

Semantic Features of Hungarian Neologisms With the Prefix Be: Analysis of Some Frequently Used Verbs (e.g., bevállal)¹

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Abstract: The present paper deals with the semantic features of three Hungarian neologisms (*becéloz*, *betámad*, *bevállal*), and analyzes their semantic structures with the help of the Conceptual Integration Theory (Blending Theory). The words analyzed are verbs that have been used with the prefix *be* in recent years, although they are well-established with other prefix(es). As *be* is one of the oldest Hungarian prefixes, it has likely gained new function(s) in these cases. To substantiate this claim, data was gathered from two questionnaires (in 2010 and in 2014), and informants' answers concerning meaning and style were analyzed. These data can help the survey in other fields too: firstly, they can help model the processes of understanding (or misunderstanding) of these neologisms, secondly, they can help model the semantic structures of the verbs within the framework of Blending Theory. Thirdly, these data can help indicate language use at a given point in time, from a synchronic viewpoint.

Keywords: *Neologisms, Be- prefix, Conceptual Integration (Blending) Theory, Questionnaire, Semantic Structure*

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This paper deals with a phenomenon that has become more and more frequent in present-day Hungarian, namely the use of the prefix *be* ('in, into') with Hungarian verbs previously found with other prefixes, such as *meg*, *fel* or *el*. Nowadays the two different forms of such verbs (i.e. the same stem with two different prefixes) are both found, but with noteworthy differences in meaning as well as register (style). It follows that these "new" verbs (their occurrence and their register) often attract the attention of Hungarian speakers, many of whom regard them as neologisms. It is important to emphasize that there can be important differences between language users' opinions and attitudes, and even between the ways they understand (or misunderstand) these novel phenomena. However, people can usually recognize new words and phrases in language use, and in the long run it is the language users who decide whether to employ these neologisms. Accordingly, this paper has multiple goals: firstly, it considers the "older" meanings and functions of *be*, with regard to its present-day use. Secondly, it exemplifies some verbs with *be* from present-day language use (*becéloz*, *betámad*, *bevállal*), and considers their semantic characteristics. This study is a part of a bigger project begun in 2005, since which time more than 1300 informants have completed questionnaires concerning various types of neologisms.

The present paper is based on answers gathered from questionnaires. The hypothesis of the paper is linked to the informants' answers: with the help of their answers the process of understanding or misunderstanding a neologism can be modeled and analyzed. In the case of the neologisms analyzed, graphic representations will be given based on the Mental Spaces and Conceptual Integration Theory (Blending Theory) of Fauconnier (1994) and Fauconnier and Turner (1998). Language users' answers concerning the meaning of the analyzed neologisms and informants' attitudes can be examined, based on answers to the questions concerning style and personal opinions about neologisms.

Although many definitions of "neologism" have been offered (see *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur* (1989), *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (1990), *Dictionnaire des termes littéraires* (2001), *Stiliztikai lexikon* (2004)), there remain problems of defining and understanding the notion since it is very difficult and sometimes impossible to identify the precise moment in time when a change occurs between the two states when language users still consider a linguistic phenomenon a neologism and when they feel that it is no longer a neologism (for theories of linguistic change see Keller 1985 and Croft 2000).

Language users' opinions about new words or phrases can be influenced by many factors, such as the details considered relevant by the speaker; the aspects of the conceptualization emphasized; the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee; the speaker's beliefs concerning the addressee's knowledge of the context and the intention that is being expressed (Langacker 1987: 65).

Some neologisms can be called "trendy" (Lehrer 2003: 369) and in such cases, the speaker is not really interested in helping the addressee discover the term's meaning in the quickest possible manner but rather to increase the mental effort required of the addressee, and to thus attract his attention (e.g. *bocsoda*, *garfieldozik*, *vidámparkol*). To some extent, verbs with *be* fall into this category as well.

As the problem of defining neologisms suggests, such a definition is needed that reflects the relative and language-user orientated features of the novel linguistic phenomena. In the present paper, the following definition of neologism will be used: a neologism is a linguistic phenomenon, sometimes with a novel structure, that in a given situation is considered by the addressee to have a novel meaning and/or a novel style, according to the addressee's prior or

imagined prior experiences and expectations. These meaning and style attributions are dynamic, and may be subject to change according to a scale, depending on the above mentioned features, even in the case of the same language user (Sólyom 2014: 19).

As mentioned above, Conceptual Integration Theory (also called Blending Theory) as elaborated by Fauconnier (1994) and Fauconnier and Turner (1998) will be used in the analyses of the verbs examined. While the theories of conceptual metaphor and metonymy deal with relationships between fixed pairs of mental representations (see Kövecses and Radden 1998: 38; Panther and Thornburg 2003: 2), Conceptual Integration Theory can connect more than two mental representations. Consequently, the processes depicted in a blend can represent a dynamic structure seen in the process of meaning construction (Tolcsvai Nagy 2010: 96). As a result, meaning can be understood in the given context, and can be represented according to the intentions of the participants in the communicational process, in a dynamic structure. During this process, so-called space-builders (Fauconnier 1994: 16; Tolcsvai Nagy 2010: 98) help build up small conceptual units or mental spaces, and this can help with the processes of understanding and forming further reactions (Kövecses and Benczes 2010: 160). Mental spaces that are linked together are structured by frames and cognitive models, and so they can be changed as the discourse unfolds (Fauconnier and Turner 1998: 137).

