29

Ser and estar

For the conjugation of *ser* see 13.3.45, and of *estar* see 13.3.21.

The main topics discussed here are:

- The uses of *ser* (Section 29.2)
- The uses of *estar* (Section 29.3)
- When *ser* and *estar* are more or less interchangeable (Section 29.4)
- *Estar* used to mean 'seem', 'taste', etc. (Section 29.4.3)
- *Ser* or *estar* used to change the meaning of adjectives (Section 29.4.4)

29.1 General

*Ser* and *estar* both translate the English 'to be', but the difference between the two Spanish words is fundamental and sometimes subtle.

Basically *ser* is used to answer questions about who or what something or someone is, whereas *estar* answers questions about where, how or in what condition something is: *soy español, pero estoy en Londres* 'I'm Spanish, but I'm in London'; *es callado* 'he's the quiet type', *está callado* 'he's keeping silent (at the moment)'; *puede que sea así* 'perhaps he/she/it is like that', *puede que esté así* 'perhaps that's the condition/situation he/she/it's in'.

It is usually true that *ser* indicates permanent features and *estar* temporary conditions, but this is contradicted by *está muerto* 'he's dead' or *durante varias horas fue feliz* 'for several hours (s)he was happy', or by the fact that one can say either *soy calvo* or *estoy calvo* 'I'm bald'. Nor is a characteristic expressed by *ser* necessarily permanent: a brunette can change the colour of her hair and say *antes era morena pero ahora soy rubia* 'I was a brunette before, but now I'm a blonde': each colour is considered, at the time, to be a typical feature of the woman, not a temporary state.

*Ser* is also often used with a few adjectives that indicate what can be thought of as states, e.g. *feliz* 'happy', *desgraciado* 'unhappy', *pobre* 'poor', *rico* 'rich', *consciente* 'conscious', but these are probably best treated as exceptions: cf. *está deprimido* 'he's depressed', *está contento* 'he's happy'/'content', *está animado* 'he's full of life' (*estar* obligatory).

Some adjectives, e.g. *gordo* 'fat', *divorciado* 'divorced', *casado* 'married', may be used with either *ser* or *estar* with hardly any significant change of meaning.

*Estar* before a noun phrase can normally only denote location: compare *¿es el jefe?* 'is (s)he/are you the boss?' with *¿está el jefe?* 'is the boss in?'

Learners constantly forget that *ser* must be used for the location of events as
opposed to people or things: ¿dónde es la fiesta? ‘where’s the party?’, but ¿dónde está el libro? ‘where’s the book?’

Ser is used to form the passive: fue criticado ‘he was criticized’; see Chapter 28.
Estar is used to form the continuous aspect of verbs: está hablando ‘he’s talking’; see Chapter 15.

Both ser and estar are often echoed or ‘resumed’ by lo, as in —Ana parece sueca.
—Lo es ‘“Ana looks Swedish.’ “She is.”’. See 7.4.1 note (i).

29.2 Uses of ser

29.2.1 In equational sentences of the sort A = B

Ser is used to link elements in statements of the type ‘A = B’, where A and B are nouns or pronouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ser</th>
<th>Estar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>París es la capital de Francia</td>
<td>Paris is the French capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es médico/abogado/bibliotecario</td>
<td>He’s a doctor/lawyer/librarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es un estafador/ Esto es una estafa</td>
<td>He’s a swindler/This is a swindle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es la una/ Son las doce</td>
<td>It’s one o’clock/twelve o’clock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha sido un año/ verano frío</td>
<td>It’s been a cold year/summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esto es lo que me fastidia</td>
<td>This is what I find annoying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La confrontación de culturas en el siglo XXI puede ser sangrienta, vaticina</td>
<td>Umberto Eco predicts that culture clashes in the 21st century may be bloody</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(i) Estar cannot appear before nouns or pronouns unless the latter are its subject:
*yo estoy maestro* is emphatically not Spanish for ‘I’m a schoolteacher’: soy maestro.

Exceptions to this rule are very rare, and include ranking, as in el Barcelona está/es el segundo en la clasificación ‘Barcelona is second in the league table’ (from GDLE 37.6.3), estar pez, e.g. estoy pez en historia ‘I’m a complete dunce in history’ (colloquial and Spain only?), and weather expressions like está un día magnífico ‘it’s a lovely day’. Many speakers accept only hace un día magnifico or es un día magnífico, etc., but all Spanish informants accepted está un día que da gusto salir a la calle ‘it’s one of those days when you like going out into the streets’. With an adjective estar is used in weather expressions—está lluvioso ‘it’s rainy’—but with certain nouns hacer is used: hoy hace frío/calor/viento ‘it’s cold/hot/windy today’; but hay niebla/helada ‘it’s foggy/frosty’.

