

WORD ORDER AND SENTENCE ARTICULATION: HUNGARIAN-ENGLISH CONTRASTIVE ASPECTS

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Abstract

The first part of the study draws attention to basic problems of a contrastive description of word order in Hungarian and English sentences.

The second part gives a brief review of the most important results in investigating the syntax of Hungarian sentences and characterizes the components of their invariant structure. The paper shows the parallelism of the syntactic structure and the 'communicative patterning' (topic-comment structure) of sentences.

By contrasting English sentences and their Hungarian counterparts, the third part outlines the differences one can find comparing the structure of a subject prominent language (English) with a language in which sentences are organized according to the communicative content (Hungarian). The differences of word order and sentence articulation in English and Hungarian can be explained by the different typological character of the two languages.

Keywords: word order, sentence articulation, communicative content and topic-comment structure of sentences, Hungarian-English contrastive linguistics.

1. Introductory Remarks

1.1. This paper does not intend to give a comprehensive and systematic description of the word order and communicative articulation of Hungarian and English sentences. Neither does it belong to the typical contrastive studies that discuss and compare various grammatical phenomena of the source and the target language, surveying the errors and difficulties of the learners of the target language. A number of useful studies of this type can be found in the volume *Studies in English and Hungarian Contrastive Linguistics* (DEZSŐ – NEMSER, 1980). Since English is the target language in nearly all of the studies, it is surprising (but probably not without any reason) that in the paper on 'Word Order, Theme and Rheme in Hungarian and the Problems of Word-Order Acquisition' (DEZSŐ, 1980) Hungarian is the target language.

1.2. But there is a resource that can be of help if we want to study the difficulties of Hungarian learners in acquiring the word order rules of English. The interference of Hungarian and English is investigated – among others in this field too – in L. Budai's work on grammatical contrastivity and error analysis (BUDAI, 1979). He refers to the basic problem of contrasting the word order of Hungarian and English sentences, saying that though not all the permutations of Hungarian sentences are acceptable for the native speakers, the number of the grammatical/acceptable word order variants, sentence permutations is so big that a consistent and explicit contrastive description of Hungarian and English word order could hardly be of any use to Hungarian learners of English. This observation has some 'exempting' and orienting content even for those who study the issues of word order and sentence structure purely with linguistic considerations (and it also explains the direction of Dezsó's contrastive study on word order).

1.3. Considering the problem mentioned above, this paper aims at outlining the main features of the basic syntactic structure of the Hungarian sentence and presenting a brief survey of the principles that guide the movements and decide the position of the major constituents in the sentence structure. The contrastive aspects will be treated by contrasting the English and Hungarian sentence articulation. Analysing the structure of English sentences and their Hungarian counterparts, we intend to characterize the correlation between the communicative/semantic content and sentence construction in both languages.

2. Views on the Hungarian Sentence Structure

2.1. In describing the Hungarian sentence structure and the topic-comment articulation of Hungarian sentences, this paper especially draws on the works of K. É. Kiss (É. KISS, 1982, 1987, 1992) and it also applies a system of categories worked out by K. Klaudy (KLAUDY, 1987, 1997). I also draw on a study of mine investigating the topic-comment structure of 200 sentences taken from technological texts (ARADI, 1987).

2.2. Since the syntactic structure of Hungarian sentences reflects the so-called *communicative patterning* of the sentence,¹ we take this parallelism as a starting point. In this way the sentence constituents having specific communicative functions (given and new information, the centre of communicative interest) can clearly be related to the invariant positions of the

¹*Communicative patterning* is a most appropriate term for *topic-comment structure* in case of Hungarian because its interpretation also involves the decisive syntactic role of the focus, the most marked element in the comment (cf. É. KISS, 1982:39).

Hungarian sentence, analysing the organization of sentence structure of messages as topic-comment: 'The topic of a sentence is the person or thing about which something is said, whereas the further statement made about this person/thing is the comment.' (CRYSTAL, 1983). In other words - and with some modification - we can distinguish the initial constituent(s) of the sentence conveying given/known information (topic) and the post-topic part, the comment carrying new information.

