



Revisiting the Persian Ezafe construction: A roll-up movement analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores the Persian Ezafe construction, a construction which has received significant attention in the syntactic literature in the past few decades. Descriptively, Ezafe is an unstressed vowel -e (-ye after vowels) which appears between a noun and its modifier (N-e Mod), and is repeated on subsequent modifiers, if they are present, except the last one (N-e Mod₁-e Mod₂-e Mod₃). This paper takes a fresh look at the distribution of the Ezafe vowel, with a special emphasis on its correlation with the order of elements in the noun phrase. After the close connection between word order and the absence/presence of Ezafe is established, the paper considers alternative ways this relation can be captured and argues for a roll-up movement account of this construction, which takes the base order of the noun phrase in Persian to be head final, with the surface order derived via phrasal movement to specifiers of intermediate functional projections in a roll-up fashion. In developing and arguing for this analysis, we will also have a closer look at several constructions in Persian, such as the superlative and the colloquial definite marker, and will account for various word order restrictions in the Persian noun phrase.
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Keywords: Ezafe; Persian; Word order; Roll-up; Linker

1. Introduction

The Persian Ezafe construction has intrigued linguists and has been the subject of various analyses over the past several decades. Descriptively, Ezafe is an unstressed vowel -e (-ye after vowels) which appears between a noun and its modifier (N-e Mod), and is repeated on subsequent modifiers, if they are present, except the last one (N-e Mod₁-e Mod₂-e Mod₃) (see section 2). Several authors have investigated the nature and function of the Ezafe vowel. Some have analyzed it as a case marker (Samiian, 1983, 1994; Larson and Yamakido, 2008), some as a vowel inserted at PF to identify constituenthood or to link it to its modifiers (Ghomeshi, 1997; Ghaniabadi, 2010), and yet others as a (phrasal) affix to mark the presence of a syntactic dependent (Samvelian, 2007, 2008).

This paper takes a fresh look at the distribution of the Ezafe vowel in Persian, with a special emphasis on its correlation with the order of elements in the noun phrase. After the close connection between word order and the absence/presence of Ezafe is established, the paper considers alternative ways this relation can be captured and argues for a roll-up movement account of this construction. In doing so, the paper also deals with the head vs. phrasal status of the post-nominal modifiers, their structural relation to the head noun and accounts for various word order restrictions in the Persian noun phrase. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the distribution of Ezafe. In section 3, we will have a closer look at the relation between word order and the presence of the Ezafe in three domains

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of Persian (morpho)syntax: the superlative, adjectives in the formal/literary register and compound formation. In section 4, we explore ways of capturing the distribution of the Ezafe marker and its correlation with word order both with reference to Persian and cross-linguistically. In this context, the proposal by Larson and Yamakido (2008), which takes Ezafe to be a case marker, is discussed at some length and several arguments against it are provided. Instead, a roll-up movement analysis of the Persian Ezafe construction is developed. This analysis takes the base order of the noun phrase in Persian to be head final, with the surface order derived via phrasal movement in a roll-up fashion. According to this analysis, the Ezafe is seen as a reflex of this phrasal roll-up movement. As such, the assumption that all bare or phrasal post-nominal modifiers in the Ezafe construction are merged as (part of) phrases in the specifiers of functional projection above the noun is crucial to this analysis. In this light, the proposal by Ghaniabadi (2010), who makes a strict distinction between bare adjectives and phrasal modifiers, treating the former as heads adjoined to N and the latter as phrasal adjunctions to the NP, is considered at some length and several empirical arguments are provided against it. Section 5 discusses two cases where the Ezafe construction is somewhat surprisingly missing, namely the superlative (and ordinal) constructions and bare post-nominal adjectives used in the context of the colloquial definite marker. A syntactic account is suggested for each case. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. The distribution of Persian Ezafe

In this section, we will look at the distribution of the Ezafe vowel, considering both contexts where Ezafe is present and where it is absent. Ezafe is present with post-nominal modifiers as shown in (1). (1a) shows an example of a noun followed by an attributive noun.¹ (1b) is an example of a noun followed by an attributive adjective. With two attributive adjectives, both the noun and the first adjective will be marked with an Ezafe, as shown in (1c). The Ezafe vowel also appears on a noun followed by a possessive noun (or pronoun), as shown in (1d). In a prepositional phrase, some prepositions are marked by the Ezafe vowel, as exemplified in (1e). When a pronoun is modified by an adjective, the pronoun will take the Ezafe marker, as in (1f). The Ezafe even appears on a first name followed by a family name, as shown in (1g).² Finally, more than one post-nominal modifier can be used, in which case the Ezafe vowel appears on the head noun and all the modifiers except the last one. This is already seen in (1c) with two attributive adjectives. Another example with two adjectives and a possessor is given in (1h).

- (1) Presence of Ezafe with post-nominal modifiers
- | | |
|---|---|
| a. (ye) kif-e charm
a bag-Ez leather
'a/the leather bag' | b. (ye) mard-e chaaq
a man-Ez fat
'a/the fat man' |
| c. sag-e qahveyi-ye gonde
dog-Ez brown-Ez big
'big brown dog' | d. ketaab-e Ali/man
book-Ez Ali/I
'Ali's/my book' |
| e. posht-e dar
behind-Ez door
'behind the door' | f. man-e divune
I-Ez crazy
'crazy me' |
| g. Ali-ye Mohammadi
Ali-Ez Mohammadi | |
| h. gorbe-ye iraani-ye sefid-e Maryam
cat-Ez Persian-Ez white-Ez Maryam
'Maryam's white Persian cat' | |

Crucially, Ezafe only appears with post-nominal modifiers. Ezafe never appears on a bare noun (2a) or on pre-nominal elements such as numerals (2b), demonstratives (2c), quantifiers such as each/no (2d), the adjective "only" (2e)³ or any combination of these elements (2f).⁴

¹ Standard Persian does not have a definite article. Without the indefinite article, the unmarked interpretation of a modified noun phrase is definite. There is a marker of definiteness, used in colloquial Persian, which is discussed in section 5.2.

² When speaking about a very well known person, the Ezafe is often dropped: e.g. Ali Daayi (famous Iranian soccer player).

³ The same adjective can be used post-nominally and take on the meaning "lonely". The noun will have to be marked with an Ezafe, as expected. An example contrasting with (2e) is given in (ia) below. Both the pre-nominal and post-nominal adjectives can appear on the same noun, as shown in (ib).

- | | |
|---|--|
| a. mard-e tanhaa
man-Ez only
'the lonely man' | b. tanhaa mard-e tanhaa
only man-Ez only
'the only lonely man' |
|---|--|

⁴ Note that the form in (2a) is grammatical with -e if -e is taken to be the homophonous definite colloquial marker (see section 5.2). Only -e as Ezafe marker is relevant here.

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