

Simple vs. periphrastic future in Brazilian Portuguese: The role of token frequency

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Studies on the use of the future tense in Brazilian Portuguese show that the innovative periphrastic form is more frequent in speech than the older simple form, especially when the verb is three or more syllables long, the subject is agentive, or the speaker is referring to a proximate future. Thus, examples such as *vamos viajar amanhã* ‘we are going to travel tomorrow’ are more frequent than *viajaremos amanhã* ‘we will travel tomorrow’, under the conditions mentioned.

Analysis of 24 recorded conversations of speakers from Salvador and Rio de Janeiro at two points in time separated by about 20 years (12 dialogues from the 1970s and 12 from the 1990s) reveals that certain factors condition the use of the variants of the future. For example, younger speakers use the innovative periphrastic form more than older speakers, suggesting change in progress. For the written language, we examined 48 editorials from newspapers published in the two cities, 24 from each decade.

Our results show that, for both decades, the periphrastic future form dominates in spoken language, while the simple future form dominates in written language. Examining our results more closely, it can be seen that the simple future occurred only five times in the data from the 1990s. Furthermore, it happens that all five of these tokens are from the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Analyzing these five data points, we find that they are special cases of highly irregular crystallized verb forms, such as *ser* ‘to be’, *ver* ‘to see’, *ir* ‘to go’, and *haver* ‘to be’ or ‘to exist’ (the latter accompanied by a modal auxiliary), short (three of them are monosyllabic), and possess high linguistic productivity. Such examples constitute contexts of resistance, where the simple future remains in use. This can be explained by the high frequency of these verbs in language use, in accord with Bybee’s Retention Effect Hypothesis (2003), which postulates that frequently used forms are stored as irregular and do not obey the paradigm. They are autonomous and bypass ongoing linguistic evolution, becoming conservative.

Our results confirm this hypothesis: in the case of morphosyntactic change, high token frequency items retain conservative characteristics even in the environment of new productive morphosyntactic patterns.

A more sustainable empirical verification of this hypothesis requires the consideration of the frequency of these verbs in spoken and written language. In order to support the affirmation that the frequency with which they occur can have the effect of blocking ongoing change, we provide an analysis of the frequency of the relevant lexical items in Portuguese. This study corroborates Bybee’s Retention Effect Hypothesis with respect to the phenomenon analyzed here.