

# A Cognitive Approach to the Polysemic Verb /ʃekastan/ in Persian

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## Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate some senses of the verb /ʃekastan/ and to explicate the relations based on some related concepts in cognitive linguistics such as categorization, radial category and prototype. The study is restricted to the transitive verb /ʃekastan/. The data are gathered from both written and spoken languages accessible to the writer. Furthermore, the intuition of the writer as a native speaker is another source of data gathering. The results of the study showed that the prototypical meaning of the verb is 'to break'. Among the different uses of the verb, there are some related senses and some discrete senses. The relation can be described as a web radiating out from a central point. In this respect, the categorization of the verb is gradable; that is, from the very nearest meaning to the farthest to the prototype. The farthest meaning has a discrete meaning that is totally different from the prototypical meaning of the verb.

**Keywords:** categorization, radial category, prototypical meaning.

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## 1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics emerged in the 1980s. It placed central importance on conceptual processes and embodied experience in the study of language. Meanings of a word can be rooted in experience. There are a lot of abstract concepts in every language. It seems that the meanings of some abstract concepts are conveyed through concrete words. When somebody suffers emotional distress, he or she may be disturbed and annoyed. So, in order to describe this situation, the person can say “My heart is broken”. The same meaning is conveyed by the verb /ʃekastan/ ‘to break’ in Persian. The present study investigates the different meanings that this verb has in different collocations with other words. In some of the usages of the verb /ʃekastan/, there is an abstract meaning. The question is, how many meanings can this verb have? The other question is that, how much related are those meanings to each other? How do we understand the different meanings of the verb and make a relationship between them in our minds? ‘Categorization’ is one way of understanding the different meanings and relates them to each other. Categorization is not restricted to human beings. An animal has cognitive capabilities like vision. Humans use language. So, they depend on their language to make categorization. When someone encounters the two sentences “The window is broken” and “My heart is broken”, in the light of the ‘prototypical meaning’ of the verb ‘break’, he or she can recognize or guess the meanings of the two sentences. ‘Radial category’ is used to conceptualize various meanings radiating out from a central point.

## 2. Data Gathering

The verb /ʃekastan/ in Persian can be used as both an intransitive and transitive verb. This research is only restricted to the transitive verb. The data are gathered from both written and spoken languages accessible to the writer. Furthermore, the intuition of the writer as a native speaker is

another source of data gathering. All of the sentences include a subject, an object, and a verb. The sentences are in active voice. The passive voice sentences are not included in the data. The verb is analyzed within the framework of cognitive linguistics.

### 3. Data Analysis

There are different sentences in Persian with the verb /ʃekastan/. Some of these sentences are listed below from (1) to (7).

- (1) /ʔali ʃiʃe ra ʃekast/  
Ali **broke** the window.
- (2) /moʃkelat-e ʔegtesadi ʔali ra ʃekast/  
Economical problems **broke** Ali.
- (3) /ʔali ʔahd-aʃ ra ʃekast/  
Ali **broke** his promise.
- (4) /ʔali namaz-aʃ ra ʃekast/  
Ali **broke** his prayer.
- (5) /ʔanha mogarrarat ra ʃekastand/  
They **broke** the rules.
- (6) /ʔanha eʔtesab-e gaza ra ʃekastand/  
They **broke** hunger strike.
- (7) /varzeʃ-kar rekord ra ʃekast/  
The athlete **broke** the record.

The examples presented in (1) to (7) show the different meanings of the

verb /ʃekastan/ in Persian. For better understanding, their meaning is presented in Table 1:

**Table 1. The meanings of the verb /ʃekastan/ in different sentences**

Example	Meaning
1	make into pieces
2	damage
3	violate
4	do incompletely
5	ignore
6	end
7	increase

How can our mind relate these different meanings to one another? In cognitive linguistics, it is assumed that in order to relate meanings, speakers resort to some strategies like ‘categorization’, ‘prototypical meaning’ and ‘radial category’.

### **3.1. Categorization**

Categorization is one of the most basic human cognitive activities. Categorization involves the apprehension of some individual entity, some particular experience, as an instance of something conceived more abstractly that also encompasses other actual and potential instantiations (Croft & Cruise, 2004: 74). For instance, a specific animal can be construed as an instantiation of the species DOG, a specific patch of color as a manifestation of the property RED, and so on (ibid: 74).

