

This paper deals with several issues in the semantics of Persian noun-determination, which has long been of interest to linguists of various theoretical backgrounds, but has only recently started receiving attention from formally-oriented semanticists. The aim of this paper is to introduce and elaborate on several of the more promising newer approaches to the problem of Persian noun-determination, and also to make a new contribution to the treatment of the postpositive case marker *râ*. Since the subject matter is enormous in scope, I will not make it my objective to make a full description of the Persian noun-determination system; rather, I will try to summarize the existing approaches to several important problems and to formulate a more or less coherent picture of how most of the Persian system could be treated from a formal semantic standpoint. It should specifically be noted that I will not touch upon issues related to discourse or pragmatic factors, which, as prior research shows, also have an important impact on how the Persian noun determination markers, especially *-râ*, are used.

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section, I outline the main strategies of marking NPs in Persian, with the general outline of when each of them is used, according to the consensus in prior research; in the second section I will then list some of the problems that the traditional approach encounters. In the third section, the ‘set of alternatives’ analysis for *-i* is described; in the fourth, the analysis of *yek* as a quantifier (with also a general description of quantifiers in Persian); in the fifth section, I introduce my proposal for treating the semantics of *-râ*. Finally, in the closing section, I outline the problems still not fully analyzed and the possible directions for future research.

It should be noted that in my account I will deliberately limit myself to singular NPs functioning as core arguments of the verb, i. e. to subject and object NPs. As for plurality in Persian, it is another issue which is also quite complicated (see e. g. Ghomeshi 2003).

## I. General information

The account given in this section is mostly based on existing grammars of Persian (among others Lazard 1957, Thackston 1983, Rubinčik 2001), which tend to be quite conservative in treating the issues under question, and in part on the existing literature on each of the phenomena at hand.

The basic variants of how subject and direct object NPs are marked are the following: bare NPs, NPs with indefinite article (*-i* or *yek*), and NPs with the postposition/enclitic case marker *râ* (only in direct object position).

### I.1. Bare NPs

The basic rule is that bare NPs in object position are non-referential, while NPs in subject position are definite:

- (1) a. *man ketâb<sub>i</sub> mi-xun-am.*  
 I book PRS-read-1SG  
 ‘I read books/I am book-reading’  
 \**ân<sub>i</sub> jâleb=e*  
 it interesting=COP.PRS.3SG  
 ‘It is interesting’

- b. *ketâb ru-ye miz=e*  
 book surface-EZF table=COP.PRS.3SG  
 ‘The book is on the table’

However, it appears that at least in some contexts (and, perhaps, only with certain predicates – unaccusative verbs, perhaps?) subject NPs can be non-referential. See the following two examples:

- (2) a. *vaxt-i=ke asb-hâ âmâde=and, ma-râ xabar=kon-id*  
 when horse-PL ready=COP.PRS.3PL me-DO news=do.IMP-2PL  
 ‘When *the* horses are ready, let me know’
- b. *vaxt-i=ke asb âmâde=ast, ma-râ xabar=kon-id*  
 when horse ready=COP.PRS.3SG me-DO news=do.IMP-2PL  
 ‘When horses are ready, let me know’

The examples are from Windfuhr 1994, who in turn cites a 19<sup>th</sup>-century textbook of Persian for Englishmen, written by a Persian. Allegedly, (2a) can only be used when talking of definite, specific horses, while the NP *asb* in (2b) is number-neutral, and is thus close to the usage in (1a). How cases such as (2b) are to be dealt with is uncertain, if at all they survive in the modern language; they will for the time being remain beyond the scope of our analysis.

## 1.2. Indefinite article NPs

Persian possesses a postpositive particle *-i*, which is usually called ‘indefinite article’, but some alternate terminology exists, e. g. ‘emphatic (or restrictive) article’ (‘выделительный артикль’) in Rubinčik 2001. Its main semantics does seem to be that of indefiniteness. The *-i* can be combined with the numeral *yek*<sup>1</sup>; grammars in fact go as far as to claim that the three variants of combining these elements (*yek*, *-i* and both *yek* and *-i*) are equivalent; as will be shown later this is not always the case.

