The issue of "separability" in Persian complex predicates: An experimental investigation

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LE 2018
Tübingen, Feb. 16, 2018

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Persian Complex predicates (CPs)

- Persian disposes of a limited number of simplex verbs (a total of <250). Verbal lexicon is mainly formed by syntactic combinations including a (simplex) verb and a non-verbal element, particularly, a noun: ex. *dars xāndan* 'to study (Lit. lesson to-read)', *bāzi kardan* 'to play (Lit. play to-do)'
- Persian CPs have been a focus of interest since 1990s. Their formation (morphological/lexical vs. phrasal/syntactic) and their interpretation (compositional vs. idiomatic) have been thoroughly studied and various syntactic analyses are proposed to account for their properties.
- Most prevailing studies assume a clear-cut distinction between a noun-verb combination forming a CP and an ordinary complement-verb combination. Samvelian (2012) however argues that these studies explore a limited data and their generalizations do not always hold when a larger set of data is taken into account. She rejects any "special" syntactic analysis of noun-verb combinations forming a CP and assumes that from a syntactic point of view noun-verb combination forming a CP do not differ from an ordinary combination of a verb and its nominal argument.

A Construction-based view of Persian CPs

Each CP is a Construction – a conventional association between a form and a meaning (e.g. Goldberg, 1995). CPs can be grouped in classes according to their semantic and syntactic properties. Each class can be represented by a Construction (where the verb is lexically specified) mapped to an abstract meaning:

Harming-*zadan* Construction
N0 (be) N1 N *zadan*
Agent Patient Harm to hit
'N0 harms N1'
ex. *āsib zadan* 'to harm (harm hit)'

Speading-*zadan* Construction
N0 (be) N1 N *zadan*
Agent Destination (Ground) Theme (Figure) to hit
'N0 applies N on N1' / 'N0 covers the surface of N1 with N'
ex. *vaks zadan* 'to polish (polish hit)'

(cf. Samvelian & Faghiri, 2013, 2014, 2016)

The (in)separability of CP components: An empirical question

➢ Most prevailing studies claim that syntactic (hard) constraints limit the possibility for truly syntactic constituents to separate CP components, e.g.:

Karimi-Doostan (1997 and sub.): Only predicative nouns display the possibility to be separated from the verb (if realized as a DP, *i.e.* carrying determination)

- When the nominal element is realized as a bare noun (*i.e* no determination or quantification), it must always be adjacent to the verb.
- A predicative noun (as in ex. 1), when realized as a DP (e.g. carrying the indefinite marker), functions as the nominal argument of the verb, and can precede the PP argument. Non-predicative nouns (as in ex. 2) lack argument structure and cannot develop into DPs when part of a CP.

(1) a. tagarg be bāq=e man latme zad
hail to garden=EZ me damage hit
`The hail damaged my garden'

b. tagarg latme=ye bad=i be bāq=e man zad
hail damage=EZ bad=INDF to garden=EZ me hit
`The hail damaged my garden badly'

(2) a. Ali be rādyo guš dād
Ali to radio ear gave
'Ali listened to the radio'

b. *Ali guš-e xub=i be rādyo dād
Ali ear=EZ good=INDF to radio gave
Putative 'Ali listened to the radio well'

➢ Samvelian (2012): The (in)separability of CP components is a matter of tendency (due to their semantic relatedness) rather than syntactic constraints.

Our approach: The question of (in)separability of CP components should be framed in terms of word order preferences

We consider noun-verb combinations forming a (compositional) CP as an ordinary combination of a verb and its nominal complement, namely the DO.

Recent quantitative studies on word order variation in distransitive sentences have shown that bare DOs prefer to be adjacent to the verb, while indefinite DOs prefer to precede the PP argument (Faghiri, 2016). **N.B.:** Previous studies assumed the canonical position to be adjacent to the verb for both types.

Method

Acceptability rating (7-scale) experiment, *via* a web-based questionnaire (Ibex Farm), filled out by 42 native speakers (5 excluded); 24 target items (+48 items).

Design: 2x3 design, we manipulated order: adjacent (3) *vs.* shifted (4), and nominal element's realization: bare (a) *vs*. indefinite (b) *vs.* modified indefinite (c). We also controlled for animacy: the noun in the PP argument is animate in half of the stimuli (12 items) and inanimate in others.

(3) a. Ali [be bačče-hā] qazā dād...
Ali to child-PL food gave

b. Ali [be bačče-hā] qazā=i dād...
Ali to child-PL food=INDF gave

c. Ali [be bačče-hā] qazā=ye sabok=i dād...
Ali to child-PL food=EZ light=INDF gave

(4) a. Ali qazā [be bačče-hā] dād…

b. Ali qazā=i [be bačče-hā] dād…

c. Ali qazā=ye sabok=i [be bačče-hā] dād…

In 6 items the nominal element is a concrete noun.
N.B.: Karimi-Doostan's data is problematic:
(1) belongs to a productive Construction (namely Harming-*zadan*) while (2) is highly idiomatic.
➢ There are a number of CPs with concrete nouns that belong to productive classes, e.g. Spreading-*zadan*, and allow for the noun to be realized as a DP.

Results:

- Only for bare nouns we found a significant difference between adjacent (mean=6.32, SD=1.36) and shifted orders (mean=5.47, SD=1.71); t(36)=5.05.
- The effect size is however medium (Cohen's d=0.53 / Est. 0.86, SE=0.19, t=-4.57) and overall shifted orders are not rated as unacceptable (Q1:5, Q2:6, Q3:7).
- We found a small but significant interaction between order and animacy (Est.=0.26, SE=0.07, t=3.44), showing that shifted orders are rated lower with animate PPs, in other words, in line with the "animate-first" preference, animate intervening PPs disfavor the shift more than inanimate PPs do.
- In the case of indefinite (and modified indefinites), both orders are rated as highly acceptable: mean above 6 and Q1:6, Q2:7, Q3:7 in all conditions.
- Concrete nouns of our sample display similar rating distributions.

Discussion and Conclusions

- Our results are in line with our previous studies on word order variations in Persian: For indefinite NPs, semantic relatedness favors the adjacent order while the NP shift is licensed on syntactic ground. For bare nouns, on the other hand, both factors favor adjacency. That shifted orders are not rated as unacceptable also follows from Faghiri *et al.* (2018) claim that the relative order between the NP and PP is a matter of soft constraints not syntactic rules.
- Our findings credit Samvelian's view and undermine most existing accounts, given that: in the case of bare nouns, they rule out shifted orders on syntactic ground, and, in the case of indefinite NPs, they consider shifted orders to be non-canonical even when possible.
- In sum, our study challenges those accounts that depict Persian CPs only in terms of syntactic rules and credit those favoring soft functional constraints.

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