

Obviation in Hungarian:  
What is its shape,  
and is it due to competition?

Tel-Aviv Linguistics Colloquium

June 25, 2020

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## The classical description of **obviation**

The subject of a subjunctive is **disjoint in reference** from the attitude-holder subject of the immediately higher clause.

\* Je veux que je parte.                      Ruwet 1984 / 1991  
I want that I leave-subj  
'I want for me to leave'

Inspired by Ruwet 1984/1991 and Farkas 1988, 1992, I present data from Hungarian where obviation in certain subjunctives is plainly lifted, and data where obviation occurs in similar indicatives. I raise the question whether obviation is a result of competition.

Much of the material comes from an old seminar handout (Szabolcsi 2010). Goncharov 2020 got me thinking about the topic again.

# Plan

## Background

Ruwet 1984/1991

Farkas 1988, 1992

My core data for +/- obviation in Hungarian

PPIs diagnose unintentionality

Two views of obviation (recap)

On mood choice and blocking

Reasons to doubt that obviation is a blocking effect

Subjunctives as realistic extensions

Obviation in indicatives with no competitors

Possible causes for obviation

Mind-boggling meanings

UG-level competition

Supplementary cross-linguistic data

# My paraphrase of Ruwet's core intuition

- In subjunctives, the two coreferential occurrences of the subject in the matrix and the complement “iconically” convey a discontinuity between the will and the actions of a person.
- If, in view of the meanings of the matrix verb and its complement, it is mind-boggling how such a discontinuity could exist, disjoint reference arises.
- The sentence becomes acceptable when, for some reason or other, that discontinuity makes sense.
- Below are some of Ruwet's examples. Note right away that with the exception of [49], the French speakers consulted do not report an improvement (thanks to Vincent Homer for help). But likeminded examples in Hungarian are impeccable (apparently also in Russian, Polish, Romanian).

English: for X to VP = subjunctive

- [39]a. ?Je veux que je sois enterré dans mon village natal.  
I want for me to be buried in my native village.
- [41]a. ?Je veux que je puisse attaquer à l'aube.  
?I want for me to be able to attack at dawn.
- [46]b. Ah! Je voudrais que je sois déjà parti!  
Oh! I would like for me to be already gone!
- [49] Je veux que tu partes et que je reste.  
I want for you to go and for me to stay.
- [68]a. Je veux que je sois très amusant ce soir.  
I want for me to be quite amusing tonight.
- [80]b. ?Je ne veux pas que je me trompe de clé (encore).  
?I do not want for me to mix up the keys (again).

Farkas 1988, RESP (in obligatory control)

- The responsibility relation **RESP(*i*, *s*)** holds between an individual *i* and a situation *s* just in case ***s* is the result of some act performed by *i* with the intention of bringing *s* about**. If so, *s* is the (possibly) intentional situation and *i* **its initiator**. Initiator is similar (but not identical) to agent.

Farkas 1992, RESP (in canonical control)

- Canonical control: Both the participant linked to the complement subject and the participant linked to the matrix argument that controls it bear the **RESP** relation to the complement situation.
- Obviation: In subjunctive complements that conform to the canonical control case, the infinitive **blocks** the subjunctive [if it is available in the language].

## Farkas 1988 introduced RESP for controller choice

- The responsibility relation **RESP(*i*, *s*)** holds between an individual *i* and a situation *s* just in case ***s* is the result of some act performed by *i* with the intention of bringing *s* about**. If so, *s* is the (possibly) intentional situation and ***i* its initiator**. The initiator is similar (not identical) to an agent.
- With RESP-inducing matrix verbs, whose meanings require that one of the participants be the initiator of the complmnt situation, **unmarked controller = initiator participant**.
  - X convince / persuade / ask / force / order / help / encourage / tell / advise Y [ **PRO** to VP ]
  - X promise Y [ **PRO** to VP ]
- If the initiator has the power to determine the actions of the other participant, that **other** may be a **marked** controller.

