



Report on Marta Ruda's doctoral dissertation entitled
On the Syntax of Missing Objects:
A Study with Special Reference to English, Polish, and Hungarian
(Kraków, 2016)

This is an insightful, thoroughly researched, well-written, and properly organised dissertation on a difficult topic, which has been insufficiently investigated in the available literature although it is theoretically quite interesting. Ms. Ruda has shown in her dissertation that she is fully capable of discussing intricate linguistic problems, as well as offering analyses and solutions that will certainly be welcome by the linguistic community at large. Therefore **I propose that she be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and that it be conferred on her 'with distinction'.**

In this report I will list the merits of the dissertation, but, as is the nature of such an enterprise, I will devote more space to problems and criticisms, which are intended to help the author in her future work and/or in case she wishes to publish the manuscript. Needless to say, I am looking forward to her response and counterarguments.

Ms. Marta Ruda (henceforth referred to as MR) divides the thesis into three parts. The first one is devoted to surveying the issues surrounding missing objects. The middle part reviews the additional data gained from corpora of English and Polish. The last one contains MR's theoretical contributions to the set of problems at hand. MR is justified to confine her attention to the three languages of which she has excellent command, and indeed her findings related to the two that I am familiar with, that is, English and Hungarian, are quite reliable.

MR starts by characterising non-anaphoric and anaphoric missing objects, an important distinction followed throughout the thesis, for it emerges from the examples, all carefully presented, that the primary line of interpretation must involve such a decision. The overview given here is extensive, and, at the same time, succinct. For instance, her discussion of involving the passive or structures of secondary predication takes up three pages only but enlightens the reader. I am also in agreement with the author in drawing the conclusion on the basis of examples like *The dog bites ø* that "the human interpretation usually observed with CPAA [= characteristic property of agent alternation] (and related constructions) is an effect arising at the Conceptual-Intentional (C-I) interface rather than being an inherent property of the construction." (p.24) It may be of interest to note here, by way of human missing objects, that in addition to similar constructions in Hungarian, of which MR is aware as transpires from a subsequent chapter, Hungarian forces a human interpretation of missing subjects of third person plural verb forms, cf. (*What's this noise?*) *Kopog-t-ak* 'knock-PAST-3PL; Someone has knocked'; or: *Ugat-t-ak* 'Someone has barked.' Note that the occurrence of the corresponding pronominal object *ők* 'they' forces anaphoric interpretation, out of the question in this context.

With regard to anaphoric missing objects, lexical properties are identified as playing a major role, and of course the appropriate context is necessary for the missing object to be properly identified. Incidentally, while I agree with MR's judgments here, I take issue with Beth Levin's (1993) example cited on p. 28: **Jennifer craned $\emptyset$* , since even *Merriam-Webster Online* has an illustration contradicting it: *Everyone in the crowd was craning forward (to see her)*. And certainly the adverbial *forward* does not stand in for the missing object here. Perhaps the cause of the difference between the English example and the corresponding Polish and Hungarian ones goes back to the former, but not the latter two, being metaphorical. Also, I object to calling the indefinite missing object as anaphoric in examples like (122), p. 36, in which people are distributing bread and one of them asks the question *Mindenki kapott $\emptyset$* ? 'Has everybody got (some)?'. I contend it is a case of pure ellipsis of the head noun without any property of anaphoricity as it is commonly understood.

