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## TOWARDS A PRAGMATICS OF WEBLOGS<sup>1</sup>

*Francisco Yus*  
University of Alicante (Spain)

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The weblog, mostly a kind of diary with a format similar to the web page, is currently one of the most fashionable genres on the Internet. One of the most complete definitions available is the one provided by Vuorinen (2005: 5):

A blog is a website that consists of short entries made by a writer, or a blogger. The entries are arranged in a reverse-chronological order (latest entry first) by time and date, much like on a message board or a website guestbook. Usually the entries consist of the entry text itself, a title and a time/date stamp. Only the newest entries are displayed on the main blog page while older entries are usually arranged in archives where they can be accessed on a later date. Many blogs nowadays also allow readers to post comments to individual entries, much as they would do in threads on a discussion forum.

With a constant growth, and fuelled by the increasingly user-friendly computer software for weblogs (or *blogs*, for short) that is available on the Internet are now often commented upon, both by utopians of the Internet, who find in weblogs the liberty of expression that is normally limited and controlled in physical environments, and also by dystopians, who treat them as irrelevant, untrustworthy sources of news and information.

In this paper, an explanation within cognitive pragmatics, specifically from a relevance-theoretic framework, will be proposed<sup>2</sup>. The analysis will show how, from a cognitive pragmatics point of view, some of the features of

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, this article is part of a general project of relevance-theoretic analysis of Internet discourse and communication that has been labelled *Ciberpragmática* (*Cyberpragmatics*). See Yus (2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006).

weblogs are counter-productive, and their communicative efficiency is then questioned. On the other hand, weblogs do contain features that are satisfactory and foster both communication and efficient information transmission.

What can relevance-theoretic pragmatics do to explain the weblog phenomenon? Firstly, it should be able to trace the author's (henceforth the *blogger's*) intentions when including information in the weblog. For that purpose, the weblog itself should be used only as a blueprint for the actual intended interpretation. After all, with this kind of written communication, the blogger expects that the audience will eventually read it and, hopefully, even comment on it, thus generating web interactions. This will be dealt with in heading 3 below (called *Tracing*). Secondly, it should be able to analyse what processing effort is demanded and what hypothetical interest is eventually provided by the information coded in the weblog, basically related to what will be called the "contextualisation potential" of the weblog, that is, the balance of interest and mental effort that the specific verbal-visual qualities of the weblog produce in the readers. This will be addressed in heading 4 (called *Coding*). Finally, relevance-theoretic pragmatics should also be able to decide whether the information coded (and the way this information is coded) will eventually be interesting, worth the processing effort (in other words, *relevant*), basically weighing the balance of the hypothetical reward from reading the weblog in exchange for the effort it demands. This will be analysed in heading 5 below (called *Predicting*)<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. RELEVANCE THEORY: INTEREST, MENTAL EFFORT AND CODED WEBLOG DISCOURSE

The main assumption of this theory (see Sperber & Wilson, 1995; see Yus, 1998, 2006 for reviews of this theory) is that human beings are endowed with a biologically rooted ability to maximize the relevance of in-coming stimuli (linguistic utterances or nonverbal behavior) that they process. Assessing relevance is a typical mental activity of human beings, always

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<sup>3</sup> Notice that I think pragmatics can focus on author, text and reader, unlike other analysts who claim that pragmatic analysis should only focus on the outcome of readers' interpretations. This is the case of Paul Hernadi's (1972, quoted in Sinding, 2004: 379) division of genre theories, only one of which –reader-oriented theories– is labelled "pragmatic". Similarly, Eco (1992) writes that the author knows that he or she will not be interpreted according to his/her intentions, but according to a complex strategy of interactions which also covers the readers, together with their competence in the production and interpretation of language (e.g. grammatical rules, encyclopedia, cultural conventions...) plus the on-going interpretations that the text is generating. The act of reading may produce many subtle effects and connotations, and it is unlikely that the real reader can cover them all. Every act of reading is a difficult transaction between the reader's competence and the kind of competence that the text postulates in order to be read economically (see also Yus, 2002c: 624-625).

geared to obtaining the highest reward from their interpretations of the world (and also of communicated thoughts): As a result of an innate tendency towards increasing efficiency, the human cognitive system has developed in such a way that we tend automatically to pick out potentially relevant stimuli, our memory retrieval mechanisms tend automatically to activate potentially relevant assumptions, and our inferential mechanisms tend spontaneously to process them in the most productive way (Wilson & Sperber, 2002: 254). At the same time, this endowment allows for the manipulation of other people's thoughts and allows us to predict what information is likely to be relevant to them and what interpretive steps might be involved in its processing.

