

# HUNGARIAN AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE IN THE AUSTRIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: MORPHOLOGICAL FEATURES OF YOUNG ADULTS' WRITTEN LANGUAGE USE

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**Abstract.** In our study, we examine the written language use of Hungarian of university students in Austria who have Hungarian as a heritage language and who take Hungarian courses as part of foreign language education. We conduct a detailed analysis of their writing samples to identify and systematize the morphological and morphosyntactic phenomena that characterize their use of written Hungarian. Understanding these linguistic features may later contribute to the development of effective language pedagogy and teaching methods to support the successful education of this specific target group.

**Keywords:** bilingualism, heritage language, morphology, language awareness, Hungarian language teaching

## Motto

*"... the truth is that I speak better German, but I often don't want to admit it. I grew up in Vienna, we complement constructions nt to school there, learnt the language better and speak it more. Most of my friends speak German, and that counts for a lot. Even now, at the age of 19, I still have moments when I can't say or explain something. But I'm still glad I was born that way. But to be honest, there are times when it's a bit embarrassing that I don't speak like everyone else. Often they use words that I understand and know, but I wouldn't think of using them in a sentence. (...)*

*What I like to say about all this is that it's often difficult, there are obstacles and limitations, but at the end of the day I think anyone who*

*has grown up bilingual is grateful for it. Because I think it doesn't matter how many mistakes you make or what level you speak at, we were given two languages, and that's one of the best things that can happen to someone. Because I think it doesn't matter how many mistakes you make or what level you speak at, we were given two languages, and that's one of the best things that can happen to someone. I think I wouldn't be me if I didn't speak Hungarian or German". (11)*

The quote chosen as the motto comes from a Hungarian heritage speaker living in Austria and studying at the University of Vienna. Reflecting on her own bilingualism, she articulates important thoughts that are also defining elements of the concept of heritage language speakers. When she assesses her own language skills, she believes that her Hungarian heritage language skills fall short of her skills in German, the dominant language of her environment. She communicates much more often and in more domains in German. She also reflects on how her own use of Hungarian differs from that of other Hungarian speakers, and this is accompanied by a sense of shame. Her receptive language skills (comprehension) are stronger than her productive skills. She perceives both positive and negative aspects of bilingualism, but sees it as an integral part of her own personality and identity, to which she feels a strong emotional attachment. This layperson's articulation of these thoughts partially summarises what is often emphasised in the linguistic literature about the concept of heritage languages.

## Heritage Language and Related Concepts

In our study, we present the results of research analysing the written language production of Hungarian heritage language university students living in Austria. However, before discussing our investigation and its findings, first we clarify some fundamental concepts related to the topic. In our research, we use the term 'heritage language' (in German, *Herkunftssprache*; in Hungarian, *származásnyelv*, *örökségnyelv*, *örökségi nyelv*) according to the general definition in heritage language research.

In Hungarian linguistics literature, the term *származásnyelv* (heritage language) has been in use since the 1980s, primarily as a pedagogical concept addressing the language practices of second- and third-generation individuals in the diaspora (Maróti 2021: 129–136). Since the 2000s, the terms *örökségnyelv* or *örökségi nyelv* (heritage language) have emerged as synonyms for *származásnyelv*, predominantly in reference to the languages of immigrant communities in the United States (Fenyvesi 2013: 114; Heltai 2025: 42). However, these terms are also applied to the language of the Hungarian diaspora (Huber 2014).

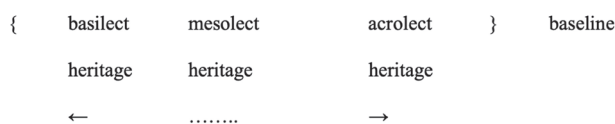
In a general sense, a ‘heritage language’ is defined as a language spoken regularly at home that was not the dominant language of the surrounding majority society: “[...] heritage speakers are individuals who were raised in homes where a language other than the dominant community language was spoken and thus possess some degree of bilingualism in the heritage language and the dominant language” (Polinsky 2015: 8). In the present study, every participant is a heritage language speaker who was either born in the host country or immigrated from their country of origin before starting school, thus growing up in a multilingual environment from childhood. Heritage language speakers are, of course, not exclusively associated with families of immigrant backgrounds; they may also be found in other contexts. Importantly, members of indigenous communities can also be heritage language speakers of their community’s often endangered indigenous language. If someone acquires more than one language in their family environment, they can have multiple heritage languages.

