The Role of Hungarian Suffix Harmony in the Adaptation of Foreign Verbs

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0 Introduction

LOANWORD ADAPTATION refers to a process whereby the shape of a borrowed word is adjusted to the phonology of the receiving language. When it comes to Hungarian, an important aspect of loanword adaptation is vowel harmony, a widely investigated area of Hungarian phonology.

This study aims to (i) give a brief outline on Hungarian vowel harmony (ii) provide examples when backness harmony is violated by certain words of English and German origins (iii) present possible explanations to the problem introduced in 'ii'. (iv) present data collected by the author in relation to the topic (v) draw a conclusion based on relevant studies and the author's results.

1 Hungarian backness harmony

In order to understand what backness harmony (also known as palatal harmony) is about, we need to categorize Hungarian vowels. According to their phonetical categorization, vowels can be put into three groups. Based on the horizontal position of the tongue, we can talk about front (*i, í, ü, ű, e, é, ö, ő*), central (*á*) and back vowels (*u, ú, o, ó, a*). However, the distinction between central and back vowels is irrelevant to our topic: in terms of phonology *á* patterns with back vowels (e. g., *ágy+nak* **ágy+nek* 'bed- DAT')

Backness harmony means that vowels within a given domain agree in backness, and it is a phenomenon that occurs within the stem and also between the stem and the suffix(es). Some examples for morpheme-internal backness harmony would be: *ajtó:* B B 'door'*, ablak:* B B 'window', *esernyő:* F F F 'umbrella' or *üveg:* F F 'glass'. Harmonizing suffixes are exemplified by forms such as*: ember+nek:* F F F 'to a person'*, barát+nak:* B B B 'to a friend'.

One may notice that a relatively large part of the Hungarian word stock consists of words that have a stem in which both front and back vowels occur, this is called antiharmony (e.g.*, papír:* B F 'paper'*, citrom:* F B 'lemon'*, tányér*: B F 'plate'*)*. In most cases these stems are followed by a suffix that contains a back vowel. To understand the reason for that, the concept of transparency should be introduced.

Transparency is a feature of a stem vowel that becomes apparent when a derivational or an inflectional suffix is attached to an antiharmonic stem. One group of front vowels (*i, í, e, é*) are called transparent (also known as neutral) because in words like *tányér+nak* ('plate-DAT') or *papír+nak* (*'*paper-DAT'), in terms of phonology, they behave as if they were invisible,

so the suffix actually harmonises with the back vowel of the stem. The behaviour of *e* varies depending on the word, so its transparent nature is not obvious. (I only include transparency for the sake of illustrating the basics of vowel harmony. The above examples are not directly relevant to the present study, because it is only concerned with monosyllabic borrowings.)

One crucial condition of antiharmony (whether inter- or intra-morphemic) is that the stem needs to contain a transparent vowel. We have already mentioned stem-internal instances (*tányér, papír*) however, it can occur inter-morphemically as well. In such examples, there is a monosyllabic stem that contains a transparent vowel, while the suffix attached to that has a back vowel, thereby violating backness harmony (e. g., *ír+ok* 'I write'*, fi+am* 'my son'*, izm+ok* 'muscles').

2 Monosyllabic verbs of foreign origin and their phonological adaptation: *csekkol*-type verbs

In most cases, verbs of German or English origin are adapted into Hungarian by adding the derivational suffix *-ol* or *-el* to the stem (*e. g., web+el* 'to browse'*, cset+el* 'to chat')

This study will specifically deal with those words that (i) only have one syllable (ii) have a transparent vowel in their stem (*i, í, e, é*) (iii) come from English or German (iv) take the *-ol/ -el* suffix. (henceforth -@l)

Despite the fact that -@l is a harmonising suffix, recent borrowings sometimes seem to disobey Hungarian backness harmony, thus forming antiharmonic words (*-öl* is also another allomorph of the same suffix but its appearance is conditioned by round harmony rather than by backness harmony alone, so it is excluded from further discussion). Such phonologically unexpected examples include: *csekkol* 'to check'*, szévol* 'to save' or *lejmol* 'to cadge'.

3 Possible explanations for borrowings violating palatal harmony

This study aims to provide two possible explanations for the aforementioned unexpected behaviour of such borrowings. One of them is introduced by Ádám Nádasdy and has to do with the free or bound nature of the stem, while Zsuzsa Kertész' paper connects the process to syllable weight.

Nádasdy (1989) categorizes the borrowings into two groups based on whether their stem is free or bound. A free stem is one that does not need any suffix to make sense, thus it can be used by itself as well, and it is still considered a full world. (e. g., *sminkel 'to put on make-up', bridzsel* 'to play bridge'*, csetel* 'to chat'). In contrast, if the stem is bound, the derivational suffix *-@l* needs to be added to create a meaningful word (e. g., *csekkol*).

According to his explanation to the previously introduced problem: when the stem is free, it will invariably harmonize with the suffix attached to that (e. g., *csetel, webel*). However, when the stem is bound, harmony is unpredictable, so both harmonic and antiharmonic examples are represented (e. g., *csekkol, hekkel* 'to hack').

He also suggests that most of these examples are only used in a familiar or intimate environment, thus they do not appear in academic or formal contexts. English examples are mainly borrowed from IT terminology or slang, while German items mainly belong to the active vocabulary of well-educated speakers.

Kertész in her study makes an attempt to point out the correspondence between syllable weight and the violation of backness harmony in recent borrowings. She puts her examples into three groups, which are the following: 1. words that disobey vowel harmony (*csekkol, szévol*) 2. elements of the harmonising type with a heavy root-syllable (*hekkel, reppel* 'to rap') 3. harmonising elements with a light syllable in the stem (*csetel, netel*).

