

The (un)availability of idiomatic interpretations in Persian light verb-stranding ellipses

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Introduction: VP ellipsis (VPE) and pseudogapping have been noted to have very similar distributions, and many attempts have been made to assimilate the latter to the former (Jayaseelan 1990; Lasnik 1995, 1999), or otherwise reduce the two to the same process (Merchant 2008, 2013). We provide novel evidence from Persian revealing an asymmetry between VPE and pseudogapping: while VPE is acceptable with both compositional and idiomatic complex predicates, pseudogapping is only acceptable with compositional complex predicates. We argue that this difference follows from an interaction between 1) the insertion of idiomatic interpretations and 2) an analysis that treats VPE as PF Deletion and pseudogapping as a null pronominal that receives its interpretation from its antecedent semantically.

Background: Most verbal expressions in Persian are formed through *complex predicates*, expressions formed from a *light verb* and a *non-verbal element* (Folli et al. 2005). Complex predicates vary with respect to their degree of compositionality: some are semantically transparent (*tamiz kardan* ‘to clean’ lit. clean do), while others are highly idiomatic (*yâd gereftan* ‘to learn’ lit. memory take).

Persian also possesses forms of ellipsis corresponding to verb phrase ellipsis and pseudogapping that act on complex predicates. In VPE, the non-verbal element and, if present, direct object, are elided (Toosarvandani 2009), while in pseudogapping, the non-verbal element is elided to the exclusion of the light verb and direct object or PP argument.

- (1) Sohrâb piran-â-ro otu na-zad, vali Rostam zad (2) Bahâr miz-o tamiz kard, vali panjera-ro na-kard
S. shirt-pl-ra iron neg-hit but R. hit B. table-ra clean did but window-ra neg-did
‘Sohrab didn’t ironed the shirt, but Rostam did.’ ‘Bahar cleaned the table, but didn’t the window.’

At first glance, Persian VPE and pseudogapping appear to be quite similar; both involve the deletion of part of a complex predicate. However, VPE and pseudogapping differ in that while the former is grammatical with any complex predicate, pseudogapping is only acceptable with a subset of them. For instance, *yâd gereftan* ‘to learn’ is acceptable in VPE, but unacceptable in pseudogapping.

- (3) Bahâr zabun-o yâd gereft, vali Rezâ na-gereft (4) *Bahâr zabun-o yâd gereft, vali alefbâ-ro na-gereft
B. language-ra mind took but R. neg-took B. language-ra mind took but alphabet-ra neg-took
‘Bahar learned the language, but Reza didn’t.’ ‘Bahar learned the language, but didn’t the alphabet.’

We therefore find an asymmetry between VPE and pseudogapping: pseudogapping is sensitive to complex predicate type in a way that VPE is not.

An unsuccessful explanation: One explanation for this difference appeals to the different light verbs in each complex predicate. Indeed, previous work notes differences in the relative “lightness” of light verbs, with verbs like *kardan* ‘do’ being largely semantically bleached and those like *gereftan* ‘take’ still possessing non-light verb uses (Harvey et al. 2011). This explanation runs into difficulties, however, as the particular light verb used does not accurately predict the acceptability of a complex predicate with pseudogapping; there are complex predicates with *kardan* that are not acceptable in pseudogapping (5), and those with *gereftan* that are (6).

- (5) *Kimea barâ to tab mi-kon-e, vali barâ man ne-mi-kon-e
Kimea for you fever Asp-do-3sg but for me neg-asp-do-3sg
Intended meaning: Kimea is devoted to you, but not to me’.

- (6) man ketâb-o az to gharz gereft-am vali majalla-ro na-gereft-am
I book-râ from you loan took-1.sg but magazine-râ neg-took-1.sg
‘I borrowed the book from you, but didn’t the magazine.’

Pseudogapping is sensitive to idiomaticity: An alternative explanation appeals to the idiomaticity of different complex predicates: pseudogapping permits compositionally interpretable complex predicates and disallows idiomatic ones. This explanation receives support from complex predicates that are ambiguous between a compositional and an idiomatic reading. *Bâzi kardan*, for instance, is ambiguous between its compositional meaning ‘to play’ and an idiomatic meaning ‘to manipulate.’ While both readings are available under VPE, only the compositional reading is permitted with pseudogapping.

