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Maybe: Development and Topic Marking

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development of *maybe* and related expressions (i.e., *it may be*, *mayhap*) in the history of English. I provide a quantitative analysis of their long-term histories by drawing on the *OED* and its quotations database, along with data from two different datasets, namely, the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts*, version 3.0, and the Brown family of corpora. After extracting their instances from the datasets, this study analyzes the data to determine the position in which *maybe* is used the most within a clause. The results of the analysis indicate that both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were crucial periods for the development of *maybe*. In addition, I further demonstrate that the target adverb, over time, began exhibiting features of a topic marker, and that the development has also interwoven with the process of subjectification.

Keywords: English modal adverbs, *OED*, corpus data, historical analysis, topic/theme, subjectification.

1. Introduction

The historical corpora of English originate in the *Helsinki Corpus*, and more and more corpora have now become available for historical research. Due to the limited number of words in these corpora, however, they cannot yield sufficient instances of some target expressions; particularly, they lack low frequency items for linguistics research. In addition, few corpora (corpus series) span more than a thousand years of English usage. This study, therefore, explores an alternative way of using an even larger database for providing big data through the analysis of modal adverbs as case studies.

　　This study concerns the histories of the modal adverb *maybe* and related expressions, and takes a fresh look at the change in *maybe* in the history of

English. In comparison to other modal adverbs formed by the combination of two elements (morphemes), the history of *maybe* is less well documented (e.g., on *indeed*, Traugott – Dasher 2002; on *no doubt*, Simon-Vandenbergen – Aijmer 2007; Davidse – De Wolf – Van Linden 2015; on *of course*, Lenker 2010). In present-day English, *maybe* is used to mark epistemic possibility, as in (1):

(1)   *Maybe* I'm right and *maybe* I'm wrong. (Swan 2005: 17)

In the history of English, modal adverbs assumed their forms during the Middle English period; in contrast, they did not have "their present-day epistemic meanings" at that time (Hanson 1987: 137). In a similar vein, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*, *maybe* is first evinced in the Late Middle English period, and it derives from *it may be (that)*. Additionally, based on Terasawa (1997), Table 1 indicates the first attestation and epistemic use of typical modal adverbs, including *maybe*:

Table 1. The development of the main modal adverbs (from Terasawa 1997)

Modal adverbs	First appearance in English	First epistemic usage
certainly	c.1300	c.1303
surely	?c.1300	?c.1300
maybe	a.1325	a.1325
possibly	1391	1600
probably	c.1535	1613

Although previous studies agree on the origin and first appearance of *maybe*, no comprehensive analysis of the semantic shift is offered. Therefore, a detailed description derived from historical data is the starting point of this study, followed by a theoretical discussion of the general linguistic change.

2. Methodology

The main data source of the present study is retrieved from the quotations database of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), based on the CD-ROM version of the second edition (Version 4.0) (cf. Berg 1991). The use of the *OED* quotations database as a "corpus" is widely discussed in the literature,

including Brewer (2000), Mair (2001, 2004), Hoffmann (2004), Iyeiri (2010), and Rohdenburg (2013). The database is not a balanced or representative one, and the number of quotations it comprises fluctuates significantly throughout the different periods. However, the dataset has certain advantages that offset these drawbacks. The database contains over 2.4 million quotations, spanning more than a thousand years of English usage. This amounts to "a total of 33-35 million words" (Hoffmann 2004: 25), i.e. a sizable body of actual usage in English over a considerable period of time, which is indispensable for a linguistic analysis.

In extracting the data concerning *maybe* and related expressions from the *OED* quotations database, I proceeded as follows. First, I manually extracted all occurrences matching the target expressions, including the following spelling variants, from the search results[1]:

Table 2. Occurrences of the target expressions in the OED

Expressions	Variants	Total
maybe	*mebbe* (31), *mebby* (5), *maybees* (1), *may be* (53), *maybe* (542)	632
mayhap	*mayhap* (19), *mehap* (1), *mayhaps* (2)	22

I then identified the quotations in which the target expressions serve as sentence adverbs, because this study focuses on the epistemic function in a sentence[2]. This process was completed also in manual jobs, and the results are organized in Table 3.