Heritage languages are primarily acquired and used in oral form as the language of communication within the immediate family. Entering school is a significant turning point in a heritage language speaker’s language development, as it is at this point that the language of the majority society usually becomes dominant. The domains of language use expand in the society’s dominant language, individuals acquire general knowledge through that language (see Brehmer, Mehlhorn 2018: 28–29). Alongside their first language, heritage language speakers acquire the majority language either simultaneously or with a slight

delay. This bilingualism is typically unbalanced, favoring the majority language. However, heritage languages are used primarily for oral communication within the family context and hold emotional significance for their speakers. Teaching heritage languages, particularly by developing written language skills, can support the preservation of these languages or revive language proficiency after extended periods of non-use. Students who develop and deepen their heritage language skills within institutional frameworks are referred to as ‘heritage language learners’ (Mehlhorn 2022: 1–2).

When discussing the competencies of heritage language speakers, a high degree of heterogeneity is often emphasized. Among their language skills, their greatest strength is listening comprehension, as the primary input for their heritage language comes from oral language use. The linguistic competencies of heritage speakers span a wide spectrum, ranging from individuals who speak the language fluently at a high level (approaching the competence of native speakers) to those who know only a few words in the given language.

To illustrate these heterogeneous linguistic competencies, Polinsky and Kagan (2007: 7) place the competencies of heritage language speakers on a continuum. On one end are individuals who know only a few words of the language (basilectal speakers), and the other end are individuals with near-native speaker competence (acrolectal speakers):



It is important to note that such classification efforts represent a snapshot rather than a static state: the competencies of heritage language speakers can change over the course of their lives. This variability (in German, *Veränderlichkeit*) is a key characteristic of heritage language competencies, which can develop or deteriorate over a lifetime (Schmid 2011). Factors contributing to this variability may include

changes in the linguistic environment, language use practices, life circumstances, or participation in heritage language education.

### **Research on Hungarian (as a heritage) language in Austria**

Despite the Hungarian language having been present in Austria for around a thousand years, Hungarian speakers in the country represent an ‘invisible minority’ whose specific issues are rarely addressed in current Austrian debates on migration and education policy (see Csiszár 2007). Research on the Hungarian language in Austria has so far been dominated by classical dialectology (Imre 1971, 1973) and sociolinguistics (Gal 1979). While these studies have focused primarily on the language and language use of the autochthonous Hungarian minority in Burgenland (see Bodó 2005) the language use of Hungarian migrants living in Vienna and other Austrian cities has been significantly underrepresented. Research on the Hungarian language in Austria is primarily conducted by Hungarian researchers and research institutions. The findings are almost exclusively published in Hungarian-language forums and in Hungarian. These studies mainly focus on language preservation or loss, linguistic contact phenomena (particularly loanwords), and ethnocultural topics, especially the preservation of Hungarian identity (Csire, Laakso 2012).

In Austria, two federal states (Burgenland and Vienna) officially recognize autochthonous Hungarian ethnic groups, whose language and educational rights are legally protected. Currently, there is no reliable information available about their population size. However, the significant majority of Hungarian speakers in Austria are from Hungary or are descendants of recent immigrants to Austria and form an allochthonous minority (112,000 people; Statistics Austria 2025). Their minority rights are not legally guaranteed. Thus, while a significant Hungarian-speaking population resides in Austria, research on the Hungarian language in Austria remains underrepresented in linguistics. Another characteristic of the research conducted so far is the absence of time- and labor-intensive empirical studies.

In this study, we investigate the characteristic features of language use among young speakers of Hungarian as a heritage language. The research contributes to the underrepresented field of heritage language studies through an empirical analysis that explores the typical linguistic phenomena observed in this group.

### **About the present study: participants subjects and methods**

The eight participants in the study (six females and two males) were either born in Austria or arrived there before school age. At least one of their parents had an immigrant background, originating from Hungary or one of the Hungarian-speaking communities outside Hungary (and Austria). They acquired Hungarian through natural language acquisition, making it (one of) their first language(s). Hungarian is (one of) the languages used in family communication, with its functions primarily limited to this domain of language use. As a result, their linguistic competencies in Hungarian have not developed as broadly as in the dominant language (in some cases, their other first language, such as in mixed-parent marriages), German.

