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AN EPISTEMIC DETERMINER IN HUNGARIAN: ITS CONSTRUALS AND ITS EVOLUTION

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1 Introducing *va-j-egy* and its construals

Va-j-egy (*vagy + egy* lit. ‘or one’) is an approximator and an epistemic determiner found with Hungarian speakers in Romania (Transylvania and the so-called csángó or ceangău region).

- (1) Ha létezik **vaegy** update le fogod tudni tölteni
If exists V1 update down FUT-2SG can-INF fill-INF
‘If there is some update or other you’ll be able to donwload it’

Va-j-egy is freely used in colloquial Transylvanian Hungarian, however, it is unattested in other variants of Hungarian. While certain functions of *vaegy* have already been described by traditional grammarians in the second half of the 19th century (Czuczor and Fogarasi (1874), Kriza (1926)), it has until now escaped the attention of theoretical (generative, ...) linguists.

Observations, Claims:¹

- *Va-j-egy* has several related but distinct construals. It can be
 - a ‘plain’ indefinite determiner (‘some’, ‘a few’), or
 - an epistemic indefinite determiner (‘some or other’), or
 - an approximator (‘approximately’, ‘some’).
- *Va-j-egy* has diachronically developed from the reinterpretation of a *vagy egy* (lit. ‘or one) compound.
- The Romanian epistemic indefinite *vreun* (Farkas (2002a), Farkas (2002b), Fălăuş (2014), among many others) played a role in aiding this reinterpretation through analogy.

¹Data from the Internet, narratives of old villagers mingled with notes from young(er) people. Also: Generated by ÁBF herself.

1.1 Main data

As has been noted already in Kriza (1926) and Czuczor and Fogarasi (1874), *va-j-egy* can be used interchangeably with *néhány* ‘some’, ‘a few’ in Transylvanian (and specifically, in Szekler) dialects:²

- (2) Tehetünk bele **vaegy** szem kását is.
Put-POSS.1PL into-3SG some grain:CL porridge-ACC too.
‘We may also add some grains of porridge (kasha) to it’

The above-mentioned authors note only this construal of *va-j-egy*. In addition to the ‘some’, ‘a few’ construal, however, *va-j-egy* is also used as an epistemic indefinite determiner:

- (3) Ha létezik **vaegy** update le fogod tudni tölteni
If exists V1 update down FUT-2SG can-INF fill-INF
‘If there is some update or other you’ll be able to download it’

Va-j-egy can also be used as an approximator modifying a numeral (‘approximately n pieces of something’), similarly to Romanian *vreun/vreo*:

- (4) A tenyeremen van **vaegy** öt vérhólyag
The palm-POSS.1SG-ON is V1 five blood.blister
‘There are about five blood blisters on the palm of my hand’
Romanian: ‘Am **vreo** cinci bășici cu sânge pe palmă’

Va-j-egy can also be used as an approximator modifying a measure expression (approximately n units of x). Interestingly, however, in the case n=1, the numeral is obligatorily suppressed, cf. (6).

- (5) Még fennebb sétáltunk **vaegy fél** kilométernyit a
Yet higher.up walk-sc past.1pl V1 half kilometre-WORTH-ACC the
Borzia mentén
Borzia along
‘Higher up, we walked for about half a kilometre along the Borzia creek’.
- (6) Hoztunk ehejt **vajegy** zsák pityókát magának.
Bring-PAST-1PL here V1 sack potato-ACC you(HON)-DAT
‘Here, we’ve brought you a sack or two of potatoes’ (Clear from context: =1 sack.)

(Aside: HT: *vaegy* zsák: approximately one sack(ful). ÁBF: *vaegy* zsák: A sack or

²Data: collected by H.T. from the Internet, in addition to the data from the 19th century dictionaries.

two. ($n \geq 1$, and the difference between n and 1 is not large, it can be said to be minimal.)

- (7) Van **vaegy** gyufád?
 Is V1 match-POSS.2SG
 ‘Do you have a match?’
 Rom.: ‘Ai vreun chibrit?’)

