

Ahmad Reza Lotfi

English Language Department,

Islamic Azad University-Khorasgan (Isfahan) Branch

Persian *Ezafe* as a ‘figure’ marker: A unified analysis

Abstract

This article is a conceptual exploration of *Ezafe* in Modern Persian. I will consider cases where *Ezafe* seems to be conceptually non-neutral. In certain cases of the ‘X-e Y’ construction, X and Y can change their places with a shift in meaning while they are apparently frozen in their positions in other cases of *Ezafe* construction. The question to address here is if the *Ezafe* element -e marks any conceptual relation between X (*Mozaf*) and Y (*Mozafon-elaih*). I hypothesize that the degree of the conceptual integration of X and Y is a defining characteristic of the a/symmetry of the relation between X and Y in such cases. Moreover, I propose to analyze Persian *Ezafe* as the grammaticalized marker of the *figure-ground* organization of information. This conceptual analysis of *Ezafe* also seems to have bearing on formal accounts of the phenomena under discussion here. As such, the article is expected to afford a moderate degree of unification of both formal and conceptual accounts of language in this respect.

Keywords: *Ezafe* construction; figure; ground; salience; Persian; Cognitive Grammar; minimalist syntax

1. Introduction

Ezafe (literally ‘annexation’) or *jancteur* (‘linker’) is an obligatory element inside Persian noun phrases that links the head noun to its dependants, as in examples below:

(1)

ketab-e Bahram	N + N _{possessor}
book-EZ Bahram	
‘Bahram’s book’	

sa’at-e kar	N + N _{modifier}
hours-EZ working	
‘working hours’	

neveshtan-e ketab	N + N _{complement}
writing-EZ book	
‘writing a book’	

In examples above, the head noun X is annexed to its nominal dependant Y through the indispensable mediation of *-e* (realized as *-ye* in cases with a vowel at the end of X), then X-(y)e Y. In traditional Persian grammars, X is termed *Mozaf* ('annexe') and Y *Mozafon-elaih* ('annexed-to'). The element *-e* is termed *Kasre-ye Ezafe* ('*-e* of annexation').

Persian linguists are not unanimous in their analyses of the origins of Persian *Ezafe*. Moyne (1971) believes that *-e* developed from a non-enclitic relative pronoun in Old Persian. Moyne and Carden (1974) consider it an originally reduced relative clause. According to Windfuhr (1979), *-e* originally is the predicative 'is'. With regard to its grammatical function(s) in Modern Persian, they are even more divided among themselves. For Samiian (1983), *Ezafe* is "syntactically motivated by the relationship between the head noun and the phrasal modifier and therefore it is triggered by the occurrence of the latter (Samiian 1983:39)." Karimi and Brame (1986), on the other hand, argue that the class of nominals (including Persian prepositions) trigger for the insertion of *Ezafe*. Still on the other hand, Samiian (1994) suggests that Case is the trigger for *Ezafe*. She proposes that Case-assigning categories are [-N], and that *Ezafe* is attached only to categories that do not assign Case. She also makes a distinction between two types of prepositions in Persian: Type I prepositions are those like *dar* ('in') with [-V, -N] categorial features. They assign cases, and, as a result, *Ezafe* will not be annexed to them. Type II prepositions (e.g. *zir*), on the other hand, are neutralized with regard to their [-N] feature. It follows that *Ezafe* appears on them necessarily. Hashemipour (1989) analyzes *Ezafe* as a structural Case marker annexed to nouns, adjectives and some prepositions. For Karimi (1989, 1990), it is not a Case assigner, but it still transfers the Case of the head noun to its complement. Also Larson and Yamakido (2005) analyze *Ezafe* as a Case marker. Kahnemuyipour (2000) treats it as realizing a strong feature and marking the syntactic movement of the noun within the framework of the minimalist syntax.

Ghomeshi (1997) challenges the view that *Ezafe* is a Case marker/transferer with the question "why there are Case requirements *within* the NP in Persian. That is, while it is assumed that noun phrases require Case, and furthermore that possessive noun phrases within noun phrases also require Case, it is not necessarily clear why other types of modifiers within noun phrases, such as adjectives and attributive nouns, need Case (Ghomeshi 1997:751)." Moreover, she cannot view *Ezafe* as a morpheme heading any syntactic projection as "it iterates throughout the noun phrase and appears in adjective and prepositional phrases also (Ghomeshi 1997:737)." She concludes that *Ezafe* is not a morpheme but a mere vowel "inserted at PF on a lexical [+N] element that is followed by another independent constituent within the same extended projection (Ghomeshi 1997:781)." She proposes some *Ezafe* Insertion Rule according to which the unstressed vowel *-e* is inserted on a lexical head with the feature [+N] once followed by "phonetically realized, non-affixal material within the same extended projection (Ghomeshi 1997:781)." As such, *Ezafe* "serves to identify constituenthood (Ghomeshi 1997:786)."

Despite significant differences among the syntactic accounts of *Ezafe* reviewed above, there seems to be at least one basic tenet underlying all these formal analyses of the phenomena under study here: the semantic superfluity of the linker! Case is unanimously considered to be a non-interpretable feature in generative accounts of syntax. It follows that *Ezafe*, whether a Case marker/transferer or a marker of movement realizing a strong feature, must be semantically void. Also Ghomeshi's analysis of *-e* as a PF phenomenon serving to identify constituent structure seems to stress the irrelevance of *Ezafe* to the question of meaning. This is in perfect agreement with Samvelian's (2005) claim that *Ezafe* "is semantically vacuous and conveys purely syntactic information (Samvelian 2005:25)." She regards *Ezafe* as a phrasal affix that functions as an indicator of dependency relations between the head noun and its dependants. For her, the restrictions on the *Ezafe* construction

are due to its morphological status, on the one hand, and its interaction with other phrasal affixes within the NP, on the other. On a more general tone, she defines linkers (including the Chinese *de*, the Tagalog *na* and *ng*, and the Persian *-e*) as “meaningless items whose sole function is to connect a head to its modifiers (Samvelian 2005:26).”

This article is a *conceptual* exploration of *Ezafe* in Modern Persian. I will consider cases where *Ezafe* seems to be conceptually non-neutral. In certain cases of the ‘X-e Y’ construction, X and Y can change their places with a shift in meaning while they are apparently frozen in their positions in other cases of *Ezafe* construction. The question to address here is if the *Ezafe* element *-e* marks any conceptual relation between X (*Mozaf*) and Y (*Mozafon-elaih*). I hypothesize that the degree of the conceptual integration of X and Y is a defining characteristic of the a/symmetry of the relation between X and Y in such cases. Moreover, I propose to analyze Persian *Ezafe* as the grammaticalized marker of the *figure-ground* organization of information. This conceptual analysis of *Ezafe* also seems to have bearing on formal accounts of the phenomena under discussion. As such, the article is expected to afford a moderate degree of unification of both formal and conceptual accounts of language in this respect.

