SEMANTIC DIFFERENCES OF SUFFIXAL
ALTERNATES IN HUNGARIAN

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Abstract

Some of the inflectional paradigms of the Hungarian lexicon contain suffixal alternates which do not vary freely with each other, but certain inflected forms are connected to specific senses of the lexical item. Among verbal suffixes the -ik suffix marking the third person singular form of the present tense indicative behaves in this way, which on certain verbs can simultaneously signal intransitivity, while the alternate for with the zero suffix is transitive. On other verbs, the choice between the bare -t and -vít forms of the past tense suffix (in 3rd person singular) can indicate sense differences. The inflectional paradigm of some verbs can even contain more than one instance of semantic distinction among alternates.

A peculiar difference between the multiple plural forms of nouns derived from adjectives is based on whether the nominal meaning is an occasional one or the nominal lexeme has become completely independent. The same difference is reflected in the accusative form of these nouns, too. Different personal possessive suffixal forms of nouns can signal differences between the types of the possessive relation (real possession or part-whole relation), instead of differentiating senses of the basic form. The adverbial forms of adjectives with -lag, -an and -ul suffixes can also indicate sense distinctions.

1. In 1994 the Dictionary of Hungarian Inflections [Magyar ragozusi szütiur] was published by the Linguistic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest. The introductory part of this dictionary contains English explanations together with an overview of 6 basic verbal and 6 basic nominal inflectional paradigms of Hungarian. The whole paradigm of the verb contains 61 grammatical forms (infinitives, participles, gerunds and a verbal noun as a derivative in addition to the verbal forms in a strict sense). The nominal paradigm contains 33 forms (nominal cases and other suffixed forms with grammatical roles), which more or less depend on the root of the word. (Several other forms are also derivable, but with such a regularity that there is no need for distinguishing between them according to root forms.) Among the six verbal patterns the dictionary entry corresponds to the third person singular
declarative form of the verb (verbs without the suffix -ik), while in the other three the root is followed by a personal suffix -ik (verbs ending in the suffix -ik). The three patterns represent the three classes of vowels, namely velar, palatal and labiopalatal. Many variants of suffixes harmonize with the types of vowels in the root. Among the six basic forms of nominals three belong to nouns ending in vowels and three ending in consonants. The three classes in each group also differentiate according to classes of vowels.

The 61 verbal and 33 nominal forms of actual words, however, do not always follow the basic patterns, but differ from them in certain respects. There exist some typically alternating roots as well. Taking the characteristic types of alternations into account, the Dictionary of Hungarian Inflections distinguishes between 153 verbal and 404 nominal inflectional paradigms. It classifies these paradigms according to the most characteristic suffixal and root-alternations. According to this, the verbal patterns constitute ten groups without -ik and nine with -ik, while the nominal patterns fall into ten groups of nominal paradigms, ten groups of adjectival paradigms, and a further ten groups the other nominal patterns (numerals and pronouns) and nouns with an incomplete inflectional paradigm, and six groups of adverbials and sentence-words (usually with very limited possibilities for inflection).

In the dictionary, the code of each paradigm consists of two or three elements: it starts with a number, which stands for one of the 19 verbal and 36 other (mainly nominal) paradigm types, followed by a letter standing for the vowel class (a, b and c for verbs and A, B, C and D for the other classes of words, the latter comprising the class of words with unstable vowel harmony), and if the paradigm is not a main type within the group, the letter is followed by another number.

The morphological system of Hungarian is so rich (also in forms with grammatical function, and their freer and more bound varieties as well) that the Dictionary of Hungarian Inflections is only a comprised summary of the detailed lexicographic database which contains its entries. (This dictionary was originally intended as a supplement to the Concise Hungarian Explanatory Dictionary [Magyári általános szótár.] The more comprehensive database, entitled The Morphological System of Hungarian Vocabulary [Szókincsüveg nyelvtani alakrendszere] can be found at the Department of Lexicography of the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in four file-drawers and 240 typed pages of code tables. The entries contained here are the same as the entries in the Dictionary of Hungarian Inflections, as well as its system of classifying forms, but the number of sub-