

2nd edition

Hungarian

An Essential Grammar

Carol H. Rounds



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Hungarian

An Essential Grammar

2nd edition

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Carol H. Rounds lectures in Hungarian at Columbia University, New York.

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Hungarian

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Preface

This book is designed for all students of Hungarian – but perhaps especially for those who have been told it is too hard to learn. College students, business men and women, people of Hungarian heritage or spouses of Hungarians can use this book as an anchor in their quest to master the intricacies of Hungarian.

The Hungarian language is complex, wonderfully expressive, and like no other language you know. This book guides you through the patterns of building words, phrases and sentences with clear explanations, paradigms, and examples. What at first seems unusual to the Hungarian student becomes a regular and predictable – and therefore a *learnable* – pattern used to inspire your own Hungarian expression. Have fun with it!

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Second edition

Special thanks to all the students, linguists, readers, and scholars-at-large who have written me with their highly detailed comments on the first edition. This current edition has benefited greatly from your thoughtful observations and recommendations.

Abbreviations

abl.	ablative
acc.	accusative
adess.	adessive
all.	allative
caus.-fin.	causal-final
comp.	comparative
dat.	dative
delat.	delative
def.	definite
distr.	distributive
elat.	elative
ess.-for.	essive-formal
illat.	illative
indef.	indefinite
iness.	inessive
instr.	instrumental
intrans.	intransitive
lit.	literal(ly)
nom.	nominative
part.	participle
pl.	plural
pl1	first person plural
pl2	second person plural
pl3	third person plural
poss.	possessive
pres.	present
px	possessive
relat.	relative
s1	first person singular
s2	second person singular

s3	third person singular
sg.	singular
sociat.	sociative
sublat.	sublative
sup./superess.	superessive
superl.	superlative
sy	somebody
temp.	temporal
term.	terminative
trans.	translative
zool.	zoological

Abbreviations



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PART I

Alphabet, pronunciation and vowel harmony



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Alphabet

Hungarian uses the Roman alphabet in addition to some diacritics placed over some vowels. The diacritics resembling accent marks above the vowels indicate that the vowel is ‘long’ – see the pronunciation section to follow. Some consonants are digraphs, i.e., they consist of two letters; one consonant (dzs) is a trigraph. Although they are written with more than one letter, the digraphs and trigraph are each individual letters of the alphabet.

a á b c cs d dz dzs e é f g gy h i í j k l ly m n

ny o ó ö ő p (q) r s sz t ty u ú ü ű v (w) (x) (y) z zs

Unless found in the spellings of foreign words and a few Hungarian names, the letters *q*, *w*, and *x* are not used; the letter *y* is found only in old spellings (pronounced as the letter *i*) and in digraphs.

Pronunciation

2.1 Consonants

2.1.1

Many of the consonants in Hungarian are pronounced as in English. All consonants are pronounced – there are no silent letters. The following are those consonants pronounced differently than in English; their pronunciation equivalents are given in the International Phonetic Alphabet.

c	[ts]	as in <i>cats</i>	cukor sugar ecet vinegar
cs	[tʃ]	as in <i>church</i>	csal deceive bocsánat excuse me
dzs	[dʒ]	as in <i>jury</i>	dzsem jam dzsessz jazz
g	[g]	(always hard) as in <i>go</i>	gaz weed igen yes
j	[j]	as in <i>yes</i>	jó good fáj hurt
r	[r]	trill the tongue on the top of the mouth	ró carve kérem please
s	[ʃ]	as in <i>she</i>	sárga yellow este evening
sz	[s]	as in <i>sat</i>	szervusz hi asztal table
zs	[ʒ]	as in <i>azure</i>	zseb pocket garázs garage

2.1.2 The palatal series

The following four consonants are palatalized, i.e., they are pronounced with the tongue gliding off the top of the palate.

gy	[j]	similar to a <i>dy</i> sound as in <i>during</i>	gyár factory magyar Hungarian
ly	[j]	as in yes (thus the same as the Hungarian letter <i>j</i>)	lyuk hole személy person
ny	[ɲ]	as in canyon	nyár summer kenyér bread
ty	[c]	similar to a <i>ty</i> sound as in <i>studio</i>	tyúk hen kártya card

2.2 Consonant length

All consonants can be long or short. Long consonants are written as double consonants and are pronounced approximately twice as long as short ones. Great care should be paid to differences in length as this can change the meaning of a word, e.g.,

szeretem I love him/her. vs. **szerettem** I loved him/her.