My takeaway from Farkas: Obviation in Hungarian is restricted to RESP cases

- Farkas predicts that obviation is restricted to cases where RESP obtains. I find that, with an appropriate understanding of when RESP fails to obtain, this is correct for Hungarian, Russian, Polish, Romanian, etc.
- Hungarian (...) bears out Ruwet's intuition much better than French. Alas, I won't have an explanation for the "East-European" vs. Western Romance contrast.
- Hungarian has both infinitives and subjunctives (unlike in Balkan languages), but both have a narrower distribution in than French or Spanish.
- I take up the question what causes obviation after the presentation of the obviation data.



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Agentive verbs in complement – **obviation** (under normal circumstances!)

1. # Azt akarom, hogy távozzam.  
it-acc want.1sg that leave.**subj.1sg**  
'# I want for me to leave'
2. # Azt akarom, hogy meglátogassam Marit.  
it-acc want.1sg that pfx.visit.**subj.1sg** Mari-acc  
'# I want for me to visit Mary'

Non-agentive complements – **no obviation**

3. Azt akarom, hogy jó jegyeket kapjak.  
'I want for me to get good grades'
4. Azt akarom, hogy egészséges legyek.  
'I want for me to be healthy'
5. Azt akarom, hogy ne essek le.  
'I want for me not to fall'

Urges, mistakes and accidents, even if the complement verb is agentive – **no obviation**

6. Fogjál le! Nem akarom, hogy megöljem a gazembert.  
`Hold me down! I don't want for me to kill the rascal'  
(= I don't want for it to happen that I kill him;  
=/= I have no desire to kill him)
7. Magasságiszonyom van. Nem megyek fel a toronyba,  
nem akarom, hogy leugorjak.  
`I have the fear of heights. I'm not going up the tower,  
I don't want for me to jump'  
(= I don't want for it to happen that I jump)
8. Nem akarom, hogy (véletlenül/tévedésből) az  
egészséges lábat amputáljam.  
`I don't want for me to (accidentally/by mistake)  
amputate the healthy leg'

Dependence on the authority or the co-operation of others – **no obviation**

9. (parent to child) Ha azt akarod, hogy velünk gyere, viselkedj szépen.  
`If you want for you to come with us, behave well'  
(= if you want me to decide that you are coming)
10. (to fairy offering to grant wishes) Azt akarom, hogy legyőzzem a sárkányt és feleségül vegyem a királylányt.  
`I want for me to kill the dragon and marry the princess'
11. (actor to director) Azt akarom, hogy táncoljak is ebben a jelenetben.  
`I'd like for me [=my character] to dance in this scene'
12. Azt akarom, hogy (csak/ne) ÉN látogassam meg Marit.  
`I want for it to be only me who visits Mary' /  
`I want for it not to be me who visit Mary'

Farkas (1992: 92, fn 6) on (9) [=her 17]

Thanks to A. Szabolcsi for bringing this type of examples to my attention. Exactly which contexts allow a focused non-obviative subjunctive clause is not clear to me at present. The mere presence of the pronoun *az* 'that' appears to be insufficient, since (i) is bad, or at least significantly worse than (17).

(i) \* *János<sub>i</sub> azt akarja, hogy e<sub>i</sub> jöjjön velünk.*

J. that-ACC wants that (he<sub>i</sub>) come.SUBJ with us.

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AS: Back then, I was suggesting that Farkas's theory accounted for (9)/(17), if dependence on someone else's authority eliminates RESP. This is what I am developing here. Her (i) is good on the *velünk jöjjön* order, in a similar context as (9)/(17).

## Overt nominative subjects in infinitival control complements -- Szabolcsi 2009

A probable connection, not explored in this talk.

The overt subject pronoun is *de se* but with no internal perspective (not event-*de-se*, Higginbotham 2003). It always bears focus. It is non-obviative.

