

The emergence of approximative *meio que* in Brazilian Portuguese

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Research Topic

Uses and emergence of *meio que*, a new approximation marker in Brazilian Portuguese
(Spanish *en plan* and English *sort of/kind of*)

(1) A parentada ficou **meio que** pasma, se perturbando pelo talento desperdiçado (...).
(TenTen23, 98)

The relatives got kind of stunned, becoming distressed by the wasted talent (...).

(2) Nós **meio que** fingimos que temos controle regulamentar, mas não o temos. (TenTen23, 98)
We kind of pretend that we have regulatory control, but we really don't.

(3) (...) mas **meio que assim**, eu posso ver o ponto de outras pessoas e reformular minhas opiniões (...). (TenTen23, 15)

But kind of, like, I can see other people's point of view and rethink my opinions.

Research Questions

Originally, *meio* is a degree adverb used to indicate the partial attribution of a property to a predicate, as in (4), whereas *que* is a multifunctional particle (< Lat. *quam*) that can be used as a complementiser, a relative pronoun, and a conjunction with several semantic nuances, such as causal and comparative.

(4) Ela anda **meio** solitária desde que se separou do Júnior e anda numa busca constante por companhias (TenTen23, 252).

She has been feeling a bit/a little lonely since she split up with Júnior and has been constantly looking for company.

Considering that *meio* and *que* exhibit independent functions originally, the main objective is to explain the **reanalysis** process that gave rise to the approximative interpretation and led to the syntactic actualisation of both forms as a periphrastic structure. The analysis is guided by two main research questions:

(I) Which conceptual link can be established between the adverbial *meio* and the approximative *meio que*?

(II) What bridging contexts motivated the development of approximative *meio que* and how do they differ from the source and the target contexts?

Methodology

- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of synchronic and diachronic evidence
- Brazilian Portuguese data extracted from a web corpus (ptTenTen23, Sketch Engine) and a historical corpus of theatrical plays (Rosemeyer 2025).
- Stages of analysis:
 1. Investigation of the factors underlying the **variation between the adverbial *meio* and the approximative periphrasis *meio que***, based on **semantic criteria**, such as scalarity, the valence (positive, negative, or neutral) of the item modified by the marker, predicate type (more objective or more subjective), and tense, as well as **syntactic criteria**, such as scope and position;
 2. Investigation of contexts in which *meio* and *que* occur in **syntagmatic contiguity**, while *meio* still retains its degree meaning. This second line of inquiry aims primarily to identify clues as to which function of *que*, within its broad functional network, played a role in the emergence of the periphrastic construction.

The main distinction between source and target

The concept of approximation:

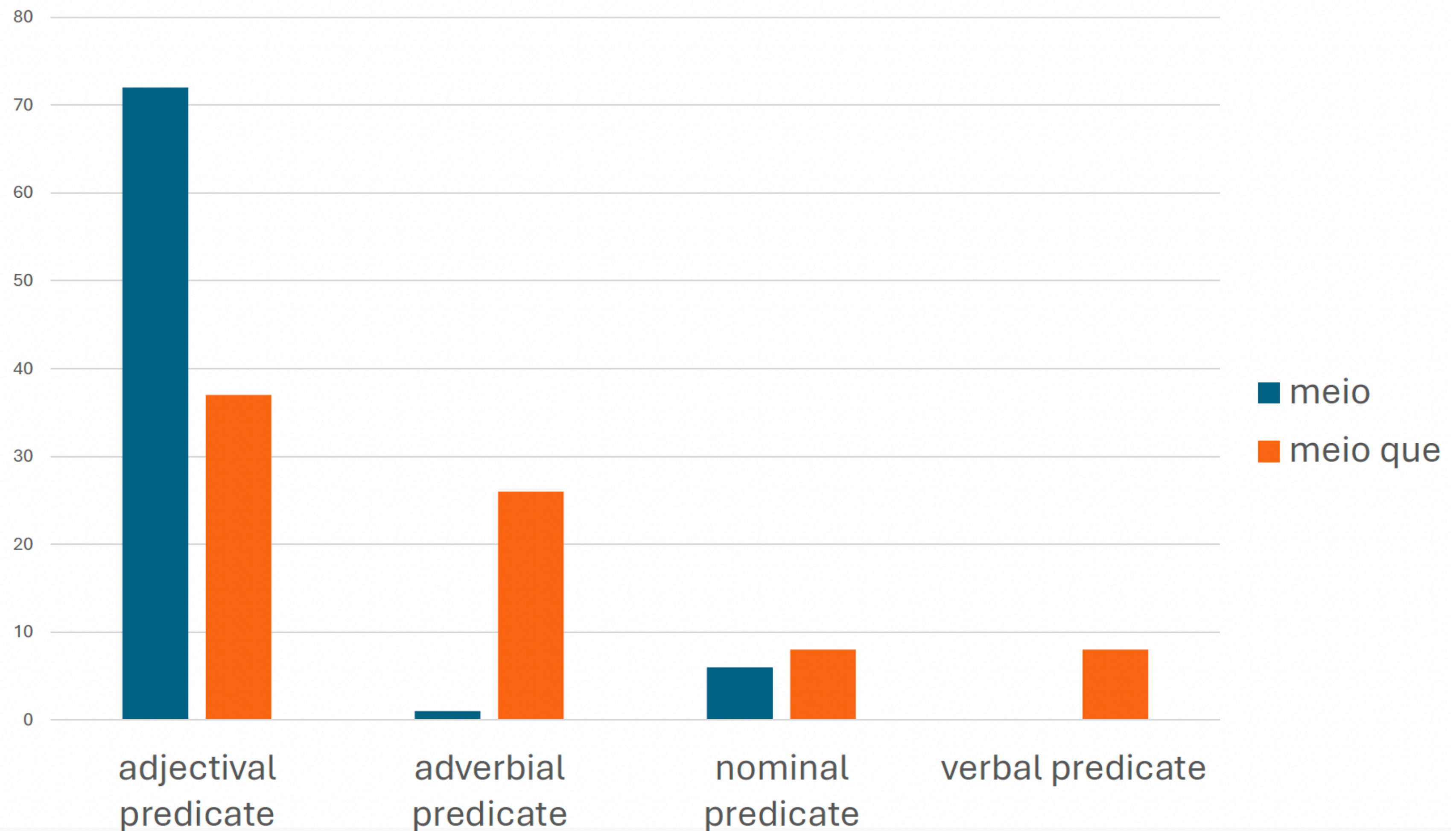
“These markers flag a semantically loose use of a lexical expression, a use clearly affecting the truth conditions of a proposition” (Mihatsch 2009: 65).

“(...) loosening of the semantic application restrictions of a lexical expression” (Mihatsch 2009: 65).

- By signalling approximate rather than strict category membership, *meio que* “relaxes” the application of truth conditions, modifying how strictly the proposition must be interpreted in order to count as true or pragmatically appropriate.
- By contrast, by using *meio*, the speaker still remains committed to asserting it, although the described property is presented as holding to a lesser degree.

Preliminary Results

Figure 1. Distribution of *meio* and *meio que* according to scope



Source contexts

➤ *Meio* used as a degree adverb with scope over adjectival, nominal, and adverbial predicates.

(5) Tava **meio** deprê... Meu tratamento vai ser mais longo do que eu esperava. (TenTen23, 247)

I was a little depressed... My treatment is going to take longer than I expected.

(6) Seguindo um estilo **meio** Dua Lipa, a cantora usa o visual de forma super moderna. (TenTen23, 227)

Following a style somewhat like Dua Lipa, the singer uses the look in a very modern way.

(7) Vi aqui no post que o pessoal tudo usa 55lbs! </s><s> Eu **meio** na dúvida deixei calibrado 45/45lbs. (TenTen23, 262)

I saw in the post that everyone was using 55 lbs! A little in doubt, I left it calibrated at 45/45 lbs.

Switch contexts

- *Meio que* spreads to a wider range of contexts, expanding its scope possibilities: it may take verbal predicates, the whole proposition and discourse itself within its scope → Actualization (Timberlake 1977; Hansen 2021)
- *Meio que* used before **adjectival phrases** no longer to indicate an attribute, but exclusively to indicate approximated class membership. The interpretation of the copula phrase is then no longer restricted to a predication reading.
- Pragmatically, this has the effect of reducing the speaker's commitment to the assertion, as opposed to the source contexts.

(8) (...) Edu conta ao doutor sobre suas aventuras e obstáculos, de como é amar! </s><s> Mas não qualquer amor, digamos que um amor **meio que** "estranho" ao ver dele e das pessoas que estão ao seu redor. (TenTen23, 187)

But not just any kind of love – let's say a kind of “strange” love in his view and in the view of the people around him.

Switch contexts

(9) Se exageramos muito num dos temperos corremos o risco de azedar tudo. </s><s> Se excluirmos outros, podemos acabar por deixar as coisas **meio que** insossas. (TenTen23, 146)

If we exaggerate one of the seasonings, we run the risk of spoiling everything. If we leave others out, things may end up kind of tasteless.

