

Between shared expectations and possibilities: The discourse particle *sempre* in European Portuguese

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Proceedings of the 31st International Conference on
Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar

Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic


Stefan Müller, Rui Chaves (Editors)

2024

Frankfurt/Main: University Library

pages 47–59

Keywords: keywords

Azevedo, João & Jakob Maché. 2024. Between shared expectations and possibilities: The discourse particle *sempre* in European Portuguese. In Stefan Müller & Rui Chaves (eds.), *Proceedings of the 31st International Conference on Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic*, 47–59. Frankfurt/Main: University Library. DOI: 10.21248/hpsg.2024.3. 

Abstract

This paper examines the syntactic and semantic properties of the confirmative use of *sempre* in European Portuguese. Unlike its temporal counterpart which carries the meaning of ‘always’, confirmative *sempre* is restricted to the pre-verbal position, disqualifying it as a prototypical adverb. In terms of its semantic contribution, the confirmative discourse particle *sempre* marks the proposition as given by suspending the stress on phonological constituents in the clause. Consequently, the nuclear stress falls on *sempre*. Contrary to the analysis proposed by Amaral & Del Prete’s (2014), givenness is not equated with being part of the shared knowledge/common ground. Instead, there could have been disagreement about the validity of the embedded proposition between the speaker and the addressee at some earlier stage. Givenness, therefore, will be understood as being part of at least one party’s discourse commitments, following the framework of Farkas & Bruce (2010).

1 Introduction

This paper addresses the question of whether there are genuine ‘modal’ particles in Portuguese. Although there have been proposals slightly fewer than twenty candidates over the past thirty years (cf. Franco 1990: 175, 1998: 147–149, Macário-Lopes 1998: 8–10, Meisnitzer 2012: 344–353, Pinto de Lima 1997, Mendes & Lejeune 2022), these candidates lack essential syntactic properties. The present study focuses on the items *afinal*, *cá*, *lá*, *sempre* and *nem*, (i) all of which are restricted to the position preceding the finite verb and (ii) all of which make reference to either previously shared expectations attributed to the speaker, the addressee, or some third party.

To date, it remains contested whether these items qualify as belonging to the syntactic category *particle* and to what extent they exhibit ‘modal’ semantics. This debate largely stems from terminological confusion inherited from the early pioneering work on German modal particles by Weydt (1969). Already Thurmair (1989: 3) observed that, in previous studies on these particles in German, the term ‘modal’ only is used to express that these markers convey extra-propositional meaning and therefore does not contribute much in the characterisation of these elements. As a consequence, the most recent literature on German replaced the misleading term *modal* by the descriptively more adequate term *discourse*, as in the handbook articles by

[†]First, we would like to express my gratitude to the three anonymous reviewers during the initial reviewing process and the fourth one in the final reviewing process for their comments and suggestions. They helped to significantly improve the quality of the present paper. Furthermore, we are indebted to Marco Coniglio, Jonathan Ginzburg, Elena Karagjosova, Andy Lücking, António Machicao y Priemer, Ana Maria Martins, Rui Marques, Amalia Mendes, Benjamin Meisnitzer, Eva Remberger, Oliver Schallert and Giuseppe Varaschin for their comments and support before and after the presentation.

Zimmermann (2011) and Grosz (2020). Thus the more appropriate term *discourse particle* is used in this paper whenever these items do not clearly reflect the basic characteristics of modal semantics.

The paper aims to bring clarity to the discussion by drawing on corpus data and on recent findings on discourse semantics. It concludes that at least the confirmative use of *sempre*, which is the main focus of this study, exhibits all the relevant characteristics comparable to its German counterparts. Furthermore, regarding its semantics, mirativity and the dimension of discourse are much more relevant for its description than is the dimension modality in the narrow sense. The dimension discourse is understood here as referencing assertions or other types of commitments, beliefs or expectations that were previously shared between the speaker and the addressee. Specifically, the particle *sempre* makes reference to previous *Discourse Commitments* and/or *Common Ground*, in the sense of Farkas & Bruce (2010: 84–90). Finally, a definition of the syntactic category of discourse particles will be suggested, which applies at least to Germanic and Romance languages.

