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► **To cite this version:**

Jasper Vangaever, Mihaela Iliaia. Specialisation through competition: habeo vs mihi est from Latin to Romanian. EPURE. Quand le syntagme nominal prend ses marques: du prédicat à l'argument, pp.243-265, 2023. hal-03931918

**HAL Id: hal-03931918**



**<https://hal.science/hal-03931918>**

Submitted on 3 Feb 2023

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**Specialisation through competition:  
*habeo vs mihi est* from Latin to Romanian**

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	Titre du volume	<i>Quand le syntagme nominal prend ses marques : du prédicat à l'argument</i>
	Directeur(s) du volume	Peter LAUWERS, Katia PAYKIN, Mihaela ILIOAIA, Machteld MEULLEMAN et Pascale HADERMANN
	ISBN	978-2-37496-146-0 (broché) 978-2-37496-155-2 (PDF)
	Édition	ÉPURE - Éditions et presses universitaires de Reims, 2021
	Pages	243-265
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## **Specialisation through competition: *habeo* vs *mihi est* from Latin to Romanian**

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**Résumé** • Cet article porte sur l'évolution de la compétition entre *habeo* et *mihi est* dans des constructions possessives et expérientielles du latin au roumain. Contrairement aux autres langues romanes, qui ont généralisé *habeo* dans les deux types de constructions, le roumain maintient les deux formes. Sur la base des acquis théoriques sur le rôle du concept de compétition fonctionnelle dans le changement linguistique, nous avançons que la compétition entre *habeo* et *mihi est* en roumain se fixe en termes de différenciation, chacune des deux formes se spécialisant dans des domaines fonctionnels différents. Nous menons une étude diachronique sur corpus, exploratoire mais pionnière, afin de vérifier cette hypothèse à la lumière de données empiriques examinées quantitativement.

### **Introduction**

Like other languages, Latin has different ways to express prototypical possession, defined as a relation of ownership between an animate

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1. This author's research is realised within the context of the ANR / DFG project PaLaFra.

possessor and a concrete possessee that can in some way be used by the possessor (Bolkeštein 2001: 269). Among these strategies, two cross-linguistically recurrent patterns can be distinguished: a transitive pattern, in which a verb of possession is combined with a (potentially pro-dropped) nominative NP and an accusative one [1], and an intransitive pattern, in which the verb *esse* ‘to be’ is combined with a nominative NP and a dative one [2] (Bolkeštein 2001: 269).

- |            |                  |             |
|------------|------------------|-------------|
| <b>[1]</b> | Librum           | habeo.      |
|            | book.ACC         | have        |
|            | ‘I have a book.’ |             |
| <b>[2]</b> | Mihi             | eſt liber.  |
|            | I.DAT            | is book.NOM |
|            | ‘I have a book.’ |             |

The accusative NP in the transitive pattern and the nominative NP in the intransitive pattern are sometimes abstract instead of concrete, as in respectively [3] and [4].

- |            |                   |        |
|------------|-------------------|--------|
| <b>[3]</b> | Febrim            | habeo. |
|            | fever.ACC         | have   |
|            | ‘I have a fever.’ |        |
| <b>[4]</b> | Mihi febris       | eſt.   |
|            | I.DAT fever.NOM   | is     |
|            | ‘I have a fever.’ |        |

These abstract NPs code the possessee, and hence the transitive and intransitive patterns do not express a relation of prototypical possession, but an experience (Bolkeštein 1983: 83–84, 2001: 269, Fedriani 2011: 310, Pinkšter 2015: 108, Danesi & Barðdal 2018: 23).

In most Romance languages, the intransitive pattern is entirely lost, while the transitive pattern is preserved in both possessor [5] and experiencer [6] contexts, as shown for French [5a], [6a], Spanish [5b], [6b], and Italian [5c], [6c] (Stolz *et al.* 2008, Van Peteghem 2017).

- [5a]** Pierre a un livre.  
**[5b]** Pedro tiene un libro.  
**[5c]** Pietro ha un libro.  
 Peter has a book  
 ‘Peter has a book.’
- [6a]** Pierre a faim.  
**[6b]** Pedro tiene hambre.  
**[6c]** Pietro ha fame.  
 Peter has hunger  
 ‘Peter is hungry.’

Romanian, on the contrary, retains both patterns (Pană Dindelegan 2013: 186). As in Latin and in the other Romance languages, the transitive pattern appears in both possessor **[7]** and experiencer **[8]** contexts.

- [7]** Am un fiu.  
 have a son.ACC  
 ‘I have a son.’
- [8]** Am frică.  
 have fear.ACC  
 ‘I am afraid.’

As to the intransitive pattern, as in Latin, it can be used in possessor **[9]** and experiencer **[10]** contexts, but its use in possessor contexts is restricted to identificational clauses: the nominative NP is the predicate of another, potentially pro-dropped, nominative NP acting as the subject of *fi* ‘to be’ and being referentially identified by the “property-denoting nature of the possessee NP” (Pană Dindelegan 2013: 186).