This sets *vaegy* apart from other approximators, where a numeral is obligatory in front of the measure expression:

- (8) a. ***körülbelül** zsák(nyi) krumpli
 about sack(ful) potato
 ‘about one sack(ful) of potatoes’
 b. **körülbelül egy** zsák(nyi) krumpli
 about one sack(ful) potato
 — same —
- (9) a. **vaegy** zsák(nyi) krumpli
 V1 sack(ful) potato
 ‘about one sack(ful) of potatoes’
 b. ***vaegy egy** zsák(nyi) krumpli
 V1 one sack(ful) potato
 — same —

Va-j-egy ‘some’ and *va-j-egy* ‘approximately’ do not impose semantic restrictions on the environments where they can appear.

Va-j-egy ‘some.or.other’ on the other hand is subject to semantic restrictions. These will be listed in 4.2. A hint here: modal (epistemic vs deontic) contexts, intensional verbs, antecedent vs consequent of conditionals, questions, ...

2 *Va-j-egy* as an approximator

Point of departure: *vaj-e-gy* as a generalised quantifier. Conservative, and provides a unitary ‘platform’ for all readings of *va-j-egy*.

$$(10) \quad \llbracket \text{vajegy}_{\text{some}} \rrbracket = \lambda f. \lambda g. [\{x | f(x) = 1\} \cap \{x | g(x) = 1\} \neq \emptyset]$$

That is, *va-j-egy* as a plain indefinite determiner is an existential quantifier.

Va-j-egy As an approximator, first version (Rothstein (2016), Schvarcz (2017)):

$$(11) \quad \llbracket \text{vajegy}_{\text{apprx-ly}} \rrbracket = \lambda n. \lambda f. \lambda g. [\{x | f(x) = 1\} \cap \{x | g(x) = 1\} \approx n]$$

- (12) **vajegy öt** vérhólyag (‘some five blisters’):
 $\lambda g. [|\{x|blister(x) = 1\} \cap \{x|g(x) = 1\}| \approx 5]$

Va-j-egy with measure phrases:

- (13) $\llbracket \text{vajegy}_{\text{appx.meas}} \rrbracket = \lambda n. \lambda u. \lambda f. \lambda g. [\text{MEAS}(\{x|f(x) = 1\} \cap \{x|g(x) = 1\}) \approx \langle n, u \rangle]$
- (14) **vajegy fél deci szilvapálinka** ‘about 0.05 l of slivowitz’:
 $\lambda g. [\text{MEAS}(\{x|sl(x)\} \cap \{x|g(x) = 1\}) \approx \langle 0.05, \text{litre} \rangle]$

Second version: why not unify entries for approximating *va-j-egy*, regardless of what they approximate.

Simplistic attempt: declare approximating *va-j-egy* to be ambiguous, and that is that.

Not so simplistic attempt: for the ‘count’ case assume a covert classifier $\#$, meaning (approximately) ‘piece’, ‘head’, ...

- (15) $\llbracket \text{vajegy}_{\text{appx}} \rrbracket = \lambda n. \lambda u. \lambda f. \lambda g. [\text{MEAS}(\{x|f(x) = 1\} \cap \{x|g(x) = 1\}) = \langle n, u \rangle]$,
 where
 $u \in \{\#, \text{litre}, \text{kilometre}, \text{bunch}, \text{sack(ful)}, \dots\}$.

Reducing existential-quantifier-*va-j-egy* to an approximator:

- (16) $\llbracket \text{vajegy}_{\text{some}} \rrbracket = \lambda f. \lambda g. [\text{MEAS}_{\text{card}}(\{x|f(x) = 1\} \cap \{x|g(x) = 1\}) > \langle 0, \# \rangle]$

3 The evolution of *va-j-egy*

The origins of *va-j-egy*: from *vagy* ‘or’ + *egy* ‘one’.

- (17) $vagy\ egy \rightarrow vajegy \rightarrow vaegy$

NB, the conjunction *vagy* ‘or’ on its own is (to this day) often pronounced as **vaj** in Transylvania. (See also Szigetvári (2008).)

