

Towards an account of Hungarian Object-drop*

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In this paper I examine constructions in Hungarian where the object pronoun may be silent. I propose that (i) there is partial object-drop in Hungarian, and (ii) this object-drop is due to DP/NP ellipsis and (iii) the privative nature of person/number features. The phenomenon of object-drop in Hungarian, however, exhibits some peculiarities. In this paper I explore possible approaches and make the first step towards an analysis.

Keywords: *NP-ellipsis, object-drop, Hungarian*

1 Introduction

In Hungarian referential object pronouns can be dropped both in subject and object position. Pronouns in subject position can be dropped in all persons and numbers. However, omission of object pronouns exhibits some peculiarities. It has been observed that singular pronoun objects can be dropped in every person (Farkas 1987, Puskás 2000). As to null subjects, Hungarian shows similarities to classical *pro*-drop languages, e.g. Italian (as in (1)), in that the verbs carry number and person features that identify the missing subject (e.g. in (2) and (3)).

- (1) *ec*¹ *Compra un libro.*
buy-3SG a book
'(He) buys a book.'
- (2) *ec Vesz egy könyvet.*
buy-3SG a book.
'(He/she) buys a book.'
- (3) *ec Veszek egy könyvet.*
buy-1SG a book
'(I) buy a book.'

In Hungarian the direct object of a transitive verb can be covert as well (Farkas, 1987). This has been suggested for singular object pronouns in Hungarian as in (4)-(6) (Puskás, 2000). However, the omission is optional in all cases.

- (4) a. *(Én) látlak (téged).*
I see-1SG you
'(I) see (you).'

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¹ *ec* = empty category

- b. (*Én*) látom (*őt*).
 I see-1SG him/her
 ‘(I) see (him/her).’
- (5) a. (*Te*) látsz (*engem*).
 you see-2SG me
 ‘(You)see (me).’
 b. (*Te*) látod (*őt*).
 you see-2SG him/her
 ‘(You) see (him/her).’
- (6) (*Ő*) lát (*engem/téged*).
 he/she see-3SG me/you
 ‘(He/she) sees (me/you).’

There are two main questions to be answered:

1. What makes object-drop possible?
2. How does object-drop work in the syntactic representation?

In order to answer these questions, I propose that (i) there is partial object-drop in Hungarian, and (ii) this object-drop is due to DP/NP ellipsis and (iii) the privative nature of person/number features. In this paper I present my own survey on Hungarian object pronouns. The questionnaire contained sentences with missing object pronouns. The informants had to judge the acceptability of the sentences.

In the following I will shed some light on object-drop in Hungarian. In section 2, I provide some relevant background and summarize Farkas (1987). In section 3 I revisit the empirical data that serve as the basis of the papers reviewed in section 2. In section 4 two possible analyses will be considered and rejected. In section 5 I present my suggestion for analyzing the data. In section 6 I give a conclusion of the paper.

2 Background

2.1 Object definiteness agreement - The verbal paradigms of Hungarian

There are two verbal paradigms in Hungarian. The “subjective” conjugation (as in (7)) appears on a verb if it has an indefinite (NP) object or no object at all (as in (8)).

(7)	subjective ² conjugation	
	singular	plural
1 st	<i>lát-ok</i>	<i>lát-unk</i>
	see-1SG _{subj}	see-1PL _{subj}
2 nd	<i>lát-sz</i>	<i>lát-tok</i>
	see-2SG _{subj}	see-2PL _{subj}
3 rd	<i>lát-Ø</i>	<i>lát-nak</i>
	see-3SG _{subj}	see-3PL _{subj}

² There is a special form of inflection in 1st person singular: ‘*lak/lek*’. This suffix expresses that the subject is 1SG and the object is 2nd person, either singular or plural.

- (8) *Látok/ *látom egy fiút.*
 see-1SG_{subj} see-1SG a boy
 ‘I see a boy.’

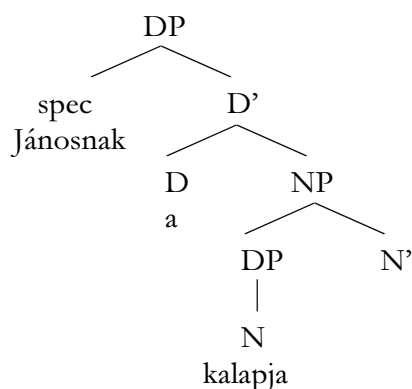
This conjugation is also called indefinite conjugation, or general conjugation. The “objective” conjugation (as in (9)) is used with a verb that has a definite (DP) object (as in (10)).

