Changing modals, changing mores: Obligation in Australian English across real and apparent time

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The role of interpersonal authority is widely assumed to have diminished since the 1800s, however the locus of parallel linguistic change beyond lexis has been elusive (e.g., Hilpert 2020; Verhagen 2000). Quantitative variation patterns provide a way to trace language change, which proceeds through the rise of new expressions in conjunction with shifts in their conditioning in variation with existing expressions (Labov 1982:20; cf. Poplack & Malvar 2007; Szmrecsanyi 2016; Torres Cacoullos 2012). To gauge the role of social-cultural change in grammatical change we put forward variation patterns between competing forms expressing similar meanings, together with distributions of the data according to meaning nuances expressed. We focus on English modals of obligation, for which declines in *must* and *should* and increases in *have to, (have) got to* and *need to* (e.g., Collins 2014; Penry Williams & Korhonen 2020; Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2007) have been linked to a move away from authoritative, external obligation towards more personal obligation (Myhill 1995).

We capitalise on three corpora of Australian English to assess linguistic and societal change over five generational groups: Elderly Australians (born early 1900s) from the *NSW Bicentennial Oral History Project* (1987); Adults (born 1930s) and Teenagers (born 1960s) from the *Sydney Social Dialect Survey* (Horvath 1985); and Adults (born 1960s) and Young Adults (born 1990s) recorded in the 2010s for the *Sydney Speaks* project (Travis 2016-2022). Of some 3,800 tokens of the five competing modals of obligation extracted, approximately half (*n=*1,760) occur within a variable context (Present tense, affirmative, declarative clauses) (Myhill 1995:165-166; Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2007:60).

Consistent with prior studies, we observe a drop over time in *must* and to a lesser degree *should*, offset by an increase in *have to* and *(have) got to* (in particular, by working class men), and, most recently, *need to*. To assess change in the nature of obligation expressed, we establish a three-way meaning classification of source of obligation—that imposed by social hierarchy or norms (ex. (1)); that arising naturally from circumstances or as a logical consequence (ex. (2) and (3)); and that deriving from personal choice or opinion (ex. (4) and (5)). We find that the nature of the obligation expressed correlates with recency of the modal, for example, *have to* is favoured for obligation arising from circumstances, while the newest grammaticalizing form, *need to,* is favoured for personal choice.

(1)   Beatrice: *You <u>must put</u> your pencil down*. ((instructor to student))   [Bcnt_AEF_158]

(2)   Sophia: *but she <u>has to do</u> it,*
      because she has to support her family.   [SydS_AYF_035]

(3)   Graham: *like when you just can't get petrol. and <u>I've got to spend</u>,*
      half the day running from place to place, getting a bit of petrol.   [SSDS_AAM_501]

(4)   Flynn: *I <u>should</u> get fit again.*   [SydS_CYM_051]

(5)   Max: *I don't feel like I n- <u>need to be</u> in a relationship generally anyway.*   [SydS_AYM_012]

Tracking distributions of the data according to meaning expressed reveals a change in the role of interpersonal authority. For human specific subjects (*n*=703)*,* we identify shifts in the relative frequency of hierarchy/social norms (which decrease) and personal obligation contexts (which increase) in real time (across corpora) and apparent time (across older and younger cohorts within the 2010s corpora). This change, furthermore, is observed most clearly among women. By pairing variation patterns between competing forms with contextual distributions of the data according to meaning nuances we discern an association between a change in *modal forms* with a change in the *nature of obligation expressed*, and thus provide evidence that the linguistic change observed is concomitant with societal change.

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