

Structural Ambiguity and Case Assignment in Hungarian Clausal and Phrasal Comparatives

0. Introduction

elliptical comparatives:

- (1) a. I am taller than **Mary**.
b. I am taller than ~~{x-tall}~~ Mary is ~~{x-tall}~~.

degree expression (QP) in (1b) obligatorily eliminated in English

Bresnan (1973), Kennedy (2002), Bacskai-Atkari (2014)

Hungarian: both clausal and phrasal comparatives

- (2) a. Magasabb vagyok, **mint** (amilyen magas) Mari (volt).
taller am than how tall Mary was.3SG
'I am taller than Mary (was).'
b. Magasabb vagyok **Marinál**.
taller am Mary.ADE
'I am taller than Mary.'

comparative complement: CP or PP

CP often reduced to C head + one XP

lexical cases are instances of PP (see e.g. É. Kiss 2002; Asbury 2005, 2008a, 2008b)

ambiguity: remnant DP or DP in PP may be contrasted with multiple DPs in the matrix clause

also in Germanic languages (Bacskai-Atkari 2014b)

• Type I constructions:

- (3) I love you more than **my brother**.
SUBJECT READING: 'I love you more than my brother loves you.'
OBJECT READING: 'I love you more than I love my brother.'

• Type II constructions:

- (4) I saw a taller woman than **my mother**.
LEXICAL READING: 'I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.'
PREDICATIVE READING: 'I saw a taller woman than my mother is.'

two major ways of accounting for ambiguities:

- clausal analysis – case-syncretic remnants ambiguous
see Bresnan (1973), Lechner (2004)
- phrasal analysis – no underlying structural differences
see Hankamer (1973)

→ importance of Hungarian: both clausal and phrasal comparatives

relevance to the general theory: ambiguity in (4) cannot be due to the *than*-XP being phrasal

1. Ambiguity and case assignment with single predicates

- English:

(5) I love you more than **my brother**.

SUBJECT READING: 'I love you more than my brother loves you.'

OBJECT READING: 'I love you more than I love my brother.'

reasons for the ambiguity (see Bacskai-Atkari 2014b):

- the DP *my brother* is case-ambiguous
- default accusative case allowed for subjects if overt case assigner is absent

pronominal pattern:

(6) a. ?I love you more than **he**.

'I love you more than he loves you.'

b. I love you more than **him**.

'I love you more than he loves you. / I love you more than I love him.'

- German: ambiguity with case-syncretic remnants, no default accusative

ambiguity:

(7) Ich liebe dich mehr als **meine** Schwester.

I.NOM love.1SG you.ACC more than my.F.NOM/ACC sister

'I love your more than my sister.'

case distinction:

(8) a. Ich liebe dich mehr als **mein** Bruder.

I.NOM love.1SG you.ACC more than my.M.NOM brother

'I love you more than my brother loves you.'

b. Ich liebe dich mehr als **meinen** Bruder.

I.NOM love.1SG you.ACC more than my.M-ACC brother

'I love you more than I love my brother.'

→ the German pattern is fully predictable on the basis of overt case distinction

similar patterns across Germanic

- Hungarian clausal comparatives: case distinction

- (9) a. Jobban szeretlek, mint **Márk**.
 better love.1SG than Mark.NOM
 ‘I love you more than Mark loves you.’
- b. Jobban szeretlek, mint **Márkot**.
 better love.1SG than Mark.ACC
 ‘I love you more than I love Mark.’

generally no case ambiguities in Hungarian – one exception: possessive objects may lack the otherwise obligatory accusative marker (-t)

- (10) a. Látom Mari-t/*Mari-Ø.
 see.1SG Mary-ACC
 ‘I can see Mary.’
- b. Látom az anyám-at/anyám-Ø.
 see.1SG the mother.POSS.1SG-ACC
 ‘I can see my mother.’

but: no ambiguity in elliptical comparatives

- (11) a. Jobban szeretlek, mint **a bátyám**.
 better love.1SG than the brother.POSS.1SG.NOM
 ‘I love you more than Mark loves you.’
- b. *Jobban szeretlek, mint **a bátyám-Ø**.
 better love.1SG than the brother.POSS.1SG-ACC
 # ‘I love you more than Mark loves you.’
- c. Jobban szeretlek, mint **a bátyám-at**.
 better love.1SG than the brother.POSS.1SG-ACC
 ‘I love you more than I love Mark.’

→ strict disambiguation pattern

- Hungarian phrasal comparatives: ambiguity

- (12) Jobban szeretlek **Márknál**.
 better love.1SG Mark.1SG.ADE
 ‘I love you more than Mark.’