29.2.2 Ser with adjectives

Ser is used with adjectives or adjectival phrases which indicate identity or nature, i.e. physical, moral and mental characteristics, as opposed to conditions or states:

—¿Quién eres? —Soy Carlos
—¿Cómo eres? —Soy, alto, moreno y delgado
El cobre es ideal para los cables
Esa chaqueta es bien bonita
Así soy de testarudo (G. Cabrera Infante, Cu., dialogue)

‘Who are you?’ ‘I’m Carlos’
‘What are you like?’ ‘I’m tall, dark and slim’
Copper is ideal for cables
That jacket is very nice
That’s how stubborn I am
Hacer is used in statements about the weather that involve certain nouns: see 29.2.1 note (i). One uses tener frío/calor for sensations: compare tiene frío ‘(s)he feels cold’ and es muy frío ‘he is very cold’ (i.e. emotionless). Estar caliente means ‘to be hot’ applied to lifeless things, ‘to be sexually excited’ applied to humans.

29.2.3 Ser with certain adjectives apparently denoting states

Ser is normally used with pobre ‘poor’, feliz ‘happy’, desgraciado ‘unhappy’, inocente ‘innocent’, culpable ‘guilty’, consciente ‘aware’, despite the fact that they may be thought of as conditions:

Now that the price of oil has gone down, this country is poor
The accused said he was innocent
There are many people who don’t feel guilty even though they are
I’m conscious of my limitations
He was seldom so happy as during the hours before his interview with Bordenave
I only want her to be happy

(i) Estar rico/pobre/feliz is sometimes heard in Spain when describing a transitory state, although many Spaniards reject estar with these adjectives, except in the phrase estoy feliz y contento ‘I’m happy and satisfied’. Latin Americans frequently use estar with feliz: estaban tan felices que me dieron envidia (A. Mastretta, Mex.) ‘they were so happy that they filled me with envy’, acababan de ganar las elecciones y están felices (A. Bryce Echenique, Pe., dialogue) ‘they’ve just won the elections and they’re happy’.

Estar rico generally means ‘to be tasty’/’to taste nice’ in Spain; see 29.4.4; but not necessarily in Latin America: Andrés acompañó al padre José que estaba riquísimo y lo oyó jurar por la Virgen de Covadonga que no tenía un centavo (A. Mastretta, Mex.) ‘Andrés accompanied Father José, who was extremely rich, and he heard him swear by the Virgin of Covadonga that he didn’t have a cent’.

(ii) Peninsular usage differentiates ser consciente (de) ‘to be aware/conscious of’ and estar consciente ‘to be conscious’ (i.e. awake). In Latin America the distinction is not always made: quienes no están conscientes de su libertad no son libres ‘those who are not aware of their freedom are not free’ (E. Poniatowska, Mex., dialogue; but in the same novel tú eres muy consciente... ‘you’re clearly aware...’).

29.2.4 Ser de

Ser can be followed by de + noun or by de + un + adjective to denote identity, nature, origin or the material something is made of:

—¿De dónde eres? —De Londres
La situación era de risa
Es de día/noche

‘Where do you come from?’ ‘London’
The situation was extremely funny
It’s day/night
29.2.5 Ser and estar in impersonal statements

As stated at 29.2.1, ser is used before nouns and noun phrases:

- Es verdad/mentira/una tontería/una pena/una lata
  - It’s true/a lie/nonsense/a pity/a bore, etc.

Phrases based on adverbs take estar, e.g. está bien/mal/estupendamente ‘It’s/(s)he’s fine/bad/great’. See 29.3.4. With adjectives, ser is the usual verb, but there are apparent exceptions:

- Es triste/trágico/incredible que haya muerto tan joven
  - It’s sad/tragic/incredible that (s)he died so young

- está visto que...
  - it’s clear that...
- claro está...
  - clearly.../of course...

Es claro is common in Latin America: es claro que, cuando eso acaba, debe quedarle a uno un sentimiento de dignidad (M. Benedetti, Ur., dialogue) ‘it’s obvious that when that sort of thing ends one must be left with a feeling of dignity’.

