

Undetermined? Determined, very determined

A few remarks about (in)definiteness, through the Hungarian loupe

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Ce que beaucoup se demandent, c'est si l'enseignement de la grammaire, tel qu'il est, mène au but que l'on se propose, et je crois qu'ils ont tout à fait raison de s'interroger et de douter, car, s'il y a une « crise du français », ce n'est pas qu'on enseigne trop peu de grammaire, c'est qu'on l'enseigne mal.

Abstractions incompréhensibles, définitions prétentieuses et néanmoins le plus souvent vides, règles fausses, énumérations indigestes, il n'y a qu'à feuilleter quelques pages d'un manuel pour trouver des spécimens variés de ces fautes contre la raison, la vérité et la pédagogie.¹

I have always been amazed by the incredible capacity of people to speak despite how complicated their language seems according to linguistic descriptions. In such a case we might ask ourselves about the scope of such descriptions, and this is particularly important when we consider giving details about single facts of a language. If we work on the listing of details for teaching, we give the students a lot of information apart from language use, information that is not always easy to handle for them. If we work on it for comparison with other languages, there is a risk that we don't catch the essence that

¹ Brunot 1909, 3.

makes the comparison possible, the common ground on which languages develop their own way of realizing a communication. I would like to discuss some points about linguistic description and language teaching, reflecting about definiteness through the Hungarian language.

In the following pages I will present in (1) some points about the research on the Definiteness Effect in Hungarian in order to introduce (in)definiteness through Hungarian examples in (2). On this basis I will make my conclusions in (3) and finish with recalling in (4) a thesis suggested by Hadrovics that may offer material for new studies on the topic.

(1) Definiteness of noun phrases (henceforth NPs) is a central feature in Hungarian, since it also affects the form of the verb. The use of the correct conjugation is almost solely determined by the application of a specific rule: if there is an accusative argument and it is definite, the conjugation must be the definite one. Therefore investigations concentrate on the (in)definiteness of NPs. An example of what is probably an excessive description is the presentation of the Definiteness Effect (henceforth DE).

The phenomenon has first been studied in English. We have the DE whenever certain verbs can only have indefinite arguments. This is the case with subjects of English existential sentences introduced by “there”:

There is/are a/some/any cat(s) in the house.

*There is/are the/every/those cat(s) in the house.

The DE has also been studied in Hungarian. What is striking in this language is the fact that there are many more verbs admitting the DE than in English. Generative linguists constructed a number of sentences, demonstrating that some verbs trigger the DE, while in English the same verbs admit both definite and indefinite arguments. The alternation in Hungarian is possible with new verbal forms derived through the so-called preverbs, or verbal particles (*igekötők*). The picture can be very colorful, as we can see reading Peredy's articles,²

² Peredy 2008; Peredy 2009.

which recall all the main literature on this topic. Together with the status of the verbal particles, which can receive many interpretations, an important question is the role of the clause's focus in Hungarian, and generally speaking the structuring of the sentence. This is why the Hungarian DE is studied only forthetic clauses.

We know that Hungarian is a topic-prominent language, and it is clear also from the articles on the DE and Peredy's articles that information structure³ too plays an important role in the making of a clause.

What is interesting with the studies available about the DE in Hungarian is that they show how rich the Hungarian sentence can be and how many nuances can be expressed by this language. The articles by Peredy cast a deep look at this, because they present all previous material, but they are also critical, in that the author searches for a new possible way of explaining the many cases of the DE. In fact she negates the previous lexicalist interpretation for DE verbs, namely that the definiteness of the argument depends on the meaning of the verb, and suggests that in many cases the presence of an indefinite argument is motivated by what are called obligatory adjuncts.⁴

Because the generative approach is primarily formal, those articles show probably all, or most of, the possible cases, and discuss all of them. Multiplying the features, though, does not help either the potential student of the language or the typologist: while this analysis takes up every single possible form, it does not seem to catch possible generalizations, unless we also study the whole theory backing it.

Can we suggest a different approach? A risk lies in this study:

As it is the article that expresses definiteness most clearly, it was obvious that after discovering the function of articles scientists considered the problems of nature of definiteness solved.⁵

As a matter of fact, much research about definiteness concentrates on the use of articles, and pays little attention to how (in)definiteness contributes to the communication flow.

