

# The developments, uses, and functions of preverbal particles in Hungarian and other Uralic languages

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May 9, 2003

## 1. Introduction

Within the Uralic language family, preverbal particles generally only occur within the Ugric branch of the Finno-Ugric languages, a fact known for some time (cf. Zsirai, 1933). Most Uralic scholars (who assume the existence of proto-Uralic) assume that preverbal particles are not a Uralic feature, that is, the existence of these particles in a handful of Uralic languages is due to innovations in the later forms of each of those languages. A more open question is whether the existence of preverbal particles in the (Ob-)Ugric languages is due a feature in common (Ob-)Ugric, but note that the preverbal particles found in other Ob-Ugric languages are etymologically related to those found in Hungarian. The notable non-Ugric Uralic language possessing preverbal particles is Estonian.

I will be using the term preverbal particle in a neutral way to designate phrasal elements appearing before or attached to the verb. I take prefixes (found, for example, in Russian) to be preverbal particles which only appear immediately before the verb and typically comprise a single phonological word. Preverbs, on the other hand, may appear separated from the verb.

In this paper, I begin first by attempting to describe the use of the preverbal particles in each of the languages for which I have information – Hungarian, Estonian,

Mansi and Khanty. I attempt some sort of typology of the uses of these particles in Uralic, to the extent that such an exercise is appropriate or even possible. In Section 3, I tackle the issue of the historical development of the particles in the daughter Uralic languages. One predominant idea was that the development of preverbal particles was an areal phenomenon, and I compare this approach with other alternative analyses.

In the final section of the paper (Section 4), I examine issues that must be addressed in any syntactic theory of preverbal particles. I present the argument with Hungarian examples, but the issues are of a very general nature and apply to the other Uralic preverbal particles and beyond. I cite and give reasons to believe that preverbal particle plus verb complexes (also called phrasal predicates) comprise a single lexical unit, and I contrast this approach with a syntactic analysis which treats each unit as a distinct lexical entity. To conclude, I briefly state a proposal that would allow for a resolution to the analytical paradox.

## 2. Preverbal particles in modern Uralic languages

According to Nurk (1996), there exist what are termed “loan prefixes” in Livonian, Veps, and the Estonian Leivu dialect. I am aware of no other discussion of these prefixes other than a simple passing reference and hence I omit these languages from the current treatment. I restrict the current discussion to Hungarian, Estonian, Mansi and Khanty.

## 2.1 Hungarian

Hungarian preverbs are perhaps the most widely discussed preverbal particles in Uralic. In their basic functions, they may be used to indicate direction of motion, manner of an action, or the beginning or completion of an action (aspect). There appears to be as many as nine distinct categories of meaning assigned to preverbs, given in (1).

- (1) Meaning categories –  
(taken from Harlig 1989 after Velcsov 1976, Kovalovszky 1980)
- Indication of direction
  - Perfectivity
  - Inchoation/inception
  - Durativity
  - Action with successful outcome
  - Improperly done action
  - Diminution/belittlement or augmentation/aggrandizement
  - Opposite meaning of verb base
  - Transitivization of verb base

Even though the Hungarian preverb plus verb combination is orthographically one word, the Hungarian preverb cannot be considered to be a prefix or clitic. The Hungarian preverb is not a bound morpheme, and it may stand alone as an answer to a question, as shown in (2). In each case, the affirmative answer to each question can be simply the preverb.

- (2) Q. Elmész? ‘Are you going away?’ A. El.  
Q. Megcsinálod? ‘Will you do it?’ A. Meg.

One distinguishing difference between prefixes and preverbs is the possibility of preverbs to occupy an alternative position within the sentence. In Hungarian there are three distinct positions a Hungarian preverb can occur in with respect to the verb. These are given in (3).

- (3) direct order: PV V  
 inverse order: V PV  
 discontinuous order: PV (X) V

The direct order is generally taken to be the unmarked case. In an otherwise neutral sentence, a preverb appearing immediately before the verb will give a perfective reading, while a postposed preverb can indicate a non-completed action. Inverse order is also realized when element occupies focus position, the position immediately to the left of the verb. The ordering selection is determined by modal, aspectual, and pragmatic factors (if not others!), a proper discussion of which is beyond the scope of the present paper, but see Harlig (1989) for further discussion of how preverb aspectual considerations interact with object definiteness.

Preverbs can alter the valency, case-government pattern, and lexical semantics of verbs with which they co-occur. In the following example from Ackerman and LeSourd (1997), the first sentence in (4a) occurs with no preverb, and the noun in dative case should be taken to be an adjunct, (i.e. ‘shout’ is a one-place predicate). In the sentence in (4b), the preverb *rá* ‘onto’ combines with the verb to create a two-place predicate which selects a different case ending for the patient.

- (4) a. Az anya kiáltott a gyerekeknek / \*a gyerekre.  
 the mother shouted the child-DAT the child-SUBL  
 ‘The mother shouted to the child.’
- b. Az anya rá kiáltott \*a gyerekeknek / a gyerekre.  
 the mother onto shouted the child-DAT the child-SUBL  
 ‘The mother shouted at the child.’