Chapter 2 catalogues the various characteristics from lexical to aspect to genericity that may contribute to object drop. It is a state-of-the-art survey of the literature and forms an excellent basis of making theoretical claims in the third part of the thesis. I particularly appreciate the reference to polarity and information structure, which are often neglected in discussions of missing objects. When MR compares Polish and Hungarian, she cites Kiefer (1994) claiming that "object drop is also available with the perfective and the imperfective aspect in these two languages." (p. 66) However, Kiefer (1994: 421) does not specifically refer to object drop there, but concentrates on the analysis of the perfective. In other words, verbs with a perfective prefix in Hungarian, e.g., *meg-ír* 'PV-write', do not, as a rule, tolerate object drop, even though at least some prefixed verbs, especially those denoting activities related to housework (e.g., *ki-takarít* 'PV-clean', *el-mosogat* 'PV-wash.up') or other regular activities (e.g., *le-arat* 'PV-reap') allow for object drop. It would be interesting to test further examples of this semantic class, especially because not every verb that apparently belongs here undergoes object drop. To cite a few examples, *fel-szeletel* 'PV-slice, slice up (meat)', *le-szed* 'PV-take, take off (dishes from tables) or *meg-terít* 'PV-lay, lay (the table)' are OK, but *meg-hámoz* 'PV-peel, peel off (apples, potatoes)' or *fel-akaszt* 'PV-hang, hang up (pictures on wall)' do not tolerate object drop. A corpus-based study accompanied by testing native speakers would certainly throw light on regularities so far unnoticed, and could serve as the basis of further theoretical forays. The other type of exception to this rule is also given, that is, the irregular activity verb *fel-olvas* 'PV-read, read out', which licenses object drop precisely because it is not (exclusively) perfective/telic.

In contrast to Polish, Hungarian does not seem to allow the object to drop in negated perfective verb, cf. pp. 67f. The verb *meg-harap* 'PV-bite' cannot have a missing object whether in an affirmative or a negative sentence. Moreover, modal contexts are also excluded if the sentence is negated, cf. *Ez a kutya harap/harap-hat* 'This dog bites/can bite'; but **Ez a kutya nem harap-hat* 'This dog cannot bite.' Interestingly, if modal inflection is replaced by the equivalent auxiliary, the construction is acceptable: *Ez a kutya nem tud harap-ni* 'This dog not able bite-INF, This dog cannot bite'. The rest of Chapter 2 lists further contexts of possible object drop, of which I have found the part on information structure the most interesting, although the phenomena discussed are strongly context dependent and therefore Hankamer and Sag's (1976) pioneering article could have been invoked here too. I agree with MR that *tough*-movement structures and infinitival relatives are outside the scope of the dissertation, but I would not even consider them as "special environments with missing objects" (p. 71) any more than I would plain relative clauses such as *(the man) you saw $\emptyset$* .

Chapters 3 and 4 review data from English and Polish corpora, respectively, which I find quite opportune. However, I cannot condone MR's neglect of data from the ever growing

Hungarian National Corpus¹, since even though the topic of missing objects has been extensively studied in this language (though probably not more extensively than in English) and the “descriptions provided in the existing literature offer rich empirical material” (p. 81), new questions can always be raised and relevant data cross-checked in the corpus as I have indicated above.

The theoretical discussion starts in Chapter 5. In her review of the various approaches MR points out difficulties and inconsistencies, and proceeds to submit her own proposal. One ingredient is the parametrisable *Manner specification generalisation*, which I quote here in full: “If a verb makes object drop available, its near synonym with a more specific manner component tends to block it.” (p. 134) As follows from the formula, it is not watertight and this is just as well: as far as lexical regularities go, they can only be grasped as tendencies. MR then continues to generalise over the data sets and outline her basic theorems. She continues with dividing the treatment of missing objects into indefinite and definite ones, as follows from her previous analyses.

The proposal to identify indefinite missing objects as *n* has several advantages. I am in complete agreement with MR that the missing object is unspecified for number. However, the postulation of a bare *n* to stand in for the missing object does not account for the fact, which MR is fully aware of (cf., e.g., p. 146), that the missing object is, among other things, lexically selected, i.e., in case of *smoke*, it is not just anything/something, but cigarette(s), cigar(s), or a pipe; in case of *drink* it is an alcoholic beverage, in case of *eat* it is something edible, etc. But this observation is not represented either by *n*, or the semantic formula given in (15), p. 148 – unless I have missed something. Her examples in (23), p. 150, are meant to illustrate her generalisation that it is (only?) pragmatic considerations that “the interpretation of an existentially-closed object is further guided by”, but I suggest that (23c) is a case of definite missing object and thus a misfit here, (23b) is clearly determined by the lexical, rather than the pragmatic, context, and the interpretation of the missing object as referring to alcoholic drink in (23a) is the one that is available with no context at all.² Moreover, I take it that pragmatic considerations do not affect the interpretation of the missing objects in constructions with *smoke* and *eat*.

