Part 2: **Change and development of epistemic meanings**

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6 *Maybe* or *perhaps*? – A corpus-based study of an on-going change in Present-day English

Abstract: The present article investigates recent changes in the frequency and functions of *maybe* and *perhaps* based on a comparison of their uses in corpora at two different periods of time. It is shown that the adverbs are used differently to express neutral support (possibility) in the Spoken BNC2014S than in the demographic component of the British National Corpus. *Maybe* is more frequent with a modal function (especially in initial position) where it presents something from the speaker's perspective. *Perhaps* is increasingly exploited for the response-inviting function. Independent of function and position *maybe* is used more frequently than *perhaps* in the Spoken BNC2014S. The changes in the frequency of *maybe* over a short time are attested in all age groups of the speakers with a frequency peak for younger speakers. An interesting observation is that *maybe* is used primarily by female speakers in the Spoken BNC2014S.

Keywords: corpus, language change, modality, adverbs, variation

6.1 Introduction

The trigger for the present study was my observation based on corpora that the epistemic modal adverb *maybe* is increasing in frequency in present-day English. The frequency of *maybe* was also higher than that of the synonymous *perhaps* with which it is in competition.

This suggested that it would be interesting to investigate recent changes in the frequency and functions of *maybe* and *perhaps* based on their uses in actual interaction at two different periods of time. The existence of 'synonyms' is not a new phenomenon but has been discussed as a result of layering in language (Hopper 1991). Thus, when a new competing lexical element emerges, the old word does not disappear but remains in circulation. *Maybe* and *perhaps* have the same core meaning from which new discourse functions can be developed in a regular way. However, their discourse functions may be affected by their competition about the

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space in the functional domain they occupy. Specifically, they are expanding their territory over time intruding into contexts dominated by another variant or they are pushed out from the functional niche they occupy.

Based on previous research, the functions of *maybe* and *perhaps* will be compared with regard to the following factors*:*
– *maybe* and *perhaps* in different positions in the utterance
– co-occurrence with elements strengthening the subjectivity of the modal adverbs
– combinations of *maybe* and *perhaps* with modal auxiliaries in indirect speech acts (requests, suggestions)

The investigation can be expected to bring new light on the development of the uses of *maybe* and *perhaps* involving the speaker's and the hearer's role in the interaction. An additional aim is to consider the influence of the age and gender of the speakers on the frequency and use of the adverbs and the social meaning of the emergent new uses.

The outline of this paper is as follows. Section 6.2 situates the present study in the context of previous research on *maybe* and *perhaps*. In Section 6.3 I will describe the corpora and the methodology used to study similarities and differences between the adverbs. Section 6.4 presents the findings of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the two datasets.

In the qualitative analysis the rising frequency of *maybe* and the shrinking usage of *perhaps* in the Spoken BNC 2014 are discussed with regard to the factors: position in the clause, co-occurrence with other modal elements, pragmatic usage in speech acts and occurrence in questions with engagement meaning (reflected in their response-indicating or attenuating function). Section 6.5 contains a sociolinguistic analysis of the changes based on the information about the age and gender of the speakers. Section 6.6 summarizes the findings of the investigation.

6.2 Previous research

Maybe and *perhaps* express epistemic modality. Most typically, epistemic modality is realized in language by modal auxiliaries. Studies of modal adverbs have mainly focused on adverbs expressing certainty (see e.g. Simon-Vandenbergen and Aijmer 2007 and the references there). In comparison, the description of epistemic modal adverbs expressing greater uncertainty has been relatively neglected. The starting point in this section is therefore to investigate how *maybe* and *perhaps* would be categorized in general accounts of epistemic modality. Boye (2012) provides a framework which is aimed

at describing epistemic modal systems in many languages. In his opinion, epistemic modal elements can express different degrees of support on an epistemic scale. The adverbs *maybe* and *perhaps* have the weak meaning 'epistemic possibility' corresponding to neutral support referring to the endpoint on a scale where the other endpoint is full support (total certainty). The notion of neutral support "is taken to cover meaning glossed with '(epistemic) possibility', but also meanings that can be characterized as representing complete ignorance, complete uncertainty, complete lack of knowledge, or the like" (Boye 2012:25).

The descriptions of *maybe* and *perhaps* in reference grammars are compatible with this analysis. Quirk et al. (1985:620) classify *maybe* and *perhaps* as content disjuncts with the function of commenting on the degree of doubt associated with the truth of the proposition. In Biber et al. (1999) they have been regarded as stance adverbials expressing the speaker's doubt regarding the message (Biber et al. 1999:867).

Suzuki (2018) is of particular interest for the present study because it describes the variation between *maybe* and *perhaps*. Her aim is to investigate the uses and frequency distribution of what she refers to as two 'low confidence' adverbs in the British National Corpus situating her study within the tradition of language variation and change. The quantitative analysis shows that the frequency of *perhaps* is higher than that of *maybe* in both speech and in writing and that *perhaps* is remarkably prevalent in the written component of the British National Corpus.

