

Spatial Prepositions in Modern Standard Arabic*

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1. Abstract

The paper investigates syntactic and semantic properties of spatial prepositions in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). In this paper, I argue that the so-called, by traditional grammarians, *dhruuf al-makaan* 'Adverbs of Place' such as *fawq* 'above', *tahta* 'under', *xalf* 'behind' etc are just another class of prepositions. Hence, there are two classes of preposition in Arabic: Class 1 Prepositions (henceforth C1 Ps) which contain true prepositions such as *ʕala* 'on', *fi* 'in' etc, and Class 2 Prepositions (henceforth C2 Ps) which contain a group of so-called adverbs of Place. To motivate my argument for existence of two classes of prepositions in MSA, certain diagnostics are set in line with Svenonius's (2004, 2006) Axial Part (henceforth AxPart) and Pantcheva's (2008) Silent Place. Further, I attempt to unify these proposals in order to capture the co-occurrence of Silent Place and AxPart in the language.

Key words: spatial prepositions, Modern Standard Arabic, syntactic and semantic properties

2. Overview and Theoretical Issues

In this paper, I follow the same idea in the traditional grammar books of Arabic (e.g., Wright (1874), Haywood & Nahmad (1965), Sibawayhi (1938), Ibn Siraj (1986) and Al-shamsan (1987) among others) that a preposition is a semantic letter associated with nouns; it changes the Case-marking when inserted. In MSA, prepositions can be either morphologically separated from nouns e.g. *min* 'from' *ila* 'to' *fi* 'in/at' etc or attached to the

* I would like to thank Prof. Ayesha Kidwai, my guide, for her incessant encouragement and support. Also, thanks for Deepak Alok for the discussion and good company. Being a native speaker of the language under investigation, I mainly rely on my intuitions as well as some Arabic grammar books for the data collection. The abbreviations used throughout the paper are as follows: PRES = present tense, 3SM = 3rd singular masculine, 3SF = 3rd singular feminine, acc = accusative, nom = nominative, gen = genitive, Pl = Plural, Indef = Indefinite Marker, C1 P = Class 1 preposition, C2 P = Class 2 preposition, TAM = Tense and Aspect Morphology, s-selection = semantic selection, c-selection =categorial selection, MSA = Modern Standard Arabic.

The lack of TAM property in prepositions suggests that the category P specifies with [-V] feature. The so-called adverbs are similar to prepositions in lacking of this property.

To conclude, there are many similarities between prepositions and this group of adverbs but there is a slight difference as well. It suggests that the so called adverbs are not true prepositions as their functions are limited to expressing location.

Now, let us examine how this kind of adverbs draws apart from the common properties of adverbs/adverbials in Arabic.

Unlike other Adverbs of Arabic, this kind of adverb cannot be nunated², that is, it cannot take an indefinite accusative marker suffix *-an* to express spatial or even temporal dimensions of the event/action.

4. a) Passed miil-an (Adverb of Place)

passed.3SM mile-Indef.acc

'He passed a mile.'

b) was^ṣila al-manzil ḏ^ṣuuhr-an (Adverb of Time)

arrived. 3SM the-home noon-indef.acc

'He comes back home at noon.'

c) al-kitaab-u fawqa-* an at^ṣ-t^ṣaawilat-i (So-called adverb)

the book-nom above-indef.acc the-table-gen

'The book is above the table.'

d) al-kitaab-u ʕala-*an at^ṣ-t^ṣawilat-i (Preposition)

the-book on-ndef.acc the-table-gen

'The book is on the table.'

² One of distinguishing properties of adverbs is that they can show some form of nunation; that is to take the indefinite accusative Case marker suffix *-an*.

The ungrammaticality of (4c) would not be predictable, if we take into our account the traditional claim that *fawq* ‘above’ is an adverb. It does not even share main characteristics of true adverbs: a necessity of taking the indefinite accusative Case marker *-an*. Further, it raises the question of whether this is an adverb at all. In the same connection, the example (4d) is ruled out by the fact that true prepositions such as *ʕala* ‘on’ never take indefinite accusative case morphology that the true adverbs normally take. This might draw true prepositions and this kind of adverbs apart from true adverbs. From the above discussion, I conclude that the behavior of so-called adverbs is different from that of true adverbs and that the so-called adverbs are neither true prepositions nor true adverbs.