### **3.2. Prototype**

Prototypical meaning is a kind of categorization. According to Langacker, a ‘prototype’ is a typical instance of a category, and other elements are

assimilated to the category on the basis of their perceived resemblance to the prototype (1987: 371). The pioneering experimental and theoretical work on prototype theory was carried out by Rosch and her co-workers, although this built on earlier insights, notably Wittgenstein (1953) and Brown (1958) (Croft & Cruise, 2004: 77). Prototypes, as reference points of categories, may be representative either because the most representative members of categories are taken as the prototype or because those members are salient points in a domain and the category tends to form around them so that they become representative of it (Rosch, 1983:74).

The first meaning that a Persian speaker can think of the verb /*ʃekastan*/ is ‘to break’. So, the prototype meaning can be ‘make into pieces’. Consider the first sentence in the examples ~~that were~~ given above:

/ʔali ʃiʃe ra **ʃekast**/ ‘Ali **broke** the window.’

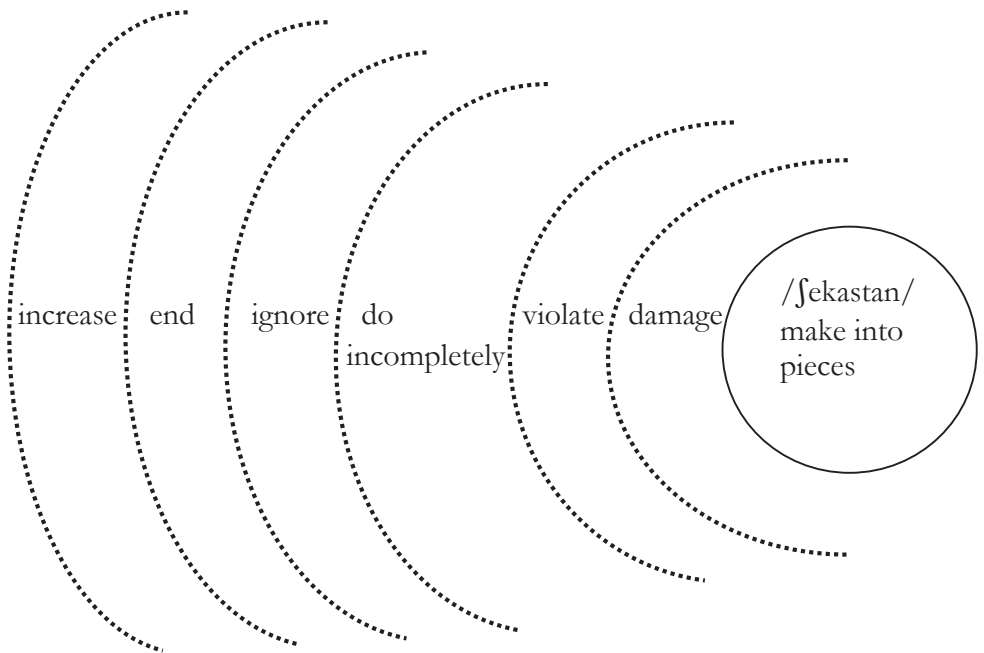
This sentence means that the window was made into pieces. In the second sentence (2), /*moʃkelat-e ʔegtesadi ʔali ra ʃekast*/, the verb is used to describe a person’s situation. In fact, a person is compared with a fragile thing that some problems break him. The verb in the third sentence (3) means ‘hurt’. The noun /*ʔahd*/ means ‘promise’ and is capable of being broken by one of the partners. Similarly, /*namaz*/ ‘prayer’, /*mogarrarat*/ ‘rules’, /*eʔtesab*/ ‘strike’ and /*rekord*/ ‘record’ can be broken. Examples (1) to (5) encompass negative consequences, whereas example (7) encompasses a positive consequence. Therefore, the degrees of relativity to the prototype are not the same in all of the sentences. The phenomenon that we find a group of related but distinct meanings attached to a word is called ‘polysemy’ (Saeed, 2013: 370).

