

Syntactic and Semantic Features of Persian Proper Names: A gender-based study

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Abstract

Proper names are usually simply classified under the noun category; a closer look, however, reveals that they are more diverse than expected. Grammatically, they are formed differently. That is to say, while some are simple nouns, others are a combination of prefix/suffix and a noun and some others that of an adjective and a noun. There are still others which are adjectives by nature but functionally are used to name an individual. Due to the semantic as well as syntactic diversity noticed in the formation of proper name, the present study has primarily taken a descriptive approach and has studied Persian proper names to find out what grammatical categories contribute to the proper name construction; furthermore, certain combinations mark the gender of its beholder. Then, the researchers have traced the possible semantic connotation assigned to each gender.

Keywords: proper names, semantic features, syntactic features, Persian names, gender

Introduction

Persian is the language spoken in Iran and some other countries. Most Persian names are those given to boys and girls born of Iranian parents. As most Persian names are derived from the Persian language, there are some that are drawn from Arabic and some other languages such as Turkish and Kurdish languages. We chose naming and naming practice in Iran as a site for investigating the syntactic and semantic features of male and female names.

I. The Study

There are many factors contributing to the identity of a person, one of which is believed to be the name assigned to him/her (Ekanjume-Ilongo, 2014). Ekanjume-Ilongo asserts that the act of giving name to a person is far from using that name just for calling that person; it is, in effect, strongly contribute to the identity of a person. This notion has motivated us to investigate the status and process of naming in Persian language. Hence, the main inquiry in this paper is to probe into the personal names currently used in Iran. To meet this end, the researchers have studied 100 frequent personal names randomly selected from students of five classes studying at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. The students were asked to write down the first name of their family members, including that of their father, mother and siblings. Despite the fact that there are a number of published books and official lists of personal names used and/or allowed to be used in Iran, the researchers decided to collect the names from the students to see what name are actually used in Iran. The mean age of students is 20 years old and depending upon where the students stand in their family- i.e. whether he/she is the eldest or youngest child, it is speculated that the mean age of their parents is 40-60 years old. Then, in this study the first names of two generations are collected. Out of all the data collected, the names of 22 family randomly selected comprised the data of the study. The names are studies from two aspects: structural or syntactic and semantic.

1. Syntactic Features

Under structural or syntactic features of the personal names, the names are divided into two categories: compound and simple. The compound names are further divided into names with affixes and those combined with another name or an adjective. The study further speculates on whether the gender of the child would affect the distribution and designation of compound and simple names.

Compound Names

As for the affix, there are two types of suffixes commonly used for naming the child: those involved in designating gender (called gender markers) and those showing resemblance, usually resemblance to natural and/or beautiful things such as flower, sun, snow, and the like. In Persian, the suffix can affect the meaning of the name; there are suffixes denoting resemblance, profession, wealth, etc., but not the one showing the gender of the beholder. That is, the Persian language lacks the gender marker suffix. But since the Arabic language extensively uses gender marker suffixes, the names whose origins are Arabic bear such suffixes and are frequently used in Arabic feminine names common in Iran. The most common gender marker for feminine names are 'h' and 't' sounds; and when an Arabic name enters Persian language, these sounds are reduced to 'h' but they have retained the same function. In this study, they are used exclusively for female names and are seen in 25% of all names (50% of feminine names). Then because of the effect of Arabic language and only in case of Arabic names used in Iran, gender markers are used frequently.

1.1. Simple Names

As its name implies, a simple name is one which is not compound and is easy to pronounce. It is further divided into three classes:

- 1) The name which is by nature a name, like Pooria and Bahar
- 2) The name which has originally been an adjective but now functions as a noun. These adjectives have retained their original features and are still used as adjective in appropriate contexts. Example:

The word 'Ziba' (meaning *beautiful*) is originally an adjective as found in this sentence:

Ex.1. *man yek dokhtare ziba didam*
 One girl beautiful saw I
 I saw a beautiful girl.

But in the following sentence it is used as an ordinary name.

Ex.2. *Esm-e man Ziba ast.*
 Name mine (Ziba)beautiful is
 My name is Ziba.

- 3) infinitives, also while retaining their original functions in other contexts, are used as simple names.

