

The Complementizer *That*-Deletion in English

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the complementizer *that*-deletion in embedded complement clauses in English. This paper is concerned with the alternation between the overt *that*-complementizer and the zero complementizer by the complementizer deletion (C-deletion or *that*-deletion) in constructions with a nominal complement *that*-clause, i.e. [VP Verb [CP *that*-TP]]. In this paper, we compare *that*-complementation and zero-complementation in a diachronic grammaticalization and corpus, and show that the complementizer *that* has its origin in pronouns diachronically and finally becomes to form a C-head of the functional category CP. We provide the syntactic and semantic explanation on the optionality of *that*-deletion while answering the question why and how *that*-deletion is getting increasing in use especially with the verb, *think*, in the informal contexts. With the major causes for the currently increasing use of *that*-deletion, we are concerned with the contexts in which the overt complementizers or the covert complementizers are preferred.

Keywords: Complementizer, *That*-Complementation, Zero-Complementation, *that*-Deletion, Grammaticalization

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the alternation between the overt complementizer *that* and the covert zero complementizer in constructions with a nominal complement clause, as in (1) *that*-complementation and (2) zero-complementation.

- (1) I think that I saw it on Mulberry Street.
- (2) I think \emptyset I saw it on Mulberry Street.

In generative syntax, a complementizer deletion (C-deletion) is the process of deleting a complementizer, so the complementizer *that* is optional as given in (1) and (2). In the previous studies, the [Verb + *that* Complement Clause] construction, i.e., [VP Verb [CP *that*-TP]] has been evolving towards an increased use of the zero-complementation than *that*-complementation [1-4]. It is argued that formal contexts favor the retention of the complementizer *that*, as shown in (1), i.e. salient retention of *that* in formal contexts, but *that*-deletion in informal contexts or child language.

This study is to compare *that*-complementation and zero-complementation in a diachronic grammaticalization, provide syntactic and semantic explanation on the optionality of *that*-complementizer and answer the question why zero-complementation is getting increasing in use especially with the verb, *think*, in informal contexts. The complementizer *that* has its origin in pronouns and it form a C-head of the functional category CP. The complementizer *that* has its origin in pronouns diachronically and it forms a C-head of the functional category CP. We will discuss the current contexts where overt or covert complementizers are preferred and the major causes for the currently increasing use of *that*-deletion.

2. THE C(OMPLEMENTIZER)-DELETION

2.1 Grammaticalization of Complementizers

The C-deletion has grown through the history of English. The grammaticalization has a visible effect cross-linguistically. There are common patterns of grammaticalization in how the lexical to functional change may take place. The previous research shows that a complementizer *that* has its origin in pronouns (interrogatives, demonstratives, relatives) [3-4]. The pronoun retains its pronominal status as a phrase, and then reanalyzes it as a C head [5]. This process includes both the categorial (i.e., pronoun > complementizer) and structural change into a complement clause CP headed by the head C [5].

There is general agreement on the historical development of the complementizer *that* from an Old English neuter demonstrative pronoun and the use of pronouns as complementizers is quite pervasive in Indo-European languages. However, the question which of the two complementation patterns, *that* or zero, is older is impossible to answer since both *that* and zero complementizers occur in the earliest extant texts [1]. The zero form was rarely used in Old and Middle English, but there has been a steady increase of the use of zero form or *that*-deletion between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century [1]. The most dramatic rise in the zero complementizer can be observed in the second half of the sixteenth century and in the early seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, we witness a temporary drop in zero use due to the prevalence of the prescriptive grammar. Later on, the descriptive grammar refers to the use of *that*-deletion as an optional phenomenon, so by the twentieth century, *that*-deletion becomes quite possible [3, 6, 7]. In addition, the zero form is more common in speech-like informal genres and its increase is more frequent with the verbs like *think* and *know* than with the verbs like *say* and *tell*. The previous study shows that overall the zero complementizer was used at a rate of 86%, while another study argues a rate of up to 90% [3, 8]. In a word, *that*-deletion is more frequent in the more colloquial genre of the personal letter than in the formal genres of medical writing and sermons [9]. In addition, child acquisition also shows that a complementizer *that* is absent in over 97% of the cases, which is a ratio of almost 36:1 [9].

