From Possessive to Existential:
Change and Preservation in the History of Portuguese

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In Brazilian Portuguese (BP), the verb *haver* 'to exist' can be replaced by the possessive *ter* 'to have' in existential constructions (1). An intriguing aspect of this variation is that *ter* weakens the definiteness restriction on complements (Viotti 2002, Avelar 2004) while *haver* triggers such restriction (2).

(1)   *Tem/ Há* crianças aqui.   (2)   Hoje *tem*/??*há* o jogo   do Brasil.
        have/exist children here   today have/exist the game of-the Brazil
        'There are children here.'   'Brazil's team is playing today'
                                                  Lit: 'Today there is the game of Brazil.'

We will show that this contrast is due to the fact that, although *ter* has been reanalyzed as existential, it retains the selection properties of possessive sentences, in which there are no constraints on the selection of definite complements. We also argue that the selection properties of *haver* have been preserved since Old Portuguese (OP), when it could be used as a possessive (3).

(3)   ...priuilegios que *am* as eygreias   (14th century)
          privileges that have the churches
        "…privileges that the churches have…"

To support this hypothesis, we analyze two samples: 1528 existential clauses from spoken contemporary BP and 200 *haver/ter*-possessive clauses in OP (from the 13th to the 16th century). Regarding definiteness, the same contrast is observed in both periods. As in BP, *haver* clearly exhibited definiteness restrictions as a possessive in OP: 83% of the possessive sentences with this item show non-definite complements. The semantic characterization [+/- material] of the verbal complement (*pen*, *car* versus *fun*, *faith*) is also analysed: in BP, [+material] complements show a frequency of 70% with existential *ter*, but do not exceed 12% with *haver,* and the same tendency is observed in OP with the possessive version of the same verbs. Another fact reinforcing the preservation of selection properties involves conditions on the subject position: in BP, existential clauses with *ter*, but not those with *haver*, may occur with the expletive-like category *você* 'you' in subject position (4). This contrast can be explained if we consider that *ter*-constructions don't lose the possibility of having a filled subject position even as an existential verb and that, in contrast, *haver*, an impersonal verb, cannot receive an expletive. However, when *haver* lost the possessive status and became existential, it usually occurred with a deictic adverb as a subject (5) - (Said Ali 1964, Mattos e Silva 1997), which means that, although *haver* has lost the possibility of receiving a subject in contemporary Portuguese, it exhibited this property in its first stages as an existential.

(4)   **_Você_** *tem*/*há florestas no Brasil.
        you   have/exist forests in-the Brazil
        'There are forests in Brazil.'

(5)   não *ha* **_i_** segredo   (16th century)
        not exist there secret
        'There is no secret.'

To sum up, the data analyzed reveal a crucial aspect of the relevant changes in the history of Portuguese: the existential versions of *ter* and *haver* in BP have inherited syntactic-semantic aspects of their possessive versions, which shows that an item can emerge into a new context without changing its essential selection properties.

References

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