

WE MAY SAY THAT...
DO WE STILL SAY THAT?

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Structure

1. Introduction: what is happening in the modal domain in present-day English?
2. A corpus-based study of *may* in 20th c American English
3. The demise of the *we may say* construction
4. Conclusion and outlook

Definitions

Modality:

In a modalized proposition, the propositional content is not predicated to be true in the factual world, but expressed to be either potential, obligatory, desirable, or possible (see Declerck 2011).

Definitions (cont.)

Dynamic modality	meanings referring to neutral possibility, ability and volition
Deontic modality	meanings referring to obligation and permission
Epistemic modality	meanings referring to the probability of the truth of propositions

Modality in present-day English

- ▣ Most common and most grammaticalized expression of modality in present-day English: The modals - a small closed class of elements. Core members: *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would*
- ▣ Other grammaticalized expressions of modality include quasi-modals or semi-modals (e.g. *have to, had rather, be supposed to*).

Previous research

Krug (2000): Core modals (*can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would*) have been going down in frequency, 'emerging modals' (*have to, have got to, etc.*) have been on the rise since EModE.

Leech & Smith (2006): Core modals decrease in BrE and AmE; 'semi-modals' (*have to, had better, need to, be supposed to* etc.) increase.

Mair & Leech (2006: 327): low frequency modals (*shall, ought to*) plummet sharply, mid-frequency modals (*may, must*) also clear decline. Only high frequency modals (*can, will*) remain stable.

Collins (2009a, b): Decline of modals and rise of 'quasi-modals' most pronounced in AmE.

The decline of the modals and their different functions

- ▣ Modals seem to decline more sharply in some functions than in others (e.g. *may* and *must* in British English more in the deontic function, but *should* more in the epistemic function, cf. Leech 2003)
- ▣ Modals decline at different rates in different global varieties (Collins 2009a, 2009b) and in different genres (compare Millar 2009 with Leech's response to Millar (2009))
- ▣ Socio-cultural changes such as democratization may well be responsible.

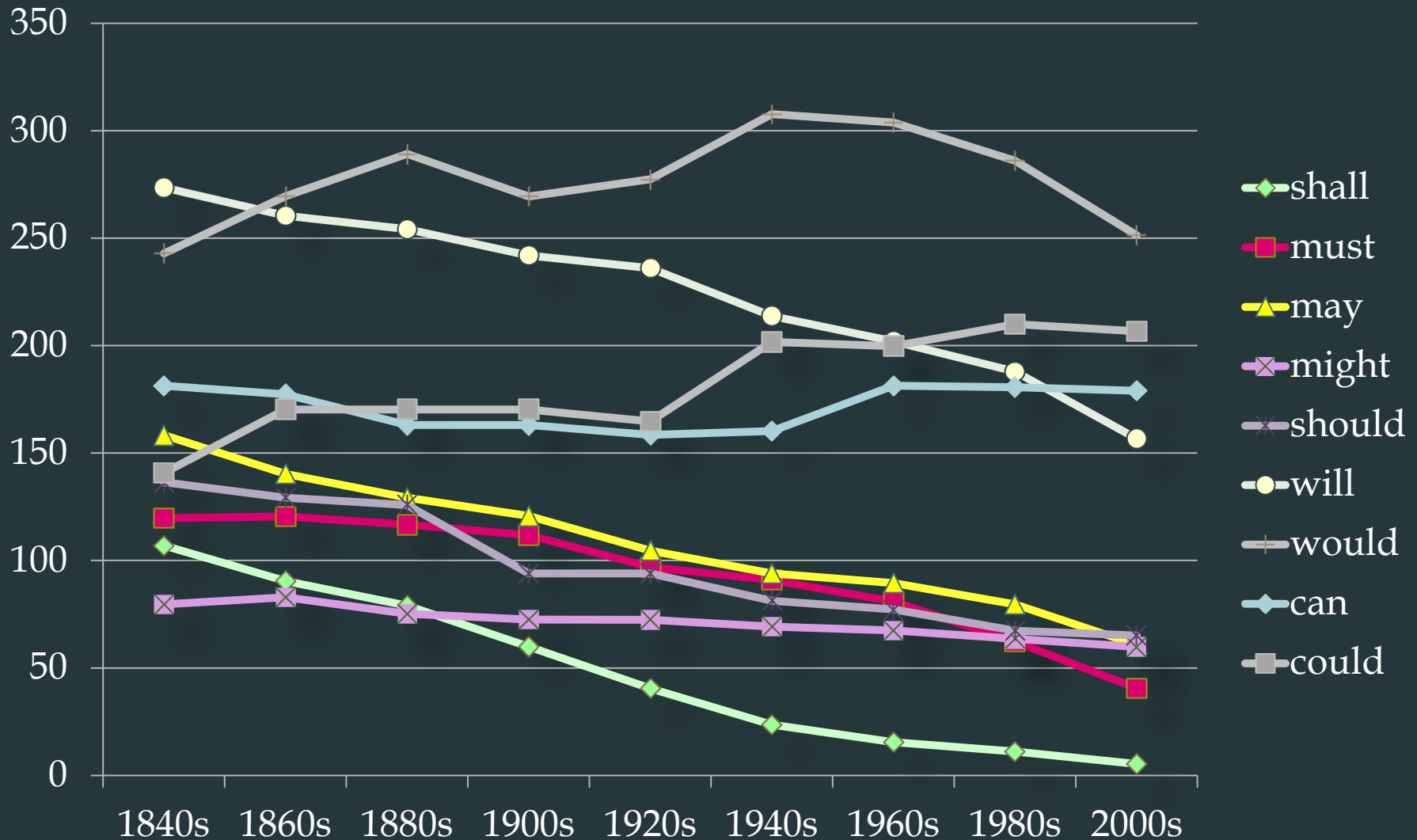
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Data: The Corpus of Historical American English

