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Syntax matters in the acquisition of Spanish copulas

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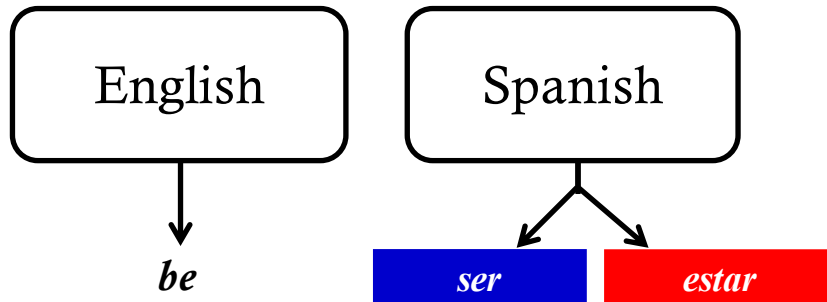
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This talk

- About the factors that rule the acquisition of Spanish copular verbs by native speakers of English.
- There has been a great deal of discussion and we are going to argue it is driven by syntactic and semantic factors of subtle nature.

The Issue: 1 copula in English; 2 in Spanish



Spanish Copular alternation

SER	ESTAR
(1) <i>Martín <u>es</u>/*está estudiante.</i> Martín is _{SER/ESTAR} student. ‘Martín is a student.’	(2) <i>Martín *es/<u>está</u> en Mallorca.</i> Martín is _{SER/ESTAR} in Mallorca. ‘Martín is in Mallorca.’
Noun Phrases	Locative Prepositional Phrases

Spanish Copular alternation with APs

(Luján, 1981; Fernández Leborans, 1999; a.o.)

Only-ser adjectives	Only-estar adjectives	Dual adjectives	
(3) <i>María <u>es</u>/*está famosa.</i> María is _{SER/ESTAR} famous. 'María is famous.'	(4) <i>María *es/<u>está</u> contenta.</i> María is _{SER/ESTAR} happy. 'María is happy.'	(5) <i>Pedro <u>es</u> nervioso.</i> Pedro is _{SER} nervous. 'Pedro is nervous.'	(6) <i>Pedro <u>está</u> nervioso.</i> Pedro is _{ESTAR} nervous. 'Pedro is nervous.'
Syntactic factors		<p style="text-align: center;">Nature</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The property is attributed to the individual as such</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Circumstantial</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The property is ascribed to the subject in a particular circumstance (Arche 2006)</p>
Discursive factors			

Task for the English L2 learner of Spanish

- To learn the distribution of the two copular verbs

That is,

- To identify and acquire the **factors that rule the distribution**

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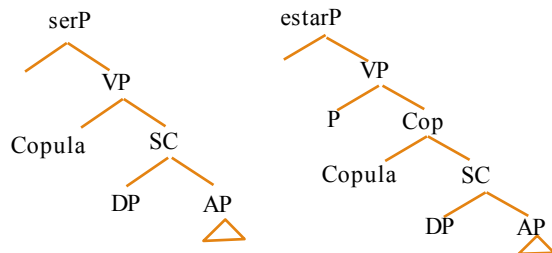
Differing properties of Spanish copulas

Syntactic properties

Ser is simpler than *estar*.

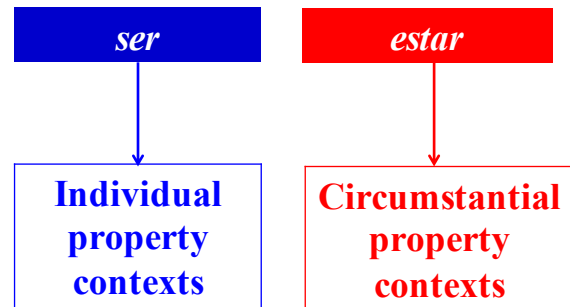
Luján 1981, Schmitt (1992 & 2005), Fernández Leborans (1999), Gallego and Uriagereka (2009 & 2016), Arche (2012) and Arche, Fábregas and Marín (2017), a.o.

