

The Role of Aspect in the Developmental Stages of the Acquisition of *ser* and *estar* in Locative Contexts in L2 Spanish

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Despite the systematic difficulty that the selection of copular verbs in Spanish (*ser/estar* 'to be') supposes for L2 learners (Bruhn de Garavito & Valenzuela, 2006; Geeslin, 2002; 2003; Pinto & Guerra Rivera, 2015; Schmitt & Miller, 2007; VanPatten, 1987; 2010), the acquisition of copular constructions, and particularly in locative contexts, has not received the attention it deserves in the acquisition literature. One of the reasons why there is a scarcity of research in this area is the complexity of the linguistic phenomenon, and most especially, the inadequacy of many available theoretical treatments to explain their complementary distribution (Montrul, 2008, p. 337). The purpose of this study is two-fold: on the one hand, it provides a fine-grain aspectual description of the expression of location with *ser* and *estar* in Spanish by taking into account relevant semantic features not previously considered and, on the other hand, as a consequence of this new theoretical analysis, it expands the developmental stages of acquisition of *ser* and *estar* with respect to the expression of location and provides an explanatory account for them. Our general research question is whether L2 learners are sensitive to the multiple aspectual features encoded in the copulas, and if so, to which ones and in which order.

Most of the studies have concluded that *estar* is more problematic than *ser* in L2, particularly with adjectives, the last stage acquired according to VanPatten (1987). The explanation for this general difficulty with *estar* is its marked aspectual nature, to the point that VanPatten considers that the learner's job is to acquire the marked aspectual nature of *estar* and *ser* 'takes care of itself' (VanPatten, 2010, p. 33). Very few studies looked at the L2 acquisition of location with the copular verbs, with the exception of Pérez-Leroux, Álvarez & Battersby (2010), Dussias, Contemori & Román (2014). Generally speaking, these studies showed that L2 speakers of Spanish have difficulty expressing the location of events, which requires *ser*, whereas the location of objects, which requires *estar*, is acquired earlier. These results are at odds with VanPatten's belief that *estar* is the difficult copula to acquire. Still, none of these studies looked at the semantic interpretation of the selection of copular verbs in locative constructions, and its developmental stages of acquisition. This is what we address here.

We assume that the choice between *ser* and *estar* is aspectual in nature (Arche, 2006; Luján, 1981; Marín, 2010), and we expand this proposal also for locative constructions. According to Mateu (2002), *Sofía está en el jardín* ('Sofía is in the garden') has essentially the same denotation as *Sofía está contenta* ('Sofía is happy'): both structures denote temporally bounded (or stage-level, S-L) states; this is why they combine with *estar*. On the other hand, when the subject is not an object, but an event, the copula chosen is *ser*: *El concierto es/*está en el jardín* ('The concert is in the garden'), because events are only compatible with *ser*, also in locative constructions (Marín, 2016). Thus, events do not enter in the I-L vs. S-L configuration as they belong to a different aspectual class altogether, they are not states. Events are by definition [+temporally bounded], so it is dynamicity and not temporal boundedness what determines the copula selection in locative constructions. Our proposal is summarized in Fig. 1.

Taking into account this analysis, the present study investigates the comprehension, production, and semantic interpretation of locatives with *ser* and *estar*

in English-speaking (n= 102) and Italian-speaking learners (n= 33) of L2 Spanish. Participants completed an Acceptability Judgment Task with grammatical (objects + *estar*; events + *ser*) and ungrammatical (*objects + *ser*; *events + *estar*) sentences; a Written Production Task in which they had to locate objects and events in a map, and a Sentence Interpretation Task with ambiguous nouns (1).

Results indicated that Italian-speaking learners of Spanish correctly recognized the copula *estar* to locate objects (90% accuracy), and to a lesser extent, the grammatical sentences with *ser* to locate events (65% accuracy). However, they also accepted ungrammatical sentences with *estar* to locate events (50% - 75% acceptance), and ungrammatical sentences with *ser* to locate objects (25% - 50% acceptance), indicating an overextension of *estar* for location. English-speaking learners, on the other hand, overextended *ser* in *estar* contexts, and did not show any progress as proficiency advanced in *ser* contexts, whereas they did with *estar*. Overall, results from both types of learners show that the real challenge in the acquisition of the expression of location with copular verbs in Spanish resides in the acquisition of events, which require *ser*, against what VanPatten (1987, 2010) predicted. Our analysis provides a theoretically-based aspectual explanation for these developmental results: once L2 learners realize that not all stative [-dynamic] Spanish predicates imply *ser*, they exclusively associate *estar* with [+temporally bounded] contexts. This produces the ungrammatical location of events with *estar*, a stage that lasts very long in the interlanguage of the learners. Thus, the location of events with *ser* appears very late due to its aspectually contradictory nature: they are [+temporally bounded] predicates, which almost always require *estar*, but they combine with a [+dynamic] subject, which exceptionally calls for *ser*. This apparent clash of aspectual features in its derivation significantly delays its acquisition.

Examples from the Sentence Interpretation Task

1. El examen final es en el aula 205. (target response: B, event reading)
The exam final SER in the room 205.
'The final exam will take place in room 205.'
2. El examen final está en el aula 205 (target response: A, object reading)
The exam final ESTAR in the room 205.
'The copy of the final exam is in room 205.'

A



B



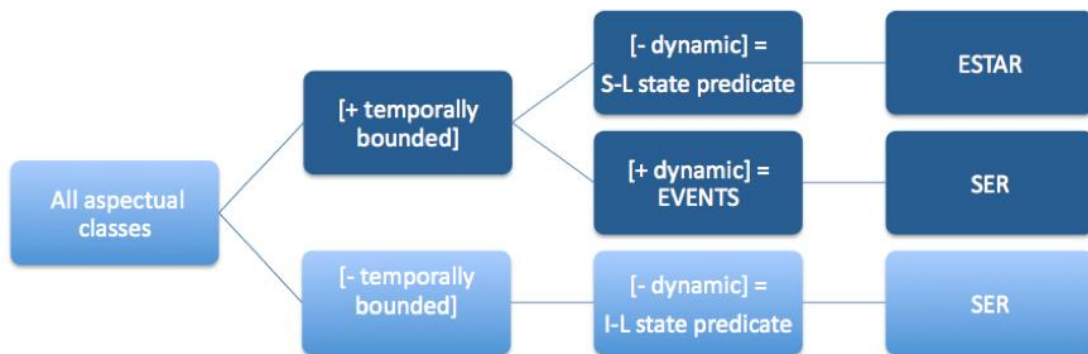


Figure 1: General Distribution of Spanish Copulas according to their Aspectual Class