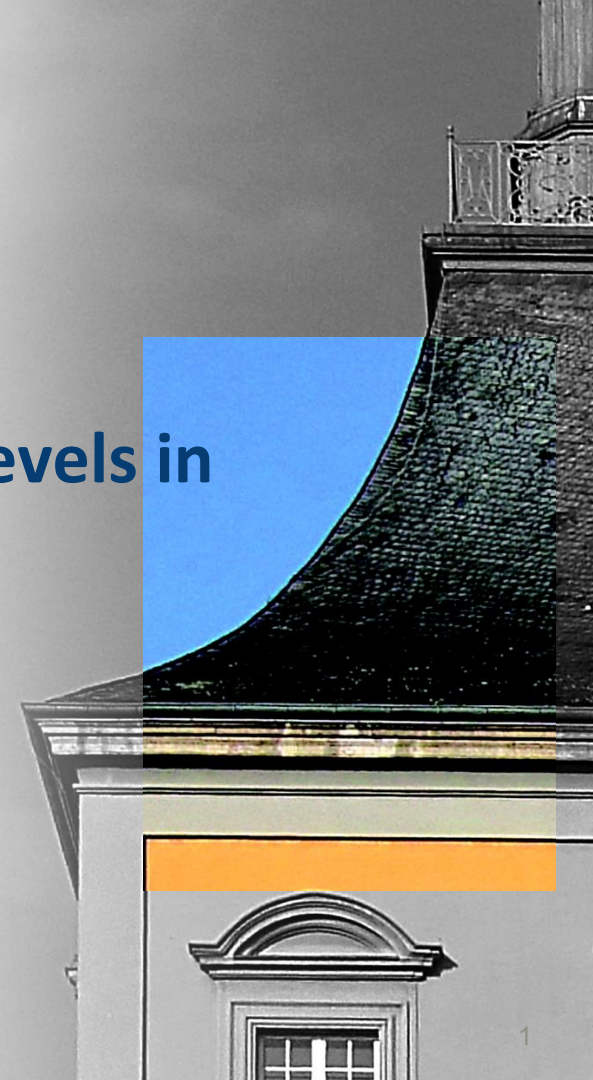# Asking politely?
Changing norms concerning directness levels in requests
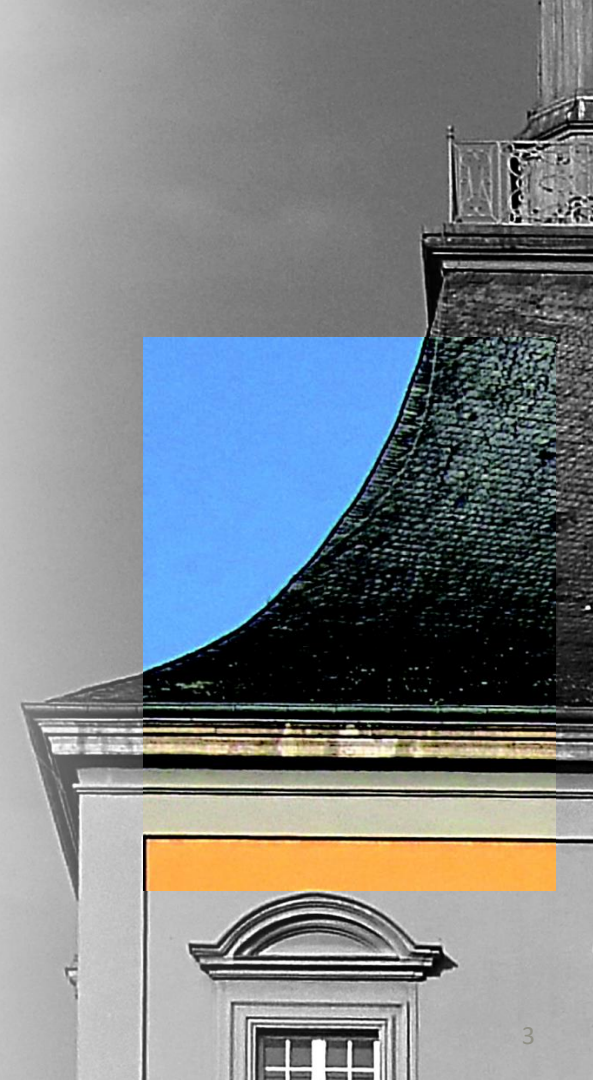
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1. Introduction: Socio-cultural impact on recent language change
2. Effects of power and weight of imposition on requests
3. Changes in the modal domain: Comparing the DCT results to corpus-based findings
4. Conclusion and outlook

