

Association with Contrastive Topic: Farsi *ke* and the Need for a Topic Shift

Introduction. Discourse particles form a closed class of invariable expressions and play a key role in structuring discourse by conveying information about the epistemic states of speakers relative to the utterance content (Z 2011). These particles are often closely linked to other discourse-informational modules, such as focus and topic, which organize around the conversational goals mutually recognized by discourse participants (R 2012; T 2012). This paper presents a semantic analysis of the Farsi discourse particle *ke*, which we argue associates with contrastive topic and indicates the need for a topic shift. We propose a unified account of *ke* in both declaratives and polar interrogatives, also highlighting expected pragmatic effects.

Data from Farsi. The Farsi element *ke* may serve as a declarative complementizer (K 2005) or exhibit a discursive function by interacting with information structure (T 2004; B&T 2013). This paper investigates *ke*'s latter use. Previous studies (O&R 2013) have already pointed out that discursive *ke* follows a prosodically prominent constituent and have treated it as a focus (F) particle. We argue instead that *ke* associates with contrastive topic (CT) and additionally conveys the speaker's belief that the prejacent proposition is already in the Common Ground (CG). The main data below is presented in three steps: (A) the association of *ke* with CT; (B) the sentence-final position of *ke* in conflicted contexts; and (C) the bias effect of *ke* in polar questions.

A. In Farsi, both F and CT are marked prosodically rather than morphologically. These elements may remain in situ or optionally move to the left periphery, specifically to Spec-TopP and Spec-FocP, respectively, with topics occupying a structurally higher position than foci (K 2005). (For simplicity, we present examples with in-situ F and fronted CT, which seems to follow the most common pattern.) While perceived prosodic distinctions—such as increased pitch for F and lengthening for CT—may exist, this study is not grounded in prosodic distinctions. Instead, we control for interpretive elements through carefully designed discourse contexts, adopting the ‘alternative semantics’ for focus (R 1992) and its extensions to CT (B 2003) through interaction with Questions Under Discussions (QUD; R 2012). The data below shows that *ke* is infelicitous when following focus, whether informational (1) or contrastive (2). However, *ke* is felicitous when occurring after a CT and its presence triggers an epistemic inference (3).

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| <p>(1) A: What did Ali give to Sara?
 B: Ali [ketab]_F ro (*ke) be Sara dad.
 Ali book ACC KE to Sara gave
 ‘Ali gave the book to Sara.’</p> | <p>(2) A: Did Omid give the book to Sara?
 B: na, [Ali]_F (*ke) ketab ro be Sara dad.
 no Ali KE book ACC to Sara gave
 ‘No, Ali gave the book to Sara.’</p> |
| <p>(3) A: What about the books and magazines, who gave them to Sara?
 B: [ketabha]_{CT} ro (ke) Ali dad, [majaleha]_{CT} ro ham (ke) [Omid]_F dad.
 books ACC KE Ali gave magazines ACC too KE Omid gave
 ‘Ali gave the books, Omid also gave the magazines.’ (= <i>p</i>)
 <i>ke</i> \rightsquigarrow The speaker believes that <i>p</i> already is in the CG.</p> | |

Notably, in sentences containing both F and CT, *ke* can only follow the CT. When *ke* follows what should be the F, the latter is reinterpreted as a CT. In (4), *ke* forces a CT interpretation on the immediately preceding prosodically prominent element, thus reformulating the QUD.

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| <p>(4) Ali, Sara and Omid brought apples, pears and kiwis. But there are no fruits left. Who ate them?</p> | |
| <p>B1: SIB ro (ke) ALI xord.
 apple ACC KE Ali ate
 ‘Ali ate the apples.’
 (But what about the pears and the kiwis?)</p> | <p>B2: ALI (ke) SIB xord.
 Ali KE apple ate
 ‘Ali ate the apples.’
 (But what about Sara and Omid?)
 New QUD: Who ate the fruits?</p> |

B. In addition to its sentence-internal position, in certain contexts *ke* can also occur sentence-finally, as in (5).

- (5) A: No one gave their books to Sara.
 B: ALI (ke) ketabhaš ro be Sara dad (ke).
 Ali KE books ACC to Sara gave KE
 ‘Ali gave his books to Sara.’ (= *p*)
ke \rightsquigarrow The speaker believes that *p* is already in the CG (leading to the speaker’s surprise).