- [9]** Ioana îmi este cumnată.  
 Ioana me.DAT is sister-in-law.NOM  
 ‘Ioana is my sister-in-law.’
- [10]** Mi-e frică.  
 me.DAT-is fear.NOM  
 ‘I am afraid.’

The aim of this paper is to explore the evolution of the patterns in **[1]–[4]** from Latin to Romanian, and to examine how this evolution

differs from that toward the other Romance languages. This paper is written in honour of Marleen Van Peteghem. Our comparative Romance perspective echoes the spirit of this author's own work, and our focus on Romanian reflects her lifelong interest in this most isolated and distinct of the Romance languages.

The general evolution of the patterns in [1]–[4] is well known, but a detailed account is currently lacking. This is due to the absence of a coherent theoretical framework to properly assess this evolution, and of quantitatively oriented corpus-based studies within the history of Latin and in the transition from Latin to the individual Romance languages. To fill both of these gaps is too ambitious for this article. Hence, we will restrict ourselves to (i) the elaboration of a theoretical framework capable of accounting for the evolutionary trends mentioned in the existing literature and (ii) an exploratory, quantitatively oriented diachronic corpus study of Romanian aiming to scrutinise the idiosyncratic position of this language among the Romance languages.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we will present the theoretical framework of this study. Then, we will use this framework to synthesise the current knowledge of the patterns in [1]–[4] in Classical Latin and to coherently sketch their evolution from Latin to Romance in general. This latter section will propose a new hypothesis for the evolution of these patterns from Latin to Romanian, which will be empirically examined in a final section. A conclusion will be drawn at the end of the paper.

## Theoretical framework

The evolution of the patterns in [1]–[4] will be explored within a model of language change based on the concept of functional competition. At the same time, these patterns will be conceived of as constructions in the sense described in Construction Grammar. The current section aims to define the kind of linguistic structures called “constructions” in this framework and to examine the concept of functional competition.

### Construction Grammar

Construction Grammar, as developed in particular by Goldberg (1995, 2006) and Croft (2001), is a usage-based theory of language. In this

theory, constructions are defined as unique and conventional associations of form and function. For instance, the noun *avocado* combines a specific form (i.e. a string of phonemes having a phonetic realisation in spoken language and a graphical one in written language) and a specific meaning (it denotes a tree or the fruit of this tree). This combination is unique and conventionalised, and should as such be either acquired (L1) or learned (L2). Constructions show different degrees of internal complexity and lexical specificity. In addition to words like *avocado*, they include, among other types, prefixes (e.g. *pre-*) and idioms (e.g. *give the Devil his due*). Contrary to the modular approach of Generative Grammar, in which the arbitrary character of language is relegated to the lexicon, while syntax consists of the association of lexical units, Construction Grammar admits that syntactic constructions are also pairings of form and function. For example, the ditransitive construction involves a subject, a verb, and two objects on the formal side, and evokes a transfer of an entity by an agent to a beneficiary on the functional side (Goldberg 2006: 5). Due to the association of this meaning with the form in [11a], it is possible for verbs like *slide*, which do not intrinsically evoke a transfer, to express nonetheless such a scenario [11b], and thus behave like verbs denoting a transfer through their lexical semantics, like *give* [11c] (Goldberg 2006: 7).

<b>[11a]</b>	Subj	V	Obj <sub>1</sub>	Obj <sub>2</sub>
<b>[11b]</b>	He	slides	a book	to Mary.
<b>[11c]</b>	He	gives	a book	to Mary.

Constructions are the minimal units of language. Their inventory in a given language is referred to as the “constructionicon”, by analogy to the term “lexicon” (Goldberg 1995: 5, 2006: 64).

## Functional competition

In linguistics, the concept of functional competition is a commonly used metaphor to refer to “the selection struggle among alternative forms at language production” (Fonteyn 2019: 53). The strength of this struggle depends on the degree of formal or functional similarity between the alternatives: the higher their similarity, the stronger their

competition (Berg 2014: 344). Competition is the strongest when the alternatives combine formal and functional similarities (Berg 2014: 344).

When two forms engage in competition over some functional domain, two main scenarios can be distinguished (De Smet *et al.* 2018: 198). Either one of the alternatives is favoured and causes its competitor to decline or even disappear (Leech *et al.* 2009), or each of them subsists, but specialises in distinct functional domains (Torres Cacoullos & Walker 2009). The outcomes of these scenarios, called respectively “substitution” and “differentiation” by De Smet *et al.* (2018: 198), have a similar effect on the language system: they increase its degree of isomorphism (De Smet *et al.* 2018: 198–199). Isomorphism refers to the situation in which there is a functionally motivated division of labor between the forms of a given language, in line with the more general idea that “a difference in syntactic form always spells out a difference in meaning” (Bolinger 1968: 127). Languages are claimed to naturally develop an increasing degree of isomorphism, ideally providing its users with one form for one function(al domain). Hence, competition has gained an important role in diachronic linguistics.

Functional competition may manifest itself on the level of syntactic constructions. The so-called “dative alternation”, illustrated in [12], is a typical case in point (Levin 2008).

[12a] He gives her a book.

[12b] He gives a book to her.

