

The Syntax of Hungarian

KATALIN É. KISS



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Times 10/13 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

É. Kiss, Katalin

The syntax of Hungarian / Katalin É. Kiss.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index

1. Hungarian language – Syntax. I. Title.

PH2361 .K55 2002

494'.5115 – dc21 2001043126

ISBN 0 521 66047 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 66939 1 paperback

Contents

Acknowledgments	<i>xi</i>
1 Introduction	<i>1</i>
1.1 Genealogy, areal distribution	<i>1</i>
1.2 A general overview of the syntactic and morphosyntactic features of Hungarian	<i>2</i>
2 The topic–predicate articulation of the sentence	8
2.1 The topic function	<i>8</i>
2.2 The formal features of the topic constituent	<i>9</i>
2.3 The marking of the topic–predicate boundary	<i>11</i>
2.4 The topic projection	<i>12</i>
2.5 Apparent and real topicless sentences. The (in)definiteness effect	<i>14</i>
2.6 Sentence adverbials and the topic–predicate articulation	<i>20</i>
2.7 The contrastive topic	<i>22</i>
2.8 Summary	<i>25</i>
3 The minimal predicate	27
3.1 Argument order in the VP	<i>27</i>
3.2 The referentiality effect	<i>29</i>
3.3 The subject as an internal argument	<i>30</i>
3.4 The structure of the VP	<i>33</i>
3.5 Morphosyntactic projections	<i>43</i>
3.6 The verbal prefix	<i>55</i>
3.7 The nominal predicate	<i>71</i>
3.8 Summary	<i>75</i>
4 Focussing	77
4.1 The focus function	<i>77</i>
4.2 The syntax of focus	<i>83</i>
4.3 Inherent foci	<i>89</i>
4.4 <i>Only</i> -phrases	<i>93</i>

viii List of contents

4.5	<i>Wh</i> -questions	98
4.6	Summary	104
5	Quantification	105
5.1	Distributive quantifiers at the head of the predicate	105
5.2	The DistP projection	110
5.3	The scope principle	113
5.4	Quantifiers or adverbial modifiers?	126
5.5	Summary	129
6	Negation	130
6.1	Two NegP projections	130
6.2	The locus of negative pronouns licensed by <i>nem</i>	136
6.3	The status of <i>sem</i>	140
6.4	The universal and existential readings of negative pronouns	142
6.5	Long distance negative polarity	147
6.6	The negative existential verb	148
6.7	Summary	149
7	The noun phrase	151
7.1	The basic syntactic layers of the noun phrase	151
7.2	Evidence for the different noun phrase projections	155
7.3	The possessive construction	157
7.4	Non-possessor arguments in the noun phrase	175
7.5	Summary	179
8	The postpositional phrase	181
8.1	Restricting the category of postpositions	181
8.2	The formal properties of postpositional phrases	184
8.3	The structure of the postpositional phrase	188
8.4	PPs as verb modifiers	191
8.5	Case-marked pronouns or PPs?	194
8.6	Summary	197
9	Non-finite and semi-finite verb phrases	199
9.1	Introduction	199
9.2	Subject and object control constructions	199
9.3	Infinitival complex predicates	205
9.4	Agreeing infinitives with a case-marked subject	210
9.5	Adverbial participle phrases	221
9.6	Adjectival participle phrases	227
9.7	Summary	229

10	The subordinate clause	230
10.1	Introduction	230
10.2	<i>That</i> -clauses	230
10.3	Relative clauses	243
10.4	Adverbial clauses	248
10.5	Long operator movement	250
10.6	Parasitic gaps	260
10.7	Summary	262
	References	265
	Index	275

Introduction

1.1 Genealogy, areal distribution

Hungarian is a Finno-Ugric language. The Finno-Ugric languages and the practically extinct Samoyed languages of Siberia constitute the Uralic language family. Within the Finno-Ugric family, Hungarian belongs to the Ugric branch, together with Mansy, or Vogul, and Khanty, or Ostyak, spoken by a few thousand people in western Siberia. The family also has:

- a Finnic branch, including Finnish (5 million speakers) and Estonian (1 million speakers);
- a Sami or Lappish branch (35 000 speakers); as well as
- a Mordvin branch, consisting of Erzya (500 000 speakers) and Moksha (250 000 speakers);
- a Mari or Cheremis branch (550 000 speakers); and
- a Permi branch, consisting of Udmurt or Votyak (500 000 speakers) and Komi or Zuryen (350 000 speakers).

Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian are state languages; Sami is spoken in northern Norway, Sweden and Finland, whereas the Mordvin, Mari, and Permi languages are spoken in the European territories of Russia.

