Structural Ambiguity and Case Assignment in Hungarian Clausal and Phrasal Comparatives

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Introduction

elliptical comparatives:

(1) a. I am taller than Mary.
   b. I am taller than \([x\text{-tall}]\) Mary is \([x\text{-tall}]\).
both clausal and phrasal comparatives

(2) a. Magasabb vagyok, mint (amilyen magas) Mari (volt).
   taller am than how tall Mary was
   ‘I am taller than Mary (was).

   b. Magasabb vagyok Marínál.
   taller am Mary. ADE
   ‘I am taller than Mary.’
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-syntactic remnants ambiguous
  see Bresnan (1973), Lechner (2004)

- phrasal analysis - no underlying structural differences
  see Hankamer (1973)
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.’
English 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:

(7) Ich liebe dich mehr als meine Schwester.
‘I love your more than my sister.’
German

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.’
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.’
Case ambiguity in Hungarian

only with possessives:

(10) a. Látom Mari-t/*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.’
Elliptical comparatives

no ambiguity:

(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.’
Hungarian phrasal comparatives

ambiguity:

(12) Jobban szeretlek Márknál.
better love.1SG Mark.1SG.ADE
‘I love you more than Mark.’
PP as a focus

(13) Márknál szeretlek jobban.
Mark.1SG.ADE love.1SG better
‘I love you more than MARK.’
‘As for Mark, I love you more than he loves you / than I love him.’
PP as a distributive phrase

(15) **Márknál** is jobban szeretlek.
    Mark.1SG.ADE too better love.1SG
    ‘I love you even more than Mark.’
Summary for Type I

• Germanic: pattern predictable from general case-assignment properties

  → both ambiguity and disambiguation

• Hungarian clausal comparatives: strict case distinction
  (stricter than generally)

• Hungarian phrasal comparatives: ambiguity
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.’
English 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:

(18) Ich habe eine größere Frau als meine Mutter gesehen.
I have a.f. ACC taller.f. ACC woman than my.f. NOM/ACC mother seen

‘I saw a taller woman than my mother.’
(19) a. Ich habe einen größeren Mann als mein Vater gesehen.
   I have 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 a. M. ACC taller. M. ACC man than my. M. ACC father seen
   ‘I saw a taller man than my father is.’
German predicative comparatives

(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.’
Hungarian clausal comparatives

ambiguity:

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

b. Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint Liza.
saw.1sg a taller woman than Liz.
‘I saw a taller woman than Liz.’
Hungarian clausal comparatives

no accusative available:

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

b. *Láttam egy magasabb nőt, mint Lizát.
   saw.1sg a taller woman than Liz.
   ‘I saw a taller woman than Liz.’
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.’
Egy magasabb nőt láttam az anyámnál.
‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’
(25) *Az anyámnál láttam egy magasabb nőt.

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

$\text{LOVE}(a, s)$

(i) $\text{LOVE}(j, s)$

(ii) $\text{LOVE}(a, j)$
(28) Alex saw a taller woman than Mary.

SEE(a, woman) & TALL(woman, d)

(i) SEE(m, woman) & TALL(woman, d')

(ii) TALL(m, d')
Tense distinction 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

→ there is a match in Type II constructions (tensed vs. tenseless)
Ellipsis in Hungarian comparatives

Type I: regular ellipsis mechanisms (cf. Bacskaï-Atkari 2014a)

    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.’
Ellipsis in Type I

(30)

```
CP
   C'
      C
         mint
         DPᵢ
            Márk
            Márkot
       FP (=PredP)
          F
             F'
                vP
                   tᵢ szeret téged amennyire
                   [E]
                   tᵢ szeretem amennyire
```
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, 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 (in a v)

    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.’
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
    látott 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 my mother is.’
Ellipsis with lexical readings

(33)

\[
\text{mint} \quad \text{az anyám} \quad \varnothing \quad t_{i} \text{látott amilyen magas nőt}
\]
Ellipsis with predicative readings

(34)

\[ (C \rightarrow \text{mint}) \]

\[ (C' \rightarrow \text{az anyám}) \]

\[ (\text{FP} (=\text{PredP})) \]

\[ (F' \rightarrow \text{QP}) \]

\[ (t_i \text{ amilyen magas}) \]
So...

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
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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
Thank you!
Bedankt!
😊
References

- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia (2014b) Structural Case and Ambiguity in Reduced Comparative Subclauses in English and German. *Acta Linguistica Hungarica* 61.4. 363-378.


References


