

CHANGES IN THE MODAL DOMAIN IN RECENT ENGLISH: EFFECTS OF DEMOCRATIZATION?

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Workshop "Democratization of
English(es)". ICAME 39, Tampere

Structure

1. Introduction: what is happening in the modal domain in present-day English?
2. Democratization: a possible explanation
3. Corpus-based study of *may* and *must*
4. Effects of Power and Distance on requests in different varieties: Results of the DCT
5. 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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Democratization and the use of modals

- ▣ One effect of democratization: lesser attention is paid to overt hierarchies, more focus put on equality.
- ▣ The modals may be affected in a variety of ways:
 - **Deontic modality:** Permission and obligation are expressed differently if hierarchies are more or less overtly focused on, e.g. expressions of objective obligation (such as *have to*) may be preferred over expressions associated with subjective obligation (such as *must*)
 - **Epistemic modality:** Often used as a hedge to avoid face threats and promote agreement (cf. e.g. Hyland 1996). Less hierarchical relationships can lead to less need for such negative politeness strategies.

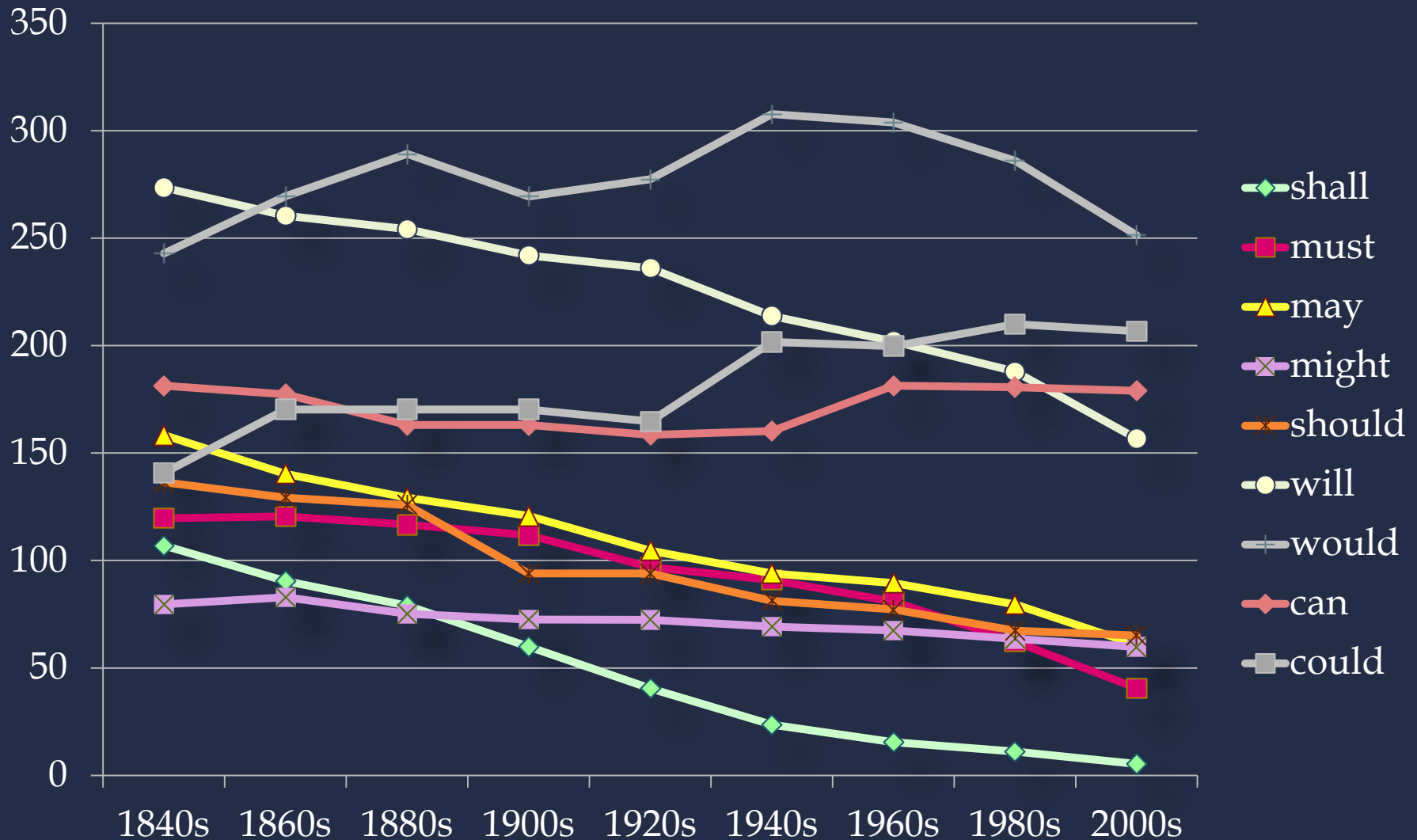
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Data: The Corpus of Historical American English

