The Lexicon-Grammar Continuum: What Persian Complex Predicates Reveal

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Contrary to the modular view of language, cognitive linguistics posits a lexicon-grammar continuum with gradient boundaries between the traditional modules of language (Langacker, 2008) where it is not always possible to ascribe given linguistic units to only one single language subsystem such as morphology versus syntax or semantics versus pragmatics.

In this study, we present empirical support for the lexicon-grammar continuum by looking into the separability of Persian complex predicates that, following the modular view, are thought to be either separable or inseparable. Such constructions are formed by joining a nonverbal element (NVE) to a simple verb that may have lost parts or most of its prototype meaning. The verb may be separated from the NVE by various words (example 1). In doing so, we focus on complex predicates consisting of nouns joined with *zadan* 'to hit', the second most often used simple verb in Persian, as the verbal element (example 2).

We argue that separability is best described as a scalar rather than an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Our analysis of corpus data within the framework of Construction Grammar yields a semantic description of *zadan* complex predicates as a radial category along with the frequency of separated complex predicates. It has been argued that the more *zadan* is removed from its concrete prototype meaning, the less the resulting complex predicates are open to separation. Compositional complex predicates are also more commonly used in separated configurations (example 3).

As far as frequency is concerned, only a weak negative correlation was found between token frequency and separability. Comparison of the complex predicates at the two extremes of the frequency continuum shows a stronger negative relationship between token frequency and separability (Table 1), supporting the idea that the internal structure of complex predicates of very high frequency becomes less accessible to syntactic modification through the process of chunking in which linguistic units develop stronger bonds through repetition (Bybee, 2010: 36; Dąbrowska, 2004: 223). Our results also suggest that separability is best described in terms of families of constructions that are semantically related to the core meaning of the simple verb, since complex predicates with similar meanings show different behaviors regarding separability.

An additional observation is that even those complex predicates that most resist separation may also be found in separated configurations, which makes it relatively unreasonable to label these constructions as either separable or inseparable. We view these constructions as existing along a continuum from less separable to more separable. Our view is consistent with the lexicon-grammar continuum as well as other gradient linguistic phenomena.

1. (a) *ali*   *bā*   *dust-ash*   **harf** **mi-zad**   **(not separated)**
        Ali   with   friend-3SG.POSS   speech IPFV-hit[3SG.PST]
        'Ali was talking to his friend.'

   (b) *ali*   **harf-e**   <u>*khubi* *be*   *dust-ash*</u>   **zad**   **(separated)**
        Ali   speech-EZ   good   to   friend-3SG.POSS   hit[3SG.PST]
        'Ali said something good to his friend.'

2. *harf* [speech] *zadan* 'to talk, say'; *hads* [guess] *zadan* 'to guess'; *ghadam* [step] *zadan* 'to stroll'

3. *sili* [slap] *zadan* 'to slap' vs *chāne* [chin] *zadan* 'to haggle': 45 vs 0 separated cases in a 100-sample

size

	Token frequency	Total separations in the samples	Total attested tokens	Percentage of separation
lower 20 percent	100-225	432	4586	9.4
upper 20 percent	1000 and above	159	78184	0.2

Table 1. Lower token frequency shows higher rates of separation.

Abbreviations

SG: singular   POSS: possessive   IPFV: imperfective   EZ: Ezafe marker (connecting the head nouns to its modifiers)   PST: past tense

References

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