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On not Squaring the Circle: Some Diagrammatic Representations in the Teaching of Hungarian as a Foreign Language

Diagrammatic representation of linguistic information is reasonably familiar from both grammars and textbooks. For Hungarian it is often found as rectangular/tabular presentation of (e.g.) personal forms in the noun and verb system. While entire schools of linguistics can usually be recognized from the diagrams they use: generativists/universal grammarians from the oddly-labelled 'tree' diagrams (these would be analogous to trees only if they were upside down), prosodic analysts from their complex tabular arrays, connectionists from their particular symbols, and so on, here I will take up only the issue of the ways in which some of the rectangular/tabular presentations may actually retard understanding, and offer to those who may be interested some diagrams using a circle (or circles, or at least part of a circle) which I have found helpful in Hungarian language teaching.

The rectangular/tabular presentation of linguistic data has a long history, stretching back to the grammarians of the ancient world. It is retained in many contemporary grammars and especially textbooks based on traditional approaches, even though their nineteenth-century relationship to the (hard) sciences has long been superseded by quantum theory and even stranger phenomena. The sciences would now never tolerate – if they ever did – such terminological linguistic slapdashery as surrounds as apparently straightforward a term as PLURAL. In the description of languages with a SINGULAR–PLURAL distinction the meaning of PLURAL is 'two or more', while in a SINGULAR–DUAL–PLURAL scenario the meaning of PLURAL is 'three or more'. It may be unreasonable to suggest that we continually modify scientific or scholarly terminology to match etymological accuracy; for example, no-one is likely to demand that the term ATOM(IC) be replaced simply because the atom is no longer unsplittable. On the other hand, language about language has special responsibilities to itself and towards inquirers and learners to be as clear as is humanly possible. Knowing the actual use of noun forms in *-K/-I(-)* in Hungarian, for example, it is misleading to say that 'the plural in Hungarian is *-K/-I(-)*', unless either the **meaning** of PLURAL is re-specified or a new term is used. It is a matter for debate which is better for teaching purposes, but one of these MUST

be done, else confusion will reign.[1] Furthermore, even the basic terms 'singular' and 'plural' cannot be satisfactorily used (inter alia) with reference to all three persons, since there is of course no 'first person plural' in the same cumulative sense as there is 'second' or 'third person plural'. This has long been clear (and indeed in some languages there are quite different 'inclusive' and 'exclusive' 'first person plural' forms, to mention only the most familiar discrepancy)[2]. However, the apparent absence of specific inclusive/exclusive forms in Hungarian does not mean that their presentation in the traditional rectangular/tabular format is at all helpful; it merely mimics quasi-mathematical displays used for other languages with a longer history of written description.[3]

The diagram below, or something like it, is frequently found. X marks the actual suffixes for person, Q marks the slot of the suffix I consider semantically incongruent. NUMBER across the top, PERSON vertically.

	sg	pl
1	X	Q
2	X	X
3	X	X

One possibility is to change the diagram, perhaps to the following, less misleading format:

	sg	pl
1		----------
	----------	1+2/1+3
2		2+2(+2...)
3		3+3(+2...)

This is not quite as neat but it is more accurate and draws attention to the problems of 'first person plural' in general (the 'royal we', the 'editorial we', the weasel 'we' of politicians, etc.), and more specifically to the problem surrounding

[1] Further argumentation in Sherwood 1990 [1991], 1996a, 2002.

[2] for Hungarian, Lotz 1976, Sherwood 2001; for inclusive/exclusive in the North American Indian languages, Mithun 1999, chapter 3; for number in general, see now Corbett 2000.

