

interpretation tends to occur in those contexts where there is an implicit or explicit contrast with the marked term.

One may summarize this situation, following Jakobson (1957), and say that on the level of general meaning (i.e., the use of two terms without an individuating context) the opposition is [signalization of *x*] versus [non-signalization of *x*], while on the level of more narrowly specified meaning (i.e., in individuating contexts and with an implicit or explicit contrast between marked and unmarked), the opposition is [signalization of *x*] versus [signalization of non-*x*]. The dynamic dialectic between unmarked and marked terms, then, entails the dichotomy of general meaning versus more narrowly specified, contextually conditioned meaning as well. For the past and present tenses, the opposition in general meanings is between [signalization of past time] and [non-signalization of past time], while on the level of more narrowly specified meanings, the opposition is between [signalization of past time] and [signalization of nonpast time]. The zero-interpretation of the present tense is that one where time is largely unspecified (e.g., *two and two are four*), while the minus-interpretation is that one where the nonpast is meant (*he is here now*).

The unmarked member of an opposition may also (but this is more difficult and has to be forced by very specific contexts) have a 'plus-interpretation' (also called the 'not-proper' interpretation or 'hypostasis' by Jakobson [1932, 1936, 1939]). The 'plus-interpretation' is that interpretation that could also be signaled by the marked term. An example, again from the tenses, is the use of the present tense in English for the so-called 'historical present' or 'narrative present': *Napoleon retreats from Paris and takes exile on the island of Elba, the German opposition demands early elections, Pope John Paul I dies* (the latter two being newspaper headlines), etc. Even though both the present and past tenses could be used in such situations, there is (as is implied by the subset-set/figure-ground diagram given earlier) no synonymy between the unmarked and marked terms: in all such cases, we can interpret the use of the present tense for what is known to be a past event as presenting the action as if it were happening before our very eyes, making it seem more vivid. At the very least, there is a stylistic difference between *the German opposition demands early elections* and *the German opposition demanded early elections*: because the present tense can be used for simultaneity as well as for more 'timeless' uses, the *demand* (in the newspaper headline *the German opposition demands early elections*) is assumed to be still valid at the time the public is reading the article and even afterward; while because the past tense is used for past time, the use of the past tense may imply that the *demand* was not met or that the *demand* is something truly historical — not of relevance at all for the present moment.

It is evident that in different oppositions there are different propensities for the unmarked term to take on either the zero-interpretation or the minus-interpretation (and, more rarely, the plus-interpretation). One general problem that remains on the agenda for linguistics is an explanation of these propensities. It is, however, clear that the dynamic tension between the zero-interpretation and the minus-interpretation (and potentially also the plus-interpretation) may lead to systematic ambiguity in certain contexts where it is not clear whether the unmarked is in implicit contrast with the marked, and thus to the possibility of interpreting the unmarked term in at least two ways. If we take another opposition in English — namely that exemplified by *woman ~ man* and *she ~ he* — the protests of feminists against language use are especially aimed at the 'slipperiness' of *man, he*, and at the swing from their use as the representative of the category (*man is a thinking animal* or *he who hesitates is lost* = zero-interpretation), to their use for the nonwoman part of the species (*one man and two women came to see you* or *he's a nice person* = minus-interpretation), to their use in the plus-interpretation (*everyone in New York State is entitled to an abortion if he wants it!*), to unclear uses that may be interpreted in either way but for cultural reasons tend to carry the minus-interpretation (*chairman*, in the context of an academic department). Furthermore, the swing from zero-interpretation to minus-interpretation may take place in the midst of one sentence: cf. *man is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — and to marry the woman of his choice.* (!)

The potential of the unmarked term for both a minus-interpretation (signalization of non-*x*) and a zero-interpretation (nonsignalization of *x*) has led to some confusion by investigators about the status of the opposition between the marked and unmarked terms. First of all, as Jakobson has pointed out (1932, 1936), in those contexts where the unmarked and marked are contrasted with each other, either implicitly or explicitly, the normal interpretation of the unmarked is the minus-interpretation: *he was here, but he isn't here now* (past tense versus present tense in the minus-interpretation). However, one should not be led to assume that this is the general meaning of the unmarked, especially if one's analytic technique involves the methodology of 'minimal pairs'. In minimal pairs, one tends always to get the minus-interpretation for the unmarked because that contrasts it most directly with the marked. And indeed, since the '+' and '-' are equally interchangeable, as has been noted by various investigators, it is only by knowing which member of the pairs may also be used in the more general meaning or is seen as being less specified that we may know which one is unmarked. (In other words, the