

Democratisation in the South African parliamentary Hansard? A study of change in modal auxiliaries

by

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ABSTRACT

Democratisation as explanation for language change covers cases where linguistic usage demonstrates increasing avoidance of forms that cue unequal relations between people (Fairclough 1992, Farrelly & Seoane 2012, Leech et al. 2009). Changes in the use of modal verbs, especially the increasing avoidance of using modals in a way that imposes face-threatening obligations or rely on a hierarchically stratified view of human relations, have been adduced as evidence of such linguistic democratisation (e.g. Myhill 1995, Leech 2003, Millar 2009). The change in modal usage has been recorded across Inner Circle varieties of English (Collins 2009), with the exception of South African English, where core modals like *must* have not been in decline to the same degree (Wasserman & Van Rooy 2014).

The idea that democratisation accounts for language change is rooted in the assumption that, as societies become more egalitarian, language comes to reflect those changes. Democratisation, here, has a generalised meaning. In political science, however, democratisation specifically denotes extension of franchise and parliamentary participation to the broader public, e.g. the inclusion of women and other previously disenfranchised groups (Farrelly & Seoane 2012, Spirling 2016). Parliaments are thus a primary site where democratisation can be seen in action, making parliamentary discourse, as represented in the Hansard of Commonwealth countries, a particularly relevant data source of linguistic evidence.

South Africa offers an exemplary case of social change which may influence language use. This paper first outlines the historical trajectory of democratisation in the South African parliament. It subsequently sets out to correlate these socio-political changes with changes in the use of English modal auxiliaries in a specialised corpus consisting of the South African parliamentary Hansard, sampled at 10 year intervals from 1925 to 2015, to yield approximately 500,000 words per year sampled.

Modal auxiliaries are an important resource in political discourse (Simon-Vandenberg 1997, Vukovic 2014). We trace changes in the use of modal auxiliaries, as possible evidence for linguistic democratisation aligned with social and political democratisation, taking into consideration both changes in the immediate communication context of the chamber, and changes in the wider public audience as construed by parliamentarians. Changes in the frequencies of modals are reported first, before turning to the semantics of a random sample of modals that display significant changes in frequency over time, focussing on the strength of deontic force and the sources of obligation.

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