

A Semantics and Semiotics Perspective on the Position of Nouns in Persian Language: An Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the position of nouns in the Persian language through the lens of semantics and semiotics. Previous grammatical frameworks have predominantly focused on semantics, making semantical approaches familiar. Thus, the research sought to determine how semantics is utilized in definitions and their application within previous schools of thought. Traditional grammatical frameworks have discussed the significance of semantics in formalism, structure, and historical usage. In the context of semiotics, which adopts a structural method and offers a scientific approach to language studies, definitions rooted in semantics can be deciphered. Each word represents a combination of a signifier and a signified or a sign and a meaning, as expounded in structural frameworks by Saussure and Peirce. Consequently, semiotics plays a crucial role in defining nouns, as it introduces interpretation and understanding, emphasizing the importance of social and cultural semiotics, which need to be adequately addressed in traditional semantics. Despite its limited attention to traditional and historical semantics, semiotics serves as the foundation for the philosophy of language and semantics in the realm of nouns.

Keywords: Semiotics, Semantics, Structural, Formalism, Persian language, Signifier and signified

1. Noun

Persian's distinct structure sets it apart from Semitic and Indo-European languages. Suppose we accept Chomsky's assertion that languages share a universal deep structure and differ primarily in surface expression and word order. In that case, it becomes evident that Persian requires the development of an independent grammar separate from foreign languages. The definition of sentence components such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives in Persian has either been influenced by mapped instructions within the language or has followed global schools of thought.

In traditional grammar, various factors hindered the creation of a scientific and comprehensive Persian grammar. These factors included merging form and meaning, concerns about correctness and incorrectness in language, the persistence of grammar, the dominance of written language over spoken language, the imposition of foreign concepts on the language, and the merging of historical and synchronic grammar. These obstacles prevented the establishment of a robust framework for Persian grammar.

Furthermore, formalist grammars, such as those proposed by Mirza Habib Esfahani and Qarib, "5-Ostad," as well as structural grammars like Vahidian and Omrani's grammar (2007) and Farshidvard's grammar (2003), have placed excessive emphasis on structural form while neglecting meaning and semiotics. This emphasis has led to superficial and mechanistic definitions and usage of language elements.

The definition of nouns has varied among different schools of thought. For instance, in Qarib's formalist grammar, which primarily relies on semantic definitions, a noun is defined as a word that names and designates people, animals, or things. However, this definition is incomplete and not prescriptive. It is incomplete because it fails to account for subcategories of nouns like pronouns, which refer to humans, animals, and objects. Additionally, the definition lacks prescriptiveness as it should be based on grammatical criteria such as acceptability and position in a sentence.

Form-oriented grammarians and their adherents, in both morphology and syntax, tend to prioritize formal characteristics over semantics when defining elements and units of grammar. For example,

their definition of nouns focuses on the word's ability to be pluralized rather than acknowledging that a noun is used to name something, as semanticists and proponents of traditional linguistics would argue.

In Parviz Natel-Khanlari's book "Historical Grammar of the Persian Language," a noun is described as a word used for naming individuals or objects (Khanlari, 1990: 46). Khosro Farshidvard (2003) defines a noun as a word used for identifying and naming things, such as stone, human, knowledge, and going (Farshidvard, 2003: 181). Farshidvard's conclusion is drawn from his example of the word "going," where verbal forms in Persian are used as nouns, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of different types of nouns. Farshidvard provides a detailed explanation of noun structure in his analysis and categorization of nouns.

Moreover, the claims made by Persian grammarians about whether grammar should be formalist, structural, or semanticistic require critical examination. These approaches have failed to maintain clear distinctions between schools of thought, resulting in a mix of various grammatical perspectives. Farshidvard's grammar, for instance, only establishes a structural aspect in certain sections of phonetics, possibly due to the nature of sounds. However, the book lacks a systematic approach, leading to inconsistencies and a lack of coherence. Particularly in discussing portmanteau words, Farshidvard fails to provide a clear and consistent distinction throughout the book. Additionally, his grammar irregularly combines spoken and written language, and his explanations include unwarranted criticism of opponents, relying on foreign languages, and baseless assumptions. These flaws invite valid criticism of his work.