- ▣ 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* and *must* (1960-2000)

- ▣ Method: Functional analysis of 400 random instances of each *may* and *must*.
- ▣ 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* and *must*

I. Dynamic necessity, ability/possibility

must = expression of an internal need

may = be able to/be possible

II. Deontic

must = have to

may = be allowed to

III. Epistemic

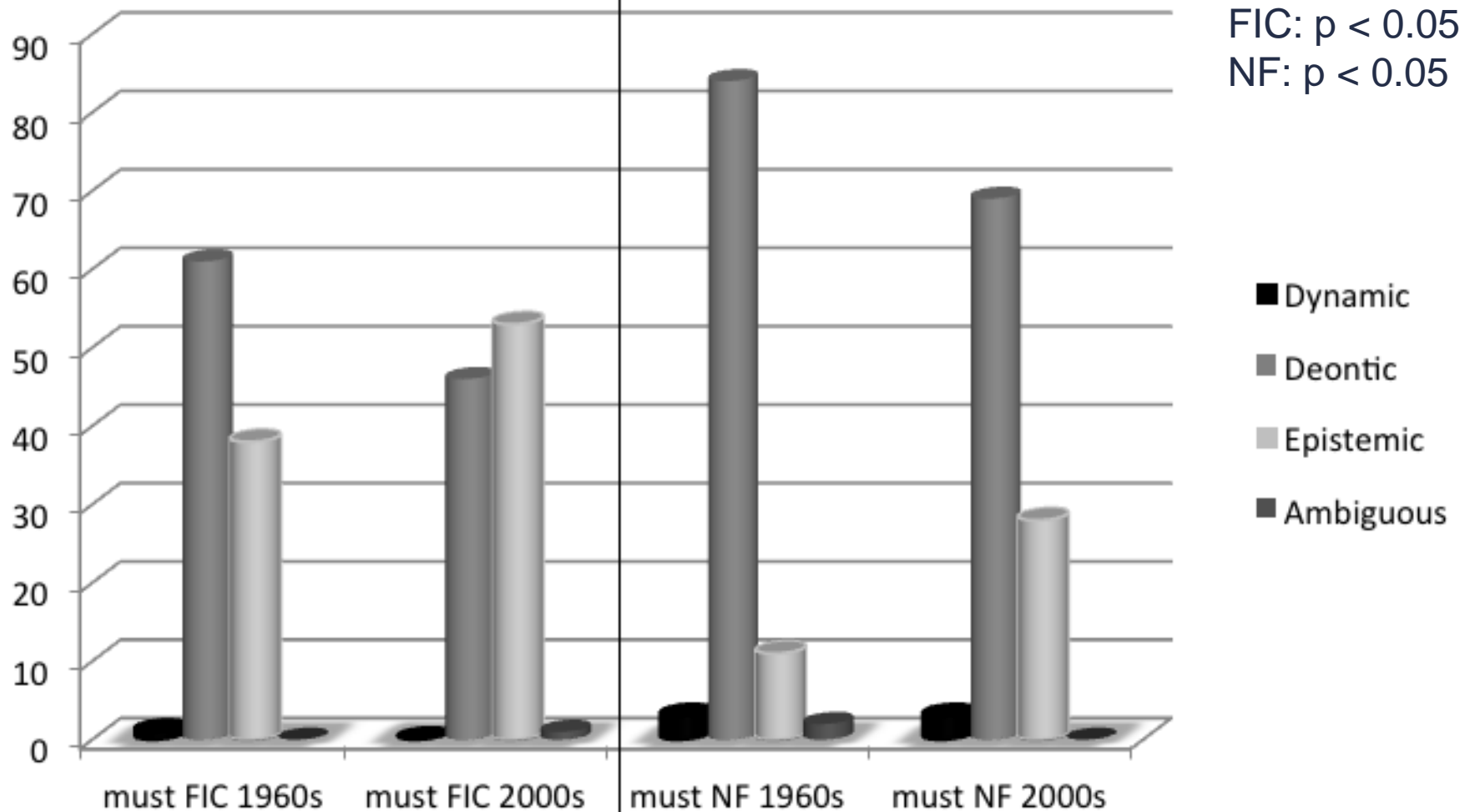
must = very likely

may = perhaps

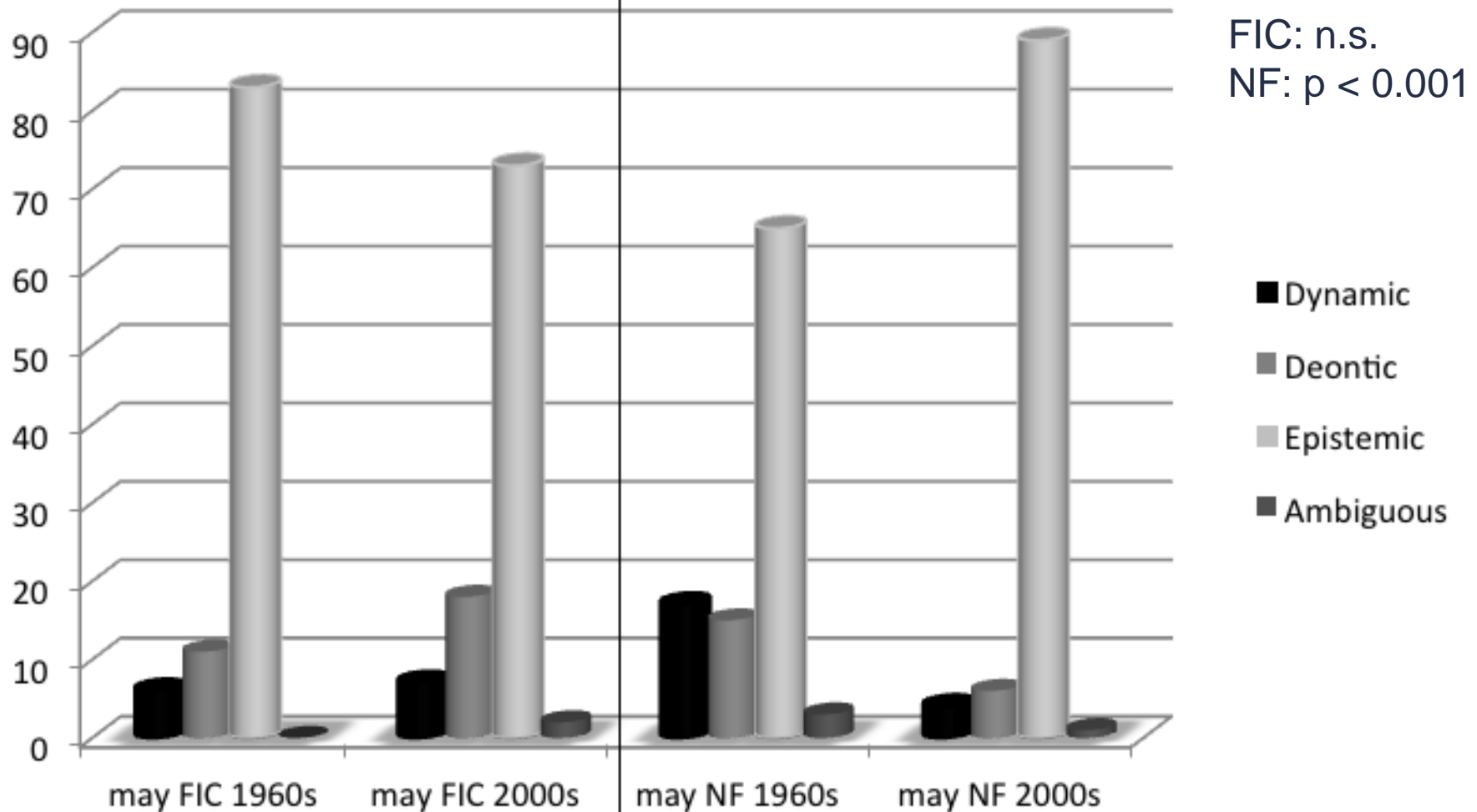
Ambiguous:

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

Must in COHA 1960s vs 2000s



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*)

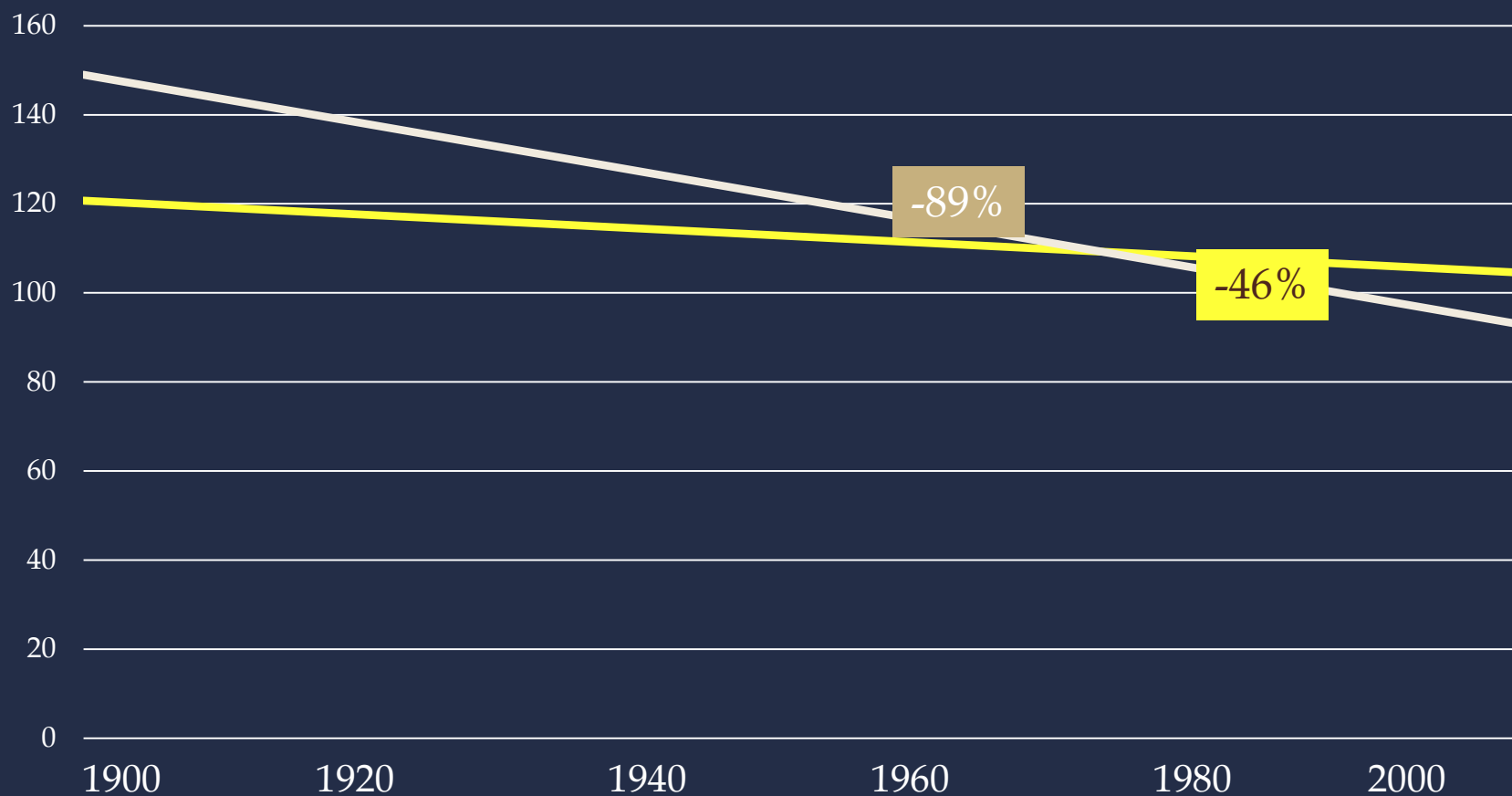
Non-epistemic *may* as part of hedging construction in 1960s non-fiction