There are three important types of spaces in a blend that have to be mentioned here: they are the so-called input spaces, the optional generic space and the blended space. "In blending, the selection of input structures is selective, that is, not all the elements from the input spaces get to be projected" (Benczes 2006: 53). That is why the blended space usually contains selected aspects from the input spaces (Coulson and Oakley 2003: 55). As already mentioned, mental spaces can be characterized by great flexibility: "(...) a mental space is a short-term construct informed by the more general and more stable knowledge structures associated with a particular domain" (Grady, Oakley, and Coulson 1999: 102). Applying Conceptual Integration can be fruitful if we want to represent the semantic structure of verbs with prefixes—and not only in the case of neologisms (Tolcsvai Nagy 2013: 231–232). Therefore in the present paper this opportunity will be exploited in the semantic analysis of these verbs (see Sólyom 2012b, 2013).

Be is one of the oldest prefixes in the Hungarian language. Its meaning is the opposite of *ki* ['out']. "Their functions often developed analogously, so that they are a kind of mirror-image of each other. However, the use of *be* is more limited, its occurrence is more rare, it has fewer functions, than the other prefixes discussed and it has strayed less from its original meaning, with its perfective role relatively recent (see Soltész 1959: 107). In present-day Hungarian, the use of *be* can be observed with a number of verbs. These novel forms often live side by side, having more meanings or different prepositions. It is worth asking "... why do these forms come into existence: through the realization of potential forms appropriate to the rules of the system, or merely through the breaking of its rules, or maybe the restructuring of the system's rules?" (Ladányi 2007: 260).

In Hungarian, *be* has many meanings and functions: according to Soltész, it can refer to various situations (after the description I give the literal as well as the approximate meaning of the verbs in English): 1) movement into an enclosed space (*bemegy*, ['go in']), 2) creating an enclosed space (*becsuk*, ['shut in' 'enclose, shut']), 3) covering a space or a surface with the action or with the result of the action (*bemázol*, ['paint in', '(completely) paint']), 4) perfectivity (*besötétedik*, ['get dark']), 5) verbs involving jurisdiction (*bevádol*, ['accuse in', 'arraign, accuse']), 6) verbs connected to eating and drinking where something gets into the 'inside' of a human being (*bereggelezik*, ['breakfast in', 'eat a hearty breakfast']), 7) some verbs that have a

radically different meaning with *be* than without it (*beéri valamivel*, ['make do with something', where *ér* is 'reach, etc']; Soltész 1959: 116–121). According to *Strukturális magyar nyelvtan* ['Structural Hungarian Grammar'], *be* has three main functions: 1) direction, 2) completeness, totality, 3) saturation (Kiefer and Ladányi 2000: 484–93). Nevertheless, in spite of the richness of possible meanings of *be*, it should be emphasized that their process of semantic change has not come to an end, not even in the case of the so-called ancient Hungarian prefixes (Pátrovics 2002: 481–482).

The present paper investigates responses to three neologisms with *be*, collected from informants in 2010 and 2014. The first questionnaire was completed by four groups of informants in spring 2010 (see Sólyom 2012a), and the second by two groups of informants (secondary school students and university students) in spring 2014. Although the two questionnaires asked questions concerning the same words in the case of *becéloz* (literally ['aim in'], meaning approximately ['aim at']), *betámad* (literally ['attack in'], meaning approximately ['attack']), and *bevállal* (literally ['undertake in'], meaning approximately ['undertake']), neither the contextualizing sentences nor the questions that followed them were exactly the same.

The survey focuses on informants' responses concerning 1) the meaning of the neologism (semantic features, understanding processes, misunderstanding processes, synonyms, circumlocutions for the neologisms), as well as 2) their opinions about the neologisms (attitude, opinions concerning style and register). Certain differences between the answers of informants in 2010 and in 2014 will be highlighted, as four years can bring important changes in the case of neologism use. As mentioned, graphic representations of the verbs analyzed will also be given.