Arche, Fábregas and Marín (2017)



Discursive properties

- Ser* and *estar* are both discourse dependent; against Maienborn (2005)



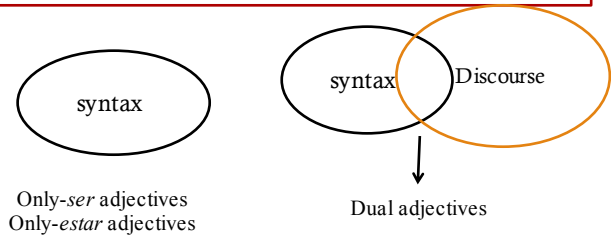
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Hypotheses and predictions (Vázquez-López, 2016)

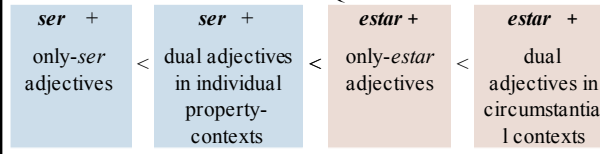
“Syntactic Complexity Hypothesis”

- The **simpler** the easier, the earlier
- Ser** will be acquired well and earlier.
- L2ers will exhibit difficulties and delays with *estar*.

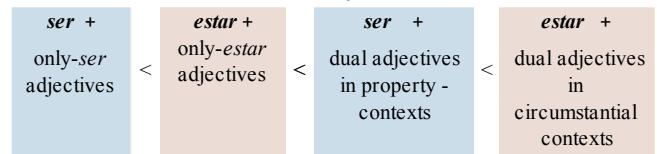
Interface Hypothesis
 (Sorace, 1993; Sorace, 2003; Sorace and Serratrice, 2009; Sorace, 2011; a.o.)
 If discourse dependent, more complicated



PREDICTED PATHWAY OF ACQUISITION



PREDICTED PATHWAY OF ACQUISITION



Experimental study

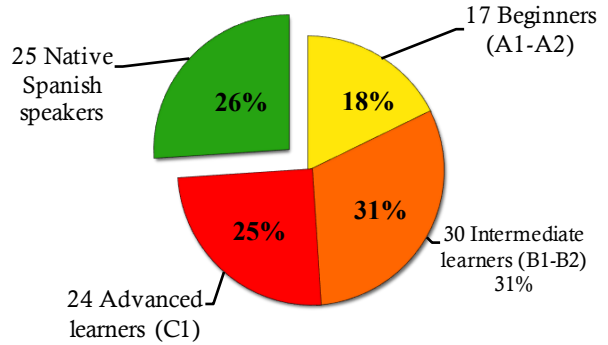
1) Cross-sectional study

71 English-speaking undergraduates
25 Peninsular Spanish monolinguals

2) 4 focused elicitation tasks (144 tokens):

- 2 oral production tasks (48)
- 2 written comprehension tasks (96)

3) Adjectival classification (Luján 1981, Fernández Leborans 1999, Marín 2010 & Arche 2012)



ONE COPULAR COMBINATION		DUAL COPULAR COMBINATION		
6 only- <i>ser</i> adjectives	6 only- <i>estar</i> adjectives	6 dual dependent-stage adjectives of physical appearance	6 dual dependent-stage adjectives of disposition	6 dual self-standing stage adjectives
famoso 'famous'	contento 'happy'	viejo 'old'	amable 'kind'	nervioso 'nervous'

Classification of dual adjectives

Labels of *self/dependent* based on Arche 2012- need *estar* to be independent/refer to a circumstance)

Dual self-standing stage adjectives	Dual dependent-stage adjectives of physical description	Dual dependent-stage adjectives of disposition
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Absolute constructions

