

Hungarian

An Essential Grammar

Carol Rounds



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Hungarian

An Essential Grammar

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- Aspect and tense
- Word-formation mechanisms
- Linking vowels
- The case system and its uses
- Word order

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

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Carol Rounds



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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 and paradigms. What at first seems complex 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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Abbreviations

abl.	ablative
acc.	accusative
adess.	adessive
all.	allative
caus.-fin.	causal-final
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
relat.	relative
s1	first person singular
s2	second person singular
s3	third person singular
sg.	singular

Abbreviations

sociat.	sociative
sublat.	sublative
superess.	superessive
sy	somebody
term.	terminative
transl.	translative

PART I

Alphabet, pronunciation and vowel harmony

Chapter I

Alphabet

Hungarian uses the Roman alphabet in addition to some diacritics placed over some vowels. The accent mark(s) 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, digraphs (and the 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, 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.

Chapter 2

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 the consonants pronounced differently from those in English.

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

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 similar to a <i>dy</i> sound as in <i>during</i>	magyar ‘Hungarian’ gyár ‘factory’
---	---

ly as in yes (thus the same
as the Hungarian letter **j**)

ny as in canyon

ty similar to a *ty* sound
as in *studio*

személy ‘person’ **lyuk** ‘hole’

kenyér ‘bread’ **nyár** ‘summer’

kártya ‘card’ **tyúk** ‘hen’

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; it 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	[addja]	s/he gives it
hagy + ja	→ hagyja	[haddja]	s/he leaves it
mutat + ja	→ mutatja	[mutattja]	s/he shows it
báty + ja	→ bátyja	[báttja]	his/her brother
kíván + juk	→ kívánjuk	[kivánnjuk]	we wish it
any + ja	→ anyja	[annja]	his/her mother

2.3 Voicing and devoicing of consonants

Consonants can be classified as voiced and unvoiced. The following are the voiced and unvoiced consonants of Hungarian:

Unvoiced p t k f sz s c cs ty h

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

2.3.1 Voicing of unvoiced consonants

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

Unvoiced	Voiced	Examples	
p	→ b	népdal [nébdal]	folk song
t	→ d	kertben [kerdben]	in the garden
k	→ g	lakbér [lagbér]	rent
s	→ zs	kisgyerek [kizsgyerek]	(small) child
c	→ dz	ketrecbe [ketredzbe]	into the cage
cs	→ dzs	bográcsgulyás [bográdzsgulyás]	kettle goulash
sz	→ z	részben [rézben]	in part
f	→ v	kuglófban [kuglóvban]	in (a) cake

2.3.2 Devoicing of voiced consonants

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

Voiced	Unvoiced	Examples	
b	→ p	zsebkendő [zsepkendő]	handkerchief
d	→ t	tudtok [tuttok]	you (pl.) know
g	→ k	megszeret [mekszeret]	(start to) like/love
v	→ f	nyelvtan [nyelftan]	grammar
z	→ sz	dolgoztok [dolgosztok]	you (pl.) work
zs	→ s	varázspálca [varáspálca]	magic wand

dz	→ c	edztek [ectek]	you (pl.) train
dzs	→ cs	bridzstől [bricstől]	from bridge
gy	→ ty	nagyterem [natyterem]	main hall

Assimilation
of sibilants

2.4 Assimilation of sibilants

Hissing sibilants (**sz, z**) when preceding hushing sibilants (**s, zs**) become hushing sibilants (the above voicing and devoicing rules also apply if applicable).

