

The Suffix that Makes Persian Nouns Unique

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Overview Despite its widespread usage in Persian definite and indefinite constructions, the nominal suffix *-e* has not received much attention in Iranian linguistics. The current consensus is that *-e* is an informal marker of definiteness (Ghomeshi 2003) and that a nominal with *-e* alone (N-*e*) is definite. However, we bring evidence of the widespread and systematic usage of *-e* with the indefinite determiner *ye*. The co-presence of *ye* and *-e* (*ye*-N-*e*) makes the nominal scopally specific (Farkas 1994). However, we argue that such specific indefinites are better analyzed as scopally inert singleton indefinites (Schwarzschild 2002). To capture the contribution of *-e* to both definites and indefinites, we suggest that *-e* enforces uniqueness on the noun it modifies. In the absence of the indefinite determiner *ye*, the nominal is type-shifted via Partee (1986)'s iota, and the uniqueness implication of *-e* is rendered presuppositional. When *ye* is present, a singleton indefinite is formed that cannot participate in scope relations. Under this analysis, *-e* is considered a Uniqueness Marker. We provide a compositional analysis of definite and indefinite constructions with the nominal suffix *-e*.

Empirical Observations Modern colloquial Persian has no marker of definiteness but marks indefinites with the indefinite determiner *ye*. Bare nominals like *bache* “child” in (1) are ambiguous between generic, existential, and definite readings (Toosarvandani & Nasser 2014). Indefinites like (2) are ambiguous between specific and nonspecific readings. The nominal suffix *-e* (or *-he* after vowels) resolves these ambiguities on bare nominals and indefinites. In the examples below, *-e* ▶ to the left of a reading indicates that if *-e* is present, the reading to the right of the arrow is the only available one.

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|---|---|
| (1) <i>bache</i> (- <i>he</i>) <i>gerye mi-kon-e</i>
child(-UM) cry MI-do-3.SG
- “Children cry.” (Generic)
- “Some child is crying.” (Existential)
<i>-e</i> ▶ - “The child is crying.” (Definite) | (2) <i>ye bache</i> (- <i>he</i>) <i>gerye mi-kon-e</i>
I.D child(-UM) cry MI-do-3.SG
- “A child is crying.” (Nonspecific)
<i>-e</i> ▶ - “A certain child is crying.”
(Specific) |
|---|---|

In both (1) and (2), the presence of *-e* conveys the uniqueness of the nominal. In (1), *-e* is interpreted similar to definites with *the* in English. In (2), it is interpreted similar to specific indefinites with *some* or *a certain*. While bare nominals and indefinites with *-e* both carry uniqueness implications, they have different contextual requirements. Bare nominals with *-e* require their uniqueness to be common ground between interlocutors while indefinites with *-e* can be uttered informatively out of the blue. In a context where students are sitting in a class, someone can come in and shout (4) but not (3).

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|---|---|
| (3) # <i>pesar-e bihush shod-e</i>
boy-UM unconscious become-3.SG
“The boy has passed out!” | (4) <i>ye pesar-e bihush shod-e</i>
I.D boy-UM unconscious become-3.SG
“Some boy has passed out!” |
|---|---|

We show that the uniqueness implication of *-e* is not targeted by entailment canceling operators such as conditional antecedents. Whether the indefinite determiner is present or not, the sentence in (5) implies that there is a unique boy under consideration in the utterance context.

- (5) *age (ye) pesar-e biad, man mi-ra-m*
if (I.D) boy-UM comes, I MI-go-1.SG
“If (a certain / the) boy comes, I will leave.” \rightsquigarrow *There is a unique boy.*

We also show that indefinites marked by *-e* always appear to take the widest possible scope. The sentence in (6) is ambiguous between a wide scope and an intermediate scope existential when *-e* is absent but in the presence of this suffix, only the wide scope reading is available. We show that in the presence of the nominal suffix *-e*, similar apparent wide scope readings are obtained in de-re/de-dicto sentences or with temporal adverbials.

- (6) har doxtar hame-ye eshtebā-hā-ye ye-pesar(-e) ro tasih kard-ø
 every girl all-EZAFE mistake-PL-EZAFE Indef.D-boy(-UM) OM correct do-3.SG
 “For every girl, there was a boy that the girl corrected all his mistakes” ($\forall > \exists > \forall$)
-e ▶ “There is a boy that every girl corrected all his mistakes.” ($\exists > \forall > \forall$)

Analysis We adopt the following assumptions about Persian nominal semantics from Jasbi (2016): First, common nouns are of type $\langle e, t \rangle$. Second, the indefinite determiner *ye* introduces an existential quantifier. Third, since Persian has no definite determiner, it relies on covert type shifting via Partee (1986)’s *iota* operator. We propose that the nominal suffix *-e* is an identity function that enforces a uniqueness implication on the noun it modifies ($\lambda P[|P| = 1]$). This implication restricts the extension of the noun to a singleton.

Our proposal accounts for the effect of the suffix *-e* on both definite and indefinite constructions. In definite examples like (1), with the absence of the indefinite determiner *ye* and the presence of the nominal suffix *-e*, the nominal extension can be type-shifted via *iota*. Type-shifting by *iota* further requires the uniqueness implication to be common ground as shown in (3). In examples like (2), the presence of the indefinite determiner *ye* blocks the application of *iota*. Since *iota* is blocked, the *ye-N-e* construction imposes no common ground constraints as shown in (4). The uniqueness implication of *-e* simply limits the domain of the existential quantifier introduced by *ye*, resulting in a singleton indefinite (Schwarzschild 2002). For such constructions, scope relations with other operators such as the universal quantifier, modals, or temporal adverbials are made inert - there can be no variation for the nominal value with respect to these operators. We argue that this phenomenon gives rise to an appearance of wide scope in examples like (6).

Summary We investigate the properties of two Persian colloquial constructions: *N-e* and *ye-N-e*. We show that *N-e* is definite while *ye-N-e* is best characterized as a singleton indefinite. We propose that the shared property of these two constructions is uniqueness, which is contributed by the Uniqueness Marker *-e*. We provide a compositional analysis of the two constructions with *-e* and situate it within a broader theory of definites and indefinites in modern colloquial Persian.

References Jasbi, M. 2016. Three types of indefinites in Persian: Simple, complex, and antidefinite. In Mary Moroney, Carol-Rose Little, D. B. and Collard, J., editors, Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory 26, pages 244-263. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications. Partee, B. 1986. Noun phrase interpretation and type-shifting principles. In Groenendijk, J., de Jongh, D., and Stokhof, M., editors, Studies in Discourse Representation Theory and the Theory of Generalized Quantifiers, pages 115-143. Dordrecht: Foris. Potts, C. 2005. The Logic of Conventional Implicatures. Oxford, Oxford University Press. Schwarzschild, R. 2002. Singleton indefinites. Journal of Semantics, 19(3):289-314. Toosarvandani, M. and Nasser, H. 2015. Quantification in Persian. In Keenan, E. L. and Paperno, D., editors, Handbook of Quantifiers in Natural Language. Springer, 2nd edition.