2.3. How can these notions serve the description of the basic syntactic structure of the Hungarian sentence? According to the views of É. Kiss (which I am going to interpret briefly and in a simplified form) two basic structural (and communicative) units can be distinguished in the Hungarian sentence: the topic or logical subject and the verb phrase (VP) in the function of the logical predicate² (the latter, VP being essentially identical with the notion of comment characterized in 2.2.).

The topic in the initial position of the sentence - to complete its characterization - 'sets off a part of the message to be communicated that is contextually or anaphorically known to the listener' (É. Kiss, 1982: 41). Syntactically the topic is constituted of one or more nominal phrases in subject, object or adverbial function:

- (1) [T Az előadás után a résztvevők] feltették kérdéseiket
the lecture after the participants up put questions - their -acc.
 PreV
 az előadónak.
the speaker - dat.

'After the lecture the participants put their questions to the speaker.'

2.4. The verb phrase/comment is the post-topic part of the sentence, it comprises the verb and its complements³ not belonging to the topic (in the 'free' word order Hungarian the comment can also include the grammatical subject). It can begin with a constituent that is the phonetically and communicatively most marked element of the comment and carries a primary/sentence stress. This constituent is called focus, it is always a single phrase in Hungarian, and the verb immediately follows it:

²The notions *logical subject* and *logical predicate* used here, roughly speaking, correspond to the two elements in logical judgements (S-P). It must also be noted that in some pieces of Hungarian linguistic literature the parts of sentences having the given and the new information were referred to as *psychological subject* and *psychological predicate* (which can be confusing sometimes).

³The notion of *complement* will be used here in a broader sense than in the grammar-books of English: it is the equivalent of the Hungarian term 'bővítmény' subsuming all features of the predicate other than the verb.

- (2) Az előadás után az első kérdést [C[F egy külföldi résztvevő]
the lecture after the first question-acc. a foreign participant

tette fel az előadónak.]
put up the speaker-dat.
 PreV

'It was a foreign participant who put the first question to the speaker after the lecture.'

2.5. As it has been said the focus is followed by the finite verb and its complements (if any), that have no special communicative markedness, the focus being the semantically most prominent constituent. The Hungarian verbs can take verbal prefixes (PreV), which modify the meaning of the verbs or assign perfect aspect to them (e.g. ki/'out', be/'to', 'into', fel/'up', le/'down', meg;perf. etc.)⁴. They can also have verb modifiers (VMod) that is bare determinerless nouns (nouns without any articles or demonstrative elements) forming a single semantic unit with the verb (levelet ír/letter - acc. write: 'write a letter'; moziba megy/cinema - to - go: 'go to the cinema' etc.).

If the verb has a verbal prefix or a verb modifier belongs to it, the focus element causes the PreV or VMod to move behind the verb. (This is an obligatory rule of focusing, which results in a structural change in the sentence and influences its communicative dynamism as well.) If there is focus at the head of the comment, the verb and the PreV or VMod postponed after the verb are unstressed.

2.6. The focus position of the comment can also be empty. When this is the case, the verb is the first element of the comment and the PreV/VMod immediately precedes the verb. In such sentences the verb or the PreV/VMod have a primary stress.

- (3) Az előadás után a résztvevők [C feltették kérdéseiket az előadónak.]

See the English equivalents of the sentence (3) in example (1).

Changing the structure of (3) it can be shown that topicalization (moving one or more constituents into topic position) is not obligatory, the topic can be an optional element of the Hungarian sentence structure:

- (4) [C Feltettek néhány kérdést az előadónak.]
up put a few question-acc. the speaker-dat.
 PreV

⁴In English adverbial particles (especially used as part of phrasal verbs) have similar semantic function. If the verbal prefix immediately precedes the verb, the PreV and the V are written as one word in Hungarian.

'A few questions were put to the speaker.'

In a topicless sentence the sentence-structure is identical with the comment part of the topic-comment construction, and it can begin with a focus having the function of 'identification by exclusion' (cf. É. KISS, 1987: 40):

- (5) [C[F Egy külföldi résztvevő] tette fel
a foreign participant put PreV/up
 az első kérdést az előadónak.]
the first question-acc. the speaker-dat.

