WORD ORDER TYPOLOGY OF IRANIAN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

This article describes word order in Persian and selected Iranian languages. Although Persian is mainly recognized as an SOV language, the article shows that out of twenty criteria utilized in Dryer (1992) to distinguish OV languages from VO languages, in two third of them this language behaves like a verb medial language. The study will account for the dual behaviour of the language by providing a historical review of its word order status from Old Persian to New Persian and will draw theoretical implications. It will then analyze word order in selected Iranian languages.

Key words: Word order status in Persian and selected Iranian languages.

Introduction

This article describes word order in Persian and selected Iranian languages of Iran and discusses the theoretical implications of its findings. Though there is a large growing literature on word order, word order status in Persian has not been adequately dealt with and the word order of other Iranian languages is basically untouched. In a number of studies, the basic SOV order is postulated for Persian against odds such as the fact that it contains a single postposition and a large number of prepositions. However, Marashi (1970) has assumed the SVO order for Persian and Tabaian (1974), Karimi (1989) and Darzi (1996) have proposed the underlying SOV order when the object is phrasal and the SVO order when the object is a clausal complement.

The present study has relied on the word order correlations which have been empirically substantiated in Dryer (1992). Dryer has evaluated more than twenty criteria and has shown what pairs of elements in fact reveal a statistically significant correlation in order with the verb and object. These criteria will be listed later in this article.

Word order of Persian

My analysis of contemporary Persian shows that out of the twenty relevant criteria utilized by Dryer,

in more than two third of them this language behaves like a verb medial language in comparison with both the languages in its own geographical area (i.e. EurAsia) and the six large geographical areas in the world postulated in that article. For each correlation, it is shown whether Persian matches with the dominant tendency established in Dryer's statistical study or fits with the minority. If the former were the case, I have called Persian strong OV/VO, if the latter, I have labelled it weak OV/VO.

The results of the data analysis are provided in Table 1 below. One representative example from Persian for each criterion is provided in examples (1)-(20) after the table.

Table 1. Persian

a. Persian compared with languages of EurAsia

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
S OV					x	x	x			x	x	x					x	x	x	x
W OV	x	x	x	x				x	x				x	x	x	x				
W VO					x	x	x		x							x				
S VO	x	x	x	x				x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x

b. Persian compared with languages of the world

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
S OV		x			x	x	x		x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x	
W OV	x		x	x				x				x	x	x				x		x
W VO					x	x	x									x				x
S VO	x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x

Key: 1. Adposition type, 2. Order of noun and relative clause, 3. Order of noun and genitive, 4. Order of adjective and standard in comparative construction, 5. Order of verb and adpositional phrase, 6. Order of verb and manner adverb, 7. Order of copula and predicate, 8. Order of 'want' + verb, 9. Order of noun and adjective, 10. Order of demonstrative and noun, 11. Order of intensifier and adjective, 12. Order of verb and negative particle, 13. Order of content verb and auxiliary verb, 14. Order of question particle and sentence, 15. Order of adverbial subordinator and clause, 16. Order of article and noun, 17. Order of verb and subject, 18. Order of numeral and noun, 19. Order of tense-aspect affix and verb stem, 20. Order of possessive affix and noun, S(trong), W(eak).

The following examples correspond with the criteria (1)-(20) in the horizontal row in Table 1 respectively.

(1) minā ketāb-rā be maryam dar xāne dād-ϕ
Mina book-obj. to Mary at home gave-she
'Mina gave the book to Mary at home'.

(2) Mardi ke diruz bā šomā sohbat kard-ϕ
Man that yesterday with you speech did-he
'The man who talked to you yesterday'

(3) pedar-e minā
father-genitive Mina
'Mina's father'

(4) bozorg-tar az Minā
big-more from Mina
'Bigger than Mina'

(5) u ruy-e zamin xā bid-ϕ
he on-genitive ground slept-he
'He slept on the ground'

(6) u āheste dav-id-ϕ
he slowly run-past-he
'He ran slowly'

(7) u mo? allem ast
he teacher is
'He is a teacher'

(8) u mi-xāh-ad ke be-rav-ad
he indicative-want-he that subjunctive-go-he
'He wants to go'

(9) zan-e mehrabān
woman-genitive kind
'A kind woman'

(10) ān zan
that woman
'That woman'

(11) besyār bozorg
very big
'Very big'

(12) na-raft-am
not-went-I
'I didn't go'

(13) xāh-am raft
will-I go
'I will go'

(14) āyā u raft-ϕ
Q he went-he
'Did he go?'

(15) hengāmi ke u raft-ϕ
when that he went-he
'when he went'

(16) ketāb-i
book-a
'A book'

(17) minā āmad-ϕ
Mina came-she
'Mina came'

(18) do ketāb
two book
'Two books'

(19) dav-id-am
run-past-I
'I ran'

(20) ketāb-am
book-my
'My book'

With respect to Table 1, two points are noteworthy: (a) Persian contains a single postposition (and a large number of prepositions), i.e., the postposition rā which as I have argued elsewhere (Dabir-Moghaddam, 1992) is a pragmatic-syntactic marker. (b) The language is strongly OV with respect to criteria (6) and (7) in the table.

Two hypotheses may be raised to account for the split behaviour of Persian with respect to the word order correlation:

(i) Persian is in the process of a syntactic change from an OV type to a VO type.

(ii) Persian is basically a free word-order language.

To assess the first hypothesis, the word order status of Old Persian (OP), spoken between sixth to third B. C., and Middle Persian (MP), spoken until seventh A. D., were studied based on the same aforementioned criteria. The findings are presented in Tables 2 and 3 below respectively.

