

***Ser y estar* as a semantic problem in Spanish. Polysemy and polyfunctionality of *ser y estar* in constructions with adjectives and participles**

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Abstract: The verbal constructions of *ser y estar* with adjectives in current Spanish are characterized by their complexity and unpredictability. For this reason, they have been the subject of multiple studies that have tried to discover the linguistic keys of the functioning of both verbs. Among the many questions raised by the use and function of *ser y estar* (both as autosemantic verbs and copulative nexus), the problem of the semantics of these verbs still stand out.

This paper presents a study of *ser* and *estar* verbs in current Spanish with the aim of re-examining the nature of both verbs. We will check if both verbs are just copulative nexus without any semantic value or, on the contrary, they are predicative verbs that present only existential and narrative values.

This work defends the idea that both *ser* and *estar* are polyfunctional and polysemic verbs. In the case of *estar*, its clear polysemy is the key to understanding its uses as a predicative verb and also as a copulative nexus. In the case of *ser*, there are reasons to argue for and against polysemy in its uses as a nexual verb.

Keywords: *ser, estar*, Spanish grammar, polysemy, polyfunctionality.

1. Introduction

The problem that poses the meaning and use of Spanish verbs *ser y estar* is central to Spanish grammar, being one of the most relevant grammatical issues, if not the most. The case of *ser y estar* has given rise to numerous studies, papers and discussions, and will undoubtedly continue to be the subject of research and debate in the future. Today there is still no consensus on the conundrum of both verbs, which implies that there are still aspects of the problem that need to be elucidated.

Quantitatively speaking, we are also faced with a substantial problem, since it affects a significant percentage of sentences in Spanish. Given the irregularity and unpredictability of the uses of both *ser* and *estar*, these verbs constitute, together with the subjunctive mood, some prepositions, the form *se* and others, one of the most important problems that teachers

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and students face in the teaching and learning of Spanish as a Foreign Language. This dichotomy (*ser/estar*) is also part of other three pairs (Adjective Position, Adjectival Clauses and Preterite/Imperfect) that lead to confusion to non-native speakers (González, 2021).

Linguistically speaking, it is also a significant and extraordinarily decisive case because its study allows us to delve into the nature of language while, at the same time, it helps to better understand the complex design of languages, as well as the interaction of lexical, syntactic and pragmatic components in the production of language speech.

Besides, a comprehensive study of *ser y estar* as the one we present here allows us to understand the complex and subtle problems of the semantics of function words of a language. The existence of these functional words entails questions of difficult articulation such as grammaticalization, polyfunctionality and polysemy.

2. Theoretical framework: on the existence or not of semantic content in copulative verbs

The difficult rationality of the uses of *ser y estar* has been studied in depth since the beginning of the 20th century¹ by Spanish authors such as Andrade (1919), Gili Gaya (1943), Crespo (1946,1949), Monge (1959), Navas Ruiz (1963, 1977, 1984), Bello (1970), Roldán (1970, 1974), Vañó-Cerdá (1982), Lema (1995), Camacho (2012), Marín (2016), among others, and has also aroused the interest of foreign authors such as Morley (1925), Cirot (1930), Bolinger (1944, 1947, 1973), Bull (1942, 1965), Falk (1979, 1987), DeMello (1979), VanPatten (1987, 2010), Schmitt (1992), Maienborn, 2005, Roby (2009) who have studied it from the perspective of Spanish as a Foreign Language, focusing therefore on the problems that this dichotomy poses in the use of the language, especially for those speakers in whose mother tongue there is only one copulative verb. It is in this field of interlinguistic comparison where the investigation of the problem of the use of *ser y estar* has been most fruitful. Finally, it should be noted that in recent decades, publications and studies on these verbs have increased exponentially.

The discussion about the semantics of the verbs *ser* and *estar* is still today an open question. In general, the status of autosemantic verb is

¹ The problem posed by *ser* and *estar* appears already in some of the first grammars of the Spanish language. See, for example, Caesare Ovdino's *Grammatica hispanica* (1608).

granted to *estar* although this status is denied to the verb *ser*. The verb *ser* suffers in the European tradition from a logicist approach that goes back to the Greek philosophers. It was Aristotle who established the foundations of this approach that would highlight the function of the verb *ser* as a logical operator of judgment. As a mere operator, the verb *ser* has no semantic load of its own, that is, it is a semantically empty verb, a bare carrier of the time, person, mode and number categories. Thus, in the opinion of Lyons (1968: 322):

[...] the principal function of the copulative ‘verb to be’ in Russian, Greek and Latin is to serve as the locus in surface structure for the marking of tense, mood and aspect. (‘Locus’ is not a standard technical term. It is introduced to refer to the surface-structure element which ‘carries’ the overt marking of some syntactic distinction). In other words, ‘to be’ is not itself a constituent of deep structure, but a semantically-empty ‘dummy verb’ generated by the grammatical rules of Russian, Greek and Latin for the specification of certain distinctions (usually ‘carried’ by the verb) when there is no other verbal element to carry these distinctions.

