

On the emergence of *ter* as an existential verb in Brazilian Portuguese

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In Brazilian Portuguese (BP) - but not in European Portuguese (EP) - the existential verb *haver* ‘there is/there are’ is on the verge of being fully replaced by the possessive verb *ter* ‘to have’ (cf. (1)). Several sociolinguistic approaches have shown that the frequency of *haver* is very low and restricted to formal/written styles (Leite & Callou 2002). In this paper I argue that rather than being just a matter of substitution of one verbal form for another, this change actually shows how the computational system may explore the syntactic configuration that underlies possession to express existence. I will also show that this change can be related to the on-going loss of null subjects in BP.

- (1) **Tinha** um livro sobre a mesa. ‘There was a book on the table.’ (BP: OK; EP: *)
had a book on the table

Reinterpreting Freeze’s 1992 and Kayne’s 1993 ideas within the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993), I take possessive *ter* to involve a prepositional morpheme P amalgamated with a copular/stative version of *v* (*v_{cop}*); if they are not amalgamated, P and *v_{cop}* receive the phonological matrix of *com* ‘with’ and *estar* ‘to be’ respectively (Avelar 2004). In fact, the fused and non-fused structures may both be licensed, *modulo* their aspectual difference (possession is durative with *ter* and transitory with *estar com*), as shown in (2). In both derivations, the subject *João* is merged in [Spec,PP], receiving the possessor role, and is then moved to [Spec,TP] to satisfy agreement-EPP requirements.

- (2) a. João tem / ‘tá com um carro. ‘João has a car.’
João has / is with a car
- b. [_{TP} João_y [_T T+*v_{copi}*+P_j = **tem**] [_{vP} t_i [_{PP} t_y [_P t_j [um carro]]]]]]
- c. [_{TP} João_y [_T T+*v_{copi}* = **está**] [_{vP} v [_{PP} t_y [_P P = **com** [um carro]]]]]]

From this perspective, the change involving existential verbs in BP can be illustrated as in (4). That is, in an early BP period (Stage I), *v_{cop}* in existential clauses could be associated with partitive Case (Belletti 1988, Lasnik 1995) and in this circumstance, it activated the phonological matrix corresponding to *haver*. Such possibility was lost in Stage II, which in turn triggered a reanalysis of sentences such as (5): due to the general loss of referential null subjects in BP (Duarte 1995), *ter* without full subject is interpreted as an existential verb. Changes in this way was a BP general trend: in a sentence such as (6), for instance, the null subject is interpreted as referential in EP, but as arbitrary in BP; to enforce a referential interpretation, BP speakers must insert a referential element in subject position, as in (7). Thus, interpreting all *ter* constructions with null subject as possessive became impossible for BP learners in Stage II. Whereas EP speakers kept assigning a referential (possessive) interpretation to sentences such as (5) (it kept being a standard pro-drop language), BP speakers then came to reanalyze these sentences as existential.

- (4) STAGE I: *v_{cop}* + P = *ter* STAGE II: *v_{cop}* + P = *ter*
v_{cop}-partitive = *haver* *v_{cop}* = *estar*
v_{cop} = *estar*
- (5) Tem várias calças no armário. EP: ‘You have / he-she has many pants in the closet’
has many pants in-the closet BP: ‘There are many pants in the closet’
- (6) Vende roupas nesta loja? EP: ‘Do you sell / Does he-she sell clothes in this store?’
sells clothes in-this store BP: ‘Does one sell clothes in this store?’

- (7) **Você** vende roupas nesta loja? BP/EP: ‘Do **you** sell clothes in this store?’
 you sells clothes in-this store

There are several pieces of evidence for the proposed reanalysis. First, there are many licit existential constructions with *estar com* alternating with *ter* in BP, as illustrated in (8), which are impossible in EP. This indicates that existential constructions in BP are internally identical to possessive structures, with a projection of P.

- (8) Hoje **tem** / ‘tá com muita gente na praia. ‘There are many people in the beach today.’
 today has / is with many people in-the beach

Second, the pronoun *você* ‘you’ with generic reference can appear in the subject position of existential sentences in BP, without altering the existential value of the clause, as illustrated in (9). Given that *você* is not an expletive, its pure merger in [Spec,TP] isn’t licensed; thus, it must have been initially inserted in a thematic position such as [Spec,PP]. Note that *haver* can’t license *você*, and this can be derived from the absence of the PP layer in existential constructions with this verb.

- (9) Você tem/*há muitas praias no Rio de Janeiro. ‘There are many beaches in Rio de Janeiro.’
 you has many beaches in-the Rio de Janeiro

Third, differently from EP, existential clauses in BP don’t display rigid definiteness effects (Viotti 2002). As shown in (10), definite postverbal DPs are blocked in *haver* existential clauses if the sentence is in an out-of-the-blue context. By contrast, there are no such restrictions in the corresponding existential construction with *ter* in BP. This is captured straightforwardly if there is no partitive Case in BP existential clauses (see Stage II above): since the possessive configuration is the one used to generate existential clauses, it is (abstract) P that assigns (structural) Case to the postverbal DP, and no (rigid) definiteness is observed.

- (10) a. Já tem o CD do meu cantor preferido nas lojas. (BP)
 b. * Já há o CD do meu cantor preferido nas lojas. (EP)
 already has/there is the CD of-the my singer favorite in-the stores
 ‘My favorite singer’s CD is in the stores’.

Finally, the fact that existential *ter* began to appear in the second half of the 19th century shows the link between the new status of *ter* and the restrictions on null subjects: it is exactly in this period that several effects of the verbal inflection impoverishment in BP (and its relation to the loss of null subjects) are firstly detected in written documents (Tarallo 1996). As showed in Avelar 2005, there is no clear example of existential *ter* until 18th century, but the frequency of *ter* in BP existential environments attains strikingly 20% in the 19th century second half. In this same period, the rate of null subjects corresponding to the third person began to decrease, passing from 85% in 1845 to 65% in 1882 (Duarte 1995).

To sum up, there are qualitative and quantitative evidences that the use of *ter* is not an isolated change: it reflects a syntactic solution to deal with the consequences of the wider change process involving the null subject parameter in BP.

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