

11 The structure of meanings

There would be no communication among human beings, no languages, no phonological systems, no words, no syntax, if languages with their sounds, their words and syntax did not enable speakers to create in the minds of their interlocutors thoughts related to their own. What do the meanings brought about by language consist of? Do they resemble what animals may experience? Why did our ancestors' brains evolve to manipulate these novel meanings? These are crucial questions if we are to understand the emergence of the human system of communication. Were it not for the operation of understanding, language would be nothing but pointless noise or at best a restricted signalling code. The crux of the mystery surrounding the appearance of language lies in this question of meaning. We can all have an intuition about what a sentence 'means', but to describe from the outside what that meaning consists of is not easy. It is even less easy to have a clear idea of the cognitive difference between a human being capable of understanding any given sentence and another primate incapable of such understanding. In this chapter, it is not our aim to bring these issues to definitive resolution, but rather to arrive at a description of the essential aspects of semantics from a functional point of view. If we can give a convincing account of the functional anatomy of meaning, however sketchy, we shall then be able to canvass the reasons why it emerged.

We have already encountered two modes of interpretation of speech. The concept of protolanguage, examined in Chapter 8, presupposes protosemantic competence in dealing with images and concrete scenes. Predicate-based semantics, on the other hand, which we drew on in Chapter 10 for our account of the role of syntax, is a world away from protosemantics. The aims of this present chapter¹ are first to clarify the

¹ The ideas presented in this chapter and the following one were developed in collaboration with Laleh Ghadakpour.