Some remarks on Hungarian ethical datives

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1. Introduction

The so-called ethical datives have traditionally been recognized as a distinct group of non-lexical dative expressions. (1) is a much-cited Latin example from Horace.

(1) Quid mihi Celsus agit? Latin
what 1.DAT Celsus does
‘What is Celsus doing, I wonder?’

Similar datives also occur in, for example, various Romance languages, Serbian, Hebrew, German, or in certain dialects of English. Many intriguing aspects of their syntax have not yet been fully explained, but there is at least good consensus that they are non-argumental in nature.¹ Furthermore, it is commonly accepted that ethical datives do not refer to participants of the event denoted by the predicate. Instead, they create a link between the event described and an individual who is seemingly outside of it.

Ethical datives can be found in Hungarian, too, as exemplified in (2).

(2) Ez meg mi-t csinál itt nek-em?
this and what-ACC does here DAT-1SG
‘And what (the hell) is this one doing here?’

This use of the dative is only sporadically mentioned in Hungarian descriptive grammars, which tend to note that ethical datives are restricted to the vernacular.² However, the grammar of Hungarian ethical datives,

¹ I refer the reader to Authier & Reed (1992), Cuervo (2003), Franco & Huidobro (2007) and Smith (2001) for useful overviews of both the data and the existing literature.
² In his comprehensive monograph of the grammar of Hungarian adverbials, Simonyi (1888:303) only devotes a couple of lines to ethical datives, claiming that they are very rare in Hungarian. But it is difficult to evaluate such remarks in the absence of any relevant statistical information. Furthermore, ethical datives are evidenced in Hungarian texts from at least as early as the sixteenth century (cf. Kiss & Pusztai (2003:447)), therefore this dative type cannot simply be dismissed as a (relatively) novel feature of the language.
beyond the mere observation that they exist.³

My prime objective in this paper is to investigate how Hungarian ethical datives compare with other, evidently non-argumental datives in the language, and how they relate to ethical datives in other languages. I show that ethical datives indeed have curious grammatical properties, which I interpret as a reflex of their special, essentially pragmatic function. Not purporting to present a comprehensive analysis, the paper is only intended to be a collection of structured remarks that all point in the same direction: ethical datives cannot be treated on a par with regular adjunct datives.

2. Ethical datives and datives of emotive opinion

Ethical datives typically occur in exclamatives and in interrogatives in Hungarian (3a,b), but they are certainly grammatical in declarative sentences, too (3c,d).

(3)a. Ne sérjál itt nek-em!
    not cry-IMP:2SG here DAT:1SG
    ‘Don’t cry, will you?’

b. Te mi-t ugrál-sz nek-em?
    you what jump-2SG DAT:1SG
    ‘Why the hell are you jumping around?’

c. A végén még elájul itt nek-em.
    the end.in even faints here DAT:1SG
    ‘He’s bloody well going to faint in the end.’

d. Hihetetlen! Képes és tényleg megnyeri nekem a verseny-t.
    unbelievable capable and indeed wins DAT:1SG the race-ACC
    ‘It is unbelievable! He can and will bloody well win the race.’

They are notoriously difficult to translate into standard English, which lacks ethical datives. Certain types of Romance ethical datives are regularly rendered through an ‘on me’-paraphrase (see, for example, Authier & Reed (1992) for French and Cuervo (2003) for Spanish), a practice that Ürögdi (2006:328) applies to the Hungarian data. In Hungarian, however, ethical datives refer to individuals who are typically not the kind of adversely affected participants that the English on-PP’s in question describe (as in She walked out on me). Instead, ethical datives are used to indicate that their referent (generally the speaker) has characteristic feelings towards an event, or at least (s)he shows an increased level of interest or concern towards it. They often describe negative, rather than positive attitudes (3a-c), but this is certainly not necessary (3d). In what follows, I will try to translate Hungarian ethical dative constructions into English in ways that I deem most illustrative in each individual case.⁴

