

Contact and the origins of headed *wh*-relatives in Hungarian

Headed *wh*-relatives are a feature of Standard Average European (Haspelmath, 1998, 2001). De Vries (2002) found that 40% of Indo-European (IE) languages had such relative clauses, but only 2.3% of the non-IE languages in his sample did. The non-IE languages that do include Hungarian, Finnish, and Georgian; (1) is an example from Hungarian, from (Comrie 1998: 60).

(1) A fiú, akit láttam
The boy who.ACC I saw ‘the boy I saw’

Comrie (1998) and Hendery (2012) explain the cross-linguistic distribution of headed *wh*-relatives in terms of contact. However, the precise mechanisms of this contact-induced distribution are obscure. In particular it is hard to learn functional vocabulary like *which*: there are fluid pairings between category and denotation which give rise to persistent ambiguity. This underspecified nature of function-word meaning makes change likely, but direct borrowing difficult. Instead, it seems probable that Hungarian developed a precursor of headed *wh*-relatives through contact. Headed *wh*-relatives then emerged as Hungarian followed a recurring pathway found extensively in IE languages.

In IE languages, the Proto-Indo-European indefinite/interrogative pronouns **kwi-/kwo-*, which did not head relative clauses, are the source of IE *wh*-relative forms. There is a pathway from conditional to correlative (Belyaev & Haug, 2014, 2020) and on to headed relative (Haudry, 1973) with multiple possible pathways through the semantic space (Gisborne & Truswell, 2018). Conditional-correlative constructions, formed around indefinite-interrogative pronouns (a class of words found in interrogatives, conditionals, and other dependent contexts, Haspelmath, 1997), are therefore the source of headed *wh*-relatives in the IE daughter languages, where they have developed through parallel evolution. Word-order conditions the change. Conditional protases are topics (Haiman, 1978) and the indefinite/interrogative pronoun is focused. Kiparsky (1995) argues that early Indo-European (Vedic, Hittite, Greek) had the structure (TOPIC)-(FOCUS)-Clause: the emergence of conditional-correlatives involves topicalization of the conditional clause and, typically, fronting of the indefinite/interrogative pronoun.

Examples of conditional-correlatives are found in modern Hungarian: (2) is from Lipták (2009: 27).

(2) Amelyik kutya közel jön hozzám, azt elkergetem
REL.which dog close comes to.me that.ACC chase.away

‘Which(ever) dog comes close to me, I’ll chase it away’=‘If a dog comes, close to me I’ll chase it away’

However, structures like (2) were not possible in proto-Hungarian, which Kiss (2013) reconstructs as strict SOV/head-final, with grammaticalized discourse roles for S and O. S is always the (primary) topic and O the focus or secondary topic. For patterns like (2) to emerge in Hungarian, a word-order change was necessary. Kiss (2013) argues that the SOV of proto-Hungarian developed into (TOPIC)-(FOCUS)-V-X* in Old Hungarian, giving Hungarian a word-order type consistent with the early IE languages that developed conditional correlatives.

Contact-driven change depends on both the complexities of the sociolinguistic context, and on what can plausibly be transferred from one language to another in bilinguals and bilingual use. Some contact-driven changes seem more plausible than others. As noted above, functional vocabulary is hard to learn. Similar abstract forms to *wh*-relatives appear resistant to borrowing: Sorbian has co-opted its demonstratives to certain functions of definite marking without having all the properties of definite articles (Heine & Kuteva 2005: 71-73). And yet, contact induces word-order change (Heine & Kuteva, 2005). We argue that Kiss’ word-order change provides the relevant context for the development of a headed *wh*-relative in Hungarian. It is also possible that Hungarian borrowed left-adjoined conditional-correlatives formed on indefinite-interrogative pronouns. In either case, given the necessary pre-conditions, the potential pathway of change exists, making it possible for *wh*-relatives to emerge in Hungarian without having to borrow abstract, underspecified forms. The account developed here allows us to develop a plausible understanding of the role of contact in the diffusion of areal phenomena by understanding the context in which ‘replica’ development (Heine and Kuteva, 2005) is enabled.

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