

Using the Verbs *Ser* and *Estar* in Portuguese: A Difficult Task for Non Native Learners*

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the difficulty of learners of Portuguese to deal with the verbs SER and ESTAR ('To Be'), as far as each of them is used to express different and specific situations. It also aims to help the teachers solving this problem.

After an overview of what the most important grammars of Portuguese say about this subject, the corpus is presented and the data (around 60 examples) are analysed taking account of the origin of the learners and also dividing the various examples according to different levels of language proficiency.

When the various types of language mistakes are identified, the results are explained and the conclusions lead to the need of teaching SER and ESTAR in a way provides the non natives of Portuguese to actually understand the normal use of each of these verbs. This intends to avoid students of Portuguese to go on repeating the same errors which will get them to a future linguistic fossilization.

Keywords: Portuguese; verbs SER and ESTAR; learning and teaching of Portuguese; non native learners; analysis of corpus.

Résumé

L'objectif principal de cet article est d'analyser la difficulté des apprenants du portugais à traiter les verbes SER et ESTAR («Être»), dans la mesure où chacun d'entre eux est utilisé pour exprimer des situations différentes et spécifiques. Il vise également à aider les enseignants à résoudre ce problème.

Après un aperçu de ce que les grammaires les plus importantes du portugais disent a propos de ce sujet, le corpus est présenté et les données (environ 60 exemples) sont analysées en tenant compte de l'origine des apprenants et en divisant les différents exemples selon différents niveaux d'apprentissage.

Lorsque les différents types d'erreurs de langage sont identifiés, les résultats sont expliqués et les conclusions conduisent à la nécessité d'enseigner SER et ESTAR de manière à ce que les apprenants de portugais comprennent l'usage normal de chacun de ces verbes. Ceci a pour but d'éviter que les étudiants répètent les mêmes erreurs et les empêchant ainsi de subir, dans le futur, une fossilisation linguistique.

Mots-clés: portugais; les verbes SER et ESTAR; apprentissage et enseignement du portugais; apprenants non autochtones ; analyse de corpus.

1. Introduction

1.1. The verbs SER and ESTAR in Portuguese

Portuguese is one of the few languages (in relation to the languages of Europe, and together with Spanish, Galician and Catalan), which have two different verbs to distinguish between permanent and transient¹ states.

In their etymology ESSE and STARE had, in Latin, the values of 'being, existing, meeting (in a place or situation), belonging to' and 'standing, to stay, to persist, to get fixed², to fight for someone' respectively. The verb ESSE then suffered, from the archaic period to the modern one, a merger with SEDERE³ (> seer> ser, 'to be'), which meant 'to be seated, to remain, to be immobile, to be fixed', not only in morphological aspects, from which inherited the value of permanence as opposed to merely transient or temporary.

In this regard, Aldo Bizzocchi (Bizzocchi, 2008) writes: 'Permanent states are inherent qualities of the subject, which are part of their essence, such as the yellow colour of gold or the heat of the sun, while transient states indicate conditions that can change, such as temperature of an environment, the location of an object, or the mood of a person. This does not mean that a state regarded as permanent is immutable (...). However, we tend to attribute to some conditions a more stable character than to others.'⁴ He goes on to note: 'To be honest, many of these uses are stereotyped and therefore do not follow a logic that is resistant to any evidence. They are idiosyncrasies that all languages present'⁵.

1.2. What do Grammars say?

I will now consider the two relatively recent Grammars of the Portuguese Language, which have given more importance to the subject under study.

In Mira Mateus' s grammar (Mateus et al., 2003: 302) the authors consider that SER and ESTAR are copulative verbs, also called predicative or binding, and may have an adjectival nucleus (A Luísa é linda! 'Luísa is beautiful!'), nominal (A Isabel é professora, 'Isabel is a teacher'), prepositional (Eles estão com sono, 'They are sleepy') or adverbial (A Faculdade é perto daqui. 'The Faculty is near here'). They may also function as auxiliaries and passive adjectives (A casa está destruída, 'The house is destroyed'; Este assunto está bem explicado, 'This subject is well explained').

When referring the copulative verbs (2003: 538 et seq.), they note that these verbs do not impose selection restrictions on the expression with the grammatical relation of the subject (it can, incidentally, occur with subjects ± abstract, ± human and ± animate), while the subject's predicative already imposes them. The choice of the predicative verb is thus 'conditioned by the type of property that the constituent with the grammatical relation of the subject's predicative expresses'.⁶ (2003: 539). So, if predicates of species or individual are used, the verb SER is used; for those that express phase predicates, the verb ESTAR. For this reason, the predicates of the subject with locative interpretation, if they refer to phase properties, are usually constructed with ESTAR (O João está em casa hoje. 'João is at home today').

We conclude, then, that in copulative sentences 'there is such a strong and direct link between the subject's predicative and the subject that the copulative verb does not seem to have the typical properties of a predicator. This fact led the grammarians to consider copulative verbs as mere elements of connection and, following this tradition, some linguists regard them as mere lexicalization of temporal, modal and aspectual values. According to this conception, the copulative verbs would not be full lexical items, since they would not have a plot grid, the predicative of the subject being the main predicator of the sentence and the subject an argument of this »⁷ (Mateus et al., 2003: 540). But, it is clarified, this 'does not require that the copulative verbs should be removed from the status of full lexical items'⁸, especially since there is agreement between the predicate and the subject.