Becéloz

Although the novel meaning of this verb (literally meaning ['aim in']) is not attested in the standard, it has been used in oral use for about ten years. During the last few years it has become widespread in language use: the Google search engine found 2950 examples of it on July 23rd 2010, and on April 19th 2014, the number of examples was 21800. This verb does not occur in the standard *Magyar Értelmező Kéziszótár* ['The Concise Dictionary of the Hungarian Language']. In the questionnaires conducted in 2010 and in the spring of 2014 informants could read the verb in sentences from the Internet, where the verb meant 'aim at' someone: "The production ... *aims at* every age group" [*A rendezés ... becéloz minden korosztályt*], and "The Opera House will *have in its sights* both schools and teachers next season" [*Iskolákat és tanárokat is becéloz az Opera a következő évadban*]. From the informants' answers in the questionnaires it was clear that having read the verb in the contexts provided, they emphasized its metaphorical meanings (e.g. 'aim at', 'recommend'). In 2010, 68% of secondary school students and 100% of university students wrote that the verb meant 'aimed at someone', 'it is intended for someone'. Moreover, 21% of the former group and 19% of the latter group wrote that 'it has an impact upon someone', or 'it is interesting, enjoyable' (informants had the opportunity to write several synonyms or circumlocutions). However, in 2014, some changes in the questionnaire answers were noticeable: more secondary school students and fewer university students wrote that the meaning of the verb was 'aimed at someone' or 'it is intended for someone', 81% of secondary school students and 88% of university students felt that 'aim at' was the meaning of the verb. As for the meaning 'it has an impact upon someone', 'it is interesting, enjoyable', fewer informants felt that this was the meaning of the verb (11% and 1% of informants, respectively).

The informants' answers can be diagrammed as follows:

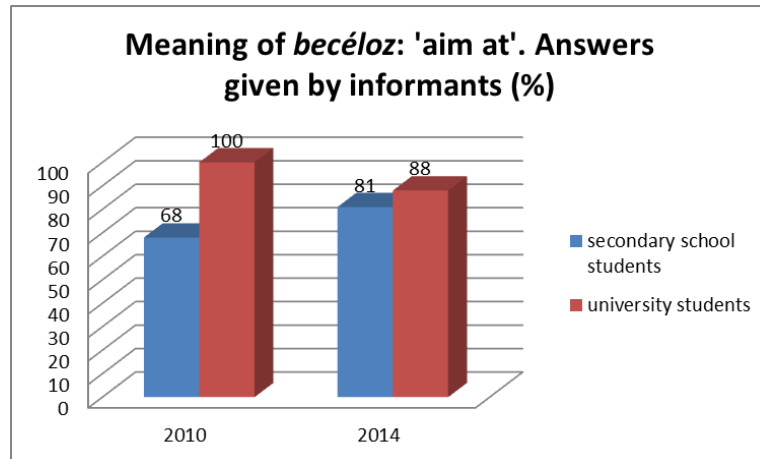


Diagram 1: *Becéloz* as 'aim at'

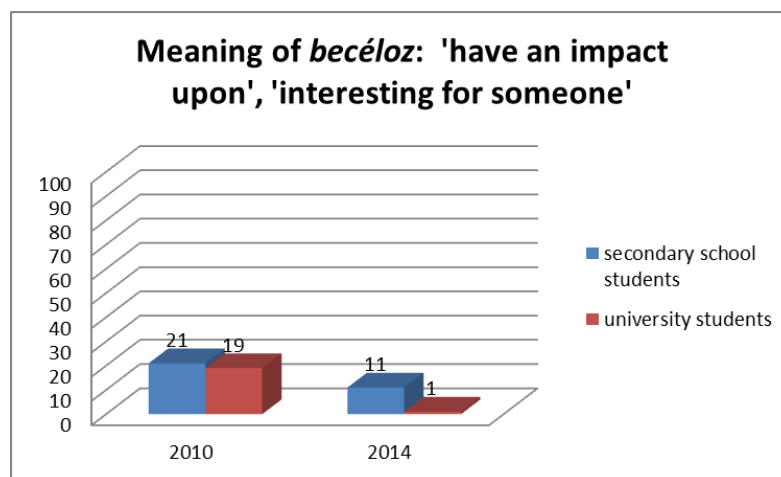


Diagram 2: *Becéloz* as 'have an impact upon'

It should be noted that there is an existing word, *megcéloz* in standard Hungarian which means 'aim at'. *Megcéloz* has the the same root as *céloz*, ['aim'], but with the prefix, *meg*, which refers to the aim (direction) and perfectivity of the action. Taking into account informants' answers concerning the neologism *becéloz* in the given sentences, a question arises at this point: what is the difference between the older *megcéloz* and the newer *becéloz*? There must be some differences, as the novel form has come into existence, and is becoming more widespread. As mentioned earlier, it seems that the verb *becéloz* has developed additional senses beside the one noted: attacking a physical object and attacking someone's feelings. It is useful to take a look at the informants' responses in the 2014 questionnaire, concerning their opinions about the effects

of *becélož* in the sentences given as examples in the questionnaire. Some felt that the usage of *be* made the verb more precise than the usage of *meg*: many informants mentioned the older form *megcélož* when they read the novel verb in the given sentence. They also considered it "more dynamic" and hence drew the attention of readers more. One informant even wrote that in the case of the Opera House's advertisement they felt as if someone had aimed an arrow at the audience. Based on the answers given by these two groups of informants, the processes that play a role in the understanding of this neologism can be sketched and represented graphically with the help of the Conceptual Integration Theory (Blending Theory). It is best to start with the semantic features of the prefix *be*, and of the older verb *megcélož*. The semantic features of the prefix *be* and the verb *megcélož* will be represented in the so-called input spaces. As these input spaces contain 'entirely different characteristics, there will not be a generic space (which is facultative), but the characterizing features of the two input spaces will be projected directly into the blended space. Thus, the important difference mentioned by the informants between the older *megcélož* and the newer *becélož*, viz. the precise and total aim at someone's opinion (choice, decision) can be emphasized (cf. Ladányi 2007: 275). Graphically, the above mentioned features can be represented as follows (Sólyom 2014: 109):