Length of digraphs is indicated by doubling the first consonant of the digraph. For example, a long **sz** is written **ssz**: **vissza** ‘back’; long **ny** is written **nny**: **lánnyal** ‘with a girl’, etc.

2.2.1 Lengthening of consonants before *j*

The consonants **d**, **gy**, **t**, **ty**, **n**, **ny** are pronounced long when preceding the letter *j* (though this is not represented in the orthography):

ad + ja	→ adja	[ɔj:ɔ]	s/he gives it
hagy + ja	→ hagyja	[hɔj:ɔ]	s/he leaves it
mutat + ja	→ mutatja	[mutɔc:ɔ]	s/he shows it
báty + ja	→ bátyja	[ba:c:ɔ]	his/her brother
kíván + juk	→ kívánjuk	[ki:va:ɲ:uk]	we wish it
any + ja	→ anyja	[ɔɲ:ɔ]	his/her mother

The consonant **l** may be included here with one deviation from the pattern. In an **lj** cluster, the **l** assimilates to the **j**, resulting in a pronunciation of long **jj**.

tanul + ja	→ tanulja	[tɔnuj:ɔ]	s/he studies it
énekel + junk	→ énekeljünk	[e:nɛkɛj:yɲk]	let's sing

2.3 Voicing and devoicing of consonants

Consonants can be classified as voiced and unvoiced. Moreover, nine voiced/unvoiced consonant pairs can be determined where the main difference in pronunciation is one of voice, i.e., the place of articulation in the mouth remains largely the same, for example (unvoiced) **p** and (voiced) **b**. With few exceptions,¹ it is the consonants of these voiced/unvoiced pairings that affect and are affected by voice assimilation rules.

Consonants

Unvoiced p t k f sz s c cs ty h

Voiced b d g v z zs dz dzs gy j l ly m n ny r

2.3.1 Voicing of unvoiced consonants

Unvoiced consonants (except **h**) become voiced when followed by voiced consonants (except **j, l, ly, m, n, ny, r, v**). Some examples:

Unvoiced	Voiced	Examples	
p	→ b	népdal [ne:bdɔl]	folk song
t	→ d	kertben [kɛrdbɛn]	in the garden
k	→ g	lakbér [lɔgbe:r]	rent
s	→ zs	kisgyerek [kiʒɟɛɾɛk]	(small) child
c	→ dz	ketrecbe [kɛtrɛdzbɛ]	into the cage
cs	→ dzs	bográcsgulyás [bogra:dʒɟuɟa:ʃ]	kettle goulash
sz	→ z	részben [re:zbɛn]	in part
f	→ v	zsiráfból [ʒira:vbo:l]	from (a) giraffe

2.3.2 Devoicing of voiced consonants

Voiced consonants (except **j, l, ly, m, n, ny, r**) are devoiced when followed by unvoiced consonants. Some examples:

¹ The consonant **v** does not cause voicing of a preceding consonant, though it can be devoiced. The consonant **h** does not have a voiced pair, and although it can cause devoicing of a preceding consonant, it cannot become voiced.

