

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *New perspectives on the Study of Ser and Estar*

Edited by Isabel Pérez-Jiménez, Manuel Leonetti, and Silvia Gumiel-Molina.
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This volume is the fifth in John Benjamins' series *Issues in Hispanic and Lusophone Linguistics*. It contains 10 original contributions, in addition to an introduction by the editors. This volume is the first collection of papers devoted to Spanish copulas *ser* and *estar* using the tools and frameworks of contemporary theoretical linguistics.

Keywords: copulas; *ser* and *estar*; interfaces

1 Introduction

The study of the contrast between the Spanish copular verbs *ser* and *estar* has attracted a wide variety of scholars, given its importance for the understanding not only of the meaning of these verbs but also of the elements with which they respectively combine and the restrictions they impose on other constituents. Such study has been undertaken from a variety of perspectives, from the traditional and pedagogical to the theoretical, developmental and contrastive. The present volume represents a very welcome addition to the research on this important subject, and it is the first collection of papers entirely devoted to this copula contrast from a theoretical linguistic perspective. It originates from the *International Workshop 'ser & estar' at the interfaces*, held at the Universidad de Alcalá (Madrid, October 18–19, 2012), comprising a selection of papers from that workshop and several additional invited papers.

Many of the properties associated with the contrast between *ser* and *estar* have been well known to traditional grammarians and are described in several papers and monographs in sufficient descriptive detail (Porroche 1988; Leonetti 1994; Fernández Leborans 1999; Marín 2004; RAE-ASALE, 2009). Although some of the empirical facts are well-known, this volume certainly contributes to expand the empirical domain associated to the contrast by bringing to the fore new interesting data. Nevertheless, its main contribution to the field is to present the reader with a very balanced collection of approaches and perspectives, which do justice to the complexity and variety of the issues implicated in the *ser/estar* contrast. First, the nature of the contrast between *ser* and *estar* does not appear to pertain to an area of linguistic inquiry exclusively. There are syntactic issues involved, such as the functional structure of each copula and their respective association with designated structural positions or features. There are semantic issues, such as the distinction

between stage and individual-level predicates (Camacho 2012), other aspectual properties such as association with a related event, permanent/temporary interpretations, and gradability. Finally, scholars have noticed the importance of pragmatic issues, and others related to the semantics/pragmatics interface, such as the association of *estar* with a topical situation (Maienborn 2005).

The papers in this volume advance our understanding of the complexity of the issues in each one of these domains and, fortunately, the editors have wisely chosen to adopt an eclectic point of view incorporating different theoretical perspectives from these domains, within a coherent formal theoretical approach where generative assumptions predominate. Although the variety of approaches and insights might leave those looking for a single or uniform explanation unsatisfied, the truth is that such a “golden grail” of explanatory unity is probably not desirable for the topic at stake. Recent research, and this volume can be considered a very significant contribution to it, clearly points to the need of keeping track of different domains and even exploring the connections between them in a fruitful fashion, either embracing a theoretical notion such as “the interface” or just by highlighting such connections.

2 The papers

The volume is divided in three sections. The introduction presents an overview of the papers and outlines the major theoretical problems and connections with the recent literature. It does not undertake the arduous and most likely unnecessary task of summarizing previous approaches to the *ser/estar* contrast. Rather, it opts for a transversal strategy in which several points of theoretical interest are highlighted, and their discussion in the papers in the compilation is discussed. The first section addresses the aspectual properties of *ser* and *estar*. Luis García Fernández and Diana Gómez Vázquez (“More than a copula: complex predicates with *estar* and the clitic *se*”) explore the contribution of the clitic *se* to the meaning of constructions with the copula *estar*. This contribution is dual, since the clitic seems to be thematically and aspectually relevant. They claim that the clitic acts as an event-structure modifier, producing a complex event consisting of an achievement and a result state. Thematically, the clitic indicates an increase in the degree of involvement of the subject in the event from theme to agent (or experiencer). Syntactically, they claim that the clitic *se* is a morphological mark of voice on the verb that changes the argument structure of the predicate. Their proposal is that the clitic heads the Voice Phrase that dominates the VP constituent.

Juan Romeu (“*Ser, estar* and two different modifiers”) presents a syntactic analysis of the *ser/estar* contrast within the theoretical model of Nanosyntax, where structure is claimed to emerge as a sequence of nodes that are semantically interpreted in the position they occupy in such structure. He proposes that the elements Conjoint and Disjoint, respectively marking coincidence and non-coincidence between two elements, play a critical role in the copula distinction: *ser* lexicalizes Conjoint and *estar* lexicalizes Disjoint. Conjoint gives the interpretation that the state is not linked to a different, separate state, whereas Disjoint is associated to the interpretation that the relevant state is linked to a separate one. He correlates this contrast with the association of *ser* with individual-level predicates and other properties observed in the literature.

María Jesús Fernández Leborans and Cristina Sánchez López (“Sentences as predicates”) focus on a not very well studied construction from colloquial Spanish “*muy de* + infinitive” as in *Pepe es muy de salir con los amigos* (‘Pepe likes going out with his friends’). They notice that the correlate construction with *estar* is not possible and show that “*muy de* + inf.” predicates exhibit all the properties of individual-level predicates. They argue that

the characterizing reading of these predicates emerges from the imperfective aspect of the infinitive, which receives a habitual reading. Habitual readings can be of two forms, either actualized habituality or gnomic habituality.