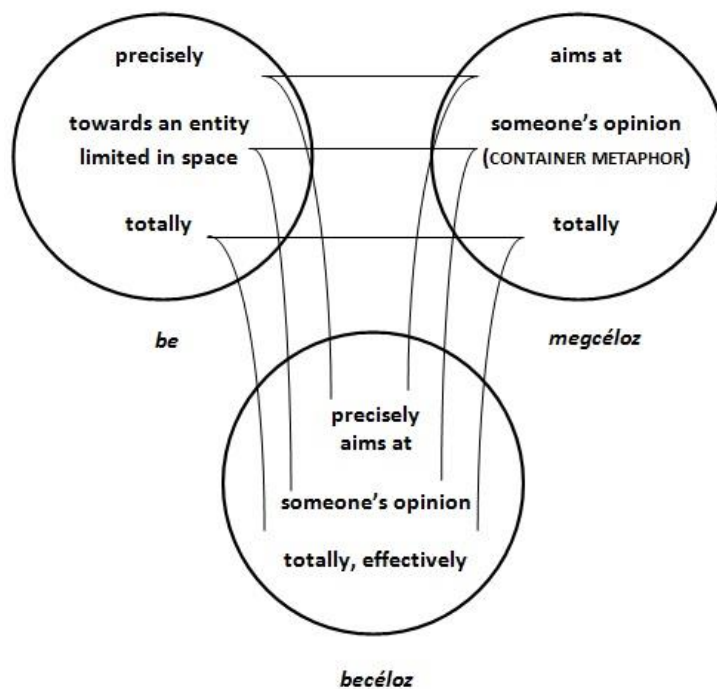


Figure 1: Blend of *becélož*

As for informants' opinions and attitudes about the style of *becélož*, important data can be gleaned from the questionnaires. In the 2010 questionnaire, informants were asked about the use of *becélož*: they had to say whether or not they liked the word in the given context. Their answers can be seen in Diagram 3:

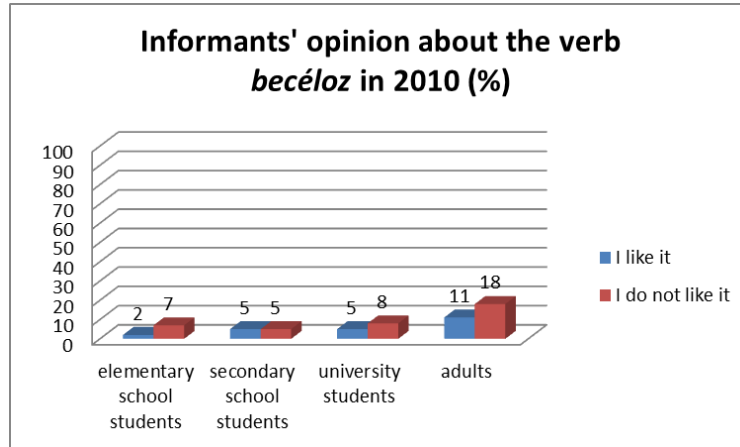


Diagram 3: Opinions about *becéloz*

In 2014, two groups of informants were asked to give their views about the verb *becéloz*. Fifty percent of the university students and 33% of the secondary school students wrote that they felt the use of *becéloz* in the given context negative, rude, or inappropriate. It is significant that more university students felt the usage to be ruder or inappropriate than secondary school students, showing that they may be more sensitive to the stylistic effect of the new prefix, which may be because 1) they have had more prior exposure to the use of *be*, 2) they are older and consequently do not find these kinds of neologisms as “trendy” (Lehrer 2003) as do the secondary school students, 3) as these university students are students in the faculty of arts, they may be more conscious of their language use than the other group.

Here is a selection of the more interesting responses from university students concerning the style of *becéloz*:

- I find it weird, more like school slang,
- it is slangy, I don't understand why the prefix *meg* had to be changed,
- I think that the speaker is uneducated,
- it is disrespectful.

These can be compared with some responses from secondary school students:

- it is flippant,
- it is not appropriate to this serious text (i.e. the Opera House text that contained the examined verb),
- it is uneducated.

Fifty percent of the university students wrote that they felt that the verb was informal or slang, which means that they do not consider it rude or uneducated. In the case of secondary school students, 26% of the informants failed to respond to this question. Those who did, however, also mentioned its slanginess and some of them added that the style of this verb was modern and/or funny.

