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The inverse agreement constraint in Hungarian - a relic of a Uralic–Siberian Sprachbund?*

1. Introduction

Whereas some of the most evident Sprachbund phenomena that Hungarian displays link it to West-Germanic - as revealed by a project initiated by Henk van Riemsdijk (see É. Kiss – van Riemsdijk 2004), Hungarian might also have preserved from its distant past remnants of a Siberian Sprachbund, which involved, in addition to the ancestor of Hungarian, a Uralic language, the East-Siberian Chukotko-Kamchatkan languages. This paper will argue that two seemingly mysterious morphosyntactic facts of Hungarian: the lack of V-object agreement in the case of 1st and 2nd person objects, and the existence of an extra-paradigmatic agreement morpheme used in the presence of a 1st person singular subject and a 2nd person object, get a natural explanation if they are derived from a prohibition against inverse agreement. This prohibition, described in connection with Chukchee, Koryak, and Kamchadal by Comrie (1980), and Bobaljik and Branigan (2004), requires that the object of a verb be lower in the animacy hierarchy than its subject. The verb cannot agree with an object violating this prohibition.

2. The facts

In Hungarian, the verb agrees not only with its subject, but also with its object if it is represented by a definite noun phrase. Compare the identical conjugations of an intransitive verb (1a) and a transitive verb taking an indefinite object (1b) with the conjugation of a transitive verb taking a definite object (1c):

(1)a. áll-**ok**   b. lát-**ok** egy fiút   c. lát-**om** a fiút
      'I stand'   'I see a boy'   'I see the boy'
    áll-**sz**   lát-**sz** egy fiút   lát-**od** a fiút
    áll-**0**   lát-**0** egy fiút   lát-**ja** a fiút
    áll-**unk**   lát-**unk** egy fiút   lát-**juk** a fiút
    áll-**tok**   lát-**tok** egy fiút   lát-**játok** a fiút
    áll-**nak**   lát-**nak** egy fiút   lát-**ják** a fiút

Rebrus (2000) and Bartos (2000) argue that the conjugation in (1c) involves two agreement morphemes, which are fused in 1st and 2nd person singular, but are distinct in the rest of the cases. The object agreement morpheme has several allomorphs *(-(j)a/-j/-i/-e)*, which are licensed in different phonological environments, but it is invariant with respect to person and number. Observe the object agreement morpheme situated between the verb stem and the subject agreement morpheme in a paradigm involving a verb with a back vowel (2a), and in a paradigm involving a verb with a front vowel (2b):

(2)a. én lát-om őt   'I see him'   b. kér-em őt 'I ask him'
    te lát-od őt   'you see him'   kér-ed őt 'you ask him'
    ő lát-**ja**-0 őt 'he sees him'   kér-**i**-0 őt 'he asks him'
    mi lát-**j** -uk őt 'we see him'   kér-**j**-ük őt 'we ask him'
    ti lát-**já**-tok őt 'you see him'   kér-**i**-tek őt 'you ask him'
    õk lát-**já**-k őt   'they see him'   kér-**i**-k őt   'they ask him'

According to Bartos (2000), the VP merges with an object agreement morpheme if and only if the VP contains an object of the category DP. In his analysis, indefinite noun phrases do not project a DP; they are NumPs, whereas bare noun phrases are NPs. DPs include, in addition to noun phrases preceded by a definite article, as in (1c), also proper names and 3rd person personal pronouns. In the case of proper names and pronouns, D is filled by N-to-D movement. If this movement is blocked e.g. by an intervening adjective, the definite article is spelled out:

(3)a. [$_{DP}$ Péter$_i$ [$_{NP}$ t$_i$]]   (4) [$_{DP}$ ő$_i$ [$_{NP}$ t$_i$]]
   b. [$_{DP}$ az [$_{NP}$ okos [$_{NP}$ Péter]]]   [$_{DP}$ a [$_{NP}$ nagy [$_{NP}$ ő]]]
          the   smart   Peter   the   great   he 'one's great love'

Possessive constructions are also DPs, whether their definite article is spelled out, or is deleted in the local environment of another determiner (see Szabolcsi 1994).

    Bartos's theory of V-object agreement correctly predicts the presence or absence of the object agreement morpheme on the V except for one curious set of facts: it cannot explain why an object represented by a 1st or 2nd person pronoun triggers no agreement. The V-object combinations displaying no agreement include the following cases: a V with a 3rd person subject does not agree with a 1st or 2nd person object (4a); a V with a 2nd person subject does not agree with a 1st person object (4b), and a V with a 1st person plural subject does not agree with a 2nd person object (4c). The verbs in (7a-c) only bear a subject agreement morpheme:

(4)a. *ő lát-0   engem/téged/minket/titeket*
     he see-3SG me   /you /us   /you-PL
     ők   lát -nak engem/téged/minket/titeket
     they see-3PL me   /you /us   /you-PL

   b. *te lát-sz   engem/minket*
     you see-2SG me   /us
     ti   lát -tok engem/minket
     you.PL see-2PL me   /us

   c. *mi lát-unk téged/titeket*
     we see-1PL you /you-PL

A 1st person singular verb does, in fact, agree with a 2nd person object; however, the agreement morpheme is not the regular -*(j)a/-j/-i/-e.* Cf.

