

Distributive plural after numerals in Hungarian

Fejes, László

Hungarian Research Institute for Linguistics

fejes.laszlo@gmail.com

It is a commonplace about Hungarian that nouns quantified by numerals (and other quantifiers) are singular, with the exception of some archaic expressions. (These are considered to be the relics of earlier literary forms that emerged under the influence of Latin and maybe some other language(s)). While (1) presents the regular form of the expression ‘three kings’, (2) shows the archaic form, which is still used in Biblical context.

- (1) *három király*
three king
‘three kings’
- (2) *három király-ok*
three king-PL
‘three kings’ (archaic)

Other cases, in which nouns quantified by numerals are in plural, are not mentioned even by the detailed and thorough description Dékány–Csirmaz (2018, esp. 1051–1054, 1126–1127). However, if we search a corpus of Hungarian (Oravecz et al. 2014), we find a number of nouns in plural modified by a numeral.

- (3) *Három órát ha aludtam.*
three hour-PL-ACC if sleep-PRT-1SG
‘I slept maximally three hours (at different times)’
- (4) *...harminc percekét kapott a televízióban*
thirty minute-PL-ACC get-PST-3SG ART.DEF television-INE
‘...s/he got thirty minutes (air time) on the television (from time to time)’
- (5) *Kétszáz forintokat osztogatott zsebből.*
two hundred forint-PL-ACC hand.out-FREQ-PST.3SG pocket-ELA
‘S/he handed out two hundred forints (several times and/or to several people)’

The plural in (3)–(5) clearly indicates distributivity. If *órát* is changed to *órát* ‘hour-(SG.)ACC’ in (3), the sentence will refer to one instance of sleeping. If *percekét* is changed to *percet* ‘minute-(SG.)ACC’ in (4), the sentence will describe a situation when someone got thirty minutes air time once. The situation is a bit different in (5), in which the verb is frequentative. If *forintokat* is changed into *forintot* ‘forint-(SG.ACC)’, the sentence continues to mean that money was given several times, but it will mean that the whole amount distributed was 200 forints.

Thus in general, nouns quantified by a numeral are singular and cannot be plural (1). However, in some cases (3)–(5) the plural marker marks the plurality of the sets of entities denoted by the phrase composed of the numeral and the noun (and not simply of the entities denoted by the noun). Consequently, it may be concluded that the plural marker is attached to the Num + N phrase: [Num N]-PL. This can be confirmed by the fact that nouns quantified by *egy* ‘one’ can also be plural in such constructions (6).

- (6) *...egy csövek fejlődtek csak ki a kukoricán...*
one cob-PL develop-PST-3PL only out ART.DEF maize-ADE
‘Only one cob developed on each maize.’

Hungarian morphology has strong concatenative characteristics. Although stem alternations occur in numerous lexemes, these can be suspended when words occur in specific enclosures. E.g. the accusative of *sólyom* ‘hawk’ is generally *sólymot*, but *Sólymot* when it is a surname; the accusative of *borz* ‘badger’ is generally *borzot*, but rather *borzt* when it is the part of the name of the popular band *Kispál és a Borz* ‘Kispál and the Badger’. However, the plural forms in the constructions discussed are the same as elsewhere: there can be *v*-epenthesis (*cső* ‘cob’ : *csövek* ‘cob-PL’, (6)), or stem-internal vowel shortening (*hét* ‘week’ : *hetek* ‘week-PL’, (7)).

(7) ...*általában két heteket késünk...*
usually two week-PL-ACC be.late-PRS-1PL
'...usually we are late by two weeks...'

That is, while the plural marker is attached to the Num + N phrase morphosyntactically, it is attached immediately to the noun morphophonologically.

References

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