

Task Design, Discourse Context and Variation in Second Language Data Elicitation

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1. Introduction

The current investigation is a reanalysis of a subset of the data from Geeslin (2000), a study conducted on the second language acquisition (SLA) of copula choice, in order to specifically address the influence of linguistic contextual features on variation in learner language across elicitation tasks. In studies of second language (L2) variation, the role of the elicitation task in learner production has been explored extensively (Adamson 1988, Tarone 1988). Factors such as discourse context, social characteristics of the speaker, and language attitudes influence a speaker's use of a particular form (Bayley & Preston 1996, Young 1991). Several investigations have also measured the effect of task type and elicitation condition (e.g., degree of planning) on learner production (Bygate 1999, Crookes 1989, Duff 1993, Skehan & Foster 1997, 1999). Tarone and Parish (1988) found that different tasks elicited different types of noun phrases (NPs) from learners, despite the fact that these tasks were designed to test the same structure. Following Tarone and Parish (1988), it is hypothesized that in addition to the task characteristics examined in previous research, the frequency with which linguistic contextual variables appear across tasks is also an essential component of L2 variation.

Previous research on the SLA of copula choice in Spanish, has shown that for native and non-native speakers copula selection is based on a speaker's response to contextual features that interact in a given discourse context (Geeslin 2000, 2003a). In the current study, it is hypothesized that if those features that predict the use of copula choice vary in frequency of occurrence from one task to another, so too will a speaker's use of each copula. The current investigation examines whether or not the linguistic features of data elicited from language learners vary across tasks. Furthermore, where variation in the linguistic features of the task does occur, this study will examine the relationship of these features to copula selection.

2. Predictors of copula choice

In the syntactic structure [copula + adjective], both *ser* 'to be' and *estar* 'to be' are permissible, and the appropriate choice between the two is influenced by the features of the surrounding context (oral or written). These features of the discourse may be syntactic, semantic or pragmatic and may vary in importance depending on the meaning a speaker chooses to express (Falk 1979). Although some investigations have focused on a single characteristic as a means of explaining copula contrast in Spanish, recent research in sociolinguistics and in SLA has shown that copula contrast is best viewed as a decision based on many features, each of which is present in a single discourse context (Díaz-Campos & Geeslin 2004, Geeslin 2003a). This approach is effective because the use of *estar* is currently undergoing a process of extension such that norms for copula use are variable both between and within speakers. Each of the factors that contributes to a speaker's decision to select *ser* or *estar* will be outlined briefly in the discussion that follows (see also section 4.3). These same factors will be used to code and analyze the data in the current investigation.

The variable that has received the greatest attention in Generative accounts of copula contrast is the type of predicate in which a copula appears. Predicates may be either stage level, where an interpretation is limited in time, or individual level, where a statement is interpreted as applying to the referent without such temporal constraints (Carlson 1977, Fernández Leborans 1999, Leonetti 1994).

In contrast, Functional approaches as well as sociolinguistic approaches nearly always examine the contrast between the class frame of reference and an individual frame of reference (Cortés-Torres 2004, Gutiérrez 1992, Silva-Corvalán 1994). When a referent is described in a class frame of reference it is compared to a group of like objects, whereas in an individual frame of reference, the referent is compared to itself at another point in time (Delbecque 1997, Falk 1979). It has been shown that both of these features are important for explaining copula contrast (Geeslin 2003a).