<i>Hissing</i>	<i>Hushing</i>	<i>Becomes</i>	<i>Examples</i>	
sz	+ s	ss (long s)	egészség	[egésség] health
z	+ s	ss	igazság	[igasság] truth
sz	+ zs	zzs (long zs)	horgászzsinór	[horgázzsinór] fishing line
z	+ zs		tíz zsinór	[tízzsinór] 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	aw as in 'awl'	nap day
á	aa as in 'baa'	ár price
e	a sound between the a in 'bat' and the e in 'bet'	reggel morning
é	ay as in 'say', but without the y-sound (diphthong) at the end	kérem please

i	e as in 'he'	mi	what
í	a longer version of the above, as the ee in 'green'	tíz	ten
o	oh as in 'note'	kívánok	I wish
ó	a longer version of the above	jó	good
ö	purse your lips as though to say oh but say eh	köszönöm	thank you
ő	a longer version of the above	hétfő	Monday
u	oo as in 'food'	tud	know
ú	a longer version of the above	út	road
ü	purse your lips as though to say oo but say ee	üveg	bottle
ű	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?

Chapter 3

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, ű**

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 affixes back vowel suffixes; should the word contain only front vowels it can affix only front vowel suffixes.

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 *last* vowel requires a second stage in vowel harmony rules: if the stem's *last* vowel is front and rounded it takes a suffix with a front rounded vowel.

If the stem’s *last* vowel is front and unrounded, it takes a front unrounded suffix. Although suffixes for most words have front/back vowel variants only a few endings have rounded/unrounded variants (examples include the allative case, *-hoz/-hez/-höz*, or the plural suffix, *-ok/-ek/-ök*).

3.3 Neutral vowels

Finally, the 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.¹

3.4 Application of the rules of vowel harmony

To show how vowel harmony works, we will use the plural suffix, which has both front/back vowel harmony and the rounded/unrounded distinction. The plural ending is either *-ok* (back), *-ek* (front and unrounded), or *-ök* (front and rounded).

Stem		Description of stem	Plural
asztal	table	only back vowels	asztalok
gyerek	child	only neutral (front) vowels, last vowel unrounded	gyerekek
fűzet	notebook	only front vowels, last vowel unrounded	fűzetek
ismerős	acquaintance	only front vowels, last vowel rounded	ismerősök
papír	paper	back vowel with neutral vowel	papírok

¹ 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.

PART II

Parts of speech

Chapter 4

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 coverbs 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 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.

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 this section.

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.

regular ending ~ -ik 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 play piano

Conditional: **utaznék ~ utazna** he/she would play piano

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.

4.1.2 *Fleeting vowel stems*

Verb stems

In this large class of verb stems the last vowel is omitted when vowel-initial suffixes are added, yielding a stem-final consonant cluster. Although you cannot tell by its shape whether a verb is a fleeting vowel stem, a pattern emerges with familiarity. In all cases² the vowel which elides is *o/e/ö*; at least one of the consonants in the resulting cluster is always *j*, *l*, *ly*, *r*, *n*, *ny*, *m*, *z*, or *zs*.

The vowel is omitted only when the suffix attached begins with a vowel, thus there are no tri-consonantal clusters. Vowel-initial suffixes are found in the present and past tense conjugations as well as with present and past participles, and the noun-forming suffixes *-at/-et* and *-ás/-és*. The presence of a vowel-initial suffix does not always trigger vowel elision and, in fact, the absence of a consistent trigger is what makes this group of stems so irregular. Only the present participle *-ó/-ő* will consistently trigger the omission of the fleeting vowel.

mosolyog ~ mosolyg-

mosolyognak they smile **mosolyogtam** I smiled
mosolyogni to smile

mosolygok I smile **mosolygott** he/she smiled
mosolygó smiling (pres. part.)

érez ~ érz-

éreztem I felt (it) **érezzük** we feel it **érezni** to feel
érezem I feel it **érezitek** you (pl.) feel it **ézés** feeling

üdvözl ~ üdvözl-

üdvözölsz you (sg.) greet **üdvözöltek** they greeted (us)
üdvözölni to greet
üdvözlöm I greet him/her **üdvözlík** they greet him/her
üdvözet greeting

² With the one exception of *őriz* 'guard'.

