Hungarian possessive constructions, object agreement, and specificity

This paper reports results of a series of surveys of possessive constructions in Hungarian and their behaviour with respect to object agreement. Hungarian has differential object agreement: while all subjects trigger agreement with the verb (glossed as sbj), a proper subset of direct objects (DOs) triggers additional object agreement (glossed as obj). In (1a), the verb agrees with the subject only, in (1b), it agrees with both the subject and the object.

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(1) a. Lát-ok egy kutyá-t. b. Lát-om a kutyá-t. see-1sg.sbj a dog-Acc 'I see a dog.' b. Lát-om a kutyá-t. see-1sg.obj a dog-Acc 'I see the dog.'
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Definiteness (as in (1)) is not a perfect predictor of object agreement. With respect to possessed direct objects, Szabolcsi (1994), É. Kiss (2000) suggest that there are two varieties of Hungarian: one group, the "standard", requires object agreement with *all possessed DOs*, independently of their interpretation. Another variety, the "non-standard", makes a semantic distinction: non-specific possessed DOs co-occur with subject agreement only (SBJ), while specific and definite possessed DOs trigger object agreement (OBJ). A relevant example is shown in (2), which is only acceptable for a subset of Hungarian speakers.

(2) % Chomsky-nak nem olvas-t-ál vers-é-t.

Chomsky-dat neg read-pst-2sg poem-poss.3sg-acc

'You have not read a poem of Chomsky's.'

SBJ, non-specific DO

(Szabolcsi 1994: 227)

In previous surveys, we have not found a significant number of speakers who accept examples like (2). One reason for this is the absence of a determiner (participants consistently judged examples with determiners higher than those without). Another reason is the ambiguity of examples like (2): for "standard" speakers, there is no morphosyntactic difference between specific and non-specific readings, which makes it difficult to control for effects of interpretation.

- **1 Data** To avoid this problem, we conducted further tests with target sentences including imperatives and possessed DOs, as shown in (3). Indefinite objects in such contexts are obligatorily interpreted as non-specific, e.g. *Bring me a doctor!* (Abbott 2010: 154).
- (3) a. *Hív-j-ál* be egy titkárnő-m-et. sBJ, non-specific DO call-IMP-2sg.SBJ in a secretary-poss.1sg-ACC 'Call in a secretary of mine.'
 - b. *Hív-d be egy titkárnő-m-et*. ов д, non-specific DO call-IMP.2sg.ов д in a secretary-poss.1sg-acc 'Call in a secretary of mine.'

This makes it possible to **control for specificity** and makes a number of predictions about expected judgments. First, non-standard speakers should judge (3a) as significantly better than (3b). Second, if standard speakers treat all possessed DOs alike independently of interpretation, they should judge (3b) as significantly better than (3a). Third, if standard speakers are sensitive to the interpretation of possessed DOs, they should judge neither type as acceptable: (3a) is ruled out because standard speakers do not allow for sbJ with possessed DOs, and (3b) is ruled out if standard speakers require possessed DOs to be specific.

2 Tests Participants were asked to judge sentences like (3) on a seven-point Likert scale, two choose one of two alternatives like (3a,b), and to fill in a verb form in a gap: ____ possessed DO.

3 Results

4 Conclusions Our results suggest that ...

Reference. Oxford University Press. **É. Kiss**, K. 2000. The Hungarian noun phrase is like the English noun phrase. In G **Alberti** & I **Kenesei** (eds.), *Approaches to Hungarian*, 119–149. JATEPress. **Szabolcsi**, A. 1994. The noun phrase. In F **Kiefer** & K **É. Kiss** (eds.), *The syntactic structure of Hungarian*, vol. 27, 179–274. Academic Press.