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The Syntax-Prosody Interface: An Interview with Carolina Serra

Carolina Serra¹²

ReVEL – Considering your trajectory as a researcher in the field, could you tell us a little about the history of prosody studies in Brazil and how the field has developed, particularly with regard to studies of the syntax-prosody interface?

CAROLINA SERRA – Let me begin by saying that I will not be able to provide a comprehensive account of the history of prosody studies in Brazil, but I will try to report on what I know and, unfortunately, many names and studies will be left out due to my own limitations. I actually intend to present a modest portion of what has been produced and circulated in the field, although research in prosody has been quite vigorous.

Right from the outset, I should also point out that prosodic studies are subdivided, at least, into four broad linguistic categories: stress (lexical and secondary), rhythm, voice quality, and tone/intonation. There is also a type of prosody that examines timbre, formant frequencies, duration/quantity units, as well as a more phonetic prosody and a more phonological prosody, following the same paradigm as our broad understanding of the respective scopes of phonetics and phonology; this is a division that was, to some extent, usefully consolidated explicitly

¹ PhD; Permanent Professor in the Graduate Program in Vernacular Languages at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

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by the Prague Linguistic Circle in the 1920s. My ideas on this issue, that is, on the phonetics and phonology of prosody, are briefly presented in two entries that I wrote and that will appear in a forthcoming publication by Editora da Abralin (Concise Encyclopedia of Speech Sciences, organized by Plínio Barbosa, Tommaso Raso, and Gustavo Silveira); for the time being, they can be accessed online on <https://gepf.falar.org/entries/7/> and <https://gepf.falar.org/entries/8/>.

Because I was integrated into Prof. João Moraes's research group from early in my undergraduate studies — through Profs. Cláudia Cunha and Dinah Callou — my readings, my training, and my interests became concentrated on intonation, although João had already worked, and continues to work, with a wide range of categories within the broader universe of prosody, phonetics, and phonology. Thus, inevitably, I will direct my attention here to studies of Brazilian Portuguese (hereafter, BP) intonation. This focus is all the more justified given that the first question of this interview asks how the field has developed, particularly with regard to studies of the syntax-prosody interface. Studies of intonation have contributed greatly to our understanding of the degree of connection between syntax and prosody — understood as two subsystems of grammar — as I will have the opportunity to discuss below.

Before that, however, I would like to go back to the 1970s and 1980s to mention foundational studies on BP intonation, prior to the consolidation in Brazil of Janet Pierrehumbert's Autosegmental-Metrical model and its developments by Robert Ladd and others, as well as the IPO (Instituut voor Perceptie Onderzoek/Institute for Perception Research) model developed by 't Hart, Collier, and Cohen. These studies include Aubert (1976), Fernandes (1976), Gebara (1976), Cagliari (1980, 1982), Rizzo (1981), Hochgreb (1983), Moraes (1984), and Reis (1984), most of which I encountered only in the 2000s. Many of these Brazilian studies were inspired by research on English intonation, both British and American³ — Pike (1945), Crystal (1969), Halliday (1970, 1973), Lehiste (1970), Liberman (1979), among others — and included a strong component of phonetic experimentation for hypothesis testing.

³ Moraes's (1984) study—his doctoral dissertation on the intonation of Brazilian Portuguese—belongs to the French school of intonation analysis, associated with Ivan Fónagy. This tradition is characterized by integrating experimental phonetics, psychophonetics, semantics, pragmatics, and stylistics, seeking to understand intonation as a phenomenon that is simultaneously physical, linguistic, and expressive.

I would like to open a parenthesis to comment that, among the earlier theorists, I consider Halliday (1970, 1973), from a functionalist perspective, to have raised many questions that would later be taken up by other theoretical paradigms when he proposed the concepts (or systems) of tonality, tonicity, and tone, understood, respectively, as the delimitation of tone groups in speech utterances (intonational segmentation), the location of prominences within the tone group (the anchoring of tones to the segmental text), and the intentional melodic modulation of the tone group (the direction of the melodic contour). Thus, among all the linguistic functions that intonation may perform, three are represented here: the segmenting function (demarcating/phrasing discourse into prosodic groupings and/or distinguishing syntactic structures), the informational function (highlighting the most important elements in an utterance), and the illocutionary function (indicating sentence types). The relationships between intonation and syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are also made evident. And I will close the parenthesis here.