³ I will write more about information structure in part (2).

⁴ Peredy 2009.

⁵ Korchmáros 1983, 7.

(2) What is definiteness, then?

In generative studies the concept of specificity as a component of definiteness recurs. Specificity in this case means that the referent is already known, already present in the domain of the discourse.

Lambrecht offers a subtler analysis in his seminal work about information structure (henceforth IS) in recognizing a relationship between definiteness and identifiability [id], which according to Chafe designates referents for which a representation exists in the addressee's mind. This point of view places (in)definiteness in the pragmatic domain, together with topic and focus. Moreover the author introduces for (in)definiteness also the indication of specificity [s], which refers to the identifiability of the referent to the speaker.⁶

Thus the clause "I have bought a new car" refers to an indefinite [-id] specific [+s] car, known by the speaker and not by the addressee.

This interpretation has been developed within a complete grammar by Hengeveld and Mackenzie, who introduced it in their coherent theory, namely Functional Discourse Grammar (henceforth FDG),⁷ that simply recognizes (in)definiteness as the combination of [±s] and [±id].

Because they are pragmatic operators, [s] and [id] can be realized grammatically in many different ways in different languages, and display a set of possibilities within single languages. This can be seen if we compare, for example, English and Hungarian with Russian, a language without articles, but whose speakers know what (in)definiteness is.

A rich set of grammatical realizations of [s] and [id] is found in Hungarian. All articles about the DE in Hungarian have to mention different elements of the grammar, either lexical or syntactic.⁸ The picture we can grasp from them is really variable, but it is striking that they isolate the phenomenon of the DE, despite everything indicating that it is part of a complex linguistic system.

Analyzing the realization of definiteness, researchers on Hungarian seem to stress the quality of the single parts of speech only, while Lambrecht recognizes that

⁶ Lambrecht 1994, 77ff.

⁷ Hengeveld/Mackenzie 2008.

⁸ Both Peredy 2008 and Peredy 2009 recall these points.

grammatical analysis at this level is concerned with the relationship between linguistic form and the mental states of speakers and hearers, and that the linguist dealing with information structure must deal simultaneously with formal and communicative aspects of language.⁹

But because dealing with formal and communicative aspects of language is exactly the scope of FDG, it can be worth using that theoretical framework if we want to capture these relationships. Let me try to introduce them for Hungarian. I will list some examples displaying the composition of definiteness of the argument, starting with an indefinite subject:

Egy sas [+s; -id] *repül a felhők fölött.* An eagle is flying above the clouds.

The speaker can help the addressee in identifying the argument, in case it is not known from the context:

A régen idomított sasom [+s; +id] *repül a felhők fölött.* The eagle I have long been taming is flying above the clouds.

A distinction can be made when the referent is completely new to both:

Sasok [-s; -id] *repülnek a felhők fölött.* There are eagles flying above the clouds.

There is also a case when the addressee, and not the speaker, can identify the referent:

Mit [-s; +id] *látsz?*

These examples make the point about grammatical (in)definiteness, but tell us nothing about its behavior in Hungarian. The picture is richer than this, because definiteness has a grammatical expression in the article, and at the same time is partially influenced by and influences

⁹ Lambrecht 1994, 1.

the syntax. Moreover, it is interesting to recognize also the fact that NPs get different degrees of definiteness according to their semantics or function; therefore there is a definiteness located in the lexicon and in the primitive grammatical units of the language, like pronouns.¹⁰

Proper nouns are definite, because they pick out entities by naming them. Some pronouns are clearly definite, because they refer to clearly identifiable parts of speech. The so-called indefinite pronouns are in any case more definite than common nouns, because they group referents, distinguishing them from others. Pronominal adjectives determine the nouns they accompany. And we can point out other cases. The most important is probably the fact that all nouns determined by an adjective are more definite than the noun alone. When on the tram we read

Kérjük, adja át a helyét a gyermekkel utazóknak. Please offer your seat to those carrying babies and small children.

we refer not to uniquely definite travelers, but to the group of people with babies that both speaker and hearer can identify and which therefore are [+s; +id], although in theory there may be no one corresponding to this group on the tram. Moreover, the same person can satisfy this property on one trip and not on another.

