

# A Discursive Approach to Discourse Functions in Hungarian

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## 1 Introduction

In configurational languages, like English, syntactic structure and the (canonical) linear order of constituents are determined by syntactic functions, like *subject* or *object*, which constitute functions between constituents and the whole sentence (“*the subject/object of the sentence*”). In discourse-configurational languages [É. Kiss (1995)], syntactic structure and the positions of the elements reflect discourse structure, *i.e.* the role that the sentence plays in the discourse. Discourse functions (*topic*, *focus*, etc.) are thus not functions between a constituent and the sentence, but between a constituent and the discourse structure.

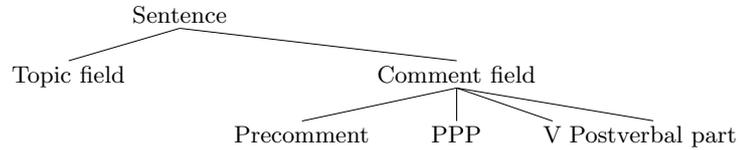
Many syntactic analyses, especially in derivational frameworks, account for the discourse-relatedness of syntactic structures by positing special functional projections (TopP, FocP) that host a particular discourse function (see for instance [Rizzi (1997), É. Kiss (2002)]). However, such analyses run into some serious problems. Firstly, positing separate functional projections for every discourse function has little explanatory adequacy from a discursive perspective. Secondly, as opposed to lexical projections (NP, PP, AP, etc.), discourse functional projections do not encode categories, but discourse-semantic information integrated into the syntax, without a clear formal account of the discourse/syntax interface. Thirdly, as we will show, discourse functions cannot exclusively be assigned to designated syntactic positions, and *vice versa*, a particular syntactic position can host more than one discourse function, even in discourse-configurational languages.

In this paper, our aim is to propose an overview of the interaction between a specific syntactic position and discourse functions in Hungarian, a discourse-configurational language. We concentrate on the preverbal position and demonstrate that the exact position of constituents bearing a particular discourse function depends on the discourse relation the sentence is part of, and discourse functions can by no means be exclusively assigned to a designated syntactic position.

## 2 The Data

Schematically, the Hungarian sentence can be divided into two fields: the *topic* and the *comment*, and the comment can be further divided into four subfields: the

*pre-comment*, the *prominent preverbal position*, the *finite verb*, and the *postverbal part* (see for instance [Kálmán (2001)]). This is illustrated in Figure (1):<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 1.** The structure of the Hungarian sentence

Although the names (topic, comment, prominent preverbal position, etc.) are semantic/pragmatic in nature, there are also syntactic (distributional) and prosodic arguments for this division of the Hungarian sentence into these fields and subfields.

The topic field hosts elements relating the sentence to the current discourse topic. These can be thematic shifters that introduce a subtopic of the discourse topic, and contrastive topics that reshape the discourse topic by decomposing some part of it into subsets [Büring (2003)]. The latter cannot occur in *out of the blue* sentences and always co-occur with a focus.<sup>2</sup>

The precomment contains distributive quantifiers that follow a given order. [Kálmán (2001)] classifies them based on their order into the *IS (also)-group*, the *MINDEN (all)-field* and the *SOK (a lot)-position*.

In this section, we aim at the two following conclusions:

- A variety of elements can appear in the PPP, and not all of them can be interpreted as focus.
- The focus of the sentence can appear in a position different from the PPP.

This is sufficient to prove that it is not possible to tie the localization of focus to a single syntactic position.

## 2.1 Distribution in the Prominent Preverbal Position

Our main concern here is the *prominent preverbal position* (PPP) in Hungarian. It is often referred to as *focus position*, after one of the elements appearing there.

<sup>1</sup> Note that (1) is a schematic, topological representation, and not a syntactic structure proposed in a particular framework.

<sup>2</sup> Focus is defined in this paper as the semantically prominent and formally highlighted element of sentences that necessarily co-occur with another discourse segment. A typical example is replies, *i.e.* answers to questions, corrections, etc. Formal highlighting means appearing in a salient syntactic position (peripheral, preverbal, etc.) and/or carrying a pitch accent. Semantic prominence is defined in the sense of [Jacobs (1984)], as being especially affected by the illocutionary operator associated with the sentence.

