

Complexity and distinctiveness in the possessive allomorphy of Hungarian

Our aim is to describe the distribution of the glide-initial allomorph of the third person singular possessive suffix in Hungarian. From a phonological point of view, this distribution is mostly arbitrary. We argue that this is due to its development, shaped by the speaker-listener preference for similarity between existing forms in the lexicon.

The third person singular possessive suffix has four allomorphs in total. It agrees with the stem in the backness of the vowel ($-a/e$ ($-A$)), and potentially contains an initial glide ($-ja/je$ ($-jA$)). The glide always shows as a hiatus filler after vowels, but never after sibilants and palatals.

After other consonants, however, its behaviour is non-categorical, showing intraspeaker and interspeaker variation. Papp (1975) lists the conditioning factors of the glide's appearance. The most robust one is that back vowel stems prefer $-jA$ more: in our corpus search (Halácsy et al., 2004), the ratio of back vs. front stems was 0.87 for the $-jA$ form and 0.45 for the $-A$ form (the $-ja$ form is generally in a minority).

We claim that it is impossible to explain these tendencies if one assumes that allomorph selection is driven by notions of phonological markedness (cf. Bye 2008), since there is no factor of phonological markedness which would warrant the assignment of the more complex suffix to back stem vowel classes.

The back V stems' preference for $-ja$ is due to an independent factor, the overall tendency towards similarity between forms in the lexicon (cf. Skousen 2002; Kálmán & Kertész 2008; Rebrus & Törkenczy 2008), which operates solely on the grounds of formal similarity and sheer numbers. The nominal possessive and the verbal definite paradigms are similar in the singular. The only difference is in the third person, where back V verbs take the suffix $-ja$ (identical to the possessive allomorph), but front V verbs take $-i$. The result is that in third person, back V nouns are affected by the similar verbal paradigm, opting for $-jA$ more than their front V counterparts, which show no such effect.

The crucial point is that a system where such effects are present is not necessarily based on on-line computation. If we assume listener misperception as a source of sound change (Ohala, 1981; Blevins, 2004), such a system can emerge based on the principles of contrast enhancement and the preference for similarity between existing forms.

While languages generally thrive to maintain different forms for different functions, considerations of economy will inevitably cause certain forms to fall together, as listeners will show preference for newly encountered forms that are similar to ones already in their mental lexicon. This is the reason why nominal forms similar to the verbal paradigm will be preferred.

These principles, as in the case of Hungarian possessive allomorphy, are not solely based on formal similarity, but also on statistical data, which allow us to posit directions for changes in allomorphy distributions.

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