2 Syntactic properties of *sempre*, *nem*, *lá*, *cá* and *afinal*

Adopting the more developed insights from decades of research on German modal particles as discussed by Thurmair (1989: 25–29, 36) and Coniglio (2008: 14–16, 121–126, 148, 159), this paper shows that the term *particle* is essentially a syntactically motivated category. Specifically, it refers to a type of defective sentence adverbial, which has almost completely lost its capacity for displacement within a clause and no longer is part of a question domain of any question pronoun, in the sense of Ginzburg (2012: 122), and often not of a focus domain either. The question domain of a question pronoun like *who*, *what* or *why* is the set of constituents which are possible answers. For instance, the question domain of *who* contains all NPs that denote referents with the feature [+HUMAN]. Similarly, the question domain of *why* encompasses all the PPs and adverbials, or adverbial clauses that can denote a cause of an event or proposition. Likewise, the focus domain contains all the possible alternatives by which a focused item could be replaced. It should be noted, however, that confirmative *sempre* in declarative clauses obligatorily attracts nuclear stress, just as its German cognate stressed *DOCH* which acts as an exponent of verum (focus), as shown by Gutzmann (2010) and Egg & Zimmermann (2012: 230–233).

Before examining the corpus data, it is important to note that in Indo-European languages most of the discourse particles represent just one single use among several uses of polyfunctional or heteronymous lexemes, as illustrated by Thurmair (1989: 21), Helbig 1994, and Coniglio (2008: 8–9). In European Portuguese, *sempre* is primarily used as a temporal adverb that

universally quantifies over time intervals, similar to its English counterpart *always*. In that usage, it preferably occurs in the post-verbal position as demonstrated in example (1).

- (1) O banho de imersão é_V sempre demorado.¹
 DET.M bath of immersion is always take.time-PPP
 ‘The full bath is always time consuming.’
- (2) Vocês ontem sempre foram_V ao cinema?²
 you.PL yesterday after.all were at.the.M cinema
 ‘Did you go to the cinema after all?’

In contrast, the more grammaticalised discourse particle use of *sempre*, also referred to as confirmative *sempre*, is restricted to the preverbal position as illustrated in example (2). Its semantics is more intricate. Confirmative *sempre* in example (2) requires there to be a previously shared commitment of the addressee to go the cinema, which was later doubted by the speaker.

In its limitation to the preverbal position, confirmative *sempre* fulfils the main criterion for particles introduced above. Apart from *sempre* there are many other core candidates for discourse particles competing for the same slot (cf. Franco 1990: 175, 1998: 147, 150; Macário-Lopes 1998: 7, Brito 2001: 66, Ambar et al. 2004: 2–5, Fiéis 2010 and Amaral & Del Prete 2014: 137). Amaral & Del Prete (2014: 137) and Ambar et al. (2004: 3) even attempt to correlate the semantic interpretation of the modifier *sempre* with its syntactic position, claiming that the confirmative use of *sempre* is only available in the preverbal position whereas the temporal use is rejected in the preverbal positions by many native speakers. However, in the corpora investigated here, there are numerous instances of temporal *sempre* in preverbal position, falsifying the second part of the authors’ claim.

Additionally, Macário-Lopes (1998: 9) and Amaral & Del Prete (2014: 146–147) argue that confirmative *sempre* cannot co-occur with negation, instead another particle *afinal* has to be chosen. In contrast, Franco (1998: 148) discusses an example where the negation *não* appears within the scope of confirmative *sempre*, though he notes that negation can never take scope over confirmative *sempre*.

We conducted two independent corpus studies, based on data from the *DiLeB* corpus (*Discurso Informal de Lisboa e Braga*) and the *CRPC* corpus (*Reference Corpus of Contemporary Portuguese*).³

¹ *CRPC-ORAL* pf1202pu.txt.

² *CRPC-ORAL* pfamev06.txt.

³ The *DiLeB*-corpus (*Discurso Informal de Lisboa e Braga*) is an online corpus of informal conversations with speakers from Lisbon and Braga in sociolinguistic interviews from the last decade of the 20th century.

<http://teitok.clul.ul.pt/dileb/index.php?action=home>

The *CRPC* corpus (*CRPC-ORAL (Reference Corpus of Contemporary Portuguese)*)

The frequencies are represented in Tables 1 and 2. It should be noted that one defining feature of discourse particles is that they often represent just one usage of polyfunctional or heteronym lexemes, which are notoriously difficult to distinguish (Thurmair 1989: 21, Helbig 1994, Coniglio 2008: 8–9). In most cases, there are also less grammaticalised, more lexical adverbial uses. For instance, Portuguese *sempre* primarily functions as a temporal adverb meaning ‘always’, which universally quantifies over time intervals.

