

An onomasiological approach to subjectification: the semantic redistribution of Spanish copular verbs

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Subjectification — the process of semantic/pragmatic change whereby ‘meanings tend to become increasingly situated in the speaker’s subjective belief state or attitude toward the proposition’ and ‘meanings with largely propositional (ideational) content can gain either textual (cohesion-making) and expressive (presuppositional, and other pragmatic) meanings, or both’ (Traugott 1982; 1989; 2003; 2010; Traugott & Dasher 2001), leading to ‘strengthening of the expression of speaker involvement’ (Traugott & König 1991:191) — has normally been approached from the point of view of semasiology: the object of study has been the meaning of individual words. In this paper I suggest that subjectification may also be approached fruitfully from an onomasiological perspective: here, the object of study is the word that is the exponent of a particular meaning. I present a case study from Spanish which suggests that onomasiological subjectification is a significant mechanism of linguistic change.

Spanish has two copular verbs, *ser* and *estar*. The distinction between them is complex, but is often defined in terms of individual-level predicate vs. stage-level predicate, essential vs. contingent properties, or characteristic vs. state (for a detailed recent survey, see Camacho 2012) — compare:

- (1) *Eres joven* ‘You are young’ (*ser*)
- (2) *Estás joven* ‘You are young-looking; you look young’ (*estar*).

However in several varieties of Spanish, chiefly in the New World — Mexico (Cortés Torres 2004; Gutiérrez 1992; Juárez-Cummings 2014), Cuba (Alfaraz 2012), Costa Rica (Aguiar-Sánchez 2012), Venezuela (Díaz-Campos & Geeslin 2011), Puerto Rico (Ortiz López 2000; Brown & Cortés-Torres 2012), New Mexico (Salazar (2007), and Los Angeles (Silva-Corvalán 1986) — but also in Spain itself (Icardo Isasa 2014; Guijarro Fuentes & Geelin 2006), the use of *estar* is encroaching on that of *ser*. This development is often ascribed to contact with languages which have only a single copula — English (Silva-Corvalán 1986) or Basque (Icardo Isasa 2014) — or which have two copular verbs which are etymologically the same as those of Spanish, but which have a different distribution (Galician: Guijarro Fuentes & Geelin 2006). Nonetheless, it is far from clear that language contact is at work in all instances of this widespread phenomenon. Moreover, the language-contact hypothesis fails to explain why *estar* (the marked term of the opposition: see Leonetti 1994) should replace *ser*, rather than the contrary. I claim that, regardless of language contact, this change hinges on the use of *estar* in evaluative contexts (compare (1) and (2) above). The verb which encodes salience of speaker-attitude is preferred to the alternative; a more ‘subjective’ item replaces a more ‘objective’ item.

Onomasiological subjectification yields different surface effects from semasiological subjectification: individual lexical items appear to extend their meaning into less subjective contexts. However, this is an epiphenomenon: underlyingly, in both processes, semantic change shifts in the direction of speaker-attitude. In a tentative outline of future work, I shall suggest that onomasiological subjectification may account for a number of other changes, such as the extension of the definite article in Romance, the replacement of the preterite by the present perfect in several

languages, and the conventionalization of some diminutive nouns and frequentative and inchoative verbs in Late Latin.

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