

A Comparative Study of English and Persian Adjectives

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Abstract

This study aimed at comparing English and Persian adjectives. Identification of Persian adjectives is not an easy task; however, this is not the case with English adjectives for they are easy to identify. Nevertheless, Persian speakers utilize some strategies to identify adjectives from other categories. English and Persian adjectives have some similar and different properties which affect language learning/teaching and translation. For instance, adjectives in both languages have the same syntactic, and predicative functions. Moreover, in both languages superlative adjectives are made morphologically. The findings of this study can be beneficial for those who teach Persian to English speakers who are interested in learning Persian language.

Keywords: Persian adjectives, predicative function, English adjectives

INTRODUCTION

An adjective is a part of speech which describes, quantifies, or identifies a noun or a pronoun. So, the main function of an adjective is to modify a noun or a pronoun so that it will become more specific and interesting. Traditional grammar provides a definition for adjectives that is, adjectives refer to characteristics or qualities. However, in descriptive grammar, adjective is an entity which limits other categories. Adjectives can be identified through inflection or comparative morphology. This category has several functions. It can modify a person, an object, an event or relationships. However, this does not mean that every adjective can have all functions. Adjectives are used to describe or give information about things, ideas and people: nouns or pronouns. In English the form of an adjective does not change, once you have learnt it that's it and it does not matter if the noun being described is male or female, singular or plural, subject or object. Some adjectives give us factual information about the noun - *age, size, color*, etc. (fact adjectives - can't be argued with). Some adjectives show what somebody thinks about something or somebody - *nice, horrid, beautiful*, etc. (opinion adjectives - not everyone may agree).

English Adjectives

Shawet et al. (1970, pp, 19-20) believed that certain words and groups of words are used within a sentence to specify, qualify, or otherwise determine the meaning of another word. This relationship is known grammatically as modification. A modifier does not change or alter the meaning of the word it modifies. The purpose of a modifier is to make the meaning of a word more exact and specify within the sentence or in their overall context. The parts of speech whose basic functions are to modify by themselves are adjectives and adverbs.

Frank (1993) considered all determiners including articles, demonstratives, numbers, possessives, relatives and interrogatives, prepositional phrases, and clauses as adjectives. Rusiecki (1985) stated that adjectives have some common properties with adverbs and some common properties with nouns. Most adjectives function as subject or object compliment.

Huddleston (1988) mentioned that some languages do not have a distinct adjective class. The gradable feature of adjective e.g. (short-tall) can play an important role to boost vocabulary learning. Quirk (1972) mentioned that there are different types of adjectives such as descriptive, proper, etc. He believed that all adjectives should have the four following features: a) they can take comparative and superlative forms (*The weather is warmer today*), b) they can be in attributive positions (*the warm weather*), c) they can be in predictive positions (*It seems warm*), and d) they can be premodified by intensifiers (*It is very warm*). It should be stated here that all the above mentioned features that traditionally attributed to adjectives nowadays are not features of adjectives (Mirhassani, 2000).

Adjectives are divided into *simple* and *compound* adjectives. Additionally, simple adjectives are subdivided into *base* and *derived* and compound adjectives consist of *phrases* and *clauses* (Mirhassani, 2000). Simple adjectives are normal adjectives. If they come before nouns they are called attributive. They are modifiers of nouns. There are different types of attributive adjectives. Numeric: *two, one hundred and ten*, etc. Quantitative: *some, more, half, more than enough*, etc. Qualitative: *size, color, smell*, etc. Possessive: *her, your, their*, etc. Interrogative: *whose, which, what*, etc. Demonstrative: *this, that, those, these*, etc. The articles *a, an*, and *the* are a special kind of adjective called articles, and the possessives *my, our, your*, and *there are* sometimes known as possessive adjectives. Adjectives can be used to describe color (the blue pen), give opinion about something (a good girl), describe size (the tall man), describe age (an old man), describe shape (a circle box), describe origin (a German car), identify the material something is made of (a wooden chair), describe distance (a long walk), describe temperature (a hot day), describe time (an early start), and describe purpose often end with "-ing" (a sleeping bag) (Murphy (1997).

Predicative adjectives are considered as complements of verbs. After linking verbs, they are subject complements (*he felt excited.*), after verbs *like, keep, find*, etc., they are object complement (*I found him calm.*), in a finite or nonfinite clauses, they are complements to

a subject (*speaking English is not easy.*), and they can be object complement to a clause (*she believes learning English is important*) Mirhassani, (2000).

Adjectives that are formed by adding suffixes to stems are called *derived adjectives*. It should be mentioned that most derived adjectives come before nouns, but past participles follow the nouns they modify (*The glass broken yesterday is here*). Some suffixes can be added to nouns to make adjectives e.g. less, -ful, -ly, -y, -ous, -like, -ish, etc. (*helpful, childish*). Some suffixes can be added to verbs e.g. -ing, -ed, -ive, -ible, -ant, -ent, etc. (*interesting, interested, workable*). For comparison, -er and -est can be added to adjective stems (Mirhassani, 2000).