2. Grammar and conceptualization

In cognitive approaches to the study of language including Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar (1987, 1991, 1999, 2008), syntax does not constitute an autonomous formal level of representation. Moreover, categorization is primarily viewed by cognitivists and functionalists as non-discrete, and as a result, a matter of degree. Categorization, according to Langacker (2008:58), is a manifestation of a general feature of human cognition: “[C]ategorization ... succeeds to the extent that the categorizing structure is recognized within the experience being categorized. The categorizing structure lies in the background, taken for grounded as a preestablished basis for assessment, while the target is in the foreground of awareness as the structure being observed and assessed (Langacker 2008:58.” Also of importance are *construals* in conceptual accounts of language. Construals refer to the ways in which the relative salience of elements is mentally shaped and structured. As Sharifian and Lotfi (2003) put it, “construal refers to imagery developed in the mind for different aspects of the experience (Sharifian and Lotfi 2003:228).” In Cognitive Grammar (CG), grammatical distinctions are viewed as markers of subtle distinctions in construal. For example, different possibilities in the organization of an event in terms of *figure* and *ground* are reflected in passive and active versions of the same sentence.

The distinction Langacker makes between a *reference point* and its *target* could be of particular relevance to a conceptual analysis of Persian *Ezafe*. According to Langacker (2008:83) “[w]e have the ability to invoke the conception of one entity in order to establish ‘mental contact’ with another. The entity first invoked is called a *reference point*, and one accessed via a reference point is referred to as a *target*.” The reference point’s *dominion* is the set of potential targets perceived collectively:

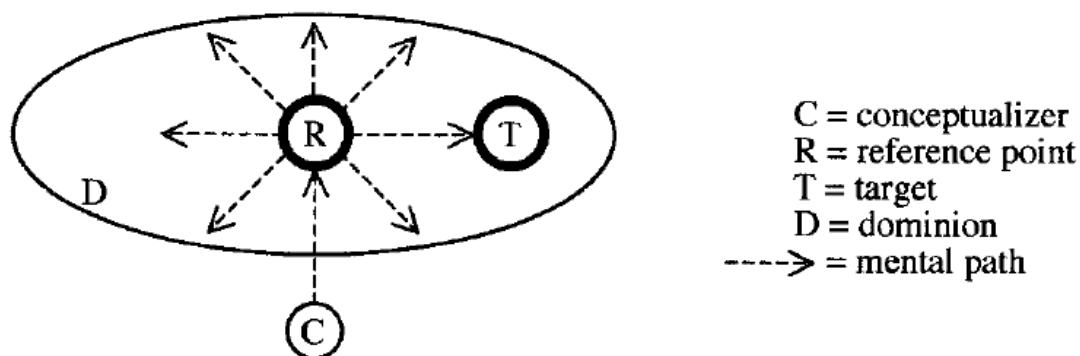


Figure 1. Reference point's dominion (Langacker 2008:84)

For Langacker, the possessor-possessed relationship grammaticalized in English as the possessive construction *Y's X* is an example of the conceptual relationship between a reference-point and its target. As his examples in (26) (a) and (b) (repeated here as 1(a) and (b)) indicate, "it is usually infelicitous to reverse the choice of possessor and possessed (Langacker 2008:84)."

- (1) (a) *the boy's shoe; Jeff's uncle; the cat's paw; their lice; the baby's diaper; my train; Sally's job; our problem; her enthusiasm; its location; your candidate; the city's destruction*
- (b) **the shoe's boy; *the paw's cat; *the diaper's baby; *the destruction's city*

He concludes that "[t]his irreversibility reflects the intrinsic asymmetry of a reference point relationship, where conceiving of one entity makes it possible to mentally access another. As a schematic and fully general description, it is thus proposed that a possessor functions as a reference point, and the possessed as its target (Langacker 2008:84)."

Although he correctly observes that it is only *usually* infelicitous (emphasis mine) to reverse the order of the elements involved in possessive expressions, one also needs to bear in mind that *Y* and *X* in the English possessive construction *Y's X* are not necessarily the possessor and the possessed (not even in Langacker's own examples). *The city*, for instance, does not possess *destruction*, nor does *Jeff* his *uncle*. Even the relation between a cat and its paw seems to be one between the whole and its parts rather than the possessor and the possessed. While a true possessor-possessed relationship does not seem to be reversible, some other relations captured in terms of the English possessive construction could be:

- (2) (a) *the teacher's students; the mother's baby; the leader's country*
- (b) *the students' teacher; the baby's mother; the country's leader*

3. The figure/ground alignment

For gestalt psychologists (e.g. Koffka 1935), the visual/auditory input is organized in terms of the salience of its different parts. What is singled out as the figure prototypically contains thing-like qualities such as shape, contour, structure and coherence. The ground, on the other hand, is usually shapeless, uniform and unstructured. Moreover, the figure is more likely to be moved around than the ground. To sum up, the figure is part of the input which is perceived as more *salient* than the ground. In the scene depicted in Figure 2 below, for instance, the cat and the roof are readily perceived as the figure and the ground respectively:

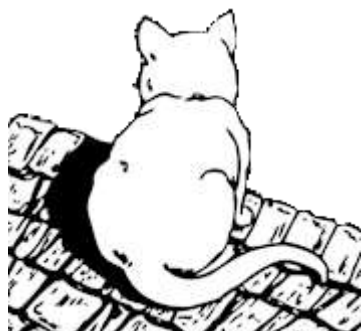


Figure 2. Figure and ground: cat and roof

Cognitive linguists as early as Talmy (1978) had already noticed how the figure/ground distinction was rendered in words. For instance, language-users are more likely to describe the situation depicted in Figure 2 as ‘the cat is *on* the roof’ than ‘the roof is *under* the cat’. Likewise, it is more likely to say that ‘*the bicycle is near the church*’ than ‘*the church is near the bicycle*’. Also more natural to say ‘*the car crashed into the tree*’ than ‘*the tree was hit by the car*’. According to Talmy (2000), language relies on a cognitive system in which a concept is established as a reference point or *anchor* for another concept. The figure is a fundamental cognitive function of language performed by the concept in need of anchoring. The ground, on the other hand, is the cognitive function that does the anchoring. Talmy identifies the properties outlined in (3) below as those that favour figure or ground in the domain of spatial relations:

(3)	<p>Figure location less known smaller more mobile structurally simpler more salient more recent in awareness</p>	<p>Ground location more known larger more stationary structurally more complex more backgrounded earlier on scene/in memory</p>
-----	---	--

Although visual scenes in our daily lives usually suggest some particular figure/ground segregation, it is still possible for visual scenes in certain cases to allow a ‘figure/ground reversal’. The well-known face/vase illusion depicted in Figure 3 is a good example of this reversal:

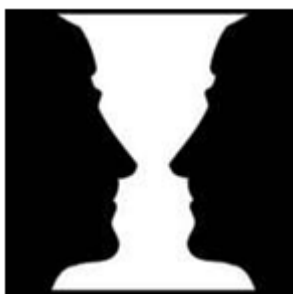


Figure 3. The face/vase illusion

Concerning the visual scene in Figure 3, we may perceive it either as a vase or two faces. Significantly, we can only see one of these two figures at a time. Once the vase is perceived

as the figure, the two faces will be reduced to the ground, and vice versa. As far as language is concerned, it is also possible to afford such reversals under certain circumstances. For example, both ‘*the bank is near the post office*’ and ‘*the post office is near the bank*’ are congruent. They are different in that the former organizes the bank and the post office as the figure and ground respectively. The other reverses the arrangement of information.