Table 3. Instances of the target adverbials in the *OED*

Adverbial	*OED*
it may be	55
mayhap	19
maybe	403

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[1] The *OED* and other etymological dictionaries suggest *may-chance*, *may-fall*, *may-fortune*, *mayhap*, and *may-tide* as the competing forms of *maybe*, which have all become obsolete; however, no instances of their forms, excluding *mayhap*, were obtained from the *OED*. With regard to the spelling variants of *maybe*, the reviewer of the journal has highlighted other forms such as *maybee*, *mabbei*, *mabby*, and *maybi(e)*, but the search of the *OED* makes no matches of them.

[2] For this analysis, I excluded all examples of one-word responses, such as "*Mebbe.*" or "*Maybe.*" and of the nominal use, as in (i). Also excluded from this analysis were examples that did not form a complete clause, as in (ii). I further excluded any examples in which the target expressions appeared within the phrase structure, as in (iii): (i) Without all *Maybees*, the Lord is never more gracious to his Servants. (1615 Day *Festivals* xii. 335, *OED*), (ii)*Maybe* scenario writing eventually. (1928 H. Crane *Let.* 27 Mar. (1965) 321, *OED*), (iii) Barmaids do the work, with *maybe* a barman, potman or cellarman to help. (1936 Mencken *Amer. Lang.* (ed. 4) 243, *OED*).

The other different sets of corpus databases I used to complement the above data are the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts*, version 3.0 (CLMET3.0) and the Brown family of corpora. CLMET3.0 includes 34 million words of running text from the Late Modern English period, covering five major genres: narrative fiction, narrative non-fiction, drama, letters, and treatise. The corpus design categorizes all texts into the following three sub-periods, with each sub-period spanning 70 years: [1710-1780], [1780-1850], and [1850-1920]. The Brown family of corpora, for its part, spans one million words of running text from 1961 and 1991-2 and the two major varieties of English, American and British. They sample the following different registers:

> Press (reportage); Press (editorial); Press (reviews); Religion; Skills, trades, and hobbies; Popular lore; Belles lettres, Biography and essays; Miscellaneous (government documents, foundation reports, industry reports, college catalogue, and industry house organ); Learned and scientific writings; General fiction; Mystery and detective fiction; Science fiction; Adventure and western fiction; Romance and love story; Humor

In this series, the American components in 1961 and 1992 are from the *Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-Day American English* (Brown) and the *Freiburg-Brown Corpus of American English* (Frown), respectively. The equivalents of British English in 1961 and 1991 are from the *Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus of British English* (LOB) and the *Freiburg-LOB Corpus of British English* (FLOB), respectively. Additionally, and even more importantly, these four sets were constructed under the same principles of corpus design and selection of texts, which facilitate comparability between two regions over a thirty-year period. The instances of *maybe* were obtained from CLMET3.0 and the Brown family of corpora along the same lines as in the *OED* dataset, identified in Tables 4 and 5, respectively:

Table 4. Instances of *maybe* in CLMET3.0

Adverb	CLMET3.0
maybe	315

Table 5. Instances of *maybe* in the Brown family of corpora

Adverb	Brown (1961)	Frown (1992)	LOB (1961)	FLOB (1991)
maybe	134	199	85	101

In addition to the frequencies of the target adverbials, I provided the factor interacting closely with their usage, which will be shown as significant in the following analysis. The factor is the clausal position, referring to the clause position (i.e., initial, medial, or final) in which the target adverbials occur. English permits modal adverbs to be placed initially, medially, or finally in actual use, and Quirk et al. (1985: 490-491) and Hoye (1997: 148) present the different positions of modal adverbs as in (2a-g):

(2) a *I*   *(initial)*   *Possibly* they may have been sent to London.
     b. *iM*   *(initial-medial)* They *possibly* may have been sent to London.
     c. *M*   *(medial)*   They may *possibly* have been sent to London.
     d. *mM* *(medial-medial)* They may have *possibly* been sent to London.
     e. *eM* *(end-medial)*   They may have been *possibly* sent to London.
     f. *iE* *(initial-end)*   They may have been sent *possibly* to London.
     g. *E*   *(end)*   They may have been sent to London *possibly*.
                                                    (Hoye 1997: 148)

Despite the various approaches towards the positioning mentioned above, I followed Biber et al. (1999) in focusing on the three major categories of initial, medial, and final positions in a clause[3], hand-coded this information into the above data, and determined the frequency and percentage of the target adverb in each position. This factor can be interpreted as an indicator of the speaker's or writer's perspective, and by comparing the shift of the factor across the database, I can further assess whether an individual change may indicate more general changes in grammar.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Historical overview