³ One recent exception is Ürögdi (2006:328), who notes in passim that the ethical dative is always pronominal and clause-bound in Hungarian.
⁴ Besides the core ethical dative construction represented in (3), there also exists a special exclamative constructional idiom which involves a dative expression that descriptive grammars sometimes treat as an
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It should be evident even from this informal description alone that the contribution of ethical datives to the meaning of the sentence is pragmatic, rather than semantic in nature. If this is so, then we expect some cross-linguistic variation in how exactly datives that are described as ethical modify the meaning of the sentence in which they occur, for pragmatic markers, even if they are of a universally recurrent type, often show language particular interpretive idiosyncrasies. The German ethical dative, for example, seems to have the same function as the Hungarian one (McIntyre 2006:206), but what Smith (2001:12-16) describes as the Galician ethical dative does not. The following examples are quoted from the respective authors.

(4) a. Du gehst mir nicht da rein.
   ‘I won’t have you going in there.’

b. Non che me gustou nada.
   ‘I didn’t like anything.’

Smith argues (2001:15) that the Galician dative in (4b) creates “a closer affective link between the hearer, the speaker, and the utterance”. He calls it a dative of solidarity (also available in French), but he explicitly argues that these datives represent what we can regard as the true ethical dative construction. Such datives are absent in Hungarian, and whenever I use this term here it refers to the dative type represented in (3) and (4a).

To get a better grasp of the grammar of ethical datives in Hungarian, it is useful to employ a comparison class comprising at least one other, apparently non-argumental dative type. Besides goals, recipients, benefactive and certain experiencers, dative case can also appear on a purely optional, high level adjunct which can be inserted into any clause irrespective of the nature of the predicate. As is clear from the English translations of the Hungarian examples below, this dative type, unlike ethical datives, exists in English, too (marked by the preposition to).

(5) a. Nek-em te vagy a legszebb.
   ‘To me, you are the most beautiful.’

(i) a. Mi-t nek-em ez a vizsga!
   ‘Why should I care about this exam?’

b. *Mi-t ez a vizsga nek-em!

This construction, however, is much more constrained than regular ethical dative constructions. Unlike the ethical datives in (3), which can be inserted into different syntactic positions (see also below), this dative must be strictly adjacent to the wh-word (cf. (ia) and (ib)). Pending a future inquiry into the details of this construction, I will restrict my attention here to what I regard as true ethical datives, as in (3).
As I argue elsewhere (Rákosi 2006:138-146), these datives are not simply about opinion: they are used to introduce a model which describes the emotional rather than the pure knowledge state of their referent. Consequently, (5a) is true in a context in which the speaker does not in fact aim to deny his or her recognition that the addressee is not beautiful at all. Since these expressions are as much about emotion as about opinion, it is more appropriate to call them datives of emotive opinion. For the purposes of this article, I will use the term *emo-datives*

Since both ethical datives and emo-datives relate to the emotional state of their referent, it need not be immediately obvious how they differ with respect to the nature of their contribution to the meaning of the sentence. On closer inspection, however, the difference manifests itself vividly. As noted above, the emo-dative in (5a), for example, refers to the individual anchor of the model in which the embedded proposition is interpreted. Consequently, the omission of the dative pronoun may change the truth-conditions of the sentence quite radically, for it may very well be the case that everyone else finds the addressee non-attractive. The same holds of (5b) and of every occurrence of emo-datives, which are therefore semantically relevant expressions. In contrast, the omission of an ethical dative does not change the truth conditions of the sentence in which it occurs (see also Franco & Huidobro (2007) for the same point). The propositional core of the following sentence has the same truth value both in the presence and in the absence of the ethical dative.

(6) Ez megint elájult itt (nekem).

‘This one (bloody well) fainted again.’

Thus ethical datives are not only optional, but they also lack any obviously semantic content. It is in this sense that I prefer to view them as pragmatic operators.