Returning to the studies on BP intonation mentioned above, some more phonetic and others more phonological, I consider that they paved the way for the field by seeking to provide an initial description of intonational units (also referred to as phonetic groups, accentual groups, stress groups, tonal units, tone groups, prosodic groups, and intonational phrases), the basic tones of the intonational system (melodic levels), phrase-final and phrase-internal melodic contours, intonational cues to the informational organization of discourse (given/new information), emphatic intonation, the characterization of intonational contours associated with certain sentence types (assertions, questions, requests, and commands), and the identification of perceptible melodic differences at the level of comprehension.

In the following decades, studies of intonation began to take a wide variety of directions, expanding, deepening, and questioning the knowledge that had previously been produced about BP intonation. Among many others, I can mention the studies by Moraes (1993, 1998, 2008), Callou et al. (1993), Freitas (1995), Tenani (1996, 2002), Gonçalves (1997, 1998), Madureira (1999), Cunha (2000), Frota and Vigário (2000), Oliveira Jr. (2000, 2003), Orsini (2003), Fernandes (2007), Raso et al. (2007), Antunes (2007, 2011), Madureira, Paes and Fontes (2007), Stein (2008), Trukenbrodt, Sândalo and Abaurre (2008), Serra (2009, 2016), Lucente and Barbosa

(2009), Fonseca (2012), Lucente (2012), Silvestre (2012, 2021), Madureira and Tamashiro (2013), Soncin (2014), Castelo (2016), Ferreira Netto et al. (2017), Martins and Ferreira Netto (2017), Miranda (2019), Ferreira Netto (2020), Carnaval (2021), and Caldas (2022), as well as subsequent studies by these authors and their research groups, since the great majority have continued, and continue, to work on intonation from a wide range of theoretical and methodological perspectives.

Several research groups at Brazilian universities have contributed to the advancement of research in the field and to prosodic studies more broadly, in interfaces involving language acquisition, linguistic variation, teaching, speech therapy, speech processing, and speech technology.

With regard to syntax-prosody interface studies, research in Brazil developed remarkably from the 2000s onward, under the strong influence of two generative-based phonological theories, Prosodic Phonology and Autosegmental-Metrical Intonational Phonology, and, more recently, incorporating experimental, perceptual, multimodal (acoustic-prosodic and visual-gestural), and sentence-processing approaches. Focusing on prosodic and intonational structure within the terms of the two theories mentioned above, researchers have developed, for example, studies on sentence disambiguation, seeking to demonstrate that speakers make use of prosodic information in the input to mental sentence processing at a very early stage, guiding the syntactic interpretation of the structure and assisting in the comprehension of the message.

Another major line of interface research investigates the prosodic phrasing of speech (the segmentation of the speech stream into prosodic phrases) in relation to the syntactic constituency of sentences. Through mapping rules that relate the two structures and through evidence from melodic contours, studies have sought to describe, for example, how sequences that are not structurally attached to the root clause are phrased, such as relative clauses, clefts, parenthetical expressions, tag questions, discourse markers⁴, topics⁵, vocatives, exclamative elements, elements

⁴ Wiltschko's (2021) recent model seeks to "syntacticize" interactional language, based on the premise that the computational system operates equally on pragmatic-discursive phenomena; from this perspective, it emerges as a promising framework for mapping the structural correspondence between syntax, prosody, and discourse, by establishing a more direct link between intonational contours, conversational markers, and specific positions within the syntactic hierarchy.

displaced within the structure, gaps corresponding to syntactic elements, and so forth. Prosodic literature has also devoted attention to the analysis of coordinated and subordinate clauses, enumeration, doubled subjects, and topic and subject structures. Intonation is one of the resources that signals prosodic organization, which, in turn, is intertwined with the syntactic organization of spoken sentences/utterances. Linguists are interested in elucidating how this interaction takes place.

ReVEL – The interface between prosody and other subareas of linguistics, such as phonetics and psycholinguistics, has proven to be quite productive. In your view, what motivates and justifies the study of the prosody-syntax interface specifically?