- ▣ Corpus: COHA
 - ▣ over 400 million words
 - ▣ 1810-2009
 - ▣ contains fiction (short stories, novels, drama) and non-fiction (academic and popular scientific monographs, magazine articles, newspaper articles)
- (for more information, see Davies 2012)

The modals in COHA (1840-2009)



Normalized frequencies per 100,000 words

A closer look at *may* (1960-2000)

- ▣ Method: Functional analysis of 400 random instances of *may*
- ▣ 200 from 1960s
- ▣ 200 from 2000s
- ▣ 100 each from Fiction and Non-Fiction
- ▣ Functions (dynamic, deontic, epistemic) of these instances analyzed.
- ▣ Comparable to Leech's (2003) analysis of *must* and *may* in BrE, which showed for both decline in proportion of deontic use, increase in proportion of epistemic use.

The functions of PDE *may*

I. Dynamic necessity, ability/possibility

may = be able to/be possible

II. Deontic

may = be allowed to

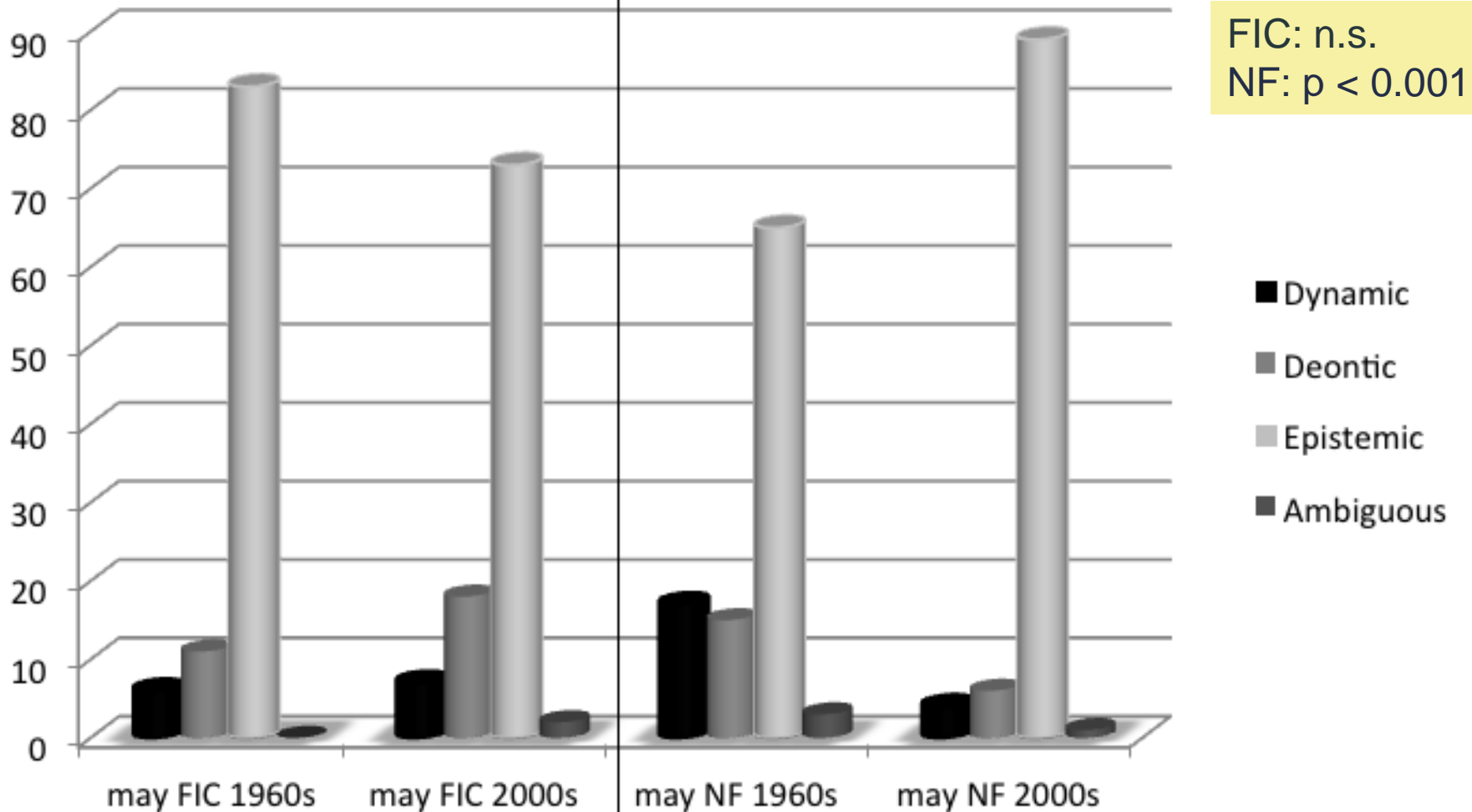
III. Epistemic

may = perhaps

Ambiguous:

With all the books we're taking, we may sink the island (1960sNF)

May in COHA 1960s vs 2000s



What is non-epistemic *may* doing in the non-fictional texts in the 1960s COHA data?

- ① Sounds may be divided into musical sounds and noises. (*The Science of Language*)
- ② ...this may be called a study of thinking. (*The Great Psychologists*)
- ③ ... which we may call the sentiment attitude. (*Introduction to the Science of Sociology*)
- ④ For instance, we may tentatively put: (I) a believes that $p =$ in all possible worlds... (*Perception and Identity*)

Non-epistemic *may* as part of hedging construction in 1960s non-fiction

- ▣ Sharp decrease of non-epistemic *may* in non-fictional texts.
- ▣ Due partly to decrease of a hedging construction fairly frequent in the 1960s data but not in the 2000s.

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Decrease of a hedging construction

- ▣ Depraetere and Cappelle (2014) outline a web of constructions based on collocation patterns for the modal *may*.
- ▣ Based on the qualitative analysis of COHA examples of *may*, its decrease seems to a large extent connected to a decrease of the construction *we may* + verb of saying/reasoning.
- ▣ Looking at this pattern with 48 verbs (e.g. *add, agree, argue, claim, conclude, consider, exclude, explain, note, recognize, say, wonder*, based on <http://www.thesaurus.com>)

Types of verbs in the construction

▣ Verbs of saying

- ⑤ As examples we may mention the laxity that has changed the meaning of soon, which in OE. meant at once (1928, NF, *LanguageItsNature*)

