2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The term ‘grammar’ is used in a number of different senses—the grammar of a language may be understood to be a full description of the form and meaning of the sentences of the language or else it may cover only certain, variously delimited, parts of such a description. Here we shall use it in one of these narrower senses, embracing syntax and morphology. Syntax is concert and with the way words combine to form sentences, while morphology is concerned with the form of words. We will launch without delay into a discussion of basic concepts in syntax and morphology, returning in §8 to the distinction between grammar in this sense and various other components of a full description and to the basis for dividing grammar into syntactic and morphological subcomponents. The only terms that we shall need to anticipate are ‘phonology’ and ‘semantics’: phonology deals with the sound system, with the pronunciation of words and sentences, semantics deals with meaning.

Syntax deals with combinations of words, we have said, morphology with the form of words. But again the term ‘word’ has been used in a variety of senses. For our immediate purposes it will suffice to draw just one distinction, which we can approach by considering the relation between, say, tooth and teeth: are they different words or the same word? From one point of view they are clearly different words: they are pronounced and said differently, they differ in meaning, and they occur in different positions in sentences (so that we could not, for example, replace tooth by teeth in This tooth is loose or teeth by tooth in These teeth are loose, and so on). Yet they are also traditionally said to be different
forms of the same word. This is a more abstract sense: we abstract away the differences between them to isolate what is common to both. It will be helpful to distinguish both terminologically and notationally between these two senses. I shall use word for the less abstract concept, lexeme for the more abstract one, and I shall cite words in ordinary italics, lexemes in bold face italics. We accordingly say that tooth and teeth are different words, but forms of the same lexeme tooth.

More specifically, we will say that tooth is the ‘singular’ form of tooth and that teeth is its ‘plural’ form. The words tooth and teeth are thus each analyzed into two components, the abstract lexeme and what we shall call an inflectional property. These properties are relevant to both the morphological and syntactic components of the grammar (and for this reason are commonly referred to also as ‘morph syntactic properties’). The morphology will include rules for deriving the various inflectional forms of a lexeme from the ‘lexical stem’, while the syntax will include rules specifying under what conditions a lexeme may or must carry a given inflectional property. Thus it is a fact of morphology that the plural of tooth is teeth, whereas it is a fact of syntax that if tooth enters into construction with this there must be ‘agreement’ in number, i.e. both must carry the singular inflection or both the plural. Similarly, the morphology will tell us that the ‘past participle’ of the verb see is seen, whereas the syntax will say that a past participle is required in the ‘passive’ construction, as in He was seen by the caretaker.

Words are not the only units that we need in describing the structure of sentences. Although we can break a sentence down into a sequence of words, we
will not go from sentence to word in a single step but will recognise units intermediate in size between sentence and word. For example, in

*The teacher must have made a mistake*

it is intuitively obvious that although a is immediately adjacent in the sequence to both made nd mistake, it is more closely related to the latter than to the former: this relationship between a and mistake can then be described by saying that they go together to form a constituent of the sentence. More generally, the syntactic analysis of a sentence will assign to it a constituent structure which identifies the full hierarchy of its constituents.

The verbal component is the more central, and significant differences in this component will be sufficient to distinguish one sentence from another. By ‘significant’ differences I mean those that reflect distinctions within the language as opposed to variation in, say, the sound of a given phoneme or the shape of a given letter as spoken or written by different people, or by the same person on different occasions. Thus there is no problem in recognizing It was a bin and It was a pin as different sentences. With the nonverbal component matters are much more difficult, partly because of the problem of deciding which kinds of non-verbal signal would be relevant to sentence identity (‘tone of voice’ and overall loudness and speed would be generally accepted as irrelevant, whereas intonation is commonly but not invariably regarded as an aspect of the linguistic form of spoken sentences), partly because we are often dealing with continuous variation rather than discrete units (with intonation, for example, we can talk grossly of rising or falling intonation, but it is unlikely that we can distinguish a fixed
number of discrete types of fall or rise: the steepness and extent of the pitch movement is continuously variable over a certain range). It is accordingly hardly realistic to ask, for example, how many linguistically distinct ways there are of pronouncing a certain sequence of words, such as Tom stayed in because lie was ill. Notice, moreover, that whereas in the verbal component speech and writing are in close correspondence, in the non-verbal component they are not — there is, for example, only a very rough and indirect correlation between punctuation and intonation, with the former providing for considerably less variation than the latter.

Given the limited scope and introductory nature of the present hook, we need not worry about these problems: we shall not be dealing with those aspects of the meaning of utterances that depend simply on the non-verbal signal (and where syntactic constructions are differentiated non-verbally as well as verbally, we will be able to make do with a very limited set of international contrasts). We can accordingly work with the simplifying assumption that paradigmatic sentence identification depends solely on the verbal component, so that we shall contain to talk of sentence ambiguity—a single sentence with two or more meanings, as opposed to two or more different terms each with its Wolf meaning—even when utterances expressing the different meanings differ non-verbally, as with the sentence Liz saw John. This emphasis on the verbal component ties in with our failure to rely on punctuation in determining sentence boundaries on the syntagmatic axis: the criterion suggested above is neutral as between speech and writing.