Compound adjectives can be in two forms of *infinitives* and *participles*. Infinitives can modify a noun or a sentence. They function as adjectives (*To be successful he must go to class; There is some water to drink*). Additionally, participial phrases modify a noun or a pronoun (*The girl talking to the teacher is Mary.*) Adjective clauses can function as adjectives and modify a person or a thing as subject, object, possessive position, and object of preposition (*The tribes who lived in Asia used smoke signals*) Mirhassani, (2000).

Persian adjectives

Adjectives take only one form. They agree neither in gender (since Persian doesn't distinguish gender) nor in number with the noun that they modify. Adjectives come after the noun and are related to it with the genitive particle (e) ((ye) after all vowels but (i)):

Pesar **e** bahush (= clever boy)

Adjectives can be modified by adverbs:

xane **ye** ziba (= beautiful house)

xane **ye besyar** ziba (= very beautiful house)

Adjectives come after the noun and are related to it with the genitive preposition can be translated with (of) in English:

marde xub (= good man)

mardane xub (= good men)

Adjectives cannot be inflected in Persian language and there is no morphological agreement between an adjective and its noun. Therefore, the plural form of "*pesare xub*" is "*pesarane xub*" and "**pesarane xuban*" is not acceptable in Persian.

In Persian, adjectives have the following functions: a) as a participle in a noun phrase e.g. *pesare xub* (=good boy) b) as a predicative adjective in sentences which have a linking verb e.g. *Ali bahush ast.* (=Ali is clever) c) as an adverbial e.g. *Ali xub minevisad.* (=Ali writes well)

In English, however, adjectives can have the following functions:

Adjectives can:

- a) Describe **feelings or qualities**: e.g. He is a *lonely* man. They are *honest* people.
- b) Give **nationality or origin**: e.g. Pierre is *French*. This clock is *German*. Our house is *Victorian*.
- c) Tell more about a thing's **characteristics**: e.g. A *wooden* table. The knife is *sharp*
- d) Tell us about **age**: e.g. He's *young* man. My coat is very *old*.
- e) Tell us about **size and measurement**: e.g. This is a very *long* film. John is a *tall* man.
- f) Tell us about **color**: e.g. Paul wore a *red* shirt. The sunset was *crimson* and *gold*.
- g) Tell us about **material/what something is made of**: e.g. It was a *wooden* table. She wore a *cotton* dress
- h) Tell us about **shape**: e.g. A *rectangular* box. A *square* envelope.
- i) Express a **judgment or a value**: e.g. A *fantastic* film. Grammar is *boring*.

On the other hand, unlike English, it is impossible to distinguish adjectives from nouns through syntactic criteria. Some adjectives in Persian are considered as nouns as well. For example, "*binava (=poor)*" "*tarsu (=frightened)*". In these cases, there no definite border between adjectives and nouns because in Persian we do have the comparative form of "*binavatar (=poorer)*" and the plural form of "*binavayan (= the poor)*".

In many cases, there is grammatically no clear border between adjectives, nouns, and adverbs. It is likely that a word plays the three roles. Thus, an adjective might be used as a noun. For instance, in "*mard e xub (=good man)*" it is an adjective but in "*mard xub minevisad (the man writes well)*" it is an adverb and in "*xuban e shahr (=good people of the city)*" it is a noun. In colloquial speech, an adjective might take "*shenaseh (=ending)*". For example, "*in mashin sefidesh xoshkeltare (=the white color of this car is more beautiful)*". These categories cannot be distinguished morphologically because they all have the same form in different categories. Moreover, both adjectives and adverbs can sometimes be used in comparative forms.

Order of adjectives

In English, when several adjectives come before a noun, they are usually put in a more or less the same order. For example, it is said (*a thin old lady*), NOT (*an old thin lady*), (*a big round black leather purse*), NOT (*a leather black round big purse*). In Persian there is no such a limitation and adjectives can come in any different orders. In this case, adjectives that come at the end have more emphasis on. For example:

A fat old woman (= *pirezan e chagh*)

An old fat woman (= *zan e chagh e pir*)

A demonstrative adjective modifies a noun. In Persian, demonstrative adjectives come before nouns and like other adjectives, they have only one form; they agree neither in

gender nor in number with the noun that they modify. In Persian, we do not say *anha ketabha* (= *those books*) but we prefer to say *an ketabha* (= *those books*). The plural form (i.e. *books*) indicates that we refer to more than one entity. Table 1 contains proximal and distal demonstratives in English and Persian.