In the recent grammar of Paiva Raposo (Raposo et al., 2013, vol. II: 1297 et seq.), copulative sentences are considered to have a 'stative' value, since they describe properties that characterize the subject (O Pedro é alto. 'Pedro is tall') or states in which he is found (O Luís está cansado. 'Luís is tired').

It is considered that there is a relation with the semantic areas of the aspect and the modality: whereas ESTAR is associated with a more limited temporal state, SER marks the attribution to the subject of a property that is considered as essential in it, outside a temporal framework more or less temporary.

Thus, the semantic values of the verbs are extremely important, as we have seen in Mateus et al., 2003, and there are some restrictions of combination in what concerns the constituents with which they may be combined (see Raposo et al., 2013: 1298). It is also noted that, similar to auxiliary verbs, copulatives are mandatory and not optional: they are, in fact, a morphological support not only of the verbal marks of Time, Mode and Aspect but also of agreement of person and number with the subject.

In this way, the copulative verbs can occur in any semantic type of subject and can also occur in a verbal syntagm in unique and exclusive combination with an adjective (2013: 1301). It is not these verbs that select the argument that has the function of subject and do not choose, as noted by Mateus (Mateus et al., 2003), the features \pm human, \pm animate or \pm concrete. In fact, the verb ESTAR is compatible with any of them. It is, therefore, the predicative constituent that 'chooses', as Mateus et al, 2003, have also observed, the subject that may occur (2013: 1302).

The grammar of Paiva Raposo (Raposo et al., 2013: 1304) argues that copulative verbs can be classified, semantically, into two large groups. The one that is useful for this study is the one which concerns those used to 'attribute a property to the subject or to describe a state in which he/she/it is' ⁹, that is SER and ESTAR. In this group, SER 'marks the attribution to the subject of a property that characterizes him/her as an individual'. ¹⁰ (A Carolina é médica. 'Carolina is a doctor'); ESTAR 'marks a more or less provisional and contingent state in which the subject is'. ¹¹ (A Mariana está grávida, 'Mariana is pregnant').

There is, therefore, a semantic distinction, in which SER relates to stable predicates and ESTAR to episodic, temporary predicates, a distinction made in function of the nature of properties, but also of states, denoted by these two types of predicates.

The same Grammar then considers that SER (2013: 1305 et seq.) is linked to stable properties, which characterize a person during a long period of his life, being thus essential to characterize a person or entity in their own individuality, abstracting from any spatial or temporal framework in which individuals are located, this being the aspectual sense of the verb in copulative sentences (2013: 1306).

We may consider stable characteristics to define a person or entity, for example, the nationality or origin of birth, the reference to periods of life (he/she is young, he/she is old, he/she is adolescent), which of course, not being perpetual, occupy a part of a human being's life.

SER is also used with adjectives that refer to physical properties (tall, short, fat, thin, beautiful, ugly, bald, etc), colours (blue, black), shapes (round, square), mental or behavioural attitudes (intelligent, polite), social status (married, single, divorced, etc.), also religion (Catholic, Jewish, Muslim), geographic origin (European, Asian), membership of clubs or political parties (Ele é do Futebol Clube do Porto 'He supports Futebol Clube do Porto team'), but also social status, profession, personal or family relationship, etc., which are fairly stable.

SER may also be used to make a positive or negative assessment of someone (Ele é um génio! 'He's a genius!'; Ela é louca! 'She's crazy!'), or to identify a property that is unique to someone (É a minha mãe! 'She's my mother!'; Ele é deputado da Assembleia da República. 'He's a deputy of the Republican Parliament').

As for ESTAR (1309 et seq), it is used for 'episodic predicates, which denote transient properties of individuals, that is, temporally limited states (...) susceptible to frequent change'. ¹². The Authors give as examples, among others, sad, tired, furious, mature,

open, arranged, wounded, arrested and also dead (Ele está morto! 'He's dead' – This is called stative passive, in which a normally 'telic' verb, denotes a state, although it is not a temporary situation¹³).

It should be noted, however, that there are adjectives that allow the use of both verbs, such as handsome, intelligent, fat, thin, cheerful, etc. The difference is that SER characterizes timelessly, defining the person; ESTAR involves particular circumstance, duration of a state, etc. Temporal or stable aspectual interpretation is linked to the verb used or to the nature of the subject (\pm human), for instance. It is also important to consider cases where there is a metaphorical meaning (Ele está cego! 'He is blind (at the moment)')! It is, therefore, different from Ele é cego! 'He is blind' - in this case, he is a blind person).

The same grammar (2013: 1318 et seq) also specifies the existence of copulative clauses that characterize and identify, explaining that the sentences with SER are classified into two great classes, which are distinguished by the property denoted by the predicate: a general characteristic that the subject possesses (Ele é baixo. 'He's short'; É de Coimbra. He/She is from Coimbra; Ela é veterinária. 'She's a veterinarian') or a description of a property that makes this subject stand out from the others (É o meu professor de Português. 'He's my Portuguese teacher').

