

Development of Learner Use of ‘*Estar* + Adjective’ in Contexts of Comparison within an Individual Frame of Reference

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1. Introduction

The study of the second language acquisition of the Spanish copular verbs *ser* (‘to be’) and *estar* (‘to be’) in pre-adjectival contexts has remained a challenge for several reasons. First, early studies used binary categories ‘*ser* + characteristic’ and ‘*estar* + condition’ to assess learner copula choice (VanPatten, 1987; Ryan & Lafford, 1992). This categorization has since been questioned given that it is estimated that over 80% of adjectives can be used with either copula (Vañó-Cerdá, 1982; Mesa Alonso et al., 1993). Furthermore, it has been argued that native speakers highlight specific contextual meanings through copula choice (Falk, 1979a, 1979b; Silva-Corvalán, 1986, 1994), suggesting that not only can either copula be used appropriately with most adjectives, but that either copula can be used appropriately with most adjectives in the same types of contexts. This is especially problematic when studying L2 learners, because the highlighted contextual meaning according to copula choice may not correspond with the learner’s intended meaning. Consider, for instance, the utterance *la chica es feliz* (‘the girl is happy’), produced by a learner in any context. First, both *ser* and *estar* can be used appropriately with the adjective *feliz*. Second, though the use of *ser* highlights a specific meaning (permanency, for example) it is difficult to tell whether the highlighted meaning corresponds with the meaning intended by the learner. Recent approaches to the study of the SLA of the Spanish copula have therefore moved away from assessment to instead describe the ‘bundle of features’ that predict copula choice (Falk, 1979a; Clements, 1988; Silva-Corvalán, 1986, 1994; Geeslin, 2000, 2003). However, the systematic study of contextual variables as predictors of copula choice remains elusive due to instrument design that does not control for context nor enables the researcher to confirm speaker intent (Geeslin & Woolsey, 2004; Woolsey, 2006a).

In an effort to address these challenges, the current study uses an instrument designed specifically to control contextual variables and to provide ways to confirm speaker intent (Woolsey, 2006a). By using this instrument, the study is able to examine the development of learner use of ‘*estar* + adjective’ in contexts where a comparison within an individual frame of reference is possible (Falk, 1979a, 1979b). *Estar* is usually associated with these kinds of comparisons, which refer to instances when the referent is compared to itself at a previous point in time. One hundred and one English-speaking Spanish students at four different levels of proficiency at a large university in the United States participated in the study. Elicitation instruments included a picture-description task of famous people. Findings from the study are examined in relation to recent predictive models (Geeslin, 2000, 2003) as well as needs for future research of the SLA of Spanish copula choice.

2. Background

2.1 Change, norms and X/X comparisons

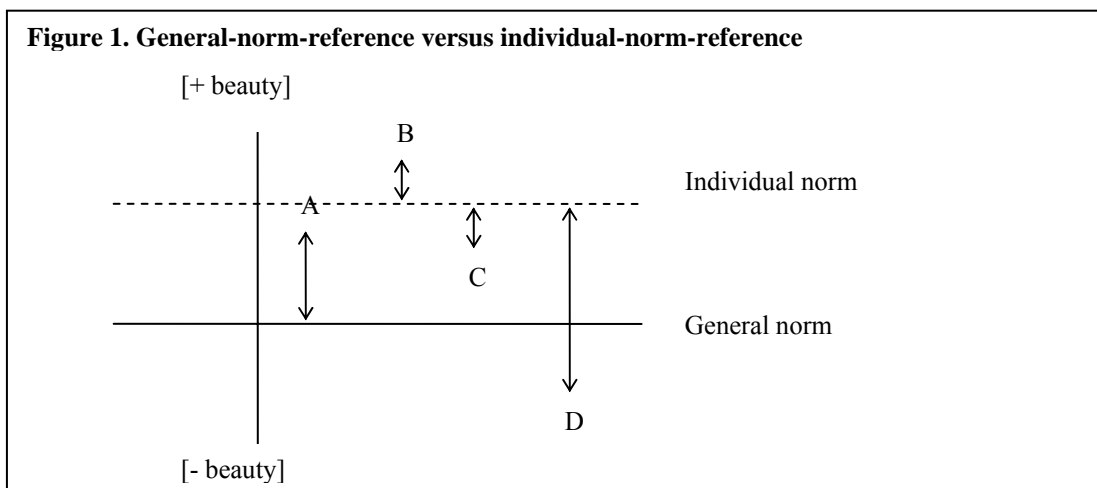
Semantic/pragmatic approaches to the study of the Spanish copula have long associated change with the use of *estar*. Bull (1942, 1965), for instance, proposes a ‘principle of change’ to explain the

* I would like to express my sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. Any errors are, of course, my own.

ser/estar distinction. Falk (1979a, 1979b) outlines ‘norm theory’, refining aspects of Bull’s principle and focusing on comparisons of the referent to different norms. Franco & Steinmetz (1983, 1986) advance Falk’s theory in terms of X/X comparisons, that is, comparisons of the referent with itself. Central to these conceptualizations is the possibility of change within the referent with regard to the attribute. Describing these types of changes are associated with the use of *estar*.

