



On the semantics of the structure *estar por* + infinitive in European Portuguese

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The main goal of this article is to provide a semantic characterisation for the structure *estar por* (literally, ‘be by’) + infinitive in European Portuguese. The combinatorial restrictions that this construction displays regarding the aspectual class of the predications with which it can cooccur suggest that it takes telic events as its input. Moreover, its linguistic behaviour parallels that of states. The connections between *estar por* + infinitive and adjectival passives, on the one hand, and sentential negation, on the other, lead us to propose an analysis that treats this configuration as a denied resultant state.



1. Introduction

The structure *estar por* (literally, ‘be by’) + infinitive in European Portuguese, illustrated in sentences (1)–(3), displays several syntactic and semantic restrictions that deserve particular attention. As we will see, this construction shares some of its main properties with the so-called adjectival passives, built with the copular verbs *estar/ficar* + past participle (cf. Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou, 2008; Duarte & Oliveira, 2010; Embick, 2004; Levin & Rappaport, 1986; McIntyre, 2013; Nunes, 2023; Sleeman, 2011). However, its meaning is quite different since it does not point to a resultative state but to the current non-occurrence of a given situation, that is, the “not-yet” actualisation of the event in the infinitive, which, however, is somehow expected to occur in a later interval.¹

Peres and Mória (1995, sections 3.1.2.3 and 3.2.3) consider the construction *estar por* [and other similar configurations, such as *encontrar-se por* (literally, ‘find oneself by’), *ficar por* (literally, ‘get/become by’) or *continuar por* (literally, ‘continue by’)] as part of a subclass of passive constructions they term “infinitive passives”.²

- (1) Desde há pelo menos três semanas que Perot, cuja candidatura
since there.is at least three weeks that Perot, whose candidacy
independente Casa à Branca ainda está por formalizar,
independent to.the House White yet be.PRES3SG by formalise.INF
surge consistentemente em primeiro lugar nas pesquisas de opinião.
appear.PRES3SG consistently in first place in.the polls of opinion
(CetemPúblico, par = ext11410-pol-92a-1)³
‘Perot, whose independent candidacy for the White House is not yet formalised, has
consistently been leading in opinion polls for at least three weeks.’
- (2) Isto porque uma blindagem de estatutos pode acarretar uma desvalorização
this because an armouring of statutes can.PRES3SG lead.INF a devaluation
das acções, e um quarto do capital social do BPA ainda está
of.the shares and a quarter of.the capital social of.the BPA yet be.PRES3SG
por vender. (CetemPúblico, par = ext12616-eco-94b-1)
by sell.INF
‘That is because a statutory shield could lead to a devaluation of shares, and a quarter
of BPA’s share capital is not yet sold.’

¹ As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, negation will be crucially involved in the interpretation of the constructions under analysis, but it is not the whole story; sentences (1)–(3), for instance, may be paraphrased by an adjectival passive combined with the negative structure *ainda não* (‘not yet’). We will return to the critical topic of the relationship between *estar por* and negation in sections 3 and 4.

² Although different structures in European Portuguese can be grouped under the infinitive passive label, as acknowledged by Peres and Mória (1995), in this paper, we have chosen to focus only on the structure *estar por* + infinitive.

³ For the glosses of the Portuguese examples, we will use here the Leipzig glossing rules available at <https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>. The following abbreviations will be considered: SG = singular; PL = plural; PRES = *presente do indicativo* (‘simple present’); IMP = *pretérito imperfeito do indicativo* (‘imperfective past tense’); PPERF = *pretérito perfeito simples do indicativo* (‘terminative past tense’); COND = condicional (conditional); PPART = past participle; INF = infinitive; GER = gerund.

- (3) Tanto num caso como no outro, ainda está por desvendar o
 as in.a case as in.the other, yet be.PRES3SG by identify.INF the
 autor (ou autores) do crime. (CetemPúblico, par=ext29291-soc-98a-1)
 perpetrator (or perpetrators) of.the crime
 ‘In both cases, the perpetrator(s) of the crime is yet unrevealed.’⁴

At first glance, we can see that, in these sentences, (i) the nominal expressions that occupy the subject position are base-generated as the internal arguments of the main verbs and (ii) the situations described – namely the formalisation of the independent candidacy for the White House in (1), the sale of a quarter of the BPA’s share capital in (2) and the identification of the perpetrator of the crime in (3) – have not yet arisen at the time at which the sentences are uttered, although, in some extent, they are expected to occur.

The primary purpose of this paper is to describe the linguistic behaviour of the structure *estar por* + infinitive, aiming to find its position in the aspectual domain of European Portuguese since, as we will see, its interpretation is intimately related to concepts such as telicity and resultativity.

In order to achieve this goal, I will firstly, in section 2, establish a close comparison between the structure *estar por* + infinitive and the European Portuguese adjectival passives since they both share relevant syntactic and semantic restrictions. Section 3 will be devoted to the description of the meaning of *estar por* + infinitive, discussing the fact that it primarily conveys the non-realisation of a given eventuality. In section 4, taking as our starting point the theoretical aspectual treatment set by Moens (1987) and by Moens and Steedman (1988), we will examine the configuration under analysis according to its semantic properties, defining the aspectual constraints that lead us to determine its input and output; such characterisation will allow us to differentiate the construction at issue from other aspectual operators and from sentential negation, which will ultimately contribute to a better understanding of its aspectual profile. The paper concludes with some final remarks in section 5.

2. *Estar por* + infinitive vs. adjectival passives

Although they have different meanings, the construction *estar por* + infinitive – as well as some other structures that Peres and Móia (1995) group under the class of infinitive passives – and the so-called adjectival passives with *estar* + past participle share a number of common linguistic properties and behaviours that deserve our attention.