The importance of incorporating a semanticistic approach in previous grammars has been acknowledged. While grammar writers have shown a particular preference for their chosen schools of thought, they have inevitably integrated semanticistic elements. The definitions provided for nouns, which involve naming individuals or objects, have often utilized semanticistic grammar without fully recognizing the use of semiotics. Semiotics, as demonstrated in Saussure's structural approach, examines the conventional relationship between form and meaning. Therefore, to accurately define sentence components, mainly nouns, it is necessary to simultaneously consider phonetic, semantic, and syntactic factors in the definitions.

2. The Position of Nouns from a Semantic Perspective

The semantic factor plays a crucial role in defining nouns and is the most significant factor in linguistic units, including parts of speech (Sadeghi, 2009: 106). Traditionally, noun definition has primarily relied on semantic criteria, where words have been assigned their grammatical roles based on their dictionary meanings (Bateni, 1991: 71). Shafahi states that "nouns are not inherently nouns by themselves and must be associated with various concepts" (Shafahi, 1984: 8). However, because nouns can sometimes function as adjectives and adverbs, relying solely on semantic definitions is inadequate. Considering their syntactic and structural roles can address this issue. Sadeghi (2009) also supports this idea and explains that grammarians pay attention to the grammatical role of nouns because restrictions and attributes can be transformed into nouns in a sentence. These transformed elements must be nominalized, and their naming can only be based on their grammatical role (Sadeghi, 2009: 12).

For instance, the adjective "beautiful" in common usage can be used as a noun, taking on the meaning of a specific noun. Thus, an adjective can function as a noun and even be used as the subject of a sentence. Therefore, more than relying solely on its meaning is required to determine its grammatical role, and structural and formal approaches must be employed. If a comprehensive definition of a noun that encompasses semantic content and structural and syntactic roles can be provided, Esmail Sadeghi's definition can be referenced. According to him, a noun is a word or group of words that represent affairs, objects, and concepts. Phonetically, it does not have any specific marker. Morphologically, it accepts grammatical categories such as tense, number, definiteness, and distinction and is dependent.

From a previous perspective, examples include demonstrative adjectives, interrogative pronouns, and posterior markers like "dey" (negative marker), plural markers, genitive markers, and adjectives

(regarding number, it varies; in Persian, there are no gender distinctions between masculine and feminine). From a syntactic point of view, nouns in a sentence can function as subjects, phrases, complements, objects, interjections, and genitives (Sadeghi, 2009: 111).

Vladimir Grigorovich describes the semantic factor as the structure encompassing all sensory perceptions. According to him, the word "wolf" represents a living creature, "coming" signifies an action, "table" denotes an object, and "beauty" represents a quality. These meanings form the basis for words as semantic signs, each indicating an action, quality, or the existence of something. In contrast, the formalist perspective defines a noun as a word that can function as the subject of a sentence, focusing on its grammatical role rather than its meaning. Definitions solely based on semantic or formalist approaches are insufficient in explaining the role and meaning of nouns in a sentence. It is more appropriate to have definitions that combine both perspectives.

As semantic approaches have long been prevalent in Persian grammar and have been utilized by grammarians, a description of these approaches is provided, incorporating semantic concepts within their framework to some extent.

Like historical grammar, traditional grammar extensively employs the semantic approach to define and explain grammar. Traditional grammar can be categorized into classical, traditional grammar, and semantic traditional grammar. *Lesan-Ol-Ajam* is one of the earliest works that independently addresses the field of traditional grammar in the Persian language. According to *Lesan-Ol-Ajam*, words or utterances are divided into meaningful and meaningless categories. The meaningless category includes letters of the alphabet, prepositions, and conjunctions. On the other hand, the meaningful category is further divided into verbs and nouns based on whether they have an independent meaning. Taleghani, like his colleagues, defines three types of words based on their position in a sentence rather than their meaning. In his definition of a noun, Taleghani states, "The characteristic that distinguishes a noun from a verb and a particle is its ability to function as a subject, either as an occurrence of the subject or as an agent, interjection, described, or genitive" (Taleghani, 1980: 12).

