

Some Verbs Are More Perfect than Others *Why Learners Have Difficulty with ser and estar and What It Means for Instruction*

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Abstract: In this essay, I apply current linguistic theory to reanalyze earlier research on the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* (e.g., VanPatten 1985, 1987). Using insights from Roby and Schmitt (“Semi-Copulas”), for example, I argue that the acquisition of the copular verbs is an issue of the acquisition of their aspectual properties (see also Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela 2008, as well as Montrul 2004); that is, the difficulty in the acquisition of the Spanish copular verbs is akin to the acquisition of aspect. In addition, I reconceptualize the traditional notion of the acquisition problem being *ser* versus *estar* and instead posit that the problem comes down to the acquisition of *estar* and its perfective nature. I conclude by describing some possible implications for instruction based on this research.

Keywords: acquisition problems, second language acquisition, second language instruction, *ser* and *estar*, syntax and semantics interface

In my travels, I often get asked about the relationship between second language acquisition (SLA) research and language teaching. Many nonspecialists believe there is a direct relationship between the two—that somehow the purpose of second language research is to improve instruction. Teachers ask me, for example, if I have any good ideas for teaching the subjunctive based on my research or if I have any good techniques for teaching the preterit and the imperfect contrast. I understand these questions and where they come from, but ultimately my answers are disappointing to teachers. Although acquisitionists can talk about the implications of SLA research for language teaching in general terms (e.g., an approach based on the role of communication in acquisition is probably better than an approach based on learning discrete pieces of grammar and lists of vocabulary), I generally tell teachers that SLA research does not and cannot speak to the day-to-day issues that confront them. Invariably I get the look—if not an actual utterance—that clearly communicates “Then what good is the research?”

The expectation that SLA research should somehow have immediate consequences for the classroom is predicated on certain assumptions and misunderstandings. First, teachers and acquisition researchers possess different ideas about the nature of language. Teachers often see language as the rules they teach in textbooks. They believe that the rules for, say, the use of the subjunctive are the rules that speakers carry around in their heads. Acquisitionists, however, are guided by contemporary theories in linguistics and/or psycholinguistics. Language is not a set of rules but a complex interaction of abstract features, constraints, principles, and lexical properties that could never find their way into the pages of a language textbook. Second, teachers are led to believe that language is internalized by the practice of the rules that students encounter. Because of their training and because of textbooks themselves, teachers often come to believe that language learning is like learning anything else. Acquisitionists, on the other hand, generally believe that there is something unique about language, that it is not governed

by the same mechanisms for learning how to lay tile or learning how to draw Mickey Mouse. Acquisition involves a set of internal processes that teachers (and students, for that matter) cannot normally see.

Thus, because teachers and acquisitionists are not even looking at the same things or conceptualizing them in the same manner, it is virtually impossible for acquisition research to speak to teachers' everyday concerns. But perhaps we are being too hasty here. An additional problem in the relationship between acquisition research and instruction is the nature of what the research should do. In the beginning I said that many nonspecialists believe that the research should somehow *improve* instruction. But what if improvement is the wrong expectation? What if the role of research is to *understand* acquisition and thus *inform* instruction? The research may not be able to improve instruction in directly measurable ways or help teachers better explain grammar to learners, but it might give them insight into what the learning problems are. What could teachers do, then, once they know the source of difficulty in acquiring various aspects of language?

The purpose of the present paper is to explore this last question and to demonstrate how knowledge about acquisition might allow instructors to consider various options in terms of their efforts. We will take as our focus for this exploration the acquisition of the copular verbs *ser* and *estar* in Spanish.

The Nature of the Problem

As most of us know, Spanish has two verbs that function like English 'be', *ser* and *estar*. For the most part, they exist in complementary distribution, as the following major uses suggest.

