

Noncanonical syntax paired with noncanonical interpretation: A preliminary judgment study of Hungarian subpart of additive focus fronting

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Introduction Noncanonical word orders often give rise to reduced acceptability, as attested by a large number of acceptability rating studies. This effect has been argued to result in great part from increased processing load associated with the narrow syntactic derivations yielding noncanonical orders (Kaiser & Trueswell 2004, Fanselow & Frisch 2006, Hofmeister et al. 2014). At the same time, the effect partly also originates from the fact that noncanonical orders are typically limited to special contexts. Indeed, in several studies it has been found that in the appropriate context, noncanonical structures may be just as acceptable as canonical counterparts (Fanselow et al. 1999, Bornkessel et al. 2006, Fanselow et al. 2008, Weskott et al. 2011), despite the fact that their processing disadvantage typically largely persists (Bornkessel & Schlesewsky 2003) or is alleviated only partially (Kaiser & Trueswell 2004, Bader & Meng 2023). In other studies, however, noncanonical structures were judged as poorer than canonical ones even in the presence of supporting context (Bader 1999, Keller 2000, Weskott et al. 2004, Kristensen et al. 2014). This accords with findings showing that even when context is favourable, sentence comprehension in noncanonical orders is still compromised (Burmester et al. 2014, Bader & Meng 2023).

Background Subpart of focus fronting (SFF), investigated mostly in German, presents a special case of noncanonical structures in that it not only involves noncanonical syntax but also a special kind of noncanonical interpretation. In particular, in the noncanonical syntactic form involved in SFF some constituent is syntactically marked by fronting, but instead of that constituent, it is a larger constituent that receives focus interpretation (Fanselow & Lenertova 2011). This noncanonical, nontransparent mapping to interpretation may pose special processing difficulty, not present in other non-canonical structures that have been investigated. Similarly to other noncanonical orders, acceptability studies of the German SFF construction placed in an appropriate context have yielded conflicting results. While Fanselow et al. (2008) found that (written) OVS sentences with a VP-focus interpretation are judged as acceptable as canonical SVO sentences in an all-new context, some other experimental studies detected lower acceptability of the same SFF construction (Wierzbica 2017, Wierzbica & Fanselow 2020). Fery & Drenhaus (2007) also showed that the mode of presentation may have a substantial effect: in their experiment, OVS SFF sentences were judged as poor when presented in writing, but as acceptable when presented auditorily.

Objective In view of these conflicting findings, the current preliminary study investigates an SFF construction in Hungarian in which the noncanonical nature of the targeted focus interpretation is morphosyntactically marked by the presence of an additive focus particle. The noncanonical word order at issue, illustrated in (1), involves the fronting of an internal argument phrase to a pre-verbal position, immediately followed by an additive focus particle. The construction is ambiguous between a narrow focus interpretation (cf. 2a) and a wide, VP-focus interpretation (cf. 2b) (Balogh & Langer 2020). We seek to address the following two questions. (i) Does the fronting involved in this additive focus construction lead to degradation either in a narrow focus context or in a VP-focus context? (ii) How does the rating of acceptability in each case relate to speakers' ease of access to the target focus interpretation as reflected in access to the associated presupposition?

Experiment We conducted a study based on three experimental tasks. In each trial of Task1 participants had to rate the naturalness of a continuation of a sentence like (1) on a visually presented five-point numerical scale. Task2 differed from Task1 in that the target sentence was preceded by the context sentence, which involved an exclusive focus particle. The critical conditions are exemplified in (2) and (3). Task3 tested participants' interpretation of sentences like (1) by having them judge whether the existential presupposition of a narrow focus interpretation, illustrated in (4), presented as a possible inference, is entailed (whether it is "completely certain"). In critical conditions, target sentences were preceded by a context that either favoured the narrow focus reading, inviting a 'yes' response to the entailment question, or it favoured a wide focus reading, inviting a 'no' response. The same 22 Hungarian adults participated in each task in the invariable order Task1, Task2, Task3. Each critical condition in was tested by five lexicalizations in each task, but in Task3 three of the lexicalizations contained accidental errors, so they had to be excluded from analysis. Critical items were complemented by controls/fillers, and item order was pseudorandomized in each task.