Hungarian is spoken in Central Europe. It is the state language of Hungary, but the area where it is a native language also extends to the neighboring countries. In Hungary it has 10 million speakers, in Romania 2 million speakers, in Slovakia 700 000 speakers, in Yugoslavia 300 000 speakers, in Ukraine 150 000 speakers. There is also a Hungarian minority in Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria, and a considerable diaspora in Western Europe, North America, South America, Israel, and Australia.

The period in which the Finno-Ugric peoples represented a kind of linguistic and areal unity is believed to have lasted until 2000 BC. On the basis of linguistic evidence – e.g. the habitat of the plants and animals whose names are shared by the Finno-Ugric languages – the Finno-Ugric homeland is located on the south-western slopes of the Ural mountains. The Hungarian language must have

emerged here from among the Ugric dialects after 1000 BC. The Hungarian tribes left the Finno-Ugric homeland in the fifth century AD, and occupied the territory surrounded by the Carpathian mountains in 895. In the period of migration, the language had been subject to heavy Turkic influence. After the Hungarian tribes settled in Central Europe, the Slavic languages and German had a noticeable impact on Hungarian.

The first written Hungarian records are Hungarian fragments in a Greek and a Latin text, dating from 950 and 1055, respectively. The first two surviving coherent written Hungarian texts originated in 1192–95, and in 1300. Interestingly, they are still to a large extent comprehensible to the present-day reader. Hungarian is also fairly homogeneous areally; the only dialect displaying substantial lexical, phonological, and syntactic differences from standard Hungarian is the easternmost, archaic Csángó dialect spoken in Romania.

1.2 A general overview of the syntactic and morphosyntactic features of Hungarian

Hungarian is often referred to as a free word-order language, because the grammatical functions of subject, object, etc. are not linked to invariant structural positions in the sentence. Thus, a transitive verb and its two arguments, e.g. *keresi* ‘seeks’ *János* ‘John’ *Marit* ‘Mary-ACC’ can form a sentence in any of the theoretically possible SVO, SOV, OVS, OSV, VSO, and VOS combinations:

- | | | |
|-----|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| (1) | <i>János keresi Marit.</i> | <i>Marit János keresi.</i> |
| | <i>János Marit keresi.</i> | <i>Keresi János Marit.</i> |
| | <i>Marit keresi János.</i> | <i>Keresi Marit János.</i> |

A closer scrutiny, however, makes it clear that the order of major sentence constituents is just as strictly constrained in Hungarian as it is, for example, in English or French – merely the functions associated with the different structural positions are logical functions instead of the grammatical functions subject, object, etc.

The Hungarian sentence can be divided primarily into a topic part and a predicate part. The topic, functioning as the logical subject of predication, names the individual that will be predicated about in the sentence. The topic role is independent of the function ‘grammatical subject’; in other words, an action or state can be predicated about any of its participants. Thus, in (2a) the agent, or grammatical subject, and in (2b) the theme, or grammatical object, occupies the position associated with the topic function. (Since in English the topic and the grammatical

subject roles have to coincide, (2b) is translated by a passive sentence. Hungarian (2b), however, differs from (2a) only in its word order.)

- (2) a. [Top János] [Pred fel hívta Marit]¹
 John up called Mary-ACC²
 ‘John called up Mary.’
- b. [Top Marit] [Pred fel hívta János]
 Mary-ACC up called John-NOM
 ‘Mary was called up by John.’

As for the predicate of the sentence, its central element is the verb (V). The postverbal positions are argument positions. The verb usually has a so-called verb modifier (VM), i.e., a non-referential complement incorporated into it, acting as an aspectual operator, as in (3):

- (3) [Top János] [Pred **fel** ásta a kertet]
 John up dug the garden-ACC
 ‘John dug up the garden.’

The preverbal section of the predicate phrase contains operator positions. The verb may be immediately preceded by a focus constituent, expressing exhaustive identification (N.B. small capitals are used in the Hungarian text here and throughout the book to mark focus, indicating its phonological prominence):

- (4) a. [Top János] [Pred **MARIT** kérte fel]
 John Mary-ACC asked VM
 ‘As for John, it was Mary that he asked for a dance.’
- b. [Top Marit] [Pred **JÁNOS** kérte fel]
 Mary-ACC John-NOM asked VM
 ‘As for Mary, it was John who asked her for a dance.’

The focus position is preceded by a distributive quantifier position, the locus of universal quantifiers and *is* ‘also’ phrases; for example:

¹ When the verbal prefix precedes the verb, they are traditionally spelled as one word. Nevertheless, I often spell them as two separate words in this book, in order to express the fact that they represent two separate syntactic constituents.

² Hungarian is an agglutinating language, in which morphosyntactic elements are right-adjoined to the lexical root. In cases when the morphosyntactic elements play no role in the discussion, the order of the stem and the suffix may be reversed in the glosses in order to facilitate understanding; i.e., example (i) may be glossed as (iii), instead of the more precise (ii).

