



## The expression of PRESENT TENSE in Brazilian Portuguese: diachronic change across four centuries

### A expressão de TEMPO PRESENTE em português brasileiro: mudança diacrônica em quatro séculos

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**ABSTRACT:** In his *Introdução ao estudo do aspecto verbal na língua portuguesa*, Ataliba T. de Castilho (1968) argues that the present is less a tense than a tense with an aspectual tendency. Indeed, in contemporary Brazilian Portuguese (BP) the synthetic present does not convey simultaneity with the moment of speech, a function taken over by the periphrasis *estar* 'be' + gerund. We aim to investigate, from a Generative Grammar perspective, the diachrony of this aspectual tendency, determining how present tense *per se* was expressed over four centuries and when BP came to prefer the analytic form. We analysed Brazilian theatrical comedies from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries, drawn from the Tycho Brahe Parsed Corpus of Historical Portuguese; occurrences of the synthetic and analytic present were extracted and classified according to their aspectual, temporal and modal readings, and the data were then submitted to inferential tests (logistic regression, Cochran–Armitage trend test and chi-square). Until the end of the nineteenth century, the synthetic present conveyed not only aspectual values but also present tense *per se*; only in the first quarter of the twentieth century, with the crossover point estimated at 1910, did the analytic form become the majority strategy. The aspectual tendency of the synthetic present remained constant throughout the documented diachrony, whereas its temporal reading declined significantly; the periphrasis, in turn, stably maintained the coexistence of temporal and aspectual readings and never conveyed modal value. Performative verbs, finally, remain as a residue of the earlier system. We propose that the lexical verb in the synthetic present checked Tense and Aspect features in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but ceased to check temporal features in the twentieth and twenty-first, retaining only Aspect. The functional projection of Tense became inert with respect to lexical verbs and active only with auxiliaries, a parametric change from a meso- to a microparameter that surfaces, in E-language, as the advanced state of analyticisation of BP, possibly triggered by feature economy in acquisition and by language contact, and that lends formal support to Castilho's long-standing intuition.

**KEYWORDS:** Present tense. Aspect. Analyticisation. Verb movement. Brazilian Portuguese.

**RESUMO:** Em sua *Introdução ao estudo do aspecto verbal na língua portuguesa*, Ataliba T. de Castilho (1968) sustenta que o presente é menos um tempo do que um tempo de tendência

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aspectual. No português brasileiro (PB) contemporâneo, de fato, a forma sintética de presente não veicula concomitância com o momento da fala, função assumida pela perífrase “estar” + gerúndio. Nosso objetivo é investigar, à luz da Gramática Gerativa, o percurso diacrônico dessa tendência aspectual, determinando como se expressou, ao longo de quatro séculos, o Tempo presente *per se* e em que momento o PB passou a preferir a forma analítica. Analisamos comédias teatrais brasileiras dos séculos XVIII a XXI, extraídas do Corpus Histórico Anotado do Português Tycho Brahe, nas quais levantamos as ocorrências de presente sintético e analítico e classificamos suas leituras como aspectual, temporal ou modal; os dados foram então submetidos a testes inferenciais (regressão logística, tendência de Cochran–Armitage e qui-quadrado). Até o fim do século XIX, o presente sintético veiculava, além de valores aspectuais, o próprio Tempo presente *per se*; foi apenas no primeiro quartel do século XX, com ponto de cruzamento estimado em 1910, que a forma analítica se impôs como estratégia majoritária. A vocação aspectual do sintético mostrou-se constante em toda a diacronia, ao passo que sua leitura temporal recuou de maneira significativa; a perífrase, por sua vez, manteve estável a convivência das leituras temporal e aspectual e jamais veiculou valor modal. Os verbos performativos, por fim, permanecem como resíduo do sistema anterior. Propomos que o verbo lexical no presente sintético checava traços de Tempo e de Aspecto nos séculos XVIII e XIX, mas deixou de checar traços temporais nos séculos XX e XXI, ficando restrito ao Aspecto. A projeção de Tempo tornou-se inerte para os verbos lexicais e ativa apenas com auxiliares, mudança paramétrica de meso- a microparámetro que se manifesta, na Língua-E, como o avançado estado de analiticização do PB, possivelmente desencadeada pela economia de traços na aquisição e pelo contato linguístico, e que confere respaldo formal à antiga intuição de Castilho.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Tempo presente. Aspecto. Analiticização. Movimento do verbo. Português brasileiro.

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## 1 Introduction

Among Ataliba de Castilho's extensive contributions, his *Introdução ao estudo do aspecto verbal na língua portuguesa* (Castilho, 1968), a text based on the doctoral thesis he defended at the Universidade de São Paulo in 1966, was the first systematic survey of the category of Aspect in Portuguese. It appeared at a time when, as the author himself observes, verbal syntax was still the ‘stepchild’ of Portuguese language studies. In describing the notion of Aspect, Castilho (1968) arrives at a claim that we take here as our guiding thread: the present is not, strictly speaking, a Tense, but a Tense with an Aspectual tendency. This formulation contains an inversion that seems to us productive. The subject of this article is the present Tense, yet Castilho's (1968)

monograph on Aspect bears directly on how it should be understood. Castilho (1968) does not treat the present as the canonical marker of simultaneity with the moment of speech. He shows instead that the present form serves as a vehicle for a range of aspectual values.

The aim of this paper is to investigate, from the standpoint of Generative Grammar, the diachrony of this Aspectual tendency of the synthetic present in Brazilian Portuguese (henceforth BP). To this end, theatrical plays from the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries were analysed. We show that the Aspectual tendency of the synthetic present, which Castilho (1968) emphasises so strongly, is not a property of contemporary BP alone. It has always been part of the system of the language, with one crucial difference: until the end of the nineteenth century, the verb in the synthetic present conveyed Aspectual readings and also present Tense *per se*, that is, simultaneity with the moment of speech. Within the Generative framework, we argue that the lexical verb in the BP synthetic present checked both Tense and Aspect features in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it ceased to check temporal features and was left with Aspect features alone. We hypothesise that the functional projection T has become inert with respect to lexical verbs and is now restricted to auxiliaries. In E-language, this outcome surfaces as the advanced stage of analyticisation in BP.

The paper is organised as follows. In section 2, we summarise the overall architecture of Castilho (1968), focusing on his conception of Aspect as a lexico-syntactic category and on the relationship between Aspect and Tense. We also examine the present Tense in contemporary BP, bringing together Castilho's description, the Aspectual semantics of Müller; Bertucci (2018) and Comrie's (1985) theory of Tense. In section 3, we dig into the history of the present Tense in BP, presenting the *corpus*, the methodology and the quantitative results for the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries. In section 4, we put forward a formal analysis that links Castilho's (1968) observations

to the loss of V-to-T movement. Finally, in the conclusions, we revisit our findings and their implications.

## 2 Tense and Aspect

### 2.1 Castilho's (1968) perspective

Castilho (1968, p. 14) shows that the concept expressed by the verb is shaped by six categories (Aspect, Tense, Mood, Voice, Person and Number), whose function is to actualise the process, which is otherwise considered only virtually. Aspect is defined as “the objective view of the relationship between the process and the state expressed by the verb and the idea of duration or development”<sup>1</sup> (Castilho, 1968, p. 14). In his words, it is “the spatial representation of the process”<sup>2</sup>. In this formulation, the objectivity of Aspect stands in opposition to the subjectivity of Tense, the category that locates the process with reference to the speaker.

Two features of this conception are decisive for our argument. First, Castilho (1968, p. 15) treats Aspect as a lexico-syntactic category, since its characterisation involves an interplay between the meaning contained in the verbal root and syntactic elements such as adverbial adjuncts, complements and clause type. This can be clearly observed in the aspectual distinction between “*desenhar dois círculos*” (‘to draw two circles’) and “*desenhar círculos*” (‘to draw circles’): the former is an accomplishment, the latter an activity (see also Wachowicz; Foltran, 2006). Second, and as a consequence of this, the author maintains that Aspect “must be the oldest verbal category”<sup>3</sup>. This is partly because it expresses a more concrete and objective idea than Tense does, and mainly because it is more essentially bound up with the notion of process (Castilho, 1968, pp. 15–16). Broadly speaking, for Castilho Tense is a later and more abstract elaboration, whereas Aspect is rooted in the verbal lexicon itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Original: “a visão objetiva da relação entre o processo e o estado expressos pelo verbo e a idéia de duração ou desenvolvimento”.

<sup>2</sup> Original: “representação espacial do processo”.

<sup>3</sup> Original: “deve ser a categoria verbal mais antiga”.

On this basis, Castilho (1968, pp. 14-15) recognises four fundamental aspectual values, distributed as follows:

- (1) a. Imperfective: the verbal action indicates duration;  
b. Perfective: the action is completed, which runs counter to the notion of duration;  
c. Iterative: the action is repeated;  
d. Indeterminate: the verb takes on a virtual character and is not actualised by any category.

