

## Interlanguage Subjectivity

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### Abstract

This article investigates persons and semantic verb types as indexes of subjectivity in English and Persian as well as English (L1=Persian) Interlanguage. Our data were collected through informal classroom debates arranged for adult intermediate speakers of English as a foreign language at Azad University at Esfahan. The results of the study reveal that Interlanguage contains all verb types that are present in Persian and English. The percentages of the frequencies of different verb types in Interlanguage, however, are closer to those in Persian. Since Interlanguage contains verb types and persons also present in both L1 and L2, it can function like L1 and L2 for expressing subjectivity. English (L1=Persian) Interlanguage has got the capacity to be as subjective as any other language. Interlanguage subjectivity, however, is remarkably influenced by patterns of subjectivity expression in L1. Although the participants have attained some measure of independence in other linguistic respects, traces of transfer at macro-levels of language functioning such as subjectivity are still left behind.

Subjectivity is the speaker's use of language in order to express their perceptions, feelings and opinions in discourse (Lyons, 1994). Benveniste (1971) characterizes subjectivity as the ability of speakers to view themselves as subjects. Assuming all language to be subjective in a sense (as we use it to express perceptions, feelings and opinions), and that conventionalized linguistic structure, or grammar, emerges from repetition, or frequency of use, of (sequences of) lexical and grammatical elements in natural discourse, it follows that linguistic items (constructions of all size) that appear in conversation are those that participate in subjective expressions. In other words, we would expect greater co-occurrence of elements whose combinations lend themselves to conveying speaker point of view than those combinations that do not.

Scheibman (2000) investigates subjectivity in emergentist terms. She explores the emergence of local and global patterns of linguistic structures that emerge in conversation due to high frequency and repetition. For Scheibman, the occurrence of subject pronouns and verb types helps the speakers to use language to express their perceptions, feelings, and ideas in discourse. Then subjectivity of language emerges from the relative frequency and repetition of different subject pronoun and verb types.

A classification system for verb types may be based on Halliday's general taxonomy of verbal processes in English which models three general processes of human experience: *being, sensing, and doing* (Halliday, 1994). More specific semantic classes for coding verbs include verbs of cognition (*know, think, and remember*), corporeal (*eat, drink, sleep, live, and smoke*), existential (*be, have, sit, stay, and happen*), feeling (*like, want, feel, need, bother, and enjoy*), material (*do, go, take, teach, work, use, play, and come*), perception (*look, see, hear, find, and notice*), perception/relational (*look, smell, and sound*), possessive/relational (*have, and get*), relational (*be, get, be like, and become*), and verbal (*say, talk, mean, tell, and ask*).

In keeping with the goal of tracking subjective expression in conversation, this system allows for more sensitive distinctions among verbs having to do with speakers' states and processes (e.g., feeling, thinking, speaking, perceiving, bodily gestures and activities) than for more general external actions which are grouped under one super class, *material*, subsuming diverse collection of verbs expressing both abstract and concrete activities (Scheibman, 2000a).

Table 1 outlines the distribution of semantic verb type with respect to subject in English. The most frequent verb class is relational, typically copular constructions. These account for 30% of the predicates and 497 of these relational verbs (497/641), or 78%, have third person singular subjects. The next most frequent verb class is the material type, that is, a large heterogeneous group of lexical items whose meanings fall under the general processes of *doing* and *happening* (Halliday, 1994); these items make up 25% of all utterances. The third most frequent verb type in the corpus is verbs of cognition (16% of the total) and, notably, 57% of these tokens co-occur with first person singular subjects. Finally, predicates designating verbal processes account for 11% of the main verb types and 52 % of these appear with first person singular subjects.