According to Bull (1942), “*ser* expresses a first impression or a normal concept; *estar*, a change or deviation from the average or normal concept” (p.441). This change does not depend on changes in objective reality, it can reflect a speaker’s subjective change in perception of that reality. The use of *estar* is not motivated externally, but in the mind and attitude of the speaker (p.438). Neither does the choice of *estar* depend on time. In fact, Bull rebuffs notions of temporality as an explanation for the *ser/estar* distinction, since copula choice does not alter the inherent meaning of the adjective, and most adjectives can be used with both *ser* and *estar*. Thus, *está muerto* (‘he/she is dead’) does not impose a temporal interpretation on death, but rather points back to the change from life to death. Bull also claims that this notion of change can be expressed forward or backward in time (p.446). Additionally, when what was once a perceived change in the referent has become a normal characteristic in the speaker’s mind, a shift occurs back to using *ser*. These kinds of shifts can occur even within the same sentence, moving backward and forward between two or more frames of reference.

Falk (1979a) proposes a ‘norm theory’ (p.53) which differentiates *ser* and *estar* by focusing on the norm to which they refer: *ser* classifies the referent in relation to a general norm, while *estar* classifies the referent in relation to an individual norm. Falk (1979b) exemplifies this ‘norm theory’ by discussing beauty adjectives such as *guapo* (‘handsome’) and *feo* (‘ugly’). To say that *Juan es guapo* is to differentiate Juan from other men, effectively comparing Juan to a general norm of ‘handsomeness’ for men and classifying him as ‘handsome’, above the general norm. To say that *Juan está guapo* is to compare Juan with his own individual norm of ‘handsomeness’ and classify him as being above that norm. A visual representation of these statements can be seen in Figure 1 (adapted from Falk 1979b, p.283): *Juan es guapo* would be represented by A, *Juan está guapo* by B. The statement *Juan está feo* could be represented by either C or D, noting Juan’s ‘ugliness’ in relation to his individual norm of ‘handsomeness’.¹ The observation that this statement can represent ‘ugliness’ either above or below the group norm of ‘handsomeness’ reflects Falk’s belief that *ser* and *estar* represent two separate semantic domains. By stating B, C, or D, the speaker makes no reference to where Juan falls in relation to the group norm, but simply places the attribute in relation to the perceived individual norm for Juan (Falk 1979a, p.95). Additionally, the statement *Juan es feo* is never appropriate, given where Juan’s individual norm of ‘handsomeness’ is located in relation to the general norm.



¹ Of course a more humorous distinction could be expressed by *Juan está feo* (C) and *Juan está feísimo* (D), as some of my colleagues have been quick to point out.

Franco & Steinmetz (1983, 1986) propose a universal linguistic principle that inserts *ser* or *estar* at the surface level based upon the kind of implicit comparison present in the use of predicate adjectives. “The semantic interpretation of most, if not all adjectives, involves an implied comparison which may have the form X/Y or X/X” (1986, p.380). If the comparison is of the type X/Y, where the referent is being compared with something else, then *ser* is inserted at the surface level. If, however, the comparison is of the referent with itself, i.e. X/X, then *estar* is used. The selection of *ser* or *estar* is therefore not related to inherent semantic properties of the adjective, but rather represents a speaker-imposed interpretation of the adjective in relation to comparison type.

It can be seen from the brief review above, that semantic/pragmatic approaches to the Spanish copula associate the use of *estar* with some form of change in the referent with regard to the attribute in ‘copula + adjective’ contexts. The goal of the current study, therefore, is to examine the second language acquisition of copula choice in contexts of comparison within an individual frame of reference.

