Some analogical phenomena in Hungarian syntax

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Plan

A theoretical debate

The generativist-Montagovian stance

- The more general a principle or a hypothetical structure, the more explanatory. (Because then it allegedly yields a simpler account.)
- Therefore, the hypothetical structures of sentences and the abstract semantics attributed to them must be maximally general, uniform and unique.

The constructionist/analogist/exemplar-based stance

- Structure emerges from surface generalizations (about both forms and functions).
- Subpatterns may give rise to partial generalizations with properties not derivable from the more general patterns.

In particular, in Hungarian syntax

The generativist tradition

- a single "underlying" structure of all sentences, with many invisible placeholders
- very abstract, general and often impressionistic semantic characterisation of the functions of expressions (e.g., "focus", "existential", "predicative", "referential")

The non-generativist tradition

- many different subpatterns in Hungarian sentence structure (eradicating and level-stress, and further subcases), with possibly multiple functions
- specific subpatterns may have specific semantic peculiarities, and need not be functionally homogeneous

Examples

English nominalization

Chomsky (1970) argues against Lees' (1960) analysis in which he derives nominalizations (e.g., *the destruction of the city*) from clauses (*(that) the city was destroyed*).

"Discontinuous possessive"

(1) ˈ*Mária Teréziának* ˈ*aludtak* *az* ˈ*ágyában.*
     Maria Theresa-DAT slept-3PL in her bed
     'Somebody slept in M. T.'s bed.'
     (Weird if she is no longer alive.)

Szabolcsi (1981) derives such structures from "normal" (continuous) possessive constructions. To explain why M. T. must be "personally affected", the predicate must be "reanalysed" or "re-categorized", which leads to extra complexities.

Peculiarities of the analogical approach

- Analogy is *regularity* without rules.
- It consists in maximizing the correlation between formal similarities and functional similarities. (and similarly for differences, but the effect of that is less spectacular).

The main principle

In every case, language users' decision depends on their memory traces of earlier language use. The most similar and most prominent precedents will be most influential in their decision. (Similarity includes distributional similarity — Saussure's "syntagmatic associations".)
(Prominence originates from frequency, relevance, and recency.)
(Note the difficulty of measuring similarity and prominence. This is quite different, though, from the difficulties faced by the generative approach.)

Main manifestations of analogical mechanisms

Blending

simultaneous use of patterns that are roughly equally influential, potentially with a trade-off

Variation

different choices between roughly equally influential patterns that are mutually incompatible

Note that if we observe such phenomena in a given linguistic domain, then an analogical explanation of that domain will fare better than a generativist one.

Formal characterization of eradicating patterns

- In most cases, the entire comment bears only one main stress (on the first constituent), even lexically accented stressed words get destressed. This stress is called eradicating stress.

- Should additional main stresses appear after the initial stress, each one of them starts a new characteristic melody. (In other words, an eradicating stress can be followed by eradicating stresses only.)

- In the case of multiple eradicating stresses within one comment, the character melodies are identical in most cases.

- The left edge has fixed positions, such as an *also/neither*-phrase, universal phrases, a contrastive focus, negation (the last two obligatorily followed immediately by an unstressed finite verb).

Formal characterization of level-prosody patterns

- All lexically accented words carry main stress.
- The characteristic melody starts with the last main stress, the melody of the preceding stress domains is redundant.
- Unless comment-initial, the inflected verb is unstressed, and is preceded by a stressed constituent, the "verbal modifier" (not really a modifier, the term was coined by generativists wishing to attribute it a uniform function), which
- is usually not a maximal projection (except in a certain subclass of the pattern);
- the "verbal modifier" is categorially heterogeneous: e.g., verbal prefixes, infinitives (with auxiliaries), negation can also fulfil this role.

Functional roles of eradicating-stress patterns

- riposts (contradicting something previously said or assumed)
- answers to questions (and questions themselves)
- elements of parallel clauses (contrast, comparison etc.)
- journalistic emphasis on non-contrasted element
- …

One of the most typical sub-patterns

Only the first constituent (bearing the eradicating stress) carries new information, the rest is known and optional.

(2) a. "*Jánost* (*hívták meg* (*az értekezletre*)).
John-ACC invited-3PL PREF to the meeting
'It is JOHN who they invited to the meeting'

b. "*Mindig* (*Jánost* (*hívták meg*)).
always John-ACC invited-3PL PREF
'It is ALWAYS John who was invited [e.g., not just sometimes]'

Partial generalization 1

Such patterns typically function as

- answers to *wh*-questions, or
- riposts (disagreement concerning stressed constituent).

