

14 A Semantic Basis for Grammatical Description and Typology: Transitivity and Reflexives



1. Introduction

Grammar encodes meaning. Categories of grammar known, traditionally, as "plural", "dual", "past", or "imperative" encode semantic distinctions which in a given speech community are deemed (at a subconscious level) particularly important. The difference between a swallow and a lark (at times) be ignored by the speakers of English because they can both be subsumed under a more general label "bird"; but the difference between a *bird* and two or three *birds* cannot be similarly ignored: for the speakers of English, the distinction between singular and plural is obligatory (for "count nouns").

But it is not just semantic distinctions (such as that between "one" and "more than one" or between "now" and "before now") which constitute the substance of a language's grammar. There are also notions which don't belong to any contrastive sets of this kind and which become grammaticalized—in one language, in several languages, or even in most languages of the world. (The so-called "imperative" construction, which will be discussed below, is an example of such a widely grammaticalized meaning.) One could say, then, that far from being an "autonomous" system, independent of meaning, grammar constitutes in fact concentrated semantics: it embodies a system of meanings which are treated in a given language as particularly important, indeed essential, in the interpretation and conceptualization of reality and of human life in that reality (see Boas 1938*g*; Jakobson 1962).

The semantic basis of grammatical categories is recognized in traditional labels such as "plural", "dual", "past", or "imperative". These labels embody insights which grammarians have gained from ancient times through their study of languages; and although the insights gained by earlier generations of grammarians are not fully adequate for the description and interpretation of the hundreds, even thousands, of often very different languages which have become accessible to study in the twentieth century, they are none the less valuable and can be built upon by modern linguistic

science, with its broader empirical scope and more sophisticated theoretical frameworks.

Labels of this kind reflect the sound intuition that grammatical categories have a semantic basis, and also that they can be matched, to some extent, across languages—not by virtue of the grammatical form, or structure, because this differs from language to language, but precisely by virtue of some shared semantic core.

But valuable as labels of this kind often are, they carry with them a certain danger, because while they may hint at the meaning encoded in a certain grammatical category, they cannot represent this meaning accurately. Paradoxically, the realization that a traditional grammatical label does not give an accurate portrayal of the semantic range of a category often leads to claims that grammatical categories have no semantic basis whatsoever; or at least that they cannot be described in semantic terms.¹

Such a conclusion amounts to throwing out the baby with the bath water, but scholars may find themselves in this absurd position if they have no coherent semantic theory to draw on, or can see no alternative to either taking semantic labels at face value or denying that the categories in question are based on meaning at all.

It is worth recalling in this connection John Lyons's comments on the status of linguistic labels, made specifically with respect to standard labels for moods, but applicable to other grammatical labels as well:

it is important to emphasize that, at the present stage of linguistic theory and descriptive practice, it is impossible to formulate any very clear notion of the distinctions that are grammaticalized, within the category of mood, throughout the languages of the world. The labels that are used in standard descriptions of particular languages are often misleading in that they imply that the functions of the moods are narrower or more specific than they really are. This is true, for example, of the term "conditional" as it is used with respect to French, or the "inferential" as it is applied to Turkish. In general, we cannot be sure that, because the same term is used in relation to two different languages, the moods that the term refers to have exactly the same function in the two languages. Nor can we be sure that, because two different terms are used, two different functions are involved. (Lyons 1977, ii. 847)

By linking grammatical labels with well-defined meanings we can standardize the use of these labels and thus help to overcome the confusion that Lyons is talking about. The range of meanings encoded in one construction which we want to call "imperative" (or "reflexive") may well not be the

¹ In private discussions, at least, many linguists express the view that grammatical labels don't matter, and that there is no point in trying to define terms such as "imperative", "reflexive", "passive", or "dative". But without some such terms grammatical descriptions of different languages cannot be compared. Linguistics as a discipline becomes a Tower of Babel, typological studies lose their necessary basis, and important generalizations about human languages cannot be made. (See Kibrik 1992: 43–4).

same as that encoded in another construction, in another language, to which we want to give the same label. But this doesn't mean that we cannot assign the label "imperative" (or "reflexive") a coherent definition. To show how this can be done, I will first discuss the notion of "imperative".

2. The Uniqueness of Grammatical and Semantic Systems

Every language has its own unique system of meanings encoded in grammar. Traditional grammatical labels do not make this point clear. Anyone who has had some experience with different languages knows that what is called "plural", or "past", or "imperative" in one language does not correspond exactly to what is called "plural", "past", or "imperative" in another. Is it justified, therefore, to apply the same labels to such different phenomena?

There is nothing wrong in using the same label for different phenomena as long as these phenomena have something in common, and as long as the label is defined in terms of a common core (and of course as long as the language-specific phenomena linked with such labels are rigorously described, from a language-specific point of view). In the past, definitions of this kind were usually not given; I believe, however, that since most widely accepted grammatical labels are based on sound linguistic insight, definitions of this kind *can*, in principle, be provided.

Consider, for example, the (so-called) English imperative construction, as in *Go away!*, *Give me that book*, *Keep the door closed*, or *Be quiet*. Formally, this construction can be described as a verb phrase with an uninflected verb as its head. Semantically, it can be described as encoding, prototypically, the following core meaning: 'I want you to do something'. Since this core meaning carries with it a certain illocutionary force, a more precise formula would read as follows:

- (1) I say: I want you to do something
I think: you will do it because of this

In addition to this prototypical meaning, the same construction can also be used in a restricted number of set expressions such as *Sleep well!*, *Have a nice day!*, or *Have a good trip!*, that is, expressions which encode the following general meaning: "I want something good to happen to you".

Can the English "imperative construction" be equated with the "imperative constructions" in other languages—for example, in Polish? In a sense it can't, because the scope of the English construction is different from that of the Polish one; I will argue, however, that in another sense the two can indeed be identified with one another, and that traditional grammar was right in identifying them terminologically.

First, some facts.

Polish verbs have a special imperative form, or rather two such forms, singular and plural. What is normally regarded as the Polish imperative construction takes the form of a verb phrase with the imperative form of the verb as its head. For example:

- (2) Chodź tutaj!
come: IMP:SG here
'Come here!'
(3) Daj mi tę książkę!
Give: IMP:SG me:DAT this:ACC:SG:FEM book:ACC:SG:FEM
'Give me this book!'

The basic (prototypical) meaning encoded in this construction is the same as in the English imperative construction 'I want you to do something'; but the extensions from this prototype are different.

