

TOWARD A SEMANTIC CHARACTERIZATION OF "SER" AND "ESTAR"

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Be is unique among the verbs of English in the fact that it can be deleted from many constructions with no loss of semantic information. Thus, for example, it is a well-known fact that sentences 1.1 and 1.2 below say exactly the same thing, the difference between them being a matter of emphasis or style:

- 1.1 Tom is the man who is sitting at the far right.
 1.2 Tom is the man sitting at the far right.

While sentence 1.3, on the other hand, is not reducible. Sentence 1.4 is not related to 1.3 through deletion of *want*:

- 1.3 Tom is the man who wants to go.
 1.4 Tom is the man to go.

The observation of examples such as the above pairs have lead linguists to call *be* the "semantically empty" verb.¹ This view of the copula is particularly disturbing to the Spanish teacher who knows how difficult it is to explain the uses of *ser* and *estar* to English-speaking learners because, if the difference between the two copulas of Spanish is not semantic, then it is hard to conceive what else it could be.

As a working procedure, the linguist trying to interpret a set of data must suspect the existence of "semantically empty" words. The suspicion is particularly justified in this case, where one can think up hundreds of pairs of sentences in which two "meaningless" words are the only clue to contrastive messages in otherwise identical contexts. Consider the following pairs:

- 2.1 El acero es duro.
Steel is hard.
 2.2 El acero está duro.
The steel is hard.
 2.3 Esta playa es buena.
This beach is good.
 2.4 Esta playa está buena.
(a) This beach seems good.
(b) The beach is good today.
 2.5 Dónde es la salida?
Where is the way out?

- 2.6 Dónde está la salida?
Where is the exit door?
 2.7 La conferencia era en la biblioteca.
The lecture (reading) was in the library.
 2.8 La conferencia estaba en la biblioteca.
The lecture (written paper) was in the library.

The standard explanation is that in Spanish there are two verbs which correspond to English *be*: *ser* and *estar*, and each of them has its distinct province. This explanation begs the question and leaves us with no answers for the two central problems regarding the grammar of *ser* and *estar*: (1) Are they two verbs or one? (2) What is the nature of the distinction between the two, and is this distinction lost in English?

Several answers have been proposed to the above questions in the literature of foreign language teaching. The following quotes, taken from three textbooks written by distinguished experts on Spanish morphology are representative of the most commonly held solutions; they could be called the semantic, the behavioral, and the structural view.

Ramsey and Spaulding² (henceforth referred to as R. & S.) explain *ser* as: "To be by nature, inwardly, absolutely," and *estar* "to be by condition, outwardly, relatively." Admittedly, these explanations are rather obscure, yet, I find myself agreeing more with R. & S. than with the other more contemporary grammarians.

The second author is William Bull³ (henceforth referred to as W. B.). Who takes a strong stand against the "fraud perpetrated on the students by those test-books which associate *ser* with permanence, inherent characteristics and qualities, and *estar* with temporariness, accidental characteristics and conditions" (that is to say, against R. & S. and others, proponent of a semantic explanation). Bull presents the behavioral view saying: "The

Spaniard organizes reality in terms of two criteria, change versus no change. All entities consequently, are divided into two sets, those which have undergone change, and those which have not." W. B. defines *ser* as the verb that expresses that no change has occurred, and *estar* as the verb for events that have changed.

The two explanations seem to be basically correct: personally, I fail to notice a drastic difference between W.B.'s and the semantic interpretation he attacks so vigorously. The most notable defect in the characterizations based on semantic interpretations of *ser* and *estar* is that they tend to be chaotic, full of unexplained exceptions, and subjective, seldom clear. They also tend to ascribe too much semantic responsibility to the copula. A partial list of readings proposed for *ser*: "it expresses origin, ownership, material of what something is composed, 'to take place,' 'to act,' 'to behave'"; for *estar*: "it denotes the location of something *even though it be a permanent one*,⁴ sometimes it has partially the meaning of 'to go' or 'to come', 'attend to,' 'look after,' 'as'" (R. & S.).

W.B. says: "*Estar* implies a change to whatever is described by the predicate adjective, *ser* indicates the norm, when *estar* is used, it indicates that the entity deviates from the speaker's preconception of it." This author also claims that the sentence: *Aquí es mi casa*, 'Here is my home' is a reduction from *Aquí es donde está mi casa*, 'Here is where my house stands.' As we shall see below, this interpretation is incorrect, and the two sentences are unrelated (this can be observed from the different English sentences that translate them.)

