

# Verb Form, Definiteness, and the Given-New Distinction in Hungarian\*

JEFFREY HARLIG

Indiana University Bloomington, Indiana

The present work attempts to explain certain phenomena in Hungarian involving verbal prefixes or preverbs (Hungarian *igekötő*) in terms of the relationship of those preverbs to a feature of noun phrases, namely definiteness. The material presented here arose out of an effort to account for problems of verb form that could not be satisfactorily explained in terms of verbal aspect. The linguistic data described in this article are therefore, by definition, exceptions to a more general pattern of aspect and aspect-like expression which I will describe in a moment. Although the data are exceptional in this sense, I believe that the pattern they exemplify is consistent with general processes in Hungarian, and that using noun phrase definiteness as a parameter in explaining verbal phenomena is a method that can lead to useful results in the future.

## Preverbs and aspect in Hungarian

Preverbs in Hungarian are mostly adverbial particles with spatial meanings. They include *el-* 'away', *ki-* 'out', *le-* 'down', and *meg-*. While *meg-* historically meant 'back to', today it has no clear lexical meaning of its own and is considered to be a purely "perfectivizing" preverb (Bencédy et al. 1976, Tompa 1968). The role of preverbs in the expression of aspect in Hungarian is a complex and controversial topic. Several recent works, such as Kiefer 1982 and 1983, Wacha 1983, de Groot 1984, Hetzron 1982, and Pete 1983, not to mention other works dating back into the last century, discuss this problem. There is one relatively consistent pattern which serves as the starting point for this investigation, shown in (1) and (2). (For clarity, preverbs are shown separated from the base verb by a dash '-,.)

\*I would like to thank Professor Gyula Décsy, Professor Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, and András Bocz for helpful comments on the conference version of this paper. I would also like to express my debt to Olga Böke, past Hungarian lecturer at Indiana University, for extensive discussion with me of much of the material presented here.

Portions of this paper appear in chapter 5 of my dissertation (Harlig 1989). That research was supported by dissertation research grants from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and Fulbright-Hays.

- (1) a. János el-olvasta a könyvet.  
'János read the book.'

- b. János éppen olvasta a könyvet, amikor be-jöttem.  
'János was (just then) reading the book when I came in.'

- (2) a. Mari meg-írta a levelet.  
'Mari wrote the letter.'

- b. Mari éppen írta a levelet, amikor...  
'Mari was (just then) writing the letter when...'

The (a) forms above, in the past tense, indicate a completed action. The (b) forms indicate an incomplete and/or ongoing action in the past tense. The (b) meaning is probably not identical to the English progressive form shown in the translations, but the progressive is a convenient and reasonable means of expressing the temporal value of the (b) Hungarian sentences for an English audience.

There can be a clear aspectual opposition in Hungarian when three conditions are met: 1) the verb phrase describes a process, such as *read the book* or *write the letter* and their Hungarian equivalents shown above; 2) both the verb with a preverb and the form without take an accusative object (marked with *-t*); and 3) that object is definite, for example, marked with the definite article *a/az* 'the'.

### Verbs with defective aspect paradigms

In contrast, the verbs to be described below have a form corresponding to (1a) and (2a), but generally lack a form corresponding to (1b) or (2b), if the meaning is intended to be "progressive". For example, two of the verbs, (*meg-*)*talál* 'find' and (*meg-*)*kap* 'get' behave like this:

- (3) a. Meg-találtam a kulcsom.  
'I found my key.'

- b. \*(Éppen) találtam a kulcsom.  
'\*I was finding my key.'

- (4) a. Meg-kapta a csomagot.  
'He got the package.'

- b. \*(Éppen) kapta a csomagot.<sup>1</sup>  
'He was getting the package.'

In other words, these verbs do not create an aspectual opposition, because one pole of the opposition is lacking.<sup>2</sup> What they do instead is utilize the same morphological

feature—presence or absence of the preverb—to mark differences in the definiteness of their arguments, i.e., the noun phrases that occur with them. I will describe three ways that this happens. In the first case (already suggested by (3) and (4)), a form with a preverb accepts a definite argument but not an indefinite one; for the form without a preverb the reverse is true. In the second case, the form with a preverb may allow an indefinite argument, but will impose a special interpretation on it. In the third case, which may have very few representatives, a kind of definite/indefinite opposition is imposed within the category of definite arguments, depending on the presence or absence of the preverb.

### Definiteness marking through preverbs

The remaining discussion owes a great deal to work by Anna Szabolcsi (Szabolcsi 1984) and Balázs Wacha (Wacha 1984), both of the Linguistics Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest.

