Reanalysis of Overt and Null Complementizers
Ji Young Shim & Tabea Ihsane
University of Geneva

This study provides a new outlook of overt and null complementizers (COMPs) in clausal complements in English. Since the seminal work by Kiparsky & Kiparsky (1970; KK henceforth), it is widely assumed that the finite declarative COMP that can be omitted in clausal complements of non-factive verbs (e.g., believe, say, think), whereas it cannot be deleted in clausal complements of factive verbs (e.g., know, realize, regret). Most studies on the null COMP have an overarching view that overt that and null that clauses have the identical underlying structure, where the COMP, either overt or null, represents a C head (Stowell 1981, Pesetsky 1991, Bošković and Lasnik 2003), predicting both overt and null that clauses are predicted to show (nearly) the same syntactic distribution, contrary to fact: the so-called ‘main clause phenomena’ (MCP) are permitted only when that is present, as in (1).

(1) a. John believes/thinks/says *(that) vegetables Mary doesn’t eat
   b. John believes/thinks/says *(that) one day Mary will eat vegetables
   c. John believes/thinks/says *(that) never has Mary eaten vegetables

On the other hand, MCP are banned in clausal complements of factive predicates, despite the presence of that (KK, Hooper & Thompson 1973). Researchers propose that the structure of factive complements is simpler than that of non-factive complements, and the limited syntactic behavior of factive complements is related to its simpler/reduced CP structure (Haegeman 2006, de Cuba 2007). In spite of the abundance of research on this topic, an explanation as to why the COMP that can be optional in non-factive clausal complements but is obligatory in factive clausal complements is still missing in the literature. We hypothesize that the different syntactic behavior observed in factive and non-factive complements is closely related to the distribution of overt and null COMPs in clausal complements of both factive and non-factive predicates.

Adopting Rizzi’s (1997) split CP structure, we propose that null that clauses are FinPs (2a), whereas overt that clauses have an extra functional layer above FinP, lexicalizing either a higher C head Force (2b) or a light demonstrative head d under factive predicates (2c).

(2) a. [FinP Fin = Ø ] \hspace{1cm} \text{null COMP}
   b. [ForceP Force = that (Topic) … (Focus) [FinP Fin = Ø ]] \hspace{1cm} \text{overt COMP}
   c. [d \ d = that [FinP Fin = Ø ]] \hspace{1cm} \text{overt COMP}

To support our claim that Force is not projected when the COMP is null in (2a), we assume that (i) English has no lexical item to spell out Fin with [+finite], whereas Fin with [-finite] may be spelled out as for, and (ii) the COMP that originates as a demonstrative (Roberts & Roussou 2003). Building on these, we propose that the Force head lexicalized as that has a d-(eictic) feature. To show also how a null that clause is interpreted as a declarative sentence when Force is not projected in (2a), we adopt Roberts (2008) who argues that ForceP is either absent or inert in root declaratives, suggesting root declaratives are the unmarked clause type. We further expand this view and propose that declaratives are the unmarked clause type in both root and embedded clauses (in English): declarative force may not be encoded on Force per se, but is granted as the unmarked sentence type at the level of FinP. On the other hand, the information delivering other sentence types than declaratives,
such as interogatives, is encoded on Force by their relative features, for instance [+wh]. On this assumption, the label of Force seems to be misleading and we re-label it as Assert, following Hooper & Thompson (1973), who argue that assertion is the crucial property that licenses MCPs in embedded clauses.

(2) b'. \([\text{AssertP Assert = that (Topic) \ldots (Focus)} \ [\text{FinP Fin = } \emptyset]]\) overt COMP

The structures in (2a, b') explain why MCP are permitted only when the COMP is overt. When a predicate selects a clausal complement/CP, it must be either FinP or AssertP, whose head corresponds to C. Projecting Topic and/or Focus is optional, expressing the information structure of a clause, and neither TopP nor FocP are qualified to be a complement of a predicate, which cannot be optional; when TopP or FocP is projected above FinP in (2a), it cannot be directly selected by the matrix predicate, explaining why MCPs are banned in a null that clause in English.

To account for the obligatoriness of that as well as the unavailability of MCP in factive clausal complements, we propose the structure in (2c). Both the Assert head in (2b') and the d head in (2c) are spelled out as that, but they are different in nature: that in (2b') is a COMP whereas that in (2c) is a demonstrative. Thus, the dP structure in (2c) supports the widely-head view that the clausal complement of a factive predicate is nominal in nature (KK and inter alia). A factive predicate selects a nominal complement, a dP, whose head is lexicalized by that. On the other hand, a non-factive predicate selects a clausal complement, either a FinP or an AssertP. When it selects a FinP, the complement is null-headed. When it selects an AssertP, it leads to an overt that clause. In addition, we argue that that in (2c) is a weak, light demonstrative lacking ϕ-features, whereas a strong demonstrative that has ϕ-features. Our claim that that in (2c) is a light or weak demonstrative lacking ϕ-features is supported by cross-linguistic evidence from Korean, in which the COMP ko may be used as a ϕ-feature/number lacking demonstrative. Also our proposal that the d head lexicalized as that in (2c) is a light, ϕ-feature lacking head has a consequence in syntactic derivations, explaining the unavailability of MCP.

Based on word order in French and Hungarian nominals, Ihsane & Puskás (2001) propose a split DP structure in (3), in which demonstratives are [+specific, +definite], merge under Def and move up to Topic.

(3) Det(ermine)P \ldots (Topic) \ldots (Focus) \ldots Def(inite)P

If the distinction between strong and weak demonstratives is real in English, and due to the lack of certain features, such as ϕ-features, the weak demonstrative that in (2c) does not move in the course of the derivation but remains in situ, whereas strong demonstratives move further up to Topic (or even higher), this means that the dP in (2c) is lower than Topic and Focus. In other words, Topic and Focus may optionally appear above dP, not between dP and FinP in (2c). Yet, topicalization is not possible above dP, as shown in (4). As explained earlier to account for the unavailability of MCP in a null that clause (2a), neither TopP nor FocP can be directly selected by the matrix predicate, explaining the ungrammaticality of the sentence in (4).

(4) *John knows/realizes/regrets *vegetables that Mary doesn’t eat

Finally, we show that our proposal in (2) successfully accounts for the distribution of overt and null COMPs beyond clausal complements, such as sentential subjects, and extend it to various other languages, which may or may not allow a null COMP in similar contexts.
References