

Pragmatic Perspectives on the Preterite in Persian

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ABSTRACT

The preterite in Persian can be used, particularly in its colloquial variety, to designate the future time and for immediate warning. These rather unusual uses of the preterite have not been investigated adequately by grammarians of the Persian language. As a purely grammatical approach will be unable to explain such non-characteristic uses of the preterite, this paper aims to explore the issue from a pragmatic perspective. Interestingly enough, such uses of the preterite are associated with the pragmatic category of deixis. For this reason, the current paper argues that the deicticity of the preterite used for expressing futurity must be explained in terms of subjective deixis, rather than from the perspective of mere temporality. The paper also argues that deontic modality can be an appropriate alternative to account for the preterite being used for the speech act of warning.

Keywords: 1. Preterite 2. Deixis 3. Subjectivity 4. Futurity 5. Deontic modality.

1. Introduction

The study of deixis, both as a semantic and a pragmatic category, has achieved a paramount position in linguistics in recent years (e.g. Fillmore, 1997; Lyons, 1977 and 1982; Levinson, 1983; Anderson and Keenan, 1985; Wales, 1986; and Bourdin, 2002). Despite their limitation to a closed set in any language, deictic elements have a wide range of uses in human natural language. Thus, deixis can be investigated from different perspectives: typological, discursal, and socio-psychological, to mention only a few. The current paper aims to focus on certain aspects of temporal deixis in Persian. More specifically, the study confines itself to an examination of the use of deictic preterite¹ to express futurity and command in colloquial Persian.

2. Temporal categories

In many languages, we usually observe two main temporal categories used to relate the time of a situation² (e.g. an event, a state, etc) to the time of a speaker's utterance: lexical and grammatical. The former category is normally defined as *time adverbial* and the latter as *tense*. As Lyons (1977:678) states: "... the participants in a language event must be able to control and interrelate at least two different frames of temporal reference: deictic and non-deictic." Therefore, tense and adverbs of time are considered as important cases of temporal deixis in a given language. However, although adverbs of time can be invariably found in all human natural languages, the category of tense does not seem to be a universal characteristic of them. I shall start the discussion with deictic tense as a temporal category.

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3. Deictic tense as a temporal category

The deictic category of tense, one of the thorniest topics in linguistics, has attracted the attention of some scholars (e.g. Lyons, 1977; Smith, 1981; Comrie 1985; Declerck 1991; Klein, 1994; and Bhat 1999). They all recognize the complex and important status that tense holds in linguistics; however, many aspects of its use have been left unexplored. One crucial aspect of primary tenses deals with their deictic characteristic. According to Levinson (1983:77), "... tense is one of the main factors ensuring that nearly all sentences when uttered are deictically anchored to a context of utterance." In a similar vein, Anderson and Keenan (1985:300) also state: "of course, most languages represent an inherent category of temporal reference whose interpretation is necessarily deictic, in the notion of tense." By drawing on the insight gained from previous studies, the current research will discuss two uses of the Persian preterite that do not appear to have been investigated properly. In an attempt to build up a theoretical preliminary, I shall first present a few definitions of tense proposed by a number of linguists. According to Lyons (1977:678)

[tense] grammaticalizes the relationship which holds between time of the situation that is being described and the temporal zero-point of the deictic context.

If we look at other definitions presented in this connection by linguists, it will become clear that they follow, more or less, Lyons' authoritative description. For instance, Comrie (1985:9) describes tense thus: "... tense is grammaticalized expression of location in time." Alternatively, Allan's (2001:353) definition is "TENSE consists of a small number of grammatical morphemes which systematically locate situations in time relative to a DEICTIC CENTRE *td*." In Huddleston and Pullum's terms (2002:116) "the general term **tense** applies to a system where the basic or characteristic meaning of the term is to locate the situation, or part of it, at some point or period of time." All these definitions point to two important aspects of tense, namely its deictic nature and its grammatical status. Moreover, the deictic nature of tense relates directly to its context-boundedness. With these preliminaries in mind, let me now illustrate how the Persian preterite, as a deictic tense, behaves in certain pragmatic contexts.

4. The Persian preterite

The use of the preterite tense in Persian, as far as its characteristic behaviour is concerned, need not necessarily be very different from its typical application in other languages. In a sense, this statement fits in with Allan's position (2001:355), in which "PAST TENSE, P, means the event or state of affairs spoken of has already taken place before the time of utterance and it is not current at the time of utterance." However, as is also the case with some other languages, the Persian preterite does not necessarily involve locating a situation prior to the time of speaker's utterance. Take for example:

[1] mi-xâstam bebinam do daqiqe vaqt dâri?
 IMPI³-want-past-I pres.-see-I two minute time have-you?
 'I wanted to know whether you've got two minutes time (to spare).'

