First of all, thanks to Thom for his excellent book. I agree completely that pragmatics has been under-represented in discussions of the evolution of language (with the notable exceptions you mention). I was, I recall, the only pragmaticist speaking at Evolang in Paris in 2001. I recall also that I was advised in the strongest possible terms not to go by a certain person: he knows who he is, but shall remain nameless! Thanks also to Tiffany and Olivier, and to cognitionandculture.net, for inviting me to participate.

As someone whose interest in relevance theory has come via linguistics, rather than say, psychology, anthropology or cognitive science, I will not address the areas of the book with which I broadly agree – the centrality of ostensive-inferential communication, the emergence of language as a tool to make that more explicit, mindreading, cultural attractors etc. Much of the book is, as far as I can see, right. However, there is one thing I'd like to take issue with.

On page 19 Thom introduces two pieces of terminology from my [2003 Mind and Language article](link) (and [2009 book](link)): 'natural codes' and 'conventional codes'. These, he admits, he has adapted to suit his own purposes, but the definitions he offers are in pretty much the same spirit as mine. 'Natural' codes are codes such as those used in communication that relies on strict coding and decoding (bee-dancing, bull-frog calls etc.) In the class of natural codes I include human behaviors such as smiling, with the proviso that these can be recruited for use in ostensive-inferential communication by being either deliberately shown (in the Gricean sense) or even faked.

Conventional codes, on the other hand, are those regularities perpetuated by tacit agreement between members of a particular community: driving on the left (or, inexplicably, the right…); Morse code; leaving a gratuity in a restaurant; the person who initiated a phone-call calling back in the event that you are both cut off. Thom then goes on to define language as 'the rich, structured collection of conventional codes that augment ostensive-inferential communication within a given community' (p. 20).

But here is where we differ. You see, I presented the notions of 'natural' and 'conventional' codes not in order to point out that language is an example of the latter, but rather to point out that the human linguistic code is, crucially, neither.

Let me explain: I could just about be persuaded that we, as members of the same speech community, could all agree to call 'cats' 'tacs', or even spell 'convention' . Indeed, something along these lines goes on when young people decide as a group (and to the exclusion of old fuddy-duddys such as myself) to describe a positive experience as 'really bad' or a really cool band as 'really sick' (or, for that matter spell the word 'cool').

But there are properties of language – the headedness of phrases, the fact that dependencies are local, so-called 'island' effects and many more – that surely cannot be the result of tacit agreement among members of a speech community. Moreover, these properties of language cannot be induced by children acquiring that language because they are simply not there in the data they hear.

I'll quote William Lycan, as I do in my 2003 paper:

"…most sentences of a language are never tokened at all; since hearers instantly understand novel sentences, this cannot be in virtue of pre-established conventions or expectations directed on those sentences individually" (1991: 84).

So, what I'd like to ask is this: How does 'language' as defined as a set of conventional codes fit with the notion of language viewed from an internalist, modular, domain-specific perspective, or, for that matter, with the myriad advances made by generative linguists? Relevance theory, as I understand

it, was conceived as a framework intended to complement such a view of language.

And relatedly, to touch on some points raised in Chapter 6, to what extent does the view sketched in Speaking Our Minds really still allow room for some innate specification in language evolution? Thom doesn't appear to rule out the possibility of an evolved Universal Grammar-like mental faculty, but in the end he sits on the fence. Then, on p. 136 he proposes that the cultural attractor account is an alternative to Universal Grammar. This makes me feel uneasy and I'd like to know more.