In practice, outside of family interactions, they are not members of a Hungarian-speaking community and only occasionally interact with other Hungarian speakers. However, they have continuously used Hungarian in family communication without interruption and are all fluent speakers. They acquired Hungarian and German either simultaneously or with a slight delay. With a few exceptions, they did not participate in Hungarian language education (e.g., language courses organized by a Hungarian community or during after-school hours or on the weekend.). They are all young adults aged between 19 and 24 who started learning Hungarian in an institutional setting at the University of Vienna in Hungarian as a Foreign Language courses. Most of them have parents (or at least one parent) who emigrated from Hungary to Austria, while others are children of Hungarian-speaking parents from Slovakia, Serbia, or Romania (particularly from Transylvania). Since the mid-1990s, Hungarian has been considered a pluricentric language in

Hungarian linguistics, with standard varieties used in several countries (contact varieties), so that Hungarian varieties have specific features from country to country (Kontra 2006: 551–553). However, the differences between contact varieties are not significant enough to impact the results of our present study. As this study serves as an initial step toward empirical research on Hungarian as a heritage language, we have chosen not to address this factor at this stage.

In our research, we analysed the written texts produced by the eight aforementioned participants over a period of nearly two years. These were written assignments and longer compositions prepared as coursework on various topics covered in university Hungarian language classes. This study is the first step in a larger project focusing on the study of Hungarian as a heritage language. As a pilot study, it takes a qualitative approach; achieving more representative results in future will require a larger number of participants and linguistic data. The linguistic features presented in this study were selected because they broadly characterize the language use of most of our informants and represent the most frequent differences from the standard. While we acknowledge that the linguistic material analyzed imposes certain limitations on the scope of the study, we view this as a preliminary step toward a more comprehensive investigation, which we aim to continue. Nonetheless, the material analyzed reveals general linguistic phenomena that are characteristic of nearly all the informants.

In our analysis we focused on morphological phenomena (morpho-phonological and morphosyntactic features), aiming to identify and present recurring differences from the standard language variant that appeared across multiple participants. It is important to note that our analysis is purely linguistic in nature and aims to categorise language-use characteristics into types. It is not an error analysis and is free of value judgements.

When presenting linguistic phenomena, we frequently refer to ‘language awareness’, which we define as explicit knowledge about language, as well as the conscious perception and sensitivity involved in language learning, teaching, and use (see the general definition provided by the ALA).

In the following sections, we will provide a detailed account, illustrated with examples, of the morphophonological, morphological, and morphosyntactic linguistic phenomena that characterise the language use of these learners. The examples are presented in their original spelling, along with the codes of the participants (I1–8). Morpheme boundaries used for analysis are marked with hyphens, and the relevant linguistic forms are annotated.

## Morphological linguistic characteristics of heritage language learners – results of the analysis

### MORPHOPHONOLOGY

#### 1. Linking vowels

Although we analysed written texts, difficulties in the correspondence between certain sounds and letters can often be observed. This issue can be identified as a problem situated at the intersection of morphology and phonetics. For instance, in the case of linking vowels attached to stems ending in consonants (both verbs and nouns), the difficulty in distinguishing between the Hungarian [ɔ] (rounded upper low back vowel) and [o] (rounded lower mid back vowel) is frequently observed (see examples 1.a–d. About Hungarian vowels see for example Törkenczy 2011). Additionally, similar phenomena can also occur within suffixes themselves (see example 1.d).

- |    |          |   |
|----|----------|---|
| a) | (I2)     | <i>a muzeum-at</i>                                  |
|    | standard | <i>a múzeum-ot</i><br><i>the museum-Acc</i>         |
| b) | (I2)     | <i>dino-k-ot</i>                                    |
|    | standard | <i>dínó-k-at</i><br><i>dinosaur-Pl-Acc</i>          |
| c) | (I5)     | (ő) <i>vigyáz-at</i>                                |
|    | standard | (ő) <i>vigyáz-ott</i><br>(she) <i>look-Past.3Sg</i> |



- d) (I2)            *válasz-tak*  
                  standard    *válasz-tok*  
                                  *choose-1Sg*

One possible and likely explanation for this phenomenon is orthographic influence, potentially related to the fact that in standard Austrian German, certain words containing the letter o are pronounced as [ɔ], a rounded low back vowel (Moosmüller et al. 2015).

Since the participants' Hungarian language use is primarily oral, no written language form is associated with the spoken forms. This raises the question of the level of phonological awareness, which is the ability to recognize and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in words, developed in the heritage language. Heritage language learners, during the process of learning to write, can only rely on the acoustic form of the language. The relationship between phonological awareness and written language acquisition – despite decades of research on the topic – remains a subject of debate. The central question is whether phonological awareness is a prerequisite for or a consequence of written language acquisition. According to Hug's 2007 study, the operationalisation of phonological awareness has been highly heterogeneous, leading to correspondingly divergent research findings (Hug 2007: 22–23). Research from the past decades has also highlighted that the relationship between reading and phonological awareness should be understood as an interaction between the two areas. In other words, phonological awareness develops during the process of learning to read, while letter knowledge supports the formation of phonological awareness (see Jordanidisz 2012, 2017).

