In this presentation, I will show that the fluctuations in frequency of subject-verb order patterns are important indicators of the change from Middle Portuguese to Modern European Portuguese, particularly as regards the location of this change in time. The arguments are founded in data selected from 16th to 19th century Portuguese texts available in an annotated, electronic corpus (cf. <http://www.ime.usp.br/corpus>), comprising 851,619 words and 13,841 tokens. I will point out possible consequences of this research for further diachronic studies of Portuguese syntax, as regards the measurement of variation in clitic placement. The syntactic change that originates Modern European Portuguese (hf. EP) has most often been described in the literature on the basis of clitic placement variation. The location of this change in time has been quite a controversial point; some authors consider that it took place in the beginning of the 17th century (Martins 1994), others located it in the end of the 18th (Galves and Galves, 1995). To a certain extent, the difference in the timings can be related to different theories of change within the generative framework. But we will see here that the approach towards the variation itself is another crucial aspect of the difficulties faced by most studies in locating this change in time. The usual method for quantifying the changes in clitic placement patterns is to measure the relative rates of enclisis (V-cl) against proclisis (cl-V) in the relevant contexts (finite unembedded clauses where the clitic-verb complex is preceded by referential, non-focalized constituents; subjects in particular) – the so-called “diachronic variation” contexts. However, Paixão de Sousa (2004) proposed an alternative assessment of clitic placement patterns, considering that the “variation game” would not be played between “proclisis or enclisis”; but rather, among three possible positions for the lexical subject, each of which connected to a fixed clitic placement pattern. The lexical subject could surface as post-verbal (Vcl-S), as pre-verbal with proclisis (S-clV, S in an internal position), or as pre-verbal with enclisis (S-Vcl, S in an external, adjunct position). Drawing from this hypothesis, the study mapped out the behavior of subjects in finite sentences with clitics in 16th-19th century texts. The data were separated into post-verbal subjects (VS, cf.1-a below), pre-verbal subjects (SV, cf.1-b below), and of course null subjects (cf.1-c below) - in a first view, regardless of the relative position clitic-verb:

(1)  
a. Uma carta de V.R. me deu o padre Fr. N. perto de Cascais (Chagas, 1631)  
   ‘A letter from V.R. gave me father N. near Cascais’

b. O Govenador o recebeo bem (Couto, 1546)  
   ‘The Gov. received him well’

c. Sábado passado vos mandei um papel ... (Melo, 1608)  
   ‘Last Saturday I sent you some paper...’

The average frequency rates of each construction along the surveyed time span evolves as follows: for VS: 0.18-0.21-0.22-0.09-0.09-0.08; for SV: 0.22-0.27-0.27-0.42-0.36-0.42; for null subjects: 0.56-0.47-0.49-0.41-0.49-0.42 (combining texts in 50 year periods, as in 1550/99-1600/49-1650/99-1700/49-1750/99-1800/59). The frequency of VS patterns present a consistent fall in the texts representative of the first years 1700; this is accompanied by a raise in SV frequencies, while the frequency of null subjects does not show clear tendencies to raise or fall. The evolution does not draw a gradual line of change – rather, two plateaus are drawn; in the first phase, VS remains at around 20%; it then falls to around 10%. The falling point is
the first half of the 18th century (1700/1749, with 0.09 VS, compared to 0.22 VS in the immediately previous period). This result is in itself a remarkable indicator that the 1700s are an important threshold in the diachrony of Portuguese. Nonetheless, the close exam of clitic placement in this raw data brings out further interesting facts. First, the raise in SV constructions after 1700 is in fact a raise in SV with enclisis (that is: S-Vcl, and not S-clV). This is revealing, once S-Vcl is the crucial innovative EP construction. In all the texts by authors born after the 1700s, the overall rate of occurrence of VS never surpasses the overall rate of occurrence of S-Vcl. This is true even for some texts in which the clitic placement patterns are hard to define as “classic” or modern (which means that given a “borderline” text, VS frequencies can function as a measurement rode, as Galves, Britto and Paixão de Sousa 2005 have pointed out based on this data). Second, this study clearly shows that for 16th-17th century texts, SV with proclisis is not used to the detriment of SV with enclisis (nor vice-versa). In fact, in this period the texts with the higher proportions of S-clV are those in which there are lower proportions of null subjects: the frequencies of S-clV and null subjects vary in complementary proportions, while the frequency of S-Vcl is comparatively stable among contemporaries. This is good news for the hypothesis that in this first period (1550-1699), SV with enclisis and SV with proclisis are independent syntactic options, with different structures and different conditionings on usage (cf. Galves, Britto and Paixão de Sousa 2005). These are some of the facts that show that subject-verb order patterns can be a strong indicative of the syntactic change towards EP, in combination with enclisis-proclisis patterns. Moreover, I propose that these results are a fertile field for the discussion of a known challenge that faces diachronic studies in the generative framework: how to measure variation, or even – what does “diachronic variation” mean in this framework? Diachronic studies of clitic placement in Portuguese have long relied on measuring the rates of enclisis versus proclisis in so-called “variation contexts”. Here I point out that this apparently obvious method is not our sole possibility; in fact, if we consider that S-Vcl and S-clV are both grammatically sound options in the texts that precede Modern EP, there is little to gain in measuring their “variation” for this period. A more interesting view of the facts can be obtained by measuring the overall rate of occurrence for each construction. This alternative view results in an interesting interpretation for the “turning point” in the years 1700, when the rates of VS (and the rates of SV with proclisis) fall, and the rates of SV with enclisis increase. This is the point in time when we can grasp a structural change, in which a new position for subjects is manifested: a pre-verbal position for neutral subjects, which yields enclisis of complement clitics to the verb. This is the innovative structure (S-Vcl), which will become the most frequent construction with lexical subjects overall in the more modern texts – surpassing not only SV with proclisis, but also VS constructions.

References