The book's onomasiological architecture rests on this framework. Each chapter starts from one notion (duration, completion, repetition or indeterminacy) and lists the resources the language has for expressing it. In the conclusions, Castilho (1968, p. 115-116) ranks these generating elements. Portuguese Aspect is, above all, "a category dependent on the lexical resources of the language"<sup>4</sup>, and it is grounded most generally in the semanteme of the verb. Tense inflection, adverbial adjuncts and clause type come in as secondary factors, though not negligible ones.

The relationship between Aspect and Tense is therefore one of coexistence rather than mutual exclusion. As Castilho (1968, p. 116) had already pointed out, the two categories are not mutually exclusive and occur simultaneously in the same form. "Dizia" ('said/was saying'), for instance, expresses both past (Tense) and durative (Aspect), which leads him to admit that Tense and Aspect would be "two faces of a single reality"<sup>5</sup>. In the next section, we carry this insight over to the present Tense in BP.

## 2.2 The present Tense in contemporary Brazilian Portuguese

Contemporary Brazilian Portuguese uses the synthetic present to convey a range of Aspectual notions, but not simultaneity with the moment of speech. To

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<sup>4</sup> Original: "categoria tributária dos recursos lexicais da língua".

<sup>5</sup> Original: "duas faces de uma só realidade".

convey simultaneity, BP must use an analytic form headed by the auxiliary *estar* ('to be') and followed by the non-finite gerund. By way of comparison, the European and Brazilian Portuguese versions of *The Little Prince* show the contrast clearly. In the former, simultaneity is triggered by the synthetic present *fazes* ('does') (see also Mira Mateus *et al.*, 1989, p. 76). In the latter, it is triggered by the analytic form *está fazendo* ('be doing'):

- (2) (Context: the narrator, stranded in the desert after an accident, addresses the child who appears before him:)
- a. — Mas... que **fazes** aqui? (EP)  
'But... what are you doing here?'
  - b. — Mas o que diabos você **está fazendo** aqui? (BP)  
'But what on earth are you doing here?'

The synthetic form does not convey present Tense *per se*. It does, however, convey several Aspectual readings: durative, habitual and generic. If the synthetic form *faz* 'does' were used in (2) in place of *está fazendo* 'be doing', the reading triggered would be that the character is asking what kind of activity the child does in general. The primary reading associated with the synthetic present is therefore an **Aspectual** one, not a **Temporal** one. The contrasts in (3) and (4) set out this paradigm systematically:

- (3) Readings of the synthetic present in contemporary BP:
- a. Durative: João **faz** academia desde o ano passado.  
'João has been going to the gym since last year.'
  - b. Habitual: Eu **acordo** às 7 da manhã (, normalmente).  
'I wake up at 7 a.m. (usually).'
  - c. Generic: Cães **são** amigos do homem. / Cães **latem**.  
'Dogs are man's friends.' / 'Dogs bark.'
  - d. Present Tense *per se*: \*O que você **faz**? (= at this very moment)  
'What are you doing?'

- (4) Readings of the analytic present *estar* + gerund in contemporary BP:
- a. Durative: João **está fazendo** academia desde o ano passado.  
'João has been going to the gym since last year.'
  - b. Habitual: Eu **estou acordando** às 7 da manhã (, normalmente).  
'I'm waking up at 7 a.m. these days (usually).'
  - c. Generic: \*Cães **estão sendo** amigos do homem. / \*Cães **estão latindo**.  
(generic reading)  
'Dogs are being man's friends.' / 'Dogs are barking.'
  - d. Present Tense *per se*: O que você **está fazendo**?  
'What are you doing?'

Notably, the analytic form conveys Tense and also the same Aspectual nuances as the synthetic form. The one exception is the generic reading (see (4c) and (3c)), which is generally unavailable to the progressive periphrasis. To convey present Tense *per se*, then, BP resorts to the analytic form *estar* + gerund.

### 2.3 The aspectual basis of present interpretation: Müller, Bertucci and Comrie

Müller and Bertucci (2018) provide a semantic foundation for the paradigm illustrated in (3) and (4). The authors analyse how unmarked tenses (non-past/non-future) are interpreted in languages such as BP, English and Karitiana. They show that whether a simultaneous or a habitual/generic reading is available depends on the interaction between lexical Aspect (Aktionsart) and grammatical Aspect. In past/non-past languages such as BP, eventive predicates in the simple present trigger a habitual or generic reading. The simultaneous reading is not available to them and requires the progressive periphrasis. Stative predicates, by contrast, allow the simultaneous reading:

- (5) Eventive predicate (accomplishment):
- a. #João **come** um sanduíche neste exato momento.  
'João eats a sandwich at this very moment.'
  - b. João **está comendo** um sanduíche neste exato momento. (Müller;

Bertucci, 2018)

'João is eating a sandwich at this very moment.'

(6) Stative predicate:

*Maria está em casa neste momento.* (simultaneity available)

'Maria is at home at the moment.'

The generalisation is captured by Smith's (2008) *Bounded Event Constraint*. Under this constraint, a present (simultaneous) reading requires the form to present the eventuality as unbounded. Bounded predicates, which are typically eventive, block this reading. The default reading of the unmarked Tense is therefore habitual/generic, and the simple unmarked tense ultimately carries perfective Aspect (Müller; Bertucci, 2018). It follows that languages of this type are predicted to use some other strategy to express simultaneity, and the BP progressive periphrasis *estar* + gerund is exactly such a strategy. This prediction converges with Castilho (1968). The telic verbs in the present, which he groups together as the momentary present, are precisely the bounded predicates that, according to Müller; Bertucci (2018), resist the simultaneous reading.

The notion of present Tense we use is Comrie's (1985, p. 36): the present "invariably locates a situation at the present moment, and says nothing beyond that". One corollary of this definition matters for the analysis that follows: progressive aspect does not compromise present value. Comrie's own example, "the author is working on chapter two", is present Tense (it locates the situation at S) plus progressive aspect. For this reason, *está fazendo* in (2b) is unambiguously present Tense. The auxiliary *está* locates the situation at the moment of speech, and the gerund contributes the aspect. Comrie (1985, p. 37) further observes that cases where the process literally coincides with the moment of speech are rare. They are confined to **performatives** and simultaneous reports (sports commentary, for example), and these are contexts that, as we shall see in section 4, resist analyticisation in BP.

## 2.4 The readings of the present in light of Castilho (1968)

In the status he assigns to the synthetic present, Castilho (1968) shows that the form serves as a vehicle for various Aspectual values or for other Tenses. More specifically, he identifies iterative, indeterminate and virtual Aspect, along with uses with future and past value. Castilho (1968, pp. 81-82) calls present with telic verbs the **momentary present**, in which a **future nuance** can sometimes be detected. Following Imbs and Bassols de Climent, the author notes that the present is incompatible with perfect (i.e. completed) action, and the future sense derives from this (Castilho, 1968, p. 82).

- (7) Momentary present (punctual perfective, TELIC verb):
- a. **Tomo** o carro, **parto** para as férias. (Castilho, 1968, p. 81)  
'I take the car, I set off on holiday.'
  - b. **Fecho** os olhos para não ver. (Castilho, 1968, p. 81)  
'I close my eyes so as not to see.'

The present of definitions, sayings and truisms illustrates what Castilho (1968, pp. 103-104) classifies as **indeterminate** aspect. The form presents the process in a vague, imprecise and **omnitemporal** way, and the proposition is held to be true at any moment, so the present form does not locate anything on the time axis.

- (8) Gnomic present (indeterminate, omnitemporal):
- a. A terra **gira** em torno do sol. (Castilho, 1968, p. 104)  
'The earth revolves around the sun.'
  - b. Uma semana **tem** sete dias. (Castilho, 1968, p. 104)  
'A week has seven days.'

In (9), the present marks an ability or disposition of the subject rather than an ongoing process. Castilho (1968, p. 105), following Adolfo Coelho, calls this reading **virtual**. Two further values belong alongside these. The durative present occurs with

atelic verbs and is linked to the cursive imperfective. The iterative present covers series of repeated processes.

- (9) Dispositional or virtual present
  - a. Será que esse bicho **morde**? (= is capable of biting) (Castilho, 1968, p. 105)  
'Does that animal bite, I wonder?'
  - b. Filha minha não **casa** com filho de carcamano! (Castilho, 1968, p. 105)  
'No daughter of mine marries the son of a carcamano!'
- (10) Iterative
  - a. Eu sei que **falam** de mim. Lins do Rêgo — PB 178. (Castilho, 1968, p. 93)  
'I know that they talk about me.'
  - b. Desde que o mundo existe, os homens, antes de brigar e de amar, **bebem** vinho... G. Figueiredo — DD 12. (Castilho, 1968, p. 93)  
'Ever since the world began, men, before fighting and loving, have drunk wine...'
- (11) Modal value  
Mas enfim, se eu **embirro** com ela não me importa... R. Brandão — H 47. (Castilho, 1968, p. 17)  
'But anyway, if I take against her, I don't care...'
- (12) Future value  
Eu mesmo posso-te agora matar... R. Brandão — P 157. (Castilho, 1968, p. 19)  
'I myself can kill you now...'
- (13) Past value  
Quando **acorda**, Maria Clara já tinha tirado a mercedes da garagem. C. H. Cony — AV 59. (Castilho, 1968, p. 19)  
'When she wakes up [= woke up], Maria Clara had already taken the Mercedes out of the garage.'

