In this chapter I describe the linguistic concepts that form the theoretical basis for the thesis put forth in §§3–6. My ultimate objective in this chapter, naturally, is to explain what grammatical voice is and to describe the various types of voice phenomena. But voice cannot be described without recourse to the linguistic notions upon which it depends. Foremost among these is semantic transitivity. In fact, voice systems may be seen as encoding departures, of various degrees, from the prototypical transitive event. Voice, therefore, is very much a function of transitivity. In this chapter I devote considerable space to discussing transitivity and with it, linguistic notions of categories and prototypes. Also discussed here are the cognitive models that facilitate the understanding of voice in terms of perspective. That is, grammatical voice, as a series of linguistic options for expressing alternative conceptualizations of events, constitutes a deictic category in which the choice of one voice form over another is dependent upon the speaker’s perspective. Finally, and more fundamentally, there is a need to elaborate upon what is meant by grammatical case since voice revolves around the relationships between nominal arguments, and case itself can assume different meanings at different levels of conception. As case, in its broadest sense, is basic to the other notions discussed in this chapter, this is where I begin.

2.1 Grammatical Case

In order to compare languages productively with the least degree of ambiguity, it is necessary to introduce categories and terminology that are not specific to any one language, but that can be applied equally to all. Describing case in terms of semantic roles, grammatical roles, and grammatical relations allows for cross-linguistic comparison and for a more profound understanding of the nature of case more generally. In essence, these three categories represent three levels of abstraction, ranging from the theoretical to the concrete, from the entirely semantic
to the entirely syntactic. There is a great deal of ambiguity in the literature concerning these three terms, particularly with regard to the distinction between grammatical roles and grammatical relations. I will follow the lucid classification given by Palmer (1994: 4–16), although I use the standard term semantic roles in lieu of his notional roles.

The idea that case-marking strategies are based ultimately on a series of abstract, deep-structure cases stems from the seminal work of Fillmore (1968 and later work [see 2003]). These underlying cases, or semantic roles (also referred to as thematic roles or theta-roles), are situation-type—or even verb—specific and are defined by intuitive semantic criteria. They are, in Langacker’s words, “pre-linguistic conceptions grounded in everyday experience” (1991: 285). Semantic roles are idealizations of case as intuitively perceived in experience and language—for instance, recipient, experiencer, location, etc.—ideals that no language actually grammaticalizes, but upon which, as many linguists believe, all languages structure grammatical case. Grammatical roles, on the other hand, represent the various types of participants that occur in language (e.g., Agent, Object, Subject) and are intermediate between semantic roles and grammatical relations. They are ideal to the extent that they may not display a one-to-one correspondence with overt case markers in a given language, but they are concrete to the extent that they are based on actual case marking strategies as attested cross-linguistically. Grammatical roles form a semantic category in that their content is meaningful, representing the semantic roles of the participants lexically assigned by the verb, but the roles themselves are defined morphosyntactically. Grammatical relations, finally, are the surface expression of grammatical roles. Grammatical relations represent the way in which grammatical roles are organized and syntactically coded in a language. These are the language internal designations that describe the overt case-marking strategy, e.g., nominative, accusative, ergative, etc.

The following sentences exemplify some of the issues involved and the necessity of describing case as a tripartite structure.

    b. I like beer.
    c. I broke the window.

These are three very different events, yet English acknowledges no grammatical distinction between them with respect to their common participant, I. In terms of overt case, English treats the subject of the