Premature Spell-Out in Colloquial Hungarian:
Evidence for the Fine Structure of the Minimal VP
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1. Introduction

It has proved difficult to determine the shape and headedness of the minimal VP, owing to the fact that much or even all of the material originating in it routinely moves out of it in the course of the derivation of a clause. In this talk, novel data from Hungarian are offered to present a clause type radically pared down to the minimal VP, making it possible to observe the VP by itself. The syntax of such radically truncated clauses (RTCs) will show that the Hungarian VP is, in fact, head-final. RTCs in Hungarian will also provide prima facie evidence against the universality of head-complement branching order (Kayne 1994), and strong support to the availability of OV as a basic, non-derived word order (Haider 2000). RTCs also provide support to the split-DP proposal of Sportiche (2005). Finally, I show that RTC data lend further support to the adjunction analysis of both topicalization (Lasnik and Saito 1992) and quantification (Fox 1995, Reinhart 1995, Chomsky 1995). My claims are supported by corpus data (3731 RTC utterances) and an acceptability judgment survey (680 respondents).

2. Radically truncated clauses: the main facts

RTCs are used in informal spoken and written registers (blogs, forums) to describe a succession of sub-events (or a single subevent) within a well-defined containing event or situation.

(1) *[Namármost amikor én alud-t-am   ott,   úgy   kezd-t-em,   hogy]*
    well   when I sleep-PST-1SG there   so   start-PST-1SG that
    'So when I was sleeping there, the way I started was
    szemét   le-visz,   szoba   rendbe-rak,   fürdőszoba el-pakol...
    rubbish   PRT-carry   room   PRT-put   bathroom PRT-pack
    I took out the rubbish, I cleared the room, I cleared the bathroom.'

This succession of RTCs is not a syntax-free to-do-list: in fact, RTCs have a much stricter syntax than real to-do-lists, which in Hungarian typically involve an infinitival construction with relatively free word order, with objects obligatorily carrying accusative case and with the objects optionally having the definite article. As opposed to this, RTCs are subject to a number of constraints. First of all, RTCs lack all phi-feature agreement:

(2) a. *sör meg-isz*   b. **sör meg-isz-ik*   c. **sör meg-isz-sza*
    beer PRT-drink   beer PRT-drink-3SG.INDEF   beer PRT-drink-3SG.DEF
    'I/you/she/he/we/you-pl/they drink/drank the beer.'

They also lack all tense, aspect and mood features and they are felicitous only if this missing information can be inferred from the context. The object is obligatorily in the morphologically unmarked case form (a form otherwise reserved for nominative subjects and possessors), which is highly unusual since objects in Hungarian obligatorily carry accusative case:

(3) a. **sör-t   meg-isz*   b. *sör   meg-isz*
    beer-ACC PRT-drink   beer PRT-drink
    'I/you/she/etc. drink/drank the beer.

While word order in neutral non-truncated sentences in Hungarian is V-initial, RTCs are strictly O PRT V:

(4) a. *tévé   be-kapcsol*   b. **be-kapcsol   tévé*
    television PRT-switch   PRT-switch   television
    'I/you/she/etc. switch(ed) on the TV and open(ed) the beer.'

In RTCs, the object cannot have a definite article (even when it denotes a salient, unique entity). The object is a nominal phrase (not a mere N), it can be a NumP, a PossP, a QP, or even a CP, and can be pluralized. (I will show based on this and other observations that the objects in RTCs are not incorporated or pseudo-incorporated.) In RTCs, no subject is allowed in transitive or unergative sentences, however, the subject is allowed in unaccusatives:

(5) a. *(*én) tévé   be-kapcsol*   b. *(*én) fut*   c. *én meg-érkez*
        I   television   PRT-switch   I   run   I   PRT-dress
        'I switch(ed) on the television.'   'I start/started.'   'I arrive(d).

3. Analysis

I will claim based on these observations and other evidence that RTCs in Hungarian are VPs which lack all higher projections including vP, the inflectional domain (from ModP to AgrSP) and the higher functional domain (PredP to CP):

(6)   ~~[CP [NegP [FocP [NegP [PredP [AgrSP [AgrOP [MoodP [TenseP [ModP~~
         ~~[vP ext. arg.~~ [VP int. arg. [V' PRT V]]~~]]]]]]]]]]]~~
         (cf. Bartos 1999 and É. Kiss 2006 a.o.)

While focusing is completely out and negation is only marginally attested, topicalization and Q-raising are freely available in RTCs, which I will take as supportive of the approaches which analyze these latter two as adjunction. (I will show using adverb placement tests and other evidence that topicalization is possible but not obligatory in RTCs.) The lack of a vP layer explains both why external arguments are excluded from RTCs and also the lack of accusative case on the internal argument. The strict and verb-final surface order is due to the fact that in these minimal structures, the V is trapped within VP. Under the standard analysis of the Hungarian sentence, even in fully neutral sentences, the V is taken to move to a position outside vP, resulting in a V-initial word order in neutral sentences and free word order postverbally (É. Kiss 2006). This movement fails to happen in RTCs, and as a consequence, the word order reflects the underlying structure of the VP in Hungarian, which is otherwise unobservable in non-truncated sentences due to obligatory V-movement. The proposed structure is the following: the internal argument is generated in SpecVP, and, crucially, the PRT is a complement to the left:

(7)   [VP internal arg. [V' PRT V]]

(Following É. Kiss (2006) a.o., I assume that verbal particles (PRTs), which express the result state or location of the theme argument, are base-generated as clausal complements of V, however, the analysis offered here carries over seamlessly to other theoretical frameworks too.)

While neutral full sentences in Hungarian are verb-initial, the language has many features typical of head-final languages, which means that this new finding of a head-final VP shows that Hungarian is more typologically well-behaved than previously thought. The lack of definite articles in RTCs objects provides support to Sportiche's (2005) proposal that verbs select NP arguments, and the DP layer is added only later in the derivation, outside VP. I will discuss how RTCs in Hungarian can be related to somewhat similar constructions such as the Inflektiv (Bücking and Rau 2013), root infinitives in child language (Guasti and Rizzi 2002), clause chains (Weisser 2015) and the reduced written register (Haegeman 1987 a.o.)

Finally, I will argue that RTCs arise in situations where speakers terminate the derivation of a clause prematurely, at VP level, and send the VP to spell-out (PF) and semantic interpretation (LF). This is to maximize the efficiency of the exchange of information: if all the information that is encoded above VP is safely recoverable by the hearer from the context, it might make sense not to waste time and effort on building up the above-VP level. However, such early termination and spell-out constitutes a breach of the Theta-Criterion (the external argument role is not assigned to any element), spell-out by phase (the phase head v is not merged, yet VP is spelt out); semantic interpretability at LF (the external argument slot is unsaturated); and the principle that the numeration needs to be exhausted (several elements of the numeration are not used up in RTCs). In the survey, RTCs were judged as acceptable but degraded in a colloquial speech situation (4.2 on a 1-to-7 Likert scale; where grammatical non-RTCs received 6.8 and ungrammatical non-RTCs received 1.2). RTCs are properly built, faultless VPs, but the premature termination of the derivation is in itself a breach of various fundamental rules. This complex situation is reflected in their degraded but acceptable status in colloquial registers.