2.2 C-Deletion

2.2.1 Diachronic *That*/Zero Alternation

The previous research suggests that there has been a diachronic increase of C-deletion, i.e., zero complementizer in use. That is, the [Verb + *that* Complement Clause] construction has been evolving towards an increased use of the zero-complementizer form as shown in the figures 1 & 2 [4].

The figures 1 and 2 show the diachronic change of the overt *that* versus zero form per million words with the verb, *think*, in the spoken and written data. The figures indicate that the zero form is clearly more frequent from 1560 to 2012 than the overt *that*, which accords with previous findings on the verb, *think* and with the claims regarding diachronic *that*/zero variation [1, 4].

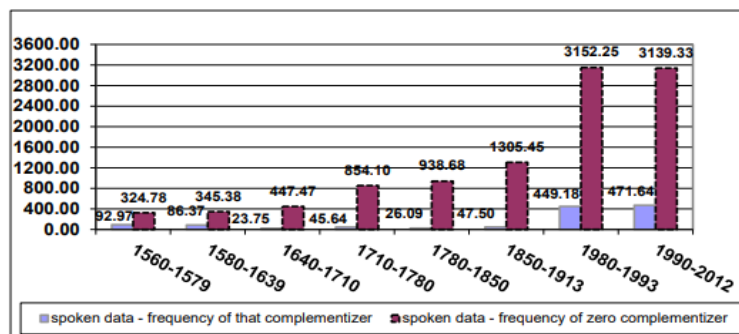


Figure 1. *Think* spoken data – *that* vs. zero complementizer per million words

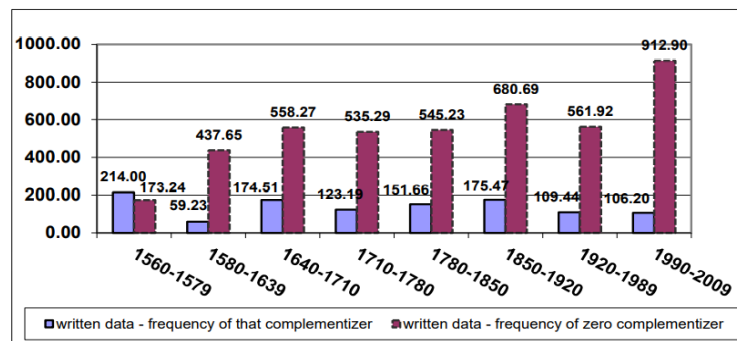


Figure 2. *Think* written data – *that* vs. zero complementizer per million words

2.3 Zero Complementizer

Zero Complementizer or *that*-deletion is a construction allowed by the syntax of English. The English grammar has a mechanism that makes it a possible alternative construction to the overt *that*. There are contexts that seem to favor absence of *that*, as the following examples illustrate, which come from a song or personal conversation.

- (3) We never knew \emptyset we could want more than that out of life.
(*Scenes from an Italian Restaurant* - Billy Joel)
- (4) A: Women think \emptyset they knew everything.
B: Not my life. She admits \emptyset there is one thing she does not know.

It is clear that the zero complementizer is more frequent in the more colloquial genres of the personal speech or song than in the formal writing [10]. The research result shows that *that*-deletion in informal contexts by native speakers consists of up to 91.7%, while *that*-retention consists of only 8.3% [9]. Therefore, there are certain linguistic properties, precisely those that involve the complex interplay of syntactic and discourse conditions [10]. Therefore, *that*-deletion is a clear stylistic patterning for economy in language use [11].

2.4 Overt *That*-Complementizer

In this section, we will look at five contexts that require overt *that*-complementizer without allowing *that*-deletion.

