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Is *ḥalfa* a Preposition? On a Subclass of the *zarf* in Arabic Grammatical Tradition*

Abstract

This article discusses the semantic distinction, drawn in medieval Arabic grammatical tradition, between prepositions belonging to the part of speech ‘particle’, e.g. *fī*, and a group of nouns (*zurūf*) displaying a certain similarity to such prepositions, e.g. *ḥalfa*. It is demonstrated that their categorization by Arab grammarians as nouns should not be regarded as merely formal, as portrayed by some modern scholars, but also has semantic aspects, reflected in their referential meaning. It is the latter point around which the present article revolves.

Keywords

Arabic grammatical tradition, preposition, locative, adverb, *zarf*.

1. Introduction

A group of Arabic words, including *ḥalfa* (“behind”), *amāma* (“in front of”), *taḥta* (“under”), *fawqa* (“above”) and others, has posed a classificatory challenge for modern scholars. Although these words appear to qualify *prima facie* as prepositions – thus the phrase *ḥalfa l-bayti* “behind the house” does not seem to differ essentially either in structure or in function from *fī l-bayti* “in the house” – they also display nominal features, particularly alternation of the final vowel, mostly between *-a* and *-i*, depending on whether the word in question follows a preposition, e.g. *ḥalfa* vs. *min ḥalfi*,¹ which indicates that this vowel is in fact a case-marker.

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¹ On the sense of *min* in such phrases, see fn. 42.

Wright (1896–1898 I, pp. 280–282) classifies these words as “prepositions”, but recognizes that they are “simply nouns of different forms in the accus. sing., determined by the following genitive ...” (ibid. I, p. 280). In a similar vein, Fischer (1972, p. 134) differentiates between “primäre Präpositionen” and “sekundäre Präpositionen”, which latter “haben die Form des Akk. im St. constr.”. Of special interest is Badawi, Carter and Gully’s (2004, p. 57) explanation:

Arabic has two categories of word which map on to the Western class of prepositions, though they have different origins and should not be equated. There are true prepositions ... and there are pure nouns with adverbial inflection and prepositional function ... Syntactically both behave identically, i.e. they form an annexation unit with their nouns, which accounts for the two types often being classed as undifferentiated ‘prepositions’.

In consequence, they distinguish between the two classes terminologically, by naming the latter “prepositionals”. Ryding (2005, pp. 366–367, 386)² differentiates between “non-derived prepositions”, which are “a relatively small number (ten) of ‘true’ prepositions” and “derived prepositions”, which are a “collection of locative expressions”, i.e. *zurūf* (on this term see the next section). She holds that the latter, which she terms “semi-prepositions”, “denote location in much the same way as prepositions”. The reasons why these are “not ‘true’ prepositions” are that “they are derived from trilateral lexical roots” and that “they can be preceded by a true preposition or even another semi-preposition”. She also mentions their *-a* case marker, “to indicate their adverbial function”, which may change.³

Reckendorf (1895–1898, p. 191), on the other hand, maintains that prepositions in Arabic (in general!) are “Substantive im Akk., die wie jedes Subst. den Gen. regiren”. He adds: “Die ursprünglich substantivische Natur der Praepos. äussert sich noch darin, dass sie den Gen. regiren, dass in der Doppelpraep. die zweite Praep. soweit möglich in den Gen. tritt, und dass von den Praep. Diminutiva bildbar sindViele Praep. kommen, wenn z. T. auch nur der Form nach, noch geradezu als Substantive vor”, e.g. *tahta*, *amāma* and *halfa*. “Einige wenige Praep. haben jede flexionsmässige und zugleich syntaktisch verständliche Form verloren”, e.g. *bi-*, *fī* and *li-* (ibid., p. 192). His following statement applies to the entire class of the prepositions (as also his discussion in the sequel):

Es ist ganz unanfechtbar, dass die arab. Praepositionen der Kategorie des Nomens entrückt sind, und wir die Berechtigung besitzen, auch in der arab. Grammatik

² See also Ryding 2014, pp. 121–122, 125.

³ See also Blachère and Gaudefroy-Demombynes 1952, pp. 207 ff.; Beeston 1970, p. 88; Procházka 2008.

von Praepositionen zu reden. Wenn ferner die Praepositionen durchweg nur den Gen. regiren, so ist doch auch bei diesem Zeichen der Nominalnatur ein Unterschied zwischen der praepositionalen Genitivkonstruktion und der rein nominalen: es wäre vergebliche Mühe, eine bestimmte Färbung des Genitivs nach Praepositionen ausfindig machen zu wollen, es gibt hier keinen Gen. partit., Gen. possess. u. s. w. mehr (ibid., p. 193).

Now, that words such as *ḥalfa* are classified in Arabic grammatical tradition as nouns has been long recognized, as has also the fact that formal considerations played an important role in this classification.⁴ But the question that prompts itself is whether it is the case that Arab grammarians were, so to speak, coerced by formal considerations to classify as nouns words which, for them, qualified semantically as prepositions, just like proper prepositions.

This is what Levin's (1987) article, dedicated to prepositions in Arabic grammatical tradition, implies. Levin claims that prepositions "are divided into two groups: some are conceived as particles (= *ḥurūf*) ... Other prepositions are conceived as nouns (= *ʾasmāʾ*) taking the accusative and belonging to the subcategory of the *ʾism* known as *al-zarf* or *al-zurūf* i.e. accusatives denoting place or time" (ibid., p. 342; on the term *zarf* see the next section). The distinction between these two groups, he maintains, "is based on morphological and syntactical considerations, and not on logical-semantic ones" (ibid., p. 351).

