

1. Your field of research is linguistics. Could you please explain your work in layman's terms? (Our homepage is not visited exclusively by professionals.)

When people discover that you're a linguist, their first reaction typically emphasises some aspect of the complexity and variation of natural languages. People never fail to express their amazement at the sheer number of different languages and dialects spoken in the world, and then usually add some personal anecdote about how hard it is to learn a language. It certainly is true that there is a lot of linguistic variation, across and within languages. And it is also true that it is a struggle for most people (myself definitely included) to learn a foreign language. But when you think about it for a little while, one of the most amazing things about natural language is that it is acquired perfectly effortlessly by native speakers. It takes just a few years for a child, anywhere in the world, to pick up his or her native language, and no explicit training is needed for that: it doesn't matter whether the child grows up in a sophisticated educational environment such as Hungary or in a place where there are no schools at all; pathological cases aside, he or she will always end up with a complete mental grammar of his or her native language. And it is not uncommon for children to acquire more than one grammar: many children grow up in multilingual environments, and those who do usually become multilingual themselves, equally fluent in the various languages spoken around them; most people speak more than a single dialect, which is another instance of multilingualism. None of these languages or dialects are 'difficult': it is literally child's play to acquire them ('acquire' is certainly a better verb to use in this context than 'learn'); and children aren't at a disadvantage if they grow up acquiring multiple languages: to the contrary, multilingualism has been shown to have cognitive benefits. So acquiring languages natively doesn't seem to be a complex task. And the variation among languages poses no hurdles to children picking up the languages spoken around them. As a matter of fact, when you look beyond the surface, you discover quite quickly that languages vary much less, at a fundamental level, than they seem to at first blush. There are quite a number of things that turn out to be very common or even universal among all natural languages. For instance, it is not at all rare to find that, under certain circumstances, the finite verb (the verb that bears person/number inflection and an expression of tense, like *goes* or *went* in English, and *megy* or *ment* in Hungarian) is placed in the second position from the left in a sentence, regardless of what's in the first position: in English, one can say *The weasel goes pop!* or, as in the well-known nursery rhyme, *Pop! goes the weasel* — irrespective of whether the subject (*the weasel*) or the other non-verbal element of the sentence stands in the initial position, the verb (underlined) in both cases comes in second place. You might think that the placement of *goes* to the immediate right of *pop!* is a special case of poetic licence; but the pattern of placing the finite verb after the first constituent in the sentence is actually a very common strategy: we see it also in the alternation between *The man said, 'I'm hungry'* and *'I'm hungry,' said the man*, or between *The light went out* and *Out went the light*, or between *He has done something* and *What has he done?*, or between *I would do this under no circumstances* and *Under no circumstances would I do this*, or between *John drank pálinka* and *Mary did so, too* and *John drank pálinka and so did Mary* — when you think about it, English presents us with plenty of situations in which the finite verb goes in second position, following the subject or some other element of the sentence. Other languages apply this 'Verb Second' rule even more rigidly: in my own native language, Dutch, you basically have to put the finite verb in second position in every root sentence. And in Hungarian as well, we see the 'Verb Second' rule rear its head in lots of places. It certainly isn't impossible to place the finite verb somewhere further to the right in a Hungarian clause: there is nothing wrong with *János moziba ment*, where *ment* is in third place. But when we want to stress that it is János and only János who went to the movies, we

