Overt and Non-Overt Subjects in Persian

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The phenomenon of prodrop has attracted much attention in recent years both in the field of syntactic theory and in pragmatics (Chomsky, 1981, 1982; Rizzi, 1982; Gundel, 1980; Givon, 1976). Persian is among the many languages which exhibit this phenomenon. The central aim of this paper is to discover the pragmatic constraints governing the distribution of overt and non-overt subjects.

Persian is a SOV language. Verbs carry the person and number information in the form of suffixes. These agreement markers are unique for each person. Non-overt (zero) subjects are allowed and occur very frequently in speech. Looking at natural data, we see that overt subjects appear even when their referents are in focus. Finding the constraints governing the distribution of these overt subjects is the primary question addressed in this paper. For the purposes of this study, we are classifying full noun phrases and pronouns together as overt subjects although pronominalization has its own separate pragmatic functions. Here we are focussing on zero subjects and overt subjects. Our data base consists of six children and four adult narratives. The unity of the narrative as a genre with its usual focus on one main actor make it possible to track the same noun phrase throughout the story in a variety of syntactic and pragmatic environments. This makes the narrative genre ideal for

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contrasting overt and non-overt subjects.

I. CHILD DATA

In determining the distribution of overt and non-overt subjects, we need to know whether the latter serve any pragmatic function or have any discourse level significance for the speaker and the hearer. This question is addressed by Karmiloff-Smith in her 1981 article entitled "The grammatical marking of thematic structure in the development of language production". In this article, Karmiloff-Smith reports on an experiment which was designed to answer, among other things, the question of why speakers pronominalize sometimes and not at other times. She presented six pictures bound together like a book to 350 monolingual French or English-speaking children and asked them to describe to the experimenter what was going on in each picture. A brief description of each picture is as follows: 1) a boy is walking; 2) he sees a balloon seller; 3) he buys a balloon from the balloon seller; 4) he walks off with his balloon; 5) his balloon flies away; 6) he is crying. Karmiloff-Smith finds that children over six show an awareness of the narrative as a unit. Children over six years old pronominalize nouns according to the thematic role they play. These children consistently pronominalize the thematic subject of the story (i.e., the boy), and do not pronominalize any temporary characters. Furthermore, in these narratives the thematic subject is pronominalized even after one or more intervening sentences. Karmiloff-Smith therefore concludes that such pronouns are the default case for the thematic subject: "[using pronouns is] an implicit instruction to the addressee not to recompute for retrieval of the pronominal referent (i.e., there is no 'looking back' for an antecedent) but rather to take it by default to be the thematic subject." (Karmiloff-Smith, 1981:142).

Using the same materials, I conducted an experiment with six Persian-speaking children over the age of six. They were all from middle class, literate families. Like the children studied by Karmiloff-Smith, these children also treated the thematic subject (i.e., the boy) differently from the other characters in the story. However, they used a zero subject for the thematic subject and not a pronoun. For the balloon a full noun phrase was used (the balloon seller went unmentioned). The narratives of these children consist of six sentences each, as they describe every picture². The general pattern of these six narratives is as follows: the first sentence contains a full NP for referring to the boy. Starting with the second picture, there is no overt subject
for the boy, neither a noun phrase nor a pronoun. The boy, being the thematic subject of the narrative, is referred to by a non-overt subject. The responses of one of the children is reproduced below. This narrative is typical of all the children in this sample:

**Example 1: Narrator, age 7**

1-1) dareh aqaheh rah mireh  
    is man-the walking  
    'The man is walking.'

1-2) inja Ø yeh clown dideh  
    here Ø one clown has seen  
    'Here (he) has seen a clown.'

1-3) inja Ø yeh balloon gerefteh  
    here Ø one balloon has gotten  
    'Here (he) has gotten a balloon.'

1-4) inja Ø dareh mireh ba balloonesh  
    here Ø is going with balloon+his  
    'Here (he) is walking with his balloon.'

1-5) inja Ø balloonesh dar raft  
    here Ø balloon-his got away  
    'Here his balloon got away.'

1-6) Ø dareh geryeh mikoneh  
    Ø is cry doing  
    '(He) is crying.'

As can be seen, in the first sentence a full NP, *aqah*eh, is used to refer to the boy. In the sentences that follow, there is no overt subject NP for this referent. Note that in sentence (1-5) the subject is 'his balloon' and yet in the sentence following this one, no overt subject is used for the boy. The data from this experiment confirm Karmiloff-Smith's findings and suggest that in Persian a zero subject in the narrative genre is used to refer to the thematic subject. Secondly, the default value is a zero and not a pronoun.
As we will see below, the same pattern holds for the adult data. That is, a non-overt subject is used for the thematic subject of their narratives. However, regardless of the thematic role of the referent, an overt subject occurs when it is different from the grammatical subject of the preceding main clause.