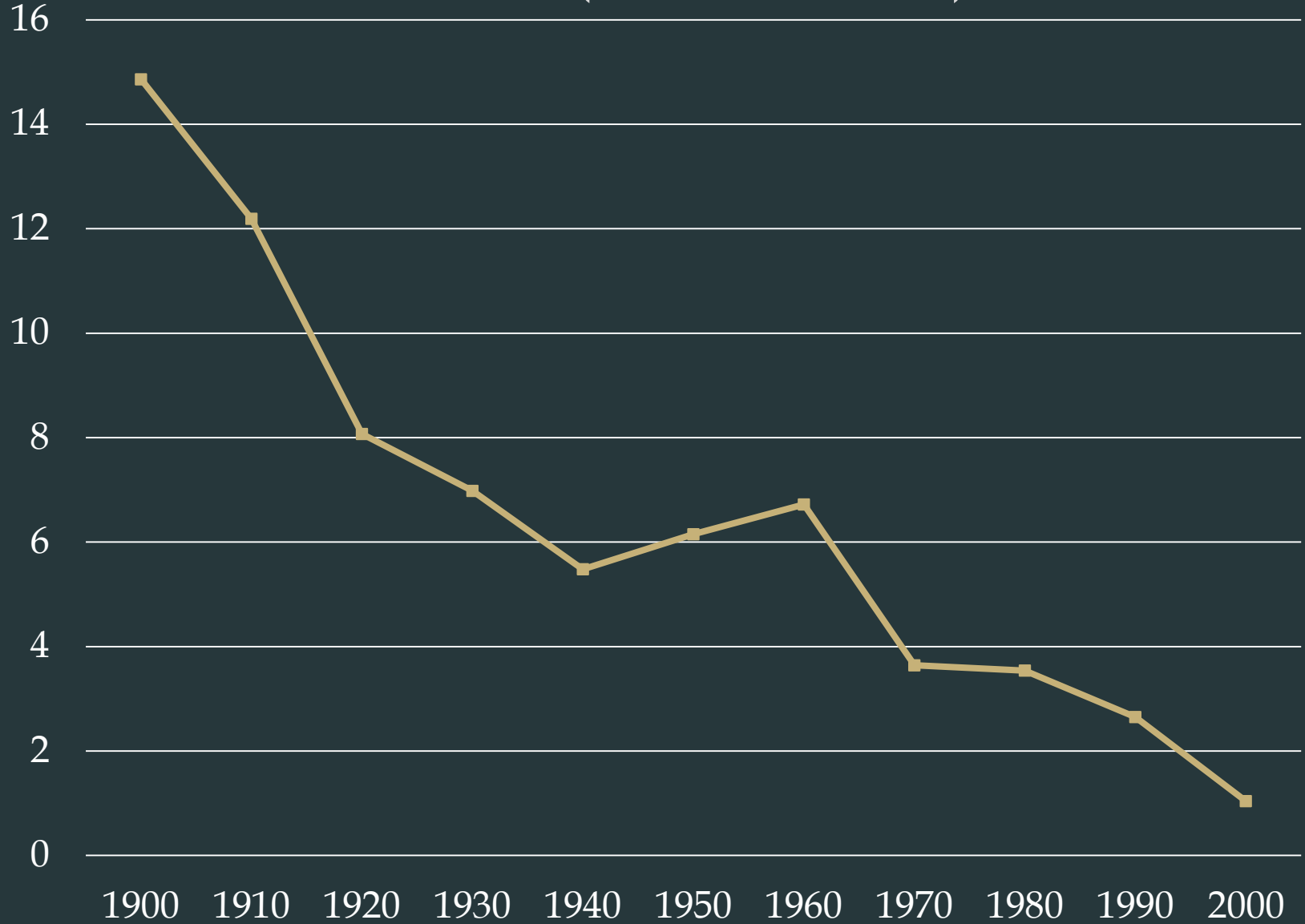
▣ Verbs of thinking

- ⑥ We may assume that the marginal product of labour in farming is smaller the larger is the amount of labour already employed per acre. (1965, NF, *StationaryEconomy*)