The qualitative analysis of the data suggests that the meanings of *maybe* and *perhaps* are sensitive to contextual factors such as the kind of register, the kind of NP chosen as the subject in *maybe/perhaps* clauses, the kind of modal verb used in the same clause and the position occupied by the modal verb and that the differences between them could be explained by taking into account intersubjectification and grammaticalization (Suzuki 2018:392). Suzuki concludes that *perhaps* is more grammaticalized than *maybe* because it is used in more contexts to perform a wider set of functions. According to Suzuki (2018:405),"epistemic modality can underlie the adverb in its essence, but is reinterpreted for a broad functional domain that is more general" (Suzuki 2018:10).[1] She also observes "an interesting shift as regards the use of *maybe* and *perhaps* from expressing the speaker's mental attitude" in their initial position to intersubjective uses in the final position of the utterances paying more attention to the addressee (Suzuki 2018:10).

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1 The functional domain of weak epistemic possibility (neutral support) also includes *possibly* and *conceivably,* Specifically, Suzuki and Fujiwara (2017) compare *conceivably* with *perhaps.* López-Couso and Méndez-Naya (2016) trace the history of *maybe.* In a later study they discuss the sources and development of *perhaps* and other 'happenstance' adverbs (López-Couso and Méndez-Naya 2023).

6.3 Methodology

The short-term diachronic changes undergone by *maybe* and *perhaps* can be investigated by contrasting the frequencies and uses of the adverbs in the Spoken BNC2014 with their uses in the traditional BNC compiled in the 1999s (Love et al. 2017). The corpora have been collected using similar (but not identical) methods and they have been designed in similar ways.[2] For the present study I have used the 'sample or early access corpus' of the Spoken British National Corpus (Spoken BNC2014S) because it is comparable to the demographic component of the BNC1994 (BNC1994DS). The corpora have approximately the same size (5 million words) and the data consist of informal conversations between friends or family members. The starting point for the present study is that we now have the possibility to investigate the interaction between *maybe* and *perhaps* using corpora from two different periods of time in present-day English. From a short diachronic perspective, we can, for example, compare the functions of *maybe* and *perhaps* in BNC1994DS with their uses in the Spoken BNC2014S. Using data from one of the corpora only we can describe differences and similarities between *maybe* and *perhaps* at a single period of time. In addition, we can describe the speakers using the adverbs based on the meta-linguistic information provided about their age and gender in the corpora.

The methodological procedure is as follows. Comparable samples of 200 tokens o *maybe* and *perhaps* have been collected from the corpora. The occurrences of the adverbs have been annotated with respect to the items they collocate with, position in the utterance, discourse function and utterance type (assertion or question). The focus is on discussing the variation between *maybe* and *perhaps* in the Spoken BNC 2014S from a quantitative and qualitative perspective and to make a comparison with data from the BNC1994DS when it is relevant.

6.4 Results

6.4.1 The frequencies of *maybe* and *perhaps*

The overall frequencies of *maybe* and *perhaps* change dramatically over the twenty years elapsing between the compilation of the two BNC corpora. See Table 1.

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2 An innovative feature of the Spoken BNC2014 is, for example, the use of 'public participation in scientific research' for data collection. The contributors use smartphones to gather the data. In the BNC1994, on the other hand, the contributors use analogue recording devices.

Table 1: The frequency of *maybe* and *perhaps* in BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014S.

	Maybe		Perhaps	
	Raw frequencies	Per million words	Raw frequencies	Per million words
BNC1994DS	990	197.421	1,040	207.392
Spoken BNC2014S	4,062	848.214	389	81.230

In BNC1994DS *perhaps* is more frequent than *maybe* which is to be expected based on previous studies (Suzuki 2018). However, *maybe* increases in frequency from 990 tokens in BNC1994DS to more than 4000 occurrences in the Spoken BNC2014S, while *perhaps* declines in frequency during the same time. With regard to relative frequencies, *perhaps* is used in 87.4% of the cases in BNC1994DS while 12.6% of the cases are *maybe.* In the Spoken BNC2014S 91.3% of the occurrences are *maybe* to be compared with *perhaps* in 8.7% of the cases. Another observation we can make is that the number of examples containing either *maybe* or *perhaps* is higher in the Spoken BNC2014S than in BNC1994DS. We can conclude from this that the changes in the frequency over time cannot be explained only as a rise in the frequency of *maybe* making up for the declining frequency of *perhaps.*

In the next section I will describe the functions *maybe* and *perhaps* in different positions of the utterance based on samples of 200 words from both corpora.

6.4.2 The position of *maybe* and *perhaps*

Modal adverbs can be placed in different positions in the utterance depending on their function in the discourse (see e.g. Beeching and Detges 2014, Hancil, Haselow and Post 2015, Van Olmen and Šinkuniene 2021). According to Beeching and Detges (2014), there is a tendency for elements at the utmost left position of a discourse unit (the left periphery) to have discourse-organizing functions and for elements in the utterance-final (right periphery) position to be more concerned with modalizing (stance, subjective and intersubjective' qualities (Beeching and Detges 2014:18).

The different positions in which *maybe* and *perhaps* are placed are as follows: Initial position

(1) **maybe** in a way the heightened bit is the bomb

Medial position

(2)   there 's **perhaps** an element of jealousy there too

Final position

(3)   then we can get one at the same time **maybe**

Both adverbs may also be used alone in the answer to a question.

