

Negation and Modals in Early Modern and Late Modern English A Complex Relationship

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So far, studies of the relationship between modals and negation in English have mostly focussed on scope (cf., e.g., De Haan 1997; Palmer 1997; Radden 2009). There are few empirical – let alone diachronic – studies on the topic (cf., e.g., Bergs 2008; Dausg 2021). Consequently, we know relatively little about the frequency of negated modal verb phrases, their dominant contexts of use and how these may have changed over time.

The empirical studies presented here shed light on modal–negated clauses in English by addressing questions such as whether the emergence of DO-support had an influence on modal–negation patterns in English; whether the loss of core modals in the 20th century (cf. e.g. Leech 2013) affected modal and non-modal contexts equally and whether contracted forms, like *'ll* and *'d*, pattern like their full-form counterparts (in this case, *will* and *would*).

Results are based on an exhaustive analysis of core modals (i.e. *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should*, *may* *might*, *must*) from the Chadwyck Healey collection of prose published in England since 1460 as well as the imaginative prose subsection of the British National Corpus. I conclude that the most substantial changes in the modal-negation system after 1500 were brought about by the establishment of the contractions *not* > *n't*, *will* > *'ll* and *would* > *'d* in the nineteenth century.