

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:

París es la capital de Francia
Es médico/abogado/bibliotecario
Es un estafador/Esto es una estafa
Es la una/Son las doce
Ha sido un año/verano frío
Esto es lo que me fastidia
La confrontación de culturas en el siglo
XXI puede ser sangrienta, vaticina
Umberto Eco (El Mundo, Sp.)

Paris is the French capital
 He's a doctor/lawyer/librarian
 He's a swindler/This is a swindle
 It's one o'clock/twelve o'clock
 It's been a cold year/summer
 This is what I find annoying
 Umberto Eco predicts that culture
 clashes in the 21st century may be
 bloody

(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 magnífico* 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:

*Ahora que el precio del petróleo ha bajado,
este país es pobre*

El acusado dijo que era inocente

*Hay muchos que no se sienten culpables
aunque lo sean*

Soy consciente de mis limitaciones

*Pocas veces fue tan feliz como en las horas
que precedieron a la entrevista con
Bordenave (E. Sábató, Arg.)*

*Yo sólo quiero que sea feliz (A. Mastretta,
Mex., dialogue)*

*—Soy tan desgraciada —me dijo
(G. Cabrera Infante, Cu.)*

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'm so unhappy,' she told me

(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', *acaban 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

—¿De qué es la mesa? —Es de madera
 Era una película de guerra
 Esa chica es de miedo
 Tú eres de prontos impetuosos (C. Martín
 Gaite, Sp.)

'What's the table made of?' 'Wood'
 It was a war film/movie
 That girl is tremendous
 You're given to hasty decisions

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/increíble que haya
 muerto tan joven
 es evidente/obvio que...
 es necesario/imposible/probable/dudoso
 está visto que...
 claro está...*

It's sad/tragic/incredible that (s)he
 died so young
 it's clear that...
 it's necessary/impossible/probable/
 doubtful
 it's evident that...
 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
 El piso es de mi yerno*

All this is mine, tomorrow it'll be
 yours
 The flat/apartment belongs to my
 son-in-law

29.2.7 *Ser to denote impressions*

*Me es/resulta simpática
 Esto me es/resulta molesto
 Todo le era distinto (A. Carpentier, Cu.)*

I find her likeable
 This is uncomfortable for me
 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
 Hay un incendio en el edificio pero no sé
 en qué piso es
 ¿Dónde es la manifestación?
 El entierro sería a las cinco (G. García
 Márquez, Col.)*

The party is at his place
 There's a fire in the building but I
 don't know which floor it's on
 Where is the demonstration?
 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':

Está más bien triste
Estuvo enferma 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
 (J. Aldecoa, Sp.)

(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:

Está de buen/mal humor
Está de camarera en Inglaterra
Están de veraneo/de viaje

Estamos 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/trave(l)ling
 We're having a chat/fooling around

Colloquially:

Estás 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 está 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)

Miguel says they're suspicious, and he's right

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)

They've got a lot of work these days
How are things?/How are you doing?
so many children and adolescents who are lost because of addiction

¿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 hallo 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

(S)he's going out with a girl who's divorced

Tiene que mantener a su madre que es/está viuda

(S)he has to keep his/her widowed mother

Pero si es casado debe estar cenando en casa a estas horas (M. Puig, Arg., dialogue; or *está casado*)

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!

Good heavens, haven't you lost weight!

Siempre ha sido calvo/gordo, pero ahora está más calvo/gordo que nunca

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/les 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
Siempre está/les cariñosa
Tienes que estar/ser más amable con él

(S)he was very courteous towards me
She's always affectionate
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
La situación es/está caótica
La fiesta fue/estuvo muy animada
La vida es/está cara hoy día

The lecture was very interesting
The situation is chaotic
The party was very lively
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'.

NB: Note how *ser* can be used to make it clear that a situation is being talked about: *ahora era mucho más serio y ella estaba más seria* (S. Puértolas, Sp.) 'now it (the situation) was more serious and she was more serious'.

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

El día es/está bueno
Es/Está un tiempo soleado, agradable
(but see 29.2.1, note i for *estar* before noun phrases)

The weather is nice today
The weather is sunny and pleasant

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?
¿Cuántos somos hoy para comer?
Somos doce en mi familia
Los sobrevivientes fueron pocos

How much do I owe you?
How many are we for lunch today?
There are twelve of us in my family
Few people survived

But either can be used for fluctuating prices:

¿Cuánto/A cuánto/A cómo son/están las uvas?
Son/Están a un euro con veinte el kilo
¿A cuánto/A cómo están esas acciones?

How much are the grapes?
They're €1.20 a kilo
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:

<i>Es muy guapa/Está muy guapa</i>	She's very good-looking/She's looking very attractive
<i>Este niño es muy alto/Está muy alto</i>	This child is very tall/He's grown very tall
<i>Este sillón es ya viejo/Está ya viejo</i>	This armchair is old/It's getting old
<i>El pollo es riquísimo*/Está riquísimo</i>	[The] chicken is very good/It tastes delicious
<i>El café es horrible*/Está horrible</i>	(The) coffee is horrible/It tastes awful
<i>Tráelo como sea/Tráelo como esté</i>	Bring it any way you can/Bring it as it is
<i>Eres muy española/Estás muy española</i>	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:

<i>ser aburrido</i>	boring	<i>estar aburrido</i>	to be bored
<i>ser atento</i>	courteous	<i>estar atento</i>	attentive
<i>ser bueno</i>		<i>estar bueno</i>	(see 29.4.1 c)
<i>ser cansado</i>	tiresome	<i>estar cansado</i>	tired
<i>ser católico</i>	catholic	<i>no estar católico</i>	unwell
<i>ser decidido</i>	resolute	<i>estar decidido</i>	decided
<i>ser consciente</i>		<i>estar consciente</i>	(see 29.2.3)
<i>ser despierto</i>	sharp/alert	<i>estar despierto</i>	awake
<i>ser un enfermo</i>	be an invalid	<i>estar enfermo</i>	be ill
<i>ser interesado</i>	self-seeking	<i>estar interesado</i>	interested
<i>ser listo</i>	clever	<i>estar listo</i>	to be ready
<i>ser (un) loco</i>	scatterbrained	<i>estar loco</i>	mad
<i>ser malo</i>	bad	<i>estar malo</i>	ill
<i>ser negro</i>	black	<i>estar negro</i>	very irritated
<i>ser orgulloso</i>	proud	<i>estar orgulloso</i>	proud (of something/someone)
<i>ser rico</i>		<i>estar rico</i>	(see 29.2.3 note i)
<i>ser torpe</i>	slow-witted	<i>estar torpe</i>	clumsy, moving with difficulty
<i>ser verde</i>	green/smatty	<i>estar verde</i>	unripe
<i>ser violento</i>	violent/embarrassing	<i>estar violento</i>	embarrassed
<i>ser vivo</i>	sharp/alert	<i>estar vivo</i>	alive
<i>(ser un vivo)</i>	to be sly		