II. ADULT DATA

The data for this section consist of four narratives taken from four sociolinguistic interviews with native speakers of Tehrani Persian. These interviews were carried out by the author, a native speaker of Persian, during the summer of 1982 in Tehran.

First of all, to get an idea of their relative frequencies, all occurrences of subject NP's, pronouns, and zero subjects were counted. Table 1 below shows the frequency of all three in the four narratives. Since zero subjects comprise 53% of all the subjects, our initial impression that they are very frequent seems to be correct.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Zero</th>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Full NP</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three factors which were hypothesized to affect the choice between overt and non-overt subjects (thematic or not) were coded for every occurrence of a nominal subject. The first one was whether sentences which do not contribute to the progression of the narrative itself, but are added to provide background information, are more likely to have an overt subject. Since such sentences are often explicit attempts at making sure that the hearer understands and follows the narrative with all its implications, they are potentially more likely to have overt subjects. The second factor concerned a comparison of marked versus unmarked syntactic constructions with regards to the presence or absence of overt subjects. And finally the third factor was
a check of every occurrence of an overt subject to see whether it was the same as or different from the subject of the preceding main clause.

The first two factors did not turn out to be of any real significance. It was often problematic to decide whether a sentence belonged to the body of the narrative or was just providing background information. As for marked versus unmarked constructions, there were not enough marked constructions in the data to warrant a comparison. Overt and non-overt subjects occur for the most part in the same syntactic environments.

What did turn out to be highly significant was the third factor, namely, that overt subjects occur when they are different from the subject of the preceding main clause, whether the referent is the thematic subject or not. This was the case with every one of the 53 overt subjects in my data. To see how this works, one full narrative is provided below (speaker number 1 in Table 1). This narrative was given in response to a question about the high school memories of the interviewee. He is nineteen years old and of an urban lower class background. The overt subjects in this narrative are typed in capital letters; verbs followed by the plus sign and a pronoun indicate verb followed by a personal suffix. All other suffixes are indicated by a dash.

Example 2: Narrative of an urban lower class male, age 19

2-1) wallah XATEREYEHXEILY QASHANGIKeh yadam miyad
well memory very nicethat to mind comes

'Well, a very nice memory that comes to my mind'

2-2) yaani Ø xandeh avaram hast
in fact Ø laughter bringing is

'And (it) is also funny'

2-3) MADRESEHAYE INJA ya dabirestanhayepayeeneh shahr--schools-of here or high schools-of bottom-of city

'The schools around here or the high schools of the slum section of the city'

2-4) INJA bishtar gomar baziyo hezarta fesad
here mostly gambling play-and thousand corruption

toosh anjam misheh
inside done is
'Here it is mostly gambling and a thousand other kind of dirty business'

2-5) MA-m keh tebqeh maamul -- eyneh bachahayeh digeh--
we-also as usual -- like kids-of other--

'We (i.e., I), like the other kids, as usual'

2-6) chon Ø kareh digeyee nemikardim
because Ø work other not-did+we

'Because (we) didn't do anything else'

2-7) Ø mo' allemharo aziyat mikardim
Ø teachers bother did+we

'(We) gave the teachers a hard time'

2-8) Ø yeh dabir dashtim axoond bud beh esmeh
Ø one teacher had+we cleric was with name-of

aqayeh moradi
Mr.-of Moradi

'(We) had a teacher who was a cleric with the name of Mr. Moradi'

2-9) baad ISHUN xeily Emam Zamuno doost dasht
then he very twelfth prophet-the like had

'And then he really liked the Emam Zamun
(the Twelveth Prophet)'

2-10) Ø nomreh ham ru Emameh Zamun midad
Ø grade even on Emam-of Zamun used to give

'(he) even used to give grades on (one's lip service to) the Twelveth Prophet'

2-11) baad Ø har vaqt sareh kelaseh ma miyumad
then Ø every time to class-of we would come

Ø aziyatesh mikardim
Ø bother-him did+we

'And then every time (he) would come to our class (we) used to give him a hard time'
2-12) یه روژ یکی از بچهها -- ئه جدید بود ئه عماهن بود
یک روز یکی از کودکان -- ئه جدید بود ئه آمد بود

'یک روز یکی از کودکان-- (او) جدید بود و (او) سوگواره بود'

2-13) هامون مولالیم بابا خودمون داری میداد
همه تعلیم‌گر دوباره برای ما درس داده می‌شد

معلٔم الفقه
تعلیم‌گر علوم اسلامی

'همه تعلیم‌گر دوباره درس ما می‌داد'

2-14) یکی از بچهها نامه شیطان بود

'یکی از کودکان نامه شیطان بود'

2-15) ئه ادمو چسبندگان بود به آباه بود
ئه گلم -- ئه چسبندگان بود به آباه بود

'(او) دانشجویی بود که برخورد به پرده او بود

2-16) ئه اباسم اندختم بود بر میز
ئه پرده -- ئه اندختم بود بر میز

'(او) تعلیم‌گری بود که پرده او را بر میز قرار داده بود'

