

10 Syntax and meaning

The only function there can be for our ability to put words together in a particular way must be a communicative one. Poetry, for example, may play with syntax in making its effects, but the function of syntax cannot be versification. If evolution has endowed us with a capacity to learn the grammar of human languages, it must be in order to facilitate the communication of meanings. In Chapter 9 we inspected some aspects of the workings of syntax and noted the extent to which they have their own logic. If their purpose is the communication of meanings, we must understand their role in the construction of semantic representations.

10.1 From protolanguage to language

In order to assess the role of phrases, their mode of assembly, and their ability to move within the syntactic structure of any given sentence, we must come closer to defining what the meaning is that these mechanisms help create. As presented in Chapter 8, protolanguage is purely referential. A word is used in protolanguage to refer to a concrete entity and the collocation of words refers to a composite scene thanks to a mechanism of composition of images. Any addressee hearing *bread table* will visualize, given the context, a new loaf lying on the table. As protolanguage expresses no relation between *bread* and *table*, such as their positions with respect to each other, that relation remains implicit in the image constructed via protosemantic interpretation. One manifest feature of language is that it does express relations and properties: *the bread on the table* expresses a spatial relation between two entities; *The runner wins* expresses that the property ‘winning’ applies to the ‘runner’. Relations and properties are generally represented by ‘predicates’ and the entities concerned by the ‘arguments’ of these predicates. Thus, in accordance with the mode of