CAROLINA SERRA – I think that what motivates interface studies in general is the understanding that the components of grammar function, to some extent, in an integrated manner. Intonation has been referred to as “the golden triangle of linguistics, located at the point where syntax, phonology, and semantics meet” (Goldsmith, cited by Moraes, 1993). Different theoretical approaches seek to make this integration explicit in different ways, and generative-based phonological theories have promoted a particularly strong alliance between prosodic and syntactic factors.

What specifically justifies the interface between prosody and syntax is the assumption that, in order to be well-formed, sentences in a language must be properly uttered, in the sense that assigning a particular melodic contour to a sentence or segmenting the speech stream in a particular way will point to the syntactic constituency and semantic value of what is being said. On the other hand, it is also necessary to say that every syntactic structure is accompanied by — or guided by — prosody, even if that prosody is silent.

For example, as I write this text, I am assigning prosody to what I write; I hear an internal prosody, in Chafe's (1988) terms. The same occurs during silent reading:

⁵ The study by Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007) is important for researchers investigating the relationship between syntax, prosody, and discourse in topic constituents. For BP, Rezende dos Reis (2025) has considered the tripartite typology proposed by those authors (*aboutness*, *contrast*, and *familiar*), relating these discourse categories to the analysis of subject doubling and its intonational properties.

the reader mentally projects a prosodic structure onto the sentence, that is, the reader organizes the sentence into prosodic units, which can be perceived through many different cues, such as pauses, stresses/prominences, rhythm, and intonation. According to Fodor (1998, 2002a, 2002b) and many of the proponents of her theory, including Brazilian linguists and psycholinguists, this implicit prosody can influence the way readers carry out syntactic processing and resolve structural ambiguities. Fodor argues that sentence-processing models need to incorporate prosody, since evidence shows that prosody can be mentally projected even during silent reading and can influence syntactic processing.

From the perspective of Prosodic Phonology (Nespor and Vogel 2007[1986]), we can think of this prosodic structure as consisting of a hierarchy of prosodic constituents (from smallest to largest: syllable, foot, prosodic word, clitic group/prosodic word group, phonological phrase, intonational phrase, and phonological utterance⁶), which are fundamental to the organization of speech.

In fact, we can think of this in the opposite direction: by observing facts from various languages, Nespor and Vogel proposed a theory to account for the organization of speech into prosodic constituents. The facts that provide evidence for the existence of prosodic constituents above the segmental level include lexical stress, which refers both to the syllable constituent (and its internal structure) and to the foot and even the prosodic word; the distribution of pitch accents in sentences, which refers to the prosodic word, phonological phrase, and intonational phrase; the application or blocking of phonological processes (elision, degemination, resyllabification, stress retraction), which depend on the location of segments within the domains of the phonological and intonational phrases; and the occurrence of the main phrase melody, as well as syllable lengthening and pauses, which refer both to the intonational phrase and to the phonological utterance. A wealth of examples of

⁶ According to the so-called *Strict Layer Hypothesis* (cf. Selkirk 1984, 1986; Nespor and Vogel 2007 [1986]), each unit in the prosodic hierarchy is composed of one or more units of the immediately lower category, and each unit is exhaustively contained within the immediately higher unit of which it is a part. I would like to point out, however, that the issue of the non-recursiveness of prosodic structure has been challenged by subsequent models of prosodic hierarchy, such as *Match Theory* (Selkirk 2011, among others).

prosodic and segmental phenomena pointing to a prosodic hierarchy — and to its relationship with morphosyntactic constituents, such as the morphosyntactic word, syntactic phrase, and clauses — can be found in studies of Brazilian Portuguese, among which I mention only those by Bisol (1996, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2013) and Tenani (2002, 2004, 2006).

The joint investigation of these two components of grammar makes it possible to understand the extent to which syntactic structure determines prosodic phrasing, the highlighting of structures, and many other phenomena and, conversely, the extent to which prosody provides evidence for the appropriate interpretation of syntactic structure. In short, and without exhausting the subject, I think that what fundamentally motivates the study of the prosody-syntax interface is the intriguing question of how syntax and prosody, by organizing the sound continuum in different ways, articulate with one another so that language can be efficiently produced, perceived, and understood.

ReVEL – Still considering the syntax-prosody interface, what object of study does a researcher in this area investigate? What are the specificities and theoretical and methodological challenges of working with an interface?