1. INTRODUCTION

Socio-cultural impact on recent language change

LINK BETWEEN SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES AND RECENT LANGUAGE CHANGE

– Changes in society between 1960 and today:

  – Decline of overt attention to hierarchy

  – Democratization

  – Globalization of knowledge

  – Globalization of communication (Internet)

  – […]

  (cf. Mair 2006: 1-11)

DEMOCRATIZATION

– In the linguistic sense, democratization refers to a "rise of more congenial, less face threatening alternatives in a society apparently more egalitarian, democratic, and antiauthoritarian", leading to "speakers' tendency to avoid unequal and face threatening modes of interaction" (Farrelly & Seoane 2012: 393)

– Note: Less overt power markers in language may not mean that less power is being exercised, but that it is simply exercised more implicitly (cf. Fairclough 1992: 1-29)

"Language and social contexts influence one another, and together constitute social processes." (Culpeper & Nevala 2012: 372)

- Problem: "Sociocultural processes and their related concepts are often introduced into works on the history of English in a piecemeal fashion [...] social contact can be partially analyzed empirically [...], but a sociocultural process such as democratization cannot." (365)

- But link between culture of origin, linguistic choices and attitudes in individual speakers (e.g. towards social hierarchies) can be.

- **Our goal: To see culturally triggered change in linguistic conventions in different varieties of English and of German**

LINGUISTIC MARKERS AFFECTED BY DEMOCRATIZATION

- Modals (both deontic uses, as permission and obligation are expressed differently if hierarchies are more or less overtly focused on, and epistemic uses, which are often used as a hedge; cf. e.g. Hyland 1996, Kranich 2011).
- Other hedges as well as boosters (lesser need to downtone, more freedom to boost one's opinion if hiearchies are flatter)
- Terms of address (more equality-oriented, less hierarchy-oriented)
- FTAs, e.g. requests
- Changes in conceptualisation of hierarchical relations should affect realisation of FTAs
- Previous research has shown interesting culture-based contrasts across linguacultures, cf. e.g. Blum-Kulka et al. (eds.) (1989), and across varieties of English, cf. e.g. Schneider & Barron (eds.) (2008)