According to Bach (1967: 477), in English, the copulative verb *to be* shows an absence of semantic content and offers the following typology that summarizes the fundamental uses of this verb:

- (1) McX is a cat (class-membership)
- (2) John is old (property-assignment)
- (3) Armadillos are mammals (class-inclusion)
- (4) John is the armadillo... (identity)
- (5) McX is in the flowerbed (location in space)
- (6) The lecture is at four (location in time)
- (7) Bachelors are unmarried adult males (definition)

In Bach's opinion, the various meanings shown in parentheses: *class-membership*, *property-assignment*, *class-inclusion*, *identity*, *location in space*, *location in time* and *definition*, depend on whether the elements are defined or undefined, generic, locative or predicative. Copula, Bach claims, does not contribute to the semantic relationship between predicate and subject in sentences in which the copulative verb *to be* appears.

A different view on copulative verbs, especially on the verb *to be* in English, appears in Crystal (2017) who lists up to 26 different values or uses of such verb²:

1. Existential (*To be or not to be*)
2. Obituarial (*Being, as was*)
3. temporal (*Time being*)
4. Identifying (*Business is business*)
5. Obligational (*I am to resign*)
6. Visitationary (*Has the doctor been?*)
7. circumstantial (*How are you?*)
8. Sexual (*I've been with someone*)
9. Numerical (*Two and two is four*)
10. Progressive (*I might be being obsessive, but . . .*)

Actually, the types that Crystal presents are neither comprehensive nor homogeneous from a functional and semantic point of view. Many of them respond only to pragmatic uses. Thus, taking into account studies such as that of Crystal and others on the subject, we can venture that the comprehensive study of the semantics of copulative verbs is still to be done.

3. Semantics and function of copulative verbs in Spanish. Polysemy and multifunctionality of *ser* and *estar*

Basically, the verbs *ser* and *estar* correspond, from the point of view of their function, to three types of constructions:

- 1) CONSTRUCTIONS IN WHICH THEY HAVE PREDICATIVE VALUE
- 2) CONSTRUCTIONS IN WHICH THEY HAVE AN AUXILIARY FUNCTION³

²The rest of the values included by Crystal are: 11. PERFECTIVE BE (*My kids are all grown up*); 12. NOMINAL BE (*Wannabes and has-beens*); 13. SIGNIFYING BE (*That is to say*); 14. REPETITIVE BE (*You're cheeky, you are*); 15. EVENTIVE BE (*Been and done it*); 16. LAVATORIAL BE (*Have you been?*); 17. FACTUAL BE (*So be it*); 18. DECLARATIVE BE (*I live in Wales, innit?*); 19. QUOTATIVE BE (*So I was, like, 'wow'*); 20. BEFALLING BE (*Woe is me*); 21. MEMBERSHIP BE (*All shall be well*); 22. CHRONOLOGICAL BE (*How old are you?*); 23. MUSICAL BE (*Is you is or is you ain't?*); 24. LUDIC BE (*Oh no he isn't*); 25. MISSING BE (*Lane closed ahead*); 26. SUMMARIZING BE (*It's just a book, is all*).

3) CONSTRUCTIONS IN WHICH THEY HAVE A NEXUAL FUNCTION (NEXO-ATTRIBUTIVE)

The function of auxiliary verb, like the function of nexus or copulative verb, apparently develops in all languages from full verbs through a process of grammaticalization and desemantization. Any given verb can acquire an auxiliary or nexual verb status without completely losing its auto-semantic values, or it can even develop auto-semantic values from its function as a nexual verb.