- Only *ser* can be used with predicate Noun Phrases (NPs) or Determiner Phrases (DPs). Ex: *Juan es/*está estudiante* ('John is a student'); *Hoy es/*está viernes* ('Today is Friday'); *Son/*Están las doce de la tarde* ('It's twelve o'clock').
- Only *ser* can be used to express origin. Ex: *Juan es/*está de México* ('John is from Mexico').
- Only *ser* can be used to form true passives. Ex: *La torre fue/*estuvo construida por una compañía francesa* ('The tower was built by a French company').
- Only *estar* can be used to form progressives. Ex: *María está/*es escribiendo su tarea* ('Mary is writing out her homework').
- Only *estar* can be used to form true locative constructions, either spatially or temporally. Ex: *Mi padre está/*es en la cocina* ('My father is in the kitchen'); *Estamos/*Somos al diez* ('We're at the tenth' meaning 'It's the tenth of the month').¹

Ser and *estar* overlap in their distribution when it comes to adjectives. Theoretically, almost any adjective can appear with either verb, although there is a difference in interpretation of the situation.

(1a) *Juan es triste.*

'John is sad' (with the intent that John is a sad person).

(1b) *Juan está triste.*

'John is sad' (with the intent that John seems sad or appears to be sad).

(2a) *María es gorda.*

'Mary is fat' (with the intent that Mary is a large woman).

(2b) *María está gorda.*

'Mary is fat' (with the intent that Mary looks fat or has gained weight).

Such adjectives would include those derived from verbs (i.e., participles). In the case of *ser*, the rendering is a truncated passive (i.e., a passive without an expressed agent).

(3a) *El café es servido caliente, con leche y azúcar al lado.*
 ‘Coffee is served hot, with a side of milk and sugar’ (with the intent to describe, e.g., how one ought to serve coffee properly).

(3b) *El café está servido.*
 ‘The coffee is served’ (with the intent to announce that coffee awaits to be drunk).

Because English has only one copular and auxiliary *be*, the learning problem for English speakers acquiring Spanish as an L2 is the distribution of *ser* and *estar*. The idea is that the learner must separate out the different functions of *be* and learn to repartition them to the two copular verbs in Spanish. This problem is often referred to as *ser* versus *estar* (see, e.g., Solé and Solé 1977; Whitley 2002).²

What We Know about the Acquisition of *ser* and *estar*

Research on the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* by English speakers began to surface in the early 1980s. In VanPatten (1985), I established stages of acquisition for the two copular verbs. Based on longitudinal research of learners of Spanish, I posited three distinct stages:

Stage 1. Acquisition and overgeneralization of *ser*. In this stage, learners show evidence of having picked up *ser* but at the same time extend its use to contexts where *estar* would be required.

- (4) *Juan es alto.*
 ‘John is tall’.
- (5) **Juan no es aquí.*
 ‘John is not here’.
- (6) **Juan es estudia* (= *está estudiando*).
 ‘John is studying’.
- (7) **Juan es muy contento.*
 ‘John is very happy’.

Stage 2. Appearance of *estar* with true locatives. In this stage, learners begin to use *estar* to indicate location, but there is continued overgeneralization of *ser* to other contexts requiring *estar*.

- (8) *Juan no está aquí.*

Stage 3. Appearance of *estar* with adjectives to express conditions. In this stage, we see evidence of learner knowledge that *estar* with adjectives means something different from the use of *ser* with adjectives.

- (9) *Juan está muy contento.*

In VanPatten (1987), I amended these stages based on additional data. I posited five observed stages in the acquisition. What was new at this time was an early stage in which learners did not use copular verbs at all (reminiscent of pidgins as well as languages like Chinese that lack copulas with predicate adjectives) and the first stage of acquisition of *estar* that preceded its use with locatives, namely, *estar* + *-ndo* (progressive). The revised stages appear below.

Stage 1. Lack of copular verbs for any functions.

(10) *Juan muy inteligente.*

(11) *Juan no aquí.*

Stage 2. Acquisition and overgeneralization of *ser* (per above).

Stage 3. Appearance of *estar* with *-ndo* to express progressive function.

(12) *Juan está estudiando.*

Stage 4. Appearance of *estar* with true locatives (per above).

Stage 5. Appearance of *estar* with adjectives to express conditions (per above).