This shows that the preterite in Persian, like that in English, does not locate the situation, in this case 'wanting', prior to the time of uttering. The speaker uses the dissociative preterite, rather than its present tense counterpart (*mixâham*, 'I want') which has the same propositional meaning, to keep his/her distance from the addressee. In pragmatic terms, the distance (or social remoteness) in the preterite form indicates a polite way of asking, which minimizes the degree of imposition on the addressee (see Huddleston and Pullum, 2002:138 for politeness/diffidence function of the preterite).

And, hence, it is socio-culturally more welcomed than its non-modalized version of asking⁴.

4.1 The Persian preterite and futurity

As has been mentioned earlier, reference to futurity is one of the non-prototypical uses of the Persian preterite, and the current paper focuses on semantic and pragmatic aspects of such a use of the preterite in colloquial Persian. Although such uses of the preterite have not received due attention from most Persian grammarians, it appears that it was first noticed by Lazard (1975:141-42) and subsequently by Windfuhr (1979:90-91). Nonetheless, Bateni (1979:38), Anvari and Ahmadi-givi (1982:43), and Shaghayei (1984:79) also merely state that the past tense can be used to refer to the present or future time, particularly in conditional sentences. The same goes for other more recent Persian grammar works such as Mahootian, (1997), Arjang, (1995), Farshidvard (2003), and Mace (2003).

Bateni (1979:38), for instance, provides the following example without any explanation:

- [2] barnâmeu: ma'lu:m nist, šâyed fardâ raft ku
 program he known not-be, perhaps tomorrow went mountain
 'We don't know his plan, perhaps s/he will go to mountain tomorrow.'

Windfuhr (1979:90-91) supplies more examples:

- [3] Hasan, biâ! - Bale, umadam
 Hasan, come! - yes, came-I
 'Hasan, come!' – 'O.K., I am coming / on my way.'

- [4] xub, mâ dige raftim
 well, we too went-we
 'Well, I am going / will go now.'

- [5] ide-ye xubi-e, mâ ham raftim.
 idea good, we too went-we
 'Good idea, we will go too.'

Following Lazard (1975), Windfuhr (1979:91) regards such uses of the preterite as "the perfective aspect of the present sub-system, i.e., referring to the definite future." He must be right in arguing that this form is mainly used to refer to the definite future in the standard colloquial Persian. However, it is unfortunate that Windfuhr does not explain on what grounds he treats this form as "the perfective aspect of the present sub-system."⁵ More specifically, it is not clear how "the preterite" can be treated as "the present sub-system" unless we confuse the category of form with the category of meaning. This phenomenon, thus requires serious investigation.

It appears that the main reason beyond such a negligence by the Persian grammarians arises from the fact that this use of the preterite is mainly observed in colloquial Persian, and they have very often focused on the written Persian language. Furthermore, this characteristic of the Persian preterite will not be observed in many regional dialects of Persian, thus people possessing certain regional intuitions may struggle to have the right interpretation of it.

Prior to focusing on the future meaning of the preterite in colloquial Persian, it should be noted that such sentences are ambiguous between two readings: referring to the future time and the past time. It is the context of situation and, in a large measure, the prosodic contour that disambiguate its meanings. Such sentences are frequently used by one of the interlocutors in a conversation. However, this particular use of the Persian preterite imposes certain semantic and pragmatic constraints. First, context-boundedness may be regarded as one of its major pragmatic restrictions. This means that, without envisaging an actual interactive scenario, this use of the preterite referring

to futurity is not sustainable. In a sense, in non-interactive scenarios the preterite cannot be used to locate a situation in near future relative to the time of speaking. This use then is limited to conversation and cannot be employed in the other modes of language, in particular in the written mode.

As for the second constraint, it relates to the type of verbs used in such circumstances. Despite the fact that deictic verbs⁶ such as ‘âmadan’ (come), ‘raftan’ (go) and ‘residan’ (arrive) are the most typical verbs normally used for this purpose, other agentive verbs can also be employed to convey the same sense. For example:

[6] A: *čeqadr lefteš midi*
 how much length-its IMPI-do-you
 ‘How long are you lengthening it out?’

B: *alân tamu:m kardam*
 now finish do-past-I
 ‘I’ll just finish it.’