suddenly have to put *ment*, the finite verb, to the immediate right of *János*: we then say *Csak János ment moziba*, and not *Csak János moziba ment*. And if we aren't sure who went to the movies, and would like to ask someone, then we say *Ki ment moziba?*, and not *Ki moziba ment?*. So in Hungarian, too, the 'Verb Second' rule applies in a good number of cases. This has nothing to do with 'foreign influence' on Hungarian: the 'Verb Second' phenomenon is found all over the world, in lots of genetically unrelated languages. It is a property of what linguists call Universal Grammar — by which we mean that it is a property that is available to natural languages universally (though of course it doesn't have to be exploited by all languages to the same extent). Now think about the logical inverse of 'Verb Second', which would be 'Verb Next-To-Last'. What's interesting is that no language has been found to date that employs this property: in no natural language is it the case that the finite verb must be in penultimate position, either systematically or in particular sentence types. Natural language does not seem to make a rule of the 'Verb Next-To-Last' type possible. This is important, because it shows that linguistic variation is by no means random: certain things are possible and common to a wide variety of languages, while others that are logically equally possible are systematically non-existent. Language-external explanations for these things are difficult to give. There certainly is nothing wrong with verbs coming in towards the end of the message: German is famous for placing its verbs together at the end of subordinate clauses, for instance. But no language seems to single out its *finite* verbs for systematic placement in *penultimate* position. Why not? There must be something about the grammars of human languages that makes such a rule impossible. A proposal that is popular in my field of theoretical enquiry is that this 'something' is a fundamental principle of the structure of linguistic expressions. All linguistic expressions are constructed (or 'projected', as we say in slightly more technical terms) from a 'head' — thus, a complex noun phrase such as *a Brazilian's beautifully written book about Budapest* (here I am referring, by the way, to Chico Buarque's book *Budapest*, which I would warmly recommend to all readers) is constructed out of the head noun *book*, with all the other material organised around it. An influential hypothesis in my field is that complex linguistic expressions obey a universal organising principle: they are always projected from a 'head', and the head is in a fixed structural position within the complex structure, to the left of all material that is subordinated to the head (the 'complement' of the head), and to the right of what we call the 'specifier' of the head. This 'specifier – head – complement' structure is the core of any syntactic structure. It can be decorated further by the addition of optional modifiers, called 'adjuncts'. In the example I just gave you, we can say that *book* is the head, *a Brazilian* the specifier, and *about Budapest* the complement; the additional modifier of this complex noun phrase (*beautifully written*) is an 'adjunct', which we can freely leave out — and when we do leave it out, we see the 'specifier – head – complement' order surfacing in its pristine form: *a Brazilian's book about Budapest*. English is nicely 'wysiwyg' ('what you see is what you get') in this respect. But if you are familiar with one or more languages other than English, you are probably aware that not all languages work the same way: there is plenty of variation in the surface word order of complex linguistic expressions in the world's languages. This variation has to be accounted for by a principled theory of linguistics — of *syntax* (the structure of sentences), more particularly. Syntacticians of my theoretical persuasion (followers of the framework of generative syntax, founded in the 1950s by Noam Chomsky, who still is active in the field today) do this by postulating a small set of universal phrase structures, and by manipulating these structures with the aid of, again, a small set of universal operations that can be performed on these phrase structures. One of these operations is 'movement': a particular constituent can be placed in a position different from the one in which it originates in the structure by moving it into this position in the course of the syntactic derivation. Syntax starts

out with a particular base structure, and can ‘transform’ it into a derived structure that sounds different from the one we started out with. Movement is one of the ways in which syntactic structures can be transformed. Movement is tightly constrained: for instance, a head can only be moved into another head position; it cannot be moved into a specifier or complement position. This principle of structure preservation facilitates an explanation for our earlier observation that the finite verb in many languages shows up in second position but there is no language in which the finite verb must systematically show up in penultimate position in the sentence. To understand this, let us assume that finiteness is structurally independent of the verb. (We see this, for instance, in the fact that there are situations in which finiteness is severed from the lexical verb: in a sentence like *John never shows up on time*, the marker of finiteness, *-s*, is attached directly to *show*, but in *Show up on time, John never does*, the *-s* and the lexical verb *show* are severed from each other, with finiteness now borne by the ‘dummy’ verb *do*.) In the structure of the sentence, finiteness represents a head of its own, and it takes the projection of the verb as its complement. By hypothesis, the universal structure of syntactic projections is ‘specifier – head – complement’. Now imagine that we put the subject in the specifier position of the finiteness head. Then we get the bearer of finiteness (i.e., the finite verb) to follow the subject, as in *The weasel goes pop!*. If instead we place something else in the specifier position of the finiteness head, the finite verb will end up to the immediate right of that particular element, as in *Pop! goes the weasel*. This gives us a simple account of the ‘Verb Second’ rule. But a putative ‘Verb-Next-To-Last’ rule is unformulable in this system. The material that we place in the specifier position of the finiteness head is *moved* into this position from the complement of this head, which contains all the material (besides finiteness) that belongs to the verb. Since the specifier of the finiteness head is universally to its *left* and its complement is universally to its *right*, it is impossible to move material out of the complement of the finiteness head into its specifier and to have it surface to the immediate *right* of the bearer of finiteness, such that the finite verb would systematically be in penultimate position in the clause — in other words, it is impossible to derive a ‘Verb-Next-To-Last’ pattern, which is precisely the desired result. What this shows us is that a restrictive theory of syntactic structure can explain what appear to be universal properties of natural languages: certain robustly attested patterns are derivable, while other, non-existent properties cannot be derived. A restrictive theory of this type can hope to ultimately give a principled answer to the question of how it is that children all over the world manage to acquire their native language(s) so quickly and efficaciously — the central explanandum for the group of linguists that I am a member of. Needless to say there are plenty of other questions one could also ask about natural language, incl. questions about how hard it is to learn a foreign language later in life, or questions about how language is used communicatively in speech situations, or questions about how languages change under the influence of exposure to social media. These are all very interesting and difficult questions, too; but they are not the kinds of questions I usually ponder because they go beyond what I think I know something about. The study of natural language is multi-faceted and endlessly fascinating, and we need specialists of all stripes to contribute to it. Generative linguists make their particular contribution to this field of enquiry, and they do so by asking particular questions about natural language and approaching them with the aid of a theoretical model that assigns linguistic expressions very particular structures that are organised and manipulated on the basis of universal principles of human grammar.

