The title of the book clearly discloses its purpose: an application to Arabic prepositions of the grammaticalization theory (GT), as pioneered by Meillet and Kuryłowicz and recently championed by Lehmann, Traugott, to cite but a few. Far from merely being an academic exercise in reformulating well-known data (i.e., prepositions) in the light of a new theory, however, the book exploits the notion of grammaticalization to massively expand the prepositional repertoire of Arabic: in addition to (1) traditional prepositions (or Ps: $fi$), such an analysis is meant to incorporate (2) zarfs (e.g. $fawaqa$), (3) compound-like Ps (or PN-units, N for noun: $bi-fadli$) (4) complex prepositional phrases (or PNP-units: ‘$âlâ al-râgmi$ min’).

GT justifies the unified analysis of (1-4) based on an enhanced version of Kuryłowicz’s/Lehmann’s Unidirectionality Principle, summarized here as follows: diachronically, less grammaticalized items become more grammaticalized via gradual change (‘grammaticalizationcline’), thus passing through intermediate stages, motivated in terms of cognitive mechanisms such as metonymy, metaphor, reanalysis (p. 38, 52-68). These stages are defined in the literature according to some qualitative criteria, among them syntagmatic condensation, whereby the more shortened a form, the higher its grammaticalization. In particular, this qualitative criterion also implies a quantitative one — the more shortened a grammaticalized item, the higher its frequency, the so-called Zipf’s Law (p. 69-74). In this interpretive scenario, a traditional $P$ like $fi$ (1), because of its extremely reduced form, turns out to be just the tip of the iceberg of a diachronic process having $fi$ as endpoint, the $N$ $fâmâ $‘mouth’ as starting point and the types (4,3,2), in this order, as intermediate stages — now lost to us (p. 169 ff.). That is, GT interprets the intermediate types (4,3,2) as belonging to the prepositional repertoire of Arabic because they are, in evolutionary terms, the missing links between the nominal etymon of a $P$ and the $P$ itself. According to this theory, the intermediate types in question are still attested in some idiomatic forms etymologically connected to the $N$ $râgmun$ ‘dust’ (p. 89): the PNP-unit ‘$âlâ al-râgmi$ min’ (4) is regarded as a direct descendant of $râgmun$ and as older and less grammaticalized than the PN-unit $bî-râgmi$ (3), itself older and less grammaticalized than the $zarf$-form $râgma$ (3).
the form bi-hāgātin ilā ‘in need of’, whose plural is ungrammatical (*bi-hāgātin ilā: p. 77), is not nominal, being better seen as a complex prepositional phrase, and so too is the (head of) the form bi-al-nisbati ilā, due to its inability to be modified (*bi-al-nisbati al-kabirati ilā: p. 78). In this light, the terms ‘complex prepositional phrase’ and ‘compound-like P’ are more appropriate than ‘PNP-unit’ and ‘PN-unit’ to describe the types (4,3). After re-conceptualizing the types (4,3) as P(-like) forms, the author studies their textual frequency, which reveals that the recency of many of their manifestations, albeit unexpected under GT due to their low condensation (see above), straightforwardly follows from their being arisen through language contact with French, English, etc. during Nahḍah (what grammaticalizationists call ‘replica grammaticalization’). Chapters Five and Six show that the notions of zarf, ḥarf posited by Arab Grammarians to describe the types (2,1) in synchrony share core-functions corresponding to those performed by the P in Western traditional grammar, with the consequence that the dichotomy zarf-ḥarf lacks ontological status on synchronic level. Pertinent to proving this proposal is, apart from the N-government ability of both (2,1), their shared ability to form complex polysemic networks. Rather, the two types differ on diachronic level as to their advancement in grammaticalization, as tested against their N-government ability. Zarf, in fact, exhibits the property at issue only in part, as its adverbial function shows (p. 165), which qualifies it as an incipient P. By contrast, the N-government ability of ḥarf is absorbed by the verb in phrasal verbs like ‘axaḏa fī ḥattā ‘begin’, which qualifies it as a decaying P (technically ‘adprep’: p. 180-2). Chapter Seven has the opposite aim: ḥarf is divided into two diachronically distinct categories, with one category made up of the forms li-, bi- and the other of all the remaining ḥarfs. What sets li-, bi- apart from the other ḥarfs is their obligatory mono-consonantal and prefixal status as well as their utterly rich polysemy, so extended to be subsumed under a very abstract semantic nucleus, whose intrinsic abstractness may also result in decategorization. A telling example is on p. 251 the shift ġāb bi- ‘come with’ > ġāb bi- ‘bring’ > ġāb ‘id’, where the erstwhile P bi(i) turns into a transitivizing particle, then a phoneme (‘phonogenesis’). In this respect it is odd that the author, while recognizing on p. 236 the phonogenesis undergone by li- in the word māl ‘wealth’, conditions (< mā li-), fails to mention its transitivizing function, the so-called lām al-ta’diyāh.

