

# The Perfectivizer Particle “*meg*” in Hungarian as the Spell-Out of Specificity

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One central aim of syntactic investigation is to determine the set of features that are relevant and accessible for operations in syntax. These days it is a relatively well-established fact that definiteness plays a part in core syntactic processes such as case-assignment and agreement, and a wide range of phenomena have been investigated to support this idea, although there is much debate concerning the technical implementation. The same has not been as solidly established for specificity, perhaps due to the fact that languages that have articles generally differentiate these based on definiteness, and so the specificity of a DP is often taken to constitute some sort of pragmatic issue. In this paper I present data and arguments to support the claim that the Hungarian *meg*, a so-called default perfectivizer particle, is in fact the spell-out of the [+specific] feature of the Theme argument (that is, the direct object of transitives or the surface subject of unaccusatives). I show that, although this particle is apparently aspectual in nature and has been claimed to be part of the lexical entry of the perfective verb, its presence is actually controlled by the specificity of the Theme. At the same time, I would also like to position this phenomenon and its analysis in the wider realm of current research that seeks to establish syntactic connections between the feature makeup of arguments of the verb and the aspect of the sentence (see Ramchand(1997,1998), Travis(2000)).

The presentation is organized in the following manner. First, I will present data pertaining to verb modifiers (VM) in Hungarian, and briefly demonstrate how they affect the aspectual interpretation of the sentence. Then I proceed to facts showing that while some other VM's are associated with oblique arguments, when there is no oblique argument present and the VM is *meg*, this particle is clearly associated with the Theme. I illustrate the interaction of the specificity of the Theme argument and the aspect of the sentence. Then I turn my attention to the so-called Non-Specificity Effect (Szabolcsi(1986), Kiss(1995)) and argue that this effect and its neutralization by focusing or by the presence of another VM can be understood given the present analysis. Finally I discuss the conclusions and implications.

Compare the following two sentences:

- (1) a. *Péter*            *ette*                    *az*    *almá-t.*  
P                    ate                    the    apple-Acc  
'Peter was eating the apple.'
- b. *Péter*            ***meg-*** *ette*                    *az*    *almá-t.*  
P                    MEG ate                    the    apple-Acc  
'Peter ate the apple.'

When the preverbal position is filled by the particle *meg*, the sentence is perfective, while in its absence the sentence is imperfective. However, *meg* cannot be used to perfectivize all

predicates. Here I will concentrate on one such distinction, namely the difference between verbs with an oblique argument and simple transitives/unaccusatives:

- (2) a. *Anna rá- írta a vers-et a táblá-ra.*  
 A onto-3<sup>rd</sup> sg wrote the poem-Acc the board-onto  
 ‘Anna wrote the poem onto the board.’
- b. *Anna meg- írta a vers-et.*  
 A MEG- wrote the poem-Acc  
 ‘Anna wrote the poem.’

Although both sentences are perfective (and imperfective if the VM is missing), there is obviously an interpretational difference. While in (2a) there is a locative argument, and the action is completed only when the poem is on the board, in (2b) the only internal argument is the direct object, and the action lasts until the poem is written. Without going into the details of this here (for discussion see Ürögdi(2002)), it is easy to see that in some sense the VM *rá* in (2a) is associated with the locative, since it matches the locative in case, person and number. Therefore it would be desirable to claim that *meg* in (2b) is similarly associated with the direct object – this would explain why the verb with an oblique argument is not perfectivized with *meg*. At first glance this seems difficult because *meg* is not pronominal. However, one characteristic, namely the specificity of the Theme does influence the presence or absence of *meg*, suggesting a syntactic connection:

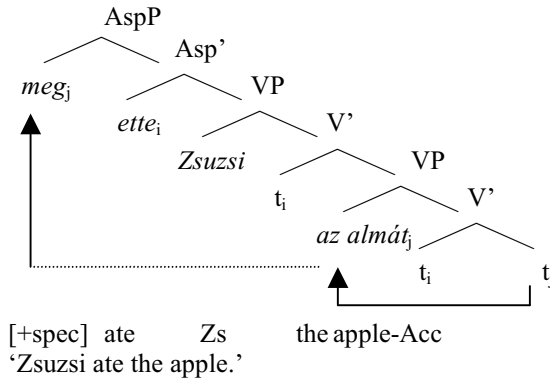
- (3) a. *Zsuzsi meg- ette az almá-t.*  
 Zs MEG ate-Def the apple-Acc  
 ‘Zsuzsi ate the apple.’
- b. *Zsuzsi ette az almá-t.*  
 Zs ate-Def the apple-Acc  
 ‘Zsuzsi was eating the apple.’
- c. *Zsuzsi evett egy almá-t.*  
 Zs ate-Indef an apple-Acc  
 ‘Zsuzsi ate / was eating an apple.’
- d. \* *Zsuzsi meg- evett egy almá-t.*  
 Zs perf- ate-Indef an apple-Acc  
 ‘Zsuzsi ate an apple.’ (OK if the ‘apple’ is interpreted as specific.)