There are several additional features that aid in the analysis of copula choice. One such feature is whether or not the referent + adjective combination can be said to be susceptible to change (Geeslin 2003a, Silva-Corvalán 1994). The case of the size of a boy, where the attribute is changeable, contrasts with the size of a building, which does not change. A second variable is whether or not the speaker has prior experience with the referent. It has been said that *estar* is used to react to specific situations. In contrast, *ser* is used to describe situations with which the speaker does not have prior experience (Aid 1976, Guitart 2002). The lexical class to which an adjective belongs has also been helpful in describing copula choice (Geeslin 2003b). Some classes, such as size and age, allow more extensive use of *estar* than others. In addition, some adjective classes have participated in the extension of *estar* to new contexts to a greater extent (Díaz-Campos & Geeslin 2004, Gutiérrez 1992, Silva-Corvalán 1994). A final variable used to describe copula contrast appeared first in research on SLA (Geeslin 2003a) but is adapted from the semantic transparency variable used in sociolinguistic research (Silva-Corvalán 1994). Following Geeslin (2003a), the current study will distinguish contexts where only *ser* is allowed, from those where only *estar* is allowed, and from those where both copulas are permissible. This variable is based on the characteristics of the adjective itself, without regard for the surrounding context. It is important to note that even in contexts where *ser* is expected 100 percent of the time, native speakers may periodically use *estar* to highlight one of the previously mentioned discourse features (Díaz-Campos & Geeslin 2004).

Because recent research on copula choice is quite extensive, each of the variables mentioned here has been examined for native and L2 speakers of Spanish. In addition, each has been shown to be effective for describing copula choice for a variety of populations. Thus, there is solid support for the application of these variables to future analyses. It should be noted that each contextual variable is a potential influence on copula choice and each variable is present in all [copula + adjective] contexts. The purpose of the current study is to determine whether or not the distribution of the categories of these variables varies from one task to another and how this distribution is related to learner copula use.

3. Previous research in SLA

3.1. Previous research on the SLA of copula choice

Early research on the SLA of copula choice focused on the order of acquisition of the distinct copular functions. For example, VanPatten (1987) found that the use of *estar* in locative contexts was acquired before *estar* in adjectival contexts. VanPatten's data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, a written instrument, and a picture description task with six English speaking learners of Spanish at two week intervals during one academic year (VanPatten 1987). By assessing accuracy in each obligatory context and using 90 percent as an indication of the acquisition of a structure, VanPatten identified the stages of acquisition through which each learner passed. This research has been shown to generalize to the study abroad context (Ryan & Lafford 1992), Peace Corps volunteers (Gunterman 1992), and written production (Ramírez-Gelpi 1995), with one exception. One result that has not generalized is the order of acquisition of *estar* with locatives and with adjectives of condition. While Ryan and Lafford (1992) found that adjectives were acquired prior to locatives, Briscoe (1995), Gunterman (1992), and VanPatten (1987) found the opposite to be true.

Specific interest in the [copula + adjective] structure emerged, in part, as a result of the disagreement in previous studies. Geeslin (2000), in an investigation of 77 English speaking learners of Spanish, analyzed data collected through interviews, picture descriptions and a contextualized preference task. It was argued that previous studies, which relied on the categories '*ser* + characteristic' and '*estar* + condition' to evaluate [copula + adjective] contexts, required the researcher to know the 'correct' answer before applying the categories. Thus, *alegre* 'happy' was a condition

when the linguistic contextual features reviewed earlier prompted *estar*, and *alegre* ‘happy’ was a characteristic when the linguistic context was appropriate for *ser*. In some cases it may also have been necessary to make assumptions about the speaker’s intentions (e.g., to distinguish between mood and personality). Geeslin (2000) proposed that data could be more objectively coded using a probabilistic approach where learner use was examined in light of the presence or absence of particular features in the linguistic context. For example, are learners more likely to use *estar* in contexts that are susceptible to change? Thus, each [copula + adjective] token was coded for each of the linguistic variables included in the study. It was found that in such contexts, those variables that interact to determine native speaker copula choice (e.g., frame of reference) can be used to describe learner progress across time. A regression analysis of the data from all three tasks, for all four levels of ability, showed that the features that interacted to significantly predict the appearance of *estar* varied from one level to another. In other words, the linguistic features upon which learners relied in selecting a copula varied with proficiency.