Levin (ibid., pp. 352–353) bases his first argument on a definition, popular among the Arab grammarians, of the particle (*ḥarf*)⁵ – the third part of speech, alongside the 'noun' (*ism*) and the verb (*fiʿl*)⁶ – as a word which designates meaning in something else (*mā dalla ʿalā māʿnan fī ḡayrihi*).⁷ For example, in the sentence *huwa fī l-qubbati* "he is in the tent" the preposition *fī* designates the sense of 'being located in' with respect to the noun *al-qubba*. The same, he says, holds good for e.g. *ḥalfa*. For example, in the sentence *dārī ḥalfa dārika* "my abode is behind your abode", "the sense of *xalfa* is pertinent to *dārika* just as the sense of *fī* is pertinent to *al-qubba* ..." (ibid., p. 353). Levin summarizes: "It is thus evident that, logically, the Arabic grammarians were not justified in contending that *fī* and other prepositions classified as *ḥurūf al-ḡarr* belong to

⁴ See e.g. Carter 1981, pp. 358 ff. and the following discussion.

⁵ Note that the term *ḥarf* did not always denote the part of speech 'particle'. For overviews of the different views regarding the early history of this term, see Talmon 1984, pp. 49 ff.; Versteegh 1995, pp. 68–70. See also Levin 2000; Talmon 2003, pp. 213 ff.

⁶ See e.g. Guillaume 1988; Bohas, Guillaume and Kouloughli 1990, pp. 50–51; Versteegh 1995, pp. 22 ff.

⁷ See Guillaume 1988; Versteegh 1995, p. 71. Note that this is not the characterization of this part of speech by Sībawayhi, whose conception in this regard has been the subject of a major debate (see the references in fn. 5). See also section 3.

a given part of speech, while *xalfa* and other prepositions classified as *zurūf* belong to another part of speech” (ibid.).

Levin’s account was criticized by Kouloughli (2007, pp. 160–161). After stating that, first, many words governing the genitive were not considered in Arabic grammatical tradition as prepositions, since they fulfilled certain conditions which made it possible to consider them as nouns, and, secondly, that independently of the criteria of this tradition, “quasi-prépositions” displayed certain distributional properties which differentiated them from proper preposition, i.e. being ‘modified’ by a preposition,⁸ he says (ibid., p. 161):

C’est la raison pour laquelle il faut rejeter la position de certains arabisants contemporains, comme Levin (1987) qui, sur la seule base de l’équivalence lexicale avec les prépositions des langues occidentales, élargit d’autorité la liste des prépositions de l’arabe, y incluant des circonstanciels de lieu à l’accusatif comme *ʿamāma* (devent) ou *ʿinda* (chez). La “catégorie” ainsi obtenu n’aurait plus aucune cohérence distributionnelle.

That is, the criticism remains in the formal domain, and nothing is said about the semantic difference between the two classes.

Another criticism of the Arab grammarians (as well as their successors) is leveled by Esseesy (2010). Following Badawi et al.’s terminology (see above), Esseesy dedicates the fourth chapter of his book to four members of a class which he terms “Simple Stem Prepositionals”: *fawqa*, *tahta*, *amāma* and *halfa*. He criticizes the distinction which Arab grammarians made between this class and “true prepositions” (which he discusses in the next two chapters, entitled “Simple Stem ‘Primary’ Prepositions”, e.g. *fī*, and “Bound-Stem Prepositional Forms”, e.g. *li-*), “based on morpho-semantic grounds” (ibid., p. 129).⁹ In the book’s summary he states:

Contrary to [the labeling of *fawqa* etc. as *zurūf*], owing to attested overlapping functionality with true prepositions, it has been argued in this investigation that no clear-cut categorical distinction should exist between them and other members of the preposition class. ... The conclusion drawn from analyzing the semantics of these forms is that the difference between *zurūf* and *hurūf al-jarr* should not be considered categorical, but rather gradational in the ability to fulfill prepositional functions in a given discourse context (ibid., pp. 343–344).

It should be emphasized that Esseesy’s study is basically a linguistic inquiry, with only marginal discussions of medieval Arabic grammatical thought.

⁸ Kouloughli also maintains that these words display the root/pattern structure, which belongs exclusively to nouns and verbs.

⁹ See also Esseesy 2010, pp. 8–9, 22–23, 165.

The present study intends to shed light on the *semantic* differentiation, according to Arab grammarians, between “proper prepositions”, belonging to the part of speech ‘particle’, such as *fī*, and “quasi-prepositions”, belonging to the part of speech ‘noun’, such as *ḥalfa*. It will be shown here that it is not the case that Arab grammarians regarded the latter as semantically prepositions but were compelled to classify them as nouns due to purely formal considerations. For concreteness’ sake, the following discussion will be restricted to six members of this class: *ḥalfa*, *warāʿa*, *amāma*, *quddāma*, *taḥta* and *fawqa*.

Section 2 presents the main thesis, that the classification of quasi-prepositions as (nominal) *ẓurūf* has not only a formal, but also a semantic facet, namely, their referential meaning. Sections 3 and 4 develop this notion further, the former by elaborating on the meanings these words carry, and the latter by discussing constructions in which quasi-prepositions occupy syntactic positions other than the *ẓarf*. Section 5 discusses briefly the semantic distinction between prepositional phrases, e.g. *fī l-bayti*, and cases of annexation whose *nomen regens* is a quasi-preposition, e.g. *ḥalfa l-bayti*. Before concluding, I digress to a short discussion of a pair of words, *ʿalā* and *ʿan*, which pose a yet more difficult challenge to the grammarians, whose discussions of these words prove to be of special interest to the issue at stake.

2. Quasi-Prepositions as *ẓurūf*

As mentioned above, quasi-prepositions are classified by Arab grammarians under the category of *ẓarf*. It will be shown in the present section that, in accordance with this categorization, they were construed as nouns *referring* to locations, that is to say, that they were conceptualized as dichotomously distinct from particles at the semantic level.

In general, *ẓarf* is identified with *mafʿūl fīhi*, a time/place adverbial.¹⁰ It is defined, or at least characterized, as a noun¹¹ designating time/place, in which something is ‘included’. Interesting in this respect is the lemma *ẓarf* in the early dictionary *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*¹² (VIII, p. 157): after explaining the literal

¹⁰ See e.g. Ibn al-Sarrāġ, *al-Uṣūl* I, p. 190; Ibn al-Anbārī, *Asrār*, p. 177; Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ, *al-Basīṭ*, p. 467; Ibn Hišām, *Šarḥ*, p. 230–231. See also Carter 1981, pp. 352–353; Owens 1988, pp. 131, 167; Versteegh 2008.

