

ON THE CATEGORY OF TUNISIAN OBJECT MARKING *FI**

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focusses on the categorial status of the particle *fi* in Tunisian Arabic (simply Tunisian from now on¹). As the article illustrates, *fi* is best analyzed as a preposition in all its occurrences: in its locative use, that is when it precedes a locative argument or an adjunct, and in its so-called “aspectual use”, that is when it linearly precedes the direct object of aspectually marked sentences, e.g. sentences interpreted in the progressive, inceptive, iterative aspect, etc. The absence of a distinguishable semantic content and the peculiar distribution of this latter object-preceding-*fi* suggest that we deal with a dummy prepositional element whose presence is triggered by independent syntactic requirements.

This paper has two main goals: first, to provide solid evidence in support of the prepositional status of the particle *fi* and, second, to investigate the nature of the syntactic requirements that trigger its insertion. Section 2 presents a quick overview of the phenomenon of aspectual *fi* insertion in Tunisian and discusses the syntactic distinctive properties of aspectual *fi* as opposed to its locative homophone. Section 3 provides arguments in support of the hypothesis that aspectual *fi* is indeed a preposition. In section 4 the distribution of aspectual *fi* DPs is shown to parallel this of Accusative Case arguments and, finally, section 5 draws the conclusions and proposes a tentative explanation for the distribution of the item under discussion.

2. TUNISIAN *FI* OBJECTS

In Tunisian the item *fi* appears to have a double categorization: there is an object marking *fi*, and a locative preposition *fi* ‘in’, expressing central coincidence. These items are homophonous and in the present work are referred respectively as “aspectual” and “locative” *fi*. While locative *fi* precedes a locative argument or a locative adjunct regardless of the aspectual properties of the sentence in which it occurs, see example (1); aspectual *fi* occurs only before the direct object of sentences that trigger an aspectually marked interpretation, as in (2):

- (1) semi qāʕid yəqra fī-dār jedd-hu
Semi sit.prtpc study.imp in-home grandfather-his
‘Semi is studying in his grandfather’s home’

* This research is part of the project “*Selection at the interfaces*” P.I. Tabea Ihsane, founded by the SNSF grant 10012_146699/1. I thank Ur Shlonsky for his insights and Majid Askri for all the time he devoted to gathering the data with me.

¹ Tunisian Arabic concretely corresponds to a cluster of dialects presently spoken in the territory of the Tunisian Republic. The variety object of this research is the one spoken in the norther regions of Tunisia, in and around the Capital city of Tunis. Similar phenomena, as discussed also in the article, can be detected in other varieties as well, nonetheless additional research is needed to establish whether the conclusion reached by the present work can possibly extended to such varieties as well.

- (2) a. semi qāʕid yəqra fi-dars-hu²
 Semi sit.prtpc study.imp fi-lecture-his
 ‘Semi is studying his lecture’
 b. * semi qāʕid yəqra dars-hu
 Semi sit.prtpc study.imp lecture-his

Progressive, iterative and inceptive sentences constitute some of the suitable contexts for the insertion of aspectual *fi*; for practical reasons, however, the examples in this paper are limited to sentences of the first type³. The embedding predicate *qāʕid*, in both examples (1) and (2), literally means ‘sitting’ and it encodes progressive aspect. Notice that the use of a posture-verb for the expression of progressive aspect is by no means a peculiarity of Tunisian (Bybee et al. 1994). For instance, a similar construction exists in Swedish as discussed in Blenselius (2015). The peculiarity of this Tunisian progressive marker, however, is illustrated by the contrast in (2a-b). The opposition provided by this pair shows that the presence of *qāʕid* patterns with the insertion of aspectual *fi* in transitive constructions. As the starred example (2b) shows, if the particle *fi* is omitted the sentence is no longer felicitous.

With respect to the type of complement that aspectual *fi* can precede, it appears that most DPs introduced by this item including the nominal phrase in (2b) are understood as direct objects and Themes, however, as discussed in section 3.2 and 4.2, once the appropriate syntactic conditions apply, other argument DPs also require its insertion.

Aspectual and locative *fi* perform compatible functions and their presence is not mutually exclusive. The following example illustrates that locative and aspectual *fi* can co-occur in contexts in which the simultaneous presence of a locative adjunct and of a direct object are semantically appropriate:

- (3) semi qāʕid ydhin fi-l-bēb fi-dār jirēn-əh
 Semi sit.prtpc paint.imp fi-the-door in-house neighbor-his
 ‘Semi is painting the door in his neighbor’s house’
 ‘#Semi is painting in the door in his neighbor house’

Example (3) illustrates that a DP preceded by locative *fi* and one preceded by aspectual *fi* do not compete for the same function. Sentence (3) is felicitous because it allows to access the interpretation “*Semi is painting the door in his neighbor’s house*”. In this sentence the

² The matrix predicate *qāʕid* in (2) appears in its active participial form. The progressive predicate *qāʕid*, however, is the only participial embedding predicate in constructions of this type. Other verbs, inceptive predicates for instance, occur in their perfective or imperfective forms only. In addition to this peculiar morphological property, progressive *qāʕid* is the only aspectual predicate that can be deleted at PF without altering the aspectual interpretation of the sentence (Halila 1992). This may be the effect of an ongoing grammaticalization process whose final state has not been achieved yet. In order to present intelligible data, *qāʕid* is not marked as optional in this work. The reader, however should keep in mind that the omission of *qāʕid* is possible in Tunisian and that (i) below and the above example (2a) are semantically and syntactically equivalent:

- (i) semi ydhin fi-dīār jirēn-əh
 Semi paint.imp fi-houses neighbors-his
 ‘Semi is painting his neighbors’ houses’

Strong evidence, for instance the unavailability of verb movement above negation in negative contexts, suggest that, in sentences like (i), the progressive marker is present at LF and that the presence of this item, at least in northern Tunisian, is indeed the trigger for the insertion of aspectual *fi*. Space consideration forbid the exposition of the full argument in the present work, however, the reader interested in this aspect of the analysis should refer to Pallottino (in prep.).

³ For an extensive description of the contexts in which aspectual *fi* occurs refer to Ritt-Benmimoun (2017). Although her work describes a southern variety of Tunisian, the same facts are attested the northern variety, which is reference variety for the present article.

preceding *fi*-phrase, *fi-l-bēb* ‘the door’, is not understood as a semantically odd locative adjunct but rather as the Theme; the second *fi*-phrase, conversely, unambiguously refers to the location where the painting event is taking place⁴.