Stockwell, Bowen and Martin⁵ (henceforth S.B. & M) carefully avoid any semantic commitments. They attempt to define the territories of *ser* and *estar* by distribution only. Their strict structural stand saves them from the accusations of subjectivity that the other authors lay themselves open to. S.B. & M's is the only book to have addressed itself directly to the two questions proposed at the beginning of this paper. Their answer to the first question is that *ser* and *estar* are one verb; to the

second, that their contrast is not semantic but only distributional; they view these two words as variants of one verb in more or less arbitrary complementary distribution. But this view can be easily falsified, for example, by sentences 2.3 and 2.4 above, which, at least in one of their possible readings, contrast only in their respective verbs.

The purpose of the present study is to argue a semantic, rather than a structural point of view.⁶ It is therefore closer to the first two text-books mentioned above than to the third one. I do agree with S.B. & M. in one important respect, I also believe that *ser* and *estar* are two variants of one single verb; but my contention, which I will try to defend in this paper, is that the contrast between them is semantic, not structural.

I hope I will be able to show that the usage of these two forms is much simpler and more consistent than what the grammar texts have lead students to believe. If we observe the "first" dictionary entry of these two verbs (that which corresponds to their use as intransitive verbs), and consider all the other possible uses in the light of the basic ones, we can see a constant semantic feature that reappears with slight, or at least, logically possible extensions, in each case.

The intransitive verb *ser* means 'to exist'; it is the word used to denote the existence of the subject.⁷ Example: *Hoy es viernes*, i.e. 'Friday exists for the extent of today.' Extensions of this meaning are: (a) sentences that assert the intrinsic identification with the subject of a given predicate: an adjective, a participle or a noun phrase.⁸ In this case, it is possible to speak of an "existential identity" of the predicate and the subject. (b) Statements of identification of the subject, usually with no further information: these include definitions, generic statements, the question: "Who is X?" and its answer. (c) Happenings, i.e., the existence of events. Case (c) is, strictly speaking, the same as the first or basic use of *ser*, but it seems to be the most difficult for foreigners to learn. These two extensions account for all the cases of

ser with nouns and adjectives or participles in the predicate.

The verb *estar* when used intransitively (that is, with only adverbial phrases in its predicate) denotes presence of the subject at a specific locus of space or time. Example: *Chile está en Sud America* 'Chile is in South America.' In this example, the verb in the present tense indicates location of a concrete object: 'Chile,' which is valid for now, with no implication of either permanence or non-permanence. The fact that the speaker knows that 'Chile' is a piece of the earth's surface and, therefore, has been and will be at the same locus for as long as the earth exists disturbs the non-native speaker, who associates the idea of "permanence" with *ser*. However, *estar* does not contradict the semantic feature of "permanence," on the contrary, it emphasizes it so to speak, because it means: 'permanence which is valid for now.' The extension of this meaning appears in the transitive constructions of *estar*, that is, when it has adjectives or past participles in its predicate. In these cases, *estar* denotes the presence of the subject in the state or condition denoted by its complement at the time specified by the sentence. These sentences generally imply that a change is potentially possible, but they don't have to. The necessity of a change preceding or following the time of the sentence is always denoted by the semantics of the complement or other phrase in the predicate, or, sometimes, it is extra-sentential, a consequence of the speaker's beliefs about the world but, and this must be emphasized, the connotation of change is not a part of the semantics of the verb *estar*. When *estar* is used, existence is not explicitly denoted but it is presupposed (this is the situation when any other verb besides the "existential" ones are used.) This is the only extension of the "first" meaning of *estar*.

The verb *ser* is apparently neutral as to activity or state. It can take both active and stative adjectives in its predicate. In the latter case, it accepts the imperative form, in the former it does not. Examples:

- 3.1 ¡Sé más cariñoso!
Be more affectionate!

- 3.2 *¡Sé más rico!
Be wealthier!

The verb *estar* is stative and its predicate must be stative, too. A sentence with *estar* can not be commanded.⁹ Even if an active complement appears in the predicate of *estar* this activity is viewed statically, so to speak, for its relative durativeness, and not as action.

As has been observed thousands of times, the most important problem in the translation of *be* into the *ser-estar* couplet is that the two semantic features discussed above overlap in English, while in Spanish they are always apart. The unfamiliar split poses perpetual problems to the English speaker who is used to handling "existence" and "permanence" as if they were one and the same thing.