## ***Habeo* and *mihī est* in Classical Latin**

This section gives a more detailed description of the patterns in [1]–[4] in Classical Latin. It will be argued that these patterns are syntactic constructions in the sense described above, and that functional competition exists both between the possessor [1]–[2] and the experienter patterns [3]–[4].



## Formal and functional properties of *habeo* and *mihi est*

### Possessor *habeo* and *mihi est*

In Classical Latin, the transitive pattern in [1] and the intransitive pattern in [2] have different formal, but similar functional properties (Bolkeštein 2001: 269). From a formal viewpoint, the transitive pattern contains a verb of possession, a potentially pro-dropped nominative NP, and an accusative NP. The nominative NP is the subject of the verb of possession and the accusative NP acts as its direct object. The verb of possession is in principle lexically unspecified, but it is mostly realised by *habere* ‘to have’. Hence, we will restrict our attention to the pattern with this verb, all the more because this pattern is the only one of interest in the evolution to be examined here. On a functional level, the transitive pattern codes a relation of prototypical possession: the subject denotes an animate possessor, while the object expresses a concrete possessee that can in some way be used by the possessor (Fedriani 2011: 310). A schematic representation of this pattern is given in [13].

[13] NP<sub>NOM</sub> NP<sub>ACC.CONCR</sub> V<sub>habere</sub>

As to the intransitive pattern, on the formal side it combines the verb *esse* ‘to be’, a nominative NP, and a dative NP. The nominative NP is the subject of *esse* (and cannot be pro-dropped), while the dative NP is more difficult to analyse (Pinkšter 2015: 108). Some authors take it as the second argument of *esse*, without however detailing its specific syntactic function (Bolkeštein 1983: 83–84, 2001: 269, Fedriani 2011: 310, Pinkšter 2015: 107–108). Others analyse it as an adjunct (Scherer 1975: 126, Stassen 2009: 49–50), but since it cannot be omitted without altering the meaning of *esse*, this analysis is excluded. Compare [2] and [14]: in the absence of the dative pronoun *mihi* ‘to me’, the meaning of *est* shifts from ‘is’ to ‘exists’, thus causing the sentence to express the existence of a book instead of its state of possession by the speaker.

[14] *Eŝt liber.*  
is book.NOM  
‘There is a book.’

On the functional side, the intransitive pattern also codes a relation of prototypical possession: the nominative NP codes the possessee, while the dative NP has the role of possessor (Fedriani 2011: 310). Bolkeštein (1983: 83–84, 2001: 275) takes the dative NP as an experiencer instead of a possessor, but this analysis is excluded due to the concrete character of the nominative NP. Pinkšter (2015: 107–108) hesitates between an experiencer and recipient analysis of the dative NP, but its status as a recipient, though more plausible than its experiencer status, is less likely than its possessor analysis (the pattern does not express a transfer, and thus does not involve a recipient). The scholars defending the adjunct analysis of the dative NP ascribe it the semantic role of beneficiary (Scherer 1975: 126, Stassen 2009: 49–50). However, this analysis is as unlikely as its recipient status (for the same reason, i.e. the absence of a transfer). A schematic representation of the intransitive pattern is given in [15].

[15] NP<sub>DAT</sub> V<sub>esse</sub> NP<sub>NOM.CONCR</sub>

Since they are conventionalised pairings of a specific form and a specific meaning, the transitive and intransitive patterns in [1]–[2] hold as syntactic constructions in the sense described above. Henceforth, the constructions in [1]–[2] will be referred to as respectively “possessor *habeo*” and “possessor *mihi est*”.

Experiencer *habeo* and *mihi est*

As in the case of [1]–[2], the transitive and intransitive patterns in [3]–[4] have different formal, but similar functional properties. The transitive pattern shares its formal properties with possessor *habeo*: *habere* is combined with a (potentially pro-dropped) nominative NP and an accusative NP, the former acting as the subject of *habere* and the latter as its direct object. By contrast, the function of the transitive pattern in [3] differs from that of possessor *habeo*: instead of a relation of prototypical possession, it codes an experience (Bolkeštein 1983: 83–84, 2001: 269, Fedriani 2011: 310, Pinkšter 2015: 108, Danesi & Barðdal 2018: 23) or, in the terminology of Stassen (2009), a relation of abstract possession: the subject assumes the role of experiencer (or abstract possessor), whereas the

object has the role of abstract possessee (or stimulus) (Fedriani 2011: 313). This transitive pattern is schematised in [16].

[16] NP<sub>NOM</sub> NP<sub>ACC.ABSTR</sub> V<sub>habere</sub>

Since they have different functional properties, caused by the concrete vs abstract character of the object, the patterns in [1] and [3] are distinct form-function pairings, *i.e.* constructions.

As to the intransitive pattern in [4], its formal analysis is identical to that of possessor *mihi est*: the verb *esse* combines with a nominative and a dative NP, the former being the subject of *esse* and the latter its second argument. The analysis of this dative NP is subject to the same debate as in the case of possessor *mihi est*, and its argument analysis is again most plausible (for the reasons expounded above). On a functional level, the intransitive pattern in [4] differs from that of possessor *mihi est* by evoking an experience instead of a relation of prototypical possession, just like the transitive pattern in [3]. The nominative NP has the role of abstract possessee, while the dative NP encodes the experiencer (Bolkestein 1983: 83–84, 2001: 275, Fedriani 2011: 310, Danesi & Barðdal 2018: 23). A representation of this intransitive pattern is given in [17].

