Vegans, Teetotalers, and the Decoupling of Case and Agreement in Old Hungarian

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According to Baker (2015) case and agreement can be (A) interdependent, (B) partially independent or (C) independent. É. Kiss (2020) argued that within the Ugric family, extinct Eastern Mansi and reconstructed Proto-Ugric exemplified (A), the Ob-Ugric languages of today (Mansi and Khanty) display (B) and Modern Hungarian is an example of (C). In Eastern Mansi, only topical objects elicit verbal agreement and only topical objects get accusative case. In the other Ob-Ugric variants, while verbal agreement is still a function of topicality, all objects are assigned structural accusative case independently of discourse role. Pronominal objects are overtly accusative-marked, whereas on lexical objects, the accusative morpheme has a phonologically null allomorph: this means that morphological accusative case is still partially correlated to discourse function, as pronominal objects are likelier to be topics than lexical objects. In Modern Hungarian, all objects are assigned structural and morphological accusative case, and object agreement on the verb is triggered by definite objects (independently of discourse function): thus, both agreement and case assignment are fully independent from discourse function. É. Kiss (2020) also argued that this change (A->B->C) is due to the loosening of the strict SOV structure of Proto-Ugric: the increasing frequency of post-verbal objects in Ob-Ugric (SVO) and the development of a discourse functional left periphery (Top Foc V X*) in Hungarian.

As far as the Ob-Ugric languages (dialects of Mansi and Khanty) are concerned, the diachronic pathway has been mapped in great detail (É. Kiss 2020). However, with Hungarian, this has proved more difficult as Late Old Hungarian (the earliest period from which we have surviving texts, 12th C) had pretty much the same system in terms of accusative case assignment and object agreement as Modern Hungarian. Fossilized constructions detectable in Late Old Hungarian (SOV non-finite embedded clauses with non-case-marked objects) and in Middle Hungarian (variable object agreement with topical indefinite objects) lead É. Kiss (2020) to argue that Early Old Hungarian must have been similar to 19th-century Eastern Mansi having SOV word order, with topicalized objects eliciting verbal agreement and receiving morphologically realized structural accusative case.

In my talk, I introduce new, hitherto unreported empirical evidence for an intermediate stage between the hypothetical Eastern Mansi-like Early Old Hungarian and Late Old Hungarian (of which we have textual evidence). Personal names (such as nicknames or nickname-derived family names) often preserve archaic features of phonology, morphology, and even syntax (for the latter, cf. Layton 1990 and Bowern 1998). Of peculiar interest here is the cross-linguistically well-attested strategy of turning a clause-sized element into an adjective or noun without any morphological marking. This is mostly used to create slurs or nicknames based on a characteristic trait: a typical and defining attitude, disposition, or activity:

(1) *know-nothing* 'does not know anything' -> 'ignoramus' (English)
(2) *vau-rien* 'is worth nothing' -> 'useless person' (French)

Such epithets often develop into family names and are preserved as such:

(3) *Shakespeare, Makepeace, Drinkwater* (English)
(4) *Boileau* (= *boit l'eau* drinks the water -> teetotaler) (French)

Modern Hungarian has a set of such epithets/names which preserve a peculiar syntactic pattern: a non-casemarked object followed by a verb carrying the object agreement suffix (realized as a portmanteau morpheme with the 3SG subject agreement suffix):

(5) *bor-(nem)-isz-sza*
wine-not-drink-OBJ.3SG
'wine-lover/teetotaler', lit. 'drinks (not) wine'

(6) *hús-(nem)-esz-i*
meat-not-eat-OBJ.3SG
'meat-eater / meat-avoider'

(7) *ló-dönt-i*
horse-topple-OBJ.3SG
'strong enough to topple a horse', lit.: 'topples horse'

(8) *maga-hány-ja-vet-i*
self-scatter-OBJ.3SG-throw-OBJ.3SG
'boastful', l.: 'scatters and throws self'

The presence of the subject agreement suffix and the availability of reflexive subjects indicates that these are underlyingly full sentences with a syntactically active 3SG subject:

(9) *pro*$_{3SG}$ *hús nem esz-i* (reconstructed Early Old Hungarian)
she meat not eat-OBJ.3SG

'She does not eat meat.'

