Esseesy Mohssen,
*Grammaticalization of Arabic Prepositions and Subordinators. A Corpus-based Study*.

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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: *fī*), such an analysis is meant to incorporate (2) *ẓarf*s (e.g. *fawqa*), (3) compound-like Ps (or PN-units, N for noun: *bi-faḍli*) (4) complex prepositional phrases (or PNP-units: *ʿalā al-raġmi 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 ('grammaticalization cline'), 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 *fī* (1), because of its extremely reduced form, turns out to be just the tip of the iceberg of a diachronic process having *fī* as endpoint, the N *fam/fū* '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 *raġmun* 'dust' (p. 89): the PNP-unit *ʿalā al-raġmi min* (4) is regarded as a direct descendant of *raġmun* and as older and less grammaticalized than the PN-unit *bi-raġmi* (3), itself older and less grammaticalized than the *ẓarf*-form *raġma* (3).

The just mentioned topics (GT as theoretical background and its application to Arabic prepositional repertoire as working hypothesis) are introduced in Chapter One and Two, along with two methodological tools that help the author in his aim to massively expand the empirical data-base of Arabic P(-like) types – sociolinguistic and quantitative analysis. The former tool enables Esseesy to rely upon the entire diglossic continuum, whose linguistic material includes not only Classical (CA) and modern Colloquial Arabic, but also hybrid forms - see e.g. the discussion on the alternation *'amāma-quddāma-'uddām* on p. 151-3. Based on the latter tool, Esseesy can avail himself of a diachronic corpus of about 146,000,000 words ranging from pre-Islamic times to present (the Brigham Young University Arabic Corpus). A word of caution, however, is needed here. The author is cognizant that a source of this corpus, *The Thousand and One Nights*, is quite uncertain as to its chronological place in the linguistic history of Arabic, as shown by his dating of it to '9th-18th century?' (*sic*) on p. 32, but this notwithstanding, on p. 146 he classifies the PN-unit *min taḥtu/i* found in the Koran and *The Thousand and One Nights* as a CA, and therefore old form. The main obstacle with this interpretation of the form *min taḥtu/i* seems to lie in its *ad hoc* character. While its (alleged) old nature fits into GT, where the PN-unit is a relatively archaic diachronic type because of low syntagmatic condensation (see above), its very occurrence in *The Thousand and One Nights* leaves open the possibility that it belongs to a more recent language stage, other than CA. Another problem with the author's dealing with the Arabic data is sometimes the inaccuracy of his transcription, involving the morpho-syntactic level as well (e.g. *ltimās-an* 'a petition' parsed as *l-timās-an* on p. 98, *min 'asfali min* instead of *min 'asfala min* on p. 139, *lākin al-sababu al-ḥaqīqiyyi* instead of *lākinna al-sababa al-ḥaqīqiyya* on p. 303).

Chapters Three to Seven are the second conceptual part of the book, meant to empirically ground the hypothesis laid out in the previous chapters that the types (4,3,2) qualify as P(-like) forms via GT. The chapters basically offer several case studies concerning this new prepositional typology, arranged in order of increasing grammaticalization. In greater detail, Chapters Three and Four establish respectively what is a PNP-unit (4) and NP-unit (3) in Arabic by means of a set of diagnostic criteria adapted from English and defined *in absentia*: somewhat simplifying, if a given form exhibits qualities such as pluralization, modification etc. that metaphorically 'trap' it into nounhood, then it is a N, otherwise it is not. For instance, in the type (4), the (head of)


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the form *bi-ḥāǧatin ilā* 'in need of', whose plural is ungrammatical (**bi-ḥāǧātin 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-kabīrati 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 *ẓarf, 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 *ẓarf-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 polysemy networks. Rather, the two types differ on *diachronic* level as to their advancement in grammaticalization, as tested against their N-government ability. *Ẓarf*, 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 *'axaḍa fī* '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 *ḥarf*s. What sets *li-*, *bi-* apart from the other *ḥarf*s 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 decategorialization. A telling example is on p. 251 the shift *ǧā'a bi-* 'come with' > *ǧā'a bi-* 'bring' > *ǧāb* 'id.', where the erstwhile P *b(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 phonogesis undergone by *li-* in the word *māl* 'wealth, condition'(< *mā li-*), fails to mention its transitivizing function, the so-called *lām al-taʿdiyah*.

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 (= P's becoming a subordinator) as a consequence of the fact that the speaker confronted with a minimal form (in this case, a syntagmatically '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 *ḥattā* '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 *ḥattà* 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 tataġayyaru*' 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 *taġyīr* in their universe of discourse about parts of speech seemingly referred to *'iʿrāb* 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 *ʿalā* 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



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it a different – verbal – etymon. Likewise, on p. 46, he takes the lexical source for the P *ḥattā* to be the plural N *ḥattā* based on *Lisān al-ʿArab*, but the same source also reads that the nominal etymon of *ḥattà* is questioned by al-Azharī in view of its inability to imalize (*law kānat faʿlā mina al-ḥatti kānati al-imālatu ǧā'izatan* and cp. also J. Barth, *Die Pronominalbildung in den Semitischen Sprachen*, Leipzig, 1913, p. 83 for a non-nominal etymology of *ḥattā*).

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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