Structural focus and discourse structure in Hungarian narratives

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Abstract
In my presentation I investigate and exemplify the discourse-related triggers of the preverbal focus position in Hungarian narratives. Inspired by the approaches of Riester (2015; 2016), Büring (2003) and Roberts (2012), I propose a QUD-based analysis and explanation of the licensing condition of the Hungarian preverbal focus position in narratives.

The research presented here is part of a larger project investigating and modeling the interaction of morphosyntax and the conceptual background of information structure [InfS], the local common ground [CG] or discourse context. The project investigates the influence of InfS on morphosyntax from a cross-linguistic perspective in three unrelated, non-configurational languages: Tagalog, Hungarian and Lakhota.

InfS in Hungarian
In non-configurational languages, information packaging considerations often determine the choice of a marked morpho-syntactic structure. The choice of a marked construction signals a certain informational structural organization that is only felicitous if it is licensed by the given discourse context (local CG), the shared knowledge at a given point of the discourse (dialogue or narration). Languages differ in how far morphosyntactic structure is influenced by information structure and CG considerations. A rigid syntax language like English does not have syntactic means to signal the narrow focus or the aboutness topic. The discourse-configurational language (É. Kiss, 1995), Hungarian, however, reflects information structure at the syntactic level.

Hungarian shows verb-initial word order in the unmarked case (1), and has special structural positions for the sentence topic and the narrow focus of the utterance; topics being sentence initial, while the narrow focus standing in the immediate preverbal position (2).

(1) Meg-látogatta Péter Mari-t.
    prt_meg-visited Peter Mary-ACC
    ‘Peter visited Mary.’

(2) Péter MARI-t látogatta meg.
    Peter Mary-ACC visited prt_meg
    ‘Peter visited [Mary]F’

The structural focus position in Hungarian is often analyzed in semantic terms, featuring the phenomena of identification, predication and exhaustivity (e.g. É.Kiss 2006, Szabolcsi 1994). In my presentation I propose a pragmatic approach (see also e.g. Wedgwood 2007), in line with, e.g., Riester (2016; 2015), Vellema & Beaver (2015) and Roberts (2012).

Drawing on various corpus data exemplify discourse-related triggers and licensing conditions of the preverbal focus position in Hungarian narratives, and propose a QUD-based analysis and explanation of these licensing conditions.

The focus position
As Riester (2015) points out, narratives are less expected to provide the basis of exploring information structural phenomena, since narratives are often structured along a temporal line. However, the corpus data from different narratives show interesting uses of the preverbal focus position, and provide a good basis to investigate triggers of focusing in terms of discourse structure. Consider, e.g., the following utterance in the given context:

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1CRC 991 Project D04: The Role of Information Structure in Sentence Formation and Interpretation: A Frame-based Approach; Pls: Prof. Dr. Robert Van Valin, Jr. (working on Lakhota) and Dr. Anja Latrouite (working on Tagalog).

2Translations of the the Hunger Games books and self elicited data from recordings of the Frog Stories (by Mercer Mayer).

When we are ready at the market, we go to the back door of the mayor’s house to sell the half of the strawberry. We know how much he likes it and he gives the price we ask.

Madge, a polgármester lánya nyît ajtót.
Madge the mayor daughter.Poss opens door.ACC

[Madge, the mayor’s daughter]DOC opens the door.

This example shows one instance where unexpectedness play a role in licensing the focus construction. From the local CG the expectation is that the mayor opens the door, and the focused constituent expresses unexpectedness. The underlying QUD is the constituent question _Who opened the door?_ licensed by the global CG: the previous sentence introduces a selling situation, from which opening the door (the background) is inferable.

**Analysis and goals**

In my analysis I take focus as a pragmatic notion, (see e.g. Roberts, 2012; Vellema and Beaver, 2015), being an answer of the current Question Under Discussion. According to this view, the function of focus is to help determine the current QUD. The syntactically marked narrow focus construction in Hungarian determines the actual QUD being the corresponding wh-question. This current question (and thus indirectly the focus construction) must be licensed by the underlying context. Two aspects of the CG are both relevant for the licensing conditions: (i) the local discourse context (local CG) and the situational context (global CG) or background knowledge.

The local discourse context is structured and represented as a discourse-tree (d-tree) extended by an annotation schema for indicating the focus structure (focus, focus domain, (not-)at-issue content, aboutness topic), as well as the thematic structure (discourse topics). In my analysis I adopt the static d-trees from Büring (2003) and Riester (2016). The nodes in the d-tree represent the discourse moves: internal nodes represent the QUDs while the terminal nodes indicate the answers. The structure of the d-tree is given by increasingly specific questions, the sub-question relation has no strict entailment relation to the preceding QUD. Sub-questions are either entailed by a previous question (e.g. _q₅_ and _q₆_), or dependent on the immediately preceding answer (e.g. _q₂_ and _q₃_).

Daniel Riester (2016) claims that the QUD-structure of the discourse is driven by multiple constraints, like: (i) there must be congruence between the actual QUD and its answer and (ii) the implicit QUD must be maximally given (or salient).

As narrow focus in Hungarian indicates its immediate QUD, licensing the use of the marked syntactic construction of the preverbal focus position is on the one hand determines by the licensing on the current QUD in the given discourse context. However, licensing the focus position is also influenced by different means, like, e.g. unexpectedness. In my analysis I also investigate what aspects besides the QUD-structure license the preverbal focus position. The following issues will be explored: (i) whether the focus constituent always contains new information, (ii) whether it is an element of a contrast set, (iii) what are the requirements for the background: pre-mentioned, presupposed or expected (conventionally or situationally inferable), and (iv) whether the focused constituent serves as the newly introduced topic.

**References**


Arndt Riester. 2016. Constructing QUD trees. manuscript.