Copulative phrases can also follow the usual order or have an inverse order (which usually occurs in the specifying sentences), where the referential noun phrase is post-verbal and the predicative noun phrase is pre-verbal. (see also Mateus et al., 2003: 544-546): O professor é ele! 'He's the teacher! (meaning that HE is the teacher; nobody else is)'.

A final reference, although less important for the subject of this study, is that the verbs SER and ESTAR originate in full verbs (Raposo et al., 2013: 1326) that, through a grammaticalisation process, were recategorised by having lost their descriptive meaning, but they still retain an aspectual value attached to the original value. SER, like the Latin verb ESSE, is a copulative verb, which establishes the connection between the subject and a non-verbal predicative constituent.

Linguists are not unanimous in considering these verbs as real full verbs, although there are a few cases where they can be seen as such (É que não vi que estavas aí! 'I didn't actually see that you were there'; O jogo é às 16 h. 'The game is at 4:00 p.m.'). In fact, one of the uses of SER is for the temporal location of events (São seis horas da tarde, 'It's 6 pm'; É Domingo. 'It's Sunday'). There seems to be a connection to a basic existential meaning. As for ESTAR (Raposo et al., 2013: 1331-1335), it refers to a transient, episodic state. The fact that both verbs have semantic restrictions on the subject, in its locative use, makes them similar to full verbs, but the nature of these constraints is only aspectual.

After this overview of how the verbs SER and ESTAR are considered in grammars of Portuguese, I will analyse the written texts of foreign students, learners of Portuguese, in order to try to detect the existing language mistakes and to draw their typology.

2. An analysis of written texts organized by level (A1 to C1 learners)¹⁴ in what regards *ser* and *estar*

2.1. The corpus

The *corpus* which is used for this analysis has been extracted from the free-access online resource *Corpus de Produções Escritas de Aprendentes de PL 2*¹⁵ (Corpus of Written Productions of Learners of Portuguese as Second Language), which results, as it says in the Presentation of that Corpus, 'from the PL2 Corpora Collection project initiated in CELGA in June 2008. It is a collection of written productions of 458 PL2 learners who, in the two collection periods (phase 1, from May 2009 to May 2010, phase 2 from January to May 2011), attended the various levels of formal learning (A1 to C1) of the Courses of Portuguese for Foreigners working at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Coimbra (...),

[and has] the aim of providing young researchers (...) a structured collection of reliable empirical data capable of supporting the development of dissertations in the area of PL2 acquisition / learning. Since this corpus was not based on a particular descriptive or theoretical objective, the present corpus was conceived as a flexible infrastructure, capable of being profitable in view of different descriptive interests and theoretical models'.¹⁶

The above mentioned collection consists of the following number of texts, according to the level of learning: A1 - 111, A2 - 117, B1 - 251, B2 - 91 and C1 - 59, produced by learners of Portuguese having 39 different mother tongues. This distribution of the number of texts per level also explains why the examples analysed in this paper are in greater number of level B1 and the less numerous of B2 and C1.

2.1.1. Methodology

I read all the 629 texts of the various levels of learning, collecting examples of all cases in which it is verified exchange of one of the verbs by the other. These registrations were reproduced here, accompanied by the indication of the language of origin of each learner who produced them, and were listed by level, from the most elementary to the most advanced, in order to glimpse the possibility of some evolution (fewer to greater correction and security to the use of these verbs) in the type of mistakes recorded.

Then, each example was analysed, tracing a typology of the mistakes found, not neglecting the cases in which there is a hesitation in the use, evidenced in crossed and interlaced words, that have, in the Corpus used for this article, different notations¹⁷. From this typology, which is presented below, in 2.3., some conclusions have been extracted, which are discussed below.

The examples that were extracted from the Corpus (a total of 83), some of them belonging to the same individual, evidenced in the same text or in another production, are distributed as follows, by level of learning: A1 - 25, A2 - 7, B1 - 36, B2 - 9 and C1 - 6. However, to avoid the repetition of similar examples, I made a selection of 59 of those 83, which are analysed in this paper.

The mother tongues of the learners in this paper, are: Basque, Bulgarian, Catalan, Czech, Chinese, Korean, Slovak, Spanish, Farsi, French, Finnish, Hindi, Hungarian, English, Italian, Japanese, Lithuanian, Dutch, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Turkish and Ukrainian.

The fact that there are, for example, a greater number of learners from the German, Italian, English, French (and Chinese) mother tongues, also explains the greater number examples of these origins. Spanish is also very much represented, but given the proximity of this language with Portuguese, with regard to the subject in question, there are very few examples of registrations belonging to students with that mother tongue.

2. 2. Analysis of the data

2.2.1. Research questions

Due to the characteristics of the *corpus* and possible deviation detected, with the usual 'exchange' of one verb by the other, it seems legitimate to put some research questions / hypotheses before the analysis to be undertaken:

- a) What type of mistakes do they attest?
- b) Does the mother tongue of the informant influence the error verified?
- c) Does the fact that they study in higher levels of Portuguese exempt the learners from this type of errors?
- d) Are these errors, at more advanced levels, verified as a symptom of 'fossilization'?

