

The Sense of Being. Copular and existential meaning of the verb *esse* ‘to be’ in a medieval Latin corpus

Although generally following the pattern inherited from Classical and Late Latin (Bortolussi 2018), the use and distribution of the verb *esse* ‘to be’ experienced a significant evolution in Medieval Latin. One of the principal sources of linguistic change was the constant pressure that the vernacular languages exerted on its prestige counterpart. For example, in the variation of Medieval Latin that was used in the Kingdom of Poland Lat. *esse* started to be used as an auxiliary verb in periphrastic future forms which bear close relation to the Polish future tense:

(1) Polish Medieval Latin (15th c.)

<i>non</i>	<i>eritis</i>	<i>ludere</i>
NEG	be.2PL.FUT	play.INF.PRS.
‘you will not play’		

Moreover, as Medieval Latin was now used exclusively by non-native speakers in the diglossic setup of formal communication (Van Acker 2010), the verb *esse* and the constructions it occurs in experienced significant distributional changes as well. For example, when employed by less educated users in some specific contexts, the construction SUBJECT + PREDICATE (*esse*) + PrepP (*in* ‘in’ + Noun) becomes a standard way of expressing legal, emotional *etc.* states, replacing content verbs, such as Lat. *possidere* ‘to possess’:

(2) Polish Medieval Latin (15th c.)

<i>in</i>	<i>possessione</i>	<i>est</i>
in	possession-ABL.SG	be-3SG
‘(he) possesses’.		

These were, among others, factors that contributed to extending polysemy of the verb *esse*.

The present paper offers a systematic corpus-based investigation into constructional characteristics of the verb *esse* in its copular and existential meaning. We focus on the pattern which systematically gives rise to ambiguous readings, one in which *esse* is followed by a Prepositional Phrase functioning as either subject complement or adjunct (Pinkster 2015). We extract a set of occurrences of the verb from the *eFontes* (<https://corpus.scriptorum.pl>), a general 5M-token corpus of Polish Medieval Latin texts composed between the beginning of the 11th and the mid-16th century. The occurrences are next manually annotated with meaning (sense \in {COPULAR, EXISTENTIAL}) and a set of grammatical (verbal aspect, subject class *etc.*) and text-related labels (genre, topic *etc.*).

We start by showing which features are decisive in determining the meaning of the verb *esse*. We next compare the distribution of respective patterns in general corpus and two domain-specific subcorpora, namely of judiciary records and philosophical writing, as they represent contrasting situations of language use (administration v. exposition), registers (daily v. official communication) and topical domains (law v. philosophy). Finally, following work in Construction Grammar, we briefly discuss the general directions of constructional change from Classical and Late Latin to the Middle Ages (Boas 2010).

References

Boas, Hans C. 2010. ‘Comparing Constructions across Languages’. In *Constructional Approaches to Language*, edited by Hans C. Boas, 10:1–20. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/cal.10.02boa>.

- Bortolussi, Bernard. 2018. 'Copular Clause Classification in Latin'. *Journal of Latin Linguistics* 17 (2): 121–46. <https://doi.org/10.1515/joll-2018-0008>.
- Pinkster, Harm. 2015. *The Oxford Latin Syntax*. First edition. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Van Acker, Marieke. 2010. 'La transition latin / langues romanes et la notion de «diglossie»'. *Zeitschrift Für Romanische Philologie* 126 (1): 1–38. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zrph.2010.002>.