CAROLINA SERRA – Throughout this text, I have already mentioned some of the objects of study that have received researchers' attention, and I will mention here a few more topics in Brazilian studies of the syntax-prosody interface. Researchers, their groups, and their students — prosodists, syntacticians, and psycholinguists alike — have devoted themselves to this interface in writing acquisition, reading, oral language and its effects on non-conventional writing, the analysis of contrastive structures involving focus and their effects on intonational phrasing, and the description of parenthetical structures, relative clauses, topics, appositives, and syntactic constituent displacement, often incorporating processing, perception, and speech technology. Experimental approaches based on the principles of Laboratory Phonology and acoustic phonetics (making extensive use of electronic instrumentation) are applied to large corpora of spontaneous speech as well as to

controlled speech, in addition to drawing on more advanced psycholinguistic techniques such as eye tracking and pupillometry, speech-synthesis-based analysis techniques, and techniques associated with what is known as visual prosody, for the detection of visual cues produced in the realization of linguistic categories.

With regard to the instruments used for sound analysis, the Praat program is one of the most important and widely used tools in prosodic studies; it is free and open-access software, available for different operating systems, and brings together, on a single platform, resources for the visualization, segmentation, annotation, and analysis of the acoustic signal. Praat enables detailed analysis of fundamental frequency (Fo), duration, intensity, and formants, in addition to allowing the development of an enormous number of scripts to meet the methodological demands of research. Developed by Paul Boersma and David Weenink, the program makes it possible to associate acoustic analysis with segmental text and to perform phonological-intonational annotation through TextGrids, making it possible, for example, to delimit syntactic-prosodic units and identify tonal events, measure durations, and correlate acoustic properties with phonetic, phonological, syntactic, and discourse categories. That gives a little idea of the objects of study and methodological specificities involved in working with the interface.

As for the challenges, I think that those of a theoretical nature have been mitigated by the refinement of the models, but there is always something to question, particularly if we take into account the assumption of the universality of certain proposals in light of the wide range of typologically diverse languages that need to be described. We can think, for example, of Prosodic Phonology, which forty years ago established a very strong foundation for the study of prosody in relation to syntax. Nespor and Vogel (2007[1986]) proposed that the prosodic structure of languages is organized into a hierarchy of well-defined domains, operating autonomously with respect to syntactic structure, but maintaining a close relationship with it, since surface syntax acts as a trigger in the initial mapping of prosodic constituents, providing the structural information necessary for prosodic formation rules to construct these domains at an independent level of representation. Segmental and prosodic phonological processes do not apply directly to syntactic constituents, such

as syntactic phrases and clauses, but rather to prosodic constituents, such as the prosodic word, phonological phrase, and intonational phrase.

To perform this mapping, the model uses alignment rules that map syntactic boundaries onto prosodic boundaries, taking into account parameters such as the head of the syntactic phrase and its surroundings, as well as constituent branching. Information about the direction of syntactic recursion and the relationship between syntactic head and complement is also important for the formation of prosodic domains. Once the domains have been mapped, syntax ceases to intervene: phonological rules then operate strictly within the boundaries of these prosodic constituents or at their boundaries, depending on factors such as the phonological weight of the structure, focus, and speech rate, which motivate constituent restructuring and lead to a mismatch between prosodic structure (the rhythmic and intonational division of phrases) and syntactic structure. The non-correspondence between the structures is therefore still a theoretical challenge, since syntactic structure and prosodic structure are not isomorphic. Syntactic organization provides important information for prosodic constituency, but a syntactic constituent does not necessarily correspond to a single prosodic phrase.

Going further into the theoretical challenge I am trying to discuss, it concerns recursion in the two structures. Syntax is naturally recursive: within a clause, we can keep adding another clause, and another, and another... In a noun phrase, for example, we can keep adding adjectives indefinitely. The geometry of syntactic structures can therefore be highly complex. The initial proposals for a prosodic hierarchy did not allow for recursion; on the contrary, a prosodic constituent could contain only elements of the immediately lower category, according to the Strict Layer Hypothesis. As theoretical principles were applied to facts from different languages, however, it became clear that the issue of prosodic recursion needed to be made more flexible (Selkirk 2011), allowing a prosodic constituent at a given level to contain another constituent at the same level (for European Portuguese, see the proposals by Frota (2000) and Vigário (2010), and, for BP, Fernandes-Svartman's (2026, forthcoming) proposal). In other words, according to these proposals, the embedding of identical categories within a compound prosodic domain is permitted,

with one of them being called the maximal domain and the other the minimal domain.