These stages were subsequently corroborated to greater and lesser degrees by other researchers using both classroom-based data and data from study abroad contexts (e.g., Finnemann 1990; Geeslin 2000; Guntermann 1992; Ryan and Lafford 1992). Although some of the studies quibble as to whether stage X appears before stage Y (e.g., Ryan and Lafford claim that the appearance and acquisition of *estar* with adjectives to express conditions appears before *estar* used with true locatives), all studies converge on the following: (1) *ser* is always acquired before *estar* and is overgeneralized to those contexts in which *estar* is either required or normally used; and (2) the easiest function of *estar* is its use with *-ndo* to express progressive aspect, and a difficult function of *estar* for L2 learners is its use with adjectives to express conditions.

Even research on “individual factors” in the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* does not find counterevidence to these stages. For example, in Geeslin and Guijarro-Fuentes (2005), no effect was found for the first language, although none of the first languages in their study (i.e., English, German, and French) has a copular choice like Spanish. In addition, study abroad seemed to have no effect—a significant finding given what many would claim to be fundamental differences in classroom and naturalistic exposure to primary data (input). In short, neither the L1 nor conditions of exposure affects the overall stages of acquisition. (See also the observations made by Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela 2008, on the approach taken by Geeslin and Guijarro-Fuentes.)

Recent research on passives in advanced L2 speakers of Spanish does not speak to a general order of *ser* before *estar* but does suggest that there are continued problems with the syntax-semantics interface even with very proficient knowers/users of Spanish. Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela (2008), for example, describe research focusing on true (eventive) passives (e.g., *El café es servido*) and stative passives (e.g., *El café está servido*) as well as generic and specific interpretations of adjectives. For example, *Los fanáticos son violentos* can be interpreted generically or specifically; that is, fanatics in general are violent or a particular group of fanatics is violent. On the other hand, *Los fanáticos están violentos* can only be interpreted specifically, that is, in a particular case, a particular group of fanatics is acting violently. Although the learners in the Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela study demonstrated knowledge of passives and how they worked on grammaticality judgments, their performance on sentence interpretation tasks revealed a different picture. Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela found that with the generic versus specific interpretations with adjectives, learners were better with the generic. That is, they were better at interpreting the adjectives with *ser* (i.e., 85% correct with examples such as *Los fanáticos son violentos*) than they were with the adjectives with *estar* (i.e., 61% correct with *están violentos*). This hints at the fact that *estar* is still lagging a bit behind *ser* in a domain of the grammar previously untested in the research.³

We should add here that these stages of acquisition take some time. For example, learners generally do not traverse these stages in the first two years of instruction at the university level. Indeed, in Guntermann's 1992 study, learners demonstrate continued problems with copular verbs at the advanced and advanced+ levels of proficiency (using ACTFL [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages] scales). And in the case of Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela's 2008 study, their learners were advanced as determined by the DELE (Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera) proficiency test. So we are not talking about learners making their way through the stages in, say, the first two years of university study. We also ought to add here that all oral data used in the research were gathered via spontaneous or quasispontaneous conversations and not paper and pencil tests typical of classroom or achievement tests. In the case of Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela's study, data were gathered via grammaticality judgment tasks as well as sentence interpretation tasks. These methods were appropriate given the nature of the targets they were testing, that is, aspects of copular verb usage that are never taught or explicitly learned. In short, what we know about the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* does not derive from what teachers normally observe in classroom exercises and paper-and-pencil tests used to see if learners have learned what they were taught.

So, What Is/Are the Learning Problem(s)?

Clearly *ser* is easier than *estar* for learners with English as L1 (and perhaps for all learners). What appears to happen is that *ser* seems to take care of itself and can even be considered the default copula for learners, whereas *estar* engages learners in a protracted period of acquisition that, in the end, may never be complete. After the initial phases of acquisition of the copular verbs, the learner's job is to acquire the uses and constraints associated with *estar*, while "chipping away" at the overextension of *ser*. This is, of course, a description of what happens and not an explanation of why. Just what is the learning problem that underlies the stages we see?

