

“Case suffixes”, postpositions and the phonological word in Hungarian

Descriptive tradition and orthographic convention suggest that Hungarian has two different types of functional items corresponding to adpositions: case suffixes and postpositions. The main empirical evidence for this distinction (É. Kiss, 2002:185) is that case suffixes (1-a) undergo vowel harmony with the preceding head noun while postpositions (1-b) do not:

- (1) a. *ház-ban* *kért-ben* b. *ház alatt* *kért alatt*
house-in garden-in house under garden under
‘in a house’ ‘in a garden’ ‘under a house’ ‘under a garden’

In this talk, I argue that case markers are part of the same phonological word as their head nouns, but syntactically independent units, in other words they are postpositions. This is consistent with the independently motivated observation made in Nespor and Vogel (1986) that Hungarian vowel harmony is not operative on the morphological word, but on the phonological word. However, it requires reconsideration of their definition of the phonological word as a stem plus all following suffixes.

Postpositions and case suffixes behave identically in almost all respects: they are right-adjacent to the head noun, are unstressed and show agreement with a pronominal head. Additionally, both can occur with a pro-dropped pronominal argument (e.g. *benn-e*, ‘in it’, *alatt-a*, ‘under it’) without a preceding stem which shows that neither can be bound morphemes (hence suffixes). But there are also two important differences: apart from the vowel harmony facts, postpositional phrases unlike noun phrases with case markers allow ellipsis of head noun or the postposition. However, there is a further difference obviously not related to morphological affixhood: “case suffixes” are monosyllabic, propositions are bisyllabic. This suggests to revise Nespor and Vogel’s definition of phonological word in Hungarian as follows, where “Stem” denotes the verb root + all derivational suffixes:

(2) **Definition of phonological word in Hungarian**

Nespor and Vogel: stem + following suffixes

revised definition: Stem + following monosyllabic functional elements

This immediately accounts for the fact that “case suffixes” undergo vowel harmony while postpositions do not: both are functional elements of the same type, but only case markers form a phonological word with the stem. It also gives rise to an explanation why noun phrases with case markers cannot undergo ellipsis which would leave the monosyllabic marker stranded not being able to form a minimal phonological word. The only configuration where a case marker can occur without a head is when it is followed by an agreement marker which results in a two-syllabic word. A potential problem with this account is that Hungarian seems to have bisyllabic inflectional affixes which undergo vowel harmony, namely the 2nd person plural agreement markers (e.g. *-játok*, *-itek*). However, as shown in Rebrus (2000) and Trommer (2003), there is independent evidence that these are composed of different (monosyllabic) affixes. Hence, all functional elements undergoing vowel harmony are monosyllabic.

References

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