The availability of the first interpretation tells us that the two *fi* perform different functions. More specifically, it indicates that the former *fi* is of the aspectual kind because it introduces a noun phrase understood as the Theme, while the second one is prepositional, and heads a locative adjunct. One of the goals of this paper is to better explain the properties of aspectual *fi* in syntactic terms; the data presented so far still do not allow a precise qualification of this particle, however, the evidence provided so far indicates that aspectual *fi*, unlike its locative counterpart, is not a preposition of central coincidence.

Perfective predicates provide an additional argument in support of this conclusion. Perfective verbs are incompatible with the presence of aspectual *fi*, and therefore, they can only occur with *fi*-phrases of the locative kind. This is why (4a) is semantically infelicitous while (4b) is not:

- (4) a. # Semi kle fi-kosksi
 Semi eat.perf fi-couscous
 ‘#Semi ate in the couscous’
 b. Semi kle fi-l-kočina
 Semi eat.perf in-the-kitchen
 ‘Semi ate in the kitchen’

The DPs preceded by *fi* in (4a-b) are necessarily parsed as locative adjuncts because the sentence does not meet the appropriate syntactic conditions for the insertion of aspectual *fi*. Therefore, despite the semantic selectional properties of the predicate and the feature endowment of the following phrase, no *fi*-DP can be the Theme of a sentence of this kind. Additionally, since an eating event is hardly located in a [+ edible] environment, *kosksi* ‘couscous’ is not a suitable complement for a preposition of central coincidence, while *l-kočina* ‘the kitchen’ is. Therefore, (4b) is semantically sound but (4a) is not.

The grammaticality of (4b) and the infelicitous status of (4a) stem from conflicting semantic and syntactic restrictions which affect the aspectual and the locative type of *fi* in different ways. This is why, once the conditions for the insertion of aspectual *fi* are met, e.g. in (5) which is the progressive equivalent of (4a), *fi-kosksi* becomes an appropriate Theme:

- (5) Semi qāʕid yekl fi-kosksi
 Semi sit.prtcp eat.perf fi-couscous
 ‘Semi is eating couscous’

Example (5) is a progressive sentence and, as such it requires the presence of aspectual *fi* before the direct object. Since *kosksi* ‘couscous’ is a plausible Theme, the particle *fi* is no

⁴ The alternative interpretation “a painting event is taking place in the door in the house of the neighbor” is semantically awkward for the obvious reason that ‘the door’ is hardly interpretable as a possible location for the event itself. Sentence (3), however, is not syntactically infelicitous. Under the appropriate intonation and provided that sufficient contextual information is available, it is also possible to access the interpretation in which the two *fi*-phrases are both understood as locative arguments. For instance, the following

(ii) semi ydhin fi-ṣ-ṣala fi-dār jirēn-əh
 Semi paint.imp fi-the-living_room in-house neighbors-his
 ‘Semi is painting the living room in his neighbors’ house’
 ‘Semi is painting (something) in the living room in his neighbors’ house’

longer understood as a locative preposition but as the object-introducing item discussed above.

Therefore, example (3) illustrates that locative *fi* and aspectual *fi* do not compete for the same syntactic function; the infelicitous semantics of (4a) proves that aspectual *fi* does not share the same semantic properties of locative *fi* found, for instance, in (4b), and finally, the contrast between (4a) and (5) shows that the two kinds of *fi* are not subject to the same syntactic constraints.

3. ON THE CATEGORY OF ASPECTUAL *FI*

Brahim (2007:95) proposes that aspectual *fi* should be analyzed as an instance of the locative preposition *fi*. I refer to this proposal as the ‘identity approach’. The interpretative and distributional differences discussed above, however, suggest that this intuition cannot be completely correct: were the two items the same, in fact, their semantics and their syntax would match, contrary to what the data show. However, the homophony of the two items suggests the existence of a relation, and the nature of this link is explored in this section.

3.1. Selectional properties of aspectual *fi*

The previous section illustrates that the distribution of aspectual *fi* is constrained by the aspectual properties of the sentence in which it occurs. This section shows that the immediate syntactic context also affects the distribution of this element and that its interaction with the local environment allows to classify aspectual *fi* as a preposition. The relevant fact is that *fi* arguments cannot occur in the complement position of another prepositional element⁵. This phenomenon is described in McNeil’s (2017) corpus based research.

Her database presents examples of predicates whose second argument takes the form of a prepositional phrase; for instance, she provides examples containing the predicate *lwwaž* ‘look for’ which is systematically followed by the preposition *ʕla* ‘on’. As she points out, verbs like *lwwaž* (*ʕla*) show that the selected preposition and aspectual *fi* occur in complementary distribution whenever the appropriate conditions for aspectual *fi* insertion are met. Thus, when the verb is preceded by the progressive marker *qāʕid*, either *ʕla* or *fi* can precede the DP argument but they cannot co-occur:

- (6) a. qāʕid nlawwiž fi-bint al-ḥalal
 sit.ptcp look.imp fi-girl the-lawful
 ‘I am looking for a good girl (to marry)’
 b. qāʕid nlawwiž ʕla-bint al-ḥalal
 sit.ptcp look.imp for-girl the-lawful
 ‘I am looking for a good girl (to marry)’
 c. * qāʕid nlawwiž fi-ʕla/ʕla-fi bint al-ḥalal
 sit.ptcp look.imp fi-for/for-fi girl the-lawful
 (adapted from McNeil 2017:11 (35))

The pattern presented above illustrates that either *fi* or *ʕla* occur in felicitous progressive sentences, (6a) and (6b); but the combination of the two elements derives a non-grammatical sentence (6c). As McNeil discusses, the ungrammatical status of (6c) indicates that *fi* and the selected preposition compete for the same syntactic slot, a fact that we can easily account for under the assumption that the two elements are both prepositions. If a preposition cannot

⁵ For a similar argument on the distributive properties of prepositions in Italian see Korzen (1996).

indeed select another preposition, then it is possibly the case that aspectual *fi* and the competing *ɛla* are indeed members of the same lexical class.

3.2. Interaction between Case licensing and *fi*

The interaction between Case licensing and the insertion of aspectual *fi* brings additional support to the hypothesis that aspectual *fi* is appropriately categorized as a preposition. The relevant fact is that aspectual *fi* can only precede nominal constituents but not clausal ones, a distribution that matches this of English prepositions as described in Stowell's (1981):

- (7) a. He blamed it [on [_{DP} bill's being too strict]].
 b. * He blamed it [on [_{CP} that bill was too strict]].
 (Stowell 1981:149 (68a) & (69a))

Stowell proposes that Case licensing regulates the syntactic selectional properties of all heads, including prepositions. In his approach, constituents are reduced to two classes set apart by the *Case Resistance Principle* (CRP), that is:

“Case may not be assigned to a category bearing a Case-assigning feature”
 (ibid. p. 146).

In this system syntactic classes are either Case-bearing or Case-assigning and their licensing properties are self-evident. DPs and infinitival sentences belong to the first class while PPs and CPs belong to the second one.