*Table 1. Utterances by person and verb type (n=2172)\* (reproduced from Scheibman, 2000a)*

	<i>1s</i>	<i>2s</i>	<i>3s</i>	<i>1p</i>	<i>2p</i>	<i>3p</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Cognition</b>	195	110	15	6	0	14	<b>340</b>
	31.60%	32.84%	1.61%	9.09%	0.00%	6.42%	<b>15.65%</b>
<b>Corporeal</b>	24	7	30	1	1	3	<b>66</b>
	3.89%	2.09%	3.22%	1.52%	20.00%	1.38%	<b>3.04%</b>
<b>Existential</b>	12	6	62	3	0	8	<b>91</b>
	1.94%	1.79%	6.66%	4.55%	0.00%	3.67%	<b>4.19%</b>
<b>Feeling</b>	19	9	10	2	0	5	<b>45</b>
	3.08%	2.69%	1.07%	3.03%	0.00%	2.29%	<b>2.07%</b>
<b>Material</b>	141	90	176	30	2	100	<b>539</b>
	22.85%	26.87%	18.90%	45.45%	40.00%	45.87%	<b>24.82%</b>
<b>Perception</b>	27	19	6	10	0	2	<b>64</b>
	4.38%	5.67%	0.64%	15.15%	0.00%	0.92%	<b>2.95%</b>
<b>Perceptual/ Relational</b>	0	0	35	0	0	4	<b>39</b>
	0.00%	0.00%	3.76%	0.00%	0.00%	1.83%	<b>1.80%</b>
<b>Possessive/ Relational</b>	21	31	29	5	0	16	<b>102</b>
	3.40%	9.25%	3.11%	7.58%	0.00%	7.34%	<b>4.70%</b>
<b>Relational</b>	50	41	497	6	2	45	<b>641</b>
	8.10%	12.24%	53.38%	9.09%	40.00%	20.64%	<b>29.51%</b>
<b>Verbal</b>	128	22	71	3	0	21	<b>245</b>
	20.75%	6.57%	7.63%	4.55%	0.00%	9.63%	<b>11.28%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>617</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>931</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>2172</b>
	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Individual percentages below utterance counts refer to person (e.g., 31.60% of items with 1s subjects occur with verbs of cognition). The right-hand column shows the percentage of each verb type in the corpus (e.g., 11.28% of all semantic verb type are verbal).

## Design of the Study

This research is intended to investigate the associations between frequently occurring structures in conversation and semantic and pragmatic expressions of subjectivity in Interlanguage English. We examine frequency of persons and semantic verb types as indexes of subjectivity in Persian as well as in the English (L1=Persian) interlanguage. The general hypothesis of the research claims that both Persian and English are equally subjective. The present study is also intended to find out whether interlanguage subjectivity is influenced by L1 or L2.

### *Participants*

A group of sixty adult students were randomly selected from among the students of English as a foreign language at Azad University at Esfahan. They were all native speakers of Persian. From among this group, a sample of forty-six students at intermediate level of

English proficiency was selected. There were fifteen male and thirty-one female participants in this group. Their level of L2 proficiency was determined based on their performance on the Oxford Placement Test (Allan 1992). This group was randomly divided into two equal groups that provided both Persian and Interlanguage data required for the study.

### *Data Elicitation*

Persian/Interlanguage English data were collected through an informal classroom debate held on the topic '*the ideal person for marriage.*' The participants could present their suggestions, criticize others' ideas or support them. These informal debates were held both in Persian and English. In the first session the participants discussed the topic in Persian and in the second session in English. The data elicited in the second session were considered as Interlanguage English. A total of Eighty-five minutes of Persian data and seventy-nine minutes of Interlanguage English ones were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The transcription of the data resulted in 3368 Persian clauses and 2880 Interlanguage clauses.

The English corpus produced by American native speakers of the language came from Scheibman (2000). The data consist of nine audiotaped informal conversations among friends and/or family members. In all, eighty minutes of conversation were collected for analysis. The corpus consists of 2172 utterances, finite clauses with expressed subjects and main verbs (Scheibman, 2000a).

In order to investigate the significance of the possible differences between English and Interlanguage subjectivity, the data obtained were subject to the Chi-square statistical procedure. The frequency of verb types in three languages—Persian, Interlanguage, and English—as well as the frequency of persons in these languages were compared two by two, e.g. Persian v. Interlanguage, Persian v. English, and English v. Interlanguage.

