Structural Ambiguity and Case Assignment in Hungarian Clausal and Phrasal Comparatives

0. Introduction

elliptical comparatives:

(1)  
a. I am taller than Mary.  
b. I am taller than \{x-tall\} Mary is \{x-tall\}.

degree expression (QP) in (1b) obligatorily eliminated in English


Hungarian: both clausal and phrasal comparatives

(2)  
taller am than how tall Mary was,3SG
‘I am taller than Mary (was).

b. Magasabb vagyok Marinál.  
taller am Mary.ADE
‘I am taller than Mary.’

comparative complement: CP or PP

CP often reduced to C head + one XP

lexical cases are instances of PP (see e.g. É. Kiss 2002; Asbury 2005, 2008a, 2008b)

ambiguity: remnant DP or DP in PP may be contrasted with multiple DPs in the matrix clause

also in Germanic languages (Bacskai-Atkari 2014b)

● Type I constructions:

(3)  
I love you more than my brother.

SUBJECT READING: ‘I love you more than my brother loves you.’

OBJECT READING: ‘I love you more than I love my brother.’

● Type II constructions:

(4)  
I saw a taller woman than my mother.

LEXICAL READING: ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.’

PREDICATIVE READING: ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

two major ways of accounting for ambiguities:

● clausal analysis – case-syncretic remnants ambiguous

see Bresnan (1973), Lechner (2004)

● phrasal analysis – no underlying structural differences

see Hankamer (1973)
importance of Hungarian: both clausal and phrasal comparatives

relevance to the general theory: ambiguity in (4) cannot be due to the than-XP being phrasal

1. Ambiguity and case assignment with single predicates

• English:

(5) I love you more than my brother.
   SUBJECT READING: ‘I love you more than my brother loves you.’
   OBJECT READING: ‘I love you more than I love my brother.’

reasons for the ambiguity (see Bacskai-Atkari 2014b):

  ● the DP my brother is case-ambiguous
  ● default accusative case allowed for subjects if overt case assigner is absent

pronominal pattern:

(6) a. I love you more than he.
    ‘I love you more than he loves you.’
  b. I love you more than him.
    ‘I love you more than he loves you. / I love you more than I love him.’

• German: ambiguity with case-syncretic remnants, no default accusative

ambiguity:

(7) Ich liebe dich mehr als meine Schwester.
    I.NOM love.1SG you.ACC more than my.F.NOM/ACC sister
    ‘I love your more than my sister.’

case distinction:

(8) a. Ich liebe dich mehr als mein Bruder.
    I.NOM love.1SG you.ACC more than my.M.NOM brother
    ‘I love you more than my brother loves you.’
  b. Ich liebe dich mehr als meinen Bruder.
    I.NOM love.1SG you.ACC more than my.M-ACC brother
    ‘I love you more than I love my brother.’
the German pattern is fully predictable on the basis of overt case distinction

similar patterns across Germanic

- Hungarian clausal comparatives: case distinction

(9) a. Jobban szeretlek, mint Márk.
   better love.1SG than Mark.NOM
   ‘I love you more than Mark loves you.’

   b. Jobban szeretlek, mint Márkot.
     better love.1SG than Mark.ACC
     ‘I love you more than I love Mark.’

generally no case ambiguities in Hungarian – one exception: possessive objects may lack the otherwise obligatory accusative marker (-t)

(10) a. Látom Mari-*Mari-Ø.
    see.1SG Mary-ACC
    ‘I can see Mary.’

   b. Látom az anyám-at/anyám-Ø.
      see.1SG the mother.POSS.1SG-ACC
      ‘I can see my mother.’

   but: no ambiguity in elliptical comparatives

(11) a. Jobban szeretlek, mint a bátyám.
     better love.1SG than the brother.POSS.1SG.NOM
     ‘I love you more than Mark loves you.’

   b. *Jobban szeretlek, mint a bátyám-Ø.
      better love.1SG than the brother.POSS.1SG-ACC
      # ‘I love you more than Mark loves you.’

   c. Jobban szeretlek, mint a bátyám-at.
      better love.1SG than the brother.POSS.1SG-ACC
      ‘I love you more than I love Mark.’

→ strict disambiguation pattern

- Hungarian phrasal comparatives: ambiguity

(12) Jobban szeretlek Márknál.
    better love.1SG Mark.1SG.ADE
    ‘I love you more than Mark.’
(12) represents the most natural order – but: PP can occupy various left-peripheral positions

\[ \leftrightarrow \text{no fronting for reduced mint-CPs (like English than-CP, but unlike German als-CP)} \]

PP as a focus:

(13) Márknál szerettek jobban.
Mark.1SG.ADE love.1SG better
‘I love you more than MARK.’