In assessing how far inflection contributes to the expression of Aspect, Castilho (1968, p. 110) argues as follows. The imperfect and the preterite make a telic verb iterative, while with an atelic verb they confirm its aspectual tendency, which leads him to speak of **Tenses with an Aspectual tendency**. Thus the present and the imperfect generally express duration, whereas the preterite and the pluperfect express

punctuality. Castilho (1968, p. 110) therefore explicitly rejects Garey's position that Tenses are themselves imperfective or perfective. For Castilho, Aspectual value does not reside in the forms themselves but in the interaction between inflection and semanteme. The present form thus has neither a fixed Aspectual value nor an autonomous temporal value. It is rather a point of passage through which the verb's Aspectual tendency shows itself.

Table 1 sets out how Castilho's (1968) descriptive taxonomy corresponds to the typology of readings adopted in this article and to Müller; Bertucci's (2018) semantics. This makes clear from the outset that the durative, habitual, generic and iterative readings are treated as **Aspect**, not as **Tense**:

Table 1 — Correspondence between the readings of the present.

| Castilho (1968)      | Reading adopted                    | Müller and Bertucci (2018)                  |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Momentary (telic)    | Aspect<br>(perfective/prospective) | Bounded predicate: no<br>simultaneity       |
| Durative/cursive     | Aspect (durative)                  | Stative/imperfective: simultaneity          |
| Iterative            | Aspect (habitual)                  | Habitual<br>(default of the unmarked Tense) |
| Gnomic/indeterminate | Aspect (generic)                   | Generic<br>(default of the unmarked Tense)  |
| Concomitance         | Present Tense <i>per se</i>        | Simultaneity<br>(stative/progressive only)  |
| Modal Value          | Mood                               | —                                           |

Source: elaborated by the author.

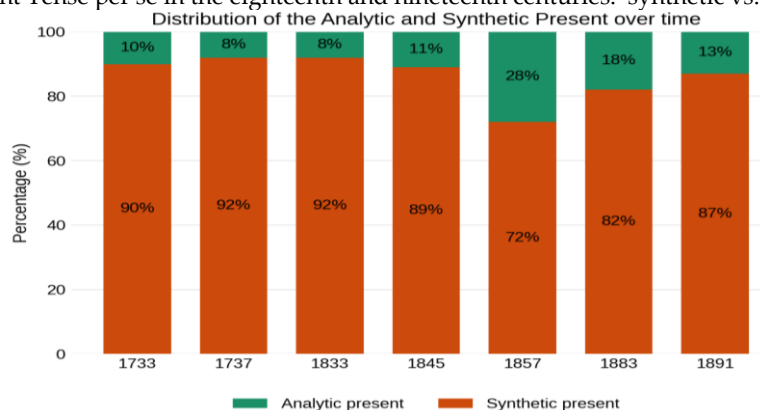
### 3 The present Tense in the history of Brazilian Portuguese

In tracing the history of the present Tense in BP, Araújo-Adriano (2026) examined plays from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this period, the present Tense was conveyed by the analytic form *estar* + gerund (see (14)), as in contemporary Portuguese, and also, in most cases, by the synthetic present form (see (15)):

- (14) a. SEMICÚPIO: [...] se lhe falo é capaz de acordar o cão do velho, que **está** **dormindo**. (1737/18, GAM)  
 '[...] if I speak to her, she may well wake that old dog of a man, who is sleeping.'  
 b. CARLOS: Parece-me que **estou vendo** o D. Abbade horrorizado. (1845/19, ON)  
 'I can just see the Abbot now, horrified.'  
 c. PEDRO: Casamento **está fervendo**! (1857/19, ODF)  
 'The wedding is in full swing!' (lit. 'is boiling')  
 d. COMMENDADOR: ...já **está escurecendo**... são horas de fechar o panorama. (1891/19, OT)  
 '...it's already getting dark... it's time to close the panorama.'
- (15) a. JUIZ: Ainda **falla**?... Suspendo-lhe as garantías. (1833/19, OJPR)  
 'Still talking?... I hereby suspend your rights.'  
 b. DOM GILVAZ: Pois entendes que Dona Nize **fala** de veras? (1737/18, GAM)  
 'So you think Dona Nize is speaking in earnest?'  
 c. FLORENCIA: Prendam-no porque ele **foge**. (1845/19, ON)  
 'Arrest him, because he's running away.'  
 d. BRITO: ...**espero** aqui os meus colegas, temos que tratar de negócios do estado. (1883/19, CM)  
 '...I'm waiting here for my colleagues; we have affairs of state to discuss.'

Figure 1, reproduced from Araújo-Adriano (2026), shows that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries BP speakers used both the synthetic and the analytic present to convey present Tense *per se*. The synthetic form clearly prevailed, accounting for between 72% and 92% of occurrences.

Figure 1 – Present Tense *per se* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: synthetic vs. analytic present.



Source: elaborated by the author (based on Araújo-Adriano, 2026).

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century speakers used both forms for simultaneity. They also used them to trigger aspectual notions, as in (16), and even past readings, as in (17), which are also treated as the historical/narrative present:

- (16) a. AZEVEDO: **Janto** hoje com minha noiva; amanhã **parto** para minha fazenda. (1857/19, ODF)  
 ‘I’m dining with my fiancée today; tomorrow I leave for my estate.’  
 b. DONA CLÓRIS: só  **digo**, Senhor Dom Tibúrcio, que **parece** muito mal estar vossa mercê aqui... (1737/18, GAM)  
 ‘I only say, Senhor Dom Tibúrcio, that it looks very bad for Your Grace to be here...’
- (17) a. MOTTA: **Subo** ao morro do Pinto, e **encontro** a casa ocupada! (1891/19, OT)  
 ‘I go up to Morro do Pinto and find the house occupied!’  
 b. MOTTA: Pois eu **subi** ao morro do Pinto e **encontrei** a casa ocupada. (*A capital federal*, Arthur de Azevedo, 1897)  
 ‘Well, I went up to Morro do Pinto and found the house occupied.’

Example (17) is an interesting case. In the 1891 play, *subir* (‘to go up’) appears in the present form, but its past reading is confirmed by the context and by the author’s own 1897 adaptation (17b), where he rewrites the passage with a preterite form. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then, the present Tense could be conveyed by the analytic form but was mostly conveyed by the synthetic one. We therefore extend the analysis to plays by Brazilian authors from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Our aim is to identify when the preference for the analytic form noted by Castilho (1968) sets in, and what its syntactic consequences are.

### 3.1 Methodology

The corpus consists of stage comedies written by Brazilian authors between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. All of them belong to the Brazilian section of the “Tycho Brahe Parsed Corpus of Historical Portuguese” and are available on the Tycho Brahe Platform (Veronesi; Galves, 2024). Comedy was chosen deliberately. Since comedy by definition aims to provoke laughter from the everyday lives of socially

diverse characters, it uses language as close as possible to the speech of its target audience, imitating everyday spoken language. In generative diachronic syntax, the object of inquiry is the linguistic knowledge, or I-language, of speakers from past synchronic stages, and this knowledge is by definition inaccessible to introspection. Given these assumptions, the comic genre appears to be one of the most reliable sources for this internalised grammar (see also Duarte, 2012).

To date the texts, we follow Paixão de Sousa (2004) in distinguishing between (i) **biological generation** and (ii) **historical generation**. Biological generation is anchored in the author's date of birth, on the assumption that grammar is fixed during the acquisition period (see Lightfoot, 1979). Historical generation is anchored in the date of publication. Although the playwright's grammar was fixed in childhood, it seems to us that the language used in a play is that of the context in which it was produced and is attuned to its audience (see also the discussion in Araújo-Adriano (2026). For this reason, the date of publication was preferred, though it was compared with the date of birth whenever the data required it. In light of the findings for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries presented at the beginning of section 3, the plays analysed for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are listed in Table 2.

