**Ser and estar: back to aspect**

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**Goals:** This paper proposes an aspect-based account for the *ser/estar* distinction in Spanish with adjectives. It is argued that *ser*-adjectives are simple homogeneous states, whereas *estar*-predicates involve an extra aspectual layer that introduces a referential time frame (understood as a stage) within that state. We also review recent gradability-based analyses that posit the gradable structure of the adjective as the source of the copular distinction, and we provide novel data that can only be accommodated under an aspectual approach, but not under a gradability-based one.

**Ser/estar:** Spanish has two copular verbs, *ser* ‘to be’ and *estar* ‘to be’. Some adjectives can only appear with *ser* (cf. (1a)), others only with *estar* (cf. (1b)), and yet others may appear with both ((1c)).

(1) a. Pedro {es/ *está} esquimal.  
   Pedro isSER isESTAR Eskimo  
   b. El restaurante {es / está} lleno.  
   the restaurant isSER isESTAR full  
   c. Juan {es / está} alto/ delgado/ alegre…  
   Juan isSER isESTAR tall thin happy

Aspectual approaches have proposed that the alternation between *ser* and *estar* has to do with the Individual-Level (I-L) vs. Stage-Level (S-L) distinction originally proposed by Carlson (cf. Fernández-Leborans 1999; Arche 2006, a.o.). Adjectives that appear with *ser* are I-L as they predicate of the individual (they classify the individual), whereas those that take *estar* are S-L as they predicate of a spatio-temporal slice of the individual (i.e. they talk about an episode, permanent or not, in an individual’s life).

Gradability-based analyses, on the other hand, propose that the *ser/estar* alternation in Spanish is a reflex of the relative vs. absolute distinction for gradable adjectives (Gumiel et al. 2015, henceforth GMP). Relative and non-gradable adjectives introduce a between-individuals comparison class and select *ser*, whereas absolute adjectives introduce a within-individuals comparison class and select *estar* (cf. Toledo & Sassoon 2011), as illustrated in (2). With an overt *for*-phrase indicating a between-individuals standard of comparison (basketball players, in this case), *ser* is selected, whereas (2b), which has a within-individuals standard of comparison (in different stages of its existence), *estar* is selected. With respect to non-gradable, classificatory adjectives, GMP argue that they only appear with *ser* (cf. (3)). Perfective/participial adjectives only take *estar* (cf. (4)).

(2) a. {Soy / #estoy} bajo para ser jugador de baloncesto.  
   amSER amESTAR short for be player of basketball  
   ‘I am short for being a basketball-player.’  
   b. {#Soy / estoy} delgada para ser yo.  
   amSER amESTAR thin for be I  
   ‘I am/ look thin for being me.’  
   (From GMP: 980)

(3) Esta revista {es / *está} semanal.  
   this magazine isSER isESTAR weekly  
(4) La puerta {es / está} cerrada.  
   the door isSER isESTAR closed

**Novel data:** The gradability-based account for *ser/estar* is appealing since it relies on independently well-studied properties of the adjective, and we do agree with GMP’s generalization that *ser* does not have a within-individual comparison class. Upon closer inspection, however, the analysis does not seem tenable. First, it is not true that *estar* bars between-individual comparison readings (cf. (5)):

(5) a. El niño está muy moreno para ser un niño albino.  
   the kid isESTAR very tanned for being a kid albino  
   b. El restaurante está muy vacío para ser un restaurante de carretera.  
   the restaurant is very empty for being a restaurant of road (i.e. a roadside restaurant)

Furthermore, non-gradable classificatory adjectives may appear with *estar*, contra GMP (cf. (6)).

(6) El semáforo {es / está} rojo (under the relevant “red light” reading)  
   the traffic-light isSER isESTAR red
Additional evidence that the comparison class of the adjective is not behind the *ser/estar* distinction comes from gradable color adjectives. These don’t always have comparison classes eg. *Blue books*, which do not form a kind (unlike, say, *red grapefruits*) (Graff 2000). As we can see in (6), both *ser* and *estar* can be selected despite the lack of a comparison class (as diagnosed by the fact that you cannot introduce it overtly via a *for*-PP.

(7) a. Este libro es muy azul (#para ser un libro) this book is\textsubscript{ser} very blue for being a book
   b. El cielo está muy gris (#para ser el cielo) the sky is\textsubscript{estar} very gray for being the sky

To sum up, both *ser* and *estar* can have a between-individuals comparison class, but only *estar* can have a within-individuals comparison class. Both copulas can also take non-gradable adjectives and gradable adjectives that lack a comparison class.

**The analysis:** We propose to derive *estar*-predicates morphosyntactically from *ser*-predicates, similar to Gallego & Uriagereka (2011) and Zagona (2010). The adjectival root starts out in aP. The subject is merged in (Spec, PredP), right above the aP. The adjective remains non-gradable up until this point. For the DegP, we follow the standard semantic analysis in Kennedy (1997, Heim 2000), where *G* is the gradable adjective meaning, *d* is the standard value, and *R* is the relation introduced by the degree morpheme. The semantics of DegP are illustrated in (8).

\[
[DegP] = \lambda G, \lambda d, \lambda x. [R (G(x))(d)]
\]

We depart from GMP in that the comparison class is an argument of DegP. DegP merely creates a gradable adjective, which may or may not have a comparison class (cf. (7)). Overt comparison classes are adjuncts, and whether they are between or within-individuals will be an epiphenomenon of the aspectual properties of the copula, and of how compatible the lexical semantics of the adjectival root is with that comparison class.

For the temporal characterization of the *ser/estar* distinction, we adopt the framework developed in Demirdache & Uribe-Etxebarría (2000 et seq) that views *T*\textsuperscript{o} and *Asp*\textsuperscript{o} as predicates that order syntactically projected arguments that denote time intervals (ZeitPs), much like DPs denote individuals. Following these authors, we argue that DegP/AP have a ZeitP argument in their syntax (a State-Time argument ST-T), given that states are anchored in time. *Estar*-adjectives, however, are selected for by an aspectual PP that introduces an extra Zeit-P (a Situation-Time argument SIT-T). Its head P has a WITHIN meaning, i.e. it locates the SIT-T interval as being part of the super-interval denoted by the ST-T. This ST-T is later fed to *T*\textsuperscript{o} and *Asp*\textsuperscript{o}, and this is what it means to be predicating of a stage in an individual’s existence that is characterized by having a particular property. On the other hand, *ser*-adjectives only have a ST-T, which denotes the whole interval in which the individual manifests a property. The different syntax is shown in (9).

\[
\text{a. } \text{estar: } [.../Asp]/v [[pp SIT-T [\text{p WITHIN } [DegP/AP ST-T ]]]] \quad \text{b. } \text{ser: } [.../Asp]/v [[DegP/AP ST-T ]]
\]

Our aspect-based analysis, combined with the standard account of the syntax and the semantics of (un-)gradable adjectives, correctly predicts the possibility of having between-individuals readings with *estar*, as in (5). It also predicts that it is not necessary for an adjective to be gradable (cf. (6)), or to have a comparison class (cf. (7)), for it to appear with *estar*. We conclude that the gradability properties of the adjective are largely irrelevant for *ser/estar* selection: the crucial factor is aspect.