Assuming, that this system applies universally, and under the hypothesis that aspectual *fi* is a preposition, we expect it to select only direct objects that can be Case marked (DPs) and not to select objects belonging to categories that cannot receive Case: CPs or PPs.

Example (6c), section 3.1, shows that a PP argument (i.e. *ɛla-bint* ‘for a girl’) cannot be preceded by aspectual *fi* even if the syntactic context in which the phrase occur meets the appropriate conditions for the insertion of aspectual *fi*. Thus, the ungrammatical status of the configuration in (6c) in syntactic terms corresponds to a violation of CRP, since aspectual *fi* bears a case assigning feature and so does the other preposition.

As for CP arguments, the double nature of the Tunisian item *illi* allows to show that they do not require the insertion of aspectual *fi*, as expected under the hypothesis that this particle is a preposition. Tunisian *illi* similarly to English ‘that’ is both a declarative complementizer and a relative one. When *illi* is a declarative complementizer, it cannot be *fi*-marked. Conversely, when *illi* is a relative complementizer, and it introduces a free relative sentence, *fi* can precede it, deriving the complex *f-illi*⁶.

Free relatives in English can occur in argument position just as any DP constituent does (Bresnan & Grimshaw 1978):

- (8) a. I'll buy [_{DP} whatever you sell]
 b. I'll buy [_{DP} the turkey]
 (Bresnan & Grimshaw 1978:335 (30a-b))

⁶ In this paper I adopt Shlonsky's (2002) analysis of relative *illi* and assume that this subordinating complementizer is contained within a higher nominal domain. The nominal nature of this topmost projection identifies *illi*-free relatives as phrases that need Case licensing and, thus, as suitable targets for aspectual *fi* insertion. Declarative *illi*, conversely, tops a finite sentential domain. Finite sentences are Case licensing domains and, therefore, declarative *illi* does not interact with aspectual *fi* insertion.

Examples (8a-b) show that free relatives and simple nominal phrases share the same distributional properties. This fact entails that the two phrases correspond to the same syntactic category, which is DP, despite their internal syntactic complexity.

Free relatives and simple DP phrases occur in complementary distribution also in Tunisian:

- (9) qāʕid nʕaddiq [DP f-illi yqūlū fi-h ən-nes]
 sit.prtcp believe.imp fi-relC say.imp fi-it the-people
 ‘I’m trusting what people are saying’
- (10) qāʕid nʕaddiq [DP fi-kelimēt-ik]
 sit.prtcp believe.imp fi-words-yours
 ‘I’m trusting your words’

Example (9) shows that a free relative is *fi*-marked when it occurs in the same context as a *fi*-marked nominal constituent, as *kelimēt-ik* ‘your words’, in (10). Notice that instances of *f-illi* such as (9) are unmistakably cases of aspectual *fi* since their occurrence is subject to the same syntactic restrictions as *fi*-DP objects, e.g. require the presence of progressive *qāʕid*. Compare the behavior of the following two examples with the above pair:

- (11) a. ʕaddaqt kelimēt-ik
 believe.perf words-yours
 ‘I trusted your words’
 b. * ʕaddaqt fi-kelimēt-ik
 believe.perf fi-words-yours
- (12) a. ʕaddaqt illi qalu-u ən-nes
 believe.perf relC say.sffx-it the-people
 ‘I trusted what people said’
 b. * ʕaddaqt f-illi qalu-u ən-nes
 believe.perf fi-relC say.affx-it the-people

As the above examples illustrate, if the conditions for aspectual *fi* insertion are not met, for example in the case of a perfective sentence, *f-illi* insertion is blocked (12) on a pair with the other instances of aspectual *fi* in (11). Thus, we can conclude that any object DP, despite its syntactic complexity, allows *fi*-licensing under the appropriate structural conditions. The contexts in which declarative *illi* occurs, in contrast, shows that no *fi*-licensing is required or allowed when the direct object is a CP even if the conditions for aspectual *fi* insertion are met:

- (13) a. brahim qāʕid yqūl [CP illi semi yəqra fi-dārs-u]
 Ibrahim sit.prtcp say.imp that Semi study.imp fi-lesson-his
 ‘Ibrahim is saying that semi is studying his lesson’
 b. * brahim qāʕid yqūl [CP f-illi semi yəqra fi-dārs-u]
 Ibrahim sit.prtcp say.imp fi-that Semi study.imp fi-lesson.his

The opposition between (13a) and (13b) illustrates that aspectual *fi* does not precede declarative *illi*. Moreover, the following example shows that verbs of saying like *qāl* ‘to say’ do not present any independent condition against the insertion of aspectual *fi*:

- (14) brahim qāʕid yqūl fi-l-haqīqa
 Ibrahim sit.prtcp say.imp fi-the-truth
 ‘Ibrahim is saying the truth’

As (14) illustrates *yqūl* selects a *fi*-marked direct object if the object takes the form of a DP, as in *fi-l-haqīqa* ‘the truth’. The comparison between (13a) and (14) shows that the semantic properties of this verb class do not interfere with the insertion of aspectual *fi*, but the selectional properties do: under the same aspectual conditions a CP argument of a verb of saying remains unmarked while a DP object requires aspectual *fi* marking.

The examples presented in this section show that aspectual *fi* behaves conformingly with Stowell’s predictions for prepositions: *fi* precedes DP arguments but not PPs or CPs. Since aspectual *fi* interacts with Case licensing like other prepositions do, this element is appropriately categorized as a member of this class as well.

The double function of *illi* nicely shows this point: when *illi* operates as a relative pronoun it can be preceded by aspectual *fi* because it tops a DP and DPs need Case. When *illi* operates as a declarative complementizer it cannot be *fi*-marked because the CRP filters out this possibility. Hence, since declarative sentences are CPs, they are not subject to Case licensing and, therefore, they are not adequate complements of any preposition including aspectual *fi*.

3.3. Aspectual *fi* as Case morpheme

Section 3.2 discusses the interaction between Case licensing and aspectual *fi* insertion, illustrating that this type of *fi* matches the behavior of other prepositions in the sense that it can only precede constituents that require Case licensing. These facts, however, could potentially be subsumed under an alternative explanation, that is the hypothesis that *fi* is not a preposition, but it is itself the morphological manifestation of Case.

The plausibility of this alternative approach is indirectly supported by the availability in certain Arabic varieties of a Case morpheme, i.e. Dative *li*, which is homophonous to a preposition, i.e. the goal preposition *li* ‘to/for’. This phenomenon, observed by Hallman (2017) in Syrian and Maltese, is also found in Tunisian and accounts for the syntactic behavior of Recipient arguments in ditransitive constructions.

