Rejecting Chomsky’s idea of language universals based on specifically linguistic capacities for which humans are hard-wired, Evans and Levinson (2009) instead argue that apparent universals are best understood as 'recurrent patterns...satisfying multiple design constraints, reflecting both cultural-historical factors and the constraints of human cognition.' This is consistent with Tomasello’s (1999) argument that the development of language has followed from a more general, but distinctively human cognitive capacity for understanding others as intentional beings, and for sharing and exchanging intentions and perspectives with them regarding objects of joint attention. Building on both of these arguments I argue that an inbuilt feature of all human languages is a capacity for grounding utterances in what I call the human ‘primordial social situation’, which corresponds closely to Tomasello’s model of triadic engagement. Comparing human language with communication systems used by other species I show that each of those also has an inbuilt social situation, but that they differ from the human one with respect to triadic engagement. Based on my research with Ku Waru people in PNG, I present a videoed stretch of interaction involving a fifteen month old child. I discuss examples of such engagement within it and compare the way in which it works at the verbal and non-verbal levels. Based on this comparison and the other one across species I conclude with some general remarks on the difference that language makes for human sociality.

References
