

Syntax matters in the acquisition of Spanish copular verbs

This talk deals with the acquisition of Spanish copular verbs (*ser* and *estar*) by native speakers of English focusing on their distribution with adjectives. The distribution of Spanish copulas with adjectival predicates is complex, as some have a fixed distribution, being able to appear only with one copula but not the other, see (1) and (2), while others can appear with the two copulas showing a dual distribution, which is determined by additional discursive factors: when the predicate describes the individual, *ser* is correct (3); when the predicate applies to an individual in a specific circumstance, *estar* must be chosen (4). The plurality of factors governing copular distribution makes its acquisition very demanding for L2 learners and its difficulty has been widely recognized in the literature. Capitalizing on the fact that *ser* is the first copula that emerges in learners' production, the vast majority of works is dominated by the view that the distribution of *ser* is easy to master and its acquisition occurs early (Geeslin 2005, Woosey 2008, VanPatten 2010). This idea is in principle congruent with theoretical hypotheses according to which *ser* is structurally simpler than *estar*, the latter including more syntactic projections (Gallego and Uriagereka 2009, Arche 2012, a.o.), see (5) and (6). Likewise, the copular distribution that hinges upon discursive properties is predicted to be more vulnerable to acquisition than the one that is not by theories such as the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace 2011). In this talk we show that, contrary to common predicament, *ser* can be demonstrated not to be fully acquired even at advanced stages of proficiency and the results are not immediately explained by the syntactic properties of the copulas or the Interface Hypothesis. Our data show that levels of accurate rejection of *ser* remain low at advanced levels in both cases, those where *estar* is the only grammatical copula and those where it is the only felicitous possibility.

A study involving four elicitation tasks to test oral production and, crucially, levels of acceptance and rejection, was designed and administered to 71 natives of English learning Spanish at different levels of proficiency (18 beginners, 30 intermediate and 23 advanced learners) and 25 Spanish monolinguals. The tasks included 18 items in obligatory distribution with *ser*, 18 in obligatory distribution with *estar* and 72 dual adjectives in both scenarios, where only *ser* was the felicitous option and others where only *estar* was. Dual adjectives were drawn from the two different groups syntactically distinguished by Marín (2010): those which pattern with *estar*-only adjectives in a larger number of structures, such as absolute clauses (Leborans 1999, Arche 2006, a.o.), and those which, despite combining also with *estar*, behave as *ser*-only adjectives in these structures. This is shown in the contrast of (7) where dual *nervioso* 'nervous' patterns with *estar*-only *contento* 'happy' and dual *viejo* 'old' patterns with *ser*-only *famoso* 'famous'.

Although advanced learners reached high levels of correct oral production and acceptance of *ser* with only-*ser* adjectives ($p=.162$) (96% for the production) and of *estar* with only-*estar* adjectives ($p=.307$) (94%), they were significantly more reluctant to reject *ser* (69%) ($p=.001$) than *estar* (89%) ($p<.001$) in ungrammatical combinations. With dual adjectives, learners do not reject *ser* in contexts where *estar* is required either. This is especially prominent with dual adjectives patterning with *ser*-only adjectives (e.g. *viejo* 'old') (74%) ($p<.001$). The fact that learners had more persistent difficulties in rejecting *ser* than *estar* not only in the discourse-dependent cases but also where the correct choice is fixed suggests that the idea that *ser* is better acquired needs revision. Also, it is seen that neither the Interface Hypothesis nor hypotheses on the structure of the copulas can obviously account for this. Learners take the syntactic properties of the adjectives that combine with them into account, which suggests that the driving force guiding the acquisition of the copular distribution is of syntactic nature but is not rooted in the copular verb themselves.

Examples:

(1) *María es/*está famosa.*

María **be**_{SER/ESTAR-PRESENT-3SG} famous.
‘María is famous.’

(2) *María *es/está contenta.*

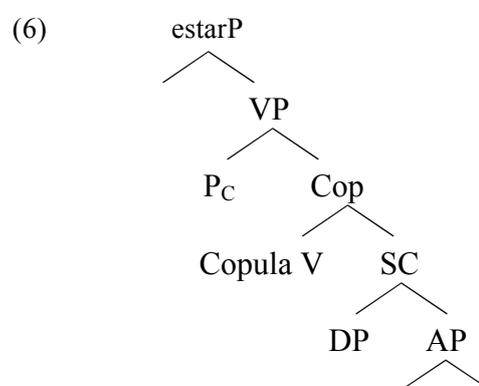
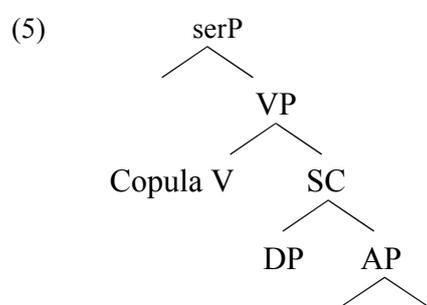
María **be**_{SER/ESTAR-PRESENT-3SG} happy.
‘María is happy.’

(3) *Pedro es nervioso.*

Pedro **be**_{SER-PRESENT-3SG} nervous
‘Pedro is nervous (type of person)’

(4) *Pedro está nervioso*

Pedro **be**_{ESTAR-PRESENT-3SG} nervous
‘Pedro is nervous (today).’



(7) Nervioso/contento, Pedro dejó la reunion.
Nervous/happy, Pedro left the meeting

(8) *Viejo/famoso, Pedro dejó el trabajo.
Old/famoso, Pedro left the job

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