In this section I first retrace some of his supporting arguments to show that Tunisian *li* has the same double function presented by the equivalent item in Syrian and Maltese. In order to do so, I will support his arguments with Tunisian data that I collected and show that the language object of this work allows to draw the same conclusions that Hallman reaches in his article. Subsequently, I will show that the respective functions performed by Dative *li* and aspectual *fi* are not comparable and that the Case morpheme approach provides a suitable explanation for the behavior of the former item *li*, but does not adequately account for the *fi*-constructions discussed in this work.

Hallman illustrates that certain Arabic varieties present two classes of ditransitive verbs: a class of verbs that patterns with the verb *ʕaʕa* ‘to give’ and a class of verbs that patterns with the verb *baʕaʕa* ‘to send’. The same partition occurs in Tunisian too: *ʕaʕa* verbs, i.e. *give*-type predicates, allow the following two constructions:

- (15) leyla ʕaʕat əl-ktēb l-semi
 Leyla give.perf the-book to-Semi
 ‘Leyla gave the book to Semi’

- (16) leyla řařat semi əl-ktēb
 Leyla give.perf Semi the-book
 ‘Leyla gave Semi the book’

Example (15) is an instance of prepositional-Dative ditransitive construction. In this sentence the Theme DP immediately follows the verb and precedes the Recipient that, in turn, is realized in the form of PP introduced by the preposition *li*. Example (16) presents the reversed argument order; in this sentence the Recipient precedes the Theme and both arguments are realized as direct objects. The availability of two direct objects is tested by means of the following pair:

- (17) leyla řařat-u l-semi
 Leyla give.sffx-it to-Semi
 ‘Leyla gave it to Semi’
- (18) leyla řařat-u əl-ktēb
 Leyla give.sffx-him the book
 ‘Leyla gave him the book’

The above examples illustrate that constructions like (16) allow the object clitic pronoun *-u* to replace both the Theme (17) and the Recipient (18). Hence, we can conclude that (16) is in all respects a double object construction in which both arguments are syntactically represented as direct objects.

As for the second class of ditransitive verbs, *bařařa* verbs, i.e. *send*-type predicates, they also allow two distinct constructions. The contrast in 0 illustrates the first of the two:

- (19) a. leyla bařařet l-semi əl-ktēb
 Leyla send.perf to-Semi the-book
 ‘Leyla sent the book to Semi’
 b. * leyla bařařet semi əl-ktēb
 Leyla send.perf Semi the-book

In this configuration the Recipient precedes the Theme and it is itself preceded by the element *li*. As these contrasting examples illustrate, the omission of *li* rules out the sentence.

The following example shows that *send*-type predicates also allow a second construction in which the arguments occur in the reverse order:

- (20) leyla bařařet əl-ktēb l-semi
 Leyla send.perf the-book to-Semi
 ‘Leyla sent the book to Semi’

In this latter construction, the Theme precedes the Recipient, and the Recipient is in turn preceded by *li*.

Thus, summing up, certain Arabic varieties present two classes of ditransitive predicates: *send*-type ditransitives and the *give*-type ones. Both verb types allow for two distinct constructions in which the arguments swap their linear order: constructions in which the Theme DP precedes the Recipient, and the Recipient is expressed in the form of a PP, illustrated by examples (15) and (20); and constructions in which the order of the arguments is reversed, exemplified in (16) and (19a).

Constructions of the first type are found with both verb classes. In contrast, the constructions of the latter type present two different forms depending on the verb class they

occur with. The difference lies in the surfacing form of the Recipient: *send*-type verbs require *li*-Recipients when the arguments occur in the Recipient-Theme order, while *give*-type ones do not.

According to Hallman's proposal, which I adopt in this paper, the above-mentioned distinction between *send* and *give* constructions of the Recipient-Theme type does not stem from the underlying syntactic structures. Rather, as he claims, (16) and (19a) are structurally identical, i.e. they are both instances of double object constructions, but they differ with respect to the Case assigned to the Recipient-object, so that: *give*-type verbs assign it with unmarked Accusative Case, while verbs of the *send*-type assign it with Dative. Consequently, whenever the item *li* precedes a Recipient object in a construction like (19a), we are not dealing with a Goal preposition, but with a Case morpheme that expresses overtly Dative Case. The following table summarizes Hallman's proposal:

(21)

	ARGUMENT ORDER		SYNTACTIC FRAME	
<i>Give</i> -verbs	RECIPIENT	THEME	DP-Acc	DP-Acc
	THEME	RECIPIENT	DP-Acc	PP
<i>Send</i> -verbs	RECIPIENT	THEME	DP-Dat(li)	DP-Acc
	THEME	RECIPIENT	DP-Acc	PP

Thus, under this account, the Recipient is expressed by means of a Goal PP in the Accusative Theme-Prepositional Recipient frame; constructions of this kind are available with both ditransitive verb groups and they require the presence of prepositional *li*. Conversely, in the double object frame, *li* is limited to predicates of the *send*-type and is not a Goal preposition but the morphological realization of Dative Case.

Although this solution may appear to bring unnecessary complication to the analysis, there are several corroborating arguments in its support. Starting with prosody: as Hallman points out, PP Recipients can rightfully precede the core DP-Theme only in the presence of marked prosody. Thus, under the assumption that examples such as (19a) present non-marked prosody, a *li*-phrase in pre-Theme position may only be parsed as a DP, and not as a PP. As the author explains, the restriction that prevents a "real" Goal phrase introduced by *li*- from preceding the Theme, is comparable to the restriction that prevents any other PP, e.g. locative ones, from preceding a Theme in the neutral intonation. See for instance the following pair:

- (22) a. leyla ḥatt l-ktāb bi-tš-tšanta
 Leyla put.perf the-book in-the-bag
 'Leyla put the book in the bag'
 b. * leyla ḥatt bi-tš-tšanta l-ktāb
 Leyla put.perf in-the-bag the-book
 (Syrian Hallman 2017:5 (17a-b))

In examples like (19a) *li*-Recipients as *l-semi* are indeed possible in pre-Theme position. In contrast the pair in (22a-b) shows that constituents which are unambiguously classified as PPs are not free to occur in pre-Theme position. Therefore, we can conclude that *li*-phrases of the type found in (19a) are not prepositional items but nominal ones. If they were PPs, in fact, they would not freely precede the core Theme argument, just like locative *bi*-Phrases do not precede the Theme in (22b).