- (i) Siettek iskolába.
 (ii) hurried-they school-to
 (iii) they.hurried to.school

4 The syntax of Hungarian

- (5) a. [_{Pred} **Marit is** JÁNOS kérte fel]
 Mary-ACC too John-NOM asked VM
 ‘(In the case of) Mary, too, it was John who asked her for a dance.’
- b. [_{Pred} **Mindenki** MARIT kérte fel]
 everybody Mary-ACC asked VM
 ‘(For) everybody, it was Mary that he asked for a dance.’

As is clear from the examples, the preverbal operator positions, too, are filled with no regard to the grammatical function of the filler.

The preverbal operator field of the predicate phrase can also contain negation in addition to the identificational focus and the distributive quantifiers. The negative particle occupies either the immediately preverbal position or the immediately prefocus position, or both simultaneously. The lower negative particle negates the VP – i.e., essentially the propositional content of the clause – whereas the higher negative particle negates the identification expressed by the focus.

- (6) a. János nem hívta fel Marit.
 John not called up Mary-ACC
 ‘John did not call up Mary.’
- b. János nem MARIT hívta fel.
 ‘As for John, it was not Mary that he called up.’
- c. János nem MARIT nem hívta fel.
 ‘As for John, it was not Mary that he did not call up.’

The negative particle triggers negative concord among universal quantifiers and indefinites, i.e., its universally quantified clause-mates, and the indefinites in its scope have a special negative form:

- (7) János senkinek nem mondott semmit.³
 John nobody-DAT not said nothing-ACC
 ‘John did not say anything to anybody.’

Examples (6a) and (6b), displaying preverbal negation and prefocus negation respectively, also call attention to a very characteristic property of Hungarian: operators precede and c-command their scope, i.e., Hungarian sentences are disambiguated scopally.

In sum: the Hungarian sentence structure to be argued for in this book is a hierarchical structure falling into a topic part and a predicate part, with the predicate part containing a V-initial propositional kernel as well as preverbal operators.⁴

³ For arguments that the negative particle + focus string in (6b,c) is not an instance of constituent negation, and for details of negative concord, see Chapter 6.

⁴ For the first formulations of this theory, see Brassai (1860, 1863–65), and É. Kiss (1977).

Chapters 2–6 of this book are devoted to establishing the precise configuration of the structural positions illustrated above, analyzing the operations filling them: examining their trigger, the constraints they are subject to, the semantic consequences they bring about, etc. Chapter 2 discusses the topic position, the topic function, and the operation of topicalization. Chapter 3, dealing with the core of the predicate phrase, examines, on the one hand, the properties, relative order, and hierarchical relations of postverbal arguments and, on the other hand, the properties of the verb modifier, acting as an aspectual operator. Chapter 4 describes the focus position, and the syntax and semantics of focussing/exhaustive identification. Chapter 5 is devoted to questions of quantification: the position of the distributive quantifier, the operation of quantifier raising, scope interpretation, and the like. Chapter 6 discusses negation, including negative concord. Operator movement across clause boundaries is examined in Chapter 10, dealing with subordination.

Hungarian lacks well-known manifestations of the structural prominence of the subject over the object. For instance, in English a subject pronoun and the genitive specifier of the object display disjoint reference; whereas an object pronoun and the genitive specifier of the subject can also corefer, as follows from Binding Condition C applied to an asymmetrical SVO (subject–verb–object) structure. In Hungarian, we find disjoint reference in both cases; compare:

- (8) a. * He_i loves John_i's mother.
 b. John_i's mother loves him_i.
- (9) a. * Ő_i szereti János_i anyját.
 he_i loves John_i's mother
 b. * János_i anyja szereti őt_i.
 John_i's mother loves him_i

The question whether the Hungarian VP is flat, with the subject and the object being sisters, or is configurational, with the subject asymmetrically c-commanding the object, was in the focus of interest in the 1980s and inspired a large amount of literature.⁵ The arguments for and against a flat VP are summarized in Chapter 3. The question will also be addressed as to whether the assumption of a flat VP is compatible with current assumptions about the possible format of syntactic structures.

The apparent freedom of Hungarian word order – i.e., the attested parallelism between the syntactic behavior of the subject, object, and other arguments – and their equal eligibility for operator movement must be related to the fact that Hungarian

⁵ See, among others, É. Kiss (1981, 1987a, 1987b), Horvath (1986a, 1986b, 1987), Marác (1986b, 1989).

morphology is very rich. Hungarian is a nominative–accusative language with 18 cases, all of which appear to be lexically selected. (Hungarian has no grammatical-function-changing transformations such as passivization.) There is no evidence of the assignment/licensing of particular Cases being linked to particular sentence positions. Accordingly, the lack of a thematic subject does not give rise to an expletive.