(5) *Lát-**l**-ak.*
  'I see you.'

The suffix -*lak* is, to all appearances, a morpheme complex, involving the -*k* 1st person singular subject agreement marker, and the -*l*, which is the 2nd person singular agreement marker of verbs in the so-called -*ik* conjugation, historically associated with unaccusative verbs; i.e., it is the morpheme agreeing with a 2nd person internal argument – e.g. *leese-l* 'you fall', *bánkódo-l* 'you feel.sad'. (It is also the 2nd person singular subject agreement marker of verbs ending in a sibilant.)[1]

    It appears that Bartos's generalization, namely, that the V agrees with its object if and only if the object is a DP, can only be maintained in the face of the facts illustrated in (4) if

1st and 2nd person objects are indefinite noun phrases projecting a mere NP or NumP. However, neither independent syntactic evidence, nor semantic considerations would support such an assumption. Furthermore, this ad hoc stipulation would still leave the 'extra-paradigmatic' form in (5) unexplained. If a 2nd person object is a NumP, why does it trigger agreement on a 1st person singular verb?

3. The explanation

The key to the understanding of the unexpected phenomena illustrated in (4) and (5) is to be found in a constraint noticed by Comrie (1980) and Bobaljik and Branigan (2005) in the verbal agreement system of the East-Siberian Chukchee, Koryak, and Kamchadal. In these languages, the participants of events are ordered with respect to animacy/agentivity. The 1st person is seen as more animate than the 2nd person, the 2nd person is seen as more animate than the 3rd person, and singulars are seen as more animate than plurals.

In Chukchee, Koryak, and Kamchadal the V agrees both with its subject and with its object – similar to Hungarian, similar to Mordvin, another Uralic language, and similar to the Siberian languages of the Uralic family (Vogul, Ostyak, and the Samoyed languages) – see Keresztes (1994). As Comrie (1980) observed, agreement in Chukchee, Koryak and Kamchadal is constrained by the following principle:

(6) *Inverse agreement constraint[2]*
    An object agreeing with a verb must be lower in the animacy hierarchy than the subject agreeing with the same verb.

As becomes clear from the studies of Comrie (1980) and Bobaljik and Branigan (2004), Chukchee, Koryak and Kamchadal have two strategies to avoid a violation of the inverse agreement constraint. In case the object of a verb is more animate than its subject, either (i) an inverse morpheme is prefixed to the verb in order to indicate that the inverse agreement constraint is suspended; or (ii) the verb only agrees with its subject, but not with its object, i.e., it behaves as if it were intransitive. Chukchee, for example, only has the latter option in the case of second person subjects acting on first person objects.

The three languages examined by Comrie all adopt the animacy hierarchy under (7), but they differ in the way they segment it.

(7) 1SG > 1PL > 2SG > 2PL > 3SG > 3PL

In Koryak, singular is more prominent than plural only in the 3rd person. Chukchee collapses the first four levels of the hierarchy, as follows:

(8) 1/2 > 3SG > 3PL

In Kamchadal, the hierarchy only has two levels:

(9) 1/2/3SG > 3PL

In Koryak, the subject agreement morpheme precedes the verb, whereas the object agreement morpheme follows it. The inverse agreement constraint excludes the following combinations:

(10)a.*2nd person subject – 1st person singular object
    b.*2nd person subject – 1st person plural object
    c.*3rd person singular subject – 1st person singular object

d.*3rd person singular subject – 1st person plural object
e.*3rd person singular subject – 2nd person object
f.*3rd person plural subject – any object

In the (a) and (c) cases, no object agreement morpheme is licensed (the verb has the agreement morphology of an intransitive verb, with both the prefix and the suffix agreeing with the subject). In the rest of the cases, the inverse agreement constraint is suspended by the inverse morpheme *ne-*.

The situation attested in Hungarian is very similar. The inverse agreement constraint excludes roughly the same set of morpheme combinations; and Hungarian adopts the former strategy to repair the violations, i.e., there is no V-object agreement in these cases.

Let us assume, following Rebrus (2000) and Bartos (2000), that a Hungarian verb with a DP object combines both with an object agreement morpheme (one of the allomorphs *-(j)a/-j/-i/-e*), and with a subject agreement morpheme – even if the two morphemes are realized by a single portmanteau element in 1st and 2nd person singular. Let us assume, furthermore, that Hungarian adopts the following version of the animacy hierarchy in (7), collapsing the two lowest levels of the hierarchy, on the one hand, and the three intermediate levels, on the other hand:

(11) 1SG >1PL/2 > 3

That is, the speaker is at the top of the animacy hierarchy; the other participants of the discourse count as less animate; whereas those not taking part in the discourse are the least animate.