4. Persian *Ezafe* as a ‘figure’ marker

In this section, I explore the possibility that (contrary to the *Y*’s *X* construction in English, e.g. in *the boy’s shoe*), the *X-e Y* construction in Persian, as in *livan-e ab* (the glass of water), is more compatible with the figure-ground organization of the event. I hypothesize that (a) the *Ezafe* morpheme is a conceptualizer annexed to what the speaker perceives as the figure, and that (b) in the *Ezafe* construction *X-e Y*, the <*X,Y*> order is reversible to <*Y,X*>, e.g. in *ab-e livan* (the water in the glass) but only in cases where no ‘intrinsic salience’ is associated with either of the entities.

Table 1 displays a number of irreversible *Ezafe* constructions in Persian which are frequently employed irrespective of mode of communication, style and dialect. As the data suggest, the irreversible cases are mainly confined to the relationships part-whole, possessed-possessor, actor-location, and functor-variable¹:

Table 1. Irreversible *Ezafe* constructions in Persian

part-whole	possessed-possessor	actor-location	functor-variable
pelleha-ye sakhteman steps-EZ building ‘steps of the building’ *sakhteman-ye pelleha	ketab-e pedar book-EZ father ‘father’s book’ *pedar-e ketab	negahban-e زندان guard-EZ prison ‘prison guard’ *zندان-e negahban	avaz-e parande singing-EZ bird ‘singing of the bird’ *parande-ye avaz
sandali-ye mashin seat-EZ car ‘car seat’ *mashin-e sandal	shishe-ye bache bottle-EZ baby ‘baby’s milk bottle’ *bache-ye shishe	police-e autobahn police-EZ freeway ‘freeway police’ *autobahn-e police	shostan-e lebas washing-EZ clothes ‘washing the clothes’ *lebas-e shostan
kaf-e dast bottom-EZ hand ‘palm’ *dast-e kaf	qallade-ye sag collar-EZ dog ‘dog collar’ *sag-e qallade	garson-e restaurant waiter-EZ restaurant ‘restaurant waiter’ *restaurant-e garson	tamasha-ye television watching-EZ television ‘watching television’ *television-e tamasha

In Section 5, I argue that the irreversible constructions in Table 1 are cases in which some *intrinsic salience* is associated with *Mozaf/annexe* (*X* in *X-e Y*) so that the <*X,Y*> order will be inevitable.

Reversible *Ezafe* constructions are exemplified in Table 2 below. The relationships of interest here include container-content, producer-product, group-member, and head-body.

¹ The variable complemented to the functor may be an *agent*, *patient*, *experiencer*, *result*, or an argument performing any other participant role.

Table 2. Reversible *Ezafe* constructions in Persian

Container-content	producer-product	group-member	head-body
khane-ye arvah house-EZ ghosts 'house of ghosts' arvah-e khane ghosts-EZ house 'ghosts of the house'	nevisande-ye ketab writer-EZ book 'writer of the book' ketab-e nevisande book-EZ writer 'writer's book'	galle-ye gusfandan flock-EZ sheep 'flock of sheep' gusfandan-e galle sheep-EZ flock 'sheep in the flock'	chupan-e galle shepherd-EZ flock 'shepherd of the flock' galle-ye chupan flock-EZ shepherd 'shepherd's flock'
autobus-e mofaferan bus-EZ passengers 'passengers' bus' mofaferan-e autobus passengers-EZ bus 'passengers in the bus'	naqqash-e asar painter-EZ painting 'painter of the painting' asar-e naqqash painting-EZ painter 'painter's painting'	goruh-e navazandegan group-EZ musicians 'band of musicians' navazandegan-e goruh musicians-EZ group 'musicians of the band'	asb-e gari horse-EZ cart 'horse drawing the cart' gari-ye asb cart-EZ horse 'cart drawn by the horse'
divan-e ash'ar collection-EZ poems 'collection of poems' ash'ar-e divan poems-EZ collection 'poems in the collection'	madar-e bache mother-EZ baby 'baby's mother' bache-ye madar baby-EZ mother 'mother's baby'	ettehadiye-ye kargar union-EZ workers 'labour union' kargar-e ettehadiye workers-EZ union 'workers in the union'	ranande-ye mashin driver-EZ car 'driver of the car' mashin-e ranande car-EZ driver 'driver's car'

The reversible constructions depicted in Table 2 are cases in which salience is associated (with either X or Y) rather extrinsically. In other words, there is no salience associated with *Mozaf/annexe* (or X in X-e Y) due to its intrinsic semantic relationship with *Mozafon-elaih/annexed-to* (Y in X-e Y). Instead, the salience comes from outside (more on this in Section 5).

The semantic categories exemplified above are understood rather metaphorically. For instance, the container-content relationship includes more prototypical cases like cup-coffee, and pond-water but also more abstract instances like album-photos, bus-passengers, and collection-poems. Likewise, the producer-product relationship extends to mother-baby in addition to better examples such as poet-poem and writer-book. The head-body relationship is not an exception either: The body is the entity or entities left in head's charge for movement, management, or supervision. The head is a supervisor for other humans or a group of animals.

5. Integrity, salience perception and the 'figure/ground reversal'

Although the salience of certain component(s) of an event or scene over others does not seem to be an attribute of such components themselves (but that of our perception of these things), it still makes sense to consider the salience of certain components more readily available to the human cognition than others. In other words, the human perception may be biased towards the salience of certain event parts under certain circumstances. In other cases, we find it a matter of our own decision to perceive some part or the other as more salient. In most cases investigated in Section 5, I attribute the presence or absence of perceptual bias

(towards salience) to the degree of the integration of one entity into another. Moreover, I argue that ‘figure/ground reversal’ (and, as a result, the conceptual reversibility of *Mozaf* and *Mozafon-elaih* in Persian *Ezafe* constructions) is negatively correlated with the bias with which salience is perceived of.

In what follows, I explore how integrity, salience, and the ‘figure/ground reversal’ are conceptually interrelated in Persian *Ezafe* constructions:

The Integrity Hypothesis

The asymmetry of an *Ezafe* construction is proportional to the degree of the integration of the entities X and Y serving as *Mozaf* and *Mozafon-elaih*: (a) If X is tightly integrated into Y, X will be intrinsically more salient than Y, and, as a result, the construction will be irreversible. (b) When X is loosely/not integrated into Y, either X or Y may be perceived as more salient, and the construction will be reversible.

5.1. Intrinsic salience

The salience of one part of an event/scene over another is intrinsic if we are cognitively biased to perceive that part as salient (i.e. as the figure), and the other as non-salient (the ground). In such cases, the ground intrinsically serves as the reference point or anchor for another. No reversal of figure and ground (nor that of *Mozaf* and *Mozafon-elaih*) is permissible under such circumstances. In what follows, I analyze irreversible *Ezafe* constructions (exemplified in Table 1) as semantic types involving intrinsic salience.