PP as a contrastive topic:

(14) Márknál jobban szerettek.
Mark.1SG.ADE better love.1SG
‘As for Mark, I love you more than he loves you / than I love him.’

PP as a distributive phrase:

(15) Márknál is jobban szerettek.
Mark.1SG.ADE too better love.1SG
‘I love you even more than Mark.’

\[ \rightarrow \text{information structure plays no decisive role in the interpretation of the PP} \]

summary for Type I:

- Germanic: pattern predictable from general case-assignment properties
  \[ \rightarrow \text{both ambiguity and disambiguation} \]
- Hungarian clausal comparatives: strict case distinction (stricter than generally)
- Hungarian phrasal comparatives: ambiguity

2. Ambiguity and case assignment with two predicates

- English:

(16) I saw a taller woman than my mother.
LEXICAL READING: ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.’
PREDICATIVE READING: ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

possible reasons for the ambiguity:

- the DP my mother is case-ambiguous (see Bacskaï-Atkari 2014b)
- the remnant DP is a subject either way
pronominal pattern:

(17) a. ‘I saw a taller woman than she.
    ‘I saw a taller woman than she saw.’

    b. I saw a taller woman than her.
    ‘I saw a taller woman than she is.’

● German: ambiguity with case-syncretic remnants, otherwise case distinction

ambiguity:

(18) Ich habe eine größere Frau als meine Mutter gesehen.
    I have.1SG a.F.ACC taller.F.ACC woman than my.F.NOM/ACC mother seen
    ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother.’

case distinction:

(19) a. Ich habe einen größeren Mann als mein Vater gesehen.
    I have.1SG a.M.ACC taller.M.ACC man than my.M.NOM father seen
    ‘I saw a taller man than my father saw.’

    b. Ich habe einen größeren Mann als meinen Vater gesehen.
    I have.1SG a.M.ACC taller.M.ACC man than my.M.ACC father seen
    ‘I saw a taller man than my father is.’

English has default accusative case in predicative structures, but no default accusative case in German (cf. Schütze 2001):

(20) a. Ralf ist größer als er.
    Ralph is taller than he.NOM
    ‘Ralph is taller than he is.’

    b. *Ralf ist größer als ihn.
    Ralph is taller than he.ACC
    ‘Ralph is taller than he is.’

similar pattern in Icelandic

→ predicative readings in Type II are marked by the accusative in English and German
• Hungarian clausal comparatives: ambiguity

(21) a. Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint az anyám.  
  saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than the mother.POSS.1SG.NOM  
  ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother.’

   b. Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint Liza.  
  saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than Liz.NOM  
  ‘I saw a taller woman than Liz.’

no accusative case available → (21a) is also not case-ambiguous

(22) a. *Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint az anyámat.  
  saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than the mother.POSS.1SG.ACC  
  ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother.’

   b. *Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint Lizát.  
  saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than Liz.ACC  
  ‘I saw a taller woman than Liz.’

→ Hungarian Type II clausal comparatives behave in accordance with general case assignment properties – German (and English) accusative seems to be exceptional

• Hungarian phrasal comparatives: unambiguously predicative reading

(23) Láttam egy magasabb nőt az anyámnál.  
  saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC the mother.POSS.1SG.ADE  
  ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

(23) represents the most natural order – both the DP and the PP can move to the left

movement structures also predicative, generally less preferred

potential ambiguity (especially with PP-movement): PP interpreted as a locative

e.g. ‘I saw a taller woman at my mother’s place’

shows inter-speaker variation

preposed DP:

(24) Egy magasabb nőt láttam az anyámnál.  
  a taller woman.ACC saw.1SG the mother.POSS.1SG.ADE  
  ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

PP as a focus:

(25) ??* Az anyámnál láttam egy magasabb nőt.  
  the mother.POSS.1SG.ADE saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC  
  # ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’
PP as a contrastive topic:

(26) Az anyámnál láttam magasabb nőt.

the mother.POSS.1SG.ADE saw.1SG taller woman.ACC

‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

the PP complement headed by the adessive suffix is uncontestably phrase-sized → no ellipsis

→ the argument that Type II comparatives are ambiguous because they are phrasal cannot hold: true phrasal comparatives are not ambiguous (also: Italian, Greek)

→ ambiguity in Germanic Type II is really a consequence of case syncretism

also: if the accusative in Germanic were a result of thanlals being exceptionally a P head, the nominative remnant should still be ambiguous, just like in Hungarian

→ Germanic languages do not have phrasal comparatives

3. Degree semantics and tense

comparative semantics: degree in the matrix clause (d) binds another degree (d’)

e.g. taller than x-tall: d > d’ (where -er carried d, x carries d’)

● semantics of Type I:

(27) Alex loves Sam more than Jay.