I provide an overview of the development of *maybe* and related expressions in the history of English in Table 6. Examples (3a-c) illustrate the use of the target adverbials. As shown in Table 6, *it may be* experienced a radical decline in the eighteenth century, and *maybe* in turn underwent a steady rise up to the present day; in particular, a remarkable increase can be observed from

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[3] In other words, *I* in (2) indicates the initial position, *iM*, *M*, *mM*, and *eM* correspond to the medial position, and *iE* and *E* correspond to the final position.

the nineteenth century onwards. It is also shown that *mayhap* constitutes a very small part of the overall dataset, and it appears to be declining without being established as a functional marker of epistemicity.

Table 6. Diachronic breakdown of frequencies of the target adverbials

	-1600	1601-1700	1701-1800	1801-1900	1901-	Total
it may be	7	36	2	6	4	55
maybe	3	7	10	64	319	403
mayhap	0	2	4	12	1	19

(3)   a.   Which, *it may be*, made the other to be the more virulently re-
               membered. (1647 Clarendon *Hist. Reb.* II. §101, *OED*)
        b.   *Maybe* Mr. Chamberlain was remembering his pre-election
               promises. (1898 *Westm. Gaz.* 16 May 3/1, *OED*)
        c.   *Mayhap* she's hungry. (1840 Dickens *Barn. Rudge* Ixxii, *OED*)

Although *maybe* was introduced in the fourteenth century, it is evident from Table 6 that *maybe* had a limited number and was not prevalent. Its usage in Middle English can be seen in Example (4), which has been taken from the *Middle English Dictionary*:

(4)   Ther is manye of yow Faitours, and so *may be* that thow Art riht such
        on. (a1393 Gower *CA* (Frf 3) 1.174, *MED*)

This is a clear example of the onset of grammaticalization[4]. What must be borne in mind is that there are some parallel expressions in other languages such as French *peut-être* and Polish *(być) może*, and the presence of the expression in Old French, including Anglo-Norman, may have been associated with the rise of *maybe* in Middle English[5]. Here, I give special consideration to the periods of Late Modern English and present-day English, when the number of instances of *maybe* attests to its growing use.

The radical shift of *maybe* from the nineteenth century onwards is confirmed by the evidence from CLMET3.0. As shown in Table 7, the CLMET3.0 data also indicate that the frequency of *maybe* increased dramatically from the period [1780-1850] onwards.

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[4]   For details on the shift of *maybe* from a clause to an adverb, see López-Couso –
      Méndez-Naya (2016).
[5]   I would like to thank one of the reviewers for alerting me to this point, which is
      clearly interesting and worth pursuing.

Table 7. Frequencies of *maybe* during the period 1710-1920 (CLMET3.0)

	1710-1780	1780-1850	1850-1920
maybe	2	71	242

The search results matching "maybe" in the period [1710-1780] yield many examples in which "maybe" forms the verbal phrase, as in (5a), and few examples are obtained in which *maybe* behaves as a sentence adverb, as in (5b).

(5)   a.   The same thing *maybe* said of the taxes upon tea and sugar, (CLMET3_0_1_51)

          b.   And then your father, *maybe*, will stay. (CLMET3_0_1_7)

In the next period [1780-1850], interestingly enough, examples can be found in which *maybe* co-occurs with the phrase *may be* and the modal verb *might*. These combinations are illustrated in Examples (6a, b), respectively. Such co-occurrence implies that the expression *maybe* is independent of, or decategorializes from, the phrase *may be*, and establishes its status as a modal adverb.

(6)   a.   … and *maybe* Aunt Barbara **may be** got to give me that much at (CLMET3_0_2_117)

          b.   … and *maybe* in th' dark it **might** take me for… (CLMET3_0_2_173)

In the same period, further cases of *maybe* can be observed, particularly in final position, and it proliferated widely from this sub-period onwards. This usage is illustrated in (7a, b). This use of *maybe* signals the fact that *maybe* is less fixed in, and more detached from, the medial position within the clause, which is the typical modal adverb positioning. The next subsection discusses positioning in more detail.