This assumed (but relatively straightforward) difference between ethical datives and emo-datives should have grammatical consequences. Thus, while I agree with many others in treating ethical datives as non-argumental (cf., among others, Authier & Reed (1992), Cuervo (2003), Franco & Huidobro (2007), and Smith (2001)), we have sound reasons not to expect them to be of the same grammatical type as emo-datives, whose adjunct status is unquestionable. What I intend to show in the next section is that this difference indeed exists and it cannot simply be reduced to the assumption that ethical datives and emo-datives are inserted into different positions in clause structure: ethical datives simply do not behave as regular adjuncts do.

5 Unlike the inflecting postposition *szerintem* lit. ‘according to me’, which is strictly used to convey the knowledge state of its referent, being roughly equivalent to an ‘I think that’ paraphrase. Korponay (2001:100-103) assumes that this postposition is a way of expressing “ethic dative” in Hungarian, but its semantics (and also its syntax) is clearly different from that of the true dative types discussed in this paper.
3. Ethical datives are rigid

It is quite well-known that the formal expression of ethical datives is relatively rigid. It is not only the case that they are required to be pronominal (dominantly first person singular), but they must also be phonologically reduced. Thus in a language like Spanish, where pronouns regularly have distinct weak and strong forms, ethical datives can only assume the former and therefore they cannot occur postverbally, irrespective of whether the strong form is doubled by a clitic (7) or not. The following Spanish example is from Cuervo (2003: 195).

(7)  Me le dieron un helado al niño (*a mí). Spanish
  CL.1SG.DAT CL.3SG.DAT gave an ice-cream the kid.DAT to me
  ‘They gave the kid an ice-cream on me.’

Likewise, Hungarian ethical datives can only be pronominal (8a), and they can only appear in their weak, pro-dropped form (8b). By way of contrast, notice that neither constraint applies to emo-datives (9).

(8) a. Ez meg elájult itt nek-i / *János-nak.
    this and fainted here DAT-3SG John-DAT
    ‘And this one fainted here (and he (i.e. John) did not particularly like it).’
  b. Ez meg elájult itt (*én-)nek-em.
    this and fainted here I-DAT-1SG
    ‘And this one bloody well fainted here (and I didn’t particularly like it.)’

(9) a. János-nak te vagy a legszebb.
    John-DAT you are the most.beautiful
    ‘To John, you are the most beautiful.’
  b. Én-nek-em vagy te a legszebb.
    I-DAT-1SG are you the most.beautiful
    ‘It is to me that you are the most beautiful (and not to someone else).’

Possibly, these purportedly phonological restrictions may be derived in part from the fact that ethical datives cannot assume any discourse function (for example, focus or contrastive topic), unlike regular adjuncts. In this perspective, it is also non-surprising that wh-words cannot be used as ethical datives (10a), though they can function as emo-datives (10b).

(10) a. *Ki-nek ájul ez itt el?
    who-DAT faints this here particle
    ‘Who does not particularly like the fact that this one faints?’
  b. Ki-nek vagy te a legszebb?
    who-DAT are you the most.beautiful
    ‘To whom are you the most beautiful?’
Nevertheless, it still is in need of explanation why ethical datives cannot receive discourse prominence or be used emphatically. I do not have a definitive answer to this, though it should be noted that elements of pragmatic function - which ethical datives here are also claimed to be - do not naturally lend themselves to emphatic or contrastive uses. This leads to the ungrammaticality of the English *bloody well* in the reply in (11b): being essentially a pragmatic marker, *bloody well* cannot stand in a contrast, unlike the sentence adverbial *luckily* in (11a).

(11) a. - *He has luckily arrived.*
   - *Not luckily: unfortunately!*

   b. - *He has bloody well arrived.*
   - *Not bloody well: most luckily!*

If this explanation is on the right track, then the phonological deficiency of ethical datives may possibly be reduced to independent factors.