First of all, as noted, e.g., by Levin and Rappaport (1986), Embick (2004) or by García-Pardo (2016, 2017), in line with all passive constructions, the subjects of adjectival passives are necessarily base-generated inside the VP, i.e., they correspond to the direct objects of the

⁴ Given the goals of this paper, I have combined authentic linguistic data, stemming mainly from the *corpus* Cetem-Público and other Portuguese websites, with purposely built examples, essential for testing some of the hypotheses that will be presented later on.

verbs underlying the past participles. As a consequence, only past participles of transitive (cf. (4)) and unaccusative (cf. (5)) verbs, but never of intransitive ones (cf. (6)) may occur in these environments:

- (4) A parede do quarto está pintada.⁵
 the wall of.the room be.PRES3SG paint.PPART
 'The bedroom wall is painted.'
- (5) A neve no alto das montanhas está derretida.⁶
 the snow in.the top of.the mountains be.PRES3SG melt.PPART
 'The snow at the top of the mountains is melted.'
- (6) *A Maria está viajada para o Canadá.⁷
 *the Maria be.PRES3SG travel.PPART to the Canada

The very same syntactic restrictions seem to apply to the construction *estar por* + infinitive (cf. Peres and Mória, 1995), as the following examples suggest:

- (7) A parede do quarto está por pintar.
 the wall of.the bedroom be.PRES3SG by paint.INF
 'The bedroom wall is not yet painted.'
- (8) A neve no alto das montanhas está por derreter.⁸
 the snow in.the top of.the mountains be.PRES3SG by melt.INF
 'The snow at the top of the mountains has not yet melted.'
- (9) *A Maria está por viajar para o Canadá.
 *the Maria be.PRES3SG by travel.INF to the Canada

Examples like (7)–(9) show us that, similarly to adjectival passives with *estar*, the structure *estar por* + infinitive, as is well known from the literature, obligatorily takes the underlying direct object of the verb in the infinitive as the subject of the sentences in which it appears, which is confirmed by its ungrammaticality in the context of intransitive verbs.

However, this is not the only restriction that brings together the two constructions we are analysing.

⁵ Cf. *O meu pai pintou a parede do quarto* ('My father painted the bedroom wall').

⁶ Cf. *A neve no alto das montanhas derreteu* ('The snow at the top of the mountains has melted').

⁷ Cf. *A Maria viajou para o Canadá* ('Maria travelled to Canada').

⁸ According to Peres and Mória (1995), sentences like this are not fully (or uncontroversially) grammatical. They consider that combining *estar por* with unaccusative verbs seems to improve the degree of acceptability of the construction when compared to its cooccurrence with unergatives, but the authors do not deem the examples completely grammatical. Nevertheless, the native Portuguese speakers who were consulted accepted the sentence in (8) without restrictions.

In fact, as noted by Cunha and Ferreira (2004) and Duarte and Oliveira (2010), in addition to the syntactic constraints we have already mentioned, adjectival passives with *estar* are sensitive to the aspectual properties of the verbs from which the past participles are derived. In particular, because they account for consequent or resultant states, these constructions are only compatible with telic predicates, namely culminated processes and culminations.⁹

In this sense, even if the syntactic prerequisites are met, past participles derived from states and processes are typically ruled out from the configuration at hand (cf. (10)–(11)), unlike those related to culminated processes and culminations, which are unproblematically accepted (cf. (12)–(13)).

- (10) *Os irmãos estão adorados.¹⁰
 *the brothers be.PRES3PL love.PPART

- (11) *O autocarro está guiado.¹¹
 *the bus be.PRES3SG drive.PPART

- (12) O quarto está arrumado.¹²
 the bedroom be.PRES3SG tidy.PPART
 ‘The bedroom is tidied up.’

- (13) O assassino está preso.¹³
 the murderer be.PRES3SG arrest.PPART
 ‘The murderer is arrested.’

Likewise, the structure *estar por* + infinitive seems equally sensitive to the aspectual profile of the basic predications from which it is built. Much like the adjectival passives with *estar*, it is only compatible with culminations and culminated processes, normally rejecting states and processes. In effect, the examples in (14)–(17) clearly parallel those in (10)–(13) as far as the selection of aspectual classes is concerned.

- (14) *Os irmãos estão por adorar.
 *the brothers be.PRES3PL by love.INF

- (15) *O autocarro está por guiar.
 *the bus be.PRES3SG by drive.INF

⁹ In this paper, I will use the terminology adopted by Moens (1987) and Moens and Steedman (1988) to name aspectual classes: states, processes (Vendler’s (1967) activities), culminated processes (Vendler’s accomplishments), culminations (Vendler’s achievements) and semelfactives.

¹⁰ Cf. *A Maria adora os irmãos* (state) (‘Maria loves her brothers’).

¹¹ Cf. *O motorista guiou o autocarro* (process) (‘The driver drove the bus’).

¹² Cf. *O João arrumou o quarto* (culminated process) (‘João tidied up his bedroom’).

¹³ Cf. *O polícia prendeu o assassino* (culmination) (‘The policeman arrested the murderer’).

(16) O quarto está por arrumar.
 the bedroom be.PRES3SG by tidy.INF
 ‘The bedroom is yet untidied.’

(17) O assassino está por prender.
 the murderer be.PRES3SG by arrest.INF
 ‘The murderer has not yet been arrested.’

Finally, Duarte and Oliveira (2010), based on work developed by Embick (2004) and Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou (2008), point out that there is a systematic alternation between the copula verbs *estar* (‘be’) and *ficar* (‘get’, ‘become’, ‘stay’) in the context of constructions expressing resultativity, as the contrast between (18)–(19) and (20)–(21) reveals:¹⁴

(18) A roupa está lavada.
 the clothes be.PRES3SG wash.PPART
 ‘The clothes are washed.’