The surprising example is (3c), where the preverbal position is unfilled and the sentence is ambiguous in terms of aspect. This is related to the fact that the DO is non-specific: the VM *meg* seems to be impossible in this case. (Notice that this is clearly an issue of specificity and not of definiteness – the marking on the verb shows the definiteness of the DO, still, (3d) is grammatical with the same verb form if the DO is a specific indefinite.) Perhaps not surprisingly, the same correlation holds between the subjects of unaccusatives (which also originate as Themes) and *meg*. Meanwhile unergatives, which are assumed to have a silent cognate object that is crucially always non-specific, basically never appear with *meg*, although I will discuss the few apparent exceptions.

Based on these facts it is reasonable to claim that *meg* is in fact somehow syntactically associated with the Theme argument, in a manner similar to the oblique-doubling VM illustrated in (2a). In particular, I will argue that *meg* is nothing more than the specificity feature of the Theme argument (the DO of transitives and the surface subjects of unaccusatives) spelled out in a VP-external position, Spec of AspectP (which is more or less

standardly assumed to be the VM position in Hungarian). Thus, when the specificity feature fills the specifier of AspP, the sentence is perfective; when this VM position is empty, the sentence is imperfective; and when the Theme is an existentially interpreted indefinite, this position is filled by an existential operator (also originating from the Theme) and the sentence is unspecified for aspect. The basic structure I argue for is<sup>1</sup>:

(4)=(3a)



The structure of (3c) differs minimally in that the Spec of AspP is occupied by an existential operator, and so follows the aspectual ambiguity.

In the next part of the paper I turn to the Non-Specificity Effect discussed by the authors cited above. The relevant occurrence of this phenomenon is illustrated below:

- (5)
- |    |   |                   |                    |
|----|---|-------------------|--------------------|
| a. | <i>Érkezett</i>                         | <i>egy vendég</i> | <i>/*a vendég.</i> |
|    | arrived                                 | a guest           | / the guest        |
|    | 'A guest arrived. /*The guest arrived.' |                   |                    |
| b. | <i>TEGNAP</i>                           | <i>érkezett</i>   | <i>a vendég.</i>   |
|    | yesterday                               | arrived           | the guest          |
|    | 'The guest arrived YESTERDAY.'          |                   |                    |
| c. | <i>Fáradtan</i>                         | <i>érkezett</i>   | <i>a vendég.</i>   |
|    | tired                                   | arrived           | the guest          |
|    | 'The guest arrived tired.'              |                   |                    |

As example (5a) shows, the unaccusative predicate *érkezett* is incompatible with a specific subject. However, when another constituent is focused (5b), or when there is another VM present (5c), the Non-Specificity Effect is neutralized and the result is grammatical. It follows from the discussion above that the same problem presents itself in another form for us here. As mentioned above, unaccusatives with specific Themes are perfectivized by *meg* in the VM position, making the sentence grammatical:

- (6)
- |                      |                 |          |                |
|----------------------|-----------------|----------|----------------|
| <i>Meg-</i>          | <i>érkezett</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>vendég.</i> |
| <i>meg</i>           | arrived         | the      | guest          |
| 'The guest arrived.' |                 |          |                |

<sup>1</sup> I use the dotted line to mean *overt feature movement* instead of traditional dislocation – for arguments in favor of the existence of such movement, see e.g. Roberts(1998), Pesetsky(2000).

Since 'to arrive' is uninterpretable as a process, (5a) with a specific subject is ungrammatical because without *meg* it has to be interpreted as imperfective. Therefore the question becomes why *meg* is not created in (5b) and (5c) (analogously with (6)), that is, why these sentences are grammatical despite the specific subject.<sup>2</sup> I propose that the solution to this question is slightly different for (5b) and (5c). It is a well-known fact of Hungarian (see Kiss(1995)) that focusing can neutralize aspectual differences, so that sentences with a focused constituent become ambiguous between a perfective and an imperfective reading. This is because focus is predicational, and in such cases the main predication in the sentence is located in FocP, the top-most level, and not in AspP. One possible syntactic realization of this is that the phrase moves through Spec,AspP on the way up to Focus – I investigate this option. In the case of (5c), however, the adverbial *fáradtan* originates lower in the structure than the Theme (either as a lower argument, as in Larson's work, or as the predicate of a small clause), in which case the adverb, and not the specificity feature of the Theme, moves up to fill the VM position. Since the adverb is non-aspectual, (5c) is also unspecified for aspect. Thus both (5b) and (5c) can contain a telic predicate because they have no aspectual specification.

In the final section of my paper, I discuss parallels between this analysis and Diesing's work on indefinites and other research on the topic, and also questions of why a specificity feature in Spec,AspP should have a perfectivizing effect.

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<sup>2</sup> As expected, the same generalizations hold for simple transitives, I will also discuss these.