

Preface

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It is very gratifying to see this most interesting collection of articles. It illustrates how relevance theory may help explain a wide range of phenomena in pragmatics, semantics, rhetorics, communication studies, psycho- and socio-linguistics, cognitive psychology, philosophy of language, and literature. Work in relevance theory has become a collective enterprise where all of us can expect echoes, elaborations, and discussions of their contributions. It is also quite gratifying to see that a variety of points of views, some quite critical of some basic tenets of the theory, are being confronted. As in any group, formal or informal, there is, among relevance theory researchers, a tendency towards the development of an orthodoxy, but we are glad to see that this is being resisted. The point is not, of course, to place a premium on work that disagrees as opposed to work that elaborates. Both critical and constructive contributions have to meet the same standards. (And let us be frank: we personally have found over the years, rightly or wrongly, that most criticisms were based on misunderstandings of the theory or of the issues.) Still, there are three main reasons why critical contributions are essential.

The first reason is the trivial observation that this is how scientific work moves ahead. The best theories are those that have withstood serious critical challenges, and, in most cases, this withstanding involves adjustments or even serious changes. Moreover, obviously, theories that fail to withstand challenges are not worth pursuing. A serious risk, alas often exemplified in academic life, is that researchers sharing theoretical commitments build an orthodox in-group that effectively protects these commitments from serious challenges, and end up perpetuating an obsolete approach, securing institutional strongholds to do so, and holding students hostages. The very thought makes one shudder.

The second reason to encourage critical contributions is that, even though the domain already explored in relevance terms is wide, as exemplified by the present issue, there are

whole areas to the study of which the theory should be, in principle, relevant, but which have received only limited attention, however valuable (see Francisco Yus's Bibliography in this issue). Expanding the theory to relatively new areas is not a mere matter of "application" of some recipe. Take for example the study of literature which has been of interest to several relevance researchers for a long time, and which is illustrated by several contributions in this issue. Here is a huge domain of scholarship with its specialists, its schools, its conceptual tools, its agendas. There is an obvious pragmatic dimension to literature, but literature is not just a pragmatic phenomenon. A text is not literary unless it is socially recognised as belonging, if not to literature itself (after all, the notion of literature is not a cultural universal) at least to some cultural genre that analysts have some good grounds to classify as a literary genre. In order to belong to a genre, a text must satisfy some pragmatic criteria. This, however is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The contribution of a pragmatic approach depends therefore in part on its ability to articulate itself (inter alia) to a more cultural approach. In order to achieve this articulation, and to be able to draw fruitfully on the knowledge and competence that has accumulated in the domain, the pragmatic approach must, at the very least, be adjusted for the purpose. The process of adjustment may require some critical rethinking of the pragmatic approach. If this rethinking is properly justified and well done, far from being a price paid to expand the scope of the theory, it is a contribution to its general improvement.

The third reason why critical contributions are welcome is, in a sense, a generalisation of the other two. Though theories contribute to the redefinition of disciplines, disciplines are, and should be, defined by their subject matter, not by theories. Thus (on a quite different scale, of course) physics is not quantum theory, or relativity theory, or string theory, population biology is not Darwinian theory, and linguistics is not Chomskyan theory. Even for those who accept these theories, the goal is to understand the subject matter of the discipline, not to cultivate the theory per se. A contrario, psychoanalysis presents the unenviable case of a discipline identified with a doctrine. Relevance theory is intended -- justifiedly or not -- as a theoretical contribution central to the study of pragmatics, and as relevant but less central to several related fields such as cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics, literary study, or philosophy of language and mind. The only way these contributions can be made -- if they can be made at all -- is by engaging scholars working in these fields from different perspectives, sharing issues with them, at times challenging them and accepting their challenges.

This is not to deny the importance of interactions among researchers who do share a basic common approach, and who therefore do not have to justify it at every step. Relevance theory has been and is being rather well served in this respect, with a network of relationships strengthened by an Internet list, and over the years, a number of international workshops, conferences, and publications. This special issue of the *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* is a particular welcome addition, and we wish to express our gratitude to the editors, José Mateo and Francisco Yus, and to all the contributors for taking part with us in this ongoing dialogue.