## **Results**

Tables 2 and 3 summarize Persian and Interlanguage data in terms of the frequency of each verb type and the frequency of each person as well as the percentage of the frequencies related to verb types and persons. English data were already presented in Table 1 above.

Table 2. Persian utterances by person and verb type (n=3368)

	<i>1s</i>	<i>2s</i>	<i>3s</i>	<i>1p</i>	<i>2p</i>	<i>3p</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Cognition</b>	229	48	40	16	0	36	<b>369</b>
	35.17%	18.89%	3.11%	6.95%	0.00%	4.01%	<b>10.95%</b>
<b>Corporeal</b>	0	0	16	0	0	32	<b>48</b>
	0.00%	0.00%	1.24%	0.00%	0.00%	3.56%	<b>1.42%</b>
<b>Existential</b>	0	8	68	0	0	92	<b>168</b>
	0.00%	3.14%	5.29%	0.00%	0.00%	10.25%	<b>4.98%</b>
<b>Feeling</b>	109	58	36	0	12	12	<b>227</b>
	16.74%	22.83%	2.80%	0.00%	20.07%	1.33%	<b>6.73%</b>
<b>Material</b>	40	28	304	104	12	194	<b>682</b>
	6.14%	11.02%	23.67%	45.21%	20.07%	21.62%	<b>20.27%</b>
<b>Perception</b>	12	0	20	10	0	34	<b>76</b>
	1.84%	0.00%	1.55%	4.34%	0.00%	3.79%	<b>2.27%</b>
<b>Perceptual/ Relational</b>	0	0	20	0	0	102	<b>122</b>
	0.00%	0.00%	1.55%	0.00%	0.00%	11.37%	<b>3.62%</b>
<b>Possessive/ Relational</b>	16	16	12	36	0	55	<b>135</b>
	2.45%	6.29%	0.93%	15.65%	0.00%	6.13%	<b>3.71%</b>
<b>Relational</b>	157	76	584	40	8	140	<b>1005</b>
	24.11%	29.92%	45.48%	17.39%	15.38%	15.60%	<b>31.12%</b>
<b>Verbal</b>	88	20	184	24	20	200	<b>536</b>
	13.51%	7.87%	14.33%	10.43%	38.46%	22.29%	<b>15.91%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>651</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>1284</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>897</b>	<b>3368</b>
	<b>19.32%</b>	<b>7.54%</b>	<b>38.12%</b>	<b>6.82%</b>	<b>1.54%</b>	<b>26.63%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3. Interlanguage utterances by person and verb type (n=2880)

	<i>1s</i>	<i>2s</i>	<i>3s</i>	<i>1p</i>	<i>2p</i>	<i>3p</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Cognition</b>	186	0	98	50	0	20	<b>354</b>
	46.96%	0.00%	7.84%	27.77%	0.00%	2.38%	<b>12.29%</b>
<b>Corporeal</b>	0	0	0	0	0	50	<b>50</b>
	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	5.95%	<b>1.73%</b>
<b>Existential</b>	0	0	71	0	0	70	<b>141</b>
	0.00%	0.00%	5.68%	0.00%	0.00%	8.33%	<b>4.89%</b>
<b>Feeling</b>	40	30	50	0	0	60	<b>180</b>
	10.10%	37.50%	4.00%	0.00%	0.00%	7.14%	<b>6.28%</b>
<b>Material</b>	50	20	130	70	144	220	<b>634</b>
	12.62%	25.00%	10.40%	38.88%	100%	26.19%	<b>22.01%</b>
<b>Perception</b>	40	0	0	0	0	63	<b>103</b>
	10.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	7.50%	<b>3.57%</b>
<b>Perceptual/ Relational</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	<b>0.00%</b>
<b>Possessive/ Relational</b>	10	0	61	30	0	14	<b>115</b>
	2.52%	0.00%	4.88%	16.66%	0.00%	1.66%	<b>3.99%</b>
<b>Relational</b>	0	0	760	0	0	130	<b>890</b>
	0.00%	0.00%	61.29%	0.00%	0.00%	15.47%	<b>30.90%</b>
<b>Verbal</b>	70	30	70	30	0	213	<b>413</b>
	17.67%	37.50%	5.60%	16.66%	0.00%	25.38%	<b>14.34%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>1240</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>840</b>	<b>2880</b>
	<b>13.75%</b>	<b>2.77%</b>	<b>43.05%</b>	<b>6.25%</b>	<b>5.00%</b>	<b>29.16%</b>	<b>100%</b>