First, one doesn't say in Polish things such as **Śpij dobrze*, 'Sleep well', **Miej przyjemny dzień*, 'Have a pleasant day!' or **Miej dobrą podróż*, 'Have a good trip!'—that is to say, Polish doesn't have the 'I-want-something-good-to-happen-to-you' extension. On the other hand, the same grammatical construction can be extended in Polish in ways in which the English construction cannot. For example, it can be used with stative adjectives or other expressions referring (explicitly or implicitly) to the addressee's thoughts:

- (4) Bądź spokojny.
'Be tranquil' (i.e. don't worry).
(5) Bądź pewny że . . .
'Be certain that . . .'
(6) Bądź zadowolony, że tak się skończyło.
'Be pleased that it ended like this.'
(7) Bądź dobrej myśli.
'Be hopeful' (lit. Be of good thought).

I suggest that the meaning encoded in this "psychological extension" can be formulated as follows:

- (8) I want you to think something good

Adjectives such as *spokojny*, 'tranquil' or *pewny*, 'certain', are not inherently positive, but they are compatible with the positive meaning of the construction as such, and when they are used in this construction they are interpreted as referring to "good thoughts". On the other hand, terms for negative emotions such as *niezadowolony*, 'displeased', or *zły*, 'angry' (lit. 'bad'), cannot be used in this construction:

- (9) *Bądź niezadowolona . . .
 'Be displeased that . . .'
 (10) *Bądź na niego zła.
 'Be angry with him.'

—although one can use such terms in a negative construction (like in English):

- (11) Nie bądź niezadowolona!
 'Don't be displeased!'
 (12) Nie bądź na mnie zła!
 'Don't be angry with me!'
 (13) Nie bądź smutna!
 'Don't be sad!'

Thus, the so-called imperative construction in English differs in scope from the so-called imperative construction in Polish. But they can reasonably be referred to by the same term, provided that we can define it in a way which would fit both languages. I suggest that this can be done in the following way: "An imperative construction is a special construction which is used in a given language to express the meaning 'I want you to do something', with possible extensions to some other related meanings." (The expression "related meanings" refers here to overlapping semantic formulae, such as 'I want you to do something' and 'I want something good to happen to you'.)

Of course a language may have no special construction encoding the core meaning 'I want you to do something' (in which case the speaker of that language wishing to express such a meaning may have to do so relying on purely lexical means). In a case like this, we would have to say that the language in question has no imperative construction. It is not clear at this stage whether there are in fact such languages, although there are, of course, languages without special imperative morphology, e.g. Vietnamese (see e.g. Bystrov and Stankevič 1988). According to Ogloblin (1988), there are no "active imperative constructions" in Javanese; there is only a passive irrealis construction, which, depending on the particle used, can be interpreted as either conditional or directive.

In those languages which do have a special construction for expressing the meaning under discussion, the construction in question has to be described, needless to say, in structural terms, so its description will be language-specific. None the less different imperative constructions found in different languages can be matched in terms of a unitary definition, referring to a language-independent semantic core.

I believe that if we didn't have such a unitary definition for the term "imperative construction", we would have no right to use the same term

with respect to different languages. We have seen that at least for English and Polish a unitary definition is possible; it is possible, however, only if phrased in terms of meaning.

It should be pointed out that the proposed procedure for matching grammatical categories cross-linguistically is not based on the vague notion of "similarity", but on the rigorous notion of identity. For example, if the English and Polish imperative constructions can be matched, despite the differences between them mentioned here (and others, not mentioned for reasons of space), it is not because they are somehow "similar", but because they can be assigned exactly the same prototypical meaning (with different extensions in each language). "Similarity" would be too vague a notion for an effective matching procedure, because an English construction may be deemed similar, in different respects, to several Polish constructions, and vice versa. But a rigorously defined common core provides a sufficient basis for non-arbitrary matching of categories across language boundaries.

Common experience of linguists who have worked on different languages of the world suggests that an imperative construction defined as proposed here can be found in most (though not necessarily all) languages of the world. The notion of the imperative construction as defined here is therefore a useful part of grammatical theory. What is more important, however, is the fact that by defining the notion of an imperative construction in the way we have done here we can capture an important substantive generalization about human language and cognition; namely, that the meaning 'I want you to do something' plays such an important role in human cognition as to merit widespread grammaticalization across languages of the world.

If someone wished to define the notion of an imperative construction in a different way (for example, linking it with the formula 'I want something good to happen to you' as its core meaning), they would, of course, be free to do so, because a definition is no more than a tool. But I believe they would have provided themselves with a very inefficient tool. In particular, they would not be able to make the generalization that "most languages of the world have an imperative construction". Useful definitions are those which are based on insights emerging from prior linguistic investigation, and which can therefore lead to substantive generalizations. Of two alternative definitions we must judge as superior the one which allows us to make stronger generalizations.

3. Typology and Semantics

To compare languages (or anything else) we need a *tertium comparationis* (that is, a common measure). This common measure cannot be provided by

linguistic form, or by linguistic structure, because these differ from language to language, but it can be provided by meaning. To quote a recent book on typology and language universals: "The characteristic feature of linguistic typology . . . is cross-linguistic comparison. The fundamental prerequisite for cross-linguistic comparison is cross-linguistic comparability, that is the ability to identify the 'same' grammatical phenomenon across languages. . . . This is a fundamental issue in all linguistic theory, in fact. Nevertheless, this problem has commanded remarkably little attention relative to its importance" (Croft 1990: 11). Croft quotes in this connection Greenberg's (1966b: 74) statement concerning cross-linguistic comparability of grammatical constructions: "I fully realize that in identifying such phenomena in languages of differing structure, one is basically employing semantic criteria"; and he comments: "These brief remarks summarize the essential problems and a general solution. The essential problem is that languages vary in their structure to a great extent; indeed, that is what typology (and, more generally, linguistics) aims to study and explain. But the variation in structure makes it difficult if not impossible to use structural criteria, or only structural criteria, to identify grammatical categories across languages." Croft concurs with Greenberg's conclusion that the ultimate solution to the problem is a semantic one; and he points out that the same conclusion was also reached by Keenan and Comrie in their cross-linguistic analysis of relative clauses (Keenan and Comrie 1977).