- (3) a. *man (ye) ketâb-i mi-xun-am*  
 I one book-INDEF PRS-read-1SG  
 ‘I am reading a book’<sup>2</sup>
- b. *(ye) ketâb-i ru-ye miz=e*  
 one book-INDEF surface-EZF table=COP.PRS.3SG  
 ‘A book is on the table’

## 1.3. Definite direct objects (with *-râ*)

Strictly speaking, the postposition *râ*<sup>3</sup>, usually described as a direct object marker, has many other functions: its use is determined by an interplay of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors, such as topicality and word order. For a general overview of the prior literature on the subject, cf. for example Vydrin 2006; notable works include Lazard 1982, 2001; Ovčinnikova 1956; Dabir-Moghaddam 1990, 1992; Karimi 1989, 1990. However, definiteness can still be considered the main function of this postposition, and some of the other proposed ‘functions’ can perhaps be further generalized.

<sup>1</sup> Usually pronounced *ye* in the colloquial language, which is how I usually transcribe it.

<sup>2</sup> The contrast of the progressive interpretation in (3a) – and in (4) – vs. the possibility of habitual in (1a) is purely pragmatic, since one would not usually be expected to habitually read a single, specific book.

<sup>3</sup> *-o*, *-ro*, *ra* in the colloquial language.

- (4) *man ketâb=o mi-xun-am*  
 I book=DO PRS-read-1SG  
 ‘I am reading the book’

#### I.4. Initial generalizations

From the information outlined above, one can make the following generalizations:

1. Bare NPs can be either definite or non-referential, in which case they are ‘semantically incorporated’ into the verb (Modarresi and Simonenko 2007). Syntactic incorporation has to be ruled out for various reasons (e. g. the NP can be separated from the verb).
2. Direct objects are marked by *-râ* in specific circumstances, primarily when definite. *-râ* thus has no semantic value of its own.
3. *yek*, *-i* and *yek... -i* are three forms of the indefinite article, the semantics of which are those of an ordinary indefinite.

But there are some problems which complicate a simple approach like this one.

## II. Problems

### II.1. *-râ* and *-i* used together

Even though the main function of *râ* seems to mark definiteness, it can be used (and is used quite often) in combination with the indefinite article *-i*:

- (5) *man diruz mard-i=ro did-am*  
 I yesterday man-indef=do see.pst-1sg  
 ‘I saw a certain man yesterday...’

Mohammad Dabir-Moghaddam (1990) provides the following insight into this usage of *-râ*: it can only be used when there is supposed to be a continuation in the discourse, i. e. in (5) the speaker would then go on to elaborate on the man he saw yesterday, on his properties etc. The explanation Dabir-Moghaddam provides is that *mard-i* is a ‘secondary topic’. Thus the function of *-râ* here is claimed to be related to information structure or discourse. I will, however, provide an analysis in section V which could account for this effect in semantic terms.

### II.2. The different interpretations of *-i* vs. *yek... -i*

There appears to be one case where the interpretations of *-i* and *yek... -i* are apparently different, specifically involving the scope of the existential vs. the universal quantifier (from Deal and Farroudi 2007):

- (6) a. *hame ketâb-i mi-xund-an*  
 everyone book-indef prog-read.pst-3pl  
 ‘Everyone was reading a book’  
 $\exists < \forall$  (there was one book that everyone was reading)
- b. *hame ye ketâb-i mi-xund-an*  
 everyone one book-indef prog-read.pst-3pl  
 ‘Everyone was reading a book’  
 $\forall < \exists$  (for everyone there was a book that he/she was reading)

The usage of *-i* with quantifiers in general deserves analysis. For example, the universal quantifier *har* in most cases requires obligatory *-i*, which mere indefiniteness fails to account for.