(7) <i>Nervioso</i> , Pedro derramó el café. Nervous, Pedro spilt the coffee.	(9) * <i>Viejo</i> , Pedro se jubilará. Old, Pedro will retire.	(10) * <i>Amable</i> , Pedro me abrió la puerta. Kind, Pedro opened the door for me.
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Subject predicative complements

(8) Pedro llegó a la oficina <i>nervioso</i> . Pedro arrived at the office nervous.	(11) *Pedro llegó a la oficina <i>viejo</i> . Pedro arrived at the office old.	(11) *Pedro llegó a la oficina <i>amable</i> . Pedro arrived at the office kind.
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Oral production task with only-*ser* adjectives and only-*estar* adjectives

(1) **¿Por qué reconoce la gente a Miguel por la calle?**
Why do people recognise Miguel on the street?

famoso
'famous'

Porque Miguel es famoso.
Because Miguel is_{SER} famous.

(2) **¿Por qué no se cambia de trabajo Fernando?**
Why doesn't Fernando change jobs?

contento
'happy'

Porque Fernando está contento.
Because Fernando is_{ESTAR} happy.

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Oral production task with dual adjectives

Individual property - context

(1) Alejandro's grandfather has appeared in the local newspaper because he has just celebrated his 100th birthday. His family takes pride in the fact that he still has a very sharp mind.

¡Qué **viejo**, tu abuelo!
'old'

What does Alejandro's friend say about his grandfather?

Dice que su abuelo es viejo.
She says that his grandfather is_{SER} old.

Circumstance - context

(2) Arturo bumps into Pedro, an old university classmate. Although the last time they met was 4 years ago, Arturo is surprised by Pedro's physical deterioration.

Later Arturo says:
*Veo a Pedro muy **viejo**.*
'old'

What does Arturo say about Pedro?

Dice que Pedro está viejo.
He says that Arturo is_{ESTAR} old.

Written comprehension with dual adjectives

Individual property context

(1) All his students love Carlos because he treats them with respect and because he thinks of their needs.

	VERY BAD	BAD	NEUTRAL	GOOD	VERY GOOD
1. Carlos es amable. 'kind'	-2	-1	0	+1	+2
2. Carlos está amable. 'kind'	-2	-1	0	+1	+2

Circumstance – context

(2) The security guard where Luis works answers rudely if you ask him something. He has a difficult character but since he was told that if he carried on this way, he would be dismissed, he seems like another person.

	VERY BAD	BAD	NEUTRAL	GOOD	VERY GOOD
1. Diego es amable. 'kind'	-2	-1	0	+1	+2
2. Diego está amable. 'kind'	-2	-1	0	+1	+2

Written comprehension task with only-*ser* adjectives and only-*estar* adjectives

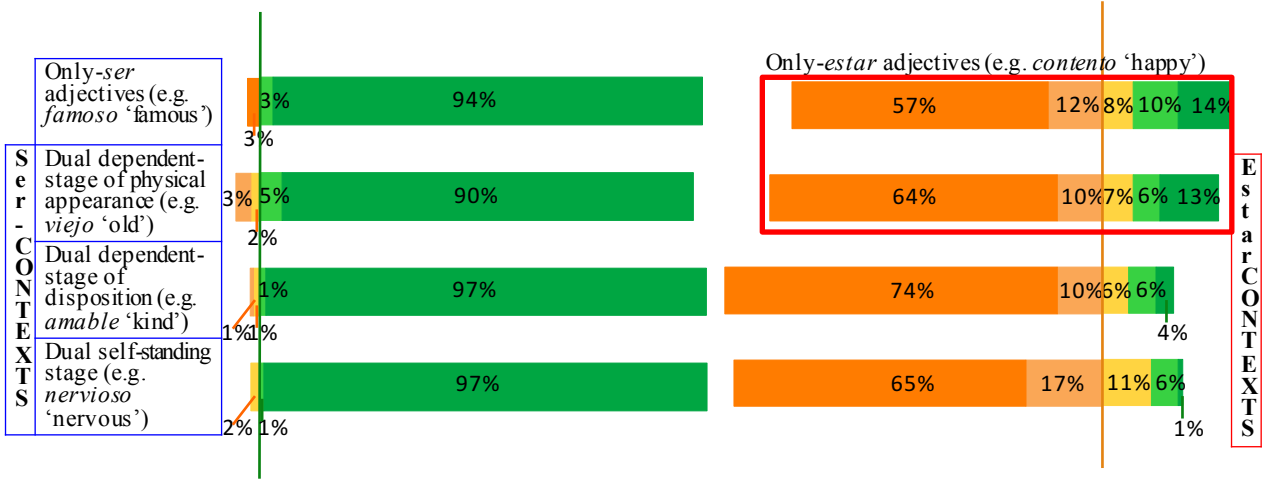
	VERY BAD	BAD	NEUTRAL	GOOD	VERY GOOD
1. Laura es famosa. <i>famous</i>	-2	-1	0	+1	+2
2. David está famoso. <i>famous</i>	-2	-1	0	+1	+2
3. Martín está contento. <i>happy</i>	-2	-1	0	+1	+2
4. Paula es contenta. <i>happy</i>	-2	-1	0	+1	+2