[7] A: *qazâto boxu:r*
 food-your eat
 ‘Eat your meal!’

B: *bebin xurdam.*
 see eat-past-I
 ‘Look! I’ll just eat it.’

In contrast, non-agentive verbs, such as those denoting states and feelings, cannot be used to refer to futurity. For example:

[8i] **man alân dar tehrân zendegi kardam*
 I now in Tehran live do-past-I
 ‘I now lived in Tehran.’⁷

[8ii] A: *hasano nadidi*
 Hasan-OM not-see-you
 ‘Didn’t you see Hasan?’

B: *man alân didemaš*
 I now see-past-I-him/her
 ‘I have seen him just now.’

Not only are utterances such as [8i] grammatically ill-formed, but pragmatically odd, as well. Here the preterite form of living, *zendegi kardam*, locates the situation in the past which is inconsistent with the time adverbial of the present, *alân* (‘now’). In a sense, example [8i] when used without its adverb of time (*alân*), means that I used to live in Tehran in the past. However, examples like [8ii] are both grammatically and semantically well-formed and well-accepted. But the point is that non-agentive verbs such as ‘*didan*’ (‘to see’) in [8ii] cannot be used to locate the situation in the future by virtue of the preterite form, except in conditional sentences. For example:

[9] A: *be hasan begu: bāhāš kār dāram*
 to Hasan tell with-him work have-I
 ‘Tell Hasan I have to see him.’

B: *age didamaš beheš migam*
 if saw-him-I to-him IMPI-tell-I

If I saw him, I will tell him. [literal translation]

‘If I see him, I will tell him.’ [idiomatic translation]

Here the event of ‘seeing’ may not happen; it depends upon whether the situation of ‘seeing’ gets actualized or not. In other words, it is a non-factual use of the preterite, which means that it does not logically entail the action it purports to convey. Nonetheless, my main concern is with actual and non-conditional declarative sentences

such as [2] to [5] and [10] to [12] in the following, whose propositional meanings entail the actions which they denote. Here we are dealing with those verbs that need to be punctual, non-progressive and accomplishable. Furthermore, it should be noted that the use of the preterite to express futurity does only apply to affirmative-declarative sentences. Put differently, the negative and interrogative counterparts of the preterite cannot be used to locate the situation posterior to the time of speaking. However, it is not restricted to first person subjects and can be used with third person subjects, too. Take, for instance, the following exchanges:

[10] A: bačehā kojāyid
children where-be-you
'Children! Where are you?'

B: alân u:madim
now come-past-we
'We'll just come.'

[11] A: ali! kojayi bābā
Ali! where-be-you father
'Ali! where are you, my son?'

B: sabr kon! u:mad
wait do-you come-past-he
'Wait! he will come right now.'

In this scenario [11], A is Ali's father and B is Ali's mother. Therefore, it is Ali's mother who replies to Ali's father call on the behalf of Ali. A similar situation is operating in example [12], too.

[12] sabr kon! alân tamu:m kardand.
wait do-you now finish do-past-they
'Wait! They will finish in a moment.'

Examples 11 and 12 illustrate that the use of the preterite can be extended to third person singular/plural although there seems to be a tendency for first person subjects to be given priority in this regard. Its use with third person subjects also illuminates one more point; that is, it indicates that commissive force is not necessarily located on the speaker's side. We also need to bear in mind that this use of the preterite does not mean that the addressee must necessarily benefit from the action performed by the utterance. Furthermore, the preterite can be used with second person subjects, too; but it is only limited to imperatives (commands), which will be taken up shortly.

4.2 The Persian preterite and subjectivity

With the above remarks in mind, it would appear that such a non-tentative use of the preterite for expressing futurity does not exactly tally with Lyons' view that (1977:677) "futurity is never a purely temporal concept; it necessarily includes an element of prediction or some related modal notion." The question we could pose at this juncture is: what are the semantic and pragmatic differences between the preterite and the present forms in Persian to locate a situation in the future? It is normally expected that the preterite must convey a less forceful statement than the present form. Take the following examples in a scenario in which someone is knocking on the door:

(note, in order to be brief, only the second part of exchanges is given from now on)

[13] i. alân u:madam. [preterite and marked form]
now come-past-I

ii. alân miâm.
now IMPI-come-I [present and unmarked form]
'I will just come.'