A comparison of the frequencies of each verb type in Persian, Interlanguage, and English reveals that they all share similar distributions for verbs types in question. The most frequent verb types are relational, material, verbal, cognition, feeling, existential, possessive/relational, perception, corporeal, and perceptual/relational respectively. Figure 1 graphically presents the results on verb types.

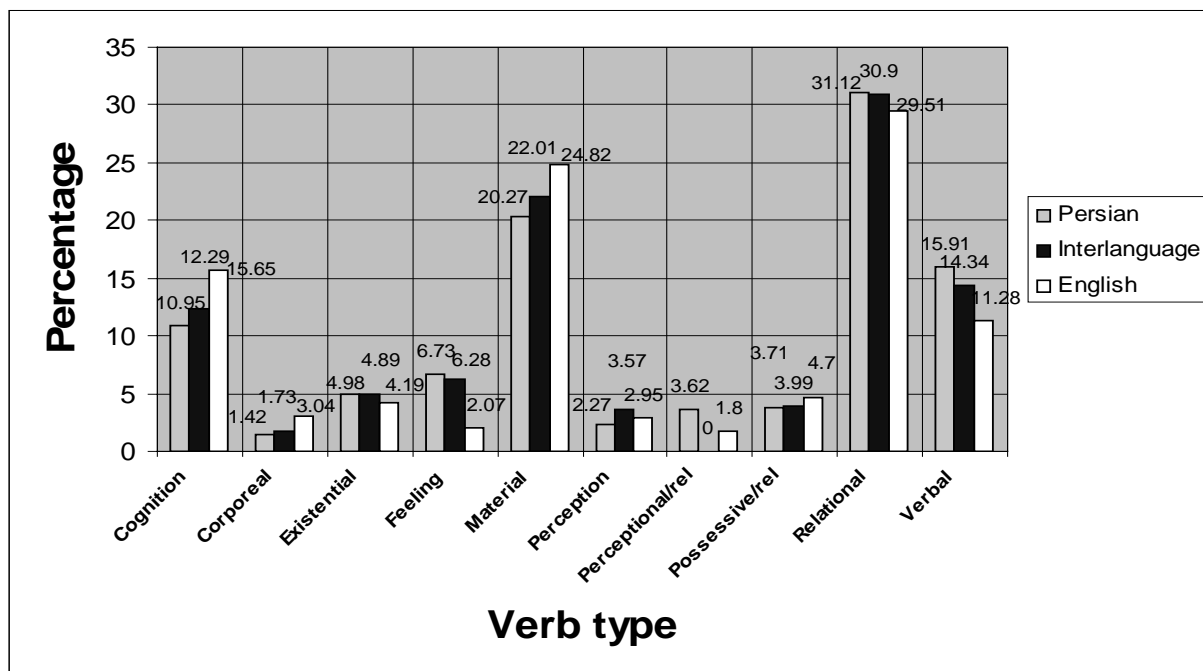


Figure 1. Verb type frequencies in percentages.

## Conclusions and Discussion

In order to find out whether the differences in verb type frequencies across these three languages are significant, the Chi-square value was computed for them. As Figure 2 indicates, the differences are all statistically significant. However, the highest chi square value is 151.65, the value for the differences between Persian and English frequencies. The lowest one is 123.11 for the differences between Persian and Interlanguage. The chi square value for English and Interlanguage is 137.72.

