

POSTPOSING AND INFORMATION STRUCTURE IN ENGLISH AND FARSI/PERSIAN

SOHEILA SHAFIEI

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Abstract: *The term postposing denotes any construction in which a phrasal constituent appears to the right of its canonical position, leaving its initial position either empty or occupied by an expletive. Ward and Birner (2004) argue that postposed constructions preserve the old-before-new information structure paradigm in English. The present paper investigates postposed constituents in Persian to find out the information structure paradigm of such constructions. The data have been taken from 34 interviews. The findings show that various constituents might undergo postposing in spoken Farsi (known as Tehrani dialect), and, in contrast to English, NPs were found to be triggered in postposed position when the referent was hearer-old.*

Keywords: *discourse-new, discourse-old, hearer-new, hearer-old, information structure, preposing, postposing*

1. Introduction

It is argued that non-canonical word order can serve an information function. Languages exhibit different canonical word orders, and, depending on the flexibility of the languages, the speakers choose a narrow or wide range of non-canonical constructions to change the information statuses. At the same time, it is believed that marking given and new information may be similar or different, and the argument reversal, both preverbal and post verbal, may play an important role in the information structure of sentences. Preposing, inversion, right and left dislocation, and postposing are among the non-canonical constructions studied by researchers. Postposing refers to the constructions in which some arguments leave their canonical positions and appear to the right of those positions (Birner and Ward 1988:3). Ward and Birner (2004:163) argue that postposed constructions preserve the old-before-new information-structure paradigm by presenting relatively unfamiliar information in post verbal position.

With regard to the topic under discussion, i.e. information structure and non-canonical word order, not much literature can be found in Farsi. Inversion as well as topicalization, however, has been under study. Birner and Mahootian (1996:127-138) discuss the differences and similarities between discourse-functional constraints on inversion in English and the corresponding construction in Farsi. After offering different examples, they conclude that both languages allow a marked ordering of XSV. While this accounts for English topicalization, Farsi XSV corresponds to English inversion with regard to discourse functional constraints. In other words, XSV non-canonical word order represents English topicalization, whereas Farsi XSV and English XVS word order represent inversion. Therefore, in Farsi there is only one construction

associated with two functions—inversion and topicalization—whereas in English two separate constructions can be observed (Mahootian 2008:282).

However, few studies, if any, especially data based ones have been undertaken concerning postposing in Farsi. In this paper, using a data-based approach, I will examine the postposed constituents and corresponding discourse properties to indicate the information as well as the pragmatic constraints in spoken Farsi. The focus is kept on the data collected from spoken Farsi since it permits more flexible word order in comparison with the rigid written one (Karimi 1994:43). Further discussion regarding word order in Farsi will be offered in section 2.1 below. The data have been taken from 34 interviews done on two popular TV shows on the VOA channel. Given the various accents common in Iran, it is necessary to mention that the present paper does not cover all Persian or Farsi speakers' accents and focuses on the standard colloquial dialect spoken in Iran called *Tehrani*. I expect to show the discourse constraints with regard to postposing in spoken Farsi and to highlight the differences between Farsi and English information structure in postposed constituents.

This paper is structured as follows: In order to discuss and compare postposing in English and Farsi, it is necessary to begin with a focus on discourse constraints. I will take Prince (1992) (cited in Ward 1999:3) to draw a distinction between possible information statuses followed by Ward's (1999) comparison of postposed subjects in English and Italian as my point of departure; the core point of the paper i.e. postposing in Farsi will be assigned to the next section (2.1) when the factual data taken from interviews will be brought up for discussion. The findings do not bear out information structure observed in English postposed constructions. I will conclude that postposed constructions in Farsi do not preserve the old-before-new information-structure paradigm by presenting relatively unfamiliar information in post verbal position.

2. Postposing

Ward (1999:2-21) examines subject postposing in English and Italian. In English, according to him, the phenomenon falls into two categories, i.e. existential "there," which is sensitive to the hearer-status, and the English presentational "there," Italian *ci*-sentences and Italian subject postposing that seem sensitive to the discourse status of the postposed constituents. Both satisfy the expected requirement that the postposed information be new. While existential *there* was found to be sensitive to the hearer- status, presentational *there*, Italian *ci* sentences, and subject postposing were shown to be sensitive to the discourse status of the postposed constituent (Ward 1999:16).

