

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT SCHWENTER

Scott Schwenter¹

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Scott Schwenter is a Professor of Hispanic Linguistics in the Department of Spanish & Portuguese at The Ohio State University. He is interested in morphosyntactic variation and pragmatics in both Spanish and Portuguese. His most recent work has focused on the study of variable past participles in Portuguese perfect constructions, entrenchment and persistence in language change, the Spanish past subjunctive case and variable negative concord in Brazilian Portuguese. Professor Schwenter has made important contributions to the field of Hispanic Linguistics in using different methodologies such as corpus based and experimental research to investigate pragmatic and morphosyntax phenomena in Spanish and Portuguese.

Specifically about Brazilian Portuguese, Schwenter has provided a testable hypothesis about the widespread phenomenon of double negation by using an explanation based on information structure to describe its pragmatic constraints. Moreover, professor Schwenter also contributed to the study of overt objects in BP by suggesting that overt pronoun expression serves to signal the markedness of the object, that is, they encode prototypical objects (inanimate, non-specific) as null, and utilize overtness to mark divergence from prototypicality. In this interview, Schwenter discusses the theoretical and methodological challenges of Variation, Pragmatics and their interfaces.

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NUNES – Where can we draw a line in the division between Semantics and Pragmatics?

SCHWENTER – I think in theory the line is very clear: encoded meaning vs. contextual meaning. In this sense, I find myself quite closely aligned with scholars like Mira Ariel (e.g. her textbook *Defining Pragmatics*, 2010, CUP), especially since I don't believe in a truth-conditional semantics—there is much encoded meaning that has absolutely nothing to do with truth conditions. Indeed, Grice seemed to realize this in 1967 when he created his very own “wastebasket” for Conventional Implicature. The only reason he called the phenomenon an “implicature” even though it was encoded meaning was because it wasn't truth-conditional in nature. Luckily, Potts (2007) realized this and created a whole new approach to Conventional Implicature that didn't have to pretend that it was pragmatic, and I think the fields are much better off as a result.

That being said, this division is very easy in theory but exceedingly difficult in practice! Anyone who has worked on semantic change knows this all too well: when does a particular component of meaning become “encoded”? Or “encoded enough” to call it semantic and not contextual? These are very difficult questions whose answers are far from being reached at present.

NUNES – Considering the fact that you have an extensive publication record on the variation between null/overt pronoun expression in Romance languages, what is the main shared feature/generalization between Spanish and Portuguese in relation to this phenomenon?

SCHWENTER – Well, in general people tend to believe that null objects in Spanish only exist in contact varieties, but the work by Assela Reig (2009, 2015, 2016) has shown that this is far from the truth. There is extensive variation between null and overt forms across Spanish dialects for direct objects with propositional referents, and Reig has uncovered this variation in her research. What is most interesting from her work in comparison with Portuguese is that it suggests that referential null objects in Spanish have their starting point in propositions, which is precisely what

Cyrino's (1997) classic study of the history of null objects in Portuguese showed. So we are really looking at an instance where Spanish is lagging behind Portuguese on a sort of evolutionary cline. Of course, whether null objects will continue to spread in Spanish is an open question, but there are particular contexts in which they are actually the more favored option in some dialects, e.g. when co-occurring with a dative clitic (*te lo dije* → *te dije*).

Beyond this surface similarity, I think there is a deeper similarity between Spanish and Portuguese, and it's something that I first tried to argue for in my 2006 article *Null Objects across South America*. Differential object marking (DOM) in Spanish essentially occurs with the same direct object referents that, in present-day spoken Brazilian Portuguese, are manifested overtly as tonic pronouns (e.g. *A Maria viu ele ontem*). Those direct object referents that occur without DOM in Spanish, by contrast, are the same as those that occur as nulls in BP. This generalization is striking, and I was truly shocked that no one else had ever noticed it: prototypical direct object referents in both languages receive no special overt marking, while atypical referents do, in the form of the DOM marker *a* in Spanish or an overt pronoun in BP. This is a clear case of iconic motivation and isomorphism between form and function. So even though Portuguese strictly speaking no longer has DOM (except with *Deus*), it clearly has a differential system of marking anaphoric direct object referents.

NUNES – What is the importance of the variationist method being applied to research pragmatic phenomena?

SCHWENTER – I think it is absolutely crucial, but at the same time it cannot replace qualitative pragmatic research. For nearly all cases of morphosyntactic variation, there has always been a need for pragmatic research in order to determine the Labovian “envelope of variation” (or “variable context”). Thus, when studying for example the alternation between null and overt anaphoric direct objects, we have to use pragmatic hypotheses in order to delimit the set of contexts where variation is possible (even if improbable), and thereby determine which occurrences should be included in the analysis. Beyond that necessary initial step, I think analyses of

morphosyntactic variation benefit greatly from pragmatic explanations, even when these have not been sophisticated in nature (e.g. when merely described by intuitive labels like “emphatic” or “contrastive”). Pragmatic theory has now been advanced enough in order to provide more content and explanatory power to such intuitive notions. At the same time, the tools of variationist linguistics, such as quantitative analysis using advanced statistical techniques, allow us to define with much greater precision than before exactly what constraints regulate pragmatic phenomena. The relationship between variation analysis and pragmatics, therefore, is a synergistic one that can dramatically improve the validity and reliability of our analyses. At the same time, being explicit about such methods also permits us to make our research much more replicable than it has been in the past, where armchair theorizing has been the norm in pragmatics. Thankfully in my view, this kind of research (in syntax and semantics too) is now becoming the norm.

