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Dear Selection Committee,

I am thrilled to write a recommendation letter in support of Esmail's Moghiseh's application to the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto.

To cut to the chase: Esmail has my highest recommendation and I believe his work is well suited to give your postdoctoral fellowship very high international visibility. He has just defended his dissertation, supervised by me, on Farsi. The dissertation surveys the interpretation of a number of determiner phrases, called 'free choice items' in the linguistics literature. It reports a number of studies that have used these Farsi free choice items to move significantly our theory of natural language interpretation. All chapters have been previously accepted for presentation at the most selective international conferences in formal semantics, the most desirable and competitive dissemination venues in the field, with acceptance rates typically in the vicinity of 15%, and chapter 2 has been recently accepted for publication with minor revisions at *Semantics and Pragmatics*, one of the top tier journals in the field, with extremely positive reviews—in fact among the most positive I have seen in my career. His is an extraordinary profile which, unsurprisingly, has been attracting international attention. Having him around will, by extension, give your position international attention too. Offering Esmail

an opportunity to continue pursuing his research agenda is a mutually beneficial proposition.

Before I comment further on Esmail's research, I need to address two points that may have caught your attention while reading his application.

First, I see in the description of your postdoctoral fellowship that applications geared towards publishing the candidate's dissertation as a monograph would be given preference. From this I gather that the call for applications does not have formal linguists in mind. The preferred dissemination means in formal linguistics are not monographs, but (as is the case in neighbouring disciplines like computer science) conference proceedings and journal articles. With this in mind, I can assure you that Esmail's dissertation contains enough material to yield four journal articles (which, together, could constitute a monograph.) As mentioned above, chapter 2 is already accepted for publication, and a different chapter is being shaped into a second journal article. I hope that the field publishing culture will not be taken against this application.

The second point I would like to address is that the work that Esmail has published to date has been done in collaboration with me. Rather than being a weakness, this attests to his unusual maturity as a researcher. In formal linguistics, collaboration is basically the norm these days, but faculty-student collaborations are somewhat rare, for obvious reasons: the required training to do work in formal semantics is long, and it's very rare for students to be in a position to collaborate with more senior scholars.

With these two points out of the way, let me say that I am in a very good position to assess Esmail's work. I first met him in my Winter 2017 Pragmatics class. I met with him regularly (basically weekly) back then, and then moved on to supervise his honours thesis, his first evaluation paper, and, finally, his PhD dissertation.

Already as an undergraduate student, Esmail showed that he can be a careful thinker. He enjoys dissecting academic readings, translating the core insights into his own terms, finding connections and apparent holes in the arguments, and testing predictions. He has a knack for finding interesting questions and has a very inquisitive mind that does not settle for less than crystal clear answers. When he was an undergraduate student, he blamed his constant search for clarification questions to what he perceived as a lack of background, and suffered from a clear lack of confidence. As time went by, I believe he understood that he was actually quite capable of engaging in deep analytical thinking and that what he thought was a problem was actually his best asset. Since then, he has never stopped looking for clearer ways of explaining to himself (and others) whatever he was up to at the moment.

In his dissertation, Esmail tackled one of the most intricate topics in formal semantics: free choice items, and he did so by paying attention to a language that remains severely underrepresented in the formal semantics literature: Farsi.

Free choice items are determiner phrases whose interpretation has an intimate connection with expressions conveying modal meanings, meanings that convey what is possible or necessary. The interpretation of free choice items poses serious challenges to current formal semantics theories. To illustrate one of the puzzles, we can consider a famous member of the class of free choice items: English *any* DPs. These DPs are completely unremarkable when they appear in combination with modal auxiliary verbs conveying information about what is possible, as in the sentence in (1), which conveys that for any relevant book  $x$ , Forood is permitted to read  $x$ . The situation changes when we consider modal auxiliaries that convey information about what is required, as in (2). In parallel to (1), we would expect (2) to convey that for any relevant book  $x$ , Forood is required to read  $x$ . Surprisingly, the sentence does not seem to have that interpretation. Linguists have been trying to understand why for the last fifty-something years.

