

Complementizers at Intonational Boundaries: Lexical Co-occurrence Frequencies, Grammaticization, and Prosody

Alexander R. Wahl
University of California, Santa Barbara

Scholars have been interested for some time in different factors that influence the placement of intonation unit (IU) boundaries. It is widely accepted that IU boundaries almost always fall at syntactic boundaries (e.g., Chafe, 1994; Croft, 1995); however, research on naturally occurring discourse has revealed that the superficially same boundary between syntactic constituents in one utterance may host an IU boundary, while in another utterance it may not. For example, Croft (1995) and Ono and Thompson (1995) have noted variability in English in whether an IU boundary is (or is not) present which might separate a complement-taking predicate (CTP) from its sentential complement (SC). Drawing on Chafe's One New Idea Hypothesis (1994), the latter authors argue that this presence or absence of an IU boundary can be explained by information-flow factors: when both the CTP and the SC are designed to draw attention to new information foci, or new "ideas," they are split across IUs. However, if either or both the CTP and SC express given information, they will tend to occupy the same IU. In Ono and Thompson's data, the complementizer tends to be dropped regardless of information status; when it is present, and when the CTP and the SC are prosodically split, it always occurs at the beginning of the IU of the CTP. Chafe (1988) has noted, however, that words such as "and" which connect two IUs may fall either at the beginning of the next IU or at the end of the one being completed.

In this paper, I focus on CTPs and SCs that are split by an IU boundary, and on the placement of the complementizer "that" either at the end of the CTP's IU or at the beginning of the SC's IU. I source examples from unscripted, connected speech from the Santa Barbara Corpus of American English (Du Bois, et al. 2000; 2003; 2004; 2005). Because complementizers lack lexical content, their placement with respect to IU boundaries is not explicitly predicted by the One New Idea Hypothesis. Moreover, since both the CTP-complementizer and complementizer-SC word boundaries are likewise constituent boundaries, in theory either boundary is a good candidate to host IU boundaries as well. This leaves open the question as to what influences the placement of IU boundaries around complementizers.

By drawing on statistical measures of word association, I show that this decision is partly predicted by the co-occurrence frequencies of complementizers and the lexical elements found before or after them. Highly frequent CTP-complementizer co-occurrences tend not to be split by an IU boundary. Likewise, highly frequent complementizer-SC co-occurrences tend not to host an IU boundary, either. In this way, adjacent CTP-complementizer and complementizer-SC boundaries are in a sense statistically pitted against each other. If we assume principles from grammaticization theory in which frequent co-occurrences like those observed here are a major factor driving syntactic integration, then these results provide further evidence for Croft's criterion of syntactic distance (1995), which states that syntactically less integrated constituents will tend to occupy separate IUs.

References

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