

Analyzing language change in British parliamentary discourse: Power and authority markers, 1930-2000

Carlos Soriano Jiménez
University of Málaga

In recent literature, one of the processes of language change which has received much attention has been the concept of democratization of discourse (Fairclough 1992: 201, for example), which often falls under the study of critical discourse analysis. This approach can take full advantage of corpus linguistics (Partington & Marchi 2015: 217; Flowerdew 2012: 175), in order to quantitatively analyze how sociocultural changes have an impact on parliamentary discourse. The primary goal of this paper is to assess to what extent and how these changes have been reflected in the language employed by Members of Parliament in Britain. The time framework chosen spans from 1930 to 2000, once universal full suffrage was achieved in 1928 via the Representation of the People Act and the Labour and Conservative parties shared the political power in the United Kingdom.

Two research questions guide this study: (i) how and to what degree has British parliamentary language removed “overt markers of power asymmetry” (Farrelly & Seoane 2012: 393) in the changing and ongoing process of democratization?, and (ii) is there any relationship between the phenomenon of democratization and the alleged decline of the core modals in British parliamentary discourse? In order to answer these questions, this corpus-based political discourse analysis examines the frequency changes of semantically-tagged words associated with expressions of exercise of subjection, command, control, power, obligation and equality. It also investigates the diachronic development of modals which express obligation, necessity, permission, possibility and ability. The data of the present investigation is from the online diachronic Hansard Corpus (Alexander & Davies 2015), which includes written records of British parliamentary debates. The expected results are (i) an overall fall in the normalized frequency of the words associated with authority and subjection of this study, (ii) a higher incidence of those related to equality and inclusion, and (iii) a decline in the number of occurrences per million words of the core modals aforementioned. Establishing connections between broad socio-cultural tendencies and specific linguistic changes may pave the way for future corpus-based political discourse analysis research.

References

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