Table 2 – Plays analysed (nineteenth to twenty-first centuries).

| Author (b.)                    | Play (publication)                | No. of words |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| Martins Pena (1815)            | O juiz de paz na roça (1833)      | 6.897        |
| Martins Pena (1815)            | O noviço (1845)                   | 17.563       |
| José de Alencar (1829)         | O demônio familiar (1857)         | 25.319       |
| França Júnior (1838)           | Caiu o ministério (1883)          | 14.629       |
| Artur Azevedo (1855)           | O tribofe (1891)                  | 22.434       |
| Gastão Tojeiro (1880)          | Onde canta o sabiá (1920)         | 27.495       |
| Gianfrancisco Guarnieri (1934) | Eles não usam black-tie (1957)    | 22.571       |
| Miguel Falabella (1956)        | A partilha (1990)                 | 17.531       |
| Paulo Sacaldassy (1966)        | Fulana, Sicrana e Beltrana (2007) | 8.548        |
| Paulo Gustavo (1978)           | Minha mãe é uma peça (2006)       | 33.075       |

Source: elaborated by the author.

The subset totals some 196,000 words. The plays were selected by the author's nationality, with the aim of covering the beginning, middle and end of each century, and authors from Rio de Janeiro predominate. The synthetic form is the simple present indicative, e.g. *canta* ('sings'). The analytic form is the progressive periphrasis *estar* + gerund, e.g. *está cantando* ('is singing'). Three types of reading were distinguished: (i) the aspectual reading, in which the form conveys an imperfective value (durative, habitual or generic); (ii) the **temporal** reading, subdivided into present Tense *per se* (restricted to present deixis *per se*, i.e. simultaneity with the moment of speech), past Tense and future Tense; and (iii) the **modal** reading. Generic and habitual readings are treated as **aspectual**, in line with Castilho (1968) and Müller and Bertucci (2018), as the contrasts in (18) illustrate:

- (18) a. A Maria **canta** muito bem. (synthetic; generic reading — aspectual)  
 'Maria sings very well.'  
 b. Amanhã eu **viajo**. (synthetic; scheduled future — temporal)  
 'I'm travelling tomorrow.'  
 c. A Maria **está cantando**. (analytic; progressive — aspectual)  
 'Maria is singing.'

The searches used the tags of the Tycho Brahe annotation system (see Galves; Faria, 2010; Galves, Andrade; Faria, 2017). For the synthetic form, we retrieved lexical verbs inflected in the present (19). For the analytic form, we retrieved the sequence of the auxiliary *estar* in the present immediately followed by a gerund domain (20):

- (19) Synthetic search: **VB-P\***  
 (lexical verb in the present: *canta* 'sing<sub>3SG.PRS</sub>', *falas* 'talk<sub>2SG.PRS</sub>' ...)
- (20) Analytic search: **ET-P\*** precedes **VB-G\***  
 (*está cantando* 'be<sub>3SG.PRS</sub> singing', *estou falando* 'be<sub>1SG.PRS</sub> talking' ...)

### 3.2 Results

This section presents a quantitative overview of how present Tense *per se* (simultaneity with the moment of speech) was expressed from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Araújo-Adriano's (2026) data for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are combined with the twentieth- and twenty-first-century data analysed here. Together they give 979 occurrences (586 synthetic, 393 analytic) across twelve sampling points. The dependent variable is the type of structure conveying the present *per se*, synthetic or analytic. The main independent variable is time, operationalised as the date of publication. Table 3 gives the full distribution.

Table 3 – Present Tense *per se*: synthetic/analytic distribution (eighteenth to twenty-first centuries).

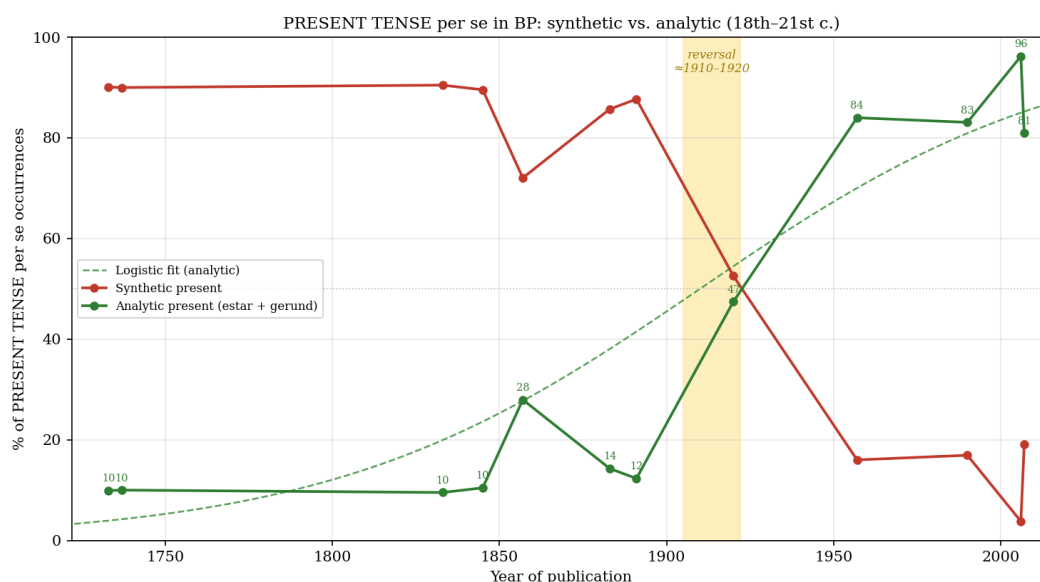
| Source                | Period  | Play                       | Synthetic n (%) | Analytic n (%) | Total |
|-----------------------|---------|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------|
| Araújo-Adriano (2026) | 18/1733 | Dom Quixote e Sancho Pança | 109 (90,1)      | 12 (9,9)       | 121   |
|                       | 18/1737 | GAM                        | 162 (90,0)      | 18 (10,0)      | 180   |
|                       | 19/1833 | OJPR                       | 19 (90,5)       | 2 (9,5)        | 21    |
|                       | 19/1845 | ON                         | 60 (89,6)       | 7 (10,4)       | 67    |
|                       | 19/1857 | ODF                        | 67 (72,0)       | 26 (28,0)      | 93    |
|                       | 19/1883 | CM                         | 18 (85,7)       | 3 (14,3)       | 21    |
|                       | 19/1891 | OT                         | 57 (87,7)       | 8 (12,3)       | 65    |
| This study            | 20/1920 | Onde canta o sabiá         | 62 (52,5)       | 56 (47,5)      | 118   |
|                       | 20/1957 | Eles não usam black-tie    | 12 (16,0)       | 63 (84,0)      | 75    |
|                       | 20/1990 | A partilha                 | 11 (16,9)       | 54 (83,1)      | 65    |
|                       | 21/2006 | Minha mãe é uma peça       | 5 (3,8)         | 127 (96,2)     | 132   |
|                       | 21/2007 | Fulana, Sicrana e Beltrana | 4 (19,0)        | 17 (81,0)      | 21    |
|                       | Total   | -                          | 586 (59,9)      | 393 (40,1)     | 979   |

Source: elaborated by the author.

As shown at the beginning of section 3 and in Table 3, the synthetic form was clearly dominant in expressing simultaneity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It accounted for between 72.0% (1857) and 90.5% (1833) of occurrences, and

the pattern never reversed. From the twentieth century onwards, however, the picture changes abruptly. In 1920 the two forms are almost level, with the synthetic form still holding a slight majority (52.5% vs. 47.5%). By 1957 the analytic form is firmly established as the majority form (84.0%), and it reaches 96.2% in 2006. Figure 2 shows this trajectory, with the logistic fit (dotted line) superimposed.

Figure 2 – Present Tense per se in BP: synthetic vs. analytic present (eighteenth to twenty-first centuries).



Source: elaborated by the author.

For statistical inference, a logistic regression model was fitted at the token level, with form (analytic = 1, synthetic = 0) as the outcome and year of publication as the predictor. The diachronic effect is highly significant. With each century, the odds that a present per se reading is conveyed by the analytic form increase by a factor of 6.09 ( $\beta = 1.806$ ; 95% CI for the odds ratio: 4.87–7.61;  $z = 15.85$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = 0.34$ ). The model places the crossover point, where the analytic form becomes the majority form, at 1910. This closely matches the change observed empirically between 1920 and 1957. A Cochran–Armitage trend test ( $Z = 19.50$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and a chi-square test of homogeneity across all sampling points ( $\chi^2(11) = 479.2$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) corroborate the result. When the data are grouped into two blocks, the proportion of the analytic form rises from 13.4% in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to 77.1% in the

twentieth and twenty-first. This difference is statistically robust ( $\chi^2 = 400.6$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; odds ratio = 21.8). We can therefore state, with inferential support, that the replacement of the synthetic form by the analytic one in expressing present Tense per se is a statistically significant change. Its implementation is concentrated in the first quarter of the twentieth century, which is the period shaded in yellow in Figure 2.