29.2.6 Ser to denote possession

Estar cannot be used with possessive adjectives:

- Todo esto es mío, el día de mañana será tuyo
  - All this is mine, tomorrow it’ll be yours
- El piso es de mi yerno
  - The flat/apartment belongs to my son-in-law

29.2.7 Ser to denote impressions

Me es/resulta simpática
- I find her likeable

- Esto me es/resulta molesto
  - This is uncomfortable for me

- Todo le era distinto (A. Carpentier, Cu.)
  - Everything seemed different to her

29.2.8 Ser of events

If ‘to be’ means ‘to be held’ or ‘to happen’ it must be translated by ser:

- La fiesta es/se celebra en su casa
  - The party is at his place

- Hay un incendio en el edificio pero no sé en qué piso es
  - There’s a fire in the building but I don’t know which floor it’s on

- ¿Dónde es la manifestación?
  - Where is the demonstration?

- El entierro será a las cinco (G. García Márquez, Col.)
  - The funeral was to be at five
Use of estar may imply a physical object. Compare ¿dónde es la conferencia? ‘where’s the lecture (being held)?’ and ¿dónde está la conferencia? ‘where’s the lecture?’ (i.e. the lecture notes or typescript). Note also el jarro es/va encima del aparador ‘the vase belongs/goes on top of the sideboard’, as opposed to ...está... ‘is on...’.

29.3 Uses of estar

29.3.1 Estar to describe state as opposed to identity or nature

Estar is used with adjectives that indicate mood, physical condition, temporary physical appearance or other non-characteristic features. Note the difference between es guapa ‘she’s good-looking’ and está guapa ‘she’s looking good/attractive’, eres inaguantable ‘you are unbearable (by nature)’ and estás inaguantable ‘you’re being unbearable’:

Estar más bien triste
Estando enfermo una temporada
Hoy no estoy muy católico

Estaba roja de vergüenza
El agua que se añada tiene que estar caliente
El televisor está estropeado
Está parado desde febrero
Estuvo callado todo el tiempo
Nueva York está llena de ventanas

(S)he’s rather sad
She was ill/US sick for a time
I don’t feel too great today (lit. I’m not feeling too Catholic’)
She was red with shame
The water to be added has to be hot
The television doesn’t work
He’s been out of work since February
He was silent all the time
New York is full of windows

(i) The pervasive use of the passive with ser in written Latin-American Spanish, especially to denote habitual or continuous actions, may produce sentences that require estar in Spain. This seems to be particularly frequent in Mexico: una de las mesas era ocupada por el doctor Bernstein (C. Fuentes, Mex.; Sp. estaba ocupada) ‘one of the tables was occupied by Doctor Bernstein’.

(ii) Ser hecho de for estar hecho de sounds poetic or archaic: ¡y cuán frágil el barro de que somos hechos! (R. del Valle-Inclán, Sp., 1890s) ‘and how frail the clay of which we are made!’

29.3.2 Estar de

Estar de + adjective or noun to indicate mood, temporary employment or situation:

Estar de bueno/mal humor
Estar de camarera en Inglaterra
Estar de verano/de viaje
Estar de charla/de bromas

(S)he’s in a good/bad mood
She’s working as a waitress in England
They’re taking their summer vacation/travel(ling)
We’re having a chat/fooling around

Colloquially:

Estar de un guapo subido/de un antipático...

You’re looking really good /You’re in a really bad mood
29.3.3 Estar con

*Estar* followed by *con* + noun:

- Está con gripe  
  (S)he’s got the flu
- Estaba con una cara malísima  
  (S)he looked terrible
- Estaba con un traje de chaqueta muy bonito  
  She was wearing a beautiful suit

29.3.4 Estar + adverb

*Estar* followed by an adverb or an adjective used as an adverb:

- ¿Cómo estás? —Estoy bien/mal  
  ‘How are you?’ ‘I’m well/not well’
- El nombre está mal. Se llamaba Luis José  
  (Cambio16, Sp.)  
  The name is wrong. His name was Luis José
- Los trenes están fatal  
  The trains are in a dreadful state

Adverbs are invariable in form, e.g. *estamos mal* ‘we’re in trouble’ / ‘we’re in a bad way’, *están mejor/peor* ‘they’re feeling / looking better/worse’ (*mejor* and *peor* are here the comparative forms of the adverbs *bien* and *mal*).

29.3.5 Estar que

- Está que muerde  
  (S)he’s in a lousy mood (lit. ‘ready to bite’)
- Hoy estás que no hay quien te aguante  
  You’re unbearable today

29.3.6 Estar to indicate location

(For *ser* used for the location of events see 29.2.8.)