The degraded status of the sequence: *li*-Recipient/Theme with *give*-type verbs brings additional support to the approach just outlined. See, for instance, the following example:

- (23) ?? leyla řatāt l-semi əl-ktēb
 Leyla give.perf to-Semi the-book
 ‘??Leyla gave to Semi the book’

Let us assume that example (23) share the same unmarked prosodic properties of (19a) and (22a-b). The awkwardness of this example is explainable as either a Case violation or as a violation of the PP/Theme order. Under Hallman’s approach, in fact, verbs of the *give*-type either assign unmarked Accusative Case to both the objects in double object constructions; or, in prepositional constructions, they assign unmarked Accusative Case to the Theme and require a Goal-PP in second position. If the phrase *l-semi* in (23) is parsed as a Dative-DP, the sentence is infelicitous because a ditransitive verb of this kind does not assign Dative Case, and, therefore, the presence of the Dative morpheme *li* is inappropriate. If the *li*-phrase is parsed as a PP, the sentence is still infelicitous because, as discussed above, prepositional arguments are generally banned from preceding core ones.

In conclusion, under Hallman’s approach, the difference between *give*-type verbs and *send*-ones boils down to their Case assigning properties: if the arguments occur in the order Recipient/Theme, the former predicate type assigns Accusative Case to both the Recipient and the Theme, while the latter assigns Dative to the Recipient and Accusative to the Theme. Accusative Case is unmarked, while Dative Case morphologically realized as *li*.

Finally, Hallman points out that the availability of indirect object cliticization with *send*-type verbs supports the claim that *li*-Recipients are Dative DPs:

- (24) leyla bařaθet-l-u əl-ktēb
 Leyla send.sffx-DAT-him the book
 ‘Leyla sent him the book’

As (24) shows, *li* cliticizes on the verb along with the pronoun, much like a Case mark would do. This fact is hardly accountable under the hypothesis that *li* is a preposition heading a PP. Cliticization, in fact, is a phenomenon that interests syntactic heads and not phrases. If *li* were a preposition, cliticization on the verb in this prosodic and syntactic context would not be available.

Additionally, the omission of *li* in the configuration in (24) causes the sentence to be ungrammatical:

- (25) * leyla bařaθet-u əl-ktēb
 Leyla send.sffx-him the book

Under the hypothesis that *li* is a mark of Dative Case the ungrammatical status of (25) is explained in terms of wrong Case assignment: *send*-type verbs assign Dative Case to the Recipient while the Recipient in (25) is understood as being assigned Accusative Case which, in turn, is not available for the first argument in constructions of this type. The contrast between the above example and (18) at the beginning of this section corroborates this explanation. The relevant example is reported below:

- (18) leyla řatāt-u əl-ktēb
 Leyla give.sffx-him the book
 ‘Leyla gave him the book’

Example (18) illustrates that the Accusative object clitic can replace the Recipient argument of a *give*-verb. Therefore not cliticization per se but the Case presented by the clitic

is the source of the violation in (25): objects cliticization is acceptable, but the clitic must carry the appropriate Case specification.

The phenomena discussed in this section show that Hallman's theory of *li*, that is its double function in Syrian and Maltese, also provides a suitable account for the Tunisian corresponding constructions. The Case licensing properties of the two ditransitive classes suggest that *li* is the morphological realization of Case when the Recipient precedes the Theme but is a goal preposition when the reverse order is attested. In the remainder of the section I will use the case of *li* to test whether the same logic applies DPs preceded by aspectual *fi*. The purpose of this comparison is to establish whether aspectual *fi* is best classified as a preposition or as mark of Case.

Sentential negation provides the appropriate testing ground to address this question. Sentential negation in Tunisian requires two negative morphemes: *ma-* and *-š*, in this work I adopt Benmamoun's (2000) approach and assume that the two morphemes form a circumfix host in the head position of the same negative projection. Sentential negation in Tunisian triggers verb movement in-between the two negative morphemes.

- (26) **ma-nitkayyaf-š** *fi-l-garu*
 neg-smoke.affx-neg *fi-the-cigarette*
 'I'm not smoking cigarettes'
 (Southern Tunisian, Ritt-Benmimoun 2017:20)

Southern Tunisian negative progressive sentences, like the above one, provide the ideal testing ground to detect the differences between *fi* and *li* arguments since this variety allows verb movement to negation in the presence of aspectual *fi*⁷.

The rationale behind the test is the following: arguments realized in the form of a clitic pronoun cliticize onto the verb and move along with it to negation, i.e. above the morpheme *-š*. Arguments realized in the form of a full DP or a PP do not cliticize onto the verb and, therefore, in negative contexts occur after the negative morpheme *-š*. Consequently, it is possible to establish whether an item is a preposition or a Case morpheme by looking at its behavior in negative contexts, checking its linear position with respect to the negative morpheme *-š*. Case morphemes are expected to cliticize together with a pronoun onto the verb and move along with it above the negative particle *-š*; preposition, conversely, host the clitic pronoun but they do not cliticize onto the verb. Therefore, prepositional phrases are expected to occur after the negation *-š*.

If Tunisian *fi*-objects are DPs they are predicted to precede the negative morpheme *-š*, like *l-DAT*-arguments do. Otherwise, if they are preposition, they must occur after the relevant negative item. The following example shows that in Tunisian the latter configuration is the one attested with *fi* marked objects:

⁷ This test cannot be carried out without extending the data to other varieties of Tunisian beside the one object of the present research because in Northern Tunisian verb movement and *fi* cannot occur in the same sentence due to the presence of the intervening progressive marker *qāšid*. As mentioned above, f.n. 4, *qāšid* can be optionally deleted at PF. PF deletion means that although an element is not realized it remains active in syntax; therefore a deleted *qāšid* patterns with the presence of *fi* but blocks verb movement to negation.

Southern Tunisian, in contrast, seems to present two distinct strategies to express progressive aspect. Either progressive aspect is realized by means of the already mentioned *qāšid* which is always realized at PF or it is encoded by a progressive operator which is only realized at LF. Similarly to other semantic operators this progressive operator does not affect the syntactic level, therefore it does not interact with the predicate's movement to *NegP*.

The two fundamental ingredients of this syntactic test are verb movement to negation and the presence of *fi*, therefore, it is necessary to make use of Southern Tunisian data in order to illustrate this point.

- (27) ma-nkallam-š fi-k
 neg-talk.affx-neg fi-you
 ‘I’m not talking with you’
 (Southern Tunisian, Ritt-Benmimoun 2017:37)

Notice that in Tunisian *kallama* ‘talk’ is a transitive predicate and *-k* ‘you’ is its direct object. Sentence (27) shows that a direct object preceded by aspectual *fi* does not move along the verb to *Neg*^o. However, this is not the linear order obtained in the absence of aspectual *fi*, for example in perfective contexts:

- (28) ma-kallamt-k-š
 neg-talk.sffx-you-neg
 ‘I didn’t talk with you’
 (Southern Tunisian, Ritt-Benmimoun 2017:37)

Examples (27) and (28) contrast with respect to where the object clitic is realized. In (28) the clitic pronoun that substitutes the direct object cliticizes onto the verbal head and ends up above the negative element *-š*. In this example, however, aspectual *fi* is not present since the relevant syntactic conditions are not met, i.e. the sentence is in the perfective aspect. Example (27) illustrates that once the relevant conditions are indeed met, e.g. progressive contexts, the complex formed by *fi* plus the clitic pronoun occurs after the negative morpheme *-š*. This linear order is obtained in the presence of an item that does not itself cliticize, therefore we can assume that aspectual *fi* is indeed a preposition and not a Case morpheme, because it incorporates the object clitic but it does not undergo cliticization to the verb along with it.

