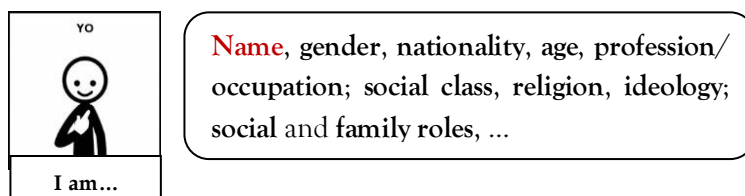


IDENTITY [*characteristics*] vs. CIRCUMSTANCES [*state/condition*] —*ser/estar*—

1. Identity: *Who are you?*



Activity 1. Introduce yourself (or your avatar):

I am...

The concept of *identity*

The identity is the **set of personal data, characteristics and roles** that define and identify a person as an individual or member of society. Among other traits, **social identity** is determined by one's own:

- ideology, beliefs, behaviors and lifestyle, such as being conservative or liberal; religious, apolitical, feminist, vegetarian, anti-bullfighting, xenophobic, geek, preppy...; consumerist or anti-system; nudist or a fashion victim.
 - social class/socioeconomic and occupational status: rich/poor/middle class...; (a) civil servant, [un]employed, pensioner, a public figure or a celebrity, squatter or homeless.
 - relationships and social roles: Depending on the situation, the same person may present him/herself as daughter or mother, pupil or teacher; friend, neighbor, boss, manager or client of...; native or foreign, host or guest; husband and ex-husband at the same time (of two different people).
 - sexual orientation, interests, hobbies or activities: being or not being heterosexual, polyamorous, sporty, smoker, intellectual (cultured/polite); hunter, traveler or a party-goer; being (a) fan, collector, member, supporter, leader or rival of...
- All in all, **membership**: classifies someone according to their social group and roles they play.

Activity 1 box. Social & role identity (lexicon)

In a nutshell, in addition to *physical and personality characteristics*, any **label** which says **who someone is**, grammatically it is considered a **characteristic (attribute) of identity** and, therefore, in Spanish it goes with the verb *ser* (the first value of the copula):ⁱ

Identidad = ser

2. Location: *Where is...* (*some place, something or someone*)?

Activity 2. The (identity) intruder: Which one of the following statements does not refer location?

Location ≠ identity	
1)	Where are the keys?
2)	Love is in the air.
3)	Mt. Everest is in the Himalayas.
4)	Honey, are you at home?
5)	What is that?
6)	The Moon is always in the sky.
7)	Is the cafeteria on the first floor?
8)	We're really close now...

Activity 2 box (solution)ⁱⁱ

Location ≠ identity: two different *communicative intention* (CI) that Spanish indicates by a distinctive morphological marker (the verb *estar*):

CI –to say–	'he/she, it' = (...)	
	Identity	Location
	– Who is he/she. – What it is.	– Where (...) is.
	<i>ser</i>	<i>estar</i>

Tab. 1 «Speaker's Communicative Intent»

The grammar concept of *circumstance*

The *location* —situation/position in space— of any subject (*love, you, the key or Mt. Everest*) does not inform about *who* or *what* but *where* (...) is, whereby grammatically *location* is considered *circumstance* [i.e. not a *characteristic of identity*]:

English	to be	Spanish	ser vs estar
identity or circumstance		identidad vs circunstancia	
I am I and my circumstance is that I am here.		Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia es que estoy aquí.	

Tab. 2 «Key contrast descriptors»

3. Grammar: ¿*ser* o *estar*?

Activity 3. First, let's play *Guess who*. The hidden character we are looking for is a woman: she is a *very famous actress, from the USA; blonde, pretty; sweet, sexy...* and *she is dead*. Did you guess? *She is* _____.

- In your perception, does 'dead' inform about *who* or about *how* Marilyn Monroe is?
- [Fill the blanks] The adjective *dead* (or *alive*) says [who/how] _____ someone is, therefore in Spanish it goes with the verb [ser/estar] _____ because it does not refer to the *identity* of the subject (in this case, a *living being*) but to [a *characteristic*/the *state* or *condition*] _____ of this one we are talking about. (Answers)ⁱⁱⁱ

Attributive function

—focusing on CI—

	<i>ser</i> —identity—	<i>estar</i> —circumstance—
CI —to say—	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Who he/she is. – What it is. – What (...) is like. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Where (...) is. – How (...) is.
Grammar	<i>characteristics</i>	<i>state/condition</i>

Tab. 3 «Basic *ser/estar* communicative background»

Activity 4. Critical point: Is *the* (dead/alive) *intruder* characteristic or state? One of them is not like the rest:

- 1) The computer is **dead**.
- 2) I am **dead** tired.
- 3) We don't know whether they are **alive** or not.
- 4) She is **alive** and kicking.
- 5) *And I am a **dead** man walking like a moth* (Lacrimas Profundere).
- 6) The town certainly is not **dead**.
- 7) *For my enemy is **dead**, a man divine as myself is **dead*** (Walt Whitman).



