

TEMPORAL IS NOT TEMPORARY : A CONTRASTIVE EXAMINATION OF SPANISH COPULA SELECTION

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1. Introduction

Spanish has a variety of forms which are translatable as the English verb "be" : ser (soy profesor "I am a teacher"), estar (Ella está en clase "She is in class", haber (Ustedes han de estudiar "You are to study"), tener (tenemos mucho frío "We are very cold"), quedar (La casa queda en la Avenida 33 "The house is on 33rd Ave"), etc. Different pedagogical grammars, however, have traditionally narrowed down the focus to a two-way contrast : ser and estar. It seems that there are cases where this distinction causes a lot of difficulty to English speakers when they try to communicate in Spanish. Spanish speakers, on the other hand, do not seem to experience major problems when trying to learn the apparently simple basic English verb be. This paper reports on an analysis I conducted in order to account for the problematic uses of the Spanish contrast ser-estar. In the first section the non-contrasting ser-estar sets are discussed. The third section of the paper analyzes the contrasting, problematic sets, together with different traditional explanations. The fourth section offers an alternative account of the contrasting ser-estar sets. Finally, the fifth section presents an overview of the problem and includes a concluding note.

2. The problem

An examination of several accounts of different pedagogical grammars in both languages (e.g. Leech and Svartvik, 1975,

and Graupera and Pace, 1970, for English and Spanish, respectively) as well as accounts of comprehensive descriptive grammars such as Quirk et. al. (1985) for English, and The Real Academia Española (1981) for Spanish, shows that be "matches" with ser and estar in a variety of functions. However, there are sets in Spanish where the copula selection seems to be tricky for English speakers. To try to account for this particular difficulty, I examined the use of the copula in both English and Spanish, and concentrated on the contrasting sets of cases where the Spanish contrast of ser-estar appears. My study thereof proceeds to an analysis of three sorts of data : cases in which only ser appears, data in which estar appears, and those in which both appear in contrast.

The sets in which ser-estar appear in contrast is characterized by Bolinger (1973) as one of essence (ser) and accident (estar). The contrasting set is tested with a set of analogous English forms which covertly show this category in operation. However appealing the essence-accident characterization of ser-estar is, it concentrates on the "object" in the real world and does not consider the evaluative point of view of the speaker.

As an alternative to Bolinger's analysis I examined the above mentioned accounts of the ser-estar contrast with the purpose of showing that however accurate different analyses may be, they still may be completed if the **speaker's viewpoint** is

considered as a determinant of the ser-estar selection.

Within this frame of reference the contrasting lexical items in Spanish can be seen as posing a problem for the English speaker not because they are immeasurably more complicated than other abstractions and abstract distinctions based on the speaker's viewpoint, but because text writers and analysts have not presented it in terms that are clear, applicable and correct.

3. Non-contrasting ser-estar sets

There is no controversy in the treatment of the first two sets. Estar is used to form progressives and to indicate location, either literally or figuratively, as shown in 1, 2 and 3, respectively :

1. Él está cantando. "He is singing".
2. La Biblioteca está en McKinley. "The library is on McKinley".
3. Ella está en Bachillerato. "She is in High School".

Most other relations are conveyed with ser : it tells time (4), it identifies or equates (5,6), and it expresses origin or possession (7,8).

4. Son las 4 :30. "It is 4 :30".
5. Ella es lingüista. "She is a linguist".
6. Dos y dos son cuatro. "Two plus two are four".
7. Soy de Colombia. "I am from Colombia".
8. Ese carro es mio. "That car is mine".

In a few cases (9 and 10), the reason for copula selection seems obscure, and though

some analysts try to explain these uses in terms of other categories and principles, they are generally referred to as "idioms".

9. Estamos de afán. "We are in a hurry".
10. Estoy de luto. (Lit) "I am in mourning".

Some other cases can easily be accounted for in terms of different alternative strategies employed by the speaker : the expression of date allows either ser or estar :

11. Qué fecha es hoy ? Hoy es el 12 (de marzo).
(Lit) "What is the date ? Today is the 12th (of March)".
12. A cómo estamos hoy ? Estamos a 12.
(Lit) "What date are we in today ? We are at 12".

In 11, ser seems to serve the function of equation, whereas in 12 estar seems to locate a date in a series.

Finally, with the exception of estar = be in as in 13, and with ser as a verb of existence as in 14, there always seems to be some kind of predicate element conditioning the selection, and the two copulas appear to have a complementary distribution :

13. Está el Doctor Davis ? "Is Doctor Davis in ?"
14. Puede ser que no vengan.
"It may be (the case) that they won't come".

But this is not true for a set of cases where ser and estar occur with the same predicate element and, still, they contrast semantically

the passive preterit use in 15 contrasts with the stative use expressing a result in 16 :

15. La casa fue remodelada "The house was remodeled".
16. La casa estuvo remodelada.
(Adap) "The house was (finally) remodeled".

There is one interesting case which can be explained if one considers that there are certain nouns that represent either things or events :

17. La fiesta es/está en la casa de enseguida. (es = event ; está = thing)
"The party is in the house next door".

As the parentheses indicate in 17, *la fiesta* as "a thing" is located with *estar*, and as an event, with *ser* (i.e., "it takes place in the house next door").