However, this is a misnomer, since not only foci can occupy this position, and foci can appear in other positions of the Hungarian sentence as well. We start by proving the first point by checking that various elements can occupy the PPP, either in all-focus or narrow-focus sentences. However, only one single focused constituent is permitted in the preverbal domain in Hungarian. Note that we do not consider question words as a subtype of focus.

“Neutral” sentences<sup>3</sup> (do not contain a focus):

– Verbal particle

- (1) 'János 'meg-ette a 'pizzát.  
 János PRT-eat.PST the pizza.ACC.  
 John ate the pizza.

– Bare nominal argument

- (2) 'János 'fát vág.  
 János wood.ACC cut.PRES  
 John is cutting wood.

– Secondary predicates

- (3) 'János 'pirosra festi a 'kerítést.  
 János red.SUBL paint.PRS the fence.ACC  
 John is painting the fence red.

– The Hocus<sup>4</sup>

- (4) 'Ma a 'feleségem vitte 'óvodába a  
 today the wife.POSS.1SG take.PST kindergarten.ILL the  
 'gyerekeket.  
 children.ACC  
 Today it was my wife who took the children to the kindergarten.

“Non-neutral” sentences<sup>5</sup> (contain a focus or a question word): observe that in the presence of a focus or a question word, the particles obligatorily follow the verb and the same is true for bare nominal arguments and secondary predicates.

– Focus

- (5) A “**Hamletet** olvasta fel János.  
 the Hamlet.ACC read.PST PRT János  
 John read out (loud) HAMLET.

<sup>3</sup> (') refers to a main stress, indicating that these sentences exhibit level prosody, and no element is prosodically distinguished. The preverbal elements do not qualify as foci semantically or pragmatically either.

<sup>4</sup> The hocus is an argument or adjunct having an identificational interpretation, sometimes expressing that its referent is surprising or unusual with respect to the predicate and without the pitch accent of focused constituents. Its form is usually full NP, a monotone decreasing quantifier or a negative adverb.

<sup>5</sup> (") refers to a sharp falling pitch accent.

- Question words

(6) “**Mit** olvasott fel János?  
 what read.PST PRT János  
 What did John read out?

- $\emptyset$ ; with pitch accent on the verb, VP or verum focus

(7) János “**látta** a balesetet.  
 János see.PST the accident.ACC  
 John DID see the accident.

## 2.2 Foci in different positions

The following data illustrate the various positions a focus can occupy in the Hungarian sentence. Contrastive topic and universal quantifier<sup>6</sup>

- (8) a. Q: Hányan nézték meg a filmeket?  
 how many watch.PST PRT the films.ACC  
 How many of the people saw the films?  
 b. A: A Csillagok háborúját “**mindenki** meg-nézte.  
 the Star Wars.ACC everyone PRT-watch.PST  
 Star Wars was seen by EVERYONE.

In (8), it is the quantifier which is focused, even though it is not immediately preverbal (it is the particle *meg* which occupies this position).

Therefore, focus is not always immediately preverbal as would be predicted under a configurational analysis relying on functional projections and it cannot be linked to the PPP.

## 3 Discourse structure and PPP

Now that we have shown that various elements can occupy the PPP and that focus is not exclusively linked to this position either, we would like to show how the elements that appear in this position are linked to the discourse structure. More specifically the semantics of the discourse relations that link discourse segments are such that:

- Discourse relations that imply that a particular element of their right argument is distinguished will use the PPP to localize this element. Thus, the focus will be in the PPP for relations such as CONTRAST, PARALLEL, and QUESTION-ANSWER PAIR, i.e. relations that make an explicit reference to the focus of their right conjunct. In case the focus must be on the verb (7), the PPP will be empty, because it is the verb that is highlighted. For questions, the PPP will be occupied by the *wh*-word, which is crucially not a focus, and which is central to the semantics of the question.

<sup>6</sup> Based on the semantico-pragmatic definition, the universal quantifier is the focus, and it is not in the immediately preverbal position.

- Discourse relations that have no such requirement often impose an all-focus reading of their right argument. These will allow the variety observed in (1)-(4): since the sentence must be all-focus, a single sub-constituent cannot act as narrow-focus. A good example of such a discourse relation is the case of NARRATION.