2-17) ئه ادمو چسبندگان بود به آباه بود
ئه گلم -- ئه چسبندگان بود به آباه بود

'(او) دانشجویی بود که برخورد به پرده او بود

2-18) باد حواسه نابود
گر انتباه او نبود

'و او (تعلیم‌گری) نبود که انتباه داشت'

2-19) ئه ابازو عماهندختم روی دوش‌ها
ئه پرده -- ئه اندختم روی دوش‌ها

'(او) برای پرده روی می‌خورد که روی پاهاشان بود'

2-20) ئه یه چه چندره چسبندها پوشش‌های...
Ø suddenly feel did some thing sticky back-his-is

'(He) suddenly felt something sticky on his back'

2-21) Ø umad bebineh chiyeh abaheh oftad az
Ø came see what robe-the fell from
ru dushesh
on shoulder-his

'(He) turned to see what is on his back but the
robe fell from his shoulders'

2-22) YEKI AZ BACHAHA az taheh kelas goft damaneh
one of kids from back-of class said+he skirt-of
aga oftad
sir fell

'One of the kids from the back of the class said:
"Our father's skirt just fell!"'

2-23) IN MARD-am -- Ø xeily maazerat mixam-- goft
this man-also -- Ø very apologize want+I -- said+he

'This man-- (I) apologize-- said:'

madar qahbeh oun damaneh abjeeteh
mother whore that skirt-of sister-your-is

'"You mother whore that's your sister's skirt
(that falls)."'

Let us go over Example 2. In (2-1), the subject is the
full NP 'a very nice memory', XATEREYE XEILY QASHANGI. In
(2-2) the subject is the same as in (2-1) and it is non-
overt. In (2-3) we have a different subject, namely 'the
schools around Here', MADRESEHAYE INJA. However, (2-3) is a
false start and the speaker starts a new sentence in (2-4),
shortening the subject to INJA, 'here'. In (2-5), the
subject is 'we', MA, which is different from the subject of
the sentence before and so it is overt. In the next three
sentences, the subject remains the same and it is non-overt,
and so on. There are no cases where the subject is overt and
is the same as the subject of the sentence before. The
converse of this finding does not hold: a zero subject does
not necessarily mean that it is the same as the subject of the preceding main clause. This is frequently the case. English which rarely allows non-overt subjects, allows them in precisely this environment. When the subject does not change, it can be dropped as in the example below:

(3) He went home, Ø didn’t say a word to his roommate, and Ø went straight to bed.

However, a zero subject can appear when it is different from the subject of the preceding main clause (see sentence 2-23 and below).

The passage in Example 1 from sentence (2-14) to (2-17) needs further explanation. The subject of sentence (2-16) is ‘the teacher’ which is different from the subject of the preceding sentence and yet it is non-overt. Likewise, in sentence (2-17) the subject changes to the ‘class-mate’ but again this subject is non-overt. There seems to be a self-repair here since sentence (2-17) is a verbatim rendition of (2-15). The narrator says that one of the kids stuck the gum to the teacher’s robe before saying where the robe was—whether the teacher had it on at the time or whether it was somewhere else. He therefore backs up in (2-16) and explains where the robe was when the student stuck the gum to it. He then restarts the passage by repeating sentence (2-15). This self-repair could in part explain the occurrence of a non-overt subject in sentence 2-16³. In addition, although this narrative concentrates more on the teacher, the class-mate is also an important character. We have two thematic subjects, and hence zero subjects for both.

DISCUSSION

On the basis of child data and the distribution of zero subjects in adult data, we concluded that zero subjects are the default value for the thematic subject of narrative discourse in Persian. We asked the question of why overt subjects occur where the verb would theoretically be enough for the identification of the subject. The formulation we found which accounts for every case of an overt subject in our data (n=53) is that overt subjects appear when they are different from the subject of the immediately preceding main clause. Finally, as we can see in the adult narrative of Example 2, there are occurrences of non-overt subjects whose referent is not the thematic subject of the narrative. The adult narratives considered here, though all have one main thematic subject, can be divided into passages each of which...
has its own thematic subject (e.g. sentences 5-8; 9-12; 18-21). In this way, zero subjects do not only appear as referents of the main thematic subject, but for other noun phrases as well.
NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at NWAV-XII, 1984, Philadelphia.

2. The children did not proceed to describe the details of the picture such as the scenery or other background details. Instead, they concentrated on the boy and his actions. Following Karmiloff-Smith, the children in this sample were not told to recount a story but to describe the pictures. This provides indirect evidence for Karmiloff-Smith’s conclusion that children above six have an awareness of the narrative as a discourse-level unit.

3. I would like to thank Ellen Prince for pointing out the self-repair here.
REFERENCES