There have been reports that Hungarian has more than a hundred preverbs, though the exact number is unclear. As Harlig (1989) points out, older preverbs (typically monosyllabic) are often considered to be derivational affixes, while newer preverbs (typically multi-syllabic and often multi-morphemic) are closer to adverbs both in form and function. These facts taken together point make suggestions about both the current status and the historical development of Hungarian preverbs, both of which will be discussed further below.

## 2.2 Estonian

Estonian scholars and teachers call preverbal particles in their language by the name *afiksaaladverb* ‘affixal adverbs’. This is just one type of adverb, distinguished from quantifier adverbs, quantity adverbs, modal adverbs, amount adverbs, independent adverbs, and adjectival adverbs, and phrasal adverbs (Nemvalts, 1996). The affixal adverb is part of the phrasal verb and modifies the meaning of the verb in both straightforward and subtle ways – this “adverb” is capable of expressing orientation, perfectivity, state, and modality (Nurk, 1996).

Similar to Hungarian, the Estonian verbal particle is also separable. In the example below, the preverb *ära* ‘away’ combines with the verb *ostma* ‘buy, purchase’ to create a complex predicate.

- (5) Mees ostab ta sõbra ära (Ackerman and Webelhuth, 1998: 5)  
man buy-3 his friend-GEN away  
‘The man is bribing his friend.’

According to Hasselblatt (1990), there are 52 particles in Estonian which when combined with basic verb forms yield approximately 2,800 phrasal verbs. Hasselblatt also claims

that 60% of Estonian affixal adverbs can be considered to be calques (mirror loan translations) from Indo-European.

### 2.3 Mansi and Khanty

Unfortunately information about specific details of Uralic languages within Russia is not readily available in English, specifically information about a detail such as preverbal particles, and hence the following information is largely taken from non-primary sources.

There exist approximately thirty preverbal particles in Mansi (Vogul). The “prefixes” typically appear immediately before the verb but may be separated from the verb by an emphatic particle, though this may occur somewhat infrequently (Kálmán, 1976, Nurk, 1996). So, according to Kiefer (1997), Mansi “prefixes” are “particle-like” because they preserve their mobility, don’t cliticize, and are therefore like Hungarian. In Khanty (Ostyak), the preverbal particles are to be considered strictly prefixes because they do not separate from the verb.

In both Khanty and Mansi, the prefixes play no role in expressing verbal aspect. Because aspect is expressed morphologically through the use of verbal suffixes, preverbal particles did not acquire this role, as was the case in Hungarian (Kiefer, 1997). As in Hungarian, Khanty and Mansi preverbal particles had their source in adverb plus lative constructions. However, unlike in Hungarian, it appears that the forms may remain morphologically complex with transparent structure. More on the development of preverbal particles is explored in the next section.

### 3. History and Development

In discussing the history and development of preverbal particles, it is impossible to ignore theories attributing the spread of these particles to areal diffusion. As stated above, it has been claimed that the majority of affixal adverbs in Estonian were borrowings from Indo-European. Décsy also claims that Hungarian's system of verbal prefixes resembles those of German and Russian (Décsy, 1965), and Hajdú (1984) gives supporting areal dispersion as well.

On the other hand Honti, (1999) has suggested that neither Germanic nor Slavic influenced Hungarian preverb development. He cites the following differences between Slavic prefixes and Hungarian preverbs, some attributable to Schlachter and Pusztay (1983).

- (6) -Double preverb constructions exist in Slavic but not in Hungarian
- Slavic never detaches prefix, unlike Hungarian preverb
- Hungarian preverbs more closely resemble Slavic adverbs than verbal prefixes.

I personally find these arguments less than compelling, and until the exact issue is closely defined, we will not be able to answer the question about the degree to which areal diffusion has played a role. While features of the Hungarian preverbs may resemble the systems of neighboring languages, this is not at all surprising. The more relevant issue, it seems to me, is whether a given preverbal particle system developed in response to language contact or was simply augmented by language contact. Clearly many Estonian particles came into the language due to borrowing, but I have not been able to find any source to discuss the origin of the system.

Preverbs are a very old feature to Hungarian, and the oldest six to eight preverbs existed prior to the fourteenth century and likely well before then. Kiefer (1997) suggests that Hungarian preverbs developed for the precise purpose of expressing aspect. Middle Hungarian had a richer past tense inflectional system, and the collapse of that system is claimed to have driven the large expansion in the number of preverbs (in order to continue to be able to express aspect). This loss of morphological aspectual marking in Hungarian critically distinguishes its system from those of Mansi and Khanty. Under this explanation, we can preliminarily conclude that the Ob-Ugric languages did in fact have preverbal particles. In each language, these particles typically consisted of an adverb plus a lative directional ending. The Ob-Ugric preverbal particle system was not nearly as pervasive as is found in Hungarian and was likely compositional in nature.