2. EFFECTS OF POWER, AND WEIGHT OF IMPOSITION ON REQUESTS in varieties of English and German
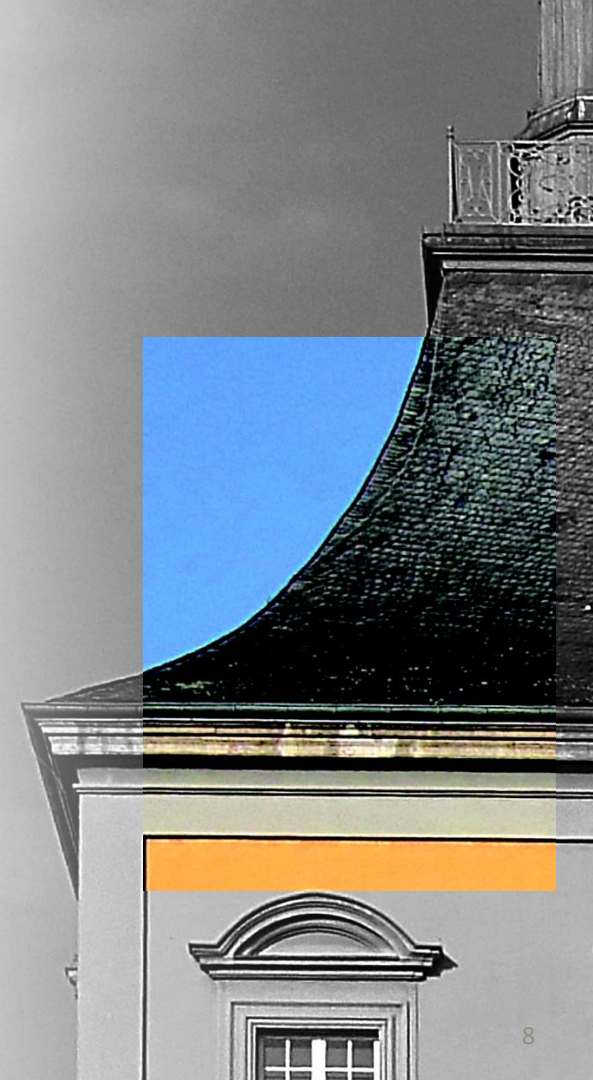
Previous findings on English-German contrasts in request strategies

– Seminal contrastive findings (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, House e.g. 1996) showed German speakers to tend towards greater directness in discourse, also concerning requests, e.g. using direct imperatives (*Seid mal leise! Be MAL quiet!*)

– Kranich & Schramm (2015), using DCTs comparable to the ones used in the CCSARP, showed that these previously established contrasts between English and German seem to be no longer in place concerning younger speakers (British and German students, 20-25):

– All of their speakers vastly preferred conventionally indirect requests (such as *Could I borrow a pen?*) over direct requests (*Give me your pen!*) and hints (*oh I wish I could write that down but I don't have a pen on me.*). Imperatives hardly occurred at all.

Hypotheses

– Conventions are changing due to changes in socio-cultural norms.

– Since a flattening of hierarchies is assumed to play a role, we would assume that power differences between speaker and hearer have a lesser effect on chosen request strategies.

– We would assume that cultures differ with respect to the advancement of democratization in general and hence with respect to recent changes in pragmatic strategies (cf. also Bruns 2017).

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

– **DCT**, using the 8 situations of Kranich & Schramm's (2015) questionnaire to elicit requests

– Focus on power difference and weight of imposition

– Informants (n = 232): speakers of AmE, BrE, IndE and German, 18-30 and 50+ years

– Coding: CCSARP coding manual (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, cf. Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010)