- ▣ 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.

Decrease of a hedging construction

- ▣ Depraetere and Cappelle (2014) outline a web of constructions based on collocation patterns for the modal *may*.
- ▣ Decrease of *may* seems mostly have to do with the construction *we may* + verb of saying/reasoning.
- ▣ Looking at this pattern with 25 verbs (accept, add, agree, argue, claim, compare, conclude, consider, correct, classify, describe, disagree, exclude, explain, include, mention, note, recognize, say, state, suppose, understand, wonder).

Decline of a hedging construction



— may in general (per 100,000 words) — Cxn "we may SAY that"

Conclusions from this study

- ▣ Clear changes in proportion of non-epistemic and epistemic uses
- ▣ Sharper decrease of non-epistemic *may* mostly due to decrease in a hedging construction.
- ▣ This decrease is only due to a sharp decrease in non-fiction. No significant decrease in fiction.
- ▣ Genre and specific modal constructions are crucial to the changes > impact of socio-cultural factors seems very likely.

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Study design and methods

- ▣ DCT, 8 situations, request elicitation
- ▣ Focus on power difference and social distance
- ▣ Informants (N=157): speakers of AmE, BrE and IndE, 18-30 and 50+ years
- ▣ Coding: CCSARP coding manual (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, cf. Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010)

Study design and methods

- ▣ Sit. 3: Boss – employees, + Power, + Distance

It's really noisy in the office, so the boss asks the workers to be quiet.

- ▣ Boss: _____
- ▣ Other workers: Sure, sorry.