'It was a foreign participant who put the first question to the speaker after the lecture.'

2.7. In the works of É. Kiss: 'The theoretical framework of the investigations is the variant of generative theory elaborated most fully in Noam Chomsky's *Lectures on Government and Binding*.' (É. KISS, 1987: 9) K. Klaudy - in her work *Fordítás és aktuális tagolás* [Translation and sentence articulation] - intends to apply the model to the theory of translation by analysing the theme-rheme structure of sentences of a Russian and a Hungarian corpus taken from the field of social sciences. In these contrastive analyses a typology is worked out for the thematic and rhematic parts of Hungarian sentences.

Klaudy's approach and aspects are different from those of É. Kiss, but their descriptions of sentence structure and the communicative functions of sentence constituents - in spite of the differences in terminology and the interpretation of certain issues - naturally and inevitably offer similar systems of rules.

2.8. Klaudy's views on communicative sentence structure can be best and most briefly summarized by characterizing the rheme types of Hungarian sentences in her model. (The criteria for the thematic part of sentences do not really differ from those defining topic in 2.2.) In Hungarian sentences two main types of the rhematic part (with slight restriction: verbal part/verb phrase) can be distinguished: *level-prosody rheme* and *falling rheme*.

The first constituent of a level-prosody rheme part of a sentence is the verb having 'strong semantic content', which means that the verb is prefixed (or has a VMod before it), or the semantics of the verb assigns a primary stress to it even if it is a non-prefixed verb, e.g. *akadályoz*: 'hinder'; *tilt*: 'prohibit/forbid'. The constituents in the post-verbal part of a level-prosody rheme have an equally high degree of communicative dynamism:

- (6) [T Az igazgató] [R megbízta Jánost
the director PreV charged John-acc.

egy új program kidolgozásával.]
a new program-gen. elaboration-with.

'The director charged John with the elaboration of a new program.'

A level-prosody rheme with a non prefixed 'semantically strong' verb:

- (7) [T Az anyagihiány] [R akadályozta a termelést
the lack of materials hindered the production-acc.

az üzemben.]
the workshop-in

'Production was hindered in the workshop by lack of materials.'

The examples and the characterization of the level-prosody rheme show that this type of rheme parts have the same structural properties as focusless sentences in É. Kiss's model.

2.9. In the falling rheme part the verbal prefix/verb modifier is moved behind the verb, and the nominal phrase before it has a primary stress. This constituent represents a 'rhematic peak' (Rp) before the verb, and has the highest degree of communicative dynamism in the sentence. As a consequence of this 'radiating' sentence stress, the post-verbal constituents of the rheme are unstressed, and occupy the falling or neutral zone of the sentence:

- (8) [T Az igazgató] [R (Rp) Jánost] bízta meg
the director John-acc. charged PreV
- az értekezleten az új program kidolgozásával.]
the conference-at the new program-gen. elaboration-with.

'It was John that the director charged with the elaboration of the new program at the conference.'

The rhematic peak is the phonetically and semantically most marked element of the sentence structure, so it can be considered identical with the notion of contrastive focus constituent, used in other works on the syntax of Hungarian sentences.

2.10. Obviously Klauďy's typology of Hungarian sentence articulation also includes topicless sentences, which - according to this terminology - can have both level-prosody and falling rheme parts in the initial sentence position.

- (9) [R Megbízta az igazgató Jánost ...]
PreV *charged the director John-acc.*

'The director charged John with ...'

- (10) [R|R_p Jánost] bízta meg az igazgató ...]
John-acc. charged PreV the director ...

'It was John that the director charged with ...'

2.11. The schemes below represent the components of the Hungarian sentence structure and their positions in the different sentence types according to the terminology applied by É. Kiss (a) and Klaudy (b).

(a) Verb Phrase/Comment

<u>[Topic]*Quantor[[Focus]Verb, PreV/VMod; complements]</u>	<i>marked</i>	S
[PreV/VMod, Verb; complements]	<i>neutral</i>	S

*Quantor: the notion here indicates a special position between the topic and the focus for a set of words which express contrast in quantity such as *minden* 'every, all', *mindig* 'always'; phrases modified by *is* 'also' are also placed in this position in Hungarian.