Grammars usually oppose definite forms to indefinite forms, but we can recognize a hierarchy, or rather a scale, between the two. I would like to reflect on the following examples:

Ő Erzsébet. She is Elisabeth.
Erzsébet az orvosunk. Elisabeth is our medical doctor.
Erzsébet szakorvos. Elisabeth is a specialist.
Az orvosunk (egy) nő. Our doctor is a lady.
Erzsébet (/az) Erzsébet. Elisabeth is Elisabeth.
Az orvos [egy] tudós. A doctor is a scientist.
Az a szék kényelmes. That chair is cozy.
Ez jó. This is good.

¹⁰ That a pronoun is a grammatical word class is a functional attitude (Hengeveld/Mackenzie 2008, 401), while cognitivists see a meaning in them, as in Tolcsvai Nagy 2017, 368.

What we can grasp from these examples is that in Hungarian the nominal predicate is always less definite than its argument, according to a scale that by and large should be like the following (which must be refined, for example with the details of different kinds of pronouns, differentiating determiners such as personal suffixes, introducing quantifiers and so on):

personal pronouns > pronouns > proper nouns > determined NPs > undetermined NPs=adjectives¹¹

I don't think we must stress this point when teaching, because this should come naturally with practice, but it is important that when introducing focus, which is the constituent that first determines the Hungarian clause structure, the students understand that whenever the less definite NP comes before the more definite, it is the predicate and it gains prominence.¹²

Syntax plays a role in all this, but also the lexicon is important, as demonstrated by Peredy. Lexicon is a relevant part of FDG, in that it realizes part of the communicative intention of the speaker and makes some constraints on the forms of the language. The studies about the DE in Hungarian all seem to display this, but in my view they limit themselves in that they don't recognize the importance of the decisions of the speaker in the communicative realization. The instruments of language are used in order to transmit speaker intention in the best possible way. The addressee can reconstruct the meaning of the communication from its output by knowing the complexity of the code, not single rules. Bock and Levelt¹³ developed this point into a possible model for learning and producing a language that seems to apply perfectly to the variegated structure of Hungarian.

¹¹ See also Aissen, cited in Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008, 36.

¹² In some cases the inverted elements do not build a nominal predication, but a complex sentence with an orientational discourse act: *Magyarország fővárosa Budapest.* can be interpreted as: *Magyarország fővárosa(, az) Budapest.* "As for the Hungarian capital, it's Budapest". There is no focus, but the first part is stressed.

¹³ Bock/Levelt 1994.

(3) From all these observations, although partial,¹⁴ we can understand how definiteness is realized in many different forms, how it is provided with many different characteristics and how it affects, or is affected by, many different structures of the language. As we have seen, this complexity must be handled in different ways when teaching, comparing or studying.

It is quite interesting that FDG is a theory that has its origins in the need for a comprehensive functional grammar for typological comparisons, and it seems to work pretty well in this case. Because it is a grammar working from top to bottom, it helps the speakers in grasping the communicative intention and shaping its linguistic realization, while on the side of the addressee it allows a clear reconstruction of the meaning. This same model that goes back to Bock and Levelt's is really productive also for teaching. I am quite convinced that in teaching a language we should not list all possible cases or speak about possible and impossible mistakes. Instead, making students understand the mechanisms of their own language allows them to understand the different realizations that foreign languages require for communicating the intentions of the speaker.

This approach suggests that the student first learns the code, then applies it not only to making sentences, but also to understanding them by reconstructing the code from the discourse. This will reduce the number of examples needed, because we don't use badly-structured sentences in order to explain possible and impossible cases. We can limit ourselves to learning the constraints required by the language, which are probably different from those of the mother tongue. Detailed rules can be learned through reading and speaking.

This same principle is useful in comparison, for it does not rely on the forms, which are necessarily different, but on the possible relations between the different elements of a language at their interfaces.

These top-to-bottom approaches require the capacity of finding paths different from those of the traditional grammars. This is not always easy, because we are used to first analyzing the surface output of a language and tracing elements back to known issues. This is

¹⁴ We can refer to Lyons 2003 for more details about definiteness in semantics, for example.

very evident for Hungarian, which is not a configurational language, but – just to cite an example – manuals still don't teach students about topic and focus.¹⁵

As far as definiteness itself is concerned, it is interesting to note that for a long time it has been unusual to present the two Hungarian conjugations immediately, as if we might speak without using definite NPs.