Results Results of the two critical conditions of each task are summarized in Figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Each figure includes a control condition in which the additive focus was incongruent with context on both the narrow and the wide focus interpretation (Task1, Task2), or in which the presented possible inference was unambiguously not entailed by the target sentence (Task3). Both narrow and wide focus conditions were rated near ceiling levels, without a significant difference, in both Task1 and Task2. In Task3, a narrow focus existential presupposition was judged as being entailed at a ceiling rate in the condition that favoured the narrow focus reading. In the condition favouring the wide focus reading, the same rate was significantly lower, but importantly, it was not near floor level. (Statistical analysis omitted.)

Conclusions Our results show that the additive focus fronting construction in Hungarian is highly acceptable on a transparent, narrow focus reading, and it is similarly highly acceptable on a non-transparent wide focus reading. This pattern of acceptability diverges from the majority of studies of the analogous German SFF construction based on written stimulus, aligning only with Fanselow et al.'s (2008) findings. Despite near ceiling acceptability of the construction on both the transparent and the nontransparent focus readings, preliminary results from Task3 indicate that the latter is more difficult to access even in a supporting context. This may suggest that the transparency of the mapping to interpretation is a factor that makes an independent contribution to the processing load of noncanonical word orders.

- (1) Az anyukám [a levest] is megfőzte.
the mum.my the soup.acc too cooked 'My mum cooked the soup too.'
- (2) a. ... és a pörköltet is. (narrow focus continuation in Task1)
... and the stew.acc too
b. ... és takarított is. (VP-focus continuation in Task1)
... and cleaned.the.apartment too
- (3) a. A: Zsuzsi csak zöldségeket eszik. 'Zsuzsi only eats vegetables.'
B: Nem igaz, mert húst is. (narrow focus continuation in Task1)
not true because meat.acc too 'Not right, because she eats meat too.'
b. A: László csak bevásárolt. 'Anna: László only did the shopping.'
B: Nem igaz, mert vacsorát is készített. (VP-focus continuation in Task1)
not true, because supper too made 'Not right, because he made supper too.'
- (4) My mum cooked something else too.

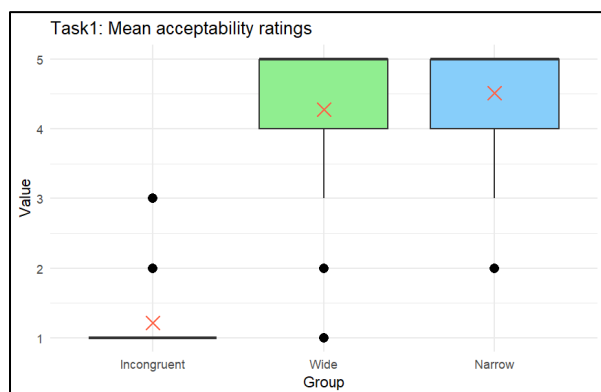


Figure 1

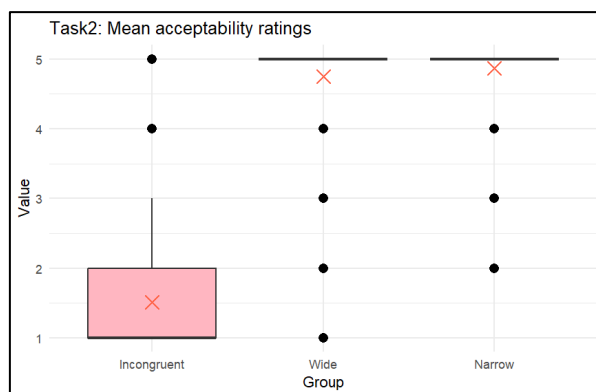


Figure 2

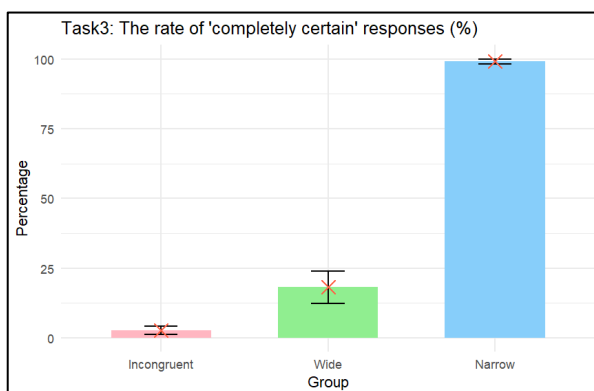


Figure 3