Results

Written production results – Advanced level

Acceptance of *ser*

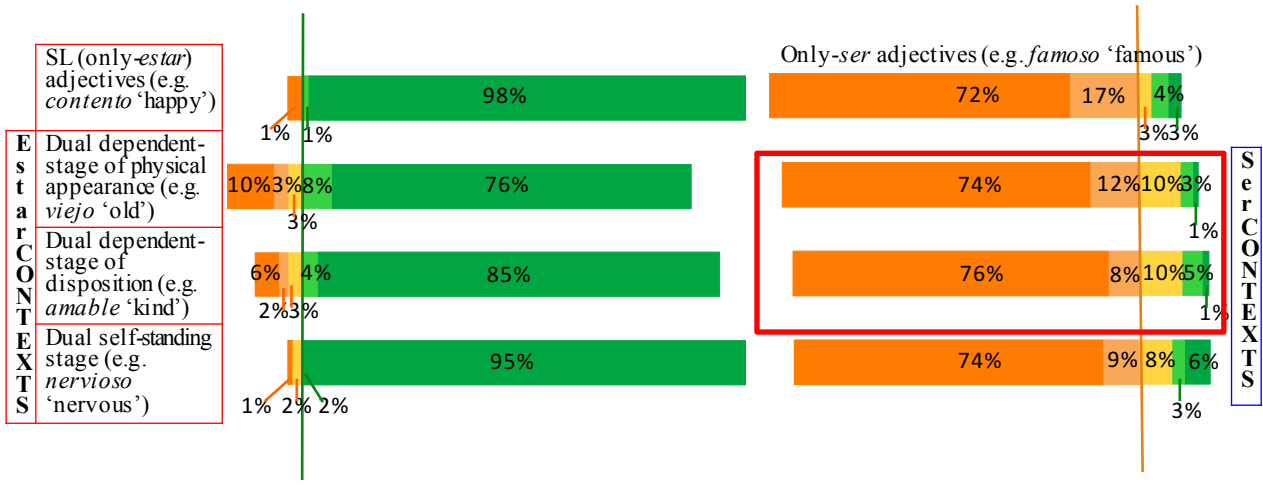
Rejection of *ser*



Written production results – Advanced level

Acceptance of *estar*

Rejection of *estar*



Discussion

Assessing the Syntactic Complexity Hypothesis

This prediction is not borne out.

- Advanced learners were as skilful as natives with the most complex copula (i.e. *estar*) in combination with **only-estar adjectives** (e.g. *contento* 'happy') and were capable of rejecting ungrammatical combinations with only-*ser* adjectives (e.g. *famoso* 'famous')

Assessing the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace 1993, Sorace 2003, Sorace and Seratrice 2009)

This prediction is not borne out.