2.2.2. Typology of the mistakes¹⁸

To make it easier the consultation and simultaneously to see if there is an increasing awareness (from the most elementary to the most advanced level) of the use of one or another verb, the description is made by level of learning:

Level A 1:

The most common type of deviation is undoubtedly the use of the verb SER for temporary situations (12 out of 25 deviant attestations, which constitutes about 50% of cases):

- (1) **Sou** em Portugal desde o Fevereiro 2010 (German)
- (2) Todos os dias, **sou** contigo (French)
- (3) Não tenho muitas certezas, mas sou que na minha vida vou voltar muitas vezes em Portugal, e **sou** muito feliz de ter feito esta experiência do Erasmus: encontrei uma terra muito bonito e no mesmo tempo <aço> acho que vou ser uma pessoa diferente, talvez melhor. (Italian)
- (4) Eu **sou** muito feliz. nos queremos casar no proximo ano. em Portugal, no Penafiel. (Polish)
- (5) A minha família **foram** /na semana passada/ aqui e <(…)> /gostaram/ o Portugal /muito/. (Polish)
- (6) Então, **estas** bem? Tudo bem em casa? eu **sou** bem apesar de ter muitos trabalhos a fazer para todas as aulas. (Romanian)
- (7) **Estás** bem? Como és <tuas> tua vida? **és** bem? (Farsi)
- (8) Eu gosto /muito/ de /a/ minha família. Um mes mais e eu volto de Eslováquia e depois vamos festar que eu **sou** em casa. (Slovak)
- (9) Se o tempo è bom eu gosto viajar a noite. (Italian)

It is interesting that, in examples (6) and (7), there is a coexistence of SER and ESTAR for the same idea (being in good health), denoting an insecurity in the use of the appropriate verb.

It is also frequent to use the inverse case: ESTAR for more permanent situations, and even to express past events, as in (10), with the deviation in question, although less frequent than the previous one. Let us see the following 7 examples:

- (10) Eu <já> já viajei muitos <países> países. O viagem preferida **esteve** à Noruegia. É um país muito lindo com uma natureza limpa. (German/Turkish)
- (11) A semana <foi> /**esteve**/ muito gira!! (Czech)
- (12) A minha casa aqui **este** grande, eu fico com <(…)> /6/ <pe> pessoas, e meu quarto **é** bela. Ele há escretaria, uma mesa, computador. Ele é depois de case de banho. (English)
- (13) Eu gosto muito de visitar <de> /as/ novas <lugar.> vidas <e ald cidade> que <**estão**> /**são**/ bonitas /e os/ cidades que **são** <girissimos> giríssimos. (Farsi)
- (14) Como estás? Agora Eu moro em Coimbra **estou** estudante na Faculdade de letras de Coimbra universidade. (English)
- (15) Por aqui estou bem, mas próximo mese **estive** muito difícil (Lituanian)
- (16) Contactar com pessoas de cultura diferente da sua tem muito oportunidades mas também **esta** difícil. (Turkish).

In (11) and (13) there was the intention of correcting the verb used, successfully in one case, but incorrectly in the other. In (14) there must have been underlying the idea of

something temporary (At this moment I am studying), but the combination with ‘student’ no longer allows the use of ESTAR.

In what concerns example (16) the verb SER would be indicated because it is commonly accepted that contact with other cultures is really difficult.

A third type of error, curiously made by the same learner, who has English as his mother tongue, are cases (17) and (18), in which the transfer of the verb TO BE, in the sense of existence (There are ...) was made to SER:

- (17) Eu gosto minha vive em Coimbra, e eu **sou** muitos coisas de fazer ao futura (English)
- (18) Mas está temperatura mais calor do que a Canadá e **são** muito de flores em Coimbra. (English).

Finally, a hesitation in the construction of a sentence with an idea of geographical origin. There must have been hesitation between DE ONDE É (where he is from) and ONDE ESTÁ (where he is now):

- (19) Muitas vezes nos viajamos para Porto, onde <são> **é** <familia> família o meu namorado. (Polish).

Level A 2:

The same tendency to use SER instead of ESTAR is verified at this learning level, either for feelings, temporary states or even for the weather:

- (20) E nas verias de verão, gosto muito de ir à praia. Eu gosto de nadar e apanho banho de sol porque o tempo **é** muito calor, e acho que **é** muito relaxada. (Chinese)
- (21) Quando fomos a Paris, **era** muito quente (Korean)
- (22) Meu pai trabalha muito e eu vejo muito poça mas minha mae **é** comigo tudo o dia (Spanish)
- (23) Os comboios **são** bem. Mas o problema é que eles <não> não vão mais tard <que> das 21 horas. Então os meios de transporte **são** bem em Portugal. (Hungarian).

In (21) and (22), there is no clear awareness of the distinction between ‘estar calor /estar quente’ ((It’ s hot today, first as a noun and secondly adjective, but in a temporary way) e ‘ser quente’ (The country is warm, as usual feature).

ESTAR instead of SER appears in two cases in the characterization of the subject, and in which SER would be expected as far as these are permanent properties (being tall and being a girl):

- (24) **Estou** longo, com cabelo preto e um pouco estranho. (Bulgarian)
- (25) **Estou** uma menina <Belga> belga, não grande. (Dutch)
- (26) Na república <sou> **estou** muito bem e gosto das mininas que moram comigo. (Catalan).

