

That as a causal conjunction in West Germanic languages

Sune Gregersen (Kiel University)

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What?

In (older) English and other West Germanic languages, the ‘that’-complementizer may have causal meaning (‘because, since’):

- (1) REASON CLAUSE
And S. Augustin excommunicated County Bonifacius **that** [‘because’] he tooke from the Churche an offender.
W. Allen, 1567 (*OED* [13], s.v. *that* II.4.a.i.)
- (2) EXPLANATION CLAUSE
What had happened, **that** [‘since’] she was looking so worried?
Huddleston & Pullum [8], p. 225

How did these functions of *that/dat* develop historically?

Focus on two languages: English and Wangerooge Frisian, an East Frisian variety spoken in Germany until c.1950.

Why?

Causal uses of complementizers observed in many languages, but not discussed for Germanic in recent comparative work [1, 7]. Not mentioned in the *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization* [9].

Relevant for typology and history of subordinate clauses as well as for historical sociolinguistics (cf. English findings below).

How?

Manual excerption of examples from English dictionaries and secondary literature [5, 8, 10, 13, 14].

Corpus study of *dat* ‘that’-clauses in 19th-century Wangerooge Frisian material [4, 2, 3]. (See [4, 6] for more information.)

Findings from English

Reason and explanation *that* both attested from Old English onwards. Explanation clauses with *that* still found in Present-Day English. Some works analyze them as a kind of result clause [13, 14].

Reason clauses with *that* obsolete in standard English by c.1800. However, they are mentioned (and criticized) in some sources on Scottish English:

- (3) I am the more impatient of pain, **that** I have long enjoyed good health.
H. Mitchell, 1799 [11], p. 80

According to Mitchell c.1800, “in this sense, [*that*] is now gone into disuse” in standard English (but was still found in dialects).

Findings from Wangerooge Frisian

Causal uses of *dat* are relatively rare in the material: 20 reason clauses and 5 explanation clauses out of 753 *dat*-clauses in total.

- (4) REASON CLAUSE
iik sin saa suf, **dat** iik farlêeden nacht nich slîpin hâb
I am so tired COMP I last night not slept have
‘I’m so tired **because** I haven’t slept last night’
- (5) EXPLANATION CLAUSE
wut him failt, **dat** hii gans nain fisk fangt?
what him is.wrong COMP he at.all no fish catches
‘[She asks] what is wrong with him, **since** he is not catching any fish at all?’

Some *dat*-clauses after emotion predicates are ambiguous between a complement (‘that’) and a reason (‘because’) reading:

- (6) daa farschrêcket yaa yam, **dat** hii saa hooch is.
then startle.PL they them COMP he so tall is
‘Then they are startled **that/because** he is so tall’

A connection between emotion complements and reason clauses has been suggested for other languages, including German [12], Dutch [15], and several Semitic and ancient Indo-European languages [7].

Take-home messages

Reason and explanation clauses are **distinct clause types** although they both have causal meaning.

Probably arose via **separate pathways**: reason clauses from emotion complements, explanation clauses from result clauses.

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