Betámad

This verb (literally meaning ‘attack in’, approximately meaning ‘attack’) is not attested in most of the dictionaries, but has gained several meanings in Hungarian in the last few years. It should be said that, just as in the case of *becéloz*, this verb has another, older form, with the prefix *meg* (*megtámad*). Nevertheless, many occurrences of *betámad* can be found in present-day Hungarian. (The Google search engine found 5,970 results for the verb on April 24th 2014.) In the questionnaires, two different senses of *betámad* could be read by informants. In 2010, the following sentence was given: “I think that if you are *aimed in* by someone, you will defend yourself” [*Szerintem, ha téged betámad valaki, akkor te is megvéded magad!*]. In 2014, another sense of the neologism was given in the questionnaire: “... some [radio] stations were trying to scare people by claiming that winter would *attack in* with snow on Sunday” [... korábban egyes állomások azzal riogattak, hogy vasárnap havazással még betámad a tél...]. As Ladányi (2007, 275) points out, in addition to the notion of ‘result, perfectivity’ that can also be found in *meg*, overexaggeration or completeness play a role in the case of the *be* prefix, consequently, *betámad* gains the meaning of ‘attack intensely, heavily’.

In the first example, *betámad* could be understood either as a physical or a verbal attack (from this viewpoint, it functioned just like *megtámad*). In the second, a natural phenomenon (the weather) had an impact upon people and threatened them; consequently, a wholly different meaning was elaborated. Interestingly, in the case of the situations given in the sentences in the questionnaires, either the verb with *meg* prefix, or the root of the verb (*támad*) alone could be used. However, both writers of the sentences given as examples chose the neologism in order to emphasize the intensity of the depicted phenomena and so the threatening circumstances. In the 2010 questionnaire, there were no secondary school and university students who did not write a synonym or a circumlocution for the verb *betámad*. Most informants focused on the fact that the meaning of this neologism is ‘attack’ someone verbally or physically. There were some answers that reflected the verb’s intentionality and “wildness”, and, consequently, informants wrote that the result of *betámad* can even be an unpleasant situation, insulting or accusing someone of something. In the 2014 questionnaire in response to the question if the informants felt the threatening meaning of the verb *betámad* in reference to the weather, both the secondary school and the university students gave identical responses, with 44% understanding the verb to refer to threatening or even dangerous circumstances, while 56% did not. The latter group simply gave synonyms or circumlocutions that explained that bad weather was on its way. The former group of informants, who referred to threat, emphasized that the attack of the bad weather will be sudden, unexpected, or dangerous. The responses can be seen in the following diagram:

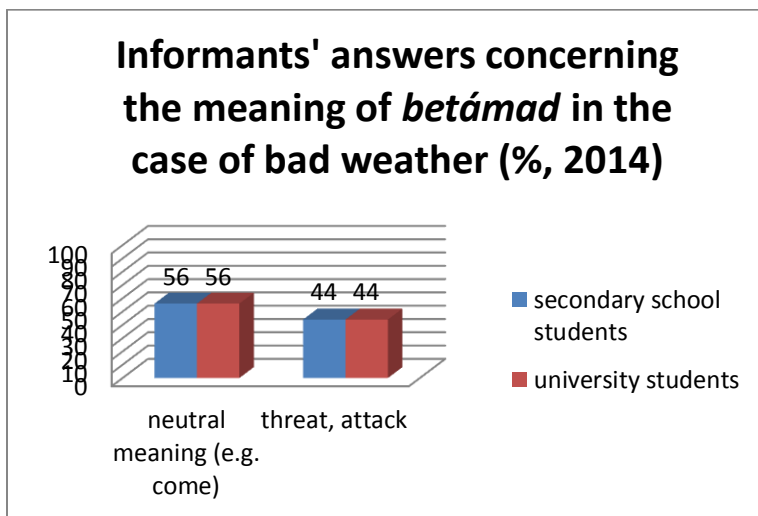


Diagram 4: Meanings of *betámad*

Based on informants' answers and on those processes that we have witnessed in the case of *becélož* (viz. the neologism's relationship to the older type of the verb, usually with *meg* prefix), we can sketch the semantic structures of the neologism *betámad* in two meanings, using Conceptual Integration Theory. In the case of the first meaning (physical or verbal attack), the new prefix (*be*) can be linked with the already existing form, *megtámad* ['attack']. The latter here is understood metaphorically, where, according to the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff–Johnson 1980 or Kövecses 2005, 2010), the human SOUL IS A CONTAINER plays important role.² It is the entity (viz. the human soul or body) that is attacked precisely and totally. The intensity, preciseness, and the totality are better expressed and emphasized by the new prefix, *be*. As can be seen in Figure 2, both the meaning of the root of the verb and the functions of *be* prefix play their role in making up the meaning of the neologism (cf. Sólyom 2014: 103):

² I would like to thank Réka Benczes for calling my attention to the importance of CONTAINER metaphors in these instances.

