Diachronic Development through Synchronic Variation in Copular Use
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Background. An understanding of how systematic patterns of variation lead to changes across languages can shed light on the cognitive basis that underlie language change. Here, we investigate the constrained synchronic variation in Spanish copular use across dialects. We argue that the synchronic variation is a manifestation of the diachronic pattern of development and can be accounted for if the interplay between the following types of information is precisely characterized: 1) the meaning of the expressions, 2) the local context and 3) the pragmatic forces that constrain their interaction.

We start from two observations concerning the distributional patterns of the copulas ser and estar in Spanish (translated as English ‘be’). Diachronic observation. Estar entered the language from Latin as a locative copula in the 12th century, gradually being used in contexts in which only ser had been previously used [1,2,3,4]. Synchronic observation. This process of encroachment continues in several varieties of modern Spanish (Mexico[2,5,6], Venezuela[7,8], Cuba[9], Puerto Rico[10], Argentina[6], Spain[6]), in situations of language contact[11] and in Spanish as a heritage language[12,13].

Analysis: Estar presupposes that the embedded predication holds contingently at utterance time (ser is neutral on this respect). Estar-licensing contexts are thus those that allow the predication to be construed as contingent by making accessible alternative situations at which the predication may be false. For example, the use of estar in (1b) is marginally acceptable in Iberian Spanish. The acceptability, however, improves when it is presented in a context such as (1a), in which the prior beliefs about the standard size of houses in the area make accessible contrasting alternatives in which the property of being big may not apply to the house.

(1) a. Context: My friend’s house is much bigger than any other in the area.
   b. ¡La casa está grande! ‘The house está big!’

Proposal: The higher informative value of estar (which leads to greater context-dependence) allows speakers to extend its use to new predications that may not be diachronically observed in a particular dialect. Accordingly, the acceptability/real-time processing of estar predications should be sensitive to contextual modulation. Predictions: Higher acceptability ratings (Studies 1-3) and faster reading times (Study 4) for estar predications when the context allows the proposition to be construed as contingent (contingency-supporting context, SC vs. neutral context, NC).

Experimental data (Materials: Table1): Studies 1-3: Questionnaire. (dialects: Iberian, Mexican, Argentinian, Venezuelan): Acceptability scores were significantly higher for [SC+estar] in comparison to [NC+estar] (p<.01). [NC+ser] sentences were rated higher than [SC+ser] (p<.04), indicating a preference for estar when SC contexts were provided. In Mexican/Venezuelan dialects, estar is less dependent (vs. Iberian/Argentinian) on contrasting alternatives being explicitly provided by the context.

Study 4: Self-paced reading (Iberian, Mexican, Argentinian). Reading times were significantly higher for estar sentences when preceded by NC contexts (p<.001) (Fig.1). No processing differences in Mexican speakers.

Conclusions: a) Mexican and Venezuelan dialects appear diachronically ahead in the pattern of development. b) Diachronic change and synchronic variation are rooted in real-time processing differences; in this case determined by the processing facilitation of contextual presupposition satisfaction. c) Systematic patterns of synchronic variation appear as a manifestation of the diachronic development of ser/estar use. d) Variation is constrained by the higher informative value of estar whose presuppositional component demands precise contextual information.
References

Table 1. Examples of Materials (2x2 Design) for Studies 1-4 (sentences are presented in English for brevity).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two contexts</th>
<th>+</th>
<th>Sentence with ser or estar</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC: We were surprised with Mondrago beach.</td>
<td></td>
<td>There are many palm trees, the water <strong>SER/ESTAR</strong> blue and it has a quiet sea.</td>
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<tr>
<td>NC: Mondrago beach has all the qualities of the ideal beach.</td>
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Figure 1. Mean Reading Times for Study 4 (Iberian Spanish, n=61)