[3] Historically the description of Hungarian has been squeezed into a Latin-style framework partly because there was no other available, but importantly also in order to legitimate it as a 'proper' language particularly since the Enlightenment; and despite the linguistics revolutions of the twentieth century, the otiose taxonomy remains largely intact today, especially among well-educated Hungarians working in non-linguistic fields, partly because in many schools it has developed into a curricular criterion of Hungarianness. 'Patriotic linguistics' is a legitimate field of sociolinguistic study; see Sherwood 1996b.

the 'we' forms in Hungarian, where there are two verbal conjugations for transitive verbs in every tense and mood. In this context the first conjugation[4] form (in the present tense: *-unk/-ünk*) **may** imply a second person or indefinite or no object, while the second conjugation form (also in the present tense: *-juk/-jük*) **does** imply a third person definite object. The pairs of conjugation forms in the other persons operate quite differently (further details below, in the discussion of Abondolo circles). The changes in this diagram apply equally to the presentation of the possessive forms of the noun, and essentially to the pronoun system, too.

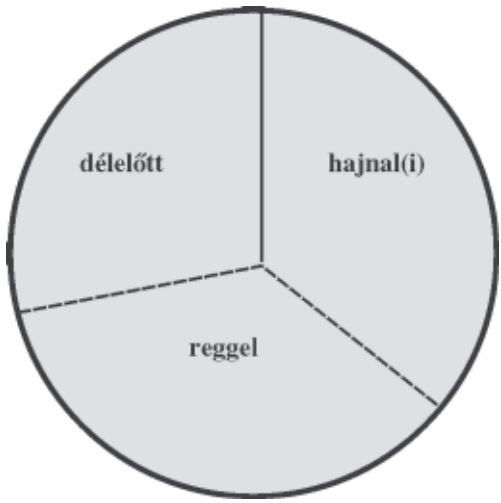
By analogy with such rectangular/tabular displays, vowel harmony variation in Hungarian is often shown in tabular form, with columns of two or three for the forms found.[5] This phonological rule unnecessarily complicates the presentation of the morphology: there are only six vowel-pairings involved, three short and three long (with one pair at each vowel-height), plus a single vowel-triplet which is never found long. These can be abbreviated by means of symbols (I use Greek letters: only four, plus a single abstract length-mark, are required to deal with all vowel harmony variation in Hungarian) inserted into the vowel-space of the hundreds of suffixes found in Hungarian, as in: -Bα (for *-BA/-BE*) and -HβZ (for *-HOZ/-HEZ/-HÖZ*). This representation makes it possible to focus on *the correct level when encountering suffixes, which is morphology*. A single image thus represents what is likely to be the basically equivalent single image in the students' mother tongue, e.g. English 'IN' = Hungarian '-BαN', and refers the vowel harmony variation to the phonological realm of the vowel harmony rule. Recognizing the vowel harmony class of a word and using (e.g.) the case endings correctly are wholly different skills and the first must be explicitly taught before the second. There is no point in constantly parading two or three pseudo-alternative forms in tabular displays of suffixes: it is, apart from any other consideration, enormously disheartening for the learner and only reinforces the myths about how 'hard' Hungarian is to learn.[6]

By contrast I have found the use of circles much more helpful in my teaching. The simplest use may be called lexico-cultural. The following circle here represents a clock-face and shows the irreducible cultural differences associated with the English and Hungarian terms for the division into parts-of-the-day of the twelve hours from midnight to noon:

[4] I use 'first conjugation' for the *'általános*/indefinite (etc) conjugation' and 'second conjugation' for the other. I first heard these terms from the late Professor G.F. Cushing: the labels refer to the order in which the conjugations are normally taught, but may also be usefully neutral in other contexts.

[5] See most recently Rounds 2001:26 etc.

[6] Further details of the vowel harmony rule and Greek-letter symbols in Sherwood 1996, 2002