2. How did you start dealing with this field, what made you interested in it?

There is nothing as quintessentially human as language: while other species have ways to communicate in all sorts of ways as well (just like humans manage to communicate certain messages without the use of verbal language), the properties of the human language faculty, with its recursion, complexity, variability and universality, are unattested as a package anywhere else in the animal world. We take language for granted in our everyday lives, which often makes it difficult for people to understand how thinking about language can keep someone occupied for his entire career. But the kinds of questions that I talked about above are of an extraordinarily thought-provoking type. It often takes a bit of luck or fate to light the spark — and that certainly was the case for me. As a first-year undergraduate student in the English department at Leiden University (in the Netherlands), I was expecting to be captivated by the classes on English literature — but instead, I was immediately drawn into linguistics thanks to the exciting classes taught by the linguists in the department (esp. Frits Beukema and, in my second year, Bob Rieger). And once I entered my third year of undergraduate studies, I got the opportunity to enroll in the legendary ‘Comparative Syntax’ courses offered jointly by the General Linguistics, Dutch and English departments of the university — fabulous classes in which the kinds of questions that I talked about above played themselves out in a particularly interesting way. With Hans Bennis from the Dutch department and Teun Hoekstra and Harry van der Hulst from General Linguistics added to the team of linguists supervising my undergraduate studies, I found myself in a kind of paradise. I could not possibly have been luckier than to have had these outstanding scholars and teachers around me in the formative years of my career as a linguist. Questions about language had always been intriguing to me: in high school, I used to drive my Latin and Greek teacher to despair with questions about the nitty-gritty of the ‘ablativus absolutus’ and other such syntactic gems. But it wasn’t until I was exposed to the generative approach to these questions that I realised that this was exactly what I wanted to study and have a career in. So almost from the outset of my university studies, I knew that I wanted to be a linguist. Though I found it hard at first to decide whether to be a phonologist (someone who studies the sound systems of the world’s languages) or a syntactician (a linguist concerned with the internal structures of sentences), in the end I found the kinds of questions posed by the generative theory of syntax more challenging and intellectually satisfying, which is why I ended up specialising in syntax towards the end of my undergraduate career — even though my first major international publication was a phonology paper written jointly with Harry van der Hulst, on the hierarchical organisation of the structure of speech sounds. Staying on in Leiden for my Ph.D., I worked particularly closely with Teun Hoekstra, the man from whom I learned more than I could ever acknowledge. The rewards of taking his relentless criticism seriously were always immense. Sadly, he died much too young. I often wish I could run an idea or a paper of mine by him for his thoughts on it, but though I can no longer benefit from his direct criticism and guidance, the way he taught me to think about linguistic questions will always remain deeply engrained in my mind. The enthusiasm about all things linguistic that permeated the linguistics team at Leiden University when I was a student there was contagious, and it has left an indelible mark on me — a mark that I hope to make on my own students as well.

