What counts as relational in Hungarian, 
Uralic and beyond? 

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Introduction: Hungarian displays two inflectional asymmetries which pertain to verbal agreement and possessor agreement, respectively. Although each of the splits is dealt with in quite some detail in the literature, no analytical link between the two has as yet been suggested. This paper offers a conjoined analysis which contains the following novelties: (i) It argues that both splits are instantiations of conceptual relationality, to be characterised as a transitivity opposition and an alienability opposition, respectively. (ii) It embeds the analysis into a general typological context of both transitivity and alienability.

A split in the possessor agreement morphology: It is very common for languages to display a morphosyntactic distinction between “alienable” and “inalienable” in nominal possession. Typically, the inalienable construction is found with relational nouns such as body-parts and kinship terms, whereas non-relational nouns tend to be treated as alienable. Although Hungarian is usually not considered to exhibit a par excellence alienability contrast, there is in fact an asymmetry which is seen in exactly this light: a systematic morphophonological alternation in the possessor agreement morphology that gives rise to two contrasting suffixes in the third person (Kiefer, 1985; Elekfi, 2000; Moravcsik, 2003). An example is ablak-a vs. ablak-ja, window-3.SG.POSS ‘his/her/its window’, where in the former case the window belongs to a house or a door (i.e., standing in a part-whole relation), and in the latter case is literally possessed (by a person). Likewise, the plural distinguishes anyag-uk vs. anyag-juk ‘their material’ (i.e., the material that something is made of vs. that belongs to someone.)

We will explain this alienability opposition as semantic vs. pragmatic possession, thus building on the opposition of semantic vs. pragmatic definiteness in the sense of Löbner’s (2011) approach to nominal determination. Semantic possession implies that the relation between the noun’s referential argument and the possessor is inherent to the noun’s lexical meaning, whereas pragmatic possession indicates that the relation is contextually established.

A split in the verbal conjugation: The verbal agreement morphology makes use of two different conjugations, of which the so-called ‘objective’ conjugation displays agreement with the subject and at the same time hinges on referential properties of the direct object.

(1) a. Lát-játok a kutyá-t
   see-2PL.OBJECTIVE DEF dog-ACC ‘You (pl.) see the dog’

b. Lát-tok egy kutyá-t
   see-2PL.SUBJECTIVE INDEF dog-ACC ‘You (pl.) see a dog.’

Commonly the objective conjugation is analysed as being triggered by an object that is definite (Comrie, 1977; Kenesei, Vago & Fenyvesi, 1998; É. Kiss, 2002; Coppock & Wechsler, 2012). It is therefore often referred to as ‘definite’ conjugation.
Note that any analysis is confronted with certain peculiarities of the choice between the two conjugations (which are also dealt with in the quoted literature): objective conjugation with complement clauses, as well as (optionally) with the wh-pronoun amellyik, as opposed to the wh-pronouns ki, aki ‘who’ and mi, ami ‘which’; valamennyi ‘each’ (objective) as opposed to minden ‘every’ (subjective). This paper, by contrast, pays particular emphasis to the two following facts: First, when the object is a local (i.e., 1st or 2nd person) pronoun the subjective rather than the objective conjugation is used. Second, the objective conjugation is also used with indefinite objects, provided that they are (either definitely or indefinitely) possessed (cf. also Bartos, 1997):

\[
(2) \quad \text{\texttt{[a / egy magyar iró ] könyv-é-t olvas-om}}
\]

\text{DEF/INDEF Hungarian author book-P'OR3SG-ACC read-1.SG.OBJECTIVE}

‘I read a book of the/a Hungarian author.’

We suggest that the trigger for the objective series is referentiality and its relevance for transitivity. Specifically, we will argue along the following lines:

- We analyse the split in the light of the well-established typological notion of differential object marking (DOM). The more articulated objective conjugation is avoided in those cases where the object is least ‘salient’, with non-specific indefinites as the traditional end-point on a scale, in the sense of least affinity to prototypical subjects and least referential potential. This way, languages differ with respect to the threshold of what precisely counts as transitive.
- We propose an extended DOM scale that takes possessed indefinites as opposed to unpossessed indefinites into account. The higher referential potential of the former thus accounts for the Hungarian objective agreement split. The end-points of the scale are implicit, existentially bound, and incorporated arguments on the one hand, and anaphoric and topical noun phrases on the other hand, with (non-possessed or possessed, indefinite or definite) lexical objects in between. Thereby the role of the utterance and its context in establishing the reference of the noun phrase increases along the scale.
- Our account also extends to the absence of the objective agreement with local pronouns. Since, however, the absence is not motivated in either semantic or functional terms, the common denominator should not be looked for in terms of referentiality but rather in terms of transitivity: Local person pronouns are so ‘bad’ as objects (in the sense that they are hierarchically too high compared to subjects) that they are likely to fail to fulfill all structural grammatical properties of objects (Bresnan et al. 2001), be they morphological or syntactic. Note that in Hungarian there are not only unusually complex accusative forms of the 1st and 2nd person pronouns (\textit{eng-em}, \textit{tég-ed} lit. ‘my I’, ‘your you’), but also 3rd person lexical objects cease to bear the accusative marker where a possessor suffix of 1st or 2nd precedes. This way, the failure of 1st and 2nd person pronouns to trigger objective agreement may be connected to the situation in Sel’kup (Samoyedic), where according to Polinsky (1992) they fail to show direct object status altogether.

\textbf{Synthesis:} Eventually, we draw on the close morphological parallels between the split in the verbal conjugation and that in the possessor agreement morphology. As is evident from example (1), the suffixes of the objective conjugation are akin to the suffix-
es of the alienable ("pragmatic") possessor agreement. We explain this by assigning to \( j(a) \) the status of an exponent of relationality:

(i) for verbs, in the sense of transitivity, i.e., that the lower argument fulfills the full range of morphological or syntactic properties of a direct object. Our transitivity claim is supported by the comparison of the split in other languages of the Uralic family. The role of transitivity rather than definiteness is particularly obvious in Nenets, a language of the Samoyedic branch, where the objective series is irrespective of the object’s definiteness (Körtvély, 2005). It is in this light that the limited suitability of local persons as direct objects also aligns in our analysis.

(ii) for possessed nouns, in the sense that pragmatic possession involves a contextual relation (e.g., of ownership) which is not required for semantic possession.

(iii) for lexicalised relational nouns such as \( \text{ujj} \) ‘finger’, \( haj \) ‘hair’, \( fej \) ‘head’, \( máj \) ‘liver’, \( száj \) ‘mouth’. Some of them are even transparently derived from non-relational bases by the \( j \), e.g., \( \text{ferj} \) ‘husband’ < \( \text{ferfi} \) ‘man’, \( \text{nej} \) ‘wife’ < \( \text{nő} \) ‘woman’.


