On the possessive nature of Hungarian reflexives and object pronouns

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1. The reflexives of contemporary Hungarian, as well as first and second person object pronouns, have evolved from possessive constructions. For reflexives, it has been claimed repeatedly in the pertinent literature that this possessive structure is still active to some extent in the synchronic system (see Rákosi 2011, 2019 for an overview and references). This claim is less uncontroversial for first and second person object pronouns, which may also be analyzed as possessive structures (see den Dikken 2004, 2006, Dékány 2021, and É. Kiss & Mus 2022 for a discussion). On the standard possessive analysis, *-g-* in *engem* is the possessum, *en* 'I' is the possessor, and *-em* is the possessive agreement morphology referencing the possessor. The reflexive stem *mag* means 'core, kernel, seed' in contemporary Hungarian, which probably had a 'body' reading in earlier stages of the language. The *-g-* element in the object pronoun (appearing in the 1SG and 2SG forms only) may be a reduced version of this noun.

reflexive	object pronoun	possessive DP
mag-am(-at)	*engem*($^\%$*-et*)	*az* (*én*) *ing-em(-et)*
STEM-1SG-ACC	me-ACC	the I shirt-POSS.1SG-ACC
'myself'	'me'	'my shirt'

É. Kiss & Mus (2022) have recently argued that pronominals with possessive structure are characteristics of the Uralic and Samoyedic languages, and they undergo a cyclic diachronic development wherein reflexives turn into (neutral) pronouns, out of which new reflexives may develop again. As part of this reflexive cycle, possessive agreement morphology may change its function to become an accusative allomorph. As for contemporary Hungarian, the accusative case suffix is generally described optional on 1SG and 2SG reflexives and possessive DPs in the pertinent literature, and it is considered to be restricted to non-standard dialects on 1SG and 2SG object pronouns.

2. An across-the-board possessive analysis does not, by itself, explain the distributional differences between reflexives and pronouns, nor does it explain, as I argue here, attested variation among reflexives. I show in this talk that at least three different stages of grammaticalization need to be postulated to describe the synchronic system, and introduce novel diachronic and synchronic data to substantiate this claim.

3. Building on Rákosi (2019), I argue that reflexive anaphors have two morphosyntactic variants. The complex reflexive *önmagam* (the nominal prefix *ön* 'self-' plus the basic reflexive) can spell out a full possessive DP structure with adjectival modifiers and determiners, as the following example from the Hungarian National Corpus shows:

(1) [$_{DP}$*Ezt a zenei önmagamat*] *nagyon sokáig keresgéltem.*
this.ACC the music.ADJ myself.ACC very long search.for.PAST.1SG
'I was searching for this musical self of mine for very long.'

The pronominal possessor may also be overt in this case (not shown). I show that such overt structure building is marginally available for the basic reflexive *magam* 'myself' for contemporary speakers.

All speakers accept, however, referential uses of the basic reflexive. Interestingly, if the object reflexive does not act as a bound variable, then the spellout of the accusative case marker is preferred. I present both corpus-based and experimental evidence to argue that variation between *magam* and *magamat* is therefore not free, contra the usual claim the literature. (2) from the HNC, for example, contains an exempt anaphor with the accusative marker, which is typical in this construction. Likewise, native speakers tend to associate the coreference-based reading of (3) with the case-marked variant of the reflexive (see also Szécsényi 2017 on this).

(2) *Akinek   van munkája   máshol   végzi azt, beleértve magam-at   is.*
     who.DAT is job.POSS.3SG elsewhere does it   including myself-ACC too
      'Whoever has a job, does it elsewhere, including myself too.'

(3) *Én is   utálom   magam(-at) ezért.*
     I   too hate.1SG myself-ACC this.for
     'I too hate myself for this.'
     (i) preferred with *magam*:   'Others also hate themselves'
     (ii) preferred with *magamat*: 'Others also hate me.'

The reduced likelihood of the accusative marker on bound variable object reflexives can be seen as the result of the grammaticalization path that É. Kiss & Mus (2022) describe. Diachronic data also support this conclusion, since, as I will show, the frequency of overt accusative case morphology on object reflexives has been on the decline. Reflexives thus have two possesssive structures in Hungarian: a more grammaticalized one (4a), with a defective, non-referential possessum and a *pro*-dropped possessor; and a less grammaticalized one (4b), where the noun stem is referential and the pronominal possessor is possibly overt. Accusative case is more likely to turn up on (4b). (4) presents the partial structures.

(4) a.   [FP *pro*   [F' ...[NP *mag-*]]]

     b.   [FP *pro/én*   [F' ...[NP<3SG> (*ön/saját*) *mag-*]]]
           I   self/own   SELF

Only the variant in (4b) may occur in positions construed with agreement, where it shows constant 3SG external agreement (see Rákosi 2019).

4. In essence, this possessive superstructure provides for the sort of φ-encapsulation effect that Preminger (2021) universally associates with anaphors. This strategy is so pervasive in Hungarian that it can be observed even on the reciprocal *egymás* 'each other (one+other)', which can assume possessive agreement morphology in non-standard Hungarian (%*egymás-unk* 'each_other-1PL'). This is a marked variant, rejected by many speakers, but it does occur consistently in contexts where the antecedent is either not expressed or is less prominent.
There is no system pressure on personal pronouns to employ encapsulation structures, and in fact we expect them not to have any. Accordingly, I will argue for a reduced possessive structure for *engemet* where *eng-* is the possessum (see den Dikken 2004 for more on an analysis of this kind). Extra support for this analysis comes again from non-standard varieties of Hungarian, in which the pronominal possessor can in fact be spelled out on top of the usual form of the object pronoun: *én-engemet* lit. 'I-me', *te-tégedet* lit. 'you-you.ACC'.

Selected references

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