Meio como que um hedge: the emergence of approximative *meio que* in Brazilian Portuguese

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This study investigates the emergence of *meio que*, a new approximation marker in Brazilian Portuguese whose meaning can be compared to Spanish *en plan* and English *sort of*/*kind of*, as in (1) below. In line with Mihatsch (2009: 65), the expression of approximation is here conceived as a process of modification that affects the truth conditions of a proposition through the semantic loosening of a lexical expression. In the first stage of the study, the analysis pays particular attention to the functioning of *meio que* in contemporary Brazilian Portuguese through a synchronic study of its variation with the degree adverb *meio*, primarily used to modify adjectives. In such adverbial uses, *meio* is similar to Spanish *medio* and English *a little*, as in (2). The synchronic analysis consists of a quantitative corpus study based on occurrences of *meio* and *meio que* extracted from a random sample of the TenTen23 corpus, available on the Sketch Engine platform.

(1) No trabalho a rotina é bem corrida. O almoço é **meio que** "rápido" e muita gente nem para de trabalhar, só come um lanche olhando pro PC e boa.

En el trabajo la rutina es bastante agitada. El almuerzo es en plan "rápido" y mucha gente ni siquiera deja de trabajar, solo comen algo mirando la computadora y listo.

At work the routine is pretty busy. Lunch is kind of "quick", and a lot of people do not even stop working, they just grab a snack while looking at their PC and that's it.

(2) Então, quem pode ser a nova Fifth Harmony? 1) Sandy. Ela anda **meio** solitária desde que se separou do Júnior e anda numa busca constante por companhias.

Entonces, ¿quién podría ser la nueva Fifth Harmony? 1) Sandy. Anda medio sola desde que se separó de Júnior Lima y está en una búsqueda constante de compañía.

So, who could be the new Fifth Harmony? 1) Sandy. She has been a little lonely since splitting up with Júnior Lima and has been constantly looking for company.

Showing that the context with the highest frequency of alternation between *meio* and *meio que* in the sample analysed consists of copula phrases, I argue that the choice between *meio* and *meio que* is anchored on a crucial semantic-pragmatic distinction: whereas *meio* is recruited for typical predicational relations in which a predicational NP2 is *attributed* to a referential NP1, as in (2) above (cf. types of copula phrases in Higgins 1979), *meio que* is used in copula phrases in which the predicational NP2 is rather only roughly *approximated* to a referential NP1, as in (1). Different truth-conditional settings are then in place for each construction. I further suggest that, in the few other contexts allowing alternation where no copula construction is involved, a similar predicational relation can be recognised and the variation is governed by the same semantic-pragmatic distinction. The approximative meaning conveyed by *meio que* favors an interpretation in terms of hedging, here understood as a pragmatic meaning emerging in the communicative context (Fraser 2010: 25). In the shift from degree adverb to approximating hedge, intersubjectivity increases in a functional expansion of *meio* from the level of content to the level of context (Hansen 2008: 16).

Finally, I propose, as an initial hypothesis based on the synchronic evidence, that the development of *meio que* as an approximating hedge may have been motivated by contexts in which the predicational relation that adverbial *meio* helps establish is enriched with nuances of *similative comparison*, which expresses an approximative, never perfect, similarity between processes, properties, or entities (Haspelmath and Buchholz 1998: 313). As argued by Mihatsch (2009: 79), the transition from the conceptual domain of similative comparison to the domain of approximation is well attested in the development of approximators in Romance languages. The next stage of the analysis will seek diachronic evidence to evaluate the evolutionary hypothesis proposed.

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