The main uses and functions of the verbs *ser* and *estar* can be outlined as follows:

0) *Ser y estar* as autosemantic verbs

1) Passive with *ser*: *La ciudad es atacada; La ciudad fue destruida.*

2) Passive resulting with *estar*: *La ciudad está destruida.*

3) Progressive times: *La ciudad está ardiendo.*

4) Present continuous passive: *Los delincuentes son/están vigilados por la policía.*

5) Identification nexus: *El asesino es el secretario.*

6) Classification nexus: *Andrés es médico; Luis es un trabajador.*

7) Nexus of defining attribution: *María es inteligente.*

8) Nexus of statutory attributions: *María está enfadada.*

When approaching the study of these verbs from a semantic point of view, in the case of *estar*, there are compelling reasons for not differentiating between the strictly nexual values from the autosemantic values. In fact, the question is posed in terms of a continuum in which it is difficult to specify when, how and to what degree the verb *estar* exceeds its functional value as a nexus and enters the field of verbal predication as a

3 As an action auxiliary verb, *estar* expresses the RESULT of an action as in *El cuerpo está cubierto de tierra* or *Las esculturas están destruidas*. *Ser* as passive auxiliary has no limitations in its application other than the requirement that the base verb be transitive (so that it can accept a passive transformation). On the contrary, the verb *estar* as an auxiliary passive finds many more restrictions in its use. This is because *estar* indicates that a transformation has taken place, that is, that a reality has undergone a change or is the result of a process. Whether or not a verb can undergo a transformative process depends on its meaning. There are verbs whose participle designates tangible or operative realities from the practical point of view, while other verbs do not leave any result or trace after their action has concluded. Thus, from the action *Ella mira el globo* it does not follow, due to her lack of communicational interest, that **El globo está mirado*. On the contrary, from *Ella pincha el globo*, a tangible result is deduced such as that *El globo está pinchado*.

clearly autosemantic verb. In the uses of *estar*, as explained later in length, there is a parallelism between the autosemantic values and the values as nexus of predicative attribution as shown in Table 1:

| | Autosemantic values | Nexus values |
|-------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Location | Estoy en el centro de la plaza. | La tienda está céntrica. |
| Health | Espero que estés bien. | Está muy mejorado. |
| Position | No tienes que estar de pie. | El cuadro está ladeado. |
| Prices | ¿Cómo está hoy el pescado? | El pescado está carísimo. |
| Performance | ¿Cómo estuvo la obra? | Los actores estuvieron magníficos. |

Table 1. Autosemantic and nexus values of *estar* in Spanish

Having seen the examples, we can conclude that there is a relationship of continuity between the autosemantic values of *estar* and its values as a nexus and how, therefore, the speaker does not see it as something different but as two formal variants of the same notion.

3.1. The elusive semantics of *ser*. Semantic duality of open signs

Some signs of language are characterized by their wide use and imprecise semantics. In Spanish, we can use as an example the verb *ser* and the preposition *de*. For many linguists, both are mere operators, that is, they are both functional words whose mission is syntactic and not semantic. In reality, both fulfill general syntactic functions (for example, *ser* is a simple functor⁴ in the passive with *ser* and the preposition *de* is a translator⁵ from noun to adjective, where *impuesto del municipio* is equivalent to *impuesto municipal*). In human language these signs, however, are open signs in the sense that they can establish formal relationships between two elements while the semantic relationship that is established between the two is not always clearly defined. If we look at the following sentences:

- (1). Los marineros son las alas del amor⁶.
- (2). El Papa de Hitler⁷.

⁴Term used to designate any logical or connective operator (such as conjunction or disjunction). Functors do not have any semantic content and are used to establish relationships between contents or to alter the functions of the elements of a class.

⁵A translator is a functional word capable of changing the type of word or part of a sentence.

⁶Luis Cernuda. *Los placeres prohibidos* (1931).

we cannot deny that in them a relationship is established, but in both cases the relationship is not sufficiently specified. Is there an identity in (1) and a property in (2)? Is there subordination or just temporal coincidence? What would such an identity or property, subordination, etc., consist of? In fact, the authors of these statements have deliberately used one of the devices that human language allows us to use and that consists of putting two elements or ideas in relation, partially leaving the imagination about what type of relation exists between them. Thus we verify that connecting two realities from a linguistic point of view does not offer any certainty that the reader or listener will interpret that relationship or link in a clearly defined and identical way for all receivers. Consequently, we are faced with open signs in the sense that they are blurred and lend themselves to different interpretations, that is, their value is, on the one hand, determined and codified, but, on the other, it can be new and unpredictable. Thus, both the verb *ser* and the preposition *de* have specific uses with clearly delimited values and many other possible open uses. This duality is one of their most notable characteristics and gives them an extraordinary potential for certain types of language, such as poetic creation. The linguist or grammarian, however, stands in a more uncomfortable position. On the one hand, he cannot categorically affirm that they are totally empty signs from a semantic point of view; on the other, the multiplicity of relationships that can be established through these two signs makes the task of specifying their contribution and semantic value difficult, and, finally, the appearance of these signs in new contexts inevitably causes semantic impregnation and the creation of new patterns or models of establishing relationships between entities.

