Book Review


Pragmatic Variation in Service Encounter Interactions across the Spanish-Speaking World, edited by J. César Félix-Brasdefer and María Elena Placencia, consists of fourteen chapters authored by a number of renowned scholars: twelve empirical studies and two theoretical discussions evaluate the transactional/non-transactional discourse of service encounters (ses) in the face-to-face (FTF) or virtual interactions (e-ses) that take place in commercial (small shops, bars) and non-commercial contexts (call centres) and between customers and service providers (sellers/servers). Each chapter contributes to research into how the discourse of ses establishes ideological positions in the Hispanic world and how social actions are negotiated and accomplished. The pragmatic resources examined include forms of address (pronouns and vocatives), small talk as a strategy to mitigate rejection and maintain rapport, and humour as a strategy to boost social relationships.

The chapters are organised by macrosocial factors for pragmatic variation – region, gender and age – or by microsocial factors – socioeconomic status, domain and social distance. Twelve (sub)varieties of Spanish in ten different countries are included. This collection reveals a nuanced picture of the linguistic repertoires that Hispanic speakers deploy when communicating. Below, I describe the investigations and discuss the strengths and weaknesses that are of value for future research.

The first three chapters analyse the regional pragmatic variation of ses. Chapter 1, Félix-Brasdefer and Yates’ Regional pragmatic variation in small shops in Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Seville, Spain, and Chapter 2, Bataller’s Corner-store Interactions in Cartagena and Bucaramanga: A variational pragmatics study, examine pragmatic variation at the actional and stylistic levels. The results, unsurprisingly, highlight the significant influence...
that the region has on the type of requests, the use of internal modifications such as colloquial and playful words, and the use of pronominals. Both chapters further our understanding of the role of interactional norms at the national and subnational levels. However, the results leave the reader wanting more depth, such as how the inclusion of multiple macrosocial factors (gender, age) might have affected discourse.

Chapter 3, Placencia and García’s “No gracias amigo”: Refusals of bargain offers in e-service encounters in Mercado Libre Ecuador and Mercado Libre Venezuela, supports the existence of regional pragmatic variation. In refusing an offer, Ecuadoreans exhibit a preference for conflict avoidance and Venezuelans employ aggravating moves such as criticising the offer, reprimanding it, or accusing the potential buyer. Also, while Ecuadorians demonstrate a preference for explicit refusals, Venezuelans prefer implicitness. These results are in contrast to the findings of previous studies on refusals in FTF interactions. Therefore, the authors suggest that the site influences the users’ potential actions (e.g., two-turn offer-refusal interactions, absence of forms of address). One of the major limitations of the study is that the authors apply a FTF classification of refusals and supportive moves, so results should be taken as tentative findings. Further research on e-ses in a wider range of market domains is needed.

The macrosocial factor of gender is examined in the next four chapters. In Chapter 4, Gender variation in address form selection in corner-store interactions in a Nicaraguan community, Michno finds that females were more formal than males. The distribution of vocatives, a sign of solidarity and respect, reveals that, during negotiations, these were much more frequent and variable between male customers and the seller. This finding is in line with the findings of other studies on Central American Spanish. The limitations of the study (small sample size and restricted to male sellers only) call for the analysis of a wider pool of participants in a comparable rural community and the inclusion of female sellers. The findings of this study serve as a major stepping stone for future work on the Nicaraguan discourse of ses, the least-studied variety of rural vernacular Spanish.

Chapter 5, unlike the other chapters in this section, examines the perception(s) speakers have of ses realisations. In Fernández-Amaya and Hernández-López’s Gender variation in the perception of appropriate behavior in hotel service encounters in Spain, participants rated their expectations in terms of language and communicative attitude. The results reveal the importance that is assigned to formality and deference. In terms of communicative attitude, no gender variation was found regarding the participants’ orientation
towards the relational and transactional aspects of their interaction with receptionists. A lack of clear gender variation might be due to limitations in the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire that was used, which cannot measure all opinions. Also, since the participants were asked to provide responses based on their time spent in a hotel, the time gap between the visit and their responses might have influenced their answers. A lack of previous studies on the topic prevents the authors from making stronger comparisons and generalisations.

In Chapter 6, The role of gender in Mexican e-service encounters, Merino Hernández examines the realisation of offers and internal modifications such as emojis, exclamations and capital letters. The results show that women prefer elliptical offers – which lack an explicit indicator that the product is for sale – and use more internal modifications than men. While the majority of offers were impersonal, instances including greetings and/or address forms involve men. The author attributes the differences to the men's lack of familiarity with the site. Merino Hernández also finds evidence that internal modifications do not follow the patterns found in FTF interactions.

Medrano, in Chapter 7, Forms of address and gender in Costa Rican service encounters, finds pragmatic variation by analysing the participant's role, type of interaction (institutional or commercial) and setting of the interaction (small town grocery store vs. metropolitan call centre). Since the gender ratio of the participants was disproportional in the study, only a report of tendencies is provided. There was a marked tendency to use distance-marking polite forms of address in institutionalised interactions. At the grocery store, the tendency was to reinforce interpersonal relations using familiar pronouns, colloquial vocatives and small talk. The findings cannot be generalised in context to a larger population. Future research in the same area and with similar participants is needed.

