Root Infinitives in Hungarian Revisited

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1. Introduction

Bartos (2002) identified and analyzed two types of root infinitives in (adult) Hungarian: the root infinitive with strong imperative meaning (1) and the root infinitive of circumstantial modality (2):

(1) *Sapká-t le-ven-ni!*
cap-ACC PRT-take-INF
'Remove the cap!'

(2) *Innen lát-ni a hegycsúcs-ot.*
here.from see-INF the summit-ACC
'One can see the summit from here.'

In this talk, I will revisit these two constructions in the light of recent theoretical and empirical advances: the discovery of radically truncated clauses (RTCs, Halm 2021, Halm 2022a) and the proposal that certain classes of verbs have a lexically hard-wired ability modality in Hungarian (Halm 2022b, Halm 2023). My main claims will be that i) root infinitives with strong imperative meaning are RTCs with an extra vP/VoiceP+TP layer and ii) root infinitives of circumstantial modality are limited to those classes of verbs that have an in-built lexical ability modality. This new account will preserve the general direction of Bartos's (2002) analysis, however, it will help us to get rid of some ad-hoc assumptions and to broaden and make more precise the empirical coverage of the model.

2. Root infinitives with strong imperative meaning = RTC + vP/VoiceP + TP

RTCs are minimal VPs that lack vP and all the higher projections in the inflectional domain (subject and object agreement, tense, aspect, modality) and the higher left periphery (focusing and negation):

(2) *sapka le vesz*
[$_{VP}$ internal arg. [$_{V'}$ PRT V]]
cap PRT take
'I/you/etc. remov(ed) the cap.'

They are produced in informal speech situations and under time pressure: The derivation is terminated prematurely at the VP level, and the bare VP (lacking any of the dedicated higher functional projections) is sent to spellout (PF) and semantic interpretation (LF). The motivation is to maximize the efficiency of the exchange of information: if all the information that is encoded above VP is recoverable by the hearer from the context, it might make sense not to waste time and effort building the above-VP level. Since RTCs breach various grammaticality conditions (the Theta Criterion, spellout by phase, semantic interpretability at LF, and the principle that the numeration needs to be exhausted), they are limited to informal contexts and have a stable but degraded acceptability (4.2 on a 1-to-7 Likert scale). Since the lack of any dedicated functional projections above VP precludes all the movements that otherwise obligatorily take place in a Hungarian sentence (except adjunction such as topicalization and Q-raising), they have a very strict syntax (caseless objects, (Adj) O (Adj) PRT V word order, determiner-less argument NPs etc.) and offer a unique window into the structure of the minimal VP.

It turns out that root infinitives with a strong imperative meaning, as described by Bartos (2002), are subject to almost the same restrictions as RTCs: they lack subject and object agreement (even though non-infinitival imperatives in Hungarian obligatorily display subject and object agreement, and infinitives can and do exhibit subject and object agreement in other, non-root constructions) and the identity of the subject needs to be inferred from the context; they lack dedicated higher functional projections such as FocusP or CP; their word order is strictly O PRT V; and argument nominals cannot have a DP layer (even if they are clearly definite, as inferred from the context). The acceptability of imperative infinitives is degraded and they are limited to situations characterized by intense time pressure.

My proposal in light of these striking similarities is that infinitives with strong imperative meaning are less-radically truncated clauses: RTCs with a vP/VoiceP layer and a TP layer. I adopt Bartos's (2002) proposal that the subject is PRO_{arb} and T is [-finite,-tense], spelled out as the infini-

tive suffix *–ni*. The presence of v/Voice explains why objects are obligatorily ACC-marked in imperative infinitives (whereas they are caseless in RTCs). This new account sheds light on two hitherto unexplained features of imperative infinitives. The O PRT V word order simply reflects the basic word order of the minimal VP (which is preserved undisturbed in RTCs due to the lack of movements that are obligatory in full, non-truncated sentences), and the lack of DP on argument nominals is explained in terms of Sportiche's (2005) split-DP proposal: the arguments of V are NPs to begin with and only receive a DP-layer outside the VP, which fails to happen in RTCs where arguments never leave the VP. (Note that in his paper, Bartos (2002: 24) actually gives a brief consideration to analysing imperative infinitives as bare VPs lacking even a TP layer – however, his sketched account immediately runs into difficulties such as predicting the positon and case-markedness of objects, in the face of which he decides not to proceed along this path. The similarity of imperative infinitives and RTCs is also briefly remarked upon by Kenesei & Szeteli 2021: 96).

3. Root infinitives of circumstantial modality: the modality is in the lexicon

Root infinitives of circumstantial modality involve root clauses containing a single infinitival verb form with a circumstantial or ability modal meaning (2). Bartos (2002) argues convincingly against a biclausal analysis (the idea that there is a silent matrix clause containing a modal operator). However, in order to account for the modality, he needs to stipulate in a somewhat ad-hoc manner an extraclausal silent MOD operator right above CP, ending up with what he half-jokingly terms a one-and-a-half-clausal (or sesquiclausal) analysis:

(3) MOD_{circ} [$_{\text{CP}}$... [$_{\text{VP}}$... V_{inf} ...]]

Another weakness of Bartos's (2002) proposal is that his characterization of the verbs that can participate in this construction (inactive subject, cognitive reaction/participation by the subject, goal or beneficiary subject) is empirically inaccurate (as it fails to cover words of physical disposition such as *elér* '(be able) to reach' and it also lacks convincing theoretical support (even if descriptively correct, why exactly is it these verbs that participate and not others?). These same two shortcomings characterize Szécsényi's (2018) biclausal proposal, where a fully-fledged matrix clause is assumed to host a covert modal operator.

Both of these problems disappear once we take into account Halm's (2002b, 2023) recent proposal. Halm argued that verbs of involuntary perception (e.g. *lát* 'see', *hall* 'hear'), involuntary (re)cognition (e.g. *felismer* 'recognize' or *ért* 'understand') and physical disposition (e.g. *elér* 'reach' or *bír* 'endure') are inherently modal in Hungarian: ability modality is lexically hard-wired into their semantics:

(4) $[[\textit{lát}]]^{w,g} = \lambda x.\, \lambda y.\, \forall w' \in W\, [R_{\text{ability}}(w)(w') = 1 \;\&\; [[\text{see}(y,x)]]^{w',g}=1]$

Evidence for this includes the inability of exactly these verbs to felicitously combine with the ability modal auxiliary *tud* 'be able to', the fact that only these verbs participate in the dispositional middle construction (e.g. *lát-sz-ik* see-MID-3SG 'be visible') and that some of these verbs can function as modal auxiliaries of a restricted ability base (e.g. *nem lát-ok olvas-ni* not see-1SG read-INF 'I am unable to read (because of a degradation of my ability to see)'). And, strikingly, it is exactly these verbs that can participate in root infinitives of circumstantial modality. This means that it is no longer necessary to stipulate an extra-clausal silent modal operator (since the verb is inherently, lexically modal) and we can give a clear, principled semantic characterization of the verbs involved.

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