The student must have noticed the difference between the verbs and used them correctly: ESTOU instead of SOU. We must observe that Catalan is similar to Portuguese in what concerns the existence of the two verbs.

Level B 1:

Again there is the use of SER, for states, feelings or temporary situations or reference to states of the climate, etc., instead of ESTAR (which we may see in half of these examples):

- (27) Quando o tempo é mal gosto também de cozinhar junto com os meus amigos. e jogar <xádre> xadrez com eles (German)
- (28) Também foi muito engraçado este dia quando fizemos /este caminho/ <estivemos perdidos> nas montanhas e fomos perdidos porque não usamos uma mapa. (German)
- (29) não sou segura se e um sujeito cultural <mo> ou mais uma pergunta pessoal de cada pessoa mas isso foi muito interessante para mim. (German)
- (30) Então nos meses de verão que ficava aqui (principalmente <)> no Setembro eu <fui estava> /estive/ na praia todos os fins de semana. (German)
- (31) Embora a Alemanha seja reunificada há 20 anos, as diferenças persistem especialmente em termos de pobreza, de educação e de língua. (German)
- (32) Eu depois tive que ir às aulas e voltei às 6h da tarde, expectando que a exposição seria quase preparada. (German)
- (33) Diz-se que o homem nunca é contente com o que tem e eu tenho de <d> confessar que é verdade. (Czech)
- (34) Primeiro no campo somos na ligação mais estreita com a natureza(...) que suporte a <nossa saúde> /nosso modo de vida saudável/. (Czech)
- (35) Ja <estas> és médica?! (English)
- (36) Assim, posso utilizar a guitarra eléctrica também, e ser más perto ao meu sonho! (English)
- (37) Os meus pais não são felizes que estou aqui. Têm saudade de mim e estão preocupados. (Italian)
- (38) Queria muito que tu fosse aqui comigo <por> assim de poder partilhar tudo o que eu estou viver. (Italian)
- (39) Flandres mesmo é outra vez dividido em 5 regiões. (Dutch)
- (40) (...) o teatro <(...)> e a dança contemporânea são de um nível altíssimo e, se queremos escapar do <isso> país, somos muito perto dos grandes centros europeos como Londres, Paris e Amsterdão. (Dutch).

In examples (28), (30) and (35), hesitation in the use of one of the two verbs is evident, with the right option being taken in two of the cases. In (39), the use of OUTRA VEZ ('again') causes the verb ESTAR to be expected and not SER, as it does, in (31), the value of passive adjective.

Inverse situation (ESTAR for permanent situations or with some duration) is also verified:

- (41) Bom espero que o meu tempo livre, mesmo que quando esteja uma avó velhina, seja cheio de experiências novas que me façam contenta e sensações que me façam feliz.> (German)
- (42) Nós dormimos na casa da uma amiga de Barcelona, isso esteve bem porque <(...)> /os/ hostels são maus. (German)

- (43) As nossas visitas <(…)> /**estivem**/ muito fixe porque /sempre depois da piscina/ fomos <para> na pastelaria Venus que é a melhor pastelaria <de> /em/ Coimbra. (German)
- (44) Coimbra também é lindíssima, estão muitos monumento, sobretudo devotos as pessoas religiosas ou literarias, e **está** um citio que <**sou** segura que> /que seguro/ vai gostar-te muito. (Italian)
- (45) **Estava** um experiência ótimo! (Dutch)
- (46) Alguns **stão** muito loucos! A vida do erasmus é muito boa, passa rápido, <es> é **está** cheia de festas! (Polish).

Note that in (41) the use of the verb ESTAR must be related to the idea that it is a passing state in human existence, but that it is normally used with the verb SER (Quando for... 'When I'm old...').

In (44) it may be noticed the correction with the suppression of SER (of a construction that is typical of the Italian), for having - certainly - felt this structure as foreign to Portuguese: ESTAR should have been used in that context. In (46), in turn, the verb expected would be SER, since it is a more or less permanent feature of some individuals.

Level B 2:

Also at this level the most frequent deviation is still the use of SER instead of ESTAR (in 7 of the 9 registrations), to express temporary states, situations and location that are not always permanent:

- (47) A cidade Coimbra tem tradição e ai mesmo tempo não é cheia de turistas e <tamb> a vida aqui também não é muito cara. Acho que tenha escolhido um bom lugar para Erasmus. (Czech)
- (48) Mas <(…)> com a idade surgem doenças e para tratá-las precisamos de um bom serviço de saúde que costuma **ser** situado na cidade. (Slovak)
- (49) Tenho uma bicicleta 'racing' que trouxe da Bélgica, e cada dia (quando o tempo está bom, se o tempo **for** bom, quente) costume andar de bicicleta partindo da minha casa (Dutch)
- (50) Estou a pensar sobre ti e os <teus> /teus/ estudos nos Estados Unidos da América – **eras** lá todo o ano sozinha, sem volta para Natal e fizeste tanto bem! (Czech)
- (51) **Era** triste quando mudamos a cidade quando tinha 14 anos e comecei a frequentar a escola secundária. (Finish)
- (52) E pode se dizer também que os franceses em regra geral **são** muito orgulhosos do proprio país e da propria lingua. (French).

