

Talán and *ejsze*: a comparative study of inferential particles in two dialects

Introduction. The paper presents the main findings of a comparative study of the *use conditions* (cf. Gutzmann 2015) of the particles *talán* 'perhaps' and *ejsze* in contemporary Hungarian. (*Ejsze* is appropriately translated into English as *surely* on the majority of its uses, but in other cases translations in terms of *so* or *I guess* appear more appropriate. For this reason, we will gloss *ejsze* as EJSZE, and try to capture its contribution in the translations.) Whereas *talán* is present in all dialects of Hungarian, displaying no substantial interpretational variation, the use of *ejsze* is restricted to Transsylvanian dialects (and, possibly, to certain dialects in Western Hungary). For reasons presumably not unrelated to this distributional difference, whereas the truth and use conditions of *talán* have already received significant attention in the literature, analyses of the formal or interpretational properties of *ejsze* (or its versions *ejisze*, *ejszén*) are scarce. This is despite the fact that the use of the latter (due to its frequency and apparent versatility) is often noted as a characteristic feature of Transsylvanian Hungarian. The present work is the first attempt at a formal pragmatic analysis of the latter particle.

Previous work. Kiefer (1981, 2005, 2018) and (Kugler 2008, 2010) have attributed an epistemic modal, inferential meaning to *talán* in declaratives. Based on these assumptions, as well as contextual requirements on the appearance of the particle, Gyuris (2020) proposes that *talán* makes no contributions to the truth conditions (following Kiefer 2018), and that its contribution to the use conditions of falling and rise-fall (\wedge) declaratives (cf. Varga 2010 for an account of the latter's prosody), illustrated in (2) and (3) (uttered in Context I), can be summarized as in (1):

(1) The use conditions of declaratives containing *talán* (informal):

UC1: There is an (explicit or implicit) open question Q in the discourse, which the prejacent encodes a complete answer to.

UC2: S has conjectured that the prejacent is compatible with S's knowledge.

Context I:

A and B are talking. They know that Mari and Béla always walk the dogs together. They see Béla walk the dogs alone. A: Why is Béla walking the dogs alone? B replies:

(2) Mari *talán* elutazott a hegyekbe.

Mari perhaps VM.travelled the mountains.into
'Mari perhaps went to the mountains.'

(3) Mari *talán* \wedge elutazott \wedge a hegyekbe \wedge ?

'Mari perhaps went to the mountains?'

The dictionary entry for *ejsze* in Itzész et al. (2016) associates a wide range of meanings with *ejsze*, claiming that can be used to express "that the speaker finds something possible, very likely, or certain", "to mark an assertion that does not correspond to expectations, based on information in the previous sentence or the context", "to introduce an objection, or encode rejection", or "to encode annoyance, irritation".

Basic observations and assumptions. We propose that there is a way to account for the apparently diverse uses of *ejsze* by claiming that, similarly to *talán*, it does not contribute to truth conditional interpretation, only to the use conditions of sentences. In the latter dimension, it serves as an *inferential evidential*: it marks that S considers the prejacent not only to be compatible with her/his knowledge, cf. UC2 in (1) for *talán*, but to *follow on the basis of defeasible inference from her/his knowledge*. Thus, *ejsze* makes a contribution analogous to what Eckardt (2020) attributes to German *wohl* in declaratives.

First, the proposal accounts for why (4) is felicitous in Context I:

- (4) Mari *ejsze* elutazott a hegyekbe.
'Mari surely went to the mountains.'

Second, it explains why *ejsze* is felicitous in (5) in Context II, where neither versions of (6) are:

Context II: At a lakeside resort, A meets his friends, who are walking towards the lake with towels. A says:

- (5) *Ejsze, mentek fürödni!*
EJSZE go.2PL bathe.inf
'Wow, you are going bathing!'
- (6) # *Talán mentek fürödni. /#Talán mentek\ fürödni^?*
perhaps go.2PL bath.INF perhaps go.2PL bath.INF
'You are perhaps going bathing.'/'You are perhaps going bathing?'

Extensions. We argue that by extending the general approach outlined above in two directions, further uses of *ejsze* can also be accounted for. First, (7) can be explained by assuming that the inference does not concern the propositional content of the utterance but the speech act itself: given the circumstances, making the promise turns out to be an obvious thing to do.

Context III. A stands on the bathroom scale and realizes that he has put on some weight. A:

- (7) *Ejsze, holnaptól kezdve minden nap sportolok!*
EJSZE tomorrow.from starting every day do.sports.1SG
'So, I will do sports every day starting from tomorrow!'

Second, the reason why *ejsze* can be used as a *hedge* in contexts like (8) is that it allows S to present the prejacent as the result of defeasible inference for politeness (cf. English *I guess*):

Context IV. A asks B whether he would like to watch a movie after dinner. B answers:

- (8) *Nagyon fáradt vagyok, ejsze vacsora után lefekszem.*
very tired be.1SG EJSZE dinner after go.to.bed.1SG
'I'm very tired, I guess I'll go to bed after dinner.'

References

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