SPATIAL LANGUAGE IN THE *KITĀB* OF SĪBĀWAYHI—
THE CASE OF THE PREPOSITION *FĪ*/IN

Mohamed Hnid

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to explore a semantic field rarely developed in modern Arabic linguistic studies, the relationship between language and space. One finds very early, in the *Kitāb* and even before, structured analysis of the way linguistic entities express different spatial values in Arabic. These relations are typically locatives as *al-iḥtiwāʾ* “containment”, which is represented by *fī* “in”, or *al-istiʿlāʾ*, “superimposition”, which is expressed by *‘alā*, “on”. But they can also be directional—laying stress on a trajectory description—with one of the following two values: *al-ibtidāʾ* “beginning”, and *al-intihāʾ* “end”, activated by *min* “from” and *ʾilā* “to”.

I will here examine the semantic structure of *fī* with the aim of describing its spatial configuration as it has been developed in the *Kitāb*. As regards the specificities of his approach, I will first discuss a very short

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1 Among the rare studies on the question of the spatial meaning of the prepositions in Arabic, one can cite the study of K.R. Lentzner, *Semantic and Syntactic Aspects of Arabic Prepositions* (Michigan: University of Texas, 1980).


3 In a book which is commonly attributed to al-Ḥalīl, one finds a spatial analysis of *ḥattā* (p. 204–205) dealing with the question of the boundaries of *ḥattā*, which is a key point in trajectory definition, in the famous example: “I ate the fish up to its head” (al-Ḥalīl, *al-Jumal fī al-Naḥw* [Beirut: Mu’assasat ar-Risāla], 1995).

text of Sibawayhi without considering any predefined analysis. Then, I will try to infer, from other examples and commentaries which I will comment on, the underlying structure that governs the spatial value of the preposition. Starting from the analysis later grammarians gave of his text, one can confirm that this approach has been universally valued by them. They developed a theory of the spatiality of the preposition by extending the perimeter of contexts in which the preposition could be used and giving a list of the parameters required for the definition of the semantic structure. So what are the distinctive features of Sibawayhi’s approach to the spatiality of fi? What are the main parameters required to realize its semantic structure?

1. Terminology

In a very short passage on fi, Sibawayhi expresses a key notion which governed nearly everything he wrote about the spatial value of this preposition, which is al-wiʿāʾ, “the container”:5, “Concerning fi, it expresses the meaning of the container, al-wiʿāʾ”. Two observations have to be mentioned here. First, the term wiʿāʾ has been used in texts which are subsequent to al-Kitāb, by Ibn al-Sarrāj:6 al-Uṣul, by al-Zajjājī,7 Hurūf al-maʿāni, by Māliqī,8 Raṣf al-mabānī and Maʿāni al-ḥurūf by al-Rummānī.9 However, other grammarians like Ibn Yaʿīš10 in Šarḥ al-mufaṣṣal, al-ʿAstārabāḏī11 in Šarḥ al-kāfiya, Ibn Hišām12 in Muğnī al-labīb and al-Zamaḫšarī in al-Mufaṣṣal,13 prefer another term, al-ẓarfiyya “the circumstance”. The term wiʿāʾ so far has been less common, if not rarely used in most of the recent grammatical literature—particularly in grammar books—where one finds it replaced by another term, which is more general and less precise, i.e., al-ẓarfiyya, and from which two subcategories derive: al-ẓarfiyya al-makāniyya and al-ẓarfiyya al-zamāniyya.

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5 Sibawayhi, Kitāb chapter 508, Derenbourg 2,335/Hārūn 4, 226.
10 Ibn Yaʿīš, Šarḥ al-mufaṣṣal (Beirut: Dār ṣādir, sd) 8, 20.