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## “THE DUCK-BILLED PLATYPUS OF HUNGARIAN GRAMMAR”?

### Notes on teaching the uses of *-nak/-nek*

For some two centuries the presentation of the grammatical suffix *-NAK/-NEK* in textbooks, and grammars for foreign learners of Hungarian, has been based largely on the framework provided by the traditional description of the Hungarian noun system. This, in turn, has been based essentially on the traditional (Hungarian) description of the noun system of Latin and/or German. At first, *-NAK/-NEK* was seen only as dative (Révai 1806: I:223, but similarly Farkas 1805: 38):

“Nom. *Határ.*  
Gen. *Határ-é.*  
Dat. *Határ-nak.*  
Acc. *Határ-t.* [etc]”

By the mid-nineteenth century, it was given as both dative and genitive (Wékey 1852: 7. Note the interesting label in this grammar, the first of Hungarian in English, for *–é*; the italics are in the original):

“N. *a ház*  
G. *a háznak*  
D. *a háznak*  
A. *a házat*

Note. – The *possessive* dative is formed by adding *–é* to the noun; as *ház* house; *házé*, belonging to the house.”

In the native scholarly (and school) tradition, despite some recent efforts in some quarters, this view has remained more or less unchanged since. The following quotation is taken from the standard university synchronic grammar, in use for at least three decades; many other, especially school, textbooks profess similar views in this respect:

“A magyarban összesen 27 névszói esettel számolhatunk, ha **a birtokos** esetet és **a részeshatározói** esetet – **azonos ragjuk ellenére** – külön számba vesszük.” [In Hungarian there are 27 noun cases, if we count the *birtokos* (genitive) case and the *részeshatározói* (dative) case(s) as two cases, despite the

fact that their suffixes are identical.] (Rácz 1971: 196; my emphases, PS. – NB the figure is not reliable and depends of course on what one means by ‘case’).

Such presentations of dative and genitive in Hungarian are modelled on the traditional declensions of other (Indo-European) languages and do not easily fit Hungarian, where there is one suffix *-NAK/-NEK* with a number of functions, some (but not all) of which can be seen as dative and genitive. To consider the disadvantages of such an approach, suppose we were to say that *-VAL/-VEL* is two (or three or four) (case) suffixes, say INSTRUMENTAL, COMITATIVE, AGENTIVE, and MENSURAL to account for *lábával*, *barátjával*, *(elvitette egy) fiúval*, *egy órával (később)*, respectively. In fact, the suffix *-VAL/-VEL* may be called the fourth grammatical case of Hungarian, or at least: the adverbial case with the most grammatical roles, after NOMINATIVE, ACCUSATIVE (both wholly grammatical), and *-NAK/-NEK* (overwhelmingly grammatical).

For the teaching of Hungarian (and perhaps not only for the teaching Hungarian as a foreign language), instead of diffracting the meaning of a single item into functions based on those identified in other, usually Indo-European, languages, it might be better to start out from the Hungarian item and see what its actual roles and usages are and how these relate to one another. In Hungarian the case of the grammatical subject is ZERO (compulsory), the case of the grammatical direct object is *-T* (not required or not possible in some verb schemata, e.g. intransitives), and the case of a third grammatical role in the sentence is marked by *-NAK/-NEK*. (The fourth, in the causative construction for instance, could be *-VAL/-VEL*, as mentioned). These should be seen as applying, normally in this order, to create simple Hungarian sentences of increasing complexity. For this reason they are also best taught in the order given. When it comes to the teaching of *-NAK/-NEK*, its main functions are presented below in what I believe is descriptively and pedagogically (and even, to an extent, historically) the most illuminating order. If teachers find this material helpful, they are invited to reflect whether it might not be worthwhile trying to (re)unite these areas of the study of the language, instead of gradually losing them to small groups of specialists unable to converse with the intelligent layman (including student).

## 1. DATIVE USE

The term DATIVE derives from the Latin for ‘give’ and *AD* is the prototypical as well as the most common verb requiring *-NAK/-NEK* in its frame: *AD* <*vki vmiT vkiNEK*>. Other transitive verbs may add *-NAK/-NEK* in a dative (beneficiary, receiver) role: *KÜLD* <*vki vmiT vkiNEK*> (‘send’ is approximately ‘give by post’), *MOND* <*vki vmiT vkiNEK*> (‘say’ is ‘give one’s words to sy’), *ÍR* <*vki vmiT vkiNEK*> (‘write’ is

‘give one’s words to sy in writing’). In the case of intransitives, unable to add a second role with the marker *-T*, the *-NAK/-NEK* case is used for this purpose, as in *TETSZIK <vmi vkiNEK>*, with the item (or, occasionally, another person) as subject, and its potential converse *ÖRÜL <vki vmiNEK>*, where the person is subject.