2.2 Characterization of C1 Ps from C2 Ps

On par with proposals made for other languages, e.g., Terzi (2008) in Greek, Dekany (2009) in Hungarian, Botwinik-Rotem (2006) in Hebrew, Pantcheva (to appear) in Persian etc, this paper argues for a possibility of dividing prepositions of MSA into two classes: C1 Ps and C2 Ps. C1 Ps include true prepositions such as *min* ‘from’, *ila* ‘to’, *ʕan* ‘about/away from’, *ʕala* ‘on’, *fi* ‘at/in’, *maʕa* ‘with’, *li-* ‘for/to’ *ka-* ‘like/as’ etc and C2 Ps which include the so-called adverbs such as *fawqa* ‘above’, *taħta* ‘under’, *xalf* ‘behind/back’, *ʔamaam* ‘in front of/front’, *naħwa* ‘towards’. Hence, MSA is compatible with the assumption of Svenonius (2006) and Pantcheva (2008) that C1 Ps are a closed class whereas C2 Ps are a larger class. The property of being a larger class may suggest that this class is derived from open-class categories, particularly nouns.

- C1 Ps never stand without a complement whereas C2 P can.

5. a) *al-kitaab ʕala (at^ʕ-t^ʕawilat-i)

the-book on the-table-gen

‘The book is on the table.’

b) al-kitaab taħta (at^ʕ-t^ʕawilat-i)

the-book under at^ʕ-t^ʕawilat-i

‘The book is under the table.’

The ungrammaticality of (5a) can be explained by the fact that there is no possibility for the C1 P *ʕala* ‘on’ to stand without a complement. Likewise, the C2 P *taħta* ‘under’ can occur with or without a complement as shown in (5b).

- C1 P can take another PP as its complement whereas C2 P cannot be.

6. a) saqata-t min fawqa aʕ-ʕadʕarat-i (C1 P > C2 P)

fell-3SF from Above the-tree-gen

‘She fell from above the table.’

b) *saqata-t fawqa Min aʕ-ʕadʕarat-i *(C2 P > C1 P)

fell-3SF above From the tree-gen

The examples (6a) and (6b) show the order is crucial: a C1 P must precede a C2 P and not vice versa. That is to say, locative prepositions cannot precede directional ones.

2.3 Similarities between C2 Ps and Nouns

In this section, I examine the extent to which C2 Ps retain some nominal properties. According to Samiian (1994) and Ghomeshi (1996), C2 PPs can occupy an argument position.

7. a) *ʕala at^ʕ-t^ʕaawilat-i Wasixun
on the-table-gen dirty-indef.nom

‘The SPACE on the table is dirty.’

b) taħta at^ʕ-t^ʕaawilat-i Wasixun
under the-table-gen dirty-indef.nom

‘The PLACE under the table is dirty.’

C1 PPs in (7a) cannot occupy an argument position whereas C2 PPs as in (7b) can. This explains a crucial difference between C1 Ps and C2 Ps in that the latter can modify the SPACE (Silent Place).

Another property of Arabic C2 Ps is that very few of them, particularly *xalf* ‘behind’ *?amaam* ‘front’ can at times take a definite article and a genitive Case marker.

8. a) waqafa-t xalfa /?amaama as-sayyarat-i
 stood-3SF behind /in front of the-car-gen

‘She stood behind /in front of the car.’

- b) jalasa-t Fi al-xalf-i/ al-?amaam-i
 sat-3SF in/at the-behind-gen/the-front-gen

‘She sat in/at the back/ the front.’

These examples show that C2 Ps retain some nominal properties, i.e., they can be used as nouns with the definite article *al-* as in (8b). However, there are some differences between C2 Ps and nouns.