Hungarian displays agreement in several areas of grammar. The verb agrees not only with the subject, but also with the object if it is definite. In the possessive construction the head noun bears an agreement suffix reflecting the person and number of the possessor. In postpositional constructions the postposition agrees in person and number with its pronominal complement. Hungarian also has a type of inflected infinitive, agreeing with its dative-marked subject. The phrase types displaying agreement all license pro-drop. Verb morphology is discussed briefly in Chapter 3, dealing with the VP. Nominal, postpositional, and infinitival inflection are analyzed in Chapters 7, 8, and 9, respectively. Inflectional morphology is treated as part of syntax.

The chapters analyzing the inner structure of the noun phrase (NP) and the postpositional phrase (PP) will reveal a great degree of parallelism between the extended VP, and the extended noun phrase/PP. Greenbergian typologies (e.g. Greenberg 1966) categorize Hungarian as a head-final language, in part because the structures of the noun phrase, the attributive adjective phrase, and the postpositional phrase are head final on the surface. However, the VP and the CP are clearly head initial, and the predicative adjective phrase need not be head final, either. This book derives all phrase types from a head-initial base, by subjecting the post-head complement to extraposition, incorporation, or phrase-internal topicalization. For example, in the case of the noun phrase, a post-head complement must be removed because it would block the merging of the head noun with case. Hungarian postpositions are morphosyntactic suffixes, and, as such, they must be right-adjoined to their complement; that is why we attest a DP P order instead of the underlying P DP.

Although Hungarian differs from the best-known Indo-European languages, particularly English, in obvious ways, its basic syntactic properties are not at all unique. Sámuel Brassai, the first linguist to identify the outlines of Hungarian sentence structure, realized already in the middle of the nineteenth century that the topic–predicate articulation relates to the subject–predicate structure attested in some Indo-European languages as the general relates to the specific. That is, the subject–predicate articulation is a topic–predicate structure with the target of topicalization restricted to the grammatical subject (compare Brassai 1860, 1863–65). The generative framework also provides a clue as to the reason for this restriction: in subject–predicate languages the subject can assume nominative case

only if it is raised to Spec,IP. In Spec,IP it is closer to the topic position than the other arguments, hence it is topicalizable more economically.⁶

The immediately preverbal identificational focus of Hungarian is also a property shared by a great many languages. For example, in an examination of 35 European languages, 27 languages were found to have an invariant structural position associated with the function of identificational focus, and in 18 of these languages the focus position was found to be immediately preverbal.⁷

The distributive quantifier position at the head of the predicate phrase may not be a feature unique to Hungarian, either. Observations concerning Arabic (compare Khalaily 1995), KiLega (Kinyalolo 1990), Chinese (Bartos 2000b), etc. suggest that universal quantifiers – irrespective of their grammatical function – gravitate to a fixed position in other languages, as well.

An interesting open question is whether there are also other languages besides Hungarian in which the subject and the object behave in a parallel way in so many areas of syntax. The possibility of a head bearing a sister relation to all of its complements is not an option directly predicted by current theoretical assumptions. According to the Linear Correspondence Axiom of Kayne (1994) the hierarchical asymmetry of structural relations ensures their unambiguous mapping onto linear order. Kayne claims that the symmetry of a structural relation, i.e., the impossibility of its linearization, leads to the crashing of the derivation. Perhaps under appropriate conditions, however, the lack of asymmetry might result in a partially linearized structure of the type represented by the Hungarian VP, in which the head – asymmetrically c-commanding its complements – occupies initial position; the post-head arguments, mutually c-commanding each other, on the other hand, can stand in any order. There may also be other ways of reconciling a flat VP with Kayne's antisymmetry theory; for example one might argue that the flat VP represents an intermediate stage of the derivation, with the traces of the initial, asymmetric stage deleted.

The description of Hungarian syntax presented in this book adopts the basic theoretical assumptions and the basic methodology of generative linguistics. However, the approach is empirical rather than technical; the goal of the analyses is to present the theoretically relevant facts of Hungarian explicitly, but without necessarily providing accounts in terms of the most recent theoretical innovations.

⁶ The claim that the subject in a subject–predicate language is, in fact, moved to topic position can be checked by examining if subjects unsuitable for the topic role – e.g. non-specific indefinites – occupy the same position that topicalizable subjects occupy. A large amount of evidence indicates that non-specific subjects stay in a predicate-internal subject position in subject–predicate languages, as well (compare É. Kiss 1996, 1998c, Diesing 1992).

⁷ The details of the investigation, performed in the framework of the EUROTYP project of the European Science Foundation, appeared in É. Kiss (1998c).