– **Interviews** with 8 participants in UK (n = 3) and Germany (n = 5)
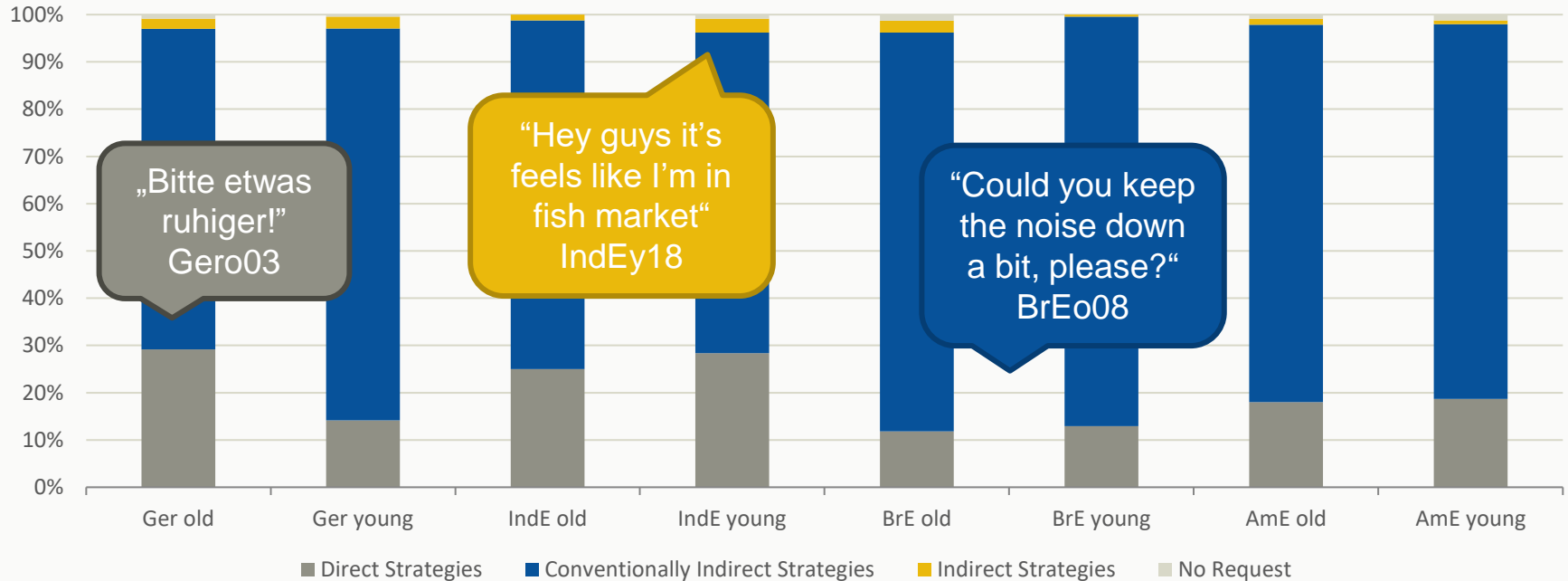
Sit. 3: Boss – employees, + Power, - Weight

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

– Boss: _____

– Other workers: Sure, sorry.

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Mean number of words
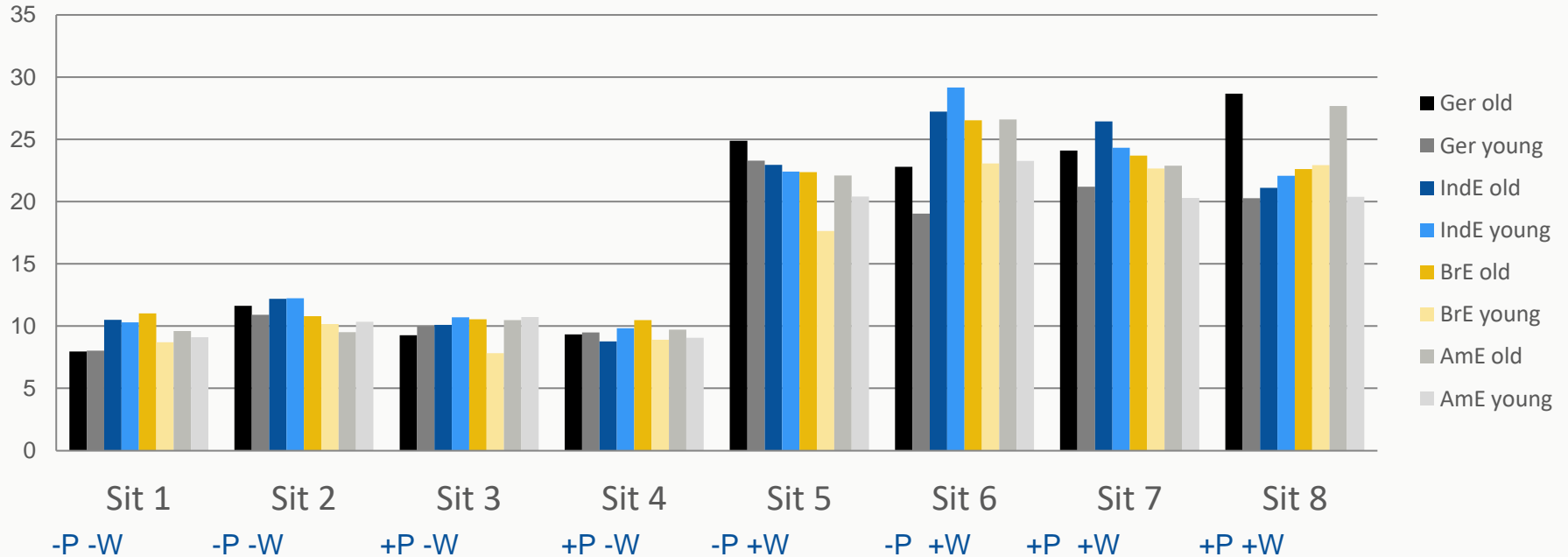
QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