Questions:

1. How did ‘or one’ come to mean ‘a few’?
2. How did ‘or one’ come to mean ‘approximately’?
3. How did ‘or one’ become an epistemic determiner?

Where it all started (according to us):

Vagy ‘or’ on its own is also used as an approximator (in the entire Hungarian speech community):

- (18) Aludtam **vagy öt** órát
Sleep-PAST-1SG some five hour-ACC
‘I slept for some five hours’

Buying ONE half:

- (19) a. Vettem egy kiló kenyeret
Buy-PAST-1SG one kilo bread-ACC
‘I bought one/a kilo of bread’ ⟨1, kg⟩;
b. Vettem fél kiló kenyeret
Buy-PAST-1SG half kilo bread-ACC
‘I bought half a kilo of bread’ ⟨0.5, kg⟩;
Rom.: ‘Am luat jumătate de kilogram de pâine’
c. Vettem **egy** fél kiló kenyeret
Buy-PAST-1SG one half kilo bread-ACC
‘I bought one half kilo of bread’ ⟨1, half-kg⟩
Rom.: ‘Am luat **un** jumătate de kilogram de pâine’
- (20) a. Vettem **vagy egy fél** kiló kenyeret
Buy-PAST-1SG or one half kilo bread-ACC
‘I bought about one half kilo of bread’
b. [**Vagy**] [**egy** fél kiló]
[Or] [one half kilo]
‘About one half kilo’ ≈ ⟨1, half-kg⟩;
c. [**Vagy egy**] [**fél** kiló]
[Or one] [half kilo]
‘About half a kilo’ ≈ ⟨0.5, kg⟩.
- (21) (Approximating *vagy*) + *egy* (numeral)
→ *vagyegy* (approximator)

Approximating *vagyegy/vajegy*: a small number, larger than 0 → use extension from quantities to countables, a.k.a. to individuals. (This is our hypothesis concerning the emergence of the construal ‘a few’.)

The emergence of the epistemic, anti-specific construal?

Observation: epistemic determiners can be used as approximators:

- (22) a. **Some** famous scientist had claimed that ...
b. Last night I slept **some** five hours.

Anti-specific *va-j-egy* may have emerged from perceived reversibility (a fallacy????):
 <If anti-specific determiners can be used as approximators, then approximators can also be used as anti-specific determiners.>

In addition, the trajectory of *vajegy* parallels the much earlier ‘evolution’ of the numeral *egy* into the indefinite *article*.

- (23) a. *egy* (‘one’, ‘a’): quantity → conveying existence, introducing a discourse referent;
 b. *vajegy* uncertainty concerning a quantity → uncertainty concerning the existence of a witness, uncertainty concerning the identifiability of a witness.

4 *Va-j-egy* as an epistemic determiner

4.1 Background: epistemic/modal indefinites

‘Epistemic’ determiners: interpretation depends on hearer’s cognitive state. Non-specific epistemic determiners (usu. called ‘epistemic’ tout court):

Jayez and Tovená (2006):

- Ignorance;
- indifference;
- existence of witness inferred.

Question (Hans Kamp p.c.): Whose ignorance/indifference/inferences? The speaker’s? The hearer’s? Attributed to some other cognitive agent?

Alonso-Ovalle and Menéndez-Benito (2010): ‘Modal’ indefinites: sensitivity to modal contexts.

4.2 On the distribution of *vajegy* and *vreun*

Based on our database and inspired by Farkas (2002a):

- Under epistemic modals: OK.

- (24) A vaktyúk es találhat **vajegy** gyöngyszemet
 The blind.hen too find-POSS.3SG V1 pearl-ACC
 ‘Even a blind hen may find some pearl or other’

- (25) János biztos letett **vajegy** vizsgát, attól olyan fáradt
 John certainly down.put V1 exam-ACC that-from so tired
 ‘John must have taken an exam, that’s why he is so tired’

- Deontic modality: ???