[17] NP<sub>DAT</sub> V<sub>esse</sub> NP<sub>NOM.ABSTR</sub>

Due to their difference in function, caused by the concrete vs abstract character of the dative NP, the intransitive patterns in [2] and [4] are different form-function pairings, to the image of their transitive counterparts (Danesi & Barðdal 2018: 23). In the remainder of this paper, the transitive and intransitive patterns in [3]–[4] will be referred to as respectively the “experiencer *habeo*” and “experiencer *mihi est*”<sup>2</sup>.

2. According to some authors (*e.g.* Bauer 2000: 174, 193), experiencer *mihi est* historically derives from possessor *mihi est*. However, this hypothesis is questioned or even rejected by others (*e.g.* Fedriani 2011: 311, Danesi & Barðdal 2018: 23). Danesi & Barðdal (2018: 23) propose an analysis of experiencer *mihi est* as a sub-construction of the dative subject construction.

## Functional competition between *habeo* and *mihi est*

As mentioned above, possessor *habeo* and *mihi est* have distinct formal, but similar functional properties. The same holds for experiencer *habeo* and *mihi est*. Since constructions with similar functional properties often enter in competition, it comes as no surprise that competition exists between *habeo* and *mihi est* in both possessor and experiencer constructions (Baldi & Nuti 2010: §2, Fedriani 2011: 310–311). This competition exists from the earliest texts onward, and might be inherited from Indo-European (Fedriani 2011: 311).

However, the competition between *habeo* and *mihi est* is not absolute (Fedriani 2011: 310–311). In particular, a *habeo* construction can always be replaced by a *mihi est* construction, while the opposite substitution does not hold. This disequilibrium between *habeo* and *mihi est* is due to a difference regarding the nouns that occur in possessor and experiencer constructions: the range of the concrete nouns coding the possessee in possessor constructions is open with both *habeo* and *mihi est*, while the inventory of the abstract nouns filling the stimulus slot in experiencer constructions is restricted with both verbs, though more significantly with *habeo* (Baldi & Nuti 2010: 260–261, Fedriani 2011: 311). This shows that *mihi est* is more specialised in experiencer contexts than *habeo*. In the oldest texts, experiencer *mihi est* is moreover preferred over *habeo*, which is reflected in a higher frequency (Baldi & Nuti 2010: 260–261, Fedriani 2011: 311–312)<sup>3</sup>. Yet, instances of experiencer *habeo* are attested already in the earliest period (Fedriani 2011: 311–312), contrary to what is claimed by Löfstedt (1963: 76–78). From the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BC onward, experiencer uses of *habeo*, as in [18], gain in frequency, putting gradually an end to the absolute dominance of *mihi est* (Fedriani 2011: 311–312)<sup>4</sup>.

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3. In Plautus' texts, the ratio of *mihi est* against *habeo* in experiencer constructions is 35:7 (Baldi & Nuti 2010: 260–261).

4. There are no quantitatively oriented corpus studies of experiencer *habeo* from this century onward, let alone of its competition with experiencer *mihi est*. Hence, no figures can be mentioned. An increasing frequency of *habeo* in experiencer constructions can nonetheless be observed, at least in absolute numbers.

[18] Si cui venae sic moventur,  
 if REL.DAT veins.NOM so tremble  
 is habet febrim. (Cic. *De fato* 15)  
 he has fever.ACC  
 ‘If his veins tremble in this way, he has a fever.’

The increasing use of *habeo* instead of *mihi est* in experiencer constructions is due to the fact that the original constraints on the object of *habeo*, *i.e.* that it should be a concrete noun denoting an object that can somehow be used by the possessor, gradually loosen (Löfstedt 1963, Fedriani 2011: 310–311). *Habeo* thus “started out as more concrete, preferably used to denote temporary possession”, but subsequently developed “more abstract senses such as experiencing physical feelings and emotions” (Fedriani 2011: 310). Put differently, speakers came to gradually exploit the use of *habeo* in experiencer contexts, leading to a more intense selection struggle between this construction and experiencer *mihi est*.

Fedriani (2011: 310) analyses the passage from concrete to abstract possession (or experience) within the light of the concept “ideas are objects metaphor”. This metaphor conceives of the mind as a container and of abstract entities, such as feelings and emotions, as objects stored in it (Kövecses 2000: 89). This is in line with the more general idea that the use of abstract nouns consists of “a linguistic technique that allows actions and processes to be treated as if they were things” (Seiler 1983: 52).

## ***Habeo* and *mihi est* from Latin to Romance**

After having detailed the formal and functional properties of possessor and experiencer *habeo* and *mihi est* in Classical Latin, we will explore in this section their evolution in Late Latin and from Late Latin to Romance. As noted in the introduction, the evolution of these constructions has the same outcome in all Romance languages, except Romanian. Hence, their evolution from Latin to Romance will be examined in two separate sections.

