

From modality to aspect: How *saber* became a habitual marker

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Introduction

In addition to its well-attested modal meaning (cf. 1), the periphrasis *saber* ‘to know’ + infinitive can express habitual aspect (cf. 2) in some Latin American Spanish varieties (cf. Kany 1945, Di Tullio 2006, Pfänder 2009, Enríquez Duque 2021).

- (1) *María **sabe** tocar el piano.* (ability)
‘María is able to play the piano’.
- (2) *Aquí a las tres de la tarde **saben** dar pan, café, monedas.* (habituality)
‘Here at three in the afternoon they usually give bread, coffee, coins’.

Some scholars have assumed this semantic extension to be induced by contact with Quichua, where the verb *yach-* has both the meanings of ‘to know’ and ‘to use’ (cf. Enríquez Duque 2021).

Research questions

- What linguistic factors brought about the semantic extension of *saber* + infinitive?
- How have the effects of these factors evolved over time?

Data and methodology

Corpus study:

- 894 occurrences of *saber* + infinitive in a **diachronic corpus** (XVI - XX) of novels containing texts in **Rioplatense Spanish** (Argentina, Uruguay) and **Andean Spanish** (Bolivia, Ecuador).
- Annotation of the meanings of *saber* (ability, habituality, ambivalent) and a set of contextual properties:

Contextual properties	Levels		
Adverbial restrictor (temporal or locative)	yes	→	Genericity restrictor <i>María sabe tocar el piano los domingos/en su cuarto.</i> ‘María plays the piano on Sundays/in her room’.
	no		
Semantic properties of the subject	animate	→	Lack of control <i>sabe llegar la correspondencia de otros países</i> ‘usually, mail from other countries arrives’
	inanimate		
	impersonal		
Semantic properties of the infinitive	volitive	→	Pluractional operator <i>María sabe hacer varios postres.</i> (inferred repetition) ‘María is able to make several desserts’.
	non-volitive		
Grammatical number of the subject	singular	→	
	plural		
Grammatical number of the OD	singular	→	
	plural		