4.1.3 v-stems

This is a small class of verbs whose third person singular form ends in a vowel, but requires a v-stem before suffixes beginning with a vowel.

The v-stem verbs are: **fő** cook **nő** grow **ró** carve
lő shoot **nyű** wear out **sző** weave

With the exception of **nyű**, the final vowel is shortened before the v: **ró**: **rov**- ‘carve’. The present tense paradigm illustrates the pattern of v-stem verbs:

sző ~ szöv	<i>indefinite</i>	<i>definite</i>	ró ~ rov	<i>indefinite</i>	<i>definite</i>
én	szövök	szövöm	rovok	rovom	
te	szósz	szövöd	rósz	rovod	
ő	sző	szövi	ró	rója	
mi	szövünk	szőjük	rovunk	rójuk	
ti	szőtök	szövitek	rótok	rójátok	
ők	szőnek	szövik	rónak	róják	

The following are the verb stems for the past, subjunctive and conditional as well as the non-finite verb forms for this class. (Note the deviation from the stem for the definite subjunctive **te** form.)

<i>past tense</i>	<i>subjunctive</i>		<i>conditional</i>	<i>present</i>	<i>infinitive</i>	<i>adverbial</i>
<i>stem</i>	<i>stem</i>	<i>s2def</i>	<i>stem</i>	<i>participle</i>		<i>participle</i>
főtt-	főj-	—	fő-	fövő	főni	főve
lőtt-	lőj-	lődd	lő-	lövő	lőni	lőve
nőtt-	nőj-	nődd	nő-	növő	nőni	nőve
nyűtt-	nyűj-	nyűdd	nyű-	nyűvő	nyűni	nyűve
rótt-	rój-	ródd	ró-	rovó	róni	róva
szőtt-	szőj-	sződd	sző-	szövő	szőni	szőve

4.1.4 -szik stems

Another class of verbs ends in **-szik** in the citation form. If a vowel precedes the **-szik** ending the verb conjugates normally. (Two exceptions are **esküszik** ‘swear’ and **alkuszik** ‘bargain’, to be discussed below.) If, however, a consonant precedes the **-szik** ending, the **-sz** of this ending alternates with other consonants throughout the verbal paradigm.³ The **-szik** verbs can be divided into four main groups, depending on which consonants **-sz-** alternates with.

(a) **sz ~ d ~ v**: This group include some very common verbs. There is considerable variation within this group; note in the following table the stem variants for the potential, causative and adverbial participles. The verbs **alszik** ‘sleep’ and **fekszik** ‘lie’ use the short form for the past tense, the rest of the verbs in this group use the long form.

The **sz ~ d ~ v** alternation is also found with five frequentative verbs having the present tense forms ending in **-kodik/-kedik** alternating with **-szik**. The present tense conjugation may occur in either stem variant; the other verb forms conform to the pattern established in the table for **cselekszik ~ cselekedik**.

cselekszik ~ cselekedik	do, act
dicsekszik ~ dicsekedik	boast
gyanakszik ~ gyanakodik	suspect
növekszik ~ növekedik	grow, increase
törekszik ~ törekedik	strive, try

(b) **sz ~ d**: This alternation is found in a number of verbs including:

dulakszik ~ dulakodik	grapple, wrestle
furakszik ~ furakodik	push through
gazdagszik ~ gazdagodik	become rich
gyarapszik ~ gyarapodik	increase

³ Exceptions are **hallatszik** ‘be heard’, **játszik** ‘play’, **látszik** ‘appear’, and **tetszik** ‘be pleasing’ which do not have variable stems and conjugate regularly. The verb **alapszik** ‘found’, ‘establish’ is found only in the present tense and conjugates regularly. All other verb forms of **alapszik** require the synonymous verb (root) **alapul**.

