepositional phrase, *nit* follows the verb and *keyn* replaces the indefinite article and precedes the noun. In most case, if no other words intervene, *nit keyn* sandwiches the preposition. With a prepositional phrase with a definite article, simply put *nit* before the preposition.

Yiddish allows and often requires double negation: נישט געווען איז דאָרטן *keyner iz dortn nisht geven* (literally: 'No one was not there') or איך האָב קיינעם נישט געזען *ikh hob keynem nisht gezen* (literally: 'I didn't see no one'). In colloquial speech even triple and multiple negations may occasionally be used: נישט געוויסט קיין גאַרנישט נישט *ikh hob nisht gevusn keyn gornisht nisht* (literally: 'I did not know no nothing not').

## Diminutive and emphatic forms

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Yiddish is rich in various emphatic and emotional forms, including several general diminutive, affectionate and emphatic suffixes may be added to Yiddish nouns and adjectives. Many other emotional suffixes are mainly used for personal names and for particular classes of nouns. Emphatic expression are also formed by reduplication of verbs, composite adjectives, various 'mood' particles and interjections.

## Syntax

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Like most Germanic languages, Yiddish generally follows the V2 word order: the second constituent of any clause is a finite verb, regardless of whether the first constituent is the subject, an adverb, or another topicalized element. The V2 grammar of Yiddish differs from that of German and other closely related languages, however: Yiddish uses V2 word order in subordinate clauses as well as main clauses, while in German only main clauses exhibit V2.<sup>[3]</sup>

However, verb-initial word order may be used to indicate a causal or other close contextual relationship between consecutive sentences, with a meaning similar to English *so*.<sup>[4]</sup>

It is customary to use freer word order in Yiddish poetry.

## Clitics

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Optional contractions are commonly used in both spoken and literary Yiddish. Some auxiliary verbs and personal pronouns are often contracted, especially in colloquial speech. For example, the phrase ער האָט מיר געזאָגט *er hot mir gezogt* (he told me) may be contracted to ער'ט מיר געזאָגט *er't mir gezogt* or ער'האָט מיר געזאָגט *r'hot mir gezogt* with the auxiliary almost disappearing, while זאלן מיר אים דערציילן דאָס געהיימע וואָרט *zoln mir im dertseyln dos geheyme vort* (let's tell him the secret word) may be contracted to זאל'מיר'ן דערציילן דאָס געהיימע וואָרט *zol'mir'n dertseyln s'geheyme vort*. The last phrase is more characteristic for the Central (Polish) dialect.

## Dialectal Differences

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The Northern or so-called Lithuanian dialect of Yiddish from the Baltic countries and Belarus is notable, among a number of other peculiarities, for its lack of the neuter gender and the simplified case system. Substantives which are neuter in standard literary Yiddish appear as masculine or feminine. Only two cases, nominative and accusative or oblique, exist in the Northern Yiddish, except for a few isolated remnants of the dative. The auxiliary verb האָבן *hobn* ('to have') may be used with any verb in the Northern Yiddish, including the cases when the literary Yiddish and other dialects require זײַן *zayn* ('to be').

The entire case and gender system seems gradually disappearing altogether in contemporary Yiddish-speaking Hasidic communities. The definite articles **Der**, **Di** and **Dos** are shifting to a single definite article **De** in the nominative, accusative, and dative cases (reserving "Di" as the plural definite article). For example, *De gitte mentsh* 'The good man', *De gitte fro* 'The good woman', and *De gitte kind* 'The good child'. There is also the emergence of a single demonstrative pronoun **Deye**, as in *Deye mentsh/fro/kind* 'This man/woman/child'.<sup>[5][6]</sup>

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