2.2 Studies of the SLA of Spanish copula choice

As mentioned above, early studies of the SLA of *ser* and *estar* limited their analysis of ‘copula + adjective’ contexts by using binary categories ‘*ser* + characteristic’ and ‘*estar* + condition’ (VanPatten, 1987; Ryan & Lafford, 1992). In so doing, they failed to recognize that most adjectives can be used appropriately with both *ser* and *estar* (Vañó-Cerdá, 1982; Mesa Alonso et al., 1993). What’s more, Falk’s ‘norm theory’ suggests that the same adjective can be used with both *ser* and *estar* in the exact same context, depending upon the intent of the speaker to impose an individual norm or general norm frame of reference. Thus, an analysis of ‘copula + adjective’ contexts based on a binary categorization is problematic.

Following Falk (1979a, 1979b), recent studies have moved away from an analysis based on accuracy to instead describe the ‘bundle of features’ that describe copula choice (Clements, 1988; Silva-Corvalán, 1986, 1994; Geeslin, 2000, 2003). In SLA research, Geeslin’s (2000, 2005) multi-variable analysis of use recognizes the relevance of a variety of theoretical perspectives to help explain copula selection among Spanish learners. Geeslin (2000), for example, codes data for syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features, including variables such as perfectivity, modality (or semantic transparency), adjective class, telicity, frame of reference, dependence on experience and susceptibility to change, among others. By using a stepwise multiple regression analysis, Geeslin is able to show the significant predictors for the use of *estar* at different levels of instruction.

However, one of the remaining limitations to current SLA research on *ser* and *estar* is the inability to confidently interpret contexts of comparison of the referent with itself, that is, when a speaker chooses to impose a comparison within an individual frame of reference (Falk, 1979a). Geeslin (2000), for instance, codes data [+individual frame] if an individual frame of reference is a possible interpretation within the context. Geeslin (2003) expands this criteria to include all forms of comparison, not just ones within an individual frame of reference. The interpretation of contexts of comparison is challenging because of the central role the speaker plays in imposing a frame of reference on the context. Thus, in order to confidently assess contexts of comparison, speaker intent must be more successfully controlled.

2.3 Instrument design²

Woolsey (2005, 2006a) makes a case for confirming speaker intent in ‘copula + adjective’ contexts through the creation of a picture-description task that explicitly prompts comparisons within an individual frame of reference. Familiarity with the referent is controlled through the use of famous celebrities, such as Harrison Ford, Britney Spears, Michael Jackson and Madonna. Pictures are chosen to elicit adjectives of physical description and mental states, adjectives that are readily used with both

² Instrument design is described at this point in the paper so as to facilitate the description of the research questions to follow. In order to effectively examine comparisons within an individual frame of reference, instrument design must first be addressed, given limitations of earlier research instruments.

ser and *estar*, that are variable in the referent, and that have been shown to be challenging to interpret in ‘copula + adjective’ contexts (Geeslin & Woolsey, 2004).

The task consists of sixteen slides, four for each celebrity, that alternate between prompts to describe the celebrity and compare the celebrity to him- or herself. Each slide is timed, providing 45 seconds for the Spanish description. Participants are digitally audio recorded throughout, and all recording and slide progression is controlled by the researcher. An example of the Harrison Ford sequence is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Harrison Ford slides in picture description task.

Harrison Ford

- Describe a Harrison Ford.
 - Describe sus características físicas.
 - Describe sus emociones.

Now repeat your description in English.

1

Harrison Ford

- Compara las características físicas y las emociones de Harrison en sus filmes.

- Star Wars
- Indiana Jones

- Air Force One
- What Lies Beneath
- Hollywood
- Homicide


← →

Now repeat your description in English.

2

Describe a Harrison en Foto 1

Foto 1



Describe:



- Sus características físicas
- Sus emociones

Now repeat your description in English.

3

Compara a Harrison en las fotos

Foto 2 Describe sus características físicas y sus emociones. Foto 3

Now repeat your description in English.

4

To summarize, semantic/pragmatic conceptualizations of the *ser/estar* distinction in ‘copula + adjective’ contexts associate the use of *estar* with change, specifically change in the referent with regard to the attribute. Thus, Falk (1979a) refers to comparisons within an individual frame of reference, that is, comparing the referent with itself. Additionally, these conceptualizations highlight the central and subjective role the speaker plays in imposing a specific frame of reference on the context. However, interpreting speaker intent has remained a challenge in current research on the SLA of Spanish copula choice. In part this is due to the nature of the second language learner and the fact that the contextual meaning highlighted by copula selection may not reflect the intended meaning of the speaker. At the same time, however, instruments have not been designed to explicitly create contexts of comparison nor find ways to confirm speaker intent (Woolsey, 2006a). The present study, therefore, examines learner use of *estar* in contexts of comparison within an individual frame of reference through the use of an instrument designed specifically to address earlier limitations, an instrument that creates clear contexts of comparison.