The reason why *be* and *ser* can always be deleted from a relative clause at no cost is that when people speak they usually presuppose the existence of their arguments. *Be* in an embedded clause is, therefore, frequently redundant, but redundant is not the same as empty.

It is quite revealing that *estar* is not as freely deletable as *ser*. *Estar* can only be deleted when its predicate is an adjective or a past participle which can not have an "existential" reading. The examples below will make this more clear. In sentence 4.1 'full' and 'contented' are clearly not the defining characteristics of the nouns 'stomach' and 'heart,' and the verb understood in the two reduced relative clauses is *estar*; the existential verb *ser* can not normally¹⁰ be followed by either one of these participles:

- 4.1 Estómago lleno, corazón contento.
(refrain)
A full stomach (equals) a contented heart.
- 4.2 Estómago que } está { lleno, corazón
 } *es {
 que } está { contento.
 } *es {

Consider now the adjective *bueno* 'good.' This adjective can occur with both copulas, as in the following example:

- 4.3 ¡Qué bueno es el jefe!
How good the boss is!

- 4.4 ¡Qué bueno está el jefe!
How good the boss is being!

In a reduced relative clause, however, only the first reading of 'good,' "temperamental characteristic" is possible, the second reading, translated roughly as "acting good" is not possible. In sentence 4.5 the "good boss" and the "bad boss" respectively refer to a boss who is good or is bad (*ser* understood) and not to one who acts good or bad.

- 4.5 El jefe malo desautorizó al bueno.
The bad boss overruled the good one.

Bueno can also mean 'in good health after illness' when used in the predicate of *estar*, and in this idiomatic use it is not freely deletable either:

- 4.6 El enfermo pronto estará bueno.
The patient will soon be alright.

- 4.7 *El enfermo bueno ya puede levantarse.

The recovered patient can get up.
(Acceptable with the reading: "The good patient . . ." with *ser* understood in the relative clause).

In the following cases *estar* is never deletable:

- 4.8 El hombre que está protestando debe ser un comunista.

The man who is complaining must be a Communist.

- 4.9 *El hombre protestando

- 4.10 El teléfono que está afuera tampoco funciona.

The phone which is outside does not work either.

- 4.11 *El teléfono afuera

The constraints on relative clause reduction then are: *ser* is freely deletable from a relative clause (with some restrictions), *estar* is only deletable from sentences having an adjective or past participle in the predicate. If the adjective or participle can occur with either form of the copula, the reduced clause is always understood as if the deleted verb were *ser*. Cases or potential ambiguity between a deleted *ser* and *estar* simply do not occur; the verbs remain clearly distinct, even in their absences, something which would be difficult

to account for if these absentees were two semantically empty words.

Next we proceed to analyze some contrasting sentences with *ser* and *estar*. Consider sentences 2.1 and 2.2 which are repeated below:

- 5.1 El acero es duro.
Steel is hard.

- 5.2 El acero está duro.
The steel is hard.

"Steel" is a generic noun in 5.1, and the verb *es* expresses the intrinsic identification of the predicate "hard" with the class of objects named "steel." Specific instances of "steel" may not correspond to this description, but this fact does not invalidate the general statement. In 5.2 one specific instance of "steel" is referred to. *Está* is used to express that at the moment specified in the sentence this piece of steel appears with the consistency "hard." W.B. is right when he says that sentence 5.2 can be said in a context where it is understood that a change has taken place, but it is gratuitous of him to claim that the Spaniard who says 5.2 regards "steel" and "hard" as not belonging together under normal conditions. Moreover, the sentence can also be said in a context where *no change* has taken place, as we can see below:

- 5.3 El acero todavía está duro, se necesita más calor para fundirlo.

The steel is still hard, it will take more heat to melt it.

- 5.4 A la temperatura ambiente el acero siempre está duro.

At normal temperatures steel (generic) is always hard.

- 5.5 *El acero siempre es duro.

In 5.5 the generic statement becomes of dubious grammaticalness due to the introduction of the word "always." Normally, "always" and "never" are introduced in a sentence in order to provide new information. The verb *ser* however means 'existentially valid,' and its negation, 'existentially invalid' or something like this. So, in a sentence with *ser* "always" is redundant, and so is "never" in a sentence with *no ser*. There are examples of these redundant

constructions, but they are always emphatic, as for example:

- 5.6 La maté, pero ella siempre fue buena. (line of a tango)
I killed her, but she had always been good.

Otherwise, in non-emphatic constructions, *siempre* and *nunca* are not commonly used with *ser*.