Double object constructions with a predicate of the *send*-type provide conclusive evidence in support of this conclusion. As said above, *send*-type verbs assign Dative Case to their Recipient when the Recipient precedes the Theme, *li*-DAT-Recipients of this type can also occur in the form of a clitic pronoun:

- (29) nekteb-l-u fi-jawwab
 write.affx-DAT-he fi-letter
 ‘I’m writing him a letter’

Negative contexts illustrate unambiguously that *li* is a Dative morpheme:

- (30) ma-nekteb-l-u-š fi-jawwab
 neg-write.affx-DAT-he.neg fi-letter
 ‘I’m not writing him a letter’
 (Southern Tunisian, Ritt-Benmimoun, p.c.)

Example (30) shows that *l*-DAT-Recipients cliticize onto the verb and move along with it to the position above the negative particle *-š*. This behavior is expected under the assumption that *li*, in this and similar sentences, is a Case morpheme.

The complex formed by *fi* plus the object clitic, conversely, cannot undergo movement along with the verbal head: a *fi*-marked clitic object, in fact, cannot precede the negative element *-š*. As (31) illustrates, a sentence in which aspectual *fi* cliticizes along with the object onto the verb is ungrammatical:

- (31) * ma-nekteb-fi-h-š l-semi
 neg.write.affx-fi-it-neg to-Semi
 (Southern Tunisian, Ritt-Benmimoun, p.c.)

Thus, we see that *fi* and *li* present different syntactic behaviors in negative contexts. This difference brings incontrovertible support to the hypothesis that *fi* in and *li* introduce constituents belonging to different classes. While the former element heads its own phrase, a PP, the latter behaves as part of the nominal head, exactly like we would expect from a Case morpheme.

Summing up the findings of this section: Tunisian like Syrian and Maltese presents a preposition *li* which is homomorphic to the Dative Case marker *li*. Aspectual *fi*, although it interacts with the Case system of the language, does not share the properties of this Dative marker (e.g. cliticization on V°). In conclusion, based on the evidence gathered in this section we can propose that aspectual *fi* heads a PP like to its locative counterpart.

3.4. The identity approach revisited

Evidence coming from syntactic tests of different nature show consistently that aspectual *fi* and locative *fi* are both prepositions. The identity hypothesis suggested by Brahim (2007) therefore appears to be on the right track. Nonetheless, their different interpretation and distribution indicate that identity approach to aspectual and locative *fi* does not account appropriately for all the described facts. Aspectual *fi* and locative *fi* are prepositions, but aspectual *fi* is not a locative one. The issue then is deciding what type of preposition we are dealing with.

My proposal is to assume that aspectual *fi* is a grammaticalized item which underwent semantic bleaching. It originates from the locative homophonous element, whose syntactic properties are retained, although the original lexical content is lost. One element in support of this claim comes again from the complementary distribution of *fi* and *ʕla* in progressive contexts. The relevant examples from section 3.1 are copied below:

- (32) a. qāʕid nlawwiž fi-bint al-ḥalal
 sit.ptcp look.imp fi-girl the-lawful
 ‘I am looking for a good girl (to marry)’
 b. qāʕid nlawwiž ʕla-bint al-ḥalal
 sit.ptcp look.imp for-girl the-lawful
 ‘I am looking for a good girl (to marry)’

As the English translations illustrate, the two prepositional elements *fi* and *ʕla* are interchangeable not only in syntax but also from the semantic view point since the two sentences trigger the same interpretation. If aspectual *fi* retained a locative interpretation, we would not expect this meaning identity, but two distinct readings.

In addition to this, it emerges that no instance of aspectual *fi* has a locative interpretation. For instance, building again on the opposition between [+edible] and [-edible] nouns, see (33) and (34), we see that, once the appropriate syntactic conditions apply, both settings of the feature become acceptable:

- (33) Semi qāʕid yekl fi-l-kočina
 Semi sit.ptcp eat.imp in-the-kitchen
 ‘Semi eats in the kitchen’

- (34) Semi qāʿid yekl fi-l-kosksi
 Semi sit.prtep eat.imp fi-the-couscous
 ‘Semi is eating couscous’

Examples (33) and (34) show the reading accessible in the presence of locative or aspectual *fi* are mutually exclusive. In (33) the presence of the [-edible] object *kočina* ‘kitchen’ triggers the locative interpretation of *fi*, since it is plausible to eat ‘in’ a place but it is not plausible to eat the place itself. In (34), conversely, the presence of the [+edible] object couscous forces us to parse *fi* as an instance of aspectual *fi* for the opposite reason: one can eat couscous but not inside the couscous. The locative meaning brought by locative *fi* is necessarily absent in this second instance, therefore, although the two elements are both prepositions, their semantic contribution is obviously not the same. More specifically: locative *fi* has a locative meaning, while the semantic contribution of aspectual *fi*, if any contribution at all is available, is difficult to qualify. The absence of semantic content rather supports a grammaticalized analysis of aspectual *fi*.

The grammaticalization approach is also supported at the crosslinguistic level. Analyzing *fi* as an element deprived of any lexical content predicts that the association of *fi* with the relevant syntactic contexts is accidental. This means that, in principle, another grammaticalized preposition, a preposition which does not have a locative counterpart, could perform the same function. The prediction is indeed borne out, since in at least one variety of spoken Arabic *bi* insertion in progressive contexts is attested instead of *fi*. Preposition *bi* in Arabic has a concomitative value, i.e. ‘with’ in English. As noticed by Mitchell & al Hassan (Mitchell & al Hassan 1994) in Jordanian Arabic the preposition *bi* precedes the direct object of a progressive sentence:

- (35) a. samir bi-yalbas il-badle
 Samir ind-wear the suit
 ‘Samir wears a suit’
 b. samir bi-yalbas **b**-il-badle
 Samir ind-wear **bi**-the-suit
 ‘Samir is putting on the suit’
 (Mitchell & al-Hassan 1994:93)

The above examples illustrate the case of aspectual *bi* in Jordanian. According to Nouman Malkawi (p.c.) example (35a) receives either a futurate interpretation and/or a reportive reading (Giorgi & Pianesi 1997). Conversely, example (35b) is unambiguously progressive, a reading triggered by the insertion of *bi* before the direct object. In addition to this, aspectual *bi* presents the same bleached semantics of Tunisian *fi*: no concomitative meaning is conveyed by the relevant example.

