

From THINK THAT to THINK Ø: Diachronic Insights, Pedagogical Applications, and AI-Assisted Experimentation

This paper investigates THINK + THAT vs. THINK + Ø complementation (see 1 and 2) as a test case for examining the interface between constructional change and applied pedagogy.

(1) “*I did not **think that** you had no faults, or were not liable to the infirmities of human nature;*”

(COHA, FIC: Logan: A Family History, 1822)

(2) “*I **think** she’s an intense young woman. Smart and aloof...*”

(COHA, FIC: Analog Science Fiction & Fact, 2010)

Largely motivated by the following two research questions, the study specifically aims to show: (a) how have the two variants developed and diverged across Late Modern and Present-day English, and (b) how can the diachronic insights gained inform pedagogical practice, complemented by AI resources, in the present?

To address the first question, the study draws on diachronic corpus evidence (COHA) spanning Late Modern English (ca. 1820) to Present-day English (ca. 2010) to trace the developmental trajectories of the two variants and discusses this syntactic alternation through the lens of Diachronic Construction Grammar (DCxG) (Traugott & Trousdale 2013, Barðdal et al. 2015). The results show that THINK + THAT and THINK + Ø exhibit distinct, though considerably overlapping, constructional profiles shaped by discourse-pragmatic effects of stance-marking and stance-framing (Du Bois 2007). In so doing, the paper lends empirical support to the principle of minimal synonymy (Goldberg 1995, 2006) and demonstrates that the alternation between overt and covert complementisers is a multifactorial phenomenon, sensitive to matters of frequency, conventionalisation, entrenchment, and distribution (see also Shank et al. 2018).

To address the second question, the paper reports on an experiment conducted with senior students of the Faculty of English Language and Literature (NKUA). Construction-based exercises targeting the two variants were designed both manually and with AI support, following recent advances in AI-assisted pedagogy (cf. Beuls and Van Eecke 2025). The experiment aimed at testing whether complementiser choice can be understood not as a matter of grammar optionality, but as a constructional site where stance is negotiated. Initial findings suggest that a constructional approach to learning, coupled with AI-enhanced resources, can sharpen learners’ intuitions about pragmatic nuance and raise awareness of form-function mappings.

By combining diachronic evidence with applied experimentation, the study underscores the cross-fertilising potential of CxG-based theoretical insights for pedagogy. Specifically, it argues that CxG can: (a) account for long-term patterns of grammatical change, (b)

inform present-day language use and instructional practices, and (c) facilitate the design of innovative AI-generated resources for the teaching, learning, and testing of constructions.

References

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