On (the lack of) dative causers in Hungarian

1. Non-selected dative causers have been reported to exist in a number of languages, including Albanian, German, Greek, Polish, Slovenian, and Spanish (see, a.o., Cuervo 2003, Rivero 2004, Kallulli 2006, and Schäfer 2008). These datives cross-linguistically have the same properties: (i) they must refer to humans (ii) who act unintentionally or unintendedly, and (iii) they are only licensed in change-of-state contexts in the absence of a (nominative) external argument, i.e. by anticausative or by non-alternating unaccusative predicates.

Existing accounts share the assumption that the *unintentional causer* reading of these datives essentially arises in full at a postsyntactic interface level, and they differ in what role they assign to the construction in constraining this interpretation. In particular, *causative semantics* may be licensed by the presence of a causatively interpreted eventive light verbal head (vP\textsuperscript{CAUS}), to which the dative is added as the specifier of an applicative phrase (cf. esp. Schäfer 2008, and also Cuervo 2003); or by the presence of a [+cause] feature in the head of the vP, which then can take the dative causer as its specifier in the lack of an external argument (cf. Kallulli 2006). In contrast, Rivero (2004) assumes (following Reinhart 1996 and subsequent work) that anticausatives involve no syntactically represented causative layer, and therefore the causative interpretation of dative causers is only an “inferential option”.

What has received relatively little attention is the fact that there is cross-linguistic variation in the licensing of dative causers, exceptions being Rivero (2004) and Schäfer (2008). Schäfer (2008) shows that only unmarked anticausatives allow for dative causers in German but *sich*-marked anticausatives do not, a fact which he derives from the presence of a (vacuous) Voice projection in the latter case (see op. cited for details). Rivero (2004) points out that Rumanian and Bulgarian speakers find the causer reading of non-selected datives difficult to obtain.

2. In this talk, I discuss novel Hungarian data and argue for the following two claims. First, Hungarian, despite being a language that applies dative case across the board (possessors, experiencers, affected datives, ethical datives), has no true dative causers. Or to be more precise, it does not have the sort of anticausative dative causers that are known from the literature. It does have, however, a predicative and presuppositional dative causer type which is licensed by any predicate. Second, the reason why no run-of-the-mill dative causers are licensed is that anticausatives do not have a causally interpreted syntactic layer of decomposition in Hungarian (in line with the general approach of Reinhart 1996, cf. also Rivero 2004). In contrast, languages that license dative causers in anticausative structures do have such a layer (as in Cuervo 2003 and Schäfer 2008).

3. Schäfer (2008), based on work by Ganenkov et al. (2008), points out that dative causers can actually have three distinguishable readings (1). He also points out that corresponding transitive structures (2) have only one of these readings, the regular unintentional causer reading (Reading A). Making a stronger interpretation of this fact than what Schäfer (2008) seems to embrace, I will claim that what we are dealing with is not a case of polysemy, but a true, grammatically relevant ambiguity between Reading A and Readings B-C.

The Hungarian facts are that Reading A is normally very difficult to get (in sharp contrast with German). In fact, I will show this reading is ungrammatical, and (3) serves to illustrate this point. As both Kallulli (2006) and Schäfer (2008) point out, the unintentional causer reading is blocked in the presence of another oblique-cause (*a from*-PP), and the dative can only be interpreted as an affected participant. In (3), the presence or absence of the *from*-PP does not affect the interpretation of the dative: it can only be construed as a negatively affected participant.
Alternatively, (3) without the from-PP also licenses Readings B-C (which are pragmatically less likely). Elsewhere, the default causer reading for datives is Reading C in Hungarian. Unlike true unintentional dative causes, B- and C-type dative causes are not restricted to anticausative contexts, but they are licensed by any predicate. (4) is a transitive construction to illustrate. Another property that sets these datives apart from A-type dative causes is that these are presuppositional (cf. 5, where the dative has a presupposition akin to that of the verb manage).

4. Accordingly, I argue that B- and C-type dative causes are predicative, and need no special syntactic licensing. A-type dative are not predicative (neither are they presuppositional), and they need syntactic licensing. Such licensing is not available in Hungarian, because there is no causatively interpreted syntactic layer of decomposition (i.e., there is no vP_{CAUS}). This is a claim that needs independent substantiation, which I show to be available. I will argue that anticausative from-causes are also predicative in Hungarian (cf. 3), and therefore they do not necessarily require the presence of vP_{CAUS} to be licensed. Evidence for this comes from stative constructions, where from-causes are grammatical in Hungarian, suggesting that their causativity does not come directly from a syntactic source.

(1)  ... als dem Mädchen die Tür (dann doch noch) aufging
    when the.DAT girl the door then after all open.went
    Reading A: ‘The girl accidentally opened the door (because she pushed it with her elbow
    while playing with her toys on the floor).’
    Reading B: ‘(The mother told the girl to hold the door so that the wind could not open it,
    but her efforts were not enough.) The girl accidentally opened the door/let the door open.’
    Reading C: ‘(All children tried but no one could open the tightly closed door, however it
    happened so.) The girl managed to open the door.’

(2)  Das Mädchen hat (versehentlich) die Tür aufgemacht
    the.NOM girl has unintentionally the.ACC door opened
    ‘The girl accidentally opened the door.’ <Reading A:√, Reading B:* , Reading C:*>

(3)  Kati-nak be-sárg-ul-t-ak az ing-ek (a mosópor-tól).
    Kate-DAT in-yellow-NONACT-PAST-3PL the shirt-PL.NOM the washing.powder-from
    ‘The shirts got yellow from the washing-powder and it affected Kate negatively.’

(4)  Nek-em meg-esz-ik a leves-t a gyerek-ek.
    DAT-1SG particle-eat-3PL the soup-ACC the child-PL.NOM
    ‘I (can) manage to get the children to eat the soup.’

(5)  Nek-em nem dolgoz-nak a munkás-ok.
    DAT-1SG not work-3 PL the worker-3 PL.NOM
    ‘I don’t manage to get the workers to work.’

References