In order to understand the connection between syllable weight and harmony. The concept of heavy and light syllable should be defined. A Hungarian syllable is considered light if (i) it contains a short vowel (non-branching nucleus) and no coda consonant. Any other conditions (long vowel in the nucleus, consonants in the coda or both) result in a heavy syllable.

According to a phonological constraint, namely the HEAVY SYLLABLE REQUIREMENT, recent borrowings of German and English became nativised in a way that prefers heavy syllables over light ones (Nádasdy 1989; Siptár 1994). This means the gemination of the last single consonant of the stem, thus a heavy syllable is created (e. g*., rap, crack* and *tick* will be *repp+el, krekk+el* and *tikk+el*). The reason why this is relevant to this study is because the number of examples having a light syllable in their stems is relatively low compared to those with a heavy one, as a consequence of this requirement.

The conclusion she draws, is the following: a) whenever the stem contains a light syllable the suffix will harmonise with that (e.g., *csetel, netel*) and b) the phonological behaviour of borrowings with a heavy syllable is ambiguous, therefore forms like *csekkol* and *reppel* both occur.

4 My research and results

The purpose of my investigation was to combine the two aforementioned accounts and make an attempt at drawing a conclusion that (at least partially) provides an explanation for the unexpected behaviour of recent loanwords.

I categorized the borrowings into six groups depending on whether they have a free/bound stem and their first syllable is heavy/light. Examples for each group included in the chart below:

	Harmonic		**Antiharmonic**	
	Heavy syllable	**Light Syllable**	**Heavy Syllable**	**Light Syllable**
Bound stem	*printel* 'to print'	*regel* 'to register'	*csekkol* 'to check'	-
Free Stem	*mixel* 'to mix'	*csetel* 'to chat'	*klikkol* 'to click'	-

List of further examples, according to the previously introduced categorization:

Harmonic, bound stem, heavy syllable: *bekkel, bliccel, blídel/ol, crindzsel, csekkel/ol, csencsel, dinsztel, drinkel, flessel, flexel, fércel, fídel/ol, kempel, kreppel, kressel, printel, renkel/ol, risztel, rédzsel, spriccel/ol, spékel, stimmel/ol, szkennel, szével/ol, tikkel, trécsel, twerkel,*

Harmonic, free stem, heavy syllable: *bridzsel, cinkel, csillel, csítel, denszel, driftel, gengel, glettel, heccel, hekkel, helpel, klikkel/ol, krekkel, meccsel, mixel, peccsel, prenkel, reppel, seftel, sprintel, szkippel, szkrínel, szteppel, sztrímel, szídel, tviccsel*

Harmonic, bound stem, light syllable: *regel, tegel*

Harmonic, free stem, light syllable: *csetel, netel, sznepel, szpemel, webel,*

Antiharmonic, bound stem, heavy syllable: *blídol/el, csekkol/el, dekkol, díbol, fídol/el, lejmol, lejsztol, lébol, rejszol, renkol/el, slisszol/el, spriccol/el, stimmol/el, szévol/el, síbol, trejbol, vikszol,*

Antiharmonic, free stem, heavy syllable: *klikkol/el*

As can be seen each harmonising group has members regardless of stem and syllable type. However, a relatively low number of examples are included with light syllables, especially in the case of bound stems. It is arguably due to the consistent final-gemination of borrowings (mentioned above).

As far as antiharmonic words are concerned, with one exception (%*klikkol* 'to click') all the collected examples belong to the same group, having bound stem and heavy syllable. I found no examples that are antiharmonic and have a light syllable, regardless of stem type (**csetol*, **regol*).

5 Conclusion

The aim of my study was to test Nádasdy's and Kertész' claims about the violation of backness harmony in recent borrowings.

Based on collected data, only *klikkol* violates the constraint Nádasdy claimed to be the reason for antiharmony (however its usage is only considered to be valid by a relatively small portion of speakers). As for Kertész' idea, I found no exception to the constraint that has to do with syllable weight, thus stems with light syllables invariably obey backness harmony, while the behaviour of heavy syllables is not predictable in this sense. In addition, the free or bound nature of the stem found in certain borrowings such as *csekkol* or *prenkel* ('to prank') depends on the speaker. It might be used as a verb by adding the -@l suffix to the stem, and also without it as a noun (*Anyukámat megint megprenkelték.* 'My mother was pranked again.', *Vicces volt ez a prenk* 'This prank was funny.'). If that is the case, a couple of other loanwords also violate the Nádasdy-constraint.

I want to abstain from drawing a conclusion based on my intuitions, but because of the aforementioned reasons, Kertész' explanation seems to be more appropriate. The fact that older speakers tend to geminate the single consonant at the end of the stem, even in cases, where it would not be necessary to do so (e.g., *%nettel, %webbel*) is also an indication that antiharmony in loanwords has to do with syllable weight rather than the category of the stem, because germination in these cases never changes the chosen suffix allomorph (**webbol*).

However, further research is needed for making generalizations: partly because the list of examples is not exhaustive, and also because most of these words belong to a specific vocabulary, so they are not used in colloquial speech regularly.

It is important to mention that the we cannot define the concept of a loanword. There is no definite period of time after which a borrowing loses its foreign nature. A borrowing's loanword status is only a lexical feature, a label that speakers put on them in their mental lexicons, and this only means that they should not be treated as other elements of the word stock.

References

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