

The licensing and interpretation of non-referential subjects in Hungarian

The ambiguity of non-referentially interpreted null pronominals (*pro*_{arb}) has been widely discussed in the generative literature: in episodic sentences, with 3PL agreement marking on the verb, null pronominal subjects are interpreted existentially, while in generic sentences a “quasi-universal” reading obtains corresponding to the meaning “people in general”.

In my presentation I discuss the characteristics of the possible arbitrary constructions in Hungarian with 3PL agreement on the finite verb and establish a set of syntactic and semantic restrictions on these constructions. On the basis of the empirical data presented in my paper, I propose the following generalizations about null non-referential subjects in Hungarian:

1. The “quasi-existential” interpretation is possible for a null subject with 3PL agreement on the verb if the sentence has non-generic tense and one of the following obtains:
 - i. the predicate expresses a perceivable (ongoing) activity (ex. (1))
 - ii. the results of a past activity are perceivable at present (ex. (2))
 - iii. the predicate as part of its lexical meaning designates a group of people that characteristically carry out the activity. (ex. (3a,b))

This implies that the term “quasi-existential” subsumes three distinct types that have to be differentiated.

2. In characterizing (habitual) sentences containing stage-level predicates non-referentially interpreted arguments are ambiguous (just like lexical indefinites). They can be interpreted either quasi-existentially or quasi-universally. Whether the existential or the universal interpretation is more salient depends on contextual factors and the lexical semantics of the predicate. (ex. (4))

3. Sentences with “quasi-universally” interpreted null subjects differ in an important way from ‘standard generics’ containing the overt subject *az emberek*: the presence of a locative (or some special time adverbial) is obligatory (ex. (5a,b)). The presence of such an overt topic cannot be attributed to the fact that generic sentences are categorial statements partitioned into topic (restrictor) and comment (matrix) and that non-referential *pro* cannot be the topic of the sentence. I claim that the locative or temporal phrase must be construable as an individual-level predicate in the sense that the property of being “in PP” or being there “at the time of X” can be viewed as a defining property of some humans.

4. The “people in general” reading also obtains in Hungarian when the topic of the sentence is an object about which the sentence expresses a well-known/established characteristic following either from the very nature of the object itself or from some social convention. (ex. 6)

On the bases of the above generalizations I distinguish six types of arbitrary constructions in Hungarian.

In the second half of my paper I propose a unitary account of arbitrarily interpreted subjects based on the idea that these null arguments are indefinites minimally content-identified by receiving the semantic feature [+human] by a default rule and are underspecified for person and number features. The [+human] feature suffices to make the null element theta-visible. 3PL agreement on the verb is dummy agreement marking, the PF realization of the following rule: [+human, α person, β number] → [3rd person, plural]. This characterization of 3PL dummy agreement explains why the interpretation of non-referential subjects

does not exclude the speaker and the hearer in all cases and why the feature [plural] does not necessarily impose a plural interpretation: the existential readings do not imply plurality. I claim that ‘*pro_{arb}*’ is an indefinite pronoun that gets bound either by a local operator (e.g. the generic operator) or by existential closure depending on the tense properties of the clause. Further content of the null subject is provided by different mechanisms of content identification discussed for each type separately.

Examples:

- (1) Zajt hallottam. Kopogtak?
 noise heard-1SG Knock-3PL
 ‘I heard some noise. Did someone(s) knock?’
- (2) Itt halat pucol-tak.
 Here fish clean -3PL
 ‘Someone(s) cleaned fish here.’
- (3) a. Dél van. Valószínűleg most kézbesítik a postát.
 noon is probably now deliver-3PL the post
 ‘They deliver the post at noon every day.’
- b. Megerősítették a hírt a rádió-ban.
 confirm-PAST-3PL the news the radio-in
 ‘They confirmed the news in the radio.’
- (4) Ebben a parkban délutánonként fociz-nak.
 this-in the park afternoons play-football-3PL
 ‘In this park, they play football in the afternoons.’
- (5) a. Ebben az országban nem félnek a kígyóktól.
 this-in the country-in not fear-3PL the snakes
 ‘In this country people are not afraid of snakes.’
- b. Az Ókorban nem ettek burgonyát.
 the ancient-times not eat-3PL potato
 ‘In Ancient Times people did not eat potato.’
- (6) a. A C-vitamint leginkább influenza járvány idején vásárolják.
 the C-vitamin-ACC mostly flu epidemic during buy-3pl
 ‘They buy vitamin C most often during flue epidemics.’
- b. Fenyőfát karácsonykor vásárolnak.
 Christmas-tree-ACC Christmas-at buy-3pl
 ‘They buy Christmas trees at Christmas.’