(4)   S0024:I do n't know what are they ?
      S0144: I do n't know
      S0024: that looks like something does it ?
      S0144: **maybe**
      S0024: it might be something (.) we should set off and have a look ?[3]

In the 'other' category the adverbs are used with a phrase in their scope. In (5)–(7) the adverb qualifies the phrase only:[4]

(5)   S0058:oh right (.) well --UNCLEARWORD I I --UNCLEARWORD actually I had my iPod on this morning which I do n't I do n't normally do (.) it 's so nice having an iPod with an actual battery like I really think that for **maybe an hour** now the battery 's still full it 's so odd

(6)   S0041: and as of as a rule I 'm sure he 's actually got the phone number **perhaps not this one** but certainly the one before

(7)   S0383: he 's probably like thirty something
      S0328 yeah **maybe like thirty-five**

The hypothesis that there is a functional asymmetry between *maybe* and *perhaps* in the left and right periphery can be explored based on their occurrences in the Spoken BNC2014S. Table 2 shows the frequencies of *maybe* and *perhaps* in different positions in the Spoken BNC2014S.

Table 2: Position of *maybe* and *perhaps* in the utterance in a sample of 200 words in the Spoken BNC 2014S.

	Initial		Medial		Final		Alone		Other	
maybe	121	60.5%	28	14%	12	6%	21	10.5%	18	9%
perhaps	89	44.5%	46	23%	35	17.5%	10	5%	20	10%

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3 All the examples are taken from the Spoken BNC21014S.
4 Rozumko (2022) describes the functions of *perhaps* before a phrase as a linking device having uses such as exemplification, clarification, reformulation.

The quantitative analysis shows that both *maybe* and *perhaps* are most frequent in initial position and that *maybe* is more frequent than *perhaps* here. In the medial and final position, *perhaps* is more common than *maybe*.

If there is a diachronic development, it is in the direction of a move of the adverb (or the pragmatic markers) from the left to the right periphery (see Beeching and Detges 2014:7).

Table 3 shows the frequencies of *maybe* and *perhaps* in different positions in BNC1994DS:

Table 3: Position of *maybe* and *perhaps* in the utterance in a sample of 200 words in BNC1994DS.

	Initial		Medial		Final		Alone		Other	
maybe	125	62.5%	24	12%	14	7%	29	14.5%	8	4%
perhaps	141	70.5%	33	16.5%	14	7%	10	5%	2	1%

In terms of change, the relative frequency of *perhaps* in initial position has decreased over time from 70.5% in BNC1994DS to 44.5% in the Spoken BNC2014S while it is becoming relatively more frequent in medial and final position supporting Beeching and Detges' hypothesis that the direction of the move is from the left to the right periphery. On the other hand, the changes undergone by *maybe* over a short time are only marginal.

To sum up, the quantitative analysis shows that both *maybe* and *perhaps* are most frequent in initial position and that *maybe* is more frequent than *perhaps* here. In the medial and final position, *perhaps* is more common than *maybe*. *Perhaps* has moved its position from initial to medial and final over time. It can be concluded from this that position has an important role for how *maybe* and *perhaps* are interpreted. The following sub-sections will discuss the functions of the adverbs in different positions in more detail.

6.4.3 The functions of *maybe* and *perhaps* in initial position

Maybe and *perhaps* have the epistemic core meaning of neutral support. In the communication situation they have the function of presenting a hypothesis thereby implying that there are more alternatives. The explanation proposed here takes into account that *maybe* and *perhaps* have the property not shared by other modal adverbs that they can signal that there are several dialogic alternatives even if these are not explicit (cf. Rozumko 2022:19; see also Tasmowski and Dendale (1984)

for a related proposal. Because of their ability to refer to alternative possibilities or hypotheses *maybe* and *perhaps* are useful devices in conversation where the speaker wants to open up the conversational space to more than one possible hypothesis for consideration by the other conversational partners. However, in general, only one alternative is presented:

(8) S0262: he 's related
     S0303: >>oh that makes it a bit less weird
     S0262: yeah
     S0303: I thought I cos I did n't understand what was going on and I just thought that
     S0262: >>I do n't really understand it myself
     S0303: >>**maybe** he somehow tracked down your dad somehow and

The speakers are talking about a common acquaintance who is doing research in genealogy. He has now found out that S0262 has a half-sister which she finds difficult to understand. Speaker S0303's hypothesis is that 'he somehow tracked down your dad'. Other alternatives are not excluded although this alternative is presumably the best one. Weak epistemic modal elements introducing an alternative or hypothesis in the interaction have also been regarded as falling under the label of evidentiality and have been classified as belonging to a sub-type of inferring (or inferred/assumed) (Dendale 2020:46). This means that the conclusions obtained are not necessarily true, but they are plausible or likely and give rise to 'quasi-assertions' (Dendale 2020). In (9), it is, for example, possible that 'he did not track down your dad'. Some evidence for such an interpretation also comes from cases where *maybe* and *perhaps* indicate that there are several alternatives.

  In (9)-(11) *maybe* is used by the speaker to introduce several alternatives or hypothetical outcomes which are considered possibilities. The reasons for the hypothetical assertions can be found in the evolving communication situation or they are based on general knowledge. *Maybe* is a useful device in the conversation when the speaker wants to show that she is open to many different alternatives:

(9) S0115: does n't agree with you
     S0037: does n't agree with us (.) I was gon na buy some at the shop today
     S0115: >>it 's good (.) is it just squid ? It 's strange that it 's just squid though
     S0037: I know I wonder what it is (.) maybe I can maybe I can try and desensitize myself

S0115: >>it it means that we ca n't buy you know packs of uh frozen seafood or other types of seafood mixes b- they s- they tend to have them them wan- bits of squid in
S0037: >>seafood mix (.) I know (.) **maybe** I could just try (.) **maybe** I could just eat them and just hope for the best.