This conclusion would seem to imply that the reliability and validity of linguistic typology depends on the availability of an adequate semantic theory. Croft stops short, however, of spelling out this implication, and the other leading typologists tend to do the same. For example, Croft writes:

The problem of cross-linguistic identification should not be overstated. In most cases, it is not difficult to identify the basic grammatical categories on an intuitive basis. To a great extent this is accomplished by examining the translation of a sentence and its parts, which is of course based on semantics and pragmatics. On the other hand, the weaknesses of an intuitive cross-linguistic identification of categories become apparent when one focusses on an example which is not so intuitively clear after all . . . (1990: 13)

I would argue, however, that while the researcher's intuition is a valuable, indeed indispensable, starting-point, it cannot obviate the need for a coherent research methodology. As the remarks quoted earlier suggest, such a coherent methodology can only be provided by semantics. I suggest that the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, which is based on universal semantic primitives and which has been widely tested in lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic description of many languages of the world, can also provide a suitable semantic foundation for grammatical typology. In particular, relying on this metalanguage we can standardize the use of labels such as "reflexive", "causative", "imperative", or "subjunctive", and give a

firm basis to the cross-linguistic study of grammatical categories. I have illustrated this claim with respect to causative constructions in my *Semantics of Grammar* (Wierzbicka 1988), and with respect to "evidentials" in Chapter 15. In this chapter, I will illustrate it mainly with respect to the grammatical category of "reflexives".

As Seiler (1986: 13) points out, "universal concepts are necessary prerequisites for all language activity. They are the *tertium comparationis* necessary for the comparison of languages, for translation; necessary also for assembling linguistic data."

The set of universal concepts arrived at on an empirical basis in the course of a quarter of a century of single-minded searching by myself and colleagues provides, I believe, a *tertium comparationis*, in terms of which grammatical constructions can be rigorously and insightfully compared. (See Chapters 2, 3, and 15; see also Wierzbicka 1988.)

4. Reflexive Constructions

Reflexive constructions are usually defined in terms of coreference of the subject and the object. For example, Givón (1990: 628) offers the following definition of what he calls "true reflexives": "The subject is coreferential with the object, and thus *acts upon itself* (reflexively)"; and Faltz (1985: 6) defines what he calls "primary reflexive strategies" as grammatical devices which "specifically indicate subject-object coreference".

According to this characterization, English sentences such as *Mary washed herself* or *Mary defended herself* are instances of a reflexive construction, since the object is marked in them as coreferential with the subject. But applying the same definitions to, for example, Polish, we might conclude (I believe incorrectly) that Polish has no "true" reflexive constructions at all. Consider, for example, the following pairs of sentences:

(14) (a) Ewa zabiła Adama.
'Eve killed Adam.'

(b) Ewa zabiła się.
Eve killed REFL
'Eve killed herself.'

(15) (a) Ewa skaleczyła Adama.
'Eve injured Adam.'

(b) Ewa skaleczyła się.
Eve injured REFL

(16) (a) Ewa umyła Adama.
Eve washed Adam.

- (b) Ewa umyla się.
Eve washed REFL

In each pair, sentence (a) is transitive, but sentence (b) is intransitive (see below), and so it cannot have an object, but only an intransitive subject; and so for (b) sentences the question of coreference between two arguments does not arise. English so-called reflexive sentences are also low in transitivity by a number of criteria (for example, they can't be passivized); but at least their reflexive object can usually be conjoined with other objects.²

- (17) Harry covered his wife and himself with a blanket.

In Polish, this is not possible:

- (18) *Henryk przykrył się i żonę kocem.
Harry covered REFL and wife:ACC blanket:INSTR

Thus if one can describe English reflexive sentences in terms of coreferentiality between the subject and the object, the same description would not apply to Polish sentences usually called by this name.

It might be objected that the Polish reflexive marker *się* cannot be conjoined with "other objects" because it is a clitic (see e.g. Rappaport, forthcoming). But the very fact that a would-be object is a clitic may point to the sentence's low transitivity. In many languages, "clitic objects" don't behave like "real objects" in a number of respects (e.g. they don't distinguish "direct objects" from "indirect objects", they don't respect the rules for the relative order of "direct objects" and "indirect objects", and so on). We should constantly remind ourselves that the number of syntactic core arguments depends not on the number of entities involved in the situation referred to, but on the manner in which the situation is conceptualized by the speaker, and that one cannot speak, for example, of a "transitive action" or an "intransitive action", because the same action may be viewed as "transitive" or "intransitive", depending on the point of view. (For further discussion, see Wierzbicka 1988.)

Furthermore, even if one wished to argue that in Polish sentences such as 19 and 20 below:

- (19) Ewa zabiła Adama.
'Eve killed Adam.'
(20) Ewa zabiła go.
'Eve killed him.'

² The co-ordination test is, of course, only one test among many which can be used to judge the level of a sentence's transitivity. I think, however, that it is an important one, and that it provides a reliable key to the conceptualization, or at least to one aspect of the conceptualization. (For some other tests, see e.g. Wierzbicka 1988: 18–19; also Hopper and Thompson 1980.)

are equally transitive, despite the fact that *go* is a clitic, the fact remains that the syntactic status of the "reflexive" clitic *się* is not the same as that of the non-reflexive clitic *go*. Whether it is a full-blown direct object or not, *go* behaves in some ways like a noun phrase, and in particular, it can combine with agreeing predicate nominals, whereas *się* cannot. For example:

- (21) Zobaczył Adama samego/pijanego.
saw:3SG Adam:ACC alone:ACC/drunken:ACC
'He saw Adam alone/drunk.'
(22) Zobaczył go samego/pijanego.
saw:3SG him:ACC alone:ACC/drunken:ACC
'He_i saw him_j alone_j/drunk_j.'
(23) *Zobaczył się samego/pijanego.
saw:3SG REFL alone:ACC/drunken:ACC

Facts of this kind suggest that in contemporary Polish the clitic *się*, traditionally called "reflexive pronoun" (*zaimek zwrotny*; see e.g. Szober 1966: 100), is better viewed not as a pronoun but as a "particle" (as it is indeed viewed by Geniušienė 1987: 245). But if *się* is not a noun phrase in (contemporary) Polish, then it cannot be the direct object of any sentence where it occurs, and consequently, a sentence where an otherwise transitive verb combines with *się* cannot be regarded as transitive.³

It might be claimed, of course, that definitions couched in terms of coreference between subjects and objects refer in fact to "underlying objects", not to "surface objects". A claim of this kind, however, presupposes the now obsolete framework of transformational grammar, with its underlying structures, surface structures, and transformations deriving the latter from the former. Since the basic assumptions on which this framework was based have been repeatedly refuted and since its inadequacy has been widely acknowledged even by most of its former proponents, it seems hardly necessary to argue against the use of this framework any more. (Of course it might be said that in the 1980s and 1990s syntactic "underlying structures" are used only as convenient fictions. But if so, then they have no empirical content and cannot be used as a basis for identifying and matching constructions across languages.)