## From Latin to the Romance languages other than Romanian

In Late Latin, *habeo* and *mihi est* still occur in both possessor and experiencer constructions. From Classical Latin, the language also inherits the competition between possessor *habeo* and *mihi est*, on the one hand, and between experiencer *habeo* and *mihi est*, on the other. At this stage of the language, however, the competition between *habeo* and *mihi est* gains in intensity and, more significantly, starts settling in favour of *habeo*, both in possessor and in experiencer constructions (Fedriani 2011: 311). Bearing in mind that the two main outcomes of functional competition are substitution and differentiation, the generalisation of *habeo* at the cost of *mihi est* is to be analysed in terms of “constructional substitution” (Fedriani 2011: 311). Empirical evidence supporting this evolution comes from the Romance languages themselves: while *mihi est* is entirely lost in these languages, *habeo* can still take as its object both concrete and abstract nouns, and thus occur in possessor as well as in experiencer constructions (cf. [5]–[6]) (Stolz *et al.* 2008, Van Peteghem 2017).

The fundamental question raised by this evolution is why the competition between *habeo* and *mihi est* settled in favour of *habeo* in both constructions instead of leading to a division of labour (e.g. *habeo* replacing *mihi est* in possessor contexts and *mihi est* replacing *habeo* in experiencer contexts). In other words, why did the competition between *habeo* and *mihi est* settle in terms of substitution instead of differentiation? According to Fedriani (2011: 312–313), two factors have played a role:

- *Habeo* might have become preferred over *mihi est* because it was perceived as a more expressive construction. Arguments in favour of this hypothesis come from a number of Latin authors. For instance, in his comment on verse 40 of Terentius’ *Andria*, the IV<sup>th</sup> c. AD grammarian Donatus explicitly testifies of the expressivity of *habeo*: “Plus dixit ‘in memoria habeo’ quam si dixisset ‘scio’” (“‘I have in memory’ means more than ‘I know’”).
- At the same time, the substitution of *mihi est* by *habeo* is part of a much more general, syntactic evolution: the victory of *habeo* over *mihi est* corresponds to the victory of a tran-

sitive pattern over an intransitive one. This replacement is thus to be seen within the overall shift of the language (and of Indo-European in general) toward a more transitive syntax (cf. Bauer 1993: 65).

The precise role of these factors in the substitution of *mihi est* by *habeo* is unknown, but the syntactic pressure exerted by the spread of transitivity is probably more significant. Since the replacement of the intransitive *mihi est* pattern by the transitive *habeo* pattern is part of a large-scale, Indo-European syntactic drift, one might raise the question why it did not take place in the transition from Latin to Romanian.

## From Latin to Romanian

Contrary to the other Romance languages, Romanian preserved both *habeo* and *mihi est*, in possessor as well as in experiencer contexts (cf. [7]–[10]) (Pană Dindelegan 2013: 185–186). The survival of *habeo* and *mihi est* in the two constructions excludes that their competition in the transition from Latin to Romanian settled in terms of substitution. Given that the other main outcome of functional competition is differentiation, it is thus expected that *habeo* and *mihi est* specialised in different possessor and experiencer contexts.

This hypothesis, proposed on the basis of theoretical insights gathered from diachronic research on competing constructions in other languages, is to this day unexplored. This is partly due to the fact that, with respect to Romanian, scholarly attention has almost exclusively focused on *mihi est* (hence *fi* ‘to be’)<sup>5</sup>. The lack of attention for *habeo* (hence *avea* ‘to have’) could reside in its transitive character: as in the other Romance languages and like many other two-place verbs, *avea* can govern as its object both concrete and abstract nouns. Therefore, it may occur in both possessor and experiencer constructions, just like in Latin. Because of its transitive character, its use in the two constructions might have been taken for granted, and, as a corollary, considered less worthy of closer scrutiny. However, a diachronic study of *avea* in Romanian could

5. Discussions of the verbs *fi* and *avea* are abundant, but they mainly focus on their use as competing auxiliaries (e.g. Dragomirescu 2010, Pană Dindelegan 2010, Ledgeway 2015).

indicate whether its competition with *fi* settled in terms of differentiation, or whether another, cross-linguistically less recurrent outcome of functional competition is to be assumed. The interest of such a study becomes even clearer when looking at the outcome, in present-day Romanian, of the two *fi* constructions.

The use of experiencer *fi* is widespread, but restricted to contexts in which the abstract possessee is realised by an NP denoting a psychological or physiological state, such as *foame* ‘hunger’ [19] (Pană Dindelegan 2013: 186)<sup>6</sup>.

<b>[19]</b>	Mi-e	foame.
	I.DAT-be.1SG	hunger.NOM
	‘I am hungry.’	

If, in the transition from Latin to Romanian, the competition between experiencer *habeo* and *mihi est* settles in terms of differentiation, it could thus be expected that, in Romanian, *avea* is specialised in contexts where the stimulus is a state other than a psychological or psychological one. This hypothesis will be referred to as the “Experiencer Differentiation Hypothesis.”