#### *Opposition between definite and indefinite*

Szabolcsi (1984) identified a group of verbs including *van* 'be', *érkezik* 'arrive', *történik* 'happen', and *kap* 'get' which accept indefinite arguments, and reject definite arguments. Some of these are presented below. (Examples adapted from Szabolcsi 1984.)

(5) a. *Van*  $\emptyset$  könyv / két könyv /  $\emptyset$  tej.  
'There is a book/are two books/is (some) milk.'

b. \**Van* a könyv/Mari könyve.  
'~ \*There's the book/Mari's book.'

(6) a.  $\emptyset$  Levél *érkezett*/Érkezett egy levél.  
'There arrived a letter.'

b. \*Érkezett a levél.  
'~ \*There arrived the letter.'

(7) a. Könyvet/két könyvet/tejet *kapott*.  
'He got a book/two books/(some) milk.'

b. \**Kapta* a könyvet/Mari könyvét.  
'He got (was getting?) the book/Mari's book.'

Note that all the (a) examples are acceptable. The noun phrases are indefinite. They may either occur as bare nouns, a distinctive characteristic of Hungarian, or

with the indefinite article *egy* 'a'. The (b) examples, with definite arguments, are unacceptable.

Szabolcs also noted that the verbs *meg-van* 'be (available)', *meg-érkezik* 'arrive', *meg-történik* 'happen', and *meg-kap* 'get' had opposite requirements for definiteness, but she did not consider this to be of major importance. These verbs thus display the opposite behavior of (5)–(7).

(8) *Meg-van a könyv.*

'The book is here/available.'

(9) a. *Meg-érkezett a levél.*

'The letter arrived.'

b. \**Meg-érkezett levél/egy levél* [– specific].

(10) a. *Meg-kaptam a könyvet.*

'I got the book.'

b. \**Meg-kaptam könyvet/egy könyvet* [– specific].

These forms take definite arguments and don't take indefinite arguments. Notice, though, that the indefinite arguments are listed as being ungrammatical with a "–specific" interpretation. It turns out that these verbs can take indefinite arguments, but only with a special interpretation, which Hungarian linguists call "specific".<sup>3</sup> What this means is that an indefinite noun will be interpreted as being part of a larger group of like objects, even though that larger group need never be mentioned explicitly. Let us consider the examples in (11), adapted from Szabolcsi (1984).

(11) a. *Meg-érkezett egy levél.*<sup>4</sup>

'One of the letters arrived.'

b. *Meg-kaptam két csomagot.*

'I got two of the packages.'

These sentences would be used if the speaker had been expecting several letters or packages, and wanted to say that of these, a certain number had arrived. They could not be used to announce the arrival of unexpected mail. The examples in (11) use numerals as indefinite determiners. Now *egy* in (11a) is no longer functioning as an article. In fact, it has taken on a meaning equivalent to an explicitly partitive form, (*az*) *egyik* 'one of them'. The question is why (11a) and (b) do not simply mean 'A letter arrived' and 'I got two packages', respectively.

*Indefinite member of a definite group*

As we observed, *meg-érkezik*, *meg-kap*, and related verbs "want" to take a definite argument, which for Hungarian means a noun phrase with the definite article, with a demonstrative (*ez a* 'this'; *az a* 'that'), or marked with a possessive suffix, for example. When *egy* as the indefinite article; a numeral; or another indefinite quantifier, such as *néhány* 'a few', is used an incongruous reading results. The listener is faced with a conflict: *meg-érkezik* (for example) is a verb which can only be predicated of some known object. However, the noun phrases *egy levél* 'a letter' or *két levél* 'two letters' are not the most appropriate way to refer to something which speaker and hearer know about, since definite forms are available to fulfill this function. The speaker invites the listener to search for something else that can "lend" definiteness to these overtly indefinite forms. The precise mechanism by which this is achieved is very complex, but in brief, principles of relevance instruct the listener to recall, or, if necessary, create on an ad hoc basis, a larger group of the same kind of object(s) to serve this function. The reference in the utterance itself remains nonspecific, but the objects mentioned can be accepted as known because they are part of a known group (e.g. expected letters).

Very few verbs display this behavior as clearly as the ones Szabolcsi mentioned. Only two others come immediately to mind: (*meg*-)küld and (*meg*-)keres. Yet I have reason to believe this phenomenon may be more general. Even process verbs which display an aspect opposition, such as (*meg*-)ír and (*el*-)olvas (see (1) and (2) above), display a pattern similar to that shown in (11). The form with a preverb allows for a reading where one entity (or more) is chosen out of a larger group (12a), while the form without a preverb excludes such a reading (12b).