Én is szeretnék / utálok odamenni.  
I too would-like.1sg / hate.1sg there-go.inf  
HI `I too want/hate to go there'

Szeretnék / Utálok én is odamenni.  
would-like.1sg / hate.1sg I too there-go.inf  
LO `I want/hate it to be the case that I, too, go there'

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Before addressing blocking, some diagnostic tools for unintentionality (no RESP)

- Szabolcsi (2002, 2004:fn10), PPIs in infinitival complements of *not want*: the  $\neg\exists$  reading is okay in unintentional, but not in intentional actions:
  - [i] I don't want to offend someone / break something.  
✓ not > some
  - [ii] I don't want to call someone / eat something.  
?? not > some
- Goncharov (2020), Strong NPIs present a mirror image. Proposes a semantic account. Beyond my goals here.
  - [9] This investment is too risky. I don't want to lose any money / ?? a red cent on it.
  - [10] The company wants to harvest new ideas, but doesn't want to spend any money / a red cent on it.



## More on +/- intentionality and PPIs

Infinitival complements admit both intentional and unintentional interpretations. Only subjunctives are picky.

13. Look, that jewelry display is not locked! Check it out?
- a. ✓ I don't want to steal anything.  
(Nem akarok ellopni semmit.)
  - b. # I don't want to steal something.  
(# Nem akarok ellopni valamit.)
14. I work for a catering service. The supervisor has just told me to go and set out the desserts.
- a. # I'd prefer to arrange the chairs. I don't want to devour anything.
  - b. ✓ I'd prefer to arrange the chairs. I don't want to devour something.

## More on +/- intentionality and PPIs

The ✓ PPI signals unintentional action in the complement, even if its subject is distinct from the attitude-holder. The PPI facts are not specific for control or obviation.

15. I need quiet. I don't want you to hammer ?? something /  
✓ anything.
16. I don't want him to hide the facts from ?? someone /  
✓ anyone.
17. Be careful. ✓ I don't want (for) you to fall from  
somewhere.
18. I'll follow you around. ✓ I don't want (for) you to jump  
from somewhere / to beat up someone.

## Zu 2016, 2018 on Newari conjunct marking

So-called **conjunct** marking on the verb requires the action to be **intentional** (beyond an “internal perspective *de se*” reading of the pronominal subject).

- Stative preds (‘be healthy/sick’) have no conjunct forms.
- Modification of the verb by ‘accidentally’ rules out the conjunct form.

(190) a. \**Shyam-a dhāl-a ki wa masika lakha-e dun-ā.*  
Shyam-ERG say-PST.DISJ that s/he accidentally water-LOC submerge-PST.CONJ

(Int.) ‘Shyam<sub>i</sub> said that he<sub>i</sub> accidentally sank into the water.’

b. *Shyam-a dhāl-a ki wa masika lakha-e dun-a.*  
Shyam-ERG say-PST.DISJ that s/he accidentally water-LOC submerge-PST.DISJ

‘Shyam<sub>i</sub> said that he<sub>i</sub> sank into the water.’

“In (190) the use of the adverb *masika* ‘accidentally’ forces the unintentional reading. Without *masika*, (190a) becomes acceptable but the cmlplt event obligatorily denotes a purposeful action.”

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## Two views of obviation (recap)

- **Ruwet, my reading: Obviation occurs when discontinuity btw will and actions is mind-boggling**

The two coreferential occurrences of the subject in sentences with subjunctive complements “iconically” convey a discontinuity between the will and the actions of a person. If, in view of the meanings of the matrix verb and its complement, it is mind-boggling how such a discontinuity could exist, disjoint reference arises.

- **Farkas: Obviation is due to competition (blocking)**

In subjunctives that conform to the canonical control case, the infinitive, if there is one, blocks the subjunctive.

