

## The Semantics of *rā*: let's be more specific!

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**Overview** The semantic contribution of the Persian object marker *rā* has been a matter of debate. The proposals include definiteness (Mahootian 1997, among others), specificity (Karimi 1990), and topicality (Dabir-Moghaddam 1992). I argue that even though these proposals are different in their details, they share a core notion that correctly captures the object marker's main contribution to sentence meaning: presuppositionality (Ghomeshi 1996). I provide a compositional account that captures the meaning of the object marker in Persian definite and indefinite constructions. I propose that *rā* triggers an existence presupposition. In the absence of the indefinite determiner *ye*, the NP is type-shifted to yield a definite construction. When *ye* is present, the composition of *ye* and *rā* results in a presuppositional indefinite. Finally, I show how this account captures several novel empirical observations on the distribution of *rā*.

**Previous Accounts and Empirical Observations** When comparing (1a) and (1b), a possible generalization is that *rā* in Persian carries the meaning of definite articles like English *the*. However, such a definiteness account fails to account for examples like (1c), where *rā* appears with the indefinite determiner *ye*. To resolve this issue, Mahootian (1997, 201) defined definiteness as a scale and suggested that *rā* marks object NPs toward the more definite end of the scale. In such a definiteness account, NPs like the one in (1c) are “somewhat definite” since “they refer to some delimited class of objects.”

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|-----|----|--|----|--|
| (1) | a. | Ali ketāb xarid<br>Ali book buy.PST.3SG<br>“Ali bought one or more books.”     | c. | Ali <b>ye</b> ketāb- <b>o</b> xarid<br>Ali Indef.D book-OM buy.PST.3SG<br>“Ali bought one of the books.” (Partitive)<br>“Ali bought a certain book.” (Epistemic) |
|     | b. | Ali ketāb- <b>o</b> xarid<br>Ali book-OM buy.PST.3SG<br>“Ali bought the book.” |    |  |

Karimi (1990, 1996) suggests that the semantic contribution of *rā* can be better captured by the notion of specificity. However, specificity can be defined in several ways. Farkas (1994) enumerates three main definitions of specificity: 1. Epistemic (Fodor & Sag 1982) 2. Scopal and 3. Partitive (Enc1991). With epistemic specificity, the speaker has an intended referent in mind. Dabir-Moghaddam (1992) points out that unmarked objects can also be epistemically specific (2a) and object-marked NPs are sometimes generic (2b). I also add (2c) where *rā* appears on a free-choice indefinite. The meaning of (2c) cannot be “Pick a card that I have in mind”. Therefore, epistemic specificity fails to capture the semantics of *rā*.

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|-----|----|---|----|--|
| (2) | a. | ye ketāb xarid-am<br>Indef.D book buy.PST-1SG<br>“I bought a book.”                                   | c. | ye kārt(- <b>o</b> ) bardār!<br>Indef.D card(-OM) pick<br>“Pick a card!” |
|     | b. | chetori gusfand(- <b>o</b> ) mi-kosh-an?<br>how sheep(-OM) MI-kill-3PL<br>“How do they kill a sheep?” |    |  |

An indefinite is scopally specific if it takes wide scope. Ghomeshi (1997) uses (3) to show that *rā*-marked objects are not scopally specific either. (3) is not necessarily interpreted as “There is a student that every teacher introduced.” In fact the narrow scope reading is the dominant one.

- (3) hame-ye moallem-ā ye shāgerd-i-**ro** mo'arrefi kard-an  
all-EZ teacher-PL Indef.D student-Indef.C-OM introduce do.PST-3PL  
“Every teacher introduced a (different) student.”

