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Tracking change in epistemic stance constructions expressing advice in the London–Lund Corpora

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Epistemic stance constructions such as modal verbs are commonly used to give advice in everyday conversation (e.g., *you could do it*). They express uncertainty about the validity of the future event, and they are also weakly deontic, making them suitable for countering the negative social consequences associated with advice-giving. This paper investigates recent change of epistemic modal constructions expressing advice in English conversation based on data from the London–Lund Corpora from the 1950s up until the present day. It seeks to determine how the use of the constructions has changed over the last half-century, and the socio-communicative factors that may have played a role.

Pervasive in human encounters, advice-giving is at the heart of how we organize social relations with each other. However, telling another person what to do is a notoriously sensitive undertaking, meaning that the way we express ourselves is of crucial importance. A common way to give advice in English is to use epistemic modal constructions such as *could* (Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson, 2017). These constructions are less direct than some of the other constructions (e.g., imperatives; *do it*), and they also express a lower degree of epistemic control and certainty about the prospective event (cf. Paradis, in press). Leech (2003) reports that modal verbs such as *can* and *could* are on the rise in Present-Day English, possibly due to the growing tendency for speakers to avoid constructions that assert power and authority over the addressee. However, more research is needed to determine if this explanation applies to different socio-communicative functions of modal verbs such as advice-giving.

The data for the analysis come from everyday conversation in two comparable corpora of Present-Day spoken British English, London–Lund Corpus 1 (LLC–1) with data from the 1950s–1980s and the brand new London–Lund Corpus 2 (LLC–2) from 2014–2019. In order to determine the relative frequency of epistemic modal constructions (e.g., *can/could*, *may/might*, *will/would*, and their negative counterparts) in the corpora, I extract the full range of constructions expressing advice, using text-processing tools such as part-of-speech taggers, parsers and speech-act taggers. I also annotate the constructions for several formal and functional factors (e.g., modal verb, agentivity, speaker commitment).

A preliminary comparison of epistemic modal constructions expressing advice in the two corpora suggests that the use of the constructions has increased from LLC–1 to LLC–2. This increase seems to mirror the general trend where speakers in the later corpus are considerably more likely to share their thoughts about what other people should (or should not) do than speakers in the earlier corpus. A closer look at the individual occurrences of the epistemic modal constructions reveals a shift to advice expressed in more indirect ways, involving the modal verb *could* (rather than *can*), the inclusive *we* (e.g., *we could do it*) even if the act is to be carried out by the addressee only, and the lack of intensifiers. This suggests that, in English conversation, there is an increased preference for epistemic modal constructions that make the act of giving advice less explicit and that warrant a high degree of caution and tact.

References

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