Exploring the relationship between stance and morphosyntactic variation: More evidence from complementizer (that)

For a long time, researchers believed that the alternation between complementizers *that* and zero in English (as in excerpts 1 and 2) is primarily constrained by linguistic factors (Tagliamonte & Smith, 2005; Torres-Cacoullos & Walker, 2009). However, recent work by Gadanidis et al. (2023) has shown that the realization of this linguistic variable is also influenced by speakers' stance towards the object of talk, with higher levels of investment correlating with higher use of overt *that*.

  (1) They don't realize **THAT** there's people up here. (Alexandra Miller, female-presenting, born 1950).

  (2) I think ∅ this might be the last time. (Carrie Beers, female-presenting, born 1992)

Gadanidis et al.'s work is based on a corpus of self-recordings from eight highly educated individuals in Toronto (Canada), leading to the question whether this finding generalizes to speakers from other socio-demographic contexts. This paper addresses this question by analyzing the use of complementizer (that) in a socially stratified corpus of sociolinguistic interviews with 42 native speakers of English from Northern Maine (USA).

      Overt *that* tokens were extracted from interview transcripts using AntConc (Anthony, 2023); zero tokens were identified by reading through interview transcripts. This process yielded a total of 1,209 tokens. The data was coded for a variety of social (such as the speaker, their age, gender, date of birth, level of education, and occupation) and linguistic factors (such as the matrix verb, its tense, and its subject, the polarity of the matrix clause, and the presence of intervening material). Investment was coded following the formal coding guide proposed by Gadanidis et al., which relies on pragmatic tests to objectively quantify this inherently interactional phenomenon. The data was then analyzed using distributional analysis, conditional inference trees, and mixed effects modeling in R (R Core Team, 2021).

      Results show that in the socially stratified sample, there is also an effect of investment, confirming that complementizer *that* is used more widely as a resource for meaning making. I argue that this is potentially due to the increased effort involved in producing the overt variant compared to the zero variant. This study highlights the need to explore what speakers do with morphosyntactic variables in interaction and offers a model for how to capture this in a replicable way.

References

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