## **2. Analogy-based morphological phenomena of verbs and nouns with stem alternations and *-ik* verbs**

The following examples illustrate verbs or nouns that exhibit different kinds of stem alternations during suffixation (Siptár, Törkenczy 2000). However, heritage language learners tend to form these exceptional forms analogously, following the rules for suffixation of regular stems (2.a–c).

- a) (I3)            *feküd-nek*  
          standard   *feksz-enek*  
                          *lie-3Pl*
- b) (I4)            *nyúl-t*  
          standard   *nyul-at*  
                          *rabbit-Acc*
- c) (I3)            *titok-já-t*  
          standard   *titk-á-t*  
                          *secret-Poss.3Sg-Acc* ‘his secret’
- d) (I3)            *vál*  
          standard   *vál-ik*  
                          *become-3Sg*

In example 2.a, the verb *fekszik* (infinitive: *feküdni* – ‘to lie’) belongs to the group of verbs with stem alternations, including forms with *sz-*, *d-*, and *v-* stems. The *sz-* stem form is used in the indicative mood in the present tense, while the *d-* stem form appears before tense and mood markers. The example demonstrates that the formation of the present tense differ from the standard, as it is based on the *d-* stem instead of the expected *sz-* stem. Among nouns with stem alternations, analogical forms primarily occur with consonant-ending stems that undergo shortening (through elision or metathesis); see examples 2.b and 2.c.

In Hungarian, verbs in the third person singular do not have a personal suffix in the present indicative of indefinite conjugation. An exception to this are the so-called *-ik* verbs, which are named because they are marked with the third-person *-ik* ending in the present indicative of indefinite conjugation. In the case of example 2.d, the *-ik* verb *válik* (‘to become’) lacks the *-ik* personal suffix. This can be explained by the fact that the verb form is created analogously, following the pattern of regular verbs, without the personal suffix.

Research on child language acquisition in Hungarian shows that regular stems are acquired early, as they are easy for 3–4-year-olds. Monolingual children acquire exceptional stem types in the following order: shortening stems, *v-* inserting stems, and eliding stems. Children

continue to acquire these exceptional types until the age of 7–8. Among these, the analogue use of *v*-inserting and eliding stems according to regular rules only ceases by the age of eight (Lukács et al., 2014: 490–492). As heritage language learners cannot be considered to have completed language acquisition, it is possible that mastery of these stem types is incomplete too. Consequently, grammatical forms based on regular rules may dominate for certain more problematic stem types.

### 3. The use of the suffixes: *-val/-vel*

The instrumental *-val/-vel* suffix begins with a [v] after vowel-final stems. However, after stems ending in consonants, the initial [v] of the suffix is realised as a geminate (Siptár, Törkenczy 2000). In the presented example (3.a), the absence of this assimilation can be observed:

- I2)                    *apuká-m-val*  
 standard           *apuká-m-mal*  
                          *dad-Poss.1Sg-Ins* ‘with my dad’

Although, according to Lukács et al. (2014: 490), the appearance of the *-val/-vel* suffix occurs in the early stages of child language development, the lack of alternating *v*-suffix in child language can be explained as follows: the speaker segments the suffix morpheme (i.e., the recognition of the morpheme and the word stem takes place) and then attaches it independently to the word stem. Child language is characterised by various assimilation processes, the most common reason for which is the resolution of difficult-to-pronounce sound combinations, resulting in articulatory ease. However, in the case of the non-assimilated [v] sound, morpheme attachment overrides the principle of articulatory ease, even if this makes articulation more difficult (Gósy 2005: 268–270). In the language use of heritage language learners, fluctuation can be observed between assimilated and non-assimilated forms (e.g., *apukám-val* vs. *apukám-mal*). This suggests that the full acquisition of the assimilation rule has likely not been completed, resulting in language use that, even in adulthood, shows similarities to certain early stages of child language acquisition.

#### 4. Absence of vowel harmony

The following examples illustrate the lack of vowel harmony. According to descriptions from child language studies, the lack of vowel harmony is very rare in Hungarian, even by the age of 3 (Lukács et al. 2014: 490). In each of these examples, Hungarian suffixes are attached to German place names, which may cause uncertainty for the learner in applying the rules of Hungarian vowel harmony.