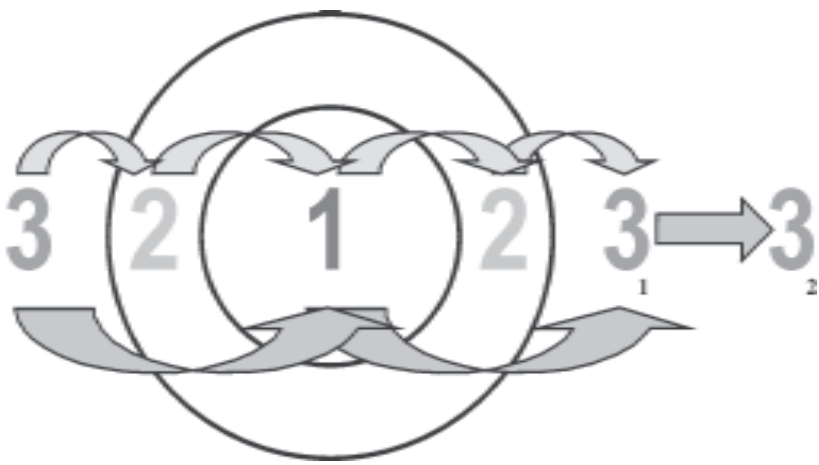


Thus there are three distinct Hungarian items for (IN THE) MORNING, as in e.g. 'three in the morning, seven in the morning, and eleven in the morning (formerly 'forenoon')'. But it is also interesting to see where the (stippled) lines are actually drawn. Seasonal differences may influence the actual time of the onset of *REGGEL*, and perhaps personal variations in the onset of *DÉLELŐTT* (though **REGGEL TÍZKOR* is probably widely unacceptable, *REGGEL KILENCKOR* or even ?*REGGEL FÉL TÍZKOR* might be acceptable). Something similar, though less spectacular, can be done for the hours from noon to midnight. Here one issue is the end-point of *DÉLUTÁN*, which may be later than that for 'afternoon': *DÉLUTÁN HATKOR* is certainly found, while 'six in the afternoon' may be less common than 'six in the evening'.

In his outstanding thesis Daniel Abondolo uses concentric circles to suggest the form/meaning nexus in the two-conjugation verb system of Hungarian.[7] In a somewhat simplified form I have employed his diagramming in my own textbook, though perhaps at too early a stage. The crucial notions are left-to-right movement, inward and outward (inward = towards 1: subject a higher person than object; outward = away from 1: subject a lower person than object, or in the case of the two third persons [*szereti* 'he loves her'] the same). The inward movement endings are those of the first conjugation and are implicit (they MAY imply the objects pointed to: *szeretsz, szeret*); the outward movement endings are those of the second conjugation and are explicit (DO imply the objects pointed to: *szeretem, szereted, szeretlek, szereti*). Thus, for example, the much-discussed implicational form -LαK is seen to occupy a space where its explicitness determines its correct environment:

[7] Abondolo 1987: 88-93 especially.

outward movement, person 1 to person 2. This is further evidence that quasi-philosophical attempts to define '(in-) definiteness' for language learners at the semantic level are not successful, since the traditional terminology and its various translations into other languages are unable to deal with the actual phenomena (e.g. why isn't 'someone' definite by comparison with 'no-one'?) which are overwhelmingly triggered by the presence of items most usefully specified at morpheme level.[8] While the second and third person plural forms operate identically to the second and third person singular forms, the 'first person plural' may look as though it does not fit into the scheme, since *szeretünk* 'we love (you)' is an INWARD movement FORM (first conjugation) but has an OUTWARD movement MEANING (subject a lower person than object). In fact a 'we' is 'lower' only if we think it contains only 'first person', but as was seen above this is never true: 'we' is always either 1+2 or 1+3. This is why historically this 'first person plural' with a personal pronominal suffix is found in the first conjugation whereas all the other personal pronouns are found in the endings of the second conjugation.[9]