5.1.1. The part-whole relationship

As shown with integrand boundaries in Figure 4(a), parts are strongly integrated into the whole: A window, for instance, is an opening in a wall of a building. Obviously a building consists of many other parts in addition to such openings. But an ordinary window is expected to be part of some walled roofed structure after all. We expect the concept building to function as an anchor for the target concept window, but not vice versa. Then a part cannot be backgrounded (nor the whole foregrounded) intrinsically. In other words, we are cognitively biased to perceive a part as the figure, and the whole as the ground (Fig 4.b). If, on the other hand, the whole is forced to function as the figure (as in Fig 4.c), parts will be inevitably foregrounded together with the integrated whole:

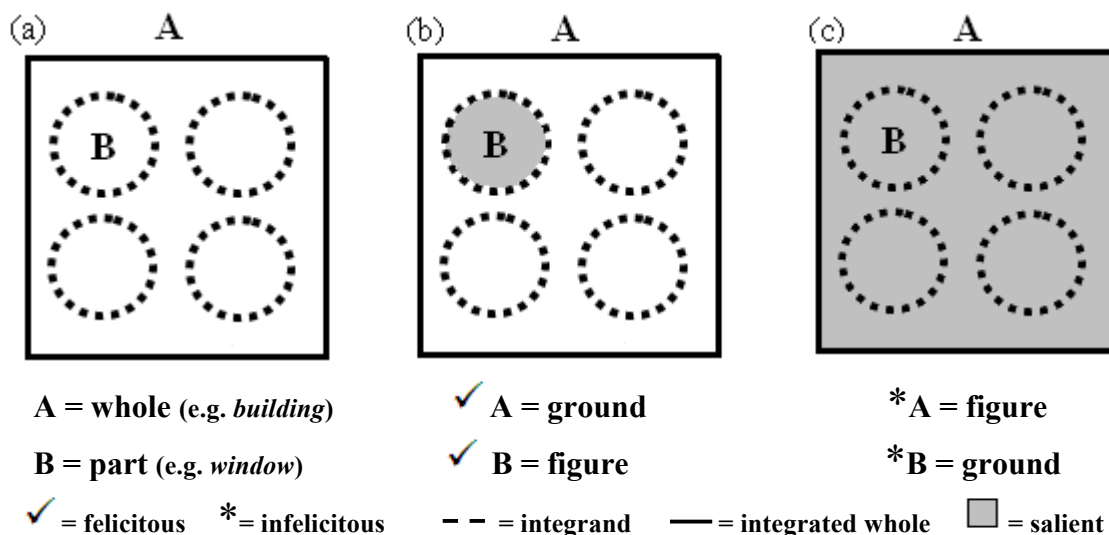


Figure 4. Intrinsic salience in the part-whole relationship (as in (b) *panjere-ye sakhteman/the window of the building* (b), and (c) **sakhteman-e panjere/*the building of the window*)

This will result in an infelicity because the part is in both foreground and background. Moreover, “a foreground is salient relative to its background (Langacker 2008:66).” With no perceptual access to the ground, which is ‘masked’ under the figure (Fig.4.c), there is no reference point to anchor the salient figure. It follows that the relation between part and whole is intrinsically asymmetrical.

As examples in Table 1 indicated, *Ezafe* constructions depicting the part-whole relationship are irreversible in Persian. The syntactic asymmetry of the relationship between *Mozaf* and *Mozafon-elaih* here is a reflection of the cognitive asymmetry of the part and the whole when it comes to the figure-ground organization of information. Such a correlation between Persian data and human perceptual experiences lends support to the Langackerian thesis according to which grammatical meanings are cognitive abilities applicable to different contents.

5.1.2. The possessed-possessor relationship

The sentient entity A possesses B iff A is granted a potentially permanent (though both transferable and revocable) right to use B, also the authority to let others do so either permanently or temporarily. Possessors are prototypically independent controllers with the attribute [+Sentient]. Possessions, on the other hand, are normally dependent, non-human, controlled entities that may or may not be sentient. A possessor is neither temporally nor causally prior to the possessed. Although neither of them will be physically disintegrated if the other ceases to exist, the relation itself will be abruptly terminated under such circumstances. At least in cultures with a well-established tradition of private ownership, the possessed-possessor relationship involves a relatively high degree of the integration of the former into the latter. In such cultures, what we have is part of what we are.

Langacker (2008:84) considers the possessed-possessor relationship as an example of the conceptual relationship between a reference point and its target where the possessor functions as a reference point, and the possessed as its target. Talmy (2000) approaches anchor and target in terms of the figure/ground distinction: The figure is a cognitive function performed by a concept in need of anchoring, and the ground is the function that does the anchoring. A juxtaposition of these two (plus the distinction I made between intrinsic and extrinsic salience) leads to the conclusion that the possessed-possessor relationship is intrinsically

organized along an asymmetry between the figure as a salient target and the ground as a non-salient anchor (reference point).

Figure 5 depicts the *inception* of the possessed-possessor relationship. The possessed is conceptually integrated into the possessor. The relationship itself is asymmetrical given the different statuses of the possessed and the possessor with regard to such factors as control and dependence. The asymmetry will be reflected in the *intrinsic salience* of the possessed as the figure function (e.g. in Fig. 5b). The mind resists the conception of the integrated possessor as the target given its inevitable masking effect on the integrand (the possessed), which makes its anchoring function unavailable (Fig. 5c). This, by its turn, renders infelicitous the figure/ground organization of entities in (5c):

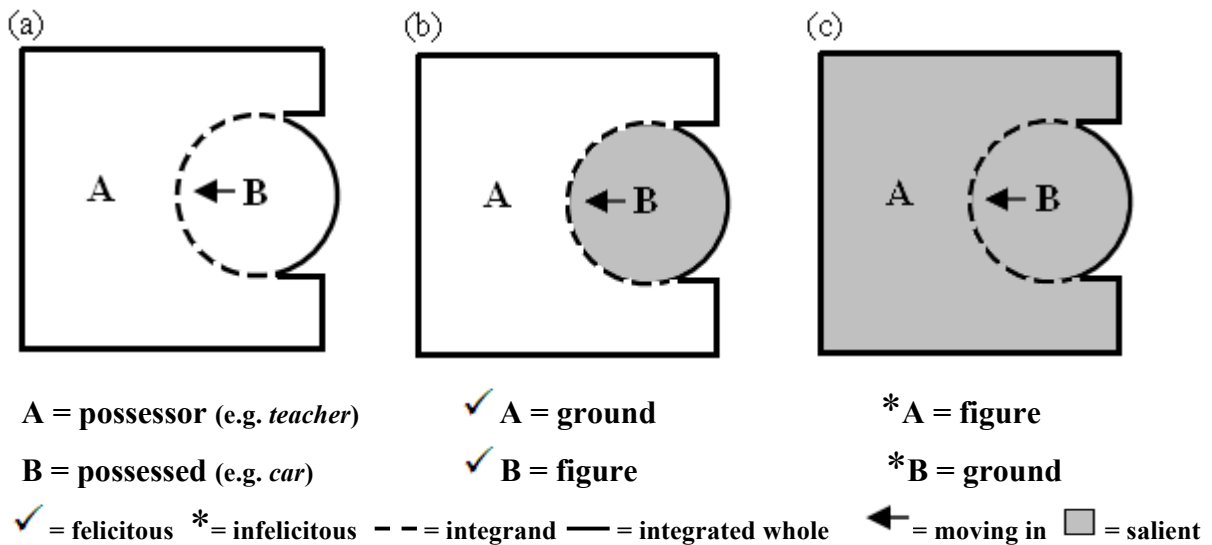


Figure 5. Intrinsic salience in the possessed-possessor relationship (as in (b) *mashin-e mo'alem/the teacher's car*, and (c) **mo'alem-e mashin/*the car's teacher*)

For the possessed-possessor relationship, the asymmetry of the *Ezafe* construction follows naturally (Table 1).