Returning to Polish, it has to be recognized, I think, that most Polish sentences usually described as reflexive (see e.g. Kwapisz 1978; Saloni 1976) are intransitive and so can't have any coreferential subjects and objects. It is true that Polish also has another "reflexive" construction, illustrated by sentences such as the following:

³ The element *się* has a number of different functions and different statuses in Polish grammar (see Bogusławski 1977). What is said about *się* in this chapter concerns only one of these functions, and one of these statuses.

- (24) Kochaj bliźniego jak siebie samego.
love:IMP neighbour:ACC like self:ACC EMPH:ACC
'Love your neighbour like yourself.'

- (25) On nienawidzi samego siebie.
he hates EMPH:ACC self:ACC
'He hates himself.'

These sentences are transitive (as, for example, the test of conjoined objects shows), and their object, *siebie* (being a special "reflexive" pronoun), is inherently marked as coreferential with the subject. But sentences of this kind normally require the presence of an emphatic specifier, *samego* (*samej, samych*, etc; lit. 'the same'; homophonous with *samogo*, 'alone') and they are highly marked. (Sentences without an emphatic specifier are not impossible, but they would have to be contrastive.)

Of the two patterns, the intransitive pattern is more basic and it is the only one which is normally used in physical action sentences (whether the action is voluntary or not):

- (26) *Ewa okryła się kocem.*
'Eve covered herself with a blanket.'
(27) *?Ewa okryła siebie samą kocem.*
Eve covered self:ACC EMPH:ACC with a blanket
(28) *?Ewa okryła siebie kocem.*
Eve covered self:ACC with a blanket
(29) *Ewa skaleczyła się.*
'Eve injured herself (either accidentally or on purpose).'
(30) *?Ewa skaleczyła samą siebie.*
Eve injured EMPH:ACC self:ACC
'Eve injured HERSELF.'
(31) *?Ewa skaleczyła siebie.*
Eve injured self:ACC

In fact, even in a contrastive context, the intransitive pattern is usually much more natural in physical action sentences than the transitive one, with an emphatic marker (in the nominative) added to the subject:

- (32) *?Ewa okryła samą siebie, a nie okryła Adama.*
Eve covered EMPH:ACC self:ACC but didn't cover Adam:ACC
'Eve covered HERSELF, but didn't cover Adam.'
(33) *Ewa sama się okryła, a Adama nie okryła.*
Eve:NOM EMPH:NOM REFL covered but Adam:ACC didn't cover
'Eve covered HERSELF, but didn't cover Adam.'

- (34) **Ewa okryła się samą, a nie okryła Adama.*
Eve covered REFL EMPH:ACC but didn't cover Adam.
'Eve covered HERSELF, but didn't cover Adam.'

(As sentence 34 above shows, the clitic *się* cannot combine with the emphatic pronoun *sam*; but the same is true of other clitics.)

In his study of the relationship between prosodic and syntactic properties of pronouns in Slavic languages, Rappaport (1988) presents the relationship between the Polish "reflexive pronoun" *siebie* and the "reflexive clitic" *się* as exactly parallel to that between tonic and atonic versions of personal pronouns such as *jego*, 'him' (tonic), and *go*, 'him' (atonic). I would argue, however, that in fact the relationship between the members of each pair is quite different, from both a syntactic and a semantic point of view. The clitic (which as we saw earlier has some properties of a noun phrase) points to a second participant in the speaker's conceptualization of the situation; but *się* (which as we have seen does not behave like a noun phrase) signals that there is only one participant in the speaker's field of vision (the one identified by the subject of the sentence). On the other hand, *siebie* is a noun phrase, and it does have a referring function, although by virtue of its lexical meaning it signals identity between its own referent and that of the sentence's subject.

Since sentences with *siebie* are transitive (by a number of criteria) and since *siebie* can be conjoined with other objects, it is understandable that acceptability of sentences with *siebie* depends on the extent to which one can treat oneself in the same way as one treats other people. For example:

- (35) *Adam zastrzelił swoją żonę i samego siebie.*
'Adam shot dead his wife and HIMSELF.'
is more natural and more acceptable than
(36) *?Adam utopił swoją żonę i samego siebie.*
'Adam drowned his wife and HIMSELF.'

The reason is that the actions involved in shooting oneself and shooting someone else are fairly similar, in contrast to the actions of drowning oneself and drowning someone else: to drown someone else one would have to push a person into water, or hold their head under water, whereas to drown oneself one would have to simply jump into water; but in the case of shooting, the basic action is the same, regardless of who one is shooting at.

The fact that in Polish even "the best" transitive reflexive sentences sound more natural if they include an emphatic marker shows that from the point of view of Polish culture, reflected in the Polish language, one's relationship with oneself is normally expected to be different from one's relationship with another person. In this respect, Polish differs from English, since in English not only sentences such as

(37) Adam hates HIMSELF.

but also those without the emphasis on the pronoun:

(38) Adam hates himself.

are fully acceptable. (I will return to this feature of English in Section 5.) To conclude our discussion of the differences between *się* and *siebie*, sentences with *się* and sentences with *siebie* suggest two different conceptualizations of a situation, and in fact very few verbs are semantically compatible with both *się* and *siebie*; this is not the case, however, with *go* and *jego* ('him'), which can combine with the same verbs.

Thus, when applied to Polish, the definition of "reflexives" couched in terms of coreference between subjects and objects makes the basic construction traditionally regarded as reflexive into a non-reflexive one, and allows only the more peripheral emphatic construction to be regarded as reflexive.⁴

Furthermore, under this definition many, indeed most, languages traditionally described as having a reflexive construction would have to be said to have no reflexive construction whatsoever. For example, Dixon (1980: 433) goes so far as to make the following general comment about Australian Aboriginal languages: "Reflexive and reciprocal verbs occur only in intransitive constructions—the single core NP is in s function and involves a noun in absolutive and/or a pronoun in nominative case."⁵

What do linguists normally mean, then, by a "reflexive construction"?

I believe that what they really have at the back of their minds is a certain meaning, and that they call different constructions in different languages "reflexive" if they sense that the central function of these constructions (though not necessarily the only one) is to express this unidentified but intuitively felt meaning. This unidentified meaning is often called "reflexive meaning". For example, Dixon (1972: 90) says that in Dyirbal "reflexive forms sometimes carry a reflexive meaning", whereas "in other cases, the reflexive affix appears just to derive an intransitive from a transitive stem, without carrying any reflexive meaning". (See also Marantz 1984: 152, quoted in footnote 5; or Geniušienė 1987: 355.)

