Complex Predicates in Focus

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Persian and Turkish exhibit a number of striking similarities: (a) many verbal concepts are expressed by complex predicates (CPr), consisting of a non-verbal (NV) element and a light verb (LV) (Foli et al 2005, Megerdoomian 2002, Kornfilt 2003), (b) both languages exhibit scrambling, and (c) they both mark direct objects for specificity (Karimi 2005, Enc 1991). However, there are also some important differences between these two languages: while non-specific objects can be scrambled in Persian, they must be adjacent to the verb in Turkish. Similarly, the Persian NV element can be separated by various elements, but not in Turkish, with the exception of the focus markers. Finally, the LV may alternate between do/make and become only in the case of unaccusative CPr types in Turkish, while this is possible in both unaccusative and transitive CPr types in Persian.

In this article, we focus on complex predicates in Persian and Turkish, and try to explain the differences in scrambling for the NV element. Although there are various types of NV elements in both languages, we concentrate on nominal NV elements, since they provide us with a better understanding of the similarities and differences observed. These differences boil down to (a) the focus position, and (b) headedness distinction, and (c) the availability of passive morphology in Turkish, but not in Persian.

We first discuss some diagnostic tools to distinguish between an NV element and a non-specific object. These tools include specificity marking, relativization, scrambling, separability, adverbial modification, conjunction of NV-elements, stress and vowel deletion. In (1) (Persian) and (2) (Turkish), for example, the modifier has scope over the whole verbal complex rather than just the nominal element, exemplifying a CPr construction. We show that some of these tools are not applicable in both languages for language specific properties, but others, such as relativization and adverbial modification, are crucial to distinguish between a CPr, on one hand, and a simple non-specific object + heavy verb, on the other.

(1) Kimea zamin-e saxti xord- ø Persian
    Kimea ground-EZ hard collided-3SG
    ‘Kimea fell badly.’

(2) pro adam-a siki bir dayak at-ti-ø Turkish
    s/he man-DAT firm a whipping throw-PST-3SG
    ‘S/he beat the man firmly.’

Next we discuss three distinct types of CPr, namely unaccusatives, transitives, and unergatives, and show that the LV alternates only with respect to the first group in Turkish, but may do so with respect to the first and the second group in Persian, as exemplified by (3) and (4), respectively.

(3) a. Kimea man-robe mehmuni davat kard ø Persian
    Kimea I-ACC to party invitation did-3SG
    ‘Kimea invited me to the party.’
We then provide an analysis to account for the major differences mentioned before. We show that the only way we can separate the non-specific object and to some extent the non-verbal element of a CPr in Persian is by contrastively focusing them. This leads us to examine the focus position in each language. We conclude that these languages present parametric differences with respect to their clausal arrangements. Turkish, similar to Hungarian, seems to have its focus position right on top of vP, while the focus phrase is in a higher position in Persian. We believe that this structural difference is responsible for the distinctions in the separability of the NV element. We also show that some of the separability differences with respect to predicative nominal NV elements are due to the headedness distinctions: Persian is head final in VP, but head initial in other phrases, while Turkish is heavily head final. Lastly, we show that the restriction on LV alternation in Turkish is due to the availability of morphological passivization, which is used in the case of transitive CPr, while Persian lacks this option. Finally we explain why alternative LV, instead of morphological passive, is used with the unaccusative CPr in Turkish.

The contributions of this study are multi-dimensional. First, it offers novel diagnostic tools to distinguish a CPr from a VP cross-linguistically. Second, it provides evidence of distinct ways in which verbal concepts are expressed. Third, major syntactic differences are explained in terms of parametric distinctions.

References