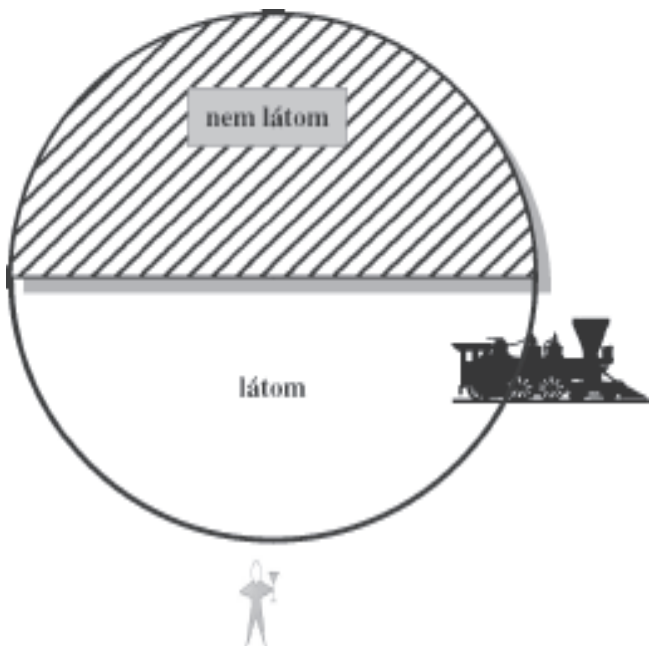
Thus: left-to-right (inward) movement = first conjugation forms: IMPLICIT	3>2 *szeret* (<u>may</u> imply *téged*)
	2>1 *szeretsz* (<u>may</u> imply *engem*)
	3>1 *szeret* (<u>may</u> imply *engem*)
left-to-right (outward) movement = second conjugation forms: EXPLICIT	1>2 *szeretlek*
	1>3 *szeretem*
	2>3 *szereted*
	3/1> 3/2 *szereti*

[8] Sherwood 1996:31 for the 'template' technique; see also Sherwood 2002.

[9] Historians of language offer no explanation: 'A T/1.-ben, a többi személytől eltérően, a névmásból keletkezett rag, a *-mök/-mök*, nem a határozott, hanem az általános ragozásban kap helyet' – MNyTNy I: 137 (Erzsébet E. Abaffy).

A circle may also be used to help explain some uses of the problematic adverbials *MÉG* and *MÁR*. It should be stressed that the diagram can be used to explain only *some* of the uses of the two terms, though I consider these to be the basic ones which, once acquired, will make other uses easier to deal with. Particular attention must be paid to word order, especially the location of the negator *NEM* in its focus slot immediately to the left of the verb.

In this case the circle represents the track of a railway line and a train is imagined going round it (in either direction, though I prefer anticlockwise). While the train is chugging along the bottom half of the circle/picture, it is visible to the viewer (at the bottom of the diagram), who is able to say about it: *LÁTOM* (I can see it). In the shaded top half of the circle/picture the train is in a tunnel and thus not visible: *NEM LÁTOM* (I can't see it).



As the train begins to move from the point nearest to the viewer it remains visible until it reaches the line dividing the two halves of the circle: until then we may say [1] *MÉG LÁTOM*. Once it has disappeared into the tunnel, we may say [2] *MÁR NEM+LÁTOM*. As it travels round it cannot be seen but there is the expectation that it will reappear: we may say during this period [3] *MÉG NEM+LÁTOM*. Once it has reappeared we may say [4] *MÁR LÁTOM*. The leaving of the negator *NEM* in its correct slot with the verb offers the possibility of drawing an imaginary giant X across the diagram, linking the two occurrences of each of the elements *MÉG* and

MÁR in an intuitively satisfying way. Translations into most West European languages are not easily grafted one-to-one onto this diagram: [1] I can still see it, [2] I can no longer see it, I can't see it any more/longer, [3] I can't see it yet, I can't yet see it, [4] I can see it now, now I (can) see it; **there** it is; [much more rarely:] I can see it already, I can already see it. Therefore the Hungarian diagram is best presented in Hungarian, and the teacher should investigate with great care what the realisations of each of the four phrases might be in the students' mother tongue(s). In the case of translation from Hungarian into English, the diagram can be used, for example, to prevent the overuse of 'already'.

The two elements may, of course, be found postverbally (*látom még, nem látom már* etc.), but this order should be taught specifically as somewhat more marked (contrastive?) and thus less usual; the negator *NEM* must remain with the verb.

