

Special Issue 2. *Ser* and *Estar* in Catalan

1 Introduction

In Modern Catalan, the two verbs (*ser* and *estar*) be regarded as counterparts of the English verb *be*, which can appear in five primary constructions: COPULAR, LOCATIVE, EXISTENTIAL, PASSIVE, and PROGRESSIVE (Batllori and Roca 2012). See English examples below in (1).

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|--------|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| (1) a. | John is tall. | (COPULAR) |
| b. | John is happy. | (COPULAR) |
| c. | John is a teacher. | (COPULAR) |
| d. | Mary is in the garden. | (LOCATIVE) |
| e. | There is a boy (in the garden). | (EXISTENTIAL) |
| f. | There are dogs that don't bark. | (EXISTENTIAL) |
| g. | He is loved by his family. | (PASSIVE) |
| h. | The table is cleaned by the waiter. | (PASSIVE) |
| i. | The man is running. | (PROGRESSIVE) |

Among them, first, the COPULAR construction characterizes the subject *John* as possessing the (individual level) property of the copular complement adjective *being tall* in (1a) or the (stage level) state of the copular complement adjective *being happy* in (1b), or it classifies the subject as belonging to the (individual level) category of the copular complement noun *being a teacher* in (1c) (Chappell and Lü 2021:4).

Second, the LOCATIVE construction (1d) expresses the position of the subject *Mary* with respect to a given spatial context *the garden*. The subject is typically definite (Chappell and Lü 2021:5).

Third, the EXISTENTIAL construction encodes the existence of an individual or a state (Li 2020:183). It has an important discourse function as a presentative device for introducing new information by means of a typically indefinite noun in (1e) or generic noun in (1f) (Chappell and Lü 2021:6).

Fourth, in the PASSIVE construction, the grammatical subject expresses the theme or patient of the main verb, that is, the person *he* in (1g) or thing *the table* in (1h) that undergoes the action or has its state changed (O'Grady et al. 2001).

Fifth, the PROGRESSIVE construction in (1i) conveys the idea that a *running* event is progressing dynamically over a time frame opened up by an utterance (Mair 2012:1).

2 The origins of *ser* and *estar*: From Latin ESSE and STARE

It is well-known that *ser* and *estar* in modern Romance languages are descendants of ESSE and STARE in (Vulgar) Latin (Batllori and Roca 2012). In Latin, STARE has a clear lexical content of *stand* or *remain* and was used in LOCATIVE sentences such as (2).

- (2) Sto ad ianuam.
 stand.1SG.PRE at door.ACC.SG
 'I am in front of the door.'

In contrast, ESSE is the counterpart of *be*, and was used in several syntactic configurations, including (the original basic) EXISTENTIAL (3a), individual level COPULAR (3b), stage level COPULAR (3c), LOCATIVE (3d), PASSIVE (3e), and PROGRESSIVE (3f).

- (3) a. Erant omnino itinera duo.
be.3PL.PST.IMPERF altogether route.NOM.PL two.NOM.PL
'There were only two tracks.'
- b. Ueri amici fideles sunt.
true.NOM.PL friend.NOM.PL faithful.NOM.PL be.3PL.PRE
'Real friends are faithful.'
- c. Bene est.
well be.1SG.PRE
'He is well.'
- d. qui in castris erant Caesaris.
who.NOM.PL in camp.ABL.SG be.3PL.PST.IMPERF Caesar.GEN.SG
'who were in Caesar's camp.'
- e. Amatus sum.
love.PTCP.PERF.NOM.SG.M be.1SG.PRE
'I am loved.'
- f. quos semper uideas bibentes esse in Thermopolio.
who.ACC.PL always see.2SG.SUBJ drink.ACC.PL.PTCP.PRE be.INF in tavern.ABL.SG
'those you always see drinking in Thermopolio.'

Briefly, Latin has only one counterpart to the English verb *be* (namely ESSE). By contrast, STARE is a lexical word, which means *stand* or *remain*, and can only be used for LOCATIVE constructions.

3 *Ser* and *estar* in Catalan

Over the course of its history, Latin STARE was grammaticalized into a counterpart of English *be*, gradually coming to share, and in some contexts even replace, functions traditionally associated with *ser* (from ESSE). Table 1 provides a brief comparison between Latin and Modern Catalan.