The second section of the volume comprises articles dealing with properties of the *ser/estar* contrast that go beyond aspectual parameters. Silvia Gumiel-Molina, Norberto Moreno-Quibén and Isabel Pérez-Jiménez (“The inference of temporal persistence and the individual/stage-level distinction”) propose that the inference of temporal persistence in predication with *ser* (and individual-level predicates in general) is related to the presence of a comparison class. *Ser* predicates require combination with relative adjectives and express comparison between individuals with respect to the given property. On the other hand, *estar* builds predicates after combining with absolute adjectives and expresses comparison within an individual, in other words, between stages of such an individual. This entails that temporal persistence is not possible in the latter case.

Karen Zagona (“Location and the *ser/estar* alternation”) focuses on the syntactic properties of the contrast and develops a proposal in which both copulas are the spell-out of a single functional verb BE and are equivalent in meaning. The contrast emerges in that BE is realized as *estar* when it agrees with an abstract locative feature (LOC). This predicts the dual behavior of this verb, as an auxiliary, when it takes as its complement a Locative Phrase introducing a reference time, or as a copula *per se*, when it combines with adjectives. In this latter case, the restriction on *estar* requiring combination with stage-level predicates follows from the fact that these adjectives are associated to temporal location.

José Camacho (“What do Spanish copulas have in common with Tibetan evidential?”) analyzes the evidential uses of *estar* (*Este jamón está fenomenal* ‘This ham is wonderful’) and compares it to Tibetan evidential marker *dug*, arguing that they both exhibit similar aspectual constraints. As in Gumiel-Molina et al.’s paper, the notions of gradability and comparison play a critical role. Given that *estar* involves a within-individual comparison class, it requires that the predicate be individuated and located. Tibetan *dug* and *estar* both induce within-individual comparison of events, but the primary meaning of *estar* is related to gradability whereas *dug* has an essential evidential nature.

Manuel Leonetti (“On word order in Spanish copular sentences”) focuses on a word order contrast: the VSX order imposes athetic, wide focus interpretation, and is compatible with *estar* predicates, whereas *ser* predicates are excluded in VSX structural patterns in spoken Spanish. Following Maienborn’s (2005) claim that *estar* requires the predicate to be dependent on a topical situation, he claims that the well-formedness of *estar* VSX sentences originates from the fact that thetic constructions always include a stage topic. On the other hand, *ser* predication is not connected to a topical situation and thus cannot be linked to a stage topic.

Finally, the third section of the volume deals with developmental and historical issues in the extension and loss of copulas. Cristina Marco and Rafael Marín (“Origins and development of adjectival passives in Spanish”) study how adjectival passive ‘*estar* + participle’ emerged in Spanish and extended its usage at the expense of *ser*. Their study is based on data analysis on a large corpus of Spanish texts from the 12th to the 20th Century. They claim that analogy was the change mechanism driving this development, more concretely the analogical relations between participles and locative prepositional phrases when combining with *estar*. Elena Valenzuela et al. (“Eventive and stative passives”) consider copula selection in passive structures in Canadian and American heritage speaker Spanish. They present two determining factors: the influence of French facilitates the acquisition of eventive and stative passives and the uniqueness of the language-contact situation in the US/Canadian bilingual settings. The last paper in the volume, by Kimberly Geeslin

and Avizia Yim Long (“The development and use of the Spanish copula with adjectives by Korean speaking learners”), conducts a variationist analysis of copula use based on twenty-three Korean learners of Spanish and studies the relationship between frequency effects and other factors, as well as the similarities with English-speaking learners.

3 Conclusion

I hope this brief characterization of the papers in the present volume gives the reader an idea of the variety and importance of its contribution, and its overall merit. There are significant findings from an empirical standpoint and several constructions understudied or not studied at all so far, such as combinations with clitics or colloquial uses of *ser muy de*, get here a well-deserved look, highlighting how the empirical realm for the discussion and analysis of copula use has still potential for extensive mining. Equivalently, new theories can illuminate how we conceive of the distinction and how the ingredients and restrictions have to be balanced in each case. At the syntactic level, looking at the micro-categorial elements present in each copula, as Zagona and Romeu do, will pave the way for a better understanding of how these copulas play different roles in the syntactic spheres “above the VP”, especially those pertaining to aspectuality and related properties. Similarly, the semantic analysis of the *ser/estar* alternation is forcefully argued in several papers to go beyond the individual level/stage level distinction. Properties such as gradability, the nature of the comparison class related to each element, and even evidentiality play a critical role, and will be used as starting points for future research. Finally, pragmatic and developmental issues also get their fair share and give us a nearly complete view of the puzzle. Going beyond the analysis of Spanish copular elements, this book also provides important insights on the articulation of grammar and the relevance of interface approaches, especially the syntax/semantics interface and the semantics/interface. It will also be extremely useful to scholars working with copulas in the Romance languages and beyond, especially those interested in comparative and contrastive approaches.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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