5.1.3. The actor-location relationship

An actor is a sentient entity capable of performing a volitional action (such as moving around, or working). A location, on the other hand, denotes a place where some action is performed. As such, it is prototypically immobile and insentient. As depicted in Figure 6, actors are *intrinsically* more salient than locations, which are perceived as ground. The infelicity of an actor as the ground, and/or a location as the figure is reflected in the irreversibility of actor-location *Ezafe* constructions in Table 1.

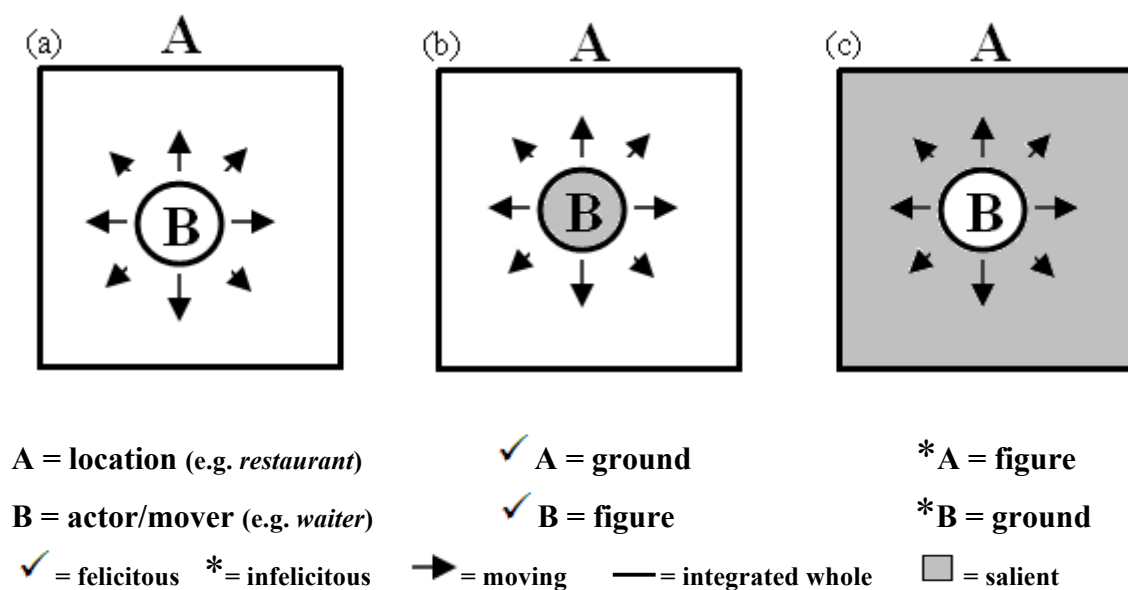


Figure 6. Intrinsic salience in the actor-location relationship (as in (b) *garson-e restaurant/a restaurant waiter* (b), and (c) **restaurant-e garson/*a waiter(s) restaurant*)

5.1.4. The functor-variable relationship

The functor-variable relationship is on a par with the relationship between a predicate and its argument(s): A predicate is a verb (or a verb/auxiliary plus a closely bound meaningful element) that can or must combine with specified argument(s) or participant role(s) to make up a clause (Trask 1993:213). In ‘*a bird was singing*’, for instance, the one-place predicate *sing* expresses the act of singing, and the entity *bird* is the argument required by the verb. In Persian *Ezafe* constructions, however, both *Mozaf* and *Mozafon-elaih* are necessarily nominal. It follows that the construction itself cannot be a clause, even if it is clause-like in its semantics.² Then instead of predicates, I use the term functor as an incomplete entity which needs to be complemented by its arguments. A variable, on the other hand, is an NP that serves as the argument of the functor. In *avaz(-khandan)-e parandeh* ‘singing of the bird’, for instance, *bird* is a subject for a singing event. In *koshtan-e parandeh* ‘killing of the bird’, it is the object.

Variables may or may not be causally prior to their functors. A variable could be an agent instigating the action, or a patient affected by it. It could be instrumental in getting the action done, or a result of it. With the nominalization of a predicate as a functor, the relationship turns into one between two entities that can be organized (in terms of salience) as figure and ground. Like possessive constructions reviewed earlier, the irreversibility of functors and variables (‘*the singing of the bird*’ but **not** ‘*the bird of the singing*’) reflects the intrinsic asymmetry of the reference point relationship in this case.

From a different point of view, we may also conceive of an entity like *bird* in terms of the different predicates/functors/attributes associated with it such as *singing*, *flying*, *having-feathers*, and *laying-eggs* etc. The relationship between an entity and its attributes is then comparable with one between the whole and its different parts sketched in Figure 4 and repeated below with slight modifications as Figure 7:

² Compare it with ‘*the singing of a bird*’ in English.

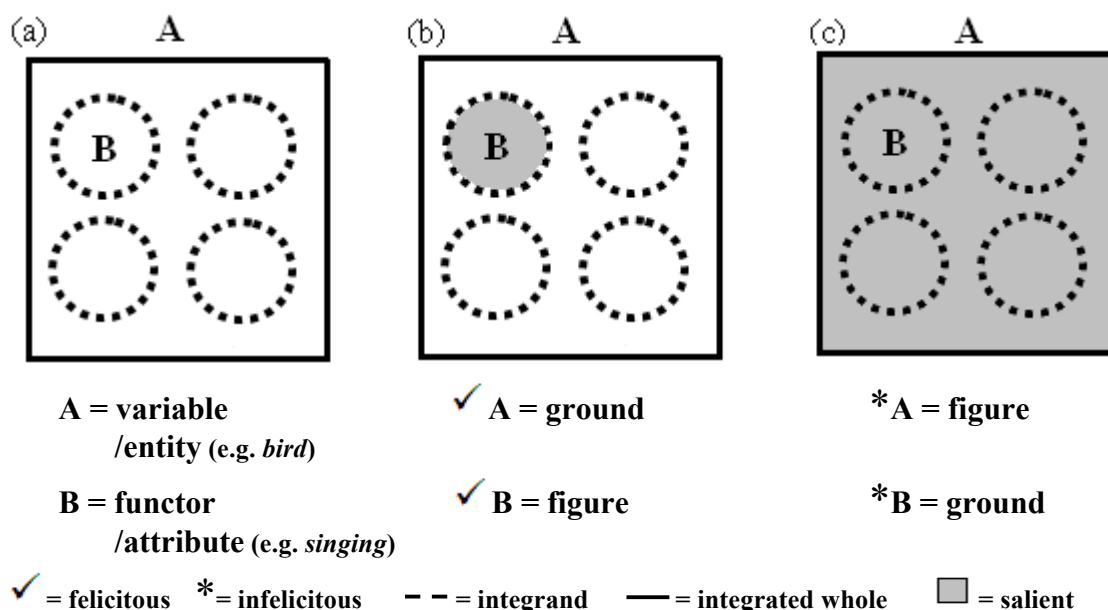


Figure 7. Intrinsic salience in the functor-variable relationship (as in (b) *avaz-e parande/the singing of a bird* (b), and (c) **parande-ye avaz/*a bird of the singing*)

As with the whole and its parts, the functor-variable (entity-attribute) relationship is intrinsically asymmetrical in that a functor/attribute is not backgrounded. We are biased to perceive a functor as the figure, and a variable as the ground. See Table 1 for Persian examples.

