People words and democratization in British English, 1700-1999
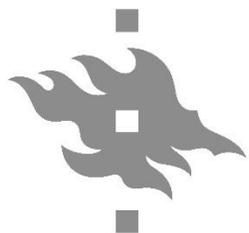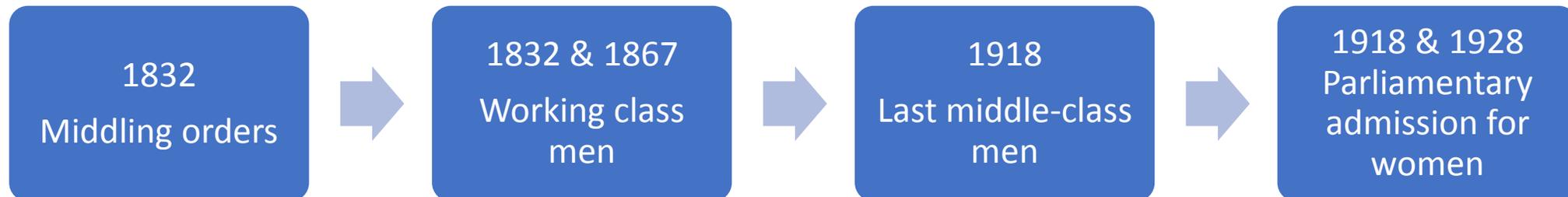
Minna Nevala & Minna Palander-Collin

ICAME 2018, Tampere

Exploring societal and linguistic change

- Democratization, Mediatization and Language Practices in Britain, 1700–1950 (Funded by the Academy of Finland 2016-2020)

- How are changes in language practices and social factors interrelated and how can this relationship be operationalized in research?

- Can we identify societal shifts (e.g. democratization) in keywords?

- People words as a locus of social relationships
  - C18: the importance of sociability, sensibility and hierarchical social order
  - C19: scientific revolution, industrialization, increasing education

Democratization in Britain 1800-

- "Large numbers were given significant opportunity for influence over the political process" (Garrard 2002: 2)
- Under way from the beginning of C19
  - End-product = free, regular elections
  - All adults have the opportunity of influencing the political process
  - End-product = liberal democracy (freedom of speech, association, press, etc.)

1832 Middling orders	→	1832 & 1867 Working class men	→	1918 Last middle-class men	→	1918 & 1928 Parliamentary admission for women

Democratization and language

- "Changing norms in cultural relations" working towards less hierarchical and more equal patterns of social organization (Leech et al. 2009: 259)

- Democratization in linguistic studies (Farrelly & Seoane 2012)
  - Colloquialization = increasing acceptance of informal linguistic options in written use (Mair 1997: 203-205)
  - Use of modals (Myhill 1995)
  - Gendered words in 20th-century BrE (Baker 2010: 144)
    - "It could be argued them, that the decline in titles is indicative of several trends: a move towards non-sexist language, a move towards more informal, equal and colloquial ways of addressing people and a (slight) reflection of the decrease of marriage in society."

Studies on language and socio-cultural change

- Philological & historical traditions
  - "Philological study of individual words...The assumed relationship between semantic change and social change is that of a flexible symbiosis." (Hughes 1988: 25)
  - Cultural keywords (e.g. Wierzbicka 1997, Williams 1958, 1976)
- Corpus and big-data approaches
  - Colloquialization, Americanization, democratization as factors in grammatical change (e.g. Leech et al. 2009, Mair 2006)
  - Google books and n-grams (e.g. Pechenic et al. 2015)
  - Comparing corpora with keywords, semantic tagging (e.g. Oakes & Farrow 2007, Potts & Baker 2012)

Data and methods

- ARCHER = *A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers*; British part only from 1700 to 1999, c. 1.2 million words

- Keyword analysis
  - PEOPLE WORDS as one time of semantic keyword category – how do centuries compare with each other in people keywords?
  - Qualitative semantic analysis, changing meanings: social status vs. personal characteristic (e.g. *gentleman*)
  - Register differences, developing register practices: between registers (newspapers vs. fiction); within registers (medical texts)

