

ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to contribute to the understanding of why grammars are shaped in certain ways rather than others, and to help establish which factors determine the grammaticality of sentences as perceived by speakers of a language. More specifically, the present work deals with so-called subject extraction and complementizer-gap effects, illustrated by the obligatory *that*-deletion in English structures such as *Who do you think (*that) won the game?*.

The complementizer-gap effect has received much attention in linguistic research, and a large number of explanations in different theories have been proposed. In the present study, many of those explanations are critically discussed and evaluated on the basis of theoretical and psychological adequacy, as well as synchronic, diachronic and cross-linguistic data.

Although the study aims to be cross-theoretical in nature, the main view adopted here is based on the Simpler Syntax Hypothesis of Culicover & Jackendoff (2005). The essence of this hypothesis is that the most explanatory syntactic theory is one that imputes the minimum structure necessary to mediate between phonology and meaning. Since many of the most essential ideas in Culicover & Jackendoff's theory are shared by theories such as Hawkins' Performance-Grammar Correspondence Hypothesis, Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar and Role and Reference Grammar, these theories also play a central role in the present work.

The main result of the investigation is that the pragmatic factors used to explain similar issues in theories such as Role and Reference Grammar and Construction Grammar are unlikely to be the source of the complementizer-gap effect. Furthermore, none of the essentially syntactic explanations in traditional generative grammar, in Hawkins' theory or in Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar seems to provide a satisfactory explanation for why complementizer-gap effects appear. In the present study, it is argued that the most likely cause of the phenomenon is connected to the presence of generalized abstract syntactic constructions in a language. However, although the explanation presented here is strictly syntactic in nature, it does not require any innate grammatical knowledge of the type assumed in nativist theories. Another important result is that, in a cross-linguistic perspective, it appears that restrictions on subject extraction must be regarded as a very heterogeneous phenomenon. Therefore, in order to explain the typological data, a number of competing motivations are suggested, related to issues of syntactic processing, argument linking and abstract syntactic constructions.