

Preliminary phases revisited: the case of the structures *estar para* and *ir a* + Infinitive in European Portuguese

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The existence of preliminary phases or pre-preparatory states associated to the basic structure of (some) eventualities has long been recognised in the literature on aspect (cf. e.g., Moens, 1987; Moens & Steedman, 1988; Binnick, 1991; Kamp & Reyle, 1993; Klein, 1994). However, little attention has been paid to the specific linguistic constructions that support this configuration in natural language.

Our main goal is, thus, to establish a comparison between two possible candidates to express the preliminary phases in European Portuguese, viz., the structure *estar* ('be') *para* + Infinitive and the construction *ir* ('go') *a* + Infinitive.

As we will argue, there are important similarities regarding the semantic behaviour exhibited by the two forms at stake, though some important differences will also be observed.

We will demonstrate that a purely topologic analysis based on the relation between time intervals, such as the one proposed by Klein (1994) for the prospective aspect, claiming that a preliminary phase results from a precedence relation between the Topic Time and the Situation Time ($TT < ST$), is not adequate to describe a pre-preparatory phase, since it does not account for the aspectual restrictions manifested by the structures under investigation, namely their incompatibility with stative predicates (cf. (1)-(2)).

(1) * A Joana está para ser médica.

«Joana is about to be a doctor.»

(2) * O João vai a ser presidente quando as eleições são anuladas.

«João is about to be the president when the elections are annulled.»

So, in line with Moens (1987) and Moens & Steedman (1988), we will argue for a treatment of the preliminary phases as taking part on the internal temporal configuration of the situations: in particular, they will be conceived as an optional state that precedes the nuclear phase structure of a given event, contributing, thus, to the characterisation of the aspectual network.

To support this statement, we will present several arguments in favour of the stative nature of these constructions (cf. Dowty, 1979). In effect, like lexical states, (i) they do not express habituality with the *Presente do Indicativo* (Pres) or the *Pretérito Imperfeito* (Imp); (ii) they do not combine with aspectualizers such as *começar a* ('begin') or *parar de* ('stop'); (iii) they establish a relation of inclusion with event predications, for instance in the context of when-clauses; and (iv) even when they apply to agentive predicates, they cannot occur as imperatives and typically reject the embedding under verbs of command like *forçar* ('force') or *persuadir* ('persuade').

The special nature of these preliminary states leads to relevant consequences regarding their interaction with temporal adverbials and their combinatorial possibilities with tense forms.

Since it describes a state, the structure *estar para* + Infinitive gives rise to a durative reading when combined with adverbials such as *há X tempo* ('for X time'), as illustrated in the following example:

- (3) A Maria está para sair de casa há uma hora.
«Maria is about to leave home for an hour.»

Moreover, the length of the interval associated to the duration of this kind of preliminary states seems to be quite flexible, as suggested by (4):

- (4) A Maria está para se casar há dois anos.
«Maria {is about to get / has been getting} married for two years.»

In contrast, and since it pertains to the complex nuclear structure of the eventuality with which it combines, the preliminary state associated with *estar para* is subject to some constraints concerning the distance between its occurrence and the coming about of the basic event; in particular, it seems to be only compatible with relatively short intervals in the presence of prospective adverbials like *daqui a X tempo* ('X time from now'), as the divergence of acceptability in the following pair of examples suggests:

- (5) O comboio está para chegar daqui a cinco minutos.
«The train is about to arrive in five minutes.»

- (6) ??/* O comboio está para chegar daqui a uma semana.
«The train is about to arrive in a week.»

The structure *ir a* + Infinitive is, in turn, much more restrictive as far as the combination with temporal adverbials is concerned. In fact, and disregarding the cases where *ir* ('go') behaves as a lexical verb, which will not be treated in this paper, neither the past durative *há X tempo* ('for X time') nor the prospective *daqui a x tempo* ('X time from now') seem to be compatible with the construction at hand.

- (7) ?? O carro vai a estacionar há cinco minutos, mas bate contra um poste.
«The car is about to park for five minutes but it hits a pole.»

- (8) * O carro vai a estacionar daqui a cinco minutos, mas bate contra um poste.
«The car is about to park in five minutes, but it hits a pole.»

Another interesting question to be explored concerns the relationship established between the preliminary states and the different tenses with which they combine, since we observe fairly significant divergences at this level.

When a pre-preparatory phase appears with the *Presente do Indicativo* (simple present), it typically describes a state that, given the "normal" course of things, leads to the occurrence of the relevant event. To that extent, as Bravo Martín (2008) or Moreno Burgos (2013) claim, these constructions convey several prospective meanings, such as planning, imminence or inevitability. Notice, though, that, in EP, the use of the *ir a* + Infinitive structure assigning a preliminary state in the simple present is quite infrequent.

In contrast, when tenses pertaining to the past domain are applied, the interpretative conditions related to the constructions under analysis change considerably.

The co-occurrence with the *Pretérito Imperfeito* (past imperfective) very often gives rise to an inference of non-realization of the basic eventuality, as shown in (9)-(10).

- (9) E, quando estava para regressar a Portugal, tive um contrato para ir à Rodésia. (CetemPúblico, par=ext71709-clt-93b-1)
«And when I was about to return to Portugal, I had a contract to go to Rhodesia.»

- (10) Quando ia a sair do automóvel, a vítima viu-se cercada pelos três indivíduos encapuzados e armados de espingardas. (CetemPúblico, par=ext76875-soc-97b-2)
«As he was about to get out of the car, the victim found himself surrounded by three hooded individuals armed with shotguns.»

The combinatorial restrictions with the *Pretérito Perfeito* (the terminative past tense) are even stronger. In fact, the structure *estar para* in the PPerf only takes into account the pre-preparatory phase, leading to a compelling inference of the non-realisation of the basic event; in this sense, they come close, to a certain extent, to the counterfactual meanings exhibited by some modal constructions.

- (11) A série já esteve para estrear, mas depois foi retirada da programação à última hora. (CetemPúblico, par=ext34746-clt-93a-1) (= a série não estreou)
«The series was about to premiere, but was later dropped from the schedule at the last minute.»

This move towards a modal meaning has interesting consequences, since, unlike its equivalent in the present tense, the structure *estar para* in the PPerf may be combined with statives, as shown in (12):

- (12) Refira-se que De Rouvre provocou um «choque» em França ao escolher dois pilotos ingleses (Martin Brundle e Mark Blundell) para aquela que esteve para ser a equipa nacional francesa... (CetemPúblico, par=ext114246-des-93a-2)
«It should be noted that De Rouvre caused a «shock» in France by choosing two English drivers (Martin Brundle and Mark Blundell) for what was to be the French national team...»

On the other hand, the structure *ir a* + Infinitive only seems to be able to appear with the PPerf when *ir* maintains its basic lexical properties relatively unchanged (cf., e.g., Fleischman, 1982); the contexts in which the construction could express a preliminary phase are completely ruled out, as (13) demonstrates.

- (13) * O carro foi a estacionar, mas bateu contra um poste.
 «* The car was about-PPerf to park, but it hit a pole.»

In sum, the structures that convey preliminary states in EP show a linguistic behaviour that sharply contrasts with the one exhibited by other aspectual operators. Though they typically describe stative predicates leading to the realisation of a given event, they may, in appropriate conditions, suffer substantial changes concerning their semantic profile, notably due to the interference of certain temporal adverbials and to the constraints imposed by the tense forms with which they cooccur. In the most extreme cases, they may even fail to provide aspectual information and assume other meanings, in particular those related to modality.

References:

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