Table 1. Proximal and distal demonstratives in English and Persian

Language	Proximal	Distal
Persian	<i>in xaneha</i>	<i>an khaneha</i>
English	<i>These houses</i>	<i>Those houses</i>

Compound forms

The basic demonstratives are combined with certain words and make compound demonstratives as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Compound Forms of Proximal and Distal Demonstratives in English and Persian

Language	Proximal	Distal
English	this/those/the same Like this/these; such as...this/these	that/those/the same like that/those; such ...as that/those
Persian	hamin / chonin	hamân / chonân

More examples of proximal and distal adjectives;

- *chonin ketâb-i* — such a book (Like English, the indefinite article follows nouns)
- *chonin ketâbhâ-yi* — such books (English doesn't have plural indefinite article)
- *chonin raftâr-i* — such behavior («behavior» is countable in Persian)
- *Mary daghighan hamin chiz râ goft* — Mary said exactly the same thing
- *Jelow-ye hamân khâne-yi istâdim ke dar ân, Shakespeare nemâyeshnâme-hâ-yash râ minevesht* — We stood in front of the very same house in which Shakespeare wrote his plays.
- *hamân dâstân-e hamishegi* — the same old story

Possession (Normal Form)

Possession can be normally expressed by bound personal pronouns coming at the end of a noun phrase (noun + adjective) as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. English and Persian Possessive Adjectives

Singular	Plural
Am / my	emân / Our
At / your (informal)	etân / your (polite)
Ash / his, her, its	eshân / their / his, her (polite)

Examples of possessive adjectives in English and Persian

- Pedar-am — My father
- Pedar-e khub-am — My good father
- Ketâb-e dust-am — My friend's book
- Sag-e kuchak-ash râ dust dârad — She loves her little dog
- Esm-etân chi'st? — What is your name? (polite)
- Esm-at chi'st? — What is your name? (informal)
- Mâdar-am dishab zang zad — My mother phoned last night
- Dasthâ-yat râ beshur — Wash your hands
- Kafshhâ-yat râ bepush — Put your shoes on
- Dast-ash shekast — He broke his arm
- Be sâat-ash negâh kard — She looked at her watch
- Kif-am râ gom kardeam — I've lost my bag
- Be komak-at ehtiyâj dâram — I need your help
- Mitavânam az telefon-etân estefâde konam? — Can I use your phone?

Possession (Strong Form)

Possession can also be expressed using genitive case and free personal pronouns. This structure is mainly used for emphasis as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. English and Persian Possessive Adjectives (Strong Form)

Singular	Plural
-e man My	-e mâ our
-e to your (informal)	-e shomâ your (polite)
-e u, -e ân his, her, its	-e ânâ their
	-e ishân his, her (polite)

Examples of possessive adjectives (strong form)

- In khâne-ye mâ'st — This is our house
- Negarân nabâsh! Taghsir-e to nist — Don't worry! It's not your fault
- Englisi-ye u behtar az man ast — His English is better than mine

Superlative Adjectives

The superlative form of an adjective can be made by adding the superlative suffix (in) to its Stem as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. English and Persian Comparative and Superlative Adjectives

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
bad (bad)	bad tar (worse)	bad tarin (the worse)
bozorg (big)	bozorg tar (bigger)	bozorg tarin (the biggest)
beh (good)	beht ar (better)	beht arin (the best)
khub (good)	khub tar (better)	khub tarin (the best)
zibâ (beautiful)	zibâ tar (more beautiful)	zibâ tarin (the most beautiful)
dustdâhtani (lovable)	dustdâhtan itar (more lovable)	dustdâhtan itarin (the most lovable)

As mentioned on comparative adjectives, (behtar) is the normal word for (better). Therefore, (behtarin) is the normal word for (the best) (and not (khubtarin)). The superlative form comes before the noun: In Persian suffixes like (tar) or (*tarin*) are used in comparative and superlative statements but in English different rules are used for different adjectives.

Examples of superlative adjectives: (most of the examples used in this article have been taken from <http://www.jahanshiri.ir>)

- behtarin dust-am — my best friend
- In behtarin resturân-e shahr ast — This is the best restaurant of the city
- Zibâtarin zan-i ast ke mishenâsam — She is the most beautiful woman I know

Both (beh) and (khub) mean «good» but (beh) is almost old-fashioned and the normal word for saying (good) is (khub). In contrast, the normal comparative form for (good) is (behtar). The comparative form can be used after the noun and is related to it with the genitive preposition.

CONCLUSION

Comparing the functions of adjectives in English and Persian indicates that there are more derived adjectives in Persian compared to English, especially in the case of suffixes, which can be problematic for the language learners and those who translate English into Persian. Also the lack of present participle in Persian as it exists in English is another source of confusion and making errors. Persian is richer in adjective phrases and sometimes students may have difficulty in using adjective clauses and, in particular, the relative pronouns with different roles they play in English. Moreover, language learners sometimes repeat the subjective of objective pronouns along with the relative pronouns in English because they do so in Persian. All the differences manifest themselves in writing and specifically in translation. Teachers have to be aware of the major and even the minor points and try to give the students enough practice to overcome the barriers and realize the obstacles in order to write English and translate from one language to the other more efficiently. Giving enough and comprehensive exercises while teaching grammar, especially to those who major in translation, can be recommended.

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