

# Negation and the Cognitive Complexity Principle in the English Clausal Complementation System

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The present paper focuses on the effect of the Complexity Principle (Rohdenburg 1996) on competing clausal complementation patterns. This principle states that “in the case of more or less explicit constructional options, the more explicit one(s) will tend to be preferred in cognitively more complex environments” (Rohdenburg 1996: 151). For example, the verb REGRET exhibits two sets of rival variants: (a) *that*- vs zero-complement clauses (*that*-CC and zero-CC), as in (1) below; and (b) *that*-CCs vs gerunds ((S)+*ing*-CC), as in (2). Given that negative polarity increases the complexity of syntactic environments (Rohdenburg 1996), the Complexity Principle could explain why (1a) and (2a) favor the more explicit clausal complement, a *that*-CC. Examples (1b) and (2b), however, show that the rival options can also occur in negative contexts, and thus the effects of negation on clausal complementation are still in need of close examination.

(1)

- a. We only **regret** that we did not meet him much earlier. (GloWbE, HK)
- b. We only **regret**  $\emptyset$  we did not meet him much earlier.

(2)

- a. Some days I **regret** that I did not go into another line of work. (GloWbE, US)
- b. Some days I **regret** not going into another line of work.

The impact of cognitive complexity on grammatical variation is more powerful in those L2 varieties “which are closer to the acquisition stages and less advanced in the evolutionary circle outlined in the Dynamic Model” (Steger and Schneider 2012). One of the cognitive effects observed in contact and second language acquisition contexts is a tendency towards isomorphism and transparency (Steger and Schneider 2012). The hypothesis here is that negative contexts will favor the use of (more transparent) *that*-CC to a greater degree in L2 varieties.

In order to gauge the influence of negation, I compare its effects in two L1 varieties and in all 14 L2 varieties available in the GloWbE corpus (Davies 2013). All tokens are manually analyzed for type of complementation pattern (*that*-CC, zero-CC, (S)+*ing*-CC) and negation (*not/n't*, *never*, *neither*, *nobody*, *no*, *none*, *nor*, *nothing*, *nowhere*). A preliminary overview of the results shows that negation seems to have mixed effects on verbal complementation. On the one hand, the tendency to select *that*-CCs in negative contexts rather than (S)+*ing*-CCs is stronger in L2 varieties. On the other hand, and contrary to expectations, the choice of *that*-CC over zero-CCs seems to be relatively more pronounced in L1 varieties. If these results are confirmed in the whole corpus, my hypothesis would only be partially confirmed, which would pose further questions for analysis.

## References

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