There is, however, another aspect of the formal invariance of ethical datives which generally goes unnoticed. The morphology of regular adjuncts is by default subject to variation up to the limits dictated by the available morphological inventory of the language concerned. Emo-datives, for example, can be coded by the inflecting postposition *számára* ‘for him’, which is a *for*-type P-element (12a). They can also be modified, for example, by *personally*-adverbials and by the particle *too* in English as well as in Hungarian (12b,c).

(12) a. Számomra te vagy a legszebb.
   ‘For me, you are the most beautiful.’

   b. Nek-em személy szerint te vagy a legszebb.
  DAT-1SG personally you are the most beautiful
   ‘To me personally, you are the most beautiful.’

   c. Nek-em is te vagy a legszebb.
   DAT-1SG too you are the most beautiful
   ‘To me too, you are the most beautiful.’

The data in (12) are quite unsurprising in light of the rather straightforward assumption that the encoding of a true adjunct is generally not rigid.

Ethical datives, however, do not license any of the forms exemplified in (12). Compare (13b-d), which are ungrammatical on the ethical reading, with the previous set of emo-datives in (12). The grammatical (13a) represents the reading that is intended, mutatis mutandis, in (13b-d).
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(13) a. Ez meg elájul itt nekem.
\hspace{1cm}this and faints here DAT-1SG
\hspace{1cm}‘And this one bloody well faints here.’
b. *Ez meg elájul itt számomra.
\hspace{1cm}this and faints here for.me
\hspace{1cm}c. *Ez meg elájul itt nek-em személy szerint.
\hspace{1cm}this and faints here DAT-1SG personally
d. *Ez meg elájul itt nek-em is.
\hspace{1cm}this and faints here DAT-1SG too

It is doubtful whether the absence of any morphological variation or the lack of any modificational option could be explained by reference to well-established phonological or syntactic principles. Ethical datives are thus in a crucial contrast with emo-datives, and if the latter are regular adjuncts, then the former cannot be. Ethical datives either represent an atypical adjunct category, or as I want to suggest here, they are pragmatic markers which do not occupy a true adjunct position.

4. Rounding up: ethical datives are pragmatic markers

If ethical datives are indeed pragmatic markers, then they need not be required to be directly governed and constrained by syntax. That this may well be the case is suggested at least by the following two considerations. First, ethical datives are not restricted to matrix clauses, they can occur in a subordinate clause as long as its deictic orientation is harmonious with that of the matrix.

(14) Nem szeret-né-m, ha ez elájul-na itt nek-em.
\hspace{1cm}not like-COND-1SG if this faint-COND.3SG here DAT-1SG
\hspace{1cm}‘I wouldn’t like it if this one bloody well fainted here.’

Clearly, whether an ethical dative is licensed in a particular clause or not is primarily a function of semantic/pragmatic, rather than purely syntactic constraints. Whatever the exact licensing mechanism is, it is strictly local and the datives that it introduces are syntactically inert. Ethical datives cannot, for example, be moved across a clause boundary for contrastive topicalization in the matrix (15a). Long contrastive topicalization is otherwise grammatical in Hungarian even if the matrix predicate is not a bridge-verb, and it may target emo-datives, too (15b).

(15)a. *Nekem nem szeret-né-m, ha ez elájul-na itt.
\hspace{1cm}DAT-1SG not like-COND-1SG if this faint-COND.3SG here
\hspace{1cm}‘I wouldn’t like it if this one bloody well fainted here.’
b. Nek-em nem szeretném, ha ez a kép lenne a legszebb.
\hspace{1cm}DAT-3SG not like-COND-1SG if this the picture were the most.beautiful
\hspace{1cm}‘To me, I wouldn’t like it if this picture were the most beautiful.’
The second property that shows the syntactic nature of ethical datives is that they can be parasitic on true argument positions. In (16), the dative pronoun can be interpreted as a recipient and an ethical dative at the same time.\(^6\)

(16) Nek-em te csak ne ad-j-ál jótanác-ok-at!
    DAT-1SG you just not give-IMP.2SG good.advice-PL.\text{-ACC}
    ‘You just don’t give any bloody advice to me.’

