

NOMINAL PLACEHOLDERS IN SOUTH AMERICAN SPANISH VARIETIES: THE CASE OF RIOPLATENSE *coso* AND CHILEAN *este*

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INTRODUCTION

A *placeholder* is a dummy element filling a syntactic slot corresponding to some target expression (Seraku 2022).

- ➡ Speakers employ placeholders when they are unable or unwilling to produce some word or phrase.

The following are examples of *nominal placeholders*, i.e., nominal elements whose target expression seems to be a noun.

- | | | |
|-----|--|---------|
| (1) | Could you hand me the <i>whatchamacallit</i> ? | English |
| (2) | Je dois aller chercher mon <i>machin</i> chez le réparateur.
I must go pick my <i>machin</i> at the repairman
'I have to go pick up my thingy from the repair shop.' | French |
| (3) | Ich habe gestern mein <i>Dingsbums</i> im Büro vergessen.
I have forgotten my <i>Dingsbums</i> in office yesterday
'I forgot my thingy in the office yesterday.' | German |

INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, I will discuss novel data illustrating the properties of two *nominal placeholders* attested in South American Spanish varieties:

- Rioplatense *cosa* ‘thing.M’, and
- Chilean *este* ‘this’.

As we will see, these elements exhibit characteristics that distinguish them from nouns such as *cosa* ‘thing’. In particular, I aim to show three things.

- ✓ While their discourse-related behavior seems to be analogous, *cosa* and *este* differ in a number of morphosyntactic aspects.
- ✓ These differences follow from *cosa* being a true *nominal placeholder* (i.e., a noun that replaces nouns), while *este* is a pronoun accompanying an *empty noun* that functions as a *placeholder*.
- ✓ *Nominal placeholders* recruit a *specificity*-related head within the DP.

The data I will present comes from acceptability judgements collected from Spanish speakers from Buenos Aires (for *cosa*) and Santiago de Chile (for *este*).

THE BASIC PATTERNS

Both placeholders seemingly derive from existing words in (General) Spanish.

The inherently feminine noun *cosa* 'thing' is common to all Spanish varieties.

- (4) Compré una cosa.
bought.1SG a thing
'I bought a thing.'

(General) Spanish

Rioplatense *coso* is its masculine version.

- (5) No encuentro el *coso*.
not find.1SG the.M.SG thing.M.SG
'I don't find the thingy.'

Rioplatense Spanish

Speakers of other Spanish varieties are able to identify this form as a neologism functioning as a *placeholder*.

THE BASIC PATTERNS

Este 'this' is a demonstrative pronoun that is found in all Spanish dialects.

(6) A: ¿Cuál compraste?
which buy.2SG
'Which one did you buy?'

B: Compré este.
bought.1SG this
'I bought this one.'

(General) Spanish

In Chilean Spanish, *este* may express the same meaning as Rioplatense *coso*.

(7) No encuentro *(el) este.
not find.1SG the.M.SG this.M.SG
'I don't find the thingy.'

Chilean Spanish

Notice that *este* in (7) is required to be preceded by a determiner. The sequence *el este* 'the this' is strongly ungrammatical in other dialects.

✓ Although Mexican Spanish also seems to display the pattern in (7).

THE BASIC PATTERNS

In Chilean Spanish, the pattern becomes unacceptable if *este* is meant to function as a demonstrative.

- (8) A: ¿Cuál compraste?
which buy.2SG
'Which one did you buy?'
- B: * Compré el este.
bought.1SG the.M.SG this.M.SG
'I bought this one.'

Chilean Spanish

This suggests there are two forms *este* in Chilean Spanish: a demonstrative pronoun and a *nominal placeholder*; only the latter combines with determiners.

➡ We will see later that this preliminary conjecture is false.

NOMINAL PLACEHOLDERS VS. GENERAL NOUNS

The behavior of *nominal placeholders* cannot be reduced to that of *general nouns* (Halliday & Hasan 1976) such as *thing* or *stuff*.