The figures presented are simple counts of the lexemes without differentiating the particle uses. However, the discourse-oriented uses of these adverbs are rare, and almost exclusively in the preverbal position. The situation with *afinal* is less clear, as it always conveys discourse meaning but it can occur post-verbally or clause-initially, and unlike *sempre*, it can appear with varying placements of the nuclear stress (cf. Amaral & Del Prete 2014: 141 for a similar observation for its Italian counterpart *alla fine*). In the *DiLeB* corpus, *afinal* has a strong preference for the preverbal position, in the *CRPC* corpus, however, it is attested mostly in clause initial position. Similarly, the discourse-oriented uses of *nem* have a strong preference for the preverbal position.

position	<i>nem</i>	<i>sempre</i>	<i>afinal</i>	<i>lá</i>	<i>cá</i>
preverbal	181	177	13	505	132
postverbal	99	503	2	1018	259
other pos.	283	109	0	345	115
total	563	789	15	1868	506

Table 1: The placement of discourse modifiers and their polyfunctional variants – *CRPC* corpus

position	<i>nem</i>	<i>sempre</i>	<i>afinal</i>	<i>lá</i>	<i>cá</i>
preverbal	395	288	7	1232	133
postverbal	152	1009	5	2358	378
other pos.	523	297	25	867	334
total	1070	1594	37	4457	845

Table 2: The placement of discourse modifiers and their polyfunctional uses – *DiLeB* corpus

Being limited to the preverbal position, confirmative *sempre* behaves

is another online corpus composed mostly of spoken European Portuguese from various contexts and periods of recent time.

<http://teitok.clul.ul.pt/crpcoral/index.php?action=home>

similarly to other recognised modal particles in other Romance, such as Italian *mai* and particles in Germanic languages including German and Scandinavian (cf. Coniglio 2008: 14–16, 95–101, Coniglio 2023: 11–15). In other words, these particles defined by their placement restrictions to some position at the left edge of the extended VP or TP—corresponding to the preverbal position in Romance languages, and some position in the middle field in German.⁴

It is quite plausible to assume that the extremely limited freedom of movement for these particles arises from more general requirements. As observed by Hentschel (1983: 48, 1986: 210–213, 232–238) Thurmair (1989: 25–37) and Coniglio (2008: 102–108), the dimensions of givenness and definiteness play essential roles in the placement of discourse particles in German. These authors argue that discourse particles mark the boundary between the theme (given information) and rheme (discourse new information). Their observations suggest that the nuclear stress must follow the particles, and that it may be the focus—rather than the rheme—that comes after the particle.

Despite Franco’s (1998: 144, 150) observation that discourse particles in Portuguese do not mark the left boundary of the constituent of the rheme, the Portuguese confirmative particle *sempre* is also sensitive to focus. Amaral & Del Prete (2014: 139–140, 148–149) argue that the confirmative use of *sempre* requires the entire preadjacent proposition to be destressed, while *sempre* itself attracts nuclear stress. Thus, it behaves semantically very similarly to the stressed version of the German particle *doch* (cf. Egg & Zimmermann 2012), as already noticed by Franco (1998: 153).

3 Modal or discourse oriented – the semantics of *sempre*

Thurmair (1989: 3) noted that previous studies on particles used the term ‘modal’ loosely to indicate that these markers convey extra-propositional meaning, following Palmer’s (1986: 1) very vague definition of modality, which posits that modal modifiers encompass any type of modifier that take scope over the proposition. As a result, this term contributed little to the precise characterisation of these elements. In subsequent research, Portner

⁴However, there are no discrete boundaries between discourse particles and sentential adverbs as regards to their semantics. Confirmative *sempre* in Italian is fairly common in postverbal position, which is only possible for adverbs under the definition defended here. But at the same time, Italian *sempre* lacks past related interpretations in as demonstrated by Amaral & Del Prete (2014: 135, 137, 140–149), which is a clear indicator that it is grammaticalised to a lesser degree. Apart from that, the Italian marker is less frequently used than its Portuguese cognate. In a similar vein, Portuguese *afinal* and its Italian counterpart *alla fine* occur in positions typical for adverbs but nevertheless these itmes display a meaning related to *sempre*, indicating an epistemic change or conflict in the discourse.