- (7) Rezâ bâ man bâzi kard, vali bâ to na-kard

R. with I play did but with you neg-did

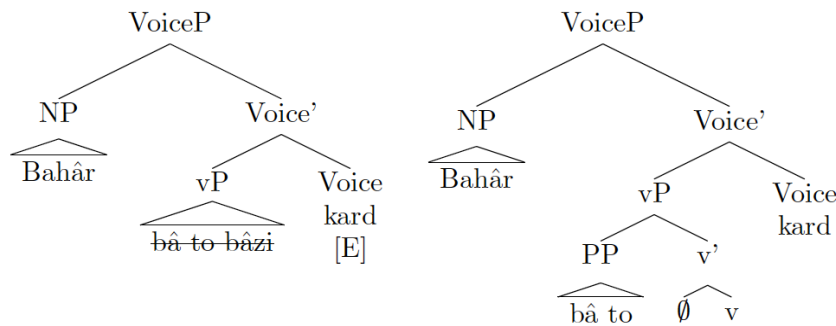
‘Reza played with me, but didn’t with you.’ / ‘*Reza manipulated me, but didn’t you.’

Against a uniform analysis: Having established the crucial contrast and generalization, we turn now to the question of whether an analysis whereby pseudogapping is reduced to VPE is tenable in Persian. On most such analyses, the remnant moves out of the VP, which subsequently undergoes PF Deletion (Jayaseelan 1990; Merchant 2008). Such an analysis, though appealing for reasons of parsimony, is challenged by the Persian data we have presented. On most approaches to idioms, idiomatic interpretations are licensed by the parts of an idiom forming a constituent (Koopman & Sportiche 1991), or are licensed prior to semantic interpretation as a special interpretation of the verbal root in the context of another phrase (Harley & Noyer 1999; Harley & Stone 2015). Given the fact that the syntactic structure required for idiomatic interpretations to arise is present on PF deletion accounts of ellipsis, a uniform treatment of VPE and pseudogapping would predict that idiomatic interpretations should be available for both, contrary to the Persian facts.

In contrast, we propose that Persian VPE and pseudogapping arise from distinct elliptical processes. We follow Toosarvandani (2009) in analyzing VPE as a species of PF Deletion. Pseudogapping, on the other hand, involves a null element, the semantic content of which is derived via an anaphoric process in the semantics, as has been argued to be independently necessary for certain cases of VPE in English (Hardt 1999). Representations of each analysis are given in (8) and (9) below.

(8) VPE

(9) Pseudogapping



Additionally, we follow work on idioms in Distributed Morphology (Marantz 1997; Harley 2014) that takes idioms to be a special interpretation of a root licensed in certain syntactic contexts, with the compositional interpretation appearing as the ‘elsewhere’ interpretation. The items that condition this special meaning, such as *yâd* in (10), receive no interpretation.

(10) gereft <-> ‘learn’ / [yâd ___{vP}]

...
<-> ‘take’ / elsewhere

In VPE, all parts of the complex predicate are syntactically present, though unpronounced at PF, so the licensing conditions on the insertion of idiomatic interpretations are met. In pseudogapping, however, although the context for idiomatic interpretation is present in the antecedent, it is not present in the ellipsis site, due to the absence of the non-verbal element. As such, the interpretation of *gereft* as ‘learn’ is inserted in the antecedent due to its occurring in the context of *yâd*, but the elsewhere interpretation of *gereft* as ‘take’ is the only possibility in the ellipsis-containing clause. Since on this analysis the non-verbal element *yâd* receives no interpretation, the null anaphor in the ellipsis site has no antecedent in the discourse, resulting in uninterpretability and thus ungrammaticality. On the other hand, if the complex predicate is not idiomatic, the verb receives its default interpretation, and the non-verbal element retains its own meaning. This allows the meaning of the non-verbal element to be picked up as antecedent by the null pronoun, leading to an interpretable and compositional semantic representation.

Implications: We have argued here that a uniform treatment of VPE and pseudogapping fails to derive the fact that idiomatic complex predicates are acceptable under VPE but not under pseudogapping in Persian. The paper thus not only contributes a novel empirical finding, but also provides an argument that

there are cross-linguistically multiple sources for ellipsis, and argues against uniform treatments of pseudogapping as a special case of VPE via PF deletion.