An enriched typology of DOM: specificity and identifiability in spoken Persian

INTRODUCTION: Differential object marking (DOM) is a phenomenon in which a direct object receives a special morphosyntactic marking by virtue of having a certain level of definiteness. Aissen (2003) formalizes this understanding of definiteness into the prominence hierarchy in (1). In this typology, the more prominent a direct object is, the more likely it is to be marked.

(1) Definiteness: Personal pronoun > Proper name > Definite > Indefinite specific > Non-specific NP

Aissen (2003) claims that Persian marks specific indefinites and higher, leaving non-specific nouns unmarked. This means that in addition to placing the DOM marker -(r)o on objects which are personal pronouns, proper names, or definite objects, 'specific' indefinites will also be marked if they are partitive (2b), or include the meaning of a certain, where the speaker has a particular value in mind:

(2) a. yeki az un nahâla-ro kâshtan. one of those saplings-DOM planted.3PL
   ‘They planted one of the saplings.’

b. un mixâst ye she’-ro boxune. he wanted a poem-DOM read.SUBJ
   ‘He wanted to read a (certain) poem.’

PROBLEM 1: NON-SPECIFIC PARTITIVES: Farkas (2002a) observes a distinction between epistemic specificity and partitive specificity. A consequence of this is that it accounts for the observation that these properties appear independently of one another. In Persian, partitives which lack epistemic specificity are also obligatorily marked:

(3) mariam do tâ az ketâb-â-f*(o) peydâ kard, vali ne-midune kodam. Mariam two CLASS from book-PL-3SG-RO find did.3SG but NEG-know.3SG which
   ‘Mariam found two of his books, but doesn’t know which.’

I suggest that partitive specificity is a salient property of definiteness that is distinct from, and immediately dominates, epistemic specificity. This bifurcation can be used reliably to account for DOM on objects that are specific in one sense, but not in another.

MODIFICATION 1: Add partitive specificity into the definiteness hierarchy:
Personal pronoun > Proper name > Definite > Partitive > Indefinite Specific > Non-specific

PROBLEM 2: NON-SPECIFIC IDENTIFIABLE: Further study indicates that some non-specific objects may receive DOM, contrary to the analysis above that only specific objects and higher could be marked. In (4a) below, the object paper receives the object marker, although its counterpart in (4b) cannot.

(4) a. mârk ye kâghaz-i-ro râje-be in mozu neveshte ke be-khâter-esh mashhur shod. Mark a paper-IND-RO about this topic wrote that because.of.it famous became
   ‘Mark has written some paper on this topic, for which he has become famous.’

b. mârk mixâd ye kâghaz-i benevise, vali nemidune râje-be che mozu-i. Mark wants a paper-IND write.SUBJ but not.knows about what topic-ind
   ‘Mark wants to write a paper, but doesn’t know on what topic.’

I suggest that the property distinguishing the presence of DOM in (4a) and the lack of DOM in (4b) is identifiability in principle (Farkas 2002b). This means that non-specific objects may be marked if their discourse referent may be identified in some context update, even if it is unidentified in the current context.

MODIFICATION 2: Add identifiability into the definiteness hierarchy:
Personal pronoun > Proper name > Definite > Partitive > Indefinite Specific > Non-specific > Indefinite identifiable

THE BIG PICTURE: By including the categories partitive and identifiable, the cases of obligatory DOM on partitives which are epistemically non-specific, and in indefinites which are identifiable in principle are accounted for. Persian obligatorily marks all objects associated with Identifiable or higher on this enriched hierarchy.