Table 1: Comparison of Latin and Modern Catalan

Type of sentence	Verb used in Latin	Verb used in Modern Catalan
COPULAR		
individual level	ESSE	<i>ser</i>
stage level	ESSE	<i>estar</i> (/ <i>ser</i>)
LOCATIVE	STARE / ESSE	<i>ser</i> / <i>estar</i>
EXISTENTIAL	ESSE	<i>haver-hi</i>
PASSIVE	ESSE	<i>ser</i> / <i>estar</i>
PROGRESSIVE	ESSE	<i>estar</i>

3.1 COPULAR sentences

Ramos (2002) and Rosselló (2002), among others, argue that in Modern Catalan, individual level COPULAR sentences take *ser* as in (4a), and stage level COPULAR sentences take *estar* as in (4b).

- (4) a. El teu germà és alt.
the.SG.M your.SG.M brother.SG.M be.3SG.PRE tall.SG.M
'Your brother is tall.'
- b. El teu germà està content.
the.SG.M your.SG.M brother.SG.M be.3SG.PRE happy.SG.M
'Your brother is happy.'

However, some stage level predicates can occur with *ser* or *estar* indistinctly with no difference in meaning, as in (5).

- (5) a. Aquestes pomes són madures.
 these.PL.F apple.PL.F be.3PL.PRE mature.PL.F
 ‘These apples are ripe.’
 b. Aquestes pomes estan madures.
 these.PL.F apple.PL.F be.3PL.PRE mature.PL.F
 ‘These apples are ripe.’

On the other hand, individual level predicates can be coerced into stage level interpretations within appropriate contexts, although this is not generally accepted.

- (6) a. En Joan és molt amable.
 the John be.3SG.PRE much friendly.SG
 ‘John is very kind.’
 b. En Joan està molt amable.
 the John be.3SG.PRE much friendly.SG
 ‘John is very kind (today).’
 (7) a. El ballarí és molt elegant.
 the.SG.M dancer.SG.M be.3SG.PRE much elegant.SG
 ‘The dancer is very elegant.’
 b. Amb aquest vestit el ballarí està molt elegant.
 with this.SG.M dress.SG.M the.SG.M dancer.SG.M be.3SG.PRE much elegant.SG
 ‘With this dress the dancer is very elegant.’

3.2 LOCATIVE sentences

In LOCATIVE sentences, *ser* is used in neutral contexts, and *estar* is used to provide the sentence with a delimitation of space and time.

- (8) a. En Joan és a casa de l’ Anna.
 the John be.3SG.PRE at home.SG.F of the Anna
 ‘John is in Anna’s house.’
 b. En Joan està molt de temps a casa de l’ Anna.
 the John be.3SG.PRE much of time at home.SG.F of the Anna
 ‘John spends a lot of time in Anna’s house.’

In (8b) *estar* is used to state the limits of permanence, which results in a marked structure where the spatio-temporal anchorage is made explicit syntactically.

3.3 EXISTENTIAL sentences

Different from Latin, EXISTENTIAL sentences in Modern Catalan are no longer expressed with the copular verb (the BE-strategy); rather, they are expressed with *haver-hi* (the HAVE-strategy).

- (9) Hi ha quatre persones (a casa).
 LOC HAVE four person.PL.F at home
 ‘There four people (at home).’

3.4 PASSIVE sentences

Bartra (2002) argues that *ser* is employed in non-resultative passives as shown in (10), while *estar* is used in resultative passives as in (11). *Resultative* here is understood as the existence of a final state that holds at the end of an event.

- (10) a. El noi és estimat (per la seva família).
 the.SG.M boy.SG.M be.3SG.PRE love.PTCP.SG.M for the.SG.F his.SG.F family.SG.F
 ‘The boy is loved (by his family).’
 b. El gos és acariciat (per l’home).
 the.SG.M dog.SG.M be.3SG.PRE pat.PTCP.SG.M for the.SG.M man.SG.M
 ‘The dog is patted (by the man).’
 c. La porta és oberta.
 the.SG.F door.SG.F be.3SG.PRE open.PTCP.SG.F
 ‘The door is opened (by someone).’
- (11) La porta està oberta.
 the.SG.F door.SG.F be.3SG.PRE open.PTCP.SG.F
 ‘The door is (already) opened.’

3.5 PROGRESSIVE sentences

The PROGRESSIVE sentences are expressed with *estar* and the gerund form of the verb, as exemplified in (12).

- (12) a. En Pere està treballant.
 the.M Peter be.3SG.PRE work.GER
 ‘Peter is working.’
 b. La Maria està escrivint un article.
 the.F Mary be.3SG.PRE write.GER a article.SG.M
 ‘Mary is writing an article.’

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