Prediction

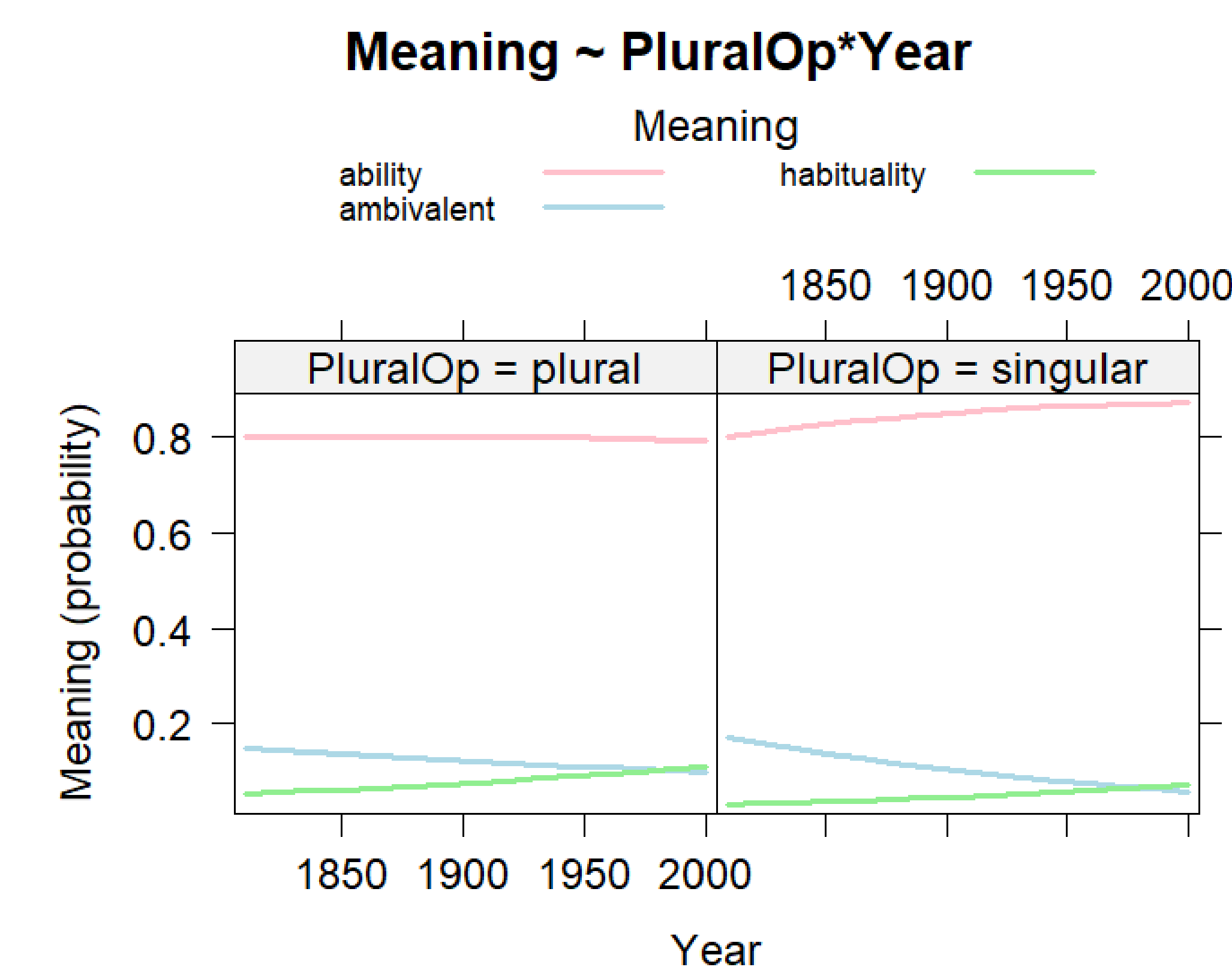
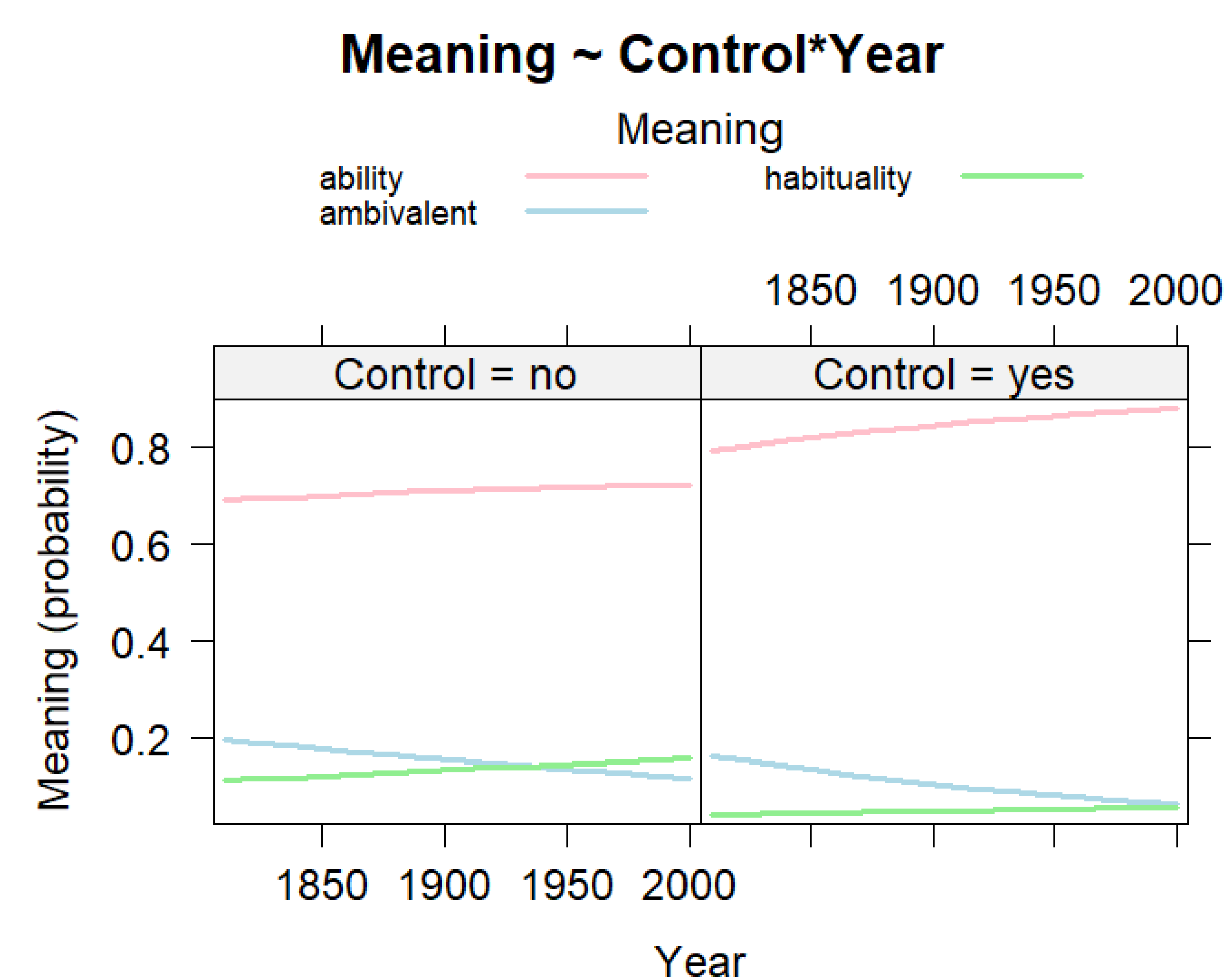
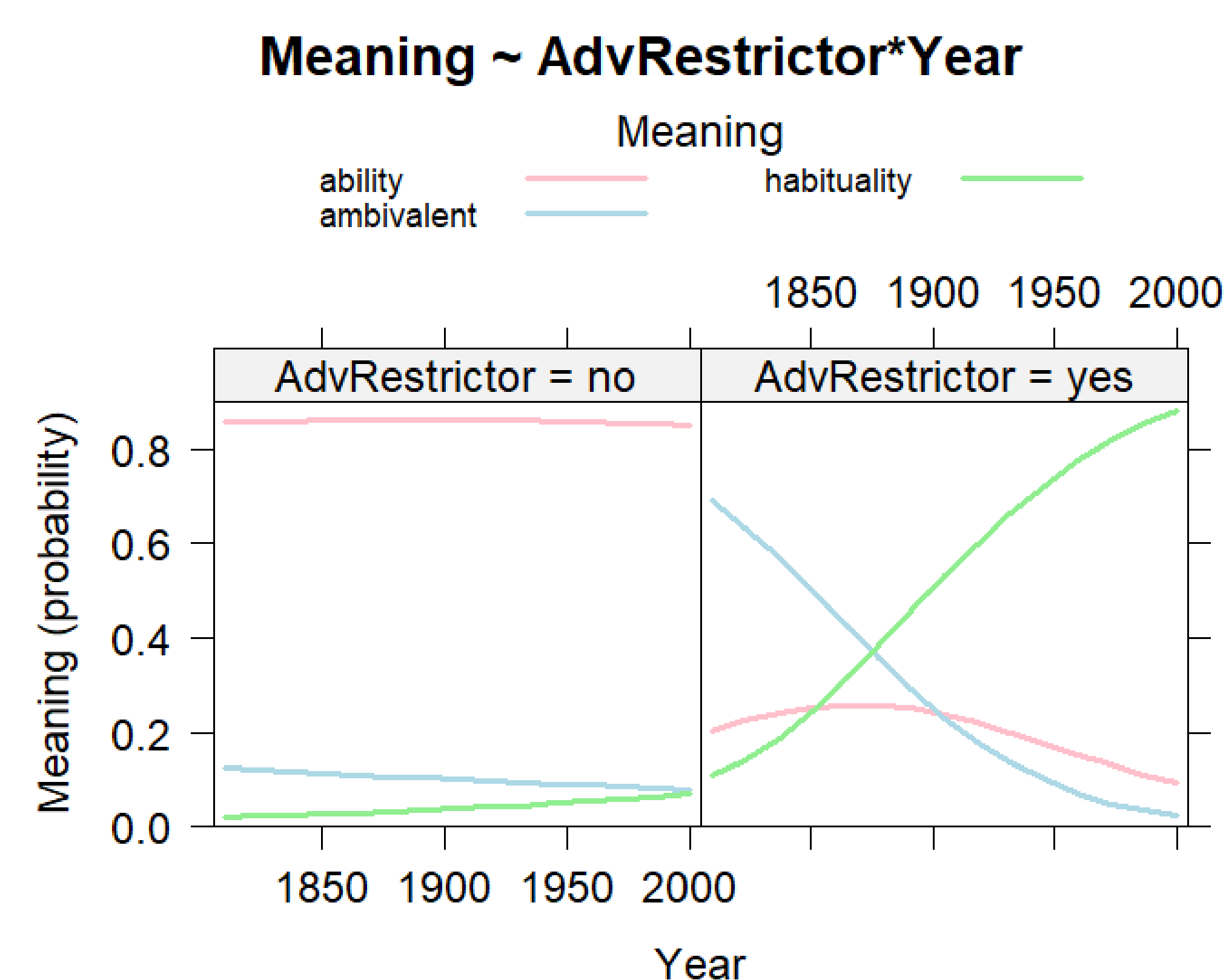
The **use of adverbial modifiers** that restrict the generic character of modal *saber*, the **absence of the feature control**, and the **presence of pluractional operators** are expected to favor the reanalysis of *saber* into a habitual marker.

