

The interpretation of Hungarian focus in Bidirectional Optimality Theory

Since Szabolcsi (1980, 1981) first made the claim that constituents in the immediately preverbal, so-called *focus position* in Hungarian receive an exhaustive interpretation as part of the truth-conditions, the claim that the exhaustive/identificational reading of the focus is encoded in the semantics of the sentence has been endorsed by many further studies since, including Hunyadi (1981, 1996, 2002), Kálmán (1985), Kálmán et al. (1984, 1986), Kálmán and van Leusen (1993), Kenesei (1986, 1989), Szabolcsi (1994), É. Kiss (1998, 2002, 2006), Bende-Farkas (2006), Horváth (2000), among many others.

These claims have come under recent attack by Wedgwood (2005), Wedgwood, Pethő and Cann (2006) and Onea and Beaver (2009), who argue that the exhaustive interpretation of the focus constituent is a pragmatic effect only, and therefore cancellable.

The paper sets out to provide a way of reconciling the claims about the truth-conditional nature of the exhaustive interpretation made in the earlier studies listed above about isolated sentences of Hungarian, which does have an intuitive appeal, with the claims made by Wedgwood (2005), and Wedgwood, Pethő and Cann (2006) concerning the non-exhaustive interpretation of certain classes of expressions in the focus position in certain actually occurring examples. The empirical data under consideration here will cover Hungarian sentences containing a prefixed verb with the prefix in postverbal position, and particular classes of noun or determiner phrases occupying the immediately preverbal position. Given that a sentence can maximally contain one constituent of the *verbal modifier* category (É. Kiss 2002), we have to assume that the noun/determiner phrases in the preverbal position are not verbal modifiers but genuine instances of focus (marked with the subscript ‘_F’ below). The data considered will cover three kinds of examples, illustrated below. The first kind, illustrated in (1), has an adjunct noun phrase in focus position, the second, illustrated in (2), a bare plural argument noun phrase, and the third, illustrated in (3), a non-monotonic or monotone decreasing DP. The common property to all three classes of preverbal nominal expressions is that they could not occur in the postverbal position of the corresponding sentences.

- (1) Az autót [Péter segítségével]_F szereztük be.
the car.ACC Peter help.his.with acquired vm
'We got hold of the car with the help of Peter.'
(a variant of a corpus example cited in Wedgwood, Pethő and Cann 2006)
- (2) Mari [férfiakat]_F vitt fel a lakásba.
Mary men.ACC took up the flat.into
'Mary took men up to the flat.'
- (3) János [háromnál kevesebb almát]_F evett meg.
John three.than fewer apple.ACC ate VM
'John ate less than three apples.'

The focus noun phrases in the above examples do not necessarily have an exhaustive interpretation, which means, for example, that (2) is not only true if Mary took men but no other alternatives to men (pets, children, etc.) to the flat. Our account for these data will be formulated in the framework of Bi(directional) O(optimality) T(heory) (Blutner 2000). This approach, as OT in general, makes use of soft (violable) constraints ranked according to their relative strength, which are used to select the optimal candidates from a larger set of potential candidates. In BiOT, however, the set of potential candidates consists of potential ⟨form, meaning⟩ pairs, therefore it can be considered a combination of OT syntax and OT semantics.

In the analysis proposed in the paper, the candidates to be contrasted will be pairs consisting of a sentence form, and a list specifying for each constituent whether it receives an exhaustive or a non-exhaustive interpretation. We will assume that the unmarked word order of Hungarian sentences is that of *neutral sentences*, and that movement of a constituent to focus position is costly, and happens only for semantic effect, for information structural reasons. In neutral sentences (cf. Kálmán 1985, Kálmán et al. 1986), the verbal modifier is situated immediately in front of the verb and all

constituents (except for the verb) are equally stressed (i.e., the sentence has ‘level prosody’). Neutral sentences provide felicitous answers to *What happened?*--questions, but not to constituent questions.

We assume that the placement of a constituent into focus position is regulated by syntactic and general pragmatic constraints, only some of which are illustrated below, which rely on general principles about the relation between questions and answers, about the information structuring of Hungarian sentences, and on general pragmatic principles, ranked in the order they are presented:

(4)Non-Exhaustive is Basic (NEB): Constituents outside the focus position receive non-exhaustive readings.

Don’t Focus (DF): Don’t move to focus if the same interpretation is available in another position.

Exhaustivity of Answers (EA): Answers are exhaustive unless explicitly marked otherwise.

Answer/Contrast is Focused (ACF): Answer status or contrasting is indicated by movement to focus position.

Avoid Focusing Verbs (AFV): Verbs are only focused when answer questions or for contrast.

Focus is Exhaustive (FE): Focus receives an exhaustive interpretation.

The following table (which only lists a fraction of the potentially available form-meaning pairs) shows how the constraints listed above predict which form-meaning pairs represent the optimal candidates in the case of (1) above, in a context where it is not uttered as an answer to any constituent question. For the appreciation of the results one has to note that the variant of the example with a neutral word order (**Az autót beszereztük János segítségével*) is ill-formed, as we will show, for incompatibility of the adjunct with the aspectual class of the prefixed verb.

	NEB	DF	EA	ACF	AFV	FE
☞ ⟨Az autót [János segítségével] _F szereztem be; János segítségével-EXH, autót-NON-EXH⟩						
☞ ⟨Az autót [János segítségével] _F szereztem be; János segítségével-NON-EXH, autót-NON-EXH⟩						*
⟨Az autót [beszereztem] _F János segítségével; János segítségével-EXH, autót-NON-EXH⟩	*				*	
⟨Az autót [beszereztem] _F János segítségével; János segítségével-NON-EXH, autót-NON-EXH⟩					*	
⟨[Az autót] _F szereztem be János segítségével; János segítségével-EXH, autót-EXH⟩	*					
☞ ⟨[Az autót] _F szereztem be János segítségével; János segítségével-NON-EXH, autót-EXH⟩						
⟨Az autót beszereztem János segítségével; János segítségével-NON-EXH, autót-EXH⟩		*				
⟨Az autót beszereztem János segítségével; János segítségével-EXH, autót-NON-EXH⟩		*				

The table shows that the first candidate pair satisfies all the constraints, which means that, given the form of the sentence indicated, the focus constituent is interpreted preferably in an exhaustive manner. Bi-directional optimalization is necessary for showing why, using the same form, the focus can also be interpreted non-exhaustively (cf. line 2 above): for expressing the meaning ‘János segítségével-NON-EXH, autót-NON-EXH’, the best form is still the one where the adjunct noun phrase occupies the focus position, since the form with the neutral word order (lines 7-8) is not interpretable. Note that the pair indicated in line 6 is an equally optimal one, as expected, and that forms where the verb is focused are only preferred if they are preceded by a relevant constituent question or if the sentence is intended to encode a statement contrasting with a previous one.