¹¹ In fact, grammarians apply the term *ẓarf* not only to nouns, but also to prepositional phrases, a practice which goes back to Sībawayhi (see e.g. *al-Kitāb* I, p. 207). Yet, they occasionally juxtapose *ẓurūf* and prepositional phrases, thus restricting the former to nouns (see e.g. Ibn al-Anbārī, *al-Inṣāf* I, p. 178). This issue, however, has no bearing on the present discussion, to which only nominal *ẓurūf* are of relevance.

¹² On this dictionary and the controversy around its authorship, see Talmon 1997; Schoeler 2000; Baalbaki 2014, pp. 282–292.

meaning of the word *zarf* as a receptacle,¹³ it states that *amāma* and *quddāma*, for example,¹⁴ are termed *zurūf*; what is significant here is that in the explanation of the accusative of *ḥalfā* in *ḥalfaka zaydun* “behind you is Zayd”, *ḥalfā* is characterized as a *zarf* and as a *mawḍiʿ* “place” of Zayd. That is, the quasi-preposition is conceived here, in contrast with proper prepositions, as *referring* to a place in which someone is located. In the same vein, Sībawayhi characterizes *zarf*, in the title of chapter 98 (*al-Kitāb* I, pp. 170 ff.), as a temporal/locative noun, in (the referent of) which something/someone is situated or something occurs;¹⁵ his first illustrations include quasi-prepositions, such as *huwa ḥalfaka* “he is behind you”.¹⁶ Later the verb *taḍammāna* “comprise” was used for this notion, also in the context of quasi-prepositions.¹⁷ From Ibn al-Sarrāḡ on, this relationship of inclusion was formalized by positing the preposition *fī* “in” at the underlying level of the noun functioning as *zarf*, to the extent that *zarf* came to be commonly defined as a locative/temporal noun comprising *fī* at the underlying level.¹⁸ What is striking is that quasi-prepositions are no exception; for instance, Ibn Yaʿīš (*Šarḥ* II, p. 45) states explicitly that the underlying levels of *šumtu l-yawma* “I fasted today” and of *ḡalastu ḥalfaka* “I sat behind you” are *šumtu fī l-yawmi* and *ḡalastu fī ḥalfika*, respectively.¹⁹ Thus, quasi-prepositions, being *zurūf*, refer to time/place in which something/someone is located or something occurs. Just as *al-yawma*, in *ḡalastu l-yawma*, is a noun functioning as a *zarf*, i.e. it refers to a time in (*fī*) which the *šawm* occurs, *ḥalfā* is a noun functioning as a *zarf*, *referring* to a place in (*fī*) which the *ḡulūs* occurs.

Underlying all this is the notion that every *ism* refers to a certain *musammā* or referent. As put by Diem (1974, p. 316),

ism bedeutet außergrammatikalisch “Name”. Diese Bedeutung bewahrt das Wort auch in der grammatischen Terminologie. ... Analog zu den Trägern

¹³ On the possible Greek source of this technical term, assumed on the ground of its literal meaning, see Versteegh 1977, pp. 8–9.

¹⁴ The term *ṣifa*, used in this text for the grammatical category in question, is (inaccurately) regarded as the ‘Kūfan’ equivalent of the ‘Baṣran’ term *zarf*. See Vidro and Kasher 2014, pp. 229–230, and the references therein.

¹⁵ The location to which the *zarf* refers can ‘comprise’ not only objects, but also actions. For post-Sībawayhian grammarians, it only ‘comprises’ actions, as they stipulate that every *zarf* is semantically and syntactically linked to a verb, either at the surface or the underlying level. On this theory, see Peled 2009, pp. 152–155 (and the references therein); Levin 2008, pp. 140–141.

¹⁶ See also Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb* I, pp. 177, 241.

¹⁷ See e.g. Ibn al-Sarrāḡ, *al-Uṣūl* I, p. 201; al-Baṭalyawsī, *al-Ḥulal*, p. 167; Ibn Yaʿīš, *Šarḥ* I, p. 89.

¹⁸ See Ibn al-Sarrāḡ, *al-Uṣūl* I, pp. 190, 293; Ibn al-Warrāq, *al-ʿIlal*, pp. 503 ff.; al-Baṭalyawsī, *al-Ḥulal*, p. 167; al-Ġurḡānī, *al-Muqtaṣid*, pp. 447, 632; Ibn al-Anbārī, *Asrār*, pp. 177–178; Ibn Yaʿīš, *Šarḥ* II, p. 41; Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ, *al-Basīṭ*, pp. 477, 484, 493, 508–509; Ibn Hišām, *Šarḥ*, p. 231. See also Carter 1981, pp. 352–353.

¹⁹ See also Ibn al-Warrāq, *ʿIlal*, p. 504; al-Ġurḡānī, *al-Muqtaṣid*, pp. 275, 632; Ibn al-Anbārī, *al-Inṣāf* I, p. 246; Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ, *al-Basīṭ*, p. 546.

der Eigennamen werden die Gegenstände der realen Welt als etwas objektiv Gegebenes aufgefaßt, wofür die Sprache einen “Namen” parat hat; die Wörter sind Namen für die Dinge. ... Der Gebrauch von *ism* als Terminus für Wörter, welche Konkreta bezeichnen, geht von der Nennfunktion des Wortes gegenüber dem zu Benennenden (*musammā*) aus. ...²⁰