Three generalisations emerge from the data. (i) In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the synthetic form was the dominant strategy for simultaneity, and the analytic form occupied a stable minority position. (ii) The reversal is concentrated around 1910–1920. (iii) In contemporary Portuguese, the analytic form is categorical or near-categorical. This trajectory takes the synthetic form from one that could still license Tense to one restricted to Aspect, and it will be important for the proposal in section 4.

Beyond the synthetic/analytic split, we now present how the readings conveyed by the synthetic present (aspectual, temporal and modal) are distributed over time. Table 4 shows the distribution of the three readings from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, based on 6,634 occurrences of lexical verbs in the present.

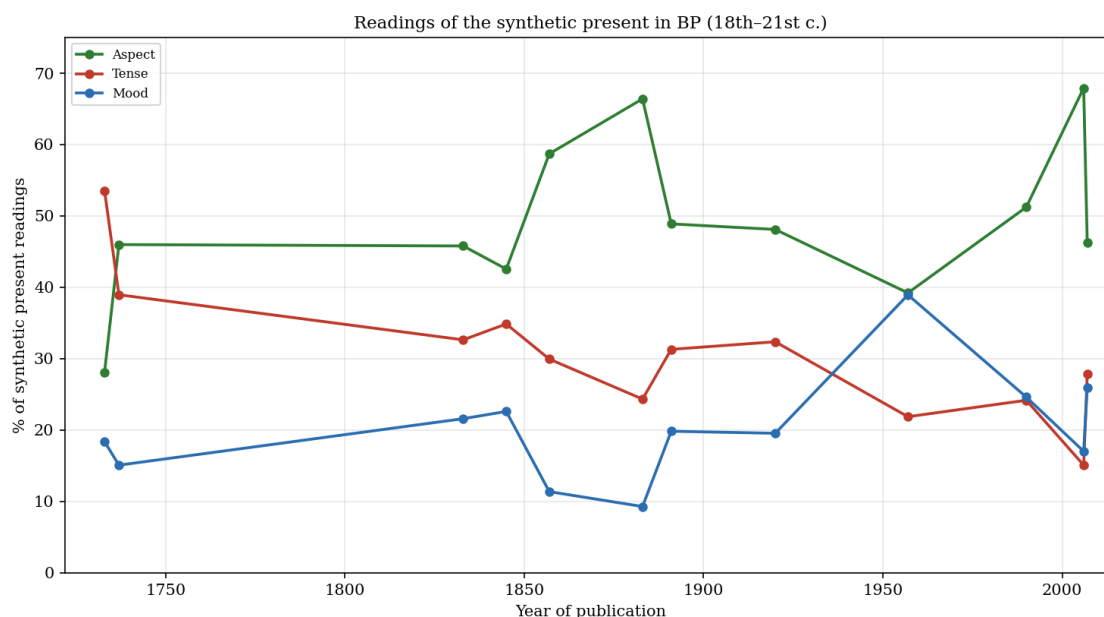
Table 4 – Readings of the synthetic present (eighteenth to twenty-first centuries).

| Period  | Aspect n (%) | Tense n (%) | Mood n (%)  | Total |
|---------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------|
| 18/1733 | 107 (28,1)   | 204 (53,5)  | 70 (18,4)   | 381   |
| 18/1737 | 412 (46,0)   | 349 (39,0)  | 135 (15,1)  | 896   |
| 19/1833 | 87 (45,8)    | 62 (32,6)   | 41 (21,6)   | 190   |
| 19/1845 | 177 (42,5)   | 145 (34,9)  | 94 (22,6)   | 416   |
| 19/1857 | 455 (58,7)   | 232 (29,9)  | 88 (11,4)   | 775   |
| 19/1883 | 172 (66,4)   | 63 (24,3)   | 24 (9,3)    | 259   |
| 19/1891 | 328 (48,9)   | 210 (31,3)  | 133 (19,8)  | 671   |
| 20/1920 | 330 (48,1)   | 222 (32,4)  | 134 (19,5)  | 686   |
| 20/1957 | 287 (39,2)   | 160 (21,9)  | 285 (38,9)  | 732   |
| 20/1990 | 229 (51,2)   | 108 (24,2)  | 110 (24,6)  | 447   |
| 21/2006 | 595 (67,9)   | 132 (15,1)  | 149 (17,0)  | 876   |
| 21/2007 | 141 (46,2)   | 85 (27,9)   | 79 (25,9)   | 305   |
| Total   | 3320 (50,0)  | 1972 (29,7) | 1342 (20,2) | 6634  |

Source: elaborated by the author.

Figure 3 presents this distribution graphically.

Figure 3 – Readings of the synthetic present in BP (eighteenth to twenty-first centuries).



Source: elaborated by the author.

Statistical inference first confirms that the distribution of readings is not homogeneous over time. The chi-square test of homogeneity is highly significant ( $\chi^2(22) = 536.0$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; Cramér's  $V = 0.20$ ). When the trend is broken down by reading, three patterns emerge: (i) The temporal reading shows a robust, monotonic decline. Its odds decrease by a factor of 0.66 per century ( $p < 0.001$ ; Spearman's  $\rho = -0.84$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ), falling from 53.5% in 1733 to 15.1% in 2006; (ii) the aspectual reading increases significantly at the token level (odds ratio = 1.23 per century;  $p < 0.001$ ; Cochran–Armitage  $Z = +7.86$ ). The trend across period proportions is less clear ( $\rho = +0.48$ ;  $p = 0.12$ ) because the aspectual reading fluctuates, with peaks in 1883 (66.4%) and 2006 (67.9%); (iii) the modal reading also increases (odds ratio = 1.25 per century;  $p < 0.001$ ), driven above all by the 1957 sample (38.9%).

The most striking result, however, is that the balance between aspectual and temporal readings is reversed. If the analysis is restricted to these two readings, the odds of an aspectual rather than a temporal interpretation increase by a factor of 1.48 per century ( $p < 0.001$ ). The aspectual/temporal ratio rises from 0.52 in 1733, when the

synthetic present was still mostly temporal, to 4.51 in 2006. The synthetic present thus becomes progressively specialised as an aspectual form as it gives up its temporal function.

These results support the hypothesis that the aspectual tendency of the synthetic present has always been present in BP. The aspectual reading is substantial at every sampling point, never falling below 28%. It is the most frequent reading in eleven of the twelve periods. The only exception is 1733, when the temporal reading still predominates (53.5%). The aspectual tendency is therefore a constant property of the synthetic form across almost the whole documented diachrony. The data only partly support the claim that this tendency intensifies in the most recent periods. The growth of the aspectual reading is significant at the token level, but it is not monotonic (2007 falls back to 46.2%), and it is shared with the modal reading. What does intensify unambiguously and continuously is the retreat of the temporal reading, and this seems to us crucial: it is the necessary counterpart of aspectual specialisation.

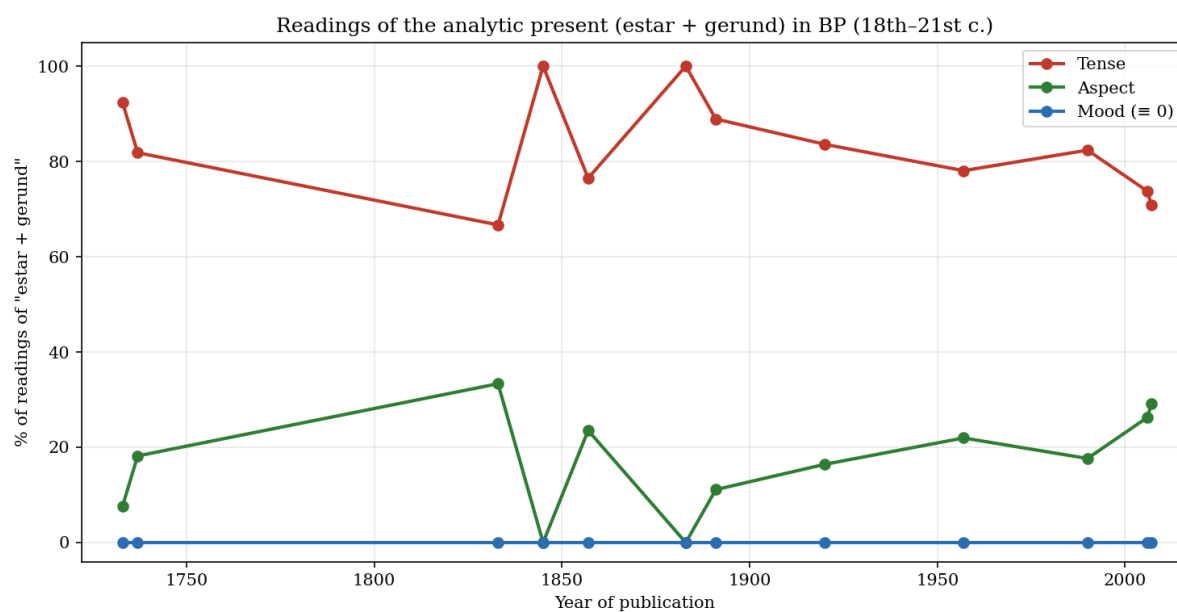
Having examined the synthetic form, we turn to the readings of the analytic form *estar* + gerund. Table 5 shows the distribution of the three readings in the plays analysed, based on 507 occurrences of the periphrasis. Note that the temporal reading in Table 5 covers all the temporal notions conveyed by the periphrasis, whereas Table 3 counts only present Tense *per se*, simultaneity with the moment of speech. Hence the difference between the temporal totals of the two tables (398 vs. 393): the five extra occurrences correspond to non-present temporal readings, one past reading in 1957 and four future readings, two in 1990 and two in 2006.