(19) O vidro do meu carro está riscado.
 the glass of.the my car be.PRES3SG scratch.PPART
 ‘My car window is scratched.’

(20) A roupa ficou lavada.
 the clothes become.PPERF3SG wash.PPART
 ‘The clothes got washed.’

(21) O vidro do meu carro ficou riscado.
 the glass of.the my car become.PPERF3SG scratch.PPART
 ‘My car window was/got scratched.’

According to the above-mentioned authors, adjectival passives with *estar* are purely stative, in that they strictly focus on the consequences that follow the underlying eventualities. On the other hand, the parallel structures with *ficar* preferentially express not only the resultant state but also the dynamic transition leading to it.

Examples (22) and (23) illustrate this point: (22), in which *estar* appears, is compatible with a durative temporal adverbial, whose presence is characteristic of states, but it sounds somehow odd when a punctual adverbial is involved; on the other hand, (23) can occur both with a punctual adverbial, in which case the eventive portion, i.e., the culmination that precedes the consequences, is focused on, and with durative adverbials, in which case it is the resultant state that is in view. Moreover, note that adjectival passives with *estar* typically occur with the *presente*

¹⁴ See also Rebouças (2019), and, in a quite different theoretical framework, Nunes (2023).

do indicativo ('simple present') or the *pretérito imperfeito* ('imperfect'), tenses that canonically supply stative readings (cf. Cunha, 2007; Ilari, Oliveira & Baço, 2016; Oliveira, 1990, 2013; Oliveira & Lopes, 1995), while the corresponding constructions with *ficar* prefer the *pretérito perfeito* ('terminative simple past'), a tense that is mainly used with event predicates.

- (22) A bilheteira está aberta {desde as quatro da tarde / # às
the ticket.office be.PRES3SG open.PPART {from the four of.the noon / # at.the
quatro da tarde}.¹⁵
four of.the noon}

'The ticket office is open {from four in the afternoon / # at four in the afternoon}'.

- (23) A bilheteira ficou aberta {durante duas horas / às quatro
the ticket.office become.PPERF3SG open.PPART {for two hours / at.the four
da tarde}.¹⁶
of.the noon}

'The ticket office was/got open {for two hours / at four in the afternoon}'.

Such alternation can also be found when we consider the *estar por* + infinitive and the *ficar por* + infinitive constructions. In fact, both *estar por* and *ficar por* are well-formed configurations in EP, as the following examples, taken from the *corpus* CetemPúblico, illustrate, and they share most of their semantic properties, as we will discuss later.

- (24) No posto local da Guarda está por desvendar «um grande mistério
in.the station local of.the Guard be.PRES3SG by uncover.INF «a great mystery
há muito tempo escondido». (CetemPúblico, par = ext132939-soc-91b-1)
there.is much time hidden»

'At the local Guard station, «a great mystery that has been hidden for a long time» is yet uncovered.'

¹⁵ Note that in this example, it is possible to accept a reading in which the eventuality establishes with the punctual adverbial a relation of inclusion, that is, in which the punctual adverbial does not refer to the moment at which a given transition takes place but rather indicates a point in time that is included in the interval occupied by the relevant situation. As pointed out, e.g., by Cunha (2007), this pattern is characteristic of (basic and derived) states, which confirms the stative nature of the construction at issue.

¹⁶ It should be noted that when the proposition *a bilheteira ficar aberta* ('the ticket office get/be open') is combined with the punctual adverbial *às quatro horas* ('at four o'clock'), we obtain a momentaneous reading that focuses on the change of state; when combined with the durative adverbial *durante quatro horas* ('for four hours'), the relevant interval that is measured out relates to the consequent state. This behaviour can also be found with several basic culminations, as the contrast between *O chefe abriu o restaurante às oito da noite* ('The chef opened the restaurant at eight in the evening') vs. *O chefe abriu o restaurante durante oito horas* ('The chef opened the restaurant for eight hours') confirms.

- (25) Não temos luz em casa, a água está por pagar e
 not have.PRES1PL light in house, the water be.PRES3SG by pay.INF and
 temos muitas dívidas às costas. (CetemPúblico, par = ext643515-soc-98a-2)
 have.PRES1PL many debts at.the backs
 ‘We don’t have electricity at home, the water bill is unpaid, and we are burdened with
 many debts.’
- (26) A votação ficou por realizar por falta de
 the vote become.PPERF3SG by accomplish.INF by lack of
 quórum. (CetemPúblico, par = ext235320-eco-94b-1)
 quorum
 ‘The vote was cancelled due to a lack of quorum.’
- (27) «Quase meio milhão ficou por pagar»,
 «almost half million become.PPERF3SG by pay.INF»,
 esclareceu. (CetemPúblico, par = ext260227-pol-95b-1)
 explain.PPERF3SG
 ‘«Almost half a million remained unpaid,» he explained.’

Despite the proximity between the two constructions under discussion, it is noteworthy to stress that significant differences still remain. For example, adjectival passives are much less restricted with respect to the thematic role played by the noun phrase in their subject position. While both configurations occur unproblematically with subjects that play the thematic role of patient, as illustrated in (28)–(29), only adjectival passives appear without difficulties combined with experiencer subjects, unlike the *estar por* structure, which is generally not allowed in this type of context, as the comparison between (30) and (31) suggests.¹⁷

- (28) O frango está assado.
 the chicken be.PRES3SG roast.PPART
 ‘The chicken is roasted.’
- (29) O frango está por assar.
 the chicken be.PRES3SG by roast.INF
 ‘The chicken is yet unroasted.’