Notice that sentence 5.4 could be factually identical with 5.1, in so far as they convey the same information. But in 5.4 there is emphasis on the fact that this is a state of the subject at a specific time even if, as is the case with "always," the time may have no end in sight.

S.B. & M. also claim that a sentence having *está* is normally understood to imply that a change has taken place. They discuss the following pair and say, correctly, that 6.1 could be said by a person who is seeing John for the first time, 6.2 could only be said by someone who has known John before and is therefore aware of the fact that his weight has changed.

- 6.1 Juan es gordo.
John is fat.
6.2 Juan está gordo.
John looks fat.

But their observation is not valid for all instances of *estar* with adjective in the predicate. For example, in sentences 2.3 and 2.4 repeated below, the normal situation would be the opposite:

- 6.3 Esta playa es buena.
This is a good beach.
6.4 Esta playa está buena.
(a) This beach seems good.
(b) The beach is good today.

A stranger at the beach for the first time is better qualified to make statement 6.4 than 6.3. Sentence 6.4 expresses an impression of the beach which is valid for right now, but not necessarily for always. 6.3, on the other hand, is a statement which is generally true, it can in fact be followed by a contrary statement with *estar*:

- 6.5 Esta playa es buena, aunque no lo esté hoy.
This is a good beach, even though it does not seem so today.

The demonstrative *esta* is ambiguous in 6.4 It can mean 'this beach' as opposed to other beaches elsewhere, and also 'today's beach' as opposed to the same beach on other days. The ambiguity is not possible in 6.3, which is a statement on one beach unique both in time and space.

Another pair of statements that can not be accounted for by S.B. & M's contention that *estar* indicates that a change has taken place is:

- 7.1 Jacinta es soltera.
Jacinta is single.
7.2 Jacinta está soltera.
Jacinta is unmarried.

The choice of *ser* or *estar* in the above examples is solely determined by the speaker's beliefs about the world. The speaker who says 7.1 regards J.'s spinsterhood as being final and does not entertain the possibility that it could change. The speaker who says 7.2 views the situation as not necessarily permanent, although valid for now. In 7.2 *soltera* can not be conceived of as a change from anything.

One predicate about which it could be alleged that a change is always viewed as having taken place is "dead." However, even with this participle it is easy to construct sentences in which the implication is a *further* change:

- 8.1 Ese sábado Cristo { ya } estaba muerto. { todavía }
That Saturday Christ was { already } dead. { still }

While *ya* in sentence 8.1 views death as a passing from life, the word *todavía* indicates the expectation of a resurrection.

There are actually many predicates of *estar* that express the non-existence of a change without implying that the change is forthcoming, for example:

- 8.1 Antes de usar asegúrese que los sellos estén intactos.
Before using make sure that the seals are intact.
8.2 En Norteamérica hay pocos lagos que estén incontaminados.
In North America there are few lakes that are unpolluted.

The reason why *estar* is used in these

sentences is not because a change is expected but because it is potentially possible.

An interesting extension of the existential meaning of *ser* is its use in constructions of identification.

9.1 ¿Quién es?
Who is it?

9.2 Soy yo, Lola.
It is me, Lola.

In army jargon "live" is used instead of "be." Sentence 9.1 is synonymous with 9.3:

9.3 ¿Quién vive?
"Who lives?"

which shows the "existential" force of this type of sentences.¹¹ A question of this type, asking about the identity of the subject, is very much like a request for a definition.

Observe that 9.1 does not admit a locative phrase in the predicate (sentence 9.4 is ungrammatical) and, therefore, neither it nor 9.3 is synonymous with the American army question 'Who goes there?'

9.4 *¿Quién es ahí?

9.5 *¿Quién vive ahí?

Sentence 9.5 is grammatical, but not synonymous with 9.3. The topic of 9.5 is the locative 'there.' This sentence asks about the name of the person who lives at a certain place, and it could be said in this person's absence. 9.3 can only be said if the person is present; the same is valid for 9.1.

The Spanish equivalent of 'Who goes there?' is the sentence with *estar*:

9.6 ¿Quién está ahí?

In 9.7 and 9.8 a locative ('in,' 'where you are,' etc.) is implied:

9.7 Está Juan?

9.8 No, no está.

These sentences do not ask or negate John's existence; his existence is taken for granted in both of them and they respectively question and negate John's presence at a specific location. Here too, like in 9.6, the focus of the sentences is the locative phrase. Sentences 9.1 and 9.6 are respectively similar to 2.5 and 2.6, repeated below:

10.1 ¿Dónde es la salida?