Table 5 – Readings of the analytic present *estar* + gerund (eighteenth to twenty-first centuries).

| Period  | Temporal n (%) | Aspect n (%) | Mood n (%) | Total |
|---------|----------------|--------------|------------|-------|
| 18/1733 | 12 (92,3)      | 1 (7,7)      | 0 (0,0)    | 13    |
| 18/1737 | 18 (81,8)      | 4 (18,2)     | 0 (0,0)    | 22    |
| 19/1833 | 2 (66,7)       | 1 (33,3)     | 0 (0,0)    | 3     |
| 19/1845 | 7 (100,0)      | 0 (0,0)      | 0 (0,0)    | 7     |
| 19/1857 | 26 (76,5)      | 8 (23,5)     | 0 (0,0)    | 34    |
| 19/1883 | 3 (100,0)      | 0 (0,0)      | 0 (0,0)    | 3     |
| 19/1891 | 8 (88,9)       | 1 (11,1)     | 0 (0,0)    | 9     |
| 20/1920 | 56 (83,6)      | 11 (16,4)    | 0 (0,0)    | 67    |
| 20/1957 | 64 (78,0)      | 18 (22,0)    | 0 (0,0)    | 82    |
| 20/1990 | 56 (82,4)      | 12 (17,6)    | 0 (0,0)    | 68    |
| 21/2006 | 129 (73,7)     | 46 (26,3)    | 0 (0,0)    | 175   |
| 21/2007 | 17 (70,8)      | 7 (29,2)     | 0 (0,0)    | 24    |
| Total   | 398 (78,5)     | 109 (21,5)   | 0 (0,0)    | 507   |

Source: elaborated by the author.

Figure 4 below also presents this distribution graphically.

Figure 4 – Readings of the analytic present (*estar* + gerund) in BP (eighteenth to twenty-first centuries).

Source: elaborated by the author.

Two observations about these data deserve attention. First, the modal reading is categorically absent. The periphrasis *estar* + gerund never conveys modal value in

any document (0 out of 507). This contrasts sharply with the synthetic present, which licensed modal readings in every period (see Table 4). It also supports the description in section 2, according to which the analytic present does not license the modal reading. Second, the temporal reading is dominant throughout the period (78.5% overall, of which 77.5% is present *per se* and 1.0% other temporal readings), while the aspectual reading holds a minority but constant position (21.5%).

The chi-square test of homogeneity between temporal and aspectual readings across the twelve sampling points is not significant ( $\chi^2(11) = 10.1$ ;  $p = 0.52$ ). The hypothesis that the two readings are stably distributed over time cannot therefore be rejected. There is at most a borderline indication that the aspectual reading may be increasing, and it does not reach significance (logistic regression: odds ratio = 1.34 per century,  $p = 0.070$ ; Cochran–Armitage  $Z = +1.82$ ,  $p = 0.068$ ; the result holds when only present Tense *per se* is considered: odds ratio = 1.35,  $p = 0.062$ ). One caveat is needed here. The earliest nineteenth-century samples have very low frequencies ( $n = 3$  to  $9$ ), so extreme proportions such as the 100% temporal readings in 1845 and 1883 should be seen as a sampling effect rather than as a structural, categorical property.

In sum, the results confirm that aspectual and temporal readings have always coexisted in the analytic form. Both are attested throughout the diachrony, and the balance between them does not change significantly ( $\chi^2(11) = 10.1$ ;  $p = 0.52$ ). The analytic present thus has a mirror-image profile to the synthetic present. The synthetic form became aspectually specialised and lost the temporal reading to a significant degree. The analytic form stably maintained the coexistence of temporal (dominant) and aspectual (minority) readings, and it never gave access to the modal reading. In the next section, we offer a formal treatment of these results.

#### 4 An explanatory proposal

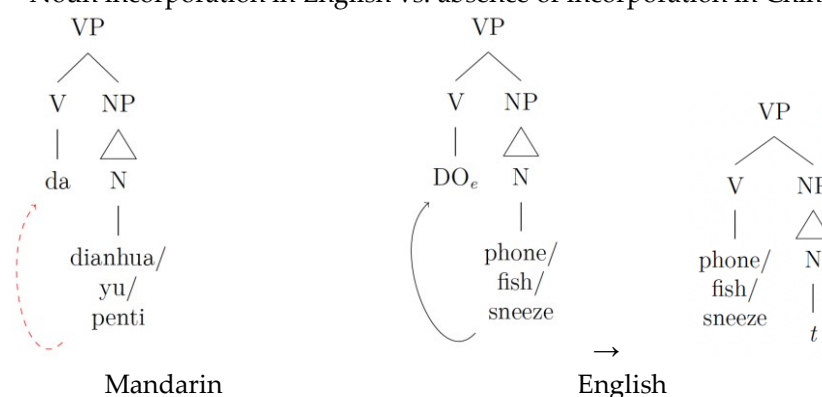
Under the assumptions of Generative Grammar, analytic and synthetic forms are seen as the products of different syntactic derivations involving the operation of

movement. Comparing English with Mandarin, Huang (2015) notes that Chinese expresses simple eventualities such as ‘to fish’ or ‘to telephone’ with a light verb *dǎ* ‘hit/strike’ preceding nominal-verbal roots, as in (21):

- (21) a. *dǎ yú* ‘lit. hit fish’ ‘fish’  
 b. *dǎ diànhuà* ‘hit telephone’ ‘telephone’

English differs from Chinese in having no morphological realisation of this light verb. It expresses the same eventuality with a single item (‘fish’, ‘telephone’). Huang (2015) proposes that English verbs are derived by incorporating the noun into a verbal head, whereas in Modern Mandarin this incorporation is blocked by the light verb *dǎ*. What interests us here is the underlying generalisation: analyticity amounts to less movement/incorporation. Figure 5 sketches the derivations.

Figure 5 – Noun incorporation in English vs. absence of incorporation in Chinese.

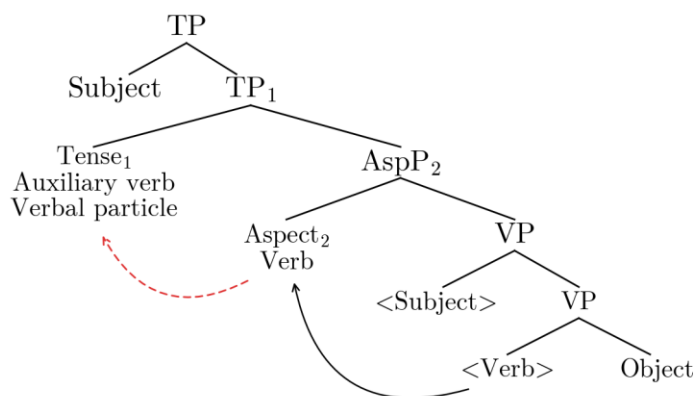


Source: elaborated by the author (adapted from Huang, 2015).

The same generalisation extends to the verbal domain: synthetic forms involve verb movement, and analytic forms block it. Reintges; Cyrino (2018) note that auxiliaries and particles are merged directly in, or moved to, TP (Roberts, 1993; Cinque, 1999; Roberts; Roussou, 2003; Biberauer; Roberts, 2012; Harwood, 2013; Araújo-Adriano; Corôa, 2025). To the extent that this is so, there is no room for the lexical verb to move to the T zone, because an element, the auxiliary, already occupies TP. Along these lines, Reintges; Cyrino (2018, p. 183) argue that “analyticization

severely restricts the scope of verb movement operations". Figure 6 below sketches this limited scope of verb movement in analytic systems, marked by the dotted line. The verb moves only as far as a lower projection, not to the higher one, where an auxiliary is already located.

Figure 6 – Movement restriction in analytic structure.



Source: elaborated by the author (adapted from Reintges; Cyrino, 2018).

