

That-clauses: Retention and Omission of Complementizer *that* in some Varieties of English

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1. Introduction

An OBJECT CLAUSE, also sporadically referred to as a COMMENT CLAUSE (Warner 1982: 169; Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 951), is a clause functioning as the direct object of the matrix verb. In English, the most common type of object clause is introduced by *that*, hence its traditional label *that*-clause (Quirk et al. 1985: 1049). The complementizer *that* can be retained or omitted with no meaning alteration, although Biber et al. (1999: 681–682) enumerates a series of discourse factors favouring *that* omission (i.e. the presence of co-referential subjects in the main clause and the *that*-clause, among others) or the retention of the complementizer (i.e. the use of coordinated *that*-clauses, among others).

On historical grounds, *that*-deletion may be traced back to Old English, where the complementizer was usually omitted when the subjects of the main and the subordinate clause were the same or before a complement representing the exact words of the reported proposition (Mitchell 1985: §1976ff; Fischer 1992: 313; Traugott 1992: 236–237; Palander-Collin 1997: 388). In Old and early Middle English the phenomenon was, however, infrequent. Even though *that*-deletion gained ground in the latter part of Middle English, the definite rise of zero does not take place until the second half of the 16th century, becoming more prone in speech-based text types (trials, sermons) or in texts representing the oral mode of expression (comedies). The construction is observed to plunge down again from the 18th century, plausibly as a result of the prescriptive bias of grammarians (Rissanen 1991: 279–287; López-Couso 1996: 271; Finegan and Biber 1995: 245–250; Rissanen 1999: 284–285).

From a scholarly perspective, *that*-deletion has been extensively researched in the history of English, with a number of studies discussing the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors conditioning the use of zero. Fanego finds that zero considerably exceeds the use of *that* in Shakespeare plays, offering conclusive statistical evidence as to the factors which directly condition the choice of the syndetic or the asyndetic construction, i.e. i) style, zero correlating with prose and that with verse; ii) the frequency of the matrix verb, high-frequency items favouring the use of zero; and iii) the existence of intervening elements between the predicate and the complement clause subject, that outnumbering zero in these environments (Fanego 1990b: 142–146).

Quite recently, *that*-deletion has also been discussed from the perspective of historical sociolinguistics in the period 1420–1710 (Conde-Silvestre & Calle-Martín 2012). The diffusion

of zero is found to be a typical change from below, initiated by the members of the upper working classes as a result of internal linguistic factors operating below the level of social awareness – and not from external prestigious norms (Guy 1990: 51; Labov 1994: 78; Conde-Silvestre 2007: 103–104). In Middle English, zero initially diffuses among the members of the middle orders of late mediaeval society, i.e. merchants and the urban non-gentry, becoming significantly restricted in the profile of the upper gentry and the professionals. The early modern period confirms these results shedding light on the progressive diffusion of the construction to the other social groups, corroborating the urban non-gentry as the natural leaders of this change and later progressively among the members of the upper gentry.

Even though the topic has been extensively researched in British and American English (Biber 1999), there is in our opinion still an important gap in other varieties of English. In the light of this, the present paper analyses *that*-deletion in some varieties of Asian Englishes (i.e. Indian English and Hong Kong English), taking New Zealand English as a point of departure, with the following objectives: 1) to analyse the distribution of *that/zero* in these varieties of English; 2) to assess the phenomenon in terms of register and the informants' age and gender; 3) to classify the instances regarding the verb taking the *that*-clause (i.e. mental verbs, speech act verbs and other communication verbs); and 4) to evaluate the contribution of the conditioning factors. The source of evidence comes from the New Zealand, Indian and Hong Kong components of the *International Corpus of English*.

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