Strong definites in colloquial Persian and referentiality

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Persian has no definite article, while bare nouns express definite or generic readings (Ghomeshi 2003, Krifka & Modarresi 2016). Modern Colloquial Persian has the additional referentiality marker -e (he after vowels, -ye after i), which can optionally be combined with bare nouns in typically “strong referential” readings, such as deictic and anaphoric uses of definites, as in (1) and (2).

(1) Ketāb-e ru mize. book-e on table.be.3SG
‘The book is on the table.’

(2) Ye arus va damād-ro didam. bride-ACC groom-ACC saw.1SG
Arus-e xeyli xošgel bud. bride-e very beautiful was.3SG
‘I saw a bride and groom yesterday. The bride was very beautiful.’

We argue that the marker -e marks referentiality and not just anaphoricity, as is often assumed in the literature for strong definites (e.g., Schwarz 2009, Jenks 2018). See the referential/non-referential reading in (3a) vs. (3b), respectively. While (3a) in a clear referential reading, i.e. the fastest runner, can refer to Ali, the same is not possible in (3b), where the expression refers to whoever will be the winner. In (3b), -e is ungrammatical:

(3) a. Esme saritarin davande(-he) chi bud? name.of fastest runner(-e) what was.3SG
‘What was the name of the fastest runner?’

b. Saritarin davande(*-he) barande.ye jāyeze miše. fastest runner(*-e) winner.of award become.3SG
‘The fastest runner will be the winner of the award.’

In sum, the referentiality marker -e in Colloquial Persian can be used with strong definites. This provides novel evidence that the contrast between weak and strong definites is based on referentiality, and not on anaphoricity.