

***I swear* [that] *I think* [that] *I have!* Syntax, situation and society as windows on grammar**

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Perhaps the most ubiquitous syntactic variable in English is alternation between *that* and \emptyset in complement clauses, (1-2):

- (1) I just thought \emptyset it was a nice day.
 (2) I just thought ***that*** the people were different up here ...

Previous explanations for this phenomenon include grammaticalization of epistemic phrases (Thompson & Mulac 1991), the 'complexity principle' (Rhodenburg 1996), lexical effects (Warner 1982), processing (Underhill 1988), and verb frequency (Ungerer et al. 1984). Formality and style are also implicated (Quirk et al. 1972). Other research has argued that constraints operating on *that*/ \emptyset variation expose the relationship between recurrent collocation patterns and the linguistic types from which they emerge (Tagliamonte & Smith 2005; Torres Cacoullos & Walker 2009). What remains unclear is the role of social factors in this dynamic process.

To explore these dimensions we conduct a quantitative analysis of *that*/ \emptyset variation. The sample includes 47 individuals stratified by age, sex and education. In over 4000 tokens, the zero option occurs a full 84.5% of the time. What then can predict the relatively rare and often dubious acceptability of the overt complementizer (as illustrated in the title)?

Consistent with earlier studies, multivariate analysis reveals significant effects of lexical verb and matrix and complement subject type, highlighting the universality of constraints on *that*/ \emptyset variability. But the overt form significantly co-occurs with certain age groups and people with post-secondary education, as well as with disfluencies in syntactic structure, (3).

- (3) I think ***that*** uh- I would definitely- I would definitely say ***that*** uh- there was never ever any...

Frequency and constraints are critical for understanding *that*/ \emptyset variation overall. However, we conclude that a further explanation may be found in social and discourse-pragmatic pressures, both of which cause overtly marked realizations of underlying structure, i.e. COMP. We explore further how the multiple perspectives provided by socially embedded data contribute important evidence for understanding linguistic systems.

References

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