- Pluralization is a distinct characteristic of nouns but it is not the case with C2 Ps which lacks this nominal property. Arabic nouns takes plural suffixes like *-uun/-aat* but this is not applicable on C2 Ps.

9. a) muudaris-uun /-aat
 teacher-Pl.M /Pl.F

- b) xalf/?amaam-*uun /*-aat
 behind/front - Pl.M/Pl.F

- In MSA, nouns can be modified by adjectives whereas C2 Ps cannot be.

10. a) muudaris-un najiit-un
 teacher-nom.Indef active-nom.Indef

- b) ?amaam wad^{si}ih-un

Front clear.nom.indef

- Although C2 Ps can take the definite article *al-* ‘the’ as in (8b), they do not allow demonstratives to precede them as nouns do.

11. a) Fi haaḏa/ḏaalika al-bass
In this/that the-bus

‘in this/that bus’

b) *fi haaḏa/ḏaalika al-xalf/al-ḡamaama
In this/that the-behind/the-front

‘in this/that behind/front’

2.4 Silent PLACE and AxPart in MSA

Kats & Postal (1994) argue for the presence of a noun Silent PLACE in English. They claim that the single-words *here* and *there* are identical to complex adverbials *at this place* and *at that place* respectively. The difference is that a Place noun is silent in the former but overt in the latter. This is supported by Kayne’s (2004) argument that empty nouns in English can be even overt in some dialects of English as in (12).

12. This here/that there place

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In parallel, MSA has enough empirical evidence for the presence of a Silent PLACE. The Arabic single-word adverbials *huuna* ‘here’ and *huunaak* ‘there’ have essentially identical meanings to those of complex adverbials *fi haaḏa al-makaan* ‘at this the place’ and *fi ḏaalik al-makaan* ‘at that the place’ respectively.

Crucially, Arabic C2 PP is possible to occur in the argument position. Consider the example (7b) repeated in (13).

13. Taḥta at^t-t^aaawilat-i wasix-un
Under the-table-gen dirty-indef.nom

'The PLACE under the table is dirty.'

The example (13) strongly supports the fact that Arabic and English have a uniform structure and the only difference is that Arabic has a Silent PLACE whereas English has an Overt PLACE. This suggests that the C2 P *taħta* 'under' must be located in AxPart in order to modify the Silent Place. Thus, we need to capture the presence of a Silent Place and an AxPart in the language.

3. Existing Proposals

There have been several proposals made in literature on internal structure of PPs³, namely Svenonius's (2006) AxPart Projection and Pantcheva's (2008) Silent PLACE. The two proposals are more crucial to me in this paper.

3.1 Svenonius's AxPart Projection (2006)

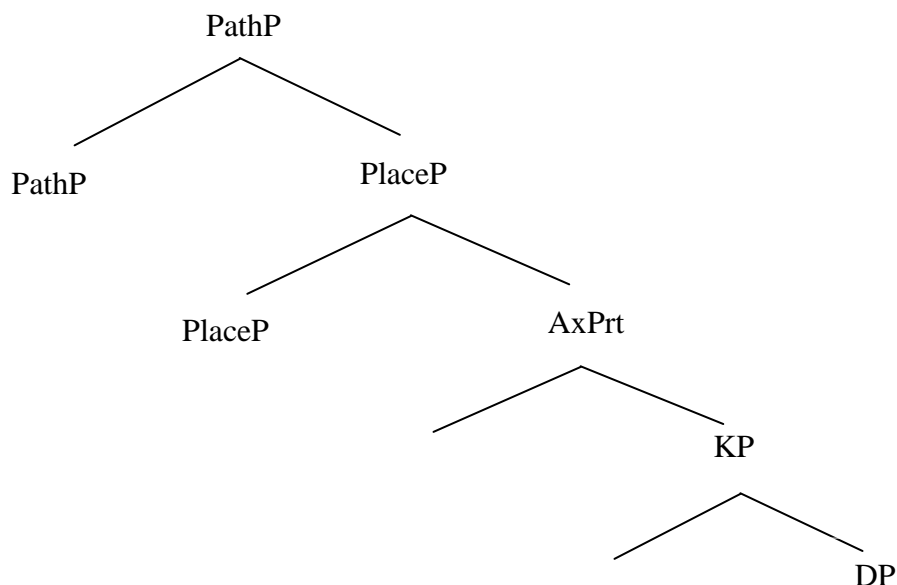
Svenonius (2006) argues for the existence of an AxPart projection to host elements exhibiting both nominal and adpositional properties. It is called *Axial Part* because it hosts the elements that occur in the regions or *axial* parts of objects. His examples are given in (14) from English.