Coding examples

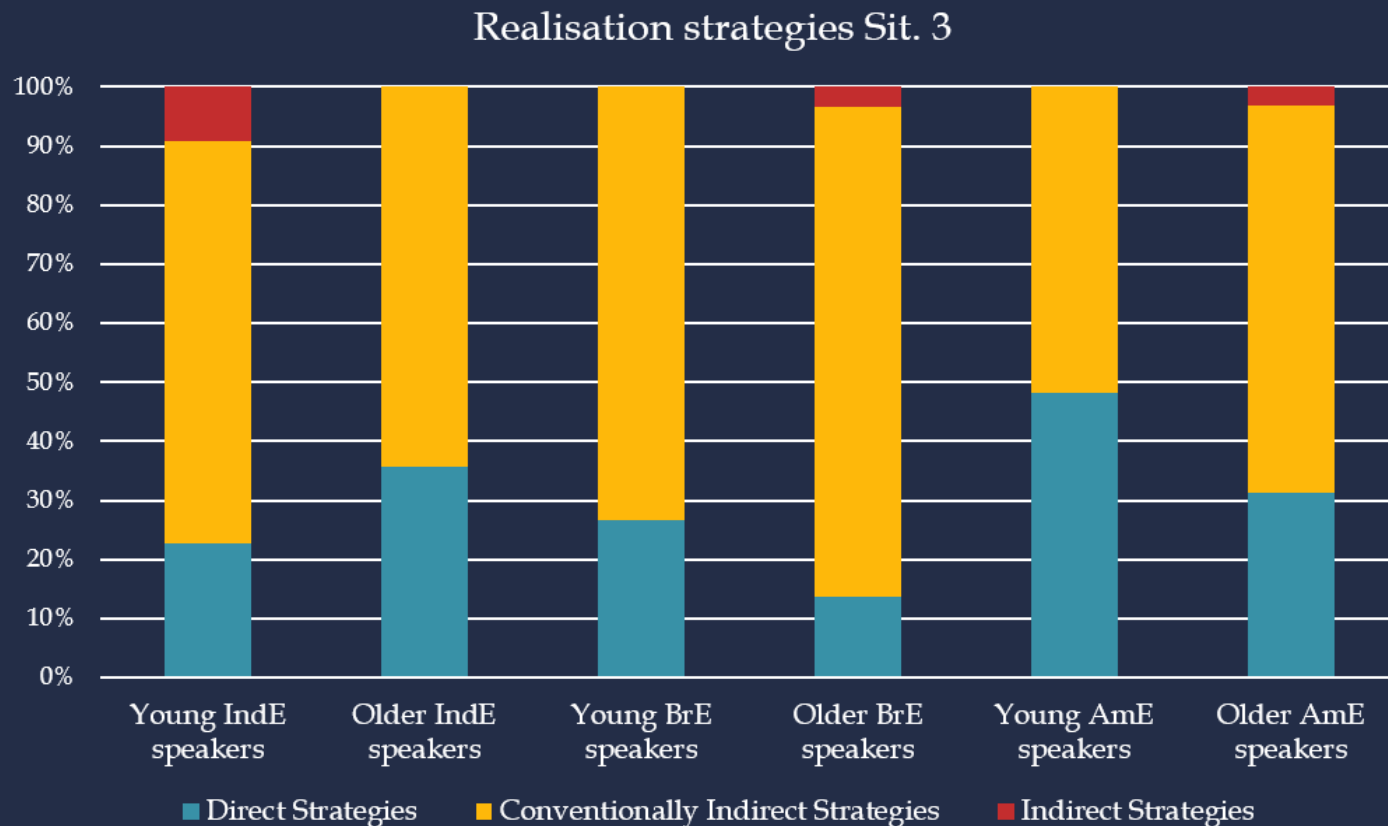
(cf. Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010)

Sit. 3: Boss – employees, + Power, + Distance

- ▣ Direct:
 - Hold down the noise, folks. (USo21)
- ▣ Conventionally indirect:
 - Guys, it would be great if you could tone it down a little around here. (INDy04)
- ▣ Non-conventionally indirect:
 - Hey guys it's feels like I'm in fish market (INDy18)

Results

▣ Sit. 3: Boss – employees, + Power, + Distance



Study design and methods

- ▣ Sit. 2: Wife – husband, - Power, - Distance

Wife (F) asks husband (M) to check the tyre pressure of their bikes. (IndE: to pick up the car from the service center today)

- ▣ F: _____
- ▣ M: Why?
- ▣ F: Because we have a date today with the Johnson family to go on a cycling tour. (IndE: Because we have quite a long drive to my cousin's birthday party tomorrow)

Coding examples

(cf. Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010)

Sit. 2: Wife – husband, - Power, - Distance

▣ Direct:

- Mani, please pick up our car today from the service centre without fail. (INDo09)

▣ Conventionally indirect:

- Honey, can you check the tyre pressure of the bikes? (UKy04)