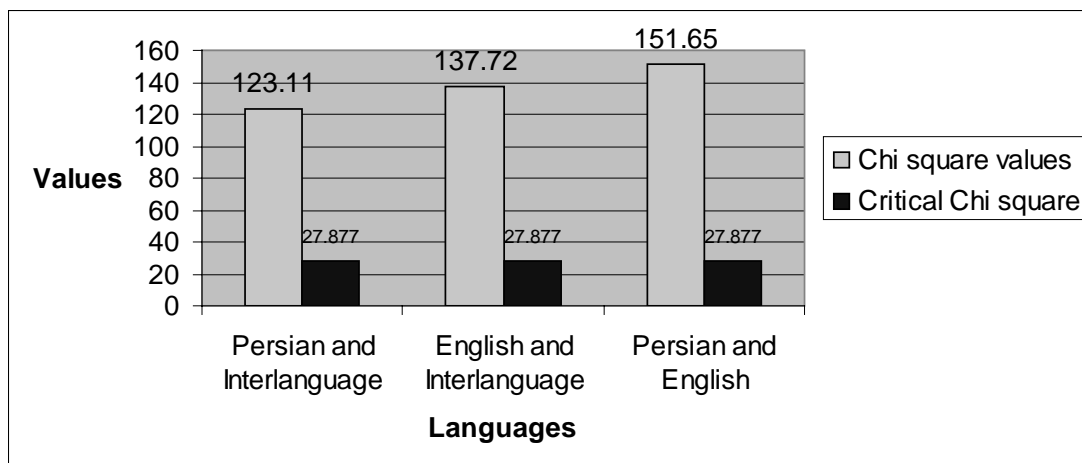


Figure 2. Chi square values of verb type  $\alpha \leq 0.001$

Figure 3 depicts the frequencies of different persons in percentages these three languages.

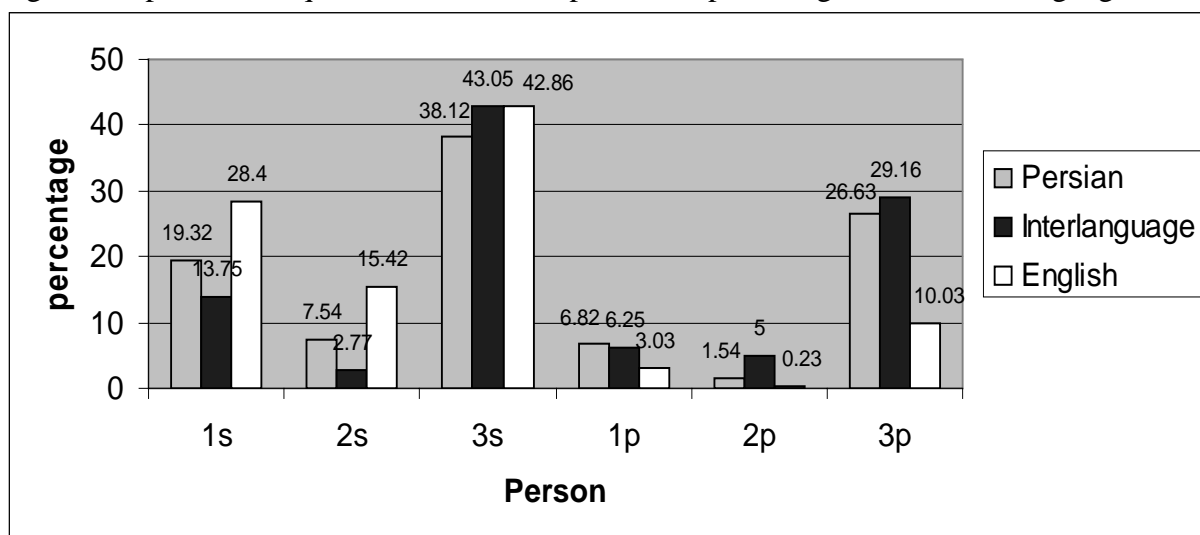


Figure 3. Person frequencies in percentages for English, Persian, and Interlanguage

Although first person singular and first person plural subjects may be considered as the most subjective pronouns in discourse, the most frequent person in the corpus proved to be subjective third person singular. This is because third person singular includes several subject types such as *s/he, it, that, there, this, what, who, one* which affect their frequency. Then the frequency of third person in the corpus is rather artificially inflated. Once we disregard third person, as Figure 3 shows, first person singular and first person plural prove to be the most frequent ones.

