

Prosodic effects on syntactic choice in L2 English?

The case of the optional complementiser

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This paper is concerned with the syntactic representation of the optional complementiser *that* in German speakers' L2 English. We are interested in whether the use of the complementiser is co-determined by the immediate phonological environment (as has been reported for English), or immune to phonological influences (as has been reported for cognate *dass* in German).

Finite complement clauses (CC) in German and English come in two varieties, viz. i) those that are introduced by a complementiser and ii) unintroduced CCs. In German, introduced CCs display verb-final syntax. In unintroduced CCs, the tensed verb is in second position (V2). English CCs display SVO order irrespective of the presence of the complementiser (1).

(1) Martha thinks (that) Lúcy/Louíse called the ambulance.

In English, complementiser use is, among other things, conditioned by the phonological environment: Lee & Gibbons (2007, LG07) suggest that speakers omit the unstressed complementiser to optimise the rhythmic structure, i.e. when the word at the top of the CC starts in an unstressed syllable (e.g. Louíse) (avoidance of stress lapse). As opposed to English, German speakers' choice between introduced and unintroduced complement clauses has been shown to remain unaffected by stress or linguistic rhythm (Kentner & Franz 2019, KF19). KF19 argue that the structure of the CC (V-final with *dass* or V2 without) is determined in the grammatical encoding stage and hence immune to phonological tampering. The English complementiser, in contrast, may be subject to phonological ellipsis, as its presence or absence is not bound to a specific word order.

There is thus a fundamental difference between the English complementiser *that* and its German counterpart *dass* concerning the susceptibility to phonological influences. This difference raises the question as to the syntactic representation of the complementiser *that* in German speakers' L2 English. Rhythmic-phonological influences on the use of the complementiser in German speakers' L2 English would suggest that the representation of *that* is essentially native-like. Conversely, immunity to phonological influences would suggest that German speakers' L2 *that* is not represented like L1 *that* but possibly like German *dass*.

We will report on a replication of LG07's sentence recall experiment using their English stimulus material and their experimental setup. 32 participants (German speakers with L2 English) read and, after a distractor task, recall 32 sentences like (1). In these sentences, the structure of the CC (with or without *that*) and the stress pattern of the name at the top of the CC (trochaic vs iambic) are systematically varied. We evaluate the influence of the stress pattern on the presence or absence of the complementiser, considering the L2 competence of the speakers. The results will shed light on the syntactic representation of the complementiser *that* in German speakers' L2 English.

References: Kentner, G. & I. Franz (2019). No evidence for prosodic effects on the syntactic encoding of complement clauses in German. *Glossa* 4(1), 1–29. Lee, M.W. & J. Gibbons (2007). Rhythmic alternation and the optional complementiser in English. *Cognition* 105(2), 446–456.