People keywords in ARCHER

1700 vs 1800	1800 vs 1700	1800 vs 1900	1900 vs 1800
positive keywords:	positive keywords:	positive keywords:	positive keywords:
Madam	major?	lady	patients
His	police	My	group?
Her	**3% of positive keywords**	sir	someone
My	negative keywords:	captain	germans
Sir	Person	thou	workers
Your	Him	his	sister
honour	King	I?	leaders
mistress	Gentleman	me	everyone
he?	Colonel	lord	german?
esq	Majesty	prince	**8% of positive keywords**
majesty	Honour	cousin	negative keywords:
colonel	Your	countess	your
gentleman	Sir	mr	mr
king	My	your	thy
him	Her	**19% of positive keywords**	subject?
I?	His	negative keywords:	prince
person	**29% of negative keywords**	german?	lord
22% of positive keywords		Sister	Me
		Patients	I?
		4% of negative keywords	his
			captain
			sir
			my
			lady
			19% of negative keywords

People words

- Keywords referring to people (nouns and pronouns)
- Quantitatively, people words differentiate centuries
  - talking about people is a characteristic feature of the C18 but less so in the C19 and even less in the C20
- Qualitative differences
  - C18 and C19 keywords refer to individual persons (personal pronouns, *person*, *mistress*, etc.) and to a hierarchical social order (*king*, *gentleman*, *colonel*, *sir*, *madam*, etc.)
  - C20 keywords refer to collective groups of people (*Germans*, *patients*, *workers*, *leaders*) as well as to unknown or generic persons with indefinite pronouns (*someone*, *anyone*, *everyone*).

People words: *person* C18

- I cannot answer for what Effect may take place from it, but if it Could be Introduced by **a person** that has any Influence on Uncle John it might be of Service. I am sure tis Reasonable. (1761rowe.x4a) letters
- The Noble Lord who first possess'd me, tho' a Man of Genius, and whom I could have lov'd for the Agreeableness of **his Person**, (with which, I own, I was soon charm'd,) had scarce enjoy'd me, when I was treated by him with a Coolness I had till then no Sentiment of; and in less than three Weeks after he had taken me from Mrs. Needham's, he left me in the Lodgings he had provided for me in King-street, Covent-Garden. (1737anon.f3b) fiction
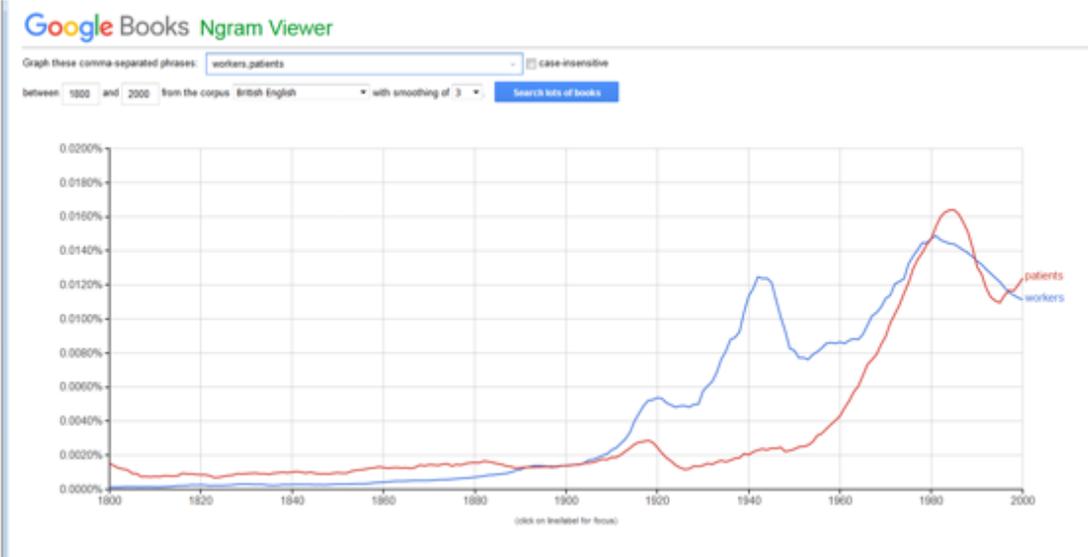
People words: *gentleman* C19

- "My dear sir,"] said **the gentleman**, speaking very gravely, ["I appreciate the hazards of our position as keenly as yourself. Our valises, and all the light luggage which we had with us in one carriage, I have left there, and shall not give them another thought. But with the parcel I hold under this arm I cannot part and if I go down the mountain-side on these cushions it must go with me. If you refuse in such a case to allow me to be one of your party, I must remain behind, and endeavor to find a board or something on which I can make the descent of the mountain."] He spoke courteously, but with an air of decision which showed me that it would be of no use to argue with him. (1892stoc.f6a) fiction