- (12) a. Egy levelet már *meg-írtam*, de a többivel még nem készültem el,  
'I wrote/have written one (of the) letter(s), but I still haven't finished the others.'
- b. Egy levelet már *meg-írtam*, de a többivel még nem készültem el.  
'I wrote/have written a letter, but I still haven't finished the others.'

Unquestionably, there are other explanations for the difference between (12a) and (b). For now I am only suggesting that we consider whether the parallels between the two types of verb may help tell us something about their semantics that we are currently missing.

*A priori knowledge of definite objects*

As a final instance, I would like to discuss an interesting phenomenon originally described by Wacha (1984). Wacha pointed out that, in certain cases, the presence or absence of a preverb in postverbal position could mark the difference between two readings of a noun phrase object in the sentence. If the preverb is present, the

object is treated as existing independently of the action of the verb, while if the preverb is absent, the object is treated as existing by virtue of the action.

Two things make this behavior especially interesting. First, we now see an opposition between the presence and absence of a preverb for verbs which we said could not show such a distinction. The verbs which will be presented here, *meg-talál* 'find' and *meg-vesz* 'buy', cannot occur in communicatively neutral utterances with a definite object and no preverb:

(13) *Meg-vette/∅-Vette* a kabátot a boltban.  
'He bought the coat in the store.'

(14) *Meg-találta/∅-találta* a táskáját.  
'She found her purse.'

Such an opposition is possible when an element is in the focus position, immediately before the verb base. The focus position is the position for communicatively new, including emphatic or contrastive, sentence elements (É. Kiss 1981). When something is in focus, the preverb, which normally is immediately before the verb itself, is forced to a position after the verb, as in (15). '[F X]' means that element X is in focus.

(15) [F PÉTER] vette meg a kabátot.  
'~It was Péter who bought the coat.'

However, when the preverb has been postposed, it can be omitted from the sentence. This omission is supposedly optional, that is, it supposedly has no semantic effect, as in (16):

(16) [F PÉTER] vette ∅ a kabátot.  
'~It was Péter who bought the coat.'

Wacha's claim, though, is that the preverb's presence or absence creates the semantic difference mentioned above, which will be exemplified below.

The second interesting point about this pattern is that the distinction between new and given which we earlier saw to be expressed by the difference between an indefinite and a definite argument is now expressed maintaining a definite subject/object at all times. The presence vs. absence of a preverb marks an additional distinction within the category of definite arguments, namely whether the speaker's license to use a definite form derives solely from the speech context, or from prior knowledge. When the object is known independent of the speech context, I shall refer to it as 'given'. This use of the term is somewhat more restrictive than many definitions of givenness.

For an understanding of this difference in types of definiteness, let us compare the following situations. First, assume that one of a group of roommates walks into his kitchen and finds a case of beer on the table. He may say "Who bought *the* beer?"

without expecting an answer; he may in fact be indirectly expressing his surprise at finding beer unexpectedly, or expressing his approval of the presence of beer. Next, think of this same group of roommates planning to have a party that will include beer. On one hand, the same roommate we imagined before can now walk into the kitchen, see the case of beer, and again ask, "Who bought *the* beer?", this time wanting a real answer. (He may want to know which roommate – Tom, Dick, or Harry – to thank.) On the other hand, he might walk into the kitchen five minutes before the party is to begin. On *not* seeing the beer, and expecting the worst, he may again ask "Who bought *the* beer?", now with the probable interpretation of 'Oh, no! Nobody bought beer, I bet!'<sup>5</sup>

There are three different sources for the use of definiteness in these three occurrences. In the first case, the roommate can use the definite article only because the beer is in his presence. He has no prior knowledge of it. In the second case, he can use the definite form either because it is in his presence or because he knew about it in advance. Finally, in the third case, the definite form is permissible only because it was decided in advance that there should be beer; since there is in fact no beer there, physical presence cannot be an explanation.

In summary, I will make a gross distinction between current physical presence and prior knowledge (either through prior physical presence or prior discussion) as the licensing factors for definiteness. In reality, the factors determining the use of definite forms are much more complicated. The reader is referred to works such as Hawkins 1978 and Shank and Abelson 1977 for further details.

In our cases above, the first is distinguished from the other two as being an example of physical presence only, while the other two share the feature of prior knowledge. This latter feature, as far as I can determine, takes precedence in its relationship to verb form in Hungarian.