4. Predicative and Idiomatic Values of *Ser y Estar*

Below we offer a summarized overview of those semantic values that verbs *ser* and *estar* can have as autosemantic verbs and as attributive nexus.

4.1. Predicative values of *ser* (autosemantic)

Ser preserves a series of autosemantic values that evidence its incomplete grammaticalization, that is to say, the combination of grammatical uses

⁷ John Cornwell's book (1999) with the original title *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*.

with autosemantic uses. *Ser* maintains its primitive value of *existir* in a series of sentences, although most of the phrases in which it preserves this value are nowadays associated with a literary or religious context, i.e., they have the connotation of an idiomatic turn in disuse. Thus, for example, *Éra(se) una vez un rey*, which is usually the initial formula of children's stories or phrases such as *Que su bendición sea sobre todos los de esta casa*. Lidia Contreras (1966: 303) calls the *se* of *érase una vez* as *narrative se*, and differentiates it from *era* in that this use confer an archaic flavor:

Ej. *Érase una vez un rey que tenía...* Lo llamaremos, por el momento, se narrativo, y lo consideraremos también estilístico, en el sentido que refleja un modo peculiar de decir, y también diacrítico, pues se diferencia de 'era', con el cual alterna, en que le imprime al estilo un sabor arcaizante.

Currently, in Spanish, both *Era una vez* and *Érase una vez* bear an archaic connotation since both are used only in similar stories and narratives. Nevertheless, the *Había una vez* formula is less archaic. Likewise, other phrases with *ser* are associated with religious language such as *Yo soy el que soy*⁸. In other cases, the connotation of archaic and outdated language is more evident, since today we pray saying *El señor es contigo* but we say, for example, to our friends *En un momento estaré con vosotros*.

Additionally, when studying *ser* and *estar*, one must always keep in mind that there is a semantic continuity between predicative, auxiliary and nexual values.

The predicative values of *ser* can be summarized by grouping them into the following sets:

1. EXISTENTIAL *SER*. It is equivalent to *existir, suceder, ocurrir, pasar, tener lugar*: *Esto no tiene razón de ser* (existir); *Fue en un abrir y cerrar de ojos* (occurrió); *Lo que tenga que ser, será* (suceder); *Sea lo que sea, tú no te apartes de mi lado* (pase lo que pase); *La boda será el mes que viene* (in this sentence *ser* shows a temporal space value that will be studied later when analyzing these values of *ser* and *estar*).

2. BEHAVIORAL *SER*. It is equivalent to *comportarse, actuar, poseer ciertas características personales, tener una determinada personalidad*:

⁸ The formula *Yo soy el que soy* has been widely studied in its philosophical and literary implications by Spitzer (1947).

¿Qué quieres que haga si yo *soy* así?; Mira, yo *soy* como *soy*, el que quiera que me acepte, y el que no, ya sabe. . .; ¡Hombre, por Dios, no *seas* así, deja que la niña se vaya a jugar con sus amigas!

From these examples it is easy to deduce that between the *ser* of *Yo soy orgulloso y testarudo* and that of *Yo soy así* there is not a great semantic distance. However, when working with different categories (adjectives and adverbs) and due to the fact that in some cases *ser* can be replaced by another predicative verb (*Yo me comporto así*) while in others not (**Yo me comporto orgulloso*), it makes us classify them as different uses. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that verbs with the meaning of *ocurrir*, *existir*, *suced* are, in general, those that give rise to copulative verbs by means of a desemantization that ends up turning them into simple nexus.

3. IMPLICATIVE *SER*. It is equivalent to notions such as *consistir*, *conllevar*, *constituir*, *implicar*, *considerarse*, etc.: *Caridad es amor a los demás, no beneficencia* (implies); *El Sahara es carencia de agua y de comida* (implies); *Ese será tu castigo, esa, tu gloria* (to constitute, to carry); *El núcleo de toda teoría física es un sistema de ecuaciones de movimiento o de ecuaciones de campo* (consist); *Eso tiene ser mujer* (entails, implies); *Un ataque en toda regla contra ese objetivo sería una decisión equivocada* (it would be considered, it would be presupposed, it would be necessary).

4. APPEARANCE *SER*. It is equivalent to *parecer*, *resultar*: *De noche todos los gatos son pardos* (look like); *Este libro es un auténtico plomo* (seems).

5. WILDCARD *SER*. There are many other uses of *ser* in which this verb replaces other more specific ones: *¿Sabe por qué un Volkswagen llegó el segundo? Porque otro Volkswagen fue primero* (arrived); *El libro y el cuaderno son cincuenta euros* (cost).