- (9) Dame el coso.
give.me the thing.M
'Give me the thingy'
- (10) Dame el este.
give.me the this.M
- (11) # Dame la cosa.
give.me the thing

The general noun *cosa* requires further specification to be used felicitously.

- (12) Dame la cosa esa.
give.me the thing that
'Give me that thing.'
- (13) Dame la cosa que está en el cajón.
give.me the thing that is.3SG in the drawer
'Give me thing that is in the drawer.'

NOMINAL PLACEHOLDERS VS. GENERAL NOUNS

Nominal placeholders and *general nouns* contrast in a number of contexts. The general noun *cosa* may refer to propositional objects, e.g., (14).

- (14) Prometiste una cosa_i: [_{S_i} que vendrías temprano].
promised.2SG a thing that would.come.2SG early
'You promised one thing: that you'd come early.'

On the contrary, *cosa* and *este* cannot refer to propositions. Arguably, this is because they only refer to nouns.

- (15) * Prometiste un coso_i: [_{S_i} que vendrías temprano]
promised.2SG a thing.M.SG that would.come.2SG early
'You promised one thingy: that you'd come early'
- (16) * Prometiste un este_i: [_{S_i} que vendrías temprano]
promised.2SG a this.M.SG that would.come.2SG early
'You promised one thingy: that you'd come early'

NOMINAL PLACEHOLDERS VS. GENERAL NOUNS

When combined with indefinite determiners, *nominal placeholders* trigger a *specific* interpretation.

(17) Te dejé una cosa en la mesa.
2SG.DAT left.1SG a thing in the table
'I left a thing for you on the table.'

(18) Te dejé un **coso** / **este** en la mesa.
2SG.DAT left.1SG a thing.M.SG in the table
'I left a thingy for you on the table.'

The relevant meaning is analogous to the specific interpretation of (19), in which the speaker refers to a particular student.

(19) A student in Syntax 1 cheated on the exam.

The discourse function of *nominal placeholders* overlaps with what Farkas (2002) dubs *epistemic specific indefinites*.

➡ Both make reference to a certain entity the speaker has in mind.

NOMINAL PLACEHOLDERS VS. GENERAL NOUNS

Indefinite nominals are interpreted as variables when they are under the scope of quantificational adverbials (e.g., Heim 1982, Bosque 2001).

- (20) Siempre ponen una cosa ahí.
always put.3PL a thing there
'They always put a thing there.'

The variable interpretation is blocked with both *coso* and *este*.

- (21) Siempre ponen un *coso* ahí.
always put.3PL a thing.M there
'They always put (the same) thingy there.'
- (22) Siempre ponen un *este* ahí.
always put.3PL a this there

NOMINAL PLACEHOLDERS VS. GENERAL NOUNS

The *general noun* *cosa* can be combined with *cualquier* to trigger free choice interpretations.

- (23) Dame cualquier cosa.
give.2SG.me any thing.M.SG
'Give me anything.'

The *nominal placeholders* *coso* and *este*, on the other hand, cannot associate with free choice items.

- (24) * Dame cualquier coso.
give.2SG.me any thing.M.SG
'Give me anything.'

- (25) * Dame cualquier este.
give.2SG.me any this.M.SG

GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *coso* AND *este*

Both *coso* and *este* can be placeholders for proper nouns, although they exhibit contrasting properties in these contexts. *Coso* functions as a gender-neutral noun.

- (26) Coso dijo eso.
 thing.M.SG said.3SG that
 'The individual you know about said that'
- (27) *Cosa dijo eso.
 thing.F.SG said.3SG that
 'The female individual you know about said that'

On the other hand, *este* inflects in Gender depending on the referent.

- (28) El este dijo eso.
 the this.M.SG said.3SG that
 'The male individual you know about said that'
- (29) La esta dijo eso.
 the this.M.SG said.3SG that
 'The female individual you know about said that'

GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *coso* AND *este*

As discussed before, *coso* and *cosa* have different meanings.