3. What was your motivation to come to Hungary? Why did you decide to apply for the visiting scientist program?

My research of the past fifteen years has featured Hungarian very prominently. I often tell people that the facts of Hungarian always answer my every syntactic question — and it is certainly true that I have discovered a lot of things about several different domains of

morphosyntactic enquiry through the lens of the Hungarian data: including, among several other things, the morphosyntax of agreement (the fact that a verb, noun, adjective or preposition often inflects for the person/number features of one of its dependents), predication, and the analysis of so-called filler–gap dependencies. This latter term refers to situations in which a linguistic expression that seems to ‘belong to’ a particular predicate is presented in a syntactic position in which it would seem not to be able to establish its syntactic relation with the predicate, as in *Who did you invite?*, where *who* ‘belongs to’ *invite* as an argument of this predicate (it is, after all, the person invited), but it is presented in a position where arguments are not normally placed (in English, the object argument is usually placed to the right of the verbal predicate head, as in *I invited Mary*). A familiar way to talk about such sentences is to say that *who*, the ‘filler’, is moved into a derived position and leaves a ‘gap’ behind — whence the name ‘filler–gap dependency’. Hungarian morphosyntax is extraordinarily rich in the ways in which it can establish such filler–gap dependencies over long distances. In English, if you want to enquire about the identity of the person who John thinks that Mary might have invited, there is basically just one way to ask the question: *Who does John think that Mary invited?* This sentence illustrates a so-called long-distance filler–gap dependency: *who*, the filler, is linked to the gap (the position to the right of *invited* where we would normally expect the object argument of *invite* to be expressed) over a considerable distance, being separated from the gap by a clause boundary (the boundary between the *think*-clause and the *invite*-clause, the latter introduced by *that*). Hungarian, unlike English, has several different ways at its disposal to build such long-distance filler–gap dependencies. One way is to ‘cut it up’ into two separate dependencies, as in *Mit gondol János hogy kit hívott meg Mari?* ‘what thinks John that who invited Mary’. Here there is in fact no long-distance relation between *kit* ‘who’ and *hív* ‘invite’: the filler and the gap are presented in the same clause. But the ‘scope’ of *kit* is over the entire complex sentence: what we’d like to know is not who Mary invited but who John thinks that Mary invited (which may very well be a different person from the one Mary actually invited). This ‘scope’ is marked by *mit* ‘what’ — a so-called ‘scope marker’. This construction, which standard adult English lacks completely (though interestingly, children learning English as their native language go through a brief stage in which they do produce such ‘scope-marking’ constructions), is typically the most popular way to express long-distance filler–gap dependencies in Hungarian. But alongside it, Hungarian has at least two other ways as well: *Kit gondol János hogy Mari meghívott?* and *Kit gondolja János hogy Mari meghívott?* differ very slightly on the surface (non-Hungarian speakers might not even notice the difference at first: *gondol* versus *gondolja*), but they are quite dramatically different in analytical terms, as I have argued in my work. When you look at ways of questioning the identity of the *subject* of an embedded clause, you find even more possibilities — and, interestingly, also quite a bit of variation among speakers with respect to which of these possibilities they prefer. The patterns and the variation among them turn out to be tremendously informative when it comes to figuring out the syntax of long-distance filler–gap dependencies, which is the focus of my research at this time. Hungarian really and truly answers almost all my questions here, which is why it is so important for me to work on these questions in Hungary, with immediate access to native speakers of the language, and with infinite opportunities for discussions with my morphosyntax colleagues at the Research Institute for Linguistics. Sitting at my desk at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City, where I have my permanent appointment, I often find myself in the unhappy position of being confronted with a question that I know the facts of Hungarian could answer but with no direct access to speakers and specialists who would be able to help me with the question and with the data. I could (and would) of course send out E-mail messages to my colleagues in Budapest; but it is so much better to be able to talk to

them directly, and to have a conversation with them in person. E-mail is a wonderful invention; but nothing beats one-on-one personal interaction, especially when it comes to doing research. I could have done the work elsewhere as well; but doing it here, right in the centre of the Hungarian linguistics community, makes everything so much easier and more successful. I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to spend 10 months here in Budapest to finish the work on my book on filler–gap dependencies and the building of syntactic structures — and to immerse myself in Hungarian language and culture in the process.