lerészegszik ~ lerészegedik	become drunk
megelégszik ~ megelégedik	be satisfied
meghidegszik ~ meghidegedik	grow cold
melegsik ~ melegedik	become warm
megbetegszik ~ megbetegedik	become ill
mosakszik ~ mosakodik	wash oneself
öregszik ~ öregedik	become old, age
tanakszik ~ tanakodik	reflect, consider (tanakszik variant is rare)
telepszik ~ telepedik	settle
tolakszik ~ tolakodik	push oneself through, impose
ülekszik ~ ülepedik	settle, deposit
vastagszik ~ vastagodik	grow thick
verekszik ~ verekedik	fight
veszekszik ~ veszekedik	argue, fight
vetekszik ~ vetekedik	rival, vie

(c) **sz ~ z**: This alternation is found in only three verbs:

emlékszik ~ emlékezik	remember
gyülekszik ~ gyülekezik	assemble, gather
szándékszik ~ szándékozik	intend

(d) **sz ~ z ~ v**: This alternation is found only with the verb **igyekszik ~ igyekezik** 'strive'.

-szik verbs and stem variants

Consonant alternation	Present tense stem	Past tense, subjunctive, conditional, infinitival stem	Present part., past part.	Potential causative	Adverbial part.
sz ~ d ~ v	alsz- sleep	alud-	alvó aludt	al(ud)hat al(ud)tat	al(ud)va
	feksz- lie	feküd-	fekvő feküdt	fek(üd)het fek(üd)tet	fek(üd)ve
	esküsz- swear	esküd-	esküvő esküdött	esküdhet esküdtet ~ esket	esküdve
	haragsz- be angry	haragud-	haragvó haragudott	haragudhat haragudtat	haragudva
	nyugsz- be calm	nyugod-	nyugvó nyugodott	nyug(od)hat nyugtat	nyugodva
	alkusz- bargain	alkud-	alkuvó alkudott	alkudhat alkudtat	alkudva
	cseleksz- cseleked- do, act	cseleked-	cselekvő cselekedett	cselekedhet cselekedtet	cselekedve
	öregsz- öreged- grow old	öreged-	öregedő öregedett	öregedhet —	öregedve
	veszeksz- veszeked- argue	veszeked-	veszekedő veszekedett	veszekedhet veszekedett	veszekedve
sz ~ d	mosaksz- mosakod- wash	mosakod-	mosakodó mosakodott	mosakodhat mosakodtat	mosakodva
	emléksz- emlékez- remember	emlékez-	emlékező emlékezett	emlékezhhet emlékeztet	emlékezve
sz ~ z ~ v	igyeksz- strive	igyekez-	igyekvő igyekezett	igyekezhhet igyekeztet	igyekezve

4.1.5 The group of seven: lesz, tesz, vesz, hisz, visz, eszik, iszik

This finite class of verbs exhibits a present tense *-sz*-stem which alternates with other consonants throughout the paradigms as illustrated in the following table. The personal endings for the tenses and moods attach regularly to the verb stems indicated by a dash; forms with no dash are complete second person singular forms; other exceptions are indicated. Full paradigms of these verbs are given in appendix 1.

The group of seven					
	Present tense stem	Past tense stem	Subjunctive stem ⁴	Conditional stem	Infinitive
lesz will be; become	lesz-	lett-	legy- légy	len-	lenni
tesz put; do	tesz-	tett-	tegy- tégy tedd	ten-	tenni
vesz take; buy	vesz-	vett-	vegy- végy vedd	ven-	venni
visz take, carry	visz-	vitt-	vigy- vidd	vin-	vinni
hisz believe	hisz-	hitt-	higgy- hidd	hin-	hinni
iszik drink	isz-	itt- ivott⁵	igy- idd	in-	inni
eszik eat	esz-	ett- evett⁵	egy- edd	en-	enni

⁴ There is a good deal of variation (in vowel length and stem shape) throughout the subjunctive paradigm for these verbs. See the full paradigm in appendix 1.

⁵ The third person singular indefinite past tense of these verbs is formed from a