(b) Rheme

<u>[Theme] [PreV/VMod, Verb; complements]</u>	<i>level-prosody rheme</i>
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<u>[Theme] [(Rhematic peak) Verb, PreV/VMod; complements]</u>	<i>falling rheme</i>
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We hope that outlining these two approaches to the syntactic structure of Hungarian sentences and 'projecting' them on each other has made simpler to survey the modules of the Hungarian sentence and easier to grasp the correlation between its constituent structure and communicative patterning.

3. Contrasting English Sentences and their Hungarian Counterparts

3.1. In this part of the paper we intend to illustrate the different constructions of English and Hungarian sentences by contrasting a couple of English sentences with their Hungarian translations, and it is also intended to draw

attention to the difficulties translators meet when translating from a subject prominent language (English) into a topic-focus prominent language (Hungarian), where sentences are organized according to their communicative content also influenced by the context. (Our examples are taken from 'authentic' sources: fiction and technical scientific texts translated by professional translators.)

3.2. In the 'free' word order Hungarian sentence in contrast with English it is often required to place the complements (sentence-level constituents) in a pre-verbal position that is on the left of the verb. This is quite natural considering that the topic, which can contain more syntagmas, and the focus element of the comment precede the verb. So it is quite frequent that the translator must shift the major constituents occupying a post-verbal position in the English sentence to a pre-verbal position in the Hungarian. This way of complementing the verb is in accordance with the predominantly SOV word order of Hungarian:

(11) Lane watched her for a moment with mounting irritation.

(J. D. Salinger: *Franny and Zooey*)

Lane egy darabig egyre növekvő ingerültséggel
Lane for a moment mounting irritation-with

figyelte, ...
watched

(Translated by J. Elbert)

3.3. In other cases this left-shifting of the complements is *not* obligatory or even a wrong decision. If the action of the verb is put in the foreground a level-prosody rheme is expected in the Hungarian sentence without focus/rhematic peak. In such a case the complements can find their appropriate (post-verbal) position on the right of the verb in the Hungarian sentence, too, where the place of the PreV can even formally indicate the communicative type of the sentence:

(12) She then took a cigarette from Lane's pack on the table, ...

(J. D. Salinger: *Franny and Zooey*)

Aztán kivett egy cigarettát Lane csomagjából,
then out took a cigarette Lane pack-from

mely ott hevert az asztalon

that there lay the table-on

PreV

(Translated by J. Elbert)

3.4. The two main types of sentences: neutral (unmarked with level-prosody) and marked (non-neutral with 'eradicating' prosody) will be seen in the following example, forming a 'mini-discourse' taken from a scientific

text. (Source: TUDOMÁNY - the Hungarian issue of Scientific American - The Amateur Scientist: a bilingual supplement.) The 'mini-discourse' is the initial pair of sentences of an article, the first sentence is the neutral one (with the verb also having a relatively strong stress). The structure of the Hungarian sentence - considering the positions of the major constituents - is exactly the same as that of the English sentence, even their syntactic functions are identical: S-V-O. (It would be worth analysing the parallelism and contrast of the long right-branching English and left-branching Hungarian adjectival constructions in the sentences.)

S

- (13a) 1. Solutions containing optically active compounds such as
O
sugar rotate the polarization of light passing through them.
2. The rotation reveals asymmetries in the construction of
the compounds.

(J. Walker)

- (13b) 1. [T Az optikailag aktív vegyületeket, például
the optically active compounds e.g.

S

cukrot tartalmazó oldatok]
sugar-acc. containing solutions-

nom.

[elforgatják a rajtuk áthaladó fényt]
rotate. the through-them. passing light-gen.

O

polarizációjának síkját.]
polarization-gen: plane-acc.

