An incomplete journey of a clitic in Persian: the puzzle of '-esh'

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Issue: Persian subject agreement paradigm is empty for 3SG past tense verbs. Though, a new marker, *'-esh'*, which is homophonous to 3SG Persian object clitic is optionally added to 3SG past tense verbs in the spoken dialect of Tehrani (Jahanpanah 2009) as in (1):

(1) *Ali umad-**(esh)***
Ali came-**(esh)**
'Ali came.'

The one might assume this marker as a new subject agreement marker in paradigm. But it has some properties which make it different from other agreement markers such as blocking Persian object clitics from following unlike other agreement markers as in (2).

(2) a. * *Ali unha-ro did-**esh**-eshun*
Ali they-OBJ saw-**esh**-3PL CL
Intended: 'Ali saw them.'

b. *man unha-ro did-**am**-eshun*
I they-OBJ saw-**1SG.S**-3PL CL
'I saw them.'

Very few studies have systematically explored what category this new marker belongs to in Persian. Rasekh (2011, 2017), for instance, suggest that 3SG object clitic *'-esh'* has been borrowed from the Persian object clitics paradigm and reanalyzed as a subject agreement marker to fill the existing gap in the Persian subject agreement paradigm while it can be still used as a clitic.

The current study: In this study, I will bring some empirical data to support Rasekh's view that *'-esh'* is used both as an object clitic and a subject agreement marker, but the process of its grammaticalization as an agreement marker is not complete yet.

Methodology: A group of 42 native speakers of Tehrani are asked to rate the acceptability of items where *'-esh'* is forced to select different types of arguments (i.e., specific vs. non-specific) at different syntactic positions (i.e., subject vs. object). It is predicted that as an object clitic, it must only select specific objects (Uriagereka 1995, Fuß 2005, Baker & Kramer 2018). As an agreement marker, on the other hand, it must select both specific and non-specific subjects.

Results: The results show that *(i)* when *'-esh'* is forced to select object arguments, specific objects are preferred over non-specific objects, *(ii)* when *'-esh'* is forced to select subject arguments, both specific and non-specific subjects are rated similarly. However, there is an individual variation, in rating these items with some participants rating these items less acceptable and some rating them more acceptable, *(iii)* when *'-esh'* attaches to the non-verbal element of complex verbs, object arguments are preferred over subject arguments, and *(iv) '-esh'* is preferred to attach to the non-verbal element of complex verbs than the verbal element when it selects object arguments.

Discussion: The findings of this study are aligned with the hypothesis that two types of *'-esh'* exist in Persian: an object clitic *'-esh'* which only selects specific object arguments and a new marker *'-esh'* which selects both specific and non-specific subject arguments, thus acting as a subject agreement marker. The variation in participants' ratings of items where *'-esh'* is forced to select subject arguments, however, suggests that the new marker *'-esh'* has not been accepted by all native speakers of Persian, thus the process of grammaticalization is still in progress. Moreover, the higher rating of items where *'-esh'* attaches to the non-verbal element and refers to the object argument compared to items where *'-esh'* attaches to the verbal element shows that the clitic is based-generated on the non-verbal element of complex verbs, but native speakers might have generalized the possibility of following clitics after subject agreement markers in simple verbs as in (2b) to complex verbs and moved the clitic from its original position (i.e., the non-verbal element of complex verbs) to the verbal element.