Chapters Eight and Nine are the third and last conceptual part of the book, whose avowed object is to further expand the prepositional repertoire of Arabic by incorporating subordinators, on the ground that the latter are no more than Ps widening their scope: Ps taking as complement a clause instead of N. In Chapter Seven this idea, clumsily anticipated in Chapter Two (p. 70-1) through the theoretical construct of ‘c-command’, obscure to non-generativists, is clarified at length and reformulated in pragmatic terms. The Gricean notion of implicature and its developments by Levinson are invoked to explain scope widening (= Ps becoming a subordinator) as a consequence of the fact that the speaker confronted with a minimal form (in this case, a syntactically ‘condensed’ P) tends to reconstruct its meaning by amplifying it, i.e. by implying ‘the richest temporal, causal, and referential connections… consistent with what is taken for granted’ (p. 280). Chapter Eight returns to GT, discussing that the speaker’s scope widening/informational amplification of Ps proceeds along a grammaticalization cline, having (A) the causal clause as starting point, (B) the conditional clause as intermediate stage, (C) the concessive clause as endpoint. The graduality of this evolutionary path is captured by compositional considerations: (B) is (A) plus logical and linear inversion (p. 315), (C) is (B) plus negation (p. 329). The chapter also contains some case studies in scope widening of Arabic Ps, among which hattā ‘even (if)’. In particular, GT fruitfully exploits the grammaticalization cline (A-C) to straightforwardly account for the relative stability of such a form in its function of concessive subordinator from CA to present-day varieties: the concessivity encoded in hattā makes it the endpoint of the cline in question, which prevents its evolution into another subordinator (p. 326-7).

In sum, the greatest contribution of this book is that it has founded a structuralist (‘systemic’ in Esseesy’s own words) treatment of Arabic P(-like) forms, which clearly departs from the ‘atomistic’ approach worked out by the Arabic linguistic tradition and inherited by modern scholars (cp. p. 17). That being said, the author seems to regard this paradigm shift as too neat. On p. 15 he interprets Arab Grammarians’ remark that Ps ‘lā tatagyayaru’ as evidence that they statically described Ps as semantically unchanging. But the just cited remark is more likely to be morpho-syntactic (no variation in the stem-final vowel of prototypical Ps), since tagyār in their universe of discourse about parts of speech seemingly referred to ‘rāb‘ rather than to semantics. Similar misunderstanding or ignoring of primary sources also runs the risk of hiding some counterexamples to a GT of Arabic P(-like) forms. By way of illustration, on p. 2, 48, 56 Esseesy argues that the P ‘alā originates from a N in line with the grammaticalization cline (4-1), but on p. 20 he is forced to admit that Arab Grammarians assigned
it a different – verbal – etymon. Likewise, on p. 46, he takes the lexical source for the P hattā to be the plural N hattā based on Lisān al-ʿArab, but the same source also reads that the nominal etymon of hattā is questioned by al-Azharī in view of its inability to imālize (law kānat faʿlā mina al-hatti kānati al-imālatu ḣaʾīzatan and cp. also J. Barth, Die Pronominalbildung in den Semitischen Sprachen, Leipzig, 1913, p. 83 for a non-nominal etymology of hattā).

That is regrettable, because Esseesy’s book is a landmark in the development of a truly linguistic – qua structuralist – approach to Arabic P(-like) forms. One can appreciate the relevance of this idea for our understanding of Arabic and more generally Semitic languages by simply looking at one of the most important achievements of Semitic linguistic thought – alphabet. After all, underlying to the alphabetic letters and to the phenomenon of phonogenesis that the author finds to be at work in the prepositional evolutionary path is one and the same process: the shift from N to phoneme (/grapheme).

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