

Microvariation in L2 Acquisition: The Acquisition of Spanish Copulas by Portuguese Learners

The acquisition of *ser* and *estar* remains a persistent challenge for learners of Spanish as a second language. However, most research has focused on English-speaking learners in classroom settings (see Geeslin, 2014; Perpiñán & Marín, 2024, for comprehensive reviews). The few studies examining learners with other native languages—such as German, French, or Portuguese—have reached similar conclusions: the selection rates of *estar* do not significantly vary based on learners' L1 (Bruhn de Garavito, 2009; Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2005, 2006). However, the study on Portuguese learners was limited to a small sample of 11 advanced learners and assessed only one context: [copula + adjective]. Building on this research, the present study investigates the acquisition of the Spanish copulas by initial Portuguese learners in two categorical contexts of copula usage: (1) *ser* and *estar* with Individual-Level (IL, 1a) and Stage-Level (SL, 1b) adjectives, and (2) copula selection in locative constructions with non-eventive (2a) eventive subjects (2b).

| Spanish | Portuguese | English |
|--|---|------------------------------------|
| (1) a. María es inteligente | A Maria é inteligente. | Maria is intelligent |
| b. María está descalza | A Maria está descalça. | Maria is barefoot |
| (2) a. El libro está en la biblioteca. | O livro está na biblioteca. | The book is in the library. |
| a'. La biblioteca está en la calle principal. | A biblioteca é / fica na rua principal. | The library is on the main street. |
| b. La reunión es en la biblioteca. | A reunião é na biblioteca. | The meeting is in the library. |

The acquisition of the Spanish copulas in locative contexts has been identified as one of the most challenging stages for learners, particularly when eventive subjects are involved (2b, Perpiñán et al., 2020). This difficulty persists even among learners whose native language exhibits similar copula distribution in the location of events, such as Italian. Given the structural similarity in the copula distribution systems of Portuguese and Spanish, except for the location of non-eventive, non-mobile objects (2b'), we question whether Portuguese learners would encounter comparable challenges as other Spanish learners. Specifically, we aim to determine whether the developmental stages proposed for English-speaking and Italian-speaking learners (Perpiñán et al., 2020; Perpiñán & Marín, 2021), in which the location of events was the last stage to acquire, would also hold for Portuguese learners.

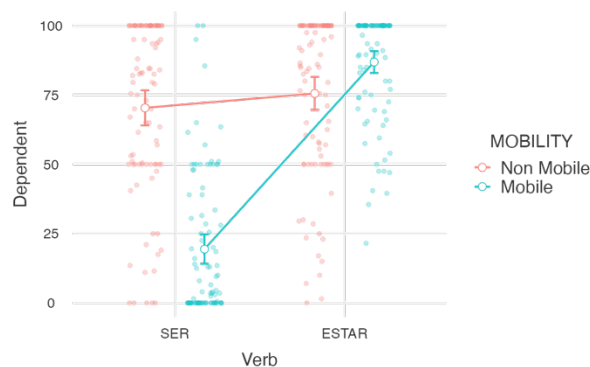
A total of 96 Portuguese learners of Spanish (A2 level) completed an Acceptability Judgement Task (AJT) and a Written Production Task (WPT), together with a short Spanish Proficiency Test. The AJT included contexts with Adjectives (IL and SL predicates), and Locatives (eventive and non-eventive subjects), with *ser* and *estar*, so sentences were counterbalanced for grammaticality ($k = 4$ per condition, $2*2*2*4 = 32$ sentences in a total of 56-sentence AJT). The WPT included contexts with Adjectives (IL and SL), and Locatives (Eventive and Non-Eventive), in which participants had to provide the appropriate verbal form or *ser* or *estar* (5 tokens per condition, 20 sentences in total).

The results revealed a clear distinction between the copulas in the Adjective condition, with *ser* being accepted in IL contexts and *estar* in SL contexts (ratings close to 100), while their ungrammatical counterparts were consistently rejected (ratings near 0). Significant differences were observed across all contrasts, except between the two grammatical conditions (Fig. 1, Left). A similar pattern emerged for Locative contexts, though higher acceptance rates were noted in the ungrammatical *Object* + *estar* condition (Fig. 1, Right). Further analysis showed that when *Mobility*—a relevant aspectual factor in Portuguese—is taken into account, it significantly influences the interlanguage grammar of Portuguese learners (Fig. 2). Comparable findings were obtained in the WPT. Overall, Portuguese learners did not exhibit specific difficulties with the location of events, unlike other L2 learners, but struggled with the location of non-mobile objects (e.g., "library"), accepting them interchangeably with *ser* and *estar*. We interpret these results as L1 transfer effects, which both facilitate and delay aspects of the acquisition process.

Fig. 1: Acceptability ratings for Copulas *Ser/Estar* combined with Adjectives (L) and Locatives (R)



Fig. 2 Acceptability ratings of the Location of Objects split by Mobility



References:

- Bruhn de Garavito, J. (2009). Eventive and Stative Passives: The Role of Transfer in the Acquisition of *ser* and *estar* by German and English L1 Speakers. In J. Collentine, M. García, B. A. Lafford, & F. Marcos Marín (Eds.), *Selected Proceedings of the 11th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium* (pp. 27–38). Hispanic Linguistics Symposium, Somerville, MA. Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
- Geeslin, K. L., & Guijarro-Fuentes, P. (2005). The Acquisition of Copula Choice in Instructed Spanish: The Role of Individual Characteristics. In D. Eddington (Ed.), *Selected Proceedings of the 6th Conference on the Acquisition of Spanish and Portuguese as First and Second Languages* (pp. 66–77). Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
- Geeslin, K. L., & Guijarro-Fuentes, P. (2006). Second Language Acquisition of Variable Structures in Spanish by Portuguese Speakers. *Language Learning*, 56(1), 53–107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0023-8333.2006.00342.x>
- Perpiñán, S., & Marín, R. (2021). Aspect in the acquisition of the Spanish locative paradigm by Italian L2 learners. In S. Baauw, F. Drijkoningen, & L. Meroni (Eds.), *Romance Languages and Linguistic Theory 2018* (pp. 192–204). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://benjamins.com/catalog/cilt.357.10per>
- Perpiñán, S., Marín, R., & Moreno-Villamar, I. (2020). The role of aspect in the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* in locative contexts by English-speaking learners of Spanish. *Language Acquisition*, 27(1), 35–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10489223.2019.1610408>