– English, UK: **F, 25, student & F, 24, international relations degree**

– I think it depends on the role they're in and also the person rather than generation.

– But I also think nowadays there's a lot more of like office culture and people like being told of like people's/ other people's sensitivities that I don't think back then there were so maybe their boss would just kind of like, um, not verbally abuse, but you know, kind of be more like „Shut up!", you know, straight forward with their employees whereas now (.) everyone is a bit more like sensitive and we kind of like respect //everyone else//.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

– English, UK: **F, 45, worker**

– We have a couple of young ones, and they don't listen. They're rude. […] And they are not very respectful. The way they speak to the / all of us. […] if they are asking FOR something, if they WANT something, then obviously they can be quite polite and they can say "please"

– I think [people who are older] DO ask in more of a direct way (…) obviously that's just the position of authority that they have got. […] because they are more older and wiser and more experienced, it does come across differently

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

- German, Germany: **F, 51, secretary**, when asked whether a change has taken place in the way people address others dependent on hierarchical relations, in the last 10 or 20 years: "Ja, auf jeden Fall. Ich glaube, das verändert sich ganz stark. Also, Respektspersonen gibt's da nicht mehr so... ist mein Eindruck" ('Yes, absolutely. I think this has really been changing a lot. Authority figures no longer really exist that much... that's my impression.')