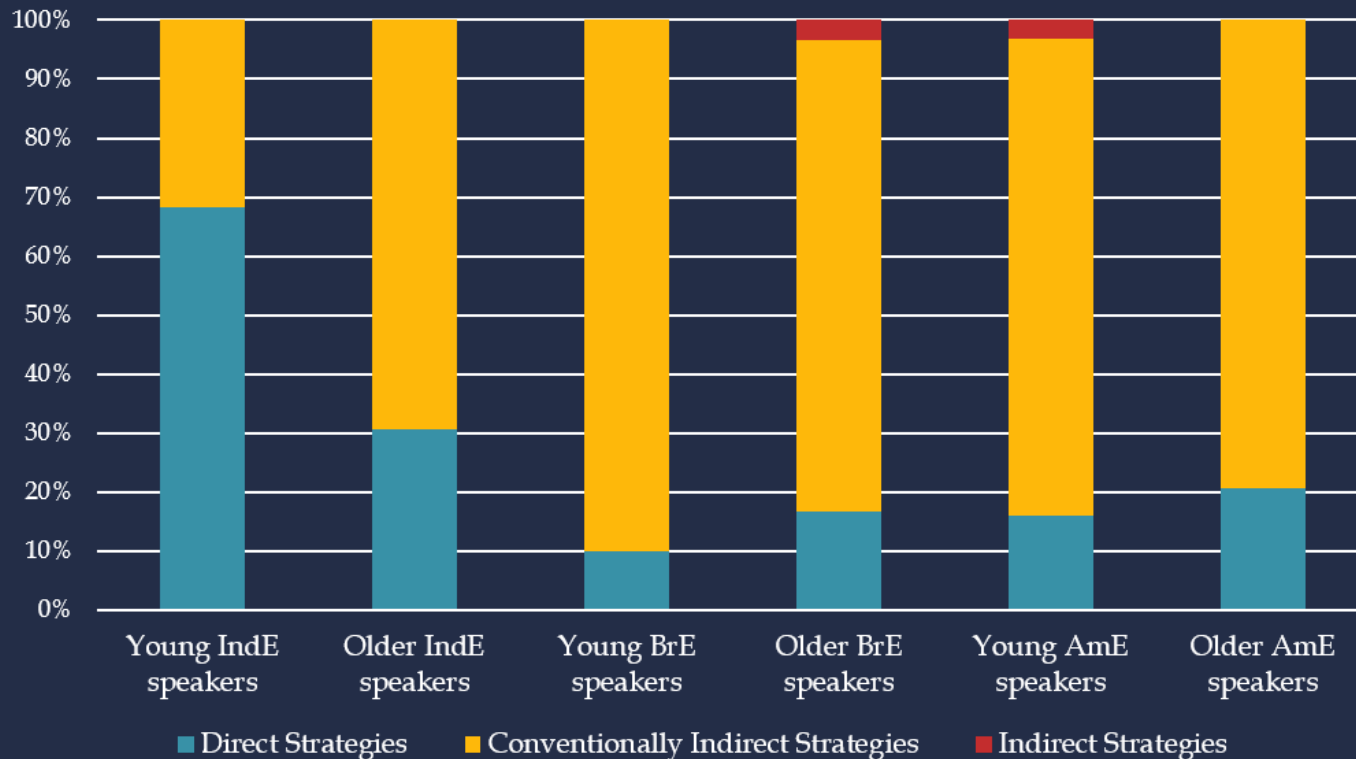
▣ Non-conventionally indirect:

- Baby, have you checked the tire pressure on our bikes yet? (USy02)