- |    |          |   |
|----|----------|---|
| a) | (I5)     | <i>Wiener Neustadt-<b>be</b></i>                |
|    | standard | <i>Wiener Neustadt-<b>ba</b></i>                |
|    |          | <i>Wiener Neustadt-Ill</i> ‘to Wiener Neustadt’ |
| b) | (I6)     | <i>Gráz-<b>ben</b></i>                          |
|    | standard | <i>Graz-<b>ban</b></i>                          |
|    |          | <i>Graz-Ine</i> ‘in Graz’                       |

#### MORPHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA

Linguistic phenomena related to morphology are reliably reflected in spelling. Hungarian orthography is a letter-based system with a phonemic nature, meaning that letters represent phonemes. There are no significant differences between the spoken and written forms of the language. Among the principles of Hungarian orthography, we would like to highlight two in this case: one is the phonemic principle, or phonetic (sound-representing) spelling, and the other is the so-called word analysis (or etymological spelling). The latter allows individual morphemes (such as the root and affixes) to be recognised in written word forms. In this second type of spelling, it may occur that the representation of sounds at morpheme boundaries differs from the pronounced sounds.

The following examples demonstrate the uncertainties in the meta-linguistic abilities of heritage language learners, which are reflected in their spelling.

- |    |          |                                 |
|----|----------|---------------------------------|
| a) | (I3)     | <i>le-<b>t</b></i>              |
|    | standard | <i>le-<b>tt</b></i>             |
|    |          | <i>become-Past.3Sg</i> ‘became’ |

- b) (I3) *összes-ég-é-ben*  
           standard *összes-ség-é-ben*  
                     *whole-DenNom-Poss.3Sg-Ine* ‘as a whole’
- c) (I7) *imát-koz-tam*  
           standard *imád-koz-tam*  
                     *pray-DenVer-Past.3Sg* ‘I prayed’
- d) (I5) *elég-é*  
           standard *elég-gé*  
                     *quite-Tr* ‘quite a lot’

One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be the lack of linguistic awareness and metalinguistic abilities, which leads to an inability to recognise morpheme boundaries. Additionally, the conscious acquisition of the correct forms of case suffixes (see example a) is also absent from the learners’ knowledge of the language. While morpheme boundaries may be recognised, there is no language awareness of the correct form of the word root. This results in unmarked devoicing in writing, which follows the phonetic spelling principle (see example c). Confirmation of this explanation would require metalinguistic research of our participants. However, the scope of this study does not allow for such an investigation.

A second explanation could be that consonant degemination occurs as an interference feature from German. However, the fact remains that heritage speakers are exposed only to the spoken language, not the written one. In the spoken language, degemination or shortening is not typical in the cases in question. Native speakers clearly produce geminates in these contexts, meaning that heritage speakers were exposed to this pattern. Of course, it is possible that a different perceptual basis develops in the heritage language, leading our participants to fail to perceive the distinction between geminate and singleton consonants. However, as this is a morphology-focused article, we did not conduct perceptual studies to confirm this.

The use of a single *-t* to mark the past tense after a vowel may be influenced by German language interference. In German, there are

no long consonants in a phonological sense, as consonant length is not a distinctive feature of the language. While derived, so-called fake geminates can occur across prosodic word boundaries in German, these are phonetic phenomena rather than phonologic ones (Hamann 2020). This lack of phonological geminates in German may contribute to the difficulty heritage language learners have in distinguishing between long and short consonants in spoken Hungarian.

## MORPHOSYNTAX

### 1. The absence of case markers

In the language use of heritage language learners, the most common issue is the omission of the accusative case marker. In Hungarian, unmarked objects are rare, but possible (e.g., in the case of objects with first- or second-person possessive suffixes), but the object must always be marked. In the examples, the missing *-t* accusative marker and other case markers are indicated with the symbol ‘ø’. In some cases, examples of the omission of other case markers can also be found (see example c).

- a) (I5) *Angol-ø* is szerettem  
           standard *az angol-t* is szerettem  
                     *the English-Acc* also love-Past.3Sg ‘I also loved English’
- b) (I4) *remek nyaralás-ok-ø* terveztek  
           standard *remek nyaralás-ok-at* terveztek  
                     *great vacation-Pl-Acc* plan-Past.3Pl ‘(they) planned  
   great vacations’
- c) (I6) *A zene egyetem-ø* (...) volt nekem egy (...) tanárom  
           standard *a zeneegyetem-en* (...) volt nekem egy (...) tanárom  
                     *the music university-Sup* had I.Dat a teacher-Poss.1Sg  
                     ‘I had a (...) teacher at the music university’

The absence of the *-t* accusative marker may be due to interference from German, where the accusative case is unmarked for singular feminine and neuter nouns, as well as for plural nouns and certain pronouns.