Statements pointing at, or presupposing, the *ism-musammā* relationship are ubiquitous in Arabic grammatical writings; here I will restrict myself succinctly to two conspicuous loci where it manifests itself. First, the notion of reference occasionally features in definitions of the part of speech *ism*. al-Zağğāgī (*al-Īdāh*, p. 50) mentions reference to a *musammā* as one of its suggested definitions, albeit without any ascription; he himself deems it a description (*wasf*) of this part of speech, rather than its definition.²¹ Moreover, other definitions mentioned in this text, attributed to al-Mubarrad, Ibn Kaysān and Ibn al-Sarrāğ, also revolve, in one way or another, around this notion of reference, in the form of the ‘meanings’ which nouns signify (*ibid.*, pp. 48–51).²² Secondly, the link between *ism* and *musammā* is related to the term *ism* itself. We are told that according to the Başran view, *ism* is derived from *sumuww*, i.e. ‘*uluww* “being high”, “being above (something)”’, which, according to one explanation, reflects the relationship between the *ism* and the *musammā*; the Kūfans, on the other hand, are said to have derived *ism* from *wasm* (or *sima*), i.e. ‘*alāma* “mark, sign”, which also reflects, according to the explanation given, the relationship between *ism* and *musammā*.²³

To recapitulate, quasi-prepositions, being nouns, refer to their *musammās*: the referent of *ḥalfa*, for instance, is a place, where something/someone is situated or something occurs. But what kind of place do quasi-prepositions refer to? This will be our next issue.

3. The Meanings of the Quasi-Prepositions

Lexical definitions of quasi-prepositions are seldom found in grammatical writings; when they do, these lexemes are defined as clear-cut nouns. Thus Sibawayhi (*al-Kitāb* II, p. 338) defines *ḥalf* as the *mu’ahḥar* “rear part” of something, *amām* as its *muqaddam* “fore part” and *fawq* as its *a’lā* “upper

²⁰ See also Diem 1974, p. 318. Diem’s conclusion regarding adjectives and verbal nouns is outside of the scope of the present discussion.

²¹ See also Versteegh 1995, p. 51; Peled 1999, p. 84 n. 12.

²² See Versteegh 1995, pp. 56 ff. On the *ism-musammā* relationship in al-Zağğāgī’s *al-Īdāh*, see also pp. 43–44, 56–58, 100–101. For further discussions, see Versteegh 1995, pp. 37–38, 151.

²³ See, e.g., Ibn al-Anbārī, *al-Inṣāf* I, pp. 6, 8. See also Diem 1974, pp. 316–317; Versteegh 1995, p. 38.

part”.²⁴ Note that Sībawayhi does not distinguish here between the “part of-” sense and the sense of “an area located in such-and-such relationship to-”, a distinction which is highlighted in diachronic studies nowadays.²⁵ We shall come back to this lack of distinction in the next section.

What one does frequently encounter in the grammatical literature is a certain qualification of the quasi-prepositions. Ibn al-Anbārī (*Asrār*, p. 179), for instance, characterizes these words as *mubham* (lit. “vague”), explaining that the expression *ḥalfa zaydin* “behind Zayd” comprises everything opposite Zayd’s back, *ad infinitum*, whereas *amāma zaydin* comprises everything opposite his face, *ad infinitum*.²⁶ Thus the noun *ḥalf*, for example, refers to an uncircumscribed area, located behind the referent of its *nomen rectum* (e.g. Zayd in *ḥalfa zaydin*), just as the noun *yawm* refers to a certain time. When it functions as a *zarf*, it refers to a place in which something/someone is located or something occurs, e.g. *ḡalastu ḥalfa zaydin* “I sat behind Zayd”, where it refers to an uncircumscribed area behind Zayd, in (*fī*) which the sitting took place. This is, again, no different from e.g. *ḡalastu l-yawma* “I sat today”, where *al-yawma* refers to a time in (*fī*) which the sitting took place. In principle, this is also no different from *ḡalastu fī l-dāri* “I sat in the abode”: both *ḥalf* and *dār* refer to places in (*fī*) which the sitting took place, the only difference being that it is impermissible to say **ḡalastu l-dāra*, namely, without the preposition *fī*, as its omission is restricted to specific groups of place names, among which is the group of the *mubham* place nouns.²⁷ That is, if we compare the phrases *fī l-dāri* and *ḥalfa l-dāri*, what corresponds in the former to *ḥalfa* in the latter is not *fī*, but rather *al-dār*!

²⁴ See also Ibn al-Sarrāḡ, *al-Uṣūl* III, p. 178. In the neighbouring field, lexicography (*luḡa*), quasi-prepositions are defined either via a synonym or an antonym. For instance, Ibn Durayd defines *fawq* as the antonym of *taht* (*Ġamhara* III, p. 156) and *taht* as the antonym of *fawq* (ibid III, p. 186).

²⁵ For instance, Esseesy (2010, pp. 153 ff.) states that the source of *ḥalfa*, for example, is apparently the noun *al-ḥalfu* “the back”, a case of a widespread “semantic change where a concrete object such as a body part is exploited to express relations belonging to the relatively more abstract spatial domain” (see also ibid., pp. 41, 44–45, 51, 157–158). See also Beeston 1970, p. 88; Procházka 2008, p. 700.

²⁶ See also Ibn al-Sarrāḡ, *al-Uṣūl* I, p. 197; Ibn al-Warrāq, *al-ʿIlal*, p. 504; al-Ġurḡānī, *al-Muqtaṣid*, p. 642; Ibn al-Anbārī, *Asrār*, p. 203; *al-Inṣāf*, p. 263; Ibn Yaʿīš, *Šarḥ* II, pp. 43–44; Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ, *al-Basīṭ*, pp. 492, 495; Ibn Hišām, *Muḡnī*, pp. 637–638; *Šarḥ*, pp. 231 ff. See also Carter 1981, pp. 358–359; 2002; Owens 1988, pp. 131, 136; 1989, pp. 224 ff.; 1990, pp. 141 ff. (Owens’ findings should, however, be revised in light of the fact that, first, prepositional phrases were almost universally, and as early as Sībawayhi, classified under *zarf* [see fn. 11], and, secondly, that the terms *mubham* and *muḥtaṣṣ* were already in use, in this sense, by Sībawayhi [see *al-Kitāb* I, p. 11 and p. 174, respectively]); Versteegh 2008. Note that this sense of *mubham* does not tally with the abovementioned lexical definitions offered for these words.

