

Schrödinger's morpheme boundaries

Both in Hungarian and Estonian, word-final vowels were dropped in several cases historically. Thus, the original stem-final vowels were lost in the non-suffixed singular nominative form, but remained before the suffixes. As a consequence, an unpredictable vowel appears between the stem present in nominative singular and the suffix present in all other forms in the same slot of the paradigm, even after stems ending in a vowel. Table 1 presents examples of nominative singular forms ending in a consonant and the nominative plural forms of the same words. The beginnings of the latter forms are always identical with the former forms, and they always end in the same way (Estonian, *-d*, Hungarian *-k*; the very same suffixes occur after stems ending in a vowel: Estonian *kana* 'hen': *kana-d* 'hen-PL', Hungarian *kapu* 'gate' : *kapu-k* 'gates'). However, between the two sequences, there is always a short vowel the quality of which is unpredictable based on the phoneme structure of the stem.

The unpredictability of the vowel quality does not mean that any vowel can occur in the intermediate position. In Estonian, any vowel which occurs in non-initial syllables can occur in that position. However, if the stem ends in a palatalized consonant (or a cluster containing a palatalized consonant), the vowel will always be *i*. In Hungarian, the vowel is never high, and due to vowel harmony, *a* and *o* never occur after front rounded vowels, *ö* and *e* never occur after back vowels, and *ö* never occurs after unrounded front vowels either.

The same vowels occur in the same positions in many other forms of the paradigm. In Estonian, they are present in all or in the great majority of the singular oblique case forms and also before the *-de-* plural marker in the plural oblique case forms. In Hungarian, they are usually present in the singular accusative form, and in the 1SG, 2SG, 2PL possessive forms. In both languages, they are also present in some derived forms.

However, there is a great difference between the traditional analysis of these forms. In Estonian, the vowel is analyzed as the part of the stem, while in Hungarian as the part of the suffix. However, there are arguments for both kinds of analysis in both languages.

In the presentation such arguments will be demonstrated. Nonetheless, I will argue that neither analysis is appropriate and both derive from the desire for seeing Estonian/Hungarian morphology as concatenative. In the favour of preserving the possibility of such an analysis, grammars try to limit the assumption of non-concatenative strategies to some special cases (in Estonian, supposing a non-concatenatively generated stem form to which suffixes are added concatenatively; in Hungarian, morphologically marked lexemes requiring different subsets of suffix allomorphs to be attached to them concatenatively). These kinds of analyses just serve to conceal the fact that morpheme boundaries cannot be univocally delimited. Any systematicity in morphology should be seen rather as systematic differences between the forms of the paradigm rather than a result of putting morphemes after each other in a particular order.

Estonian			Hungarian		
singular	plural	meaning	singular	plural	meaning
<i>vaar</i>	<i>vaar-i-d</i>	‘old man’	<i>vár</i>	<i>vár-a-k</i>	‘castle’
<i>kaal</i>	<i>kaal-u-d</i>	‘weight’	<i>kár</i>	<i>kár-o-k</i>	‘damage’
<i>kaar</i>	<i>kaar-e-d</i>	‘curve’	<i>óz</i>	<i>óz-e-k</i>	‘roe’
<i>jaam</i>	<i>jaam-a-d</i>	‘station’	<i>gőz</i>	<i>gőz-ö-k</i>	‘steam’
<i>raam</i>	<i>raam-i-d</i>	‘frame’	<i>hír</i>	<i>hír-e-k</i>	‘news, fame’
<i>paar</i>	<i>paar-i-d</i>	‘pair, couple’	<i>sír</i>	<i>sír-o-k</i>	‘grave’
<i>saar</i>	<i>saar-e-d</i>	‘island’	<i>íj</i>	<i>íj-a-k</i>	‘bow’

Table 1. Singular and plural nominative forms of some consonant final stems in Estonian and in Hungarian

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