- Advanced learners were able to distinguish the semantic contrast that copulas give rise to in different discursive contexts with a particular adjectival group (i.e. **dual self-standing adjectives** as *nervioso* 'nervous')

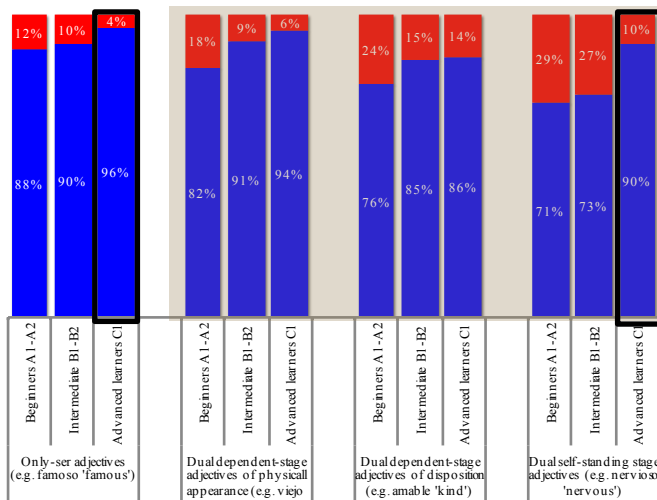
Some conclusions

1) The syntactic properties of *ser* are not fully acquired.

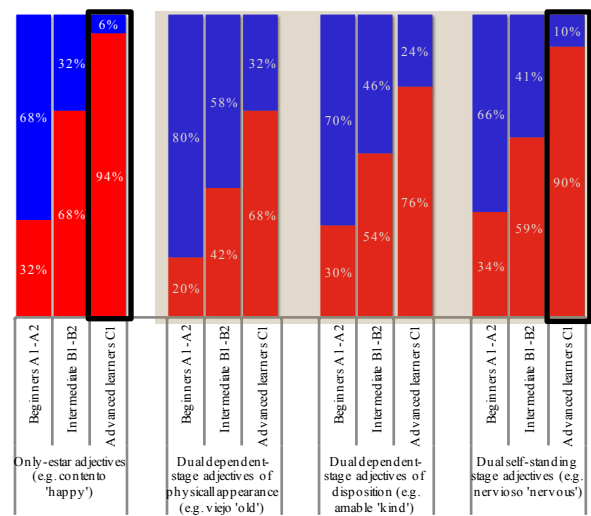
Learners are reluctant to reject *ser* in ungrammatical (i.e. only-*estar*) adjectives such as *contento* ‘happy’) as well as in infelicitous combinations with dual dependent-stage adjectives of physical appearance (e.g. *viejo* ‘old’).

Oral production results

ser



estar



Some conclusions (cont.)

2) The syntactic and semantic properties of the adjectives themselves need to be taken into account.

Learners were more proficient with *estar*, particularly with those adjectives that behave as a stage in a larger array of syntactic constructions such as absolute constructions (12)-(13) and predicative complements of the subject (14)-(15).

Only-*estar* adjectives

Dual self-standing stage adjectives

(12) **Solo**, *Pedro pierde el tiempo.*
'(Being) **alone**, Pedro wastes his time.'

(13) **Nervioso**, *Pedro derramó el café.*
'(Being) **nervous**, Pedro spilt the coffee.'

(14) *Pedro llegó a la oficina solo.*
'Pedro arrived at the office **alone**.'

(15) *Pedro llegó a la oficina nervioso.*
Pedro arrived at the office **nervous**.

Further discussion

- The syntax of the copulas may not be the decisive force of acquisition, but syntax does not have to be ruled out.
- Focus on the contrast of dual cases: true minimal pairs

Minimal pairs -- dual adjectives; behavioral

(16) a. Pedro **es** *nervioso*.

Pedro **be**_{SER-PRESENT- 3SG} nervous

‘Pedro is nervous (type of person)’

b. Pedro **está** *nervioso*

Pedro **be**_{ESTAR-PRESENT- 3SG} nervous

‘Pedro is nervous (today).’