(7)   a.   To-morrow I may look on you different, *maybe*. (CLMET3_0_2_173)

          b.   I've said all this afore, *maybe*. But from that time I've dropped down, downdown. (CLMET3_0_2_173)

3.2. Position

In their corpus analysis, Biber et al. (1999: 872) present a tendency for stance adverbials to be positioned medially in a clause, as shown in Table 8[6].

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6   According to Biber et al., stance adverbials have "the primary function of commenting on the content or style of a clause or a particular part of a clause" (1999: 853). They

Therefore, this general trend will be compared with the results of the present study.

Table 8. Positioning of stance adverbials across registers (from Biber et al. [1999: 872])

	Initial position (%)	Medial position (%)	Final position (%)
CONVERSATION	• • •	• • • • • • • • •	• • • • • • •
FICTION	• • • • •	• • • • • • • • • •	• • • •
NEWSPAPER	• • • • • • •	• • • • • • • • • •	• •
ACADEMIC	• • • • • •	• • • • • • • • • • • •	•

each • represents 5%

In my analysis, Figure 1 presents a comparison with different positions of *maybe* from 1801 onwards in the *OED* dataset. The breakdown by position is illustrated in Examples (8a-f). As Figure 1 shows, the use of *maybe* in the initial position commenced with a share of over 50%, and the medial use was a strong runner-up to the initial one.
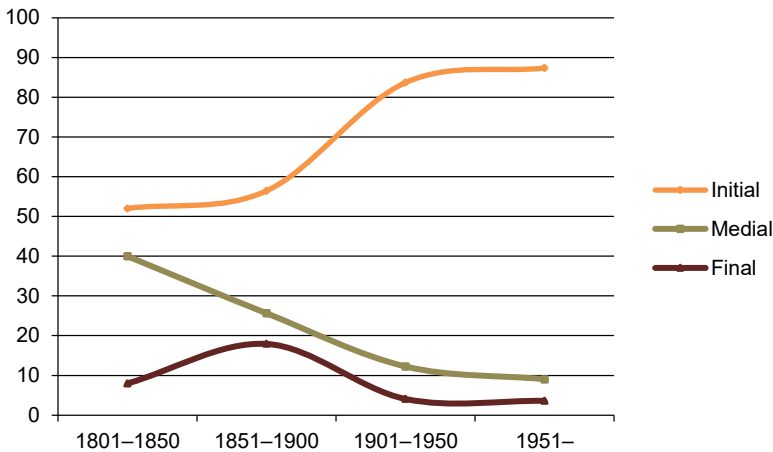

Figure 1. Positioning of *maybe* from 1801 onwards (*OED*)

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further categorize stance adverbials into three sub-divisions, namely, epistemic, attitude, and style. Epistemic adverbials include *no doubt, certainly, probably, definitely, I think, in fact, really, according to, mainly, generally, in my opinion, kind of,* and *so to speak*; attitude adverbials include *unfortunately, to my surprise,* and *hopefully*; and style adverbials comprise *frankly, honestly, truthfully,* and *in short*.

The frequency of *maybe* in the initial position then began to rise in subsequent periods. Particularly, the dramatic rise from the twentieth century, reaching a share of between 80% and 90%, made the initial position use vastly outnumber the medial position in present-day English.

(8)   **Initial**
  a. *Mebbe* I've ben hard done by all my hull life. (1898 E.N. Westcott *David Harum* (1900) xx. 197, *OED*)
  b. *Maybe* we didn't do so bad for a Dago fisherman and a sheeny storekeeper. (1977 H. Fast *Immigrants* II. 88, *OED*)
  Medial
  c. Some people will *maybe* not crack quite so crouse by-and-by. (1824 S.E. Ferrier *Inher.* Ixvi, *OED*)
  d. I think Bullock is *maybe* ten years out of date. (1977 *Jrnl. R. Soc. Arts* CXXV. 671/2, *OED*)
  Final
  e. [Said of a dying man] He will go out with the tide, *may be*. (1891 S.C. Scrivener *Our Fields & Cities* 10, *OED*)
  f. Jacques'll be here about then, *mebbe*. (1910 R. Brooke *Let.* 8 June (1968) 240, *OED*)