<i>Voiced</i>		<i>Unvoiced</i>	<i>Examples</i>	
b	→	p	zsebkendő [ʒɛpkɛndø:]	handkerchief
d	→	t	tudtok [tut:ok]	you (pl.) know
g	→	k	megszeret [mɛksɛɾɛt]	(start to) like/love
v	→	f	nyelvtan [ɲɛlftɔn]	grammar
z	→	sz	dolgoztok [dɔlgostok]	you (pl.) work
zs	→	s	varázspálca [vɔra:ʃpa:lɔ]	magic wand
gy	→	ty	nagyterem [nɔctɛɾɛm]	main hall
dz	→	c	edztek [ɛctɛk]	you (pl.) train
dzs	→	cs	bridzstől [britʃtø:l]	from bridge

2.4 Assimilation of sibilants

Hissing sibilants (*sz*, *z*) when followed by hushing sibilants (*s*, *zs*) become hushing sibilants (the above voicing and devoicing rules also apply where the phonetic environment dictates).

<i>Hissing</i>		<i>Hushing</i>		<i>Becomes</i>	<i>Examples</i>
sz	+	s		ss (long s)	egészség [ɛgɛ:ʃ:e:g] health
z	+	s		ss	igazság [igɔ:ʃ:a:g] truth
sz	+	zs		zzs (long zs)	horgászsinór [horga:ʒ:ino:r] fishing line
z	+	zs		zzs	tíz zsinór [ti:ʒ:ino:r] ten lines

2.5 Vowels

Vowels can also be either long or short. Length in the vowels is marked by long marks over the vowel and long vowels are pronounced approximately twice as long as short ones. For two sets of vowel pairs, *a* ~ *á* and *e* ~ *é*, there is a difference not only in length but of quality in the vowel as well. For all other vowel pairs the difference between them is primarily of length.

Hungarian has no diphthongs, i.e., each vowel is pronounced separately.

a	[ɔ]	aw as in awl	nap day
á	[a:]	with your tongue toward the front of the mouth, say aah	ár price
e	[ɛ]	a sound between the a in bat and the e in bet	reggel morning
é	[e:]	ay as in say, but without the y-sound (diphthong) at the end	kérem please
i	[i]	e as in he	mi what
í	[i:]	a longer version of the above, as the ee in green	tíz ten
o	[o]	oh as in note	kívánok I wish
ó	[o:]	a longer version of the above	jó good
ö	[ø]	purse your lips as though to say oh but say eh	köszönöm thank you
ő	[ø:]	a longer version of the above	fő main
u	[u]	oo as in food	tud know
ú	[u:]	a longer version of the above	út road
ü	[y]	purse your lips as though to say oo but say ee	üveg bottle
ű	[y:]	a longer version of the above	egyszerű simple

2.6 Stress

The first syllable of every word is stressed.

Unless otherwise emphasized, the articles **a**, **az**, **egy**, and the particle **is** receive no stress. Thus in the following phrase, the only stressed element is the first syllable of **kutya**:

a *kutya* is the dog too

2.7 Intonation

2.7.1

Hungarian declarative sentences have a primarily descending intonation:

Szép idő van.

The weather is beautiful.

2.7.2

A question containing a question word has a higher rise on the question word:

Milyen idő van?

What is the weather like?

2.7.3

A yes–no question has a rise–fall intonation where a high rise in intonation is found on the penultimate syllable of the sentence; a sharp fall is on the last syllable.

Szép idő van?

Is the weather nice?

(Note here that intonation may be the only way to differentiate between declarative and interrogative sentences.)

In yes–no questions with fewer than three syllables, the rise in intonation takes place on the final syllable followed by an immediate drop:

Ez az?

Is this it?

Kedves?

Is she nice?

Vowel harmony

Hungarian vowels are classified according to front vs. back assonance and rounded vs. unrounded. These terms come from describing the tongue position in the mouth and the roundedness of the lips, respectively. The following is the vowel inventory of Hungarian:

Back vowels: **a, á, o, ó, u, ú**

Front unrounded vowels: **e, é, i, í**

Front rounded vowels: **ö, ő, ü, ú**

Vowel harmony rules in Hungarian require that front or back assonance in the vowels of a stem be maintained throughout the entire word, thus for the most part – except for recent loan words – Hungarian words have either only back vowels in them or only front vowels.