For the analysis of weblog communication, there is no variation in this claim: both the production and interpretation of weblogs are subject to this general relevance-oriented biological criterion that human beings invariably apply to new stimuli. This idea is covered by the so-called *Principle of Relevance*, both in a broad cognitive sense ("human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance"), and in its more restrictive communicative<sup>4</sup> sense ("every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance"), the latter being the main focus of analysis within pragmatics. In this article these ideas will be used as the theoretical framework within which I intend to show to what extent we can trace intentions underlying weblogs, evaluate the qualities of their coded discourses, and predict whether the Internet user is expected to find the coded information relevant enough to deserve the effort involved in its processing. In a way, then, communication in weblogs involves a balance between what the blogger thinks that might be relevant to the audience (but could well turn out not to be so) and the reward that this audience might obtain despite the effort required to process the information contained in the weblog (interest centred upon the derivation of so-called "cognitive effects" in relevance theory terms)<sup>5</sup>. The balance is, of course,

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<sup>4</sup> The *Communicative Principle* is based upon two clauses: (a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it; and (b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 267 and 270). As Wilson & Sperber (2002: 257-258) correctly point out, communicators "cannot be expected to go against their own interests and preferences in producing an utterance. There may be relevant information that they are unable or unwilling to provide, and ostensive stimuli that would convey their intentions more economically, but that they are unwilling to produce, or unable to think of at the time".

<sup>5</sup> Other authors who do not work within cognitive pragmatics have also pointed out the need for this balance. For instance, Nystrand (1989) proposes the *reciprocity principle* applicable to all kinds of written communication, and according to which "a given text is functional to the extent that it balances the reciprocal needs of the writer for expression and the reader for comprehension. Communicative homeostasis is the normal condition of grammatical texts" (p. 81).

constrained by a number of factors, one of them being particularly influential in the (un)successful outcome of weblog communication: the fact that accessing and reading weblogs demands knowledge and literacy in the technology that makes them possible (Bauman, 1999: 70).

### 3. *TRACING* (BLOGGERS' INTENTIONS)

Weblogs are verbal-visual discourses that function as “pieces of evidence” of their authors’ informative intention. This intention is basically directed to either filtering relevant information to other users (*filter-type weblog*), or to providing personal information on the blogger’s life, a sort of diary on the Internet (*diary- or journal-type weblog*). In both kinds, tracing authorial intentions is essential for successful weblog communication (see Katz, 2002: 20-21). Gibbs (1999: 16) corroborates this idea when he states that “our interest in communing with the intentions of others is so deeply a part of how people construct meaningful interpretations of artifacts that we sometimes feel that the search for intentions is optional and therefore can be abandoned if desired. Yet an explicit search for the psychological underpinnings of human action will reveal the fundamental importance of communicative intentions in many aspects of meaningful experience”. Needless to say, tracing intentions underlying weblog communication (in which there is no physical co-presence of interlocutors) is much more difficult than doing it within highly contextualised face to face interactions in physical settings.

Initially, weblogs were created with the intention to filter the vast information that is available on the Internet. In this case, the readers necessarily have to trust the blogger’s reliability when filtering the information, and will eventually find relevance in the removal of the waffle out of the really interesting resources<sup>6</sup>. The balance of interest (“cognitive effects”) and mental effort is, in theory, satisfactory, since the effort required to select the interesting information on the Internet has already been made by the author of the weblog. But the problem remains in deciding the trustworthiness of the source<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> On general issues concerning the importance of filtering information on the Internet see, among others, Blood (2002: 8, 2004: 5), Nussbaum (2004), Barrett (2002: 28-29), and Rhodes (2002: 100).

<sup>7</sup> This is an issue extensively addressed by Umberto Eco (quoted in Origgi (2002): “With the Web, everyone is in the situation of having to filter information that is so vast, and so unsustainable, that if it isn’t filtered it cannot be absorbed. It is filtered unsystematically, so what is the primary metaphysical risk of this business? That we’ll end up with a civilization in which every person has his own system of filters, in other words where every person creates his own encyclopaedia. Now a society with five billion concurrent encyclopaedias is a society in which there is no more communication”.