The famous German example from Kratzer and Shimoyama (2002):

- (26) Marinak férjhez kell mennie **valami**/???**vajegy** orvoshoz
 Mary-DAT husband-to must go-INF-3SG something/???V1 doctor-to
 ‘Mary has to marry some doctor or other’
 ‘Maria muss **irgendeinen** Arzt heiraten
- (27) a.???A diplomához le kell még tennie **vajegy** vizsgát
 The degree-to down has.to still put-INF.3SG V1 exam-ACC
 Int.: ‘He has one more exam to pass before he can get his degree, I have
 no idea in what subject’
 b.???A doktori követelmények szerint tartani kell/meg kell tartani
 The doctoral requirements acc.to hold-INF must/pfx must hold-INF
vajegy kurzust
 V1 course-ACC
 ‘According to PhD requirements one has to give some course or another’

- Under intensional predicates: NO

- (28) *# János keres **vajegy** könyvet
 John seeks V1 book-ACC
 Intended: ‘John is looking for some book or other’

- Antecedent (and NOT the consequent) of conditionals:

- (29) a. Ha létezik **vaegy** update le fogod tudni tölteni
 If exists V1 update down FUT-2SG can-INF fill-INF
 ‘If there is some update or other you’ll be able to download it’
 b. ?Ha Mari szomorú, bemegy **vaegy** múzeumba
 If Mary sad, in.goes V1 museum-into
 ‘If Mary is sad, she visits some museum or other’

- Universal quantifiers: In Restrictor, NOT in Nuclear Scope.

- (30) a. Minden gazda, aki elment **vajegy** vásárba, jól érezte magát
 Every farmer, who away.went V1 fair-into, well felt self-ACC
 ‘Every farmer who went to some fair or other had a good time’
 b. ?Minden gazda, aki elment Berlinbe, betért **vajegy**
 Every farmer who away.went Berlin-into, in.steps V1
 múzeumba
 museum-into
 ‘Every farmer who travelled to Berlin visited some museum or other’

- Imperative:

- (31) [az örökségemet] adják **vaegy** esztelneki
 [the inheritance-POSS.1SG-ACC] give-IMP.3PL V1 Esztelnek-from
 rászorulónak
 person.in.need-DAT
 ‘My inheritance should be given to some person (or other) in need from Esztelnek’

- Purpose:

- (32) Ehelyt a ponkhálót verem, nehogy **vajegy** mérges ponk
 Here the spider.web-ACC hit-1SG, lest V1 poisonous spider
 megmássza a lovakot
 climb.up.on the horse-PL-ACC
 ‘Here I smash the spider’s web lest some poisonous spider or other get on the horses’ (Áron Tamási, novelist)
- (33) Nem tudok falura menni, hogy **vajegy** jó kövér bornyút
 Not can-1SG village-onto go, so.that V1 good fat calf-ACC
 hozzak.
 bring-SUBJ-1SG
 ‘I cannot travel to the country, to bring some nice fatted calf’

- Desiderative:

- (34) Bár **vajegy**et nyikkantott volna
 If.only V1-ACC squeak-PAST-3SG be-PAST-COND
 ‘If only he had squealed but once’

- Questions:

- (35) Van pasid, vagy tetcik **vajegy** fiu?
 Is boyfriend-POSS.2SG, or please-3SG V1 boy?
 ‘Do you have a boyfriend, or do you fancy some boy or other?’ (From our db)
- (36) #Mikor megy **vajegy** vonat Frankfurtba?
 When goes V1 train Frankfurt-into?
 Intended: ‘When is there a train to Frankfurt?’

Farkas (2002a) on Romanian *vreun* in questions: the question must be such that the existence of a witness is called into question.

- Habitual:

- (37) **Vajegy** virágcserepbe, ócskább csuporba, fazékba tettük.
 V1 flowerpot-into, older jug-into, pot-into put-PAST-1PL
 ‘We would put it into some flowerpot or other, into an older jug or pot’

Farkas (2002a): In Romanian ‘frequentative progressives’ license *vreun*. Hungarian analogue — habituals.

- (38) Férfiak nemigen vótak velünk, **vajegy** legény ütötte bé magát.
 Men not-yes were INSTR-1PL, V1 lad popped into self-ACC
 ‘(Usually) there weren’t many men with us, some lad(s) would pop in’

A series of events, the witness for the V1-indefinite may vary with them, and the pairing of events and witnesses can be random.

