

Sara Sanchez-Alonso – Abstract

Spanish Speakers are Innovating: Constrained Synchronic Variation of Copula Use across Dialects

Spanish copula 'estar' (but not 'ser') presupposes that the predication it occurs with (simpatico 'friendly' (1)) is contingent. Despite dialectal variation, a clear pattern emerges: 'estar' use expansion at the expense of 'ser' use. We present the first systematic study of synchronic variation in three Spanish dialects (Spain, Argentina and Mexico) as a manifestation of the diachronic pattern of estar's expansion.

Proposal: estar's higher informative value motivates its expansion into ser's domain. Possibility of contingency is triggered by context:

(1) Ayer volvi a ver Juan[contingency-triggering-context] El ESTA muy simpatico. Yesterday I saw Juan again He IS BEING friendly.

Predictions: contingency-triggering context (vs. neutral context) will result in higher acceptability for 'estar' (study1) and faster reading times for estar's predication (study2).

Study1: Questionnaire: Contingency-triggering contexts resulted in higher acceptability ($p < .01$). Mexican dialect: estar acceptability is less dependent (vs. Iberian/Argentinian) on explicit contextual triggers.

Study2: Self-paced reading: Contingency-triggering-contexts facilitated reading-times for estar-predications ($p < .001$). Women show facilitatory effect of context earlier in sentence.

Conclusions. a) Dialectal variation in copula use is a manifestation of general pattern of diachronic change. b) Mexican dialect appears diachronically ahead in the pattern, and c) diachronic change and synchronic variation in acceptability are rooted in real-time processing asymmetries.