

Arguments for the Argument Structure of Relational Nouns

1. Introduction

The fundamental goal of this paper to argue for postulating that a clearly identifiable group of Hungarian underived relational nouns in the broad sense has an argument structure (AS), in addition to what is often called a lexical conceptual structure (LCS).

2. Relational nouns, typology, and LCS

The behaviour of relational nouns across languages has been extensively discussed in the typological literature, fundamentally in the context of inalienability and the semantics of possessive constructions. The most salient types of these nouns include kinship terms, names of body parts and part—whole relationships. The basic generalization is that in a great number of languages these inalienable nouns typically exhibit distinct formal (morphological or syntactic) properties, of which I will give an overview in the talk. These well-attested cross-linguistic phenomena minimally call for a clearly definable LCS approach to the nouns in question, the argument being that otherwise it would be hardly possible to formulate the relevant rules for the relevant processes in the languages in question.

As regards Hungarian, the following facts point in the same direction.

(A) There are nouns in the relevant categories which practically can only be used in possessive inflectional forms. This especially holds for part-whole nouns like *alj* ‘bottom’, *szél* ‘edge’, etc.

(B) There are a few nouns that have two different inflectional paradigms depending on whether they are used in an inalienable or in an alienable sense. For instance, *gyapjú* ‘wool’ inflects differently if it is taken to belong to a farmer or if it interpreted as (inalienably) belonging to a sheep.

(C) Hungarian also exhibits a version of a cross-linguistic tendency to the effect that it is only an inalienable noun that can be used as an “extra” argument, as illustrated by the following pair of English examples: *John kicked Peter’s leg* – *John kicked Peter on the leg*. It is a special feature of the Hungarian construction that this extra argument can be expressed either as a fully-fledged possessive noun phrase or as a reduced constituent, a bare noun.

3. Arguments for postulating ASs in Hungarian

The following considerations strongly motivate the postulation of AS in the case of Hungarian relational nouns.

(A) Intuitively, the generalization that quite a few such nouns can only be used with a possessive inflectional paradigm can be captured in a most principled manner by assuming that they have an AS which contains a possessor argument, and if this argument is not realized, completeness will be violated, or, in Chomskian terms, the nominal predicate will not be able to assign a theta role. And the presence of the possessor always triggers the use of possessive inflection on the noun head in Hungarian.

(B) A closely related property of relational nouns is that when they occur within possessive noun phrases, without a strongly influential linguistic or situational context the possessor constituent is, as a rule, interpreted as the salient element of the inalienable relationship. Again, this fact can also be most naturally captured by assuming that the possessor is a genuine argument of the noun. I have developed an account of possessors in noun phrases headed by relational nouns along these lines elsewhere.

(C) Most importantly, certain types of Hungarian relational nouns in clearly definable constructions must not be used in non-possessive noun phrases on the relevant reading, cf.:

(1) a. *Péter fel-emel-te a kez-é-t.*
Peter.NOM up-raise-PAST.3SG.DEF the hand-POSS.3SG-ACC
‘Peter_i raised his_i hand.’

b. *Péter fel-emel-te a kez-et.*
Peter.NOM up-raise-PAST.3SG.DEF the hand-ACC
‘Peter raised the hand. / *Peter_i raised his_i hand.’

(1b) is ungrammatical in the sense in which (1a) is grammatical. (1b) is only acceptable in the sense that *Peter* raised someone else’s hand or an “alienated” limb, for instance, an artificial hand in a hospital. The important point is that the relationship between *Peter* and *the hand* in (1b) is strictly non-inalienable, and for the inalienable interpretation to be available the noun must be used in a possessive construction. My claim is that this fact, again, is best captured by assuming that *kéz* ‘hand’ in its inalienable use does have

an AS and its possessor argument must be realized. Capitalizing on this phenomenon, I will suggest that this construction type can be used as a reliable test in Hungarian to decide whether a relational noun in a broad sense has an AS or not. For my treatment of the grammatical use of *kéz* ‘hand’ in (1b), see the next section.

4. Extending the analysis

This analysis is closest in spirit to Barker’s (1995) approach to English relational nouns, in the sense that by default an AS is attributed to several groups of relational nouns in their relevant uses. However, any account also has to treat cases in which no argument is present in the construction. Barker’s (1995) solution in this respect is suppression, widely used in a great number of generative analyses of passivization. The essence of this process is that the suppressed argument is existentially bound in AS. I will argue that this treatment is not feasibly applicable to cases like (1b), because if the existentially bound argument is present in the AS then it is a mystery why its trivial, most natural interpretation is strictly prohibited. Therefore, I will propose that a deeper, more radical process takes place. Semantically it creates a non-inalienable noun from an inalienable one. It affects even the LCS of the noun by removing its relational complement. As a consequence, no complement from the LCS is projected to AS, thus, there is no AS at all. Notice that the assumption of this deep-going change is necessary in order to handle the (1b) case. The reason for this is that if the salient element in the basic inalienable relationship is present in LCS (whether it is also linked to a suppressed argument in AS or not) then there is no principled explanation for the unavailability of the starred interpretation in (1b). It is also to be emphasized that this radical change creates a noun that will be used in a non-inalienable, non-relational sense from the relevant perspective. For instance, (1b) can have a reading on which *Peter* raised John’s inalienable hand, but in this situation the hand was non-inalienable from *Peter*’s perspective.

Relational nouns like *szomszéd* ‘neighbour’ behave rather differently in a significant respect, cf.:

- (2) *Péter* *állandóan* *bosszant-ja* *a* *szomszéd-ok-at*.
 Peter.NOM constantly annoy-PRES.3SG.DEF the neighbour-PL-ACC
 ‘Peter is constantly annoying the neighbours.’

This sentence, as opposed to (1b), can be felicitously interpreted in such a way that *Peter* annoys his own neighbours (despite the fact that the relational noun occurs in a non-possessive construction). Interestingly, (2) can also mean that *Peter* annoys the speaker’s (and, perhaps, the listener’s) neighbours. There are at least three different solutions that can be considered in this case. (A) It can be assumed that these relational nouns have no AS: they only have LCS, in the spirit of Uriagereka (1995), for instance. (B) It can be postulated that they have both LCS and AS, but the argument is optional, cf. Asudeh (2005). (C) In the spirit of Barker (1995), we can assume that *neighbour*₁ is a relational noun with LCS and obligatory AS and we derive *neighbour*₂ from it by suppressing, that is existentially binding, the argument in AS. In order to offer as uniform a treatment of these two major types of relational nouns (*kéz* ‘hand’ and *szomszéd* ‘neighbour’) as possible, I will opt for (C).

5. A comparison (Hungarian vs. French)

The *hand* type behaves differently in French: the French counterpart of (1b) does allow the starred interpretation. In this case we can adopt Vergnaud and Zubizarreta’s (1992) approach: they assume that this type even in French has an obligatory AS, but French relational nouns allow their argument to be realized by a PRO. Thus, the following parametric contrast suggests itself: Hungarian (underived) relational nouns do not admit a PRO argument, while their French counterparts do. Elsewhere I argue that Hungarian derived (complex event) nominals do allow a PRO argument.

References

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