3. The current study

3.1 Research questions

The current study examines learner use of *estar* with adjectives in comparisons within an individual frame of reference. Thus, the primary research question is: Do comparisons within an

individual frame of reference elicit the use of *estar*? However, this primary research question is subdivided into three more specific research questions that relate directly to the instrument design (see Figure 2). These questions are listed here and explained below.

1. Do slides that explicitly prompt side-by-side comparisons elicit *estar* more frequently than slides that do not explicitly prompt side-by-side comparisons?
2. Do 'now' frames within slides prompting side-by-side comparisons elicit *estar* more frequently than 'before' frames within those same slides?
3. Do the second, third and fourth slides elicit *estar* more frequently than the first slide?

The first question investigates the frequency of *estar* in those slides that explicitly prompt comparisons within an individual frame of reference. Thus, it is hypothesized that *estar* will occur more frequently in slides 2 and 4, than in slides 1 and 3.

The second question examines the frequency of *estar* within slides 2 and 4, specifically examining the frames that prompt 'now' descriptions in comparison to frames that prompt 'before' descriptions. 'Now' frames are found on the right side of slides 2 and 4, while 'before' frames are found on the left side of the same slides. Given the differences and changes evident between frames, it is hypothesized that the 'now' frames will elicit *estar* more frequently than the 'before' frames.

The third question considers the possibility that the first slide is the only slide not to elicit comparisons (since it is the first), whereas all subsequent slides create the possibility of a comparison to that first slide. In theory, the first slide would correspond to Bull's (1942, 1965) first impression, establishing what is 'normal' for the referent. In this way, Falk's (1979a) individual norm is established in relation to the group norm during the first, abstract and general description. All subsequent slides create opportunities to compare the referent to that initial individual-norm description. Therefore, it is hypothesized that the second, third and fourth slides will elicit *estar* more frequently than the initial slide.

3.2 Participants

One hundred and one Spanish learners at four levels of proficiency participated in the study. Subjects were recruited from eight sections of four different university courses: two sections of a second-semester Spanish language course (n=22), two sections of a fourth-semester Spanish language course (n=29), two sections of a sixth-semester Spanish grammar course (n=33), and two sections of a fourth-year Spanish linguistics course (n=17). All participants were L1 speakers of English, and their study-abroad experience varied from no time abroad at level one to over ten months abroad at level four. An 11-item multiple choice questionnaire was administered prior to the research tasks. Results from the task revealed significant proficiency differences among the four levels of instruction (ANOVA $p < .001$, post-hoc Tamhane $p < .05$ for all comparisons across all levels).³

3.3 Analysis

Data were coded according to response given, adjective type, and frame of reference. Response given included omission, *ser*, *estar*, *parecer*, *mirar/ver*, and other. *Parecer* and *mirar/ver* were listed as separate categories given their high frequency of use (see section 4.1). Adjectives were categorized into nine types, using categories established by Silva-Corvalán (1986, 1994) and Geeslin (2000, 2003). These categories were: mental states, physical appearance, status, description of person(al)ity, age, color, size, physical state, description/evaluation. Description of person(al)ity was a catch-all category for animate referents, while description/evaluation was a catch-all category for inanimate referents. Frame of reference was coded as [+/-individual reference] and applied differently for the three research questions: for the first, slides 2 and 4 were [+individual reference] while slides 1 and 3 were [-

³ The mean scores for the proficiency test (out of 11 items) were 3.82, 6.41, 8.09, 10.00 for levels one through four respectively. Standard deviations for each level were 2.15, 2.10, 1.97, 1.17. Non-parametric post-hoc analyses were run given lack of homogeneity of variance, and the most conservative analysis (Tamhane) revealed all comparisons between all groups to reach at least the $p < .05$ level of significance, if not higher (i.e. $p < .01$ or $p < .001$). The test in full and complete statistical analyses can be viewed in Woolsey (2006b).

individual reference]; for the second, ‘now’ frames within slides 2 and 4 were [+individual reference] while ‘before’ frames in slides 2 and 4 were [-individual reference]; finally, for question three, slides 2, 3 and 4 were coded [+individual reference] while slide one was coded [-individual reference].⁴