The word "Afarinesh" (meaning *to create*), for example, is originally an infinitive as used in the following sentence:

Ex. 3. *Afarinesh honari neshandahande khalaghiat-e honarmand ast.*
To create art signify creativity of artist is
To create a work of art represents the artist's creativity.

But in the following sentence, it functions as a noun.

Ex.4. *Dirooz, Afarinsh be didar-e man amad.*
 Yesterday, Afarinesh came to see me.

2. Semantic Features

From semantic point of view, the names are divided into four categories: 1) names denoting religion; 2) names referring to nature or natural objects (e.g. flower, gold, etc.); 3) names after national, religious, or sentimental figures and 4) names associated with wisdom and thoughtfulness.

Concerning the origin of the names, they are divided into three classes: Persian, Arabic and a combination of Persian /Arabic, shown in the following figure.

II. Data Analysis

Before presenting the syntactic and semantic analysis of the data, it is noticed that out of the 100 names studied, 66 are Arabic, 30 Persian and 4 combined Arabic Persian names. (Figure 1)

As the above graph shows, Arabic names are predominant among the males (84% compared to 48% in females) while Persian names are found more extensively among females (50% compared to 10% in males). The combination of Persian and Arabic is rarely used in the names studied. Structurally, as mentioned above, names are either simple or compound. The findings of the study show that most female names are simple (33 to 44) whereas those of males are mostly compound (17 to 6). (Figure 2)

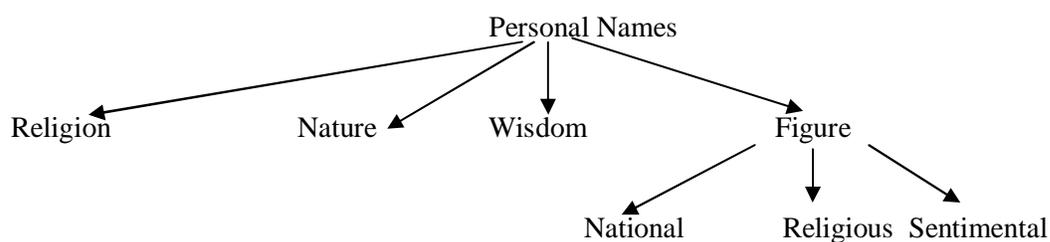
The simplicity of a name can have some sociological implications. For instance, allocating simple names to women and compound one to men can reflect the general attitude of the community toward females and males, respectively. The less important point is that simple names are pronounced with more ease while compound ones are longer and stronger which may reinforce or even have been reinforced by the view that women are more expected to be delicate and behave 'properly', while men can act in a more powerful way, even if he has a lower rank than the female counterpart (Lakoff, 1975). According to Lakoff, women's speech is characterized by some linguistic features such as tag questions, empty adjectives (e.g. charming, cute) and intensifiers (such as just, very very), all denoting her relatively lower status in the conversation. This view can play a role in the naming process allocated to male or female baby. Moreover, in previous section, it is shown that the percentage of men's names having the Arabic origin is higher than women's names (84%). As you know Arabic words contain more consonants and this presents them stronger and masculine-like while Persian words are more melodic and sounds more feminine; it is said to be a melodic language spoken in Iran (Aguilar e Silva 1972 cited in Ana M^a Rierola Puigderajols).

Going more into details, simple names themselves are subdivided into simple, adjective and infinitive. Out of these three subcategories, adjectives are more likely to be used as a feminine name and still retaining their adjectival meanings (24%). No female names studied are infinitives. As ... argues, adjectives are used to assign certain attributes to the person; One of the most important difference between a noun and an adjective is that the latter carries certain judgments whereas a name's primary function is first to bear the referential function and name someone. The other point worth noting is that adjectives are not usually independent, their existence heavily relies on nouns, while a noun is an independent entity. The names studied revealed that it is common to use adjectives as male names, but the newly made names have less likely retained their adjectival meaning to the lay people. In other words, people more consider them as nouns than adjectives. As for the infinitives, since infinitives contain certain actions, they are mostly reserved for male names. This may be due to the attitude taken and value given to males; males are expected to be responsible for the action taken and to get more involved into actions than females. Of course, these are some speculations drawn from the public attitude towards male's and female's status in the society and we do not claim that when people name their children, they have all these issues in mind.

