Possessive time and temporal implicatures in Brazilian Portuguese

In this presentation, I will be concerned with how possessive time\(^1\) (i.e., the time in which the possessor-possessed relation holds) is encoded in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). The empirical problem that motivated this research was the fact that sentences with individual-level predicates that take a possessed noun as an argument do not trigger a lifetime effect in the past tense. This phenomenon is surprising and, at least to my knowledge, it has passed unnoticed by the literature so far.

Lifetime effects (Musan 1997) are implicatures that arise from sentences with individual-level predicates in the past tense, as in “Gregory is from America”. In out-of-the-blue contexts, this sentence is felicitous only if Gregory is dead.

However, there are some contexts in which this type of implicature does not arise. For instance, the sentence “All applicants were French” (Kratzer 1995) asserts that the people who were applicants are French. Even though the analysis developed below could be extended to account for this kind of data, this will not be discussed here.

In the BP sentence in (1), lifetime effects are also not triggered. One does not infer from (1) that the speaker’s teacher is dead; instead, it is inferred that she is no longer his teacher. It seems that the clausal tense is not locating the time in which the predication is true of the argument, but the time in which the noun is possessed. It should be noted that, if the noun is inalienable, as in (2), lifetime effects are triggered – there is an obvious parallel between individual/stage-level predicates and inalienable/alienable nouns.

(1) Minha professora era dos Estados Unidos.
My teacher BE.PST.IMPF from-the United States
‘My teacher was from the United States.’

(2) Meu irmão era dos Estados Unidos.
My brother BEPST.IMPF from-the United States
‘My brother was from the United States.’

The first measure of my analysis is to propose that possessed noun phrases in sentences are actually ambiguous. The possessive time can correspond to the time of the utterance or to the clausal tense. So, both sentences below have two different readings. Sentence (3) can either mean that (i) ‘the car that I own, used to be blue’; or that (ii) ‘in the past I owned a car that was blue’. As for sentence (4), it can mean that (i) ‘I will paint the car I currently own blue’; or that (ii) ‘I will buy a blue car’.

(3) Meu carro era azul.
My car BE.PST.IMPF blue
‘My car was blue.’

(4) Meu carro vai ser azul.
My car FUT.AUX to be blue
‘My car will be blue.’

That these clauses have a different structure can be proved by the different implicatures they trigger, as can be seen in (5) and (6).

(5) a. Meu carro era azul. > Meu carro não é azul.
My car was blue My car is not blue.

b. Meu carro vai ser azul. > Meu carro não é azul.
My car will be blue My car is not blue.

\(^1\) The term is from Judith Tonhauser’s work with nominal tense in Paraguayan Guarani.
My car was blue

The blue car is no longer mine.

My car will be blue

The blue car is not mine yet.

I argue that the functional head that introduces the possessor (Poss) has a tense argument that can be saturated by the time of the utterance or by a tense variable that is bound by the clausal tense. I’ll adopt the theory of tense and of temporal implicatures as scalar implicatures developed in Thomas (2012, 2014), which in turn builds up from the work of Magri (2009) and the theory of structurally defined alternatives by Katzir (2008). Scalar implicatures are computed in the grammar (see Chierchia, Fox and Spector (2011) by an exhaustivity operator EXH, obligatorily attached to every sentence. This operator generates a conjunction of the denotation of a sentence \( \varphi \) and of the negation of its relevant alternatives \( \psi \). Thomas (2014) proposes that EXH adjoins to every TP, and I will follow him in this respect.

My proposal is that the tense variable is introduced in the DP by a T head. My first argument for this is that, unlike the implicatures in (5), the implicatures in (6) cannot be globally computed. It seems like the temporal implicature of the possessed noun has to be computed beforehand – in other words, we are dealing with an embedded implicature. Hence the need for a TP (which are obligatorily adjoined by EXH). I will also sustain this analysis by comparing this construction with nouns prefixed by ex-, a prefix that, in theory, also heads a TP.

Therefore, I propose that sentence (1) is interpreted as follows. Firstly, the temporal implicature is computed inside the DP. Next, the implicature of the sentence that ‘it is false that the speaker’s teacher is from the United States’ is blocked because it is not relevant (the present alternative does not refer to the topic time, which is the possessive time). We can conclude, then, that sentence (1) is not as different as it may seem from (7):

(7) The professor that I once had was from the United States.

The study of nominal tense and temporal implicatures in BP is still scarce, and by this fact alone this research is justified. However, it is also theoretically motivated – as it has already been stated, the lack of lifetime effects in sentences such as (1) has not been analyzed in the literature. This kind of data motivates research into the temporal semantics of nouns in languages without overt morphology, such as BP.

Bibliography