In my early work, I relied on various cognitive-oriented explanations to account for the stages in the acquisition of *ser* and *estar*. First, based on research in which we analyzed various sources of input to learners, we found that *ser* is three to four times more frequent in the input to learners compared with *estar* (VanPatten 1987; see also Collentine 2008). If frequency is a major factor in acquisition (e.g., N. Ellis 2007), it would not be surprising then that learners would pick up and overextend the more frequent copular verb *ser*. But this is not a particularly satisfying explanation for what we see happening with these two verbs in toto. After all, *estar* seems to be acquired in particular stages, with particular functions appearing before others over time. Why would this be? What makes *estar* more difficult? If we take *estar* plus *-ndo* to be the easiest function of *estar* to appear and *estar* plus adjectives as the most difficult, we can find a more satisfactory explanation within linguistic theory. Let's examine first the use of *estar* with adjectives.

Theoretical work in the syntax/semantics of copular choice in Spanish has converged on the idea that the difference between *ser* and *estar* is related to aspect. Aspect is perhaps most familiar to the reader in terms of the preterit/imperfect contrast, in which preterit verbs encode [+perfective] aspect whereas imperfective verbs encode [-perfective]. Perfectivity here refers to boundedness; that is, an event marked as [+perfective] is bounded temporally (within time), whereas an event marked as [-perfective] is not bounded by temporality. For this reason, preterit verb forms are [+perfective] because they refer to events with either beginning or end points, thus having some kind of boundedness. Imperfect verb forms are [-perfective] because they refer to events whose beginnings and/or endings are not implied. But there is also lexical aspect, which refers to the nature of events themselves. Events can be categorized into two large classes: telic and atelic. Telic events imply boundedness whereas atelic events do not. "Knowing" is an atelic event, for example, whereas "realizing something" is a telic event. Both are mental processes, but the former does not imply beginning and end points whereas the latter does.

Within current syntactic theory, both the inherent nature of an event (telic/atelic) and its verbal inflection (preterit/imperfect, for example) are features that need to get checked in the syntax. This happens by way of verb movement. To be brief, the clause structure of Spanish is complex with a number of functional projections under the Inflectional Phrase and above the Verb Phrase in a syntactic tree. These include tense (present/past), agreement (person/number), and two kinds of aspect: telicity (nature of the event) and grammatical aspect. A sentence is grammatical if the features encoded on the verb match those that are encoded in the functional projections. The way that features get checked is by having the verb move out of the Verb Phrase and up into the syntactic tree, stopping at the appropriate landing sites for feature checking (see, e.g., Giorgi and Pianesi 1997; Montrul 2004; Zagona 2002).

Feature checking is something that needs to occur with the copular verbs but in a slightly different way. In recent analyses, Schmitt (1992, 2005) has argued that *ser*, as a true copula, is featureless. That is, it does not encode for any aspectual distinctions and has no features related to aspect that must get checked in the syntax. On the other hand, Schmitt claims, *estar* encodes [+perfective], making it more marked and having a functional feature that must get checked somewhere in the syntax. At the same time, it is argued that predicates themselves, adjectives in this case, are also marked for [± perfective]. If an adjective is marked for [-perfective], then it must be used with a copular verb that is unmarked for aspect or marked for [-perfective] as well. If an adjective is marked for [+perfective], then it must be used with a copular verb that is also marked for [+perfective]. In short, the predicates must get their features checked with the copular verbs. *Ser* presents no problem for learners with English L1 because, under Schmitt's analysis, it possesses the same features as *be* regarding aspect. English *be* is a featureless verb and does not encode for aspect. Thus, it and *ser* overlap in terms of both function (copular) and features (or lack thereof). From this account, we might conclude that the perfective nature of *estar* is what must be acquired.