(4) Related to both definiteness and syntax is a remark by Hadrovics that changes greatly the most known points of view about verbal particles. Literature on this topic agrees that verbal particles express aspect and/or direction. It also agrees about the fact that sometimes they change the meaning of the verb they attach to, sometimes not, and agrees about the fact that the syntax is deeply affected by them: as we have seen, verbal particles and definite NPs in Hungarian combine in the syntax.

While seeing all these points, Hadrovics wrote that:

Durch das Präfix wird die Handlung des ungarischen Verbs nicht nur perfektiviert, sondern auch auf einen speziellen Fall konkretisiert, sozusagen individualisiert. Diese konkretisierende Wirkung des Präfixes wird im allgemeinen so gedeutet, wie eine von den vielen Funktionen des Präfixes. Meines Erachtens muß man aber diese konkretisierende Wirkung viel allgemeiner auffassen, sie bildet sozusagen die Grundfunktion des präfigierten Verbs im Ungarischen.¹⁶

Later he repeated this same concept in Hungarian, to address the need for suggesting profitable ways of teaching how to translate this characteristic of the Hungarian language, therefore linking grammatical description to didactics. In that article he also relates the verbal particles to the definite articles.¹⁷

¹⁵ We can also avoid the terminology spread by generative linguistics, and find another way to call it. But these elements keep their importance in the grammar of Hungarian.

¹⁶ Hadrovics 1976, 85.

¹⁷ A magyar igekötőknek [...] funkciója [...] a cselekvésnek befejezett és egyedi, egy konkrét alkalomra vonatkozó jelentést is ad, ami tárgyas igék-

If we combine the fact that (in)definiteness is a pragmatic feature while all other properties ascribed to verbal particles are features at a lower level of production, as explained in FDG,¹⁸ we can conceive that definiteness, the identification of an individualized instance (*individualisierter Fall*), might be the common property of all Hungarian preverbs. This would keep all the partial descriptions we have, while recognizing a common framework for verbal particles. If there is a common framework, it can also be productively taught, which is not possible if we ascribe different possible basic functions to the verbal particles.

Moreover, by linking verbal forms to definiteness we can probably offer better descriptions of the complex syntax of Hungarian, having already recognized the role of definiteness in the making of the sentences.

Let me propose a quick analysis. I will describe the verb from the point of view of definiteness as well, a tentative example which is far from being complete, but which may throw some light onto the possibility this approach offers.

Kutyát (-s; -id) *keresek* (+s; -id). I'm looking for a/some dog.

Keresek (+s; -id) *egy kutyát* (+s; -id). I'm looking for a (certain) dog.

but when we say "I am looking for the dog", we can say:

Megkeresem (+s; +id) *a kutyát* (+s; +id).

It is also possible to use the definite conjugation of the verb stem with a definite noun:

Keresem [+s; -id] *a kutyát* [+s, +id]. I'm looking for the dog.

nél szorosan összefügg a határozott névelő vagy mutató névmás használatával ["The function [...] of Hungarian verbal particles [...] is to give to an action also a completed and unique meaning related to an actual situation, which is closely related in the transitive verb to the use of the definite article or demonstrative pronoun."] Hadrovics 1981, 7.

¹⁸ In Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008 tense, aspect and spatial references are worked out at the Representational Level, after the pragmatics of the Interpersonal Level is decided.

If Hadrovics is right, the difference between the last two sentences is that with the verbal particle I underline the importance of my looking for the dog now (and that I want to catch it), not only the generic action of looking for it (and it is not sure I will catch it).

As far as I can understand Hadrovics' intuition about verbal particles and apply it to my knowledge as a foreign Hungarian speaker, in some cases (sometimes it is compulsory) it depends on the intention of the speaker whether or not to refer to a specific, individualized action (occurrence or state of being), therefore to signal whether or not it is important to refer to the action as identifiable, almost as happens with NPs.

If compared with those of most grammars of Hungarian, Hadrovics' theses are really functional and are really close to what is expressed by FDG and what is expressed by Lambrecht about IS. I hope that these considerations can incite new researches on the topic, although in an unusual direction.

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