- (9) objective conjugation
- | | | |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | singular | plural |
| 1 st | <i>lát-om</i> | <i>lát-juk</i> |
| | see-1SG _{obj} | see-1PL _{obj} |
| 2 nd | <i>lát-od</i> | <i>lát-játok</i> |
| | see-2SG _{obj} | see-2PL _{obj} |
| 3 rd | <i>lát-ja</i> | <i>lát-ják</i> |
| | see-3SG _{obj} | see-3PL _{obj} |

- (10) **Látok/ látom a fiút.*
 see-1SG see-1SG_{obj} the boy
 ‘I see the boy.’

Adopting Bartos’ (1997) analysis, I will assume that objects of verbs that are conjugated with the objective conjugation always display a DP layer. That is if the verb has a definite object it will bare objective morphology. Verbs that have an indefinite object will be conjugated with subjective conjugation. Indefinite objects are NPs. Bartos adopts the structural representation of NP’s of Szabolcsi (1994).

- (11) definite DP with “high” possessor

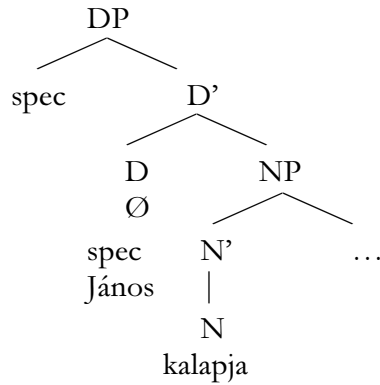


(Based on Szabolcsi, 1992, 1994 and Bartos, 1997)

- (i) *Lát-l-a-k.*
 see-1SG_{subj}-2SG_{subj}
 ‘I see you’

This form appears in the survey as well, however, no difference lies in the different forms when the second person plural object is dropped. Speakers reject sentences with null second person object pronouns with the ‘lak/lek’ form as well as with other verb forms above. Those speakers do not accept (second person) plural pronouns to be dropped in general.

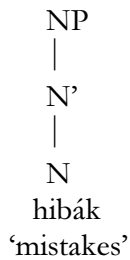
(12) definite DP with a “low” possessor



In this structure definite objects are full DP's and they are marked for accusative case through the higher D⁰ (as in (13)).

(13) *(Én) látom a fiúkat.*
 I see-1SG_{obj} the boys
 'I see the boys.'

(14) indefinite plural NP's



Indefinite objects are, however, only NP's (as in (14)) that do not yield objective conjugation (as in (15)). These can be objects that have an indefinite determiner or a numeral in front of the noun.

(15) *(Én) látok hibákat.*
 I see-1SG_{subj} mistakes
 'I see mistakes.'

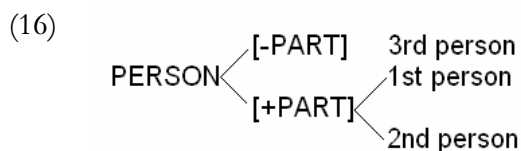
2.2 Direct Object *pro* in Hungarian: Farkas (1987)

Farkas (1987) considers null direct objects in Hungarian. She claims that in Hungarian direct objects can be null if their content is recoverable. Farkas in her analysis considers Taraldsen's generalization, namely that *pro* must exhibit strong agreement³ with the verb (Taraldsen, 1978). However, she finds that there is no agreement between a transitive verb and its direct object in Hungarian, at least not in the sense of Taraldsen's

³ Taraldsen's generalization states that there is strong agreement in a language if the language marks differently every person in each number.

generalization. The Hungarian verb agrees with the subject with respect to verbal morphology. The verb agrees with its object only in definiteness (as shown above in 2.1).

Farkas claims that the direct object of a transitive verb can be null in singular but not in plural. Hungarian direct objects display feature sharing with the verb. Farkas proposes that the structure of the feature PERSON (in Hungarian) is as in (16):



The feature [PART] (participant) is always recoverable from the verb. That is, the hearer knows whether the speaker is a participant or not from the morphology on the verb. As for the object, it can be recovered whether it bears the [PART] feature. This feature has a binary value. First and second person are [+PART] and third person is [-PART].

3 The data: Results from a questionnaire study

In the following I present sentences where the object pronoun is null in the embedded sentence. The sentences where singular pronouns are covert are acceptable for all speakers of Hungarian (as in (17)-(19)).

(17) *(Én) elbújtam előled (te) mégis megtaláltál (engem).*
 I hide-PAST-1SG from.you you still find-PAST-2SG_{subj} me
 ‘I hid from you, still you found me.’

(18) *(Te) elbújtal előlem, (én) mégis megtaláltalak⁴ (téged).*
 you hid-PAST-2SG from.me I still find-PAST-1SG you
 ‘You hid from me, still I found you.’