### II.3. The relativising *-i*

*-i* is also used to introduce restrictive relative clauses (7).

- (7) a. *ahmad, ke diruz âmad, injâ=st*  
Ahmad REL yesterday come.PST here=COP.PRS.3SG  
'Ahmad, who came yesterday, is here'
- b. *ahmad-i=ke diruz âmad injâ=st*  
Ahmad-INDEF=REL yesterday come.PST here=COP.PRS.3SG  
'The Ahmad who came yesterday is here' (in contrast to some other Ahmads)  
(from Thackston 1983:82)

Grammars usually claim that this is a different, homonymic *-i*, and it is claimed that they have different etymologies (OPers. *aiva-* 'one' for indefinite *-i* vs. PIr. \**ya* for the relative one, from Lazard (1989)). Lazard (1989, p. 276) also claims that:

Le second *-i*, à la différence du premier, est compatible non seulement avec les démonstratifs, mais aussi avec le suffixe *-e* de la langue familière (a suffix used to mark definiteness in the spoken language<sup>4</sup> – O. B.): *ân ketâb-e i ke..* Le sentiment des locuteurs ne semble pas identifier les deux *-i*.

However, the 'feeling of the speakers' cannot be regarded as a valid argument; as for the usage with overtly definite NPs (which is even more evident in (7b) than in Lazard's example), a better analysis would be that which takes account of this, too. Therefore, one should better change the notion of 'indefiniteness' used if it does not agree with the data, rather than stick to the definition that is valid for other languages like English or French.

### II.4. Negative clauses

In negative clauses, two possible ways of marking a non-definite object are possible:

- (8) a. *ân gorbe muš ne=mi-gir-e*  
that cat mouse NEG=PRS-catch-3SG  
'That cat does not catch mice'
- b. *ân gorbe muš-i ne=mi-gir-e*  
that cat mouse-INDEF NEG=PRS-catch-3SG  
'That cat does not catch a single mouse'

The informal understanding of the difference between *muš* and *muš-i* cannot capture the semantic difference between (8a) and (8b). This proves that there is sometimes a need for a more formal approach to explain even the more simple cases.

### III. *-i* as introducing sets of alternatives

To account for the usage of *-i* with quantifiers, for its behaviour with negatives, and for some other phenomena in a general manner, Amy Rose Deal and Annahita Farudi (2007) propose an analysis of *-i* involving so-called Hamblin indefinites (based on Hamblin's analysis of *wh*-words as introducing sets of alternatives, cf. Hamblin 1973). The idea behind this is that a bare NP in

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<sup>4</sup> I deliberately avoid including this *-e* in my analysis, since this marker is only used in the spoken language and is very poorly analyzed in the literature (as, regrettably, spoken Persian in general). The form of Persian I am focused on is thus the literary language, albeit in its colloquial form.

Persian is semantically incorporated and denotes a property, i. e. bare nouns are essentially predicates (see the evidence in Modarresi and Simonenko 2007); indefinites, on the contrary, denote a set of alternatives available in the context that possess these properties. Formally, the semantic difference between the two is the following:

$$(9) \quad \begin{aligned} [[ketâb]]^{w,g} &= \{\lambda x \lambda w''. book(x)(w'')\} \\ [[ketâb-i]]^{w,g} &= \{x \mid book(x)(w) \ \& \ x \in g(D_e)\} \end{aligned}$$

$g(D_e)$  stands for the set of entities ( $e$ ) in the given context. Therefore, *ketâb* means the set of all books in all the possible worlds (i. e. the property of being a book), while *ketâb-i* denotes the set of books in the current world  $w$ , in the given context  $D_e$ .

