Izāfat

The izāfat is a feature of Urdu orthography derived from Persian, a language in which it is used with much more frequency than in Urdu. (This means that—normally—izāfat is used only with words of Persian or Arabic origin; Arabic because many Arabic words were borrowed into Persian) Generally in Urdu you see the izāfat most often in poetry, newspapers or otherwise formal language, and you don’t want to use the izāfat in everyday speech, except for some special instances—and there are special instances of the izāfat that show up in everyday speech as well. So it’s important to understand what izāfat does and how it is written.

I. How to write it

1. After word-final consonants (except silent choti he) and -ī
The izāfat always appears at the end of a word. When the word ends in a consonant that is not silent choṭī he (this is the majority of the cases), the izāfat appears as a zer dangling below the last letter of the word. As expected the zer adds a short ‘i’ to the end of a word. Many transliteration systems like to use "-e" to indicate izāfat, but this is unnecessarily confusing, and may make you forget that the izāfat is a zer. So I am going to use "-i" to indicate izāfat s wherever they appear.

So, for instance, the word ḥāl + the izāfat = ḥāl-i. In Urdu script, this is:

\[
\text{حال} - i
\]

This way of writing izāfat also applies to words ending in -ī, which is indicated by choṭī ye.

When it comes to pronouncing izāfat s, though, you can either say -i or -e, it doesn’t matter much.

2. After word final -ā, -o or -ū
When an izāfat appears after a word ending in -ā, -o or -ū, we’re faced with a problem, because if we were to do write the izāfat the usual way, as a zer below the last letter, strange things would begin to happen.

In the case of the alif, we know that it never takes a short vowel (like the -i that zer indicates), unless it is the very first letter of the word. Whenever alif is in the middle or at the end of a word, it indicates a long ‘a’ (ā), and a letter that is already a long vowel can’t take a short vowel too. So, there’s a special (but unsurprising) way to indicate the izāfat: after the alif, we have

\[
\text{hamza (on its chair) + barī ye:}
\]

\[
\text{ṣadā-i buland}
\]
When it comes to -o and -ū, these, as we know, must be indicated by wā'o and by pesh + wā'o respectively. But if we attach an izāfat in the normal way, to the end of the wā'o, then that wā'o becomes a consonant, since a wa'o that is followed by any vowel is (almost) always a consonant. In this case, it would be ‘wi,’ whereas we want ‘o-i’ or ‘ū-i.’ So, we do the same thing that we did in the case of the alif: after the wā'o, we write

\[ \text{hamza (on its chair) + barī ye:} \]

\[ \text{bāzu-i qātil} \]

**3. After word final -a(h)**

In the case of silent word-final chaṭī he, the izāfat again is indicated not by a zer, but in this case by a little hamza(h) piggybacking on top of the final chaṭī he.

For instance, the word pājāma(h) + the izāfat = pājāma(h)-i in Roman transliteration, but in Urdu, this is:

\[ \text{ปรากฏہ} \]

Remember that this does not apply to words in which the final chaṭī he in fact is pronounced, nor to words ending in baṛī he (of course). For instance, the word wajh + the izāfat = wajh-i in Roman transliteration, and in Urdu this is:

\[ \text{وہ} \]

**II. What it does**

There is of course no use in knowing what the izāfat looks like if you don’t know what it does. This is a rather large subject, since the izāfat is very versatile and does a lot of things. However, most the time, it’s doing one of two things: it indicates either description or possession.

**1. Descriptive use**

Often the izāfat is used to indicate that the word following the izāfat describes the word preceding it. That is, it tells us that the second word is being used as an adjective.

For example, āh means “sigh” (noun), and garm means “hot” (adjective).¹ If we wanted to write “hot sigh” in Urdu, the usual way to do it would be to put the adjective before the noun:

\[ \text{garm āh} \]

¹ These are both Persian words.

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But the way that it is done in Persian and in poetic Urdu is to put the adjective after the noun and insert the īzāfat in between them, so that “hot sigh” may also be written

\[ \text{āh-i garm} \]

So, whereas the normal adjective noun pair is simply adjective + noun, the structure of the descriptive īzāfat construct is the other way around:

\[ \text{noun + īzāfat + adjective} \]

Another example: 

*muḥal* means “Moghul” (surprise, surprise), and *aʿẓam* means “greatest.” To say “greatest Moghul” using the īzāfat, we would say:

\[ \text{muḥal-i aʿẓam} \]

### 2. Possessive use

In many other cases, the īzāfat is used to express the idea the word preceding the īzāfat is possessed by the word following it. In other words, it does the same thing as *kā*, *ke* and *kī*, but in the reverse order.

For instance, the word *gham* (noun) means “sadness,” and the word *dil* (noun) means “heart.” If we wanted to say “the heart’s sadness” in regular Urdu, we would put the correct form of *kā*, *ke* or *kī* in, and say

\[ \text{dil kā gham} \]

But if we wanted to say the same thing using an īzāfat construction, we would reverse the order of the two nouns, and stick the īzāfat between them:

\[ \text{gham-i dil} \]

So, normally possession is indicated in the following way: possessive noun + *kā/ke/kī* + possessed noun. But, the structure of the possessive īzāfat construct is again the other way around:

\[ \text{possessed noun + īzāfat + possessing noun} \]

### 3. How to tell how the īzāfat is being used

When you are faced with an īzāfat construct, you have to understand whether it is descriptive or
possessive in order to figure out what it means. In order to do this, you must determine *whether the second element can be used as an adjective or a noun*. There are, then, two possibilities:

a) If the second element of the *iẓāfat* construct is an adjective, the construct is descriptive.

b) If the second element of the *iẓāfat* construct is a noun, the construct is possessive.

So, for instance, let us say we have the following:

\[ \text{gham-i 'ishq} \]

*Gham* means “sorrow,” and *'ishq* means “love.” The second element is *'ishq*, which is a noun, therefore the construct is probably possessive. Let us check by translating it as a possessive construct: it would be “the sorrow of love,” or “love’s sorrow,” which works, whereas the other possibility, “the love sorrow,” makes little sense.

Let us say we have:

\[ \text{cashm-i nam} \]

*Cashm* means “eye,” and *nam* means “wet.” The second element is *nam*, which is an adjective, therefore the construct is probably descriptive: “a wet eye.”

These rules work most of the time, though sometimes an adjective looks like a noun or a noun like an adjective. In fact, sometimes we have words in Urdu that can act as both nouns and adjectives. These situations are tricky, but can usually be resolved by the context.