(2009: 1) offered a clearer definition of modality describing it as making statements about situations in non-actual possibilities/possible worlds. His work is heavily inspired by earlier work by Kratzer (1978, 1981), who focused only on selected modal verbs in German and English but did not explicitly define modality as a phenomenon itself. However, among the 20–35 markers considered as modal particles by Thurmair (1989: 49) and Durrell (2011) only a few, such as the epistemic particles *wohl* refer to non-actual possibilities. Most of these elements instead refer to shared or individual beliefs, convictions or statements by discourse participant or third participants, some of them but not all also refer to events in non-actual worlds.

The dimension of discourse seems more relevant for many of these items, as they reference propositions to which at least one speech participant is publicly committed too. Macário-Lopes (1998: 8–9) observed that the confirmative particle *sempre* expresses the speaker’s expectations and doubts regarding the truth of the prejacent proposition p . Amaral & Del Prete (2014: 135–140, 2016: 1135–1137, 2020: 5–7) propose a more specific and detailed description of the semantic contribution of confirmative *sempre*. They argue that it is “only felicitous in a context where the truth of the prejacent is presupposed to have been under discussion by the interlocutors” (p. 140).

In their analysis, Amaral & Del Prete (2014: 149–150) take the particle *sempre* to be an epistemic modal operator that takes a proposition p and returns the confirmation of the truth of that proposition, and referencing three different temporal points: an initial point t_1 prior to utterance time when the prejacent p_1 was considered true in all the best epistemic worlds, a subsequent point t_2 when it became possible that p could be false, and utterance time t_0 when p is confirmed to be true. Crucially, they align with Kratzer’s (1978, 1981), view that epistemic modal operators are evaluated with respect to collective knowledge, rather than individual knowledge.

While Amaral & Del Prete’s (2014: 149–150) analysis captures many relevant aspects of *sempre*, it has at least two essential shortcomings. Firstly, it fails to distinguish between propositions to which both speech participants commit (hence part of the common ground) and propositions to which are only known to the speech participants, in the sense of that the speech participants know that one of them has publically committed to them without that the other speech participants shares that commitment. In the example (3), it is possible that the speaker never believed the proposition p that CHEGA would win more than 15% but addressee always insisted that p would be true. In such a scenario p was never part of the common ground, of the shared knowledge between speaker and addressee. However, what was mutually shared knowledge is that the addressee wanted to add p to the common ground. So there are two different senses for p of being ‘known’.

The most common case are propositions to which only one speech participant committed publicly by asserting it, but whose truth is contested by the other party. This conflict can be resolved assuming that there is another

4 Analysis

The analysis presented here is implemented in HPSG_{TTR}/KoS (based on *Type Theory with Records*) as suggested by Ginzburg (2012) and more recently in the HPSG handbook in Lücking et al. (2021). This particular version of HPSG includes semantics that is specialised for representing dialogues with their intricate semantic relations. The discourse particles under discussion make reference to discourse commitments or their suspension that have been previously shared between the speaker and the addressee. Given the large body research within HPSG_{TTR}, which specialises in the treatment of the semantic relations within dialogue moves, it is more appropriate than alternative implementations of semantics within the framework of HPSG. As will be shown below, a dialogue game board including the feature MOVE is incredibly helpful for tracking discourse commitments previously made by the speaker or the addressee.

Confirmative *sempre* is treated as a defective sentential adverb with the denotation of a propositional modifier of the type $\langle t, t \rangle$. It takes a proposition, returns the same proposition and adds the requirement that two specific previous moves must have had occurred for its truth conditions to be met: (i) A move m_1 , a public commitment to the truth of p by some speech participant (endorser) x and (ii) another subsequent move m_2 , a commitment by the same or another speech participant (questioner) y that p is/or may no longer be valid. The semantic contribution is summarised as follows. Confirmative *sempre* makes references three times: t_1 , which precedes t_2 , which in turn precedes t_{utt} . There is an epistemic attitude holder, the endorser x , who publicly committed to the validity of p at t_1 or that it would become true in future. At some subsequent moment t_2 , the questioner y commits to the possibility that p could be false. This is expressed by means of a modal operator anchored to some attitude holder or modal judge, the questioner y , in the sense of Stephenson (2007: 501).

In cases where the endorser x and the questioner y are identical, the sudden commitment m_2 to the possibility that p is no longer valid, entails a retraction of their previous commitment m_1 , and m_2 will be interpreted as a concession. This strict separation between the two roles is necessary to model scenarios in which there is an epistemic disagreement between speaker and addressee, one insisting in the truth of p , the other in the truth of $\neg p$. Importantly, both the expectation and the concession that p might be false are prior dialogue moves. Eventually the speaker asserts p . Remember that the speaker can be identical to x or y or both of them. This is ensured by the two auxiliary clauses c_1 and c_2 .

