FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON SER AND ESTAR
FREDERICK S. SPURR
Blewett High School, St. Louis, Missouri

Since my "New Rules for Ser and Estar" appeared in the October, 1939 issue of The Modern Language Journal, several other articles on this subject have appeared in the same periodical and in HISPANIA. Most of these have treated the use of these Spanish auxiliaries from a philosophical rather than a technically grammatical viewpoint. In general, they have stressed the attitude governing the speaker in the choice of the verb employed with predicate adjectives, and have shown that this depends on whether the condition is regarded by the speaker as normal or acquired.

The "New Rules" were intended as a simple and practical—indeed, nearly "fool-proof"—guide for secondary-school students, without reference to the underlying psychological implications. It might not be uninteresting to analyze these rules to discover any possible relationship between them and the more profound ideas expressed by such writers as William E. Bull, Dwight L. Bolinger, and William Moellering.

As stated in The Modern Language Journal (xiv, 43) "as a result of many years' experience in teaching Spanish to high-school students, the author has found one fundamental defect in all textbooks that have come to his notice in the treatment of the verbs ser and estar. This is that all such texts convey the mistaken impression that the pupil should primarily base his decision as to which verb to employ on the degree of permanency involved." Hence the three rules, which may be summarized by stating that ser is always used with a predicate noun or pronoun, estar is always used to express location, and only as a last resort, should one consider permanency. This last point is the substance of Rule Three, which says, "When neither Rule One nor Rule Two will apply, use ser to express relatively permanent or inherent ideas, and estar to express relatively temporary or accidental ideas."

These rules attracted some favorable attention and were reprinted in Las Américas. Of the three rules, only the last offers any particular difficulty; and paradoxical as it may seem, it is the reader rather than the writer of Spanish sentences who might find the usage perplexing. From that point of view, the emphasis in Rule Three shifts from the opening words preceding the verb use to the adverb of degree, relatively. This word was deliberately chosen to convey the thought that many ideas that we might at first be inclined to regard as temporary,—such, for example, as ideas of wealth, poverty, or youth,—may be considered by the Spanish writer or speaker as comparatively enduring. In other words, as any of the recent writers on the subject would doubtless agree, the choice of the verb meaning to be would depend on the subjective concept as to the normality of the attribute. Here we may encounter an apparent contradiction, inasmuch as it would on the surface appear that riches are acquired rather than inherent; but on second thought, we realize that aside from such an exception as a Ziegfeld or a La Borda, most people are rich or poor during a sufficiently prolonged period of time to entitle them to regard their riches or their poverty as a normal condition. Furthermore, youth,
although in retrospect it is seen to have been all too fleeting, seems to its possessor as almost eternal; and certainly, old age, once acquired, becomes one's normal and henceforth permanent state.

Perhaps a clearer understanding of the subjective concept governing the use of *ser* or *estar* may be obtained from the origin of these verbs. *Ser* is of course the Spanish development of the Latin verb *sum*--infinitive *esse*--and *estar* was originally the Latin *sto*-infinitive *stare*. Now the real meaning of *esse* is to be, to exist, to have one's being; and *stare* means to stand, not only in space, but to stand out or take one's place mentally, as well as physically. Strangely enough, the Portuguese have come to feel that whatever permanently stands somewhere is existing rather than standing, and so they use *ser* for permanent position, and also, perhaps more logically, with past participles to express a more permanent resultant state, as in *O telhado é coberto com telhas* (The roof is covered with tiles) in contrast with, *O telhado está coberto de neve* (The roof is covered with snow). In French, there is no confusion between *etre* and *se tenir*, any more than in German between *sein* and *stehen*, or in the corresponding English verbs. In Italian, however, although one may nearly always use *essere* for to be, it is permissible, nevertheless, to substitute *stare* in many sentences, and vocabularies usually give to be as well as to stand as a meaning of the latter. In such expressions as *Come sta?* (How are you?) *stare* is required; and in sentences like *Io non sto comodo* (I am not comfortable) and *Noi siamo alla tavola* (We are at the table) it can readily be seen that *stare* is used like the Spanish *estar* to express temporary state and "place where" respectively.

These comparisons with Portuguese and Italian usages show that the real distinction between the two Spanish verbs depends on their derivation from the original Latin. It would seem that this clarifies their use in such expressions as *Es* (meaning *Ernesto es orgulloso ... es muy triste*, quoted by Mr. Moellering in *The Modern Language Journal* (xxviii, 598).

Bearing in mind the origin of these verbs, we should perhaps find few constructions not self-explanatory. Of these, possibly some represent, as Professor Hespelt suggests in *HISPANIA* (xxvi, 221), "a careless use" influenced by an author's having lived "among English-speaking people." Others may be due to the caprice of men of genius who, like Dickens or Trueba, deviate from and sometimes transcend the laws of language by which lesser writers are bound. Such authors are said to write in moments of inspiration thoughts and expressions which even they cannot later interpret.

Aside from such possible peculiarities in the choice of these verbs, there is one other potential cause of confusion, due to the frequent substitution of *ir* for *estar*. Now inasmuch as the preterite and imperfect subjunctive forms of *ir* are identical with those of *ser*, it is not unreasonable to suppose that such forms as *fue* and *fuésemos* may sometimes mistakenly be regarded by the reader as derived from *ser* when they are really intended by the writer or speaker as forms of *ir*. Is it not possible that this would explain the word *fueses* in Mr. Moellering's quotation from Valle-Inclán, in which the priest says, *"No me habían dicho que fueses borracho!-Si estás borracho, anda a dormirlo."*? Mr. Moellering thinks that the priest alters his conception "from one in which * borracho* was constituent to one in which * borracho*
was phaselike." *(The Modern Language Journal, xxviii, 602.)* This may be the explanation, but is it not simpler to suppose that *fueses* is from *ir* and used to represent *estuvieses* and to suggest the same idea as the *estás* which follows? In *La mitacón*, Trueba says "*El senor cura iba ya muy adelantado en su sermon,*" using *iba* for *estaba*, but with a slight suggestion of going as well as of being. May this not be the case in the passage quoted from Valle-Inclan?

In conclusion—although there can be no real conclusion to the speculations that may arise from the countless shades of thought expressed or implied in the devious uses of *ser* and *estar* with predicate adjectives where the other of the two verbs might sometimes at first glance seem more reasonable—I would say that the foregoing reflections were prompted by the numerous interesting and scholarly discussions of the uses of *ser* and *estar* which have appeared since October, 1939. They have suggested a reexamination of the "New Rules" and have led to the confirmation of the author's belief that these rules are still comprehensive and adequate for practical purposes, and when more fully analyzed, expanded, and applied to individual passages in Spanish literature, they can account for the choice of verbs, unless the selection was made carelessly, ignorantly, or capriciously; unless, also, the writer intended to use neither *ser* nor *estar* but *ir*. These meditations suggested to the writer certain considerations as to the origin of these verbs and the corresponding usages in other Romance languages, which may perhaps contribute something to the clarification of the subject.

* The infinitive *ser*, of course, and such forms as *sea*, come etymologically from Latin *sedere*, not *esse*.
2 Russo, J. L. *Elementary Italian Grammar*, 113-115.