Contrary to our expectations, [13i, the preterite] is more forceful and determinate

than [13ii, the present]. In other words, [13i] entails an act of coming whose propositional meaning cannot be cancelled without leading to contradiction; whereas the implicature raised by [13ii] can be cancelled without any contradiction. In a sense, here we are dealing with logical entailment, on the one hand, and with pragmatic implicature, on the other. Note that the counterpart examples in 14 attempt to cancel the implicature by further information. However, the implicature evoked by [14i] (the preterite form) cannot be cancelled.

[14] i. *alân u:madam age betu:nam.

now come-past-I if pres.-can-I

I came if I can [literal translation]

'I'll just will come if I can.'

ii. alân miâm age betu:nam.

now IMPI-come-I if pres.-can-I

'I'll just come if I can.'

This reveals the important fact that there is at least one case in Persian where the preterite does not carry with it a sense of distance and remoteness, but rather a sense of nearness. More importantly, this particular use of the preterite in Persian illustrates, contrary to the prevalent view, that the concept of futurity is not necessarily tied to a sense of prediction, uncertainty or epistemic modality. Nevertheless, here we can see how the preterite is used to treat an action as something which is sure to happen. Put differently, it eliminates all aspects of uncertainty and treats the case as something destined to happen. The question then is how one can be sure about one's future action, except for those events which have been pre-planned by authorities or by nature, and not by speakers themselves. Take, for example, the following English utterance:

[15] He was to see me tomorrow.

This indicates a schedule or obligation located before the time of utterance for him to see me tomorrow. In a sense, it locates the situation of planning or scheduling an event anterior to the time of the utterance rather than the time of seeing. More importantly, its propositional content does not entail 'he meets me tomorrow' since it is quite possible for such an implicature to be cancelled by further information 'he was to see me tomorrow but it has now been postponed to next Monday'. Thus, it seems unreasonable to be certain about future reference.

However, as far as Persian is concerned, we use the preterite to express the definite future. One may even argue that this linguistic behavior indicates a specific kind of cultural schema enabling the speaker to conceptualize futurity as if it has already happened; i.e. something which s/he has already experienced. This, to a certain extent, may lead us to the culturally-determined subjectivity aspect of deixis in a language (Lyons, 1982 and 1995). Following Enfield (2002:13), such a pragmatic inference of deictic futurity, based on cultural logic, finds semanticization and grammaticalization, a phenomenon that may be called 'cultural semantics in grammar'. Yet, a separate investigation is required to support such an argument. In particular, the use of the preterite to designate futurity is not unique to Persian, it can be found in other languages including Arabic, Russian, Kurdish. But, it is not yet clear how it behaves in the different languages.

Furthermore, according to Lyons (1982:102) "the term 'subjectivity' refers to the way in which natural languages, in their structure and their normal manner of operation, provide for the locutionary agent's expression of himself and of his own attitudes and beliefs". He also argues (1982:121) that "... tense itself, even in its basic function of establishing temporal reference, is ultimately subjective (though it can be objectified and made part of the propositional content in certain languages." Following this line of

argument, one may posit that the Persian speaker uses the preterite to objectify his future action as something already actualized. Also illuminating are Lyons' remarks (1982:119) on the relationship between deixis and subjectivity. In this regard, he states: "... the speaker can project himself, in memory or imagination, to a point of reference different from that of the situation of utterance and, from that point of reference, describe situations in the experiential mode as if they were currently taking place". In his later works, however, he seems to be more explicit (1995:342): "speakers must refer to the actual or non-actual world that they are describing from the viewpoint of the world that is in them." This implies that certain linguistic expressions/categories may determine the perspective from which a scene is viewed.

4.3 The Persian preterite and deontic modality

The use of the Persian preterite to express futurity can be interpreted from yet another perspective, which is not incompatible with the concept of subjectivity. As Enç (1996:349) mentions futurity does not always involve prediction and uncertainty; it can encompass deontic modality as well. This treatment provides a unified description of the preterite in question with yet another use, namely its use for directives. The reason is that, in Persian the preterite can also be used to issue a command in an interactive scenario. Take the following examples illustrating the use of the Persian preterite for directive speech acts:

- [16] i. xord-i â!
 eat-past-you DM (discourse marker)
 'you must eat!' [I appeal to you to eat.]
 ii. raft-i â!
 go-past-you DM
 'you must go!' [I appeal to you to go.]

