

# Aspect and the Categorization of States

The case of *ser* and *estar* in Spanish

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## Preface

Ever since I began studying Spanish over twenty years ago, I have always been intrigued by the verbs *ser* and *estar*. As I continued to study Spanish, however, I was never fully satisfied with any explanation offered for when one of these two verbs was to be used over the other or why. Counterexamples and exceptions always readily came to mind, and it seemed like the more Spanish I learned, the less I understood about *ser* and *estar*. When I became a Spanish teacher, I found that my lack of a thoroughly satisfying “*ser* and *estar* explanation” was then being passed on to my own students. This is when I took it upon myself to one day devise the most accurate theoretical model possible to account for their uses. It did not take long for me to realize that it would perhaps be foolish and arrogant to think that I could actually provide a “silver bullet” solution to explain every single use of *ser* and *estar*. However, in the true spirit of science, and out of the love for the Spanish language and the good people who speak it, I could not resist the urge to see just how close I could come to accomplishing this feat. This is what motivated me to compose the present monograph.

The inspiration and skills necessary for the genesis of this work were drawn in large part from a small and very special group of individuals. I first must acknowledge Michael Reider, my syntax teacher at West Virginia University, for instilling in me the basic fundamental principles of sound linguistic analysis. It was in his classes where I learned to appreciate the work of Noam Chomsky and had the privilege of doing so by means of Andrew Radford’s smart, simple, user-friendly approach. I would also like to thank Lisa Green, my syntax teacher at The University of Texas, for challenging me and helping to broaden my interest and knowledge of copula verbs in other languages besides Spanish. It is especially necessary to acknowledge Marta Luján, my Spanish semantics teacher and dissertation supervisor at The University of Texas, whose professionalism and enthusiasm for Spanish grammar is highly contagious. It was by working with her that I gained a deeper appreciation of Chomsky’s work and was taught of the accomplishments of the great Andrés Bello, a man whose insights on Spanish grammar were well more than a century ahead of their time.

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## Introduction

In this book, the primary goal will be to construct the most descriptively and explanatorily adequate analysis possible to account for the complementary distribution of the Spanish copula verbs *ser* and *estar*. Over the past several decades, numerous theoretical accounts have been put forth in an attempt to accomplish this goal. Though such accounts accurately predict most types of stative sentences with the two copulas, they often fall short of predicting a significant number of them that are used in everyday speech. The first chapters of this book will be devoted to reviewing a number of existing approaches that have been taken to account for the uses of *ser* and *estar* by testing their theoretical viability and descriptive adequacy. Among these are traditional conventions such as the *inherent qualities vs. current condition* distinction and the analysis of *estar* as an indicator of change. Those of a more recent theoretical framework, which will receive the most attention, include the application of Kratzer's (1995) *individual-level vs. stage-level* distinction to stative predicates and Maienborn's (2005) discourse-based interpretation of Spanish copulative predication. Schmitt's (2005) compositionally-based analysis of Portuguese *ser* and *estar*, which treats only *estar* as an aspectual copula, will be of special interest.

After testing each of these analyses, it will be shown that the least costly and most accurate course to take for analyzing *ser* and *estar* is to treat both verbs as aspectual morphemes along the lines of Luján (1981). As aspectual copulas, *ser* and *estar* denote the aspectual distinction [ $\pm$ Perfective]. In my proposed analysis, I will argue that aspect applies to both events and states, but does so *internally* and *externally* respectively. By adapting Verkuyl's (2004) feature algebra to states, I will posit that aspect for stative predication is compositionally calculated, and the individual aspectual values for *ser* and *estar* remain constant in co-composition. In light of its descriptive adequacy for Spanish stative sentences and universality in natural language, it will also be shown that the [ $\pm$ Perfective] aspectual distinction is very strong in terms of explanatory adequacy as well.