This can help explain, for example, the difference between two types of marking NPs in negative clauses. The interpretation of the example (8a) is that the cat does not catch any mice at all, i. e. it does not possess the property of mouse-catching (10a), while (8b) means that the cat simply does not catch any mice given in the context, i. e., for example, it hasn't caught any mice in the house after it has been brought there (10b).

$$(10) \quad \begin{aligned} \text{a. } [[ne \ \hat{a}n \ gorbe \ mu\check{s} \ gir]] &= \lambda w''. \neg[\exists y. catch(y)(this \ cat)(w'')] \\ \text{b. } [[ne \ \hat{a}n \ gorbe \ mu\check{s}-i \ gir]] &= \lambda w''. \neg[\exists y. catch(y)(this \ cat)(w'') \ \& \ y \in g(D_e)] \end{aligned}$$

In positive sentences, the singularity that  $-i$  entails arises from existential closure applied externally over the sentence.

This analysis of  $-i$  can lead us to believe that the  $-i$  used with relative clauses is, in fact, the same  $-i$ . In the example (7a) *ahmad* is just a proper noun, and denotes a specific entity (type  $e$ ); on the contrary in (7b) *ahmad* is treated as a property of being Ahmad, i. e. as a common noun; thus *ahmad-i* means the set of all entities possessing the property of being Ahmad in the context. The interpretations for (7a-b) are in (11a-b), respectively:

$$(11) \quad \begin{aligned} \text{a. } \lambda w''. came(ahmad)(w'') \ \& \ is.here(ahmad)(w'') \\ \text{b. } \lambda w''. \forall x. ahmad(x)(w'') \ \& \ came(x)(w'') \ \& \ x \in g(D_e) \Rightarrow is.here(x) \end{aligned}$$

Therefore it can be said that, technically, restrictive relative clauses could be used without  $-i$ , but since we are only using restrictive clauses when we somehow want to specify one entity among the others (and not one in the whole world), pragmatics forces us to invariably use the form with  $-i$ . A similar line of thought will be applied to Persian universal quantifiers in the next section.

It is interesting to note that the approach of Deal and Farudi (2007) seems close to the terminology used in some grammars, including Rubinčik (2001), where the preferred name for the article is 'restrictive' rather than 'indefinite'. Thus it can be viewed as a formalisation of a more intuitive understanding shared by many prior researchers.

#### IV. Universal and existential quantifiers

The problem described in II.2 can be resolved by accepting another of Deal and Farudi's proposals and considering *yek* in its 'indefinite' function a quantifier, rather than a numeral. In fact, Jila Ghomeshi (2003) has already provided syntactic evidence for treating it as a quantifier: firstly, it cannot combine with classifiers like other numerals can, and sometimes must:

- (12) a. *ye (\*tâ) ketâb*  
           ‘a book’  
 b. *čahâr \*(tâ) ketâb*  
           ‘four books’

This only applies to the ‘indefinite’ *yek*, however; when used as a numeral, *ye tâ ketâb* is perfectly normal. However, the other argument is that *yek* can combine with plurals, unlike other numerals which are normally used with singular forms:

- (14) a. *ye ketâb-â-i*  
           ‘some books’  
 b. *?? čahâr ketâb-â(-i)*

The semantic argument is expressed by the difference between (6a-b), which is easily explained if we consider *yek* a quantifier: in (6a) the existential scope is wide due to the external closure being applied, while in (6b) the existential quantifier is already present in the syntax of the sentence on a lower level.

The approach to *-i* as specifying sets of alternatives also allows us to explain why the universal quantifier *har* tends to be used only with *-i*:

- (16) *har mard-i fâteme-râ dus=dâr-e*  
 every man-INDEF Fatima-DO friend=have.PRS-3SG  
 ‘Every man loves Fatima’

Using *har mard* here is possible in principle, but sounds really strange, which is not surprising in the approach taken, since it would mean that every man in the world has an inherent property of loving Fatima. On the other hand the analysis predicts that *har mard* can be used in sentences like ‘every man is mortal’ or in proverbs, which is in fact a true prediction:

- (17) *har kas=râ be gonâh-e xod gir-and<sup>5</sup>*  
 every person=DO to guilt-EZF REFL take.PRS-3PL  
 ‘Every person is punished according to his guilt’  
 (Короглы 1973)

