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## **Hungarian as L2: some problems as seen from abroad**

### *Introduction*

Hungarian has been taught at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at the University of London (now part of University College London) for more than sixty years, the first appointment with the words ‘Hungarian language’ in its title being offered to the English literature scholar Miklós Szenczi in 1936. (For a brief history of Hungarian studies in London, see Sherwood 1993). As in most institutions which teach Hungarian as a foreign language, numbers have always been too small to support research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Specifically, research is needed into the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic context of the acquisition of Hungarian as L2 in the English-speaking area, probably treating the United Kingdom and North America separately. As English expands as a world language, some non-native speakers of English (e.g. Scandinavians or Asians) may also be expected to use English as the medium if seeking a knowledge of Hungarian. This suggests that the linguistic interface between English (or ‘Englishes’) as L1 (or pseudo-L1) and Hungarian as L2 will be of especial interest and importance in the future. While, therefore, it is important to move beyond anecdote in studies of such areas as the influence of the local image of Hungary and the Hungarian language, students’ motivations and attitudes, or responses and expectations in native-nonnative speaker contacts, in my own work I have perforce concentrated on that strand of L2 acquisition which is concerned with the pedagogical grammar (PG) and the learner’s dictionary (LD) – of Hungarian, written from a (British) English perspective.

Here I can present only a few points. More about my approach to the PG of Hungarian may be gleaned from my introductory textbook (Sherwood 1996). I claim little or no originality for many of the fundamental grammatical notions presented; their (and my) debt to Lotz, Austerlitz, Abondolo, Hetzron and others is obvious and wholeheartedly acknowledged. At the same time, no-one but I should be held responsible for the manner in which I have used (or possibly abused) their work in SLA materials for Hungarian. A description of the London learner’s dictionary of Hungarian, a project begun about 1989, will be found in Sherwood and Váradi 1993, and Sherwood 1997.

### *The grammar of Hungarian and pedagogical grammars of Hungarian*

Traditional descriptions of Hungarian grammar have evolved over the last two hundred years and have continued to elaborate a basic schema whose original purpose was the demonstration that Hungarian was in every way just as suitable for the transmission of culture as the classical languages or such ‘developed’ Western European languages as French or (especially) German. This is true of the evolution of Hungarian literature, for example, and the only reason it is not so obvious or well-known is the lack of interest in the study of the evolution of the metalanguage of Hungarian grammar over this period. This has meant that the traditional presentation of Hungarian language and linguistics in schools and even universities has been pressed into the service of an unaggressive but none the less profound and powerful nationalistic ideology, and has utilized a metalanguage that is an admixture of terms that are quasi-political (*magyarosan/magyartalanul fejezi ki magát*) as well as (as is more usual) genealogical (*édes anyanyelvünk*), ethical (*jó/rossz magyarsággal beszél*) and aesthetic (*szépen /csúnyán beszél*) in origin. The absence of an autonomous metalanguage for Hungarian deserves special study, and here I must limit myself to suggesting some enduring consequences for L2 teaching. It is not really possible to draw too deeply from this particular tradition. Problems include: (1) misleading re-translation of metalanguage into ‘West European’ (an example is given below: *pluralis* > *többes szám* > *plural*); (2) inability to deal with the facts (e.g. concern with whether *-nak/-nek* is one case or two; word-order); (3) simple out-of-dateness (e.g. ‘psychological’ and ‘logical’ subject, from the early part of the twentieth century). More modern partial descriptions of Hungarian are, of course, now available. From the point of view of L2, however, these by-products of the development of general linguistic theory pose possibly even more serious problems: (1) they are still fragmentary; (2) they are written in a variety of (usually) incommensurable (though increasingly autonomous) metalanguages of (often) considerable complexity, which – to cap it all – appear to the would-be user to be constantly being modified as research (rightly, of course) progresses.

The implications for pedagogical grammar are compounded by the relative dearth of teachers and scholars interested and qualified in the topic. Often an individual will heroically develop an entire schema – a textbook – which then remains accessible only to learners with one particular mother tongue; Lelkes’s French-language textbook is an example. Or a team, as in Debrecen, may develop materials based generally on foreign (usually communicative) models, which are no doubt effective with full-time study in a genuine Hungarian environment with experienced native teachers, but less so when study is limi-

ted to a few hours a week outside the Hungarian context and with limited access to native speakers. For all the reasons stated, it is therefore necessary to develop both a PG and a LD of Hungarian on principles appropriate to the Hungarian language and the requirements of its students outside the Hungarian speaking area.

Before giving some examples from my own PG of Hungarian, I should like to quote the most successful language teacher in the Western world, Michel Thomas, in support of my view that simply talking Hungarian to foreign students is not enough. He describes the practice of teaching almost exclusively in the foreign language, with little or no use of the student's first language to explain or prompt, as „teaching the unknown in the unknown”, and „a waste of effort and a waste of time” (Bald 1997: 5). And he is talking about teaching French or German to English speakers.