- Segovia está en España  
  Segovia is in Spain
- No está (en casa)  
  (S)he’s not at home
- Está encima de todo  
  It’s on top of everything
- Yo soy el que esta ahí (L. Silva, Sp., dialogue)  
  I’m the one who’s on the spot (lit. ‘who’s there’)

But with nouns that are permanent fixtures or features there is a colloquial tendency to use *ser*:

- ¿Dónde es la casa de tu amigo?  
  Where’s your friend’s house?
- Aquí era la plaza de las Carretas  
  This is where Carretas Square used to be
  (J. L. Borges, Arg., dialogue)
- Turku es en Finlandia, ¿no?  
  Turku is in Finland, isn’t it?

*Estar* would also be correct in these three sentences.

29.3.7 Estar meaning ‘to suit’, or ‘to fit’

- Este traje te está muy bien  
  This dress suits you
- El abrigo te está corto  
  The coat is too short for you
- El puesto de ministro le está grande  
  The ministerial job is too big for him

For *estar* with *por* and *para* see 34.14.8.
29.3.8 Idiomatic use of andar, encontrarse and hallarse for estar

Andar ‘to walk’ is sometimes used in colloquial language instead of estar when the subject is human. This is only possible when the phrase refers to some kind of activity or to dress or attitude: one could not say *ando calvo for estoy calvo ‘I’m bald’:

- Miguel dice que andan recelosos y no le falta razón (M. Delibes, Sp., dialogue)
- Andan muy atareados estos días ¿Cómo andas? ( = ¿cómo estás?)
- tantos niños y jóvenes que andan perdidos por causa de la adicción (Tiempos del Mundo, Nicaragua)

¿Dónde andas? is a good question to ask someone answering from a mobile phone. Andar is also sometimes used colloquially (at least in Spain) to refer to non-living things that can easily be moved about, e.g. Dios sabe dónde andarán mis gafas ‘God knows where my glasses have got to’, ¿dónde anda el coche, tú? (M. Delibes, Sp., dialogue) ‘Hey, whereabouts is the car?’

(i) Encontrarse can mean the same as estar: ¿dónde se encuentra el museo? ‘where’s the museum?’, ¿qué tal te encuentras? ‘how are you/how do you feel?’, nuestros servidores se encuentran conectados a 6 proveedores de backbone (advert., Arg.) ‘our servers are linked to six backbone service providers’, no me encuentro con fuerzas para seguir ‘I’m not strong enough to go on’. Hallarse is used in formal or literary language: me halló enfermo y fatigado ‘I’m feeling ill and tired’.

29.4 Ser or estar?

29.4.1 Ser and estar more or less interchangeable

(a) With words indicating marital status:

- Sale con una chica que es/está divorciada
- Tiene que mantener a su madre que es/está viuda
- Pero si es casado debe estar cenando en casa a estas horas (M. Puig, Arg., dialogue; or está casado)

(S)he’s going out with a girl who’s divorced
(S)he has to keep his/her widowed mother
But if he’s married (i.e. ‘a married man’) he must be at home having his supper at this time of day

One would usually ask as stranger ¿es usted casado? ‘are you married?’ (or está), but two friends meeting again after some time would say ¿estás casado? or ¿todavía estás soltero? ‘are you married?’ or ‘are you still single?’ because the enquiry is about a change since the last meeting.

(b) With calvo, gordo and delgado, estar is always used when there has been a change of state. Elsewhere the two verbs are practically interchangeable except in generalizations, when ser is required:

- ¡Mujer, pero qué delgada estás!
- Siempre ha sido calvo/gordo, pero ahora está más calvo/gordo que nunca

Good heavens, haven’t you lost weight!
He’s always been bald/fat but now he’s balder/fatter than ever
Dentro de cien años todos seremos calvos
(L. Rafael Sánchez, Puerto Rico)
La novia de mi primo parece simpática pero está muy delgada
Las mujeres de esa tribu son muy gordas (generalization)

We’ll all be bald in a hundred years
My cousin’s girlfriend seems nice but she’s very thin
The women of that tribe are very fat

(c) With adjectives describing social manner when ‘to be’ = ‘to behave’:

| Estuvo/Fue muy cortés conmigo | (S)he was very courteous towards me |
| Siempre está/ser más amable con él | She’s always affectionate |
| Tienes que estar/ser más amable con él | You must be kinder to him |

But hoy has sido bueno ‘you’ve behaved well today’ because estar bueno means ‘tasty’, ‘appetising’ and therefore also sexually attractive (at least in Spain). Note, however ¡hoy has estado bueno! ‘you had a good day today!’ (ironic, i.e. ‘I don’t think…’).