4.3 Comparing Romanian *vreun* and Hungarian *va-j-egy*

Anecdote, which helps distinguish between 2 kinds of epistemic indefinites in Hungarian:

Scenario: visitor to the big city has lost his way. He phones his host for help.

- (39) a. H: Hol vagy? ‘Where are you?’
 b. G: **Valami**/#**Vaegy** szobornál. ‘At some statue or other’

Same in Romanian:

- (40) a. H: Unde ești? ‘Where are you?’
 b. G: La **ceva**/#**vreo** statuie. ‘At some statue or other’

NB, *valami* is originally a full DP meaning ‘something’. As a determiner it is an epistemic determiner comparable to French *quelque*. Same for Romanian *ceva*.

A bit from Aloni & Port’s checklist (Aloni and Port (2010)):

The hide-and-see scenario (children are hiding in a house)— UNLIKE *vreun* (Fălăuș (2015)) :

- (41) a. Peti **#valami/valamilyik** emeleti szobában lehet
 Petey something/some-which storey-ADJ.SFX room-INE be-POSS-3SG
 ‘Petey may be in one of the rooms upstairs, doesn’t matter where’
 b. Peti **????vaegy** emeleti szobában lehet
 Petey V1 storey-ADJ.SFX room-INE be-POSS-3SG
 ‘Petey may be in some upstairs room or other’

BUT-BUT-BUT:

- (42) Peti **vajegy** eldugott sarokban lehet
 Petey V1 hidden corner-INE be-POSS-3SG
 ‘Petey may be in some hidden corner or other’

The ‘namely’-continuation:

- (43) a. Péter találkozhatott **valami** hírességgel, mégpedig
 Peter meet-POSS-PAST-3SG some(-thing) celebrity-INSTR, namely
 Jolina Angel-lel.
 Jolina Angel-INSTR
 ‘Peter may have met some celebrity, namely, Jolina Angel’
 B???Péter találkozhatott **vajegy** hírességgel, mégpedig Jolina
 Peter meet-POSS-PAST-3SG V1 celebrity-INSTR, namely Jolina
 Angel-lel.
 Angel-INSTR
 ‘Peter may have met some celebrity or other, namely, Jolina Angel’

Negation, MON ↓ contexts: *va-j-egy* and *vreun* behave differently. *Vreun* IS acceptable in certain negative contexts, AND under *MON* ↓ quantifiers. *Vajegy* is not acceptable under clausemate negation.³

- (44) a. fără **vreun** dubiu
 without VR1 doubt
 Rom.: ‘without any/the smallest doubt’
 B???**vajegy** kétség nélkül
 V1 doubt without
 H: ‘without any doubt’; OK with one FC item or with *minden* ‘every’
- (45) a. Puțini studenți s-au înscris la **vreun** curs
 Few students SE-PERF-3PL enrol-PARTCPL at VR1 course
 avansat
 advanced
 Rom.: ‘Few students signed up for any advanced courses’
 B???Kevés diák vett fel **vajegy** haladó kurzust
 Little student took up V1 advanced course-ACC
 H: intended meaning the same as in Romanian
- (46) Niciodată n-am ținut **vreun** talk la București
 Never not-PF.AUX-1SG held VR1 talk at Bucharest
 ‘I’ve never given a single talk in Bucharest’ (Edward Göbbel, 7.June 2019)

⇒ *Vreun*-DPs are NPIs (Fălăuș).

³Except in deontic contexts, but that is another matter.