In addition to identifying the relative importance of various linguistic variables, Geeslin (2000) showed that task type contributed statistically to the prediction of the use of *estar* by L2 learners at four levels of ability. For all levels, learners were most likely to use *estar* on the preference task, less likely on the picture-description tasks, and least likely in the interview. While previous studies showed varying accuracy rates across tasks, Geeslin showed varying frequencies of use of *estar* across tasks. The link between varying frequencies of use of *estar* across tasks and the linguistic contextual features elicited in each task remains unclear. The current study investigates the relationship of those features to variation across tasks for a subset of the data described in Geeslin (2000).

3.2. *Previous research on variation in SLA*

Early studies of variation in SLA explored linguistic and social variables that predicted the appearance of a particular variant across contexts (See Tarone 1988 for a review). Research has also specifically explored differing language use across tasks. Dickerson and Dickerson (1977) found systematic differences in the production of English (r) and (z) by Japanese speakers in data elicited through free speech, dialogue reading and word list reading. This type of effect has been found with numerous phonetic variants, among speakers from varying language backgrounds (Adamson & Kovac 1981, Adamson & Regan 1991, Beebe 1980, Weinberger 1987, and Zampini 1994). Other features of the task setting, such as the ethnicity of the interviewer (Beebe & Zuengler 1983), the topic of conversation (Selinker & Douglass 1985), and the degree of cultural empathy shown by the interviewer (Berkowitz 1989) have also been shown to correspond to variation in use. Outside the area of phonology, Tarone (1985) found that variation across tasks was related to the degree of cohesiveness of the elicited discourse. In Young’s (1991) investigation of plural marking, he found no effect for ethnicity of the interviewer, which was the only feature of the discourse context that was manipulated. At the level of discourse, Pica et al. (1991) found that in native – non-native speaker interactions, the opportunities for requests for input and modification of interlanguage were significantly lower for females than for males when the native speaker was male.

Not only has task type been investigated extensively, the way in which task type is viewed has evolved. Following sociolinguistic research, such as Bell’s (1984) model of audience design, task type has come to be thought of as multi-dimensional (Young 1991). Characteristics of the setting in which the interaction takes place, characteristics of the interlocutors, and the purpose of the exchange can all contribute to variation. The range of factors that can influence learner language includes: situational context, illocutionary meaning, linguistic contexts, discourse contexts, and planning conditions (Ellis 1999). Nearly all of these relate to variation across tasks.

Research on variation has not only stemmed from sociolinguistic approaches, but also from interest in task based language instruction. McDonough and Mackey (2000) examined the variation in the frequency of variables associated with the negotiation of meaning across nine instructional tasks. Bygate (1999) demonstrated that several features of learner language varied in the narrative and argument tasks included in the study. Duff (1993) also found variation on a single task across time. Robinson (2001) proposed a framework within which tasks are distinguished by complexity, learner perceived difficulty and the interaction of the two. Each of these studies serves to inform language

teachers regarding the characteristics of classroom tasks. In related studies, the effects of planning and its interaction with task type on learner production have been investigated (Crookes 1989, Skehan & Foster 1997, 1999). This second group of studies generally measures the effects of task and elicitation condition on learner accuracy (Skehan & Foster 1997, 1999 also measure complexity and fluency). The most interesting result of these studies is that task type interacts with planning conditions such that no single measure of learner production is affected consistently. For example, Skehan and Foster (1997) found that planning increases fluency, but accuracy only increased with planning on some tasks. Crookes (1989) found significant effects of planning on some forms but not on others (e.g., ‘a’ vs. ‘the’).

The preceding review of research on variation across tasks demonstrates considerable interest in the effect of tasks on learner accuracy, learner use and language instruction. Nevertheless, research on the linguistic features of these tasks (as opposed to social or situational) is more limited. To date, the best known study of this type of task variation is Tarone and Parrish (1988). In a reanalysis of data collected from 20 learners of English, 10 of whom had Arabic as a first language and 10 of whom had Japanese as a first language, Tarone and Parrish sought to identify differences in the types of NPs that were elicited by different tasks and the degree to which this was related to variation in accuracy across tasks. The original study, Tarone (1985), found differences in the accuracy with which learners used NPs on a grammaticality judgment task, an oral interview, and an oral narration task. By categorizing the NPs into four different types, Tarone and Parrish showed that learners produced different quantities of each of the four types in the two oral tasks, even though some types of NPs were consistently more frequent than others regardless of the task. In addition, the accuracy rates for each type of NP were different within a single task and in some cases these rates also varied across all three tasks. Thus, Tarone and Parrish demonstrated the importance of a linguistic analysis of the different functions of a single form across tasks. Relating this finding to the current study raises the question of how the variation across tasks found in Geeslin (2000) might be related to the various functions of *estar* produced by learners in different tasks.