(10) Me desculpa é que eu não sei bem como é esse colegio e to **meio que** perdido aqui Dul. (TenTen23, 82)

I'm sorry, it's just that I don't really know what this school is like, and I'm kind of lost here, Dul.

(11) Nós **meio que** fingimos que temos controle regulamentar, mas não o temos. (TenTen23, 27)

We kind of pretend that we have regulatory control, but we really don't.

(12) Eu sempre fui aquela garota pé no chão, que vive o presente pensando no futuro, sabe? </s><s> Eu **meio que** forro a cama todos os dias, mas muito raramente deito nela. </s><s> **Metáfora ruim?** </s><s> Então decidi que eu preciso aproveitar mais o hoje também, viver um pouco, pois – **mais metáfora ruim** – o que se leva da vida é a vida que se leva. (TenTen23, 25)

I kind of make the bed every day, but I very rarely lie in it.

(13) Mas fazer o que. é a segunda obra que leio do David, e me desapontou um pouco, mas lerei outras, serei insistente nele. </s><s> **Meio que** agora eu fiquei com medo de ler esse livro. </s><s> Mas mesmo assim darei oportunidade, Parabéns pela sinceridade. (TenTen23, 158)

Now I'm kind of scared to read this book.

(?) Kind of now I'm scared to read this book.

Bridging contexts

- *Meio* used before comparative *que* to modify **noun phrases**
- Communicative purpose of establishing an approximated (and hence mitigated) comparison
- *Que* is the prototypical conjunction to express comparison of inequality in Portuguese, similarly to English *than* (*Ela é mais alta que o irmão*/“She is taller than her brother”). It is also used in intensifying constructions with *mais/menos* (*Isso é mais que o esperado*/“This is more than expected”) that likewise show features of comparison of inequality.
- ADV + *que*: productive comparative construction in BP (*mais que, menos que, pior que, melhor que*).
- Through the association with *meio*, the meaning of *que* would also be reanalysed: from comparison of inequality to similitive comparison.
- Evidence that this is plausible is the emergence of *que nem* as a new comparative marker specialised in the expression of similitive comparison (cf. Longhin-Thomazi 2011):

(14) Esta revelação caiu **que nem** uma bomba junto dos fãs. (TenTen23)

Bridging contexts

(15) O single I Hate Ya / I Want Ya Back era mais para o punk rock do que para o hardcore, mas sua importância como precursor na construção daquela então nova cena é inquestionável. </s><s>

A primeira música é um punkão básico e a segunda é **meio que** uma balada. (TenTen23)

The single I Hate Ya / I Want Ya Back leaned more towards punk rock than hardcore, but its importance as a precursor in the development of that new scene is unquestionable.

The first song is classic punk rock, and the second is a little like/kind of a ballad.

Bridging contexts

Two interpretations are possible:

- the second is [a little] [like] a ballad → **Scalar**

[meio] [que uma balada]

Ballad is an independent entity/category used as a standard of comparison; a simulative comparison is established between *I want ya back* and *a ballad*

- the second is [kind of] a ballad → **Non-scalar**

[meio que uma balada]

Ballad functions as a conceptual frame; the referent is inserted approximately into the category “ballad”; non-strict categorisation via conceptual approximation

