Title: An agreeable topic: Locating a discourse motivation for variable concord in Spanish existential constructions

In this study, I present a discourse-pragmatic explanation for patterns of variable concord in Spanish presentational *haber* constructions, linking referent topicality and preferred argument structure with variable rates of agreement across Latin American varieties of Spanish. Scholars have long posited explanations for this widely studied case of morpho-syntactic variation, though these are rarely found to be consistently predictive across quantitative studies. More recently, scholars have argued that speakers’ lexicalized probabilistic knowledge of nouns’ use in discourse promotes analogical leveling with *haber* (Brown & Rivas 2012). This assertion, however, has been made without adequately considering how potentially relevant pragmatic factors, such as those related to topicality, measure the same thing as a grammatical relation probability but in a more precise and discourse specific way.

In this study, I conduct a variationist analysis of 758 tokens of presentational *haber* clauses taken from a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews from across Latin America. I code for the same factors as those considered by Brown & Rivas (2012) (i.e. proportion of noun coded as subject in discourse, animacy, definiteness, polarity) in addition to factors related to the topicality of the referent in the *haber* clause (i.e. referent position in clause, number of mentions in prior discourse, discourse persistence across clauses, referent discreteness). The results of my mixed effects logistic regression model using the lmer command in R show that while topicality and the proportion of a noun’s use as subject in discourse are related measures, topicality is a better predictor of plural variants than a noun’s grammatical relation probability. This means that speakers are much more likely to interpret discourse-persistent referents (i.e. non lexical, references over multiple clauses) as subjects compared to those that are not. Moreover, these measures of topicality interact with animacy in ways that allow us to tie the results presented here with both prior studies of *haber* pluralization and cross-linguistic patterns of variable concord.

The results of this study not only connect *haber* pluralization with other direct object variation in Spanish, such as clitic doubling, differential object marking, and null objects, they point to the discourse motivation of subject-verb agreement. I show how concord is ultimately bound up in discursive design and how speakers structure information together during talk-in-interaction. This is in line with Corbett’s (2006:197—204) typological discussion of communicative functions as a condition on agreement, which allows us to apply an information structure framework in understanding this long-studied variable and why speakers ultimately produce certain kinds of syntactic variation.