I hypothesize that the prototypical meaning which, on a subconscious level, guides linguists in their actual use of the term "reflexive" can be represented as follows:

⁴ Needless to say, for reasons of space, the account of Polish reflexives given in this chapter is very sketchy and does not aim at completeness. In particular, I am not going to survey here the existing literature on the topic.

⁵ In fact, Marantz explicitly links "reflexivization" with intransitivity. He writes, for example: "Many languages include special intransitive verb forms with reflexive meaning" (1984: 152). (One wonders, however, what exactly he has in mind when he talks of "reflexive meaning".)

(39) (R) at some time, someone did something because of this, something happened to the same person at the same time

For example, a sentence such as

(40) Harry killed himself by cutting his wrists.

indicates that at some time Harry was doing something with some sharp object (bringing it into contact with some parts of his body), and that he died because of this (loosely speaking, "at the same time").

The condition "at the same time" has to be understood in a broad sense, as it is usually understood in ordinary language, not in the sense of strict simultaneity. For example, if a man kills himself by cutting his wrists, the action of his cutting his wrists precedes, strictly speaking, the event of his dying. Both events have to occur, however, at what is conceived of as the same time. Although one can say, for example,

(41) He killed himself: he cut his wrists on Thursday and he died on Friday.

one cannot say:

(42) *He killed himself on Friday by cutting his wrists on Thursday.

(43) *By cutting his wrists on Thursday, he eventually killed himself on Friday.

Reflexive sentences are similar in this respect to transitive clauses. (For discussion, see Wierzbicka 1975, 1980b.)

It must be stressed that formula R is proposed as a representation of the prototypical meaning of all so-called "reflexive" sentences, not as their semantic invariant: there are many types of so-called "reflexive" sentences in many languages which do not have the prototypical meaning in question. Nor am I proposing formula R as a full definition for the notion "reflexive construction"; rather, I am suggesting that a useful definition can be formulated with reference to this semantic formula.

I propose, then, the following definition of a reflexive construction:

A REFLEXIVE CONSTRUCTION IS A CONSTRUCTION WHICH ENCODES THE MEANING SPELLED OUT IN THE FORMULA R (AND POSSIBLY SOME OTHER MEANINGS).

A reflexive construction may have more than one meaning ("just as an imperative may have more than one meaning; cf. Section 2), but it must have the meaning spelled out in the formula R.

The formal characteristics of a given "reflexive" construction (in the sense defined here) will vary from language to language, and so will the additional meanings which it can serve, but the prototypical meaning

stipulated by the definition (and spelled out in formula R) must be constant. (Otherwise, the definition would have no constant point of reference.)

Some readers may wonder at this point why I don't use instead conventional linguistic labels such as "agent" and "patient": can't the prototypical reflexive situation be defined in terms of coreference (or identity) between agent and patient? (For example, Dixon (1977: 280) writes, with respect to Yiddish: "If the agent and patient of an action described by a transitive verb are identical, then a reflexive construction must be used"; see also Mosel 1991.)

I believe that a definition based on the notions "agent" and "patient" would indeed be preferable to a syntactic definition along the lines of "subject = object".⁶ But it would not be adequate either. What is missing from such a hypothetical definition is the causal and temporal link between the action and the resulting event or state. The formula proposed in this chapter, framed in terms of simple, non-technical verbs *do* and *happen*, allows us to present the prototypical reflexive situation in terms of a scenario including causal and temporal links. (Cf. Chapters 2 and 3.) The use of static (and highly technical) concepts such as agent and patient does not allow us to capture the dynamic character of the prototypical reflexive meaning. (For further discussion of the inadequacy of this definition see Section 5.)

It should be emphasized that the definition of the reflexive construction proposed in this chapter, while based on meaning, does take the structure into account, in a crucial way: a sentence which meets the semantic condition R will not be called "reflexive" if it doesn't meet the structural condition specified for the language in question. For example, the English sentence *Harry committed suicide* is not a reflexive sentence, because although the semantic condition is met, there is nothing in the structure of the sentence as such which would show this. On the other hand, the sentence *Harry saw himself in the mirror* does qualify as a reflexive sentence, even though it doesn't refer to any action (we can't say that Harry "did something") and thus does not correspond to the semantic prototype specified in the definition. The construction

- (44) NP_{transitive} Pronominal form + SELF

is identified in English on a structural basis, and of course a sentence such as *Harry saw himself in the mirror* has to be recognized as belonging to this construction. Similarly, in Polish the construction

- (45) NP_{transitive} SIĘ

is identified on a structural basis, and sentences such as

- (46) Henryk zobaczył się w lustrze.
'Harry saw himself in the mirror.'

have to be recognized as belonging to this construction. But if these two constructions (44 and 45) are called "reflexive" at all it is because they both are also used to express the scenario stated in formula R.

From the requirement that a language-specific structural condition has to be met it follows that if two sentences, say one English and one Polish, mean the same, and if we call one of them "reflexive", we do not have to call the other one "reflexive", too. For example, of the following two sentences one (the Polish one) is reflexive (in terms of the definition proposed in this chapter), whereas the other one is not:

- (47) Henryk położył się.
Harry laid:TR REFL
(48) Harry lay down.

It also has to be recognized that the two constructions (the English and the Polish one) have a different scope; for example, as mentioned earlier, psychological attitudes towards oneself cannot be described in Polish, as they can in English, in the same construction as physical action:

- (49) Harry hates himself.
(50) *Henryk nienawidzi się
Harry hates REFL

None the less, the two constructions (44) and (45) are matched under the same name "reflexive" because they can both be used to express the prototypical meaning R, as in the following examples (where (a) and (b) mean the same):

- (51) (a) Henryk powiesił się.
(b) 'Harry hanged himself.'
(52) (a) Henryk ogolił się.
(b) 'Harry shaved himself.'

Alongside with the proposed definition, I put forward the following substantive hypothesis: Very many, perhaps the majority of, languages of the world do have a reflexive construction in the sense of this definition; in other words, the meaning spelled out in formula R is so important to human beings that it is grammaticalized in the majority of languages of the world.

⁶ Compare the following comment by Kibrik (1991: 69), who also argues for a semantic basis for grammatical typology: "There is a widespread tendency to describe the opposition of accusativity to ergativity in terms of subject and object . . . But the notions 'subject' and 'object', once they are studied more carefully, prove to be no less complicated than 'ergativity' and 'accusativity', and even less obviously universal." The same could be said, of course, about attempts to define "reflexivity" in terms of these highly problematic notions.

