

Objects in Hungarian

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In Hungarian, there are two direct object coding properties: accusative case marking and definiteness agreement with the finite verb in their clause. In Hungarian grammars and textbooks, it is commonly stated that a verb appears in the definite conjugation whenever it has a definite object. While this generalization holds for the majority of cases, I argue that object coding properties do not correlate directly with object behavior; if a verb agrees in definiteness with some accusative nominal, then the accusative nominal is not necessarily the verb's object.

The major class of counterexamples to the traditional generalization comes from the focus-raising construction. Hungarian focus-raising and *wh*-questions are subcases of the same construction; both are long-distance, both respect island constraints, both involve a filler in the preverbal focus-position, and both types of extraction are sensitive to the presence of bridge verbs. Both may target a wide range of grammatical functions in the embedded clause, as well. (É. Kiss, 1987)

In the case where the subject of an embedded clause is focus-raised, it surfaces in accusative case in the matrix clause. The focus-raised subject in (1) would receive nominative case downstairs (É. Kiss, 1987).

- (1) PÉTER-T mond-t-a, hogy jön
Péter-ACC say-PAST-3SG.DEF that come.3SG
'It is Peter who he/she said is coming.'

Accusative focus-raised subjects bear the other object coding property, as well; they agree in definiteness with matrix V (É. Kiss, 1987):

- (2) Két fiú-t mond-ott hogy jön.
two boy-ACC say-3SG.INDEF.PAST that come.3SG
'It was two boys that he/she said were coming.'

Accusative focus-raised subjects therefore show both coding properties of objects.

But I argue that they are not, in fact, objects. If we suppose they were, there are two possible scenarios. Either the focus-raising construction is like raising, and the raised object does not receive a thematic role from the matrix verb, or the construction is like *equi*, where the matrix verb assigns the raised accusative a thematic role. I offer two conceptual arguments against the *equi* analysis. (i) All bridge verbs would then have two argument structures, one bivalent for the usual case, and one trivalent for focus-raising. Crucially, the extra argument would only ever surface in the focus position, and it would always long-distance control a lower argument. (ii) *Equi* is licensed by a particular lexical item. In LFG terms, if the construction were *equi*, then the matrix verb would need a constraining equation linking matrix accusative to embedded subject. This puts the burden of constraining the path of extraction on the verb, rather than the aspect of grammar that regulates long-distance dependencies. An empirical argument comes from the fact that accusative focus-raised subjects don't undergo incorporation, unlike true thematic direct objects.

Going further, I argue that accusative focus-raised subjects are not objects in any sense, either through equi or raising. A raising or equi analysis of accusative focus-raised subjects would imply the existence of a construction that is both long-distance and local, both A and A', an odd scenario we should be wary of believing in. Furthermore, the complement clause in a focus-raising construction should be analyzed as the matrix OBJ, and there can only be one OBJ.

Moreover, the behavior of accusative focus-raised subjects is unlike objects. **(i)** Unlike normal objects, accusative focus-raised subjects can be *non-reflexively* bound by the subject. If accusative focus-raised subjects were objects, we would expect them to be obligatorily reflexive when bound by the local subject. **(ii)** Unlike normal objects, accusative focus-raised subjects cannot be the subject of depictive secondary predication. Thus, although focus-raised accusative subjects are coded as objects, they do not behave as objects.

After we find that definiteness agreement is not directly sensitive to objecthood, the next logical hypothesis to consider is that it is sensitive purely to accusative case. There are several kinds of counterexamples to this hypothesis. **(i)** An indefinite accusative temporal adverbial may co-occur in the same clause as a definite verb. **(ii)** Accusative focus-raised *objects* only *optionally* agree in definiteness with the matrix verb:. **(iii)** Definite focus-raised objects may occur with indefinite matrix verb, as well (Szamosi, 1976). Thus, definiteness agreement is sensitive neither to objecthood, nor purely to accusative case.

I propose that definiteness agreement is based on accusative case *assignment*, instead. In particular, I offer the following two parallel constraints: **(i)** If the accusative case feature of some NP is assigned by an indefinite verb, then that NP must not be definite. **(ii)** The constituent whose accusative case feature is assigned by a verb in the definite conjugation must be definite. I offer an implementation of the analysis in LFG, wherein the presence or absence of the appropriate definiteness feature is enforced at the same time that accusative case is assigned. Accusative case is assigned under certain conditions of locality, and grammatical function; while a verb may assign accusative case to a grammatical function that is not its object, the path of accusative case assignment must pass through one or more complement functions.

The case-assignment based analysis accounts for the definiteness agreement phenomena related to focus-raising, as well as the counterexamples to the pure accusative case hypothesis. This type of conclusion is familiar from work on Icelandic, which shows that “subject”-verb agreement is with the nominative argument, rather than with the subject; here again, agreement is sensitive to case, rather than grammatical function. The extent to which this pairing holds is an interesting future research question.

References

- É. Kiss, K. (1987). *Configurationality in Hungarian*. Akadémiai Kiado.
- Szamosi, M. (1976). On a surface structure constraint in Hungarian. In McCawley, J., editor, *Syntax and Semantics*, volume 7, pages 409–426.