

## On the Pronunciation of Postposition “râ” in Persian

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*Received: 12 April 2017 Accepted: 5 August 2017*

### Extended Abstract

#### 1- Introduction

The word “râ” is the only postposition in Persian. Its formal pronunciation is never used in the spoken style. The postposition /rA/ is pronounced [ro] after words ending with vowels and [o] when it occurs after words ending with consonants. That is because a preceding consonant triggers /r/ deletion. These phonological environments indicate that variation is arguably not random.

#### 2- Methodology

This research aimed at analyzing various environments and phonological processes which change the pronunciation of /rA/. In so doing, it came up with the inclusive rankings of the constraints to explain these different pronunciations within the optimality theory (OT) (Prince & Smolensky, 1993/2004).

Optimality theory is one of the most significant developments in generative grammar. The first detailed exposition of the theory appears in Prince and Smolensky's (1993) book, entitled ‘Optimality Theory: Constraint Interaction in Generative Grammar’. Its goal is to explain the phonology of languages only by using a set of universal constraints. No phonological rule is being applied in its analyses because they generally explained the language-specific phenomena. In contrast, constraints in OT are not merely solutions to language-specific problems; they are claims about Universal Grammar (UG) seeking to explain phonological phenomena universally. Furthermore, there is no interaction between rules and constraints, i.e., OT is not a mixed theory. The principles of SPE phonology (Chomsky & Halle, 1968) namely rules and serial derivations between underlying representation (UR) and phonetic representation (PR) have been abandoned by OT; however, UR and PR which are renamed as input and output respectively, are being assumed in the classical sense.

This research deals with optionality also known as ‘free variation’ in the pronunciation of “râ”. Optionality is a case in which a single input is mapped onto two grammatical outputs, although their distribution is not under grammatical control. The fact that variation is ‘free’ does not imply that it is totally unpredictable, but only that no *grammatical* principles govern the distribution of variants. Nevertheless, a wide range of extra grammatical factors may affect the choice of one

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variant over the other, including sociolinguistic variables (such as gender, age, and class), and performance variables (such as speech style and tempo). Extra grammatical variables affect the choice of occurrence of one output over another.

In this research, free *ranking* is applied to explain optionality in the pronunciation of “râ”. According to Kager (1999) as a purely theoretical option to deal with optionality, *free ranking* was observed by Prince and Smolensky (1993), and has since been argued to be the OT counterpart of optional rule application. When two constraints *C1* and *C2* are freely ranked, the evaluation procedure branches at that point. In one branch, *C1* is ranked above *C2*, while in the other branch the ranking is reversed. Evaluation of the candidate set is split into two subhierarchies, each of which selects an optimal output. Free ranking preserves strict domination, which holds within each subhierarchy.

The ultimate goal of this research is to come up with inclusive rankings of the constraints which explain different pronunciations of /rA/ in various phonological environments. The results section of this research includes several facts about the phonological processes involved in changing the pronunciation of /rA/.

### 3- Discussion

The choice between /rA/'s two allomorphs [ro] and [o] depends on the phonetic properties of the preceding word. If the preceding word ends with vowels [e], [a], and [A], then /rA/ obligatorily changes to [ro]. In this raising process the underlying low vowel /A/ changes to [o]. However, if the preceding word ends with a consonant, then /rA/ obligatorily changes to [o] due to vowel raising and /r/ deletion. The markedness constraints \*A<sub>popo</sub> and \*C<sub>rpopo</sub> trigger these two pronunciations respectively. Moreover, /rA/ is optionally pronounced [o] after words ending with vowels [i], [u], and [o]. This is due to /r/ deletion which triggers glide insertion to resolve hiatus at an intermediate level between the underlying representation and the phonetic representation.

### 4- Conclusion

The significance of this research is that it is the first study which introduces different pronunciations of the Persian sole postposition /rA/ in various phonological environments. It also discusses several facts about the phonological processes involved in changing the pronunciation of /rA/. A significant feature of this paper is that it starts with a constraint ranking and ends with coming up with a single inclusive ranking of constraints that is capable of explaining all the different pronunciations of the postposition /rA/. The inclusive ranking is in fact a combination of different constraint rankings.

**Keywords:** Postposition /rA/, Feeding interaction, Vowel raising, Free variation, Optimality theory.

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