It should be added that while the English and Polish reflexive constructions have been described here with reference to transitive verbs, the proposed semantic definition of a reflexive construction can also be met by intransitive verbs, and that it can account for the fact that, in many languages, reflexive markers are widely used with change of state verbs, regardless of their transitivity. For example, in Romance languages reflexive markers are often used with perfective verbs of physical position, in contrast to the corresponding imperfective verbs. For example, in Italian there is a contrast between the imperfective *sedere*, 'to sit, to be seated', and the perfective *sedersi* (with the reflexive marker *-si*), 'to sit down'; or between the imperfective *giacere*, 'to lie', and the perfective *sdratarsi*, 'to lie down'. Facts of this kind can be explained with reference to the prototypical reflexive scenario: 'at some time, someone did something (e.g. made some movements); because of this something happened to the same person at the same time (roughly: this person came to be in a new position).'

Of course, one might declare that "reflexives" of this kind are purely lexical and have nothing in common with fully productive grammatical "reflexives"; but by doing so one would be losing a generalization which can be captured in terms of the semantic scenario.

The definition of reflexives proposed here corresponds, by and large, to the accepted usage (in the sense that it picks out, on the whole, those constructions which are usually called "reflexive"). But it doesn't necessarily correspond to the way the term "reflexive" has been used by every descriptive grammar—because the general usage of this term, not being controlled by any precise definition, is, predictably, shaky, inconsistent, and at times arbitrary.

Consider, for example, the possibility that a language may have two different constructions, one for describing a voluntary action, for example:

(53) Adam covered himself with a blanket.

(54) Adam cut himself (on purpose).

and another for describing actions with unintended results, for example:

(55) Adam burned himself (accidentally).

Should both these constructions be called "reflexive" or should the term "reflexive" be reserved for only one of them, namely, the voluntary one? Different authors have treated this problem in different ways (see e.g. the discussion in Dixon 1976a,b, 1977: 280).

In my view, however, whatever analysis may best fit this or that particular language, a universal definition of the notion "reflexive construction" should not take as its reference-point a semantic formula stipulating

that the action must be voluntary (RV, as in formula 57 below), but rather should remain neutral on this point (as in formula R, repeated below as 56):

(56) (R) at some time, someone did something
because of this
something happened to the same person at the same time

(57) (RV) at some time, someone did something
because of this
something happened to the same person at the same time
this person wanted this (to happen)

Formula R is clearly more fruitful as a basis for a universal definition because in most languages of the world so-called "reflexive constructions" (as described in the relevant literature) are not restricted to situations when the action is voluntary and the subject "acts upon itself", and in fact in many languages reflexive sentences can be ambiguous between a "voluntary action" reading and an "accidental event" reading. For example, in Spanish,

(58) Juan se mató.

Juan REFL killed

can mean either that Juan killed himself voluntarily, or that he died by accident, as a result of his own action. Similarly, in Polish,

(59) Jan zabił się.

John killed REFL

can refer either to a suicide or to an accident. Even in English many reflexive sentences are similarly ambiguous; for example,

(60) John injured/burned/cut himself.

I suggest, therefore, that the meaning commonly (though not universally) grammaticalized in one way or another in different languages of the world in the form of some recognizable "reflexive" construction is the one proposed here, R, rather than a more specific one, requiring the presence of a voluntary action, RV. Reflexive constructions differ in this respect from "transitive constructions", whose semantic prototype refers indeed to a voluntary action. (See e.g. the data in Hopper and Thompson 1980, 1982; Plank 1984; Tsunoda 1981.) Although reflexive constructions in the sense defined in this chapter are very widespread, apparently they are not universal. For example, the Austronesian language Samoan appears to have no reflexive construction (Mosel forthcoming).

5. Transitive Constructions

The distinction between intransitive and transitive constructions, though by no means sharp and clear-cut (see Hopper and Thompson 1980; Verhaar 1990), plays a fundamental role in most languages of the world. The current knowledge about the different ways in which this distinction can be manifested in different languages suggests a certain prototypical scenario, or what Givón (1990: 565) calls "the prototypical transitive event". (See also Slobin 1982.) According to Givón, "Three semantic dimensions are central to the semantic definition of transitivity. Each corresponds to one central aspect of the prototypical transitive event, thus also to one central feature of the prototypical transitive clause." Givón specifies these three "dimensions" as follows:

- (a) *Agent*: The prototypical transitive clause involves a volitional, controlling, initiating, active agent, one that is responsible for the event, i.e. its *salient cause*.
- (b) *Patient*: The prototypical transitive event involves an inactive, non-volitional, non-controlling patient, one that registers the changes-of-state associated with the event, i.e. its *salient effect*.
- (c) *Verb*: The prototypical transitive clause involves a compact (non-durative), bounded (non-lingering), realis (non-hypothetical) verb and tense-aspect-modality. It thus represents an event that is fast-moving, completed, and real, i.e. *perceptually and cognitively salient*. (Givón 1990: 565)

In my terms, the prototypical transitive scenario can be represented as follows (see Wierzbicka 1988):

- (61) at some time, someone was doing (did) something to something because of this,
something happened to this something at the same time
this person wanted this (to happen)

Of course "transitive sentences" don't have to meet all the aspects of this scenario, but a departure from any of them is likely to lead to a decrease in syntactic transitivity (manifested in case assignment, passivizability, and so on). The evidence for this assertion cannot be surveyed here for reasons of space, but it can be easily found in the abundant literature on the subject (in particular Hopper and Thompson 1980; Moravcsik 1978; Tsunoda 1981; see also Wierzbicka 1988).

In an earlier work discussing the semantic basis of transitivity (Wierzbicka 1981) I proposed a somewhat different semantic formula, with a person or animal rather than an inanimate object as a prototypical patient. I was in two minds about it, however, and left the question open, adducing in fact a number of arguments in favour of my present position

(that the prototypical patient is inanimate). As I argued at the time (Wierzbicka 1981: 57–8), the fact that animate patients often receive differential case marking (ACC ≠ NOM) does not establish that clauses with animate objects are more highly transitive than those with inanimate ones.

The matter is complicated because a highly transitive clause requires two clearly individuated arguments, and human objects tend to be more highly individuated than inanimate ones. None the less the meaning encoded in a "cardinal transitive clause" (see Hopper and Thompson 1980) presupposes a maximum contrast between the two arguments, one active (a human agent) and one passive (an inanimate object purposefully acted upon).

