Nominal placeholders in South American Spanish varieties: the case of Rioplatense *coso* and Chilean *este*

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General issue. A *placeholder* is a dummy element that speakers use to fill a syntactic slot corresponding to a target expression that they are unable or unwilling to produce (Seraku 2022). In this paper, we present novel data depicting the grammatical behavior of two of these elements in South American Spanish: *coso* 'thingy', which is typical for Rioplatense Spanish, and *este* 'this', which is characteristic for the Spanish dialect spoken in the central area of Chile. While these placeholders are similar in that they both have a noun-like distribution, they differ in a number of morphosyntactic properties. These differences lead us to propose two distinct analyses for them: we contend that while *coso* is the head of the NP in which it appears, structures with *este* involve a null noun. Overall, our account illustrates the array of alternative underlying representations that nominal placeholders may have in Spanish.

The patterns. Both placeholders under study derive from existing words in (General) Spanish. To begin with, *cosa* 'thing' is a noun common to all Spanish varieties; Rioplatense Spanish, however, further displays its masculine counterpart *coso*, which is roughly equivalent to elements such as German *Dingbums* or English *thingy*, e.g., (1). Similarly, *este* 'this' is a demonstrative pronoun that is found in all Spanish dialects; Chilean speakers, however, may seemingly use this form as a nominal placeholder preceded by a determiner, e.g., (2). Both *coso* and *este* are highly colloquial in their varieties.

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

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

Both elements can be used with indefinite determiners, e.g., (3) and (5). However, they need to be interpreted as specific indefinites in these contexts, i.e., their referent must be fixed or already determined (Von Heusinger 2002). Thus, they cannot trigger free choice interpretations and reject elements like *cualquier* 'any' associated to them, e.g., (4) and (6).

(3) Dejé un coso en la mesa.
    left.1SG a thing.M.SG in the table
    'I left a thingy on the table.'

(5) Dejé un este en la mesa.
    left.1SG a this.M.SG in the table
    'I left a thingy on the table.'

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

(6) *Dame cualquier este.
    give.2SG.me any this.M.SG
    'Give me anything.'

The specificity requirement distinguishes these placeholders from the more generally available noun *cosa* 'thing', e.g., (7). Additionally, notice that *cosa* may refer to propositional objects, e.g., (8).

(7) Dame cualquier cosa.
    give.2SG.me any thing
    'Give me anything.'

(8) Prometiste una cosa$_i$: [$_{S_i}$ que irías].
    promised.2SG a thing that go.2SG
    'You promised one thing: that you'd go.'

On the contrary, *coso* and *este* cannot refer to propositions.

(9) *Prometiste un coso$_i$: [$_{S_i}$ que...]
    promised.2SG a thing.M.SG that
    'You promised one thingy: that...'

(10) *Prometiste un este$_i$: [$_{S_i}$ que...]
    promised.2SG a this.M.SG that
    'You promised one thingy: that...'

Coso and *este* can be placeholders for proper nouns, although they exhibit different properties in these contexts. On one hand, *coso* can function as both a masculine or a feminine proper noun, e.g., (11); the noun *cosa* cannot be used to refer to female entities, e.g., (12). This contrasts with the behavior of *este*, which does inflect for feminine, e.g., (13) and (14).

(11) Coso   dijo   eso.
      thing.M.SG said.3SG that
      'The individual you know said that'

(13) El este   dijo   eso.
      the this.M.SG said.3SG that
      'The male individual you know said that'

(12) *Cosa   dijo   eso.
      thing.F.SG said.3SG that
      'The female you know said that'

(14) La esta   dijo   eso.
      the this.M.SG said.3SG that
      'The female individual you know said that'

Notice that while Rioplatense *coso* does not require a determiner in these contexts, Chilean *este/esta* do. This correlates with the patterns of co-occurrence of definite articles and anthroponyms in both varieties (e.g., De Mello 1992). Basically, while proper nouns referring to humans do not typically accept determiners in Rioplatense, this is the norm in Chilean Spanish (Oroz 1966: 371).

A further difference between *coso* and *este* is that morphological processes that define the nominal class are exclusive to the former. For instance, only *coso* can host diminutive morphology.

(15) el cosito   de la silla
      the thing.DIM.M.SG of the chair
      'the thingy of the table'

(16) *el estito   de la silla
      the this.DIM.M.SG of the chair
      'the thingy of the table'

These elements also exhibit distinct distributions regarding demonstrative pronouns within the nominal phrase. The placeholder *coso* behaves like most nouns in Spanish, allowing for demonstrative pronouns to precede it, e.g., (17), and to follow it, e.g., (18). In contrast, *este* cannot be combined with demonstratives no matter their position, e.g., (19) and (20).

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

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

(18) ese coso
      that thing.M.SG
      'that thingy'

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

Analysis. We take that there is a projection NumP occupying a position between D^0 and N^0 (Ritter 1995). Furthermore, we follow Panagiotidis (2000) in assuming that (i) demonstratives occupy the Spec,NP position, and (ii) the order N-Dem obtains from moving N^0 to Num^0. With this background, we propose that Rioplatense *coso* is syntactically a nominal head N^0, e.g., (21). In contrast, Chilean *este* is a demonstrative pronoun licensing an empty noun *e* which is the true responsible for the placeholder interpretation, e.g., (22); see Panagiotidis (2003), Saab (2019), i.a., for discussion on empty nouns.

(21) [DP el [NumP *coso* [NP ese [N' ~~coso~~]]]]

(22) [DP el [NumP *e* [NP este [N' ~~e~~]]]]

This allows to capture the morphosyntactic properties discussed so far. That is, the data in (11) to (14) are expected if both *coso* and *e* are nominal heads that may carry [±F] features for gender. Moreover, under the assumption that there is a single position for demonstratives within the NP, the structure in (22) derives the unacceptability of (19) and (20). Finally, the proposal straightforwardly explains the contrast in (15) and (16): *estito* cannot be formed because *este* is a pronoun, not a noun.

We take that the behavior observed from (3) to (10) follows from the hypothesis that placeholders compose units with meta-linguistic reference (Seraku 2023). Roughly speaking, they denote expressions under discussion pertaining to a certain class, i.e., *coso* and *e+este* point to salient nouns in a context.

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