Semantically, personal names are subdivided into four classes, which are as follows:

- 1) Names attributed to religion
- 2) Names referring to nature or natural objects
- 3) Names representing wisdom
- 4) Names referring to national, religious or sentimental figures

The following schematic diagram illustrates the names and their subcategories:



The following table displays the semantic characteristic of personal names which are being used in Iran. The findings of the study show that names denoting religion, either a religious figure or religion in general, are predominately used for males (67.2% to 30%)

However, as the table shows, the names which resemble nature or natural objects have a reverse inclination; that is to say, female names referring to nature outnumber male names (28.3% to 4.9%). Furthermore, the names associated with sentimental figure or love in general are more found among female names (11.6% to 1.6%). Concerning names drawn from national heroes or figures, the study shows that such names are found more in males than females (16.4% to 5%). Having the cultural background and males' status in mind, this finding is not far from expectation. There are few female characters mentioned in history books. This may be because of the point that such books are mostly written by males; Or as Trömel-Plötz Trömel-Plötz (1998) argues males display more powerful style in their conversation. This can result either from their higher social status in the society or lead them to occupy higher position. Of course, there are some heroic characters in literary books but they are rarely used for naming partly because most of them are difficult to pronounce (e.g. Gordafarid).

What is interesting and again far from expectation, is the frequency of female names denoting wisdom which is far greater than those of males (25% to 9.8%). Examples of such names are Farzaneh, Fahimeh, and Hakimeh, none of which have male counterparts).

Conclusion

Examining the personal names used in Iran, the researchers studied the structural and semantic features of these names. Below is the summary of the findings of this study:

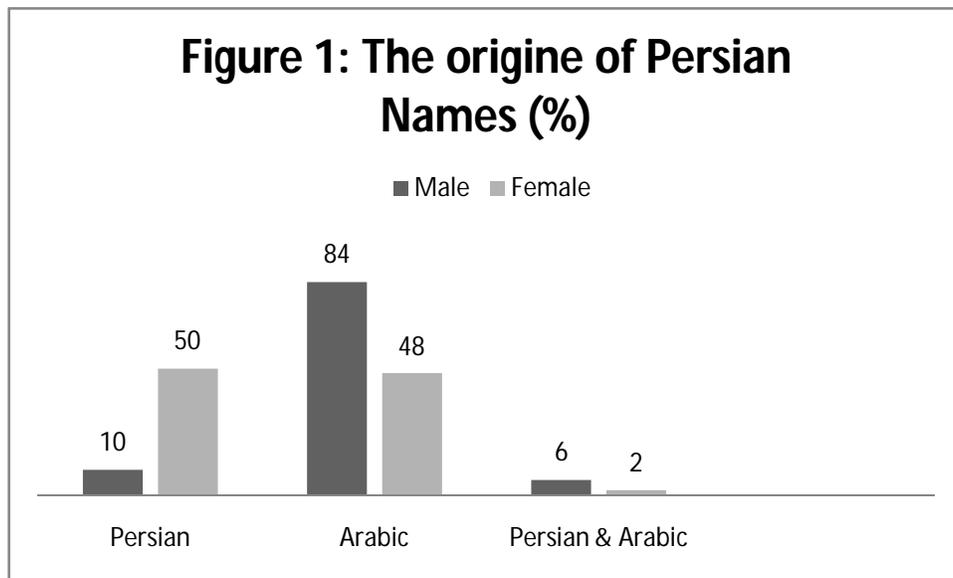
1. Although their alphabet looks similar, Persian and Arabic languages have different structural features. However, Arabic words, including Arabic names, have extensively entered the Persian language. This is vividly seen in the names collected for this study. The ratio of Arabic names to Persian ones is 67% to 31 % . The main reason mostly behind this is because these names are religious and hence, sacred. Concerning the prevalence of Arabic names among males, one may infer the attitude of the society toward male. That is to say, people hold the idea that those bearing religious names are more protected by the saints and God. And since, the cornerstone of a family is the father or the son (males in general), people tend to give religious names mostly to their male children.
2. Concerning nature, in Persian culture, nature is feminine and in the Zoroastrian religion, out of the number of divinities known in this religion, the only feminine divinity is the one governing and representing the earth. The findings of this study supports this viewpoint that there is a close association between nature and females. Of course, the emphasis lies mostly on the tenderness and beauty of nature. This is reinforced by the percentage of the feminine names related to sentimental figures and love (11.6% among female names compared to 1,6% among males. In this regard, Holms (1998:463)) argues that "Women tend to focus on the affective functions of an interaction more often than men do."
3. The names given after national heroes are masculine ones.
4. The names denoting wisdom belong to females.
5. Structurally, the male's names are quite long and strong in pronunciation.
6. Names combined with suffix is not very common but among those used in the names, the females' ones enjoy higher frequency. And these suffixes mostly are used to show females resemblance with nature. (Example: Mahsa, meaning 'like the moon')
7. The words that have originally been adjectives but have either lost their adjectival function or, depending upon the context in which they are used, have functioned as either adjective or noun, function as nouns and adjectives. These mostly appear as names
8. Infinitives usually denote actions and in this study the infinitives functioning as names all belongs to males. This is in line with the general trend practiced in the community and this in turn affects and reinforces such attitudes towards masculinity.
9. Simple names, compared with adjectives, are stronger and independent and are mostly masculines, However, adjectives are usually dependant entity; their presence in a sentence depends upon the name it accompanies.