6. *SER* together with other grammatical elements forms phrases with an special idiomatic value. With the so-called ethical dative, *ser* takes the value of OPINION / CONCEPT about someone or something, equivalent to the meaning of the verb *resultar*, *caer*, etc.: *Me es indiferente si te gusta o no*; *Se ve que le eres antipático*; *Te es simpática Encarnita, ¿verdad?*

4.2. Predicative values of *estar*

Estar conserves in Spanish, as previously noted, semantic values that allow it to appear with full meaning in certain constructions. One of these values is LOCATIVE, which correspond to the oldest of the values that this verb had in Latin and which is equivalent to *hallarse, encontrarse, residir, vivir, situarse*, etc., as can be seen in the example *Napoleón estuvo (vivió) desterrado los últimos años de su vida en Santa Elena*.

The main set of predicative values of *estar* could be roughly grouped as follows:

A. LOCAL AND EXISTENTIAL VALUES

1. PERMANENCE (same as *permanecer, quedarse*): *Estarás en casa hasta que yo lo ordene (te quedarás en casa)*; Solo puedo *estar* un rato contigo, porque a las cinco tengo que *estar* en clase; No *estaremos* en París más que una media hora, el tiempo necesario para cambiar el avión.

2. RESIDENCE (*vivir, residir* en un determinado sitio): *Estamos* en Barcelona desde el año pasado; En el verano *estaremos* en el chalet de la playa, y luego, a partir de septiembre, *estaremos* en el piso de Madrid.

3. POSITION AND LOCATION. Position is, by nature, the most unstable and transitory characteristic of objects, for this reason, and because this is the primitive meaning of *estar*, inherited from Latin, it is the one with the most general use. This is the case with adjectives such as *plano, vertical, horizontal, tumbado, levantado, alzado, echado, inclinado*, etc. There are also adjectives that indicate the location of an object in relation to the location of the subject or another object. Thus, *equidistante, lejano, cercano, céntrico, próximo, alejado, colgado, distanciado, salido, alto, bajo*, etc.: El barco *está fondeado* en el puerto; Las sillas *están tiradas* en el suelo; El coche *está atascado* en el barro; El perro *está echado* sobre la alfombra; No tienes por qué *estar* de pie, siéntate si quieres; Asunción *estaba* de rodillas ante la imagen del santo; El lugar *está* (o es) *muy retirado*, pero vale la pena visitarlo.

4. EXISTENCE (this value sometimes gets mixed with the idea of situation): La última vez que vine a veros no *estaba* esa casa que os quita todo el sol (No existía esa casa); Aquí *están* los tres mil euros que te

debía; Bueno, ya *estamos* todos, ya puede comenzar la reunión (haber llegado); Ni *están* todos los que son, ni son todos los que *están*.

B. CONDUCT AND MENTAL STATUS OF PEOPLE

1. Social treatment and behavior: *Estar* with certain adjectives has the same value as *comportarse, mostrarse*: Miguel *ha estado encantador* conmigo; *Estuvo frío y distante* con todos los invitados; *Estás* tú muy *charlatán*; Los niños *están insoportables*; *Han estado demasiado amables* con nosotros.

2. Social performance: The public intervention of a person, whether in a theatrical performance, in a public talk or in a political conference, is valued with certain adjectives such as: *fatal, genial, espléndido, magnífico, brillantísimo, excepcional, lamentable, desdichado, colosal, correcto, espectacular, fabuloso, horroroso, infame, maravilloso, soberbio*, etc.: La actriz que interpretó a Ofelia *estuvo sensacional*; Ayer, en tu intervención, *estuviste incoherente*, se notó que no te habías preparado bien el discurso; En la clase *has estado* muy monótono, tienes que aprender a darle más vivacidad a la exposición.

3. Ideological pose: The construction with *estar* of certain classification adjectives, which are normally constructed with *ser*, often carries a tinge of surprise, irony, or contempt. This group of adjectives would include, among others, *socialista, anarquista, puritano, carca (reaccionario), progre (progresista), fascista, republicano, demócrata, religioso, ateo, teórico*, etc.: Mi suegro ha sido siempre un *carca*, pero últimamente *está* muy *demócrata*; Ahora que parece que van a cambiar las cosas en el país, todo el mundo *está* muy *comunista*.

4. Mood state: Certain adjectives constructed with *estar* express a temporary emotional situation, while when constructed with *ser* they express a type of character: *melancólico, triste, alegre, apático, lánguido, romántico, sentimental, pensativo, taciturno, huraño*, etc.: ¿Qué te pasa que *estás* tan *meditabundo*?

