

Less-beaten paths from pronoun to agreement: The case of Uralic objective conjugations

Elizabeth Coppock and Stephen Wechsler, The University of Texas at Austin

The transition from pronoun to agreement marker is standardly characterized as a loss of the referential property of the pronoun, with a retention of person, number, and gender (ϕ) features (Bresnan and Mchombo, 1987). In LFG, this can be modelled as the loss of a PRED ‘pro’ equation in the lexical specification of the affix. But the path from pronoun to agreement marker does not always follow this simple scheme. For example, as Bresnan (2001, 146) notes, “finer transition states” are possible, in which affixes retain sensitivity to properties like definiteness and animacy. We argue that the Hungarian objective conjugation is an agreement marker historically derived from a pronoun through an even more complex and varied set of transitions, which nevertheless can be modelled naturally in LFG as the loss of lexical specifications on the affix.

Hungarian has two subject-verb agreement paradigms, the *subjective* and *objective conjugations*, whose distribution depends on the presence of a ‘definite’ object (they are glossed as INDEF and DEF, respectively):

- (1) a. Vár-ok b. Lát-ok egy madar-at c. Lát-om a madar-at
 wait-1SG.INDEF see-1.SG.INDEF a bird-ACC see-1.SG.DEF the bird-ACC
 ‘I’m waiting’ ‘I see a bird’ ‘I see the bird’

The objective conjugation is an agreement marker rather than an incorporated object pronoun (Coppock and Wechsler in prep.). But it is unlike normal cases of pronoun-derived agreement in that it cross-references the definiteness, rather than the ϕ -features, of the object. We argue that, seen from the perspective of its historical provenance, the objective conjugation may nevertheless be understood as a variation on the more familiar cases of ϕ -feature agreement. Sensitivity to specificity or definiteness can be lost before ϕ -features in the transition from pronoun to affix; Bininj Gun-Wok is an example of a language where ϕ -features remain but specificity requirements do not (Evans, 1999). In Hungarian, we suggest that feature loss occurred in the opposite order: ϕ -features were (almost completely) lost, but sensitivity to specificity, definiteness, or topicality was retained, and this property was reanalyzed as formal definiteness.

Following several (but not all) other Hungarian linguists, we propose that the objective conjugation endings derive historically from a third person singular object marker (OM) agglutinated to a subject marker (SM). Support for this view comes from the fact that phonologically, many of the objective conjugation endings consist of a glide or similar sound followed by an element that is similar to the corresponding subjective conjugation ending, as shown in (2) (the glide element is indicated with a box).

- (2) INDEF DEF
- | | | |
|-----|------------------------------|---|
| 1SG | -ok/-ek/-ök | -om/-em/-öm |
| 2SG | -(a)sz/-(e)sz or -ol/-el/-öl | -od/-ed/-öd |
| 3SG | ∅ | - j a/- i |
| 1PL | -unk/-ünk | - j uk/- j ük |
| 2PL | -(o)tok/-(e)tek/-(ö)tök | - j á tok/- i tek |
| 3PL | -(a)nak/-(e)nek | - j ák/- i k |

Further evidence for this view comes from (i) the fact that the verbs in other Uralic languages, including Ostyak and Mordva, follow a V+OM+SM template and (ii) the special *-lak/-lek* suffix, used for first person singular subjects and second person objects, which can be analysed as second person *l* + 1SG *k*.

Furthermore, the Hungarian objective conjugation is not totally insensitive to ϕ features; first and second person (non-reflexive) objects trigger the subjective conjugation, unlike third person objects:

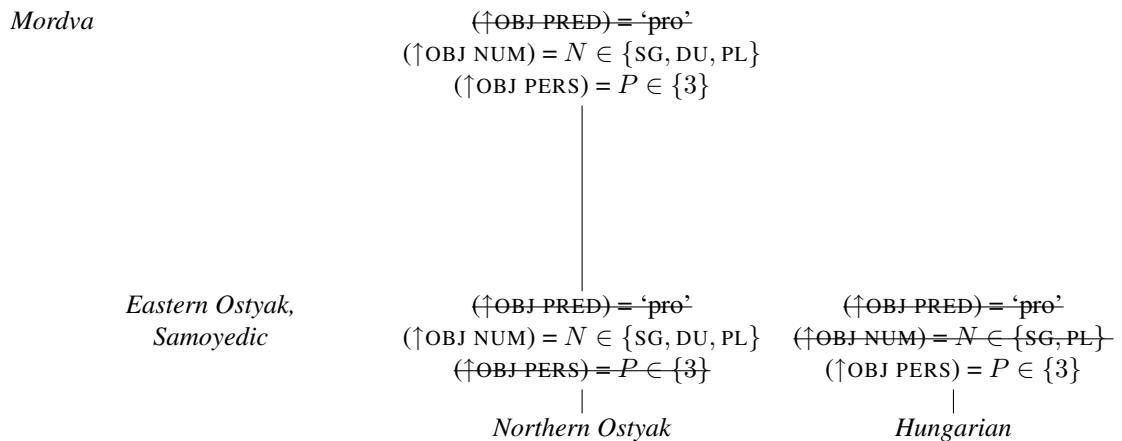
- (3) a. Lát-ják őt/őket b. Lát-nak engem/téged/minket
 see-3.PL.DEF it/them see-3PL.INDEF me/you/us
 ‘They see it/them’ ‘They see me/you/us’

How Hungarian verbal morphology managed to retain sensitivity to object definiteness while losing (most of) its object ϕ -features, we argue, is as follows: First, due to factors related to topicality, object pronouns (which display both person and number) were incorporated only in third person, so person *distinctions* were lost, and only number distinctions remained, as in the Eastern Ostyak (Gulya, 1966) and Samoyedic (Honti, 1984), both Uralic. Then number distinctions were lost within third person. This yielded a language with an agreement system expressing exactly *one* ϕ -feature: third person. This feature in a sense “carried” the sensitivity of the phenomenon to topicality, a sensitivity

that is shared by Northern Ostyak (Nikolaeva, 1999). The absence of ϕ -distinctions, along with the sensitivity to topicality, led the marker to be reanalyzed as a ‘definiteness’ marker.

The proposed historical development is given in (4). We assume that in all of the languages in question, the verb has the template V+OM+SM, and the object marker contributes features to the OBJ f -structure. The annotations contributed by the object marker are given in the nodes of the historical tree. Strike-throughs indicate that the annotation has been lost; we hypothesize that the historical development proceeds in part by removal of these constraints. The inventory of object markers is indicated by the sets of features; loss of inventory is another proposed historical mechanism.

- (4)
- $$\begin{aligned} (\uparrow \text{OBJ PRED}) &= \text{‘pro’} \\ (\uparrow \text{OBJ NUM}) &= N \in \{\text{SG, DU, PL}\} \\ (\uparrow \text{OBJ PERS}) &= P \in \{1, 2, 3\} \end{aligned}$$



To account for the absence of the object marker in first and second person singular (cf. (2)), we argue that the objective conjugation endings in those cells were replaced by possessive markers, due to the identity in form between the third person singular objective conjugation ending and the third person singular possessive marker (along with the presence of possessive markers in other arenas of verbal inflection). Unlike competing theories of the Hungarian objective conjugation (reviewed and contributed to by Havas (2004)), this theory accounts for all of the quirks of its distribution and morphology and sheds light on other Uralic languages, using simple and independently grounded historical mechanisms (feature loss, analogy).

We conclude that the provenance of this phenomenon bespeaks a richer array of historical possibilities for the feature loss that leads from pronoun to agreement: agreement markers can end up deficient in ϕ -features through feature loss akin to the process by which the referential property of pronouns is lost, and sensitivity to properties like definiteness and animacy can “survive” on a single ϕ -feature.

References

- Bresnan, J. (2001). *Lexical-Functional Syntax*. Blackwell, Malden, Mass.
- Bresnan, J. and Mchombo, S. (1987). Topic, pronoun, and agreement in Chicheŵa. *Language*, 63:741–782.
- Evans, N. (1999). Why argument affixes in polysynthetic languages are not pronouns: Evidence from Biniŋ Gun-Wok. *Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung*, 52:255–281.
- Gulya, J. (1966). *Eastern Ostyak Chrestomathy*. University of Indiana Press, Bloomington.
- Havas, F. (2004). Objective conjugation and medialisation. *Acta Linguistica Hungarica*, 51:95–141.
- Honti, L. (1984). *Chrestomathia Ostiaca*. Tankönyvkiadó, Budapest.
- Nikolaeva, I. (1999). Object agreement, grammatical relations, and information structure. *Studies in Language*, 23:331–376.