(10) S0037: yeah I 've got the day off before the August bank holiday (.) I 've got the Friday beforehand
S0115: alright so that 's a possibility then that one (.) but a similar thing would also happen on Easter and probably we might be you might be able to swap or something someone could swap for one for of the other w- but w- like we 're more flexible than
S0037: what d' you mean ?
S0115: we 're more flexible than than that I mean (.) I I doubt that they 're only going one one you know
S0037: >>no but what 's not this (.) yeah but **maybe** that 's the only time that they 're all going together (.) **maybe** like like Phil 's kids might be going to their mum 's or something

(11) S0086: she 's got a lot of lines yeah
S0041: yeah
S0086: she should be getting the old Olay out (.) that 's what you need
S0041:yeah
S0086: em yeah she did have lines
S0041: she looked She looked old
S0086: yeah I mean **maybe** she 's tired (.) **maybe** the kids are young and **maybe** she 's having to get up with the kids (.) I do n't ever have to do that which is good

In (9) the speaker does not know if the packet of frozen seafood mix contains squid (which disagrees with her). She moves from one alternative (maybe I could try) to another alternative (maybe I could eat them and hope for the best) in the conversation. The topic discussed in (10) is whether it is a good idea for the participants in the conversation to visit their friends during the August bank holiday. Speaker 0037 has got the day off before the holiday which makes this an alternative but Easter would be another possibility. Speaker S00037 proposes that that time they are all going away and that Phil's kids may go to their mum. However, these proposals are only hypotheses making it possible for the speaker to show that she is not committed to a particular action. In (11) the speaker's hypothetical assertion that she is tired competes with other possible explanations why she has lines on

her face, for example that she has small kids and that she has to get up with the kids. However, these proposals are only hypotheses presented from the speaker's point of view.

The alternatives considered can also be contradictory as illustrated by the following corpus example:

(12)   S0320: that 's your house (.) that 's your view just straight onto the water
        S0322: yeah
        S0320: unbelievable
        S0322: mm
        S0320: erm what to read before you go ?
        S0322: yeah yeah gon na read
        S0320: murder mysteries in --ANONplace before you go ?
        S0322: >>they wo n't be my cup of tea but
        S0320: **maybe maybe not** the best thing to read

The speakers have been talking about the author Donna Leon whose murder mysteries take place in Venice. Speaker S0322 is going to read her mysteries before he goes to Venice. According to Speaker S0320 these are maybe not the best thing to read leaving it open that there are alternatives.

To summarize, in their epistemic meaning *maybe* and *perhaps* have been described as covering neutral support (the absence of both negative and positive support). From an interactional perspective the speaker uses *maybe* and *perhaps* to present something as a possibility or alternative based on deduction. Attention has been drawn to examples where *maybe* and *perhaps* introduce alternative hypotheses which can be understood on the basis of the context and the speakers' shared knowledge.

Maybe and *perhaps* also co-occur with *I think* reinforcing that what is said is a hypothesis by the speaker. *I think* is clearly subjective because it contains a reference to the subject and because it refers to the speaker's attitudes. In initial position it is used for emphasis and not for downtoning. According to Kärkkäinen (2006), "the starting-point function of *I think* is to routinely bring in the speaker's personalized perspective in the discourse at a given point." The reason may for instance be to mark a boundary in the discourse or 'to display that the upcoming turn will contain a new or different perspective to what was said in the prior turn¨ (Kärkkäinen 2003:171; quoted from Butler (2008:57)). Together with *maybe* or *perhaps* it reinforces the hypothesis presented treating it as the best alternative.

In (13)-(16) the neutral support meaning of *maybe* and *perhaps* is strengthened in the combination with *I think* in initial position:

(13) S0200:what I was going to say but the thing is is there 's five of us looking at a four bedroom house
S0188: I 've thought of this like what are we gon na say if they you ca n't share a room
S0200:**I think maybe** one of us should go and the other one should stay

(14) S0423: but I do n't understand why erm why do the get to France and want to go to England because
S0421: maybe they 're
S0423:>>what 's wrong with staying in France ?
S0421: >> **I think maybe** the help they get is n't as good

(15) S0013: >>well I thought you 'd forgotten where you were you know on the behind the workbench
S0012: oh yeah
S0013: I think that 'll look nice
S0012: yeah yeah
S0013: and **I think perhaps** you need to seal in that stuff a bit

(16) S0251: and my education so that you know the benefit trickles down the generations
S0252: yes **I think perhaps** books are a bit more of a a tricky aspect I suppose one thing is erm everyone well most people would have the ability to be able to write a book but it 's

The examples have in common that *I think maybe (perhaps)* is clearly subjective and that is used at a boundary in the situation where the speaker wants to underscore that what is said is a hypothesis or a conclusion (based on considering several different alternatives). In (13) the people are discussing how a four-room flat can be shared by five people. What is reinforced by *I think* is the hypothesis that one of the people will have to go leaving other alternatives (for example that two people share a room) open for discussion. In (14) the speakers are discussing the reasons why refugees want to go to England rather than stay in France. *I think maybe* is used at the point in the discourse where the speaker wants to reinforce a particular alternative. In (15) one of the speakers is painting the walls of a shed. *I think perhaps* is used at a boundary in the discourse where the speaker wants to bring in something new in the discourse while presenting it as an alternative only ('I think perhaps you need to seal in that stuff a bit'). In (16) the speakers are discussing how they want their children to have the benefits of their own education. By using 'I think perhaps'

Speaker S0252 introduces her own point of view in a cautious way underscoring that it is her personal view and an alternative only. From an interactive point of view the speaker also invites the hearer into the conversation by emphasizing that something is only a hypothesis and that other alternatives are possible.