(30) Eliana me dio el *coso* que estaba en el cajón.
Eliana DAT.1SG gave the thing.M that was in the drawer

(31) Eliana me dio la *cosa* que estaba en el cajón.
Eliana DAT.1SG gave the thing that was in the drawer

These sentences admit paraphrases with very different truth conditions.

(30) \approx “Eliana gave me that specific thing you know about that was in the drawer, perhaps among some other things”

(31) \approx “Eliana gave me the one and only thing that was in the drawer”

From the behaviour of *coso* and *cosa*, we may conclude that

- ✓ they are not forms of the same word based on a Gender distinction, but
- ✓ they are distinct lexical items in the Rioplatense lexicon.

GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *coso* AND *este*

On the other hand, *este* does exhibit a synonymous feminine counterpart *esta*. For some speakers, *esta* is the preferred form between the two.

- (32) Pásame el *este* / la *esta* que dejé ahí.
give.me the.M this.M the.F this.F that left.1SG there
'Give me the thingy I left there.'

Some speakers report the intuition that *este* and *esta* should replace masculine and feminine nouns, respectively.

➡ However, this does not seem to trigger any grammaticality contrasts.

For instance, (33) could be used to refer to the spoon (feminine) on the table (feminine), or to the knife (masculine) on the shelf (masculine).

- (33) Pásame la *esta* que está en el *este*.
give.me the this.F that is in the this.M
'Give me the thingy that is on the thingy'.

GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *coso* AND *este*

When replacing a proper noun, Rioplatense *coso* rejects determiners.

- (34) (*El) *Coso* me dijo eso.
the thing.M DAT.1SG told.3SG that
'The individual you know about told me that.'

While Chilean *este* requires it for grammaticality.

- (35) *(La) *esta* me dijo eso.
the.F this.F DAT.1SG told.3SG that
'The female individual you know about told me that.'

This fits the normal pattern of co-occurrence of definite articles and anthroponyms in both varieties (e.g., De Mello 1992).

- ➡ While proper nouns referring to humans do not typically accept determiners in Rioplatense,
- ➡ this is the norm in Chilean Spanish (Oroz 1966: 371).

GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *coso* AND *este*

Morphological processes that define nouns can be applied to *coso*, but not to *este*. For instance, only *coso* can host diminutive morphology.

(36) el cosito
the thing.DIM.M.SG
'the little thingy'

(37) *el estito
the this.DIM.M.SG
'the little thingy'

Thus, while *este* appears in nominal contexts, it does not behave as a noun at the morphological level.

➡ Thus undermines the preliminary conjecture that the *nominal placeholder este* is a noun.

GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *coso* AND *este*

These elements also exhibit distinct distributions regarding demonstrative pronouns within the nominal phrase. *Coso* behaves like most nouns in Spanish.

(38) el *coso* ese
the thing.M.SG that
'that thingy'

(39) ese *coso*
that thing.M.SG
'that thingy'

Este cannot be combined with demonstratives, no matter their position.

(40) *el *este* ese
the this.M.SG that
'that thingy'

(41) *ese *este*
that this.M.SG
'that thingy'

GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *coso* AND *este*

This contrast does not extend to other elements that alternate between prenominal and postnominal positions in (General) Spanish, e.g., adjectives.

Both *coso* and *este* may be followed by adjectives.

- (42) No encuentro el *coso* / *este* nuevo.
not find.1SG the thing.M this new
'I can't find the new thingy.'

However, neither of them can be preceded by adjectives.

- (43) *No encuentro el nuevo *coso* / *este*.
not find.1SG the new thing.M this
'I can't find the new thingy.'

SUMMARY OF PROPERTIES

- ✓ The behavior of *nominal placeholders* *coso* and *este* cannot be reduced to that of *general nouns* such as *cosa* 'thing'.
- ✓ Both *coso* and *este* can only receive specific interpretations, even in indefinite contexts.
- ✓ *Coso* does not inflect for Gender, while *este* does.
- ✓ *Este* always requires a determiner, while *coso* only does when it replaces a proper noun.
- ✓ Only *coso* admits morphological processes that apply to nouns.
- ✓ *Este* cannot co-appear with demonstrative pronouns within the DP.
- ✓ Both *coso* and *este* are incompatible with prenominal adjectives.