(12) represents the most natural order – but: PP can occupy various left-peripheral positions

↔ no fronting for reduced *mint*-CPs (like English *than*-CP, but unlike German *als*-CP)

PP as a focus:

- (13) **Márknál** szeretlek jobban.
 Mark.1SG.ADE love.1SG better
 ‘I love you more than MARK.’

PP as a contrastive topic:

- (14) **Márknál** jobban szeretlek.
 Mark.1SG.ADE better love.1SG
 ‘As for Mark, I love you more than he loves you / than I love him.’

PP as a distributive phrase:

- (15) **Márknál** is jobban szeretlek.
 Mark.1SG.ADE too better love.1SG
 ‘I love you even more than Mark.’

→ information structure plays no decisive role in the interpretation of the PP

summary for Type I:

- Germanic: pattern predictable from general case-assignment properties
 → both ambiguity and disambiguation
- Hungarian clausal comparatives: strict case distinction (stricter than generally)
- Hungarian phrasal comparatives: ambiguity

2. Ambiguity and case assignment with two predicates

- English:

- (16) I saw a taller woman than **my mother**.
 LEXICAL READING: ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.’
 PREDICATIVE READING: ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

possible reasons for the ambiguity:

- the DP *my mother* is case-ambiguous (see Bacskai-Atkari 2014b)
- the remnant DP is a subject either way

pronominal pattern:

- (17) a. ?I saw a taller woman than **she**.
 'I saw a taller woman than she saw.'
- b. I saw a taller woman than **her**.
 'I saw a taller woman than she is.'

- German: ambiguity with case-syncretic remnants, otherwise case distinction

ambiguity:

- (18) Ich habe eine größere Frau als **meine Mutter** gesehen.
 I have.1SG a.F.ACC taller.F.ACC woman than my.F.NOM/ACC mother seen
 'I saw a taller woman than my mother.'

case distinction:

- (19) a. Ich habe einen größeren Mann als **mein Vater** gesehen.
 I have.1SG a.M.ACC taller.M.ACC man than my.M.NOM father seen
 'I saw a taller man than my father saw.'
- b. Ich habe einen größeren Mann als **meinen Vater** gesehen.
 I have.1SG a.M.ACC taller.M.ACC man than my.M.ACC father seen
 'I saw a taller man than my father is.'

English has default accusative case in predicative structures, but no default accusative case in German (cf. Schütze 2001):

- (20) a. Ralf ist größer als **er**.
 Ralph is taller than he.NOM
 'Ralph is taller than he is.'
- b. *Ralf ist größer als **ihn**.
 Ralph is taller than he.ACC
 'Ralph is taller than he is.'

similar pattern in Icelandic

→ predicative readings in Type II are marked by the accusative in English and German

- Hungarian clausal comparatives: ambiguity

- (21) a. Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint **az anyám.**
 saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than the mother.POSS.1SG.NOM
 ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother.’
- b. Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint **Liza.**
 saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than Liz.NOM
 ‘I saw a taller woman than Liz.’

no accusative case available → (21a) is also not case-ambiguous

- (22) a. *Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint **az anyámat.**
 saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than the mother.POSS.1SG.ACC
 ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother.’
- b. *Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint **Lizát.**
 saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than Liz.ACC
 ‘I saw a taller woman than Liz.’

→ Hungarian Type II clausal comparatives behave in accordance with general case assignment properties – German (and English) accusative seems to be exceptional

- Hungarian phrasal comparatives: unambiguously predicative reading

- (23) Láttam egy magasabb nőt **az anyámnál.**
 saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC the mother.POSS.1SG.ADE
 ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

(23) represents the most natural order – both the DP and the PP can move to the left

movement structures also predicative, generally less preferred

potential ambiguity (especially with PP-movement): PP interpreted as a locative

e.g. ‘I saw a taller woman at my mother’s place’

shows inter-speaker variation

preposed DP:

- (24) Egy magasabb nőt láttam **az anyámnál.**
 a taller woman.ACC saw.1SG the mother.POSS.1SG.ADE
 ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

PP as a focus:

- (25) ^{??/*} **Az anyámnál** láttam egy magasabb nőt.
 the mother.POSS.1SG.ADE saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC
 # ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

PP as a contrastive topic:

- (26) ?**Az anyámnál** láttam magasabb nőt.
 the mother.POSS.1SG.ADE saw.1SG taller woman.ACC
 'I saw a taller woman than my mother is.'

the PP complement headed by the adessive suffix is uncontestably phrase-sized → no ellipsis

→ the argument that Type II comparatives are ambiguous because they are phrasal cannot hold: true phrasal comparatives are not ambiguous (also: Italian, Greek)

→ ambiguity in Germanic Type II is really a consequence of case syncretism

also: if the accusative in Germanic were a result of *than/als* being exceptionally a P head, the nominative remnant should still be ambiguous, just like in Hungarian

