

# The transitive prototype: Iconicity and universality

Åshild Næss

14th January 2008

## Abstract

There is general agreement in functional linguistic literature on the kind of semantic properties taken to make up the transitive prototype, a cluster of semantic properties assumed to correlate crosslinguistically with a certain formal structure, the transitive clause. A problem which has received considerably less attention is that of why just these seemingly disparate properties should correlate across languages – in other words, is there a superordinate semantic notion which will include all the Transitivity components (Hopper and Thompson 1980: 279)? In this talk I will argue that the feature common to all the properties generally included in the transitive prototype is that they define an event involving two distinct, independent participants. This in turn suggests an explanation for the universality of the transitive prototype: As a transitive clause is, by definition, a construction involving two distinct, independent syntactic arguments – a subject and a direct object – there is an iconic relationship between this structure and its prototypical use to refer to events construed as having two distinct, independent participants. I will make some suggestions as to the kind of implications such an understanding of the notion of transitivity may have on future research on the subject.