The obligatory verb-final word order and the position of the negator (O Neg V) reflect the reconstructed word order of Early Old Hungarian (É. Kiss 2013). The absence of verbal particles is also indicative of an archaic, pre-Late Old Hungarian provenance. Given the meaning of these sentences, the object is unlikely to be a discourse-old topic. This indicates that object agreement here must be sensitive to definiteness. The question at this point is whether it is reasonable to assume that the object in sentences such as (11) is indeed definite. The lack of a definite article is not relevant: Early Old Hungarian, similarly to most Uralic languages, lacked articles (definite or indefinite) altogether: definite articles are a Late Old Hungarian development (cf. Egedi 2013, 2014). An important common characteristic of these sentences is that they provide a general characterization of the subject's attitude/ disposition/relationship wrt the object: whether she eats meat / drinks wine / topples horses in general. In other words, the object is generically interpreted. Crucially, in Hungarian, singular definite DPs can freely receive a generic interpretation:

(10) *János* *szőrén* *ül-i* *meg* *a* *lovat.* (Modern Hungarian)
John hair.3SG.on sit-OBJ.3SG PRT the horse.ACC
'John rides horses without a saddle.'

This means that it is reasonable to assume that the generically interpreted object in (9) was indeed definite in Early Old Hungarian too (cf. Egedi 2013:378 for a detailed argument), and object agreement on the verb was triggered by definiteness. These fossils thus arguably represent a stage where object agreement was already a function of definiteness (and not of topicality) and non-topicalized lexical noun phrase objects were morphologically non-casemarked. This latter fact may either indicate that non-topicalized objects were not assigned accusative case (as in Eastern Mansi and reconstructed Proto-Ugric) or that objects in general were assigned accusative case, the exponent of which in the case of lexical nouns was a phonologically null accusative morpheme (as in Eastern Khanty, Northern Khanty and Northern Mansi). The fact that in (8), the reflexive pronoun has no visible case marking supports the former position. This suggests that Hungarian traversed a different path than its Ob-Ugric sisters: the agreement-topicality link was severed first and the case assignment-topicality link was severed later:

Table 1. Topicality, agreement, and accusative case assignment in the Ugric Languages

	Proto-Ugric, E Mansi	**E & N Khanty, N Mansi**	**Reconstr. Early Old Hungarian**	**Modern Hungarian**
Object agr. is a function of:	Topicality	Topicality	Definiteness	Definiteness
Acc. case is assigned to:	Topical objects	All objects	Topical objects	All objects

In É. Kiss's (2020) dependent-case style analysis, the interdependence or otherwise of accusative case assignment and topicality is a function of whether SubjP and vP are separate domains for case assignment:

(11) [$_{SubjP}$ Subject [$_{ObjP}$ Topical object [$_{Voice\ P}$ [$_{vP}$ [$_{VP}$ Non-topical object]]]]]

I argue that in the stage of Early Old Hungarian that is preserved in the construction under discussion, the sentence still had the structure shown in (11) and v was still a hard phase head (as it was in Proto-Ugric and Eastern Mansi): non-topical objects, being in a separate case assignment domain from the subject, received nominative case. Object agreement, on the other hand, was already sensitive to the [+definite] feature, as opposed to [+topic] (in a departure from Proto-Ugric and the known Ob-Ugric varieties). Such a change from [+topic]-sensitivity to [+definite]-sensitivity is a cross-linguistically well-attested phenomenon (facilitated by the shared component of specificity/givenness, cf. Givón 1975:158) and it is a development that is orthogonal to whether v is a soft or a hard phase head.

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