A second type of weblog is the “diary weblog”, personal information about the bloggers that they want to share with other Internet users. Tracing the intention here is more complicated than in the “filter type”. On paper, few people should find interesting a lot of the information that we can find in *diary weblogs*, for example ‘important’ daily events posted such as taking the dog for a walk, buying a new carpet for the dining room etc. Nevertheless, some of these Internet diaries obtain a high number of accesses plus comments by visitors (some of them faithful) and sometimes they even generate a feeling of reciprocity which is close to the one felt in community membership (see Yus, 2005a)<sup>8</sup>. This may have to do with the inherently human tendency to scrutinise other people’s behaviour which has led to the popularity of Big Brother or programs on celebrities. Of course, the eventual relevance also depends on how the information is presented and on the personality of the bloggers (which, to a greater or lesser extent, can be inferred from their weblog content)<sup>9</sup>. As Miller & Shepherd (2004) underline, content is important to bloggers because it is basic for their freedom of selection and presentation. What many bloggers find most relevant about blogs is the combination of the immediately real and the genuinely personal, which represents a refreshing contrast with the ‘bland’ point of view of so

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<sup>8</sup> Miller & Shepherd (2004) also wonder why blogs –typically filled with irrelevant information– have ended up becoming so popular: Blogs are addressed to everyone and at the same time to no one. They seem to serve no immediate practical purpose, yet increasing numbers of both writers and readers are devoting increasing amounts of time to them. The blog is a new rhetorical opportunity, made possible by technology that is becoming more available and easier to use, but it was adopted so quickly and widely that it must be serving well established rhetorical needs. Why did blogging catch on so quickly and so widely? What motivates someone to begin-and continue a blog? What audience(s) do bloggers address? Who actually reads blogs and why? In short, what rhetorical work do blogs perform -and for whom? And how do blogs perform this work?

<sup>9</sup> Efimova & Hendrick (2005) share this opinion when they write that “what makes weblogs different is not the publication of content per se, but the personalities behind them. Weblogs are increasingly becoming the online identities of their authors. Most weblogs are not formal, faceless, corporate sites or news sources: they are authored by individuals (...) and perceived as ‘unedited personal voices’. Often a weblog is written as a narration of its author’s thoughts and feelings, allowing personality and values to emerge from the words. Even weblogs that are little more than collections of links and short commentaries say something about their authors. The selected content a weblog author finds interesting enough to link to and to comment on functions as a public record of personal interest and engagement”. Similarly, diary weblogs also shape the intended audience: it is not the mass audience that is addressed in this kind of weblog, but some intimate, previously selected intended audience, as Boyd (2004) states: “Bloggers are not seeking mass attention, although many would love to find others who share their values, passions and perspective. It is this possibility that motivates many bloggers who could password-protect their blogs to leave them open and to join communities dedicated to particular interests. Bloggers who leave their blogs open assume that uninterested strangers will just move on, but like minds will stop. In essence, these blogs are digital bodies, complete with fashion markers intended to convey cultural and subcultural signals that only have meaning to those with shared values” (see also Mortensen & Walker, 2002: 209-210; Van Dijck, 2004).

much Internet content. The ‘reality’ offered by diary-style blogs is thus a thoroughly perspectival reality, anchored in the personality of the blogger.

Besides, an analysis of the intentionality of these diaries would lead to puzzling results: Firstly, many of their authors do not really want to be read by a massive audience, and therefore a private/public interface is frequent in blogging<sup>10</sup>. Secondly, publishing online is also relevant to the bloggers, in the sense that they end up valuing more the effect that the weblog has on them than the effect it has on the audience. For instance, Blood (2002: 12) comments how, after publishing information in her weblog, she began to value more highly her own point of view. In composing her link text every day she carefully considered her own opinions and ideas, and she began to feel that her perspective was unique and important. These fragments provided her with an unexpectedly intimate view of what it is to be a particular individual in a particular place at a particular time (cf. also Estalella, 2005: 106). As a side effect, though, the blogger’s subjectivity is bound to be in a non-stop development as new content keeps being updated in the weblog:

The assembled subjectivity of the blogger is never fixed, but always becoming. The dynamic nature of the content of a blog and thus of the selective representation of Self effected by the blogger renders it an unfixed subjectivity. De-centred and re-centred by each new entry, the subject who is represented by a blog is the epitome of the postmodern identity (...) [The] existing representation of her subjectivity is altered, adapted and/or extended by each additional entry. Each entry then can be interpreted as a new algorithm, trawling through a collection of R[eal] L[ife] and online life experiences, choosing select moments, bringing them to the fore, marginalising others and creating a new view of the data set (Jarrett, 2004).

In both types of weblog (filter/diary), the fact that most weblogs contain a form that readers can use to leave their posts<sup>11</sup> with comments or replies,

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<sup>10</sup> Gregor Wright: “I don’t really read many other blogs. I’m not interested in anyone else’s life, just my own. The whole blogging thing has the appearance of people recording their lives in order to be examined by a larger audience when in fact they’re mostly recording their lives in order to examine themselves” (in Marsden & Wright, 2004: 8). This interface is also addressed, from a different perspective, by authors such as Badger (2004): “Weblogs occupy a dichotomous position. They wish to stand out and present an individual voice, but they also want to fit into the genre of weblogs -to be instantly recognisable as being part of a community. Weblogs (...) are forever hovering on the border between public and private”.