The discussion of the syntactic activity of the missing object is excellent, and the analysis of the relevant Hungarian examples in (33) and (35) are exemplary. I also agree with the conclusion that “the arbitrary object, taken here to be represented as *n*, can participate in control in Polish, but not in English and Hungarian.” (p. 155) In general, the proposal for the syntax of missing indefinite objects is one of the gems of the dissertation.

Chapter 7 is on definite missing objects, and here MR’s typology classifies English and Polish in one group as contrasted with Hungarian, another welcome result. Definite missing objects in English and Polish differ from indefinite ones in MR’s approach only in their semantic representations, viz., that they apply the *iota* operation. Naturally, the sections most interesting to this reviewer were the ones on Hungarian, which present several problems to an investigation of object drop, even though the phenomenon has been extensively studied. MR commands impressive knowledge of the properties of the related constructions, and her presentation, as far as I can judge, is also instructive to the nonnative linguist. She takes issue with Farkas & de Swart’s (2003) claim that ϕ -features of null pronouns must be recoverable from verbal morphology. MR correctly argues that if they were right definite objects could

¹ http://corpus.nytud.hu/mnsz/index_eng.html

² What I have in mind here is, e.g., two people starting a conversation with one asking the other: *Do you drink?* – without any beverage present.

not be dropped in nonfinite clauses, which turns out not to be the case, as her examples in (32) illustrate. There are further examples to support MR's position in addition to the auxiliaries uninflected for person (e.g., *kell* 'must'), namely, those finite matrix verbs that take infinitival complements but do not have a paradigm for definite object marking, as shown in the following contrast.

- (1) a. Péter megérkezett, bár nem akar-t-ad meghív-ni ø
 P. arrived though not want-PAST-2SG.DEF invite-INF
 'Peter has arrived though you didn't want to invite him.'
- b. Péter megérkezett, bár fél-t-él/*ed meghív-ni ø
 P. arrived though fear-PAST-2SG.INDEF/DEF invite-INF
 'Peter has arrived though you were afraid to invite him.'

The definite conjugation is a peculiar phenomenon, with quite a few ill-understood properties. It is certainly closely associated with person features as shown in Bárány (2015)³, and argued also in the dissertation at hand, but Tense also has an important role to play since definite object marking must occur on the finite verb in the highest clause in the syntactic hierarchy, even if all the other predicates in between are nonfinite, cf.:

- (2) Péter nem fog-ja akar-ni próbál-ni meghív-ni (ő-t)
 P not will-3SG.DEF want-INF try-INF invite-INF she-ACC
 'Peter will not want to try to invite her.'

If, however, any one of the verbs intervening between the finite matrix verb at the top and the transitive infinitive at the bottom is of the type that does not have a definite paradigm, like *fél* 'fear' above, the verb at the top cannot have definite conjugation, cf.:

- (3) Péter nem fog(*-ja) fél-ni próbál-ni meghív-ni (ő-t)
 P not will-3SG.INDEF/DEF fear-INF try-INF invite-INF she-ACC
 'Peter will not be afraid to try to invite her.'

As far as I am aware, this long-distance agreement problem has not been given adequate analysis in the available literature, including Bárány's recent dissertation.

MR offers a new approach to the well-known problem of the lack of definite object (or *pro*) drop when the object is plural. (pp. 185ff) Since definite object drop is the result of the drop of the complex D-Pers head, there is nothing to carry the plural marker *-k*, and it is this circumstance that renders the structure ungrammatical. While this suggestion is very attractive, it is not without complications. MR observes that accusative marking is not obligatory on (singular) first and second person objects and that since singular (case marked) pronominal objects can be dropped, "the structure of missing objects excludes the K head." (p. 187) It would then follow that unlike the plural marker the accusative marker is omissible. However, on the one hand first and second person plural pronouns do not allow for the accusative marker to be omitted, much the same way as first and second person plural possessive markers behave vis-à-vis the accusative marker; compare (ii) in fn. 19, p. 187, with (4):

- (4) mi-nk-*(et), ti-tek-*(et); a mi könny-e-i-nk-*(et)
 we-1PL-ACC you-2PL-ACC the we tear-POSS-PL-1PL-ACC
 'us-ACC' 'you.ACC' 'our tears-ACC'

³ András Bárány, *Differential object marking in Hungarian and the morphosyntax of case and agreement*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 2015.

