

Identificational focus in Hungarian is metalinguistic

Christopher Pinon

Université Lille 3 / UMR 8163 STL

According to the standard view of (free) identificational focus in Hungarian (Szabolcsi 1981, 1994, Kenesei 1986, van Leusen & Kálmán 1993, É. Kiss 1998), technical details aside, identificational focus is *semantically exhaustive*, as illustrated in (1) (which can be contextualized as possible replies to the question *Ki csókolta meg Tamást?* [who kissed PREV Thomas.ACC] ‘Who kissed Thomas?’).

- (1) a. REBEKA csókolta meg Tamást.
Rebeka kissed PREV Thomas.ACC
‘REBEKA kissed Thomas.
- b. REBEKA ÉS NOÉMI csókolták meg Tamást.
Rebeka and Noemi kissed PREV Thomas.ACC
‘REBEKA AND NOEMI kissed Thomas.

In each of the sentences in (1), the focused expression is said to be interpreted exhaustively, which means that the individuals referred to by the focused expression are the sole individuals to have kissed Thomas. For example, (1b) is said to mean that Rebeka and Noemi, no fewer and no more, were the ones to have kissed Thomas; or to put it another way, Rebeka and Noemi are *identified* as those who kissed Thomas.

In Hungarian, identificational focus is signaled both phonetically by prosodic prominence (indicated by small capitals in (1)) and syntactically by the placement of the focused expression in the position immediately before the tensed verb. The syntactic requirement is most visible if the verb has a preverb (e.g., *meg-csókol* [PREV-kiss] ‘kiss’ in (1)), because in this case the preverb is required to follow the verb. If no focused expression is present, the preverb immediately precedes the verb, as seen in the non-focus (“neutral”) variants of the sentences in (1):

- (2) a. Rebeka meg-csókolta Tamást. ‘Rebeka kissed Thomas.’
b. Rebeka és Noémi meg-csókolták Tamást. ‘Rebeka and Noemi kissed Thomas.’

In none of these sentences is exhaustivity entailed. For instance, the uncontroversial meaning of (2b) is that Rebeka and Noemi, and possibly others as well, kissed Thomas. (If a verb lacks a preverb, then prosodic prominence is the main cue that an expression immediately preceding the tensed verb is focused.)

Arguably, the strongest argument for the exhaustivity of identificational focus is originally due to Szabolcsi (1981), who points out that a sentence with a focused conjoined NP does not seem to entail a corresponding sentence with only one of the conjoined NPs focused, whereas this is not the case if the respective NPs are not focused. Recasting Szabolcsi’s observation as an acceptability test with *tehát* ‘therefore’, note that (3a) is judged to be unacceptable, whereas (3b) is fine.

- (3) a. #REBEKA ÉS NOÉMI csókolták meg Tamást; tehát REBEKA csókolta meg.
#‘REBEKA AND NOEMI kissed Thomas; therefore, REBEKA kissed him.’
b. Rebeka és Noémi meg-csókolták Tamást; tehát Rebeka meg-csókolta.
‘Rebeka and Noemi kissed Thomas; therefore, Rebeka kissed him.’

Szabolcsi concludes that this contrast reveals a *semantic* feature of identificational focus, namely, that it is exhaustive, which accounts for why in (3a) we cannot infer the truth of the second clause (= (1a)) from the truth of the first clause (= (1b)).

In this paper, I propose another view of the contrast in (3), a view that takes identificational focus to be *metalinguistic*. On this view, the unacceptability of (3a) is not due to the failure of an entailment

at the level of the semantics of the object language, but it is instead due to a conflict in *assertability*. The idea is that if the first clause is assertable with respect to a given situation, then the second clause is not assertable with respect to the same situation. Exhaustivity still plays a role in identificational focus, so the present view should not be conflated with views that say that exhaustivity is “pragmatic” (e.g., Wedgwood 2005), but exhaustivity now appears as a *sincerity condition* on assertability.

In more detail, applied to (1b), the present account says the following: (i) the (object-language) semantics of (1b) is the proposition that Rebeka and Noemi (non-exhaustively) kissed Thomas; and (ii) the (metalinguistic) sincerity condition on the assertability of (1b) is that the (would-be) speaker believes that Rebeka and Noemi are (exhaustively) identified as those who kissed Thomas (with respect to a given situation). (This is in addition to the usual sincerity condition that the speaker believes that Rebeka and Noemi (non-exhaustively) kissed Thomas.) The treatment of (1a) is analogous, though now with the sincerity condition that the speaker believes that Rebeka is (exhaustively) identified as the one who kissed Thomas.

If correct, then the unacceptability of (3a) is due to what Austin would call an *abuse*: if the sincerity condition for the assertability of the first clause (= (1b)) is satisfied by a speaker, then the sincerity condition for the assertability of the second clause (= (1a)) cannot be satisfied by the same speaker (for it would require inconsistent beliefs). In contrast, at the semantic level, there is no obstacle: the truth of the first clause entails the truth of the second.

There are at least three considerations in favor of the view that identificational focus is metalinguistic. A first general consideration (that I mention only in passing here) is that the preverbal focus position in Hungarian is already employed for metalinguistic negation (Horn 1989:chap. 6) and corrective focus, so the present view makes the function of the focus position more uniform.

A second consideration comes from the following exchange between two speakers A and B (inspired by an experiment in Onea & Beaver 2009):

- (4) A: REBEKA csókolta meg Tamást. ‘REBEKA kissed Thomas.’ (= (1a))
 B: Igen, de Noémi is meg-csókolta Tamást. [yes but Noemi also PREV-kissed Thomas.ACC]
 ‘Yes, but Noemi also kissed Thomas.’

The puzzle for the standard view is why B naturally reacts using *igen, de* ‘yes, but’ instead of *nem* ‘no’ (*nem* is experimentally significantly dispreferred). On the standard view, B’s reaction should contain *nem* because Rebeka is not (exhaustively) identified as the one who kissed Thomas. In contrast, on the present view, B’s use of *igen* signals agreement with A at the semantic level (that Rebeka (non-exhaustively) kissed Thomas), whereas B’s use of *de* ‘but’ signals a disagreement at the metalinguistic level, in this case, that B would not assert what A asserted because B does not satisfy the sincerity condition that B believes that Rebeka exhaustively kissed Thomas.

Finally, a third consideration is another exchange between A and B, now a question followed by a reply:

- (5) A: REBEKA csókolta meg Tamást? ‘Did REBEKA kissed Thomas?’
 B: Igen, többek között REBEKA. [yes others among Rebeka] ‘Yes, among others REBEKA.’

Again, B’s use of *igen* ‘yes’ is a puzzle for the standard view: B’s reply should be *nem* ‘no’ if Rebeka is not (exhaustively) identified as the one who kissed Thomas. In fact, if B replied with *nem*, B’s reply would be unacceptable. In contrast, on the present view, B’s use of *igen* indicates agreement at the semantic level (that Rebeka (non-exhaustively) kissed Thomas), and B’s use of *többek között* ‘among others’ signals that there are also others who kissed Thomas. (*Többek között* has a short history in the literature on Hungarian, but I believe that the consideration illustrated in (5) is novel.)

In sum, there are reasons to think that the standard view of identificational focus in Hungarian as *semantically* exhaustive is incorrect, but that there is nevertheless a role for exhaustivity at the *metalinguistic* level, as an additional sincerity condition on assertability.