As noted above, Wacha (1984) asserts that objects which are already definite, i.e., known prior to a speech event (cases two and three above), will cause a preverb to remain in a sentence more often than objects which are definite just because they are physically present at the time of the speech event (case one above). He gives the following examples (focus notation added):

- (17) Azt a piros selyemblúzt [F egy szemüveges fiatalember] vette meg.  
'That red silk blouse was bought by a young man with glasses.'  
(Wacha 1984)

- (18) Ezt a piros selyemblúzt [F a férjem] vette [meg ← Ø].  
'My husband bought [me] this red silk blouse.'  
(Wacha 1984)

Example (17), with the preverb present, would be uttered by someone who had seen "that red silk blouse" before and already knew of its existence, for example, a store clerk speaking to another clerk. For the speaker of (17), the action expressed by *meg-vez* 'buy' is not the causal factor in his/her knowledge of the blouse. In

essence it is a report of what happened to the blouse, and, in fact, the blouse need not even be present any longer when the utterance is produced. Example (18), on the other hand, with the preverb absent, would be said by someone explaining how she came to have the blouse. Her knowledge of the blouse derives directly from the action described.

This phenomenon appears in questions as well, since question words also occupy the focus position.

(19) [F Ki] *vette meg* (azt) a könyvet?  
'Who bought that/the book?'

(20) [F Ki] *vette* Ø (ezt) a könyvet?  
'Who bought this/the book?'

A difference in discourse function similar to the "literal" vs. "rhetorical" question distinction in English exists for examples (19) and (20). The former example asks for the agent of the action 'buy', and therefore, the name of a person is the most appropriate response. The latter example may be primarily an indirect comment on the existence of the book now present in the room.

Some Hungarian speakers do not share the feeling that the *absence* of the preverb eliminates the possibility of the prior-knowledge reading. Thus (18) and (20) may also be used for the functions of (17) and (19), respectively.<sup>6</sup> However, I think I can still safely say that the *presence* of the preverb in (20) implies prior knowledge of the object, and would not be a likely candidate for expressing, for example, surprise at an object's presence.

A telling and, I think, amusing example with (*meg-*)*talál* is this: Assume that a husband walks into his house with a child by the hand. If his wife says (21) below, then she conveys, in the form of her question, that she does not know about the child that has just come in. Thus, her question does not have the status of a strict question, as in the English examples discussed above. She may be conveying an implied message of interest or approval, something along the lines of *Juj de aranyos! Milyen szép ajándék!* ['Oh, it's sweet! What a nice present!'] On the other hand, if the husband walks in and the wife says: *Hol találtad meg?* ((22) below), then the child must be a child they knew about already (probably their own child), who was lost, and the wife really wants to know where the husband finally found him.<sup>7</sup>

(21) [F Hol] *találtad* Ø (pl. ezt a gyereket)?  
'Where did you find him (e.g., this child)?'

(22) [F Hol] *találtad meg?*  
'Where did you find him?'

### Conclusion

The preverb *meg-* is strongly correlated with the definiteness of arguments. This relationship comes out most clearly for verbs with which the primary function of preverbs, expressing aspect, is deficient or suspended. However, the "object out of a known group" reading may exist even for verbs that do express aspect, such as *meg-ír*.

The distinctions presented here apply canonically to definite vs. indefinite arguments. However, when the preverb can be absent with a definite argument present, as in cases of focus, the preverb takes on another level of specification. It then can distinguish between definite arguments referring to given entities and those referring to new entities which are definite just by virtue of physical presence.

In order for these phenomena to be of relevance to the overall system of Hungarian grammar, it will be necessary to show that more verbs can participate in the functions described in this paper, and, in particular, to show that other preverbs also make the contributions attributed to *meg-*.