Both functions are associated with *exhaustiveness*.

Counterexample

(3) *János a "zongoránál volt nagyszerű,*
John the piano-AT was wonderful

Mari pedig a "hegedűt kezelte virtuózan.
Mary CONJ the violin-ACC handled in a virtuoso manner

'John was wonderful at the piano, while Mary handled the violin in a virtuoso manner'

The comments in both clauses follow an eradicating pattern, but the unstressed parts are not necessarily presupposed or optional. Reason:

Partial generalization 2

Use eradicating patterns in parallel (or contrastive) structures if there is at least a partial overlap in the parallel clauses, and put the non-overlapping part into the focus position.

Two other patterns that resemble this in different aspects:

No overlap at all (Szabolcsi—Zsámboki sentences)

(4) *Nem a "gyerekek aludtak a "padlón,*
not the children slept on the floor

hanem a "vendégek mentek "szállodába.
but the guests went to [a] hotel

(contrast between explanations of something in the common ground)

There is one distinguished constituent, but the rest need not be presupposed

(5) *Csak "X...*
'only *X*..'

(6) *Többek között "X...*
'*X*, among others, ...'

Verum focus

Resemblance to other patterns

- contrast between truth values ('yes' vs. 'no')
- hence, used mainly in answers, riposts (e.g., rebuttal), and parallel structures
- no distinguished constituent, hence no "inversion":
  - (7) ″(*Mindig*) *bejött.*
    always   in.PREF-came
    '(S)he DID come in. ((S)he ALWAYS came in.)
- BUT: negative expressions treated as distinguished:
  - (8) ″*Nem* (*mindig*) *jött be.*
    not   always   came in.PREF
    '(S)he didn't (always) come in

Short answers with verum focus

Distinguished constituent or finite verb

(9) "*Józsi* (*jött be* (*a könyvtárba*)).
Joe came in.PREF into the library
'(Yes,) it's Joe (who came in(to the library)).'

(10) "*Mindig* (*bejött* (*a könyvtárba*)).
always in.PREF-came into the library
'(Yes,) (s)he always (came in(to the library)).'

'Yes' and 'no' in parallel structures

(11) "*Kati* "*nem* (*jött be*), *de* "*Józsi* "*igen.*
Kate not came in.PREF but Joe yes
'Kate didn't come in, but Joe did (come in).'

The "existential" subpattern

(12) "*Szálltak   le   Vácon.*
stepped-3Pl down.pref at Vác (town)
(a) 'There were occasions when they got off at Vác.'
(b) 'There were some who got off at Vác.'

Variation: quantificational adverbials

(13) a. "*Sokan (leszálltak   (Vácon)).*
many   down.pref-stepped-3Pl at Vác (town)
'Many people got off at Vác.'
b. "*Sokan (szálltak   le   (Vácon)).*
many   stepped-3Pl down.pref at Vác (town)
'Many people got off at Vác.'

Interim conclusion

- Eradicating stress and the focus position are not to be given a uniform semantic/functional characterization.

- However, in accordance with the principle of analogy, these patterns exhibit family resemblances.

- The relevant resemblances include: distinguished constituent carrying new information (hence: answers to *wh*-questions), distinguished constituent in general (hence: contrast, ripost).

Verbal modifier patterns

- Complements expressing goal, direction, result etc. tend to be incorporated more than any other complement. (This is a universal tendency.)
- Hungarian verbal prefixes originate from such complements (and this function is still transparent in most of them in many cases).
- The presence of goal, direction, result etc. complements typically co-occurs with telicity.
- Telic predicates co-occur with perfect aspect (atelic predicates do not). This motivates the perfective use of Hungarian prefixes.

Partial generalization 1

Use a verb stem-initial comment to express imperfectivity.

The "definiteness effect"

- Telicity tends to co-occur with the "accomplishment/completion" Aktionsart, which implies a preparatory process leading to the actual event/culmination. — typically expressed by verbal prefixes in Hungarian.

- An "existential" culmination (e.g., coming into existence or becoming available) is anticipated throughout the preparatory phase, e.g., *I am building a house, the house I am building* — language represents the house as "existing" in some sense before it actually exists.

- This motivates the specific interpretation of indefinite noun phrases that express the result of an "existential" culmination with telic predicates expressing completion.

Partial generalization 2

Use a verb stem-initial comment to express the non-specificity of an indefinite expressing the result of an "existential" culmination.