Results

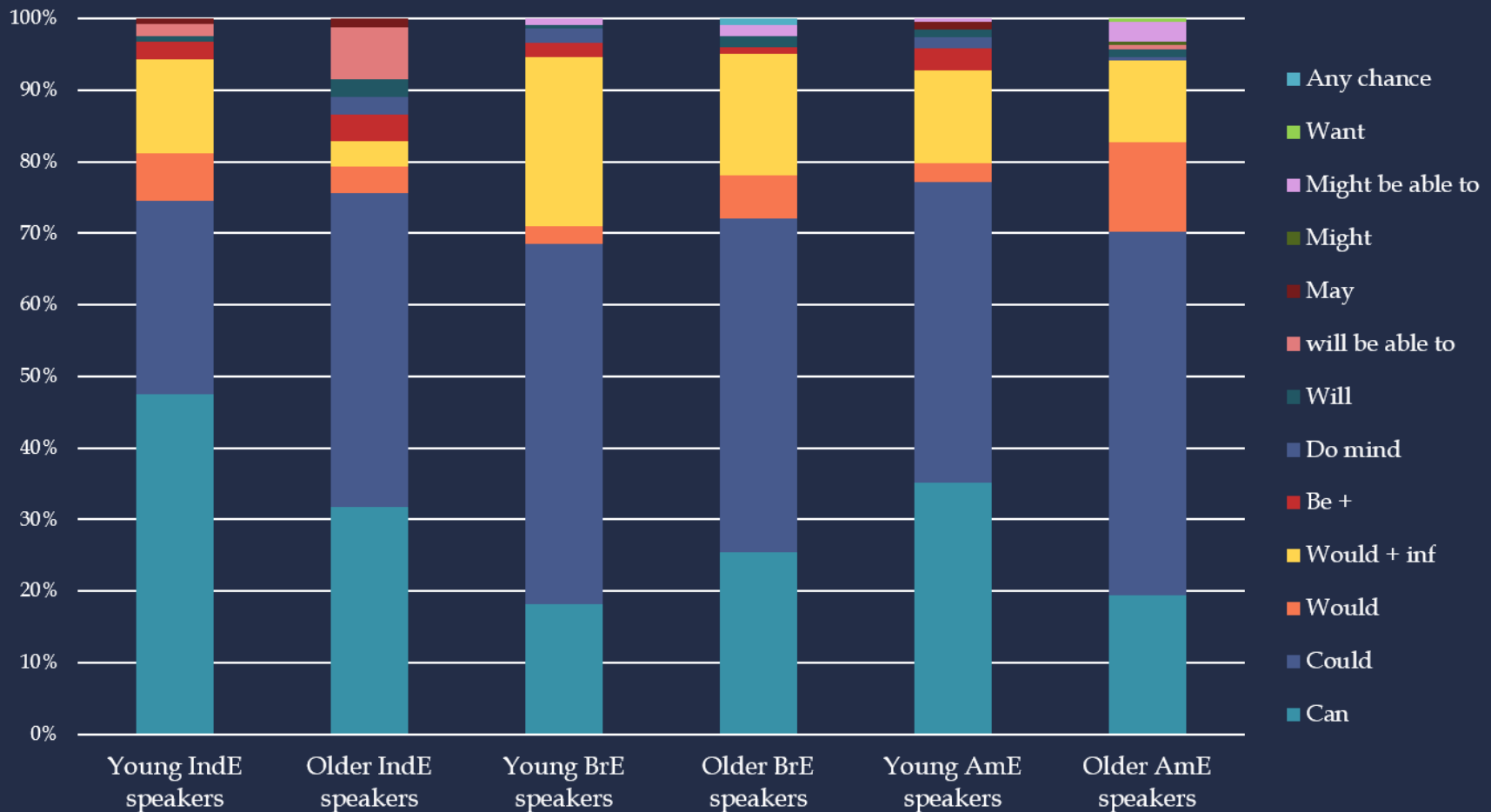
▣ Sit. 2: Wife – husband, - Power, - Distance

Realisation strategies Sit. 2



Modals and other modifiers

▣ Preparatory conditions in all QP head acts



Discussion

- ▣ Pilot study reveals generational and cross-cultural differences
- ▣ Preference for conventionally indirect strategies (esp. QP) across all data sets
- ▣ Tendency towards increasing directness in some situations and varieties
- ▣ → Less need for indirectness due to increasing democratization?
- ▣ Young Indians prefer more indirect strategies in situations of +P +D and more direct strategies in situations of -P and -D (see also: Bruns 2017)
- ▣ *Can* and *could* preferred modals for making requests
- ▣ Internal and external request modification yet to be analysed

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Preliminary Conclusion

- ▣ Changes in functional distribution and genre distribution of the modals may and must point to socio-cultural factors as an important driving force of the frequency changes in the modal domain
- ▣ Preliminary findings from the DCT pilot study support the notion of changes in directness-related conventions, again most likely due to socio-cultural factors

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.
- ▣ 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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