- There was a sense of Christmas about the travellers and the people who were at the terminus to meet them. The porter who came to the carriage door reminded Trefusis by his manner and voice that the season was one at which it becomes **a gentleman** to be festive and liberal. (1887shaw.f6b) fiction
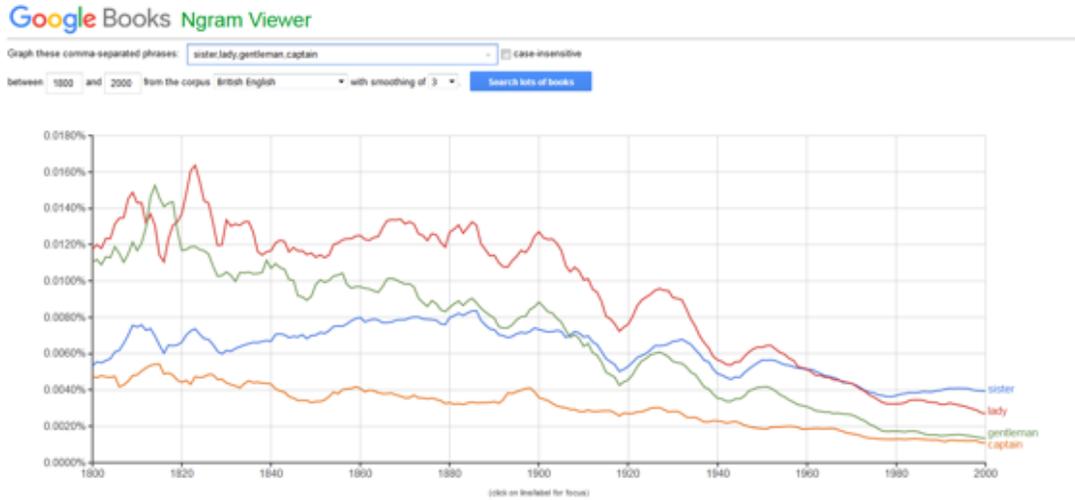
People words: *workers* C20

- Some Ministers believe the Government must prepare itself to face a major public sector strike, possibly the local authority manual worker, if its credibility is to be restored. Thousands of **workers** in industry face the prospect of being laid off this week because of the rapidly worsening disruptive impact of the unofficial lorry and oil tanker drivers' strikes in many parts of Britain. (1979obs1.n8b) news

- I was glad to find that Eddie [Shackleton] too had shifted back to believing in an agreed solution and a Bill in the next Session. He showed me the huge new official paper he'd had prepared on the working of the two-tier system as well as his invaluable check list. He really is **a tremendous worker** and his Cabinet papers are some of the best I've ever seen. (1968cros.j8b) journal or diaries

Just Archer?

patients, workers

sister, lady, gentleman, captain

Changes in register practices?

Pre-20th-c. medical texts:

- *It is not common to have an opportunity of examining the body of a woman dying from the anaemia produced by a fibrous uterine tumour. On this account, the dissection of the following case was regarded by me with much interest, but I did not expect that its importance would turn out to be so great as it did.* (1864dunc.m6b)

20th-c. medical texts:

- *In view of recent interest in the relationship of haematocrit and blood viscosity to hypertension and vascular disease, we have analysed retrospectively the relationship of haematocrit to blood pressure, vascular complications and other variables in 2,381 patients referred to the Glasgow Blood Pressure Clinic.* (1985lowe.m8b)

Conclusions

- Important to contextualize with the help of socio-cultural knowledge
- Some changes can be observed, but are we always comparing like with like? Corpus effect?
- Some keywords are clear and occur in different data sets
  - titles, hierarchical words mark C18 & C19, but not C20 > democratization
- Others are less clear
  - *Workers, patients,* and other collective nouns characteristic of C20?
  - Register developments
    - Newspapers develop and contain certain type of topics
    - E.g. fiction might be different
- Results based on specific data sets can hardly be conclusive but similar analyses could be repeated in different data sets to confirm more general trends

References

- Baker, Paul. 2010. Will Ms ever be as frequent as Mr? A corpus-based comparison of gendered terms across four diachronic corpora of British English. *Gender and Language* 4.1: 125–149.

- Garrard, John. 2002. *Democratisation in Britain: Elites, Civil Society, and Reform since 1800*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Farrelly, Michael & Elena Seoane. 2012. Democratization. In Nevalainen & Traugott eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 392–401.

- Leech, Geoffrey, Marianne Hundt, Christian Mair & Nicholas Smith. 2009. *Change in Contemporary English: A Grammatical Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Mair, Christian. 2006. *Twentieth-century English: History, Variation and Standardization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Myhill, John. 1995. Change and continuity in the functions of American English modals. *Linguistics* 33: 157–211.