- (18) *pošt-e har mard-e movaffağ yek zan hast,*  
 behind-EZF every man-EZF successful one woman be.PRS.3SG  
*pošt-e har mard-e nâ-movaffağ do zan<sup>6</sup>*  
 behind-EZF every man-EZF NEG-successful two woman  
 ‘Behind each successful man is a woman; behind each unsuccessful man there are two.’  
 (<http://twitter.com/cafechi/status/1612277349>)

As predicted, *yek* does not seem to put any constraints on the use of *-i*, since for the existential quantifier, unlike the universal one, there is no difference if the choice is made from the whole set of entities or only a part of it.

- (19) *hame ye ketâb mi-xund-an*  
 everyone one book PROG-read.PST-3PL  
 = (6b)

<sup>5</sup> This example is a bit archaic since in the modern language *mi-* is obligatory in the present. However, in the ways relevant to this paper the grammar is pretty much identical.

<sup>6</sup> Curiously, this appears to be wordplay on *yek* used as a quantifier vs. *yek* used as a numeral.

## V. *-râ* as a type-shifter

In his 2001 paper Gabi Danon proposes an analysis for the Hebrew definite object marker *et*, a phenomenon typologically similar to the Persian *râ*, which I found interesting in terms of applying a similar way of thinking to the Persian material. Like *râ*, Hebrew *et* is used to mark direct objects which are definite; however, definiteness is explicitly marked in Hebrew, so in most cases the placement of *et* is determined in syntax:

- (20) *berešit bara elohim et=ha=šamayim ve=et=ha=arec*  
 in.the.beginning created God DO=DEF=skies and=DO=DEF=ground  
 ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.’

However, some sentences do allow two possibilities:

- (21) a. dan kara axad ha=sfarim  
 Dan read one.CONST DEF=books  
 ‘Dan read one of the books’  
 b. dan kara et=axad ha=sfarim  
 Dan read DO=one.const DEF=books

Danon claims that (21a) has a ‘quantificational’ interpretation (which seems to mean that it is roughly equivalent to ‘Dan read a book’), while (21b) has a ‘specific’ interpretation. He proposes to account for this difference by postulating that *et* type-shifts the type *e* to  $\langle\langle e,t\rangle,t\rangle$ ; *axad ha=sfarim* is of type  $\langle e,t\rangle$ , so if it is used with *et*, it means they first have to be covertly shifted to type *e* via a choice function (CF):

- (22) a. axad ha=sfar-im  $\langle e,t\rangle$   
 lift $\langle e,t\rangle,\langle\langle e,t\rangle,t\rangle$ (axad ha=sfar-im)  $\langle\langle e,t\rangle,t\rangle$   
 b. axad ha=sfar-im  $\langle e,t\rangle$   
 CF(axad ha=sfar-im) *e*  
 et axad ha=sfar-im  $\langle\langle e,t\rangle,t\rangle$

The semantics Danon uses is rather unconventional; aside from using a modified version of the Partee triangle, he also seems to consider all transitive verbs to require a direct object of type  $\langle\langle e,t\rangle,t\rangle$ , which is not uncontroversial. However, the main idea of his paper appears to be remarkable regardless of the framework one adheres to. It can be expressed in more conventional terms by saying that *et* simply marks the type *e* and this is its function<sup>7</sup>.

What I propose is for *râ* to be analyzed in a similar vein. This could perhaps help generalize some of the numerous ‘functions’ that it is often claimed to possess. Specifically, its usage with *-i* can be analyzed as having a covert choice function shift the type of NP-*i* to  $\langle e\rangle$ , which can account for the ‘second topic’ effect discussed in Dabir-Moghaddam 1990<sup>8</sup>, and perhaps for

<sup>7</sup> This seems to go a little bit counter to what his paper claims, however: that *et* has a semantic value of its own. If *et* type-shifts, this claim is certainly true; but if it is analyzed as simply a marker for type *e*, as I suggest, it would mean that it doesn’t change anything in the semantics, but simply marks NPs under certain semantic conditions. A possible direction for further investigation would be to search for evidence to argue for one approach or the other.