The Dutch-speaking student hesitates to use the verbs for the weather, while there is overcorrection in:

- (53) Numa cidade <é> **está** mais fácil criar <uma> tolerância e respeito para os outros. (German).

Level C 1:

Although at a very advanced level, there are some examples of mistakes which are similar to those which have been referred to at other levels.

Once again, SER instead of ESTAR is the most common one:

- (54) Espero que todos na sua família estejam bem e a sua irmã mais nova já devia **ser** casada. (Hindi)
- (55) Com a presença dos portos, dos canais e da costa, a vida dos povos é ligada à indústria marinheira e têxtil. (Japanese)
- (56) Não se pode **ser** preso do horário de transportes públicos. (Japanese)
- (57) Muitas vezes o informação sobre horários, sítios dos paragens etc. não é disponível ou costa muito tempo para encontrar uma pessoa que quer ajudar e <sabe> tem este informação. (Czech)
- (58) Bruxelas foi originalmente parte de Flandres, mas quando a Bélgica tornou-se independente, a ‘burguesia’ **era** convencida que a cultura Francesa valeu muito mais e tornou a cidade ‘francófona’. (Dutch)

In the first example (54), the idea of civil status, which is usually used with SER, should be clear. In reality, for a Portuguese native speaker, the meaning of the sentence « a sua irmã mais nova já devia **ser** casada» (‘his younger sister should already be married’, sounding like an obligation) is thus totally different from what the learner intended to say (your younger sister is probably already married).

The use of ESTAR instead of SER also occurs in one case, being - however - an acceptable statement for a native speaker:

- (59) Gostaria de dizer que aquela zona está sempre cheio dos alunos e também o meu quatro **está** no Rest-do-chão, <e> escuro e frio. <que (...)> (Hindi).

It is interesting to note that in the case of deviations in C1, most occur in constructions of the passive type adjective: ser casada (‘she is married as civil state’) instead of estar casada (‘she is married’ at the moment), é ligada (she is normally connected’) instead of está ligada (‘she is connected now’), era convencida (‘she was really convinced’) instead of estar convencida (‘she was convinced of something at that moment’), etc., more elaborate than the usual copulative sentences. The degree of difficulty thus seems to be greater and this constitutes a factor that induces some mistakes.

3. Analysis of the results

To retake the questions initially posed, there is a great difficulty, on the part of the learners of Portuguese as non-maternal language or second language, in relating the verb ESTAR with temporary states and SER with more permanent properties or states, reason why the most part of the mistakes we have seen are, at all levels, the use of this last verb instead of ESTAR.

Regarding the possible influence of the original language, it seems to be confirmed, especially since the deviations are merely punctual in Spanish and Catalan speakers (who have the same verbs as Portuguese) and frequent in the productions of speakers of the other languages, in which there is only one verb corresponding to the values that SER and ESTAR have in Portuguese, namely: German - SEIN, Basque - IZAN, Bulgarian - *бъда*, Czech - *být*, Chinese - *是*, Korean - *있다*, Slovak - *byť*, Farsi - *استن - هستن* / *astan-hastan* (they are two variants of the same verb but without different sense), French - ÊTRE, Finnish - OLLA, Hindi - [hona], Hungarian - TO BE, Italian - ESSERE (STARE corresponds to Portuguese FICAR), Japanese - *されませ*, Lithuanian - BŪTI, Dutch - ZIJN, Polish - BYĆ, Romanian - FI, Russian - *быть*, Turkish - OLMAK and Ukrainian - *бути*.

Thus, as evidenced by the analysed data, this is a problem when learners transfer from one language to another, trying to choose the right Portuguese verb for a specific situation for which their languages have a single verb.

In what concerns the possibility that students who are attending higher levels of proficiency may be exempt of this type of deviations, this really does not always occur, since the difference between the mother tongue and Portuguese leads them to make the same type of errors as well.

Although the deviations occurring in C1 are found in somewhat more complex structures, and there are (by the number of attestations) less incidence of these type of mistakes, there seems to be, from the perspective of Applied Linguistics, cases of interlingua, that is, transference of particular language aspects of the mother tongue to the language of learning, and, consequently, some possible symptoms of fossilization¹⁹ may be noted.

4. Conclusions: How to deal with this problem when teaching?

Since the difficulty in using SER or ESTAR is inherent in the nature of the languages of learners of Portuguese as non-mother tongue, since most languages are not aware of this double possibility, the distinction must be made clear to foreign learners.

An overview of the most used textbooks distinguishes - in synthesis - the two verbs as follows:

SER: nationality (Eu sou portuguesa. 'I am Portuguese'), profession (Ela é professora. 'She is a teacher'), civil status (Eu sou solteira. 'I am single'), origin (Sou de Coimbra 'I am from Coimbra'), general characteristic of the subject (A água do mar é salgada. 'Sea water is salty'), characteristic that is not a result of an action (O livro é novo. 'The book is new'), possession (O cão é meu. The dog is mine), chronological time (São 8 horas 'It is 8 o'clock'), matter (A mesa é de Madeira. 'The table is made of wood'), fixed geographical situation (Coimbra é no centro de Portugal. 'Coimbra is in the centre of Portugal'), physical description (Ela é alta. 'She is tall'), relationship (Ela é minha prima. 'She is my cousin'), etc.

