

Change and stability in passive constructions in the history of Portuguese

Silvia Cavalcante (*Federal University of Rio de Janeiro*)

The linguistic literature analyzes SE-constructions like “vendem-se casas” (“someone or other sells houses”) as synthetic passives or passive-SE constructions, in which the DP *casas* is analyzed as the subject of the sentence or co indexed with the subject position (Cinque, 1988; Dobrovie Sorin, 1998). This analysis, however, may be questioned in view of: (1) the linguistic change that occurs between the 15th and 16th centuries by which the agent disappears from these passive constructions (Naro, 1976; Martins, 2003) and (2) the change that occurs from the 18th century on by which the subjects of active and canonical passive constructions become preferably preverbal (Galves & Paixão de Sousa, 2005). This paper investigates the correlation between the syntactic changes **mentioned in (1) and (2) by means of the comparison between canonical passives, as in “as casas foram vendidas”** (“the houses were sold”) and indefinite-SE constructions (Raposo & Uriagereka, 1996) in the Tycho Brahe Parsed Corpus of Historical Portuguese.

The main hypotheses followed in this paper rely on the statistical patterns that arise in the comparison of the evolution of the “subject” position in these two constructions; i.e., if the DP of these constructions with SE is indeed a subject, it will behave as subjects of passive and active constructions and will present the same statistical behavior as regular subjects do. The main goals of this paper are: (a) to describe the usage pattern of the indefinite-SE construction, comparing it to the canonical passive and to other uses of SE and (b) to relate the behavior of the indefinite-SE construction to other changes that occurred in Portuguese from the 18th century on, specially the change in subject position attested in the Tycho Brahe Corpus (Galves and Paixão de Sousa, 2005). For this, we observed the behavior of these DPs in these constructions along the 16th and 19th centuries texts taking into account (a) the position of DP in relation to the verb, the frequency of null DPs (in relation to full DPs); (b) the presence of the PP external argument; (c) the verbal agreement patterns between the plural DP and the verb in SE-constructions.

The quantitative results indicate considerable differences between the behavior of the DP of indefinite-SE constructions with the DP subjects: the subjects of active and passive constructions present a steady increase in the rates of pre-verbal position; whereas the rates of the pre-verbal DP in indefinite-SE constructions present a stable variation and are lower than the rates of post-verbal DPs along the time. These results are interpreted in terms of the actuation and embedding problems (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog, 1968) and of the Constant Rate Hypothesis (Kroch, 1989). We show that the increase in the rates of pre-verbal subjects in passive sentences is embedded in the change that happens in subject position of active sentences; whereas the rates of pre-verbal DP in indefinite-SE constructions are statistically independent of the rates of pre-verbal subjects because these DPs are in fact objects that bear nominative Case.