4. The current study

The purpose of the current investigation is to reanalyze a subset of the data from Geeslin (2000) in order to specifically address the influence of linguistic contextual features on variation in learner language across elicitation tasks. It is hypothesized that even when the task characteristics examined in previous research on variation in SLA, such as social variables and planning time, are held constant, the frequency with which linguistic contextual variables appear across tasks will vary. Furthermore, this variation in linguistic contextual features is hypothesized to be a correlate of the frequency with which a particular copula, either *ser* or *estar*, is used and the contextual features that predict that use. The study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. Does the distribution of the categories of the linguistic contextual variables that predict copula choice vary across tasks where learners control production?
2. How does this relate to learner copula use?
 - 2a. How does this relate to the frequency of use of *estar*?
 - 2b. How does this relate to the predictors of use of *estar*?

4.1. Participants

The participants in the current investigation were 24 students of fourth-year high-school Spanish.¹ Students were recruited through their teachers. By the fourth year of instruction at this public school students interact effectively, although not always accurately, in spoken and written Spanish. All students received instruction from the same teachers and texts. No student had more than five weeks of

¹ These data from Geeslin (2000) were chosen based on the participant’s proficiency level, and the large number of tokens provided for all tasks.

travel experience in a Spanish speaking country, and all but two had two weeks or less. All participants were Caucasian and came from middle or upper class families as defined by parental level of education. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 18, and 15 of the 24 participants were 17 years old. All but one participant began language instruction in seventh grade. All participants maintained at least a C average, and one half of the participants had received an A in Spanish during the previous grading period. Four participants said they had used Spanish on the Internet and six said they had contact with a native speaker.² Prior to analysis, data from two of the 24 participants were eliminated because these two students had significant knowledge of another Romance language.

4.2. *Data elicitation instruments and procedures*

All participants completed a background questionnaire from which the preceding description was taken, prior to making an appointment to meet with the researcher. Appointments were scheduled during a three week period, in a private conference room in the school library. During an individual meeting, participants completed three tasks in the following order: (1) a guided interview, (2) a picture description task, and (3) a written preference task. All three tasks were designed to elicit instances of the [copula + adjective] sequence. Only data from the first two tasks will be analyzed in the current study because learners did not control production on the third. Thus, no further mention of the preference task will be included in the current article.

4.2.1. *Task one: The guided interview*

Upon arrival, each participant was greeted and the researcher introduced herself. The researcher told participants that the conversation would be tape recorded and explained the use of the microphone. Participants were told that the session would begin with a conversation and that only Spanish should be used. Although the nature of the interview (structure and content) was relatively informal, each participant knew that the researcher was conducting an academic investigation.

The interview was guided by questions that elicited descriptions of family members, possessions, the town of residence, teachers and friends (See Appendix). The researcher asked all questions of each participant, but follow-up questions varied according to areas of individual interest. The type of question asked influenced the contexts elicited. For example, the question “How has this town changed in the last ten years?” elicits a response in which a comparative (individual) frame of reference is present. Nevertheless, the creativity, quantity of speech and amount of connected discourse varied such that several participants produced additional tokens as they expanded their answers and, thus, additional categories of each variable were represented. The researcher's focus was directed toward the elicitation of the greatest number of adjectives possible.³ The interview lasted at least 10 minutes.