14. a) There was a kangaroo in *front* of the car. (AxPrt)
b) There was a kangaroo in the *front* of the car. (N)

For Svenonius, an AxPart is a category that is distinct from both a noun and an adposition. His basic structure is illustrated in (15).

³ Other Proposals include Koopman (2000), Den Dikken (2003), Svenonius (2004) for minimal distinction between locative and directional Ps and Van Riemsdijk (1990) for an extra projection to host more functional element. I think I do not need them here. In the same connection, Amritavalli (2007) gives distribution of Axial Parts in Kannada.

15.

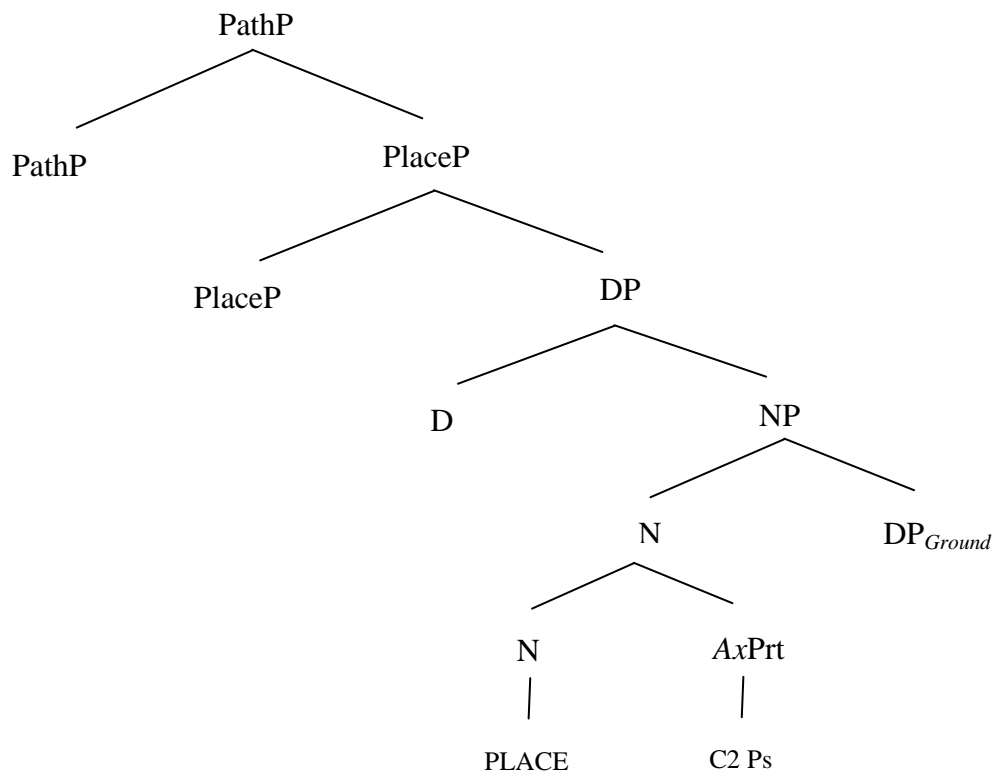


In the above structure, a PP contains three heads: a Path head, a Place head and an AxPart head. The highest two heads host C1 Ps: a Path head hosts directional C1 Ps such as *to* and *from* whereas a Place head hosts locative Ps such as *in* and *on*. These functional heads select an AxPart as a complement that licenses the DP complement. But the problem of this proposal is that it cannot capture a Silent PLACE attested in Arabic as shown in (13).