In the examples given, *perhaps* or *maybe* is placed initially but after *I think* with a foregrounding function indicating that something is 'the best alternative' from the speaker's perspective. A comparison can be made with (17) where *maybe* is placed at the end of the utterance with a backgrounding function ('this is only one possible alternative').

(17)   S0115: well **I probably think** he he has he has like a like a main official one **maybe**

Both *maybe* and *perhaps* are found in combinations with *I think* (*I think maybe* 6 cases and *I think perhaps* 5 cases). Other combinations are *I feel perhaps* (1 case)*, I mean perhaps* (3 cases)*, I thought perhaps* (1 case)*, I mean maybe* (1 case)*.* In total there were more combinations with *perhaps* and a combination of *I* and an epistemic predicate than with *maybe* in the same combinations (*perhaps* 59%; *maybe* 41%).

6.4.4 *Maybe* and *perhaps* and modal concord

In medial position *maybe* and *perhaps* have the epistemic modal meaning to express the speaker's lack of knowledge (neutral support). See (18) and (19):

(18)   S0303: objectively maybe or with a bit more perspective
        S0262: yeah yeah
        S0303: step back
        S0262: yeah a ste- a step back in erm a realisation or an awareness that there's **perhaps** an element of jealousy there too
        S0303: oh definitely there too

(19)   S01115 oh okay (.) I think it 's got quite a nice taste
        S0037: it 's quite sort of spicy (.) it 's nice
        S0115: yeah I **maybe** put a little bit too much chilli in there but uh that 's fine
        S0037: >>no I do n't think you did I think it 's nice (.) I think um with um

Maybe and *perhaps* also co-occur with modal auxiliaries with a semantically compatible meaning. These cases have been referred to as modal concord (or modal

harmony) and have been noted by several linguists (see in particular Halliday 1970; Lyons 1977). An example, first discussed by Halliday (1970) contains both the adverb *possibly* and the modal auxiliary *may:*

(20)   Possibly the gazebo may have been built by Wren.
        Halliday notes that the same content is expressed by both (a) and by (b):
        (a)   Possibly the gazebo has been built by Wren.
        (b)   The gazebo has been built by Wren.

An example from my data would be:
        The modal adverb has a reinforcing effect on the modal auxiliary.

(21)   S0392: >>she **maybe would** n't have felt happy though being on a late night

In (21) the adverb and the auxiliary are clause mates and co-operate to express a single modality.
        The issues involve describing all the ways that modal concord is expressed and explaining why speakers use several modal expressions to express a single modal meaning.
        Table 4 shows the frequencies of the combinations of *perhaps* or *maybe* with modal auxiliaries in the Spoken BNC2014S.

Table 4: The frequencies of *maybe* and *perhaps* with modal auxiliaries in the Spoken BNC2014S.

	Maybe	Percent	*Perhaps*	Percent
can	1	2.7%	5	17.2%
could	7	18.9%	4	13.8%
will	16	43.2%	8	27.6%
would	2	37.8%	5	17.2%
may	1	2.7%	–	–
might	–	–	4	13.8%
must	–	–	–	–
should	10	27.03%	3	10.3%
	37	100 %	29	100%

The semantic compatibility between the adverbs and modal auxiliaries is reflected in the frequencies of the combinations. Thus, for example, *maybe* is significantly more frequent in combinations with modal auxiliaries than *perhaps* (p>0.01). Both *maybe* and *perhaps* are most frequent with *will* or *would.*

From a pragmatic perspective, the occurrence of modal concord can be explained in terms of its function in indirect speech acts. Thus, both *perhaps* and *maybe* are prominent as politeness devices in indirect speech acts such as suggestions, offers, requests in combination with modal auxiliaries and with reference to either the speaker or the addressee (or 'we') usually as the subject in the utterance (cf. Hoye 1997:122–123). (22)-(25) illustrate *perhaps* and *maybe* as a part of indirect speech acts.

(22) S0336: (. . .) (.) erm I wondered whether (.) **you perhaps would** like to buy a new car (.) using my car as part exchange. and then sell your car and just pocket the money

(23) S0104: no I think the whole family are away somewhere I could tell you if I looked it up on my phone but I ca n't be bothered
S0379: oh right
S0104: but he 's erm so I said **perhaps I could** try and arrange another one at my house
S0379: oh:

(24) S0058: um (.) but I was thinking obviously it 's er it 's up to you but I was thinking tomorrow we 're not really gon na be able to do much sort of city town wise (.) so we could go out
S0179: beach wise
S0058: yeah to a beach wise (.) cos that 'll be open (.) it 's up to you (.) **I mean I think you should maybe** go in and get some ice on that first
S0179: yeah
S0058: and we can maybe go later tonight if you want to

(25) S0320: >>oh really ? oh I did n't know that well er yeah **maybe I should** get some lipstick I never wear lipstick
S0323: it should n't matter I wore my red lipstick yesterday and I have n't worn it for ages