Here the speaker directs the addressee to perform an action immediately or in near future, and the speaker treats it as something which has been performed even though in the real world it has not been actualized yet. Thus, this use of the preterite behaves in exactly the same way as the previous case. But the only difference is that in the previous situation it was the speaker who undertook the obligation of doing the action while in this case it is the addressee who is under an obligation to perform the act. In other words, following Searle (1979:14), we are dealing with commissives in the former case and with directives in the latter. This phenomenon can best be described in terms of Palmer's remarks (1986:97) concerning commissives and directives, "... both are not only subjective, but also performative, they actually initiate action by others or by the speaker. For that reason they will always be related to the future, since only the future can be changed or affected as a result of them being expressed. At the time of speaking a speaker can get others to act or commit himself to action only in the future". Therefore, it seems quite reasonable to treat both uses of the preterite under the category of deontic modality. There is also another piece of evidence in support of this argument; that is, the discourse marker (DM) 'â' is usually used for both cases. Take, for example, the following utterances:

- [17] i. raftam â!
 go-past-I DM
 [I am TELLING YOU] 'I'm about to leave!.'
 ii. rafti â!
 go-past-you DM
 [I am TELLING YOU] 'You are about to leave.'

It seems that the discourse marker 'â' diachronically derives from the function word '*hân*' used to indicate warning. Thus, 'â' in [17.i] and [17.ii] is used to emphasize the

obligation: 'BEWARE that I will go' or 'BEWARE that you must go' respectively. The point is that the discourse maker 'â' is very often used with both cases to highlight the obligation; and this in turn provides a further support for their deontic aspect.

5. Conclusion

This paper has focused on two non-characteristic uses of the preterite in Persian; its use to express futurity and deontic modality. It was argued that the deictic and context-bound nature of this tense triggers off such uses. In point of fact, such uses of the Persian preterite can be produced at the utterance rather than sentence level; in particular, the prosodic contour plays a crucial role in the interpretation of an utterance. The deicticity of this pragmatic category was explained in terms of subjectivity. This means that the speaker projects him/herself into a deictic center where the action described in the utterance is treated as actualized. The important point is how the subjectivity and futurity of action can be reconciled with entailment and certainty since it was illustrated earlier that the conventional implicatures raised by such uses cannot be cancelled. I have suggested two complementary analyses for these paradoxical cases. First, subjectivity needs to be described in terms of its culturally-determined aspects. In this regard, Lyons (1995:339) states: "... the self which the locutionary agent expresses is the product of the social and interpersonal roles that he or she has played in the past, and it manifests itself, in a socially identifiable way, in the role that he or she is playing in the context of utterance". Therefore, it can be argued that the phenomenon of subjectivity in Persian culture differs from that in other cultures such as English. The explanation is that the future is not always unknown to Persian speakers; on the basis of some degree of culturally-based determinism, they can be sure about certain actions of themselves in future. In a sense, the epistemic and scientific uncertainty associated with future does not encompass all aspects of the cultural schema of Persian speakers. The second suggestion has dealt with an analysis of both uses of the preterite in terms of deontic modality. In the former case (i.e. the use of the preterite to express futurity), the speaker commits him/herself to performing the action expressed by the utterance. He/she uses the preterite, rather than the present tense, to guarantee the fulfillment of task he/she is obliged to do. In the latter case, the use of the preterite to express command follows the same treatment. The speaker uses the preterite tense, rather than the imperative, to guarantee or emphasize the actualization of the task which the addressee is obliged to do. Thus, both uses express the deontic modality of a future action. On either interpretation, the concepts of deicticity and subjectivity play crucial roles in understanding such peculiar uses of the preterite in Persian.

Notes

1. Following Huddleston and Pullum (2002:115), I use the term 'preterite' rather than the more commonly-used one, namely 'simple past', to distinguish the category of form from the category of meaning.

2. In technical works, the term 'situation' is used as a general one to cover all types of processes embodied by a verb (see Lyons, 1977; Comrie, 1985; and Huddleston, 1988).

3. IMPI = imperfective inflection

4. It must, however, be pointed out this particular use is associated mainly with standard spoken Persian and therefore is not necessarily generalizable to those regional dialects to which such a case of temporal deixis is alien.

5. The argument is not that a kind of aspectual meaning, in particular semantic of verb, is not involved in using of the preterite to project 'perfectiveness' or actual futurity.

But it is not possible to verify morphologically and syntactically that there is a grammatical form of aspect which can be called 'the perfective aspect'.

6. The use of the preterite to designate futurity is typically associated with verbs showing deictic directionals, namely 'âmadan' and 'raftan'. In a sense, one may argue that such a particular use originated in deictic directionals and then gradually extended to other agentive verbs. However, this interesting and challenging area is open to further exploration.

7. This English sentence may be acceptable in certain contexts. However, it fails as a translation equivalent for the 8i.

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