(19) *(Ő) elbújt előlem, (én) mégis megtaláltam (őt).*
 she/he hide-PAST-3SG from.me I still find-PAST-1SG_{obj} her/him
 ‘(She/he) hid from me, still (I) found (her/him).’

It has been stated in the literature (e.g. Farkas 1987) that object pronouns can be null only in the singular. However, in plural first and second person object pronouns can be zero as in (20) and (21), for some speakers of Hungarian, at least.

(20) *(Mi) elbújtunk előletek, (ti) mégis megtaláltatok %(minket).*
 we hide-PAST-1PL from.you you still find-PAST-2PL_{subj} us
 ‘(We) hid from you, still (you) found (us).’

⁴ This is an occurrence of the ‘lak/lek’ form referring to the first person singular subject and the second person object either singular or plural. Here it is a second person plural object pronoun.

- (21) *(Ti) elbújtatok előlünk, (mi) mégis megtaláltunk % (titeket).*
 you hide-PAST-2PL from.us we still find-PAST-1PL_{subj} you
 ‘You hid from us still we found you.’
- (22) *(Ők) elbújtak előlünk, (mi) mégis megtaláltuk *(őket).*
 they hide-PAST-3PL from.us we still find-PAST-2PL_{obj} them
 ‘They hid from us, still we found them.’

Third person plural object pronouns can never be null. In the following sections I will consider two possible analyses; however, neither of them will prove to be adequate for Hungarian.

4 Two possible analyses

4.1 Null objects as a result of topic-drop

Hungarian null objects might be similar to that of Japanese-type null arguments. Topic drop is the phenomenon that is observed in languages like Chinese, Japanese and Korean, when a nominal element in a sentence can be null if it has been mentioned previously in the discourse. This means that any argument of a verb can be omitted that has been introduced into the discourse can be left out from the following sentences.

- (23) *John-wa keisatsu-ga Ø mibatteiru koto-o sitteiru.*
 John-TOP police-NOM are watching fact-ACC know
 ‘John_i knows that the police are watching him_i.’

(Huang, 2000, 85)

- (24) *Kuruma-wa Taro-ga Ø kat-ta*
 car-TOP Taro-NOM buy-PAST
 ‘The car, Taro bought.’

(Huang 2000, 266)

As it can be seen in (23) and (24), in Japanese nominal arguments can be phonologically zero after being present in the discourse. Along these lines one could suggest that the Hungarian data be analyzed as topic drop. However, that would not explain the ungrammaticality of sentences like (22). In (22) the third person plural pronoun is present in the first clause but when it is in object position it cannot be covert. If it is non-overt, the sentence becomes ungrammatical. Therefore the data cannot be analyzed as topic-drop, as it is not only dependent on discourse.

4.2 VP-ellipsis

Another possible explanation for the missing object in Hungarian could be VP-ellipsis. This means that object pronouns are allowed to be non-overt if they are situated in the VP, and – after the verb has moved out of the VP – the VP is deleted (together with the object pronoun). Therefore the deletion of the VP may include other elements that are in the VP (as in (25)).

- (25) A: *Láttad* *tegnap* *a* *fiúkat* *a* *parkban* *focizni?*
 see-PAST.2SG yesterday the boys the park.in play.football
 ‘Did you see the boys playing football in the park yesterday?’
 B: *Láttam* (*őket* *tegnap* *a* *parkban* *focizni*).
 see-PAST.1SG them yesterday the park.in play.football
 ‘I did (see them playing football in the park yesterday).’

In the conversation in (25) B answers A’s question with the verb only, that is the rest of the sentence is deleted with the deletion of the VP. The verb in the short answer is moved out of the VP (Bánrét, 1992). As it can be seen in (25) in VP-ellipsis constructions third person plural pronouns *can* be null. Given our generalization that the omission of *őket* renders the sentence ill-formed shows that VP-ellipsis cannot explain the ungrammaticality of (22) where the object pronoun is not pronounced.

The variation among speakers indicated in (20) and (21) set another obstacle if one would like to analyze Hungarian non-overt object pronouns as VP-ellipsis. All speakers of Hungarian accept VP-ellipsis structures with missing plural pronoun objects, such as the one in (25B). However, only some speakers of Hungarian accept the sentences in (20) and (21) without an overt object pronoun. If the apparent object-drop was due to VP-ellipsis, then we would have no explanation for the unacceptability of (20) and (21) for speakers who do not allow for 1st and 2nd person plural pronouns to be dropped.