### Notes

1. I have found that not all Hungarian speakers consider a sentence like (4b) to be unacceptable. However, I think it is safe to say that overall, (4b) is less acceptable than (1b) or (2b).
2. Although I initially thought that the lack of a (b) form was the defining characteristic of this group of verbs (see Harlig 1989), I am no longer certain that this is so. However, I continue to believe that the lack of an aspect opposition makes these verbs available to mark other distinctions more saliently, particularly distinctions in noun phrase definiteness.
3. This notion of specificity is different from the notion used in Western linguistics.
4. I give the following examples in the same word order as the preceding examples, to facilitate comparison of the verb forms. András Bocz pointed out to me that the uses in (11) are more natural if the relevant argument precedes the verb, and is treated as a "contrastive topic" ("CT" in (i) below; cf. Hunyadi 1981, Szabolcsi 1980, É. Kiss 1987). Contrastive topics imply that there are other potentially relevant objects which are not being mentioned, and this function dovetails nicely with the "member of a larger group" interpretation that the preverbed forms of these verbs provide.  
(i) [CT Egy levél] meg-érkezett.  
'As for one letter, it arrived. (...as for the others...)'  
I have followed Bocz's advice in the presentation of (12) below as well.
5. In each of these situations, the roommate may ask, "Who bought Ø beer?" with no article. That is a choice the speaker makes. The point is that he *can* use the definite article if he chooses, though the reason he *can* is different in the three cases. Compare this to a situation in which a speaker could not use the definite form: If one person comes home from the market, puts down the bags in the kitchen, then walks into the living room, the other person may ask "Did you buy Ø beer?" out of the blue. She could *not*, however, ask, "Did you buy *the* beer?" if there had been no prior discussion of buying beer between the two of them.
6. For example, Professor Szegedy-Maszák pointed out to me that (20) could easily be used at a birthday party, where the recipient of the book would genuinely want to know who had bought it, so as to know who to thank for it. This is the function that I propose for (19) only.
7. The scenario I have just presented for the use of these utterances is meant only to give an intuitive sense of the distinction between them. It is not essential to my argument that (21) be used to convey

pleasure at the child's presence only, or that (22) be used only in a strictly literal sense. Example (22) may be used to indicate relief that the child is safe in addition to asking for information. The important distinction is that if the former verb form is used, the child's existence was not common knowledge between the husband and wife prior to the child's walking into the kitchen, whereas if the latter form is used, they must have known about him.

### References

- De Groot, Caspar. 1984. Totally affected. Aspect and three-place predicates in Hungarian. Caspar de Groot and Hannu Tommola (eds.), *Aspect bound: A voyage into the realm of Germanic, Slavonic and Finno-Ugrian aspectology*. Dordrecht/Cinnaminson, U. S. A.: Foris, 133-151.
- Harlig, Jeffrey. 1989. The interaction of verbal aspect and noun phrase determination in Hungarian. Ph. D. dissertation, University of Chicago.
- Hawkins, John A. 1978. *Definiteness and indefiniteness: a study in reference and grammaticality prediction*. London: Croom Helm.
- Hetzron, Robert. 1982. Non-applicability as a test for category definitions. Ferenc Kiefer (ed.), *Hungarian general linguistics. [Linguistics and literary studies in Eastern Europe 4.]* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 131-83.
- Hunyadi, László. 1981. a nyelvi polaritás kifejezése a magyarban. [The expression of linguistic polarity in Hungarian.] Candidate's dissertation, Kossuth University, Debrecen.
- Kiefer, Ferenc. 1982. The aspectual system of Hungarian. Ferenc Kiefer (ed.), *Hungarian general linguistics*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 293-329.
- Kiefer, Ferenc. 1983. Az előfeltevések elmélete. [The theory of presuppositions.] Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- É. Kiss, Katalin. 1981. Structural relations in Hungarian, a "free" word order language. *Linguistic Inquiry* 12.
- É. Kiss, Katalin. 1987. Configurationality in Hungarian. Dordrecht: Reidel and Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Pete, István. 1983. Az igeszemlélet, a cselekvés megvalósulásának foka, a cselekvés módja és minősége a magyar nyelvben. [Aspect, the degree of realization of an action, and mode and manner of action in Hungarian.] *Magyar Nyelv* 79. 2. 137-49.
- Shank, Roger, and Robert Abelson. 1977. *Scripts, plans, goals, and understanding*. Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Szabolcsi, Anna. 1980. Az aktuális mondattagolás szemantikájához. [Toward the semantics of functional sentence perspective.] *Nyelvtudományi Közlemények* 82. 59-83.
- Szabolcsi, Anna. 1984. On the syntax (?) or semantics (?) of the definiteness effect in Hungarian. *Groninger Arbeiten zur germanistischen Linguistik* 24/25. 178-218.
- Tompa, József. 1968. *Ungarische Grammatik*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Bencédy, József, Pál Fábrián, Endre Rácz, and [Mrs.] Márton Velcsov (eds.). *A mai magyar nyelv. [Modern Hungarian.]* Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 65-9.
- Wacha, Balázs. 1983. Az "aspektualitás" és tanítása. ["Aspectuality" and how to teach it.] *Magyar Nyelvőr* 107. 2. 152-65.
- Wacha, Balázs. 1984. A folyamatos-nemfolyamatos szembenállásról. [On the progressive-non-progressive opposition.] Ms., Hungarian Academy of Sciences.