¹⁷ Since an in-depth discussion about the restrictions underlying thematic relations in the constructions under analysis is far beyond the scope of our paper, I will not pursue this issue here. For the characterisation of thematic roles, see, among many others, Cançado (2000), Carlson (1984, 1998), Dowty (1989, 1991), Jackendoff (1987), Kroeger (2005), Perini (2019), and Roca (1992). Regarding specifically the interaction of thematic roles with adjectival passives, see Dryer (1985) and García-Pardo (2017).

- (30) O frango está assustado.
 the chicken be.PRES3SG frighten.PPART
 'The chicken is frightened.'
- (31) *O frango está por assustar.
 *the chicken be.PRES3SG by frighten.INF

The central meaning associated with each of these constructions is also very disparate. As we have already mentioned, adjectival passives typically refer to the occurrence of a consequent state that somehow follows an implicit or explicit culmination. The structure *estar por* + infinitive, on the other hand, intrinsically expresses the non-occurrence of the given situation. In the next section, we will turn our attention to the semantic contribution that the construction *estar por* + infinitive makes to the sentences in which it appears.

3. The meaning of *estar por* + infinitive

Sentences containing the structure *estar por* typically deny the occurrence of the eventuality expressed by the predicate in the infinitive in a given relevant interval (typically, the speech time), somehow implying the expectation that it will possibly take place in the future. The following examples illustrate:

- (32) O projecto do IC3, no entanto, ainda está por aprovar, podendo
 the project of.the IC3, in.the however, still be.PRES3SG by approve.INF, can.GER
 portanto serem corrigidas algumas situações. (CetemPúblico, par = ext698757-soc-95a-1)
 so be.INFPES corrected some situations
 'The IC3 project, however, has not yet been approved, therefore allowing for some situations to be corrected.'
- (33) Ainda está por escrever a odisseia dos emigrantes portugueses
 still be.PRES3SG by write.INF the odyssey of.the emigrants Portuguese
 clandestinos para a América... (CetemPúblico, par = ext495788-pol-97a-2)
 clandestine to the America...
 'The odyssey of clandestine Portuguese emigrants to America remains yet unwritten...'
- (34) Assim, estão por pagar os seguros da Mundial Confiança de sete
 so be.PRES3PL by pay.INF the policies of.the Mundial Confiança of seven
 viaturas ao serviço da higiene
 vehicles at.the service of.the hygiene
 pública (...) (CetemPúblico, par = ext105930-soc-94a-1)
 public (...)
 'Thus, the Mundial Confiança insurance policies for seven public hygiene vehicles remains yet unpaid.'

Sentence (32) says, roughly, that, at the speech time, the IC3 project is unapproved; parallelly, (33) states that the odyssey of clandestine Portuguese emigrants to America is not yet written at the time of the utterance and (34) that the insurance policies for seven public hygiene vehicles have not been paid.

Note that the structure *estar por* + infinitive does not convey prospective aspect nor a preliminary phase, i.e., a period of time that immediately precedes the happening of a given situation, leading to its subsequent occurrence,¹⁸ as proposed for the construction *estar para* (literally ‘be to’) + infinitive in European Portuguese, since it is not required that the relevant eventuality will ever occur in a later interval.

Moreover, *estar por* cannot combine with temporal adverbials that explicitly refer to the (basic) event associated to the verb in the infinitive, as shown in (35) :

- (35) A cria de gnu está por nascer { * daqui a meia
the calf of wildebeest be.PRES3SG by beborn.INF { * from.here at half
hora / * às duas da tarde}.
hour / * at.the two of.the afternoon}
‘The wildebeest cub is yet unborn { * in half an hour / * at two in the afternoon}.’

In this example, the temporal adverbials *daqui a meia hora* (‘in half an hour’) and *às duas da tarde* (‘at two in the afternoon’) are meant to refer to the basic event associated with the infinitive, a culmination expressing the birth of the wildebeest calf. Their exclusion from the *estar por* + infinitive configuration suggests that the possible occurrence of the eventive situation is not a core ingredient of its meaning but, perhaps, merely a conversational implicature that can easily be cancelled.

In effect, the construction *estar por* + infinitive is perfectly compatible with the withdrawing of the actualisation of the relevant event, suggesting that the fulfilment of the situation involved is somehow facultative and, thus, not part of its invariant meaning, constituting, as we suggested earlier, a kind of cancellable conversational implicature (cf. (36)).

- (36) O novo disco da banda ainda está por lançar e, se calhar, nunca
the new disc of.the band still be.PRES3SG by release.INF and, if fall.INF, never
vai ser lançado.
go.PRES3SG be.INF released
‘The band’s new album is yet unreleased and, perhaps, it might never be released.’

In this view, I diverge from analyses, such as those developed by Burguera Serra (2013) for the parallel structures in Spanish¹⁹ (and also Alzamora (2018) for EP), which assume that both *estar por*

¹⁸ For more details and discussion on the concept of preliminary states, see, among others, Klein (1994) and Schroeder (2011).

¹⁹ Another hypothesis, suggested by an anonymous reviewer of this text, is that in Spanish, the semantics of the structures under consideration differs significantly from their Portuguese counterparts. Given that our aim at the moment is not to make a detailed comparison between these configurations in the two languages, we will leave this question for future research.

and *estar para* + infinitive manifest as their permanent meaning the rise of a preparatory phase, differing only with regard to a set of modal-based discursive values that would make it possible to differentiate their various readings in specific contexts. Conversely, I will assume here that, regardless of discursive and pragmatic factors that may condition the particular interpretations of each of these operators, their semantic characterisation is essentially different: *estar para* + infinitive describes a preliminary phase leading to the occurrence of a given eventuality, whereas *estar por* + infinitive refers to the negation of a consequent state. However, I agree with several observations made by Burguera Serra, namely that both *estar para* and *estar por* describe stative predications and that *estar por* involves, in one way or another, the non-occurrence of the situation represented by the infinitive form.

