

Tense-sensitive and tense-neutral ϕ -suffixes in Portuguese

Tarald Taraldsen

We may think of ϕ -suffixes that only occur in some specific tense as being footed at a tense-related feature specific to that tense. If a ϕ -suffix occurs in more than one tense, perhaps in all, we can think of them either as being footed either at ϕ -feature or some tense-related feature common to many or all tenses, e.g. T.

In Portuguese, a number of ϕ -suffixes occur in all tenses except for the perfective past tense pretérito, which, with one possible exception, has its own set of ϕ -features. I take the ϕ -suffixes specific to the pretérito to be footed at a feature Q which is also specific to the pretérito. It turns out the ϕ -suffixes footed at Q will block the tense-neutral ones whether these are footed at the lowest ϕ -feature or at T below Q.

The main focus in this paper is on the 1pl suffix *mos*, which seems to occur in all the tenses including the pretérito. Since *mos* occurs in the pretérito, it must be footed at a ϕ -feature rather than below Q. However, *mos* affects the pronunciation of the theme vowel *a* in the present tense, but not in the pretérito:

present tense 1pl *cant-a-mos* = *cant*-[æ]-*mos* ≠ pretérito 1pl *cant-a-mos* = *cant*-[a]-*mos*

This suggests that there is a “screen” # between the theme vowel and *mos* in the pretérito: Either *mos* is footed at the lowest ϕ -feature, and # is a separate morpheme lexicalizing the Q specific to the pretérito, or the 1pl suffix of the pretérito is actually #*mos* distinct from the *mos* in the other tenses and footed at Q.

It turns out that the second option is preferable when we look at the pretérito forms with dedicated pretérito roots and the special theme vowel ε : In these paradigms, a *mos* footed at the lowest ϕ -feature would block the pretérito-specific 3pl *ram* footed at Q.