

Focused topic constructions in Hungarian
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The pragmatic concepts of topic and focus are usually treated as mutually exclusive in Hungarian: topic function has been defined in terms of aboutness or frame-setting and assigned to constituents in topic position, whereas the structural focus position of the Hungarian sentence has been claimed to involve identification or predication (É. Kiss 2002, 2006, Kenesei 2006). On the other hand, it has been shown for languages with cleft constructions that the cleft constituent in *it*-clefts may play the role of an aboutness topic in certain contexts where new information is carried by the relative clause following the cleft constituent (Prince 1978, Huber 2006, den Dikken 2013).

This study investigates the possibility of using a constituent in structural focus position functioning as a pragmatic topic in Hungarian. This type of use turns out to be relatively frequent in Hungarian, especially in equative copular sentences (1), but in other types of constructions as well (2)-(3):

- (1) Who are you?
Én_F vagyok az éjjeliőr.
I am the night-watchman
'I am the night-watchman'
- (2) How did Peter run?
Ő_F futott a leggyorsabban.
he ran.3SG the fastest
'He ran the fastest'
- (3) What kind of house is this?
Itt_F született Radnóti Miklós.
here was-born R. M.
'Here was born Miklós Radnóti'

These constructions – referred to as *focused topic constructions* in this talk – share the following properties:

- (i) The constituent in preverbal focus position is a definite or specific indefinite NP or a place/time locative expression.
(ii) Not only the preverbal constituent but also the postverbal material bears main stress.
(iii) The constituent in preverbal focus position is contextually or situationally linked and the verb – together with the postverbal material – conveys new information about the referent of the focused expression.

Moreover, they are often contextually equivalent with sentences with classical topic-comment articulation: the question in (1) may be answered by (4) below as well. In other cases, only the option with focused topic is available. For instance, (5) and (6) are ruled out in any context, not only in contexts provided by the questions in (2) and (3), respectively:

- (4) pro az éjjeliőr vagyok.
the night-watchman am
'I am the night-watchman'
- (5) *pro a leggyorsabban futott.
the fastest ran.3SG
'He ran the fastest'
- (6) *Itt_{Top} megszületett Radnóti Miklós.
here Perf.was-born R. M.
'Here was born Miklós Radnóti'

In this talk I will argue that the main motivation of the use of these focused topic constructions is to exploit the exhaustiveness presupposition associated with identificational

foci: the sentence asserts something about the referent of the focused constituent and implies at the same time that this referent is being selected exhaustively over some potential candidates in the universe of discourse.

This motivation explains the fact that focused topic constructions typically contain predicates that inherently impose a uniqueness condition to the preverbal argument: definite NPs in case of equative copular sentences, predicates containing superlatives or other restrictive expressions, verbs such as *győzni* ‘to win’, *megszületni* ‘to be born’, *meghalni* ‘to die’ etc. The contrast between (7) and (8) indicates that this lexical property of the predicate may restrict the type of construction used with it:

(7) What do you think about yourself after all that happened?

a É_{nf} vagyok a felelős a törtétekért.
I am the responsible the happenings.CAUS
‘I am the responsible for what happened’
b pro felelős vagyok a törtétekért.
responsible am the happenings.CAUS
‘I am responsible for what happened’

A subclass of focused topic constructions are the so-called quiz-question sentences, analyzed in É. Kiss (2011). É. Kiss explains the use of the latter as a special syntactic device for encoding new information as presupposed information, since what is asserted in them is in fact already known by the hearer, as opposed to (9) in which the speaker may not felicitously assume that the hearer is aware of the information carried by the “ground” part of the answer.

(8) Who is Lee Harvey Oswald?

Ő_f lőtte le John Kennedyt. (É. Kiss 2011:257)
he shot.3SG down J. K.ACC
‘He shot down John Kennedy’

(9) Who is John Smith?

??‘Ő_f lőtte le a ‘szomszédját. (Idem.)
he shot.3SG down the neighbor.POSS.ACC
‘He (is the one who) shot his neighbor’

The exhaustivity approach I propose here accounts for the main motivation behind the syntactic encoding of assertions like the answer in (8) as follows: the presupposed part of quiz-question sentences (in (8): “someone shot John Kennedy”) presents a unique event involving the referent of the focused constituent, and it is the uniqueness rather than the presupposed status of this event that allows for the exhaustive identification of the individual denoted by the preverbal expression. As for the answer in (9), the event described by the V and the postverbal material (“someone shot his neighbor”) does not fulfill in any context the uniqueness condition necessary for the identification of the individual involved in it.

References

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