Following Geeslin (2000, 2003), response given was divided into ‘*estar*’ and ‘non-*estar*’ categories to examine the development of the use of *estar*. Chi-squares were run on the data from each level according to the research questions listed above. Thus, for each level, the use of *estar* was first compared between slides that explicitly prompted comparisons and those that did not (slides 2/4 vs. 1/3). Second, for each level, a chi-square was run for *estar* according to comparisons in frames (‘now’ vs. ‘before’). Finally, for each level, data from slides 2, 3 and 4 were grouped and compared to slide one using a chi-square analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

A total of 3412 ‘copula + adjective’ tokens were collected from the 101 participants. Adjectives from all nine categories were collected, examples of which can be found in Table 1. It can be seen that the instrument elicited a wide variety of adjective types and that the majority of these adjectives may be used appropriately with both *ser* and *estar*, and may be considered variable in the referents used in the task (even *africano* and *casada* may be considered variable attributes for these celebrities).

Table 1. Frequency and examples of adjective type

	Adjective Type	Referent	Examples	#	%
1	mental states	A	<i>preocupado</i> ‘worried’, <i>enojado</i> ‘angry’, <i>triste</i> ‘sad’	393	11.5
2	physical appearance	A	<i>bonita</i> ‘pretty’, <i>gordo</i> ‘fat’, <i>musculoso</i> ‘muscular’	480	14.1
3	status	A	<i>africano</i> ‘African’, <i>casada</i> ‘married’	233	6.8
4	description of person(ality)	A	<i>estúpida</i> ‘stupid’, <i>tímido</i> ‘timid’	1031	30.2
5	age	A/I	<i>joven</i> ‘young’, <i>viejo</i> ‘old’	419	12.3
6	color	A/I	<i>blanco</i> ‘white’, <i>negro</i> ‘black’, <i>rubia</i> ‘blonde’	330	9.7
7	size	A/I	<i>alto/bajo</i> ‘tall/short’, <i>grande/pequeño</i> ‘big/small’	159	4.7
8	physical state	A/I	<i>abierto</i> ‘open’, <i>embarazada</i> ‘pregnant’	79	2.3
9	description/evaluation	I	<i>bueno</i> ‘good’, <i>diferente</i> ‘different’, <i>cómico</i> ‘comical’	288	8.4
			TOTAL	3412	100.0

NOTE: A = animate referents, I = inanimate referents, A/I = both animate and inanimate referents

In relation to response given, *ser* represented 76.5% of the tokens in the data, while *estar*, *parecer* and *mirar/ver* represented 8.4%, 7.6% and 2.3% respectively. Omission occurred 4.8% overall, while other verbs – like *tener* and *sentir* – were used 0.5% of the time. When response given is examined across levels, no trends seem apparent (see Table 2). *Ser* reduces in frequency somewhat consistently, beginning at 87.6% and progressing to 76%, 77.4% and 66.2%. Interestingly omission of the copula peaks at Level 2, which might offer a possible explanation for the lack of difference in *ser* between levels 2 and 3. Regarding *estar*, there is a steady upward progression that is interrupted by a significant

⁴ I am indebted to one reviewer for drawing my attention to the potential effect tense may have on copula choice. The current study does not address this effect. However, an initial look at the data reveals that 90% of ‘copula + adjective’ tokens use the present tense, while 9% employ a past tense. This ratio, roughly 9:1, remains fairly consistent across copula type and proficiency level. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the effect tense may have on learner copula choice is warranted in future studies.

dip at Level 3. However, it should be noted that *estar* seems to be in competition with *parecer* and *mirar/ver* at Level 3, an observation that will be discussed in greater detail in the concluding section.

Table 2. Response given by level

Response given	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
omission	5.9%	9.9%	2.0%	1.2%
<i>ser</i>	87.6%	76.0%	77.4%	66.2%
<i>estar</i>	3.5%	10.0%	5.5%	14.7%
<i>parecer</i>		2.9%	10.7%	15.7%
<i>mirar/ver</i>	1.7%	0.8%	4.0%	2.2%
other	1.4%	0.4%	0.4%	
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%

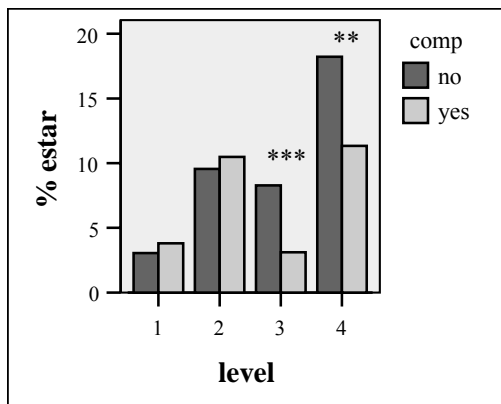
4.2 Side-by-side comparisons: Slides explicitly prompting X/X comparisons

