

María Mercedes PIÑANGO

**“Mismatches” as Context Construal Demands:
Psycholinguistic underpinnings of the semantics of Spanish *estar***

The acceptability of Spanish *estar* (English ‘be’) with some adjective predicates e.g. *Pedro está inteligente* ‘Pedro estar intelligent’ appears to be dependent on the context in which the sentence is uttered. Yet, even with the “right” context, acceptability appears to be variable across speech communities of the language. *Estar*’s developmental trajectory is also a puzzle: children are reported to overuse *estar* as compared to adults, a use that overtime undergoes attrition. Finally, diachronically *estar*’s use is shown to be encroaching on the domain of *ser*. From every perspective then *estar*’s behavior appears to be “in flux”. Converging with most previous proposals, we propose that the causes of this instability appear to be semantic in nature, suggesting in turn a situation of "mismatch" between its lexical properties and that of the context.

In the talk I present the results of a multiyear exploration by our research group on the *cognitive consequences* of the meaning of *estar* in both children (4-12 years-old, Venezuelan variety) and adults (Argentinian, Iberian, Mexican and Venezuelan varieties). Discussion centers around our proposal that *estar*’s meaning is distinct from that of *ser* in that it contains in addition a contingency presupposition whose accommodation makes specific demands on its context. And it is the computational and communicative demands of this process of accommodation what constrain the variation, developmental and diachronic trajectories observed.

One take home-message from this exploration which goes beyond the particulars of *estar*’s use is a view of “mismatches” not as accidents of the grammar, but as expected manifestations of an interaction between lexical meanings and their context; an organizing feature that due to its particulars cognitive demands gives rise to the grammar’s constant flux.