In sum, masculinity is conveyed through the compound names (stronger, longer names), infinitives, and the names used after national heroes while femininity is understood through the simple name, more adjectives and the sentimental character the feminine names denote. In this sense, personal names, like other discursive practices, can be both constituent and constituting.

They arise from the general attitude towards males and females and in turn form a general trend in the society to be practiced and become familiarized and naturalized (Billig, 1991).

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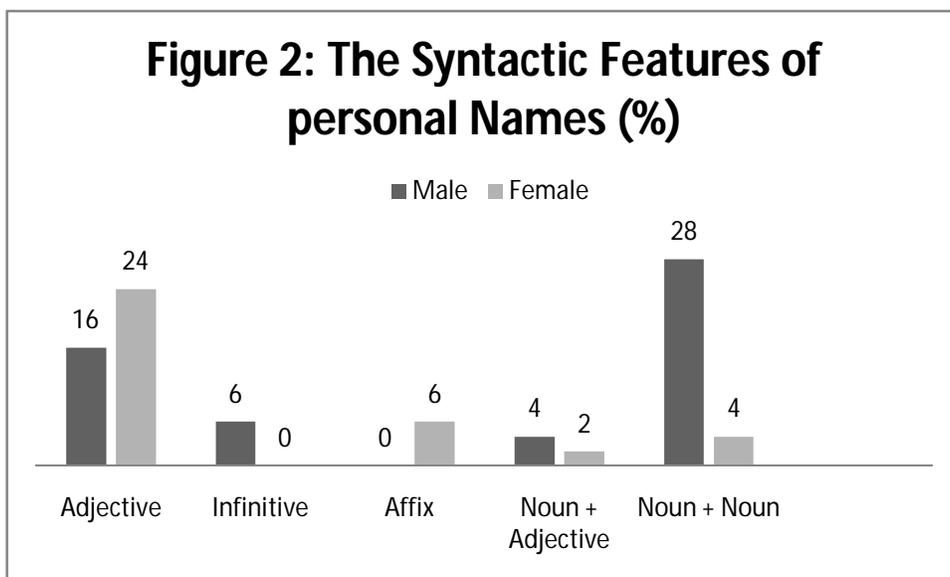


Table 1: The Semantic Features of Personal Names in Iran

Gender	Religious	Resembling nature	Wisdom	Figure			Total
				National	Religious	Sentimental	
Male	17 (27.9%)	3 (4.91%)	6 (9.8%)	10 (16.4%)	24 (39.3%)	1 (1.63%)	61
Female	9 (15%)	17 (28.3%)	15 (25%)	3 (5%)	9 (15%)	7 (11.6%)	60
Total	26 (21.4%)	20 (16.5%)	21 (17.35%)	13 (10.7%)	33 (27.2%)	8 (6.6%)	121