The hypothetical meaning of *perhaps* and *maybe* makes them suitable as politeness strategies. In (22) the speaker does not want to ask directly if the hearer wants to use his old car as an exchange when buying a new car but uses *perhaps* to soften the illocutionary force of the speech act. In (23) *perhaps I could* is a fairly conventionalized phrase with the function of making a polite suggestion. In (24) the two participants in the conversation are discussing what to do the next day. Speaker S0058 suggests that the other person should get some ice on his injured leg before

they can go on a city walk. *I mean I think maybe you should* contains several elements having the function of mitigating the illocutionary force of the request. In (25) the speakers are sharing some information on the internet that you shouldn't both use eye makeup and wear lipstick. *Maybe I should* is a polite way of asking for advice which does not threaten the hearer's face.

6.4.5 *Maybe* and *perhaps* with engagement meaning

There is a problem with regard to describing expressions which have different meanings depending on their positions in the clause (cf. Section 6.4.2). The issue discussed in this section concerns the formal and functional properties of *maybe* and *perhaps* in final position.

Suzuki (2018) relates the final position of the adverbs to their intersubjectivity and states that "modal adverbs too can appear in sentence-final position, and can acquire intersubjective meanings, particularly in speech. Further research would be required"(Suzuki 2018:407). When describing *maybe/perhaps* as intersubjective she assumes that intersubjectivity involves the speaker's attention to the hearer. Along the lines suggested by Traugott and Dasher (2002), intersubjectivity is closely connected to and presupposes the existence of subjectivity. While subjective expressions are concerned with opinions and evaluations, markers of intersubjectivity, in this view, are additionally oriented towards the "AD[dressee]/ R[eader] as a participant in the speech event, not in the world talked about" (Traugott and Dasher 2002:22). The distribution of modal adverbs in the initial and final position has also been approached as a question of categorization.

My purpose here is to describe what *perhaps* and *maybe* are doing in the final position basing myself on notions such as the involvement of the speaker and the hearer in the interaction and who has access to information. In particular, I want to suggest that the notion of engagement can be used to describe how speakers position themselves with respect to the events talked about in the conversation. According to Bergqvist (2020:471), the function of engagement is to "situate information between the speech act participants by specifying cognitive access and involvement." In other words, engagement implies that the speakers in the conversation have different access to information which is reflected in whether they use an assertion or a question or something in between. When *perhaps* or *maybe* is placed in final position they relate the current utterance to an aspect of the situation which can be accessed by both the speaker and the hearer. The adverb is used with the procedural function to signal to the hearer that an aspect of the situation is shared information (accessible to both the speaker and the hearer). Shared information (cognitive access to information) may, for instance, be based on the fact that

the speaker and hearer share experiences and beliefs or what has been said in the preceding context.

In (26)–(28) *maybe* and *perhaps* can be regarded as pragmatic markers with an engagement function. Here they acquire a response-inviting function implying that the preceding sentence should not be taken as an assertion but as hypothesis or conjecture. Notably, the presence of the question mark underscores the response-inviting function.[5]

(26)   S0013: cor it needs a lot of seasoning does n't it ?
        S0012: there 's some bones in it (.) --UNCLEARWORD the table (.) not a bad taste though it ?
        S0013: no it is n't (.) needs a bit of butter in it **perhaps** ?
        S0012:yeah (.) –UNCLEARWORD

(27)   S0264: but that 's Twitter is n't it ?
        S0265: that 's Twitter yes I 've only used Twitter
        S0264: yeah but do you think the same applies to blogs **perhaps** ?
        S0265: I do n't know

(28)   S0425: I I went any higher than sort of giving seventy-five
        S0426: er how how many seventy-fives did you give ?
        S0425: not (.) **possibly** sort of er (.) three or four **perhaps** ?

The speaker treats the context as something which is accessible and shared information for both the speaker and the hearer. In (26) it is presupposed that both the speaker and the addressee can taste the food. *Perhaps* is used as a marker of engagement or common ground with the function of signaling that the assertion should be taken as hypothetical inviting the hearer to respond. In (27) the topic concerns whether you need a hashtag when you create a blog on Twitter. *Perhaps* follows a question addressed to the hearer whether that is (only) Twitter. *Perhaps* makes the question more polite by softening its illocutionary force. In (28) the question-like character of the assertion is also indicated by 'possibly'. The speakers are discussing the grades they have given to students' essays. In (29), however, the utterance ending with *maybe* or *perhaps* is best described as a 'quasi-assertion':

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5 The uses of *maybe* and *perhaps* with a question mark have also led to a great deal of discussion in the social media. The issues discussed on the internet are, for instance, what *maybe* (and *perhaps*) mean and if the question mark is correct (https://ell.stackexchange.com/questions/113521/ sentence-starting-with-maybe-as-question).

(29) S0307: no ? well actually it 's funny you say that cos I do n't feel hungry when I do n't eat I have n't felt hungry for years yeah not years but I eat because it 's the time to eat
S0281: mm
S0307: or because I 'm a bit low on energy **maybe** or because you know I like food but er I er I do n't feel hungry very often (.) no (.) do n't know I 'm not thinner

The notion of shared knowledge is present although the hearer is not explicitly invited. *Maybe* and *perhaps* are sometimes analysed as hedging, "defined as a linguistic strategy, used to avoid sounding too authoritative and direct" (Murphy 2010:49). However. this analysis would not account for their hypothetical and response-indicating function and how these adverbs are distinct from other epistemic modal adverbs.