With this in mind, it seems possible to revisit Castilho's description in the light of Generative Grammar. What Castilho (1968) records as the temporal emptying of the synthetic present corresponds precisely, in the generative literature on BP, to a structural change: the loss of lexical verb movement to the Tense zone. As Cyrino (2013) discusses, the loss of high movement of the lexical verb to T is linked to the increase in analytic forms. In BP synthetic forms, the lexical verb would have lost its temporal content and would raise only as far as the Asp zone to check aspectual features. The auxiliary, in turn, becomes responsible for checking temporal features in T, as (22) shows:

- (22) a. A Maria canta. (generic/habitual; not simultaneity)  
       'Maria sings.'  
       b. A Maria está cantando. (simultaneity – present Tense per se)  
       'Maria is singing.'

As the diachronic data suggest (see section 3.2), until the end of the nineteenth century the BP synthetic present conveyed, among other readings, present Tense *per se*. After that period, the synthetic form ceased to trigger this reading. The periphrasis *estar* + gerund, which had always been present in the system, became the preferred form for expressing it. In formal terms, there was a parametric change from a meso- to a microparameter, as explored below.

More recent work in Generative Grammar reduces Universal Grammar as far as possible in order to account for evolutionary considerations. On this view, linguistic variation “arises from underspecified aspects of UG and is structured by third-factor properties arising largely from the need for efficient learning” (Roberts, 2012, p. 321). There would therefore be no parameters pre-specified in Universal Grammar. Parameters would instead be set during acquisition by learning strategies, namely Input Generalisation and Feature Economy. The new Principles and Parameters model starts from the Borer–Chomsky Conjecture (Baker, 2008, p. 353), according to which parametric variation follows from the presence or absence of features on functional items. It assumes a Parameter Hierarchy (Biberauer; Roberts, 2012; Biberauer, 2017; Roberts, 2019) that ranges from a feature maximally present on all functional heads to a feature restricted to a few heads, as in (23):

- (23) For a value  $v_i$  of a parametrically variant feature F:
- a. Macroparameters: all heads of the relevant type (all probes, all phase heads) share  $v_i$ ;
  - b. Mesoparameters: all heads of a given natural class (e.g. [+V]) share  $v_i$ ;
  - c. Microparameters: a small subclass of functional heads (e.g. modal auxiliaries) shares  $v_i$ ;
  - d. Nanoparameters: one or more individual lexical items is/are specified for  $v_i$ .

In terms of this hierarchy, BP shifting from a meso- to a microparameter means the following. The functional projection of Tense, T, previously entered into a relation

with any finite verb class, lexical or functional. It became restricted to auxiliaries and inert with respect to lexical verbs, which no longer trigger temporal notions, only aspectual ones. In terms of the presence or absence of features, our proposal is this. Until the end of the nineteenth century, T bore an uninterpretable feature  $\mu$ T with respect to all [+V] elements, which is why both *estar* and synthetic verbs could trigger present Tense *per se*. In twentieth- and twenty-first-century BP, T no longer relates to lexical verbs, only to the auxiliary *estar*. Since uninterpretable features trigger movement (see Schifano, 2018), in the first scenario both the lexical verb and the auxiliary moved to T. In the second, synthetic verbs no longer move to T, and only the auxiliary moves (24):

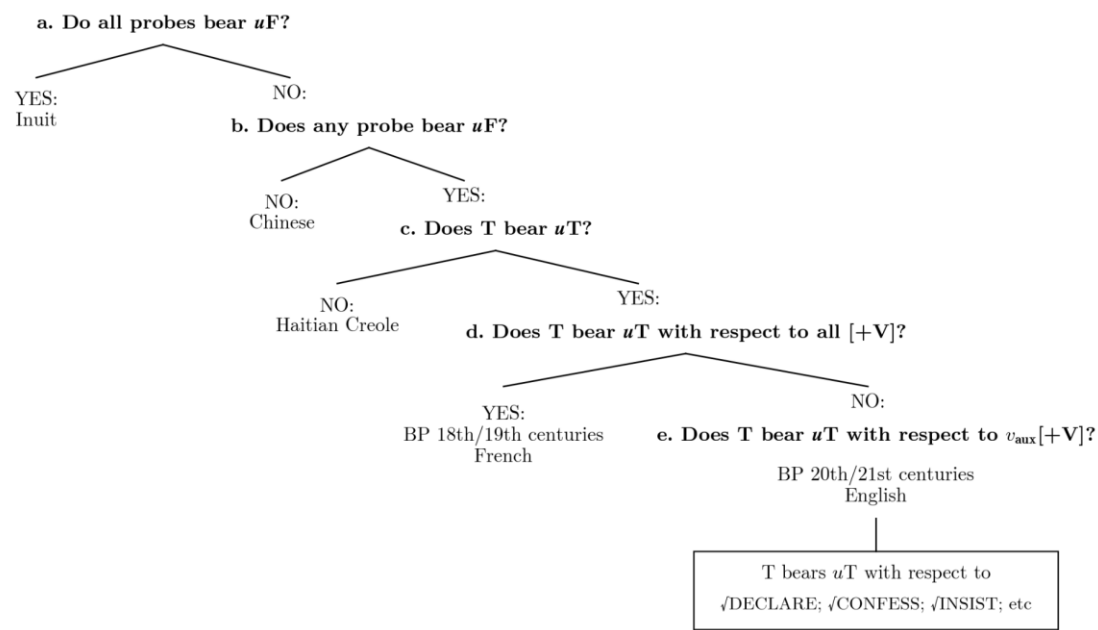
- (24) a. BP in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries  
       T = [ $\mu$ T] associated with V: **yes**; with  $v_{aux}$ : **yes**.  
       b. BP in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries  
       T = [ $\mu$ T] associated with V: **no**; with  $v_{aux}$ : **yes**.

As Table 3 showed, contemporary BP still has some synthetic present verbs that convey simultaneity with the moment of speech. Interestingly, these are performative verbs (Austin, 1962), such as *declarar* ('declare'), *confessar* ('confess') and *aceitar* ('accept'):

- (25) a. – **Agradeço** a vossa confiança! (1845, O noviço)  
       'I thank you for your trust!'  
       b. – E te **juro** pela alma de minha mãe que eu caso com Maria e não  
       faço ela passar necessidade. (1957, Eles não usam black-tie)  
       'And I swear to you on my mother's soul that I'll marry Maria and  
       never let her go without.'  
       c. – **Prometo** que não vou morder ninguém! (2006, Minha mãe é uma  
       peça)  
       'I promise I won't bite anyone!'

Only a small, lexically defined set of synthetic verbs licenses present Tense *per se* in contemporary BP, so we propose that they form a nanoparameter (see (23d)). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, synthetic verbs in general moved to T and did not behave differently from performatives. Only after T restricted the elements it probes to auxiliaries did performatives, as fossils of the earlier system, become exceptions to the contemporary pattern. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century children express present Tense through auxiliaries, but they store in the lexicon a small set of items (only 4.8% in the diachronic *corpus*) that deviate from the general pattern. These verbs coincide with the cases Comrie (1985, p. 37) identifies as literal coincidence with the moment of speech (performatives and simultaneous commentary). They also coincide with the exception Müller; Bertucci (2018) record for the unmarked tense. This convergence strengthens the residual status of these items. Figure 7 presents the Parameter Hierarchy for the present Tense in BP.

Figure 7 — Parameter Hierarchy for the present Tense in BP,



Source: elaborated by the author.

#### 4.1 Independent evidence: verb position relative to adverbs

Consider a minimally articulated structure such as (26) (see also Figure 6). The corollary of T losing its features with respect to lexical verbs is that these verbs stopped moving to T in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and came to relate only to the lower projection, Aspect:

$$(26) \text{ [TP T [AspP Asp [vP v ... ]]]}$$

Independent evidence for this loss, which affects lexical verbs but not auxiliaries, comes from verb position relative to adverbs. Assume that adverbs such as aspectual/temporal *sempre* ('always') are located in the Aspectual zone of the structure (Cinque, 1999; Schifano, 2018). Then movement of the lexical verb to T leaves a trace whenever the verb precedes the adverb. In the nineteenth-century plays, the lexical verb precedes *sempre* (27), which is the high-movement pattern (29a). In contemporary BP, the more natural order has the verb following the adverb (28), which is the pattern generated when the verb remains in Asp (29b):

- (27) a. ...podemos odiá-lo um dia, porém o **respeitamos** sempre. (1857, O demônio familiar)  
 '...we may hate him one day, but we always respect him.'  
 b. O senhor nunca nos incomoda, **dá-nos** sempre muito prazer. (1883, Caiu o ministério)  
 'You never trouble us, sir; you always give us great pleasure.'
- (28) a. Eu sempre **choro**, quando vejo. (1990, A partilha)  
 'I always cry when I see it.'  
 b. Porque mãe sempre **dá** um jeito. (2006, Minha mãe é uma peça)  
 'Because mums always find a way.'
- (29) a. 19th century  
 [TP respeitamos [AspP sempre [ ~~respeitamos~~ ... ]]] (V > sempre)  
 b. 20th–21st centuries  
 [TP [AspP sempre choro [ ~~choro~~ ]]] (sempre > V)

In other words, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, lexical verbs, like functional verbs, related to both Asp and T and triggered both aspectual and temporal readings. After that period, lexical verbs move only as far as Asp and license the aspectual notions already discussed. Auxiliaries continue to move to T, so they have always licensed both present Tense *per se* and aspectual notions (30):

- (30) a. BP in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

T = [*u*T] with respect to V: yes; to *v*<sub>aux</sub>: yes.