Results from the chi-square test examining the use of *estar* in slides 2 and 4 versus 1 and 3 are listed in Table 3 and graphed in Figure 3. It can be seen that only proficiency levels 3 and 4 reveal a significant effect. This would suggest that explicit prompts to compare the referent with itself has a significant impact on the choice of *estar* only at levels 3 and 4. The direction of this effect can be discerned from the clustered bar graph. Interestingly the significant effect is contrary to what was initially hypothesized: at levels 3 and 4, slides that prompt explicit side-by-side comparisons of the referent with itself elicit *estar* significantly less frequently than slides that do not contain any prompt to compare.

Table 3. Chi-square results for *estar* for each level, according to side-by-side comparisons

Level	χ^2	df	small cells?	Cramer's V
1	.278	1	no	.020
2	.235	1	no	.016
3	***13.025	1	no	-.113
4	**7.303	1	no	-.097

Figure 3. *Estar* by level by side-by-side comparisons



Note: * = p<.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001. N = 3412

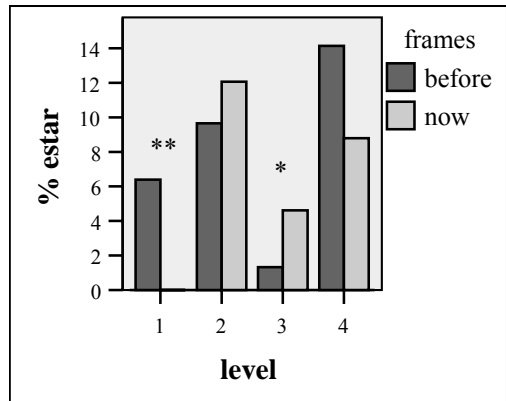
4.3 Frame comparisons: ‘Before’ versus ‘now’ within slides

Results from the chi-square test examining the use of *estar* in ‘before’ frames and ‘now’ frames in slides 2 and 4 are listed in Table 4 and graphed in Figure 4. It can be seen that there is a steady progression from levels 1 to 3 in favoring *estar* in ‘now’ frames. Level 1 does not produce any token of *estar* in the ‘now’ column (see clustered bar graph), at Level 2 the difference between *ser* and *estar* is not significant, while at Level 3 it develops into a significant effect in favor of *estar* in ‘now’ frames. Interestingly, however, Level 4 does not reveal a significant effect for *estar* in ‘now’ frames, in fact showing a tendency in the opposite direction from the development through Level 3.

Table 4. Chi-square results for *estar* for each level, according to ‘before and ‘now’ frames

Level	χ^2	df	small cells?	Cramer’s V
1	**9.640	1	yes	-.163
2	.640	1	no	.038
3	*5.188	1	no	.100
4	2.691	1	no	-.083

Figure 4. *Estar* by Level by Frames ‘before’ and ‘now’



Note: * = p<.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001. N = 3412

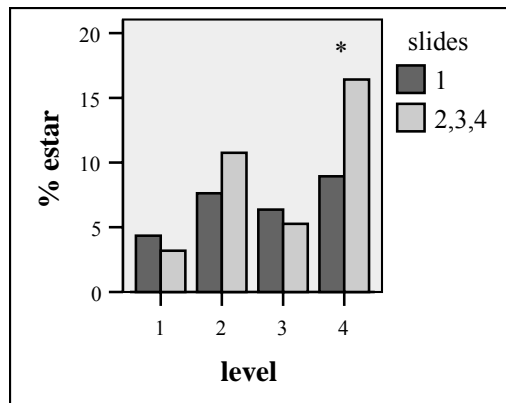
4.4 Sequential comparison

Results from the chi-square test examining the use of *estar* in the first slide versus all subsequent slides are listed in Table 5 and graphed in Figure 5. These results suggest that the first slide has a significant effect in favor of *estar* only at the fourth level of proficiency. However, the development across levels remains unclear given that Level 2 reveals a greater frequency of *estar* in subsequent slides than Level 3.