NUNES – What are the pros and cons of using corpus data and experiments to investigate pragmatic phenomena?

SCHWENTER – I think this question was answered in part by the previous question, since corpus data is so closely tied to variationist research. But it should be clarified that there are studies with corpus data that are not variationist in nature, and also variationist research that is not corpus-based. One of the main advantages of corpus data is that it can be really helpful in allowing the researcher to see what the possibilities are for whatever phenomenon they are interested in. There are so many claims in the linguistic literature of the type “expression X is not possible in context Y” and often times a simple Google search will show that this is just not true. Twitter is especially good for this, e.g. for a study that some students and I did recently, we found many irregular past participles with *ter*-perfects, such as *peço* and *trago*. We had speakers tell us explicitly that such forms are not used (and they certainly don’t appear in grammars or usage guides), but they are ubiquitous on Twitter. This is not to say however that “armchair” methods don’t have their place in pragmatics, because they do. But what corpora and Twitter and other kinds of naturally-occurring data can help us do is decide exactly what kinds of contexts we want to test for felicity when working on the armchair. To me, that is the biggest advantage. The biggest con

of course is that not everything is going to appear in corpora, and there may be key contexts that are lacking in corpus data. I find the positive tradeoffs to be much greater though, and so I encourage using corpus data in pragmatic research, whether quantitative or qualitative.

As regards experiments, their use for the study of pragmatic phenomena is much newer to the field, and their utility lies in the possibility of testing very specific and precise hypotheses that cannot be determined with naturally-occurring data. In other recent research with students, we have looked at the alternation between *te* and *você* as direct object pronouns. Such uses don't occur often in naturally-occurring data—or at least not in easily obtainable data—because tokens of second-person singular direct objects are not typical in interview contexts. We were able to use the tokens we could find however in order to form hypotheses that could be tested using experimental survey methods. In particular we found contexts on Twitter that showed alternation between the two pronouns and others that didn't, and constructed our survey items based on those contexts in order to probe speaker intuitions in a fine-grained manner.

NUNES – What are the similarities/differences between the pronominal system in European Portuguese and the Brazilian system?

SCHWENTER – I think many of these are well-known, such as the complete lack of *vós* in Brazil, the sparse use of *você* in Portugal, and the different uses of *tu* and the corresponding (or not) verb forms in both countries! The one that I've worked on the most, of course, is the system of anaphoric direct objects, and I think there are some similarities there that have been overlooked, mainly due to all the attention that has been placed on null objects and their purported syntactic differences in Brazil and Portugal (as an aside, and related to the question above, I don't think that using linguists' intuitions about these differences is at all sufficient! We desperately need experiments to test the hypotheses that are floating around in the literature). One question that bothered me for a long time was whether the innovative use of the tonic pronouns in Brazil was in some sense a "replacement" for the clitic pronouns (*o*, *a*, *os*, *as*) that were lost in spoken BP but not in EP. In Schwenter (2014) and

Sainzmaza-Lecanda and Schwenter (2017) I was finally able to provide data to show that, indeed, the third-person tonic pronouns in BP are used in nearly-identical fashion to their clitic pronoun counterparts in EP. So, the BP and EP systems for marking anaphoric third-person DOs are actually very similar, since null objects also appear in most of the same contexts (with the purported exceptions in the syntactic literature). However, as most people seem to intuit, null objects are much more frequent in BP than in EP, even though the paper that started the flood of research on null objects in Portuguese was without a doubt Raposo's (1986) paper on EP! I think in general, however, what is happening in BP is a full shift away from the clitic forms (with one possible exception which is *me*) and toward the tonic forms. Eventually, I think even *te* will be fully displaced by *você* for DOs, at least in majority subject *você*-using dialects. Note however that in our research on *te/você* variation as DO pronouns, even the speakers in our survey who said they use *tu* as their main or only subject pronoun had clear intuitions about where the use of *você* was possible, and these intuitions were similar to those speakers who chose *você* as their main or only subject pronoun. In short, I think there is a lot more to be done on the topic of pronouns in Portuguese, in both BP and EP!

NUNES – What are the main differences between the variationist research that has been conducted in the United States in comparison to that which has been done in Brazil? What are the main improvements that you would suggest in the field in Brazil?

SCHWENTER – There is no doubt that Brazilian Portuguese (and Spanish too) have contributed greatly to the development of variationist research. Of course, in Brazil the variationist movement was spearheaded by the arrival of Anthony Naro (a former student of Labov) and it has continued until this day. Gregory Guy's 1981 dissertation on BP was also crucial and led to much research on variable phenomena in Brazil. I think there are two main directions for improvement in variationist research, and not only in Brazil: (1) extending variation analysis to a broader set of phenomena than has been analyzed, and (2) more uniformity in the use of analytical and statistical techniques. I think both of these have begun to be undertaken in the work of younger Brazilian scholars like Livia Oushiro, who is now training the next generation to cast

a wider net in terms of what they study, and also teaching them advanced statistical techniques using R. While R may have a steep learning curve at the beginning, it is such a powerful tool that it makes sense for everyone to learn it, especially since it permits the creation of mixed models with random effects which, as Johnson (2009) pointed out in a scathing critique, is something that is impossible in older programs such as GoldVarb. In the USA and Europe, R is now standardly employed by variationists, and I would urge Brazilian scholars to learn it as soon as they can as well.