A Comparative Approach to English, German and Hungarian Verbal Particles

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This paper focuses on the position and function of the verbal particle in German, Hungarian and English. I try to show that although German and Hungarian are not historically related to each other, they share a lot of properties in their syntactic structure, while English has a different syntactic behaviour. In German and Hungarian, the verbal particle moves to the specifier of a functional projection, [Spec,PredP] in the surface structure, while in English, the verbal particle does not move there. The lack of this movement in English results in different aspectual interpretations. While the presence of the verbal particle results in a perfective interpretation in German and in Hungarian, it does not have the same effect on the aspectual interpretation of an English sentence.

1   Introduction

In the present paper, I will investigate the position and function of the verbal particle in German, Hungarian and English. We will see that although the verbal particle seems to occupy different positions in all the three languages, it behaves similarly in German and Hungarian. In both languages, it occupies the specifier position of the same functional head in every clause, namely the [Spec,PredP]. In English, the verbal particle behaves differently, as it cannot move out of the VP, which results in the fact that the semantic interpretation of the sentence will be different in English. While in German and Hungarian the verbal particle functions as an aspectual marker, in English it has no effect on the aspectual reading of the sentence.

2   The derivation of German sentences

2.1   The problem of verb final word order in German subordinate clauses

In German, the word order in subordinate clauses is traditionally taken for the basic word order (1a), and the word order of main clauses is considered as the derived order (1b). Since the finite verb always stands in the final position in embedded clauses, and the order of the embedded clause is considered as the underlying word order, German is traditionally considered an SOV-language. Roberts (1997) accounts for the verb final word order by claiming that the German VP is head final, and the complements of the verb are to the left of the verb. The second position of the verb in the main clause can be accounted for, if we claim that the head of the finite VP moves to the C^0 position, and another phrase, usually the subject NP, moves to the [Spec,CP] position (cf. Roberts 1997).

(1)   a.   ... dass Peter mich   gestern   *an*rief.
                   that Peter me   yesterday up-called
           '... that Peter called me up yesterday.'

       b.   Peter rief   mich   gestern   *an*.
                   Peter called me   yesterday up
           'Peter called me up yesterday.'

Kayne (1994) argues that the universal base order is the Spec-Head-Complement order. Koster (1994) adopts Kayne's theory and assumes that the underlying order in German is SVO rather than SOV: the SOV order is already a derived order. He argues that complements are base-generated to the right of the verb in German, and the fact that the object NP precedes the verb is due to an abstract accusative case feature of the NP, which has to be checked in the specifier position of a functional head[1], in [Spec,AgrOP]. So the object NP moves to the [Spec,AgrOP] position.

2.2   Predicate incorporation with NPs

Koster (1994) distinguishes semantically weak and semantically strong NPs. Strong NPs can be specific or generic and appear as full arguments, while weak NPs are non-specific and non-generic, and must often be interpreted as part of the predicate. Koster (1994) finds that semantically strong object NPs can be scrambled over the adjunct *wahrscheinlich* 'probably', while semantically weak object NPs cannot:

(2)   a.   ... dass Peter wahrscheinlich *Musik*$_i$ hörte t_i.
                   that Peter probably   music heard
           '... that Peter probably listened to music.'

       b.   * ...dass Peter *Musik*$_i$ wahrscheinlich hörte t_i.

       c.   ... dass Peter *das Buch*$_i$ wahrscheinlich gelesen hat t_i.
                   that Peter the book   probably   read   has
           '... that Peter has probably read the book.'

       d.   *...dass Peter wahrscheinlich *das Buch*$_i$ gelesen hat t_i.

In (2a-b), the NP-complement of the verb, which is a semantically weak NP, moves from the right side of the verb to a higher position, but it cannot scramble over the adjunct *wahrscheinlich,* while in (2c) the strong NP *das Buch* can.

Koster (1994) claims that weak NPs are not independent arguments, but part of the predicate of their clause. Weak NPs are incorporated into the predicate; therefore, the phenomenon in (2a) is called predicate incorporation. Predicate incorporation takes place by the movement of the weak NP to the specifier of a functional phrase. He assumes that there is a special functional projection for weak objects between the AgrOP and the VP that he calls Predicate Phrase (PredP).

Summing up what has been said so far, the object NP can be licensed in two ways: either in [Spec,AgrOP] as a full argument of the verb, or in [Spec,PredP] as a part of the predicate.

2.3 The place of verbal particles in the sentence structure in German

Den Dikken (1992) assumes that in deep structure, the object and the particle form a small clause (SC) and the particle is the head of the small clause.[2] Following his theory, we argue that in German, prefixed verbs project a complex VP that contains a VP and a Particle Phrase (PrtP), the former headed by the main verb, the latter headed by the particle. The deep object of the verb functions as the subject of the particle in the PrtP, as in (3).