In terms of acquisition, featureless and/or unmarked aspects of language are always easier to acquire than those that encode features and/or are more marked (e.g., R. Ellis 1994; Gass and Selinker 2008). For example, masculine gender (unmarked) is always easier than feminine gender (marked); subject relative clauses (unmarked) are always easier than object relative clauses (more marked); and phonological contrasts in syllable initial position (unmarked) are easier than the same contrasts in final position (marked). Thus, *ser* is "easier" than *estar* because the former is featureless and unmarked when it comes to aspect. What is more, in terms of L1/L2 differences, those functional features that do not exist in the L1 but do exist in the L2 tend to be more difficult to acquire than those that are shared by the two languages (e.g., Montrul 2004, Sorace 2003; White 2003). *Estar* carries a feature that the copular verb *be* does not, thus presenting more of a challenge to learners. It has more linguistic "baggage" than *ser*. (See Montrul 2008, for additional discussion on the role of aspect in the acquisition of copular verbs.)

To be sure, not everyone agrees with Schmitt's analysis of *ser* being featureless while *estar* is [+perfective]. Roby (2007), for example, adopts the earlier work of Luján (1981), in which both verbs are aspectual, with *ser* being [-perfective] and *estar* being [+perfective]. Thus, both verbs "carry the same baggage" but their values are different. If this is so, then why would *ser* be easier to acquire than *estar*? After all, the learner has to somehow pick up that the copular verbs in Spanish are aspectual and determine which verb carries which aspect. Under this scenario, the reason that *ser* appears earlier than *estar* in adult SLA is most likely due to L1 transfer. The English copular verb *be* is featureless, as discussed above. L2 learners of Spanish with English L1 first latch onto *ser* due to frequency in the input while imputing it with the featureless values of their L1 copular verb; that is, they make *ser* behave the way Schmitt claims it behaves because that is the way *be* behaves in English. It is only later, when learners must acquire the perfective nature of *estar* that they may subsequently determine that *ser* is [-perfective]. Of course, it could be the case that they never do this and that *ser* remains featureless vis-à-vis aspect. The acquisition results (stages) would, nonetheless, be the same,

namely, early acquisition of *ser* with adjectives and its overextension to domains where native speakers would use *estar*.

What of the use of *estar* with *-ndo*? Why is this function of *estar* the easiest to acquire? Unlike its use with adjectives, the use of *estar* with *-ndo* is not a copular function per se but rather an auxiliary function. It does not “compete” with *ser* as an auxiliary, in the same way that *haber*, as an auxiliary, does not compete. So, what the learner actually acquires is *ser* as copular verb followed by *estar* as (featureless) auxiliary. English also distinguishes between *be* as copular verb (‘John is tall’) and *be* as auxiliary (‘John is sleeping’). Indeed, in both L1 and L2 acquisition research, these two functions are separated out in the famous morpheme studies (e.g., Brown 1973; Dulay and Burt 1974; Bailey, Madden, and Krashen 1974) and, coincidentally, their functions are acquired distinctively with copular *be* acquired before auxiliary *be*. Copular verbs in English and Spanish are required in order to carry tense and agreement features. Sentences such as *‘John tall’ and **Juan alto* are simply not allowed. Thus, the syntax of English and Spanish force an early acquisition of some kind of copular verb. In Spanish, *ser* wins out over *estar*. The reason that learners acquire *estar* as an auxiliary is twofold. First, their grammars are looking for a functional equivalent to *be* as auxiliary in English. Second, it is easier to map a completely new form onto a new function rather than try to get a previously learned form to split into various functions (see, e.g., the one-to-one principle in Andersen 1984). Finally, because there are no new features associated with *estar* as auxiliary, the syntax is not complicated by needing to check those features. (See Lema 1995 for differences between copular and auxiliary uses of verbs in Spanish.)

The above discussion leads us to a redefinition of the earlier descriptive stages of the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* by positing the underlying syntax of each stage:

Stage 1. No copular/auxiliary verb.

Stage 2. Acquisition of copular verb (*ser*) to carry tense and agreement features (probably featureless in terms of aspect).

Stage 3. Acquisition of auxiliary verb (*estar*).

Stage 4. Acquisition of aspect as new copula feature.

What Are the Implications for Instruction?