<sup>11</sup> According to Jenkins (in de Moor & Efimova, 2004), four types of posts can be identified: (1) *opinion posts*, that define a topic, and usually contain between 3-15 links, one of them being the instigator of the story; (2) *vote posts*, where a blogger (dis)agrees with another post; (3) *reaction posts*, in which a blogger responds to a single post on another site; and (4) *summation posts*, where the blogger summarizes various other blogs.

makes this genre a much more interactive medium than traditional web pages, getting it closer to e-mail communication. Bloggers do, of course, retain all the control over what is published, when and in what verbal-visual format, but they can also have immediate feedback on whether the information was read, understood correctly, and reacted upon, a kind of mutual knowledge that is essential for successful weblog communication<sup>12</sup>.

#### 4. CODING (VERBAL AND VISUAL ELEMENTS IN THE WEBLOG)

Writing about the discourse of weblogs –what is verbally and visually coded– entails an analysis of aspects such as its informative richness, the size of the gap existing between what is coded and what is intended, the verbal and visual interface, and the degree of contextualisation that it favours. But, most of all, it entails an analysis of the degree of conventionalisation that it has acquired (i.e., whether there is a weblog *genre* in the first place) and its effect on the balance of informativeness versus processing effort. For example, the extent to which weblogs are (or not) clearly identifiable from similar (or competing) discourses such as the traditional web page will have consequences on what kind of mental information is accessed and what effort this operation demands while processing the information in the weblog. A fundamental task of pragmatics, then, is to decide whether weblogs are clearly identifiable autonomous genres or share and/or overlap qualities with other discourses. In Herring *et alii*'s (2005) terminology, pragmatics has to determine whether blogs are an *emergent* or a *reproduced* genre.

Traditionally, genres have been analysed from a rather static approach, which is understandable if we take into account that analysing genres means “investigating instances of conventionalised or institutionalised textual artefacts in the context of specific institutional and disciplinary practices, procedures and cultures” (Bhatia, 2001: 5). But genres are also processed in specific contexts, are identified as communicative instances, and generate different interpretive outcomes depending on their stabilised discursive

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<sup>12</sup> Within relevance theory, Sperber & Wilson (1995) also stress the importance of mutual awareness between communicator and addressee, but rewrite it as “mutual manifestness”: These authors reject the traditional notion of mutual knowledge since it generates an endless recursion (A knows that p, B knows that A knows that p, A knows that B knows that A knows that p, *ad infinitum*). Instead, they propose the notion of mutual manifestness. What is ‘manifest’ is what one is capable of inferring or capable of perceiving, even if one hasn’t done so yet. The sum of all the manifest assumptions is the person’s *cognitive environment*. A part of this environment is shared with other individuals, forming the so-called *mutual cognitive environment*. Communication in weblogs is also a matter of making certain information (i.e., certain assumptions) mutually manifest to both the author and the reader of the weblog. Posting comments is a guarantee of the degree of mutuality between blogger and reader.

properties<sup>13</sup>. This is reflected in the remaining part of Bhatia's (ibid.) definition of genres, which are used "in order to understand how members of specific discourse communities construct, interpret and use these genres to achieve their community goals and why they write them the way they do". Besides, there is a socially recognized purpose of genres that also affects their identification and interpretation, that is, genres are normally regarded as types of communicative actions habitually enacted to realize particular communicative and collaborative purposes. They are identified according to their socially recognized purpose and by their common characteristics of form. The purpose of a genre would not be an individual's private motive for communicating, but a purpose socially constructed and recognized by the relevant organizational community and invoked in typical situations (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). In theory, then, the effort required to identify the weblog will tend to decrease as the qualities of this genre become autonomous and clearly identifiable from similar discourses. Starting the processing activity with this genre identification (and the fulfilment of the readers' expectations on the conventional aspects of this genre<sup>14</sup>) will generate specific (and effort-relieving) processing paths which would not be undertaken in the processing of ordinary web pages, to take an example. Consequently, the key to the pragmatic analysis of how weblogs are *coded* lies in the degree of conventionalisation that they exhibit and their easy or difficult identification by a community of weblog users<sup>15</sup>. Additionally, the

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<sup>13</sup> This is covered by Swales's (1990: 58) definition of genre: "A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style".