Hungarian *vajegy*-DPs are NOT NPIs. Strangely enough, they may even be called PPIs. They are clearly NOT FCIs:

- (47) a. Az Isten megbocsát **vajegy** szerzetesnek, aki meg-bánta bűneit
 The God pfx.pardons V1 monk-DAT, who pfx.regretted the
 sin-POSS.3SG.PL
 ‘God will have mercy on some monk or other, who has repented his sins’
- b. Az Isten megbocsát **akármelyik** szerzetesnek, aki meg-bánta
 The God pfx.pardons AKÁR-which monk-DAT, who pfx.regretted
 bűneit
 sin-POSS.3SG.PL
 ‘God will have mercy on any monk whatsoever who has repented his
 sins’
- (48) a. János okosabb, mint **akármelyik/#vajegy** osztálytársa
 John smarter, than AKÁR-which/#V1 classmate-POSS.3SG
 ‘John is smarter than any classmate of his’
 ‘John is smarter than some classmate or other of his’ (???)
- b. Ion e mai deștept decât **oricare/#vreun** coleg de clasă de-al
 Ion is COMP smart than any(-which)/# Vr1 mate of class
 lui
 de-GEN.ART-MASC.SG he-OBL
 ‘Ion is smarter than any of his classmates’
 ‘Ion is smarter than some classmate of his’(???) (Romanian ex. from
 Farkas (2002a).)

The next possibility: non-veridicality. Not sufficient, cf. prohibition against *vajegy* under intensional verbs. (Same for *vreun*, Farkas (2002a).)

Neither is *vajegy* simply property-denoting.

- (49) *János **vajegy** régi barátom.
 John V1 old friend-POSS.1SG
 Intended: ‘John is an old friend of mine’

Vr1 according to Farkas (2002a):

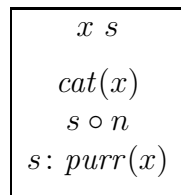
- Romanian *vreun*-DPs may in certain cases occur under negation → they are not simple NPIs. (But see Fălăuș.) Hungarian *vajegy*-DPs are incompatible with negation.
- Non-veridicality? Insufficient. (Intensional contexts, certain imperatives.)

- Being dependent? No.
- FCIs? No.
- Predicative? No.

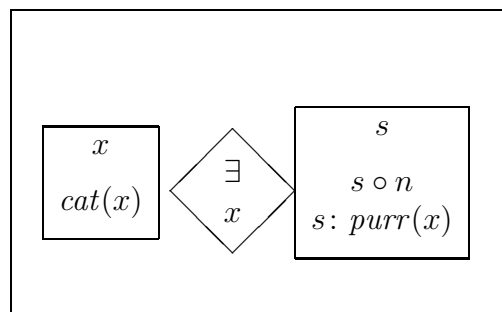
What *vreun*-DPs MIGHT be. (And, along with them, *vajegy*-DPs— still following Farkas (2002a).)

- Quodlibetic — no distinguished/particular value for witness. → domain homogeneous. This is still insufficient.
- Quantificational force: Romanian *vreun*-DPs are existential quantifiers. In DRT-terms:

(50) a. *egy macska dorombol* ‘a cat is purring’



b. *vajegy macska dorombol* ‘V1 cat is purring’



- Weak existential commitment: “the non-existence of a verifying value remains a live option” ⇒ Re-emerges as Fălăuș’s Epistemic Constraint.

The Epistemic Constraint (originally about *vreun*, accepting it to hold for *va-j-egy* as well).

- (51) THE EPISTEMIC CONSTRAINT 1 (Fălăuş (2010))
 Context of occurrence: Op[...vreun...]
Op p entails that the speakers epistemic alternatives include *non p*-worlds
- (52) THE EPISTEMIC CONSTRAINT 2 (Fălăuş (2014)) The determiner **vreun** is licensed by obligatorily non-factive epistemic operators.

Our rendering of anti-specific, epistemic *vaegy*: A modalized (modally Skolemized) choice function. (Reinhart (1997), Winter (1997), Kratzer (1998), Chierchia (2002), von Stechow (2000)).

Aside: Why λ -s? Why choice functions?

- Uniform analysis for all three construals.
- ‘Weak existential commitment’. Choice functions do convey ‘existential commitment’. Making them modally dependent weakens this commitment.

$$(53) \quad vaegy_{epst} = \lambda P. \lambda Q. \lambda w. [Q(h(w)(P))]$$

The Epistemic Constraint and (53):

If the function h is composed with the functions denoted by P, Q , the characteristic set of such a function must be a proper subset of the set W of alternatives. (‘Alternatives’: Worlds accessible to the epistemic agent.)

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