

The L2 acquisition of Spanish locative and existential constructions by Catalan and Italian speakers

Selection of copula verbs in Spanish is a classic challenging area for L2 learners. Even so, it has received moderate attention on SLA research, and most of the studies have focused on the acquisition of the semantic and pragmatic distinctions between *ser* and *estar*, particularly when combined with adjectives (Bruhn de Garavito & Valenzuela, 2006; Geeslin, 2002; 2003; Schmitt & Miller, 2007; among others). The present study goes beyond the alternation between *ser* and *estar* + adjective by looking at the selection of copula verbs to express location and existentials.

Three microparametric differences among Spanish, Italian, and Catalan are investigated, which regulate (a) the distribution of *ser* vs. *estar* in locatives (the ‘eventiveness’ effect), (b) the distribution of *haber* vs. *estar* (the *definiteness effect*, Milsark, 1977), and (c) the use of clitics in locatives. Standard Catalan uses the verb *ésser* for locatives and *haver* for existentials. Standard Italian, uses *essere* to express the existence or location of a THEME. Catalan, as well as Italian present obligatory locative clitics (*hi/ci*) in the subject position for existential sentences. Catalan and Italian, unlike Spanish, do not obey the definiteness restriction in existential constructions and allow definite DPs as THEMES in presentational sentences: *Hi ha en Joan a la porta* / *C’è Giovanni alla porta* / **Hay Juan en la puerta*. Given these differences, we question whether L2 speakers of Spanish are able to fully acquire the distribution of *estar* in locative predicates and observe the restriction on definite DPs in Spanish existential constructions.

The present study analyzes the expression of L2 Spanish existential and locative constructions in 20 native speakers of Catalan, 34 native speakers of Italian (from Rome), and 20 monolingual Spanish speakers with two main tasks, an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) and an elicited oral production task (OPT). The AJT included 45 target items -in a total of 110 sentences-, which tested *ser* and *estar* in locative structures (1), and the definiteness effect with *haber* and *estar* in simple (2) and relative clause sentences (3). The OPT consisted of a ‘Spot the Difference Task’, with 5 pairs of very similar pictures that participants had to describe localizing the differences between the two pictures (see appendix B).

Results indicated that Catalan speakers used significantly less *estar* to express location than native speakers, showing that this verb develops later than *ser* as previously reported (VanPatten, 1985, 1987), and as predicted by recent analyses of the copular *ser/estar* (Brucart, 2012; Gallego & Uriagereka, 2011). However, Italian speakers overgeneralized *estar* to presentational uses, and localize *events*, when *ser* or *haber* are required in Spanish. Finally, Italian speakers of intermediate proficiency, and some Catalan speakers continued using *ser* to localize objects. More interestingly, both L2 groups accepted definite DPs in presentational sentences, violating the *definiteness effect*, displaying problems when assembling semantic features into specific lexical pieces. These results will be discussed within the debate on dissociation between acquisition of syntax and acquisition of semantics, and the *feature assembly* or *feature matching* hypothesis (Lardiere, 2008, 2009; Slabakova, 2009).

Appendix: Target Sentences in the AJT

(1) a. **Ser / Estar with Objects*

El libro **es / está* encima de la mesa.
The book **SER / ESTAR* on-top of the table
'The book is on the table.'

b. *Ser/ *Estar with Events*

La reunión *es / *está* en el hotel Majestic.
The meeting *BE/ ESTA* in the hotel Majestic
'The meeting is in the hotel Majestic.'

(2) *Haber with *definites and indefinites.*

Hay **las / unas* llaves encima de la mesa.
HAVE the/ some keys on-top of the table
'There are the / some keys on the table.'

(3) *Estar with definites and ??indefinites*

El / ??un libro *está* encima de la mesa.
The / a book *ESTAR* on-top of the table
'The/ a book is on the table.'

(4) *Relative Clauses: ?Haber / Estar with definite antecedents*

Las llaves que *?hay / están* en la puerta son mías.
The keys that *HAVE / ESTAR* on the door are mine.
'The keys that are at the door are mine.'

Appendix B: Picture Description Task

Picture A / Abans ('Before')



Picture B / Ara ('Now')