5.2. Extrinsic salience

Salience is extrinsic if each part of an event/scene can be (volitionally) perceived so. As such, it is the perceiver herself who decides which part is to be perceived as more salient. A ‘figure/ground reversal’ is feasible once the salience is extrinsic. This amounts to reversible *Ezafe* constructions exemplified in Table 2.

5.2.1. The container-content relationship

For Langacker (2008), linguistic meaning consists of conceptual content and a particular way of construing that content. Then the term construal refers to the ability to conceive a situation in alternate ways. As sketched in his figure 2.3 (partly produced here as Figure 8), a glass containing water may be evoked in different ways (including construals 1 and 2) in order to designate semantic nuances. According to Langacker, “[t]he semantic contrast depicted (by means of heavy lines) lies in what the expressions designate (or refer to) within the conceived situation: (1) *the glass with water in it* designates the container; (2) *the water in the glass* designates the liquid it contains ... (Langacker 2008:43).”

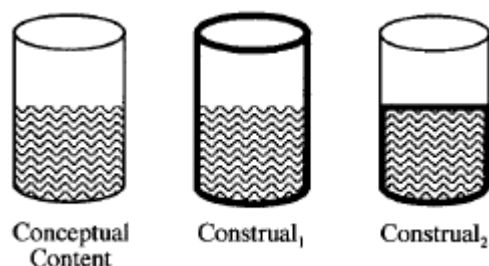


Figure 8. Ways of construing conceptual content (Langacker 2008:43)

Apparently, Langacker’s Construal₁ is one in which a container is perceived as the (salient) figure, and its content as the ground. In his Construal₂, on the other hand, it is the content that is perceived as the salient figure, and the container as the less salient ground. In agreement with the Integrity Hypothesis according to which the degree of the integration of X and Y is a defining characteristic of the a/symmetry of the relation between X and Y with regard to *Ezafe* as the marker of figure/salience/focal attention in Persian, the physical integration of a container and its content is rather loose:

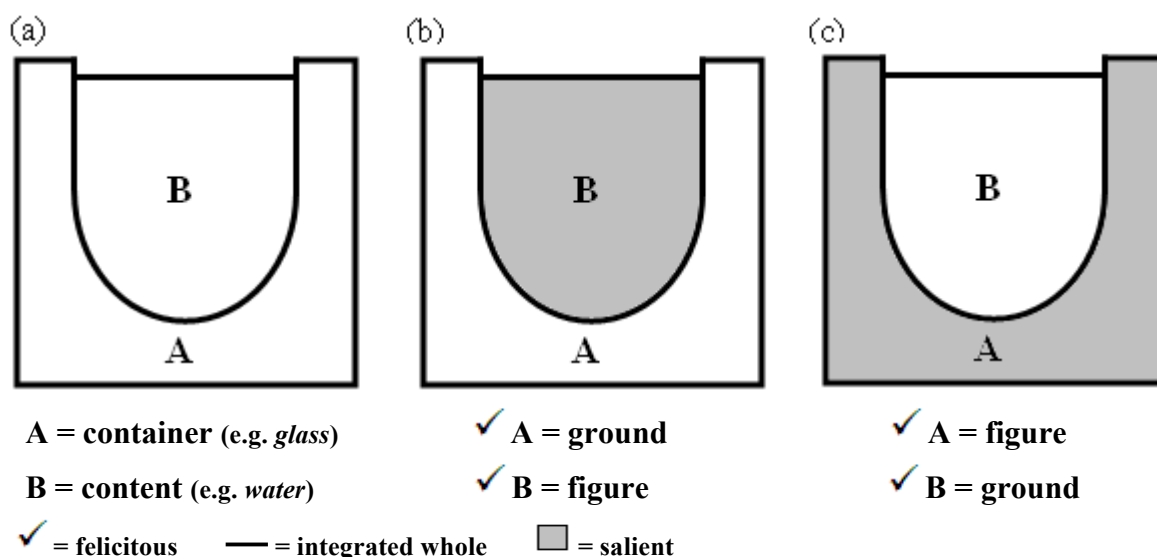


Figure 8. Extrinsic salience in the container-content relationship (as in (b) *ab-e livan/the water in the glass* (b), and (c) *livan-e ab/the glass with water in it*)

The container only holds the content inside, and it often does so only temporarily. Apart from the shape of the fluid content, the container has little or no immediate effect on the physical constitution or on the chemical properties of its content, and *vice versa*. More importantly, a container and its content are quite distinct in their physical (and also conceptual) boundaries. Obviously, some degree of compatibility between a container and its content is usually required: A suitcase, for instance, is used for carrying clothes during travel, and a folder is ideal for holding papers. Despite that, neither clothes nor papers are indispensably associated with suitcases and folders. Accordingly, with no salience intrinsically associated with either of them, it is quite possible to construe the same situation in alternate ways. In 8(b), for instance, the content is designated as the figure (*ab-e livan/the water in the glass*). In 8(c), on the other hand, the container receives the focal attention (*livan-e ab/the glass with water in it*). As with examples in Table 2, the reversibility of container-content *Ezafe* constructions is conceptually justified.

5.2.2. The producer-product relationship

If X has produced Y, then X is both temporally and causally prior to Y. Despite this causal relationship between the producer and product, neither of them is integrated (tightly or loosely) into the other (nor both into a whole), which means neither of them will be disintegrated once the other ceases to exist. It follows that the producer-product relationship is merely one in origins/history. Then at some point on the time axis, both producer and product exist independently of each other and to the effect that either of them can be the object of focal attention. The inception of the relationship is depicted in Figure 9 below:

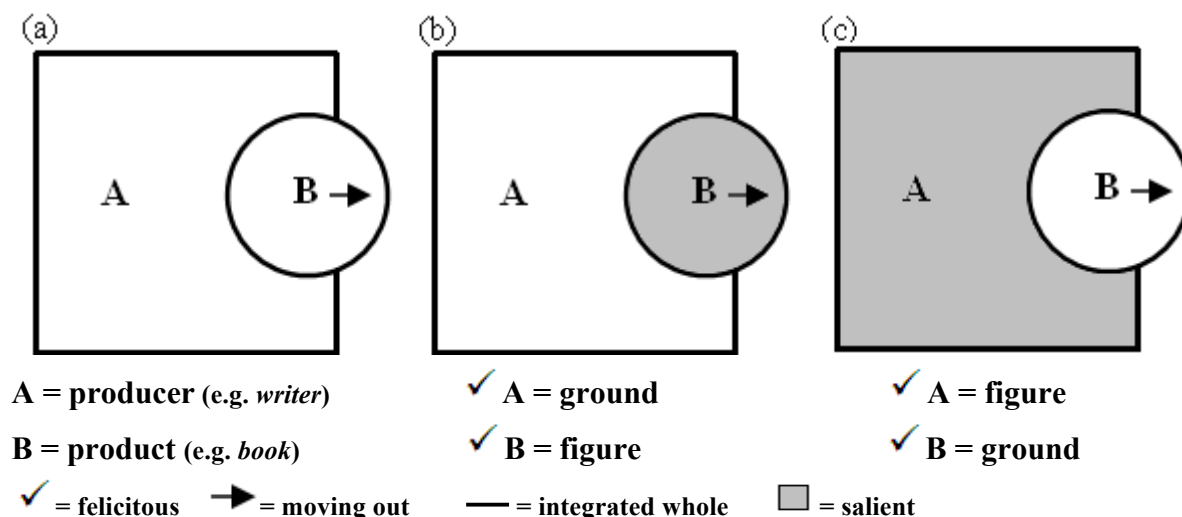


Figure 9. Extrinsic salience in the producer-product relationship (as in (b) *ketab-e nevisandel/the writer's book*, and (c) *nevisande-ye ketab/the writer of the book*)

The felicity of both *producer-as-figure/ground* and *product-as-figure/ground* is reflected in the reversibility of the producer-product *Ezafe* constructions (Table 2).

