The scalar structure of adjectives and the ser/estar distinction
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1. Goals.
The goal of this talk is to explore the distributional properties of the Spanish copulas ser and estar (‘be’) when combined with adjectival predicates, and argue for the idea that the scalar properties of adjectives [A, henceforth] determine their combination with each of the copulas. Our proposal differs from many others in the literature in which the distributional properties of ser/estar are traced back to aspectual notions, crucially the individual level [IL] vs. stage level [SL] distinction. Our ultimate theoretical goal is to hypothesize that the distinction between IL and SL A is not primitive but can be derived from the scalar structure of the adjectival predicate (as has also been proposed in Husband 2010).

2. Setting the stage.
It has been generally claimed that the IL vs. SL distinction (Carlson 1977, Kratzer 1995) is crucially involved in determining the behaviour of the Spanish copulas ser/estar. Specifically, with respect to A, it has been proposed that IL A (interpreted as A denoting permanent properties, or A without an eventive argument) combine with ser (ser alto/inteligente ‘be tall/intelligent’), while SL A (interpreted as A denoting non-permanent properties, or A with an e argument) combine with estar (la camisa está estirada ‘the shirt is stretched’, la niña está despierta ‘the bay is awake’). However, as Schmitt&Miller (2007), Maienborn (2005), Roby (2009) and Camacho to appear have shown, the permanent/non-permanent distinction is inadequate to explain the distribution of A with ser and estar (since properties than can be conceptualized as permanent combine with estar: ausente ‘absent’, exhausto ‘exhausted’), and, moreover, both A combining with ser and with estar contribute an eventive variable to the semantic representation.

Our proposal is that the combination of A with ser/estar is determined by their scalar structure, specifically by their characterization as open or closed scale A (Kennedy & McNally, 2005, [KM]).

--Scalar structure of adjectives. KM classify A in two classes, according to their scalar properties: scalar A (expressing a set of degrees linearly ordered with respect to a dimension), and non-scalar A. Only scalar A allow degree modification (más alto / despierto que yo ‘more tall/awake than me’ vs. *un periódico más semanal que este ‘a newspaper more weekly than this’). Scalar A are further subdivided into open and closed scale A, according to the boundedness properties of their associated scales. In Spanish, the scalar structure of A can be determined on the basis of the correlation between being an open vs. closed scale A, on the one hand, and being a relative vs. absolute A on the other. Relative A, like alto/tall, have a context-dependent interpretation, which requires determining a contextually defined standard of comparison relative to a comparison class: in order to determine the truth of Vi a una niña alta ‘I saw a tall girl’, a standard value for the property relative to a comparison class must be established; if the girl is 120 cms tall, the sentence will be true if the comparison class consist of five-years-old children, since the height of the girl probably exceeds the standard degree value for that class. Relative adjectives, according to KM, give rise to entailments of the kind in (1):

(1) Vi a un niño más alto que tú, aunque no era alto ‘I saw a boy taller than you, although he was not tall’, Estos niños altos son baloncestistas bajos ‘This tall boys are short basketball players’.

Absolute adjectives, on the contrary, have a non-context-dependent interpretation. Una niña dormida/despierta ‘an asleep/awake baby’ means that the girl has a nonzero degree of the relevant property. The standard degree considered to interpret the predicate is the minimal value of the scale (lower bound scale). Similarly, una camisa estirada ‘an stretched shirt’ means that the shirt has the maximum degree value in the scale of the property in question (upper bound scale). Therefore, absolute A have closed scales, and the standard of comparison necessary to interpret them is the minimum or the maximum value on the degree scale. Absolute A do not allow entailments like those in (1), see (2):

(2) *Vi a un niño más despierto que el mío, aunque no estaba despierto ‘I saw a baby more awake than mine, although he was not awake’; *Esto son camisas estiradas, aunque no es ropa estirada ‘These are stretched shirts although they are not stretched pieces of cloth’.