TOWARDS AN ANALYSIS

I will sketch an analysis for Rioplatense *coso* and Chilean *este* based on the following assumption:

- ✓ There is a *specificity*-related projection within the structure of the DP (e.g., Cornilescu & Nicolae 2016, Fábregas 2019, Konan & Puskas 2021).
- ✓ This head, which I will dub for convenience S^0 , triggers specific readings when attracting elements to its domain.
- ✓ S^0 occupies a position just below D^0 .

I take that the following contrast follows from movement of the A to Spec,S.

- (44) Quiero leer una novela interesante.
want.1SG to.read a interesting novel
'I want to read an interesting novel.'

specific ✓, *non-specific* ✓

- (45) Quiero leer una interesante novela.
want.1SG to.read a interesting novel

specific ✓, *non-specific* ✗

TOWARDS AN ANALYSIS: *coso*

I contend that *nominal placeholders* interact with S_0 by overtly moving an element to its domain. Once something moves to S_0 , it becomes inactive.

- ✓ *Coso* is a masculine noun, which explains why diminutives apply to it.
- ✓ It is inherently masculine (i.e., it does not carry a Gender feature [+F]).
- ✓ *Coso* head moves to S^0 .

The basic proposal is as follows:

(46) [DP [D' el [SP [S' *coso* [NP ~~*coso*~~]]]]]

This predicts that *coso* can co-appear with demonstratives.

(47) [DP [D' el [SP [S' *coso* [NP ~~*coso*~~ este]]]]]

(48) [DP este [D' D⁰ [SP [S' *coso* [NP ~~*coso*~~ ~~este~~]]]]]

Inactivity of S^0 precludes movement of adjectives to Spec, S^0 .

(49) [DP [D' el [SP [S' *coso* [NP ~~*coso*~~ nuevo]]]]]

TOWARDS AN ANALYSIS: *este*

I propose that *este* is a demonstrative pronoun within a DP with an empty noun *e*. Technically, the empty noun is the true *nominal placeholder* in the construction.

- ➡ *Este* is a pronoun, so it is incompatible with nominal morphology.
- ➡ *Este* moves to Spec,S⁰.

The basic proposal is as follows. This predicts that *este* cannot co-appear with other demonstratives.

(50) [DP [D' el [SP *este* [S' S⁰ [NP *e* ~~/*este*/]]]]]~~

The demonstrative agrees in Gender with *e*.

(51) [DP [D' la [SP *esta* [S' S⁰ [NP *e*_[+F] ~~/*esta*/]]]]]~~

Inactivity of S⁰ precludes movement of adjectives to Spec,S⁰.

(52) [DP [D' el [SP *este* [S' S⁰ [NP *e* nuevo ~~/*este*/]]]]]~~

IN THIS PRESENTATION...

- I presented novel data illustrating the behavior of *nominal placeholders* in two Latin American Spanish varieties.
- I showed that *specificity* is a defining characteristic of these elements.
- I described contrasting morphosyntactic characteristics between the two forms, which shows that *nominal placeholders* should become subject of comparative study.
- I advanced an account of both phenomena based on the assumption that *nominal placeholders* recruit a *specificity*-related head S^0 .

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THANK YOU!

CA

Could you write "thank you" in several Romance languages?



Certainly! Here are ways to say "thank you" in several Romance languages:

1. Spanish: Gracias
2. Portuguese: Obrigado (masculine) / Obrigada (feminine)
3. French: Merci
4. Italian: Grazie
5. Romanian: Mulțumesc
6. Catalan: Gràcies
7. Galician: Grazas
8. Occitan: Mercés
9. Sardinian: Gràtzias
10. Provençal: Mercès
11. Asturian: Gracies
12. Corsican: Gràzie