Researchers interested in interface studies will ask, for example, which properties of syntax are preserved in prosodic domains and which are liable to be modified. Studies show, for instance, that prosodic boundaries produced at points that do not coincide with syntactic boundaries are simply ignored by listeners when they are asked whether there is a break in the discourse. This demonstrates that some syntactic properties need to be preserved within the prosodic domain, whereas others can be altered. According to the proposal for a prosodic hierarchy based on Optimality Theory, mapping constraints related to isomorphism between syntactic and prosodic structure, well-formedness constraints related to constituent size, among others, are active, allowing the output of the interface constraints to contain incompatibilities between syntax and prosody and even predicting the form these incompatibilities will take (Selkirk 2011). Selkirk's model treats violations of the Strict Layer Hypothesis not as anomalies, but as the result of the interaction between the syntax-prosody correspondence constraint and universal prosodic constraints on size and purely phonological markedness.

Another challenge that I can mention⁷ (not exactly one specific to interface work), and which, as I understand it, remains very much alive, is working with spontaneous speech. Audio recording and processing techniques have advanced considerably, but conducting analyses with truly spontaneous speech, recorded in a spontaneous setting, is challenging. In addition, we face somewhat less predictability in the organization of spontaneous discourse, because disfluencies are among the most natural things that can occur in it. For researchers studying prosodic phrasing, for example, it is important to distinguish grammatical pauses, which delimit well-formed constituents, from those that occur to meet respiratory or discourse-planning demands. Hesitations, filled pauses, false starts, and so forth are therefore very common in spontaneous speech. Not to mention that spontaneous discourse is highly subject to microprosodic interference⁸, which makes it difficult to observe the

⁷ I would like to thank Vitor Caldas (FAPERJ Nota 10 Postdoctoral Fellow/UFRJ) for the conversation we had about the challenges involved in working with spontaneous speech.

⁸ Microprosodic interferences are, broadly speaking, alterations caused by the articulatory characteristics of the segments that make up an utterance; they may produce variations in the Fo

melodic contour of phrases. Voiceless consonants interrupt the melodic contour, while vowels may become devoiced or be produced with creaky voice, especially at the end of utterances, a region that is crucial for observing the main phrase melody... For all these reasons, I believe that researchers who use scripts to automate stages of acoustic analysis (segmentation, corpus annotation, extraction of Fo, duration, and intensity measurements, normalization of values, etc.), especially when dealing with spontaneous speech, should always go over the analyses with a fine-tooth comb, manually correcting what the software was unable to operationalize satisfactorily. Large-scale quantitative analysis should be accompanied by qualitative analysis, in order to separate the wheat from the chaff.

ReVEL – As a researcher of the syntax-prosody interface, how would you describe the research agenda in the field today, that is, what are its major concerns? Considering this, what are the future prospects for the field?

CAROLINA SERRA – At the risk of leaving out some more recent trend in research, I will mention four branches that have received increasing attention from prosodists in recent years and that interact, or may interact, with syntax.

Few topics in current prosodic research are as relevant as atypical/neurodivergent speech. Research findings in this area have great potential to have a positive impact on other fields of knowledge, such as medicine, speech-language pathology, psychology, and education; investigations into the relationship between language and neurodiversity are therefore of the utmost importance, as well as being promising. The formation and restructuring of prosodic phrases, the occurrence and duration of silent pauses and syllable lengthening, and the range of fundamental frequency and intensity at key points in utterances may potentially diverge from what the literature predicts for typical speech.

contour that do not properly correspond to melodic events, but rather result from the interaction between the articulation of sounds and vocal fold vibration. Microprosodic interferences occur in both spontaneous and read speech, but in controlled speech tasks, involving longer sentences or texts to be read, we can, for example, choose to use a majority of voiced consonants, which minimizes the difficulty of observing the Fo curve and, consequently, this type of microprosodic effect. I would like to thank João Moraes for exchanging these ideas with me, now and always.

