

In this section I discuss three special problems posed for the analysis of Iwaidja grammar and vocabulary by the way it organizes its verb lexicon. This will set the scene for the case studies that I will discuss in §8.4, where I show how particular discoveries thrown up as a by-product of interdisciplinary fieldwork have helped us make progress with these three problems.

### 8.3.1. Lexicalization in a verby language

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Iwaidja is a very ‘verby’ language—verbs are around 40 per cent of the lexicon, roughly around the same figure as for nouns. Compare this with English, where the ratio of nouns to verbs is greater than 5:1 on some counts (Chang et al. 2002), or with another Australian language, Kayardild, where nouns outnumber verbs by more than 2:1 (figures calculated from Evans 1992), or with languages like Kalam which are normally described as having barely 100 verb lexemes<sup>12</sup>—of which as few as 15 account for 89 per cent of verb occurrences in text, and 35 for 98.6 per cent of all verb tokens (Pawley 1993: 87).

It has sometimes been asserted that polysynthetic languages encode a greater proportion of their lexicon by verbs than is the case in other languages (Sasse 1988; Mithun 1996). Iwaidja, however, is not a polysynthetic language, although it is definitely head-marking. Verbs agree with up to two arguments by prefix, and have some other verbal morphology (basically for direction and TAM). But they do not show the exuberant growth of applicatives, adverbial affixes, and open sets of incorporable nominals that are found in the polysynthetic languages like Bininj Gun-wok which border them to their south. In this sense, it would be misleading to see the proportion of the total lexicon represented by verbs as directly proportional to the degree of morphological complexity in the verb, since Bininj Gun-wok has more complex verbs but they take up a smaller proportion of the lexicon (around 27 per cent, against 62 per cent for nouns)<sup>13</sup>. (And indeed, before we can test how well the correlation holds between verbal synthesis and the percentage of verbs in the lexicon, we need to get reliable figures on the number of verbal lexemes in the languages in the sample, which we can then cross-tabulate against other typological measures—emphasizing the need to make sure we get good coverage of the verbal lexicon.)

There could be a number of reasons for the swelling of the verbal lexicon in a language like Iwaidja:

- (a) Concepts represented by nouns in other languages are represented by verbs instead, with scant change to the actual semantics.
- (b) The defining features of holophrastic situations are construed differently, with more of an emphasis on event characteristics than entity characteristics.
- (c) Situations are often described using highly specific denotations that incorporate reference to entities as well as processes.
- (d) Some kinship relations may be characterized by verbal expressions, particularly in situations that are sensitive to speaker-addressee relations promoting a number of circumlocutions.

We shall see in §8.4.1 that each of these reasons plays a role in boosting some part of the Iwaidja verb lexicon.