Table 2. Old Persian

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
S																				
OV			x		x		x			x		x					x	x		
W																				
OV	x	x						x	x						x					
W																				
VO			x		x		x		x											
S																				
VO	x	x						x		x		x			x		x	x		

Table 3. Middle Persian

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
S																				
OV					x	x	x			x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x
W																				
OV	x	x	x	x				x	x					x	x	x				
W																				
VO					x	x	x		x				x			x				
S																				
VO	x	x	x	x				x		x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x

A number of observations about these tables and the corpus on which they are based deserve mentioning.

Old Persian (OP, henceforth) data reveal the following characteristics: (a) though there are many examples with the genitive + noun order the noun + genitive order is also permitted (Kent, 1950, p. 95 section 309 and p.80 section 250 (A)), (b) the word order in the sentence in OP is quite free, but the normal order is subject-object-verb both in main and subordinate clauses; and subordinate clauses may stand either before or after the main clause (Kent, 1950, p.96 section 310), (c) the language contains two postpositions (i.e., parā and rādiy), two prepositions which also function as postpositions (i.e., ā and patiy), and a number of prepositions (Kent, 1950, P. 86, section 268), and (d) on the basis of the available and attested data (hence the gap for some criteria in Table (2)) OP shows an almost equal split with regard to OV and VO order.

The Middle English Persian (MP henceforth) data show the following properties (a) both noun+ adjective order as well as adjective+noun order are attested (Heston, 1976, p. 3), (b) similarly, both genitive + noun and noun + genitive order are observed (Heston, p. 21-22), (c) the most frequent word order is verb final order in transitive and intransitive sentences "although variant orders often occur" (Brunner, 1977, p. 180), (d) the language "contains three types of postpositional words: Type A comprises most of the prepositions, which have the additional functions of postposition and preverb. Type B contains those terms which occur only in combination with a preposition *o...rōn* and *az...hammis*. To type C belongs only one word, rāy, it occurs only as a postposition and is usually independent of a preposition" (Brunner 1977; p. 148), (e) different tenses are formed via the combination of the past participle of the main verb

plus the appropriate auxiliaries, (f) on the whole the correlations in Table 3 indicate that MP tends towards a VO type language.

Discussion and implications

On the basis of the observations reported in Tables 1-3 and the clarifications noted above, I propose that OP, which was incidentally an inflectional language, seems to have been basically a free word-order language. MP is in consonant with OP except that it was an analytic language. In contemporary Persian, which is also analytic, we notice that the language has become more configurational by fixing the noun+genitive order reducing the number of postpositions to a single one (i.e, (OP)-rādiy > (MP)-rāy > (Persian) - rā), losing the postpositions which were used in combination with prepositions, developing a large number of prepositions, establishing an SOV order in main and subordinate clauses when the object is phrasal and very strong tendency to use the SVO order when, the object is clausal. Although scrambling is an available mechanism in Persian, it is not practically utilized in the written language and it is a weak and restricted tendency in the spoken language. Furthermore, *xāstan* 'to want' and *dāštan* 'to have' are grammaticalized and used as future auxiliary and imperfective aspect auxiliary in Persian and systematically precede the main verb. On the basis of these developments and observations, I conclude that Persian has become more configurational and has drifted towards a VO type since MP period. There is a strong resistance to a full fledged VO configuration in main and embedded clauses when the object is phrasal. The OV order of Persian at simple clause level appears to be a strong stylistic tendency, a standardization imposed by the literary tradition dating as far back as OP and which does not seem to be relaxed in near future if ever.

These findings partly support hypothesis (i), suggesting that Persian has been in the process of a syntactic change though not from a fixed type but from a free word-order type in OP towards a more configurational and VO type in contemporary Persian. This slow motion change is hastened since MP. The findings reject hypothesis (ii). At the theoretical plane, the findings cast doubt on the parametric view of languages as head-initial or head final (cf. Chomsky, 1981). Tables 1-3 show that Persian has never been one way or the other with respect to this parameter. Instead there seems to be a multiplicity of factors which are involved in shaping the word order status of languages (e.g., diachrony, perceptual strategies, stylistic tendencies imposed by the literary tradition) and the parametric view appears to be simplistic and highly idealized. Another theoretical implication of the study is that it verifies Dryer's postulation of some of the previously held typological criteria as being non-correlation pairs with respect to the order of verb and object (i.e., identical values for some of the criteria in Tables 1-3.

Word order of other Iranian Languages

Having dealt with Persian, I now turn to the order status of three Iranian languages: Gilaki and Mazandarani spoken in the north of Iran and Kurdish spoken in the western province of Kurdistan. The analysis of the data shows that the former two languages behave similarly with respect to our criteria and are dominantly of OV type (contrary to Persian) and the latter is of VO type (analogous to Persian). Tables 4 and 5 represent the word order status of Gilaki and Kurdish respectively.

In the varieties of Gilaki and Mazandarani spoken in the major cities of the north of Iran, the impact of standard Persian and more specifically the substitution of Persian prepositions for the postpositions in these languages is noticeable. This situation reflects the role of language contact, Persian as superstratum and the mentioned languages as substratum, in linguistic change and necessitates immediate recording of these languages.

Table 4. Gilaki

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
S																				
OV	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	
W																				
OV		x						x							x					
W																				
VO	x		x	x	x	x	x						x							
S																				
VO		x						x	x	x	x	x			x		x	x	x	

Table 5. Kurdish

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
S																				
OV					x	x	x			x	x	x					x	x	x	
W																				
OV	x	x	x	x				x	x				x		x	x				
W																				
VO					x	x	x		x							x				
S																				
VO	x	x	x	x				x		x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	

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