<sup>14</sup> And which readers have previously internalised. I do not agree here with Myers (1999) when he questions the validity of conventions which, he claims, turns readers into passive consumers of texts. For instance, Dillon & Gushrowski (2000) have noted that conformance with genre conventions enhances memorability of discourse and leads to greater user satisfaction, and that researchers in the area of hypermedia and web design have noted that user orientation and navigation is contingent on the user's perception of such rules in the information space and therefore the lack of genre conventions in the digital world is a potentially significant source of user difficulty. Needless to say, the conventions used in the weblogs genre change in time depending on the development of the software used by bloggers and on social or contextual constraints. On these issues, see Bauman (1999: 271), Crowston & Williams (2000: 208), and Askehave & Nielsen (2005), among others.

<sup>15</sup> In organizations or communities, genres are enacted when members take action by drawing their knowledge –tacit or explicit– of genre rules that bind a particular socially recognized purpose and appropriate elements of form and substance with certain recurrent situations. A particular instance of a genre need not reflect all the rules constituting that genre, as long as it is still recognizable as partaking of that genre. Enough distinctive genre rules, however, must be followed for the



stabilised weblog genre will exhibit specific discursive properties, “contextualisation potentials”, that will vary in their extent and quality depending on the readers’ personal encyclopedic knowledge. In any case, a lot of effort will be saved in the preliminary identification of the genre in terms of adequacy to conventions.

What are, in short, the basic clearly identifiable features of the weblog genre? If we have a look at the first 50 weblogs listed by Google’s “weblog search facility”, we will discover that most weblogs share a number of conventionalised verbal-visual features that make them highly identifiable as a genre<sup>16</sup>: (1) The name “(web)log” at the top of the page (48%); (2) some reference to the blogger (34%); (3) comments listed in a “most recent first” format (55%); (4) images inside the posts (52%) and separated from the text (34%); (5) comments on the blogger’s posts or other users’ posts (72%); (6) a list of categories to choose from (60%); links which are separated from the posts (58%), inside the posts (58%) or to other interesting blogs (23%); (7) an archive of posts arranged by month (66%); (8) advertisements –banners– about the software used to create the weblog (70%) or about other products (38%); and (9) a form in order to post comments (70%). Besides, the background of the blog is normally unmarked (60%), and does not contain images or other disturbing visual elements. All of these features make it possible that as soon as the user accesses the weblog, its verbal-visual configuration will immediately fit the reader’s stereotypical background expectation on this kind of genre, hence reducing considerably the effort in the initial stages of weblog interpretation and will even affect the subsequent interpretive steps as the genre expectation also contains information on the type of content typically uploaded in the weblog<sup>17</sup>. This “alerting aspect” of the verbal-visual configuration of the weblog genre has nowadays been accentuated, since bloggers now resort to easy-to-use (and free) software

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communicative action to be identified -within the relevant social community- as an instance of a certain genre (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> On typical elements of blogs, see Herring *et alii.* (2004), Mortensen & Walker (2002: 270), and Winer (2003), among others.

<sup>17</sup> Similar effects are caused when reading other verbal-visual media. For instance, in Yus (forthcoming) it is argued that the reader’s background encyclopedic knowledge on what comic book covers are like is a preliminary context against which the verbal and visual information of the comic will be assessed. Visual and verbal information which interacts fruitfully with the readers’ background knowledge will be regarded as relevant. In this sense, processing the cover page of a comic book turns out to be an essential phase of its interpretation. Readers will either recognise a familiar layout of a comic cover from the range of comics on display, or will be attracted by the design, colour, or letter type of an unfamiliar, not previously read comic.

applications such as *Blogger*<sup>18</sup>, which facilitates the publication of information but, at the same time, generates an identifiable recurrent format inevitably attached to the readers' mental representation of what weblogs should look like<sup>19</sup>. Needless to say, the actual evolution of weblogs from "a filtered selection of interesting links" to "a number of posts and comments presented in chronological order" has inevitably provoked a shift in the stereotype of what the weblog genre is supposed to be. However, as the genre tends to stabilise within its evolution, bloggers will tend to suppress from their Internet pages what is not consistent with the archetypal weblog genre, producing then a kind of "epidemiology of weblog genre" within which faithful bloggers reinforce the genre by suppressing non-complying features and, at the same time, the increasingly stabilised genre will make other bloggers converge to its stereotyped features:

new users of the medium have adopted fewer 'innovations' than their forbears: As notions of what constitutes a 'weblog' concretize, the creative use of visual and hypertextual features seems to be in decline. Design innovations breaking out of a certain 'acceptable' visual style are increasingly rare, while weblogs that conform to expectations –three-column, smaller text down the side, prominent header and footer, some links and sparse image use (...)– continue to be created (Scheidt & Wright, 2004).

