



Indefinites in topic position in Hungarian

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Introduction: indefinites in the preverbal field

- (1) a [_{Top} Egy 'légy] 'be-szállt a 'szobába.
a fly Pfx-flew the room.into
- b [_{VM} Egy 'légy] szállt be a 'szobába.
a fly flew Pfx the room-into
- c Be-szállt egy légy a szobába.
Pfx-flew a fly the room.into
'A fly flew into the room'

Introduction: indefinites in the preverbal field

- (2) a [_{Top} Egy `idős nő] `le-lépett a `járdáról.
an old woman Pfx-stepped the pavement-off
- b [_{VM} ??Egy `idős nő] lépett le a `járdáról.
an old woman stepped Pfx the pavement-off
`An elderly woman stepped off the pavement'
- (3) a [_{Top} *Egy `pók] `mászott a `falon.
a spider crawled the wall-on
- b [_{VM} Egy `pók] mászott a `falon.
`A spider was crawling up the wall'

Introduction: indefinites in the preverbal field



- (4) a [_{Top} Egy 'fiatalember] le-szállt a vonatról.
a young man Pfx-got the train-off
- b [_{VM} Egy 'fiatalember] szállt 'le a 'vonatról.
a young man got Pfx the train-off
'A young man got off the train'



The Topic and the VM position

Topic – VM / Focus – V – Postverbal material

(Kálmán 1985, É. Kiss 2002)

Topic position:

- prosodically separated from the V
- the prefix of the V precedes the V

VM/Focus position

- stressed
- the V is cliticized on the VM/Focus
- the prefix of the V appears postverbally
- difficult to distinguish an NP functioning as a VM and a focused NP



Indefinites in Hungarian (Alberti 1997, É. Kiss 2002, Maleczki 2001, Kálmán 2001, Gécseg 2003)

- Bare indefinites
- **Indefinites with a determiner**
- Indefinite pronominals



Question

What factors influence the syntactic position of a preverbal indefinite with a determiner denoting a brand-new referent in a neutral sentence?

Current approaches to Hungarian indefinites



- mostly in connexion with the Definiteness Effect and existential constructions (Szabolcsi 1986, Kálmán 1995, 2001, Maleczki 1995, 2010, E. Kiss 1995, 2002, Hegedűs 2013)
- Kálmán (1995, 2001), Maleczki (2010): indefinite arguments with determiners appear postverbally in neutral existential sentences
- Hegedűs (2013): indefinite arguments with determiners can also appear preverbally (in VM position) in neutral existential sentences
- Gécseg (2006), Gécseg – Kiefer (2009): indefinites with determiners denoting a brand-new referent can also occur in topic position



Pragmatic status of indefinites denoting a brand-new referent

- They are usually taken to be incompatible with topic function (Chafe 1976, Gundel 1985, 1988, Lambrecht 1994, Gundel–Fretheim 2004, Maleczki 2001)
- They are included in the comment part of the sentence
- Indefinite subjects are typically used inthetic sentences



Theticity

- Athetic sentence does not state a property of a subject but describes or presents a situation (Kuroda 1972, 1992, Kuno 1972, Sasse 1987, 2006, Lambrecht 1994)



Typology of functions

- Two types ofthetic sentences (Sasse 1987, Lambrecht 1988, 1994):
 - presentational (entity-central)
 - event-reporting (event-central)
- Discourse functions ofthetic sentences (Sasse 2006):
 - annuntiative function („statement out of the blue“)
 - introductive function (text-opening strategy)
 - interruptive function („sudden event“)
 - descriptive function (scene-setting)
 - explanative function (presupposition + explanation/elaboration)



The corpus

- Hungarian National Corpus (Oravecz, Váradi & Sass 2014), Google search
- 360 utterances
- belletristic literature, written press, spoken interview, web forum, blog
- preverbal indefinite subject NPs with determiner
- brand-new referent
- independent clauses



The predicates

- Stative predicates:

áll ,stand', *lóg* ,hang', *csillog* ,shine', *díszít* ,decorate', *átszel* ,cross', *összeköt* ,link', ...

- Dynamic predicates

- Atelic predicates:

úszik ,swim, float', *száll* ,fly', *sétál* ,walk', *újságot olvas* ,read a newspaper', *virágot szed* ,pick up flowers', *beszélget* ,talk', *fut* ,run', *kiabál* ,shout', *legelészik* ,graze', *zörög* ,clatter', ,rattle', *énekel* ,sing', *ugat* ,bark', ...

- Telic predicates

megjelenik ,appear', *megáll* ,stop', *beszáll* ,get into', ,fly into', *leszáll* ,land', ,get off', *leül* ,sit down', *felkeres* ,visit', ,look sy up', *betör* ,break into', *leesik* ,fall', *meghal* ,die', *kirabd* ,rob', *megharap* ,bite', ...