3.2 Pantcheva's (2008) Silent Place

Pantcheva (2008) extends Svenonius's (2006) proposal to include a Silent Noun PLACE selected by a C1 P. That is, the two heads (Path and Place) take a DP containing an AxPart head which in turn modifies a Silent place. Her proposed structure is given in (16).

16.

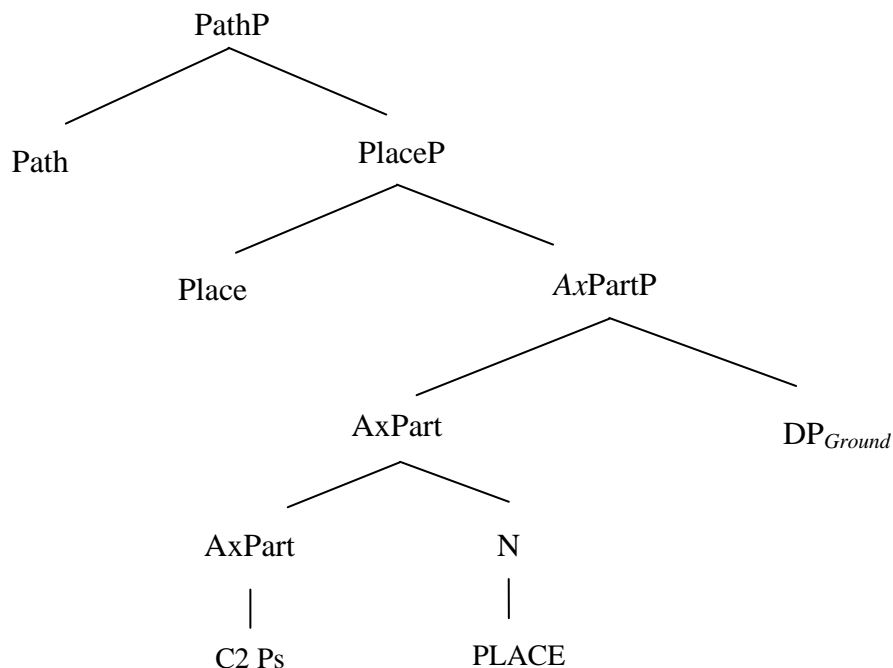


Introducing a Silent PLACE is essentially attractive but the position of this element in the structure may not be convincing. First, there is no justification for proposing a head N and the Axpart to be located under another N. Second, heads like Path and Place are not able to take directly the Axpart but a DP which contains the AxPart.

4. The Account

I attempt to unify Svenonius' (2006) AxPart Projection and Pantcheva's Silent PLACE proposals in a straightforwardly manner. However, it is closer to Svenonius's than it is to Pantcheva's in that the AxPart is taken as a separate category and not just a modifier of the Silent PLACE under N. My proposed structure for both Silent PLACE and AxPart in Arabic PPs is given in (17).

17.



The two highest functional heads are positions for C1 Ps. A Path head is a host for directional C1 Ps, but a Place head for locative C1 Ps. The hierarchical order of Path over Place may be universally favored. These highest functional heads select the AxPartP containing a separate head. I depart from Pantcheva's proposal in that AxPart takes a Silent PLACE as a complement and not just a modifier. This is to ensure the presence of a Silent PLACE whenever a C2 P in the AxPart position exists. I among others borrow Talmy's (1978) term *the Ground* to show an asymmetric relation between the Figure and the Ground.

The proposed structure in (17) can capture several facts related to the behavior of spatial prepositions in MSA.

- It can account for simple spatial prepositional phrases containing a C1 P and a DP complement.

18. a) min/ila al-madrasat-i (*Path + DP-Ground*)
 from/ila the-school-gen

b) fi/šala al-kitaab-i (*Place + DP-Ground*)

in/on the book-gen

The Source Path *min* ‘from’ or the Goal Path *ila* ‘to’ is hosted by a Path head which takes immediately a DP_{Ground} *al-madrasat* ‘the school’. In the same vein, a Place head hosts prepositions denoting location such as *fi* ‘in’ and *ʕala* ‘on’, taking directly the DP-Ground *al-kitaab* ‘the book’ as in (18).