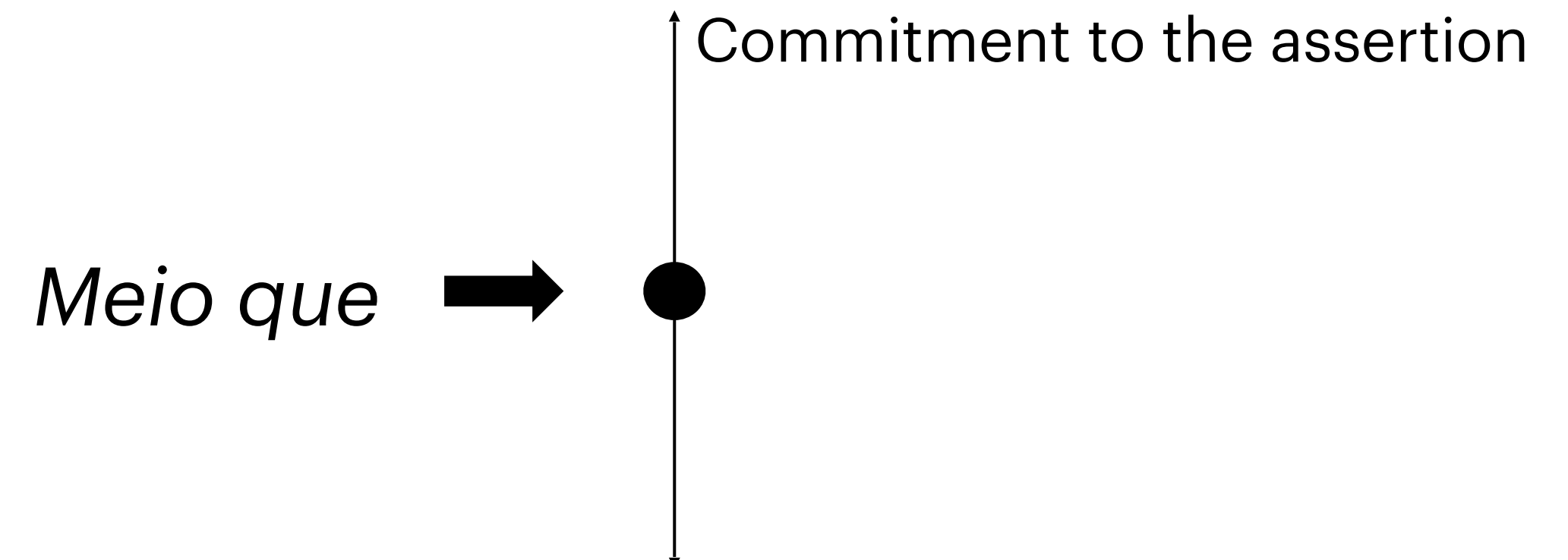
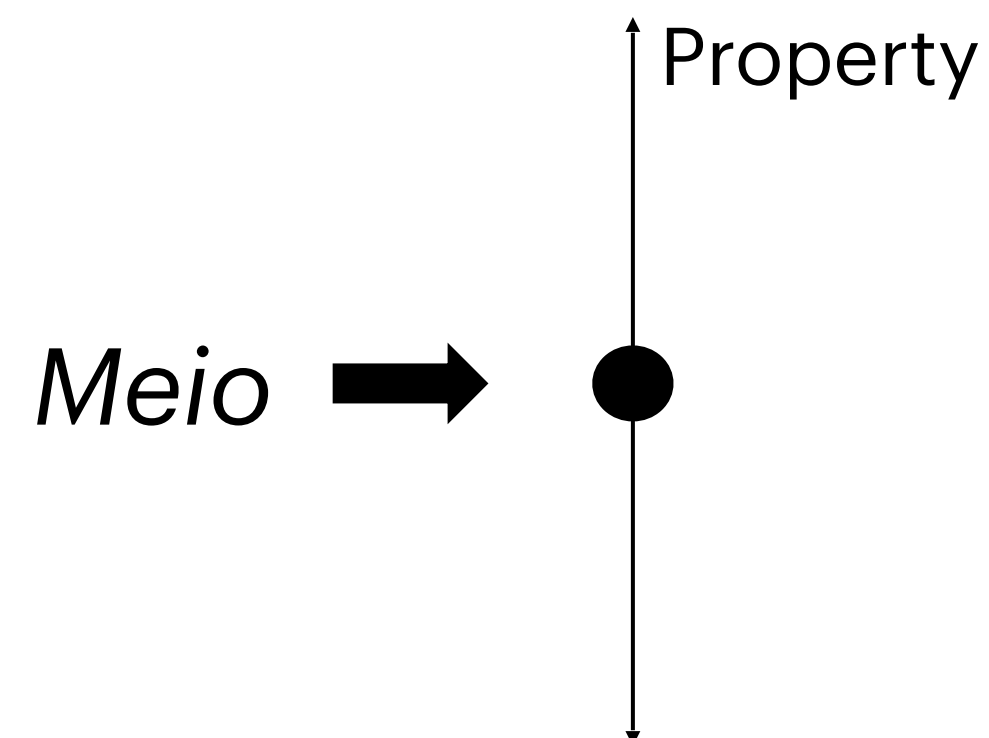
Preliminary Conclusions

Degree adverb

>

Marker of approximation

Incompleteness relative to a standard



Next stages

- **Diachronic evidence** for the hypothesis raised in the synchronic study
- Investigation of the changes involving *que* within the paradigm of comparative conjunctions in BP. As Mihatsch (2009) highlights, comparative markers are frequently a typical source of new approximators in Romance languages (e.g. *como*). In the evolution of *meio que*, comparison seems to play a relevant role at the intermediate stage rather than at the initial one. Thus, it seems to be interesting to sistematize the **role of comparison as a broader conceptual domain in the development of approximators**: is it a stage that needs to be “reached” for this pattern of change to evolve?

Obrigada!

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