On the focusing of nominal predicates
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1. The problem
The aim of the research is to find explanations to the phenomenon that Hungarian nominal predicates can occupy both verbal modifier and focus position in the same discourse situation, as seen in negative responses to binary questions:

(1)   - *Az apád orvos volt?*
            "Was your father a doctor?"

            - *Az apám nem ORVOS volt. / Az apám nem volt orvos.*
              The my_father not DOCTOR was. / The my_father not was doctor.

(2)   - *Az apád jó orvos volt?*
            "Was your father a good doctor?"

            - *Az apám nem volt jó orvos. / %Az apám nem JÓ ORVOS volt.*
              The my_father not was good doctor. / The my_father not GOOD DOCTOR was.

In (1) the focus-movement of the predicate seems in lack of motivation, the neutral and the non-neutral versions of the response are equivalent. However, it is not the case in (2), where the word order with focus sounds unnatural without explicit contrast like in (3):

(3)   *Az apám nem JÓ ORVOS volt, hanem kiváló.*
            The my_father not GOOD DOCTOR was, but excellent.

This phenomenon formulates the questions why do we focus nominal predicates in certain cases and why don't we do so in others? This study claims that focusing in this kind of sentences represents a choice of alternatives and the preference of neutral word order is related to a so-called [+binary] feature of the nominal predicate.

2. Hypothesis
The problem was discussed by É. Kiss (2012) in a study which interprets the focus-background construction as a predication structure. The origin of this approach is Higgins's (1973) analysis of the English pseudo-cleft construction which he calls specificational predication. In this relation, the subject determines a set presupposed to exist, and the predicate specifies one of its subsets by the exhausting listing of its members. É. Kiss (2012) claims that Hungarian structural focus bears a syntactic predication relation to the background representing its subject. Accordingly, the focusing of nominal predicates is motivated by the [+presupposed] feature of the background. For example, in (1) the possible professions of my father is a presupposed set (because every adult is supposed to have a profession), and the focused predicate specifies an element of it. Contrarily, being a good doctor in (2) is not a value of a presupposed property.

The alternative hypothesis of my study is that the possibility of focusing a nominal predicate does not depend on the subject's [+presupposed] feature but on the predicative AP/NP itself. The determining feature could be called [+/- binary]. If an AP/NP has [+binary] feature that means it can not function as a set-specifying element, simply because the attribute it describes (for example being a good doctor) has no values to specify apart from yes or no. In this case there is no need to grammatically encode exhaustivity by focus-movement. If, however, the predicate is [-binary], the motivation of focusing can be explained according to the focus theories based on alternatives, like the one of Krifka (2008), which says that "focus indicates the presence of alternatives that are relevant for the interpretation of linguistic expressions" (Krifka 2008: 248).

3. Empirical tests

The correlation between the predication's [+binary] feature and focus-movement was studied in empirical researches. A query among native speakers measured the preferences of word order choices. The proportion of neutral and non-neutral versions of copular clauses was also studied in corpus data.

The query contained simple nominal sentences with overt copula. Half of the predicates were typically [+binary] (*magas 'tall', nős 'married', jó szakács 'good cook', tehetetlen 'powerless', érthető 'comprehensible'*) and the other half tipically [-binary] (*orvos 'doctor', angol 'English', rózsaszín 'pink', huszonöt éves '25-year-old', fradista 'fan of Fradi'*). The participants were asked to give the negative forms of the sentences. The query was submitted by 261 native Hungarian speakers. The results showed clearly that if the predicate has [+binary] feature the neutral word order has absolute preference (over 90% in case of every predicates). However, in the case of the [-binary] predicates the choice of focus-movement was much more proportional (30 – 64%).

The corpus-based part of the research used the Hungarian Gigaword Corpus (Oravecz, Váradi, Sass 2014), the current 2.0.4 version of which contains 1,04 billion tokens. The corpus queries searched for negative copular sentences with the nominal predicate in verbal modifier and in focus position. The numbers of matches already show a sightly difference: the query of verbal modifiers gave 34723 results while the one for focus only 1665.

The processing of the data was mostly automatic, realized with a Python script. The program searched for typically [+binary] and [-binary] predicates. In this case, the [+binary] ones were adjectives derivated from verbs (e. g. *látható 'visible'*) and with *-szerű '–like', -képes '-able', -mentes '-less', -ellenes 'counter-'* suffixes, because these are easily searchable for an automatic tool. The [-binary] predicates selected for the script consisted of numeral expressions, colors, nationalities and professions. These could be searched with the use of lists. The program counted the occurrences of given predicates in neutral and non-neutral sentences. As the results showed, the verbal modifier position was almost exclusive (99,06%) among the [+binary] predicates. In case of the [-binary] ones there was also strong preference (89,25%) to the neutral word order, however the data set of this kind was not big enough to make a well-set judgement.

4. Summary

The empirical tests revealed a clear correlation between the [+binary] feature of the nominal predicate and its position, namely that this feature blocks the option of focus-movement because of the lack of value set to be specified. This result strengthens the hypothesis that the function of focusing nominal predicates is to emphasize the relevance of the alternatives. In case of [+binary] predicates, this emphasis is only possible with explicit contrast, like in (3). The tests, especially the corpus data, also showed that focusing is not a preferred option for [-binary] predicates either. The future focus of the research will be the patterns of [-binary] predicates and the question whether the focus-movement of these is merely optional.

References

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