## 2. The use of case markers different from the standard

We also observe examples of case markers that differ from the standard usage, most commonly occurring in the expression of location. Inconsistencies can be observed in the use of lative and locative cases, as well as in the distinction between internal and external location markers:

- |    |          |  |
|----|----------|--|
| a) | (I3)     | Márta elment (...) <i>a Nemzeti Muzeum-ban</i><br>Márta went (...) <i>the National Museum-Ine</i>  |
|    | standard | Márta elment (...) <i>a Nemzeti Múzeum-ba</i><br>Márta went (...) <i>the National Museum-III</i><br>'Márta went (...) to the National Museum'    |
| b) | (I5)     | három órakor <i>angolóra-n</i> járt<br>three clock-Tmp <i>English class-Sup</i> go-Past.3Sg  |
|    | standard | három órakor <i>angolóra-ra</i> ment<br>three clock-Tmp <i>English class-Sub</i> go-Past.3Sg<br>'she went to her English class at three o'clock' |
| c) | (I6)     | <i>Verseny-hez</i> is készítette engemet<br><i>competition-All</i> also prepare-Past.3Sg me  |
|    | standard | <i>verseny-re</i> is felkészített engem<br><i>competition-Sub</i> also prepare-Past.3Sg me<br>'he also prepared me for competitions'             |

Among the possible explanations is hypercorrection (a, b). In the case of inflectional forms in c, the direction marking is correct, but the semantics of external and internal location marking differ from the standard: *verseny-hez* (standard *verseny-re*) – allative instead of sublative.

## 3. Differences in agreement from the standard variety

Agreement, or the lack thereof, is also classified as a morphosyntactic phenomenon, as seen, for example, in the relationship between numerals and nouns. In Hungarian, nouns following numerals are used in the singular form. Even among heritage language learners with the highest linguistic competence, the most frequently observed agreement phenomenon is the use of the plural form after

numerals. This is likely due to strong, ingrained interference from the dominant German language, which overrides this seemingly straightforward rule. Furthermore, in standard Hungarian, if the numeral phrase serves as the subject of the sentence, it agrees in number with the predicate, meaning the predicate also takes the plural form:

- a) (I7) Most *következtek* a legkellemetlenebb **10 percek**  
 az egész életemben ...  
 now *come-Past.3Pl* the most unpleasant *10 minute-Pl*  
 of my entire life
- standard Most *következ-ett* a legkellemetlenebb *10 perc*  
 az egész életemben  
 now *come-Past.3Sg* the most unpleasant *10 minute-Sg*  
 of my entire life  
 ‘The most unpleasant 10 minutes of my entire life  
 came next’
- b) (I8) ... **sok diákok és tanárok jönnek el** az egész világból ...  
*many student-Pl* and *teacher-Pl* *come-3Pl* from  
 all over the world
- standard ... *sok diák és tanár jön el* az egész világból  
*many student-Sg* and *teacher-Sg* *come-3Sg* from  
 all over the world  
 ‘Many students and teachers come from  
 all over the world.’

#### 4. Agreement problems in verb conjugation

The lack of agreement can be observed in the use of the indefinite and definite verb conjugation paradigms present in the Hungarian language. Roughly speaking, the choice of verb conjugation depends on whether the sentence contains an intransitive or a transitive verb, and, in the case of a transitive verb, whether the object is considered definite or indefinite: a definite object requires definite verb conjugation. That said, it is worth noting that the categories of definite and indefinite are often blurry in Hungarian, and it is not always clear



why certain elements fall into one category or the other. The following examples differ from the standard conjugation pattern.

- a) (I7) Idén magyar-**t** tanul-**om** ...  
 this year Hungarian-Acc learn-DefObj.1Sg  
 standard Idén magyar-**t** tanul-**ok** ...  
 this year Hungarian-Acc learn-IndefObj.1Sg  
 ‘This year, I am learning Hungarian.’
- b) (I4) nagy házakban tölt-ött-**ünk a** nyaralás-unk-**at**  
 in large houses spend-Past-IndefObj.1Pl vacation-Poss.1Pl  
 standard nagy házakban tölt-ött-**ük a** nyaralás-unk-**at**  
 in large houses spend-Past-DefObj.1Pl vacation-Poss.1Pl  
 ‘We spent our vacation in large houses.’
- c) (I5) éjjel kétkor irodájába men-**te**  
 in the morning at 2 office-Poss.3Sg-Ill go-Past-DefObj.3Sg  
 standard éjjel kettőkor az irodájába men-**t**  
 in the morning at 2 office-Poss.3Sg-Ill go-Past-IndefObj.3Sg  
 ‘At 2 in the morning, he/she went to his office.’