²⁷ See Owens 1989, pp. 224 ff.

<i>ḡalastu ḥalfā l-dāri</i> (<i>ṣumtu yawma l-ḡumʿati</i>)	<i>ḡalastu fī ḥalfi l-dāri</i> (<i>ṣumtu fī yawmi l-ḡumʿati</i>)
* <i>ḡalastu l-dāra</i>	<i>ḡalastu fī l-dāri</i>

In the former paragraph the noun *ḥalf* is used without any case-marker. Although quasi-prepositions most frequently appear with final *-a*, this vowel is but a case marker, and thus does not constitute an integral part of the word.²⁸ In this respect also it is not different from *yawm*. Now, it is indeed easy to construct a sentence in which the noun *yawm* would not function as a *zarf*, for instance *yawmu l-ḡumʿati mubārakun* “Friday is blessed” (e.g. *Sībawayhi, al-Kitāb* I, p. 33); but is this also the case with *ḥalf*? That will be the topic of our next section. But before we tackle this issue, a final remark regarding Levin’s abovementioned argument is in order.

As mentioned above, Levin bases his first argument on the definition of ‘particle’ as a word which designates meaning in something else (*mā dalla ʿalā maʿnan fī ḡayrihi*). This definition’s popularity notwithstanding, it was not espoused by all grammarians; some of them, such as al-Baṭalyawsī (*al-Ḥulal*, pp. 74 ff.), criticize it on the ground that there are also nouns which designate meaning in something else, e.g. interrogatives (such as *ayna* “where”).²⁹ Other grammarians mention, and refute, this line of criticism, while also discussing various such apparent counter-examples.³⁰ One can draw a strong *argumentum ex silentio* from the fact that the class of quasi-prepositions is not adduced as (apparent) counter-evidence for the abovementioned definition of the part of speech ‘particle’: quasi-prepositions were not regarded as designating meaning in something else.

4. Quasi-Prepositions in non-*zarf* Positions

Quasi-prepositions are not restricted to the syntactic position of *zarf*, as grammarians often adduce sentences where quasi-prepositions function as subjects, predicates, etc.³¹

²⁸ Esseesy (2010, p. 112) refers to this vowel as an “invariable *-a* inflection” (see also *ibid.*, p. 74).

²⁹ This text is discussed in Versteegh 1995, p. 71.

³⁰ See al-Fārisī, *al-Masāʿil*, pp. 209–210; Ibn Yaʿīš, *Šarḥ* VIII, pp. 2–4; al-Astarābādī, *Šarḥ* I, pp. 37–38, 40–41; Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ, *al-Basīṭ*, pp. 169–170.

³¹ Needless to say, the term “quasi-prepositions” is used here in reference to the lexemes, irrespective of the syntactic position they occupy.

See also Owens 1988, p. 132; 1990, pp. 148–149. This property of lacking restrictions on distribution is referred to by Arab grammarians as *taṣarruf* or *tamakkun*, translated by Carter (2004, p. 106) as “free movement” and “the quality of being firmly established” (in the noun category), respectively. For an overview of previous studies, see Talmon 2003, pp. 287–288, and see also Carter 1981, pp. 365, 367; Versteegh 1990, p. 284; Danecki 2009. For example, Ibn Yaʿīš (*Šarḥ* II, p. 41–43)

An oft-cited *šāhid* for quasi-prepositions in non-*zarf* position is the following poetic verse (from Labīd's *muʿallaqa*):³²

*fa-ğadat*³³ *kilā l-farğayni taḥsibu annahu * mawlā l-maḥāfati ḥalfuhā wa-amāmuḥā*

“So she (sc. the cow) went forth, regarding both places of fear, the area behind her and the area in front of her, suitable for fear.”³⁴

Ibn Yaʿīš (Šarḥ II, p. 44) illustrates the non-*zarf* usage of these words with the pair of sentences *amāmuka faḍāʿun* and *ḥalfuka wāsiʿun* “the area in front of you / behind you is spacious”. An interesting case is the distinction al-Zağğāgī (Hurūf, pp. 26–27)³⁵ draws between the *zarf*- and the non-*zarf*-usage³⁶ of the words *taḥt*, *fawq*, *ḥalf* and *amām*. In *taḥtuka riğlāka* “your bottom part is your two legs”, *taḥt* takes the nominative, since the *riğl* is the same as the *taḥt*, i.e. they co-refer, but in *taḥtaka bisāṭun* “under you there is a carpet”, *taḥt* is a *zarf*. The same goes for *fawquka raʿsuka* “your upper part is your head”, *ḥalfuka*

mentions, beside *zurūf* of time not restricted to the position of *zarf*, e.g. *yawm*, and labelled *mutamakkin*, a group of *zurūf* which are restricted to this position, and are said to lack *tamakkun* and to be not-*mutašarrif*, e.g. *ḍāta marratin* “once”. As for *zurūf* of place, Ibn Yaʿīš (ibid. II, 44) also states that beside those which are *mutašarrif*, e.g. *ḥalf*, *quddām*, *fawq* and *taḥt*, some are not-*mutašarrif*, such as *ʿind*, which can only function as a *zarf* or as an object of *min* (due to the *tašarruf* of *min*!). See also ibid. II, p. 46; VII, p. 73. Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ (*al-Basīṭ*, p. 482) maintains that *tašarruf* is the basic state of the *zurūf*, and hence a *zarf* which lacks it needs a special explanation. Elsewhere (ibid., pp. 501–504, 881–882) he ascribes to al-Ġarmī the view that *amām* and *ḥalf* lack *tašarruf*, that is, they can only take the accusative (as *zarf*) or the genitive as an object of *min*. According to him, the nominative in the verse mentioned below is a case of poetic license. However, the majority of grammarians, according to Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ, disagree. Interestingly, he states that he is unaware of any dispute over the lack of *tašarruf* of *taḥt* and *fawq*: they are said to be restricted to the two abovementioned syntactic positions. The restriction to these two positions also applies, for him, to *warāʿ* and *quddām* (ibid., p. 505). See also Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb* I, p. 250; Ibn al-Sarrāğ, *al-Uṣūl* I, pp. 197, 199.

