

# ADVANCED PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

*A Bressanone Retrospective  
for Giovanni B. Flores d'Arcais*

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Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen

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# Preface

More than a quarter century ago, my friend Giovanni B. Flores d'Arcais, 'Ino' for short, made me his ally in a bold initiative. He had put his mind on convening a first major psycholinguistics conference at the European continent, first that is since World War II. More specifically, he intended to invite the 'young Turks' who were then zealously advocating a new partnership between psychology and linguistics and to mix them thoroughly with the cream of continental psycholinguistics. Many of these young Turks Ino and I had met during our postdoc at Harvard's Center for Cognitive Studies (1965-'66), where Jerome Bruner and George Miller had irreversibly changed the scientific conception of mind. But others had been bred in that exceptional, barely European center of excellence, the University of Edinburgh.

Ino skilfully worked his way through fathomless Italian bureaucracy, eventually collecting generous amounts of *liras*, handpicked the gorgeous old Dolomite city of Bressanone as meeting place, contracted the graceful Elefante Hotel, invited his target participants and was pleasantly surprised by sheer universal acceptance. Eventually, the conference took place in July, 1969. My memory is undecided on whether Ino attended more to the culinary or the scientific well-being of his guests, but surely, he did plenty of both. The conference was exciting, the moods were high, and a network of contacts was forged that survives till the present day.

Though duly satisfied, Ino tirelessly set out to edit the proceedings, again asking me to join him in the effort. And this was really editing! The book was based on the empirical psycholinguistic conference papers, but it got a logical structure of its own, covering the (then) major areas in psycholinguistics. Additional papers were invited where the conference had left noticeable gaps, and we wrote lengthy explanatory texts to increase the coherence of the book. It worked: *Advances in psycholinguistics* appeared in 1970 and was so well received that it had a second printing in 1974.

In retrospect, Bressanone has become a landmark in the history of psycholinguistics, and European psycholinguistics in particular. But who cares about the history of psycholinguistics? There is no written record of what happened to our discipline since the years of the 'cognitive revolution'. Most of our students and younger colleagues are unaware of the battle that was fought to establish cognitive science and about the pioneering role psycholinguistics played in it. Not so Ino. When the 25th anniversary of the Bressanone conference was approaching, he took the initiative to reconvene the meeting in order to consider what had been achieved (and lost) since these early days. Whether it was due to the decline of the Mafia, the cleansing of Ino's ethics by many years of Dutch Calvinism, or the financial suction force of the European Union, the Italian funding agencies approached by Ino didn't give in, and only let him know at a late, too late moment.

Lacking a Bressanone retrospective conference, this book is a second best solution. When Ino's sixtieth birthday (October 3, 1996) came into the offing, I approached all surviving authors of *Advances* with the request to write a short, retrospective paper about how psycholinguistics, and in particular their own work, had evolved since *Advances*. "Back to the future", as John Marshall put it. I neither offered elegant lodging nor culinary reward, still to my pleasant surprise my request too met with sheer universal acceptance. The result is a book, not by young Turks, but by established scientists, many of them main players in the recent history of psycholinguistics. Together, we are offering Ino a *petite histoire* of our field, for whatever it is worth.

This solution is second best, because our special community has not been able to *discuss* the course of a quarter century of psycholinguistics. And indeed, many of the observations surfacing in this book call for much deeper consideration. The ever-going push and pull between psychology, linguistics and the neurosciences is not fully grasped by anyone, but steadily affecting all of our work in unpredictable ways. A better sense of history would not be a luxury for psycholinguists.

The solution is only second best for another reason as well. It is that one major player did *not* contribute: Giovanni Flores d'Arcais. Not only would the editing have been so

much more imaginative (and more pleasant) if he and I had done it jointly, but also the book would have included a much needed retrospective chapter by the ‘Urheber’ himself. What would Ino have written about? His own chapter in *Advances* was about the processing of comparative sentences. He reported on remarkable differences in the processing of *more .. than* and *less ... than* constructions and adduced the difference to what he called “the focus of comparison”. In a sentence like *A cat is more friendly than a dog*, the subject (*A cat*) is the focus of comparison, whereas in the sentence *A cat is less friendly than a dog* this is not the case, *a dog* being the focus there. The grammatical subject as preferred ‘focuser’ has been a continuing theme in Ino’s subsequent work on sentence understanding and picture verification. Ino would, no doubt, have referred with satisfaction to the recent paper by Lila Gleitman et al. (*Cognition*, 1996) where exactly the same mechanism, the foregrounding effect of the subject, is invoked to explain the apparently asymmetrical interpretation of symmetric predicates, such as *is similar to*. Or would Ino have written about any of the other themes in his rich repertoire: sentence parsing, idiom comprehension, object naming and event description, word recognition, the acquisition of function words and connectives, or about his pioneering work in the reading of kanji and Chinese characters? We’ll ask him in due time.

Returning, finally, to Bressanone’s future, one should ask, How come that the young crowd over there was destined to leadership in late 20th century psycholinguistics and cognitive science? There are, at least, two possible answers. Maybe Ino, in his clairvoyance, made just the appropriate choice of contributors. Or the meeting plus the writing of *Advances* worked as a latter-day Pentecost, sparking our vocation to study the world’s tongues and their use. Either way, Ino did the right thing.

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