3.1 Suffixing and back vs. front vowels

Because vowel assonance is maintained throughout the whole word, most suffixes have front and back vowel variants, e.g., the dative case **-nak** (back vowel) and **-nek** (front vowel). Thus, if a stem contains back vowels, it takes back vowel suffixes; should the word contain only front vowels it can take only front vowel suffixes.

lány girl

lányn**ak** to a girl

nő woman

nőn**ek** to a woman

3.2 Suffixing and rounded vs. unrounded vowels

When words contain only front vowels, a second distinction in vowel type may be necessary. The rounded/unrounded distinction in the word's *last*

vowel requires a second stage in vowel harmony rules: if the vowel of the word's *last* syllable is front and rounded, it takes a front rounded suffix.¹ Although most suffixes have only front/back vowel variants, a few endings have rounded/unrounded variants making the rounded/unrounded distinction necessary (examples include the allative case, **-hoz/-hez/-höz**, or the plural suffix, **-ok/-ek/-ök**).

ismerős acquaintance

ismerőshöz to (the home of) an acquaintance

bűn crime

bűnök crimes

If the stem's *last* vowel is front and unrounded, it takes a front unrounded suffix:

fűzet notebook

fűzetek notebooks

gyerek child

gyerekhez to (the home of) a child

3.3 Neutral vowels

The (inherently) front unrounded vowels, **i, í, e, and é**, may occur in stems containing either front or back vowels. As such they are considered neutral with respect to vowel harmony rules; a word containing back vowels and neutral vowels is considered a back vowel word. If *only* neutral vowels occur in a stem, however, the stem is considered to be of front vowel assonance and will require front vowel suffixes.²

3.4 Application of the rules of vowel harmony

The plural suffix offers a chance to see the full application of the rules of vowel harmony for it has both front and back variants as well as the rounded/unrounded distinction. The plural **k** can take the linking vowels **o** (back), **e** (front and unrounded), or **ö** (front and rounded).

¹ Thus determining front and back vowel harmony takes place at the level of the stem; determining round/unrounded harmony takes place at the level of adjacent syllables at the end of a word.

² This is particularly true for nouns although there are numerous exceptions; most verbs however, that contain *only* the vowel **i** or **í** have back vowel assonance. Compare: **szív** 'heart' is a noun with front vowel assonance and **szív** 'inhale' is a verb with back vowel assonance.

<i>Stem</i>		<i>Description of stem's vowels</i>	<i>Plural</i>
asztal	table	only back vowels	asztalok
gyerek	child	only neutral (front) vowels, last vowel unrounded	gyerekek
füzet	notebook	only front vowels, last vowel unrounded	füzetek
ismerős	acquaintance	only front vowels, last vowel rounded	ismerősök
papír	paper	back vowel with neutral vowel	papírok

PART II

Parts of speech



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Verbs

The Hungarian conjugation includes the past and present indicative, the subjunctive (also used for the imperative), and conditional moods. There is no inflectional passive mood or future tense; the passive is expressed by means of other constructions with no agency, the future is expressed by the use of verbal prefixes and/or the auxiliary verb **fog**.

Conjugation of verbs includes the suffixing of tense or mood and personal endings. The personal endings indicate the subject and may indicate the presence of a direct object (see section 4.2). With few exceptions, the rules of vowel harmony extend through the conjugations.

This chapter first illustrates the regular verb stem types of Hungarian followed by the conjugations and usage of the tenses and moods. The formation and usage of the non-finite forms (participles and the infinitive) as well as the highly productive verbal suffixes of modality (potential, causative, and frequentative) follow. For more on verbal derivational suffixes, see Chapter 12 on word formation. Section 4.6 details the irregular verb stems and what form they take for individual verbal suffixes.

Verbal prefixes, henceforth referred to as coverbs, cause a particular problem for students of Hungarian; the end of this chapter contains extensive descriptions of the common uses of the most frequently used coverbs. Although some reference is made in this chapter to the order of verbs and coverbs in the sections on usage, refer to Chapter 16 for a more complete explanation of Hungarian word order.