Table 5. Chi-square results for *estar* for each level, according to Slide 1 vs. Slides 2, 3 & 4

Level	χ^2	df	small cells?	Cramer’s V
1	.490	1	no	-.027
2	1.942	1	no	.045
3	.402	1	no	-.020
4	*6.130	1	no	.089

Figure 5. *Estar* by Level by Slide 1 vs. Slides 2, 3 & 4



Note: * = p<.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001. N = 3412

5. Conclusions

5.1 Research questions

Results from the analyses provide differing answers to the three research questions guiding the present study. First, findings suggest that side-by-side comparisons within an individual frame of reference, of the type prompted by slides 2 and 4, do not elicit the use of *estar* more frequently than slides that do not contain comparison prompts. To the contrary, levels 3 and 4 reveal significant tendencies in the opposite direction, so that participants at those levels are more likely to choose verbs other than *estar* in comparison slides. Thus, the answer to the first research question is no, slides that

explicitly prompt side-by-side comparisons do not elicit *estar* more frequently than slides that do not explicitly prompt side-by-side comparisons. These findings are generally consistent with previous research, though direct comparisons across studies are difficult given differences in population, instrument design and coding procedures (see section 2.2). For example, among high-school students, Geeslin (2000) finds no significant effect for ‘individual frame of reference’ at early levels of instruction and a negative effect at higher levels of instruction. Geeslin (2003) finds no effect for ‘individual frame of reference’ among Spanish native-speakers, but a significant negative effect among advanced, near-native speakers. The findings from the current study also corroborate results from Miller & Schmitt (2005), who find that Chilean adult native speakers of Spanish use *ser* more often than *estar* in any kind of comparison, whether it be individual- or general-norm-referenced. This is especially interesting and relevant given Miller & Schmitt’s instrument design, one that closely resembles the design used in the current study.⁵

The second research question meets with mixed results. On the one hand, there is an increase in frequency of *estar* through Level 3, such that ‘now’ frames within slides prompting side-by-side comparisons elicit *estar* with increasing frequency from levels 1 through 3. However, though Level 4 is not significant, the difference in frequency of *estar* between ‘now’ frames and ‘before’ frames reveals the opposite trend: ‘before’ frames elicit *estar* more frequently than ‘now’ frames. Thus, there is not a clear trend across all levels, and results are inconclusive.

Finally, the data reveal that the initial slide elicits *estar* significantly less frequently at Level 4 than slides 2, 3 and 4. However, the development across levels remains unclear, given that Level 2 reveals a greater frequency of *estar* in slides 2, 3 and 4 than Level 3. Therefore, the third question can be answered with a conditional yes, at Level 4 the second, third and fourth slides elicit *estar* more frequently than the first slide. However, the development across levels remains uncertain.

5.2 The case for *parecer*

One of the possible explanations for the lack of clear developmental trends across levels is the exclusion of *parecer* as a viable substitution for *estar*. By grouping *parecer* with non-*estar* verbs, the assumption is made that this verb more closely resembles *ser* than *estar*, when, in fact, the opposite is most likely the case. Returning to Table 2, it can be seen that if *estar* is grouped with *parecer*, there is a consistent increase of the use of *estar/parecer* across levels, from 3.5%, to 12.9%, to 16.2%, to 30.4%. Figures 6 and 7 demonstrates this change visually.

Figure 6. Frequency of *estar* by level

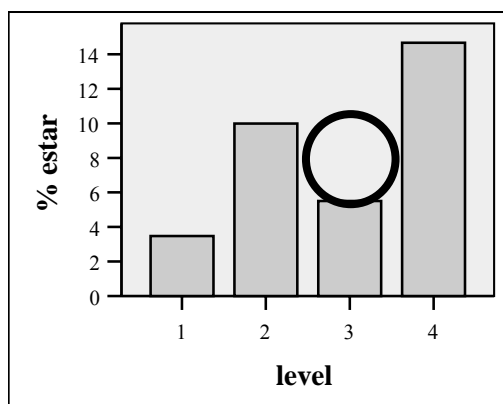
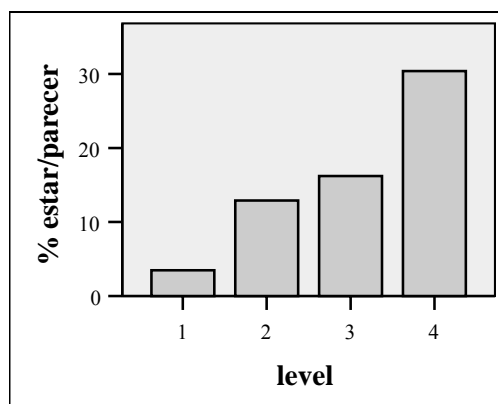


Figure 7. Frequency of *estar/parecer* by level



⁵ It has been noted that one of the limitations of the current study is the lack of a NS comparison group. However, learner data alone is sufficient to confirm the success of the instrument in eliciting comparisons: participants clearly and consistently describe side-by-side comparisons when prompted to do so. Nevertheless, a NS comparison group would undoubtedly provide an additional point of reference and help strengthen comparisons across studies.