The parallelism between aspectual *fi* in Tunisian and aspectual *bi* in Jordanian illustrates that progressive aspect does not rely on the direct object being preceded by a locative element, but rather it relies on the presence of a preposition devoid of semantic content. Therefore, aspectual *fi* is a preposition although it no longer shows the interpretative content associated with the corresponding locative preposition. Grammaticalization, as discussed in the classic account proposed by Meillet (1912) precisely produces elements that present no semantic content but full functional properties. Based on this consideration, therefore, I suggest that aspectual *fi* is the grammaticalized counterpart of locative *fi* because they present similar syntactic properties, i.e. they assign Case and have similar local distributional properties, but they differ in their semantic content.

4. ASPECTUAL *fi* AND CASE

Aspectual *fi* interacts with Case licensing since, as discussed in section 3.2, it only precedes arguments that require Case licensing. Aspectual *fi*, however, presents a peculiar distribution since it only marks certain DPs, prototypically object DPs, which occur in a limited set aspectually marked constructions. This section looks more closely at the relation between Case and aspectual *fi* in order to explain what function this grammaticalized preposition has in the syntactic system of the language.

4.1. Case restrictions and restrictions on aspectual *fi*

Aspectual *fi* and overt Case marking are subject to similar restrictions. Thus, the insertion of aspectual *fi* is subject to the same requirements affecting the licensing of other arguments. For instance, *fi* insertion requires the presence of an overtly realized argument.

- (36) a. semi qāʕid yrqoʕ
Semi prog dance.imp
'Semi is dancing'
b. * semi qāʕid yrqoʕ fi
Semi prog dance.imp fi

- (37) a. semi qāʕid yekl
Semi prog eat.affx
'Semi is eating'
b. * semi qāʕid yekl fi
Semi prog eat.imp fi

The previous two examples illustrate that in the presence of a progressive marker intransitive verbs or transitive predicates whose object is left unexpressed (37a-b), do not allow the presence of aspectual *fi*. As discussed in Chomsky's (1981) theory of PRO, PF realization is a necessary condition for the attribution of Case. Therefore, elements with no phonological content can bypass the Case Filter and occur in contexts where Case marking is unavailable. The violation occurring in (36b) and (37b) illustrates the reverse condition: aspectual *fi*-insertion is likely to be a Case licensing tool because its insertion not only depends on the occurrence of the appropriate syntactic conditions, but it also requires the presence of a phonologically realized DP on which Case licensing can operate. If this condition is not met, aspectual *fi* does not occur, suggesting that in these contexts its insertion may not have a reason to occur.

4.2. Accusative Case and aspectual *fi* insertion.

The insertion of aspectual *fi* depends on the presence of a DP realized at PF, which must also be in the appropriate syntactic position. Aspectual *fi*-insertion, in fact, prototypically targets overtly realized arguments occurring in direct object position. Objects are licensed in the structure thanks to the attribution of Accusative Case, therefore, there appears to be a correlation between this Case and aspectual *fi* insertion⁸.

⁸ Since Tunisian has lost most of its Case morphology, when I refer to Accusative Case I refer to a Case that is abstractly represented on a host DP. Thus, as it should be clear by now, the contrast between Accusative marked DPs and *fi* marked DPs shows up in overt syntax as the difference between a DP preceded by aspectual *fi* and one that is simply unmarked.

I propose to formulate the relation between aspectual *fi* and Accusative Case in terms of complementary distribution. Tunisian, similarly to other spoken Arabic varieties, has lost most of its overt Case morphology. Very few Case specifications survive in the pronominal system and no Case ending at all occurs in the nominal system. Hence, Accusative Case is abstractly realized on the DPs that receive it.

If aspectual *fi* and Accusative Case occur in complementary distribution, we expect aspectual *fi* to replace Accusative in all syntactic contexts, once the appropriate syntactic conditions occur. This means that any Accusative marked argument is potentially replaced by a *fi* DP despite its theta role or deep syntactic function. *Give*-type double object constructions and causative constructions are suitable testing ground for this prediction.

Give-type verbs, as discussed in section 3.3, assign Accusative Case to both the Recipient and the Theme argument:

- (38) semi řařa bu-h řl-kitřb
 Semi give.perf father-his the-book
 ‘Semi gave his father the book’

As discussed above, in sentences like (38) both the Recipient and the Theme DP carry abstract Accusative Case⁹. Under this assumption, the complementary distribution hypothesis predicts that progressive double object constructions with *give*-type verbs require both direct objects to be *fi*-marked. The following example illustrates that the prediction is borne out:

- (39) a. semi qřřid y’aři fi-bu-h fi-ktřb
 Semi sit.ptcp give.imp fi-father-his fi-book
 ‘Semi is giving his father the book’
 b. * semi qřřid y’aři bu-h fi-ktřb
 Semi sit.ptcp give.imp father-his fi-book
 c. * semi qřřid y’aři fi-bu-h ktřb
 Semi sit.ptcp give.imp fi-father-his book

As (39a) shows, once the predicate meets the syntactic requirements for the insertion of *fi*, both direct objects become *fi* objects. The starred examples in (39b-c) show that the omission of either instance of aspectual *fi* causes the sentence to be ungrammatical. This fact illustrates that *fi* insertion is blind to the semantic role of the argument it precedes, while it is sensitive to this argument’s Case.

Double object constructions of the *send*-type illustrate another point. As discussed above verbs of this type assign Dative rather than Accusative Case to their Recipient argument when the Recipient linearly precedes the Theme (i.e. *li*-DAT-Recipients). If aspectual *fi* replaces Accusative DPs only, we expect that a Recipient argument of a *send*-type verb does not require *fi* insertion when it linearly precedes the Theme DP. The contrast between (40a) and (40b) shows that the prediction is again borne out:

- (40) a. qřřid nekteb l-semi fi-jawwab
 sit.ptcp write.imp DAT-Semi fi-letter
 ‘I’m writing Semi a letter’
 b. * qřřid nekteb fi-semi fi-jawwab
 sit.ptcp write.imp fi-Semi fi-letter

⁹ This stand is not uncommon in the Arabic generative literature, see for instance Mohamed (2013) or Hallman (2017), among others.