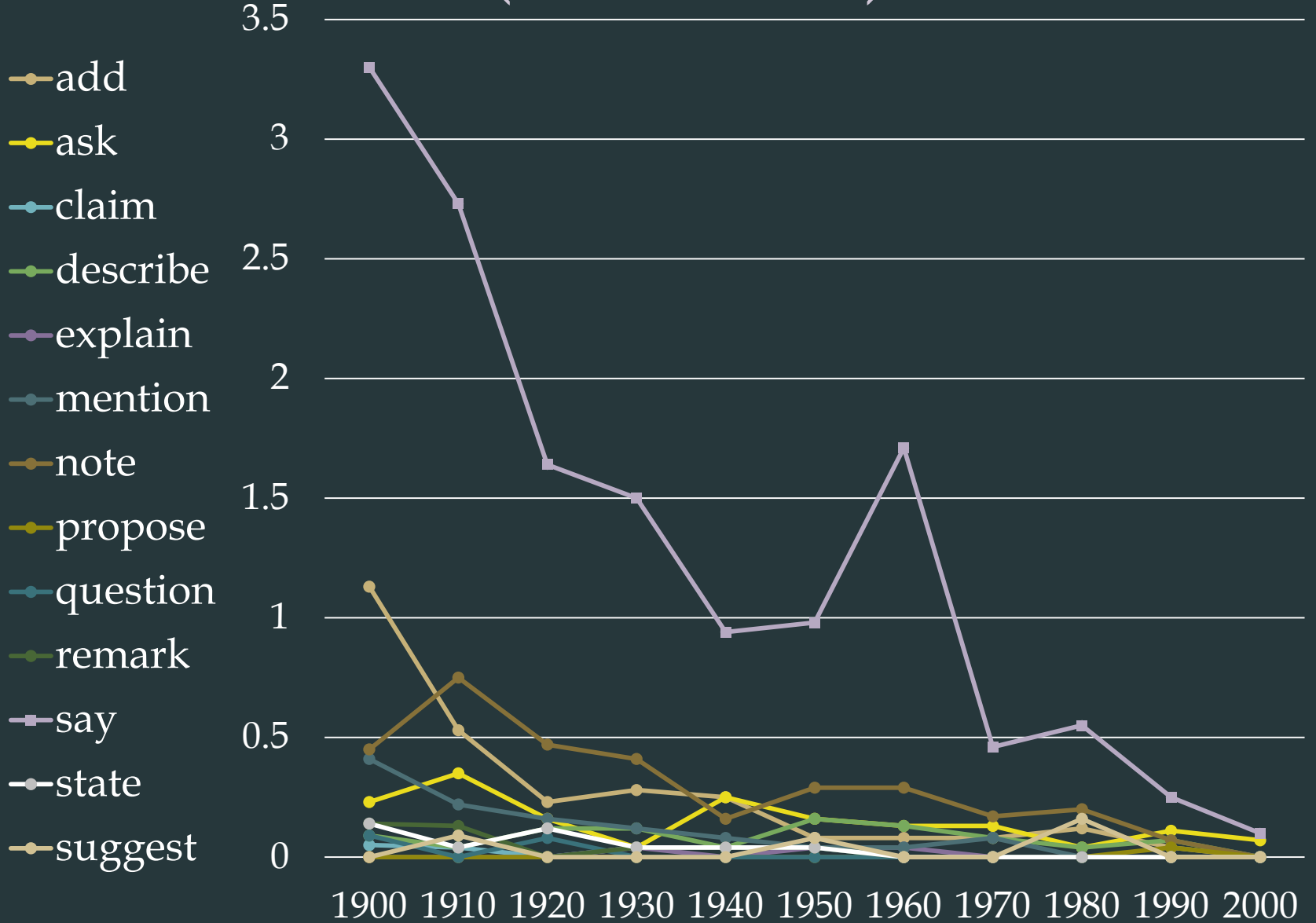
▣ Verbs of reasoning

- ⑦ From this we may conclude that collapsed stellar bodies formed of any of these elements will have nearly the same radii as if they were formed of pure helium. (1940, NF, *DeathSun*)