### *Vowel harmony*

In presenting vowel harmony, I employ a purely pedagogical notational device which (I believe) is theory-neutral.

The rule has two parts. Part 1 establishes the fundamental phonological (not phonetic!) property of any stem, including foreign stems: its *Vowel Harmony Class*. This rule is based on chapter IV of Papp 1975 and produces a simple either/or result, *Front Vowel Stem (FVS)* or *Back Vowel Stem (BVS)*, even for ambiharmonic stems, which is quite adequate at the outset of one's studies. It has a single exception class: stems containing ONLY *i/i/é* are specially marked 'BV' if they are NOT FVS. Thus *ír* BV 'writes', *ír* 'Irish(man)'. More elegant and 'truer' approaches are possible (e.g. Abondolo 1988: 29–34), but the productivity of the rule (*fixre, lizingre*) for L2 purposes probably outweighs the benefits of the additional explanatory investment needed for the other approach. Part 2 gives the correct allomorph of any suffix. I abbreviate the alternations by using Greek letters. Thus: **-BαN** 'in', where the presence of a Greek letter indicates that there is vowel harmony in the suffix, while the specific Greek alpha shows that the choice is between A (BVS) and E (FVS). Only four Greek letters are needed for a full account of vowel harmony alternations in Hungarian, although three of them can have an /abstract/ length mark: e.g. **-NάL** 'at, by; German *bei*'. The β, representing O/Ö/E (=historic *Ë*), needs an extra rule. The primary rule states: O (BVS) , Ö or E (FVS), and to choose between the latter, the vowel immediately preceding the suffix decides: if Front Rounded, the choice is Ö; otherwise E. This is, of course, an extra, relatively abstract, intermediate stage; but the advantages of this presentation are unexpectedly wide-ranging.

- **A single (visual) equivalent is given for every suffix morpheme**; paradigms are relieved of variant clutter; invariant suffixes are immediately distinct from variant ones (e.g. -NÉK conjugation 1/conditional mood/s1 from -NÓK conjugation 2/ conditional mood/ p3).
- The historically different Front Unrounded Non-High vowels that have merged in the standard language can be kept distinct, which **helps with morphology** (*fej, fejet; röhej, röhejt*), lexis (*fel, föl; vödör, veder*), and with understanding geographical and historical phenomena ('ö-zés') at a more advanced stage.
- The difference between alpha and beta is also useful with BVSs, since the **Greek letters always make clear whether O or A is needed** – sounds which are, for many learners, often hard to keep apart.
- **Vowel harmony is filtered out** of the serious work of learning morphemes.
- The 'two types of exception' (*házat*, with an *-a-* instead of productive *-o-*, and *könyvet*, with an *-e-* instead of productive *-ö-*) reduce to one, **historically accurate**, class: alpha-nouns. And, of course, the student is not taught false and misleading 'exceptions'.
- The presentation paves the way to **general linguistics**: each Greek letter refers to a particular tongue-height (although it is true that beta and omega are both mid; but beta can never be long, while omega nearly always is).
- When introduced with the present indicative, the vowel patterns reinforce the important distinction between full members of **the speech situation** (or axis of discourse: s1, s2, and p2) and others, in that beta is found only in s1 and p2, as well as with sibilant-final verbs' s2.

### *The 'plural'*

Here I would draw attention to the work of Yip and others, who say that 'certain areas of grammar call for some form of grammatical instruction, to which consciousness-raising [a cognitive approach to grammatical instruction developed by Sharwood Smith (1981) and Rutherford (1987)] can be an effective approach' (Yip 1994: 123).

I follow Lotz in not labelling -K/-I 'plural' but (perhaps inelegantly) 'aggregational', as the rules for the use of these in Hungarian are not the same as those for the use of plural markers in Indo-European (and other) languages. (Lotz 1976: 121–163, especially 125, 130, 137 and 151, where three different Hungarian translations for 'aggregation' are offered, perhaps discouraging the use of the concept.) It should be noted that the (re-)translation 'plural' is more

problematic in English than is the use of the analytical compound *többesjel* ‘sign of severalness’ in Hungarian, since ‘plural’ has a well-established, simple meaning in English not appropriate for the usage of -K/-I in Hungarian. Historically, the -K is younger than -I and has no incontrovertible etymology, but one suggestion fits this relabelling well: that it is cognate with the Finnish collective derivational suffix =KKO/=KKÖ (Korompay 1991: 259-60, but note Hajdú 1981: 147-8, with serious reservations). The advantages of this usage include:

- A constant reminder that there is no -K/-I suffix on nouns if numbers or number words precede.
- Conversely, there may be -K productively and *directly* on numbers or number words, provided the referents are +HUMAN: *a Nyolcak* ‘aggregation of 8 artists’; *többek szerint* ‘according to several people’; *sokaknak úgy tűnik* ‘it seems to many people’ (other sporadic examples are fossils or fossilized calques: *mindenekelőtt*, *mindenekfölött*, *többek között* ‘inter alia’). The adverbial forms of these are also +HUMAN: *nyolcan/többen/sokan voltak* ‘there were eight/a lot/many (people)’. It is difficult to make this as a single point otherwise. Hungarian place-names in -K are widespread for the same reason, namely that they are not ‘plurals’ but items marked as aggregations (cf. *többesjel-szilárdulás* e.g. Hoffman 1997: 93).
- By adding the rule that ‘no more than one (unquantified aggregation in) -K is permitted in belonging (possessive) constructions’, the following common errors can be filtered out:

\**a gyerekek könyvük*: either ‘one book in all’ or ‘one book per child’; in either case (each member of) the aggregation has one book (each) and there is *no distinct and separate unquantified aggregation of books*; each child is, if required, paired with a book;

\**az ők könyvük*: similar, except that this is not a basic form, but an elaboration of (*a*) *könyvük*, and it is therefore the emphatic pronoun that cannot be marked for aggregation. *No distinct and separate aggregation of ‘them’*: ‘they’ are already in the noun’s suffix.

Aggregations involving entities both inside and outside the speech situation did not always have a neat pattern in Hungarian; for example, Szenczi Molnár Albert’s grammar of 1610 lacks a form *uraik* ‘their masters’, giving only *Urai*, *uroc* for ‘domini eorum’ (Sherwood 1990: 112; more recently, citing the same example, Korompay 1992: 345).

- Compare also: ‘A **gyűjtőnevek** több egyedből álló **csoportok** közös nevei [...] rendszeren nem is használjuk többes számú alakjukat: *csapat*, ***csoport*** [...]’ (Rácz 1971: 26; my emphases – PS)

### *Belonging ('possession')*

In this example, the fundamental typological differences between Hungarian and (e.g.) English come to the fore. It is not possible to understand the morphology of the Hungarian noun system simply by adding the belonging (possessive) forms to a paradigm modelled closely on those of (say) Indo-European languages. As the two, completely different, unquantified aggregation markers show, the first split in Hungarian is between 'belonging' and 'non-belonging', and there are two rather different paradigms of the belonging forms. Indeed, to call the dictionary form of a Hungarian noun NOMINATIVE SINGULAR is misleading: it is something like NOMINATIVE GENERAL NON-BELONGING. (This, in part, explains why it is possible for a Hungarian shop to have only the simple sign KÖNYV or CIPŐ above its doors.) It is once again vital to distinguish between grammatical meaning, which is given by the system, and translational equivalence, a more ad hoc relation, partly dependent on individuals' skills.

The most important point in this connection is that the s3 marker, in my notation -/J/?, does not mean 'his/her' (or 'sein(e)', 'son/sa', etc.), although it needs to be so translated quite often in practice. *The main function of this suffix is to link two items together in a belonging relationship.* One item or both may be an aggregation, but the fact that a possessor is an aggregation makes no difference to the entity possessed in Hungarian (as shown above). For this reason, attempts to 'explain' the difference by appealing to (say) patterns in German are wrong (e.g. 'The Hungarian word-order – *az író könyve* – is the opposite of the English and is closest to the Southern German dialectic [sic] construction: *dem Schriftsteller sein Buch*'; Bánhidi–Jókay–Szabó 1965: 191). The reason that there are problems with this suffix is that sometimes the possessor is not immediately apparent. In this case either the possessor is to be found earlier in the discourse (anaphoric use of s3, not usually a problem), or the possessor is not expressed linguistically but is rather embedded concretely in the context of situation (to borrow a Firthian term). This has no parallel in English, but it may be associated particularly with the end-point of certain situations: *vége* ('The End': the final shot of a film); *folytatása következik* ('To Be Continued': end of an episode of a serial on film or a serialization in a periodical); *ára* ('Price': e.g. on back-cover of book); *kilója* ('price per kilo': often of fruit/vegetable, on sign inserted in container). There are parallels in the verb system: *NEM KERESTE* (complete label on uncollected/undeliverable postal item), where the 'object' is not linguistic but the actual physical object to which the label is attached.

A number of adverbs incorporate this suffix. Where forms both with and without the suffix are found, those with are often thought of as especially *magyaros*: *hirtelen/ hirtelenében; hamar/hamarjában; a múltkor/a múltkoriban, a múltkorjában* (Radnóti 1989: 52, 91). Here one might say that the additional suffixes provide a closer and more intimate link with the event, in a manner analogous to the *vége* forms.

