Structural focus and discourse structure in Hungarian narratives

Kata Balogh
Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf
`katalin.balogh@hhu.de`

Abstract

In my presentation I investigate and ex-emplify the discourse-related triggers of the preverbal focus position in Hungarian narratives. Inspired by the approaches of Riester (2015; 2016), Büring (2003) and Roberts (2012), I propose a QUD-based analysis and explanation of the licensing condition of the Hungarian preverbal focus position in narratives.

The research presented here is part of a larger project[1] investigating and modeling the interaction of morphosyntax and the conceptual background of information structure [InfS], the local common ground [CG] or discourse context. The project investigates the influence of InfS on morphosyntax from a cross-linguistic perspective in three un-related, non-configurational languages: Tagalog, Hungarian and Lakhota.

InfS in Hungarian

In non-configurational languages, information packaging considerations often determine the choice of a marked morpho-syntactic structure. The choice of a marked construction signals a cer-tain informational structural organization that is only felicitous if it is licensed by the given dis-course context (local CG), the shared knowledge at a given point of the discourse (dialogue or nar-ration). Languages differ in how far morphosyn-tactic structure is influenced by information struc-ture and CG considerations. A rigid syntax lan-guage like English does not have syntactic means to signal the narrow focus or the aboutness topic. The discourse-configurational language (É. Kiss, 1995), Hungarian, however, reflects information structure at the syntactic level.

Hungarian shows verb-initial word order in the unmarked case (1), and has special structural po-sitions for the sentence topic and the narrow fo-cus of the utterance; topics being sentence initial, while the narrow focus standing in the immediate preverbal position (2).

(1) Meg-látogatta Péter Mari-t.
     prt$_{meg}$-visited Peter Mary-ACC
     'Peter visited Mary.'

(2) Péter MARI-T   látogatta meg.
     Peter Mary-ACC visited   prt$_{meg}$
     'Peter visited [Mary]^{F}.'

The structural focus position in Hungarian is of-ten analyzed in semantic terms, featuring the phe-nomena of identification, predication and exhaus-tivity (e.g. É.Kiss 2006, Szabolcsi 1994). In my presentation I propose a pragmatic approach (see also e.g. Wedgwood 2007), in line with, e.g., Ri-ester (2016; 2015), Vellema & Beaver (2015) and Roberts (2012).

Drawing on various corpus data[2] exemplify discourse-related triggers and licensing conditions of the preverbal focus position in Hungarian narra-tives, and propose a QUD-based analysis and ex-planation of these licensing conditions.

The focus position

As Riester (2015) points out, narratives are less expected to provide the basis of exploring infor-mation structural phenomena, since narratives are often structured along a temporal line. However, the corpus data from different narratives show in-teresting uses of the preverbal focus position, and provide a good basis to investigate triggers of fo-cusing in terms of discourse structure. Consider, e.g., the following utterance in the given context:

---

[2]Translations of the the Hunger Games books and self elicited data from recordings of the Frog Stories (by Mercer Mayer).

(3) *When we are ready at the market, we go to the back door of the mayor's house to sell the half of the strawberry. We know how much he likes it and he gives the price we ask.*

Madge, a polgármester lánya nyit ajtót.
Madge the mayor daughter.POSS opens door.ACC

'[Madge, the mayor's daughter]^{FOC} opens the door.'

This example shows one instance where unexpectedness play a role in licensing the focus construction. From the local CG the expectation is that the mayor opens the door, and the focused constituent expresses unexpectedness. The underlying QUD is the constituent question *Who opened the door?* licensed by the global CG: the previous sentence introduces a selling situation, from which opening the door (the background) is inferable.

Analysis and goals

In my analysis I take focus as a pragmatic notion, (see e.g. Roberts, 2012; Vellema and Beaver, 2015), being an answer of the current Question Under Discussion. According to this view, the function of focus is to help determine the current QUD. The syntactically marked narrow focus construction in Hungarian determines the actual QUD being the corresponding wh-question. This current question (and thus indirectly the focus construction) must be licensed by the underlying context. Two aspects of the CG are both relevant for the licensing conditions: (1) the local discourse context (local CG) and the situational context (global CG) or background knowledge.

The local discourse context is structured and represented as a discourse-tree (d-tree) extended by an annotation schema for indicating the *focus structure* (focus, focus domain, (not-)at-issue content, aboutness topic), as well as the *thematic structure* (discourse topics). In my analysis I adopt the static d-trees from Büring (2003) and Riester (2016). The nodes in the d-tree represent the discourse moves: internal nodes represent the QUDs while the terminal nods indicate the answers. The structure of the d-tree is given by increasingly specific questions, the sub-question relation has no strict entailment relation to the preceding QUD. Sub-questions are either entailed by a previous question (e.g. q_5 and q_6), or dependent on the immediately preceding answer (e.g. q_2 and q_3).
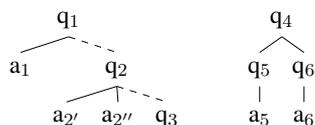
Riester (2016) claims that the QUD-structure of the discourse is driven by multiple constraints, like: (i) there must be congruence between the actual QUD and its answer and (ii) the implicit QUD must be maximally given (or salient).

As narrow focus in Hungarian indicates its immediate QUD, licensing the use of the marked syntactic construction of the preverbal focus position is on the one hand determines by the licensing on the current QUD in the given discourse context. However, licensing the focus position is also influenced by different means, like, e.g. unexpectedness. In my analysis I also investigate what aspects besides the QUD-structure license the preverbal focus position. The following issues will be explored: (i) whether the focus constituent always contains new information, (ii) whether it is an element of a contrast set, (iii) what are the requirements for the background: pre-mentioned, presupposed or expected (conventionally or situationally inferable), and (iv) whether the focused constituent serves as the newly introduced topic.

References

Daniel Büring. 2003. On D-trees, Bfans and B-accents. *Linguistics & Philosophy*, 26(5).

Katalin É. Kiss, editor. 1995. *Discourse Configurational Languages*. Oxford University Press.

Katalin É. Kiss. 2006. Focussing as predication. In V. Molnar and S. Winkler, editors, *The Architecture of Focus*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.

Arndt Riester. 2015. Analyzing questions under discussion and information structure in a Balinese narrative. In *Proceedings of the Second International Workshop on Information Structure of Austronesian Languages*, ILCAA, Tokyo University.

Arndt Riester. 2016. Constructing QUD trees. manuscript.

Craige Roberts. 2012. Information structure in discourse: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. *Semantics and Pragmatics*, 5(6).

Anna Szabolcsi. 1994. All quantifiers are not equal: The case of focus. *Acta Linguistica Hungarica*, 42.

Leah Vellema and David Beaver. 2015. Question-based models of information structure. In C. Féry and S. Ishihara, editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Information Structure*. Oxford University Press.

Daniel Wedgwood. 2007. Identifying inferences in focus. In K. Schwabe and S. Winkler, editors, *On Information Structure, Meaning and Form*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.

q_1 q_4

a_1 q_2 q_5 q_6

$a_{2'}$ $a_{2''}$ q_3 a_5 a_6