Undoubtedly, the links are, together with the entries with the most recent comments, one of the essential features of weblogs. They obviously distort the traditional 'one author / one intended interpretation' equation and leave all the responsibility for the eventual relevance of weblog interpretation to the reader, who can either navigate through the different links provided by the blogger, or move around weblogs with the aid of search

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<sup>18</sup> Evan Williams, one of the creators of this popular software application has his own succinct definition of weblogs which is worth quoting since it emphasises the qualities of the genre over the actual information provided in the weblog: "To me, the blog concept is about three things: Frequency, Brevity, and Personality. (...) This clarification has evolved over time, but I realised early on that what was significant about blogs was the format -not the content" (in Mortensen & Walker, 2002: 249).

<sup>19</sup> For Blood (2002: 11), this kind of easy-to-use computer application is responsible for the shift from the initial *filter-blog* to the now massive *diary-blog*. With a click, *Blogger* will post whatever the writer wants in the proper place, and present the writer with another empty box, just waiting to be filled. It is this free-form interface combined with absolute ease of use which has done more to impel the shift from the filter-style weblog to journal- (or diary-) style blog than any other factor. And there has been a shift. Searching for a filter-style weblog by clicking through the thousands of weblogs listed at *weblogs.com*, the *Eatonweb Portal*, or *Blogger Directory* can be an almost impossible task.

engines such as *Google*<sup>20</sup>. In a way, then, weblog readers are also the *authors* of the eventual amount and quality of the information they process. They devise the order of the ‘discursive chunks’ that they want to read and escape the linear order of traditional written genres such as novels<sup>21</sup>. From the bloggers’ perspective, links are an effective way of generating what Estalella (2005: 105) calls “a de-localised dialogue with other bloggers” which overcomes the limitations of what is typically regarded as a personal space and which is inserted, instead, in a network of links and relationships. Since the readers are “invited” to navigate through the vast amount of linked chunks of text, they also have to devote more processing effort to obtaining a deferred reward in the eventual congruence of the partially interpreted ideas deployed by the authors of one or multiple weblogs (cf. Sáez Vacas, 2004: 15; Sorapure, 2003: 14). However, not all the analysts share this idea. For us, providing links to other blogs or sites generates a greater responsibility in the readers when they try to find congruence in what they are reading and obtain eventual relevance. For McNeill (2003: 33), on the contrary, this feature of Internet is a way to foster increased intimacy with the blogger. Web diarists, as she calls them,

have the option of adding links to external sites to help the reader feel a part of their personal lives. These links act as community builders by constructing a virtual world for the diarist, peopling her autobiographical landscape with the friends and family, restaurants, shops, and schools that the diarist invokes, or the movies, music groups, or causes about which she is passionate. By following the links, readers can in a sense share the diarist’s experiences, see as he or she does, rather than relying on the diarist’s textual descriptions, and thus these links foster a greater sense of intimacy between writer and audience. They

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that recently a counter-relevant aspect of weblog search through “search engines” such as *Google* has emerged: the so-called *splog*. As defined by Pollit (2005), a *splog* is a spam or fake blog created to achieve a high search engine result. The *splogger* makes money from advertising placed in the *splog* –often using *Google*’s service– or by directing visitors to e-commerce sites. Topics range from cruises and health to porn and gambling. On a cheap-looking *splog* about gambling, to take one example, the advertisements may link to well-known betting firms. The placing of these advertisements is beyond the firms’ control, and end up spoiling their impact. In a similar fashion, the readers’ expectations of relevance will also be discouraged.

<sup>21</sup> According to Sonoski (1999, in Askehave & Nielsen, 2005) hyper-reading is based on the following reading techniques: (a) *filtering* (a higher degree of selectivity in reading); (b) *skimming* (less text actually read); (c) *pecking* (a less linear sequencing of passages read); (d) *imposing* (the reader’s cognitive frameworks override the text’s); (e) *filming* (the “...but I saw the films” response that implies that significant meaning is derived more from graphical than from verbal elements of the text); (f) *trespassing* (loosening of textual boundaries); (g) *de-authorizing* (lessening sense of authorship and authorial intention); and (h) *fragmenting* (breaking texts into notes rather than regarding them as essays, articles or books).

also, arguably, add to the reader's sense of the diary's "authenticity", because the narrative is anchored in "actual" places and people that members of the audience may also recognize, making them feel part of the narrative, as "insiders" who are part of the community the diarist addresses.

It should also be noted that in the last few months, a number of features have acquired more prominence in the weblog genre. One example is advertisements. As Whitehead (2005) correctly describes, the world of blogging initially evolved a language and community all of its own, separated from the rest of the world, which thought that blogs are mostly trivial forms of communication, largely devoted to pictures of the writer's cat and read only by said writer's friends and family. As the number of blogs has increased enormously<sup>22</sup>, mainstream media and marketers are suddenly taking note and becoming interested in placing advertisements in blogs. As a consequence, banner-like advertisements are filling weblogs and becoming part of their conventionalised genre<sup>23</sup>.

