1. INTRODUCTION

The chapter considers the notion functional category and concludes that, at least as far as overt words are concerned, the notion is ill founded. First, none of the definitions that have been offered (in terms of function words, closed classes, or nonthematicity) are satisfactory, because they either define a continuum when we need a sharp binary distinction, or they conflict with the standard examples. Second, the two most commonly quoted examples of word classes that are functional categories cannot even be justified as word classes. Complementizers (Comp) have no distinctive and shared characteristic, and Determiners are all pronouns that are distinguished only by taking a common noun as complement—a distinction that is better handled in terms of lexical valency than in terms of a word class.

2. FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES

The notion functional category has played a major part in discussions of syntactic theory. For example, Chomsky introduces it as follows:
Virtually all items of the lexicon belong to the *substantive* categories, which we will take to be noun, verb, adjective and particle, . . . The other categories we will call *functional* (tense, complementizer, etc.). (Chomsky, 1995:6)

He later suggests that only functional categories carry strong features (Chomsky, 1995:232), and that they “have a central place in the conception of language . . . primarily because of their presumed role in feature checking, which is what drives Attract/Move” (Chomsky, 1995:349).

Similarly, it has been suggested that functional categories cannot assign theta-roles (Abney, 1987; Radford, 1997:328), and that they can constitute the “extended projection” of their complement’s lexical category (Grimshaw, 1991; Borsley and Kornfilt, this volume). According to the Functional Parameterization Hypothesis, functional categories are the special locus of the parameters that distinguish the grammars of different languages (Atkinson, 1994:2942; Ouhalla, 1991; Pollock, 1989; Smith and Tsimili, 1995:24), and Radford (1990) has suggested that they are missing from child language.

Such claims have not been restricted to the Chomskyan school: In Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG) we find the suggestion that only functional categories may act as “markers” (Pollard and Sag, 1994:45), and in Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) that functional categories always correspond to the same part of f-structure as their complements (Bresnan, this volume).

Any notion as important as Functional Category² should be subjected to the most rigorous scrutiny, but this seems not to have happened to this particular construct. Instead it has been accepted more or less without question, and has become part of mainstream theorizing simply through frequent mention by leading figures. I suggest in this chapter that the notion is in fact deeply problematic. The attempts that have been made to define it are flawed, and all the individual categories that have been given as examples present serious problems. The issues raised here should at least be considered by proponents of the notion. If the criticisms are well founded, the consequences for syntactic theory are serious; but even if these worries turn out to be groundless, the debate will have made this key notion that much clearer and stronger.

To avoid confusion it is important to distinguish three kinds of category, which we can call Word Category, Subword Category, and Position Category. Word categories are simply word classes—Noun, Determiner, and so on. Every theory accepts that there are words and that these fall into various classes, so Word Category is uncontroversial even if the validity of particular word categories is debatable. Subword categories are elements of syntactic structure that (in surface structure) are smaller than words—morphemes or zero. (Clitics are on the border between these types, but it makes no difference here whether we classify them as belonging to word or subword categories.) The obvious example of a subword category is