Our proposal implies that one is able to distinguish between discourse relations whose semantics are built upon a specific element and those who are not. An *SDRT* approach [Asher and Lascarides (2003)] to discourse relations help us make this distinction. For example, the CORRECTION relation as defined in *SDRT* makes an explicit reference to the mapping of an element of the right conjunct to the left conjunct (which corresponds to the corrected element). Similarly, CONTRAST and PARALLEL relations are built upon a notion of contrasting or common theme, identified by comparing the structures of each argument of the relation. The construction of these themes also singles out some elements in each *SDRS*, and it is these elements that occupy the PPP. Space prevents us to give a detailed example of an *SDRT* approach to the interpretation of the focalized elements in the PPP, but it would assume the same lines as the one proposed in [Asher (1994)].

We now use the example (9) to illustrate our hypothesis.

- (9) A "lányok nyerték meg tegnap a "kajakversenyt, a "fiúk  
 the girls won PRT yesterday the kayak contest.ACC, the boys  
 pedig a "kenuverenyt.  
 whereas the canoe contest.ACC  
 It was the girls who won the kayak contest yesterday, and the boys who  
 won the canoe contest.

In (9), the phrases *the girls* and *the boys* occupy the PPP of their respective sentences, as shown by the fact that *meg* is post-verbal instead of pre-verbal as usual. Their interpretation is that of a focus and the sentence is best understood as an answer to a question such as *Who won the kayak contest and who won the canoe contest?*, that is with a discourse relation of CONTRAST linking the two segments (as suggested by the use of *pedig* which bears resemblance to Russian *a* which marks contrast, as shown in [Jasinskaja and Zeevat (2009)]). This relation disappears if the PPP is not occupied by the noun phrases, but by *meg* (10). In this case, the preferred interpretation is one of NARRATION, as shown by the possibility of adding *és aztán* ('and then') and making a pause between the two segments.

- (10) A lányok meg-nyerték tegnap a kajakversenyt, és aztán  
 the girls PRT-WON yesterday the kayak contest.ACC, and then  
 (...) a fiúk a kenuversenyt.  
 the boys the canoe contest.ACC  
 Yesterday, the girls won the kayak contest, and then the boys won the  
 canoe contest.

Note that the use of *és aztán* is not possible in the configuration of (9) and that without this marker of narration, the placement of the noun phrases out of the PPP appears degraded:

- (11) a. #A "lányok nyerték meg tegnap a "kajakversenyt,  
 the girls won PRT yesterday the kayak contest.ACC,  
 és aztán a "fiúk a "kenuverstenyt.  
 and then the boys the canoe contest.ACC
- b. ??A lányok meg-nyerték tegnap a kajakversenyt, a  
 the girls PRT-WON yesterday the kayak contest.ACC, the  
 fiúk pedig a kenuverstenyt.  
 boys whereas the canoe contest.ACC

On the other hand, relations like NARRATION, ELABORATION, RESULT or EXPLANATION make reference to the whole of each of their argument and thus do not give a specific status to one of their argument's sub-constituent. These will allow variation in their PPP.

The last question that needs to be solved pertains to the role that the PPP plays when the discourse relation does not rely on a distinguished element. As shown in (1)-(4), different elements can occupy the PPP. If we consider that the PPP is a semantically privileged position it is no surprise that it is the locus of the hocus since the hocus carries with it a specific semantic meaning (identification). More generally, the elements present in the PPP are a way to underline some aspects of what the speaker wants to convey. Thus in (1) the emphasis is on the perfective particle *meg*, which conveys that John ate the pizza whole. Placing John in the PPP instead would then convey that it is John, rather than someone else, who ate the pizza.

Therefore, the general conclusion is that the PPP is the location of an element that is semantically distinguished. If the discourse relation that bears on the considered utterance relies on the identification of a specific element, this element will be placed in the PPP. If the relation is not specific, the PPP merely conveys that its element must play a specific role in the interpretation, quite often aspectual or identificational.

This function of PPP is probably why it has been described as a focus position, with a loose interpretation of focus. But this denomination is not tenable as soon as one tries to consider the notion of focus more precisely, and one is led to the conclusion that the PPP cannot reasonably be tied to the notion of focus.

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