ESTAR: Temporary feature, which may have resulted from an action (Estou cansada. 'I'm tired'), characteristic that has to be observed or experienced (A sopa está quente. 'The soup is hot'), temporary location (Estamos na aula. 'We are in class'), position (Ela está sentada. 'She is seated'), weather (O dia está frio. 'The day is cold'), temporary feature (A janela está aberta. 'The window is open'), feeling, emotion or temporary state (Ela está com sede. 'She is thirsty'), to salute someone (Como está? 'How are you?'), etc.

However, even though there are several useful exercises, especially in initiation levels, similarly to those proposed in a teaching book for foreigners' tutorial (*Gramática Activa*, 'Active Grammar', page 7), in which learners are encouraged to form affirmative or negative sentences having to use **é** or **está** (The dog / a wild animal, Gasoline / very expensive, Portugal / a big country, Today / Wednesday, This bag / heavy, etc.) or in another one (*Praticar Português*, 'Practicing Portuguese', pp.19-20), which shows some several images and/or many possibilities or options to form correct sentences (The book / interesting / inside the folder / thick, The television / connected / large / in the room, etc.), among several others. The analysed data prove, however, that this approach has been insufficient.

Normally, the differences between SER and ESTAR are presented at the beginning of learning (more elementary levels) and rarely resumed later, with clear losses for learners.

The various teaching books summarize the use of the two verbs as follows: SER for situations or locations of cities, countries or buildings and permanent characteristics, as well as dates, days and hours and ESTAR for characteristics or physical states and temporary location of persons or objects, weather, occasional actions occurring at the moment of speech, which is a fact. However, they do not always consider the specificities of use which, at intermediate and advanced levels, above all, would be desirable.

Examples that may be strange to learners are several. For example, with dates it is common to use the verb SER, but there are cases where both are allowed: Hoje é dia 7 de Julho. / Estamos a 7 de Julho. 'Today is July 7'; Amanhã são 8. 'Tomorrow is the 8th of...'

but *Estamos em 2017*. ‘We are in 2017’, *Estamos em Novembro*. ‘We are in November’, but no longer **Somos em Novembro*. Another case is to use the verb *ESTAR* with situations like ‘dead’, since it is a permanent situation. And, with modern life, being (*SER*) blond or dark is already a less permanent situation than in the past, in the same way as in being married (*SER/ESTAR casado*), which is difficult for a non native speaker of Portuguese to choose one verb or another.

It would certainly be very productive, besides providing exercises and correcting (explaining) the error, to consider this deeply - at least at more advanced levels of learning - and specify the cases in which *SER* and *ESTAR* have a particular use, as well as try to make the learners understand that, if both are possible, the semantic charge is clearly distinct: for example, *Ela é linda / Ela está linda hoje!* ‘She is (always) beautiful!’ is different from ‘She is/looks beautiful today!’

In a recent article on acquiring *SER* and *ESTAR* by foreign learners, Ana Paula Huback (2011) suggests that, instead of the ‘categorical distinctions between *SER* and *ESTAR* in Brazilian Portuguese, this definition should be made in probabilistic terms’²⁰, as far as she has verified that the perception of the natives and non natives is not always coincident with the textbook solutions on this subject. The Author (2011: 105) concluded essentially that:

- The definition of *SER* and *ESTAR* in terms of permanent vs. temporary can not cover all instances of the actual use of these verbs;
- *SER* and *ESTAR* are best defined in terms of central and peripheral types of a category. The labels ‘permanent’ and ‘temporary’ are defining properties of these verbs, but there are examples that fit in the middle of these two extremes;
- Access to authentic materials produced in the target language is essential so that students can understand the language patterns available in the speaker's daily life.

The same Author considers as crucial that ‘the language teacher should adopt some activities and uses information that can supplement - or even question - the rules presented in the textbooks. There is no perfect teaching material that can cover all the variability inherent in any language, so the role of the teacher is essential’.²¹

Indeed, the call to attention to the variability of languages, to the truth that ‘each case is a case’, is absolutely fundamental in this and other more complex aspects of the Portuguese language. It should be remembered, as was explained in the introduction to this paper, that there are ‘stereotyped uses and [that], therefore, they do not obey a logic resistant to all evidence. They are idiosyncrasies that all languages present.’²²

It is to these uses that the teacher should pay particular attention, following the learner's progression, and avoiding, this way, his/her (otherwise inevitable) tendency towards fossilization.

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Notes

*This investigation had the supervision of an expert in Applied Linguistics, Doctor Isabel Pereira, Assistant Professor at the University of Coimbra.

¹ See Bizzocchi, 2008. Italian language has both ESSERE and STARE, but the latter is much more similar to *Permanecer* ('to remain') and *Ficar* than to *Estar* of Portuguese and Spanish.

² It's due to this the following difference between Portuguese and Spanish: when speaking of the location of a building Spanish language uses ESTAR instead of Portuguese SER: 'El Hotel **está** cerca de la Cibeles.' (instead of 'é perto da Cibeles'), 'This Hotel is near Cibeles [Fountain]'.
³ This verb gave the future forms of the indicative, conditional, present conjunctive, infinitive, gerund and imperative of the verb SER of contemporary Portuguese. It was common in the Middle Ages, in the medieval songbooks, the old meaning of 'being seated' ('*Sedia* la fremosa...').