To sum up, analysing *maybe* and *perhaps* in terms of engagement notions such as attention and access to knowledge makes it possible to describe many of the functions that they can have in final position including their uses to invite responses, loss of assertiveness of the preceding clause, politeness. *Maybe* and *perhaps* in final position are response inviting rather than modifiers of illocutionary force (hedging).

6.4.5.1 The response-inviting function expressed by a combination of modal elements

The response-inviting function has been discussed less than other functions where the modal adverb has its core meaning possibility of neutral support. *Maybe* does not only have a response-inviting function by itself in my data but both *maybe* and *perhaps* are commonly used in a harmonious combination with a tag question to invite a response. The meaning of *maybe* and *perhaps* involves the notion of engagement (the differential access to knowledge between the speaker and the hearer).

In (30)–(32) *maybe* and *perhaps* imply that the speaker does not know or does not remember while the tag question asks for a reaction from the hearer (*maybe* 5 cases; *perhaps* 4 cases).

(30) S0271: but we did n't hear about that when we were children did we
S0266:no
S0270: well **maybe** we did n't know the cause of that shock **did we** ? If someone had died in that way like having a bee sting that you 're (.) allergic to we did n't know the cause of it I guess we would know that but maybe not with peanuts I mean if you go back would they have even been ?

(31) S0142:ha (.) you know they grow up with every allergy under the sun now do
      n't they because because they 're not facing it
      S0024: >>yeah they do (.) all this asthma and eczema about
      S0142:>>yeah
      S0024: yeah **maybe** a little bit too protective of them **are n't we**

(32) S0018: that does n't necessarily mean that they wo n't just wo n't be as
      successful in life
      S0074: and thrive in another way
      S0018: yeah
      S0074: Cos they 're **perhaps** practical **are n't they**
      S0018: Exactly

In (30) the speakers are referring to the fact that when they were children they
didn't know that people could be allergic to peanuts. *Maybe* signals that the speaker
is only making a hypothetical statement while adding a tag question to get a reac-
tion from the hearer. In (31) the topic concerns how children nowadays grow
up with allergies and exzema. *Maybe* signals that the assertion is weakened (the
speaker does not know) while the tag question invites the hearer to respond. In (32)
the topic deals with the future of children who have not done very well in school
but who may be practical. Speaker S0074's statement is formulated as a question (a
declarative sentence followed by a tag question) in order to involve the hearer in
the discussion and establish common ground.

Example (33) illustrates the combination of *maybe* and *you see. Maybe* expresses
that the speaker does not know and *you see* signals that the speaker expects the
hearer to understand:

(33) S0370: or were they on their way back ?
      S0278: the noise no they were on their way to cheerleading
      S0370: well **maybe** doing another job before **you see** ?
      S0278: well I do n't know

Maybe and *perhaps* may also co-occur in the same utterance as in (33)–(36):

(34) S0327: so that started also what ? in the
      S0326: yeah
      S0327: fifth century ?
      S0326: about then yeah
      S0327: **maybe** because there was some particularly skilled sculptors **perhaps**?

(35)   S0441: not even May I 'm sure it was like April
       S0439: mm
       S0441: **maybe** early May **perhaps** I ca n't remember now

(36)   S0041: if you 're still hungry please help yourself to more soup
       S0085 oh thanks love no that 's perfect (.) that little wrap **maybe perhaps**

Maybe is generally placed before *perhap,s* providing some evidence for the different orientation of *maybe* and *perhaps* in the interaction. *Maybe* is more frequent in the function of establishing the speaker's subjective personalized perspective on the direction of the discourse while *perhaps* is hearer-oriented and is more likely to have the function of response-inviting establishing common ground between the speakers. In (34), the speakers are discussing why there did not use to be any commemorative statues of real people in ancient Greece. *Maybe* introduces a possible reason while *perhaps* invites the hearer to react. In (35) the speakers are trying to remember when the heating was turned on. *Maybe* foregrounds one of the alternatives as a possibility (maybe early May) while *perhaps* focuses on what the hearer may know. (36) contains an offer and its response. Speaker S0085 does not want more soup but suggests that *maybe* that 'that little wrap' would be an alternative. *Perhaps* is hearer-oriented and closely associated with politeness and downtoning the force of the response.

To sum up, the changes undergone involve the rise in the frequency of *maybe* in all positions. When they have initial position *maybe* and *perhaps* contribute to the ongoing discourse by establishing that what is said is a hypothesis implying that the evidence is not necessarily true. The hypothetical meaning of the adverbs can however be reinforced by *I think* implying that a particular alternative is the best one. When the adverb occurs in final position a shift to the hearer as the authority of knowledge takes place. *Perhaps* and *maybe* appear with a reaction-inviting function in the final position in some of their uses.

6.5 Sociolinguistic factors

The present article combines the study of the functions of *maybe* and *perhaps* with a description of their social meanings, that is "the constellation of qualities and properties that linguistic forms convey about language" (Beltrama 2020:20). The starting point for investigating the social meanings of *maybe* and *perhaps* is based on the metalinguistic data about the speakers' age and gender in the two corpora.