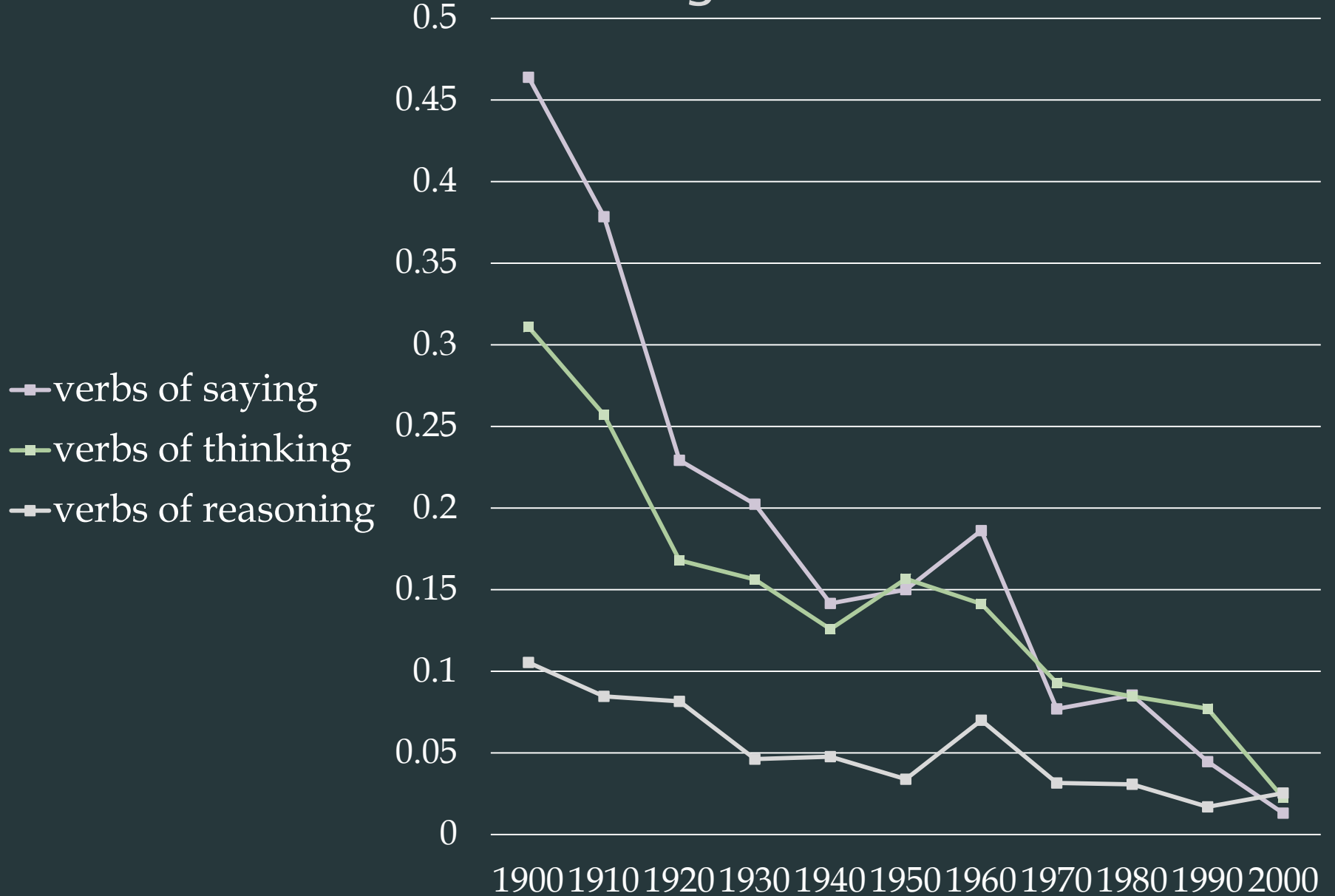
Frequency (pmw) all verbs investigated COHA (1900 - 2009)



Frequency (pmw) verbs of saying COHA (1900 - 2009)