4. Do you take part in any particular research project in Hungary, or did you contribute to the general work of the research group?

My work here fits well within the work done by the morphosyntacticians in the Department of Theoretical Linguistics of the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Academy. The department does not have a research unit specifically dedicated to filler–gap dependencies and syntactic structure building (the focus of my work here), but since the questions arising in this connection touch upon almost every aspect of syntactic research, the morphosyntacticians at the department will all be able to interact with me while I am here.

5. Where, when and how did you meet your Hungarian colleagues? How did you start working together?

I have a long-standing connection with the linguists working in Hungary, going back to the middle of the 1990s — though my first exposure to the linguists in Hungary dates back to 1988, when I visited the GLOW Colloquium in Budapest, one of the largest and most prestigious generative linguistics conferences in the world. I made my first contact with my host here at the Research Institute for Linguistics, Prof. István Kenesei, in March 1996, when I gave an invited talk at his department at what was then called Attila József University (JATE) in Szeged. We have stayed in touch ever since. I also have long-standing ties with Prof. Katalin É. Kiss, the most prolific Hungarian generative linguist, as well as with Drs Balázs Surányi and Huba Bartos. I have presented many courses and lectures throughout Hungary over the years. I have served on the thesis committees of two of the current members of the Department of Linguistics (Drs Éva Dékány and Veronika Hegedűs), and know all of my colleagues here very well.

6. What expectations did you have regarding your research in Hungary? Any discovery or new publications for example?

The primary purpose of my 10-month stay in Hungary is the completion of a book on filler–gap dependencies and syntactic structure building. This book will, if all works out as planned, be a hybrid between an historical introduction to the generative approach to filler–gap dependencies, a state-of-the-art report on the current literature, and the presentation of a novel approach to the construction of these dependencies and the way syntactic structures are built. Let me elaborate a little bit on some of the novel ingredients of the book. One of these is the idea that there's a range of different ways in which long-distance filler–gap dependencies can be established, but that none of those ways involves the kind of derivation that is considered to be the standard one in the literature — one in which long-distance filler–gap dependencies are the result of a dense succession of short-distance movements. It's precisely this standard derivation for which the facts of natural language (with Hungarian

playing a key role in this) provide no cogent support; for a well-defined set of different derivations, by contrast, precise morphosyntactic evidence can be found. The standard derivation of long-distance filler–gap dependencies works very well in a theory of syntactic structure building which proceeds from words up to phrases and ever larger constituents: the so-called ‘bottom-up’ approach. This approach to structure building has never meshed well with the way speakers process sentences, which is universally considered to proceed in a ‘top-down’ way: when you process an incoming sentence that you hear or read, you make your way from the sentence level down to its subconstituents. For a long time now, there has been friction between what we know about sentence processing and what the generative approach has postulated as the proper approach to structure building. Once we realise that what is commonly considered to be some of the strongest evidence for the ‘bottom-up’ approach to syntactic structure building actually isn’t evidence for that approach at all, and that a ‘top-down’ approach to syntactic structure building in fact delivers better results, the parser and the grammar can be aligned, which is a major step forward: the grammar itself works better in a ‘top-down’ way, and its relationship with the parser becomes much more streamlined as well — a ‘win-win situation’. What I am going to try and accomplish while here in Budapest is to develop the ideas that I have about the way filler–gap dependencies are built into a book that serves both as an introduction to and overview of the field (because of the central role played by these dependencies in the generative approach to syntax, the focus on these dependencies allows me to touch upon virtually all the central tenets of the model) and as a monograph that I hope will generate fresh discussion in the field about some of its central tenets.

7. What are your professional aims and purposes in the near future? What is your next station (step?) after leaving Hungary?

After leaving Hungary in the summer of 2015, I will return to the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City, where I will pick up my regular duties. I do plan, however, to return to Europe soon — possibly permanently. There are a number of paths to explore in this regard. One would be the excellent *Lendület* programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (from which one hopes the age restriction will be dropped in the near future), which could enable me to return to Hungary and build a research team. Another possibility would be to apply for a grant from the European Research Council. With my host here at the Institute, Prof. István Kenesei, I have already started exploring the various options.