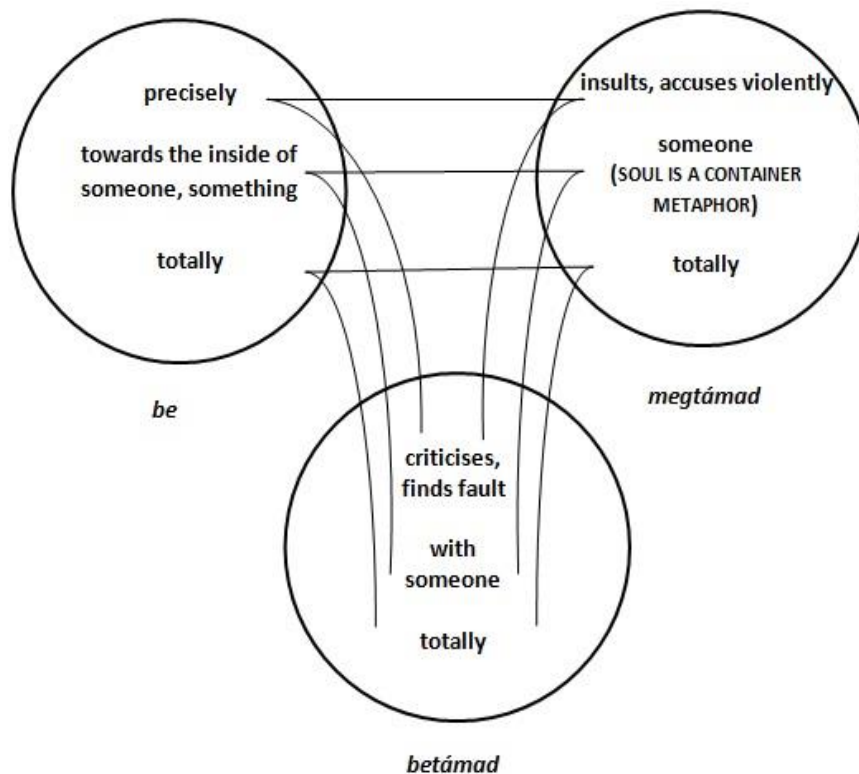


Figure 2: Blend of *betámad* (1st meaning)

As for the meaning ‘aiming someone in’ of *betámad*, we can start again from the preciseness, direction, and the totality implied by the prefix *be*. However, in the case of this meaning, these features have to be linked with the meanings of *megtámad* [‘attack’] and *feltámad* [‘start up, resurrect’] referring to unexpectedness. Because *feltámad* can be used with words about weather, language users often associate the phenomena of weather with this verb (as informants did in the questionnaire). Here, in the case of *betámad*, BODY or PLACE IS A CONTAINER metaphor plays role again, as these are the things that are threatened by bad weather.

The unexpected and threatening features of *meg-* or *feltámad* associated with weather are again summarized in the blend. When the perfectivizing function of the prefix *be* are added to the meaning of *meg-* or *feltámad*, the new meaning of *betámad* is ready, making up an effective and more energetic word than the former *megtámad* or *feltámad* (see Ladányi 2007, 275). These features are summarized in Figure 3 (Sólyom 2014: 105):

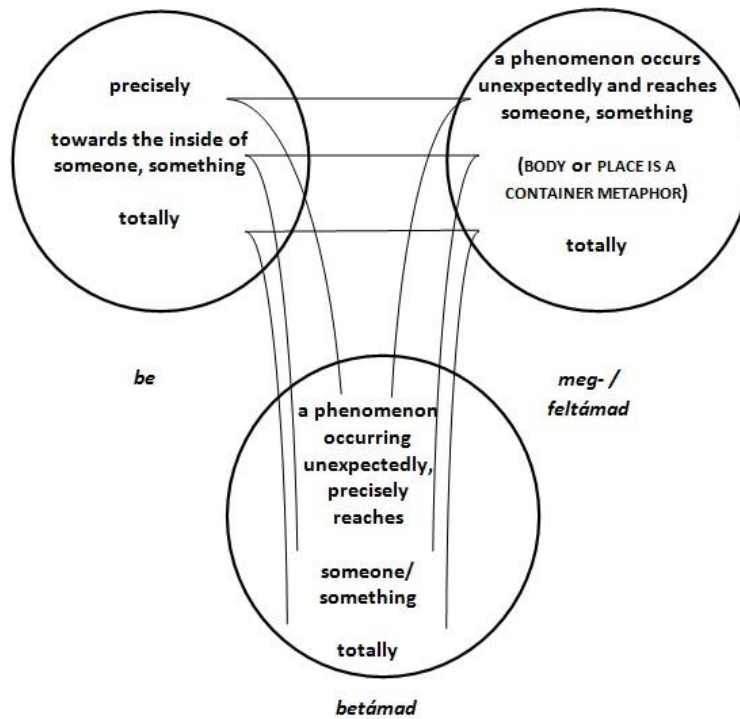


Figure 3: Blend of *betámad* (2nd meaning)