The first half of the results in Figure 1, representing the nineteenth century, parallels the results from the CLMET3.0. Figure 2 displays the shift of *maybe* from 1780 to 1920 for different positions[7].
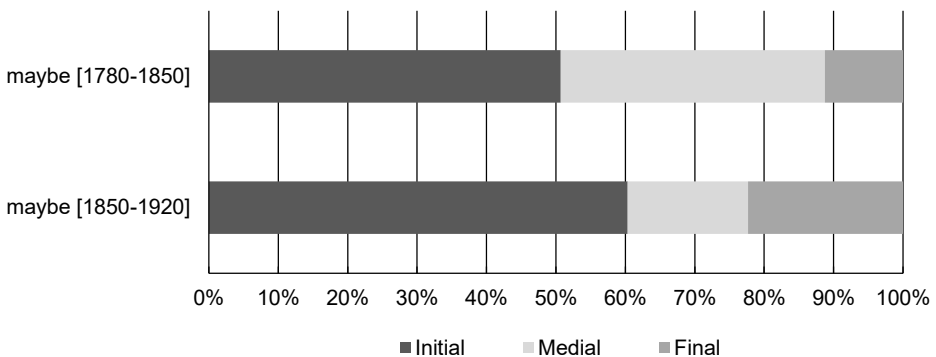

Figure 2. Positioning of *maybe* from 1780 to 1920 (CLMET3.0)

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7 In the first sub-period of CLMET3.0, namely, the period [1710-1780], only two examples were obtained from the data; therefore, my analysis here is restricted to the subsequent two sub-periods, [1780-1850] and [1850-1920].

As Figure 2 shows, the percentage of *maybe* occurring initially has increased from 50.7% of all occurrences in the period [1780-1850] to 60.3% in the period [1850-1920].

The latter half of the results in Figure 1, representing the twentieth century, is in line with the results from the Brown family of corpora. Figure 3 indicates that in American English, the percentages of the initial *maybe* are fairly stable, and its share is nearly 90%. Figure 4 clarifies that *maybe* in British English has experienced a steady increase in its initial position from 87.0% in LOB to 91.4% in FLOB.
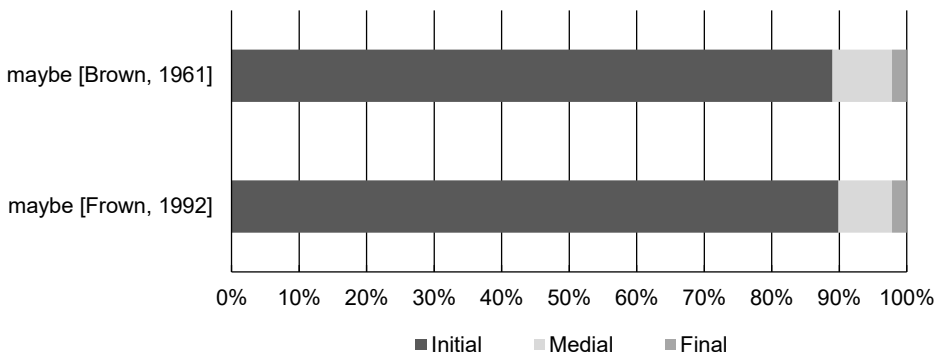

Figure 3. Positioning of *maybe* in American English in 1961 and 1992 (Brown and Frown)
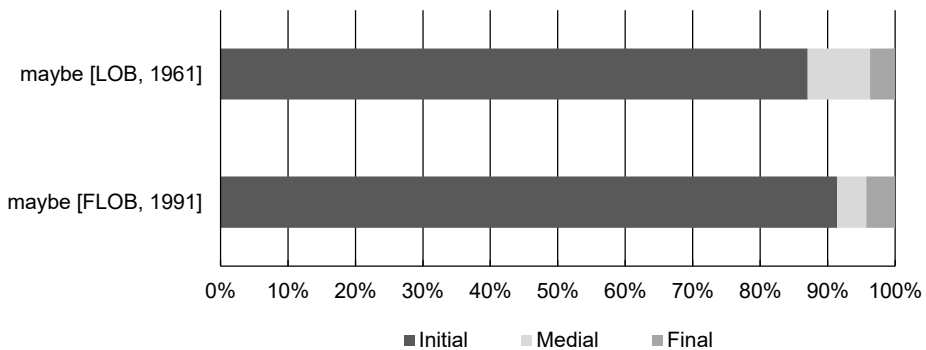

Figure 4. Positioning of *maybe* in British English in 1961 and 1991 (LOB and FLOB)

3.3. Topic marking and subjectification

The development of *maybe* can be attested to by a process of grammaticalization. One of the most significant features of grammaticalization, referred to as decategorialization, can apply to the present shift (cf. Hopper 1991; Hopper

– Traugott 2003). *Maybe* originated in the verbal phrase *may be*, acquired adverbial use with the epistemic function at a sentence level, and has further shown syntactically flexible mobility in a clause, developing an increased scope. In addition, the increased frequency of *maybe* in the last two centuries seems to play an important role in the process, as the path of grammaticalization is intrinsically involved in a significant increase in frequency (cf. Bybee 2003, 2006). This quantitative approach also presents a strong correlation of frequency with grammaticalization.