4.1 Verb stems

In general, Hungarian verb stems are identical with the third person singular present tense indefinite form. This is the citation form found in good dictionaries.

The shape of the verb stem determines in part the shape of the suffix which attaches to it. For most verbs, the verb stem remains the same throughout the conjugations. Some important exceptions are discussed in section 4.6.

4.1.1 -ik verbs

A very large group of verbs end in **-ik** in the third person singular present tense indefinite conjugation (and as such, appear as the citation form). The verb stem for **-ik** verbs is found by removing the **-ik** ending; the verbs then conjugate on the **-ik**-less stem. For example, the verb **utazik** ‘travel’ has the stem **utaz-** to which the verbal endings attach, e.g., **utazni** ‘to travel (*infinitive*)’.

In addition to the stem change, **-ik** verbs also display a regular alternation in the personal endings of some conjugations. In the present tense, the ending **-om/-em/-öm** may be used for the first person singular indefinite conjugation instead of the regular ending (**-ok/-ek/-ök**).¹ A similar alternation is found in the first person singular in the subjunctive and conditional paradigms as well, though in these conjugations the regular endings have all but replaced the now archaic **-ik** endings.

	-ik ending	~	regular ending
Present tense:	utazom	~	utazok I travel
Subjunctive:	utazzam	~	utazzak that I travel
Conditional:	utaznám	~	utaznék I would travel

In the subjunctive and conditional conjugations there is also a separate ending for **-ik** verbs in the indefinite conjugation for third person singular: **-ék**. This ending is also considered a more archaic form, and is rarely used in speech.

	-ik ending	~	regular ending
Subjunctive:	utazzék	~	utazzon that he/she travel
Conditional:	utaznék	~	utazna he/she would travel

4.2 Definite and indefinite conjugations

For each mood and tense, Hungarian verbs have two conjugations. Broadly stated, the **definite conjugation** is used if the sentence contains a definite direct object; the **indefinite conjugation** is used at all other times. Thus,

¹ Much variation is found in the use of the first person endings of **-ik** verbs; this is dependent not only on the idiolect of the speaker, but the verb as well – some verbs are prone to take the **-ik** verb endings, some to take the regular. However, the **-om/-em/-öm** endings are always correct, if not always colloquial.

in the translation of the sentences 'I see a house' and 'I see the house' the verb *lát* is conjugated differently because of the presence or absence of a definite direct object.

Látok egy házat.

I see a house.

Látom a házat.

I see the house.

4.2.1 Determining the definiteness of an object

Several factors go into determining whether a direct object is to be considered definite. If a direct object does not conform to one of the points below, or if there is no direct object in the sentence at all (overt or implied), the indefinite conjugation of the verb is used. A direct object is considered definite if:

- (a) it is preceded by the definite article *a* or *az*.

Látom a házat.

I see the house.

- (b) it is a demonstrative pronoun (*az* or *ez*, *azok* or *ezek*) or is modified by a demonstrative pronoun.²

Látom ezt/azt.

I see this/that.

Látom ezt/azt a házat.

I see this/that house.

The demonstrative pronouns are also frequently used cataphorically³ and as such they may be overt or implied. In either instance, they are still considered definite.

(Azt) látom, hogy esik az eső. I see that it is raining.

- (c) it has a possessive suffix.

Látom a házatat.

I see your house.

Látom a házát.

I see his/her house.

Since a possessed noun is almost always preceded by a definite article, this may also be considered a sub-class of (a). Although the definite article may be omitted in possessive constructions, any direct object with a possessive suffix is still considered definite. Note, also, that possessive and reflexive pronouns contain possessive suffixes and they are also considered definite.

Látom magma(at).

I see myself.

Mutasd meg a tiedet!

Show me yours!

² A contextually frequent, though semantically singular exception to this is found when the direct object *azt* has the meaning 'that kind of, such a'; in this case, the indefinite conjugation is used:

Azt kérek.

I would like that kind.

³ See section 7.9 for discussion of cataphoric pronouns.