4.2.2. *Task two: The picture-description task*

There was no pause between the interview and the second task, a tape recorded picture description task. This task was based on two photos and three sets of sketches. The order of presentation of the pictures was held constant. The researcher elicited descriptions of the pictures through questions that avoided use of either copular verb. The first photograph showed a family posing for a picture. Next, participants were asked to describe an old picture of Main Street in the town where the school was located and to tell how the town had changed. Finally, participants were asked to describe three sets of sketches. In the first set a boy plays soccer in the rain one day and gets sick the next. The second set showed a couple as children playing, as young adults getting married, as adults with a young child, and as an elderly couple. The last set, entitled ‘blind date,’ showed a couple talking on the phone and

² The self-reported contact with a native speaker may be inaccurate. During the interviews the researcher learned that several students believed (incorrectly) that their teacher was a native speaker.

³ Although it is possible to elicit certain types of contexts, each task varies in the ease with which this is done. For example, comparisons occur more naturally with pictures than with personal questions, especially when the interlocutors do not know each other (e.g., it is not possible to compare one's sister in the past to how she is now).

imagining the other. The third sketch in this set showed the two at their first meeting. In all cases it was clear that the individual in each sketch was the same person and comparisons were appropriate. As in the interview task, some participants elaborated more than others and additional tokens provided by each participant varied considerably. Learners tended to produce the greatest amount of connected discourse on this task. This task generally took 15 minutes to complete.

4.2.3. Task design

Because the current investigation compares the frequency with which various contextual features are elicited on two different tasks, it is important to discuss briefly those features that were considered in designing these tasks. For the guided interview, the researcher designed questions that included both animate and inanimate referents and made sure to include some questions that allowed for a comparison between two referents. In the picture description task, the researcher ensured that comparison of a referent to itself at another point in time was possible and sought to target three adjectives that do not appear frequently in conversation but require the use of *estar* (*enfermo* 'sick', *muerto* 'dead', and *sorprendido* 'surprised'). The overall guiding principle for both tasks was to elicit as many descriptions as possible. In both tasks, learners control the type and quantity of contexts they produce.

4.3. Coding scheme

The recorded data from the interview and picture description tasks were transcribed in their entirety. Each [copula + adjective] sequence was identified as a single token and coded for Response Type, Task Type, and the linguistic predictors of copula choice described previously. Response Type originally included five categories: *ser*, *estar*, correct other, incorrect other, and omission. These categories were collapsed to include the two categories [+ *estar*] and [- *estar*] for the purpose of statistical analysis. The linguistic variables used to describe the discourse context are summarized in Table 1. It will be recalled that each contextual variable is present in the context of each [copula + adjective] token and that the copula chosen by the learner is independent of this classification scheme. The defining question for each variable described in Table 1 summarizes the criteria used to apply the variable to each token. It will be noted that in several cases (e.g., Frame of Reference) information beyond the sentence level must be used for the classification of each token. The variables that were taken into consideration in the design of at least one task are indicated with an asterisk.

4.4. Analysis

To answer the first research question, a cross tabulation was conducted for each linguistic variable to show distribution of the categories of these variables across tasks. A χ^2 test (chi-square test) was also conducted for every variable to tell whether the distribution of the variable's categories in the interview task is significantly different from the distribution in the picture description task.⁴ This portion of the analysis shows whether or not the distribution of the categories of the linguistic contextual variables that predict copula choice varies across tasks in which learners control production.

The second research question asks whether or not there is a relationship between the distribution of the categories of the linguistic variables across tasks and learner copula use. To examine frequency of use of *estar*, a cross tabulation for response type and task was conducted. A χ^2 test was also conducted to determine whether there was a significant difference in the frequency of use of *estar* across tasks. It is expected that this test will show a significant result, as it did in Geeslin (2000). Finally, to determine the relationship between the linguistic predictors of the use of *estar* across tasks, three regression analyses were performed to identify those predictors of *estar* for each task and for

⁴ The χ^2 test was chosen for these comparisons because it does not require an even number of tokens for each condition and it is consistent with sociolinguistic research that explores the frequency of occurrence of a particular linguistic variant.

both tasks together.⁵ This allows for the qualitative comparison of significant predictors of *estar* across tasks.