##### 5. PREDICTING (READERS' RELEVANCE-ORIENTED INFERENCES)

Cognitive pragmatics is interested in predicting the reader's inferential operations and interpretive choices when obtaining the most relevant information from the available coded language in verbal or visual discourses. As was pointed out in Yus (2002c: 627), the reader is a unique individual with a unique cultural and personal background stored in his/her mind (what Sperber & Wilson would call the reader's *cognitive environment*). These backgrounds are so varied in the quality and quantity of information that can be manifest to the reader on a specific occasion, that the resulting interpretation of and emotions felt with the same text will probably differ in

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<sup>22</sup> A recent survey by web-tracking firm *Technorati* found that the number of blogs in existence doubles every five months.

<sup>23</sup> Needless to say, banners are also subject to the same relevance-seeking procedure by readers. As argued in Yus (2005b), banners are placed in web pages with the overt intention that the Internet user identifies the advertiser's intended information, either a simple wish to get the users to click on the banner, or eventually purchase a product. In doing that, advertisers exploit a universal feature of human cognition: the search for and maximisation of relevance which is biologically rooted in all human beings. Logically, this universal cognitive tendency to maximise relevance makes it possible, at least to some extent, for advertisers to predict and manipulate the mental states of Internet users. Knowing the users' tendency to pick out the most relevant stimuli in the specific context of a certain weblog which they have just accessed, and their tendency to process these stimuli in search of a maximisation of relevance, the advertisers may be able to produce a banner which is likely to attract the users' attention, to prompt the retrieval of certain contextual assumptions regarding the product advertised (advantages, price, comparisons with other similar products...) and to point towards an intended favourable conclusion about the product advertised.

many readers. For instance, people have an aesthetic sense just as they have (or do not have) a sense of humour. In any case, proposing insights of what interpretive procedures readers go through in their processing of weblogs is, in my opinion, the right track to follow. But for weblogs, as happens with many Internet discourses, the reading track is not fixed beforehand. There are a lot of weblogs that the reader can pay attention to, and there are multiple links to other sites inside the weblog that the reader can decide to select. The result is a fragmented, non-linear reading technique that may well go beyond the blogger's communicative intentions (if any). But even in these situations, the cognitive procedure is the same: readers will only find certain information on the Internet relevant if it interacts positively with their background knowledge and specific expectations. In a nutshell, there are three ways in which the information contained in weblogs can be relevant to the reader in a specific context: (a) by *strengthening* previous assumptions; (b) by *contradicting* and leading to the erasure of previous assumptions; or (c) by *combining* with previous assumptions to yield new updated information not deducible from either the previous assumptions or the stimulus taken separately, but from the union of both. This is applicable to all types of human information processing. For instance, in (1-3) below these three cases (*strengthening*, *contradicting*, *combining*) are exemplified in how the relevance of Internet banners can be obtained (adapted from Yus, 2005b):

- 1) A user wants to change to a broadband connection. He believes that broadband will be faster and let him handle all sorts of information. On the web page where he normally checks his e-mails through a web mail program, he sees a banner which advertises broadband connections of up to one megabyte per minute and at a reasonable price. Knowing that the current speed of his connection is 56 k-bytes per second, this banner will achieve relevance by strengthening his previous assumption that broadband is faster, and he will probably contract the services of the company advertised.
- 2) A Spanish Internet user wants to travel to Amsterdam for a week and she believes that the only way to travel there is by plane or by car, although she loves ships. She enters one of the online magazines specializing in information on tourist resorts and finds a banner leading to a company offering low-price tickets for sea journeys to Amsterdam from Bilbao (North of Spain). The banner will achieve relevance by contradicting and then eliminating the user's previous assumption, and therefore she is likely to click on the banner and buy the ticket.

- 3) An Internet user with a low budget for buying a car remembers that some friend of his told him once that there were brand new cars on sale for less than six thousand euros. He is reading a piece of news on cars in his favourite online newspaper and comes across a banner leading to a section of an online magazine in which there is an article comparing a number of low-price cars. He clicks on it and discovers that two out of the five cars tested are under six thousand euros, and one of them also has air conditioning and power steering. This banner is relevant in the current context (willingness to buy a car) and this expectation of relevance is confirmed: on the one hand, the user strengthens his previous assumption that there were cars for under six thousand euros. Moreover, the new information about these cars is combined with the user's previous intention to buy a low-price car, leading to the implication that the one with air conditioning and power steering is the one which he should buy.