To summarize this section, I want to point out that Nurk (1996) suggests that it may be useful to compare Khanty and Mansi preverbal particles to other language families besides Slavic and Germanic in the search for more areal relationships. However, under the idea I have sketched out above, there is no reason to believe this research direction will be fruit-bearing. Nurk's inquiries are guided more by influence of Roots group researchers such as Künnap, seeking to provide evidence of the unity of particular Uralic (or sub-Uralic) features.

#### 4. Analytical issues of preverbal particles

Preverbal particles in Uralic and other languages present interesting issues for syntactic theorists. Speaking about Hungarian, Soltész (1959) comments, "If certain prefixed verbs occupy a place between a compound word and a derived word, then from



another perspective we must locate prefixed verbs along the border between syntagmata and compounds.” Rombandeeva (1973) has a similar view with respect to Mansi preverbs – Mansi preverbs “evince a transitional function between word-formative affixes and components of compound words.”

Put simply, the question being raised by the authors above is whether to consider a verbal particle plus verb sequence as a single word (compound) or two distinct words. Harlig (1989: 71) comes to yet again a similar conclusion: “There appears to be little distinction in the syntactic-semantic behavior of any of these presumably distinct morphological categories. He points out that in Hungarian orthography, particles functions as “goals” are considered to be adverbs and written separately. Adverbial forms use in a non-literal sense and which change the meaning of the verbal complex qualify as preverbs. The example in (6) below is cited in Harlig (1989) from Kovalovszky (1980b: 988).

- (7) Itt dolgozom, mióta fennáll az intézet.  
here work-1sg since exists the institute  
'I've worked here for as long as the institute has existed.'
- (8) Fenn áll a dombon  
up stands the hill-on  
'He stands up on the hill.'

In (7) the preverb plus verb combination produces an idiosyncratic lexical meaning and hence is written as a single word. The same preverb *fenn* appears again in (8), this time receiving a literal, non-metaphorical interpretation and is thus written as a separate word<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that the non-literal versus adverbial distinction is only one diagnostic as to whether preverbs will be written together with the host verb. For example, the older preverbs will generally always be written as a single word, even if the resulting meaning is strictly compositional and adverbial.

Ackerman and Webelhuth (1998: 5) list ways in which the preverbal particles exhibit lexical, compound word-like properties: “the preverb-V may differ from the verb stem with respect to argument adicity [valency], semantics, case government and grammatical functions.” These are contrasted with morphological effects, such as that “the preverb and V together constitute a morphological base for derivational and inflectional operations.”

To formalize a bit further the nature of this “paradoxical” relationship, consider the following two lexical principles.

- (9) Lexicalist Hypothesis: All morphological derivation is carried out in the lexicon.  
Lexical Integrity: Syntactic rules neither analyze nor alter word structure.

If we assume that a preverb-verb combination such as Hungarian *fennáll* ‘exist’ obeys the lexicalist hypothesis, being morphologically derived as a unit in the lexicon, then lexical integrity is violated in a sentence such as in (10). A syntactic rule is not permitted to alter word structure assembled in the lexicon.

- (10) Az isten nem áll fenn.  
the god not exist  
‘God doesn’t exist.’

The resolution to this issue that I would like to explore as an idea for further investigation is as follows. A typical way to handle the semantics of preverb plus verb compounds such as are found here are to assume that the meaning is analytic, or compositional, unless there exists an entry in the lexicon with a more idiosyncratic meaning to override it. In this way, the size of the mental lexicon is kept relatively small – the lexical semantics of the complex predicate is only stored if it is not completely predictable.

Ackerman and Webelhuth (1997) in fact propose an idea very similar to this for Hungarian. They argue that synthetically expressed preverb-verb units (atomic entities with respect to syntactic structure) with lexical representations block analytically expressed entities with lexical representations. This proposition seems to take a lexicalist perspective. I prefer a syntactic account in which preverbs and verbs as separate entities in the lexicon. For each verb, nuanced meanings are specified for each possible preverb that the verb takes so that idiosyncratic semantic interpretations can be achieved. Nothing is specified in the lexicon if the combined meaning is purely compositional (for, say, a directional preverb that does not change the valence of the verb or grammatical case of its complements).

## 5. Concluding remarks

The ideas sketched in the previous section were intended as an initial attempt to better understand the theoretical issues surrounding preverbal particles and their intricacies for combining with verb stems. Better grounding in diverse syntactic frameworks such as Lexical-Functional Grammar or Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar would ultimately be necessary to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of these proposals.

There are not many clear commonalities among the preverb particles of the different Uralic languages. Because preverb particles are almost certainly not a common feature of Uralic, and because they thus evolved in distinct (yet certainly related) ways in each language, it is not easy to compare directly the differing uses in Hungarian, Estonian, Mansi, and Khanty. If I am attempting to demonstrate anything, it is that these

issues are by no means clear cut. Unfortunately, arguments can be made both in favor and against the development of Uralic preverbal particles under areal influences, just as evidence can be shown that the Ob-Ugric languages may have had preverbs before losing contact. The issue of whether a preverb constitutes a separate word is something that both linguists and people writing Hungarian will continue to deal with for some time. The fact that these problems are difficult does not mean, however, that we should stop asking important questions.

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