³² See Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb* I, p. 172; al-Ġurğānī, *al-Muqtaṣid*, p. 653; Ibn Yaʿīš, Šarḥ II, pp. 44, 129; Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ, *al-Basīṭ*, pp. 502, 882; Ibn Hišām, Šarḥ, pp. 161–162. See also *al-ʿAyn* VIII, p. 429.

³³ Or: *fa-ʿadat*, or: *qaʿadat*.

³⁴ The (intentionally highly literal) translation offered here is based on commentaries which were in circulation in the grammatical as well as the lexicographical literature, but it is certainly not the only possible rendition. For one thing, whereas al-Ġurğānī (*al-Muqtaṣid*, p. 653), Ibn Yaʿīš (Šarḥ II, p. 44) and Ibn Hišām (Šarḥ, pp. 161–162) parse *ḥalfuhā wa-amāmuḥā* as *badal* of *kilā l-farğayni* (see also *al-ʿAyn* VIII, p. 429), according to Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ (*al-Basīṭ*, p. 502) it is a *badal* of *mawlā l-maḥāfati*.

³⁵ Later works dedicated to particles, which frequently also comprise nouns and verbs displaying similarity with particles (see Baalbaki 2014, pp. 214 ff.), do not include entries for quasi-prepositions, as far as I know.

³⁶ This usage is referred to by al-Zağğāgī, as well as by Arab grammarians in general, as *ism*, yet it should not be inferred that the *zarf* is excluded from the part of speech ‘noun’. For discussion of this usage of the term *ism*, see Kasher 2009.

ẓahrūka “your rear part is your back”³⁷ and *amāmūka ṣadrūka* “your front part is your chest”. Similarly to the lexical definitions offered for quasi-prepositions (see the previous section), al-Zaḡḡāḡī does not differentiate between the “part of-” sense and the more abstract meaning of “area located in such-and-such relationship to-”; it is also questionable whether the *mubham*-property applies to the former.³⁸

An example of a quasi-preposition in the position of predicate taking the nominative is furnished by al-Ġurḡānī (*al-Muqtaṣid*, p. 656): *mawḍi‘u ḡulūsi amāmūka* “my sitting place is the area in front of you”.³⁹

Nevertheless, Sībawayhi (*al-Kitāb* I, p. 173) does point out a difference between *ḥalf*, *amām* and *taḥt*, on the one hand, and *ẓurūf* such as *nāḥiya* “side” on the other: the former are less frequently used as non-*ẓarfs*.⁴⁰ Of major importance is the fact that for him the difference boils down to frequency rather than to distinction in essence. It is also of interest that Sībawayhi explicates that they are used as non-*ẓarfs* both in speech (*kalām*, i.e. Bedouins’ speech) and in poetry.⁴¹

It is very easy to grasp the *referential* meanings of quasi-prepositions in such sentences.⁴² Needless to say, there is no indication in the grammatical

³⁷ See also al-Mubarrad, *al-Muqtaḍab* I, p. 102.

³⁸ See also *al-ʿAyn* V, p. 224; VIII, p. 429. One of Ibn Hišām’s (*Šarḥ*, pp. 159–164) illustrations for a *ẓarf* becoming the subject of a passive verb (i.e. *nāʿib al-fāʿil*) is *ḡulisa amāmūka* “a sitting took place in front of you”. This translation does not reflect the syntactic structure: according to (at least) most grammarians, this is one of the cases where the *ẓarf* behaves syntactically as *maffūl bihi* (direct object), thus engendering a discrepancy between form and meaning (this discrepancy being termed *ittisāʿ*, *saʿat al-kalām* and other related terms). See also Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb* I, p. 92. Another case of such an *ittisāʿ* obtains in constructions where the *ẓarf* becomes a *nomen rectum* (see *ibid.* I, p. 75 for an illustration with *ḥalf*). See also Versteegh 1990; 2008; Owens 1988, pp. 182–183; 1990, pp. 111 ff.

³⁹ See also Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb* I, p. 175 (the co-reference between the subject and the predicate in the sentences discussed there, e.g. *ʿabdu llāhi ḥalfūka*, seems to be figurative; see also Ibn al-Sarrāḡ, *al-Uṣūl* I, p. 202); al-Ġurḡānī, *al-Muqtaṣid*, p. 652.

⁴⁰ See also Ibn al-Sarrāḡ, *al-Uṣūl* I, p. 203, who maintains that it is better not to convert *ḥalf*, *amām* etc. to *maffūls* (see fn. 38) and not to put them in the nominative (as subjects of passive verbs), due to their “closeness to *ibhām*”.

⁴¹ See also Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb* I, p. 175.

⁴² The most frequent non-*ẓarf* position of quasi-prepositions is the object of *min*, but the referential meaning of the quasi-prepositions is less perspicuous in this position. Wright (1896–1898 II, pp. 188 ff.) speaks, in this case, of “compound prepositions”. For instance (*ibid.* II, p. 190), he translates *min warāʿi ḡudurin* as “from behind walls”, and *innahu ḡālisun min warāʿi l-sitārati yašrabu* as “he is sitting behind the curtain drinking”; in the latter case, *min* is said to be partitive, a sense which he explains earlier, regarding *min bayni*: “... in a part of the space between ...” (*ibid.* II, p. 188; see also Fischer 1972, p. 141). See also Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb* I, p. 176, where *anta min ḥalfi* is said to carry the same meaning as *anta ḥalfi*. See also Reckendorf 1895–1898, pp. 256–258; 1977, pp. 221–223.

literature of any variation in the lexical meaning between these nouns in their usage as *zurūf* vs. in the other usages, that is, the same referential meaning also applies to the former: the referent of *ḥalfVka* is exactly the same in the sentences *ḥalfuka wāsi'un* and *zaydun ḥalfaka*.