(17) a. Pedro **es** *viejo*.

Pedro **be**_{SER-PRESENT- 3SG} old

‘Pedro is old’

b. Pedro **está** *viejo*

Pedro **be**_{ESTAR-PRESENT- 3SG} old

‘Pedro looks old.’

(18) a. Pedro **es** *amable*.

Pedro **be**_{SER-PRESENT- 3SG} kind

‘Pedro is kind (type of person)’

b. Pedro **está** *amable*

Pedro **be**_{ESTAR-PRESENT- 3SG} kind

‘Pedro is being kind (today).’

Mixed patterning

Table I: Ser

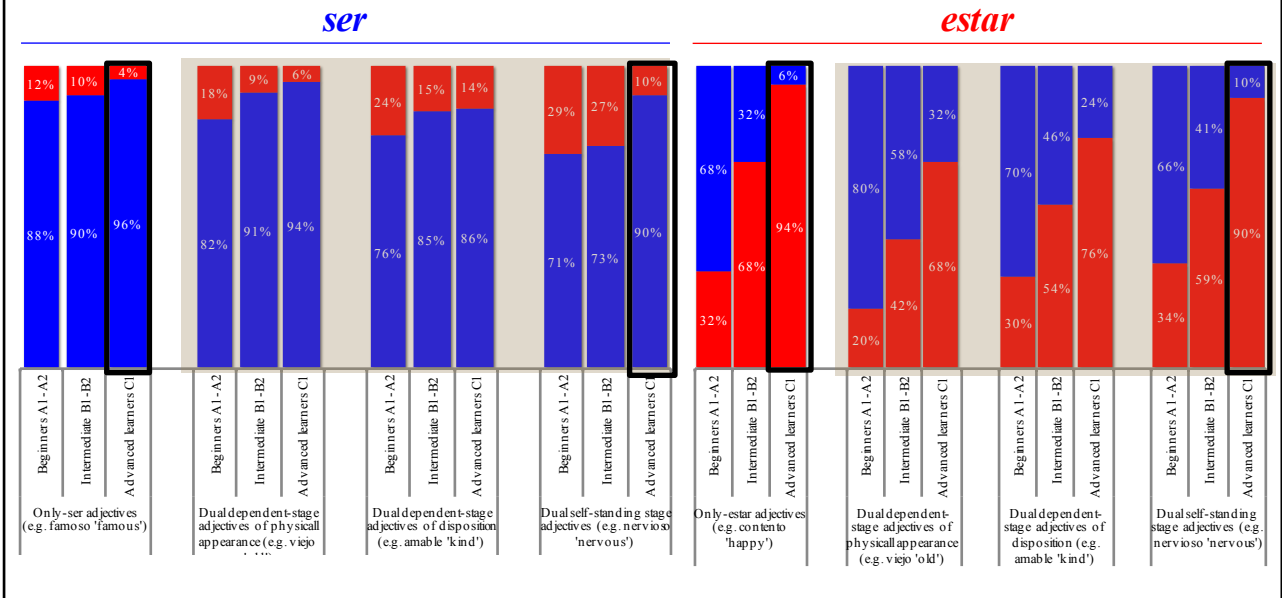
Behavioral adjectives pattern with dual more *estar*-only like adjectives

Amable ‘kind’
&
Nervioso ‘nervous’

Vs.