Another group of adjectives are only constructed with *estar* because they can only express a temporary state of mind: *malhumorado, disgustado, descorazonado, desilusionado, maravillado, asombrado, deprimido, furioso, rabioso, cabreado, hundido, alarmado, ofendido, absorto*,

enfadado, desconcertado, preocupado: Está nervioso porque se va a casar dentro de una hora; Emilia *está triste* porque no puede ver a su novio; El Sr. Aparicio *está desecho* (muy deprimido), su hija se ha matado en un accidente; Los ánimos *estaban* muy *exaltados* y preferí callarme.

C. PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PROVISIONAL STATUS OF PEOPLE

1. Health and illness. The adverbs *bien* and *mal* and adjectives such as *bueno, malo, excelente, fatal, magnífico, católico* (idiomatic value), *sano, asqueroso*, etc., when constructed with *estar*, can refer to the health of a person: Aún *no estoy* completamente repuesto del accidente de coche; En invierno *estoy fatal* del reuma; La señorita Emilia *está indispuesta* y no podrá venir a trabajar; Últimamente *no estoy* muy *católico* que digamos (sano); Gracias a Dios *estoy sano y salvo*; No quiero salir de casa porque *estoy* un poco *pachucho* (ligeramente enfermo).

2. Physical appearance and external appearance: Adjectives related to external appearance, size, weight, complexion, skin tone, etc., can be constructed with *estar* when indicating a transitory state, or an unalterable and definitive state, provided that this is the product of an evolution or development verified by the speaker. Included here are adjectives such as *gordo, flaco, delgado, atlético, cadavérico, escuálido, pálido, famélico, fofo, tostado, bronceado, demacrado, alto, hermoso, limpio, fuerte, macizo, afeitado, moreno, hinchado, sudoroso: Estás más gordo* desde la última vez que te vi (estado transitorio); ¡Qué *cambiado estás*, casi no te reconozco! (estado definitivo); Necesitas tomar el sol, *estás blancucho* (estado transitorio); Qué *pelado estás*, por poco el barbero te deja sin un pelo.

3. Physical defects: The adjectives that designate physical defects of a congenital nature such as *chato, narigudo, cegato, daltónico, patizambo*, etc., are only constructed with *ser*. However, most adjectives of this class can be constructed indistinctly with *ser* or *estar* since they are considered the result of an accident and not necessarily congenital. The fact that these adjectives are normally constructed with *ser* is due to the fact that such defects usually have a definitive character, and also because they can function as nouns (*un ciego, un cojo*, etc.). In fact, they constitute a special ground of adjectives, along with other adjectives of marital status, etc., that stands inbetween the areas of use of *ser* and those of *estar*. In

Spanish this duality is solved by means of an indiscriminate double construction. Therefore, it is said *El abuelo es o está sordo*, although for other meanings and uses it is preferred *ser* or *estar*: *El pobre es sordo de nacimiento; Estás sordo, es que no oyes que te estoy llamando*. Adjectives such as *manco, cojo, calvo, bizco, tuerto, ciego, sordo, paralítico* belong to this group: *Ese pobre señor vende lotería porque está (o es) ciego; Este niño está canijo (débil, y poco crecido), deberías de alimentarlo mejor; Como está (o es) cojo tiene que usar muletas: El pobre anciano está impedido*.

4. Beauty, clothing and makeup. The external appearance of a person can be due both to circumstantial and random causes such as dress, makeup, hairstyle, etc., as well as to the nature of the person. For this reason, adjectives such as *guapa, hermosa, linda, maravillosa, atractiva, preciosa, fea, horrible*, and other evaluative adjectives such as *imponente, despampanante, estrafalario, impecable*, etc., are necessarily constructed with *estar* when they are the result of a contingent external cause (a hat, a suit, etc.) or, when the statement specify a temporal reference that circumscribes and limits that state of beauty, as in the phrases *Juana esta tarde en el baile estaba guapísima (*En el baile era guapa); Está muy vistosa con ese traje (c.f. El traje es vistoso); Estás guapísima con ese equipo de montar a caballo; Estás impecable (vas bien arreglado, elegante y limpio); ¿Crees que estoy presentable con este traje?*

5. Age: Adjectives such as: *viejo, joven, maduro, mayor*, etc., can be considered as an objective fact or as a physical appearance (a subjective judgment), being built, in the latter case, with *estar*. This opposition is not very consistent in Spanish so it is frequently neutralized: *Tu madre está muy joven para su edad; El tío Tomás está tan viejo porque ha pasado muchas enfermedades y ha sufrido muchos contratiempos en su vida*.