Where is the way out?

10.2 ¿Dónde está la salida?

Where is the exit door?

The similarity between 9.1 and 10.1 is not readily apparent. In 9.1 the subject is identified or defined, in 10.1 the subject *la salida* is abstract. The sentence asks at what specific point of space the action of "going out" can be actualized. These are respectively instances (b) and (c) of the extensions of the basic meaning of *ser*.

In 10.2 *la salida* means 'the door,' and the sentence asks about its location. The similarity with 9.7 is readily apparent.

One apparent counter-example to the rule that *estar* is always used for the location of concrete nouns is the following: questions about the location of public buildings and offices:

10.3 ¿Dónde es el correo?

10.4 ¿Dónde está el correo?

Where is the post office?

Sentences 10.3 and 10.4 are, however, significantly different. In 10.3 the speaker is asking not about the location of a building, but rather, the place where a certain business is conducted. This sentence would be uttered by someone who has arrived in town recently and wishes to post a letter. A tourist who wants to take pictures of the most prominent building in town would say sentence 10.4, not 10.3. Similarly, if someone from town has been away and returns to find a parking lot where the post-office used to stand, he would say sentence 10.4, and not 10.3. His question would be about the building itself, not about its function.

10.5 below would be the answer to question 10.1 and 10.6 the answer to 10.2:

10.5 La salida es por la puerta de atrás
The exit is by the back door.

10.6 La salida está en la parte de atrás
del edificio.

The exit door is at the back of the building.

W.B.'s sentence: *Aquí es mi casa* is like 10.1 and 10.3. It refers to 'home,' the function, and not to 'house,' its container. Observe the impossibility of: **Aquí es mi terreno* 'Here is my plot of land.'

Since *estar* presupposes existence, this verb can not be used to mark location of an object when it is indefinite or when its very existence is uncertain:

- 11.1 *¿Dónde está algún buen libro sobre nigromancia?
Where is a good book on necromancy?
- 11.2 *Parece que está gente afuera.
It seems that people are outside.

Examples 2.7 and 2.8 repeated below are exactly like the cases of concrete-abstract subjects discussed above:

- 12.1 La conferencia era en la biblioteca.
The lecture (event) was in the library.
- 12.2 La conferencia estaba en la biblioteca.
The lecture (written paper) was in the library.

R. & S. are wrong when they say that *ser* in 12.1 indicates event, it indicates existence. It is the subject that indicates event.

In definitions, descriptions and other equational statements, that is to say, in sentences that relate a noun in the subject to another noun in the predicate by means of the copula, we observe another logical extension of the existential use of *ser*. *Estar* is never possible in this type of sentences:

- 13.1 Las escuelas públicas son una calamidad.
The public schools are a mess.
- 13.2 Luis es embajador.
Louis is an ambassador.
- 13.3 Mi hermano es ventrílocuo.
My brother is a ventriloquist.

There is an interesting difference between sentences 13.3 and 13.4. A 'ventriloquist' has an ability that once associated with a subject is not likely to be lost. Therefore, sentence 13.3 is a permanent characterization of 'my brother' as belonging to the set of ventriloquists. 'Ambassador' is a role by which the subject can belong to the set for life, as in sentence 13.2, and in this case, too, it is a form of definition. But roles can also be states that someone goes through without becoming per-

manently identified with them. This idea is expressed by 13.4 below. Observe that 13.5 is not possible:

- 13.4 Luis está de embajador en las U.N.
Luis is serving as ambassador to the U.N.
- 13.5 *Mi hermano está de ventrílocuo en el Circo Latino.
My brother is acting as a ventriloquist in the Latin Circus.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the rules about the usage of *ser* and *estar* that appear in most textbooks of Spanish suffer from a lack of generality; are often needlessly subjective or obscure and ridden with unexplained exceptions. There are two main reasons for these inadequacies: one is that the copula is often made responsible for information that actually belongs to other parts of the sentence; another, is that the grammarians have failed to notice in the various constructions with *ser* or *estar* the natural extensions of the basic meanings of the two verbs. The basic meaning of *ser* is existence and some of its extensions are: (a) assertion of identification of the subject with its predicate, (b) statements of identification of the subject, (c) happenings, i.e., the existence of events, (d) definitions, descriptions, and statements of set membership. The semantic feature existence is presupposed by *estar*, beyond this, *estar* asserts the presence of the subject at a specific point in space or time. Its main extension is: the presence of the subject in the state or condition denoted by the predicate at the time specified by the sentence.¹²

¹This claim appears very frequently in the literature of transformational grammar from its inception with Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1957).