Babarczy (cited in Lukács et al. 2014: 494) examined the language use of typically developing monolingual Hungarian children (ages 1;8 to 2;10) and identified numerous agreement patterns different from the standard, related to definiteness. She found that children, by default, use the indefinite verb conjugation form even with definite objects. Studies on children’s language acquisition support the claim that children who have been regularly and frequently exposed to two languages from birth and who actively speak both show no differences from monolingual children in terms of the general course of language development. Global similarities between bilingual and monolingual children extend to the timing of key milestones in language acquisition and the overall chronology of their developmental progress (De Houwer 2022). So we might expect similar patterns among heritage language learners (see example b). However, there are also cases of the opposite, where definite conjugation occurs with an indefinite object (example a). In the most intriguing cases, seen in example c, the sentence lacks

an object, yet the verb still takes definite conjugation. In Hungarian, the semantic definiteness of the object often (though not always) aligns with grammatical definiteness, which facilitates agreement (e.g., for learners of Hungarian as a foreign language). For instance, definiteness is clear when the object is accompanied by a definite article or a possessive suffix. Example c has a definite-article-marked adjunct next to the verb (*az irodájába* ‘to his office’), which, however, is not an object but an adverb. This example suggests that the definite–indefinite categories may not apply to the object of the sentence but instead extend to another sentence element, which might explain the conjugation difference between the standard and the contact variety.

### 5. Agreement between the subject and the predicate

The lack of number agreement between the subject and the predicate can be observed with both the general plural marker *-k* and the *-i* plural marker (used before possessive suffixes).

- a) (I6) Mindig szép **emlék-e-i-m** marad róla.  
 always beautiful *memory-Poss-Pl-1Sg remain-3Sg* of it  
 standard Mindig szép **emlék-e-i-m** marad-nak róla.  
 always beautiful *memory-Poss-Pl-1Sg remain-3Pl* of it  
 ‘I will always have beautiful memories of it.’
- b) (I4) Bizonyos *dolgok fontos voltak* neki is.  
 certain *thing-Pl important-Sg is-Past.3Pl* to her as well  
 standard Bizonyos *dolg-ok fontos-ak voltak* neki is.  
 certain *thing-Pl important-Pl is-Past.3Pl* to her as well  
 ‘Certain things were important to her as well.’

The peculiarity of example b is that the agreement between the subject and the predicate is only partially missing, as the nominal part of the predicate remains in the singular, while the verb, however, appears in the plural. This latter phenomenon could be a case of negative transfer from German, where in similar types of predicates, the nominal part remains in the singular alongside a plural verb, as adjectives in German do not have a plural form.

## 6. The agreement between the possessed noun and the possessor

In Hungarian, the possessor is marked on the possessed noun in the form of a possessive suffix. The following example illustrates a lack of agreement between the possessor and the possessed noun.

- (13) (ők) valójában az élet-**é-t** kockáztat-**ták** érte  
 (they) indeed *the live-Poss.3Sg-Acc risk-Past-DefObj.3Pl*  
 for it
- standard (ők) valójában az élet-**ük-et** kockáztat-**ták** érte  
 (they) indeed *the live-Poss.3Pl-Acc risk-Past-DefObj.3Pl*  
 for it
- ‘They were actually risking their lives for it.’

So, instead of receiving a third-person plural possessive marker, the possessed noun takes a third-person singular possessive marker. No examples of this phenomenon are found for first- and second-person possessors. The phenomenon of anti-agreement may pose a challenge in acquiring this structure. In third-person plural possessive constructions, the plural marker *-k* disappears from the possessive pronoun, meaning the correct structure in the above sentence would be: *ők* ‘they’ (poss. pronoun 3Pl) + *élet* ‘life’: *az ő életük* (‘their lives’).

However, if the possessor is a plural noun, the possessive marker referring to the possessor matches the third-person singular possessive marker. For example: *mindazok* ‘all those’ (pronoun Pl) + *élet* ‘life’: *mindazok élete* (‘the lives of all those’). The phenomenon seems to stem from a blending of these two structures.