The problematic cases appear when the predicative element is an adjective (19), or with the corresponding question forms (18) with *como* :

18. Cómo es/está ? "How is Subj ?"
19. Es/está "(verde, enfermo, loco, rico, cansón, alto, blanco, furioso) "Subj is (green, sick, crazy, rich, tiresome, high, white, furious).

In the next section of this paper I discuss the traditional approach to this problem as presented not only in pedagogical grammars but also in other comprehensive descriptions of Spanish grammar. The rather innovative and appealing treatment of this phenomenon by Bolinger (1973) is discussed together with other traditional approximations. I offer an alternative analysis involving the speaker's

evaluational perspective as a condition for the selection of the copula.

4. Contrasting *ser-estar* sets

The traditional explanation (Real Academia Española 1981 : 384 ff.) claims that with adjectives, *ser* supposedly denotes permanent qualities while *estar* indicates transitory or accidental conditions. This dichotomy supposes at least 3 categories, namely : a) *ser* as permanence, inherence, or essence, b) *estar* as temporal, or accidental condition, and c) distinguishing polysemous adjectives senses, i.e., adjectives whose meaning "changes" depending on the copula selection, as in the case of 18 and 19 above.

Bolinger (1973) claims the *ser-estar* contrast to be conceptually one of essence and accident, and he argues that something so fundamental shows up in English as a covert category, not necessarily embodied in a polar opposition of two words (as in Spanish). He further claims that the essence-accident distinction does appear in English at a number of points, and he exemplifies several cases in English where ungrammaticality arises from some sort of failure to recognize the distinction. Some of Bolinger's cases include.

20. "* He is wicked and afflicted".
21. "He is sick and afflicted"

for which he claims that "we do not generally conjoin complements that in Spanish would call for different verbs ... we are more comfortable when both complements take the same verb" (1983 :58).

Bolinger performs several tests to account for the unacceptability of some sentences on the basis of the mismatch between essence and accident :

22. "John and Mary are, admittedly, at home".
23. "The guests are, admittedly, rather comfortable".

Besides the zeugma test (Bolinger's term, 1973 : 59), several other tests are performed to demonstrate the existence of a covert essence-accident distinction in English. The tests include "all", a modifier that impinges on the essence-accident contrast : "She is all bubbling with enthusiasm vs. *He is all punishing them" (1973 : 61). Further tests include "to think x (to be) y" as in "I thought him (to be) clever vs. *I thought him (to be) ready" (1973, 62). Bolinger's explanation provides a profuse list of examples of the essence-accident contrast and summarizes its operation for the English system :

If a phenomenon is an accident, it can overtake entity with greater or lesser force ; i.e. be intensified ; hence all. The entity itself can be held in the mind ; hence think ... This is not intended as a scientific explanation of the contrasts, but as a verbalization of the metaphor. A good deal of what passes for meaning in language is pictorial, and can be described better than it can be defined" (1973 : 68)

If I understand Bolinger's explanation correctly, I would say that he is successful and innovative in his attempt to show how the essence-accident contrast appears

profusely in English, and in showing that English displays this contrast by means of several different mechanisms if compared to the two-word contrast displayed by the ser-estar distinction. What Bolinger fails to do is to account for cases such as

24. I thought him (to be) tiresome.
(Pensé que era/estaba cansón).
25. I thought the city to be cold.
(Pensé que la ciudad era/estaba fría).
26. Do you think her (to be) weak in character ?
(Piensas que ella es/está débil de carácter ?)

Note that think x (to be) according to Bolinger is used in terms of accident. For him neither of the above situations describes things in terms of essence, and thus, Bolinger argues, "we can put the divergence down as due to a specialized use of the verb ser in Spanish" (1970 :64). But my parenthetical Spanish translation shows that the "essential" condition of being tiresome, cold, or even beautiful can be achieved in Spanish with the use of ser, and that the "accidental" condition can be expressed with Spanish estar. It should be further noticed, however, that English achieves the latter with think x to be and the former with think that, and Bolinger rightly points this difference in claiming that "in this respect, think has curiously diverged from think that" (1973 : 64), as exemplified by the infelicitous use of think x to be in 28 :

27. I thought that he was unfriendly, but I was wrong.

28. I thought him to be unfriendly, but I was wrong.

I consider Bolinger's approach (and the traditional ones as well) to be incomplete and sometimes even misleading. The criticism is directed at three fundamental inadequacies. First, the notions offered as criteria for copula selection are too vague to apply because they are not questions of communication: is essence-accident a metaphysical characteristic? Is poverty (estoy/soy pobre "I am poor") temporary or permanent? The difference between a quality (essence) and a condition (accident) becomes, to my knowledge, a subject of philosophical debate. Second, the essence-accident contrast wrongly depicts copula selection as automatically cued by the referent (or "entity in the real world", as I prefer to call it). Yet even the most clear-cut cases such as loco "crazy, mad" can be argued as cases where the referent may not play any role in the speaker's saying 29 vs 30:

29. Él está loco. "He is crazy".