LOVE(a,s) (i) LOVE(j,s)

(ii) LOVE(a,j)

two arguments of a single predicate in the matrix clause

one of them is contrasted with the remnant in the subclause

the other has a corresponding DP in the elided part of the subclause (recoverability)

→ two scenarios:

clausal comparatives: role of the remnant DP determined by case-assignment properties

both in Germanic and Hungarian

phrasal comparatives: DP in the PP can be contrasted with either of the DPs

no hierarchy
● semantics of Type II:

(28) Alex saw a taller woman than Mary.

\[ \text{SEE(a,woman) & TALL(woman,d)} \]

(i) \[ \text{SEE(m,woman) & TALL(woman,d')} \]

(ii) \[ \text{TALL(m,d')} \]

two predicates in the matrix clause: a verbal and an adjectival predicate

either both predicates or just the adjectival predicate reconstructed in the subclause

the remnant DP is a subject in either case

→ three scenarios:

clausal comparatives in Hungarian: nominative remnant compatible with both readings

clausal comparatives in Germanic: accusative with predicative readings

phrasal comparatives: simpler structure reconstructed only (adjectival predicate)

● further difference between verbal and adjectival predication in Type II: verbal predication is tensed, adjectival predication is tenseless

→ PP complement in phrasal comparatives is also tenseless

→ accusative in reduced clauses ← clause is defective (Bacskai-Atkari 2014b)

small clause: lacks a tense layer – hence also tenseless

hence: there is a match in Type II constructions (tensed versus tenseless)

this is related to case assignment but not directly (↔ Type I)

4. Ellipsis in Hungarian comparatives

● ellipsis in Type I: regular ellipsis mechanisms (cf. Bacskai-Atkari 2014)


[E] feature (see Merchant 2001) on the F head

(29) a. Jobban szeretlek, mint Márk szeret téged amennyire.

better love.1SG than Mark.NOM loves you.ACC how.much

‘I love you more than Mark loves you.’

b. Jobban szeretlek, mint Márkot szeretem amennyire.

better love.1SG than Mark.ACC love.1SG how.much

‘I love you more than I love Mark.’
remnant moves to the same position → no structural difference in the position of the subject and the object → case has to distinguish

- Type II ambiguities in Germanic:

  lexical reading: regular ellipsis with subject remnant in a tensed clause, subject DP in [Spec,TP]

  predicative reading: no TP, only PredP (cf. Matushansky 2012, following Bowers 1993), subject in [Spec,PredP] – no ellipsis, as the degree predicate is deleted anyway (Comparative Deletion)

→ C may select TP or PredP (FP) in Germanic

↔ Hungarian: C selects PredP (FP) anyway

  if a (tensed) copula is present, it is located lower than the F head (in a v head)
evidence:

    Mary taller was.3SG than Mark was.3SG
    ‘Mary was taller than Mark was.’

b. Mari magasabb, mint Márk volt.
    Mary taller than Mark was.3SG
    ‘Mary is taller than Mark was.’

if the copula were in F/Pred, (31a) should be grammatical (Bacskai-Atkari 2014a: 244–253)

the copula is regularly elided, hence part of the ellipsis domain, unless it is contrastive

then the [E] feature can be located lower

→ no selectional differences in the C in Hungarian, hence C cannot be transparent for case-assignment in either case

Type II in Hungarian:

(32) a. Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint az anyám
    saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than the mother.POSS.1SG.NOM
    láttott amilyen magas nőt.
    saw.3SG how tall woman.ACC
    ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.’

b. Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint az anyám
    saw.1SG a taller woman.ACC than the mother.POSS.1SG.NOM
    amilyen magas.
    how tall
    ‘I saw a taller woman than Liz.’

structure for (32a):

(33)  

CP
  /\
 C’
  /\
 C mint DP1 FP (=PredP)
  /\
 F amilyen magas nőt
  /\
 Ø [E] től láttott amilyen magas nőt
structure for (32b):

\[
\text{(34) } \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{CP} \\
\text{C'} \\
\text{C} \\
\text{mint} \\
\text{FP (=PredP)} \\
\text{DP}_i \\
\text{az anyám} \\
\text{F} \\
\text{Ø} \\
\text{[E]} \\
\text{QP} \\
\text{t}_i \text{amilyen magas}
\end{array}
\]

→ no selectional differences for the C, and no accusative in Hungarian clausal comparatives

→ ambiguity

← phrasal comparatives are PPs, hence tenseless → no difference in subject/object ambiguities, but clear choice of tenseless reading over tensed one

**Conclusion**

structural ambiguities in clausal and phrasal comparatives

- subject/object readings: in line with case assignment properties
- lexical/predicative readings: dependent on tensed/tenseless distinction

summary:

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factors determining ambiguities:

- type of the degree complement (CP or PP)
- general case-assignment properties of the language (distinction vs. syncretism)
- general rules of tensed vs. small clause formation

References