- It can capture the behavior of spatial prepositional phrase containing C2 Ps modifying a Silent PLACE along with a DP complement.

19. *taħta/ fawqa* *atʕ-tʕaawilat-i* (*AxPart + PLACE+ DP-Ground*)
 under/above the-table-gen
 ‘*under/above the table*’

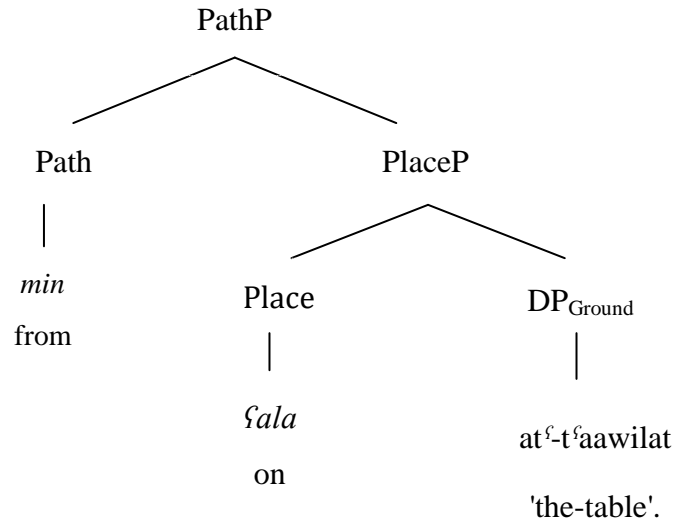
The C2 P *taħt* ‘under’ or *fawq* ‘above’ with a DP_{Ground} complement occupies an AxPart head which in turn modifies a Silent PLACE.

- It can capture the behavior of a complex structure of spatial PPs that contain two prepositions from the same class, say two C1 Ps, along with their DP_{Ground} complement.

20. *Min* *ʕala* *atʕ-tʕaawilat-i*
 from On the-table-gen

The Goal Path *min* ‘from’ and *ʕala* ‘on’ in (20) are hosted by a Path head and a Place head positions respectively. A Place head takes DP_{Ground} *atʕ-tʕaawilat* ‘the table’. The truncated structure (21) illustrates the hierarchical order of C1 Ps.

21.



- It can account for a combination of two prepositions from different classes.

22. a) min Tahta atʕ-tʕaawilat-i (Path > C2 P)
 from under the-table-gen
 'from under the table'

b) (fi) Tahta atʕ-tʕaawilat-i (Place > C2 P)
 in under the-table-gen

The example (22a) shows that a combination of a C1 P and a C2 P is also possible but with a caveat. C2 Ps can never precede C1 Ps. The Goal Path *min* 'from' takes AxPart complement where an AxPart head takes a Silent PLACE. A Place head *fi* 'in' selects C2 P *tahta* 'under' which in turn takes a silent PLACE as a complement. The example (22b) shows something interesting that C1 Ps such as *fi* 'in' denoting Place can be omitted. It suggests that the presence of an AxPartP projection that hosts C2 P *tahta* 'under' shall be associated with a Silent PLACE complement.

- It gives an explanation for the Arabic fact that *fi haaða al-makaan* 'at this the place' and *fi ðaalik al-makaan* 'at that the place' have an identical meaning to single-word adverbials *huuna* 'here' and *huunaak* 'there' respectively. This would support Kayne's (2004) assumption for decomposing single-word adverbs 'here' and 'there' in English.

5. Concluding Remarks

The paper is mainly devoted to distinguishing between two classes of spatial prepositions in MSA. It has shown that Arabic spatial Ps are of two types: C1 Ps which contains all pure prepositions and C2 Ps which contain the so-called *dhuruuf al-makaan* ‘Adverbs of Place’ in traditional Arabic grammar books.

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