Asp = [*u*Asp] with respect to V: yes; to *v*<sub>aux</sub>: yes.

Output: *chora* = TENSE/ASPECT; *está chorando* = TENSE/ASPECT.

- b. BP in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

T = [*u*T] with respect to V: no; to *v*<sub>aux</sub>: yes.

Asp = [*u*Asp] with respect to V: yes; to *v*<sub>aux</sub>: yes.

Output: *chora* = ASPECT; *está chorando* = TENSE/ASPECT.

#### 4.2 A necessary counterpoint: present and past in habitals

The proposal in (24) and (30) may raise an objection. If the lexical verb in the synthetic present no longer checks T, how can *chove* ('it rains', present habit) still contrast with *chovia* ('it used to rain', past habit)? Answering this requires distinguishing between two kinds of **present** that should not be conflated. What has been lost is the deictic feature [present], under which the event time E coincides with the speech time S (simultaneity). The default anchoring to non-past has not been lost. In a system of privative features, [past] is the marked feature and non-past is the elsewhere realisation. The *chove/chovia* contrast is thus a [ $\pm$ past] contrast over reference time (R), and it is not a manifestation of the lost deictic feature. In Reichenbachian terms (Reichenbach, 1947):

- (31) a. *chove* ('it is raining now', lost in BP): S, R and E coincide.  
 b. *está chovendo* ('it is raining now'): S, R and E coincide, with a progressive viewpoint; the present comes from the auxiliary.  
 c. *chove* (present habit): R = S (non-past, default);  $E_1 \dots E_n$  distributed by a *Gen* operator in Asp.  
 d. *chovia* (past habit): R < S ([+past]);  $E_1 \dots E_n$  distributed by *Gen*.

Note that (31c) and (31d) share the aspectual component, the *Gen* operator in Asp. They differ only in where R is located: R = S in (31c), R < S in (31d). The present habit in *chove* receives its present reading by default (absence of [past]), without the lexical verb checking the deictic feature [present] in T. The past habit *chovia* carries [+past], a feature that analyticisation of the present did not remove. The *chove/chovia* contrast therefore leaves the proposal intact. The contrast belongs to the  $[\pm\text{past}]/\text{Asp}$  zone. It does not involve the deictic T that the synthetic present has lost, a feature now conveyed only by *estar* + gerund.

### 4.3 The actuation of the change: ambiguity in acquisition, feature economy and contact

Sections 4.1 and 4.2 dealt with what changed: the loss of lexical verb movement to T and the resulting shift from a meso- to a microparameter. It remains to offer some reflections on the actuation problem (Weinreich, Labov; Herzog, 1968, p. 102). Both the synthetic and the analytic forms were always positive evidence for the child, so why did the change take place at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth? We adopt the now widely held view that syntactic change occurs in acquisition through abduction (Andersen, 1973; Lightfoot, 1979). A child exposed to input compatible with more than one grammar may abduce a grammar that differs from the parents' grammar but generates the same strings. The question, then, is which ambiguity in the input licensed the reanalysis.

Following Araújo-Adriano (2026), we propose that the input available to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century children was **P-ambiguous** (Roberts, 2017). Present Tense *per se* sentences could be generated by raising either the auxiliary or the

lexical verb to T, since T bore the feature [ $\mu$ T] with respect to both. Faced with two adequate representations, acquisition was biased by **Feature Economy** (Roberts; Roussou, 2003, p. 201):

(32) Feature Economy (Roberts; Roussou, 2003, p. 201):

Given two adequate structural representations R, R' for a substring of input (PLD), choose R if and only if R has  $n$  distinct formal features and R' has  $m > n$  distinct formal features.

We assume that lexical categories have a richer feature specification than functional ones, and that lower heads are richer than higher ones (Biberauer; Roberts, 2017, p. 147). The synthetic verb, a lexical category, is then more complex than the functional auxiliary, and the auxiliary also sits higher, closer to the probe T. Generating present Tense *per se* via the auxiliary is therefore the less costly derivation. Once the ambiguity is resolved in favour of the simpler representation, feature loss follows (Roberts; Roussou, 2003): T loses [ $\mu$ T] with respect to lexical verbs and becomes temporally inert. This is exactly the outcome represented in (24b) and (30b).

A second, complementary hypothesis attributes the actuation to language contact (Roberts, 2017; Avelar; Galves, 2016). Historical-demographic data indicate that Africans formed the majority of Brazil's population between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Mussa, 2011). In acquiring Portuguese as a second language, speakers of Niger-Congo (Bantu) languages would have transferred properties of their own grammars and failed to acquire properties of the target language, especially morphological ones (Avelar; Galves, 2016, p. 251). BP would thus have taken shape as a mixed language. It was not, however, reinterpreted as a Bantu language, given the constant proportion of native speakers of Portuguese. Bantu languages show an analytic tendency in the verbal domain. Contact would therefore have been the external force that, in line with Keenan's (2002, p. 3) Inertia Principle, "things stay as they are unless acted upon by an outside force", disturbed the input. It increased the

ambiguity of the input and triggered the choice of the simpler representation, the one with the auxiliary verb.

The two hypotheses do not seem to us to be in competition. Contact supplies the external actuating force, and feature economy supplies the internal mechanism of reanalysis in acquisition. Both point to the retreat from a meso- to a microparameter described in section 4. Both also fit a broader typological picture: the change from a system with a synthetic tendency to one with an analytic tendency, attested in varieties of European languages (Haspelmath; Michaelis, 2017). From this perspective, BP is simply implementing, in the domain of the present Tense, a movement that recurs in these languages. Finally, the contact hypothesis carries a burden of proof. Supporting it would require showing that the African languages in contact during the colonial period already displayed the analytic tendency now attributed to them. Given the limits of this article, we leave this point for future research.

## 5 Conclusions

This paper has examined, from the perspective of Generative Grammar, how the present Tense has been expressed in BP over four centuries. Its starting point, and the work it pays tribute to, is Castilho's (1968) *Introdução ao estudo do aspecto verbal*. Castilho describes, from an onomasiological perspective, a present with a virtual character and an aspectual tendency. In our formal proposal, this becomes a lexical verb that, in the synthetic present, does not reach T and stops at Asp.

Three empirical findings support this reinterpretation: (i) The replacement of the synthetic form by the analytic one in expressing present Tense *per se* is statistically significant and concentrated in the first quarter of the twentieth century, with the crossover point estimated at 1910; (ii) The synthetic present becomes progressively specialised as an Aspectual form, and the Temporal reading retreats robustly and monotonically; and (iii) The analytic form *estar* + gerund stably maintains the

coexistence of temporal and aspectual readings and never gives access to the modal reading.

At the theoretical level, the change was implemented as a parametric retreat from a meso- to a microparameter on the Parameter Hierarchy. The projection T stops bearing [*u*T] with respect to all [+V] elements and relates it only to the auxiliary, with performatives remaining as a residual nanoparameter. What has been lost can therefore be described on a four-level scale, set out in Table 6.

Table 6 – Scale of what has been lost in the BP synthetic present.

| Level     | What has been lost                                                                  |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reading   | the interpretation E = S (simultaneity with the moment of speech)                   |
| Feature   | the deictic feature [present] / [ <i>u</i> T] of T with respect to the lexical verb |
| Movement  | raising of the lexical verb to T (V stops at Asp)                                   |
| Parameter | the value linking T to lexical classes (meso → micro → nano)                        |

Source: elaborated by the author.

Finally, it should be stressed once more what exactly has been lost. BP is still fully able to locate situations at the moment of speech. The present Tense remains available and has simply moved to the analytic form. What the synthetic lexical verb has lost is the capacity to do this itself. Castilho's (1968) description, Müller; Bertucci's (2017) aspectual semantics, Comrie's (1985) theory of tense and the diachronic data presented here all converge. This convergence suggests that what Castilho called a **tendency**, the theory of syntactic movement calls a landing site. One question left open for future work is whether the same pattern of V-to-T retreat extends to other tenses in the paradigm. If it does, this would point to a generalised process of analyticisation in BP.

As for the actuation of the change, we have proposed that it results from the resolution of a parametric ambiguity during acquisition, through abduction (Andersen, 1973), in favour of the less costly representation (Feature Economy; Roberts; Roussou, 2003). This may have been triggered by the language contact that

shaped the formation of BP (Avelar; Galves, 2016). It is also part of a wider typological drift towards analyticisation (Haspelmath; Michaelis, 2017).

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