[answer] Intruder is No ____ [cf. next section]^{iv}

4. Syntax and word order as *disambiguation resource*

One of the first clues to solve possible ambiguous cases (*characteristic* or *state*?) is given by **sentence structure** and word order:

- 1) He is dead [state] *vs* He is a dead man [= He's (like) a zombie].
- 2) The computer is dead *vs*/= It is a dead computer.
- 3) The town is (not) dead *vs*/= It is (not) a dead town.
- 4) (This) Love is dead *vs*/≈ It is a dead love.

In the first choice of each of four contrasts above, *dead* works as *state* (CI = 'how he/it is') and in the second one, as *characteristic* (CI = 'what he/it is like'). That is, even though both options basically have the same *meaning* (ex. 2, 3; 4), the *attributive function* that the adjective (*dead*) performs in each is not.

In addition to the other little changes in the sentence structure (both Spanish and English), the main **grammatical consequence in Spanish** is that we use the verb *estar* when the adjective (the attribute) works as *state* and *ser* when it is expressed as a *characteristic* of the subject:

- 1) Él **está** muerto *vs* Es (un) hombre muerto.
- 2) Mi ordenador **está** muerto = Es un ordenador muerto [ordenador o computadora].
- 3) La ciudad **está** muerta = Es una ciudad muerta.
- 4) (Este)/El amor **está** muerto ≈ Es un amor muerto.

Choosing one or the other option when *inanimate subject (thing)* will depend mainly on the situation/context of conversation:

- “It’s over. My old computer is no more... **It is dead**; it has ceased to exist”.
- “The only safe computer **is a dead computer**”, hackers say.
- A: In fact, this **is a dead town** in the middle of nowhere.
B: I don’t agree. **It’s not dead** at all; it just needs some improvements to make it more attractive for people to visit.

While it is true that in everyday speech *dead (muerto/a)* seems to be used rather less as *characteristic* than as *state*, there are many other frequently used adjectives whose *default value* is *state* which also recategorized as *characteristic* by following this same **syntactic pattern**:

- | |
|---|
| 1) He is sick vs He is a sick guy.
2) She is nervous vs She is a nervous girl.
3) He is angry vs He/It is an angry man/thing.
4) She/The Moon is sad vs She/It is a sad woman/moon.
5) He is broken vs He/It is a broken toy. |
|---|

To be
ser vs **estar**

Tab. 4 «Syntax: grammar & word order»

The attribute’s CI & expressions of time

It seems obvious to point out that attributive function that the adjective performs (as *characteristic* or as *state*) is not altered because a time mark can appears in the sentence: *today, now, always/never, sometimes, all the time ...* or any one:

- Now they are **sad** and **tired**.
- She is *almost always* **angry**.
- You are **quite** *all the time*.
- I’m *rarely* **upset**.
- We are *often* **happy**.
- *Lately* my cat is *always* **sick**.
- It is not **broken** *forever* [“It” = any *inanimate subject*: a computer, a relationship, hope, my heart...].

That is, with or without time adverb, all these utterances are clearly referring to the *subject’s state*; i.e., the attribute is performed according to its default value (e.g. *sick* = *health status*; *sad* = *mood*) regardless of whether that *somebody* —or any *living being*— *be sick/sad now, always, since birth, forever* or *temporarily* (or whether time adverb be omitted from the sentence).

On the other hand, if we say of someone that “*He/She is (now) a *** person*”, the interlocutor will understand the speaker’s CI is to say ‘*what he/she is like*’ (defining, *labeling* or *characterizing* them) [and not to tell ‘*how this one is*’]:

- A: I like him. He is a **calm** and **collected** guy.
B: He’s changed a lot. He **was** a very **angry** child.



5. CI: Focusing on sentence *meaning* (e.g. **It is sad** = **It is a sad thing**)

Activity 5. The (sad) intruder: Only one of them is not like the rest. Is it *characteristic* or *state*?

CI: <i>characteristic</i> or <i>state</i> ?	
1)	Are you a sad person?
2)	That is sad news.
3)	Why are you sad ?
4)	Goodbyes are sad .
5)	... and this is so sad .
6)	It is a sad business that...
7)	Today is sad for us.