If we focus on the *what* of instruction rather than on the *how*, the implications for instruction of research on the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* seem rather clear. As noted earlier, the traditional casting of the two copular verbs has been *ser* versus *estar*, at least in textbooks and pedagogical grammars. What I would like to claim is that the learning problem is actually *estar*, and thus the instructional problem can also be seen as *estar*. In short, teachers need not worry about the verb *ser*; it will largely take care of itself. Both frequency in the input and the nature of the verb itself almost ensure the acquisition of its major functions. What teachers need to concern themselves with is whether learners are getting the verb *estar*. Such a concern invites two questions:

- whether or not pedagogical grammars should be adjusted;
- whether or not pedagogical and teacher input might be more beneficial to learners if *estar* became more privileged.

To be sure, considering the above questions along with any proposed answers does not guarantee immediate acquisition of *estar* and its functions, nor would they guarantee error-free learning. As is clear from research on instructed SLA, instruction and practice can neither

overcome nor circumvent the natural processes that are used by learners to create linguistic systems in their heads (e.g., R. Ellis 1994; Lightbown and Spada 2006; Pienemann 1998; Wong and VanPatten 2003). Instruction is constrained by the nature of acquisition in important ways. However, the research does suggest that instruction can speed up acquisition for some, if not many, learners while also helping them get to greater levels of underlying competence than if they were left to learn “naturally.” What I am proposing, then, is that privileging *estar* in instruction might speed up its acquisition.

I also want to be clear that I am not proposing new explanations for *ser* and *estar* to include in language textbooks—and most assuredly I am not advocating teaching learners about perfectivity, functional categories, feature checking, or any other such abstract notions related to syntax and semantics. Indeed, it would be absurd to expect learners to grasp issues related to theoretical linguistics as part of their language learning experience. What I am advocating here is not related to the explanation that learners get but to *the data* they are exposed to. To be succinct, the implications of the research presented in this essay are not about what to *tell* learners; the implications lie in the *input* learners are exposed to. Learners do not need some newfangled explanation about *ser* and *estar*; they need lots and lots more contextualized examples (i.e., in the input) than they currently get. Coupled with some focusing device (e.g., activities that ask learners to correctly interpret *estar* with adjectives so that there is simultaneous focus on meaning and form), then, this is about the best that teachers can do to help acquisition along (see, e.g., Wong 2005).

I am also not advocating the sequencing of pedagogical grammars in any particular way. For example, one might conclude that because *ser* is easier, it should be taught first and then *estar* should be introduced later. But the reader should note that the opposite is just as logical. One could argue that *estar*, because it is more difficult, should be introduced and practiced from the earliest days of instruction. After all, it is the more difficult things that require extra attention. I am not suggesting either position, nor am I suggesting any rearrangement of pedagogical syllabi. It is up to curriculum developers and teachers to fiddle with such syllabi and find out what works best for them. Again, my point is not about explanations or syllabi but about the data that learners are exposed to and how robust those data are. (See also the discussion in Pinto and Rex 2006 regarding *por* and *para*.)

To conclude, I go back to the beginning of this essay. I think it is still true that SLA research cannot speak to many of the day-to-day issues that confront teachers and it will never offer quick fixes or how-to's for that teacher concerned about what to do on Monday morning. But on the positive side, it also seems to me that with an understanding of the linguistics and psycholinguistics of acquisition, teachers can have a more informed reason underlying their instructional efforts and decisions. That understanding might also lead to a better set of expectations regarding the interface between teaching and acquisition. To this end, research on SLA may not be so irrelevant to instruction after all. The question we are left with is how this information gets into the hands of teachers.

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NOTES

¹For some native speakers of Spanish, *ser* is acceptable in locative constructions that involve immovable objects but largely with short locative phrases such as *aquí*, *allí*, and so on (e.g., *La oficina es*

alli ‘The office is there’ but *?La oficina es entre dos edificios en la calle Menudo* ‘The office is between two buildings on Menudo Street’).

²One anonymous reviewer pointed out that this overview does not contain references to other work on *ser* and *estar* (e.g., Bosque and Demonte 1999; King and Suñer 2004). I agree in principle with this assessment, but because I address current theoretical perspectives in a later section of this paper, these need not be addressed here.

³I should point out that Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela’s paper involves a much more complex look at passives and adjectives and that the point I make here is not one they make. I come to my conclusion based on the mean scores provided in their study.

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