5.2.3. The group-member relationship

Group membership implies relative (though, significantly, NOT absolute) homogeneity and proximity in features and attributes among members of a group.³ The relationship between a group and its members is then different from that between a whole and its parts in that (a) parts can be quite different from each other but still coordinated ingredients of a unified whole, and (b) when a whole is disintegrated, its parts become impaired and dysfunctional. For a flock of sheep, a band of musicians, a team of footballers, a party of political activists, or any other set of people or things with some attribute(s) in common, on the other hand, every member is still an integrated whole capable of some basic functioning (whatever it is) even if the group itself happens to become completely disintegrated. The integrity of the group as a whole, together with that of its individual members, is depicted in Figure 10 below:

³ Group membership is understood here on a cognitive plane basically different from category membership (whether in terms of the standard criterial-attribute model, or not). However, even in a cognitively more valid model of category membership like Rosch's prototype model, it is assumed that prototypical instances are central members of the category, which means that even if every member of a category/group does not fully possess every property on a list of class-defining features, we still need to consider some *family resemblances* among members in order to decide how far and in what ways peripheral members deviate from central ones.

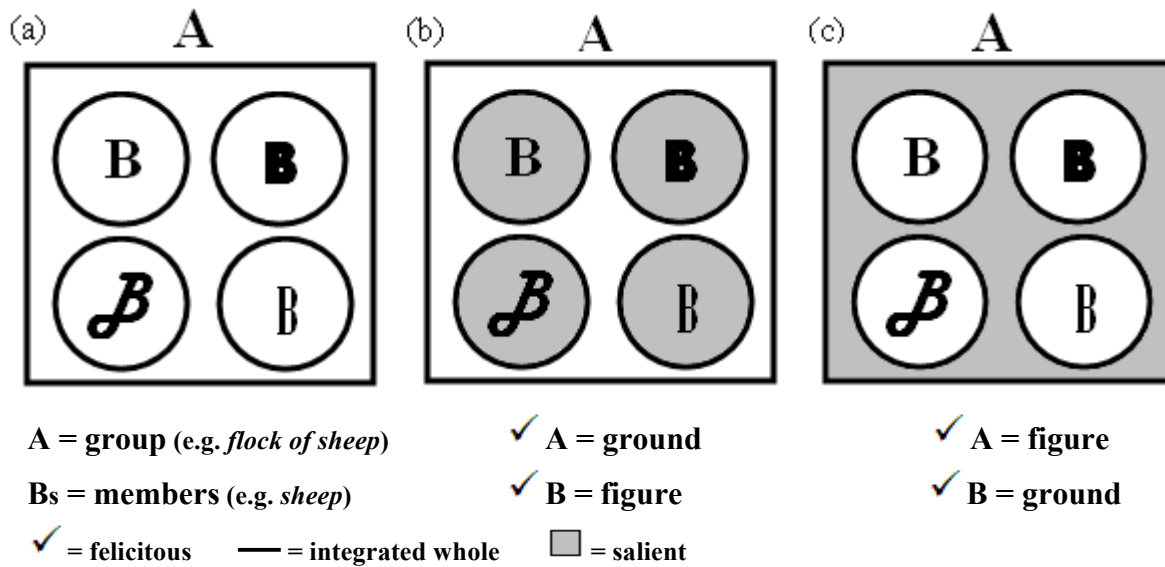


Figure 10. Extrinsic salience in the group-member relationship (as in (b) *gusfandan-e galle/the sheep in the flock*, and (c) *galle-ye gusfandan/the flock of sheep*)

As sketched in 10(b) and (c), the group-member relationship is symmetrical in that either of them may receive focal attention in view of the loose integration of members into the group. The reversibility of group-member *Ezafe* constructions in Table 2 fits in well.

5.2.4. The head-body relationship

The head-body relationship is understood here rather metaphorically. The body is the entity or entities left in a sentient actor’s charge for (perhaps among other things) movement, management, or supervision. The head is typically a human supervisor for other humans or a group of animals. The relationship, however, extends to cases where a human is in charge of one or more inanimate entities, as in *operator-computer(s)*, *driver-car*, and *pilot-plane*. It also applies to cases where an animal moves (or attends to) inanimate things. The relationship is schematically represented in Figure 11:

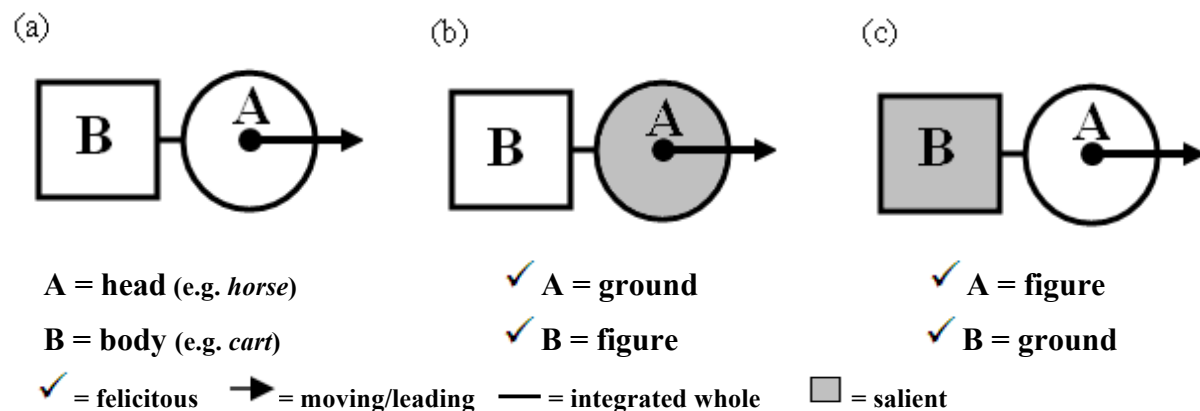


Figure 11. Extrinsic salience in the head-body relationship (as in (b) *asb-e gari/horse drawing the cart*, and (c) *gari-ye asb/cart drawn by the horse*)

Although the head exerts some sort of influence, pressure, or authority over the body, they are both integrated units immune to disintegration in case one or the other collapses. It follows that the integration of the two is not tight enough to make one part of the other, or

both parts of any other integrated whole. Like three other cases examined earlier in this section, the relationship is symmetrical enough in order for salience to apply extrinsically, and for the head-body *Ezafe* constructions in Table 2 to be reversible.

6. Conclusion

My analysis of Persian *Ezafe* phenomena lends support to the Integrity Hypothesis formulated earlier: When an entity is tightly integrated into another (i.e. the integrands in part-whole, possessor-possessed, actor-location, and functor-variable relationships), the integral entity is intrinsically more salient, and will surface as *Mozaf*. Once the integration is loose/non-existent (i.e. the entities involved in container-content, producer-product, group-member, and head-body relationships), either entity may be extrinsically more salient, and can surface as *Mozaf*. Such a conceptual analysis of *Ezafe* is a radical challenge to the existing generative accounts of *Ezafe* in Persian reviewed earlier: The *Ezafe* morpheme is the grammatical marker of figure rather than a semantically vacuous conveyor of purely syntactic information as assumed earlier.