--Ser/estar and scalar structure of As. With this background in mind, our claim is that estar selects for absolute (closed scale) A, (3a), while ser combines with non absolute A: relative A (open scale A), (4b), and non scalar A, (4c).

a. La niña está dormida ‘the girl is asleep’; La camisa está estirada ‘the shirt is streched’. (upper-closed scale)
Our proposal predicts that multidimensional As -such as *dry/seco-, which, as KM claim, can be interpreted as relative or absolute As depending on the entity they are predicated of (*dry weather/clima seco—relative A— vs. *dry shirt/camisa seca —absolute A), will combine with ser or with estar in each of these uses. This is exactly what happens, (5):

(5) a. El clima madrileño es seco vs. *El clima madrileño está seco. ‘The weather in Madrid is dry’
   b. La camisa está seca vs. *La camisa es seca ‘The shirt is dry’

Our proposal also allows us to explain coercion effects with estar, § 4.

4. Coercion with estar

According to our hypothesis, the coercion effects observed with estar, (6), described in the literature as cases where an IL predicate is coerced into a SL predicate by the copula (cf. Escandell & Leonetti 2002), must be understood as cases of scalar coercion. We claim that when estar combines with an open-scale relative adjective, it triggers a process of scalar closure or bounding. Note that, according to the tests offered above, differing relative vs. absolute adjectives, an adjective like alto behaves as a relative adjective when combined with ser, but as an absolute adjective when combined with estar, (7).

(6) ¡Qué inteligentes están hoy mis alumnos! ‘My students are really intelligent today’; La niña está muy alta ‘the girl is really tall’.

(7) a. Ana es más alta que Jon, pero Ana no es alta. (ser + relative adjective) (cf. (1))
    b. *Ana está más alta que Jon, pero Ana no está alta. (estar + absolute adjective) [only possible with a purely locative meaning: ‘Ana is located in a place higher than Jon…’] (cf. (2))

‘Ana is taller than Jon, but she is not tall’

Since our proposal explains coercion effects triggered by estar as a process of scalar bounding, it is expected, then, that only open scale relative As be coerced. In so, we can explain the fact that some As (auténtico ‘authentic’, falso ‘false’, capaz ‘able’, incapaz ‘unable’ and the relational As) are not able to combine with estar, (8). We will defend that these As are non scalar: they are notgradable, (9).

(8) *Juan normalmente no se mete en la piscina, pero hoy, hace tan bueno que está capaz de nadar.
   ‘Juan usually does not swim, but today is such a hot day that that he is able to swim’

(9) *Este cuadro de Picasso es más auténtico que aquél. ‘This picture is more authentic than that’

Our proposal also opens a way to explain the role of the subject in coercion effects. Note that coercion of a relative adjective is possible in (10), but not in (11).

(10) a. La niña es grande / b. La niña está grande. ‘The girl is big’
    (11) a. La casa es grande / b. *La casa está grande. ‘The house is big’

In (10a), it is claimed that the girl is tall (lit. ‘big’) with respect to a context-dependent comparison class (e.g. little girls at school); in (10b), the scalar bounding triggered by estar forces the adjective to be interpreted as an absolute, closed scale adjective, with a fixed, non-context dependent, standard value (the standard value will be the maximum degree of the property in this case –this fixed degree, however, seems to be established according to a specific discourse context, cf. Maienborn 2005). The sentence means, thus, that the girl has the maximum degree of the property ‘bigness’, relative to a discourse-dependent decisions: The case of the copulas

5. Conclusions. In this talk we try to show that the scalar properties of adjectives determine their combination with the Spanish copulas ser/estar. Our proposal is in line with some recent findings in language acquisition which shows that Spanish children are sensitive to the scalar structure of As as primary linguistic cues to copula selection (Holteuer 2001). Moreover, our proposal opens also a theoretically challenging way to reduce the IL / SL distinction to more basic properties of adjectives, as suggested also by Husband (2010), and to explain aspectual composition in the domain of stative predicates in a way parallel to that explored by Kennedy & McNally (1999) and Kennedy & Levin (2008) to explain aspectual composition in the eventive domain (where it is claimed that the scalar properties of adjectives homomorphically determine the telicity properties of deadjectival verbs).