6. Civil and religious status. Adjectives such as: *soltero, casado, viudo, divorciado, separado, bautizado, confirmado*, etc., indicate a characteristic of the subject that is either the product of a process or is considered a non-change. According to this, they would have to be constructed with *estar*, but, in fact, *ser* or *estar* are used interchangeably. Except that you want to insist on a marital status as a 'bureaucratic fact', in which case *ser* would be used preferably, although it could also be used *estar*. *Célibe* is preferably constructed with *ser*, although the phrase *estoy célibe* is acceptable. General usage tends to use *estar* with these

adjectives: El uso general tiende a usar *estar* con estos adjetivos: Estoy *casado* desde 1990 (unlikely **Soy casado* desde 1990); ¿*Es (o está)* usted *soltero?*; *Está casado* con mi prima (**Es casado* con mi prima).

7. Transitory physical states. They are built only with *estar* a large number of adjectives, and participles, more or less evolved into adjectives, which indicate physical states (of people) that are temporary and unstable⁹ such as *satisfecho, desprevenido, borracho, consciente, inconsciente, hambriento, dormido, sediento, soñoliento, solo, acompañado, sonriente, dolorido, embargado* ((por el dolor), *descalzo, calzado, desnudo, vestido*, etc.: *Estoy hambriento*, prepárame algo de comer; *Estamos calados*, nos ha caído toda la tormenta encima; La víctima *estaba* todavía *inconsciente* cuando la encontraron; El que me hayas encontrado varias veces *estando borracho* no significa que yo *sea* un *borracho*; *Estamos rendidos* del viaje.

8. Presence and localization/position. They are built only with *estar* numerous adjectives such as: *arrodillado, levantado, acostado, incorporado, erguido, sentado, inclinado, asomado, reclinado, afincado*, etc., for the double reason of signifying position and necessarily having a temporary character, since they describe the movements of a person¹⁰: Mi marido *estará ausente* durante varios días; *Estoy (o soy) ajeno* a todo tipo de actividad política; Estos muebles modernos *serán* todo lo *cómodos* que vosotros digáis, pero yo *estoy incómodo* en esta especie de sillón; Después de la guerra *estuvo* varios años *fugitivo* en el monte, finalmente lo prendieron y *estuvo cautivo* seis años.

D. TRANSITORY QUALITIES AND PHYSICAL STATE OF OBJECTS

⁹ A special case of states is that of the adjectives *vivo* and *muerto* that are only built with *estar*. Apart from the frequency of use, there are enough examples in the *ser y estar* system to justify this fact. The adjective *muerto* has an internal semantic participial-resultative nature. As in the cases of *roto, frío*, etc., it is 'linguistically' the result of an action, even if it is definitive. On the other hand, the adjective *vivo* means a state in process (living) and, furthermore, as in the cases of *intacto, entero, incólume, soltero, salvaje* etc., 'linguistically' is determined by a 'no-change'. Neither *vivo* nor *muerto* have reached the status of definitional adjectives (*Juan es muerto), because these adjectives are easily substantiated, existing in the language the phrases *ser vivo* (vivacious, cunning) and *ser muerto* (dull, sad).

¹⁰ Others can also be built with *ser* changing meaning, for example, *recto, estirado, firme, rígido*, etc.

1. Unstable states and qualities (price, temperature, etc.). Objects have a series of permanent qualities such as *dimensions* (thickness, volume, height, length, shape) and others such as their *position in space* that are unstable and external. However, most of the qualities are permanent or accidental depending on the object that possesses them. Such is often the case for properties such as *color* and *temperature*: La nieve *es fría* vs. El radiador *está frío*; La camisa *es negra* (es de color negro) vs. La camisa *está negra* (está sucia).

2. Weather. A reality that is by nature *unstable* and *changeable* is the weather and the phenomena related to it. Precisely because the nature of the subject is changeable, *ser* and *estar*, in most cases, can be constructed interchangeably with adjectives such as: *caluroso, lluvioso, nublado, ventoso, abrasador, tormentoso, intempestivo, desapacible, frío, seco, radiante, raso, claro, fresco, irrespirable, pegajoso, otoñal, invernial, torrencial, tropical*, etc. Only in cases in which the temporal extension of the subject appears indeterminate is the opposing differentiating power of being and being restored: El día *está bochornoso* (hace un calor asfixiante); La mañana *está casi veraniega*; El tiempo *está cambiante* (cambiando), puede que llueva; El firmamento *está estrellado* (lleno de estrellas).

