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Evidential commitment and feature mismatch in Spanish *estar* constructions

Victoria Escandell-Vidal

*Departamento de Lengua Española y Lingüística General, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED),
Senda del Rey, 7 -708A, 28040 Madrid, Spain*

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Abstract

Some Spanish constructions with the copula *estar* plus an adjective, like *María está muy guapa* (María be-ESTAR.PRS.3SG very pretty), are interpreted systematically, without any particular contextual requirements, as indicating that the predication is based on the speaker's direct perception. Interestingly, this phenomenon obtains only for a subset of *estar* + adjective constructions.

The aim of this paper is to account for the conditions under which this entailment of direct experience appears. More specifically, I argue that it is the result of an interpretive, inferential solution triggered to solve a feature mismatch between the semantic requirements of the copula *estar* and the semantic properties of individual-level adjectival predicates. The evidential commitment is added to provide a situational anchor for the *estar* predication when the adjectival predicate is unbounded.

The approach presented here has implications for our view on commitment and evidentiality, and can cast some light on the issue of copula selection in Spanish.

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1. Introduction. The facts

Languages with more than one copular verb, such as Spanish, Catalan or Portuguese, pose special challenges for grammatical description (for an overview, see Leonetti, 1994; Fernández Leborans, 1999; Batllori, 2006; RAE, 2009: §37.7; Camacho, 2012; Marín, 2015; Pérez Jiménez et al., 2015). Copula choice is a much discussed, though not yet well understood, issue.

To add even more complexity, other phenomena seem to interact with copula choice. This is the case of the facts dealt with in this paper. Consider the *estar* + adjective constructions in (1):

- (1) a. *María está muy guapa.*
María be-ESTAR.PRS.3SG very pretty.
'María looks very pretty.'
- b. *¡La comida del gato está deliciosa!*
The food of-the cat be-ESTAR.PRS.3SG delicious
'The food of the cat tastes delicious!'

E-mail address: vicky@flog.uned.es.

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In addition to the predication expressed, the examples in (1) also convey the idea that the speaker bases her assessment on direct experience. Thus, the sentences in (1) carry two different commitments (on this notion, see De Brabanter and Dendale, 2008). By uttering (1)a, the speaker commits herself (i) to the belief that María looks pretty, and (ii) to having direct evidence for her assertion. In a similar way, (1)b commits the speaker (i) to believing that cat food is tasty, and (ii) to having tasted it.

The second commitment is of an evidential nature since it relates the assertion to the source from which the information has been obtained (Aikhenvald, 2004, 2014; cf. De Haan, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Speas, 2010; Kalsang et al., 2013). In languages with evidential markers, “uttering a sentence S containing an evidential marker [ev] commits the speaker to the existence of a situation in which she receives evidence for [[S]]” (Davis et al., 2007: 73).

What is interesting about the examples in (1) is that the evidential commitment obtains without any specific linguistic operator to this effect. In this sense, it represents a challenge to compositionality, since the meaning of the sentence seems to be not fully derivable from the meaning of its parts. The evidential commitment does not look as a conversational implicature either, given that no specific set of contextual assumptions is required for it to arise. The robustness of the direct experience commitment can be made visible by minimal pairs like the following:

- (2) a. *Ayer vi a María. Está muy guapa.*
Yesterday see.PST.1SG to María. Be-ESTAR.PRS.3SG very pretty
'Yesterday I saw María. She looked very pretty.'
- b. *#Hace tiempo que no veo a María. Está muy guapa.*
Make.PRS.3SG time that not see.PRS.1SG to María. Be-ESTAR.PRS.3SG very pretty
'I haven't seen María for a while now. She looks very pretty.'

The sequence in (2)a is perfect, whereas that in (2)b is considered “odd”, “incongruent”, “inconsistent” by native speakers. I have tested this contrast with dozens of them and they are unanimous in their judgement. The reason is that by uttering (2)b the speaker commits herself to entertaining contradictory thoughts, claiming at the same time (i) that she has not seen María for a while, and (ii) that she has direct experience that María looks pretty now.

The examples in (3) provide further examples of utterances conveying an evidential commitment of direct experience:

- (3) a. *La Real estuvo inteligente y caritativa*
The Royal be-ESTAR.PST.3SG intelligent and charitable
'The Royal [Society of San Sebastián (a football team)] was intelligent and charitable.'
[They played in an intelligent way and did not humiliate their rival team]
(E. Rodríguez. *El País*, 16/09/1998)
- b. *El rey estuvo simpático con los periodistas.*
The King be-ESTAR.PST.3SG friendly with the journalists.
'The King appeared friendly with the media'
(J. Bono. *La información.com*, 1/6/2011)
- c. *El análisis de Ónega: “El Banco de España es culpable, pero Bruselas estuvo torpe y ciega.*
The analysis of Ónega: The Bank of Spain be-SER.PRS.3SG guilty, but
Brussels be-ESTAR.PST.3SG clumsy and blind.
'Ónegas's analysis: the Bank of Spain is to blame, but Brussels behaved in a clumsy and blind way'
(Ivoox.com, 17/06/2014)

In all three cases, the utterances entail that the speaker has had direct experience for his assessment. In (3)a the sports caster makes this assertion after having attended the football match; in (3)b a politician who was with the King comments on their meeting with the media; in (3)c an economic analyst judges the way in which the EU has dealt with a certain problem.

The aim of this paper is to account for the commitments of direct experience that are found in (1)–(3). The main questions I want to address are the following:

- (i) When does the evidential commitment arise?
- (ii) Why does it arise?
- (iii) What are the implications for a theory of language?

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