- German, Germany: **F, 60, secretary**: "Ich denke schon, dass meine Generation grundsätzlich höflicher war. Vielleicht ist das aber auch eine Krankheit meiner Generation oder der Älteren, die immer sagen, früher war alles besser oder früher waren die Leute höflicher. Ich erlebe es hier aktuell ja auch, dass jüngere Leute sehr zuvorkommend sind (...) da ist die Umgangsform einwandfrei... bis auf ganz wenige Ausnahmen." ("I do think my generation was generally more polite. Maybe that's an illness of my generation or of older people, who always say, everything used to be better, or in my days, people used to be more polite. Actually I also experience here (at the University of Bonn) that younger people today are very polite (...) their manners are impeccable... with very few exceptions.")
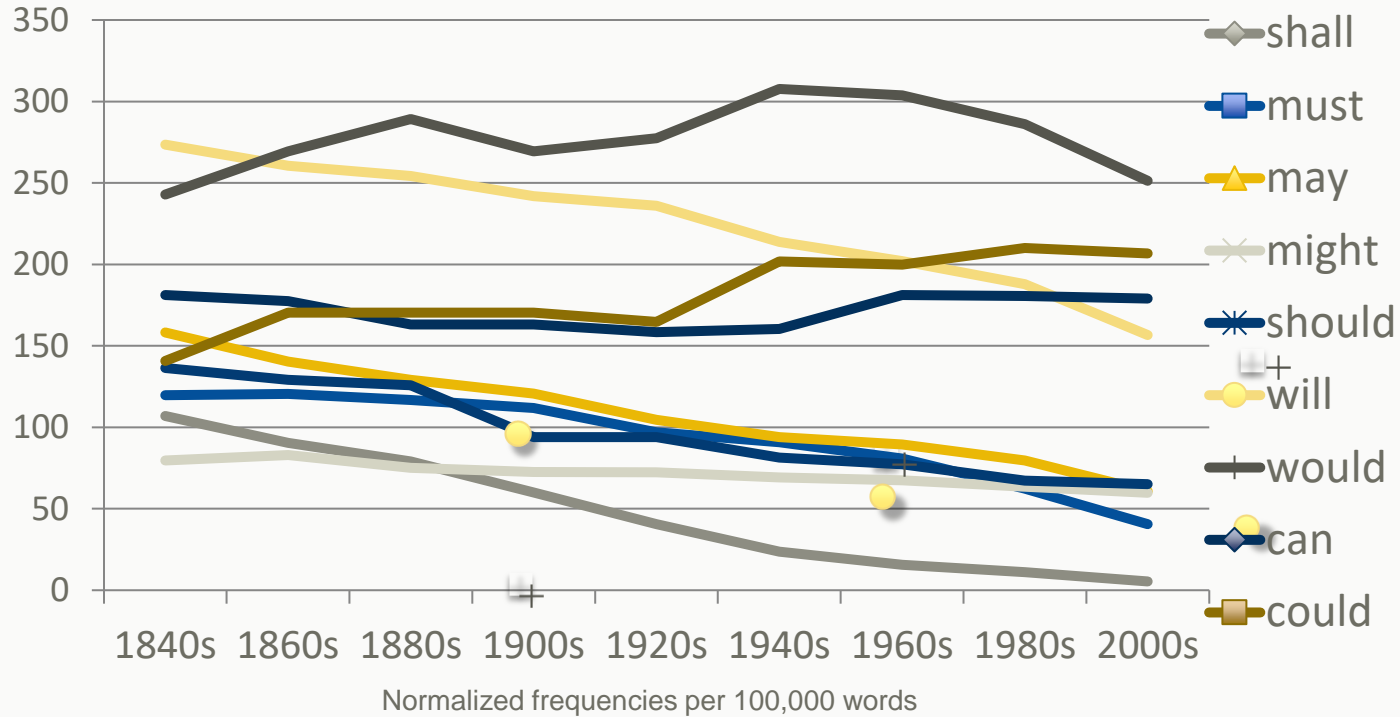
3. CHANGES IN THE MODAL DOMAIN

