

Defectivity in syntax and the Hungarian zero copula

Abstract

Arguments for a zero copula

Hungarian sentences with a nominal predicate as well as so-called “identifying” sentences (stating the identity of two individuals) contain no finite verb form in the third person of the present indicative, although they do in all other persons and all other tenses/moods (i.e., past, conditional, conditional past and subjunctive). This has led most grammarians, traditional and modern alike, to posit a zero form of the copula in the cases in point (two exceptions are Komlósy, 1992, and É. Kiss, 2002).

The presence of an overt copula in most other cases is not the only argument for the assumption of a zero copula in question. There are morphological arguments (namely, that Hungarian nominals do not take verbal endings, so it is not plausible to say that the nominal has a zero affix in the cases under scrutiny), and also syntactic arguments (in a number of expression types where the presence of a finite verb plays a role, e.g., in the case of contrastive foci, the alleged zero copula could play the role of an inaudible finite verb).

Problems with assuming a zero copula

It has been noted already in the 1980's (É. Kiss, 1981) that there are certain mysterious cases that contradict the zero copula hypothesis. In particular, certain predicted structures do not exist: you cannot have a predicate nominal in the contrastive topic position, then a contrastive focus without a finite verb immediately following it, even if the sentence is in the present indicative, and the subject is a third person one. I will argue that there is at least one other type of structure (related to the position of the question particle *-e*) where a similar kind of “syntactic defectivity” can be observed. I will argue that the data suggest that this is a case when certain phrase structure rules, which would otherwise serve as good candidates for explaining a number of expression types, seem to exclude each other when no overt copula is allowed. The situation is somewhat reminiscent of other types of defectiveness, e.g., of the morphological kind, in grammar.

Defectivity

In my view, defectivity is closely related to free variation. As a matter of fact, it is often the case that a certain paradigmatic function cannot be fulfilled by any morphological form for certain speakers (i.e., defectivity arises), while other speakers accept or use various forms in the given function (i.e., there is more or less free variation between competing forms).

One possible explanation for the relationship between defectivity and free variation is that both cases are due to *conflicting regularities* that should be embodied by one and the same structure. The outcome (i.e., free variation vs. defectivity) depends on whether the conflict

can be resolved, at least marginally, by relying on yet other regular patterns (yielding free or marginal variation), or no such repair strategy is available (yielding defectivity).

I will show that, in the case of structures involving a potential zero copula in Hungarian, we find examples for both outcomes. While defectivity prevails in the structure involving a contrastive topic mentioned above, marginally acceptable solutions exist for other types of regularity conflicts, namely, the one related to the question particle *-e*.

References

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