

# Differential object marking in Hungarian?

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Hungarian has two verbal paradigms, often called *subjective* and *objective conjugation*, respectively. Roughly speaking, intransitive verbs and transitive verbs with indefinite objects show subjective morphology, while transitive verbs with definite objects require the objective conjugation:

- (1) Lát-ok egy kutyá-t.  
see-3SG.SUBJ one dog-ACC  
'I see a dog.'
- (2) Lát-om a kutyá-t.  
see-3SG.OBJ the dog-ACC  
'I see the dog.'

Traditionally, the property of the object that triggers the objective conjugation was taken to be definiteness, but it is also known that the class of objects “that trigger the definite conjugation is semantically inhomogenous.” (Szabolcsi 1994: 223). An account of these two paradigms has to explain this. A certain syntactic approach claims that a noun phrase triggers the objective conjugation if and only if it has a DP layer in the syntax (Bartos 1999, É. Kiss 2002). More recently, Coppock & Wechsler (2010) claim that all objects triggering the objective conjugation share the morphological feature DEF.

It is clear that these two paradigms constitute, in a literal sense, the phenomenon often referred to as differential object marking (DOM, cf. Aissen 2003). Languages with DOM do not mark all objects in the same way, but have special ways of marking certain objects that are usually relatively prominent (more “subject-like” than other objects). A variety of languages show this phenomenon, albeit with variation in at least two ways: (a) the property that is marked differentially and (b) the nature of this marking.

It seems that the Hungarian subjective and objective conjugations can be analysed as an instance of DOM, but I claim that in its technical sense, Hungarian does not exhibit some of the usual characteristics of languages with DOM:

- The morphology of the differential marking is relatively exceptional when compared to other languages with DOM, in that all Hungarian direct objects have the accusative suffix and the objective conjugation is not necessarily more “marked” than the subjective conjugation.
- It is not clear what the characteristic property of the “marked” objects is; both the DP hypothesis and the morphological hypothesis have advantages, but both have problems; I want to focus particularly on the definiteness of the universal quantifier *minden* ‘every’ and the nature of possessive constructions.
- Hierarchies (definiteness, animacy, etc.) are taken to be an integral part of DOM, but the Hungarian data do not straightforwardly fit in any hierarchy.

I am not able to offer a new explanation of how Hungarian determines which conjugation appears with certain objects, but I claim that it seems implausible that the trigger is syntactic, morphological or semantic definiteness alone. Also, while Hungarian does mark objects differentially, DOM in the technical sense, as present in other languages, might not explain this system very well. Since several criteria of DOM are well supported in various languages, a conclusion might be that whatever Hungarian conjugations represent, they are not straightforward DOM.

## References

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