2. [T Az elforgatás] [R(B, a vegyületek felépítésének
the rotation the compounds-gen. construction-gen.

aszimmetriájáról) árulkodik.]
asymmetry-about reveals

The second sentences - both the English and the Hungarian - have the nominalized form of the verbs of the first sentences as their topics (rotate - rotation, elforgat - elforgatás). But the nominal phrase of the English sentence (being in object function behind the verb) takes a pre-verbal, rhematic peak/focus position in the Hungarian translation: it conveys new information and has a high degree of communicative dynamism.

3.5. As it has been seen in Hungarian sentences the pre-verbal or post-verbal position of verbal prefixes/verb modifiers explicitly and unambiguously indicates the communicative patterning of the sentence (neutral or marked

sentence structure, which constituent has the focus function). It is not so with English sentences. The parts of the sentence cannot be given prominence or importance with word order devices, though, of course, the English language has also means to give special emphasis to a phrase (even in writing) using structures called 'cleft' sentences: see the English equivalents in (2), (5), (8). They can be very useful in writing where emphasis cannot be given to the elements of the sentence by stress or intonation. But as for English it must be noticed that '... even in writing this kind of change [clefting] is not necessary if the context makes it clear which is the prominent part of the sentence.' (DOUGHTY-THOMPSON, 1991: 140) However, in Hungarian the word order rule of focusing (to move the phrase having focus function to the first slot of the comment) is obligatory.

3.6. It can be the consequence of all this that the translator must come to a decision making a choice between the neutral and marked/contrastive word order in Hungarian, considering whether the verb or one of its complements carries the prominent information. In such cases the decision usually demands discourse-level or contextual considerations (or raises stylistic questions).

Our example is the first sentence of a short story by James Joyce:

(14a) Eight years before he had seen his friend off at the North Wall,
and wished him goodspeed.

(J. Joyce: *A Little Cloud*)

The first clause of the sentence – in itself, without textual considerations – can be rendered with different word orders in Hungarian.

(14b)

1. Nyolc évvel ezelőtt (korábban) kikísérte barátját ...
'He had seen his friend off eight years before ...'
2. Nyolc évvel ezelőtt kísérte ki barátját ...
'It was eight years before that he had seen his friend off ...'
3. Nyolc évvel ezelőtt a North Wall pályaudvarra kísérte ki barátját ...
'It was the Norths Wall that he had seen his friend off ...'

The sentence of the translator of the short story:

(14c) Nyolc évvel ezelőtt kísérte ki barátját a North Wall
pályaudvarra, hogy búcsút intsen neki.

(Z. Papp)

'It was eight years before that he had seen his friend off at the North Wall to say farewell to him.'

The translator's decision (giving emphasis to the adverbial phrase of time) is well-established and justifiable by the context. As the first sentence of the story it arouses the reader's interest, expectations. As for the time-structure of the story the (Hungarian) sentence indicates that plenty of action of the story will be set in the present and the events of the *before*, the past will be interpreted, highlighted by the events of the *now*, the present time. Coming up to our expectations the second sentence of the story (15a,b) creates the association of past and present. (This is more emphatically expressed in the Hungarian translation, which can be owed to the 'constraint' following from the marked sentence construction of the first clause: *nyolc évvel korábban* - 'eight years before': in the first sentence: *azóta* - 'since that time': in the second.)

(15a) Gallaher had got on. You could tell that at once by his travelled air, ...

(15b) Gallaher *azóta* befutott. Nagyvilági ...
Gallaher since that time PreV *got on*

modora tanúskodott erről már első pillantásra is.

3.7. By analysing the above examples taken from literature and science we intended 'to infuse life' into the theoretical framework presented in the 2. part of the paper and make more practical the notions and explanations applied in it. We also intended to draw special attention to certain issues that can be important in translation between the two languages, and for those who want to gain an insight into the problems of Hungarian word order and sentence structure.

The difference observed in the syntax of Hungarian and English sentences can be attributed, to some extent, to the typological differences of the two languages. The SOV word order type of Hungarian and the prominence of topic-comment structure in its sentences are in close relation with the agglutinative, synthetic character of the language, whereas the basic sentence structure can be analysed according to the subject-predicate dichotomy in English, representing an SVO language type in accordance with its essentially analytic character.

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