SYNTACTIC INFORMATION DENSITY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

Previous research by Jaeger (2010) analyzing the usage of that-complementizer has provided evidence that its use in Present Day English is guided by the principle of UNIFORM INFORMATION DENSITY. He shows that speakers behave rationally and leave the complementizer out only in those cases, where it does not result in an abrupt increase in information density.

If the usage/omission of that is indeed a result of the sensitivity of language producers to information density, we may assume the same principle to govern syntactic choices at earlier stages of the development of the English language. The language production should, too, be syntactically optimized in order to avoid spikes in processing difficulty.

In my project, I test in how far this assumption is reflected in the data of Early Modern period on the basis of reconstructed speech from the Corpus of Early English Dialogues 1560–1760. Using multiple regression model, I explore whether the syntactic variation can be explained solely by the processing constraints, or whether other factors play a role. The examined factors include the length and position of the complement clause as well as the year in which the speech was first published (in order to explore the small-scale diachronic development of the phenomenon).

REFERENCES


A Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760. 2006. Compiled under the supervision of Merja Kytö (Uppsala University) and Jonathan Culpeper (Lancaster University).