Theoretically, the Spanish copula system has been described in terms of a continuum of verbs, beginning with *ser*, then *estar*, *parecer*, and pseudo-copulas (Roca Pons, 1960; Porroche Ballesteros, 1988). Others recognize that traditional grammar considers *ser*, *estar* and *parecer* as copulative verbs, even if *ser* may be considered as the only copulative verb proper (Fernández-Leborans, 1999, p.2365). Still others limit the copula to *ser* and *estar*, but expand the attributive function to include verbs of appearance like *parecer* (Navas Ruiz, 1963; Falk, 1979a). Thus, the inclusion of *parecer* as a copula verb, one that is more like *estar* than *ser*, is justified in theoretical conceptualizations of the Spanish copula.

Developmentally, the consideration of *parecer* is also important. If learners are incorporating *parecer* into their existing copula system, *parecer* will most likely compete initially with *ser* and *estar*. The data from this study suggest that *parecer* emerges strongly at Level 3, competing considerably with *estar*. Interestingly, by Level 4, *estar* and *parecer* have leveled out to 14.7% and 15.7% respectively. Future investigations should take into consideration the effect of emerging attributive verbs – such as *parecer* – on learner development of the Spanish copula system.

6. Future directions

6.1 Types of comparisons

An important contribution from the current study is the realization that Falk's (1979a) conceptualization of individual-norm-referenced comparisons can take many forms when applied to research design. Though the overarching question was whether comparisons within an individual frame of reference elicited the use of *estar* among second language learners, the three more specific research questions highlighted the possibility of nuances within comparisons of this kind. What's more, it becomes clear from the analyses that learners respond differently to the different types of comparisons. Explicit prompts to compare elicited *ser* at the higher levels of proficiency, whereas 'now' frames (in contrast to 'before' frames) showed a growing preference for *estar* through the third level (though not at the fourth). 'Subsequent' descriptions, as opposed to 'initial' descriptions, revealed a preference for *estar* only at the fourth level. Future studies, therefore, will need to sort out the types of comparisons implemented in research design, and explore factors within those comparisons that affect copula choice. If side-by-side comparisons of the referent with itself do not frequently elicit *estar* (even among native speakers), what additional factors must be considered to successfully implement Falk's 'norm theory' into research design?

In relation to the data collected in the present study, one way to explore additional factors is to examine the context of the descriptions of individual learners. While the current study quantified all 'copula + adjective' tokens according to slide or frame, a qualitative analysis of descriptions that identifies change would be helpful in clarifying findings for research questions two and three. For instance, when describing Harrison Ford 'before' and 'now', do learners make contrasts in age so that the opposite adjectives are used during the description? Likewise, for initial versus subsequent descriptions, how different is the initial description from subsequent ones? A qualitative analysis could identify individual instances of opposing adjectives, thus confirming change of the referent in relation to the attribute, and setting up contexts appropriate for comparisons within an individual frame of reference.

6.2 Reaction to a direct experience with the referent

Direct experience with the referent is a variable that is incorporated into the current instrument design (Woolsey, 2006a). Like change and comparisons, direct experience with the referent has long been associated with the use of *estar*. Andrade (1919) links *estar* with immediate perceptions of the referent. Parker (1927) discusses the stylistic potential of *estar* and includes subjective feelings and reactions as possible uses, among others. Aid (1976) describes a 'comment' inflexion that uses *estar* to react to an immediate experience with the referent. Guitart (2002) associates unusualness and direct and immediate experience with *estar*.

From the present study, the influence of direct experience can be clearly seen in Slide 3, where unusual and sometimes humorous pictures of the celebrity create opportunities to react to the immediate experience with the referent. In comparing the frequency of *estar* across slides for all levels, Slide 3 elicits *estar* nearly twice as often as any other slide (6.9%, 7.5%, 12.9%, 6.7% for slides 1-4). An examination of the effect of immediate experience with the referent on the use of *estar* appears promising.

In conclusion, the present study examines the SLA of copula choice in contexts of comparison within an individual frame of reference. Findings suggest that side-by-side comparisons do not elicit *estar* more frequently than other verbs. More importantly, perhaps, the current study highlights the complexity of Falk's (1979a) 'norm theory', and the challenges of applying it to research design. Future investigations must explore additional factors in order to determine what contexts best represent a comparison within an individual frame of reference.

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