As to possessor *fi*, its use in present-day Romanian is confined to identificational contexts (Pană Dindelegan 2013: 186). These are contexts where the nominative NP is the predicate of another, potentially pro-dropped, nominative NP. This NP is the subject of *fi*, and its referent is identified by the “property-denoting nature of the possessee NP” (cf. [9]) (Pană Dindelegan 2013: 186). The dative NP, in its turn, encodes the possessor of the subject predicate NP. Contrary to *fi*, *avea* cannot occur in identificational contexts, but is instead specialised in regular possessor constructions (cf. [7]). In other words, *avea* replaced *fi* in regular possessor contexts, as in the other Romance languages, but did

6. The formal analysis of experiencer *fi* is subject to debate. It has traditionally been analysed in the same way as its Latin source, i.e. as an intransitive construction in which the nominative NP is the subject of *fi* and the dative NP its second argument (Pană Dindelegan 2013: 186). More recently, another analysis has been proposed: the nominative NP and *fi* form a complex predicate and the dative NP is its non-canonically marked subject (Iliaia & Van Peteghem forthcoming). This debate falls outside the scope of this study.



not entirely oust it from the language system. Rather, it caused *fi* to acquire a new possessor function and to specialise in this use.

The substitution of *fi* by *avea* in regular possessor contexts could indicate that, in the transition from Latin to Romanian, *habeo* specialised in possessor constructions at the expense of its use in experiencer constructions. The extant use of experiencer *avea* in present-day Romanian could be explained in two ways:

- It might reflect an archaic way of expression that still competes with *fi*, but that will eventually disappear in favour of the latter and enable *avea* to completely specialise in possessor constructions. In this scenario, the language evolves toward a neat division of labor between the two patterns: *avea* becomes restricted to possessor constructions and *fi* to experiencer constructions. We will call this hypothesis the “Possessor Experiencer Differentiation Hypothesis”.
- *Avea* might be preserved in experiencer constructions, specialising in the contexts from which experiencer *fi* is excluded. The resulting division of labor is the outcome of the aforementioned Experiencer Differentiation Hypothesis.

The aim of the final part of this study is to empirically examine these two hypotheses, so as to determine how the competition between *avea* and *fi* settled in Romanian.

## Empirical investigation: *avea* vs *fi* in Romanian

In order to explore these hypotheses, two diachronic corpus studies have been performed. The first one aims to examine Possessor Experiencer Differentiation Hypothesis, *i.e.* the hypothesis of an emerging division of labor between *avea* and *fi*. Since *fi* is excluded from regular possessor constructions and is thus confined to experiencer constructions, we will examine this hypothesis by analysing to which extent *avea* specialises in possessor instead of experiencer constructions. To this end, we will compare the ratio of concrete vs abstract nouns occurring as its object from a diachronic viewpoint. The second corpus study will explore the Experiencer Differentiation Hypothesis, *i.e.* the hypothesis of an emerging division of labor between *avea* and *fi*

within the group of experiencer constructions. To this purpose, we will compare the range of the abstract nouns used in the *avea* and *fi* patterns.

Our corpus covers the entire documented history of Romanian, viz. the period between the XVI<sup>th</sup> and the XXI<sup>st</sup> c. The corpus up to the XXI<sup>st</sup> c. coincides with that used in Illoaia & Van Peteghem (forthcoming) and is drawn from the database *Sketch Engine*. The corpus from the XXI<sup>st</sup> c. is drawn from the web-corpus *Romanian Web 2016*. Following Gheție (1997), we divided the first three centuries into two distinct periods: 1500–1640 and 1641–1780<sup>7</sup>.

The two corpus studies have been conducted based on a distinct dataset, each of them covering the entire span between the XVI<sup>th</sup> and the XXI<sup>st</sup> c.:

- So as to explore to which extent *avea* specialises in possessor instead of experiencer constructions, we selected an arbitrary set of 50 occurrences of *avea* per period. These occurrences have been retrieved by a query aiming to select all instances of *avea* used with a noun in a pre- or postverbal position at a maximal distance of two words<sup>8</sup>. The ratio of concrete vs abstract nouns used as the object of *avea* in the history of Romanian will thus be examined on the basis of a total number of 250 instances.
- In order to investigate to which extent *avea* and *fi* specialise in different experiencer contexts, we selected an arbitrary set of 50 instances of *avea* and *fi* used in combination with an abstract noun. These data have been retrieved by a query serving to select all occurrences of *avea* and *fi* with a pre- or postverbal noun at a maximal distance of two words. All constructions containing a concrete instead of an abstract noun have been manually sorted out until we reached a set of 50 experiencer constructions per period for both *avea* and *fi*. However, the earliest period contains only 40 cases of experiencer *fi*. So as to allow a fair comparison of this pattern with experiencer

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7. The year 1640 marks the end of the Early Old Romanian period. In this year was printed, at the Govora Monastery, the very first collection of legal, canonical, and civil laws in Romanian. As to the year 1780, it marks the beginning of Modern Romanian as well as the year of publication of the first important grammar of Romanian (*Elementa linguae daco-romanae sive valahicae*).

8. The hits retrieved by this query are randomised, in both corpora. For each period, we selected the first 50 instances.