In Hungarian, the prohibition against inverse agreement is less strict than in the East-Siberian languages; agreement is possible in the case of a 3rd person subject and an equally animate 3rd person object. That is, the inverse agreement constraint seems to be supplemented with the following caveat:

(12) *Inverse agreement constraint* (for Hungarian)
    An object agreeing with a verb must be lower in the animacy hierarchy than the subject
        agreeing with the same verb, unless the subject represents the lowest level of the
    animacy hierarchy.

Hungarian only has one of the two strategies adopted by the Siberian languages to avoid a violation of the inverse agreement constraint: a verb whose object is more animate than its subject fails to agree with its object. That is, verbs selecting the following sets of arguments are predicted to be in the intransitive conjugation, in spite of the definiteness of their object:

(13)a. *3rd person subject – 1st/2nd person object
    b. *2nd person subject – 1st person object
    c. *1st person plural subject – 2nd person object

The predictions are borne out; these cases are the same as those listed in (4) as exceptions to the generalization of Bartos (2000) on the licensing of V-object agreement. As shown in (4), verbs taking these argument complexes all bear only the subject agreement morpheme of the intransitive paradigm.

If the verb has a 1st or 2nd person subject and an object of the same person and number, the object must be represented by a reflexive pronoun. A reflexive is used also in the case of a singular 1st or 2nd person subject, and a plural object of the same person. The Hungarian

reflexive pronoun consists of the 3rd person singular noun *mag* 'kernel', and a possessive morpheme indicating the person and number of the possessor, represented by a pro coreferent with the subject. For example:

(14) *(én) látom mag -am-at   /mag -unk-at*
     I   see   kernel-my-ACC /kernel-our-ACC
     'I see myself/ourselves'

That is, a reflexive pronoun invariably has a 3rd person head, which projects a DP because of its pro possessor. It being a 3rd person DP, the verb is correctly predicted to agree with it no matter what person the subject has.

   The cooccurrence of a 1st person singular subject and a 2nd person object does not violate the inverse agreement constraint, therefore, we would expect the appearance of an object agreement morpheme on the V. It does indeed appear in the form of the 2nd person agreement marker *-l-:*

(15) *én lát -l-ak téged   /titeket*
     I see-2-1sg you.SG-ACC/you.PL-ACC
     'I see you'

Thus the adoption of Comrie's inverse agreement constraint has led us to a refinement of Bartos's (2000) and Rebrus's (2000) analysis of the Hungarian objective conjugation: the object agreement morpheme does have a person feature after all. The allomorphs *-(j)a/-j/-i/-e* mark a 3rd person object, whereas the *-l-* marks a 2nd person object.

4. Summary

This paper has provided an explanation for an apparently idiosyncratic set of facts concerning V-object agreement in Hungarian. The facts that a verb taking 3rd person subject and a 1st or 2nd person object does not bear any object agreement morpheme, whereas a verb taking a 1st person singular subject and a 2nd person object bears an apparently irregular object agreement morpheme can both be derived from the so-called inverse agreement constraint known from the Chukotko-Kamchatkan languages (see Comrie 1980), which forbids V–object agreement in case the object is more animate than the subject. It is a question for further research whether Hungarian and the Chukotko-Kamchatkan languages can have developed the same constraint independently of one another. Chukchee, Koryak, and Kamchadal are close relatives; however, Hungarian is not related to them genetically. At the same time, it does not seem implausible to hypothesize that Proto-Uralic, a distant ancestor of Hungarian, and Proto-Chukotko-Kamchatkan could belong to the same Sprachbund. This possibility has already been raised in connection with the Uralic languages and Yukagir, another Siberian language spoken west of the Chukotko-Kamchatkan territory. The hypothesis that the inverse agreement constraint is a relic of a Uralic-Siberian Sprachbund would be supported if the costraint could also be pointed out in the (nearly extinct) Siberian languages of the Uralic family, i.e., in the Samoyed languages, in Vogul, and in Ostyak.

Notes
* I would like to thank Bernard Comrie for his useful comments.

[1] Den Dikken (2004, 2005) provides an interesting analysis of the morphosyntactic properties of *-lak*, demonstrating its clitic-like behaviour.

[2] The *inverse* element of the term *inverse agreement* was borrowed by Comrie (1980) from the grammars of American Indian languages. An animacy hierarchy similar to that in (7) plays a role in several American Indian languages, among them Algonkin. In these languages, the verb appears either in a direct form or an inverse form, depending on whether its subject or object is more prominent in the hierarchy. The direct verb form is used when the subject is more prominent than the object (e.g. when the subject is in the 1st person, and the object is in the 3rd person). If the object is more prominent than the subject, then the verb is in the inverse form. In these languages subject and object pronouns are not marked morphologically; and their word order is also free. Their subject or object status depends on whether the verb is in the direct or inverse form.

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