So far, we have seen that the structure *estar por* + infinitive (i) takes as its subject the internal argument of the main verb (cf. Peres & Mória, 1995); (ii) is restricted to combining with telic predicates (culminated processes and culminations), and (iii) denies the occurrence of the basic eventuality with which it conjoins at the relevant interval, typically carrying out a conversational implicature about the subsequent occurrence of the situation represented in the infinitive.

Property (ii) suggests that an aspectual treatment of the construction under analysis could help to understand its linguistic behaviour. In the next section of this paper, I will, therefore, propose an aspectual characterisation for the configuration at hand.

4. Towards an aspectual characterisation of the structure *estar por* + infinitive

If, as we have just seen, aspectual factors play a crucial role in the semantic characterisation of the structure *estar por* + infinitive, it is essential to investigate in more detail to what extent they contribute to establishing its meaning. Therefore, in this section, following the theoretical proposals made by Moens (1987), Moens and Steedman (1988), de Swart (1998), and, specifically for European Portuguese, by Cunha (2007) or Oliveira et al. (2004), I will try to determine the appropriate aspectual input and output for this construction.

It is assumed, in the framework we are undertaking here, that when a given operator induces a specific aspectual change, it takes as its input a predication of a basic aspectual class, its input, and converts or coerces it into another derived one with different internal temporal properties, its output. Let us consider how this general schema can be applied to the structure *estar por* + infinitive.

As we have previously pointed out, the structure *estar por* + infinitive is restricted to cooccur with culminations and culminated processes, giving rise to anomalous sequences when combined with states and processes, even if the other prerequisites for its presence are met (cf. examples (14)–(17), repeated here for convenience as (37)–(40)); this means that, ultimately, it must take as its input a telic predication.

- (37) *Os irmãos estão por adorar.
 *the brothers be.PRES3PL by love.INF
- (38) *O autocarro está por guiar.
 *the bus be.PRES3SG by drive.INF
- (39) O quarto está por arrumar.
 the bedroom be.PRES3SG by tidy.INF
 ‘The bedroom is yet untidied.’
- (40) O assassino está por prender.
 the murderer be.PRES3SG by arrest.INF
 ‘The murderer has not yet been arrested.’

Concerning its output, we observed that, like most configurations involving the verb *estar* (‘be’) in Portuguese, the structure *estar por* + infinitive gives rise to situations displaying a stative behaviour. In fact, the construction under analysis meets several criteria that have been mentioned in the literature for identifying this aspectual class (cf. Binnick, 1991; Cunha, 2007; Dowty, 1979; Moens, 1987; Smith, 1997; Vendler, 1967).

First, like statives and differently from events, the construction *estar por* + infinitive canonically receives a temporal reading of “actual present” (and not one of habituality or quantification over situations) when combined with the *presente do indicativo* (‘simple present tense’). Like other configurations with stage-level states [cf. *O João está doente habitualmente* (‘João is habitually sick’)], habitual / quantificational readings are also compatible with *estar por*, but they are not preferential. Compare the following examples:

- (41) A cama do João está por fazer {neste momento / habitualmente}.
 the bed of.the João be.PRES3SG by make.INF {in.this moment / habitually}
 ‘João’s bed is yet unmade {at the moment / # usually}.’
- (42) O João faz a cama {?? neste momento / habitualmente}.
 the João make.PRES3SG the bed {?? in.this moment / habitually}
 ‘João makes his bed {?? at the moment / usually}.’

Although compatible with a habitual reading, since it describes a stage-level predicate, sentence (41), in the absence of more specific contextual information, is meant to describe a situation in which João’s bed is currently not made, i.e., it receives preferably a temporal reading in which the state associated with the (denied) eventuality is taking place at the time of utterance. On the other hand, (42), in which the predicate occurs in its basic eventive reading, is instead interpreted as a habit or a recurrent action performed by João.

Second, even when the basic predicates are culminations, thus basic punctual situations, the structure *estar por* + infinitive consistently receives a durative interpretation, confirming its ability to perform an aspectual coercion, as the following example shows:

- (43) Trata-se de uma obra que está POR concluir há
 concern.PRES3SG-clitic of a project that be.PRES3SG by conclude.INF there.is
 bastante tempo e que agora vai ser
 quite time and that now go.PRES3SG be.INF
 desenvolvida. (CetemPúblico, par = ext711121-soc-97a-1)
 developed
 ‘This is a project that has been unfinished for a long time and is now going to be developed.’

Notice that, in European Portuguese, an adverbial like *há Q tempo* combined with stative predicates in a sentence with the *presente do indicativo* (‘simple present’) establishes an initial boundary from which the length of the interval occupied by the whole situation is calculated and measured out (constituting the utterance time its endpoint). In other words, in the environment presented above, *há Q tempo* manifests properties of a durative time measurement adverbial, being translated in English as ‘for Q time’ (cf. Móia, 2000). As shown in (44), this interpretation does not extend to events, which typically give rise to semantic anomaly in similar contexts.

- (44) *A EMPRESA {conclui / constrói} a obra há dois anos.
 *the company {conclude.PRES3SG / build.PRES3SG} the project there.is two years
 ‘*The company {completes / builds} the project for two years.’

Except if we are able to ascribe a progressive reading to this sentence – which is stative by nature –, the durational interpretation of the adverbial *há Q tempo* is simply ruled out with such events. So, the cooccurrence of this adverbial in its durative reading with the structure *estar por* + infinitive suggests that it displays a state as its output.