## 2. “DUCK-BILLED PLATYPUS” USE? HABEO-EQUIVALENT

It is from the dative role that the GENITIVE use of our suffix derives: prototypically, once something has been GIVE(N), it can (subsequently) be seen as BELONGING (TO) the donee. A possessable is first stated to exist, using the ‘there exists’ sense of the third person form of the verb ‘to be’: *VAN JEGY*, glossable as ‘ticket-as-genus exists’, possible English translation ‘a ticket/tickets is/are available/obtainable.’ This is then personalizable: *VAN JEGYE*, glossable as ‘ticket belonging to third personal singular exists’, possible English translation ‘s/he has a ticket’. The case of any added noun (i.e. ‘a third person’) or (any personal) pronoun is here determined by the fact that ‘to be’ sentences lack an accusative slot. (It is not especially helpful to say that ‘to be’ is intransitive. Rather, it is outside, and not relevant to, the transitive/ intransitive divide, as Hungarian linguistic usage already reflects: *létige*, like *ható ige* or *műveltető ige*, is also outside [in the two latter labels: above] that divide). Hence the third grammatical case of Hungarian is drawn in, *-NAK/-NEK*, which chimes well with the fact that the dative, too, is frequently attached to a PERSON here, moreover a beneficiary of some kind: *JÁNOSNAK VAN JEGYE*, glossable as ‘ticket belonging to third person singular exists; third person singular here = *János*’. The link between the dative and genitive functions of this case is entirely in line with these remarks: e.g. *JÁNOSNAK ADTAK JEGYET* ‘János has been given a ticket’ > *JÁNOSNAK VAN JEGYE* ‘János has a ticket’. Analogies with Indo-European languages which do **not** take personal possessive suffixes on nouns — the starting point of the Hungarian construction — are not especially helpful here. This also the best way of looking at the personalization of impersonal auxiliary constructions, such as *nem szabad kimenni* ‘it is not permitted to go out’ v. *Jánosnak nem szabad kimenni(e)* ‘going out is not permitted to János = János is not permitted to go out’, and similar constructions, such as *jó a kedvük* ‘their mood is good = they are in a good mood’ v. *a fiúknak jó a kedvük* ‘to/of (!) the boys their mood is good = the boys are in a good mood’. It is these constructions that are dubbed the “duck-billed platypuses of [Hungarian] synchronic grammar” (in Rácz 1971: 333).

## 3. GENITIVE USE

It is, however, likely that some of the neighbouring languages did have an areal-typological influence on Hungarian, in the establishment of the “possessor-also-

marked” form *Jánosnak (a) jegye* ‘János’s ticket’, as compared with what is almost certainly the earlier, more Uralic-looking construction *János jegye*. For convenience I call the former the extended form and the latter the primary form. Some introductory textbooks of Hungarian for foreigners (Rounds & Sólyom 2002, for example) do not even hint at the existence of the extended form, presumably considering even the primary forms difficult to master. It is true that the marking of the possessed rather than the possessor is unusual in Europe. But the primary Hungarian form is also constructed out of two interlocking elements, a suffixed noun AND a sequential restriction:

- A possessed nominal suffixed with Px3, which I abbreviate as *-/j/α(i)*, where *a* stands for *a/e* according to vowel harmony (see Sherwood 1996, *passim*)

PLUS

- The first noun linearly to its left without any case suffix (only *-NAK/-NEK* is allowed, see below), which turns the lock on the construction, being construed as the possessor nominal.

*Note 1.*

If there is no possessor nominal, the possessor must be recovered from the speech situation and/or is located linearly earlier in the text. In English translation the default ‘his/her/its//their ... (s)’ applies. Certain isolated forms with Px3 (e.g. *Vége, Ára*) offer striking evidence of the primacy of what I am calling the primary form, and need special treatment (Sherwood 1990 [1991]: 111).

*Note 2.*

The nature and number of any adjectives or adjectival constructions (such as participial phrases) before either possessor or possessed (or both) have no effect on the above construal. It is important to state this, as written Hungarian, especially, favours this construction above relative clause creation. However:

It is at this point that it should be noted that the possessor may, after all, have a marker, in particular *-NAK/-NEK*. For the purposes of language teaching it is enough to say something about the dative/genitive nexus by way of historical explanation (While it is often said, even in synchronic descriptions, that historically the *birto-kos jelző* developed from the *részeshatározó* [e.g. Rác 1971: 333], the functional links described here must also have played a role). Here the emphasis is on explaining the need for the use of *-NAK/-NEK* in the simple Hungarian sentence, with special consideration of the learner of Hungarian. As the essive, predicative (praedicativus), nuncupative, factive and certain other uses (Rác 1971: 295, 307,

311 316, 329, 330, 332) are relatively minor and can often be dealt with either in the complementation of individual verbs (e.g. *hív* <*vki vkiT vkiNEK/vmiNEK*>) and/or by explaining the necessity to leave no role, other than the simple subject role, unmarked in the Hungarian sentence (e.g. *készül* <*vki vmiNEK*>/\**János orvos készül*, as contrasted with, say, *készül* <*vmi*>), they are not treated further here.

