

Classifiers and Partitives in Persian

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Numeral classifiers in Persian are not obligatory (Mahootian 1997, Rubinchik 1971, Boyle 1966, Elwell-Sutton 1963, Faroughy 1944), as in (1).

- (1) se (ta) gorbe
three (CL) cat
'three cats'

However, there is at least one syntactic context in Persian in which the classifier is required, partitives.

- (2a) pænj ta æz pesær-ha dir resid-aend / (2b) *pænj æz pesær-ha...
five CL of boy-PL late arrived-3P / five of boy-PL
'Five of the boys arrived late'

The classifier *ta* must appear between the numeral *pænj* 'five' and the PP/partitive *æz pesær-ha* 'of the boys'; omitting it results in ungrammaticality.

First I show that the obligatoriness of classifiers in Persian partitives is a serious problem for earlier accounts of classifiers (Chierchia 1998, Borer 2005). Briefly, Chierchia's theory states that in some languages all nouns are mass and therefore need a classifier to convert them into predicates, which then can be restrictors of numerals. But the PP *æz pesær-ha* 'of the boys' is neither noun nor mass, so his theory is at a loss to explain the required classifier in a partitive. For Borer, the mass/count distinction stems from the functional projections within DP: if a noun is the complement of a "divider" (i.e. either a classifier or plural morphology), then it becomes a count noun. The problem for her is that since *æz pesær-ha* 'of the boys' is not a noun it cannot reside in an appropriate syntactic position within DP to be divided by the classifier.

I propose that classifiers are generally optional in Persian because the divider feature à la Borer can float to other elements, such as the numeral. Borer suggests this much. This is why the classifier is optional, as in (1). But while the dividing feature can in principle be spelled out in either the classifier or the numeral, the numeral also subcategorizes for a number phrase. Since PPs are not number phrases, in the sense of Ritter (1991, 1992), the classifier is the only way to save the derivation. Since English numerals also seem to take number phrases, one might then wonder why *five of the boys* is grammatical. Based on the assumption that the functional projections in DP are universally available, I argue that English also uses classifiers in partitive constructions, although they are null.

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