To discuss postposing and information structure, it is necessary to take discourse functions into consideration. It is widely believed that some factors such as discourse-status and hearer-status of the information play key roles in determining the information structure in different languages (Ward and Birner 2004:154). In the present paper, I investigate postposing in Farsi with regard to discourse-new, discourse-old, hearer-old, and hearer-new information while following Prince (1992, cited in Ward 1999:3) to refer to the following possible information statuses:

- | | | |
|----|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| a. | HEARER-NEW | entities that are new to the hearer |
| b. | DISCOURSE-NEW | entities that are new to the discourse |
| c. | HEARER-OLD | entities that are assumed to be known to the hearer |
| d. | DISCOURSE-OLD | entities that have been evoked in the prior discourse |

Through this classification, an entity may be hearer-old, yet discourse new or vice versa. Following Ward's (1999:2-21) distinction between discourse-familiarity and hearer-familiarity, we will have four possible information statuses, of which, according to him, only three normally occur in natural discourse. As a result, the fourth one is omitted in our discussion. Definitions of the others are offered below:

- a. Hearer-old, discourse-old: Information which has been previously evoked in the current discourse, and which the speaker therefore believes is known to the hearer.
- b. Hearer-old, discourse-new: Information which has not been evoked in the current discourse, but which the speaker believes is known to the hearer.
- c. Hearer-new, discourse-new: Information which has not been evoked in the current discourse, and which the speaker does not believe to be known to the hearer.

Ward (1999:3) gives the following example to illustrate the possibilities mentioned above:

- (1) A friend of mine at Stanford told me that he saw Chelsea Clinton working out in the gym yesterday.

Here, from an informational perspective, three entities attract the attention of the reader. To begin with, the phrase *a friend of mine at Stanford* represents information that is both discourse-new and hearer-new: it was not previously evoked and is unknown to the hearer. The second entity, i.e. *he*, represents discourse-old as well as hearer-old information having an explicit referent (a friend of mine). The last one, a proper name referring to a specific entity in the world, *Chelsea Clinton*, shares discourse-new but hearer-old information, because it is not evoked in the current discourse but can be assumed to be known to the hearer.

2.1. Postposing in Farsi/Persian

As mentioned in the introduction, data-based research on postposing in Farsi is limited. Some researchers such as Karimi (1994:69) and Mahootian (2008:281), while discussing preposing and topicalization, raise the issue briefly, but I could not find any independent study published on postposing in this language. Before discussing the postposed constructions, a brief discussion on Farsi word order is necessary. Farsi (Persian), a null subject (pro-drop) language, exhibits mostly a rigid SOV canonical word order in writing. The spoken language, however, licenses alternative arrangements (Karimi and Taleghani 2007:168), which can also be seen in writing, especially in informal texts. For instance, the speakers have different options to convey the same proposition as below.

- (2)
- | | | | | | | |
|----|---------------|--------|--------|---------|---------------|-------|
| a. | mæn | | sara | ro | di-d-æm | SOV |
| | I | Sara. | object | marker | see.past.1sg. | |
| b. | sara | | ro | di-d-æm | | (S)OV |
| | Sara. | object | marker | | see.past.1sg. | |
| c. | di-d-æm | | sara | ro | | (S)VO |
| | see.past.1sg. | | Sara. | object | marker | |
| | 'I saw Sara.' | | | | | |

In the first sentence, SOV word order is chosen; however, by virtue of pro-drop property, the speaker may change the structure to (S)OV in (2b), dropping the subject. Subjects are often

left implicit in daily conversations. Karimi (1994:51-70) argues that these reorderings are rule governed and restricted by certain conditions.

My data were taken from more than thirty interviews conducted in two TV shows under the titles of *Parazit*—a comedy political show—and *Shabahang*—an art show from the VOA Farsi TV channel. The data collected are classified on the basis of the kinds of constituents postposed.