In the discussion of nouns, Taleghani explores the concept of indefinite nouns and specifically mentions the "Ya=i" marker of indefiniteness. He explains that this marker renders the noun unknown and sometimes conveys a sense of greatness or insignificance. To illustrate this, he cites a poetic line: "Yare mardane khoda bash ke dar kashtiye Nooh; Hast khaki ke be abi nakharad toofan ra" (Be a friend of God's men because in Noah's ark; There is a soil that does not equate a storm to a drop of water). In this line, the "Ya=i" in "khaki" falls into the category of "Ya Ta'zim" (Ya of exaltation). It signifies that the soil is not like other soils but exceptional and significant.

Taleghani's perspective on the indefinite marker "Ya" and its functions in conveying meanings of belittlement, exaltation, and endearment in definitions and grammatical usage indicates that, although there have been substantial efforts to establish grammatical definitions based on the Arabic language, the semantic aspect has been somewhat acknowledged. Consequently, it can be inferred that traditional grammar has been more successful than formalist and structuralist approaches since it allows for the integration of meaning and form.

Formalist grammar shows minimal influence from semanticism. Roman Jakobson, a linguist and Russian literary theorist, disregarded literary concepts such as metaphor and metonymy. He believed that while the surface structures of languages may differ, their deep structures can exhibit similarities. Jakobson's definition of a noun states that it is a word used to name something or someone. If it corresponds to the essence, it is called a "proper noun." On the other hand, if it corresponds to something other than the essence, it is called a "common noun," examples being sleep, consciousness, and intellect. If the noun signifies an event, it is called a gerund, such as hitting and going. In cases where a noun deviates from its original meaning due to a specific transitive function and acquires another meaning, such as a quality or attribute, it is called a derivative. Examples of derivatives include "the one who flies" and "the one with a mouth." If a noun remains unchanged and solid, like wing and mouth, it falls under solid nouns (Esfahani, 2015: 46).

While discussing the definition and other aspects of words in Persian and Arabic, Mirza Habib also highlights their characteristics from a formalist perspective. He distinguishes Arabic and Persian nouns. A "Tanbih" section (Note) states that a noun possesses three characteristics: quality, quantity, and status. Quality pertains to masculine and feminine distinctions, quantity relates to singular and plural forms, and status involves declensions and structures. Additionally, a fourth property, indefinite and definite, may be considered alongside these three characteristics (Esfahani, 2015: 48). Thus, the definition of nouns, which serve the purpose of naming something, reveals the influence of formalist features.

Qarib, in his transition from traditional grammar to a new approach, recognizes the need to classify grammatical concepts but still inevitably incorporates elements of semanticism. He employs formalist and semanticist approaches to define the concepts of indefinite and definite. Indefinite refers to something unknown to the audience and is formed by adding "Ya" at the end of the noun's beginning. To convert an indefinite noun to a definite one, "Ya" is removed from the end. For example, "The kingdom referred to the killing of innocence" and "that poor guy said something rude to the king" (Qarib, 1936: 17). While the provided example is based on formalism, particularly when discussing the conversion from indefinite to definite, it is not entirely appropriate because once a noun is mentioned for the second time, it is no longer in the indefinite state.

The semanticist approach is not recent and has been utilized in traditional grammar until now. However, the formalist approach relies less on semanticism when explaining sentence elements. On the other hand, Structuralist, traditional, and historical grammars demonstrate a greater dependence on the meaning of nouns.

3. The Position of Nouns from a Semiotic Perspective

Semiotics is a scientific field that examines signs and their utilization by analyzing communication patterns and mechanisms. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) regarded semiotics as studying signs' existence and function within society. Although the concept of semiotics had been previously explored by the English philosopher John Locke in the seventeenth century, it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, independent of Saussure's work, that it developed into an interdisciplinary domain with contributions from the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure asserted that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is based on convention, lacking any inherent or essential connection. Each signifier serves as a representation of a signified.

In his discussion of the signifier and the signified, Saussure posited that a sign possesses a dual nature, and a conventional relationship exists between the signifier (acoustic image) and the signified (mental image). In reality, "neither of these two elements alone constitutes a sign, but their mutually constructed and interconnected structure, known as the signifier, gives rise to the sign—a relationship that is fundamentally arbitrary and conventional rather than natural, necessary, or evoked" (Azarpeik, 2018: 3). According to Saussure, "the connection between form and meaning is arbitrary, and since our understanding of the sign is a result of the general association between form and meaning, it is simpler to state that a linguistic sign is arbitrary" (Saussure, 1999: 98). Furthermore, "all means of expression in a society are fundamentally grounded in collective habits, or in other words, they are all conventional" (ibid: 99). Therefore, for the acoustic form of the word "tree," recipients may have multiple signifieds in their minds, and geographical and cultural factors can influence the mental image associated with it.