Variable	Categories	Example	Criterion
Predicate Type	[+ Stage-level]	<i>Hoy, Elena está enferma</i> 'Today, Elena is sick'	Is the interpretation limited in time?
	[- Stage-level]	<i>Elena es simpática</i> 'Elena is nice'	
Susceptible to Change	[+ Susceptible]	<i>El niño es pequeño</i> 'The boy is small'	Can the quality of the referent change?
	[- Susceptible]	<i>El coche es pequeño</i> 'The car is small'	
*Frame of Reference	[+ Comparison]	<i>El niño está alto</i> 'The boy is (grew) tall'	Is a comparison of the referent implied?
	[- Comparison]	<i>El niño es listo</i> 'The boy is smart'	
Experience with the Referent	[- Dependent]	<i>En España las fiestas son importantes</i> 'In Spain, festivals are important'	Does the speaker have first-hand knowledge? Is it ongoing or an immediate reaction?
	[+ Dependent]	<i>Mi amigo Juan es desagradable</i> 'My friend Juan is unpleasant'	
*Adjective Class	[Age] [Size] [Physical appearance] [Description / evaluation] [Description of a person(ality)] [Color] [Mental state] [Physical state] [Sensory characteristic] [Status]	<i>Joven</i> 'young' <i>Grande</i> 'large' <i>Gordo</i> 'fat' <i>Difícil</i> 'difficult' <i>Inteligente</i> 'intelligent' <i>Azul</i> 'blue' <i>Animado</i> 'excited' <i>Cansado</i> 'tired' <i>Sabroso</i> 'tasty' <i>Casado</i> 'married'	Which semantic class best describes the adjective (in the sense it is used in the given context)? [note: both 'description' categories are last resorts]
Copulas Allowed	[<i>Ser</i> only]	<i>Humano</i> 'human'	With which copulas can an adjective be paired?
	[<i>Estar</i> only]	<i>Sorprendido</i> 'surprised'	
	[Both]	<i>Bonito</i> 'pretty'	

Table 1: Variables employed in the current study. Note: * indicates variables that were considered in the design of at least one task.

5. Results

5.1. Distribution of categories of contextual variables that predict copula choice across tasks

A total of 391 tokens were collected from the 22 participants on the guided interview task and 754 tokens were collected on the picture description task. Each linguistic variable was examined to

⁵ The regression analysis is often used to evaluate the relative effect of several independent variables on linguistic dependent variables. Like the χ^2 test, it does not require an equal number of each type of condition.

determine the distribution of its categories across these two tasks. Table 2 summarizes these results, showing the variable, its categories and the number and percent of tokens that appeared for each category of the variable.

Variable	Categories	Interview		Picture description	
		#	%	#	%
Predicate Type	[+ Stage-level]	79	20.2	381	50.5
	[- Stage-level]	312	79.8	373	49.5
Susceptible to Change	[+ Susceptible]	106	27.1	486	64.5
	[- Susceptible]	285	72.9	268	35.5
Frame of Reference	[+ Comparison]	33	8.4	235	31.2
	[- Comparison]	358	91.6	519	68.8
Experience with the Referent	[+ Dependent]	95	24.3	690	91.5
	[- Dependent]	296	75.7	64	8.5
Adjective Class	[Age]	16	4.1	31	4.1
	[Size]	83	21.2	65	8.6
	[Physical appearance]	13	3.3	134	17.8
	[Description / evaluation]	130	33.2	115	15.3
	[Description of a person(ality)]	53	13.6	113	15
	[Color]	55	14.1	49	6.5
	[Mental state]	10	2.6	165	21.9
	[Physical state]	23	5.9	66	8.8
	[Sensory characteristic]	3	0.8	0	0
	[Status]	4	1	15	2
	[Miscellaneous]	1	0.3	1	0.1
Copulas Allowed	[<i>Ser</i> only]	148	37.9	460	61
	[<i>Estar</i> only]	25	6.4	27	3.6
	[Both]	218	55.8	267	35.4