Givón writes (1990: 630): "The prototypical transitive verb has an agent subject and patient direct-object. If reflexives and reciprocals were to apply to prototypical transitive verbs, they must be restricted to verbs that can take *human subjects*." In reflexives, Givón points out,

the object must also be human, if it is to be coreferent with the subject. But the prototypical transitive object-patient is not human, but primarily a *dumb inanimate*. . . . Therefore, prototypical transitive verbs such as 'break', 'build', 'make', 'chop', 'destroy', 'bend', etc. cannot undergo the reflexives or reciprocals—unless their meaning is metaphorically extended *away from* the transitive prototype. (1990: 630)

I entirely agree that the prototypical transitive object is a "dumb inanimate" and that prototypical transitive verbs are physical action verbs such as *break*, *chop*, *build*, or *open*. A prototypical transitive scenario celebrates, so to speak, purposeful human action, in the course of which a human being controls and affects "dumb objects": chops a tree, breaks a branch, makes a fire, roasts an animal, builds a shelter, and so on. Actions of this kind are so vital to human survival that one can hardly be surprised to see the basic scenario enacted in them to be encoded, almost universally, in the grammar of human languages.

Purposeful actions directed at other people are also important in human life, but other people are potential agents themselves and they are less likely to be cast in the role of completely passive patients. They are likely either to co-operate with our action or to resist it rather to remain pure "undergoers" of it. This is why, I think, human undergoers are sometimes marked (for example, in Spanish) in the same way as recipients, beneficiaries, "maleficiaries", or addressees (for discussion, see Wierzbicka 1981).

As for purposeful actions directed at oneself (as a patient), they are hardly necessary for human survival. In fact, they often have self-destruction as their goal (as in killing, hanging, drowning, shooting, or poisoning oneself). The whole idea of "acting upon oneself" requires the ability, and the inclination, to look at oneself from outside, and to treat oneself as a person-in-the-world, on a par with other persons-in-the-world—as

pointed out by Haiman (1995), hardly a universal human proclivity.⁷ It is understandable, therefore, that human languages do not celebrate self-directed action on anything like the scale on which they celebrate purposeful action directed at the physical environment and "dumb matter". ("Self-directed" actions such as eating or getting dressed are, of course, vital for survival, but these are normally viewed as "doing something" rather than "doing something to oneself". Even in English, "eating" is distinguished from "feeding oneself".)

On the other hand, the idea that by doing something I can cause something to happen to me (whether something I want or something I don't want) is important, because it encourages people to take care, so that they don't cut themselves, burn themselves, injure themselves, and also that they can, when necessary, hide themselves, cover themselves, warm themselves, wash themselves, and so on.

The prototypical reflexive scenario differs, therefore, from a prototypical transitive scenario in several respects: it involves a person, rather than a person and an object (DO versus DO TO), it involves the idea of "sameness" ("something happened to the same person"), and it doesn't (necessarily) involve the idea of purposeful action.

The idea of "sameness" is missing, I believe, from sentences such as

- (62) He washed/shaved/dressed.

Sentences of this kind are therefore not synonymous with their counterparts with a reflexive pronoun:

- (63) He washed/shaved/dressed himself.

The situations described can, of course, be exactly the same, but the conceptualization is different, and in some situations one construction may be more appropriate than the other. In particular, if there is more emphasis on the details of the resulting state, the reflexive construction (64a and 65a) may be preferred to the non-reflexive one (64b and 65b):

- (64) (a) She washed herself with special care.

- (b) She washed with special care.

- (65) (a) She dressed herself slowly, paying attention to every detail.

- (b) She dressed slowly, paying attention to every detail.

⁷ It is interesting to note, therefore, that the simple and therefore attractive formula "doing something to oneself", which might be suggested as an alternative to "agent = patient", is in fact culturally biased, as it implies the "self-alienation" discussed by Haiman. Not surprisingly, the number of languages into which this formula could be translated is rather limited. On the other hand, the semantic formula R proposed here is based on lexical and grammatical universals and can (I hypothesize) be translated into any human language.

Non-reflexive sentences such as *He washed* or *He dressed* suggest a routine action, and they indicate that this action is seen as a unitary event, not decomposed, in the speaker's mind, into different events involving "the same person". (For this reason, as pointed out by Faltz (1985: 7) one is also more likely to say *The cat washed himself* than *The cat washed*.)

Consider also the following contrasts:

- (66) Mary hid.

- (67) Mary hid herself.

- (68) Mary was hiding in the shed.

- (69) *Mary was hiding herself in the shed.

The reason why 67 and 68 are acceptable whereas 69 is not (in the appropriate sense) is essentially the same as the reason why in many languages (e.g. Romance languages) perfective verbs are often reflexive where their imperfective counterparts are not: the reflexive marker indicates a conceptual split between an action and a resulting change of state.

These examples highlight the danger involved in the common use of expressions such as "reflexive meaning" unaccompanied by precise definitions: grammar encodes different types of conceptualization, not different types of situation, and the same situation can be conceptualized in different ways. (See Langacker 1987.)

The prototypical reflexive scenario is not, then, a special case of the prototypical transitive scenario, with the additional condition that the "patient" is coreferential with the "agent". It is a different scenario, overlapping with, rather than subsumed under, the prototypical scenario of transitivity.

The idea that if I do something, something (wanted or unwanted) may happen to me does not require any "objectivization" of oneself, but it does encourage foresight and care; and—judging by the evidence of human languages—it does play an important role in human conceptualization of the world and of our life in the world.

It should be pointed out that in English, too, reflexive sentences are not always transitive to any extent. Using the co-ordination test again, we will note, for example, the following contrasts:

- (70) He covered/defended/protected/shot himself and his child.

- (71) *He hid himself and his child.

- (72) *He warmed himself and his child.

- (73) *He seated himself and his child.

- (74) *He stretched himself and his child on the grass.

- (75) *He threw himself and his child on to the grass.

Facts of this kind highlight the inadequacy of a semantic definition of reflexive constructions couched in terms of the notions "agent" and

"patient": the so-called "patient" may stand for different semantic roles in sentences referring to oneself and those referring to another person. In the case of the sentence *He covered himself and his child with a blanket* English allows the speaker to treat the two "patients" in the same way, though many languages require here, too, conceptualization in terms of two distinct roles. But in cases such as bodily movements even English makes a distinction between oneself and other people. The cover-all term "patient" obscures such facts.

The scope of transitive reflexive sentences is wider in (modern) English than in other European languages, and, perhaps, wider than in any other language. This syntactic feature of (modern) English has an obvious semantic and cultural interpretation, of the kind suggested in Haiman (1985, 1995: 224). Speaking of sentences such as

- (5b) I expect myself to win.
(6b) I got myself up.