3. Tasting and savoring. An especially significant case of direct perception is that of food tasting. The problem arises, however, insofar as a direct check can derive, at the same time, an assessment of the objective quality of the product or its preparation and seasoning. Added to this problem is the fact that most food products (coffee, meat, fish, wine, milk, etc.) can be understood in a generic sense or in a specific sense. Thus, a phrase like: El whisky *está malísimo*, has at least two interpretations: 1) In my opinion whiskey in general tastes bad and 2) This whiskey, in particular, tastes bad. Similarly, the phrase *El whisky es excelente* admits of three interpretations: 1) Whiskey in general, 2) This whiskey in particular is of good quality, and 3) This whiskey tastes good (it would be preferred to use *estar* here). Given the complexity of the internal structures underlying these statements, it is preferable to work with the following operational rule: use *estar* when talking about a direct check (even if we are referring to the quality of a certain stew or the seasoning) and use *ser* when we want refer to the objective, primitive or generic quality of the product: Este filete *está crudo*, quiero que me lo pasen un poco más; El guiso que

nos dieron para comer *estaba repugnante*; Si la carne *es buena*, el guiso *estará para chuparse los dedos*.

4. State of conservation. One of the most frequent stative meanings is the one that refers to the state of conservation (perception of a change) of the objects. *Ser* and *estar* are used to distinguish between the quality and the state of conservation of an object: El coche *es nuevo* (recién comprado) vs. El coche *está nuevo* (el coche está poco gastado); El mueble *es viejo* (es antiguo y valioso) vs. El mueble *está viejo* (está estropeado).

The following adjectives designate states of conservation (evaluative adjectives are included here): *nuevo, viejo, bueno, malo, estropeado, gastado, deteriorado, excelente, ruinoso, magnífico, despedazado, reventado, roto, quebrado, resistente, defectuoso, inservible, escacharrado, agrietado, desvencijado, rayado* (disco), *deforme, desdentado, desgastado*: El abrigo aún *está aprovechable*; Estas lentejas *no están comestibles*; Su vista *está excelente*; El coche *está estropeado*; La casa *está ruinoso*.

OTHER VALUES. *Estar* is used with many other values, many of which are difficult to specify and present little difference to the construction of the same sentence with the verb *ser*. The use of *estar* seems to grant a nuance that affects the speaker more, that is more involved in what is said. Thus, Su muerte *está reciente* (o *ser*); Su nuevo apartamento *está muy acogedor* (o *ser*); ¡*Está difícil* este maldito problema de matemáticas! (o *ser*); El manuscrito *está ilegible* (o *ser*); Conseguir dinero cada día *está más difícil* (o *ser*); El camino *está muy estrecho*, ten cuidado al conducir (o *ser*).

5. Conclusion

We can provisionally conclude that although the semantics of *ser* is not as defined or abundant as that of *estar*, where polysemy has been more than demonstrated, it does have some clearly differentiated values such as a predicative verb and an attributive nexus (existential *ser*; behavioral *ser*, etc.). To those values we must add a series of more or less subtle semantic values that always appear combined with certain expressions and contexts.

Furthermore, as it has been highlighted, when *ser* works as a nexus between two elements (A is B) there are many types of relationships that

can be established. In other words, there are many ways and forms of *ser* in Spanish. A and B can be identical, there can be a relationship of classification, ascription of a quality, but also many other forms. If we try to analyze this from the point of view of the semantics of *ser*, it could be said that, on the one hand, there are uses of *ser* as a mere nexus that are used in structures of identity, classification, attribution, etc., but also, in some other constructions, the use of *ser* seems to establish a different nuanced nexus of a figurative, metaphorical, or other nature. In these cases, as we have seen, the verb *ser* can be replaced by verbs or periphrasis of the type *parece, se percibe como, conlleva*, etc. Thus, Este libro *es* un auténtico plomo (resulta); Las desgracias *son* acicate para las ideas (sirven de); Eso tiene *ser* mujer (conlleva, implica); El libro y el cuaderno *son* cincuenta euros (costar); Un ataque en toda regla contra ese objetivo *sería* una decisión equivocada (se consideraría, presupondría, equivaldría), etc.

To conclude, it can be assumed that if the verb *ser* had a single semantic value, or even absolutely none, and the interpretation of the quoted statements depended solely on data from the environment, the substitution of *ser* with verbs such as *resultar, constituir*, etc., should be possible in each and every one of the statements. This is proven false, which leads us to the conclusion that either such substitutions depend on the pragmatic interpretation of the context, or that, in some way, new patterns of expression are constantly being formed in Spanish with the verb *ser* in which this verb is being lexicalized and impregnated with different values or semantic nuances.

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