All references in this report are to the Bibliography of Marta Ruda's dissertation, except if given in a footnote as in this instance.

Note here incidentally that both the singular and the plural accusative first and second person pronouns exhibit a morphological structure very much like that of possessive constructions, again a phenomenon ill-studied in descriptive work. One is entitled to make such a comment because MR herself embarks on a microanalysis of the various affixes (p. 191), by dismantling the second person plural *-tek* into a segment *te-* representing the second person (on account of its apparent identity with the pronoun) and another one, *-k*, conveying plurality, a standard solution in the historical grammars of Hungarian,⁴ except that second person is marked by the dental *-t/d*, and the *-e-* is the same harmonising vowel as in the possessive and verbal paradigms, viz., *-tok/tek/tök*. In this connection I do not go along with her cautioning against taking the segment *-n* to stand for first person, when she claims that it “is not clearly analysable as a first person marker”. For reasons beyond my ken, she does not notice that the first person pronoun *én* ‘I’ has the very same nasal, and is represented by a nasal stop all across the paradigms. She could even have gone further and reanalyse the first and second person plural pronouns *mi* ‘we’ and *ti* ‘you’ into *m-* and *t-* standing for the first and second person, respectively, and the plural marker *-i*, familiar from possessive constructions, such as the one in (4) above. She needs the distinction between first and second person pronouns so that she could suggest that “the agglutinative pattern is more transparent with second-person pronouns” (p. 191), a claim I do not think is tenable. But to continue with the complications, if the omission of the plural marker is illegitimate in the accusative forms of the pronouns, how come *pro-drop* is possible in any number and person in subject position, where there is no case marker at all?

In the last chapter MR sums up her findings and proposals and leads the reader on to issues relating to missing objects in languages other than the three examined in her thesis. On the other hand, she also points at further directions in which the phenomena can be investigated in the three languages. For one, she demonstrates the dependence of the option of dropping the object on aspectual factors, or more precisely, event structure and interpretation. This is mentioned as early as p. 61, fn. 21, in connection with the difference between *John drank* and **John has just drunk*, and resurfaces here at the end of the dissertation, in Section 8.1, when MR presents the difference between the progressive and the experiential type of present perfect, as in her (17a-b): **I’m killing ø* vs. *I’ve never killed ø before*. It is the same type of problem that figures in the distinction between the two Hungarian verbs that only differ in the absence/presence of the perfective prefix *öl* ‘kill’ vs. *meg-öl* ‘PV-kill, kill off (transitive)’. It is the former, but not the latter, that can be used in experiential present perfect with a missing object. Also, the recurrent examples for perfective ‘housework’ verbs that can exceptionally be used with missing objects, e.g., *meg-főz* ‘PV-cook’, cf. p. 67, are impossible in the progressive aspect, i.e., as activity verbs. All in all, one has the impression throughout the thesis that event structure has a paramount role in determining for a given verb whether or not it can have a missing object (and with what interpretation). For instance, my example in fn. 2. would be different if the question, in this case asked over the phone, were *Are you drinking?*

To sum up, it is a highly interesting and important dissertation that provides excellent analyses, a good deal of insight, as well as further questions to think about. In other words, it is an excellent piece of linguistic work that is certainly worth a doctoral degree.⁵

Budapest-Szeged, dated 18th April, 2016



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⁴ Jenő Kiss & Ferenc Puszta (eds.), *Magyar nyelvtörténet* [A history of the Hungarian language], Osiris, Budapest, 2003, pp. 156f.

⁵ The thesis contains a few (inevitable) typos, which I will not list here but send directly to the author.