<sup>8</sup> The notion ‘second-topic’ in the way Dabir-Moghaddam uses it seems quite similar to what Padučeva (1985) terms ‘weak referentiality’, i. e. when the referent is known to the speaker but unknown to the listener. See example (5), where continuation in the discourse is needed – the usage looks rather similar to the Russian *ko-*, where the speaker is also expected to elaborate on the topic to ‘activate’ the information in the listener’s mind. If this suggestion is true, then the analysis of *râ* marking type *e* and the NP-*i* being covertly type-shifted via a choice function looks very natural: *-i* is used since the listener is not aware of the referent, yet the CF is then applied, since the speaker is still having a specific (definite) referent in mind. Compare ‘I saw a man yesterday’, where neither the speaker nor the

some other factors related to discourse or information structure, which are often poorly formalisable.

## V. Conclusion

The final generalization that can be drawn, which is similar to the one in section I but in less vague terms, is the following:

1. Bare NPs in Persian are either definite (type *e*), or denote properties/predicates (type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ ).
2. The marker *-i* applied to a bare NP introduces a set of alternatives possessing the property denoted by this NP from the entities available in the context.
3. *râ* marks the type *e*. Therefore, when it is used with an *-i*-marked NP (which denotes a set), the latter is first required to type-shift from  $\langle e, t \rangle$  to *e* which is achieved via a choice function.
4. Bare NPs used without *-i* or *râ* in the object position always have a non-referential reading and are semantically incorporated into the predicate. Bare subject NPs are usually definite.

The problematic case in point which remains are ‘non-referential’ subject NPs. The ‘horse’ in (2a) cannot be generic (generics usually behave like definites in Persian, cf. (Ghomeshi 2003)) since it does not refer to the genre of horses, but just to non-specific horse(s). The idea that bare object NPs are non-referential while bare subject NPs are definite is very persistent in the literature, however, which may not be a mere coincidence, but may rather mean that my interpretation of (2a) is simply wrong. These NPs could also be “deep objects” of unaccusative verbs. Further investigation may shed light on this question.

As for other phenomena not accounted for by this analysis: they are numerous. First of all, the proposed function of *râ* still does not account for much of what it is used for: for instance, it has been claimed that *râ* is always used when the object NP in question is scrambled from its normal position between the subject and the verb (‘topicalized’, see e. g. Dabir-Moghaddam 1990, Ghomeshi 1997, Lazard 2001). Also, *râ* seems to be the preferred variant for marking animate objects, even if they aren’t definite (Ghomeshi 1997, Lazard 2001). This means that the situation is far more complex than what can be described by having only one single factor, be it syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic, account for all the uses of *râ*. At the very least, no theoretical framework existing at the moment can allow us to do so.

However, the analyses described here, especially the analysis in Deal and Farudi (2007), do help to get rid of many misconceptions, like the idea that *-i* is somehow used to mark ‘singular number’, which it in fact does not. Thus the range of functions for each morpheme is narrowed as much as possible, which is a positive development. Some other phenomena which this analysis of *-i* allows to capture have sadly remained beyond the scope of this work.

An interesting issue which this analysis does not seem to capture is the relativisation of complex predicates:

- (23) *zang-i*      *ke*      *diruz*      *zad-am...*  
 bell-INDEF    REL    yesterday    hit.PST-1SG  
 ‘The bell that I rang yesterday’

The NP in (23) seems to refer to the action rather than to the object, since in this case the phrase *zang zadan* would cease to be a complex predicate, and (23) would mean ‘the bell that I hit

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listener have any specific man in mind with ‘I saw a certain man yesterday’ where it is clearly only the speaker who knows who the man was. Pragmatics seems to meet semantics in the case of Persian *-i=râ*.

yesterday', which is certainly not the case. This poses, however, as much of a syntactic problem as of a semantic one, and requires further investigation.

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