

Some remarks on the selectional properties of “possível”: from Latin to modern European Portuguese

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This talk focuses on the selectional properties of “possível” and relates them to the historical development of this modal adjective, arguing that it only combines with nouns describing situations or entities in context.

According to Kamp & Partee (1995), modal adjectives are non-subjective (e.g. *A Ana é a possível vencedora* - lit. *the Ana is the possible winner*). As is standardly assumed, examples such as the one above neither entail that *Ana is possible* nor that *Ana is the winner*, but that the event *Ana is the winner* is possible. The adjective *possível* is the predicated of the event, and not of the entity *Ana*. Thus, it can't be used in a predicative position to, at least, qualify entities: *possible contestant* vs. **the contestant is possible* nor **Ana is possible*. I make the observation that this behaviour happens due to the fact that *possível* combines with events, not entities, and therefore, it seems to be of a semantic type st : $[[possible]] = \lambda es[e \text{ is possible}]$.

This suggests that modal adjectives (MA) have event arguments, therefore underlyingly AP is not an adjunct of DP. They are functional heads, which can be merged above TP, as stated by Heim & Kratzer (1998), Cinque (1999), among others.

A clue to the structure of the AP seems to be provided by the history of these adjectives. For instance, a look at their evolution of the meaning shows that they are rare and exceptional diachronically in attributive position, and are subject to various restrictions (De Lazzero, 2013). An example of that is that originally, they could only modify nouns describing situations, as opposed to physical entities (*winner*), and the latter usage began to spread no earlier than in the 18th-19th centuries (in English: *possible* in 1736; *probable* in 1868, etc.). Also nowadays, the nouns (Gentner, 2005) that these adjectives can modify always involve situations: they either denote sets of situations (events: *war*; or states: *peace*) or are relational, denoting sets of entities in context (*king*).

Although this talk does not rely on data from Old Portuguese, it serves as a first look at this phenomenon and a first attempt to describe it. However, one goal will also be to look into ‘possível’ and the changes it went through from Latin to modern Portuguese.

Selected References

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