In the first segment to be analyzed, the interviewee is a young filmmaker. After asking different questions concerning the filmmaker's activities, the interviewer asks why her film is entitled *roozhaye sabz* (green days). The interview continues with the following question:

(3) Interviewer: Why have you chosen this name for your film?

Interviewee: Because this film is about ... the period in which the colour green came into our lives. In fact, this green colour became the symbol of a movement.

dær vaghe nemad-e yek jonbesh sho-d in ræng-e
sæbz

In fact symbol.EZ one movement become .3.sg.past
this colour.EZ green

'In fact, this green colour became the symbol of a movement.'

The film portrays the 2009 presidential election in Iran. A majority of the people got involved in that election, and many of them are still in prison. She makes a link between the colour and the event. The speaker uses a postposed construction including a definite NP, *this green colour* (in ræng-e sæbz), with which the hearer is familiar, because after that presidential election in Iran protestors continued to wear green bracelets or carry green flags to show their protest. Therefore, the addressee and the people watching the interview are familiar with the referent. In addition, it has previously been evoked in the current discourse. In other words, it has a clear referent included in the immediate environment. This phrase is repeated by the speaker several times. Surprisingly, in contrast to postposing in English, this postposed NP in post verbal position sounds felicitous while in the very context the preverbal NP, the symbol of a movement (nemad-e yek jonbesh) is probably discourse-new yet hearer-old since, in fact, it is the first time in the discourse that *movement* is mentioned. However, it is possible that the entity occupying the preverbal position is hearer-old since some people had started referring to the demonstrations in Iran as *a movement* before.

The Ezafe/ EZ morpheme which can be seen in (3) is a productive means of modifying nouns as well as linking non-verbal heads and their complements (Mahootian 1997:66).

In the next conversation, the interviewee speaks about some sporadic demonstrations which started in protest of the result of the presidential election mentioned above. While answering various questions, he mentions the word *bachaha* several times. *This word* literally means children, but it is commonly used in any conversation to refer to a group of familiar people, especially young people. The word *bachaha* then comes up again in the following sentence:

(4) in yekshænbe ke extar be-diktator esm-
esh-ra gozasht-æn bache-ha

this Sunday that warning to-dictator name.its.object marker
put.3.pl.present perfect guy.pl

‘The next Sunday which is called warning to the dictator by the guys...’
 (...the guys have started calling it warning to the dictator).

In this sentence, the NP *bæcheha* is postposed. The postposed construction portrays an NP movement in a rather long sentence. It represents an entity that is presumably familiar to the hearer because it was mentioned at least twice by the interviewee and henceforth is discourse-old. The next interviewee is a singer whose parents are also musicians:

- (5) Interviewee: I have been familiar with music since childhood. My father is a musician, and my mother is a singer. She sings... I always was busy making songs, singing... .

Interviewer: Have you studied music academically? Explain more.

Interviewee: ...I started going to private piano classes at the age of 6...

Interviewer: Ok, you pointed out that both your father and mother are into music ..., but how much did their taste influence your work?

Cheghædr tæsîr-gozasht sælighehaye anha roo
 kar-e to

how much influence.3.sg.past taste.pl.EZ
 their on job-EZ you

‘How much did their taste influence your work?’

Interestingly enough both the subject *their taste* (sælighehaye anha) and the object *your work* (kar-eto) have been postposed. As the reader can see, the postverbal position is occupied by a subject NP preceding an object PP. His parents’ careers have been discussed in the conversation and therefore the subject NP may be considered hearer old. Regarding the object PP, one can presumably claim that it is also hearer old yet discourse-new since the singer starts explaining his works afterwards.

Other prepositional phrases may be postposed by Farsi speakers, as well. In the following pieces of data, it is possible to observe the postposition of two PP constituents postposed:

- (6) Rastesh mosighi-ra mæn æz shæhrestan-e Babol
 shoro-kær-dæm ba piano

In fact music.object marker I from town.Ez.Babol
 start.1.sg.past with piano

‘In fact, I began playing music on the piano in a town called Babol.’