The macrosocial factor of age is examined in the next two chapters. In Chapter 8, Pragmatic variation by age in women’s use of post-refusal small talk (PRST) during service encounters in Rosario, Uruguay, Kaiser finds that even in the most transactionally focused interactions, PRST serves to redress the face threat of rejection, restores equilibrium and promotes harmonious relations between the customer and seller. Middle-aged women were the most likely to use PRST as a rapport-building tactic. These findings, in line with those of previous studies, need to be treated with caution because of methodological shortcomings. Future studies with a wider range of participants would provide more conclusive findings. Overall, Kaiser's qualitative analysis finds that the sequences of PRST include rapport-building tactics such as in-group identity markers, laughter, compliments and enquiries into one's well-being.
Padilla Cruz, in Chapter 9, *Verbal humor and age in cafés and bars in Seville, Spain*, finds that although humour serves social-bonding and solidarity-creating functions, the manifestations are conditioned by factors such as the barista’s available time, camaraderie, multitasking, the number of customers, and the individual’s sense of humour. While young customers produced spontaneous humour sequences when initiating interactions, middle-aged customers were more prone to humour during the transaction or at the closing phase. Although the author recognises the limitations of his observations and field notes, he does a remarkable job presenting the qualitative results. However, video or audio recordings might yield a more comprehensive analysis. Padilla Cruz’s work on the manifestation of humour is a stepping stone for further work in the area, but a more robust definition of “humour” that includes cues such as laughter, marked lexical choices, the explicit naming of humour and paralinguistic features should be included.

In Chapter 10, *Socioeconomic variation and conflict in Spanish retailer-consumer interactions on Facebook*, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich find that high-prestige (HP) and low-prestige (LP) stores have a similar preference for positive impoliteness strategies, including seeking disagreement, associating the interlocutor with negative aspects, and calling the other person names. Interestingly, regarding the target of the conflict, pragmatic variation was found, with HP patrons targeting retailers, consumer groups and other posters, while LP patrons attacked primarily the retailers. This study opens the door for future research on both virtual settings and under-researched areas such as impoliteness and conflict.

Regarding microsocial factors, in Chapter 11, *Interpersonal work in service encounters in Mercado Libre Argentina (MLA): A comparison between buyer and vendor patterns across two market domains*, Powel and Placencia examine discourse pragmatic variation in openings and closings, forms of address, focus (task or person) and market domain (pets/toys). The results point to informal interactions that omit openings and closings and a change of style from familiar to formal. Address avoidance, nevertheless, is a feature, and reveals once again that e-commerce behaviour possesses its own characteristics. Although Powel and Placencia found little evidence of market domain differences, they observed that buyers and vendors are predominantly task focused and make little effort to work on interpersonal relations. Future studies, however, must examine the dynamics of multiple-turn interactions.

In Chapter 12, Escalona Torres’ *The effects of social distance in service encounters in Puerto Rican panaderías*, request strategies, opening sequences and small talk, and forms of address occurring in residential and commercial settings are examined. Although no clear differences were observed, in general, participants in the residential setting were more direct, used more familiar
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strategies and took time to offer full greetings, the result of a higher level of trust and familiarity, as well as a solidarity-building strategy. Participants in the commercial setting showed deference and paid attention to the transaction rather than to the building or maintaining of solidarity. At the stylistic level, the residential participants used more personal names, while the commercial participants preferred terms of endearment. The results of the study are noteworthy, but the vast quantitative analysis somewhat overpowers the reader.

The last two chapters of the volume discuss a framework for the analysis of SEs and also methodological and ethical issues. In Chapter 13, *Rethinking pragmatic variation: The case of service encounters from a modified variational pragmatics perspective*, Schneider revises the components of the variational pragmatics approach and proposes a framework that allows the addition of components, such as religion, that fit people’s experiences, language contact, and the evolution of language and cultures. Although Schneider advocates for the interdependence of the various levels, he also reiterates an integrative approach in which researchers take into consideration the impact of other levels of analysis. Furthermore, Schneider supports a top-down approach in which speech events are conceptualised as functional hierarchies of the communicative units, then these are broken down into functional units. Although Schneider’s suggestions appear to hold up, researchers have already started contemplating and applying his proposed modifications. For example, Félix-Brasdefer (2015) added a non-verbal and prosody component. Finally, Schneider points out that the framework was created to analyse oral discourse and was not intended for written communication, which several authors in this volume also agree with.

In Chapter 14, *Pragmatic variation in service encounter complaints: Some methodological issues*, Geluykens demonstrates how a multimethod approach, including controlled and spontaneous data, and quantitative and qualitative research methods, yields a comprehensive analysis. In his study on complaints, the controlled data identified patterns and sequences and the natural data pointed to confrontational and emotional involvement strategies. This multimethod approach might offer a better picture of variation in discourse in relation to several macro and micro factors. Geluykens also critiques the advantages and disadvantages of each data type, including issues around accessibility and ethics – useful information for researchers assessing and choosing methodologies. More importantly, his suggestion to use quantitative and qualitative research methods – a mixed-methods approach – has been exemplified by most of the authors in this volume, thus demonstrating its effectiveness.

In summary, this volume makes a contribution to the sparse body of research on intralingual pragmatic variation in SES and e-SES in the Hispanic World, attending to both macro and micro factors. Although some methodological
shortcomings are evident, I highlight the use of quantitative and qualitative analysis as being a strength of the studies in this volume. I concur with Geluykens that it is important for researchers to balance their analyses. Room remains in which to explore a number of under-researched areas of pragmatic analysis, such as the use of prosody and non-verbal signs in more varieties and (sub)varieties of Spanish. Finally, building a more refined analysis of e-ses requires further attention. I would highly recommend this volume to researchers and students of all levels.

_Tania Gomez_ | ORCID: 0000-0001-7429-4097  
Associate professor, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University,  
Saint Joseph, MN, United States  
tgomez@csbsju.edu

Reference


Biographical Note

Tania Gomez, Associate Professor at College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, focuses her research interest on intercultural pragmatics, variational pragmatics, and second language acquisition.