⁴ In the original text: 'Estados permanentes são qualidades inerentes ao sujeito, que fazem parte de sua essência, como a cor amarela do ouro ou o calor do Sol, ao passo que estados transitórios indicam condições passíveis de mudança, como a temperatura de um ambiente, a localização de um objeto ou o humor de uma pessoa. Isso não significa que um estado tido como permanente seja imutável (...). Contudo, costumamos atribuir a certas condições um caráter mais estável do que a outras'

⁵ In the original Portuguese text: 'A bem da verdade, muitos desses usos são estereotipados e, portanto, não obedecem a uma lógica resistente a toda prova. São idiosincrasias que todas as línguas apresentam.'

⁶ In the original text: 'condicionada pelo tipo de propriedade que o constituinte com a relação gramatical de predicativo do sujeito exprime'.

⁷ The original text says: 'existe um nexo tão forte e directo entre o predicativo do sujeito e o sujeito que o verbo copulativo parece não ter as propriedades típicas de um predicador. Este facto levou os gramáticos a considerar os verbos copulativos meros elementos de ligação e, na sequência desta tradição, alguns linguistas encaram-nos como simples lexicalização de valores temporais, modais e aspectuais. De acordo com esta concepção, os verbos copulativos não seriam itens lexicais plenos, uma vez que não teriam uma grelha argumental, sendo o predicativo do sujeito o predicador principal da frase e o sujeito um argumento deste'.

⁸ As we may read in the Portuguese original text, 'não exige que se retire aos verbos copulativos o estatuto de itens lexicais plenos'.

⁹ In the original 'atribuir uma propriedade ao sujeito ou para descrever um estado no qual ele se encontra'.

¹⁰ Translation of 'marca a atribuição ao sujeito de uma propriedade que o caracteriza enquanto indivíduo'.

¹¹ Translation of the original text: 'marca um estado mais ou menos provisório e contingente no qual se encontra o sujeito'.

¹² Translation of 'predicados episódicos, que denotam propriedades transitórias dos indivíduos, isto é, estados temporalmente limitados (...), suscetíveis de mudança frequente'.

¹³ This is different, for example, from Italian, creating many mistakes in Italian learners of Portuguese.

¹⁴ The frame according to which I refer to learning levels was introduced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (in Portuguese abbreviated as Q.E.C.R.L.) 'is a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and other countries. Prepared by the Council of Europe as the main part of the project 'Language Learning for European Citizenship' in early 90s, its aim is, mainly, to provide a method of learning and teaching which applies to all European languages. Since 2001 it is also used to validate language ability. The six reference levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2) grade language proficiency.

¹⁵ This is a resource that was coordinated by Professor Cristina Martins and which belongs to CELGA-ILTEC (University of Coimbra, Portugal). Available online in <http://www.uc.pt/fluc/rcpl2/>. See also SANTOS et al., 2016.

¹⁶ Translation of 'do projeto *Recolha de Corpora de PL2*, iniciado, no CELGA, em junho de 2008. Trata-se de um acervo de produções escritas da autoria de 458 aprendentes de PL2, alunos que, nos dois períodos de recolha (fase 1, de maio de 2009 a maio de 2010; fase 2, de janeiro a maio de 2011), frequentavam os vários níveis de aprendizagem formal (A1 a C1) dos Cursos de Português para Estrangeiros a funcionar na Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra (...), [e tem] o intuito de facultar aos jovens investigadores (...) um acervo estruturado de dados empíricos fiáveis, capazes de sustentar o desenvolvimento de dissertações na área

da aquisição/ aprendizagem de PL2. Não tendo estado, à partida, adstrito a um objetivo descritivo ou teórico particular, o presente *corpus* foi, deste modo, concebido como uma infra-estrutura flexível, passível de ser rentabilizada tendo em vista distintos interesses descritivos e posições teóricas’.

¹⁷ In the transcription notes available in the Project site, < > for words that were given up by the student and / for words that were written instead.

¹⁸ The mistakes are marked in bold to facilitate the understanding of the analysis undertaken.

¹⁹ This term was first used by Larry Selinker in 1972 (in an article entitled ‘Interlanguage’), to refer to rules, structures or linguistic items of the mother tongue that tend to remain in the second language (not maternal), and situations that are very difficult to be corrected successfully.

On error analysis, transference, interlingua, and fossilization see, for example, TORRE, 1985: 66 et seq or TAVEIRA, 2014, 46 et seq.

²⁰ Translation of the original ‘distinções categóricas entre SER e ESTAR no Português do Brasil, essa definição seja feita em termos probabilísticos’.

²¹ Translation of the Portuguese text ‘o professor de língua adote atividades e utilize informações que possam complementar – ou até questionar – as regras apresentadas pelos livros didáticos. Não existe material didático perfeito que possa abarcar toda a variabilidade inerente a qualquer língua, por isso o papel do professor é imprescindível’.

²² Translation of the original in Portuguese: ‘usos estereotipados e [que], portanto, não obedecem a uma lógica resistente a toda prova. São idiosincrasias que todas as línguas apresentam’.