Table 2: Results for linguistic variables

As Table 2 demonstrates, it appears that the distribution of the categories of the linguistic variables across tasks is indeed quite different. For example, in the interview task only 8.4 percent of the contexts allowed for a comparison of a referent to itself at another point in time whereas nearly a third of the contexts in the picture description task allowed for this type of comparison. The fact that only a third of the contexts in the picture description task allowed for comparison, despite the fact that the researcher designed the task with these comparisons in mind, demonstrates that learners indeed control the type of contexts they produce on these tasks. For each variable, a χ^2 test was conducted to see if these apparent differences in distribution across tasks are indeed significant. Table 3 provides a summary of these statistical results, including the χ^2 value, the degrees of freedom, Cramer's V (a measure of effect size), and whether or not there were any small cells. Because a χ^2 test requires that there be at least 5 tokens in each cell, a test with small cells should be interpreted with caution. Table 3 indicates that the distribution of the categories of each linguistic variable across tasks is indeed significantly different.

Variable	χ^2	<i>df</i>	Cramer's V	Small Cells?
Predicate Type	98.52	1	***0.29	No
Susceptibility to Change	143.81	1	***0.35	No
Frame of Reference	74.184	1	***0.26	No
Experience with the Referent	539.66	1	***0.69	No
Adjective Class	202.20	10	***0.42	4
Copulas Allowed	55.64	2	***0.22	No

Table 3: Results for χ^2 tests for each variable with Task Type. Note: *** $p < .001$

5.2. Frequency of copula choice across tasks

In addition to analyzing the frequency of appearance of the categories of each variable, the data were analyzed to determine how learner use of the copulas varied from one task to the other. First, a cross tabulation and a χ^2 test were conducted to determine whether or not *estar* appeared with the same frequency in both tasks. Again, it is expected that response type is different across tasks, as was reported in Geeslin (2000). Table 4 shows the distribution of the dependent variable across tasks. The results for a χ^2 test that indicate that frequency of use of *estar* is significantly different across tasks are reported below the table.

	Interview		Picture description	
	#	%	#	%
[+ Estar]	38	9.7	158	21
[- Estar]	353	90.3	596	79
Total	391	100	754	100

Table 4: Frequency of copula choice across tasks. $\chi^2 = 22.91$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's V = 0.14, no small cells

5.3. Predictors of *estar* as determined by the regression analysis

The final question raised in the current study was whether or not the predictors of the use of *estar* are different from one task to another. To answer this question, three regression analyses, one for each task and one for both combined, were conducted using all of the linguistic contextual variables included in the study. This test identifies those variables that are the best predictors of the dependent variable. In other words, the test shows which features are the best predictors of learner use of *estar*. Table 5 summarizes the results for these three tests, using an X to indicate a variable that was included in the regression equation and asterisks to indicate the degree to which this variable was significant. Table 6 provides the statistical details from these tests, including the model χ^2 , the degrees of freedom, the level of significance, the -2 log likelihood, the Nagelkerke R^2 , and the percent of all tokens the model predicts.

Variables	Interview	Picture description	Both tasks
Susceptibility to Change	***X		**X
Dependence on Experience			
Frame of Reference			
Predicate Type	*X	***X	***X
Adjective Class	X	***X	**X
Copulas Allowed	*X	***X	***X

Table 5: Predictors of *estar* as determined by the regression analysis. Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

	Interview	Picture description	Both tasks
Model χ^2	107.32	202.81	297.92
df	14	12	14
Significance	.001	.001	.001
-2 log likelihood	142.03	571.34	750.34
Nagelkerke R^2	.51	.37	.38
Percent predicted	92.8	82.5	84.8