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## A combination of mood choice with blocking by canonical-control infinitives

- Schlenker 2005: The French subjunctive is a typical elsewhere mood: it has many uses and no unitary semantics. In fact, it is semantically vacuous.
- Add Farkas's 1992 claim that canonical-control infinitives require RESP.
- It now follows straightforwardly that obviation in subjunctives is due to competition with infinitival control in RESP cases.
- Prediction: no obviation when RESP is absent: both the subjunctive and infinitival control are okay.
- Prediction: no obviation when the language has no infinitives (Greek, Serbo-Croatian).

A source for good or bad predictions:  
different languages employ infinitives &  
subjunctives with different sets of verbs

- Terzi 1992: Romanian subjunctives exhibit obviation effects when they have CA, even though there are no competing infinitives.

(`Want' + CA-less subjunctive with a PRO subject is like a Hungarian infinitive; `want' + CA-subjunctive is like a Hungarian subjunctive. CA-less subjunctives might still be viewed as competitors.)

- Farkas 1992:92 Hung. *követel* `demand' does not take an infinitive, so the subjunctive is not obviative. But her good [16] has `get-subj more food,' i.e. no RESP.
- Farkas 2003, Schlenker 2005 do not fully explain indicative/subjunctive alternations in French and Spanish.



# Background: complement facts for Hungarian

Counterparts of some Engl. subject-control attitude verbs:

	infinitive	subjunctive	indicative
akar (want)	+	+	
követel (demand)		+	
elhatároz (decide)			+
remél (hope)			+
sajnál (regret)			+
sajnál-na <sub>CTRFCT</sub> (not want)	+	}	fancy extra-clausal negations
fél 'be afraid' (neg)	+		

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Obviation is not likely to be due to blocking

- In Hungarian (perhaps in English too), the subjunctive complement describes a **realistic extension** of the attitude-holder's belief-worlds.
  - ☞ How could the infinitive block a subjunctive that has a “richer” meaning?
- In Hungarian (perhaps in English too), *remél* ‘hope’ and *sajnál* ‘regret’ exhibit obviation-like effects when the attitude-holder is solely responsible for the complement situation. Same patterns as with *akar* ‘want.’ But the complement is in the **indicative** (not a subjunctive), and these verbs do not take infinitival complements.
  - ☞ What could be blocking that indicative?

## A realistic extension of A-H's belief world

- Plain infinitival 19-20 express preferences or desires. If the contents are strange, the reaction might be, “Why do you want that?”

19. Megint 10 éves akarok lenni. I want to be 10 again.

20. [no ECM] I want the Earth to be flat.

- Subjunctive 21-22 signal that the attitude-holder considers the complement situation **realistic**. (S)he may even have an action plan for bringing that situation about.

21. Azt akarom, hogy megint 10 éves legyek.

I want for me to be 10 again.

22. Azt akarom, hogy a Föld lapos legyen.

I want for the Earth to be flat.

# Obviation in indicatives without competitors

In Hungarian (perhaps in English too),

*remél* `hope' and *sajnál* `regret'

exhibit obviation-like effects

when the attitude-holder is solely responsible  
for the complement situation.

Same patterns as with *akar* `want' and

same sense of weirdness in the #-marked cases.

But the complement is in the indicative  
(not a subjunctive),

and these verbs do not take infinitival complements.

23. Remélem, hogy egészséges v. I hope that I'm healthy.
24. Remélem, hogy magas leszek. I hope that I'll be tall.
25. Remélem, hogy nem fogok köhögni. I hope that I won't cough.
26. Remélem, hogy veszteni fogok. I hope that I'll lose.
27. Remélem, hogy nem fogok hányni.  
I hope that I won't throw up.
28. Remélem, hogy rossz jegyeket fogok kapni.  
I hope that I'll get bad grades.
29. Remélem, hogy csak én látogatom meg Marit.  
I hope that only I will visit Mary.
30. # Remélem, hogy rugdosni fogom az ajtót.  
# I hope that I'll be kicking the door.
31. # Remélem, hogy felcsípek egy kávét a SB-ban.  
# I hope that I'll pick up a coffee at Starbucks.
32. # Remélem, hogy megpróbálok segíteni.  
# I hope that I'll try to help.