*avea* in this period, the number of examples of the latter was reduced to 40. The initially planned set of 50 instances per pattern has been retained for all other periods, yielding a total number of 480 occurrences.

In the following sections, we will describe and discuss the results of the two corpus studies.

### The Possessor Experiencer Differentiation Hypothesis

If the competition between *avea* and *fi* settles according to the Possessor Experiencer Differentiation Hypothesis, the use of *avea* with concrete nouns is expected to increase between the XVI<sup>th</sup> and the XXI<sup>st</sup> c. at the expense of its use with abstract nouns. However, this trend is not confirmed by our data. As shown in Figure 1, the number of concrete nouns acting as the object of *avea* is not only lower than the number of abstract nouns in the five periods, it also decreases in the course of time.

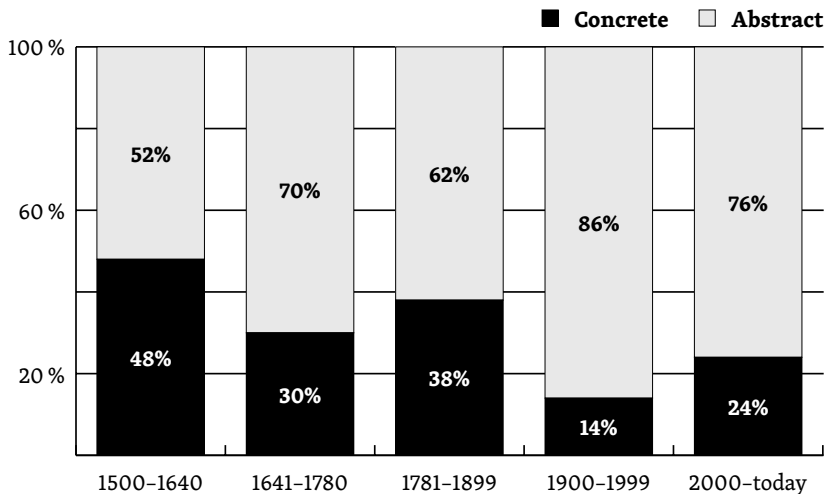


Figure 1 – Possessor vs experiencer *avea*

Hence, *avea* specialises in experiencer constructions, not in possessor ones. This disconfirms the Possessor Experiencer Differentiation

Hypothesis, and raises the question whether the competition between *avea* and *fi* settles according to the Experienter Differentiation Hypothesis.

## The Experienter Differentiation Hypothesis

The Experienter Differentiation Hypothesis predicts that the competition between *avea* and *fi* in experienter constructions settles in terms of a specialisation in distinct sets of abstract nouns. In present-day Romanian, the nouns occurring with *fi* are held to be restricted to nouns denoting psychological or physiological states (Pană Dindelegan 2013: 186). Thus, the abstract nouns serving as the object of *avea* are expected to predominantly and, from a diachronic viewpoint, increasingly denote other types of experienceable stimuli.

Our first result confirming this hypothesis comes from the number of distinct lexemes attested in the stimulus slot of *avea* and *fi*. As shown in Table 1, the lexical variation of these lexemes is more than twice as high with *avea* than with *fi* in each of the five periods.

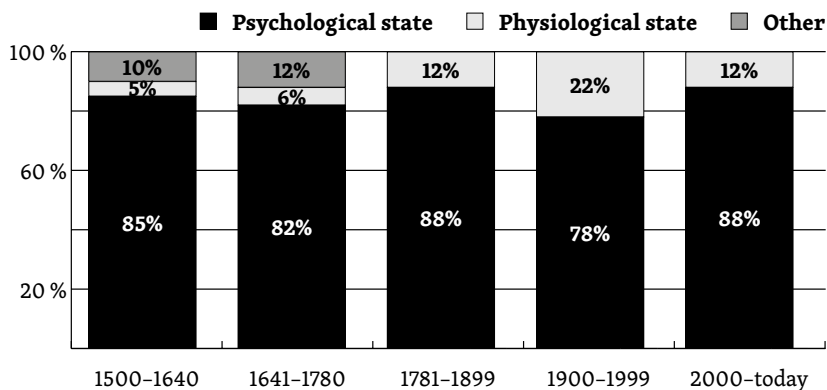
	<i>avea</i>	<i>fi</i>
1500–1640	28	13
1641–1780	42	15
1781–1899	36	16
1900–1999	45	13
2000–today	38	13

**Table 1** – Lexical variation of the abstract nouns with *avea* and *fi*

As is well known, the lexical variation in some slot of a syntactic construction is an important parameter to measure the productivity of a construction, *i.e.* its degree of schematicity and, from the point of view of the language user, applicability: the more lexical variation there is, the more productive is the construction (Barðdal 2008: 22). In view of this, the results in Table 1 suggest that experienter *avea* is more productive than experienter *fi*. This conclusion is corroborated by another difference between experienter *avea* and *fi*, also pertaining to their productivity.