The ability to be parasitically licensed on an argument is, I believe, a real feature of ethical datives in Hungarian, and as such, it is naturally compatible with an analysis in which they are treated as pragmatic elements.

Of course, the idea that ethical datives have a pragmatic function is not new and there have been attempts at providing a principled account of what their exact contribution is. Smith (2001:20), for example, treats ethical datives as “illocutionary converters” that convert Declaratives into Exclamatives in his analysis couched in terms of Functional Grammar. Unfortunately, however, he does not elaborate on precisely what sort of meaning change this conversion brings about. Building on a different set of background assumptions, Horn (2007) argues that personal datives contribute a conventional implicature to the effect that their use imposes an appropriateness constraint on the felicitous use of the sentence in which they occur. Applying this to the data we have surveyed, the use of a Hungarian ethical dative seems to be appropriate in a context in which its referent (generally the speaker) shows an obvious emotional concern towards the embedded event.

An issue that has been relatively neglected in the literature but which I have tried to substantiate extensively is that though ethical datives are indeed non-argumental, they cannot be considered to be regular adjuncts either. Given that they are essentially pragmatic markers, it is not so much surprising. Qua purported adjuncts that take scope over the whole proposition, they would be expected to be licensed high in the left periphery of the clause, a claim explicitly made by several authors (cf. Cuervo (2003) and Smith (2001), among others). There is, however, little visible evidence for this in Hungarian. We have seen that in prosodically (relatively) neutral declaratives ethical datives typically come after the verb, though they may marginally be acceptable on the left periphery in positions closer to the verb (17a). In prosodically non-neutral sentences, especially in imperatives, they may occur either on the left or on the right (17b). In contrast, emo-datives are licensed on the left-periphery, and they are only marginally acceptable after the verb (17c). The brackets below are to be interpreted disjunctively.

\(^6\) As Barbara Ürödzi informs me (p.c.), dative clitics in Serbian often seem to have both the ethical reading and a possessor reading at the same time, if there is an internal noun phrase in the clause that the dative can possibly be understood to be related to through a possession relation. Apparently, something similar is going on in (16) above. Not intending to analyze this phenomenon in depth, I only remark that by simply claiming that the dative in (16) is ambiguous between an ethical and a recipient reading, we do not explain why these two readings appear to be entertained at the same time.
I have entertained the possibility in Section 3 that ethical datives tend to be phonologically reduced elements because they cannot normally bear discourse functions. This may provide an explanation for the distributional facts, at least with respect to (17a) - though why the positioning of ethical datives is freer in an imperative (17b) is still not answered.

Notice, however, that (17a) represents a distributional pattern that reminds one of the behaviour of certain pragmatically relevant discourse markers. The recently coined Hungarian vernacular expression *vazze*, which is void of semantic content and whose function is akin to that of the dative of solidarity in Galician (4b), can be inserted into (17a) in place of the ethical dative and it shows strikingly similar distribution.

18. (*Vazze) ez meg (vazze) megint elájult itt (vazze).
   this and again fainted here
   ‘Man, this one has fainted again.’

In contrast to the ethical dative, *vazze* is more about establishing a link between the speaker and the listener, though it is not itself a vocative expression. But it is also a pragmatic element, just like the ethical dative, and it is perhaps not by accident that the behaviour of the two should converge.

With this remark falling in place, I hope to have shown that though Hungarian ethical datives are indeed non-argumen-tal, they cannot be treated on a par with other dative types that are used as true adjuncts. The ethical dative has a pragmatic function and as such, it seems to have undergone a grammaticalization process. Many questions remain, however, that I could not have attempted here to answer. Most importantly, it is quite intriguing that ethical datives are a universally recurrent category - the factors that underlie this universality, as well as the relation between ethical datives and other types of dative expression are issues which have not even been addressed here.

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