

The ontology of abstract entities: an Ibero-Romance perspective

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The semantic classification of abstract entities denoted by sentential and deverbal (and more generally event-denoting) nominals like Engl. *that John greeted Susan* and *destruction* has focused on both their ontology and distribution (i.e. their “container” contexts) in synchrony (Vendler 1967; Asher 1993, 2000; Zucchi 2015, a.o.). However, little is known about the historical development of such nominals. This paper analyzes the properties of the nouns *hecho* (Spanish) and *facto* (European Portuguese) ‘fact’ as clause-taking nominals (1,2) over time. Semantically, nowadays *hecho* and *facto* are said to be factive; they co-occur with factive verbs. Their embedded predications, italicized in (1) and (2), are presupposed to be true (Leonetti 1999; Barbosa 2013):

- (1) Pepe lamenta el hecho de haber vendido la casa de su abuela. (Spanish)
‘Pepe regrets the fact of having sold his grandmother’s house.’
- (2) Os irmãos lamentam o facto de terem vendido a casa. (Portuguese)
‘The siblings regret the fact of having sold the house.’

This paper shows that the diachrony of the nouns *hecho* (Spanish; medieval *fecho*) and the vernacular vs learned pair *feito/facto* (Portuguese) instantiates a semantic change from event to “fact-like” object (Asher 1993), specifically from an eventuality located in time and space to a possibility. In the latter meaning, these nouns can combine with a *that*-clause. Hence, the nouns came to denote an entity considered more abstract in Asher’s (1993) spectrum of abstract objects.

Originally, Spanish *hecho* and Portuguese *feito/facto* (3a,b) are eventive nouns meaning ‘feat, deeds, acts’:

- (3) a. E aquí comiençan los fechos del año de 1449 años (Carrillo, *Crónica del halconero de Juan II*, 15th c.) (Spanish)
‘And here the acts of the year 1449 start’
b. e, veendo outrossy como os feitos del rey dom Fernando hyam de bem en melhor todos (*Crónica Geral de Espanha*, 14th c.) (Portuguese)
‘and seeing also how the deeds of the king D. Fernando were progressing very well’

As eventive nouns, they are compatible with container verbs meaning *begin*, *occur*, *take place*, as they occur and develop in time (Vendler 1967; Asher 2000) and have agent and locative participants, as *el rey dom Fernando* in (3b) and *del año de 1449* in (3a). Additionally, these nouns can take deverbal nouns denoting events (e.g. *ida*) and, from the 14th c. onwards, clauses (first infinitival, then finite). Importantly, although many instances include events that are asserted to have occurred in the past (as in [3]), *hecho* is also used for eventualities that are at a planning stage and are either potential or doubtful. Aspects of an event introduced by *hecho* (e.g. who committed it) may also be called into question, as in (4):

- (4) En el hecho de que fuese muerto por nuestros segovianos hay mucha duda (Colmenares, *Historia de la insigne ciudad de Segovia*, 17th c.) (Spanish)
‘It is highly doubtful that he was killed by our people from Segovia’

Since the earliest attestations *hecho* and *feito* also meant ‘narration, story’: (sequences of) events can be narrated and told, its veracity may be questioned, and they can be the topic of conversation.

We argue that examples with such meanings provide ambiguous, bridging contexts for the semantic change, allowing for the co-occurrence of these nominals with stative nouns (5) and to gradually come to denote possibilities rather than events that have taken place:

- (5) quando quiera negarse el hecho de la existencia de este Motu propio, a lo menos no se negará que ha auido Concilio de Trento (Mayans y Siscar, *Informe canónico-legal*, 18th c.)
'whenever one wants to deny the existence of this papal document, at least one will not deny that the Council of Trent has taken place' (Spanish)

While events have a spatiotemporal location, accept concrete adjectival modifiers and can be summed and referred to by a singular expression, fact-like objects (i.e. possibilities, facts, and situations) cannot (Asher 1993, 2000). Hence, in this change there is loss of spatiotemporal location, entailments pertaining to event participants, and the ability to refer to a plurality of events. The new value involves generalization of meaning and distribution broadening, i.e. loss of co-occurrence restrictions. Additionally, unlike events, fact-like objects can be conditional and disjunctive, as in (6):

- (6) Questão: acha que é possível o lince viver aqui na região? “Há duas situações: a falta de alimento e o facto de se é uma zona livre ou se é zona de caça” (CdP) (Portuguese)
'Question: do you think that it is possible for the lynx to live here? “There are two situations: the lack of food and whether it is a free area or a hunting area”’.

The noun *feito* in Portuguese retains the eventive (older) meaning, while *facto* denotes a fact-like object (a possibility), similarly to the later interpretation of *hecho* in Spanish. In sum, the two meanings of Spanish *hecho* correspond to two different lexical items in Portuguese.

Our paper makes the following contributions. First, our findings contribute to the refinement of Asher’s classification of abstract entities. The clause-taking nouns meaning ‘fact’ that we study are not necessarily associated with a factive presupposition (*contra* Vendler and Asher’s claim about *the fact that p*; Vendler 1967; Asher 1993, 2000). Second, our data support the inclusion of a broader range of entities under “fact-like objects” than those considered in Asher (1993): *hecho* and *facto* can also denote ‘topic, matter’, a type of object not included in Asher’s typology. Third, we bring a historical perspective to this classification. Specifically, we show a path in the direction of increased abstraction of meaning, as well as meanings going from propositionally-based to discourse-based (Traugott and Dasher 2002) in the realm of nouns.

Corpora: *Corpus del Español* [corpusdelespañol.org] (CdE), *CORDE* [corpus.rae.es/cordenet.html]; *Corpus do Português* [corpusdoportugues.org] (CdP). **References:** Asher, N. 1993. *Reference to Abstract Objects in Discourse*. Dordrecht: Kluwer. • Asher, N. 2000. Events, Facts, Propositions, and Evolutive Anaphora. In J. Higginbotham et al., *Speaking of Events*, 123-150. Oxford: OUP. • Barbosa, P. 2013. Implicação e pressuposição na subordinação argumental finita. In E. Raposo et al. (eds.), *Gramática do Português*, 1821-1897. Lisboa: Fundação C. Gulbenkian. • Leonetti, M. 1999. La subordinación sustantiva: las subordinadas enunciativas en los complementos nominales. In I. Bosque and V. Demonte (eds.), *Gramática Descriptiva de la Lengua Española*, 2083-2104. Madrid: Espasa. • Traugott, E. and R. Dasher. 2002. *Regularity in Semantic Change*. Cambridge: CUP. • Vendler, Z. 1967. *Linguistics in Philosophy*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press. • Zucchi, A. 2015. Events and situations. *Annual Review of Linguistics* 1: 85-106.