### 3.3. Radial category

The notion of radiality is central to cognitive linguistics (Lee, 2003: 53).

Lakoff (1987) uses ‘radial category’ for the characteristic pattern produced by the metaphorical extension of meaning from a central origin (Saeed, 2013: 370). In this respect, radial category can be used to conceptualize the various meanings expressed by the verb /ʃekastan/ as a web radiating from the central point ‘make into pieces’. So, categorization of this verb is gradable. The very nearest meaning to the prototype is the second sentence in which the verb is used in the meaning of ‘damage’. The farthest meaning to prototype is the seventh sentence in which the verb is used in the meaning of ‘increase’.

Figure 1. Possible radially for the verb /ʃekastan/



In the sentence /varzeʃ-kar record ra ʃekast/, the meaning of the verb has been extended to a meaning totally different from the prototypical meaning. In languages of the world, some verbs have more readiness to extend their meanings than other verbs (Pauwels, 2000; Newman & Rice, 2004). The verb /ʃekastan/ in Persian is one of them.

By considering the first sentence in the examples given before, the window was made into pieces. In the second sentence /moʃkelat-e ʔegtesadi ʔali ra **ʃekast**/, a person is compared with a fragile thing that some problems break him. So, the verb means ‘hurt’. The noun /ʔahd/ means ‘promise’ and is capable of being broken by one of the partners. Also, /namaz/ ‘prayer’, /mogarrarat/ ‘rules’, /eʔtesab/ ‘strike’ and /rekord/ ‘record’ can be broken. It seems that a metaphor has been used in these verbs. ‘Metaphor’ in cognitive linguistics is a two-way affair: it can go from linguistic metaphor to conceptual metaphor, or from conceptual metaphor to linguistic metaphor. For instance, cognitive linguists have used the abundant and systematic presence of metaphors in a language as a basis for postulating the existence of conceptual metaphors, which illustrates the move from language to thought (Raymond & Gerard, 2001: 1). Lakoff and Johnson use a formula TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN to describe the metaphorical link between the domains (Croft & Cruise, 2004: 196). Metaphor makes a relationship between the two domains. For example, in the second sentence, the source domain is ‘a fragile thing’ and the target domain is ‘human’. There are some ontological correspondences between the two domains that are shown in Tables 2:

**Table 2. Ontological correspondence between source and target domains**

Source	Target
a breakable object	human
	promise
	prayer
	law
	hunger strike
	record

Table 3 shows the epistemic correspondence between human and a breakable object in the sentence /moʃkelat-e ʔegtesadi ʔali ra **ʃekast**/.

**Table 3. Epistemic correspondence between source and target domains**

1- When a breakable object undergoes much pressure, it breaks.	1- When a person faces problems, he is damaged.
2- A broken object is difficult to repair	2- A damaged person may not recover again

As shown in Table 3, a person is compared to a breakable object. One of the similarities is that both of them may be damaged as a result of pressure. Moreover, a broken object is difficult to repair. This is true about a damaged person; so that he may not recover again.

#### **4. Results**

In this study, the transitive form of the verb /ʃekastan/ ‘to break’ was analyzed within a cognitive linguistics framework. It became evident to the writer that there were different senses of the verb /ʃekastan/ explored in different sentences. Therefore, the verb /ʃekastan/ is a polysemous predicate. By supposing that the prototypical meaning of the verb is to ‘make into pieces’, other meanings were compared to the prototype. The notion of radial category was used to conceptualize the various meanings expressed by the verb /ʃekastan/ as a web radiating from the central point ‘make into pieces’. So, categorization of this verb was gradable. The very nearest meaning to the prototype was the second sentence in which the verb was used in the meaning of ‘damage’. The farthest meaning to the prototype was the seventh sentence in which the verb was used in the meaning of ‘increase’. Some senses had a close meaning relation with the prototype. Some other meanings did not have any relation with the prototype. In this case, the verb had extended a totally different meaning from the prototype. Also it was revealed that polysemy is a language process and is not accidental at all. It relies on human experiences of the real world. By using the formula TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN for the verb /ʃekastan/, the metaphorical links between the domains were described.



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