Another piece of evidence pointing to the stative nature of the structure *estar por* + infinitive can be seen in the following contrasts:

- (45) A cama do João esteve por fazer {durante cinco minutos / * em
 the bed of.the João be.PPERF3SG by make.INF {for five minutes / * in
 cinco minutos}.
 five minutes}
 ‘João’s bed was unmade {for five minutes / * in five minutes}.’
- (46) O João fez a cama {* durante cinco minutos / em cinco minutos}.
 the João make.PPERF3SG the bed {* for five minutes / in five minutes}
 ‘João made his bed {* for five minutes / in five minutes}.’

- (47) O prédio esteve por demolir {durante cinco anos / * às cinco
the building be.PPERF3SG by demolish.INF {for five years / * at.the five
da tarde}.
of.the afternoon}
'The building was undemolished {for five years / * at five in the afternoon}.'
- (48) A explosão demoliu o prédio {* durante cinco anos / às
the explosion demolish.PPERF3SG the building {* for five years / at.the
cinco da tarde}.
five of.the afternoon}
'The explosion demolished the building {* for five years / at five in the afternoon}.'

Unlike the basic events presented in (46) and (48), which are compatible, respectively, with an adverbial that identifies the interval with the overall length of the situation (cf. the culminated process in (46)) or with a punctual adverbial (cf. the culmination in (48)), the construction *estar por* + infinitive only admits simple duration adverbials introduced by *durante N tempo* ('for N time'), rejecting the adverbials predictably selected by the primary predicates from which it is obtained.

All the facts just discussed point to a state-like behaviour of the structure *estar por* + infinitive, indicating that its output is assuredly stative.

Given that it takes as its input a telic predicate (be it a culmination or a culminated process) and as its output a state, what is, then, the semantic contribution performed by the structure *estar por* + infinitive?

As we have seen, *estar por* + infinitive is meant to deny the occurrence of the eventuality associated with the infinitive form with which it combines. This fact may help to explain its stative behaviour. In effect, as several authors point out (e.g., Cunha, 2003, 2007; de Swart, 1996; Horn, 1989; Verkuy, 1993), there is a strong connection between sentential negation and stativity. The compatibility of negated sentences of all aspectual classes with durative for-adverbials (cf. (49)), the measurement reading of the adverbial *há Q tempo* with the simple present tense (cf. (50)), as well as the inconsistency with aspectualisers such as *acabar de* ('finish') or *parar de* ('stop') (cf. (51)–(52))²⁰ suggest that negative sentences share relevant properties with lexical statives.

- (49) O João não {fez a cama / correu / abriu a
the João not {make.PPERF3SG the bed / run.PPERF3SG / open.PPERF3SG the
porta do quarto} durante três dias.
door of.the room} for three days
'João didn't {make the bed/run/open the bedroom door} for three days.'

²⁰ For a discussion on the combinatorial possibilities and restrictions of Portuguese aspectual verbs with different types of situations, see Oliveira et al. (2004).

- (50) O João não faz a cama há três dias.
the João not make.PRES3SG the bed there.is three days
'João hasn't made his bed for three days.'
- (51) *O João parou de não escrever a sua Tese.²¹
*the João stop.PPERF3SG of not write.INF the his thesis
- (52) *Ontem, o João acabou de não escrever A sua tese.²²
*yesterday, the João finish.PPERF3SG of not write.INF the his thesis

Since both sentential negation and the structure *estar por* + infinitive serve mainly to deny the occurrence of a given situation, it is not surprising that they share some semantic features; in particular, both seem to induce a behaviour close to that of statives in the predications with which they combine.²³

Does this mean that the two configurations under analysis act semantically in the same way? The answer is obviously no, because there is a substantial difference between them. As we have seen, the structure *estar por* + infinitive can only appear in combination with telic predicates, while sentential negation does not present any specific requirements concerning the aspectual class of the situations with which it co-occurs.

It is, therefore, crucial to investigate the impact that the input selection may have on the final interpretation of the structure *estar por* + infinitive.

In view of the observed aspectual restrictions, we cannot simply say that the function of *estar por* + infinitive is to deny that any eventuality is taking place at a given time interval; somehow, the resultative states associated with the basic telic predications must be taken into account, which, additionally, would explain the similarities, described in section 2, between this construction and adjectival passives.

At first glance, the hypothesis that would seem most obvious would be that a covert negation operator at the semantic level triggered by the construction *estar por* + infinitive would fundamentally affect the consequent states associated with the relevant basic predications. That is, contrary to what happens with “regular” sentential negation, the negative operator associated with *estar por* would obligatorily take in its scope the resultant state connected with the predication in the infinitive.

²¹ Cf. *O João parou de escrever a sua tese* ('João stopped writing his thesis').

²² Cf. *Ontem, o João acabou de escrever a sua tese* ('Yesterday, João finished writing his thesis').

²³ Although, as a reviewer of this paper points out, the interplay between syntactic and semantic features surely affects the final ascription of a given aspectual class to the structures at hand, even those involving different kinds of negation – a topic that is far beyond the goals of this paper –, what we want to stress here is the fact that, semantically, the negation of a given situation is typically tied to stativity in the sense that the non-occurrence of a given predicate constitutes a stable, uniform and entirely homogeneous interval, properties that characterise stativity in general.

This requirement would explain the oddity of the combination of *estar por* with basic processes: even if all syntactic requirements are met, the absence of a consequent state would rule out the construction at issue.