Comparing the DCT results to corpus-based findings
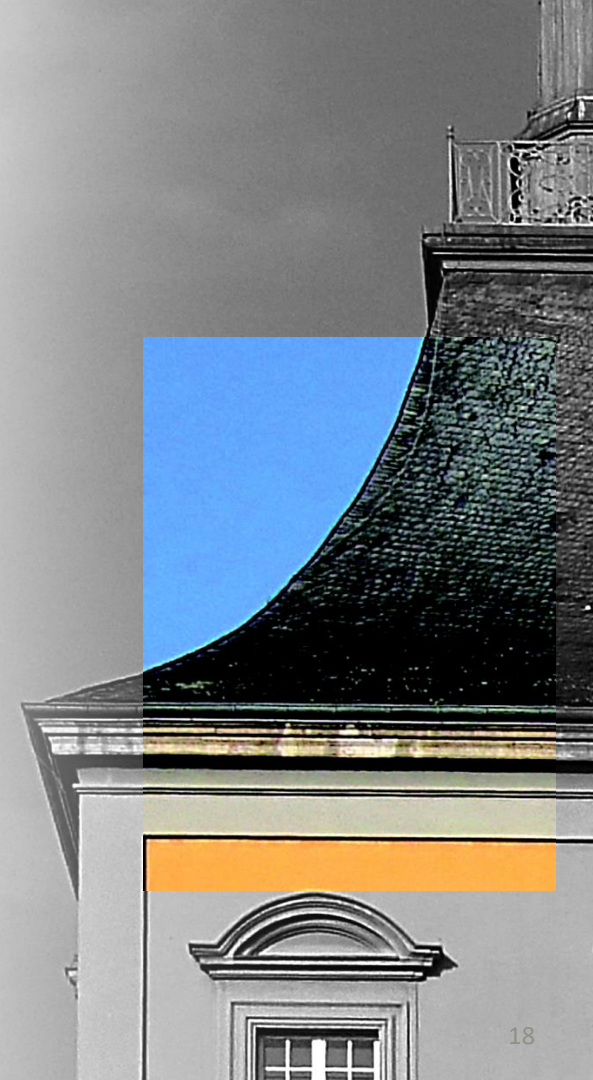
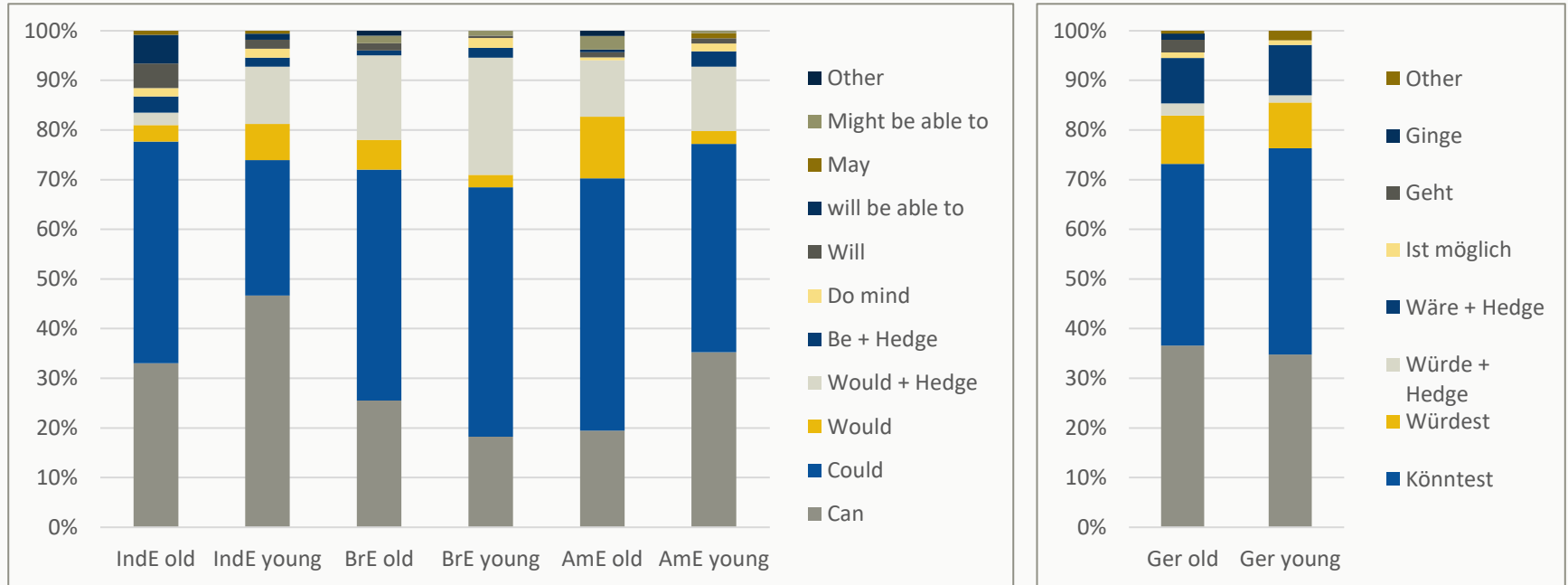# The decline of the modals and their different functions

- Previous research shows: Modals decline, semi-modals are on the rise (cf. e.g. Mair 2006).

- 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!