8. What are your impressions of Hungarian PhD students and researcher nominees?

Generative linguistics in Hungary and generative-linguistic research focused on Hungarian have always been top-notch, thanks to outstanding and internationally renowned scholars such as Ferenc Kiefer, Katalin É. Kiss, István Kenesei, Mihály Brody, Péter Siptár, Balázs Surányi and several Hungarian linguists working outside Hungary, including Anna Szabolcsi, Donka Farkas, Julia Horvath, Anikó Lipták and Anikó Csirmaz. The linguists at the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Academy have created a lively environment that is extremely conducive to top-of-the-bill research and exchange of ideas — something that is perhaps illustrated particularly well by their enthusiastic reaction to my initiative to hold weekly syntax reading group meetings at the Institute during my tenure here, which will bring the morphosyntacticians of the Institute (and beyond) together for free-flowing discussions of ideas and questions. Ph.D. students are thriving in this environment. The Ph.D. students’ and junior postdoctoral researchers’ excellent quality is apparent in their written work as well as

in the papers they present at major international conferences. The Institute regularly organises important conferences here as well. For two decades now, I have worked with many Hungarian Ph.D. students in linguistics, two of whom are currently working at the Institute. They have consistently been outstanding — hard-working, dedicated, full of original ideas, good at presenting their work. Hungarians have earned an excellent reputation within the field of generative linguistics. Their language is probably the most densely researched non-Indo-European language, thanks to the efforts of the team of highly dedicated scholars working on the language. There are already two grammars of Hungarian written from the perspective of the generative approach (the monumental four-volume *Strukturális magyar nyelvtan*, published between the mid-1990s and 2008, a subpart of which was also published as a book in English in 1994, and the *Új magyar nyelvtan* from 2006), and Hungarian is also the only non-Indo-European language for which a full-scale generative grammar is being written in English, a project coordinated here at the Institute.

9. Could you tell me some words about other things you are interested in in Hungary?

Hungary is a country that I love dearly. When I was a high school student, in 1982, I made my first acquaintance with Hungary on a school trip from the Netherlands, and Hungary, Hungarians and the Hungarian language have been dear to my heart ever since. Hungarians are immensely warm and caring people, with a cultural heritage that is truly remarkable. I would like to single out music in this connection. There are so many wonderful, world-class stages for music performance in Budapest alone, with the gorgeously restored Music Academy, the brand new Palace of the Arts and the amazing Opera House all boasting jam-packed programmes featuring the outstanding Budapest Festival Orchestra and National Philharmonic Orchestra as well as many other ensembles. I am writing this right after a weekend literally filled to the brim with marvellous music — including the Pablo Casals International Cello Competition at the Music Academy, amazing jazz and a superb performance of two Brahms symphonies by the Budapest Festival Orchestra at the Müpa, and lots of singing in celebration of the Magyar Dal Napja (as Iván Fischer said after last Sunday's Festival Orchestra performance at Müpa, 'Fontos hogy mindenki énekeljen' — after which he and his musicians sang together to the crowd). There's plenty of other great art as well. For instance, the Fine Arts Museum, which is just a stone's throw away from the Research Institute for Linguistics in its wonderful location on Benczúr utca, will soon be hosting a splendid exhibition featuring work by Rembrandt and other artists from the Dutch Golden Age, which I'm sure I'll visit several times. And I could go on and on. There's so much beauty and excitement in Budapest that it is difficult to find the time to work... And there's much more besides Budapest. I know the Alföld quite well. I spent a good amount of time there in the past, and thankfully I will have a chance to visit a different part of it for a few days in October, which I am very much looking forward to. Of course, throughout my time in Hungary I will also be in the optimal position to sample Hungarian food — especially my personal favourites: the delicious fruit soups that Hungarian cuisine is so good at. I can hardly wait for the *meggy* to be in season again so that I can have my fill of *meggy leves*. Though when you add it all together I've spent a considerable amount of time in Hungary over the years, I've never truly lived in Hungary before. These 10 consecutive months during which I will be at the Academy as a Distinguished Guest Scientist will give me my first experience of living in the throbbing heart of this wonderful country. I've felt right at home here from the moment I landed, and I'm sure I'll be very sad to leave when my time here is up. But I'll be back for more.