

Unraveling development of Spanish locative copulas with event and object subjects: insights from Catalan-Spanish bilingual and monolingual children

The present study examines the production of locative copulas *ser* and *estar* in combination with event and object subjects in the Spanish of Catalan-Spanish bilingual children. Spanish and Catalan, two typologically-related languages, have a binary copular system, yet some differences arise: both languages locate events with *ser* (1a, 1b), whereas Spanish locative copula for objects is *estar* (2a), and Catalan alternates its distribution between *estar* and *ser* (2b). Recent acquisitional approaches have described the Spanish copula distribution on the basis of the *dynamicity* aspectual property of nouns (events [+ dynamic] vs. objects [-dynamic]) as the guiding principle in copula selection (Perpiñán et al., 2020). Little existing research in Spanish monolingual and Catalan-Spanish bilingual acquisition has proven that the copula distinction in this locative context is clearly mastered at an adult age in production (Cuza & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2020, for bilinguals), but still pose a problem in interpretation (Leone-Fernández et al., 2012, for monolinguals; Perpiñán, 2015, for bilinguals). Crucially, less is known about its acquisition and development in childhood. To our knowledge, only two studies have focused on this phenomenon in monolingual (Sera et al., 1999) and Catalan-Spanish bilingual (Cuza & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2020) children, concluding that the ‘event + *ser*’ construction is developmentally more demanding than the ‘object + *estar*’ combination. Such difficulty has been attributed to language internal and conceptualisation factors, and not to bilingualism. We aim to address this gap by exploring: (1) the role of dynamicity of events and objects in copula choice; (2) the presence of cross-linguistic influence from Catalan to Spanish and the impact of language dominance; and (3) the extent to which an age effect is present in a larger cross-sectional monolingual and bilingual samples.

In our study, 118 Catalan-Spanish bilingual children, classified in 3 groups by age (age ranges: 7-8 y.o.; 10-11 y.o.; 13-14 y.o.) and language dominance, completed an oral production task, and were compared to age-matched Spanish monolingual controls ($N=100$). Participants were prompted to elicit a locative copular construction by means of 12 pair of images displaying an event or an object (6 picture items each) in two different locations based on a present/past temporal contrast. Two factors were manipulated: noun subject type (event/object), which controlled for presence/absence of dynamicity, and copula verb (*ser/estar*) (see Table 1).

The preliminary results suggest that our child bilinguals and monolinguals show a similar accurate use of ‘*estar*’ for the location of objects, performing adult-like. Overall, monolinguals preferred the locative copula ‘*ser*’ in the event constructions. Surprisingly, and unlike monolinguals, bilinguals resorted to ‘*estar*’ to locate events to a higher degree (see Fig. 1). Monolingual and bilingual data reveal a delayed acquisition of ‘event + *ser*’ compared to ‘object + *estar*’, in line with Cuza & Guijarro (2020). A more detailed analysis of copula elicitation with events by age group points to a low use of target ‘*ser*’ by children aged 7-8, and more notably by the bilingual speakers. Whereas monolinguals gradually develop ‘*ser*’ across ages, the bilingual groups exhibit a more steady process: this copula use highly increases between 7- and 11-year olds, but does not improve from ages 10 to 14 and is in clear competition with ungrammatical ‘*estar*’ (see Fig. 2). These findings prove an effect of bilingualism, contrary to those reported in Cuza & Guijarro-Fuentes (2020). Consequently, we observe that the [+dynamicity] aspectual feature of events plays a crucial role in the protracted development of ‘*ser*’ due to age effects but also bilingualism, while locating objects ([-dynamicity]) with ‘*estar*’ is acquired earlier. A further explanation for this acquisitional problem may reside in the ontological development of the ‘event noun’ concept and its linguistic expression, as previously reported by Sera et al. (1999). Future directions comparing production and interpretation monolingual and bilingual data will be addressed.

Appendices

Examples

1. Copula distribution with event nouns.
 - (1a) La graduación *es* en el Aula Magna. SP: BE-SER
 - (1b) La graduació *és* a l'Aula Magna. CAT: BE-SER

‘The graduation is at the auditorium.’
2. Copula distribution with object nouns.
 - (2a) El atril *está* en el Aula Magna. SP: BE-ESTAR
 - (2b) El faristol *és/està* a l'Aula Magna. CAT: BE-SER / BE-ESTAR

‘The graduation is at the auditorium.’

Table 1. Sample items from the oral elicitation task targeting locative copula constructions by condition.



Condition	Linguistic and visual stimuli	Expected target answer
C1: Event noun + ser		<p>Ayer el partido fue en el jardín y hoy es en el museo.</p> <p>‘Yesterday the match was in the garden and today is in the museum.’</p>
C2: Object noun + estar		<p>Ayer el columpio estaba en el jardín y hoy está en el museo.</p> <p>‘Yesterday the swing as in the garden and today is in the museum.’</p>

Figure 1. Results from experimental and control groups showing frequency of copula verbs to locate event and object subjects (in %).

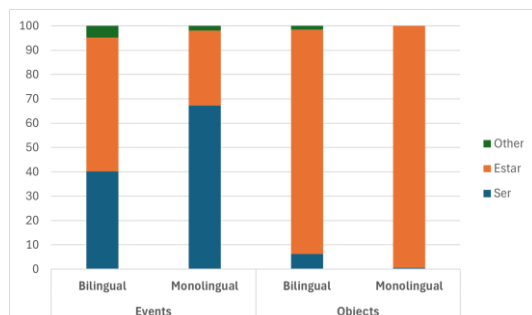
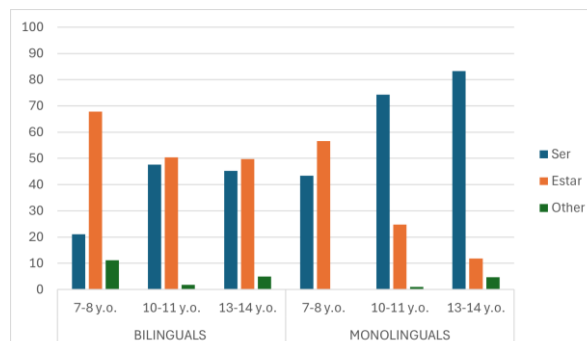


Figure 2. Results from verb use on the ‘event + ser’ condition by age in Catalan-Spanish bilinguals and monolingual controls (in %).



References

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