According to Barðdal (2008: 35), the productivity of a syntactic construction does not only depend on the lexical variation in its slots, but also on the semantic coherence between the items filling them: in a more productive construction, the fillers show a high degree of lexical variation and a low degree of semantic relatedness, while in a less productive construction, they have a low degree of lexical variation and a high degree of semantic coherence. Since experiencer *fi* is less productive than experiencer *avea*, the nouns coding the stimulus are expected to be semantically more related in the *fi* pattern than in the *avea* pattern. On the basis of Pană Dindelegan (2013: 186), the semantic relatedness of the nouns in the *fi* pattern is expected to manifest itself in a distinction between psychological and physiological states. For *avea*, no semantic categories have been proposed. According to the Experiencer Differentiation Hypothesis, however, the nouns used with *avea* are different from those occurring with *fi*. Hence, *avea* is expected to show a low frequency of psychological and physiological stimuli.

Globally speaking, these predictions are borne out by our data. With *fi*, the nouns exclusively denote psychological (e.g. *frică* ‘fear’) and physiological (e.g. *frig* ‘cold’) states, but only from ca. 1780 onward (Figure 2). Before this period, other types of abstract nouns are not excluded.



**Figure 2** – Types of abstract nouns in the *fi* pattern

The residual group of nouns are extremely rare, but lexico-semanticly diverse. In our corpus, they are represented by three

diștinct lexemes: *ajutor* ‘help’, *folos* ‘use’, and *sărăcie* ‘poverty’. Since these nouns disappear from ca. 1780 onward, the evolution of *fi* corresponds indeed to a specialisation in the expression of physiological and especially psychological experiences.

The opposite trend holds for *avea*: in the earliest period, the nouns designating a psychological state outnumber those of the residual group, while from this period onward, the two types of nouns respectively decrease and increase in frequency (Figure 3). This tendency culminates in present-day Romanian, where almost 80% of all nouns belong to the residual group. The nouns denoting a physiological state are extremely rare and have a negligible role in the evolution of *avea*.

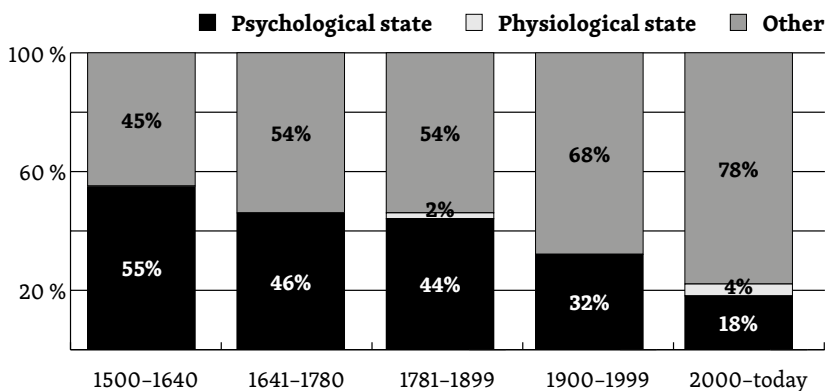


Figure 3 – Types of abstract nouns in the *avea* pattern

As in the case of *fi*, the nouns of the residual group in the *avea* pattern are lexico-semantically diverse, including, among others, *lumină* ‘light’, *obicei* ‘habit’, and *păcat* ‘sin’.

Taken together, Figures 1 to 3 show that the competition between *fi* and *avea* in the history of Romanian settles according to the Experiencer Differentiation Hypothesis. On the one hand, *avea* preserves its use in experiencer constructions alongside its use in possessor constructions (Figure 1). On the other hand, there emerges a division of labor between *avea* and *fi* within the group of experiencer constructions: *fi* specialises in the coding of physiological and especially psychological experiences (Figure 2), while *avea* specialises in the expression of all other types of experiences (Figure 3).

## Conclusion

This paper examined the evolution of two constructions from Latin to Romanian: a transitive construction, in which the verb *habeo* is combined with an accusative NP, and an intransitive construction, in which the verb *esse* combines with a nominative NP. Depending on whether the NP is concrete or abstract, these constructions express respectively a relation of possession and an experience. In Classical Latin, competition exists between *habeo* and *mihi est* in both possessor and experiencer contexts. In the transition from Latin to most Romance languages, the evolution of *habeo* and *mihi est* is ruled by their competition and settles according to one of the main outcomes of functional competition, i.e. substitution: *habeo* replaces *mihi est* in both possessor and experiencer constructions, in line with the general shift of the language toward an increasingly transitive syntax.

In the transition from Latin to Romanian, the competition between *habeo* and *mihi est* settles in another way. As in the other Romance languages, *habeo* replaces *mihi est* in regular possessor constructions. However, possessor *mihi est* does not cease to exist, but specialises in a type of possessor constructions from which *habeo* is excluded: identificational constructions. Contrary to the other Romance languages, *habeo* does not replace *mihi est* in experiencer constructions. Instead, their competition settles in terms of differentiation, which is another recurrent outcome of functional competition: *mihi est* specialises in the coding of psychological and physiological experiences, while *habeo* specialises in the expression of all other types of experiences. The resulting division of labor is a typical example of how languages naturally develop an increasing degree of isomorphism through competition (cf. Bolinger 1968).

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