### 3 (a) GENITIVE WITH DEMONSTRATIVES

Similar to English ‘this/that//these/those boy’s/boys’ acquaintance(s)’, of which the examples are translations.

COMPULSORY: failure to use *-NAK/-NEK* on both elements of the demonstrative construction could result in construal as a SENTENCE (linearly primary, suffixless item could be read or heard as sentence subject):

*ez a fiú(nak) az ismerőse* \*‘this is the acquaintance of the boy’

*az ismerőse ez a fiú(nak)* \*‘it is the acquaintance of the boy that this (person) is’

**en-nek#a^fiú-nak** az^ismerőse(i)  
az^ismerőse(i) **en-nek#a^fiú-nak**

The exhaustive list of possibilities of this type is as follows:

**annak#a fiúnak** az ismerőse(i)

az ismerőse(i) **annak#a fiúnak**

**ezeknek#a fiúknak** az ismerőse(i)

az ismerőse(i) **ezeknek#a fiúknak**

**azoknak#a fiúknak** az ismerőse(i)

az ismerőse(i) **azoknak#a fiúknak**

### 3 (b) DOUBLE POSSESSION

Possession chains (double possession), similar to English ‘his sister’s friend’s car’, ‘the King of England’s hat’, ‘the end of the line of people’

COMPULSORY: failure to use *-NAK/-NEK* (equally: the use of *-NAK/-NEK* twice), will result in what Dwight Bolinger has termed ‘jingle’ (Bolinger 1979): two Px3 suffixes (or equally: two *-NAK/-NEK* suffixes) in sequence, which make the mental processing of information relatively more difficult: who/what belongs to what’s/whose what/who?

Only two linear orders are possible, with the second relatively less frequent (the examples mean ‘Anja Silja’s mother’s friend’):



However, once *-NAK/-NEK* has been added to the possessor, the previous conditions for construal no longer obtain: the possessor now has its own marker (and the possessed retains its Px3 marker), so that the genitive construction is now achieved by means of the two markers ‘hooking up’ with each other within the domain of the sentence. The construction thus **no longer requires linearity for its construal**, so it has split into two parts, both separately deployable according to the normal rules of Hungarian “word” order (better: “sentence-part” order). Whether the result of this split is labelled a single ‘discontinuous’ noun phrase, or two noun phrases by amoeba-like division, or possibly something else, is not of direct concern to language learning, though of course it must be accounted for in linguistic theory.

The following six versions of the Hungarian for “Where is the friend of the boy?” are not all equally frequent but are all grammatical.

Hol#van a fiúnak a barátja?	The transitional forms: may be seen as			
A fiúnak a barátja hol#van?	EITHER extension OR split.			
<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"><tr><td>Hol#van</td><td>a barátja</td><td>a fiúnak?</td></tr></table>	Hol#van	a barátja	a fiúnak?	SPLIT: the order of the boxes
Hol#van	a barátja	a fiúnak?		
<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"><tr><td>A fiúnak</td><td>hol#van</td><td>a barátja?</td></tr></table>	A fiúnak	hol#van	a barátja?	is controlled largely by Topic/
A fiúnak	hol#van	a barátja?		
<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"><tr><td>A barátja</td><td>hol#van</td><td>a fiúnak?</td></tr></table>	A barátja	hol#van	a fiúnak?	Comment (pragmatic relations, involving
A barátja	hol#van	a fiúnak?		
<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"><tr><td>A barátja</td><td>a fiúnak</td><td>hol#van?</td></tr></table>	A barátja	a fiúnak	hol#van?	different sentence-intonation patterns).
A barátja	a fiúnak	hol#van?		

The teaching of Topic/Comment remains, of course, the greatest challenge in the teaching of Hungarian as a foreign language.

#### ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS USED

**Px3**: third person possessive suffix (singular, unless otherwise specified), with the realizations: *-a(i)/-e(i)*, *-ja(i)/-je(i)*, *-á/-é-*, *-já/-jé-*; (plural only) *-vowel+i*

**vki/sy**: *valaki*/someone

**vmi/sg**: *valami*/something

**#** means that the orthographic space this occupies is grammatically meaningless, as nothing may be inserted at the point marked thus

**^** means that (in theory at least: an unlimited amount of) adjectival material (including participial phrases) may be inserted between the items linked thus.

A **non-grey box** here indicates (what I regard for teaching purposes as) a noun phrase: the elements inside a box are frozen and may not be permuted and no new material may be inserted, while the box itself is mobile as a whole. To avoid overcrowding in the examples, not every noun phrase is necessarily indicated.

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