In Tunisian *ktēb* ‘to write’ is a ditransitive verb of the *send*-class. Example (40b=) illustrates that aspectual *fi* cannot target a DP merged in a position where Dative Case is assigned. Therefore *send*-verbs allow and require the presence of aspectual *fi* only before the Theme which is the only argument marked with Accusative Case. The syntax of aspectual *fi* in double object constructions, therefore, validates the complementary distribution approach and illustrates that whatever causes a *fi* object to replace an unmarked Accusative DP does not automatically affect the licensing of other Cases too. Consequently, the ability of assigning Dative Case remains unaffected.

The complementary distribution hypothesis predicts that aspectual *fi* replaces Accusative Case also in contexts where Accusative is assigned not to the object but to the deep subject of a sentence (i.e. ECM-like contexts). Causative constructions, once the idiosyncratic morphological properties of the language are factored out, provide the context to test this hypothesis.

Verbal form II in Arabic is derived by geminating the middle consonant of the triliteral root. In modern varieties this template appears to be specializing in the expression of causation; therefore, the causative form of a transitive verbs such as *ḍawak* ‘to taste’ surface as *ḍawwek* ‘to make someone taste’:

- (41) semi ḍawwek meriem/ni tšocolat
 Semi make.taste.perf Mariam/me.ACC chocolate
 “Semi made Mariam/me taste chocolate”

Example (41) show that Form II, *ḍawwek* in the case at hand, conveys the same causative reading of the corresponding English “make someone do” periphrasis. As the English counterpart, Form II provides an additional argumental position. Arbaoui (2010) accounts for these facts assuming that Form II in Arabic spells out a structure as complex as causative periphrases in languages such as English or French¹⁰.

In her work she explains that causative heads in languages like Arabic and English differ with respect to their morphological properties. Arabic’s non-concatenative morphology allows to realize a functional head, the causative head in this case, by means of an abstract CV sequence which is reduced to a geminate consonant before spell-out. Thus, in languages like Arabic, a reduplicated consonant taken from the root functions as exponent for the causative head. Conversely, English and similar languages, require in the same structural position the external merge of an independent functional verb. Even though English requires a lexical item in the syntactic position where Arabic allows reduplication, the two types of causative construction should share the same underlying syntactic structure.

If this explanation is on the right track, *meriem* or the Accusative pronoun *-ni* in (41) are instances of ECM as the English corresponding items in the glosses. The DP *meriem* and *-ni* are embedded subjects since they are first generated as external arguments at the deep structure level and, subsequently, they are raised to a position where Accusative Case is assigned.

¹⁰ Arbaoui’s work points out that Form II in Classical Arabic (CA) gives rise to a range of interpretations (i.e. the estimative and intensive readings) which are all derived in variable ways applying the logic illustrated above. She illustrates that the available reading of a verb in Form II depends on its argumental structure. Tunisian differs from CA in this respect. Tunisian’s Form II, as argued by Ouhalla (2015) for Moroccan, has undergone a simplification process, so that it either conveys the causative reading or it represents a vacuous morphological process. Ouhalla presents many instances of Form II verbs in Moroccan that lack the basic form I, and among these he lists some instances of loans from French and Berber. He suggests that this pattern “indicates a trend towards a situation whereby Form II becomes the default form at the expense of Form I” (ibid p.6). According to my data, Tunisian has also undergone a similar generalization-weakening process of Form II so that it either express causation, or it conveys the basic meaning of the predicate.

The complementary distribution hypothesis predicts that the embedded subject of causative constructions must surface as a *fi* DP once the relevant syntactic conditions are met. The following example illustrates that this is indeed the case:

- (42) a. semi qāʕid ydawwak fi-meriem fi-tʕocolat
 Semi sit.prtpc make.taste.imp fi-Mariam fi-chocolate
 ‘Semi is making Mariam taste chocolate’
- b. * semi qāʕid ydawwak meriem fi-tʕocolat
 Semi sit.prtpc make.taste.affx Mariam fi-chocolate

The contrast in (42a-b) illustrates that the sentence is ungrammatical if aspectual *fi* does not precede both the embedded subject *meriem* and the direct object *tʕocolat*. This example brings additional support to the complementary distribution hypothesis: the embedded subject of a causative construction is Case licensed via ECM, therefore, subjects of this kind are potential target for aspectual *fi* insertion as other Accusative DPs.

In conclusion, it appears that aspectual *fi* insertion occurs in complementary distribution with Accusative Case. Not only aspectual *fi* is not sensitive to the deep syntactic function performed by a DP, but also the semantic role the DP receives is not relevant. Case licensing is the only relevant factor. This claim is supported by the behavior of ECM subjects, like the embedded subjects of causative constructions. Tunisian, in a sense, has two ECM variants: Accusative Case and the insertion of aspectual *fi*. The two rescuing strategies are in complementary distribution and their respective occurrence is determined by the aspectual properties of the sentence.

One last remark: the availability of *fi* embedded subjects shows that *fi* insertion does not directly correlate with transitivity either. Causative predicates derived from underlyingly intransitive verbs show this perspicuously:

- (43) semi qāʕid yraqqid fi-bint-u
 Semi sit.prtpc make.sleep.imp fi-daughter-his
 ‘Semi is making his daughter sleep’

The unergative verb *raqqid* ‘to make someone sleep’ introduces an additional argument position where the Causer is merged. Thus, in the progressive example above aspectual *fi* insertion operates on the deep subject of sleep even in the absence of any DP in object position.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper describes an apparently simple phenomenon, the insertion of a particle before the direct object in a defined set of syntactic contexts, with wide repercussions for the overall analysis of Tunisian. Aspectual *fi* insertion, in fact, interacts with both the aspectual properties of the sentence and with the licensing of Accusative Case.

The analysis illustrates that aspectual *fi* presents the syntactic properties of the homophonous locative preposition *fi*, but not its lexical content. This suggests that we deal with a grammaticalized element produced by the system to satisfy a specific function. The question then becomes what function aspectual *fi* serves.

The lack of lexical content and the interaction with the licensing of Accusative Case suggest that this grammaticalized preposition has been recruited by the Case system of the langue. Its function, therefore, is to assign Case to its following nominal phrase. Specifically,

aspectual *fi* insertion assigns Case to DPs that would be assigned Accusative Case under other structural conditions.

The complementary distribution of *fi* DPs and Accusative ones raises questions that this article for practical reasons has not even started to consider. The main question is why Accusative is the only Case targeted by this mechanism. One possibility is that the contexts in which aspectual *fi* occurs correspond to the contexts in which Accusative Case licensing is not available; as if the aspectual periphrases triggering the insertion of aspectual *fi* “detransitivized”, so to say, the embedded predicate, depriving it of its Case licensing potential.

If detransitivization is indeed what we see, aspectual *fi* is the syntactic mechanism that rescues the structure from a Case Filter violation and Tunisian presents a construction that closely recalls Ergative antipassives in a non-Ergative system (Polinsky 2013). A syntactically viable solution of this approach will be a topic for future research.

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