

Recipient passives in Mozambican Portuguese: A case of constructional alternation in the making

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As a pluricentric language, Portuguese counts several emerging varieties that are still in the process of formation, especially on the African continent. Due to extensive and contemporaneous contact with Bantu languages (among which, e.g., Changana), the variety of Portuguese spoken in Mozambique displays a wide variety of contact-induced innovations at various levels of linguistic organisation (Gonçalves 2010; Firmino 2021; Nhatuve 2022). Some of these changes, however, are already better established than others. This appears to be the case of the Recipient passive, a construction unique to Mozambican Portuguese (MP). With ditransitive verbs, MP allows for the participant with the thematic role of Recipient (usually coded as Indirect Object) to be promoted to Subject position in the passive voice (see (1) below), an option that is precluded in other varieties of Portuguese. This Recipient passive innovation occurs in alternation with the “standard” Theme passive construction (2) in which the Theme/Direct Object features as Subject (Nhatuve & Mavota 2021). Recipient passives thus show signs of *constructionalization* (Traugott & Trousdale 2014) since they are productive (they are found with more than 50 different verbs) and display some degrees of schematicity (semantic extension from prototypical transfer to transfer as a “social interaction” (Langacker 2008: 394)).

- (1) *Pode-se dizer que Mozambique é fornecido a sua própria corrente eléctrica por um país vizinho.* (Corpus do Português)
'It can be said that Mozambique is provided its very own electrical power by a neighbouring country.'
- (2) *Rooyen explicou que o óleo será fornecido a Petromoc.* (Corpus do Português)
'Rooyen explained that the oil would be supplied to Petromoc.'

Although Recipient passives emerged due to language contact and structural convergence with the contact languages, they also turn out to be sensitive to language-specific constraints, so that the receiving language (i.e., MP) also plays a part in shaping the variation. In short, Recipient passives do not occur at random in MP but their use is shaped by a set of both language-external and language-internal enabling and hindering factors. On the basis of this emerging constructional alternation, and after having circumscribed the variable context as accurately as possible, the present study aims to unravel the multifactorial nature of the choice between Recipient and Theme passives and identify which enabling factors work as the best predictors of the alternation, by means of statistical modelling, using more specifically logistic regression and conditional inference trees. In particular, we would like to show that, beyond the undeniable effect of language contact, variation is motivated by semantics.

To achieve this goal, we relied on the *Corpus do Português – Web/Dialects* (Davies 2016), composed of authentic written data retrieved from Mozambican blogs and websites, from which we extracted all occurrences of ditransitive passive sentences (both standard Theme passive and non-standard Recipient passives), constituting a database of about 1,000 occurrences annotated according to relevant syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and social factors. While some of them are typically those mentioned in the literature such as definiteness and animacy of the Recipient, pronominality (Bresnan *et al.* 2007; Szmrecsanyi 2016), register and genre, others such as construal and (discursive) accessibility are a relatively novel contribution (see Soares da Silva *et al.* 2021 for an operationalization of construal). Our approach is innovative since it focuses on an alternation at the level of the passive voice and brings more semantics into the statistical modelling. Moreover, it seeks to apply newly developed methodological tools to a language (and more specifically a non-dominant variety of it) that is still underrepresented in this area of linguistics, and by doing so, to shed more light on an ongoing process of constructional change that is typical of Mozambican Portuguese and appears furthermore to be unique among Romance languages.

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