In order to evaluate the adequacy of this proposal, it is crucial to investigate the behaviour of sentences involving a basic culminated process. Consider the following examples, adapted from the CetemPúblico *corpus*:

- (53) A História da Filosofia em Portugal *está por escrever*, mas a
the History of.the Philosophy in Portugal be.PRES3SG by write.INF, but the
sua escrita já foi
its writing already be.PPERF3SG
iniciada. (adapted from (CetemPúblico, par = ext797143-clt-95a-1)
begin.PPART
'The History of Philosophy in Portugal is yet unwritten, but its writing has already begun.'
- (54) E, no seu entender, o problema não seria resolvido com a
and, in.the his opinion, the problem not be.COND3SG solved with the
demolição, "por uma razão muito simples: deitando abaixo os barracos,
demolition "for a reason very simple: knocking down the shacks,
eles iam-se meter nas casas que estão por
they go.IMP3PL-CLITIC get.INF in.the houses that be.PRES3PL by
construir". (CetemPúblico, par = ext933090-soc-97b-2)
build.INF
'And, in his opinion, the problem would not be solved by demolition, "for a very simple reason: "by knocking down the shacks, they would move into the houses that are yet under construction".'

The acceptability of a follow-up like the one represented in sentence (53) shows that the structure *estar por* + infinitive can be employed even in cases where the preparatory process of the basic predication is already in course. A similar observation can be extended to a sentence like (54): in order for people to be able to move into the houses that are under construction, part of the preparatory process regarding their building must have taken place.

Thus, data like those provided by the above examples leads us to conclude that, ultimately, the configuration *estar por* + infinitive applies essentially to the consequent state and not necessarily to the entirety of the basic situation with which it combines.²⁴

²⁴ Alternatively, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer, along the lines of Heinämäki, an *Aktionsart* shift – culminated process > culmination (i.e., stripping off of the culmination) – may have occurred. However, this treatment would carry the undesirable consequence of having to justify the stative behaviour of the structure *estar por*: if the culmination is left aside and it is only the preparatory process that is focused on, why should this construction behave as a stative and not as a process?

This proposal seems to be confirmed by the analysis of sentences that combine the structure *estar por* + infinitive with the *pretérito perfeito do indicativo* (henceforth PPerf), a terminative past tense in European Portuguese. Although not so frequent as those in the present tense, these sequences can be found in our *corpus* and other EP texts, as the following examples show:

- (55) Acontece porém que a origem do pinhal bravo em Portugal
succeed.PRES3SG however that the origin of.the pine forest wild in Portugal
esteve por esclarecer até agora. (CetemPúblico, par = ext1551931-clt-soc-95a-2)
be.PPERF3SG by clarify.INF until now
'However, the origin of the pine forest in Portugal has remained unclear until now.'
- (56) (...) se bem entendi a questão, uma das fracções do prédio
(...) if well understand.PPERF3SG the question, one of.the flats of.the building
onde adquiriu casa esteve por vender até há pouco tempo
where buy.PPERF2SG house be.PPERF3SG by sell.INF until there.is little time
atrás.
before
(example taken from https://forumdacasa.com/discussion/4/3/garantia-da-casa/#google_vignette)
'(...) if I understand the question correctly, one of the flats in the building where you bought your house was unsold until recently.'

Now, if, in sentences like these, due to the semantics of the PPerf, which imposes some kind of terminativity (cf. the proposal in Cunha, 2023 for the treatment of the PPerf, based on observations made by Kamp & Reyle, 1993; Peres, 1993; Reichenbach, 1947), the negated resultant state is obligatorily closed in the past, we will infer that a change of state must take place thereafter. The most plausible candidate to ensure the end of the negated consequent state is the underlying situation represented by the infinitive. In order for the absence of a resultant state at a given time to come to an end, such a state must somehow take place after the relevant interval. Since its bringing about depends on the actualisation of the culmination to which it is attached, the whole event should arise to ensure its occurrence. This reasoning seems to be confirmed by the facts, as illustrated in the following contrast:

- (57) A casa do Pedro esteve por pintar durante dois anos, mas agora
the house of.the Pedro be.PPERF3SG by paint.INF for two years, but now
já está pintada.
already be.PRES.SG painted
'Pedro's house was unpainted for two years, but now it's finally painted.'

- (58) A casa do Pedro esteve por pintar durante dois anos, ?/* e
 the house of.the Pedro be.PPERF3SG by paint.INF for two years, ?/* and
 / * mas agora continua por pintar.²⁵
 / * but now continue.PRES3SG by paint.INF
 ‘Pedro’s house was unpainted for two years * and/but now it’s still unpainted.’

On the other hand, the semantic contribution of the structure *estar por* + infinitive, as we have said, can be described as the negation of the occurrence of a given resultant state.

Combining the above-mentioned ingredients, we get the following conditions for the semantics of the structure *estar por* + infinitive in the PPerf:

- (59) a. First, we must consider an underlying resultant state associated with the input categories to which *estar por* applies;
 b. Then, we must consider the negation of such resultant states due to the semantic contribution of *estar por*;
 c. This negated resultant state holds at a past time interval *t1*;
 d. Moreover, due to the semantics of the PPerf, this negated resultant state must come to an end at an interval *t2* such that $t1 < t2$ and *t2* is located before the speech time.

(59) says that a given resultant state, provided by the infinitive part of the configuration, does not occur at a past interval *t1* and that such denied state ends at a subsequent past time *t2* that serves as its final boundary. Thus, this formulation entails that immediately after *t2* the underlying situation must arise in order to actualise the resultant state at issue.

In short, the structure *estar por* + infinitive combined with the PPerf entails the occurrence of the basic situation with which it combines since it is the most natural way of ensuring the end of a denied resultant state.²⁶

The conjoining of *estar por* with the PPerf (as well as with other terminative past tenses, such as the pluperfect) is particularly revealing in that, by imposing a final boundary on the negated consequent state, they emphasise the crucial role played by the predication associated

²⁵ A sentence like (58) can be rescued if we substitute the PPerf by a *pretérito imperfeito* [imperfective past form; cf. *A casa do Pedro estava por pintar, e penso que ainda está* ‘Pedro’s house was unpainted, and I think that it still is’], but notice that, contrary to the PPerf, the past imperfective in Portuguese does not impose any final boundary to the situation with which it cooccurs.