The two elements may be reinforced for greater expressivity. *MÉG* is reinforced by the addition of *MINDIG*, which draws the stress onto itself (from the verb), leaving *MÉG* with what may be usefully described as topic intonation. *MÁR* is reinforced by adding a preceding *MOST*, which normally extends leftwards the domain of the topic intonation of *MÁR*, though *MOST* may have its own stress in addition (*még mindig látom, most már nem látom* etc.), perhaps when used contrastively. Reinforced forms are not normally found postverbally but cannot be ruled out entirely (?*nem látom most már*).

The diagram may be cut in half vertically to deal with non-cyclic polar opposites in nouns and adjectives along a familiar time/process trajectory:

János már felnőtt/János már nem gyerek//János még nem felnőtt/János még gyerek
János már egészséges/János már nem beteg//János még nem egészséges/János még beteg

(Forms like *már gyerek, még egészséges* may, of course, exist but their presuppositions are not consistent with a regular time/process trajectory and hence do not fit this schema.)

Finally, diagrams may be used to help illuminate semantic complexity. Naturally, diagrams of this kind may be more complex, reflecting a greater degree of abstraction. I have however found helpful a partly circular diagram to answer the question: How many senses does the Hungarian verb *KERÜL* have? Or to put it another way: Is there a single verb *KERÜL* or are there several? The lexicographer's dilemma – homophony vs. polysemy – presents itself here as a teaching and learning task that occurs quite early in the language learning process (making purchases, etc.) and can also be used to illustrate the unusual richness of the semantics of some basic Hungarian verbs. The Academy Dictionary opts for the 'single verb' solution and lists three 'supersenses' which may be rendered

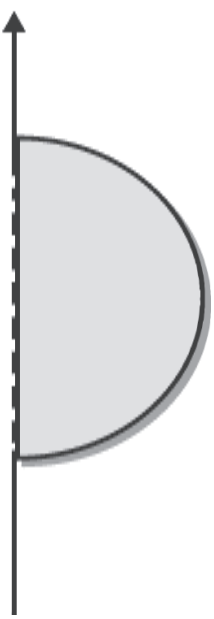
I. ‘to progress, avoiding the straight, shortest route’,

II. ‘to (happen to) find oneself/itself in some situation/condition’ (a frequent additional feature, not highlighted in the dictionary but present in a number of examples is ‘unexpectedly or surprisingly [because not in a straightforward way]’ – PS), and

III. ‘to cost (an amount)’

As these English renderings suggest, it is difficult to see from outside Hungarian how these senses might be connected. A diagram may help, however.

This is the one I use:



This diagram demonstrates the feature “indirectly, in a roundabout way”, i.e. not directly or straightforwardly, shared by the three senses. The senses *kerül valamit/valakit* ‘avoids, goes round’ and *kerül valahova* ‘finds its way somewhere somehow’ (not in the most obvious, direct way – see above) are fairly clear, but it may not be obvious how ‘to cost (an amount)’ fits into the picture. A full explanation would take us into the linguistic hinterland of Hungarian barter and trade[10], but briefly: securing something by simply *taking it (vesz–elvesz) counts as securing it directly*, while securing it by paying for it, i.e. obtaining it *in return for money (vesz–megvesz) counts as securing it indirectly*. An item secured in this latter way comes to its new owner in a semi-circular, roundabout way, *via* money; it really does *KE-*

[10] Sherwood MS

RÜL, with the verb's links to *kerek, kerék, kering* making this round(about)ness quite patent.

In conclusion I would stress that the purpose of these diagrams is primarily pedagogical[11]. It may be the case, indeed it is more than likely, that one or other of them can be shown to have theoretical implications[12]. I would be glad if this proved to be so and I am myself involved in work aiming to demonstrate such implications. It is, however, my view that their use as teaching aids is 'freestanding' and valuable enough on its own to warrant their presentation here even if they should prove to offer no exciting theoretical perspectives. I hope teachers and learners of Hungarian agree.

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[11] This applies to the Abondolo circles also (Daniel Abondolo, p.c.)

[12] e.g. Weber 2003: 99