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Close or open set? An account of morphosyntax of compound prepositions in Persian

From among different primary categories of Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives and Prepositions, the last has attracted the least attention, morphologically, due to the apparently poor productivity. What can mainly be found in the literature of Persian prepositions in this regard is a short list of simple prepositions and rarely some additional doubtful compound ones without any analytic approach towards their production rules. In fact, most of traditional linguists maintain that this category is a close set and there is no sign of newborn items carrying the label “preposition” (e.g. Shafaii, 1984). However there are also some modern linguists (e.g. Samiian, 1991) who have some contributions towards preposition reanalysis.

In this paper we show that the category of prepositions is not only an open set but also a very productive one. We believe that although simple prepositions like */bar/* (on) are not infinite in number but there are explicit morphosyntactic rules to produce new lexemes (e.g. */bar asāse/* “on the basis”) in this category like other categories and prepositions are not deprived ones, as some may believe, in morphology. All different patterns of preposition construction are presented in this paper. What we focus mainly in this paper would be as follows:

First, it is proved that prepositions are expanded through a particular morphosyntactic process of “Incorporation” to make new compound words. This process is neither a totally morphologic nor a pure syntactic process but to a degree of both. Incorporation, first introduced by Baker (1988) to account for some sort of compound words which showed two folded behavior, is proposed to account for interface of morphology and syntax. Second, in this paper, all prepositions are classified into four main groups of compound prepositions, composition of a simple preposition and a noun in 4 forms of: 1) preposition + noun, e.g. */bar asāse/* (on the basis of), 2) noun + preposition, e.g. */rāje be/* (about), 3) preposition + nouns showing place or time, e.g. */bar ruye/* (on), 4) nouns showing place or time + preposition, e.g. */pošt be/* (back to). Third, as a result, it is argued that in the process of preposition construction, there is always a simple Preposition and a Noun or a “neutralized Noun” involved. What is meant by the latter phrase is that the non-prepositional part of compound prepositions is a newly born preposition involved; a noun that has lost the [+noun] feature of itself in the transition of time and is going to be an absolute preposition in near future. In this regard we resort to Chomsky’s (1970) categorization of primary features of the basic categories, for simple prepositions as [-V, -N] and for neutralized noun and prepositions-to-be as [-V, 0N]. In this paper, following Riemsdijk (1983) and partially Samiian (1991) -as we disagree with her on which category is going to be neutralized- we consider them nouns neutralized in [+N] feature that together with prepositions have the [-V] feature in common. Adapting Emonds’ generalization (1985), we put these elements together with conjunctions and classic prepositions in one category : “preposition”. Forth, and the last topic to be discussed in this paper is to maintain that as there are always nouns falling in the group of those tending to be neutralized in [+N] feature, there is always possibility of expansion of the category of preposition.

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