- (7) Parsal –bæhar dær-Saadatabad ejra-dasht-im
 ba gorooh-e- cheshme-sevom

Last spring in Saadatabad play.1.pl.past with
 band.EZ eye-EZ –third

‘Last spring, we played with a band called The Third Eye in Saadatabad.’

In these examples, pragmatic constraints show postposing of unfamiliar information both to the hearer and to the discourse. In the postposed construction in (6), the entity occupying the

post verbal position, *with piano*, is discourse-new referring to an entity which has not been evoked in the current discourse, and can be assumed to be unknown to the hearer. In the second example (8), the interviewer asks the musician to explain about his background in music. As it is obvious, two adjuncts are preposed i.e. *last spring* and *Saadatabad* in preverbal position. The PP, *with a band called the third eye*, moved to the post verbal position represents information that is both discourse-new and hearer-new, having not been previously evoked and simultaneously unknown to the hearer.

To investigate other possibilities, consider the following utterances. In the first example provided, the interviewer asks the interviewee, a young singer, to explain how he has formed his music band:

- (8) Interviewer: How was your band formed?
Interviewee: In fact, we, the main singer of the band and I, were about to play in a university four years ago. 'We began to work on some songs.'

Shoro kær-dim rooye chænd-ta ahæng kar-kær-dæn
start.do.1.pl.past on some song work.do.infinitive

'We began to work on some songs.'

In example (8), nothing can be observed in preverbal position. Interestingly, post verbal position may be felicitously occupied by both the subject infinitive, *to work*, which is presumably hearer-old but discourse new and a PP constituent, *on some songs*, which represents discourse-new and hearer-new information. Generally speaking, contrary to the NPs, the PPs represent more unfamiliar information in the constituents placed after the verbs. Karimi (1994:55) considers this kind of construction *verb preposing*. Based on the data collected, I will now discuss the overall results.

In statistical terms, a rough estimate obtained from the data from 34 interviews illustrates that around 65% of the postposed constituents are PPs while 25% are NPs and the rest lies within other kinds of constituents. Table 1 shows this rough estimation of the postposed constituents and information structure.

Table.1. A rough estimate of the percentage of the postposed constituents

	NP	PP	Other
DISCOURSE-NEW, HEARER-OLD	15%	25%	
DISCOURSE-OLD, HEARER-OLD	10%		5%
DISCOURSE-NEW, HEARER-NEW		40 %	5 %

Summarizing the data leads us to take some significant points into consideration. To begin with, the findings are not homogenous. Secondly, Farsi permits various constituents to be postposed. The most important result to be discussed is the behavior of the NPs. 10% of the noun phrases in subject and object positions represent information not new to the discourse, having been evoked in the current discourse, and even not new to the hearer, i.e. the hearer can be assumed to be familiar with the information. The rest of the NPs (15%) also did not allow the findings to accord exactly with the conclusion in Ward (1999) and Ward and Birner (2004:163). According to them, postposing constructions preserve the old-before-new information structure

paradigm by presenting relatively unfamiliar information in post verbal position. In contrast, we have seen that in Farsi precisely the opposite informational structure holds: discourse-old and especially hearer-old information tends to be represented by the postposed NP constituents. Thus the findings obtained through the data in spoken Farsi in this paper do not confirm the claims made in English. However, Karimi (1994:69) argues that NPs appear in post verbal position only if they are specific. She believes that the restriction on Persian post verbal noun phrases is determined by the interaction of specificity and word order.

In contrast to the NPs, most of the prepositional phrases in the postposed constructions represent unknown information. Around 40% of the postposed PPs are sensitive to hearer-status as well as discourse status, or felicity arises when these constituents represent information that has not been previously evoked and, simultaneously, which the speaker does not believe to be known to the hearer. The PP constituents were found to be at least discourse-new. Therefore, based on the data collected, Farsi speakers tend to postpose prepositional phrases when they convey unfamiliar information.

3. Conclusion

Pragmatic functions, and, more specifically, discourse and hearer statuses, have been under study owing to their prominent role in structuring utterances. Researchers have investigated on the one hand the degree of sensitivity of the non-canonical constructions regarding the organization of information structure in a language, and, on the other hand, whether these constituents are constrained to represent new or old information.