Note that one of Levin's (1987, pp. 353–354) arguments is based on a definition of particles (which differs from the abovementioned definition) as words which can function neither as subjects nor as predicates,⁴³ and therefore **ilā munṭaliqun* is ungrammatical. Levin claims that this definition also applies to the quasi-prepositions, because “it is impossible to say, for example, *xalfa munṭaliqun* – lit. ‘behind is going away’ nor is it possible to say *‘amrun xalfa* – lit. ‘Amr is [the place] behind’” (ibid., p. 354). Without going here into a detailed discussion of this argument, I shall restrict myself to two remarks regarding the first illustration, **ḥalfa munṭaliqun*:

First, the syntactic definition of the part of speech ‘noun’ as a category that can function as a subject (which is the flip side of the coin of the definition of ‘particle’ at stake) was indeed criticized by some grammarians,⁴⁴ since it excludes nouns such as *ayna* “where”. At best, Levin's argument would corroborate this criticism.

Secondly, and more importantly, the impermissibility of **ḥalfa munṭaliqun* does not stem from the fact that *ḥalf* occupies this position, but rather, first, from the fact that it contains the form *ḥalfa*, which is non-nunated although it is not annexed,⁴⁵ and, secondly, from the fact that the noun assuming the nominal subject (*mubtada'*) position takes the accusative, instead of the nominative: the final vowel *-a* of *ḥalfa* is, as demonstrated above, not fixed, but depends on the position this word occupies; hence, in accordance with the fact that the nominal subject position dictates the nominative, sentences in which the subject is *ḥalfuka* are indeed grammatical, as shown in this section.

⁴³ On this definition, see also Guillaume 1988, pp. 33–34.

⁴⁴ See al-Zağğāgī, *al-Īdāh*, pp. 49–50 (see Versteegh 1995, pp. 50–51; see also ibid., pp. 67–68); al-Ġurğānī, *al-Muqtaṣid* I, p. 70. See also Owens 1989.

⁴⁵ At least some quasi-prepositions are not restricted, according to several grammarians, to annexation, even when functioning as *zurūf*. For instance, Sibawayhi (*al-Kitāb* I, p. 43) mentions *ḡalastu amāman* and *ḥalfan* as grammatical sentences. Moreover, Ibn Ya'īš (*Šarḥ* II, p. 126) interprets al-Zamaḥṣarī's classification of quasi-prepositions as *lāzimat al-iḏāfa* as *scarcely* used as not-annexed. See also his discussion (ibid. II, p. 127), where different opinions regarding the parsing of *ḥalfan* are attributed to the Baṣrans and the Kūfans. See also ibid. IV, p. 90. Note, moreover, that the class of nouns which are obligatorily annexed (or, at least, are characteristically annexed) is not restricted to the quasi-prepositions (see, e.g., ibid. II, pp. 129 ff.). See also Carter 1981, p. 359. Here I will not go into the issue of the so-called *ḡāyāt*, e.g. *ba'du* “afterwards” (on which see e.g. ibid., p. 367).

5. Prepositional Phrase vs. Annexation

Since quasi-prepositions are nouns, the syntactic relationship they engage in with the following noun in the genitive is of noun-noun annexation, and thus the semantics of this syntactic relationship applies to them as well.⁴⁶ This idea is put forward explicitly by al-Ġurġānī, for instance. For him, the *nomen regens* assigns the genitive by dint of the sense of a preposition, viz. *li-* or *min*,⁴⁷ since only verbs and particles are basically operators, but not pure nouns (that is, to the exclusion of participles etc.) (*al-Muqtaṣid*, pp. 870–871).⁴⁸ Quasi-prepositions are no exception, as these are also annexed, for him, in the sense of *li-* (*ibid.*, p. 879–880).⁴⁹

Also of interest is Ibn Hišām's (*Muġnī*, p. 739) condemnation of those who parse sentences such as *ġalastu amāma zaydin* "I sat in front of Zayd" as if *zayd* takes the genitive by dint of the *ẓarf* (*maḥfūd bi-l-ẓarf*), whereas its correct parsing is as taking the genitive by dint of the annexation (*maḥfūd bi-l-iḍāfa*), for the identity of the *nomen regens* as a *ẓarf* is irrelevant as far as the assignment of the genitive is concerned.

Excursus: *ʿalā* and *ʿan*

A small group of words, to which *ʿalā* and *ʿan* belong, pose an interesting theoretical challenge, as even they may occur in what is considered a clear-cut nominal position, i.e. the object of *min*; in this position, they were, as expected, classified as nouns, but otherwise most grammarians kept classifying them as particles, i.e. as proper prepositions.⁵⁰

Grammarians frequently state that in the former case, they carry a meaning identical to that of some other noun. For example, Ibn al-Anbārī (*Asrār*, pp. 254–257) states that when *ʿalā* is a noun, it has the meaning of *fawq*; thus *min ʿalā* means "from above (something)", i.e. from the area located above (something). In the same vein, when *ʿan* is a noun, it carries the meaning of

⁴⁶ Owens (1990, p. 147) says, in his discussion of the 'Kūfan' term *ṣifa* (see fn. 14), which comprises both prepositions and quasi-prepositions (as well as prepositional phrases): "Related to this, another reason, which however, was never explicitly mentioned, perhaps pertains to the fact that many (of Sibawayh's) locatives regularly govern an i-inf [sc. genitive] complement in the same way prepositions do." See also the quotation from Reckendorf in section 1.

⁴⁷ Annexation in the sense of *min* is discussed elsewhere (al-Ġurġānī, *al-Muqtaṣid*, pp. 881–882).

⁴⁸ See also Owens 1990, pp. 14–17; Peled 1994, p. 146; Ryding 2007; Kouloughli 2007, p. 73.