The close relationship between position and function with regard to English modal adverbs is now presented. Consider the following comparable examples:

(9)   a.   It *may* have been Wren.
        b.   *Possibly* it was Wren. (Halliday 1970: 335)

A quick look at (9a, b) reveals that *may* in (9a) and *possibly* in (9b) convey the same meaning of epistemic possibility. The difference, however, resides in their position, as *possibly* occurs initially. As argued by Halliday (1970: 335), Perkins (1983: 102-104), Hoye (1997: 148-152), and Halliday – Matthiessen (2014: 105-111), a modal adverb occurring initially expresses the topic or theme (that of modality), and serves the topic marking function. The speaker or writer provides the addressee or reader with the material that will help to (re)construct the flow of the discourse. *Possibly* in (9b) fulfills the function of expressing the topic or theme of modality in addition to merely expressing modality. Thus, the present study shows that *maybe*, occupying this position much more frequently, is strongly attracted to the function of topic encoding, and has become prevalent in present-day English.

The development in the use of *maybe* as a topic marker in the contemporary stages implies that the shift of *maybe* is also accompanied by a process of general linguistic change, namely, subjectification, and that the meanings of the adverb have changed from less to more subjective in present-day English. Subjectification is the path whereby the speaker or writer recruits meanings "that encode or externalize their perspectives and attitudes as constrained by the communicative world of the speech event" (Traugott – Dasher 2002: 30). The occurrence of modal adverbs in the initial position derives from the result of the speaker's or writer's choice of word order, signalling the speaker's or writer's perspective regarding the flow of discourse. More precisely, they "serve the procedural purposes of expressing speaker's attitude to the text under production (topicalizers, discourse markers)" (Traugott 2010: 31). In this sense, their use in this position is closely

associated with subjectivity (Traugott – Dasher 2002; Brinton 2007; Traugott 2012; Beeching – Detges 2014). The use of *maybe* thus exhibits the subjective view of the speaker or writer, and its development is characterized as subjectification in contemporary English.

Grammaticalization and subjectification as processes of linguistic change are not incompatible with each other. Grammaticalization is "a complex multilevel diachronic process leading towards grammar," whereas subjectification is "a particular type of semantic change" (Diewald 2011: 373). Diewald further states that "[t]hough subjectification is often found as one component of grammaticalization processes, it is independent of and not restricted to it" (ibid.). Viewing the two processes in parallel, subjectification in grammaticalization is "the development of a grammatically identifiable expression of speaker belief or speaker attitude to what is said" (Traugott 1995: 32; cf. Traugott 2003). In the present study, it was shown that subjectification derived from the shift in the positioning of the modal adverb within the clause, and this development of the modal adverb can be considered an instance of grammaticalization accompanied by subjectification.

4. Conclusion

Although the origin of *maybe* is well documented in the dictionaries of word history, its development from Modern English to present-day English is virtually unexplored. Despite the earlier appearance and epistemic use of *maybe* in the history of English, the later periods, namely both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, witnessed a significant shift of *maybe*. In addition, the development of *maybe* is accompanied by grammaticalization and subjectification.

This study relied on a combination of the *OED* quotations database, CLMET3.0, and the Brown family of corpora. These datasets enabled us to describe the long-term development of modal adverbs from the Modern English period to contemporary stages. Although the *OED* dataset has drawbacks as a "corpus," this study has shown that it can yield sufficient token counts, and the results are in line with those from other authentic corpora. The dataset can be regarded as "a useful and reliable source of data" (Rohdenburg 2013: 157), and can "provide the linguist with a wealth of useful information" (Hoffmann 2004: 26), spanning more than a thousand years of English. It is particularly helpful for offering a historical overview covering the long-term development of items that do not have a high frequency.

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