In a way, weblogs are different from traditional written discourses, and also from other Internet discourses such as the ordinary web page, in their capability to foster interactivity between the blogger and the readers. Elements in weblogs such as the form to send comments provide immediate feedback to the blogger, unlike the typical unidirectional web page, whose feedback is often reduced to an e-mail-form-generating link in some area of the page. Of course, the degree of interactivity with readers depends on the intention of the blogger: if it is a "filter-type weblog", the blogger will expect readers to produce some feedback and even provide him/her with additional links that appear to be interesting. In "diary weblogs", on the contrary, there is no such need, although most bloggers obviously expect some Internet users to read their posts (even if they are only *lurking*) and maybe also post some form of reply (cf. McNeill, 2003, 2005)<sup>24</sup>.

However, conversations in weblogs are inevitably fragmented, and the reader (and, in parallel, the blogger) often has to devote some mental effort to decipher the threads of the conversations taking place not only within a particular weblog, but also across a myriad of weblogs. As a consequence, conversations tend to slow down, to lose dynamism, or even end up as

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<sup>24</sup> Vuorinen's (2005: 19) words are illustrative here: "The writing style of blogs is usually personal, and this often translates into a writing style that does not necessarily involve the audience or invite discussion. This is true especially in journal [i.e. diary] blogs (...). Despite that, most bloggers write in first person instead of a narrative style. They have themselves as a subject ("I think") or include the audience ("we should see") at least some of the time. This alone gives the audience awareness of the user and her opinions, interests and personality. Most bloggers seem to be aware of the audience they are writing for, though they do not necessarily claim to write with the audience in mind".

communication in just one direction. De Moor & Efimova (2004) propose another source of conversational fragmentation: the multimodal character of blog conversations, since comments on posts are often partially located in the comments field of a particular entry, but also in the blogs of the repliers. Also, although the blog conversation may be the most visible part of the conversation, many other channels are often used, such as e-mail and Internet chat tools like ICQ and Internet phone tools like *Skype*. In any case, I agree with Herring *et alii* (2005) when they doubt that cross-posting in blogs is an authentic form of conversational interaction. Besides, although we can acknowledge this “conversational” status of weblogs, this genre is becoming increasingly complex for the occasional reader, who is faced with a lot of cross-linking, private vs. public conversations, and cross-postings among hundreds of weblogs. Besides, blog conversations rely extensively on links and cross-postings that are normally the blogger’s responsibility and the result of his/her personal decision. As a consequence, the eventual relevance of the possible reading paths, even if multiple on paper, is constrained by the blogger’s decisions and may not be only the readers’ responsibility in discovering the most relevant information available<sup>25</sup>.

Readers can also be discouraged by the lack of mutuality in the target information uploaded in the weblog. Firstly, bloggers often rely on the fact that certain information is shared (*mutually manifest*, in relevance-theoretic terms) with certain readers (and not others) and will often leave it implicit, or non-coded, generating a gradation of readers depending on this mutuality of relevant (but left implicit) information. Secondly, in the last few months a greater complexity in weblog discourse has been detected, to the extent that only those “in the gang”, those who master the jargon of weblogs will find the information relevant in any sense of the term<sup>26</sup>. As Hanley (2005) states, “surely the idea of blogging –that is, writing about things you’re interested in without the tiresome presence of an editor or censor– is to communicate; but when you’re making up words without explaining what they mean, aren’t you immediately alienating most of your audience?”. Tony Thorne (in Hanley, *ibid.*) says that “part of the whole attraction of them [blogs] is that they’re

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<sup>25</sup> As Vuorinen (2005: 57) asserts, “the distributed nature of the discourse also translates into a freedom from the rules that govern message boards. There is no editor or moderator to deal with, and the blogger can post his thoughts freely, supporting them with links and other information he or she deems worthy. In a sense, the *blogosphere* moderates itself, as nobody is forced to read a blog”.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, jargons are essential in the construction of discourse-related identities and group identification. As pointed out in Yus (2002*d*: 3729), jargons provide a sense of belonging and involve particular discursive features which work as inherent sources of intra-group identity and also as inter-group differentiation. A typical example is scientific discourse. Adolescents also display explicitly narrow codes of vocabulary choices and non-standard pronunciations only available to the group of peers.

geeky, anoraky and self-referential. All slang and jargon is essentially about exclusivity: it starts out as a very small group with their own language". He agrees that the whole idea of inventing new words and phrases is to create cliques, but believes that this creates much of the appeal for jargon-filled blogs: "If slang crosses over, it can still retain its glamour if it sounds exclusive". But exclusivity means filtered accessibility and graded interpretation in terms of mental effort devoted to processing the blog.

The truth is, though, that despite all the limitations, the users have embraced this Internet genre and do get a reward out of visiting them. Weblogs are relevant for them, and "are here to stay".

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