²⁶ It should be stressed, however, that the interruption of the denied consequent state resulting from the combination of *estar por* + infinitive with the PPerf does not always lead to the obligatory actualisation of the situation involved. The only context, though, in which the eventuality associated with the infinitive form will not take place in these circumstances is one in which we assume the non-existence of the NP in the subject position at the speech time, as illustrated in a sentence like *O carro esteve por arranjar durante dois anos, até que foi para a sucata* ‘The car was to be fixed for two years until it was scrapped’. If the NP no longer exists at the moment of utterance, then considering the resultant state in which it participates simply does not make any sense, which turns it possible to ascribe its final boundary in a given past interval.

with the infinitive form. However, as we have already mentioned, the structure *estar por* appears preferentially with the *presente do indicativo* ('simple present') or the *pretérito imperfeito* ('past imperfect') tenses. In these cases, and as expected, the negated resultative state can extend indefinitely in time, and the actualisation of the event associated with the infinitive appears only as an inference, possibly as a conversational implicature. When it occurs with the present tense, this implicature is oriented through the future; when it combines with the imperfect, this implicature refers to an interval that obligatorily follows the past Temporal Perspective Point of the stative predication.

The behaviour of *estar por* + infinitive in the PPerf sharply contrasts with that of the structure *estar para* + infinitive. Compare the following two sentences:

- (60) O novo disco dos U2 esteve por lançar durante dois anos {mas the new album of.the U2 be.PPERF3SG by release.INF for two years {but finalmente apareceu nas lojas / * e / mas nunca apareceu finally appear.PPERF3SG in.the shops / * and / but never appear.PPERF3SG nas lojas}.
in.the shops}
'U2's new album has been unreleased for two years {but finally hit the stores / * and / but it has never hit the stores}.'

- (61) O novo disco dos U2 esteve para ser lançado durante dois anos the new album of.the U2 be.PPERF3SG to be.INF released for two years { * e / mas finalmente apareceu nas lojas / mas nunca apareceu { * and / but finally appear.PPERF3SG in.the shops / but never appear.PPERF3SG nas lojas}.
in.the shops}
'U2's new album was due for release for two years { * and/but finally hit the stores / but never hit the stores}'.

As shown in (61), the structure *estar para* + infinitive, contrary to *estar por*, does not entail (and, indeed, combined with measure adverbials like for N time, seems to forbid) the actualisation of the situation associated with the infinitive form. This behaviour can be explained if we assume, following, e.g., Burguera Serra (2013) or Cunha (2024), that the structure *estar para* + infinitive describes a preliminary state that precedes the occurrence of a given eventuality.

Now, applying the PPerf to this kind of construction, we get as a consequence that the preliminary state comes to its end in a past interval; since it is a previous part of the eventuality with which it cooccurs, its cessation means that the situation will not pursue its expected course.

It should be noted that, in general terms, the occurrence of a preliminary state, unlike a resultant one, does not necessarily imply the actualisation of the situation associated with the

infinitive since it can be interrupted even if that eventuality never takes place (indeed, even before its beginning).

The interpretative distinctions observed between the constructions *estar por* and *estar para* + infinitive, therefore, seem to result from the different phases of the aspectual nucleus to which they apply: whereas *estar por* involves (the negation of) a consequent state, *estar para* refers to a preliminary state.

5. Final remarks

The main goal of this paper was to describe the linguistic behaviour of the structure *estar por* + infinitive, trying to elucidate some of the semantic properties behind this construction.

The syntactic and semantic similarities that arise between *estar por* + infinitive and the so-called adjectival passives – particularly the requirement of a basic telic predicate as its input category – lead us to consider that its meaning somehow involves the emergence of a resultant state.

Some facts that are well-known from the literature were confirmed and deeply discussed, namely, (i) the idea that the subject of constructions with *estar por* is associated with the internal argument of the infinitival verb that follows it, i.e., that these constructions belong to the family of the passive (or possibly also, inaccusative) constructions *lato sensu* (cf. Peres & Mória, 1995); (ii) the construction has an intrinsic negative component; as the *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa Contemporânea* [‘Dictionary of the Contemporary Portuguese Language’], for instance, states “[*estar*] seguido de um verbo no infinitivo precedido da prep. *por*, indica que a ação expressa pelo verbo ainda não foi executada” [*estar* followed by preposition *por* indicates that the action represented by the verb was not yet performed]. The intimate relation between *estar por* and the denial of the situation in the infinitive was already pointed out in the semantic literature (cf. Burguera Serra, 2013).

One fact, perhaps not so clearly (or explicitly) stated in the literature, was underlined and explored here, and is assumed as perhaps the most original contribution of this paper: the fact that *estar por* (contrary to e.g., *estar* + past participle) only combines regularly with descriptions of telic eventualities, not with descriptions of activities or states.

Finally, the fact that constituents headed by *estar por* have stative properties, which is unsurprising given the stative nature of *estar* (and other structures in which this verb occurs), was extensively demonstrated. Therefore, *estar por* + infinitive takes descriptions of telic situations as its input, expressing the non-occurrence of their resultant states as its output, hence giving rise to stative predications.

Before closing, I would like to stress that many questions remain open for future work. For instance, a detailed analysis of the structure *ficar por* (‘get/become’) + infinitive is deserved, as

well as a systematic comparison between *estar por* ('be by') + infinitive and other configurations containing the verb *estar* in European Portuguese. Moreover, other constructions pertaining to the so-called infinitival passive class, like *continuar por* ('continue by') or *permanecer por* ('remain by'), ask for a careful analysis in order to understand the similarities and distinctions regarding their linguistic behaviour.

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