Activity 5 box



[answer] Intruder is № ____, because here *sad*:

- a) says *what (it, he/she) is like*.
- b) refers to the *mood* —*state* of mind— the subject *is in*.

Learning tool

Check your answers into an **automatic translator**. If you don't have one installed, you can select the content of *Activity 5 box*, copy it [Ctrl-C] and paste it [Ctrl-V] at, e.g. *DeepL Translator* [online] <<https://www.deepl.com/translator>> where the results of Spanish translation are right (both of this and the other exercises and examples of *nominal predicates* included in the different steps of this route).

[Activity 5 annotated solution]

- Intruder is № 3, “Why are you sad?”, taking an interest in someone’s *mood*.
- Could it be № 4, 5 or 7 *critical points*? 4 means ‘goodbyes are a sad thing’, as does “this” in 5. In ex. 7, by “sad” we mean ‘what today *is like*’ “for us” (defining, *characterizing it*) [and not ‘which *state of mind* today *is in*’; not ‘how it *feels*’].

Activity 6. Critical point: *It feels sad* [*mood*]. If only one of the following *sad* means what *state* its subject is in, what will you choose?

- 1. Mondays **are sad**.
- 2. This song **is sad**.
- 3. The room **is sad**.
- 4. The mood here **is sad**.
- 5. The flower **is sad**.
- 6. Sometimes it **is sad** for me.

[Activity 6 annotated solution]

№ 5 CI: “The flower *looks/feels* sad” [metaphorical uses]. It could be the flower of a plant (a *living being*) that begins to wither; or a cut flower in a vase. It could also be the *rose* of *The Little Prince* story who [personification] *is sad*. Other examples may include:

- The moon *is sad*, because she is the sun's wife.
- Even though the sea *is* always *sad*, carries on being the sea.

This use (*it-personified feels sad*) is significantly **less frequent** than **general usage** (№ 1-4, 6) where **sad characterizes it** (inanimate subject): an *event* or *fact*, a *time period*, an *idea* or some *place*; that *story*, the *atmosphere*, *news* or *reality*; *to say goodbye*, *what happened* or *to think that...*; *to lose*, *current situation*; *the end*, *the truth...*, or any topic that **is (a) sad (thing) → CI: what it is like** [‘for me’].

- [Question]: For you, what is “it” in ex. № 6 above? _____ [subject’s identity: A = A].

Conclusion & aim: CI of nominal predicates (*evident* vs. *hidden* meaning)

The aim of this *prior knowledge activation* proposal is operationalize the recognition of the **CI** in *nominal predicates* as **key resource** (*guideline*) for understanding the distribution of the copula in SFL —*Spanish as a foreign language*—, i.e. the **use** of *ser/estar*:

characteristics vs. state [now/always]
(focus on the CI)

☑ Communicative approach

In addition to facilitating access to this grammar content, *building a communicative background* in one's *mother tongue* (MT) is also primarily aimed at preventing (as an *antidote*) against the most widely used, widespread and accepted background assumption to this issue in SFL today, according to which:

- **Characteristic** = *permanent / inherent quality* (whether *living being* or inanimate subject).
- **Circumstance** = *temporary state / state resulting from a change* (depending on different interpretations within this same *temporal approach*):

characteristics [= always] vs. state [= now]
(CI focusing temporality)

☒ Temporal **failed** pattern

We **warn** about the oversimplification of this scheme by quoting Juan Felipe García Santos, one of the most recognized authors in SFL and the main reference of this new *cognitive resource* we present here: “The best-known rule for the use of *ser/estar*, which states that for the *permanent* you use *ser* and for the *accidental estar*, is basically **false**”. Despite it does **not work** (no practical application), this “wretched rule” can be as easy to assimilate as difficult to eradicate afterwards, being, in fact, “the responsible for the largest number of **errors** made by advanced level speakers” (2020: 389) [free translation].

References

GARCÍA SANTOS, J.F., 2020, “Apéndice I. Ser y estar: dos verbos problemáticos para extranjeros”, *Comunicación avanzada en español. El componente gramatical*. Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca. ISBN-13: 978-8413111674, pp. 379-402.

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ⁱ Grammar L1 \neq L2: *age* and *marital status* (consult your Grammar Handbook or ask your teacher about these two categories).

ⁱⁱ Intruder is № 5) “What is that?”, question used to know the *identity* of something; to *identify* it ($A = A$).

ⁱⁱⁱ b) *Dead* informs about *how* Marilyn Monroe *is*. c) *how* / *estar* / *state* or *condition*.

^{iv} *Critical point*: Chances are you will doubt between № 5 and 6. If not, congratulations!