This analysis parallels the question bias with low negative polar questions with low negation reading, as analysed by Sudo (2013: 276–284). Speakers of such questions express an initial belief that p was true (epistemic bias) but have encountered compelling evidence suggesting that p is false (evidential

bias) shortly before utterance time. Turning to confirmative *sempre*, the shift in epistemic state is modeled by introducing an epistemic possibility at t_2 , without detailing the specific evidence behind this change.

Implemented in HPSG_{TTR}, the lexicon entry for confirmative *sempre* is illustrated in Figure 1. The assumption is that in a previous move m_1 , a speech participants x —who could be either the speaker or the addressee—publicly committed to the validity of p by asserting it. In a subsequent move m_2 , the same or a different speech participant raises doubts about the validity of p into question committing to the possibility that $\neg p$. If the endorser and the questioner are the same speech participant ($y = x$), the previous commitment m_1 will be retracted by conceding the possibility that p may not be valid. However if y is instantiated by another speech participant, the retraction of the initial commitment m_1 is unnecessary. As the expectation that p will remain valid is modeled as discourse commitment by means of some move made earlier in the dialogue, the analysis here is compatible with p being part of the *Common Ground* in some scenarios.

The move m_2 contains a possibility operator following Cooper’s (2023: 247) adaptation of Kratzer’s (1981) concept of modal operators into TTR. In the present study, the operator is a predicate of the arity $\langle Ind, Type, Type, Type \rangle$, taking as arguments: an epistemic judge (here modeled as *Individual*), a proposition (here modeled as *Type*), an epistemic modal base B (here modeled as *Type*) and a stereotypical ordering source of ideals I (likewise modeled as *Type*).

[PHON = < /'sempre/ >:list(phonform)																													
CAT:	HEAD = [MOD = { CAT: [HEAD = v:POS COMPS = {} :LIST(SYNSEM)] :LIST(SYNSEM)] : PoS]																												
DGB-PARAMS:	<table border="0"> <tr><td>SPKR</td><td>: Ind</td></tr> <tr><td>ADDR</td><td>: Ind</td></tr> <tr><td>X</td><td>: Ind</td></tr> <tr><td>Y</td><td>: Ind</td></tr> <tr><td>C₁</td><td>: x=spkr ∨ addr</td></tr> <tr><td>C₂</td><td>: y=addr ∨ spkr</td></tr> <tr><td>UTT-TIME</td><td>: Time</td></tr> <tr><td>P=CAT.HEAD.MOD.CONT.P</td><td>: Prop</td></tr> <tr><td>M₁= ASSERT(X,P)</td><td>: IllocProp</td></tr> <tr><td>BASE</td><td>: RecType</td></tr> <tr><td>IDEAL</td><td>: RecType</td></tr> <tr><td>M₂= ASSERT(Y,(poss(y, ¬p, base, ideal)))</td><td>: IllocProp</td></tr> <tr><td>C_{UTT}</td><td>: addressing(spkr,addr,utt-time)</td></tr> <tr><td>MOVES</td><td>: list(IllocProp) ⊕ m₂ ⊕ m₁ ⊕ list(IllocProp)</td></tr> </table>	SPKR	: Ind	ADDR	: Ind	X	: Ind	Y	: Ind	C ₁	: x=spkr ∨ addr	C ₂	: y=addr ∨ spkr	UTT-TIME	: Time	P=CAT.HEAD.MOD.CONT.P	: Prop	M ₁ = ASSERT(X,P)	: IllocProp	BASE	: RecType	IDEAL	: RecType	M ₂ = ASSERT(Y,(poss(y, ¬p, base, ideal)))	: IllocProp	C _{UTT}	: addressing(spkr,addr,utt-time)	MOVES	: list(IllocProp) ⊕ m ₂ ⊕ m ₁ ⊕ list(IllocProp)
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IDEAL	: RecType																												
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QUEST-DOM=	{}:list(RecType)																												

Figure 1: Lexicon entry for the confirmative discourse particle *sempre*

In summary, confirmative *sempre* resembles stressed *doch* in German, which references to a previously negated proposition that was earlier present in the common ground, as illustrated by Karagjosova (2009), Egg & Zim-

mermann (2012: 227–228) and Döring (2016). Returning to the question, whether European Portuguese has items that deserve to be considered as discourse particles of the Germanic type, the answer is clearly yes.

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