Light Verb Constructions in Persian

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Persian has a deceptively small repertoire of about 160 single word verbs which belies an intricate system of light verb constructions (LVC), similar to the English *take a walk* or *give a speech*. In fact, about 15 light verbs (LV) form the foundation of a vast array of LVCs in Persian. Most verbal notions expressed in other languages by simple verbs are expressed in Persian through these constructions (e.g. *to dream* is ‘see sleep’, etc.). A sophisticated verbal system results from this small set of general-action verbs. The LVs, combine with an open set of *preverbal elements* (PV) to produce new verbal expressions semantically distant from the LV itself. In other words, the meaning of the whole is more than the sum of the meaning of its parts.

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xun ændaxtæn  blood THROW  cause to bleed
kæm fodaen  few HIT  be diminished, lessen
arameʃ dadæn  calmness GIVE  calm
jaʃn gereftæn  party GET  celebrate
tʃopq keʃidæn  pipe PULL  smoke a pipe
qorbaæt keʃidæn  remoteness PULL  suffer a longing for home
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This productive compounding has evolved according to certain principles that help organize semantic space in Persian and is the only manner of verb formation. Unlike English, where nouns morph into verbs, as in ‘I will phone you,’ Persian speakers must always produce verbs by combining words with an appropriate, non-random LV (e.g. *telefon zædæn* ‘telephone HIT’ *to phone*).

The objective of the current study is to investigate the mechanisms that regulate the meaning of LVCs. Although the system is easily acquired by Persian speakers, the rules underlying this compounding process have never been deciphered. The framework needed must account for the key features of this system: compositionality, productivity, and polysemy. The tenets of Construction Grammar inherently provide us with these features.

I introduce the idea of *islands*, where a cluster of LVCs express similar verbal notions using the same LV and a strict class of PVs. Each island is represented by a construction which includes an LV and attributes of the PVs, resulting in an LVC with a meaning different from the sum of its components and not derivable by strict compositionality. These islands form a generative system in which knowledge is organized in constructions.

Through my study of the Persian verbal system I have found that the productive capacities of Persian speakers actually lie in the knowledge and development of a highly structured semantic space. This space contains many nodes that serve as attractors to certain types of verbal notions. My analysis shows that Persian LVCs contain semantic, lexical, and syntactic information, and that differentiation between the grammar and the lexicon is superfluous. This is the first study to investigate these properties of LVCs in Persian using and extending several cognitive linguistic theories, including Construction Grammar.