Estar is not used for general statements about behaviour: antes los ingleses eran muy corteses ‘formerly the English were very courteous’.

(d) With adjectives applied to events and with vida and situación:

| La conferencia fue/estuvo muy interesante | The lecture was very interesting |
| La situación es/está caótica | The situation is chaotic |
| La fiesta fue/estuvo muy animada | The party was very lively |
| La vida es/está cara hoy día | Life is expensive nowadays |

But la vida es difícil/maravillosa/amarga ‘life is difficult/wonderful/bitter’ can only be general comments on life. La vida está difícil means ‘life is difficult now’.

(e) With adjectives referring to weather applied to día and tiempo:

| El día es/está bueno | The weather is nice today |
| Es/Está un tiempo soleado, agradable | The weather is sunny and pleasant |
| (but see 29.2.1, note i for estar before noun phrases) |

29.4.2 Ser and estar with prices and quantities

Ser is obligatory when the price or quantity is fixed:

- ¿Cuánto (es lo que) le debo? (How much do I owe you?)
- ¿Cuántos somos hoy para comer? (How many are we for lunch today?)
- Somos doce en mi familia (There are twelve of us in my family)
- Los sobrevivientes fueron pocos (Few people survived)

But either can be used for fluctuating prices:

- ¿Cuánto/A cuánto/A cómo son/estan las uvas? (How much are the grapes?)
- Son/Están a un euro con veinte el kilo (They’re €1.20 a kilo)
- ¿A cuánto/A cómo están esas acciones? (What are those shares at?)

29.4.3 Estar implying impression or change of condition

When estar denotes impression, sensation or appearance, it often calls for translation by a special verb in English, e.g. ‘to look’, ‘to taste’, ‘to feel’ or ‘get’. Use of estar rather than ser often shows there has been a change of condition. Compare:
29.4 Ser or estar? 427

Es muy guapa/Está muy guapa
Este niño es muy alto/Está muy alto
Este sillón es ya viejo/Está ya viejo
El pollo es riquísimo*/Está riquísimo
El café es horrible*/Está horrible
Traélo como sea/Tráelo como esté
Eres muy española/Estás muy española

She’s very good-looking/She’s looking very attractive
This child is very tall/He’s grown very tall
This armchair is old/It’s getting old
[The] chicken is very good/It tastes delicious
(The) coffee is horrible/It tastes awful
Bring it any way you can/Bring it as it is
You’re very Spanish/You’re looking very Spanish/acting very Spanish

The examples marked with an asterisk are ambiguous: el pollo es riquísimo is either a general statement about chicken or it could mean ‘the chicken (uncooked) is very good quality’. Estar could only mean ‘to taste’.

(i) Note tú eres/tú estás viejo para estas cosas ‘you’re old/getting old for these things’ (there is a slight difference of meaning in both languages). But one says tú eres demasiado joven para estas cosas.

29.4.4 Ser and estar involving change of meaning

There are some words whose meaning is radically affected by choice of ser or estar. The following list is not exhaustive:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ser</th>
<th>Estar</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aburrido</td>
<td>aburrido</td>
<td>to be bored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>atento</td>
<td>atento</td>
<td>attentive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bueno</td>
<td>bueno</td>
<td>(see 29.4.1 c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cansado</td>
<td>cansado</td>
<td>tired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>católico</td>
<td>no estar católico</td>
<td>unwell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decidido</td>
<td>decidido</td>
<td>decided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consciente</td>
<td>consciente</td>
<td>(see 29.2.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>despierto</td>
<td>despierto</td>
<td>awake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enfermo</td>
<td>enfermo</td>
<td>be ill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interesado</td>
<td>interesado</td>
<td>interested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listo</td>
<td>listo</td>
<td>to be ready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loco</td>
<td>loco</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>malo</td>
<td>malo</td>
<td>mad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negro</td>
<td>negro</td>
<td>ill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orgulloso</td>
<td>orgulloso</td>
<td>very irritated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rico</td>
<td>rico</td>
<td>proud (of something/someone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>torpe</td>
<td>torpe</td>
<td>clumsy, moving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verde</td>
<td>verde</td>
<td>with difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>violento</td>
<td>violento</td>
<td>unripe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vivo</td>
<td>vivo</td>
<td>embarrassed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(see 29.2.3 note i)