

Loss of agreement between Hungarian relative pronouns and their antecedents

Daniel Szeredi (*New York University*)

Prescriptive and descriptive grammars of Hungarian frequently discuss variation in the choice of relative pronoun in Hungarian (Gr'etsy and Kovalovszky 1980, Kenesei 1992). The study presented here presents quantitative data about a phenomenon that has not been explored: the lack of agreement between the pronoun and the antecedent in Colloquial Hungarian.

The study presented here is based on the Budapest Sociolinguistic Interview (V'aradi 1998). This corpus consists of 50 sociolinguistic interviews, conducted in 1987 and 1988, totaling approximately 240 000 words. The 50 subjects were selected to represent five different social classes, who would speak different sociolects of Colloquial Hungarian in Budapest, the capital and the most populous city in Hungary. A database was prepared comprising all nominal relative pronouns from the corpus (N=1714), coded for relevant semantic, syntactic and morphological variables. The independent variables tested included: choice of pronoun, social class of speaker, formal plurality of antecedent (the presence of an overt plural marker), semantic plurality of antecedent and the formal plurality of the pronoun. The effects of age and gender could not be tested, because there is a strong correlation between these two factors and social class in the corpus.

The choice for a nominal relative pronoun is based on semantic features in the formal variety: *aki* is used for a [+animate] antecedent, *amelyik* is used for selective relative clauses, *amely* is used after specific antecedents, and *ami* is used elsewhere, as a default relative pronoun. The use of *amely* is decreasing as it is replaced by *ami* ; in the corpus there were only 40 occurrences of *amely* (8.7%), compared to the 382 instances of *ami* (91.3%) after specific antecedents. The formal pronoun *amely* was only used by interviewers, and speakers of the two highest classes in the survey.

In the formal variety (and the prescriptive norm), the relative pronoun agrees in number with the antecedent. But there are many counterexamples to this in the corpus: the form of the relative pronoun *ami* after plural antecedents is plural in only 44.2% of all cases. This variation was examined in the present study by means of a multivariate variable rule analysis (Cedergren and Sankoff 1974) using Goldvarb X (Sankoff et al. 2005), with the plurality of the pronoun as the dependent variable. In the result, formal and semantic plurality show the expected effect, that plural antecedents favor plural marking on the pronoun, despite the low overall rate of plural marking. The effect the social class factor is that higher status speakers favor agreement marking, but the effect is not monotonic, as the following table shows:

Form of relative pronoun after formally plural antecedent

sog. status	all pronouns			ami		
	plur.	sing.	plur. percentage	plur.	sing.	plur. percentage
1 (highest)	54	3	94.7%	9	2	81.8%
2	50	6	89.3%	10	5	66.7%
3	37	23	61.7%	2	17	10.5%
4	16	9	64%	4	7	36.4%
5 (lowest)	54	3	94.7%	3	3	50%
interviewer	83	9	90.2%	6	9	40%
sum	268	54	83.2%	34	43	44.2%

The choice of the pronoun has a surprising effect on agreement: while the most frequent relative pronoun *ami* disfavors plural marking (factor weight .15) and the plural of *amelyik* does not appear in the corpus, the frequent *aki* (.87) and the archaic *amely* (.93) favor overt number agreement. The causes for this phenomenon are not clear, but the pattern and its relation to other problems about Hungarian relative pronouns, like the loss of *amely* are worth for further discussion.