In the present paper, based on data taken from TV interviews, I have tried to investigate pragmatic constraints regarding postposed constructions in spoken Farsi when a preverbal constituent has been moved to post verbal position, leaving the previous position empty. Ward (1999) and Ward and Birner (2004) argue that postposed constructions preserve the old-before-new information structure paradigm by presenting relatively unfamiliar information in post verbal position.

However, the data collected in spoken Farsi do not show similar results. Generally speaking, NPs were found to be triggered in postverbal position when the referent was hearer-old or hearer-old and discourse-old. None of the postposed NP constituents present hearer-new information. This finding does not accord with the conclusion in previous research regarding postposing in English and Italian. In other words, final position does not tend to be reserved for new information which is supposed to be unfamiliar to the discourse and especially to the hearer.

Also significantly, these findings demonstrate that equivalent constructions, here postposed, may be subject to different pragmatic constraints in different languages. While the postposed NPs in post verbal position represent an entity unfamiliar in some sense in those languages, Farsi chooses an entity that is familiar to the discourse, the hearer, or both.

When it comes to prepositional phrases moved to post verbal position, the findings demonstrate different informational structure. Most postposed PPs exhibit behavior similar to what has been found in English.

To sum up, although non-canonical postposed constituents are alleged to represent discourse-new as well as hearer-new information, or at least information that is less familiar when compared with the constituents filling the preverbal position (Ward 1999; Ward and Birner 2004) in English and Italian, Farsi speakers impose the opposite constraints on the postposed constructions used. The NP constituents postposed were not found to represent new information to the hearer.

It also remains for further research to find out whether in other languages with equivalent canonical word order postposed constituents are treated as hearer-old or hearer-new. Further research may be aimed at investigating the role of morphology in Farsi or other languages with respect to such non-canonical constructions and the corresponding pragmatic constraints.

References

- Birner, Betty J. and Mahootian, Shahrzad. 1996. "Functional constraints on inversion in English and Farsi." *Language Sciences* 18(1-2):127-138.
- Birner, Betty J. and Ward, Gregory. 1998. *Information status and noncanonical word order in English* (Studies in Language Companion Series 40). Amsterdam /Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publication.
- Karimi, Simin. 1994. "Word-order variations in contemporary spoken Persian" in *Persian Studies in North America: Studies in Honor of Mohammad Ali Jazayery*. Mehdi Marashi (Ed.). Maryland: IRANBOOKS, pp. 43-73.
- Karimi, Simin and Taleghani, Azita. 2007. "Wh-movement, interpretation, and optionality in Persian" in *Phrasal and clausal architecture: Syntactic derivation and interpretation*. Simin Karimi, Vida Samiian, and Wendy. K. Wilkins (Eds.). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 167-187.
- Mahootian, Shahrzad. 1997. *Persian*. London: Routledge.
- Mahootian, Shahrzad. 2008. "Inversion and Topicalization in Farsi Discourse" in *Aspects in Iranian Linguistics*. Simin Karimi, Vida Samiian, and Donald Stilo (Eds.). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publication, pp. 277-288.
- Ward, Gregory and Birner, Betty J. 2004. "Information Structure and Non-canonical Syntax." in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*. Horn Laurence and Gregory Ward (Eds.). Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 152-174.
- Ward, Gregory. 1999. "A comparison of postposed subjects in English and Italian" in *Pragmatics & beyond. New series*. Akio Kamio and Ken-ichi Takami (Eds.). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 3-21.

Notes on the author

Soheila Shafiei comes from Iran where she learned to fight for freedom. This did not decrease her great love of learning. She graduated from Azad University with a master's degree in *Teaching English as a Second Language* in 1998. Having faced struggles for more than 15 years, she decided to carry on with her education to learn more. NTNU (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) gave her a new chance to enjoy a learning experience where she completed her master in *English Linguistics and Language Acquisition* in 2013. She is interested in linguistics and pragmatics and has worked with Persian grammar in both fields.