(3) $[_{VP}$ Peter $[_V$ rief$]$ $[_{PrtP=SC}$ Melanie $[_{Prt}$ an$]]]$

In the surface structure, the subject NP moves to [Spec,AgrSP] for feature checking. The NP *Melanie* moves to [Spec,AgrOP] and the particle – or perhaps the whole PrtP – moves to [Spec,PredP]. Evidence for movement of PrtP to [Spec,PredP] is that particles appear to behave similarly to semantically weak NPs (cf. Kiefer and Ladányi 2000: 459). In main clauses, both weak NPs and particles occupy the final position of the sentence. In embedded clauses, both of them occupy the preverbal position and neither of them can be scrambled over the adjunct *wahrscheinlich*, as we can see in [2a-b] and [4].

(4)   a.   ... dass er wahrscheinlich   *ab*fuhr.
          that he probably   off-drove
      '... that he probably drove off.'

     b.   *...dass er *ab* wahrscheinlich fuhr.

Since weak NPs occupy [Spec,PredP] and the particle appears in the same positions in the sentence as weak NPs do, we can assume that the particle moves to [Spec,PredP], as well.

3 The derivation of Hungarian sentences

If we assume that the underlying structure of a sentence is universal, then the deep structure of a Hungarian VP is similar to that of English and of German. Following Tóth (2002), we can assume that the verbal particle is the head of a small clause in Hungarian, as well:

(5) $[_{VP}$ NP V^0 $[_{PrtP=SC}$ NP $Prt^0]]$

Following the above analysis, I assume that the verbal particle occupies the same position in the underlying representation both in German and in Hungarian, namely the head of a small clause.

The word order in Hungarian can be derived similarly to German, by moving phrases from the VP to different functional projections. The difference between semantically weak and strong NPs is reflected in the syntax of Hungarian sentences, as well:

(6)   Péter valószínűleg olvasta   *a könyvet.*
       Péter probably   read-PAST   the book
       'Péter probably read the book.'

(7)   Péter valószínűleg *könyvet*   olvasott.
       Péter probably   book   read-PAST
       'Péter probably read a book.'

A major difference between German and Hungarian is that in Hungarian, neither the weak object, nor the strong object can scramble over the adjunct *valószínűleg* 'probably' (6-7), while in German, the strong NP can scramble over the adjunct *wahrscheinlich* 'probably', as we could see in (2c).

I assume, following Koster (1994), that in Hungarian, as well as in German, the weak object *könyvet* 'book' moves out of the VP to the [Spec,PredP] in (7), since it precedes the verb. The strong object *a könyvet* 'the book' remains in situ in Hungarian, since the verb precedes it, while it moves to [Spec,AgrOP] in German, hence the SOV order in embedded sentences.

The idea that the strong NP remains in situ in Hungarian can account for the word order in (6), but we can already find sentences like (8), where we will have problems if we try to account for the word order in the same way as we did for sentence (6).

(8)   a.   János *el*olvasta az újságot.
              János PRT-read the newspaper
              'János has read the newspaper.'

      b.   *János az újságot   *el*olvasta.
              János   the newspaper PRT-read
              'János has read the newspaper.'

The underlying VP-structure of (8) is represented in (9):

(9)   [$_{VP}$ János [$_V$ olvasta] [$_{PrtP}$ [$_{NP}$ az újságot] [$_{Prt}$ el]]]

During the derivation of the surface structure, the NP *János* moves to [Spec,AgrSP] for checking case. The particle has to move to [Spec,PredP], because it precedes the verb in the surface structure, but we cannot just move the particle *el* to [Spec,PredP], because only maximal projections can move to that position. So we have to move a whole phrase, in this case the whole PrtP. This analysis raises serious problems. It predicts that sentence (8a) is ill-formed, while (8b) is well-formed, which is obviously not the case. The NP *az újságot* cannot precede the verb in the surface structure. Our only option is to move the NP *az újságot* out of the PrtP before moving the PrtP to [Spec,PredP]. Since the verb has to precede the NP, I propose that there is a functional projection between PredP and VP, where the NP moves. I call this functional phrase AgrO$_2$P. The verb itself moves to Pred^0, since it has to precede the object NP, and the particle has to be adjacent to the verb.

I assume that the underlying structure is the same, both in German and in Hungarian. The subject NP of the small clause moves in each case to [Spec,AgrO$_2$P] for checking accusative case. Strong NPs in Hungarian remain in this position, while in German they move along to [Spec,AgrOP], but not for case feature checking as Koster (1994) assumes, since they check their case feature in [Spec,AgrO$_2$P]. The SCs with the particle move to

[Spec,PredP] in both languages, while the weak NPs move first to [Spec,AgrO$_2$P], where they check their case feature and then they move along to [Spec,PredP].

The question arises: what motivates the movement of strong NPs to [Spec,AgrOP] in German. I claim that strong NPs move to [Spec,AgrOP] in German to check their specificity feature. In Hungarian this movement takes place only covertly at LF.