Another field that is at the forefront is multimodal prosody, with some Brazilian studies already connecting speech prosody to what is known as visual prosody. This perspective makes it possible to understand how information from the auditory and visual modalities, taken together, is captured by the interlocutor for the interpretation of utterances, contributing to a broader conception of prosody as a multimodal, dynamic phenomenon situated within a pragmatic context. These are highly relevant studies because they broaden our understanding of “speech” beyond sound signals and recognize that meaning construction involves the integration of sound and gesture, since gesture enhances the latter. Elements such as intonation, rhythm, prominence, and voice quality operate together with gestures, head movements, and facial expressions, contributing to discourse organization, the signaling of focus, and the expression of attitudes and emotions, which gives us an idea of the complexity of the aspects involved in human communication.

The present and future of prosody also involve computational modeling of speech, with initiatives such as the automatic annotation of large corpora, syntax-audio alignment, artificial intelligence (AI), the use of machine-learning methods to investigate the relationship between syntactic properties and acoustic-prosodic cues, automatic boundary detection, and much more. In Brazil, we are seeing the advance of what is known as Computational Linguistics in the age of AI. There has been a progressive improvement in speech-synthesis technologies based on artificial intelligence, which already have intonational properties quite similar to those of natural speech. This means that computational systems are capable of reproducing human speech intonation in a highly satisfactory manner from a perceptual standpoint.

Another field that deserves attention is the articulation of prosody, syntax, and writing, which is particularly relevant for classroom applications. This articulation makes it possible to understand how properties of the prosodic organization of speech can contribute to the construction and interpretation of syntactic structures in written language. Research into this interface can contribute to our understanding of phenomena such as word segmentation, punctuation, constituent organization, and syntactic dependency relations. From a pedagogical standpoint, this perspective can contribute to teaching practices that bring oral language, reading, and writing closer

together, helping students perceive how different linguistic resources participate in the construction of meaning and the grammar of a text. In addition, it can help teachers develop strategies for teaching punctuation, expressive reading, text comprehension, and written production, fostering an integrated approach to the phonological, syntactic, and discourse components of language.

I would like to conclude by saying that research on the relationship between syntax and prosodic phrasing remains highly active, in spontaneous speech, controlled speech, Map Task and DCT (Discourse Completion Task) tasks; research on the prosody-syntax-sentence-processing interface (ambiguous and unambiguous sentences); research on the relationship between prosody and information structure, involving the realization of topics, focus, and given and new information; research on the syntax-prosody-pragmatics interface, in studies of expressivity (phonostyles, attitudes, and emotions); research on regional prosody and sentence types; among other linguistic, paralinguistic, and extralinguistic aspects involved in our communication.

ReVEL – We usually conclude ReVEL interviews by asking our interviewees for bibliographic suggestions. Could you recommend some pioneering and current texts on the syntax-prosody interface for our readers?

CAROLINA SERRA – Some pioneering texts in the field have already been mentioned throughout this interview, to which I will add a few others that may serve as a starting point for those interested in the topic. These include complete books as well as articles or chapters in edited volumes or specialized journals: Selkirk (1984, 1986, 1996, 2011), Nespor and Vogel (1986), Inkelas and Zec (1995), Truckenbrodt (1999), Carlson; Clifton Jr.; Frazier (2001), Clifton Jr.; Carlson; Frazier (2002, 2006), Fodor (2002a, 2002b), as well as Jun (2005, 2014) and Ladd (2008[1996]). A reference that I have encountered more recently is Féry, Feldhausen and Kügler (2024). This issue of *Languages* contains studies on several languages and different models of syntax-prosody mapping.

For more recent references, and specifically concerning BP, I would rather present a list of researchers who systematically work on the syntax-prosody interface, together with links to their Lattes curricula, so that readers can learn more about their research groups, collaborations, publications, and supervision/work by their students. This is also a way of making the most of the space available to me in this issue. I should also say that the present issue of the *Revista Virtual de Estudos da Linguagem* – ReVEL – will be an important reference for studies of the interface.

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<http://lattes.cnpq.br/5984303662039912>

FONSECA, Aline Alves

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/3812887394679047>

SERRA, Carolina Ribeiro

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/5878437077874490>

SILVESTRE, Aline Ponciano dos Santos

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/6087027102691784>

TENANI, Luciani Ester

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/7563247206294663>

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