→ Germanic languages do not have phrasal comparatives

3. Degree semantics and tense

comparative semantics: degree in the matrix clause (*d*) binds another degree (*d'*)

e.g. *taller than x-tall*: $d > d'$ (where *-er* carries *d*, *x* carries *d'*)

• semantics of Type I:

- (27) Alex loves Sam more than **Jay**.
 LOVE(a,s) (i) LOVE(**j**,s)
 (ii) LOVE(a,**j**)

two arguments of a single predicate in the matrix clause

one of them is contrasted with the remnant in the subclause

the other has a corresponding DP in the elided part of the subclause (recoverability)

→ two scenarios:

clausal comparatives: role of the remnant DP determined by case-assignment properties

both in Germanic and Hungarian

phrasal comparatives: DP in the PP can be contrasted with either of the DPs

no hierarchy

- semantics of Type II:

(28) Alex saw a taller woman than **Mary**.
 SEE(a,woman) & TALL(woman,d) (i) SEE(m,woman) & TALL(woman,d')
 (ii) TALL(m,d')

two predicates in the matrix clause: a verbal and an adjectival predicate

either both predicates or just the adjectival predicate reconstructed in the subclause

the remnant DP is a subject in either case

→ three scenarios:

clausal comparatives in Hungarian: nominative remnant compatible with both readings

clausal comparatives in Germanic: accusative with predicative readings

phrasal comparatives: simpler structure reconstructed only (adjectival predicate)

- further difference between verbal and adjectival predication in Type II: verbal predication is tensed, adjectival predication is tenseless

→ PP complement in phrasal comparatives is also tenseless

→ accusative in reduced clauses ← clause is defective (Bacskai-Atkari 2014b)

small clause: lacks a tense layer – hence also tenseless

hence: there is a match in Type II constructions (tensed versus tenseless)

this is related to case assignment but not directly (↔ Type I)

4. Ellipsis in Hungarian comparatives

- ellipsis in Type I: regular ellipsis mechanisms (cf. Bacskai-Atkari 2014)

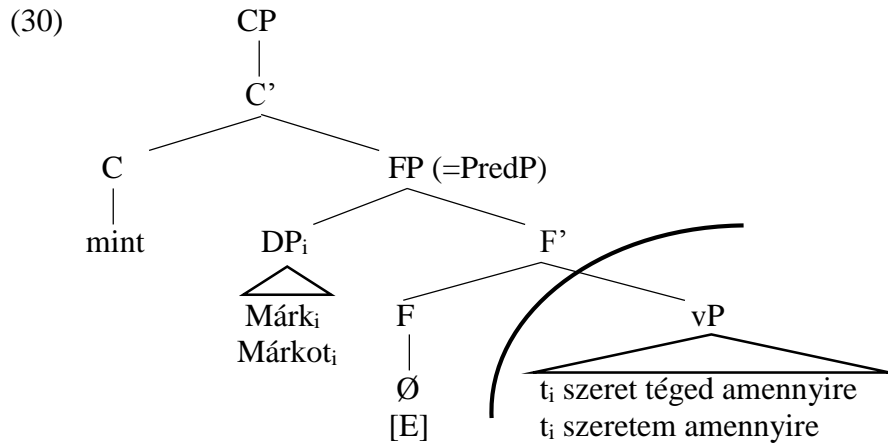
Hungarian: remnant located in a [Spec,FP] position – PredP of É. Kiss (2008)

[E] feature (see Merchant 2001) on the F head

(29) a. Jobban szeretlek, mint **Márk** szeret ~~téged~~ ~~amennyire~~.
 better love.1SG than Mark.NOM loves you.ACC how.much
 ‘I love you more than Mark loves you.’

b. Jobban szeretlek, mint **Márkot** ~~szeretem~~ ~~amennyire~~.
 better love.1SG than Mark.ACC love.1SG how.much
 ‘I love you more than I love Mark.’

structure:



remnant moves to the same position → no structural difference in the position of the subject and the object → case has to distinguish

- Type II ambiguities in Germanic:

lexical reading: regular ellipsis with subject remnant in a tensed clause, subject DP in [Spec,TP]

predicative reading: no TP, only PredP (cf. Matushansky 2012, following Bowers 1993), subject in [Spec,PredP] – no ellipsis, as the degree predicate is deleted anyway (Comparative Deletion)

→ C may select TP or PredP (FP) in Germanic

↔ Hungarian: C selects PredP (FP) anyway

if a (tensed) copula is present, it is located lower than the F head (in a v head)

evidence:

- (31) a. *Mari magasabb **volt**, mint Márk **volt**.
 Mary taller was.3SG than Mark was.3SG
 ‘Mary was taller than Mark was.’
- b. Mari magasabb, mint Márk **volt**.
 Mary taller than Mark was.3SG
 ‘Mary is taller than Mark was.’

if the copula were in F/Pred, (31a) should be grammatical (Bacskai-Atkari 2014a: 244–253)

the copula is regularly elided, hence part of the ellipsis domain, unless it is contrastive

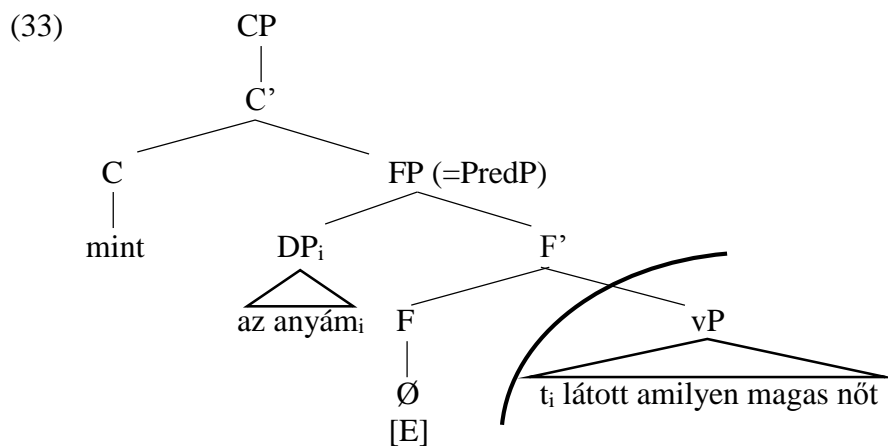
then the [E] feature can be located lower

→ no selectional differences in the C in Hungarian, hence C cannot be transparent for case-assignment in either case

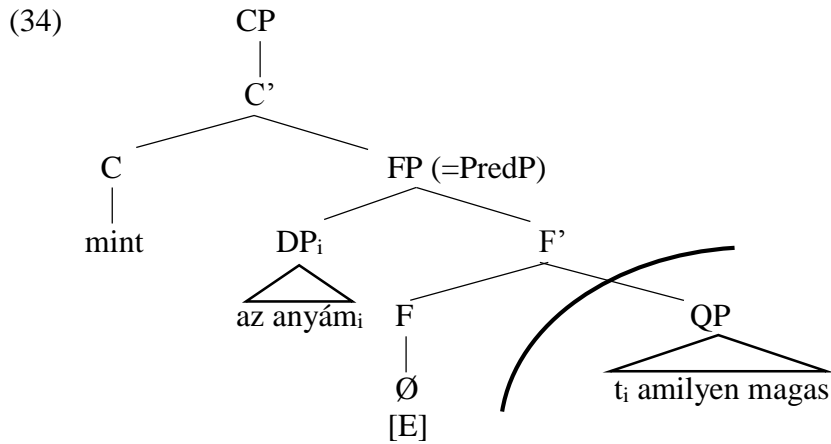
Type II in Hungarian:

- (32) a. Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint **az anyám**
 saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than the mother.POSS.1SG.NOM
~~látott amilyen magas nőt.~~
 saw.3SG how tall woman.ACC
 ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.’
- b. Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint **az anyám**
 saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than the mother.POSS.1SG.NOM
~~amilyen magas.~~
 how tall
 ‘I saw a taller woman than Liz.’

structure for (32a):



structure for (32b):



→ no selectional differences for the C, and no accusative in Hungarian clausal comparatives

→ ambiguity

↔ phrasal comparatives are PPs, hence tenseless → no difference in subject/object ambiguities, but clear choice of tenseless reading over tensed one

Conclusion

structural ambiguities in clausal and phrasal comparatives

- subject/object readings: in line with case assignment properties
- lexical/predicative readings: dependent on tensed/tenseless distinction

summary:

	Germanic (English, German, Icelandic)	Hungarian	
	CP	CP	PP
subject/object ambiguities	✓ ambiguity ✓ disambiguation	✓ disambiguation	✓ ambiguity
subject reading	remnant DP nominative OR accusative if default accusative case	remnant DP nominative	inherent lexical case
object reading	remnant DP accusative	remnant DP accusative	inherent lexical case
lexical/predicative ambiguities	✓ ambiguity ✓ disambiguation	✓ ambiguity	✓ disambiguation
lexical reading	remnant DP nominative	remnant DP nominative	inherent lexical case
predicative reading	remnant DP accusative	remnant DP nominative	inherent lexical case

factors determining ambiguities:

- type of the degree complement (CP or PP)
- general case-assignment properties of the language (distinction vs. syncretism)
- general rules of tensed vs. small clause formation

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