Maybe increases in frequency among speakers in all but one age group in the Spoken BNC2014S. See Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: The frequencies of *maybe* in relation to different age groups in the BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014S.

	BNC1994DS		BNC2014S	
	Maybe	Rate per million words	*Maybe*	Rate per million words
0–14	64	147.030	60	865.127
15–24	152	254.985	804	835.458
25–34	173	212.004	456	1.183.466
35–44	180	217.955	687	1.037.424
45–59	186	216.345	359	674.548
60+	106	135.274	378	402.126

Table 6: The frequencies of *perhaps* in relation to different age groups in BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014S.

	BNC1994DS		BNC2014S	
	Perhaps	Rate per million words	*Perhaps*	Rate per million words
0–14	22	50.541	–	–
15–24	35	58.714	42	42.463
25–34	147	180.142	23	59.692
35–44	185	224.010	31	46.812
45–59	222	258.219	41	77.038
60+	284	362.433	138	146.808

Maybe is used most frequently by speakers in the 25–34 and 35–44 age bands, suggesting that these speakers play a role in promoting the change. On the other hand, *perhaps* decreases in frequency in the speech of the users in all the age groups in the Spoken BNC2014S. Notably, it is used most frequently by older speakers in that corpus.

Particularly, there is an association between the use of *perhaps* or *maybe* and the gender of the speakers. See Table 7.

Table 7: The frequency of *maybe* and *perhaps* in the speech of male and female persons in the BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014S (raw frequences and frequencies per million words).

	Maybe				Perhaps			
	Female		Male		Female		Male	
BNC1994DS	488	188.265	379	219.457	612	229.833	300	173.712
BNC2014S	2.705	945.560	1357	703.822	184	66.067	200	103.722

In the BNC 1994DS *maybe* is preferred by the male speakers while the female speakers used *perhaps* more often. In the Spoken BNC2014S the situation has changed and female speakers use *maybe* and seem to avoid *perhaps.* In the BNC 1994DS *maybe* is preferred by the male speakers while the female speakers in our corpus used *perhaps* more often. Interestingly female speakers who had earlier preferred *perhaps* use *maybe i*n the Spoken BNC2014S.

Social meanings can be associated to linguistic expressions via indexicality. According to Ochs (1996:411), "a linguistic index is usually a structure . . . that is used variably from one situation to another and becomes conventionally associated with particular situational dimensions such that when that structure is used, the form invokes those situational dimensions." In regard to *maybe* and *perhaps* they have the core meaning of 'negative support' (hypothetical meaning). This meaning can be taken to be a rich source for social meanings. As shown above, the data from the Spoken BNC2014S suggests that *maybe* is associated to female gender identity. However, indexical associations of this sort can also invoke other social meanings. Knowledge that someone is a medical doctor may, for instance, entail properties such as being knowledgeable, objective and caring (cf. Ochs 116:418). Only *maybe* rises in frequency which suggests that its meaning is more suitable to carry social meaning. *Maybe* acquires a number of new indexical meanings which may vary across social groups but also depend on the contexts where it is used. Thus, for example *maybe* (and *perhaps*) are associated with politeness (softening illocutionary force) when the adverbs are found in indirect speech acts. In other contexts, and with other social groups *maybe* may be interpreted as non-committal and perhaps characteristic of a certain type of woman.

6.6 Conclusion

Both *maybe* and *perhaps* have the semantic core meaning of neutral epistemic support or possibility. *Maybe* is more frequent than *perhaps* in the initial position of the utterance where its function is to establish that something should be taken as a possibility for which evidence exists, making it into the best alternative. Special attention has been drawn to the co-occurrence of *perhaps* and *maybe* with *I think* (or similar verbs) in initial position indicating (a higher degree of) subjectivity and emphasis. *Perhaps* was more frequent than *maybe* in this environment. Depending on the context, *maybe* and *perhaps* may be exploited for different purposes in the interaction. *Perhaps* has evolved its own niche in the functional domain of possibility. It is used in final position where it has the intersubjective function of

inviting a response from the hearer in addition to its utterance-ending function. With modal auxiliaries both *maybe* and *perhaps* are used in indirect speech acts such as suggestions with a politeness function. Concerning their combinations with modal auxiliaries *maybe* collocate most often with *should* while *perhaps* is more frequent with *might.* It is difficult to describe the differences between *maybe* and *perhaps* based on the data available. However, Suzuki's corpus-based analysis of *maybe* and *perhaps* in the British National Corpus which is based on a large number of occurrences is interesting in this regard. Suzuki (2018) found that there was a closer association of *maybe* with modal auxiliaries, first person pronouns and initial position.

We can conclude that *maybe* and *perhaps* are used with specific functions in system of neutral support (possibility) although there are not enough data to describe their variation and changes. *Maybe* is more frequent with a modal function (especially in initial position) and can be used to present something from the speaker's own perspective. *Perhaps* is increasingly exploited for the response-inviting function. However, independent of function and position *maybe* is used more frequently than *perhaps* in the Spoken BNC2014S.

The changes in the frequency of *maybe* over a short time are attested in all age groups of the speakers with a frequency peak for speakers in the age bands 25–34 and 35–44. An interesting observation is that *maybe* is used primarily by female speakers in the Spoken BNC2014S, who use *maybe* rather than *perhaps* in order not to sound over-assertive. More speculatively, *maybe* may be preferred to *perhaps* because it sounds American or because it is more informal than *perhaps*.

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