Famoso ‘famous’
&
Viejo ‘old’

Oral production results



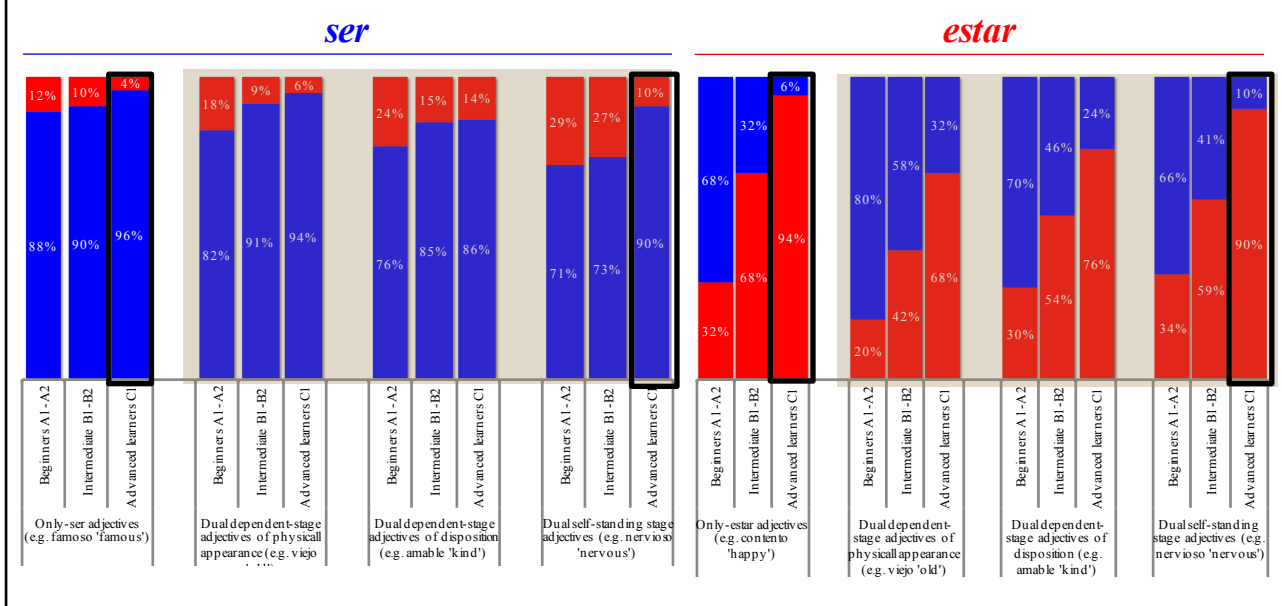
Mixed patterning – Behavioral adjectives

Table II: *Estar*

Behavioral adjectives pattern with dual more *ser*-only-like adjectives



Oral production results



Hypothesis: IL-hood vs SL-ness

- Acquisition patterns can be accounted for by properties of the IL/SL contrast.
- Semantic & syntactic distinction –aspectual kind.
- Learners' pattern: not merely based on the more superficial, typically taught distinction of permanent vs. transitory property.

Quick note; Stage & Individual Level predicates

Carlson (1977:115)

A stage is defined as “a spatially and temporally bounded manifestation of something.”

An individual, in turn, is defined as “that whatever-it-is that ties a series of stages together to make them stages of the same thing.”

IL predicates apply to their subject directly, SL predicates need an *extra semantic operation*.

→ *Extra structure hypothesized for estar*. But is that all?

Hypothesis: IL-hood vs SL-ness

- **Behavioral adjectives give a convoluted pattern**

- Syntactically, behave like *viejo* ‘old’
- Syntactically, they can be proved to be IL.
 - Inability to head absolute clauses (Arche 2012).

(19) *Cruel, Juan mató a su mujer

Cruel, John killed his wife

- Have complicated semantics that make them look like SL.

Behavioral adjectives ---Semantics

(20) Juan es amable

John is kind

‘John is a kind person’

‘John is generally kind’

‘The actions that John generally undertakes are kind’.

- A generalization over the type of actions John is typically involved.

Behavioral adjectives ---Semantics

(20) Juan está amable.

Juan be-estar.3ps.present kind

‘John is being kind at this moment’

‘John has been kind lately’

- ‘The action that John is undertaking is (IL) kind’
- ‘The property is understood to be circumstantial of him’.