The chart below illustrates the two new meanings of *betámad*. In the case of the first meaning of the neologism, relevant answers were gathered from four groups of informants in 2010. No more than 2% of the informants said that they liked the usage of *betámad* in the given example sentence, and 10–16% did not like it at all (Diagram 5):

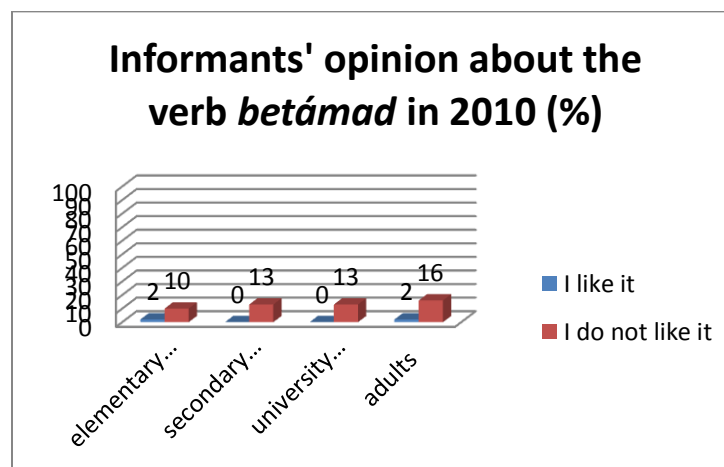


Diagram 5: Opinions about *betámad*

In 2014, 37% of secondary school students and 44% of university students wrote that they felt the usage of *betámad* to be negative and strange, with some using harsher judgments, such as careless, too modern, or even rude. In contrast to the majority group, some informants wrote that the prefix *be* "strengthened" the effect of the verb: it was more effective, dynamic, or even funny. It is interesting that in the case of this verb only 12% of the informants referred to it as slang but, on the contrary, they tended to emphasize its effectiveness and dynamism.

Bevállal

This verb (literally meaning 'undertake in', meaning 'undertake') like the previous *becéloz* and *betámad*, cannot be found in most of the dictionaries. *Bevállal* probably occurred earlier than the two other analyzed verbs, as it is discussed by Somogyi in 2003. Just as in the case of *becéloz* and *betámad*, there is another verb, *elvállal* (or even yet another, *felvállal*) in Hungarian that refers to a situation when someone undertakes something, usually something that is difficult or extreme. It should be noted that there is an adjective formed from this verb, *bevállalós* ['game, enterprising'], which is in widespread and popular use in contemporary Hungarian. Some informants mentioned that they liked this adjective.

At this point, the question arises as to what kinds of differences can be found between the type of change in the case of *megcéloz*→*becéloz*, *meztámad*→*betámad* vs. *elvállal*→*bevállal*? As we can see, the latter example contains a shift from *el* to *be*. As Ladányi emphasizes: the occurrence of *be* here is not a mistake, but, on the contrary, it has an important function: while *el* represents a process from a starting point towards an endpoint, *be* emphasizes intensity, completeness and/or beginning (Ladányi 2007, 274). It may be the case that *bevállal* means more than *elvállal*, as the former reflects the extremeness or the difficulties of a situation, and presupposes that someone who acts like this has to perform something difficult, risky, or even dangerous. If we take a look at the data gathered from informants in 2010 and in 2014, it can be seen that although the verb *bevállal* was given in the same sense and in context in both questionnaires, the proportion of those informants who felt that this verb referred to a risky, difficult or dangerous thing had changed significantly in the course of four years. While in 2010, 50% of university students felt that the neologism referred to a risky, difficult or dangerous thing, in 2014, only 31% of university students said this. In the case of secondary school students, another trend can be observed: while in 2010, 24% of them referred to the difficult circumstances concerning the meaning of *bevállal*, in 2014, 70% of them felt that this verb referred to dealing with difficulties, which implies that more research needs to be carried out in this area. It follows from the results that the features of undertaking something risky/difficult/dangerous occurs in the semantic structure of the neologism *bevállal*. Analogously to the analyses in the case of *becéloz* and *betámad*, Conceptual Integration Theory can be helpful if we want to represent the structure of this neologism graphically.

In the case of *bevállal*, we have to deal with more than one metaphor in understanding the neologism. It is significant that *vállal*, *elvállal*, *felvállal* and *bevállal* are derived from the Hungarian noun 'shoulder' (*váll*). With the occurrence of *be* with this stem, the CONTAINER METAPHOR occurs again, but—just as in the case of *betámad* above—in connection with human feelings and the soul, in order to emphasize the enthusiasm of the agent, which plays an important role in the elaboration of the new sense of the verb. These features of the two input spaces (viz. the two different ideas that can occur in the language users' mind when they use or hear the word, cf. informants' answers in the questionnaires) are very different from each other in meaning and function. Consequently, it seems to be sensible to represent a generic space. This

space is usually facultative, but in the case of *bevállal* it can help “solve”, “sublimate”, or “melt together” the metaphors that have roles in making up the meaning of *bevállal*. To sum up, SOUL IS A CONTAINER METAPHOR, viz. when someone feels that they are capable of undertake something as if it was put on their shoulders, as well as the importance of the starting point and totality emphasized by *be* result in the new meaning and give birth to those features that differentiate *bevállal* from *elvállal* or *felvállal*. The meaning of the neologism *bevállal* can graphically be represented in Conceptual Integration Theory as it follows:

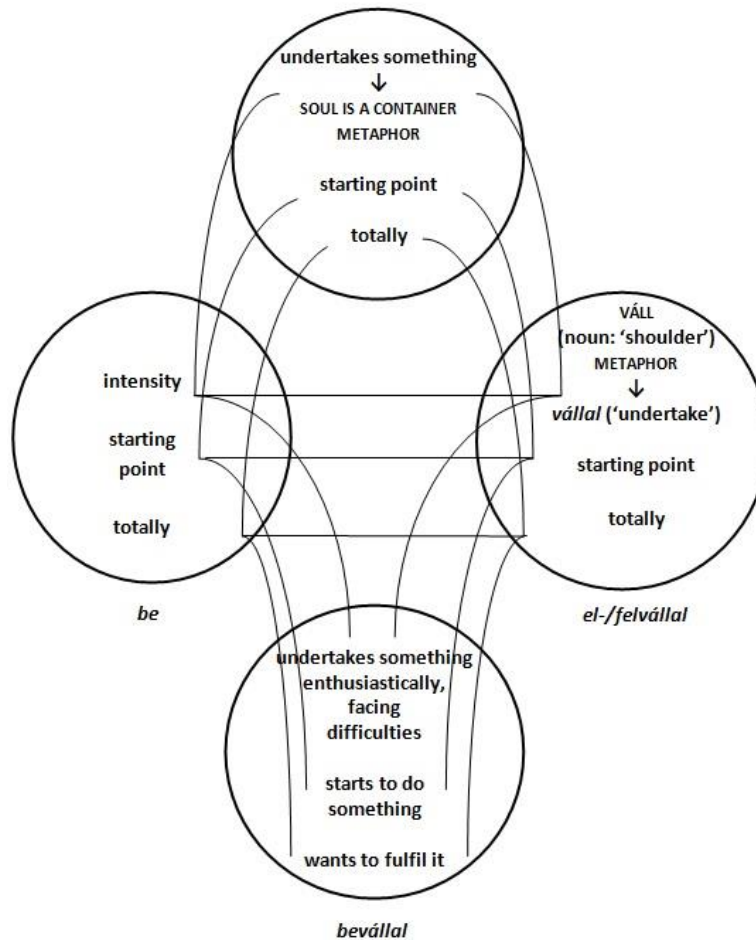


Figure 4: Blend of *bevállal*

As it can be seen in Diagram 6, in 2010, among those informants who answered the question concerning liking/disliking *bevállal*, elementary students and university students wrote that they liked the verb, but only in small proportions (4% of elementary students and 9% of university students).

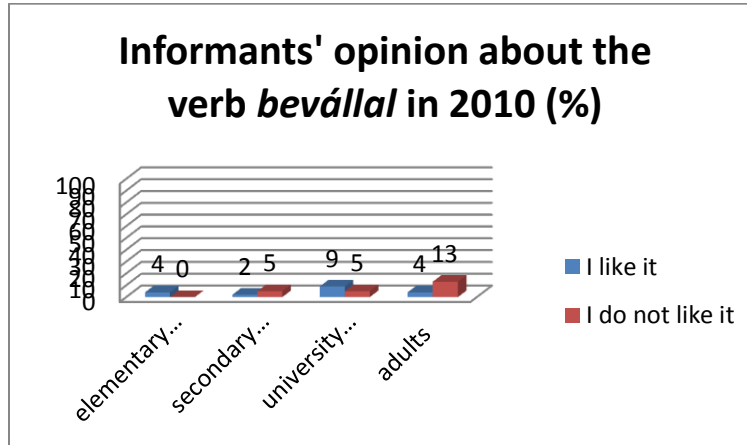


Diagram 6: Opinions about *bevállal*

In contrast to the above findings, in the 2014 questionnaire 19% of university students and 11% of secondary school students said that they found this verb ‘natural’ and they did not feel that it was unusual in the context in which it was cited, which may indicate that *bevállal* has taken root in present-day Hungarian. Nevertheless, 44% of university students and 4% of secondary school students referred to the slang, informal, or otherwise ‘loose’ style of *bevállal*, which seems to mean that although it is now common it is still felt by many to be substandard.

To conclude, the ancient prefix *be*, with frequent occurrence in present-day Hungarian, has gained new functions, which arise logically from the prefix’s general characteristics. While not everyone judges the neologisms *becéloz*, *betámad*, and *bevállal* right, they are undeniably in common use today. The present preliminary study focused on these three neologisms with the prefix *be* at a given point in time, but in the process of language change, these new meanings will likely undergo further change, as we can examine a synchronic segment of language use. It remains a task for the future to gather more data and investigate the changes in the case of these neologisms in order to draw further inferences about them and their use.

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