Observations: stative verbs

- descriptive function
- the subject is in VM position in most cases
- intransitive verbs appear with a locative constituent
- transitive verbs express a locative relation
- polysemic Vs can have a subject in topic position in their dynamic meaning

(5) [_{VM} Két halvány, párhuzamos csík] szeli át
dérékban a képet.

‘Two pale, parallel strips cross the picture at the center’

(6) [_{Top} Hét magyar] át-szeli az óceánt.

‘Seven Hungarians are crossing the ocean’

Observations: atelic dynamic verbs

- descriptive, annuntiative or introductory function
- The subject is in VM position in most cases. Limitations:
 - If the subject is [+human], two prosodic patterns are often possible

(7) a [_{Top} Egy 'siklótestű 'lány] 'úszik a 'Fedettben.

b [_{VM} Egy 'siklótestű 'lány] úszik a 'Fedettben.

‚A girl with a body of a rat snake is swimming in the Fedett’

- If the verb has a bare noun argument, the subject is generally in topic position

(8) a A közeli padon [_{Top} egy 'öregember] [_{VM} 'újságot] olvas.

‚On the nearby bench an old man is reading a newspaper’

b A nappaliban [_{VM} egy 'fehéringes 'férfi] olvasott 'újságot.
‚In the living room a man with a white hirt was reading a newspaper’



Observations: atelic verbs

- Some Vs have a quasi-stative meaning when they select a [- human] subject → always in VM position

(9) [_{VM} `Két `döglött `méh] úszik benne.

‚Two dead bees are floating („swimming”) in it’

- Vs denoting a stereotypical property of their subject are usually unstressed

(10) Előtte [_{VM} egy `szekér] zörög.

‚In front of him a chariot is clattering’

Observations: telic verbs

- Annuntiative, interruptive or explanative function
- Subclasses:
 - Subject mostly in VM position – *megjelenik* ‘appear’, *megáll* ‘stop’, *beszáll* ‘get in’ ‘fly into’, *leszáll* ‘land’, *leül* ‘sit down’, *felkeres* ‘visit, look sy up’

(11) A detonáció után [_{VM} egy helikopter] szállt le a Ljubljanka tér kellős közepén.

‘After the detonation a helicopter landed in the middle of the Ljubljanka square’

- Subject mostly in Top position – *leszáll* ‘get off’, *betör* ‘break into’, *leesik* ‘fall’, *meghal* ‘die’, *megharap* ‘bite’

(12) [_{Top} Két szlovák férfi] le-szállt, otthagyták a prágai vicclapot az ülésén,

‘Two Slovaks got off the train, leaving the Prague newspaper on the seat’



Generalization 1

Stative verbs behave like existential verbs

- weak semantic content
- main meaning component: EXIST / PRESENT at a certain location
- unstressed, with the subject stressed → VM position



Generalization 2

Dynamic atelic verbs behave much like existential verbs

- relatively weak semantic content (EXIST / PRESENT in a certain way at a certain location)
- usually unstressed, with the subject stressed → VM position
- certain factors – [+human] subject, agentivity - favor the referential separation of the subject and the V → topic position



Generalization 3

- Certain telic Vs have the meaning component COME INTO EXISTENCE, APPEAR AT THE CENTER OF ATTENTION
 - less informative than their subject
 - tend to be prosodically weak → subject usually in VM position
- Telic Vs lacking such a meaning component have a relatively rich semantic content
 - V and subject equally stressed
 - subject in topic position

Other factors

- Beginning of a story: subject often in Top position whatever the V is → introductive function (Vogeleer - Tasmowsky 2004: topic status)

(13) [_{Top} 'Két 'rendőr] 'ül a 'moziban. Megszóal az egyik: ...
'Two policemen are sitting in the movie. One of them says, ...'

- In case of statements 'out of the blue' or presentations of sudden events, the subject appears in topic position more often in informal texts than in formal discourses → annuntiative or interruptive function

(14) a [_{VM} Egy gondolat] futott át a fiú agyán: talán... beleszeretett.
'A thought ran through the boy's mind: maybe... he had fallen in love'

b [_{Top} Egy gondolat] át-futott az agyamon, de majd holnap.
'A thought has just run through my mind, but let's wait until tomorrow'



Other factors

- A V denoting (a sub-event of) an event mentioned in the previous context tends to be unstressed, with the subject in VM (Focus?) position → explanative function

(15) Headline: Ki-raboltak egy csongrádi ékszerboltot

Pfx-burgled.Pl a Csongrád jeweller's shop.Acc

'A jeweller's shop was burgled in Csongrád'

Lead: [_{VM/F} Két férfi] rabolt ki egy óra-ékszerboltot Csongrád főutcáján hétfőn a déli órákban.

'Two men burgled a jeweller's shop in the main street of Csongrád Monday at noon'



Conclusion

- VM position is favored in the preverbal field if the predicate has a lower degree of informativeness than the subject → highlighting of an individual → entity-central utterance
- Top position is favored in the preverbal field if the predicate is at least as informative as the subject → highlighting of an event involving an individual → event-central utterance



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