## 7. Complements that differ from the standard usage

The topic of complements is closely related to syntax. Our observations and examples support the idea that dominant German complement structures are often transferred into Hungarian complement constructions as well.

- a) (17) ... nem fogod elhinni, mi történt **nekem** tegnap!  
 won’t believe what *happened I-Dat* yesterday

- standard ... nem fogod elhinni, mi történt **velem** tegnap!  
won't believe what *happened I-Ins* yesterday  
'... you won't believe what happened to me yesterday!'
- b) (I4) Nem minden szempont-**ban** szigorú volt  
not every *respect-Ine* strict was
- standard Nem minden szempont-**ból** volt szigorú  
not every *respect-Ela* strict was  
'(he/she) was not strict in every respect'
- c) (I4) Az egész nap-**on** aktívan tölt-**ött-ük** ...  
the whole *day-Sup* actively *spend-Past-DefObj.1Pl*
- standard Az egész nap-**ot** aktívan tölt-**ött-ük** ...  
the whole *day-Acc* actively *spend-Past-DefObj.1Pl*  
'we spent the whole day actively'

The complement structures in examples a and b show German interference; however, there are also complements that cannot be explained by interference (see c), even though they differ from standard Hungarian.

## 8. Individual word creations and strategies for creating missing linguistic forms ('smart mistakes')

Finally, we present morphological phenomena whose presence indicates a certain level of linguistic awareness. These word forms contain recognisable morpheme boundaries and morphemes, even though they do not necessarily fit together in a regular way and differ from standard forms. These can be referred to as 'smart mistakes'.

- a) (I3) *megtilt-ot-ja*  
standard *megtilt-ott-a*  
*forbid-Past-DefObj.3Sg*
- b) (I3) *meglep-ött-en*  
standard *meglep-ett-en*  
*surprise-Past.3Sg-AdvEnd*

In example a, the verb form mixes the third person singular, definite conjugation past tense with a present tense personal suffix.

In example b, although the adverb is formed according to the rule from the past participle, the participle itself is not derived from the correct verb stem (likely based on confusion between the verbs *meglep* ‘surprise’ and *meglepődik* ‘to be surprised’). These word forms illustrate how the creation of a missing lexical or morphological element involves a creative strategy that presupposes certain metalinguistic skills. This demonstrates how heritage learners actively construct forms to fill gaps in their linguistic knowledge.

## Summary

In our study, we examined the characteristic morphological and morphosyntactic phenomena of the heritage language of Hungarian university students living in Austria. Our research was qualitative in nature, analysing the written text productions of a total of eight students. While their linguistic competencies show significant heterogeneity, it is still possible to identify common, characteristic patterns in their language use. We found that certain linguistic phenomena are not attributable to interference but rather can be explained by drawing on findings from child language development. Since the language use of heritage speakers often exhibits phenomena linked to specific stages of childhood language acquisition, it can be assumed that the incomplete and interrupted language acquisition typical of heritage speakers creates difficulties in forming exceptional or more complex linguistic structures – particularly those that cannot be acquired through general rule-based learning. Consequently, analogically formed structures are often observed in exceptional word forms.

The novelty of the research lies in the creation of a dataset that identifies linguistic phenomena based on the analysis of linguistic data, which characterises the language use of the majority of heritage language learners. Such a study has not yet been conducted for the Hungarian language in Austria.

Since we are dealing with university students who are learning their heritage language within an institutional educational framework,

their presence in education justifies placing greater emphasis on their instruction and its methodology. In their case, traditional methods used in foreign language teaching do not always yield effective results. However, research into the language use of these students can provide insights that can serve as a basis for developing appropriate teaching materials and methods for formal instruction of the heritage language. The primary goal of heritage language education is the systematic development of heritage language competencies and the support of language maintenance.

Another important finding of the study is that the education of heritage language learners could specifically focus on supporting their metalinguistic skills and linguistic awareness. Further, more detailed investigations, incorporating linguistic biographies and individual language competencies, could aid in organising differentiated instruction within the aforementioned heterogeneous learner groups.

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## UNGARI PÄRANDKEEL AUSTRIA KÖRGHARIDUSSÜSTEEMIS – NOORTE TÄISKASVANUTE KIRJALIKU KEELEKASUTUSE MORFOLOOGILISED ISEÄRASUSED

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**Vötmesõnad:** kakskeelsus, pärandkeel, morfoloogia, keeleteadlikkus, ungari keele õpetamine

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