5 Towards an analysis

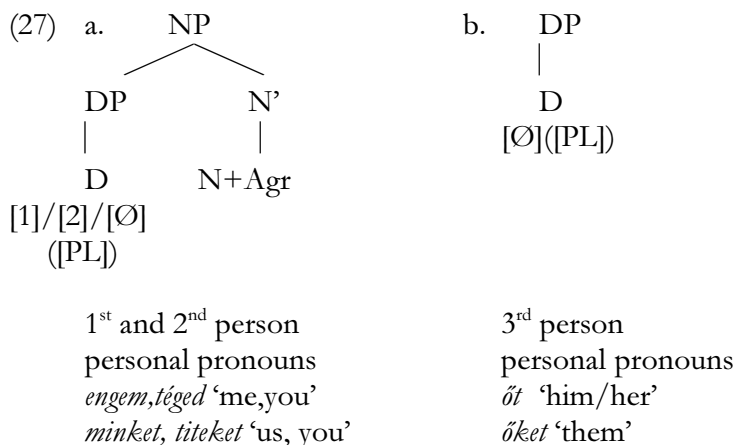
I propose that the empty object pronouns in Hungarian are to be analyzed as instances of DP/NP ellipsis. There are three main assumptions that the analysis is built on. (i) The features of the personal pronouns of Hungarian are as in (26). In particular, plural, i.e., [PL], is a privative feature, singular corresponding to the absence of [PL] (den Dikken, 2006⁵).

- | | | | | |
|------|--------------|-------|----------------|----------|
| (26) | <i>engem</i> | [1st] | <i>minket</i> | [1st,PL] |
| | I-ACC | | we-ACC | |
| | <i>téged</i> | [2nd] | <i>titeket</i> | [2nd,PL] |
| | you-ACC | | you-ACC | |
| | <i>őt</i> | [Ø] | <i>őket</i> | [PL] |
| | he/she-ACC | | they-ACC | |

(ii) The first and second person pronouns are structurally smaller (NP=indefinite) than the third person pronouns (DP=definite), which explains why there is objective verb conjugation with third person object pronouns, but not with first and second person object pronouns: namely, there is no definiteness agreement with NP arguments, only with DPs (Bartos, 1997). Contrast (17)-(18) and (19) with (20)-(21) vs. (22).

(iii) The first and second person pronouns have a possessive internal structure, as in (27a) (compare 27b). This analysis draws on the fact that these pronouns consist of a morphologically bound possessor pronoun and a morphologically bound possessed element, which bears possessive inflection agreeing in person and number with the possessor (den Dikken, 2006).

⁵ I adopt the claim of den Dikken (2006) that third person is in fact the lack of any phi-features.



The inner structure of pronouns is as in (27). First and second person pronouns are NPs with a DP in their specifier position. This DP is the pronoun itself that bears the plural feature on it – if the pronoun is plural. Thus the [PL] plural feature is embedded in the NP. Third person pronouns, on the other hand, are DPs themselves. As suggested by den Dikken (2006) third person singular being the lack of all phi-features the [PL] feature is the only feature to be recovered. Notice that the analyses in (27) subscribe to Postal’s (1966) treatment of personal pronouns as determiners.

I suggest that the deletion of the 3rd person plural pronoun is not allowed because the only feature on it(s D head) is the plural [PL], which would not be recoverable from the verb if the pronoun were deleted. 3rd person singular pronouns can be dropped because there is no person or number feature to be recovered (cf. (26)). The deletion of pronouns is apparently prohibited if it is the head of the pronoun that bears the interpretable person and number features. 1st and 2nd person pronouns can be deleted because they are NPs whose N head itself bears no interpretable person or number features (N only bears uninterpretable agreement morphology) (Chomsky 1993, 1995). The D element that bears person and number features is contained within the deleted NP as a possessor of N in the manner of sluicing or VP-ellipsis where anything can be deleted from inside the VP. Categories outside the deleted VP do not agree with elements from the deleted VP would license the deletion. The variation among speakers leaves a question for further research.

6 Conclusion

In this short paper I looked at object drop in Hungarian. As opposed to subject drop, object drop does not rely on verbal agreement. Further, object pronouns can be null only partially. In singular all object pronouns can be non-overt, while in plural only first and second person pronouns can be null, the third person plural pronoun *őket* ‘them’ can never be covert. This paper suggests that this is due to the structure of the object pronouns themselves, and the privative nature of the plural feature. First and second person pronouns, which are NPs, contain the person and number features within a

modifier position inside them. By contrast, the third person plural pronoun, which is a DP, bears the number feature on its syntactic head.

The loss of that feature through the direct deletion of the DP itself renders the sentences with third person plural object drop ungrammatical. Other possible analyses, in particular topic-drop, and VP-ellipsis, do not suffice, as they are unable to account for the ungrammaticality of omitting the third person plural object pronoun. The analysis of this paper is based on the results of a questionnaire study. This paper presents an approach towards the solution of Hungarian null object pronouns.

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