### *The two conjugations*

Here I offer a chance to compare a ‘pure’ linguistic description of a well-known crux in Hungarian grammar with its adaptation for teaching purposes.

This distinctive feature of Hungarian has lost much of its original motivation since the evolution of the Hungarian definite article, from about the fourteenth century onwards. This Europeanized Hungarian, in that ‘definiteness’ of the object could now be expressed in the noun-phrase independently of the verb forms, whose presumably Ugrian duality, vastly extended compared with Ostyak and Vogul, became semantically superfluous. The result is, paradoxically, that it may be best to think of this part of Hungarian grammar in Indo-European terms: as an agreement system. Notice that it will not, especially at the early stages, be worth even attempting to explain any semantic difference between such alternative formulations as *szeretek olvasni/szeretem az olvasást* ‘I like to read, I like reading’, or *ebédet főz/az ebédet főzi* ‘(s)he is cooking (the) dinner’, that is, where the use of *a(z)* is not readily understood as ‘definite’. A second set of verbal endings is required if there is a -T-marked object which includes one of the following **morphological** items:

- the definite article
- the demonstrative pronouns
- both the above (corresponding to English demonstrative adjectives)
- a belonging suffix
- nominal marked with the *-ik* unique specifier
- a morpheme with unique reference (a capitalized proper name)
- *egymás* ‘one another, each other’

This accounts for 99% of direct objects requiring the second set of verb endings. These morphological items form a template against which putative direct object NPs are matched; if there is no match, there is no switch to the second set of endings. Furthermore, the ‘verb last’ rule must be applied, by converting English VO structures into an interlanguage OV as an intermediate

step, even if the result is not always the most ‘unmarked’ Hungarian sentence: János likes music >> „János music likes” >> *János a zenét szereti*.

The complementary aspect of the two conjugation system is the existence of between 11 and 15 verb forms for each mood or tense. Hungarian exploits this richness to incorporate both subject and object pronouns within the verb form: *szeret* ‘(s)he loves (me/us/you sg/you pl)’ and *szereti* ‘(s)he loves him/her/it/them’. The clearest way of displaying these meanings known to me is in Abondolo 1988: 89–93, which I have adapted as ‘Abondolo circles’ in Sherwood 1996: 33–4.

### *Personal pronoun use, topic and comment, intonation*

Because of the complexities of the morphology of Hungarian, some areas of syntax have been relatively neglected in L2 teaching. One answer is to simplify the presentation of the morphology (some ideas are offered above), while making use (in this case) of recent important work on Hungarian word-order. This is not easy to adapt for L2 purposes. Even my relatively straightforward example involves word-order, intonation, and pronoun-surfacing simultaneously.

As seen above, personal pronouns are not ordinarily required and their presence always adds something extra, even if it may be difficult to specify clearly in every case what that something extra is. The problem is compounded by an understandable but unfortunate piece of teaching practice: cataphoric prompting towards the correct form by giving the personal pronoun in advance: *az én barát...*, *én azt mond... neki, hogy ...* to secure the endings *-om*, *-tam*, for instance.

Personal pronouns may surface regularly (even in the absence of a focusing item such as question-word, *nem x, x is*, etc) in three ways. I use s1 accusative as an example in the following informal presentation:

|   | POSITION           | INTONATION            | FUNCTION       |
|---|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| <sup>^</sup> <i>Szeret engem.</i>                                       | post-verbal        | falling away          | disambiguatory |
| <i>Engem</i> <sup>^</sup> <i>szeret</i><br>[, téged <sup>^</sup> utál.] | pre-verbal (topic) | topic (even, mid)     | contrastive    |
| <sup>^</sup> <i>Engem szeret</i><br>[, nem <sup>^</sup> téged.]         | pre-verbal (focus) | focal (i.e. + stress) | emphatic       |

To be noted is the complex interaction of word-order (topic–comment) and intonation to express three, quite distinct, functions each with its distinct intonation pattern. This must be audially demonstrated. As can be seen, conventional punctuation cannot reflect the intonation patterns and should be supported by a visual display that aligns the additional focus-markers needed; conventional ‘left alignment’ is unhelpful. Furthermore, the common (mis)use of ‘emphasis’ and ‘stress’ (both deriving from the metalinguistically inadequate Hungarian *hangsúly*) as a blanket term to ‘explain’ all three surfacings of the pronoun is highly misleading. The problems of teaching a (simplified) set of topic-comment terms and the attendant intonation patterns must be addressed from an early stage; in fact, the teacher must be clear about the ways in which pragmatic roles (topic, comment...), semantic roles (agent, patient...) and grammatical relations (subject, object...) act and interact in Hungarian.

It is the task of a pedagogical grammar of Hungarian, organically linked to a learner’s dictionary, to address this problem and the many others that remain.

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