- Quantitative assessment of the role of the contextual parameters **adverbial restriction**, **lack of control** and **presence of pluractional operators**.
Multinomial regression analyses: Meaning of *saber* (**response variable**, ref level: ability), AdvRestrictor, Control and PluralOp (**predictor variables**), Year (**interaction term**).

Results

- The results of the multinomial regression analyses show that the effects of the contextual parameters on the reanalysis of *saber* are significant.
(+) AdvRestrictor increases the likelihood of both habitual ($\beta = 4.02$, $p < .001$) and ambivalent readings ($\beta = 2.53$, $p < .001$) relative to ability readings.
(-) Control and (+) PluralOp increase the likelihood of habitual interpretations ($\beta = 1.33$, $p < .001$; $\beta = 0.86$, $p = .014$) relative to ability readings.
- From 1800 to 2000, *saber* increasingly appears in new contextual configurations —occurring with adverbial modifiers that constrain its original generic interpretation, in impersonal clauses, with inanimate subjects and non-control infinitives.

Influence of contextual properties over time



Selected References

- Di Tullio, Angela L. 2006. Auxiliares y operadores aspectuales en el español rioplatense. *Signo & Seña* 15. 267-285.
- Enríquez Duque, Paola. 2021. El ‘saber habitual’. Una gramaticalización inducida por factores internos y externos en el español andino ecuatoriano. *Spanish in context* 18(3). 362-386.
- Kany, Charles E. 1945. *Sintaxis hispanoamericana*. Madrid: Gredos.
- Pfänder, Stefan. 2009. Gramática mestiza. Con referencia al Castellano de Cochabamba. *La Paz: Instituto Boliviano de Lexicografía y otros Estudios Lingüísticos*.