Behavioral adjectives ---Semantics

- Allow for the progressive – dynamic (Arche 2006)

(20) Juan está siendo amable.

Juan be-estar.3ps.present being kind

‘John is being kind (at this moment)’

(21) *Juan está siendo alto.

Juan be-estar.3ps.present being tall

‘John is being tall (at this moment)’

Behavioral adjectives ---Semantics

- Allow for imperative– dynamic (Arche 2006)

(20) Sé amable.

Be kind

‘Be kind’

(21) *Sé alto.

Be tall

‘Be tall’

Behavioral adjectives ---Semantics

- Allow for *do*-cleft- dynamic, eventive, agentive (Arche 2006)

(22) Lo que Juan hizo fue ser amable

What John did was be kind

(23) *Lo que Juan hizo fue ser alto.

What John did was be tall.

Behavioral adjectives ---Semantics

- Embody typical properties of canonical eventive and SL- eventualities.

The action argument (Stowell 1991; Arche & Stowell in progress)

- (24) a. Juan es amable/está siendo amable al ayudarme ahora.
 Juan ser-pres.3ps kind/ is being kind in helping me now.
 ‘Juan is kind/is being kind to help me now’

- Juan is understood to be kind because helping is kind.
- The property is also predicated of the action, which can be overt or not.
- The action itself is SL; crucially the adjective is predicated of it in an IL manner.

The action argument (Stowell 1991; Arche & Stowell in progress)

- (24) a. Ayudarme ahora es amable (por parte de Juan).
 Help me now ser-pres.3ps kind (by part of Juan)
 ‘To help me now is kind of Juan’

- b. *Ayudarme ahora está amable (por parte de Juan).
 Help.INF.me now estar-pres. 3ps amable by part of Juan
 ‘To help me now is kind of Juan’

That is

- Behavioral adjectives:
- The event is always considered to be IL (cf. ungrammaticality with *estar*)
- The property can hold of the individual in a SL fashion (Arche & Stowell in progress).
- When the event is overt, despite their apparent transitory semantics, its syntax has been proven to be IL.

IL-hood of behavioral adjs with overt event

Despite their temporary interpretation, they can be proved to be IL. E.g., Kertz (2006):

- | | |
|--|----|
| (21) $\forall/*\exists$ American consumers are smart. | IL |
| (22) $\forall/*\exists$ American consumers are smart to buy foreign goods. | IL |
| (23) \forall/\exists American consumers are eager to buy foreign goods. | SL |

Effect confirmed using a test from Milsark (1977): the individual-level evaluative predicates do not felicitously combine with an existential *there* subject, in contrast with stage-level *eager*.

- | | |
|--|----|
| *There were lawmakers smart. | IL |
| *There were lawmakers smart to endorse the proposal. | IL |
| There were lawmakers eager to endorse the proposal. | SL |

SO: Behavioral adjectives

- Crucially: have mixed properties
- Embody typical SL properties –since they can be understood to apply (of the individual) for the stage during which the action is going on only.
 - May explain: increase of *estar* in *ser*-contexts.
- Embody typical IL properties – they are always predicated in an IL way of the action they refer to; they are unable to head absolute clauses.

Conclusions

- These acquisition data provide further empirical evidence to the idea that evaluatives *are* IL (firstly argued in Arche 2006 and Kertz 2006, against all others).
- These acquisition data provide further empirical evidence to the idea that not all dual adjectives have all the inner IL/SL-like properties (Marin 2010).
- Acquisition of copulas is driven by the acquisition of pure and abstract IL-ness vs SL-ness even within instructed settings.
 - Properties not taught are shown to guide the acquisition
 - SLA guided by abstract features, not mere “collocations”.

Next steps

To study the acquisition of behavioral adjectives (*evaluative dispositional adjectives*, apud Arche & Stowell in prep.) in more detail:

- Overt and covert action argument
 - John was nice (*to drive me home*).
- Overt and covert affected goal argument
 - John was nice *to me*.

Thank you

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