²Marathon M. Ramsey and R. K. Spaulding, *A Textbook of Modern Spanish* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), Ch. 6, 307-15.

³William E. Bull, *Spanish for Teachers. Applied Linguistics* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1965), Ch. 23, 291-97.

⁴Emphasis mine (M. R.). This "even though" implies the author's uneasiness with the use of

estar for permanent location. I try to show in this study that, on the contrary, this type of construction is totally congruent with the overall semantic content of *estar*.

⁵Robert P. Stockwell, J. Donald Bowen and John W. Martin, *The Grammatical Structures of English and Spanish* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 166-71.

⁶See Mercedes Roldán, "Ser and estar in a New Light," *Language Sciences* 12, (1970), 17-20.

⁷*Existir* 'to exist' is another existential verb. *Haber* is another possible candidate for this list. There is an undeniable relationship between *ser* and *estar* 'be' and *haber* and *tener* 'have.'

⁸This analysis will not take into account the uses of *ser* and *estar* with prepositional phrases in the predicate when these phrases are other than locatives. Although I am sure that such cases do not contradict any of the claims made here, these prepositional phrases are complex in their structure and each one of them deserving

of individual study. Such a study is beyond the scope of the present analysis.

⁹This claim, as well as apparent counter-examples to it, will be discussed in a second paper, "On the So-called Auxiliaries *ser* and *estar*," to appear in *Hispania*.

¹⁰The word "normally" here is meant to emphasize the fact that this study will not concern itself with the world of metaphor nor with situations in fairy tales, etc., although I am quite sure that such situations in "other worlds" also show the basic contrastive meaning of these two verbs, only cast in unusual contexts.

¹¹Dwight Bolinger has called to my attention the fact that the equivalence of sentences 9.1 and 9.3 may be coincidental, because *¿Quién vive?* is actually an order to give the pass-word in such a case, the coincidence, that is, the use of the word "live" when asking for identification is certainly very suggestive.

¹²I wish to thank Dwight Bolinger for many helpful comments.

LA ANÉCDOTA DOCENTE

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Ha sido para mí objeto de legítimo placer leer las palabras del distinguido colega Manuel Cibrián referentes a la importancia del contenido visual de cualquier sistema de aprendizaje del español ["¿Ver para creer? ¡Ver para aprender! ¡Leer para saber!", *Hispania* 56 (Marzo, 1973) 106-10]. Me permito a la vez felicitarle por lo acertados que son sus pronunciamientos en cuanto a la imposibilidad de ningún andamio global que rija para desempeñar en toda aula docente la espínosa tarea de la enseñanza de los idiomas extranjeros: concuerdo con él en lo absurdo que es cualquier método que pretenda ser eficaz en todo momento. Como nos lo ha dicho de forma tan sobresaliente dicho señor, según la materia basta que se le proporciona al profesor, tendrá éste que acomodar su presentación, de acuerdo con las luces lingüísticas de sus alumnos.

Subrayando y aumentando la materia de dicho artículo me propongo en estas líneas más referirme a la importancia de la palabra oída como pieza del conjunto docente. No es menester hacer hincapié en la importancia de que el alumno estadounidense sea capacitado para distinguir diferencias fonémicas (verbigracia, "peina/

pena") extranjeras a su propia lengua en un castellano hablado de compás natural. Últimamente en mis clases de primer año he dado por casualidad con un sistema de ejercicio oral, el que, aunque no es en absoluto originario del arsenal pedagógico de este servidor, me parece que no se haya subrayado como modo de adquirir dicha meta ni en los textos de última aparición ni en los artículos de metodología que van saliendo a luz en nuestras revistas.

Tiene como base la psicología del oído atento. Por superior que sea el manejo del español por parte del alumno, pecará éste de inatento confrontado con muchos adiestramientos orales que figuran en ambos textos y cintas de confección actual. La sencilla y obvia razón que produce esta modorra y lapso de interés descansa en el que las respuestas que exigen dichas materias son las más de las veces lingüísticamente en sí mismas sencillas y obvias. No me refiero al contenido de ellas que puede ser en sí mismo de alta calidad, pero más bien al tipo de contestación que requieren: si el alumno no se ve obligado a exhibir su habilidad íntegra en este procedimiento, fácilmente que se aburra y