The analysis does not need to contradict every possible generative account of the phenomena, however. A number of functional notions (including focus and topic) have already been successfully introduced into generative grammar and seem to play an important role even in mainstream generative accounts of language. Meaning does not need to be thoroughly banished from generative linguistics anymore. Some very central mechanisms employed in generative syntax today crucially relate to semantic considerations of the sort examined in this study. In Chomsky's (2000, 2001) "probe-goal" model of dislocation, for instance, non-interpretable features of a *probe* seek the matching **interpretable** features of a local *goal* in order to be erased. Erteschik-Shir (1997) proposes that some f(ocus)-structure (a structural description annotated for topic and focus) interfaces with syntax, semantics, and intonation making LF (Logical Form) redundant (Erteschik-Shir 2007:43).

To be more specific, Erteschik-Shir assumes that **top** and **foc** are features that are optionally assigned to lexical items, and then percolated to the maximal projection (also to its extended projections) of the head. For instance, for a piece of discourse reproduced here as (4a) below, a set of assignments illustrated in (4b) and the tree structure in (4c) are introduced:

(4) The f-structure (Erteschik-Shir 2007:64)

- a Q: What did John wash?
A: *He washed the dishes..*
- b select "dishes" → assign [foc]
select "the" → no assignment
select "wash" → no assignment
select "he" → assign [top]
- c
-
- ```

graph TD
 vp[vp] --- he[he[top]]
 vp --- node1[]
 node1 --- wash[wash]
 node1 --- dp[dp]
 dp --- the[the]
 dp --- dishes[dishes[foc]]

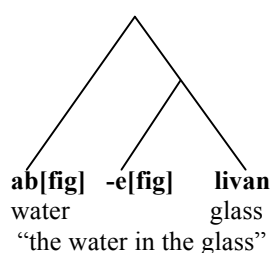
```



Interestingly, Erteschik-Shir (1997, 2007) maintains that “figure and focus are associated since both are what the attention of the perceiver/hearer is drawn to (2007:77).” She does not see any obvious association between “ground” and some linguistic concept, however, because “the ground is the complement of figure and it does not have any interesting properties of its own ... (2007:77, fn. 70).”

Inspired by Erteschik-Shir’s treatment of figure and focus, I propose a sketchy tentative formal account of Persian *Ezafe* phenomena in which the feature **fig**(ure) is attached lexically to a nominal, and then percolated to an extended projection headed by the functional head EZ. The structure is schematically represented in (5):

(5) A bare tree structure for an *Ezafe* construction in Persian



The nominal *ab* contains an interpretable feature [fig] that agrees with the non-interpretable [fig] feature of EZ. A checking relationship is then established between the nominal and the head EZ via the operation *Merge*<sup>4</sup>. In the fulfillment of Full Interpretation (FI)<sup>5</sup>, the non-interpretable [fig] feature of EZ will be eliminated. The interpretable [fig] feature of *Mozaf*, on the other hand, will be interpreted at the C-I (conceptual-intentional) interface. Given the status of *Mozaf* marked as the figure, the remainder of the phrase serves as the ground.

## References

- Chomsky, N. 1995. *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. 2000. Minimalist inquiries: The framework. In *Step by Step: Essays on Minimalist Syntax in Honor of Howard Lasnik*, R. Martin, D. Michaels, J. Uriagereka (eds), 89-155. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. 2001. Derivation by phase. In *Ken Hale: A Life in Language*, M. Kenstowicz (ed). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Erteschik-Shir, N. 1997. *The Dynamics of Focus Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erteschik-Shir, N. 2007. *Information Structure: The Syntax-Discourse Interface*. Oxford University Press.
- Ghomeshi, J. 1996. Projection and inflection: A study of Persian phrase structure. Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto.
- Hashemipour, M. 1989. Pronominalization and control in modern Persian, Doctoral dissertation, University of California at San Diego.
- Kahnemuyipour, A. 2000. Persian *Ezafe* construction revisited: evidence for modifier phrase. Paper presented at the *Annual conference of the Canadian Linguistic Association Conference*, Edmonton.

<sup>4</sup> “The simplest such operation takes a pair of syntactic objects (SO<sub>i</sub>, SO<sub>j</sub>) and replaces them by a new combined syntactic object SO<sub>ij</sub> (Chomsky 1995:226).”

<sup>5</sup> “[T]here can be no superfluous symbols in representations ... (Chomsky 1995:27).”

- Karimi, S. 1989. Aspects of Persian syntax, specificity, and the theory of grammar, Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington.
- Karimi, S. 1990. Obliqueness, specificity, and discourse functions: Râ in Persian. *Linguistic Analysis*, Vol. 20, pp. 139-191.
- Karimi, S. and M. Brame. 1986. A generalization concerning the EZAFE construction in Persian, ms., University of Washington and University of Arizona; presented at the annual conference of the Western Conference of Linguistics, Canada.
- Koffka, K. 1935. *Principles of Gestalt psychology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Langacker, R.W. 1987. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Vol. 1: Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford University Press.
- Langacker, R.W. 1991. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Vol. 2: Descriptive Application*. Stanford University Press.
- Langacker, R.W. 1999. *Grammar and Conceptualization*. Cognitive Linguistics Research 14. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Langacker, R. W. 2008. *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Larson, R. K. and H. Yamakido. 2005. Ezafe and the Deep position of nominal modifiers. Paper presented at *Barcelona Workshop on Adjectives and Adverbs*, Barcelona.
- Moyne, J. 1971. Reflexive and emphatic. *Language*, Vol. 47, pp. 141-163.
- Moyne, J. and G. Carden. 1974. Subject reduplication in Persian. *Linguistic Inquiry*, Vol. 5, pp. 205-249.
- Samiian, V. 1983. Origins of Phrasal Categories in Persian, an X-bar Analysis, Doctoral dissertation, UCLA.
- Samiian, V. 1994. The Ezafe construction: Some implications for the theory of X-bar syntax. In *Persian Studies in North America*, M. Marashi (ed), 17-41, Iranbooks, Bethesda, Maryland.
- Samvelian, P. 2005. When morphology does better than syntax: The Ezafe construction in Persian. Unpublished ms.
- Sharifian, F., A. R. Lotfi. 2003. Rices and waters: the mass/count distinction in Modern Persian. *Anthropological Linguistics*, Vol. 45, pp. 226-244.
- Talmy, L. 1978. The relation of grammar to cognition: a synopsis. *Proceedings of TINLAP-2: theoretical issues in natural language processing*, D. Waltz (ed), 14-24. Urbana: University of Illinois Coordinated Science Laboratory.
- Talmy, L. 2000. *Toward a Cognitive Semantics: Vol. 1*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Trask, R. L. 1993. *A Dictionary of Grammatical Terms in Linguistics*. New York: Routledge.
- Windfuhr, G. L. 1979. *Persian Grammar: History and State of its Study*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers.

**Author contact information:**

Ahmad Reza Lotfi, PhD  
 English Language Department,  
 Islamic Azad University-Khorasgan (Isfahan) Branch,  
 Email addresses: lotfi.ahmadreza@gmail.com  
 arlotfi@yahoo.com