2.4.1 Main Clause Subjects

The subject of the matrix clause often plays a role in the selection of either *that* or zero complementizers. Generally, the first and second pronouns, *I* or *you*, favor the use of zero-complementizer as shown in (5), but the third person pronouns or full NPs as in (6) favor the use of *that*-complementizer. Specifically, children use *I think* parenthetically as a holistic formula without knowledge of its literal meaning, which means that the parenthetical use is restricted to (*I*) *think* and perhaps a few other mental verbs [12].

- (5) I think \emptyset we are going to have the most adversarial relationship with those entities of any media outlet.
- (6) Some people think that the truth can be hidden with a little cover-up and decoration.

2.4.2 Post-Verbal Adverbials

Some argue that the post-verbal adverbial in the matrix clause is the conditioning factor making the greatest contribution to the selection of *that*-complementizer as given in (7) and (9), but the preverbal adverb does not require *that*-complementizer as in (8) [7]. Other authors also point out the ungrammaticality of *that* deletion in non-adjacent V-CP constructions as in (10), where the post-verbal prepositional phrase acts as an adverbial, so this sentence requires *that*-complementizer [13].

(7) I expected maybe that we would be talking about it.

(8) I totally thought \emptyset he was a big jerk [7].

(9) Well, I'm not, because I understand that most of his girlfriends have either been, you know, I think personally that with time we're going to continue to see positive change. (COCA)

(10) We had hoped, in a moment of optimism, that the government would look favorably on our case [13].

2.4.3 Subordinate Clause Conditionals

The presence or absence of *that*-complementizer is related to the presence or absence of conditional conjunction or subjunctive, *if*, *even if*, *even though* in the subordinate clauses as in (11~12). Without a complementizer *that*, the boundary between a main clause and a subordinate clause can be ambiguous, so for clarity of meaning, we cannot delete *that* when *if*-clause belongs to the subordinate clause.

(11) You might have heard that if you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will jump out right away. (TED, 2021)

(12) People had hoped that even if they were incompetent, the Moon government would at least be ethically superior to their conservative rivals. (Korea Herald, 2021)

2.4.4 Subordinate Clause Coordination

Similarly as in subordinate clause conditionals, to make a boundary of coordination clarify, a complementizer *that* cannot be deleted as in (13~14).

(13) A senior US official said on Tuesday that the North Korea policy review is now in its final stages and that National Security Adviser Sullivan will host his South Korean and Japanese counterparts in Washington next week to explain and discuss the outcome of the review. (AP News, 2021)

(14) Kirby said (that) he was not aware of such report and that he would not discuss intelligence reports from the podium. (AP News, 2021)

2.4.5 Subordinate Clause Topic/Focus

The following examples show that when focus and topic are activated as a topic phrase, TopP and a focus phrase, FocP, *that*-deletion is impossible, i.e. *that*-complementizer cannot be deleted when TopP and/or FocP are activated as in (14a) and (14b) respectively [14].

(14) a. She thought *(that) this book, you should read.

b. She thought *(that) never in her life would she accept this solution.

3. CONCLUSION

This study is to investigate the optionality of *that*-complementizer in the embedded complement CP clauses in English, i.e., nominal complementation in the form of [Verb-[CP *that*-Complement Clause]], i.e., [vP Verb [CP *that*-TP]]. We discuss how and why *that*-deletion occurs through grammaticalization and corpus and look at the current formal and informal contexts in which *that*-deletion is possible or not.

To analyze *that*-deletion in the embedded complement clauses, we are concerned with the possible alternation between the overt *that*-complementizer and the zero complementizer. We compare *that*-complementation and zero-complementation in a diachronic grammaticalization and corpus, and show that the complementizer *that* has its origin in pronouns diachronically and becomes to form a C-head of the functional category CP. We provide the syntactic and semantic explanation on the optionality of *that*-deletion while answering the question why and how *that*-deletion is getting increasing in use especially with the verb, *think* in the informal contexts. While analyzing the major causes for the currently increasing use of *that*-deletion, we are concerned with the contexts in which the overt complementizer or the covert complementizer is preferred.

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