Importantly, this position of *ke* requires an epistemic conflict as in (5), where the two utterances are logically inconsistent. Assuming that in such contexts, due to the epistemic conflict, CT takes sentence-wide scope, we can uphold the generalization from above that *ke* always strictly follows a CT-marked constituent.

C. *Ke* cannot occur in wh-questions, whether following the CT, the wh-phrase or occurring sentence-finally, as in (6.A’). In contrast, M&K (2024) point out that *ke* is fine in polar questions and additionally conveys a positive speaker bias, as in (6.A’').

- (6) A: What about the cake?...
 A’: [keik]_{CT} ro (*ke) ki (*ke) mixre (*ke)? A’’: [keik]_{CT} ro (ke) Ali mixare (ke)?
 cake KE who KE buy KE Ali KE cake buy KE
 ‘Who will buy the cake?’ ‘Will Ali buy a cake?’
 \rightsquigarrow The S thought that Ali will buy the cake.

Semantics for *ke*. We propose that *ke* denotes a propositional identity function, additionally triggering two presuppositions: (i) the prejacent contains a CT thus pointing to a set of sub-questions of a larger QUD, and (ii) the speaker believes that the prejacent proposition is already in the CG (i.e., the subquestion congruent with the prejacent has already been answered), even though the addressee may have indicated otherwise. This is stated in (7).

- (7) $\llbracket \phi \text{ ke} \rrbracket = \llbracket \phi \rrbracket$ in a context *c* and a world *w*, only if
 i. $|\llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{ct}| > 1$ and ii. for all $w' \in \text{Dox}_{S_c, w'} : \llbracket \phi \rrbracket \in \text{CG}_{c, w}$.

The first presupposition directly captures properties A and B, or that *ke* is licensed by CT. The second presupposition accounts for *ke*’s bias effect in polar questions. (*Ke* is ruled out in wh-questions because such questions convey individual properties rather than full propositions.)

Pragmatic effects. The joint effect of the two presuppositions associated with *ke*—that the prejacent is already part of the common ground and that other discourse questions remain open—indicates a *need for a topic shift*. This predicts additional pragmatic effects and helps account for the varied interpretations of *ke* across different contexts. Indeed, *ke* may convey the following signals: (i) Surprise: The speaker did not expect the addressee to be unaware of *p*. (ii) Emphatic meaning: The speaker asserts *p*, highlighting that *p* should already be known, thus emphasizing its relevance. (iii) Unimportance: *p* is obvious, trivial or unimportant. (iv) Unfinished utterance: The addressee expects that new information will follow, creating a sense of continuation beyond the *ke*-utterance. (v) Hope (in polar questions): The speaker expects or hopes to receive a positive answer. All of these pragmatic effects are empirically attested (examples omitted here for space reasons).

References. Bakhtiary&Tajabadi 2013 chand karbord kalami digar as ke dar Farsi goftari ‘Some discourse functions of ke in colloquial Farsi’ – Büring 2003 On D-trees, beans, and B-accent – Karimi 2005 A Minimalist Approach to Scrambling – Mohammadi&Koev 2024 – Speaker Attitudes Predict Epistemic Biases in Polar Questions: Evidence from Farsi – Oroji&Rezaei 2013 Exploring ‘ke’ as a Focus Particle in Persian from both Form and Function Points of View – Roberts 2012 Information structure in discourse: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics – Rooth 1992 A theory of focus interpretation – Taheri 2004 Indifference *ke*-construction in modern conversational Persian – Tonhauser 2012 Contrastive topics in Paraguayan Guaraní discourse – Zimmermann 2011 Discourse particles