## The Semantics of $r\bar{a}$ : let's be more specific!

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**Overview** The semantic contribution of the Persian object marker  $r\bar{a}$  has been a matter of debate. The proposals include definiteness (Mahootian 1997, among others), specificity (Karimi 1990), and topicality (Dabir-Moghaddam 1992). I argue that even though these proposals are different in their details, they share a core notion that correctly captures the object marker's main contribution to sentence meaning: presuppositionality (Ghomeshi 1996). I provide a compositional account that captures the meaning of the object marker in Persian definite and indefinite constructions. I propose that  $r\bar{a}$  triggers an existence presupposition. In the absence of the indefinite determiner *ye*, the NP is type-shifted to yield a definite construction. When *ye* is present, the composition of *ye* and  $r\bar{a}$  results in a presuppositional indefinite. Finally, I show how this account captures several novel empirical observations on the distribution of  $r\bar{a}$ .

**Previous Accounts and Empirical Observations** When comparing (1a) and (1b), a possible generalization is that  $r\bar{a}$  in Persian carries the meaning of definite articles like English *the*. However, such a definiteness account fails to account for examples like (1c), where  $r\bar{a}$  appears with the indefinite determiner *ye*. To resolve this issue, Mahootian (1997, 201) defined definiteness as a scale and suggested that  $r\bar{a}$  marks object NPs toward the more definite end of the scale. In such a definiteness account, NPs like the one in (1c) are "somewhat definite" since "they refer to some delimited class of objects."

- (1) a. Ali ketāb xarid Ali book buy.pst.3sg
   "Ali bought one or more books."
  - b. Ali ketāb-o xarid Ali book-om buy.pst.3sg
     "Ali bought the book."

c. Ali ye ketāb-o xarid Ali Indef.D book-OM buy.PST.3SG
"Ali bought one of the books." (Partitive)
"Ali bought a certain book." (Epistemic)

Karimi (1990, 1996) suggests that the semantic contribution of  $r\bar{a}$  can be better captured by the notion of specificity. However, specificity can be defined in several ways. Farkas (1994) enumerates three main definitions of specificity: 1. Epistemic (Fodor & Sag 1982) 2. Scopal and 3. Partitive (Enc1991). With epistemic specificity, the speaker has an intended referent in mind. Dabir-Moghaddam (1992) points out that unmarked objects can also be epistemically specific (2a) and object-marked NPs are sometimes generic (2b). I also add (2c) where  $r\bar{a}$  appears on a free-choice indefinite. The meaning of (2c) cannot be "Pick a card that I have in mind". Therefore, epistemic specificity fails to capture the semantics of  $r\bar{a}$ .

(2) a. ye ketāb xarid-am Indef.D book buy.PST-1SG "I bought a book."

b. chetori gusfand(-o) mi-kosh-an?how sheep(-OM) MI-kill-3PL"How do they kill a sheep?"

c. ye kārt(-o) bardār! Indef.D card(-OM) pick "Pick a card!"

An indefinite is scopally specific if it takes wide scope. Ghomeshi (1997) uses (3) to show that  $r\bar{a}$ -marked objects are not scopally specific either. (3) is not necessarily interpreted as "There is a student that every teacher introduced." In fact the narrow scope reading is the dominant one.

(3) hame-ye moallem-ā ye shāgerd-i-ro mo'arrefi kard-an all-Ez teacher-PL Indef.D student-Indef.C-OM introduce do.PST-3PL "Every teacher introduced a (different) student." Finally, an indefinite is partitively specific if it denotes a member or subset of a familiar discourse group (Enc 1991). Notice that partitive specificity under this definition does not require the NP denotation to be a proper subset of the familiar individual or group. As a result, all definite NPs are also specific since they denote the familiar individual or group itself. Partitive specificity highlights the role of familiarity and places itself closer to a definiteness account of object marking in Persian. It captures Mahootian's intuition that  $r\bar{a}$ -marked objects are somewhat definite and refer to some delimited class of objects.

Furthermore, it comes close to two other proposals: the information structural account (Dabir-Moghaddam 1992; Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011), and the presuppositional account (Ghomeshi 1996). Dabir-Moghaddam (1992) suggests that  $r\bar{a}$  is a marker of "secondary topics" and thus marks an NP's descriptive content as "old information". Ghomeshi (1996) argues that  $r\bar{a}$  indicates that an NP's descriptive content is hearer-old: the referent is old according to "(the speaker's belief about) the hearer's belief" (Prince 1992). The common denominator of these two accounts as well as the definiteness account of Mahootian (1997) and Enc (1991)'s specificity is the notion of familiarity or common ground: NPs marked by  $r\bar{a}$  are presupposed by discourse participants. I argue that the presupposed content of  $r\bar{a}$  is an existence implication.

**Analysis** I assume that common nouns in Persian are of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$  and that the indefinite determiner *ye* introduces an existential quantifier. Following Coppock & Beaver (2012), I decompose definiteness into two main parts: an existence presupposition and a uniqueness presupposition. I argue that the object marker  $r\bar{a}$  triggers the existence presupposition. If the sentence lacks the indefinite determiner *ye* and uniqueness is also presupposed in the discourse context, the nominal can be type-shifted via Partee (1986)'s IOTA operator and the derivation can continue, resulting in definite constructions like (1b). If the indefinite determiner *ye* is present, it can combine with the  $r\bar{a}$ -marked NP and form a generalized quantifier that carries an existential presupposition similar to  $r\bar{a}$ -marked indefinites like (1c). This analysis correctly predicts that if the existence implication of the case-marked indefinite is explicitly denied in a previous clause, the utterance becomes infelicitous as (4) shows. Notice that the utterance is felicitous if the object marker is dropped.

(4) chon kār-i na-bud bo-kon-am, kār-i(<sup>#</sup>-ro) na-kārd-am because work-Indef.C NEG-was.3SG SUB-do-1SG work-Indef.C(-OM) NEG-do-1SG "Since there was no work to do, I did no work."

Furthermore, this account predicts the difference in interpretation between  $r\bar{a}$ -marked and unmarked proper names. The main difference between the examples in (5) is that in (5a), the speaker is asking whether anyone with the name "Ali Saburi" exists at all, while the utterance in (5b) presupposes the existence of an individual with that name and asks about the hearer's knowledge of him. The account proposed here captures these novel observations as well as those in pervious literature on DOM in Persian.

(5) a. Ali Saburi mi-shnās-i? Ali Saburi MI-know-2SG
"Do you know anyone named Ali Saburi?"  b. Ali Saburi-ro mi-shnās-i? Ali Saburi-OM MI-know-2SG
 "Do you know Ali Saburi?"

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