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A language interference triggering structural change in Hungarian

Hungarian language spoken by indigenous Hungarians in Vojvodina, the northern province of Serbia exhibits a whole range of linguistic phenomena whose formation can be correlated with Serbian interference; in my talk I am presenting an up till now unrevealed case of Serbian interference which affects the internal structure of Hungarian comparatives and calls for a structural change in Vojvodinian variation of Hungarian language.

The standard form, i.e. the standard internal structure of a Hungarian comparative usually consists of the positive form of an adjective or an adverb plus the suffix *-bb*; the form is usually completed by the noun being compared, where this particular noun receives the case suffix *-nál/-nél* 'than':

- (1) Péter öreg-e-bb [Mari-nál].
Peter old-COMP Mary-than
Peter is elder than Mary.
- (2) Az alma finom-a-bb a [körté-nél].
the apple delicious-COMP the pear-from
Apples are more delicious than pears.

Regarding internal structure of comparatives used by Hungarians in Vojvodina, a significant distinction can be observed: they use the case suffix *-tól/-től* 'from' instead of *-nál/-nél* 'than' (3–4).

- (3) Péter öreg-e-bb [Mari-tól].
Peter old-COMP Mary-from
lit. Peter is elder from Mary.
- (4) Az alma finom-a-bb a [körté-től].
the apple delicious-COMP the pear-from
lit. Apples are more delicious from pears.

An account for this phenomenon can be found in Serbian prepositional system; to be more precise, the preposition which obligatorily surfaces in Serbian comparatives can provide us with a possible explanation: in Serbian comparatives the compared noun is (i) always headed by the preposition *od* and is (ii) marked by genitive case (5–6).

- (5) Petar je star-ij-i [od Marij-e].
Peter is old-COMP-MASC PREP-from Mary-GEN
Peter is elder than Mary.
- (6) Marija je marljiv-ij-a [od Petr-a].
Maria is diligent-COMP-FEM PREP-from Peter-GEN
Maria is more diligent than Peter.

Serbian prepositions establish grammatical relationships that link their complements to another phrase, i.e. their role is similar to the role of Hungarian noun suffixes. For this very reason I assume that Hungarians in Vojvodina, when deriving Hungarian comparatives, choose the noun suffix *-tól/-től* 'from' over *-nál/-nél* 'than' because their Hungarian noun suffix repertoire is influenced by Serbian preposition system. Namely, the default meaning of Serbian preposition *od* is 'from' – it is exactly the meaning this preposition bears in comparatives, moreover, the default meaning of the preposition *od* corresponds with the meaning of Hungarian noun suffix *-tól/-től*. Contrary to the noun suffix *-nál/-nél* 'than', the noun suffix *-tól/-től* is very frequent morpheme, therefore the interference of Serbian language can easily overwrite the internal structure of Hungarian comparative in such a way that it substitutes the noun suffix *-tól/-től* 'from' for noun suffix *-nál/-nél* 'than'.