(14) a. *Megírtam   egy verset.*
    PREF-wrote-1SG a poem-ACC
    'I wrote a poem [that I had planned,
       was contracted for, etc. writing,
       or one that (belongs to a collection that)
       has been mentioned]

 b. *Írtam   egy verset.*
    wrote-1SG a poem-ACC
    'I wrote a poem' [the indefinite is non-specific]

 c. *Írtam   a verset.*
    wrote-1SG the poem-ACC
    *'I wrote the poem' [no completed event reading]

BUT:

Non-specific indefinites with non-existential culmination

(15) *Ettem   egy almát.*
    ate-1Sg an apple-ACC
    'I ate an apple' [the indefinite is non-specific]
(16) *Raktam   egy lapot.*
    put-1Sg a card-ACC
    'I played a card' [the indefinite is non-specific]

Partial generalization 3

Verb stem-initial comments may express the non-specificity of an indefinite marking the culmination even if it is not "existential". — *pace* Szabolcsi, who posits that these are existential, too.

Note that this is a main-clause construction:

A subcategorization- or semantics-based account à la Szabolcsi is not suitable for explaining why it does not occur in subordinate clauses:

(17) *a fiú, akinek   egy/a verset   (meg)írtam*
      the boy to whom a/the poem-ACC (PREF-)wrote-1SG
      'the boy to whom I wrote a/the poem'

[This came up in the discussion:]

K. É. Kiss called into my attention that only relative clauses are exceptional, which indeed seems to be the case. According to her, this phenomenon is due to the fact that the content of a relative clause is presupposed rather than claimed. In my view, her proposal has at least two weaknesses:

1. It is not clear how the presupposed character makes "the definiteness effect" disappear. In particular, it does not disappear in clauses like those subordinated to 'I know that …', which are also presupposed.

2. The definiteness effect also vanishes in non-restrictive relative clauses, too, although their content is certainly not presupposed, e.g., 'a boy, who wrote the poem'.

- Incorporation structures are typically accompanied by unbalanced information content: contentful incorporated complements tend to result in a reduced informativity (entropy) of the verb ("light" verbs, verbs with a function similar to those of affixes). (With prefixed verbs, it is the opposite: the verb is more contentful, and the prefix is more redundant.)

- In Hungarian, because of pre-verbal incorporation and the frequent use of prefixed verbs, verb stem-initial comments are the marked option, especially with "light" verbs.

Partial generalization 3

In the unmarked case, the comment starts with a "verbal modifier" (i.e. not the verb stem itself), at least if the verb is a "light" one (and if the non-specificity of the indefinite object is not an issue).

Interim conclusion

- There is no uniform semantic/functional property that verbal modifiers share.
- However, in accordance with the principle of analogy, the patterns involved exhibit family resemblances.
- The relevant resemblances are related to incorporation, telicity, perfectiveness, the specificity of indefinites, and "light" verbs.

Analogies across the two families

The Hocus position

Level-prosody sentences are often contaminated with the exclusive/exhaustive interpretation of pre-verbal foci (without any contrast, ripost etc.):

(18) (ˈ*Nem*) (ˈ*mindig*) ˈ*Józsi vitte* (ˈ)*ki   a* ˈ*szemetet*
    not   always   Joe   took out.ᴘʀᴇꜰ the garbage-ᴀᴄᴄ
    'It's (not) (always) Joe who took the garbage out'
      [no contrast, ripost etc. implied]

(19) ˈ*Sokan jöttek*   (ˈ)*be   a* ˈ*könyvtárba*
    many   came-3ᴘʟ in.ᴘʀᴇꜰ into the library
    'Many people came into the library.'

(Prosodic variation is very frequent in such sentences.)

Negative level-prosody sentences

Only the blended pattern exists:

(20) ˈ*Nem jöttek* (ˈ)*be* *a* ˈ*könyvtárba.*
    not   came in.ᴘʀᴇꜰ into the library
    'They did not come into the library.'

"Verbal modifiers" in short answers

(21) — ˮ*Részt vettek benne?*
       part   took-3ᴘʟ in it
    — (ˮ*Igen,*) ˮ*Részt.*
    '— Did they participate in it? — (Yes,) they did.'

The surface similarity of the position of a verbal modifier and that of a
"focussed" constituent results in a short answer parallel to those given to
wh-questions, even though the verbal modifier's function has nothing in
common with that of a "focussed" constituent.

Conclusion

Maximizing generality may result in more complex rather than simpler descriptions.

The use of a linguistic device is not to be conceived of as if it stood for a "logical translation", but more like aiming at *guiding associations* through functional and formal similarities to other devices.

Language is not the output of applying a system of rules, but the by-product of stochastic processes of maximizing the correlation between formal and functional similarities.