Table 6: Details of regression analyses

6. Discussion

It will be recalled that the current study sought to examine the distribution of the categories of the variables that predict copula choice across tasks. As was shown in Table 2, the variables Predicate Type and Susceptibility to Change show an opposite distribution across tasks, where the category that appears most frequently in one task is less frequent in the other. The variables Dependence on Experience and Frame of Reference show sharply opposite distribution. The variables Copulas Allowed and Adjective Class show that some categories appear more frequently than others in learner controlled production and that this frequency varies from one task to another. As was summarized in Table 3, these differences across tasks were statistically significant. These results confirm what Tarone and Parrish (1988) found for NPs. Specifically, different tasks elicit different frequencies of the functions of a dependent variable. For example, the picture description task elicits a higher percentage of comparative contexts than the interview task. Since only the comparative context is said to prompt the use of *estar*, this finding demonstrates that differing frequencies of copula use may be due in part to differing quantities of factors that prompt *estar*. In other words, a differing frequency may actually indicate that learners are applying the rules of the grammar (e.g., use *estar* in contexts of comparison) appropriately but that these contexts are not constant across tasks. It is important to note that varying norms make assessment of accuracy impossible on these tasks and that each variable is present in each context such that they interact to determine copula choice. In other words, a context of comparison is NOT an obligatory context for the use of *estar*, it is a POSSIBLE context for the use of *estar*.

Once the differences in the distribution of the categories of each variable were established, the analysis sought to determine how learner use of the copulas differed in light of these differences across tasks. It was found that the frequency with which each copula is selected varies significantly across tasks, even though both tasks show much higher use of *ser* than *estar*. This is consistent with previous research that shows that learners begin using *ser* and gradually work *estar* into the grammar (Geeslin 2000, VanPatten 1987) and with work in sociolinguistics that shows that even though use of *estar* is being extended to new contexts, it is not used more frequently than *ser* (Díaz-Campos & Geeslin 2004).

The final question raised in the current study is whether or not learners are simply applying the same grammatical rules on both tasks but doing so at different rates of frequency due to the differences in the contextual features produced on each task. The results of the regression analysis, summarized in Tables 5 and 6 show that while the predictors of *estar* are similar on both tasks, there are slight differences. Three of the factors that predict *estar* are the same for both tasks, but the feature Susceptibility to Change is not a significant predictor of the use of *estar* for the picture description task even though it is highly significant on the interview task. This difference shows that despite the variation in the contextual cues from one task to another, learners are also varying the ways in which they select copulas. This may be due to the fact that a more frequent cue will become a better predictor of use at the expense of those that are not well represented in the task. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate important differences in learner grammars from one task to another. Perhaps the most important result from this study is seen in comparing the analysis of both tasks to the individual analyses for each task alone. Because all three results are slightly different, it can be seen that an analysis that did not take task variation into account would miss important details about learner language.

7. Conclusions and implications

The current study has shown that task variation has linguistic causes. It was shown that the contextual cues that prompt *estar* do not appear with equal frequency across tasks. Thus, in analyzing the variation in frequency of use of *estar* and the predictors of that use, it is essential to take such differences into account. For example, a higher use of *estar* on one task may demonstrate the appropriate response to a contextual cue that is more frequent in one task than another, rather than an under or overuse of *estar* on a single task in comparison to the other.

These findings have several important implications. First, researchers who do not address the linguistics differences from one task to another will find it difficult to explain the full extent of the

changes in learner use of a form across tasks where other social and contextual features are held constant. Secondly, variation in learner tasks in the classroom may have very real implications for learner input. Language instructors must be aware of the fact that not all classroom activities expose learners to all categories of the variables that predict copula choice. Consequently, tasks must be varied to ensure that all categories are included in the input learners receive. Finally, both researchers and instructors must address this type of variation across tasks in order to know exactly which functions of a particular form are being evaluated. Research of the type conducted in the current study should be carried out on additional tasks and for additional grammatical structures.

Appendix: Sample task items

Sample Interview Questions

1. *¿Cómo te llamas?* ‘What is your name?’
2. *¿Cuántos años tienes?* ‘How old are you?’
3. *¿Cuántas personas hay en tu familia?* ‘How many people are there in your family?’
4. *Describele a tu mamá. (tu papá, etc.)* ‘Describe your mother’ (your father, etc.)
5. *Describe tu casa. (tu coche)* ‘Describe your house’ (your car)

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