

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 *choṭī 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 *izāfats* wherever they appear.

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

حال

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

When it comes to pronouncing *izāfats*, 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

hamza (on its chair) + *baṛī ye*:

صدائے بلند *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 *wā'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

hamza (on its chair) + *baṛī ye*:

bāzū-i qātil بازوئے قاتل

3. After word final -a(h)

In the case of silent word-final *choṭī 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 *choṭī he*.

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

پاجامہء

Remember that this does not apply to words in which the final *choṭī 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:

وجہ

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:

garm āh گرم آہ

1 These are both Persian words.

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

āh-i garm آہِ گرم

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

noun + izāfat + adjective

Another example: *mughal* means “Moghul” (surprise, surprise), and *a‘zam* means “greatest.” To say “greatest Moghul” using the *izāfat*, we would say:

mughal-i a‘zam مغلِ اعظم

2. Possessive use

In many other cases, the *izāfat* is used to express the idea the word *preceding* the *izāfat* 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

dil kā gham دل کا غم

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

gham-i dil غمِ دل

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

possessed noun + izāfat + possessing noun

3. How to tell how the *izāfat* is being used

When you are faced with an *izāfat* 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 *izāfat* construct is an adjective, the construct is descriptive.
- b) If the second element of the *izāfat* construct is a noun, the construct is possessive.

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

gham-i 'ishq غم عشق

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:

cashm-i nam چشم نم

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.