A conceptual structure approach to Persian complex predicates

Complex predicates (CPREDs) in modern Persian consist of a preverbal element (PV) and a light verb (LV). The PV is typically nominal (but can also be adjectival, prepositional, or belong to no identifiable category), and the LV, in conformity with the wider typology of light verbs (see for example Butt 2010), is a semantically bleached form of an independent lexical verb which appears to add more than just tense, aspect or modality. From at least the 9th century onwards CPREDs came to dominate the verbal lexicon in Persian, with simple lexical verbs as a recessive force.

The inventory of LVs in Persian partly consists of the “usual suspects”, verbs such as kard-an ‘do, cause’, šod-an ‘become’, dād-an ‘give’, zad-an ‘hit’, etc. These are illustrated in (1). We enclose the CPREDs in curly brackets for ease of identification:

(1) a. Dariuš xeili {kār kard}{CPRED}
Dariush a lot  work  do.3S.PST
‘Dariush worked a lot.’

b. Dariuš be radio {guš dād}{CPRED}
Dariush to radio ear give,3S.PST
‘Dariush listened to the radio.’

Light verbs such as kardan ‘do’ and šod-an ‘become’ are extremely productive (Khanlari 1973; Bateni 1989), and take part in the causative/unaccusative alternation, e.g. combining with the adjectival PV garm ‘hot’ to give {garm kard-an} ‘heat’ and {garm šod-an} ‘become hot’.

There are however also a number of LVs in Persian which are far less productive, and appear far less frequently (if at all) in the typology of CPRED constructions, verbs such as kešid-an ‘pull’, andāxt-an ‘throw’, yāft-an ‘seek’, oftād-an ‘fall’, etc. CPREDs formed from such verbs are illustrated in (2):

(2) a. az dast-e to {bidād kešid}-am
from hand-EZ you injustice pull-1S.PST
‘I suffered because of you’

b. ou yek šerkat {rāh andāxt}
she one company  path  throw.PST.3S
‘She established a company.’

Such CPREDs lack the semantic transparency of those formed from verbs such as kardan ‘do’ and šod-an, but we establish that they nevertheless have exactly the same syntactic characteristics. Most importantly, only in a genuine CPRED construction (as opposed to superficially similar constructions with lexical verbs), can the CPRED as a whole be nominalised. Further properties that are typically associated with Persian CPREDs are that the PV and LV cannot be separated (except for stylistic, e.g. poetic reasons), and that the PV itself cannot be modified.

In the literature on Persian CPREDs, two major analytical trends can be identified. In one approach CPREDs are formed compositionally (see, for instance, Karimi-Doostan 1997, Folli et al. 2004, Megerdoomian 2012). It is argued that each element of a CPRED is an independent lexical item with its own semantic value, and the syntactic combination of the
two lexical items accounts for all the properties of the CPRED. Such a framework well suits the type of CPRED shown in (1a). On the other hand, some authors cite examples like (2) as an argument that a compositional approach cannot explain Persian CPREDs. In this second approach, the semantic value of the whole CPRED is different from that which might be predicted given the semantic values of the individual elements, and the whole should therefore be considered as an idiomatic expression (see, for instance, Goldberg 1995 and Samvelian 2012).

There are a number of formal analyses of constructions involving LVs in LFG (for an overview see Butt et al. 2010; Lowe 2015). These all aim to associate an independent value to each of the components of the CPRED, but differ in whether the contribution of the LV is featural in nature with the PV contributing the main predicate value of the CPRED, or whether the PV and LV have independent predicate values which are somehow linked by predicate fusion. To illustrate, the f-structure representations of a CPRED such as \{garm kard-an\} ‘heat’ might appear as either (3a) or (3b):

(3) 
   a. \[PRED \text{ ‘heat’} \]
   \[CAUSE + \]
   
   b. [PRED ‘cause-heat’]

Neither representation however seems appropriate for the less transparent Persian CPREDs.

We propose therefore an alternative account which develops an insight of Butt & Geuder (2001) and Butt (2010), namely that the semantic contribution of the individual CPRED components is based on the lexical semantic associations of each of these. These associations can be direct entailments, for example those of the type associated by Dowty (1977, 1979) with proto-roles, or perhaps more loose connections associated with world knowledge. In order to represent these associations, we use a conceptual language of the type proposed by authors such as Jackendoff (e.g. Jackendoff 1990, Piñango et al. 2006) and van Valin (2005).

Concretely, a verb such as kešid-an ‘pull’ in (2a) will be assigned the semantic representation in (4a), with the successive associations/entailments in (4b) and (4c):

(4) 
   a. ‘pull <x, y>’
   b. \[CAUSE (x, [FORCEFULLY (MOVE (y, DIRECTION (x)))]\]
   c. \[FORCEFULLY (MOVE (y, DIRECTION (x)))]\)

Now consider the semantics of the PV in (2a). The noun bidâd specifically denotes injustice, rather than more general notion of suffering. But an occurrence of injustice is generally associated with suffering. Composing (4c) with this semantic association would result in (5):

(5) \[FORCEFULLY (MOVE (SUFFERING, DIRECTION (x)))]\)

This cannot directly be the semantic representation of the CPRED \{bidâd kešid-an\} ‘suffer’. That should simply be ‘suffer <x>’. But if x suffers, it follows that x is accompanied by and is thereby affected by suffering, i.e. associations of what is represented in (5).

Note then that we do not intend ‘injustice-pull’ to be the semantic form associated with \{bidâd kešid-an\}. Rather, the lexical entailments/associations of bidâd ‘injustice’ and kešid-an ‘pull’ compose to give a conceptual structure representation which is itself an entailment/association of ‘suffer’. This approach extends to more transparent CPREDs, where the entailments/associations are more direct. It also suggests a potential distinction between CPREDs and the more compositional categories of idiomatic construction, where the associations might arise rather from metaphorical and similar associations.
References