(his numbers) Haiman writes:

My central claim in this essay is that the representation of reflexivity by a separate reflexive pronoun in sentences like (5b) and (6b) iconically signals the recognition of not one but two participants, and thus implies some kind of detachment from the self. . . . ordinary sentences like

- (7) (a) I (don't) like myself
(b) He restrained himself with difficulty

. . . reflect a degree of self-alienation which—unlike "reflexivization" in the middle voice . . .—is probably far from universal. The evidence for this comes not only from the large number of languages which have no reflexive pronoun at all . . . (1991a: 16)

I believe that Haiman is essentially right and that he is saying something important. I would point out, however, that in addition to the presence or absence of a "reflexive pronoun", we must also pay attention to the transitive or intransitive character of the reflexive sentence. For example, English sentences such as

- (76) He hid himself.
(77) He stretched himself on the grass.

do contain a reflexive pronoun, but, as pointed out earlier, they are not transitive (at least judging by the co-ordination test), and, I would argue, they do not show any "self-alienation" (unlike, for example, *He restrained himself with difficulty* or *I don't like myself*).

I agree with Haiman that the emergence and current prevalence of the reflexive pronouns in English is itself a sign of semantic and cultural developments of the kind discussed in his paper. But on the level of individual

sentences there may be no semantic differences between those with a reflexive pronoun (as in English), those with a reflexive clitic (as in French or Spanish), or those with a reflexive suffix (as in Russian or Dyirbal), provided that all the sentences in question are intransitive. For example, I don't think there is necessarily any semantic difference between the following three sentences, the first of which uses a reflexive pronoun (*himself*), the second, a reflexive clitic (*se*), and the third a reflexive suffix (*-ja*):

- (78) He hid himself.
(79) Il s'est caché. (French)
(80) On sprjatsja. (Russian)

On the other hand, a transitive reflexive sentence such as 81 may indeed differ in some aspects of its semantic structure from intransitive ones such as 82 and 83:

- (81) He covered himself with a blanket.
(82) Il s'est enveloppé dans une couverture.
(83) On pokrylsja odejalom.

The fact that only 81 allows conjoined direct objects (*He covered himself and his child*) does indeed point to a different conceptualization.

Once again, what matters is not just the number of "participants" in a given situation (because this depends on the speaker's point of view), and not even the number of "core arguments" in a given sentence (because two core arguments can be associated with different degrees of transitivity): only a reconstruction of the full semantic scenario, in terms of which the speaker conceptualizes the situation, can explain all the aspects of a sentence's grammar. (For full discussion, see Wierzbicka 1988, chs. 5 and 6.)

6. Conclusion

Typologists have often recognized on a theoretical level that to compare languages (or anything else) we need a *tertium comparationis*. (See Kibrik 1992: 129–30.) For example, Faltz, in his cross-linguistic study of reflexives, writes: "Before settling in to an examination of a phenomenon in many different languages, it is necessary to have some language-independent idea of what that phenomenon is, so that we know what to begin to look for. The term *reflexive* must therefore be provided with some universal content" (Faltz 1985: 1). By using as its tools meaning-based categories such as "noun", "numeral", "plural", "past", "imperative", "conditional", or "reflexive", linguistic typology has also recognized that in the case of language the necessary *tertium comparationis* is provided by meaning. However, categories of this kind were usually not defined, or if they were

defined, their definitions were not adhered to, and in fact, whatever the definitions, the actual analysis was carried out on the basis of intuition and common sense. The treatment of the category of "reflexives" illustrated in this chapter is a good case in point.

American structuralists such as Zellig Harris and Charles Fries, who refrained from using any traditional grammatical labels and from referring to any traditional grammatical categories (e.g. Harris 1946, 1951; or Fries 1952), were therefore more consistent and more rigorous in their approach to linguistic analysis than either traditional grammarians or present-day typologists. They did not, however, develop linguistic typology.

Languages differ in form and structure, but they all encode meaning. In their grammars (just as in their lexicons) different languages encode different configurations of the same semantic primitives. Some configurations, however, appear to be very widespread, and to play an important role in the grammar of countless and most diverse languages of the world. I believe that recurring configurations of this kind represent meanings which are particularly important in human conceptualization of the world. It is an important task of linguistics as a discipline to identify such meanings; by fulfilling this task, linguistics can contribute in a significant way to the study of humankind, transcending the boundaries of academic disciplines.

Among the meanings which linguistic investigations show to be grammaticalized most widely in the languages of the world, we can recognize certain scenarios such as the "transitive" scenario or the "reflexive" scenario; and we can see that large parts of grammars are organized around such scenarios, and can be described with reference to them. Other widely grammaticalized meanings are of a different nature. All types of meanings, however, can be rigorously described and insightfully compared in terms of the same set of universal semantic primitives and of the metalanguage based on them. I believe that without such a metalanguage, grammatical typology has no firm basis and no precise tools with which it could fully achieve its objectives.

15 Comparing Grammatical Categories across Languages: The Semantics of Evidentials



1. Introduction

In this chapter I am going to illustrate and document the claim that grammar encodes meaning by analysing one area of grammar in a number of different languages of the world: that area which is usually associated with the term "evidentiality". As the goal of this chapter is mainly theoretical, not empirical, my data will be drawn exclusively from one source: the volume entitled *Evidentiality*, edited by Wallace Chafe and Johanna Nichols (1986). I will re-examine the data presented in some of the chapters of this volume by experts on a number of languages, and I will try to show how these data can be reanalysed in terms of universal semantic primitives, and how in this way they can be made both more verifiable (that is, predictive) and more comparable across language boundaries.

As it is, the contributors to the volume operate with analytical categories such as "direct" (experience or evidence), "personal", "immediate", "first-hand", "witnessed", and of course "indirect", "non-immediate", "second-hand", "not-witnessed", "inferred", and so on. The trouble is that labels of this kind stand for different things in different languages; and that they have very little predictive value. For example, when we are told that a language distinguishes "direct evidence" from "non-direct evidence", or "immediate evidence (or experience)" from "non-immediate evidence", we may have no idea exactly what these labels mean with respect to this particular language, nor how the categories in question are used in this language; and if exactly the same labels are used with respect to another language, we can by no means expect that they will be used in the same sense, nor that the categories bearing these labels in the second language will correspond in use to those bearing the same labels in the first language. (See Kibrik 1992: 43, 129–30.)

By contrast, if we rely on universal semantic primitives such as I, KNOW, DO, THIS, and BECAUSE, SEE, or HEAR, we can posit intuitively clear categories such as 'I know because I see it' or 'I know because I did it', which will mean exactly the same with respect to any language for