Mismatches in Hungarian prosody and syntax: An acceptability and interpretation study

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The present work focuses on mismatches in the prosody-syntax interface in Hungarian. It is a discourse configurational language, with a fixed syntactic focus position that is preverbal (É. Kiss 1994). Prosodic prominence in Hungarian is typically left headed, with f0 maxima aligned with the left edge of syntactic and prosodic phrases (É. Kiss 2002, Varga 2002, Olaszy 2010, Kálmán and Nádasdy 1994, Szendrői 2001). The prosody of Hungarian is traditionally described as having only a supplementary function in marking information structure (IS), with word order being the primary tool for determining focus. However, more recent investigations suggest that prosodic prominence can occasionally have a primary role in marking focus, if syntax fails to resolve ambiguity. For example, Langer and Kügler (2023) show that prosodic prominence plays a role in resolving ambiguity in sentences where the preverbal (focus) position has several phrases, with the focused word bearing prosodic prominence. This goes against the observation that prosodic marking is left headed in the preverbal position of a narrow focus (NF) sentence.

In our current work, we examine whether prosodic prominence in Hungarian can be interpreted as marking focus in the post-verbal domain. To exemplify this, we start with the following examples of broad focus word order sentences. Sentence (1) is a default broad focus (BF) sentence, serving as a starting point for examples (2) and (3). Boldface indicates prosodic prominence, while the square brackets indicate the scope of syntactic focus.

(1) [**Megvett-em** a könyvet]$_F$
bought-I the book BF
'I bought the book .'

(2) [Megvett-em a **könyvet**]$_F$
bought-I the book BF, repair
'I bought the book .'

(3) [Megvett-em **a könyvet és a széket** is]$_F$
bought-I the book and the chair also BF
'I bought the chair as well as the book .'

In (2), we present a default BF focus word order, with prosodic prominence in the postverbal domain, which is an unexpected and infrequent form. Native listeners report that (2) occurs occasionally as self-correction in spontaneous speech production, where the speaker initiates a sentence production with the broad focus word order instead of a narrow focus one. Due to this 'false start', the phrase that is now in the postverbal domain cannot be syntactically focused, hence the speaker corrects the production by prosodic marking. In our ongoing study, we are interested in understanding how listeners interpret such productions of focus marking, where they are confronted with mismatching syntactic and prosodic focus markings.

In example (3), we have the same word order, but here, the postverbal domain has two noun phrases connected by the conjunction 'and'. Furthermore the additive particle 'also' is present

in the sentence. Following the traditional analyses, the particle 'also' can be analysed as focus sensitive, giving rise to prosodic focus markings. Langer (2021) found that the syntactic hosts of the additive particle were always accented. We plan to extend these analyses to further study the influence of focus sensitive particles in the postverbal domain.

Our planned study employs acceptability tasks and interpretation tasks, utilizing both reading and listening exercises, which embed the examples above in plausible dialogue contexts. In these, sentences similar to (2) may be framed as production errors, where a speaker aims to syntactically focus a phrase by placing it in the preverbal position, but fails to do so. Instead of restarting the sentence, they choose to prosodically mark the desired element while retaining the BF word order. We expect that in the reading exercise, the participants will be unable to interpret the BF sentence structure as NF. On the other hand, we hypothesise that in the listening task with prosodic marking on the postverbal NP, the NF interpretation becomes available, though less preferred, than the NF word order with the matching intonation. In the listening task, all critical sentences will be interspersed with sentences with matching and mismatching prosody to give us a more precise degree of acceptability (to be measured using 5-point Likert scales). All critical sentences will be interspersed with controls. Additionally, an interpretation task will be conducted with a different set of participants, to further nuance our understanding of how listeners interpret the non-canonical prosodic realizations. We hypothesise that participants will be able to correctly interpret sentences like (3) in reading with the additive particle 'also' as NF, despite the BF word order. We expect that the reason for this is the presence of the additive particle, and its focus sensitivity. In the acceptability task, we will compare the sentences with the NF word order and the BF word order without the additive particle. For (2), we hypothesise the same tendencies in the listening task as in the reading task, with higher ratings for the postverbal prosodic marking. All critical and control sentences will appear in a dialogue to give context, to enable the possibility of creative interpretations. A creative interpretation in this context would be a BF word order sentence with a NF interpretation. It will be measured by the acceptability task compared to standard NF word order sentences. It will also be measured by the interpretation task, where the participants will describe the NF word order interpretation for the BF word order critical sentences if our hypothesis is correct. The results of the experiment sketched above will be presented during the workshop.

Our study is the first to address the question of how Hungarian listeners interpret and resolve mismatches between syntactically and prosodically expressed IS, that occur frequently in everyday interactions. Furthermore, it analyzes the possibility of focus occurring in the postverbal domain in Hungarian, as a result of prosodically –and not syntactically– expressed IS.

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