30. Él es loco. "He is crazy".

Another extremely interesting (counter) example is the case of adjectives referring to nationality such as Americano. We can select either ser or estar with any nationality adjective:

31. Ella está (muy) americana. "She is (very) American (ized)".

32. Ella es americana. "She is an American".

With our using está in 29 and 31 as opposed to the ser option in 30 and 32, we can

conclude that with adjectives the choice of copula is not automatic.

Third, the notions of the essence-accident approach do not seem to work in all the cases, and they are even contradicted in several cases. Note, for example:

33. Soy católico. "I am a Catholic".

34. El carro es verde. "The car is green".

There is absolutely nothing inherent, or essential to me in my religious affiliation that forces the selection of ser, nor is the "greenness" of the car inherent to a car that is painted green. Conversely, although "whiteness" is apparently inherent in the nature of snow, there are cases in which one can say 35:

35. ¡Cómo está de blanca la nieve! "How white the snow is!".

For several authors (e.g. Bull, 1965 and Real Academia Española, 1981) the real key to ser-estar is the norm. Attributes that are considered as normal for an object are expressed with ser, while deviations or changes from the norm are marked with estar. They argue that when one says 36

36. Pedro es (triste, feliz, loco, ...)
"Pedro is (sad, happy, crazy, ...)"

this indicates that Pedro is typically sad, or given to happiness, etc. But when one selects está, as in 37

37. Pedro está (triste, feliz, loco ...)
"Pedro is (sad, happy, crazy, ...)"

one is implying that these are separations from the norm, that is, these are not normal behaviors of the person being characterized.

The norm-deviation from the norm approach is extremely useful to account for many cases of copula selection but it fails when the aspectual force of the imperfect (39) imposes a termination of a state and therefore a change. My (adapted) translations of examples 15 and 16, which I repeat here as 38 and 39, clarify this case :

38. La casa fue remodelada. "The house was remodeled".

39. La casa estuvo remodelada. "The house was (finally) remodeled".

The force of the preterit fue is different from the force of the imperfect estuvo, and although the difference is hardly noticed, it seems that it is necessary to conclude that "the passive with estar means result or consequence of the action" (Real Academia Española, 1981 : 369).

5. An alternative treatment

While there are aspects of the above-cited treatments of ser-estar contrast with which I agree and which I even find innovative, there are also aspects with which I disagree. A crucial point concerns the description of set+Adj as "essential", or as "norm", because some uses of estar seemingly portray normal states :

40. La Biblioteca Bracken está llena de libros.
"Bracken Library is full of books".

I propose an alternative analysis of the ser-estar contrast in the following terms

a. Ser

This copula sets up a relationship between a referent and an attribute which might be called the natural, or unmarked case ; its attributive function is simply pointing, or stating the relation. Depending on the specific referent and attribute, this relationship may be one of classification, definition, or identification, but ser does not denote in and of itself any of these. Ser is, essentially, **atemporal**.

b. Estar

This copula establishes the possession of the attribute during an indefinite period of time, that is, it never imposes identity between and attribute. It is, therefore, essentially **temporal**. Since relating an attribute to a referent in time brings up possible cessation, result, or intermitence, estar implies mutability.

With this frame of reference we can fully incorporate the speaker's point of view and claim that our set of problematic ser-estar contrasting sets are resolved not only from the "objective" perspective of the attributes of the referent, but also from the "subjective" perspective of the evaluational perception of the speaker. Thus, when a Spanish speaker says 41 :

41. Pedro es cansón. (Adap) "Pedro is (habitually) tiresome".

What happens is that he "subjectively", in the moment of his assertion, sees Pedro as

tiresome, and without the possibility of behaving well. On the other hand, when a speaker says 42 :

42. Pedro está cansón. (Adap) "Pedro is tiresome (today)".

He sees Pedro as susceptible of change from his (the speaker's) subjective perspective.

Whatever we have claimed of 41 and 42 can be said of the cases that were listed as particularly problematic in 18 and 19, which I cite here again as 43 and 44 for ease of reference :

43. Cómo es/está ? "How is Subj ?".

44. Es/está (verde, enfermo, loco, rico, cansón, alto, blanco).

"Subj is (green, sick, crazy, rich, tiresome, high, white).

6. Conclusion

I have discussed the selection of Spanish ser-estar copulas from a contrastive perspective. While there are sets where the selection does not pose a difficulty for English speakers because the Spanish sets match with the English sets in a one-to-one relation, there are ser-estar contrasts which are extremely difficult for English speakers.

I have shown that the particularly problematic sets of ser-estar in Spanish can be explained rather easily, and the English speaker can access them readily if the traditional essence-accident explanation is abandoned in favor of a temporal-atemporal approach. The latter focuses on the referent, that is, on the object in the real world, whereas the former focuses on the speaker's ability to evaluate the attributes of the referent in terms of his own subjective evaluation of such conditions as "contingent upon time".

The temporal-atemporal approach can be exploited from a variety of perspectives, among which the pedagogical one. English

speakers learning Spanish would benefit from an explanation which is clear, applicable, and easy to understand.

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