

Presupposed vs. At-issue Existence in Indefinites: Evidence from Differential Object Marking in Persian

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It is a very common phenomenon for a language to not mark all grammatical objects uniformly. In such languages, marking the object can be obligatory, optional or ungrammatical, depending on the semantic features of the NP object. George Bossong referred to this phenomenon as Differential Object Marking (Bossong, 1985, 1991). “Specificity” as a semantic notion, has played an important role in explaining the differential pattern of object marking in a lot of these languages including Spanish, Turkish, and Persian. Karimi (1990, 1996, 2003) has argued that the object marker $r\bar{a}$ in Persian marks specific NPs. I argue that this is not the case.

Following Farkas (1994), I differentiate between three types of specificity: (i) epistemic (referential) specificity (Fodor and Sag, 1982) (ii) scopal specificity and (iii) partitive specificity (Enc, 1991). I argue that none of these notions capture the distribution and semantic contribution of the object marker in Persian. Using the scope behaviour of the object marker with negation, I argue that $r\bar{a}$ in Persian adds the presupposition of existence to an NP. In other words, it signals that the set denoted by the object NP is nonempty. I adopt Coppock and Beaver (2012)’s treatment of *the* in English for Persian definite determiner and argue that Persian uses weak uniqueness ($|NP| \leq 1$) provided by the definite determiner and the presupposition of existence ($|NP| \geq 1$) provided by the object marker $r\bar{a}$ to signal that the object NP denotes a singleton set ($|NP| = 1$).

I also argue that (Enc, 1991)’s partitive specificity can be decomposed into presupposition of existence and Gricean pragmatic reasoning. If an NP that bears the presupposition of existence, is not marked by weak uniqueness, it is implicated that $|NP| > 1$. I show that the partitive reading of the NP direct objects marked by $r\bar{a}$ is not always present. Therefore, there is no need for a secondary index on indefinites to capture the partitive reading in a dynamic framework as Enc (1991) proposes.

References

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