

## 12 The emergence of meaning

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If we adopt the parameters set in Chapter 8 and see protolanguage as a forerunner of language, and protosemantics as a forerunner of semantics, then the coming of a new ability like thematic segmentation must be explained in functional terms. In this chapter, I intend to make a distinction between the respective roles of the two components of our semantics with the aim of defining the place they had in the evolutionary history of the faculty of language.

### 12.1 The dissociation of the two forms of meaning

#### *The apparent redundancy of thematic segmentation*

On hearing a sentence spoken, human beings activate two simplified representations, one of which is a scene made from sensations sometimes barely sensed and the other a thematic analysis that locates a theme and a reference point in relation to each other on an extremely schematic mental map. What is contributed by the second of these representations? Nothing at all, *prima facie*, it would appear. Thematic analysis is so sketchy that it seems to overlap entirely with scenic representation. If, on hearing the statement *The apple falls off the tree*, we can visualize the scene, even in the most perfunctory way, we have no need to analyse it into a theme and a trajectory. Thematic analysis is rather like a stupid paraphrase which omits or ignores the fine detail and subtleties of a phenomenon that we can grasp much more aptly in the sensations awoken in us by the words—we can see the apple dropping, the ground covered in windfalls, or other apples still on the tree, etc. Obviously this perception is relatively poor: the other apples are not always there; the movement of the apple is not as uniform in its acceleration as it is in reality; we are unaware of how many