4   The derivation of English verb-particle constructions

In English verb-particle constructions, two situations may arise: (i) the verb is adjacent to the particle, which in turn is adjacent to an NP (10a); or (ii) the verb is adjacent to the NP, and the particle itself immediately follows the NP (10b).

(10)   a.   The police chased off the demonstrators.
        b.   The police chased the demonstrators off. (Svenonius 1996: 4)

Svenonius (1996) claims that the sentence in (11b) has the same structure as (11a). He claims that particles without complements have the same argument structure, but their complements are incorporated into them. In (11b), the particle *off* has a dummy NP complement, which is claimed to be incorporated into the particle.

(11)   a.   The police chased the demonstrators off the steps.
        b.   The police chased the demonstrators off.

Svenonius (1996) claims that the postverbal NP forms a small clause with the particle (cf. den Dikken 1992). He also assumes that every small clause contains a functional head (F). Thus the underlying representation of (11) will be like that in (12).

(12)   a.   The police chased [$_{FP}$ F [$_{PP}$ the demonstrators [off the steps]]].
        b.   The police chased [$_{FP}$ F [$_{PP}$ the demonstrators [off]]].[3] (Svenonius 1996: 7)

The Extended Projection Principle (EPP) of Chomsky (1982) requires that every clause must have a subject. Svenonius claims that both moving the NP *the demonstrators* to [Spec,FP], and moving the particle to F can satisfy the EPP in (12b), since the particle has an NP complement incorporated into it, and therefore, it inherits its nominal feature. Notice that only particles that incorporate their complement can satisfy the EPP. Hence the ill-formedness of (13).

(13)   *The police chased [$_{FP}$ [$_F$ off$_i$] [$_{PP}$ the demonstrators [t$_i$ [$_{NP}$ the steps]]]].

Summing up so far, the EPP can be satisfied by moving an element with a nominal feature into the specifier or the head of FP.

5   English versus German and Hungarian

I suppose that the most important feature in which English is different from German and Hungarian is that the PrtP moves to [Spec,PredP] neither overtly nor covertly in English.

If we examine the German sentences in (14), we will find that the sentence is ambiguous between the progressive and the perfective reading in (14a), while in (14b), the particle is only compatible with the perfective reading. In (15b-c), we can see that similarly to German, the particle *meg* is only compatible with the perfective reading in Hungarian. The absence of the particle results in a progressive reading in Hungarian, while the sentence is

ambiguous in German. The presence of the particle results in a perfective reading in both languages.

(14) a.   Johann aß den Apfel.
Johann ate the apple-ACC
'Johann was eating the apple.'
'Johann ate the apple.'

       b.   Johann aß den Apfel auf.
Johann ate the apple-ACC   PRT
*'Johann was eating up the apple.'
'Johann ate up the apple.'

(15) a.   János ette az almát.
János ate the apple-ACC
'János was eating the apple.'
*'János ate the apple'.

       b.   János megette az almát.
János PRT.ate the apple-ACC
'János ate the apple.'
*'János was eating the apple.'

       c.   *János ette meg az almát.
János ate   PRT the apple-ACC
'John was eating the apple.'

We can conclude from (14) and (15) that in German and in Hungarian, the particle functions as an aspectual marker, by moving into [Spec,PredP]. As the particle does not move to [Spec,PredP] in English, we would expect that it does not function as an aspectual marker. That is what we find in example (16). In English, the aspectual reading of the sentence depends neither on the presence or absence, nor on the position of the particle. The reading of the sentences is perfective in (16a-c) and progressive in (16d-f).

(16) a.   John ate the apple.
       b.   John ate up the apple.
       c.   John ate the apple up.
       d.   John was eating the apple.
       e.   John was eating up the apple.
       f.   John was eating the apple up.

From the examples in (14)-(16), we can conclude that the verbal particle functions as an aspectual marker in German and in Hungarian, while it has no such role in English. In English, the verbal particle is no aspectual marker. The aspect of the sentence is morphologically marked on the verb. Progressivity is expressed by the auxiliary *be* and the *ing*-form of the verb.

6   Conclusion

I tried to show what properties the verbal particles have in English, in German and in Hungarian. I found that verbal particles behave similarly in German and in Hungarian, while

they are different in English. The most important feature in which English is different from German and Hungarian is that the verbal particle functions as an aspectual marker in German and Hungarian, moving to [Spec,PredP], while in English, the verbal particle remains within the VP. In English, the verbal particle does not play any role in the aspectual reading of the sentence.

Endnotes

[1] According to Chomsky (1995), feature checking can take place in spec-head relation, after moving an element to the specifier position of a functional head.

[2] A small clause is a verbless clause that contains a subject–predicate relation (cf. Haegeman and Guéron 1999: 109).

[3] Svenonius does not distinguish between Prepositional Phrase (PP) and Particle Phrase (PrtP), since he considers particles as prepositions with an incorporated NP complement.

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