- (1) Forood can read any book.
- (2) Forood must read any book.
- (3) Forood read any book.

In his dissertation, Esmail shows that Farsi is uniquely positioned to cast light on the puzzles surrounding free choice items. Chapter after chapter, he shows that particular Farsi expressions behave in ways that theoreticians didn't know were possible.

Take, for instance, the so-called *i*-indefinites. Esmail shows that they have a peculiar behaviour when interpreted under modals: they yield interpretations that are stronger than those of regular indefinites. For instance, the Farsi counterpart of the sentence 'Peter can borrow *i*-indefinite book' conveys that every book is a permitted option for Peter (a so-called 'free choice meaning component'), not just that Peter can borrow a book. After careful investigation, Esmail determined that *i*-indefinites convey a free choice component when they are interpreted under the scope of both deontic and epistemic modals (modals expressing what is possible or necessary given a body of regulations or some information state.) In this, they pattern with other well known cases of free choice items. This is an interesting discovery by itself. Esmail and I looked at the literature on quantifiers in Farsi (including some unpublished work by Amy Rose Deal and Annahita Farudi) and this point does not seem to have been noted before. In downward

entailing environments, *i*-indefinites are interpreted as simple narrow scope existentials, just like other free choice items are. The interesting part concerns their interpretation when they are unembedded in positive episodic sentences.

When we look at the behavior of free choice items in positive episodic sentences across languages, we find two classes: those which, like Spanish *algún* or German *irgendein*, convey a modal component (speaker ignorance or indifference), and those, like Romanian *vreun*, that are plain ungrammatical. Current theories, like Chierchia's, are tailored to make sense of this pattern.

Esmail discovered that in positive unembedded sentences *i*-indefinites differ from other similar items in other languages: unlike *vreun*, they are grammatical, and unlike *irgendein* or *algún*, they do not convey a modal meaning, but simply trigger an obligatory uniqueness component. This is an interesting third possibility which Esmail shows can be accommodated within Chierchia's theory, under certain reasonable assumptions.

The idea that Esmail explores in his thesis as a response to this data is a simple one. The counterparts of *-i* indefinites in other languages are assumed to invoke a grammatical operation that strengthens their meaning by excluding a number of alternative meanings. The resulting strengthened meaning turns out to be contradictory in grammatical contexts that do not include a modal expression. Esmail shows that the behavior of *i*-indefinites can be explained by assuming that the strengthening can be, under certain conditions, partial. This is, I believe, a very interesting proposal that is bound to have a very strong impact on current formal theories. Three anonymous reviewers for *Semantics and Pragmatics* agree with this assessment.

This contribution would have been enough to call the attention of the international community of linguists to Farsi, but Esmail's dissertation includes at least three other similar contributions. He shows that the interpretation of Farsi *-i* indefinites actually instantiates a grammatical pattern that was predicted by a major theory (Chierchia's) to be merely theoretically possible (so-called partial and local exhaustification.) He also shows that the grammar of Farsi allows for free choice items to be reinterpreted when their noun phrases are marked with the differential object marker *-ro*. One can also find in his dissertation confirmation that *hame* determiner phrases invoke interpretation mechanisms that find parallel those found in typologically unrelated languages.

Moving beyond his dissertation, Esmail has been articulating very carefully a rich research plan that he plans to devote himself to during his potential postdoctoral stay. The plan focuses on expanding his dissertation work but also includes exploring new research areas in promising ways. If he were offered this postdoctoral position, Esmail would clearly be an active citizen of your

department. He is quite easy going, organized, serious, and mature.

To summarize: Esmail's work has put Farsi in the map. I witnessed first hand in several conferences how researchers of international caliber came to talk to Esmail about his work. While I sense that your postdoctoral opportunity may not be geared towards linguistics, I believe that, by offering Esmail a chance to continue publishing his work, you have a golden opportunity to contribute to putting Farsi, and by extension Iranian Studies, under the international spotlight. I recommend his application with no reservations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'L' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

(Luis Alonso-Ovalle)