33. Sajnálom, hogy beteg v. I was regretting that I was sick.
34. Sajnálom, hogy magas v. I was regretting that I was tall.
35. Sajnálom, hogy köhögök. I regretted that I was coughing.
36. Sajnálom, hogy veszteni fogok.  
I was regretting that I was going to lose.
37. Sajnálom, hogy hányni fogok.  
I regretted that I was going to throw up.
38. Sajnálom, hogy rossz jegyeket fogok kapni.  
I regretted that I was going to get bad grades.
39. Sajnálom, hogy csak én látogatom meg Marit.  
I regret that only I am visiting Mary.
40. # Sajnálom, hogy rugdosom az ajtót.  
# I regretted that I was kicking the door.
41. # Sajnálom, hogy meglátogatom Marit.  
# I regret that I am going to visit Mary.
42. # Sajnálom, hogy megpróbálok segíteni.  
# I regret that I am trying to help. <sup>31</sup>

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# What may be causing obviation, then?

- Possibility A: Mind-boggling meanings

(My reading of) Ruwet's intuition: Mind-boggling meanings arise from the combination of the evaluative / desiderative semantics of the matrix verb and the subjects' responsibility for the complement situation. New and fine-grained semantics is called for.

- Possibility B: Possibly UG-level (conceptual) competition

Obviation is due to competition by a better-suited alternative, but that alternative does not need to exist in the same language as the one that it blocks.

In the spirit of Buccola, Križ & Chemla 2018 and Charlow 2019 for other phenomena.

- A combination of A and B?

Buccola, Križ & Chemla 2018

## Conceptual alternatives in language and beyond

... an unsolvable problem, unless a theory of alternatives indicates what counts, among all the things that have not been pronounced. It is sometimes assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that any word counts, as long as that word could have replaced one that was actually pronounced. We review arguments against this powerful idea. In doing so, we argue that the level of words is not the right level of analysis for alternatives. Instead, we capitalize on recent conceptual and associated methodological advances within the study of the so-called “language of thought” to reopen the problem from a new perspective.

## Buccola, Križ & Chemla 2018      CONTINUED

Specifically, we provide theoretical and experimental arguments that the relation between alternatives and words may be indirect, and that alternatives are not linguistic objects in the traditional sense. Rather, we propose **that competition in language is better seen as primarily determined by general reasoning preferences, or thought preferences** (preferences which may have forged the lexicons of modern languages in the first place, as argued elsewhere). We propose that such non-linguistic preferences can be measured and that these measures can be used to explain linguistic competition, non-linguistically, and more in depth.

## Charlow 2019 Scalar implicatures & exceptional scope

Our main conclusion is this: the alternatives that give rise to scalar implicatures in exceptional scope configurations are more abstract than we might have thought. Whether we pursue the choice-functional or alternative-semantic accounts of exceptional scope, the distributively quantified alternatives associated with the existential closure operator do not seem to correspond to any expressible lexical items. If they did, we would get a lot more distributive exceptional scope-taking than we actually do.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> A referee notes that Chemla (2007) makes an analogous point for French universal quantifiers. In English, *Salvador broke all his arms* is marked, presumably due to competition with *Salvador broke both his arms*. The French analog of the *all*-sentence is likewise marked, even though French lacks a correspondent of *both*. Chemla posits that alternative sets in a language may be generated from universally accessible ‘key concepts’, which may or may not be lexicalized within that language. This is a natural fit for the data discussed here, as well.

Convergent data from Russian, Polish,  
and Romanian

<https://philarchive.org/rec/SZAIVS>

pp. 9-11

A big open question

Why is the degree to which obviation is weakened in non-RESP cases so different cross-linguistically?

Recall: Ruwet's intuition is better borne out by "East-European" than by French.

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