

Developmental Stages in the Acquisition of Spanish *Ser/Estar* by Italian Learners

The seminal work by VanPatten (1987) proposed five developmental stages in the acquisition of copulas in L2 Spanish, where the last stage to be acquired was that with attributive contexts that combined with *estar* (1b). Indeed, VanPatten (2010) claimed that all acquisitional difficulties could be reduced to the extra aspectual component of *estar*, in comparison with the default-like copula *ser*. However, recent work that has considered locative contexts (Perpiñán et al., 2020) has hypothesized that English speakers acquire last the localizations that imply events (2b), given the [+dynamic] component of the subject, an extra aspectual feature that always combines with *ser*. Very few studies have considered and contrasted the acquisition of *ser/estar* in several contexts in the same learners (Briscoe, 1995; Gunterman, 1992; Ryan & Lafford, 1992) and, to the best of our knowledge, no study has done it with other combination of languages beyond English. The purpose of this study is to explore comprehensively this issue by contrasting the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* in locative and attributive contexts in L2 Spanish by Italian native speakers. The ultimate goal of this study is to describe the developmental path of the acquisition of Spanish copulas.

We assume that the distribution of *ser* and *estar* is aspectual in nature (Arche, 2006; Luján, 1981), and that the classical distinction between Individual-Level (IL) and Stage-Level (SL) predicates is a distinction related to temporal boundedness that only applies to states, i.e. [-dynamic] predicates (Husband, 2010; Marín, 2010). As shown in (1), IL adjectives combine with *ser* whereas SL adjectives combine with *estar*. With respect to the expression of location, the determining factor in the distribution of the copulas is the semantic nature of the subject: when it is an object, *estar* is required (2a), whereas when the subject denotes an event, *ser* is needed (2b). This distribution can be summarized by means of the combination of the two relevant semantic features: [temporal boundedness] and [dynamicity]. On the other hand, Standard Italian as well as the Northern Italian varieties employ only *essere* for all the uses expressed in (1) and (2), whereas the Southern regional Italian varieties roughly share the Spanish distribution of *essere* and *stare*.

- (1) a. *Álex es / *está* inteligente. I-L
 Alex *i*_{SER}/*i*_{ESTAR} intelligent
- b. *Álex *es/ está* cansada. S-L
 Alex *i*_{SER}/*i*_{ESTAR} tired'
- (2) a. El árbol **es / está* en el jardín. Object
 the tree *i*_{SER}/*i*_{ESTAR} in the garden'
- b. La reunión es */*está* en el jardín. Event
 the meeting *i*_{SER}/*i*_{ESTAR} in the garden'

Our research questions examine the order of the developmental stages in L2 Spanish and the role of the L1. Specifically, we explore whether the semantic information encoded in attributive contexts, i.e.: the feature [±temporal boundedness] is mapped onto the L2 Spanish copulas later than the semantic information of subjects in locative constructions, i.e.: [±dynamicity]. Assuming a property-by-property transfer, we further question whether the regional Italian variety, in particular the Central-Southern variety/dialect, will help the L2 learners in the acquisition process given its communalities with Spanish (Ledgeway, 2008).

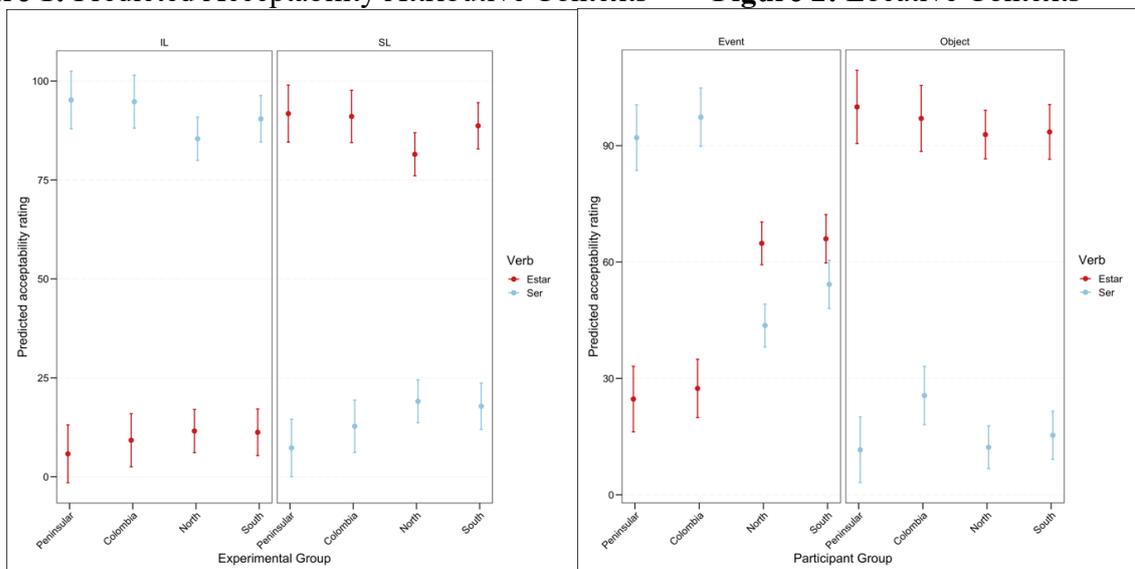
In order to examine these questions, 81 Italian-speakers divided in users of Northern vs. Southern Italian varieties, and 41 monolingually-raised Spanish speakers from Spain and Colombia participated in our study. The study consisted of four tasks, *i*- a Linguistic Background Questionnaire, *ii*- a Standardized Proficiency Test, *iii*- an Acceptability Judgment Task of a total of 64 items, counterbalanced for grammaticality, with IL and SL predicates combined with *ser* and *estar* (as in 1), four tokens each (2 x 2 x 4 = 16); as well as locative constructions with objects and events combined with *ser* and *estar*, four tokens each

($2 \times 2 \times 4 = 16$). And *iv-* an Oral Production Task which elicited locative constructions with events ($k = 4$) and objects ($k = 4$) in combination with the copulas.

The statistical modelling found two clear patterns, displayed in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2: 1- no effect of the regional variety, so that learners who speak a Southern Italian regional variety were not significantly better than the Northern learners at equal proficiency level. 2- Attributive contexts, both IL and SL, were acquired earlier than locative contexts, and in particular earlier than the location of events (*ser*), which is the last stage in the development. These results disconfirm VanPatten's idea of *estar* as the most difficult copula to acquire, and confirm Perpiñán et al's. (2020) hypothesis that the location of events with *ser* adds an extra layer of complexity, even for Italian speakers, whose L1 (and/or regional variety) already gives them the accurate combination of events + *essere*.

Figure 1: Predicted Acceptability Attributive Contexts

Figure 2: Locative Contexts



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