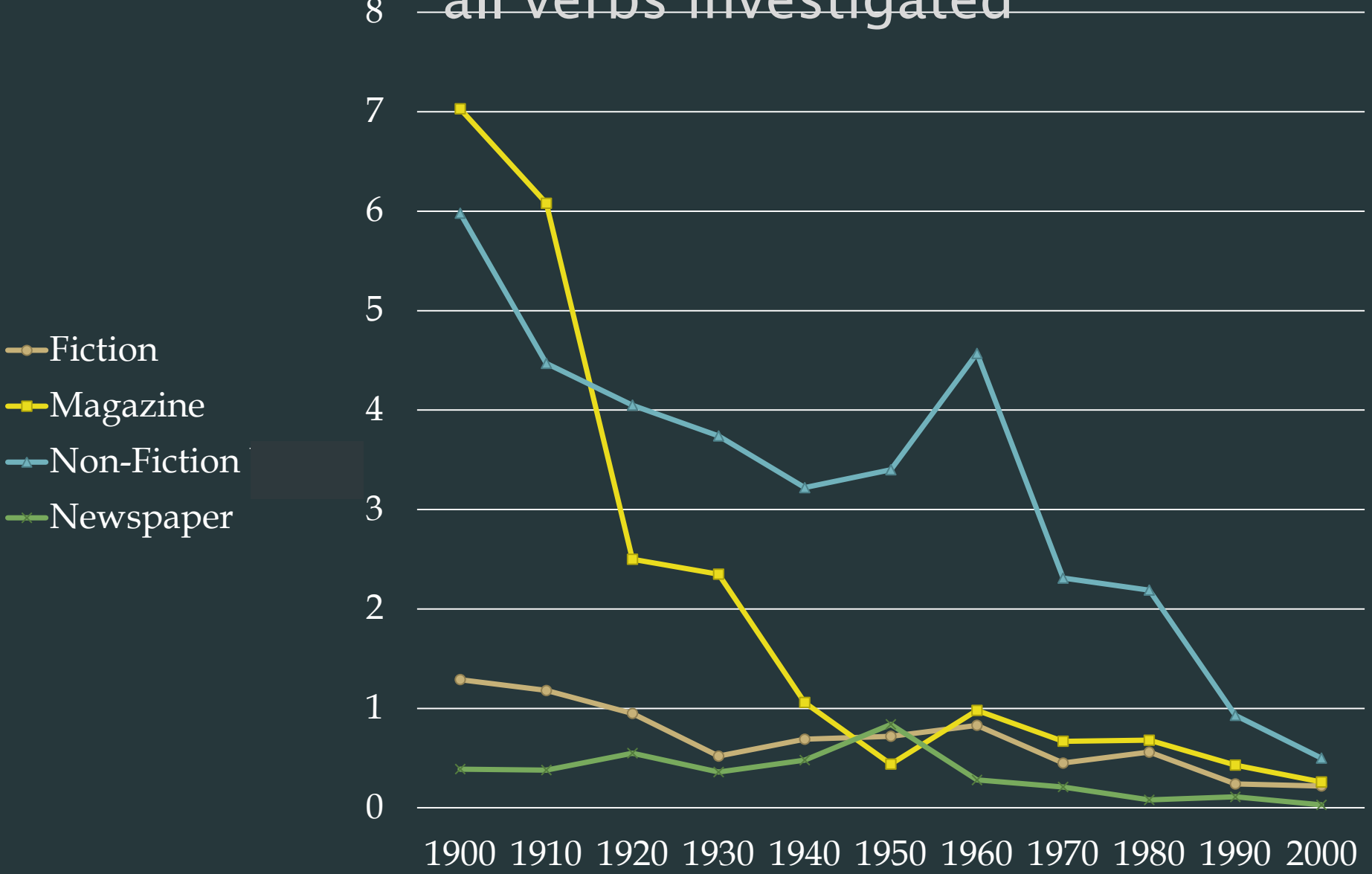


Development of medium in each of the verb categories



Genre distribution: Frequency (pmw)

all verbs investigated



We may say this hedging construction is disappearing

- ▣ The cxn is fairly popular at the beginning of the 20th century.
- ▣ Most typical lexical filler: *say*, but a multitude of other verbs occur.
- ▣ More common with verbs of saying than with verbs of thinking or reasoning
- ▣ Clearly declining in the course of the 20th century
- ▣ Never very popular in news or fiction, declining in magazines in the first half of the 20th c, and in NF in sharp decline since the 1960s.
- ▣ Possible reasons: Need for hedging is less pronounced due to socio-cultural change and ensuing change in politeness conventions.

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Conclusion

- ▣ In general: Changes in functional distribution and genre distribution of the modal *may* points to socio-cultural factors as an important driving force of the frequency changes in the modal domain
- ▣ In particular: The *we may say* construction is clearly declining in 20th century American English
- ▣ Possible reason: Need for extreme caution in academic and popular scientific writing is decreasing (cf. also Kranich 2016: Overall decline of epistemic modality markers in popular science texts).

Outlook (1)

- ▣ Aim: A more fine-grained perspective on the changes in the domain of modality, taking into account genre, discourse functions, the development of individual modals **and individual modal constructions**.
- ▣ Hypothesis: Frequency changes of modal expressions closely connected to changes in cultural, social conventions and the ensuing changing genre norms. > Differences between varieties explicable partly as differences in cultural norms (e.g. South African English speakers show no reluctance to use deontic *must*, cf. Rossouw & van Rooy 2012).

Outlook (2)

- ▣ Changes in society between 1960 and today:
 - ▣ **Decline of overt attention to hierarchy**
 - ▣ **Democratization and globalization of knowledge**
 - ▣ Globalization of communication (Internet)
 - ▣ Declining relevance of formal education as predictor of success
 - ▣ Increasing validation of youth and youth culture
 - ▣ (cf. Mair 2006: 1-11)

- ▣ Further plans: Investigation of other potential candidates for linguistic change driven by these social changes (e.g. boosters, hedges, personal pronouns, address terms).

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