THE MODALS IN COHA (1840-2009)
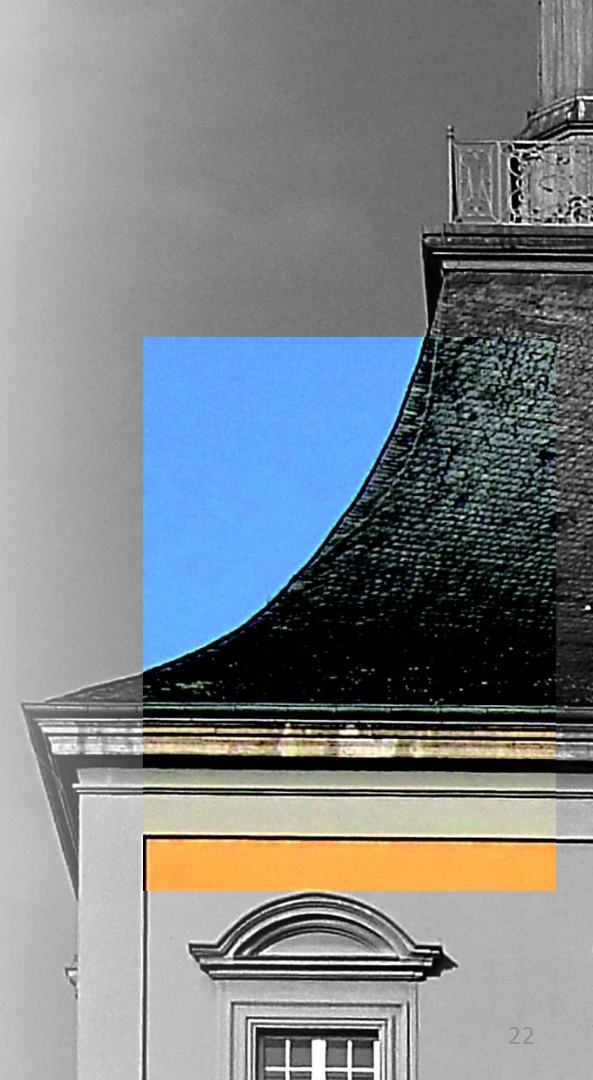
Normalized frequencies per 100,000 words

Legend: shall, must, may, might, should, will, would, can, could

see also Leech (2009)

Preparatory Condition in all Query Preparatory head acts

4. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Preliminary Conclusion

– Preliminary findings from the DCT study support the notion of changes in directness-related conventions, again most likely due to socio-cultural factors, though concerning Indian English, L2 competence might also play a role.

– Changes in the frequencies of modals can be related to changes in pragmatic conventions.

– Generational and cross-cultural differences

– Older German speakers tend to be more direct than British and American English speakers (confirming results by e.g. House 1996), but this pragmatic contrast seems to be changing in the younger generation (confirming findings by Kranich & Schramm (2015).

– Unclear whether as a result of democratization and socio-cultural change or perhaps influence of English/US-American conventions on German norms.

– **Aim**: A more fine-grained perspective on changes connected with democratisation, focusing on modal markers, hedges in general, forms of address and FTAs.

– **Hypothesis**: Frequency changes of the relevant linguistic expressions closely connected to changes in cultural, social conventions and the ensuing changing genre norms.

– Differences between different varieties of English and German make visible both impact of language structure (e.g. with regard to types of hedging) and culture.

Plans:

– Further analysis of the relevant linguistic markers > corpus-based, DCTs.

– Supplemented by interviews and questionnaires on attitudes towards hierarchical relations in society to see connection more clearly between linguistic choices and attitudes

– Inclusion of Austrian German (pragmatically very different according to e.g. Muhr 1995, 2008; e.g. clear differences concerning terms of address, cf. Kretzenbacher 2011)

– Indian English not included in final project outline (because L2 variety)

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Thank you for your attention!

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