⁴⁹ See also Ibn al-Sarrāġ, *al-Uṣūl* II, p. 5.

⁵⁰ This account seems to represent what became the common view among later grammarians regarding this pair of words. Other views are also attested, but a detailed discussion of this issue would lead us too far afield. See Levin 1987, pp. 348, 356–357; Baalbaki 1995, p. 4; Kasher 2006, pp. 154–173; Essevy 2010, pp. 195–196.

*nāhiya*⁵¹ “side”, and *min* ‘*an* means “from the side of (something)”⁵². Synonymy, however, can also be conceptualized between a particle and a noun, without the former becoming a noun.⁵³ What is of interest in the statements of grammarians discussed here is the explanations they furnish for the cases of synonymy:

Ibn Yaʿīš (*Šarḥ* VIII, p. 39) explains the semantic difference between ‘*alā* as a particle and as a noun: whereas in the former case it designates meaning in something else, and not in itself, in the latter it designates meaning in itself, just like *fawq*. The same applies to ‘*an*: when it is a noun, it designates meaning in itself, by referring to a place (ibid., VIII, p. 41). Even more striking is Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿs (*al-Basīṭ*, pp. 848–850) argument against the view that ‘*alā* is always a noun, which, just like ‘*ind*, is restricted to two positions, i.e. as a *zarf* or as the object of *min*. Thus, according to this opinion, *ǧalastu ‘alayka* “I sat on (possibly: above) you” has the same status as *ǧalastu fawqaka*. Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ, on the other hand, draws a distinction between the two: in *ǧalasu ‘alayka* the verb requires the nouns, but it does so by means of a preposition, which links it to it;⁵⁴ on the other hand, *ǧalastu fawqaka* means that the sitting occurred in a location which is related to the addressee (the referent of *-ka*) in a certain way. *Fawq* designates a place, required by the verb, and does not link the verb to the genitive noun.⁵⁵

Above we saw the explicit differentiation put forward by al-Ġurġānī between the semantics of prepositional phrase and that of annexation of a quasi-preposition. Interestingly, Ibn al-Anbārī (*Asrār*, pp. 254–257) states that when ‘*alā* and ‘*an* are particles, the following noun takes the genitive due to their affect (*maǧrūr bihā*), whereas when they are nouns, the following noun takes the

⁵¹ Or: *ǧānib*, according to some grammarians (for references, see the studies mentioned in the previous fn.).

⁵² On different opinions regarding the significance of *min* here, see al-Murādī, *al-Ġānā*, p. 243; Ibn Hišām, *Muġnī*, p. 160. See also fn. 42.

⁵³ For example, Ibn Hišām (*Muġnī*, pp. 158–159) maintains that such a synonymy obtains between ‘*an*, as a particle, and *baʿda* “after”, and grammarians occasionally point to the semantic similarity which obtains between ‘*an/‘alā* as nouns and as particles (e.g. al-Irbilī, *Ġawāhir*, p. 404; see also ibid., p. 462).

⁵⁴ On this notion of linkage, see Kasher 2013, and the references therein.

⁵⁵ See also Ibn al-Sarrāǧ, *al-Uṣūl* I, p. 437; al-Zaǧǧāǧī, *Hurūf*, p. 23; Ibn al-Warrāq, *ʿIlal*, pp. 292–293; al-Rummānī, *al-Ḥurūf*, pp. 107–108; al-Harawī, *al-Uzhiyya*, pp. 193–194; al-Ġurġānī, *al-Muqtaṣid*, pp. 849, 1092; Ibn Yaʿīš, *Šarḥ* VIII, pp. 37–42; al-Mālaqī, *Rasf*, p. 433; al-Irbilī, *Ġawāhir*, pp. 403, 462; al-Murādī, *al-Ġānā*, pp. 242, 470–471; Ibn Hišām, *Muġnī*, pp. 155, 160, 587. Formal considerations are also propounded for the classification of ‘*alā* as a particle (see Ibn Abī al-Rabīʿ, *al-Basīṭ*, pp. 849–850; al-Murādī, *al-Ġānā*, pp. 474–475; Ibn Hišām, *Muġnī*, p. 152). In the present discussions I have not included loci in which ‘*alā* and ‘*an* are said to be of the same ‘status’ (*manzila*) as certain nouns (e.g. Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb* I, p. 177).

genitive by dint of the annexation (*mağrūr bi-l-iḍāfa*).⁵⁶ He does not elaborate on this point, and elsewhere (ibid., p. 279) he states explicitly that the *nomen regens* is the operator of the genitive, in the sense of either *li-* or *min* (see the previous section).

Conclusion

In this article it was shown that Arab grammarians conceptualize words such as *ḥalfa* as semantically distinct from particles. They are classified as *zurūf*, that is, as nouns which refer to an uncircumscribed location in which something/someone is located or something occurs. Thus, strictly speaking, the literal translation of the sentence *zaydun ḥalfaka* would be “Zayd [is located in] the-area-behind you”, “the-area-behind” being the translation of *ḥalf*. Therefore, the criticism leveled at the grammarians for differentiating between quasi-prepositions and proper prepositions based on merely formal considerations is not justified. Needless to say, Arab grammarians had no need to posit a process by which a noun ‘turns into’ a (quasi-)preposition, accompanied by some sort of semantic shift.⁵⁷

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⁵⁶ On the expression *mağrūr bi-l-iḍāfa*, see Peled 1994, pp. 144–145.

⁵⁷ On the general question of diachronic studies in Arabic grammatical tradition, see Blanc 1979; Guillaume 1981; Gruntfest 1989; 1992; Baalbaki 1995; Versteegh 1996. Esseesy (2010, p. 165) says: “These similarities in function [between *zurūf* and “true” prepositions] have been masked in the exclusively synchronic treatment of Arabic prepositions from the time of early Arabic grammarians until the present.” Incidentally, according to Ibn Abī al-Rabī (*al-Basīṭ*, p. 848), *‘alā* is primarily (*al-aṣl*) a particle, and only secondarily (*umma*) a noun.

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