First person singular is the prototypical site for expression of speaker's point of view. That is, it can be used as the most subjective pronoun in discourse. Interestingly, the most frequent verb type with which first person singular subject co-occurs is the cognition type. It follows

that first person singular is not only subjective *per se*, but also it is also strongly associated with one of the most subjective verb types. The coalition results in an increase in the subjectivity of discourse. Another point worthy of mentioning is that the percentage of occurrence for this person in Interlanguage is not an intermediate value between English and Persian. Interlanguage is independent of both L1 and L2 in this respect. Similarly, the percentages of second person singular and second person plural in Interlanguage are independent of both L1 and L2.

In order to see whether the frequencies of the persons in English, Persian, and Interlanguage are significantly different or not, the frequencies of the persons were subjected to the Chi-square statistical procedure.

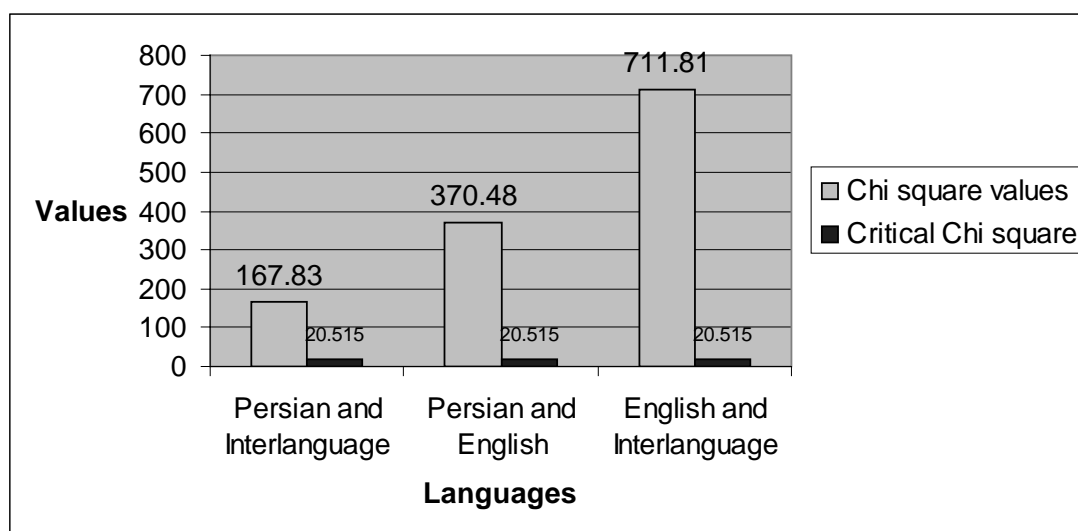


Figure 4. Chi-square values of Person  $\alpha \leq 0.001$

Although the percentages of persons in Interlanguage were independent of both L1 and L2 for most persons, the values suggest that Interlanguage and English are still the most different languages in terms of the frequency of the person while Persian and Interlanguage are the least different ones.

The results of the study reveal that Interlanguage contains all verb types that are present in Persian and English. The percentages of the frequencies of different verb types in Interlanguage, however, are closer to those in Persian. As far as persons are concerned, the least different languages are Interlanguage and Persian again. Since Interlanguage contains verb types and persons also present in both L1 and L2, it can function like L1 and L2 for expressing subjectivity. English (L1=Persian) Interlanguage has got the capacity to be as subjective as any other language. The language is a natural one.

Interlanguage subjectivity is remarkably influenced by patterns of subjectivity expression in L1. The frequencies of verb types as well as some of the persons in Interlanguage show a close relationship with the frequency of verb types and persons in L1. Although the participants have attained some measure of independence in other linguistic respects, traces of transfer at macro levels of language functioning such as subjectivity are still left behind. Apparently, such aspects of language are the most resistant ones to naturalization.

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