

unmarked leads to the various effects of markedness noted by many investigators — e.g., the tendency for the higher frequency of the unmarked term over the marked (either in the codal stock of items or in the discourses and texts built from those items); the tendency for the marked term to be found in a smaller number of different contexts; the tendency for the marked term to be less universal than, or to be nonuniversal vis-à-vis, the unmarked; the tendency for the marked term to be learned later in child language acquisition than the unmarked; the tendency in implicational statements for the unmarked term to be the *implicatum* and the marked term to be the *implicans*; the tendency toward the nonaccumulation of marks and toward the combination of markedness with nonmarkedness; etc. (See, for example, Greenberg 1966 and Waugh 1979a.) However, these effects of markedness should not be equated with its definition, and if in fact it should happen, for example, that the marked term is indeed more frequent in given texts than the unmarked, this should not be taken as evidence that the markedness values are false or uncertain, but rather that text frequency is due to the interaction of a variety of factors, only one of which is markedness. This is particularly so when dealing with lexical meaning in language.

If we examine further the logical relationship between the unmarked and marked terms of any grammatical opposition, we see that in light of the fact that it involves the relation of the necessary presence of  $x$  versus presence and/or absence and/or nonpertinence of  $x$ , it may be metaphorically characterized as a subset-set relationship where the marked category is the subset and the unmarked category is the set,<sup>4</sup> or alternatively as a figure-ground relationship where the marked pole is the figure and the unmarked pole is the ground (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>

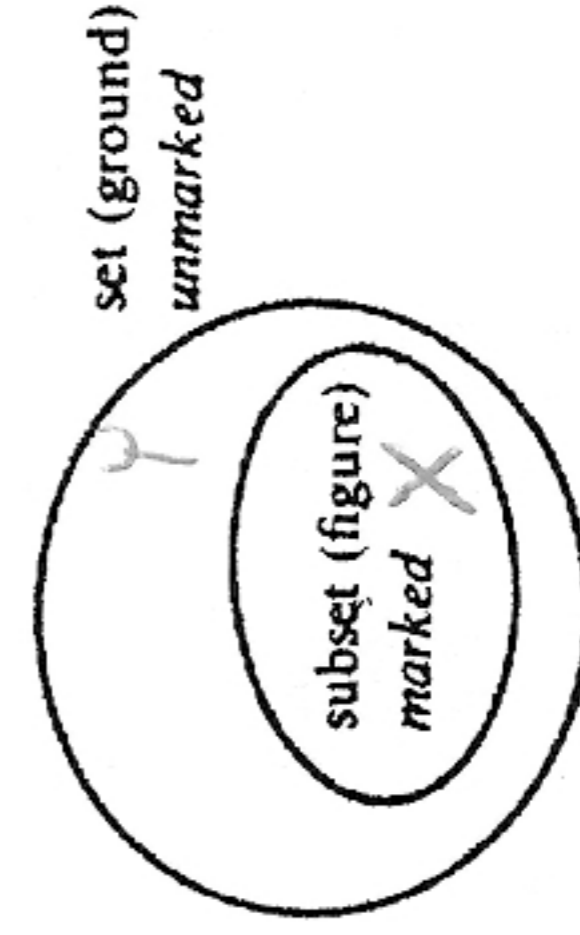


Figure 1.

This metaphorical rendition helps to point up the fact that there are two structurally given interpretations of the unmarked term — interpretations I will characterize as the 'zero' interpretation (the set/ground) and the

'minus' interpretation (the set minus the subset or the ground minus the figure) (see Figure 2).

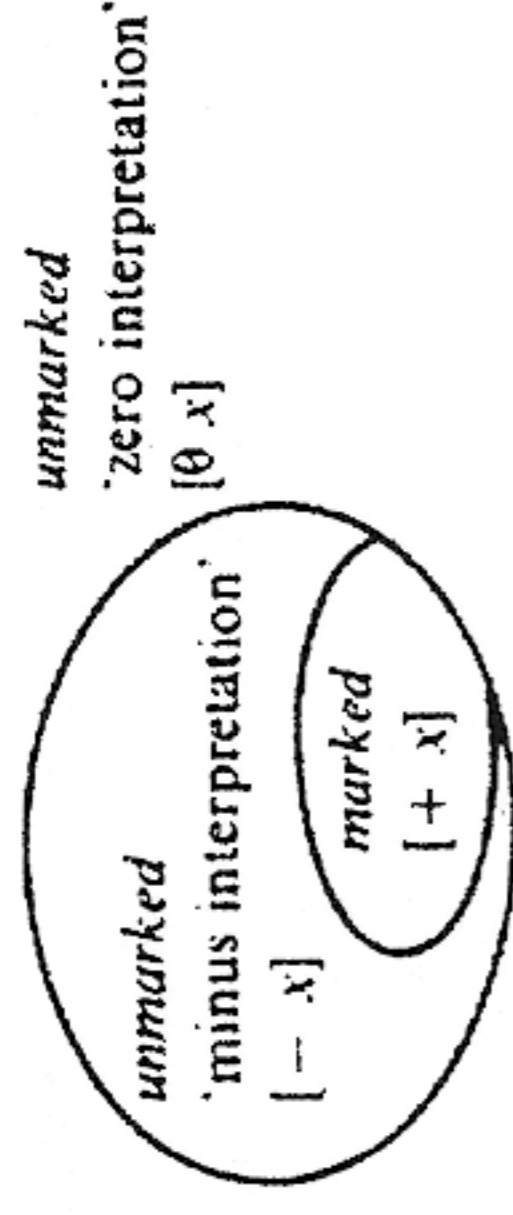


Figure 2.

The 'zero-interpretation' (called by Jakobson [1932, 1936, 1939] the 'zero-sign' and also the 'non-signalization of  $x$ ') is that interpretation that is the most general, widest, and most broad; that interpretation where the presence or absence of the unit of information is for the most part irrelevant. If we take again the present tense in English — the so-called 'timeless' present, the use of the present tense for eternal truths and repetitive and durative actions would be examples of such an interpretation. In these cases, while the past tense signalizes 'past time', the present tense, in its zero-interpretation, signalizes that time specification remains vague. Thus, one has such uses as *God is good, two and two are four, the sun rises every day and sets every night, the state of New York is situated north of Pennsylvania, the rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain, I teach at Cornell University*, etc. In such examples, the time axis remains vague, and the present tense is used not so much because it expresses a given time period but because it is the only tense that can be used with a minimal reference to time. It is in fact very often the case that the unmarked, in its zero-interpretation, is exactly that form that is most capable of making minimal reference to the marking, whatever it may be, or at the very least does not make active reference to the mark, either in affirming or denying it: it is simply the nonfocused item, that which is seen as nonspecialized. This also leads to the fact that the unmarked may, in some cases, be used to stand for the category in general without giving more specific information about that category.

The 'minus-interpretation' (called by Jakobson [1932, 1936, 1939] the '*Grundbedeutung*' or 'basic meaning' and also the 'signalization of non- $x$ ') is that interpretation that signals the absence of the unit of information associated with the marked term; it is the direct contradictory of the marked term. An example, again from the tenses, is the use of the present tense in English for nonpast time, for actions that are simultaneous with the moment of speaking: *I tell you I don't agree, I see my brother walking up the sidewalk, since you are here, we can talk*, etc. The minus-