One of Saussure's significant contributions is his seemingly straightforward yet revolutionary proposition that "language is a system of signs that expresses ideas." Saussure refers to this system of signs as *Langue*, which serves as the framework of linguistic rules that speakers must adhere to to establish meaningful communication. This concept strongly contrasts with *Speech* or *Parole*, which refers to the individual act of speaking (Saussure, 1999: 49). Saussure distinguishes language from speech by separating the social aspect from the individual aspect and the essential from the incidental or accidental. In other words, the individual's use of language is only possible when they have learned the fundamental rules of the language system and actively participate in it. Just as someone

who wants to play chess must learn the rules to play correctly, someone who speaks or writes in a language must accept the linguistic rules that shape that language.

From Peirce's semiotic perspective, "signs are positioned in a triadic relationship and are located at the head of a triangle, with two other elements at the other vertices" (Peirce, 2006: 4): the Sign, the Interpretant, and the Object are positioned at these three sides. For instance, considering a specific noun like "tree," the written form "tree" represents the sign, while the physical form of an actual tree represents the object. However, the interpretation of "tree" can vary in each individual's mind, and the representation and image of a tree may differ among individuals or in different geographical or cultural contexts. Therefore, while semiotics forms the foundation of all languages, language systems have not consciously addressed semiotics. Nevertheless, the principles of structuralism in linguistics align closely with semiotics.

1. Investigation and Comparison

In traditional grammar and prior to structuralism, as well as in structural word order, there was a consideration of the substantive meaning of a word in addition to its semantic meaning. However, within the current structural method, it was never regarded as a signifier or having multiple signifieds. This deficiency in traditional grammar was primarily due to the lack of scientific advancements in language and semiotics. It was assumed that when a word was used with a specific meaning, it was perceived in the same way by everyone, and the existence of contrasting signifieds for a word like "book" was not considered possible. Saussure viewed language as an interpretive system where signs indicate ideas, and he introduced it as a science that examines the life of signs within social life. From Peirce's perspective, this domain expanded, and interpretation was added alongside the signifier and signified.

According to referentialism, "A noun is a word that signifies and designates a person, animal, or thing," implying a direct and immediate relationship between a word and an object. However, there is no direct relationship between the written form of the word "cow" and the actual existence of a cow in any language. Thus, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is also established in referentialism, but the conceptual system of referentialism fails to recognize this deficiency. It was only with the theories of Saussure and later Peirce and Chomsky that grammar broke away from its traditional form, and linguistic analysis was defined according to scientific criteria. Semiotics is likely the philosophical foundation of a language in which each sign may change based on a society's spatial and temporal conditions. In referentialism, a red flower may only signify a fragrant flower with various uses. However, in semiotics and different cultures, a red flower has different functions. Therefore, the word or written form "red flower" does not indicate any of these functions, and the signifiers representing the red flower vary from culture to culture.

Nouns are essential in both referentialism and semiotics. In referentialism, signs indicate the type of meaning, and meaning changes with the alteration of signs. Consequently, signs always convey meaning, and linguistic signs are discovered for any semantic or conceptual differences. In this regard, referentialism and semiotics are two related concepts, although traditional grammatical traditions have been unable to articulate them despite using and employing them.

2. Result

When comparing the referential and semiotic schools in the Persian language and examining the definition of a noun, it becomes apparent that the principles of structural syntax allow us to comprehend the relationships between the signifier and signified and to address any formal or structural deficiencies by referring to meaning. From a structural standpoint, it has been observed that form and structure alone do not fully explain the function and role of a noun in a sentence. For instance, an adjective can assume the role of a noun, but a strict focus on form cannot adequately account for the meaning of an adjective when used as a noun. However, this ambiguity can be resolved by turning to referentialism. Semiotics, which is deeply rooted in structuralism, also plays a role in understanding referential meaning. Through the exploration of the signifier and signified structure of language, linguists have concluded that the foundation of referentialism lies in the semiotics of language, encompassing its social, cultural, and psychological aspects.

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