Linguistic democratization in HKE across registers: The effects of prescriptivism

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Abstract – The second half or the twentieth century witnessed the emergence and expansion of linguistic changes associated to a number of processes related to changes in socio-cultural norms, such as colloquialization, informalization and democratization. This paper focuses on the latter, a phenomenon that has been claimed to be responsible for several ongoing changes in inner-circle varieties of English, but is rather unexplored in outer-circle varieties. The paper explores Hong Kong English and studies two linguistic sets of markers that include items that represent the (old) undemocratic alternative and the (new) democratic option, namely modal *must* vs. semi-modals *have (got) to*, *need (to)* and *want to*, and epicene pronouns including undemocratic generic *he*, on the one hand, and democratic singular *they* and conjoined *he or she*, on the other. Using the Hong Kong component of the *International Corpus of English*, and adopting a register approach, the paper reaches conclusions regarding the role played by prescriptivism in the diffusion of democratic items.

Keywords – democratization; prescriptivism; Hong Kong English; modals of necessity; epicene pronouns

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

Linguistic democratization is one of the processes of language change related to changes in socio-cultural norms that took place in the second half of the twentieth century, alongside colloquialization, informalization, conversationalization, popularization, mediatization and tabloidization, among others (Farrelly and Seoane 2012; Baker 2017; Hiltunen and Loureiro-Porto 2020). Democratization, the phenomenon analyzed in this paper, was first proposed within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1992) and was later introduced in variationist studies (see Farrelly and Seoane 2012). As an example, one of the first scholars who referred to democratization as a possible trigger for language change was Myhill (1995), who

explained the decline of modal *must* as a wish to avoid face-threatening, hierarchical relations in favor of more egalitarian ones (using the semi-modals *have (got) to*, *need (to)*, *want to*), and his view was further supported by Leech (2011), among others. Another often mentioned example of democratization concerns the decline of generic *he* with genderless antecedents (e.g. *Each reader will bring his own book*), and a corresponding increase of (democratic) combined *he or she* and singular (epicene) *they* (e.g. *Each reader will bring their own book*), as shown for example in Leech *et al.* (2009: 261–263) and Farrelly and Seoane (2012: 394).

These two grammatical changes (the decline of *must* and the decline of generic *he*) are well attested in inner-circle varieties of English (Leech 2011, on modals in British and American English, and Pauwels 2001, Paterson 2014 and LaScotte 2016, on epicene pronouns in the UK, the USA and Australia) and also in the outer-circle (e.g. Collins 2009; Kotze and Van Rooy 2020; Kranich *et al.* 2020, on modals, and Loureiro-Porto 2019, on epicene pronouns). However, the role played by register variation in the diffusion of such changes remains largely underexplored, particularly in outer-circle varieties, and the same happens with the influence that an external force, such as linguistic prescriptivism, may exert on these kinds of changes in varieties of English as a second language. The relation between register variation and prescriptivism is well attested, from Biber (1988) onwards, and for that reason and with the aim of contributing to partially filling the gap in outer-circle varieties, this paper adopts a register approach (Biber 1988) and studies these two markers (modals of necessity and epicene pronouns) in three different registers of Hong Kong English (HKE henceforth) as found in the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-HK), namely private conversations, academic writing and student writing. The aim is to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Are these 'democratizing' changes taking place in HKE at the same pace as in inner-circle varieties of English?

RQ2: What is the role played by prescriptivism, as evidenced in register variation?

RQ3: Are these changes (or absence of changes) conscious or unconscious?

With that purpose, the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 explains the theoretical background, paying particular attention to democratization (2.1) and the relation between linguistic prescriptivism and register variation (2.2). The section closes with an

overview of HKE, which will allow the reader to frame the discussion socio-linguistically (2.3). Section 3 describes the methodological decisions adopted for this piece of research. Section 4 presents the results, which are discussed in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 reaches some conclusions.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section provides a description of the theoretical foundations for this study, which are divided into three main strands: democratization (2.1), prescriptivism and its relation to register variation (2.2) and a socio-linguistic account of HKE (2.3).

2.1. Democratization

The term 'democratization' was first used in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis to account for "the removal of inequalities and asymmetries in the discursive and linguistic rights, obligations and prestige of groups of people" (Fairclough 1992: 201). From that perspective, for example, it was shown how non-standard varieties have been increasingly accepted in institutional discourse. From Fairclough (1992) onwards, the term democratization has extended to research on language variation and change, with a slightly different definition: "The phasing out of overt markers of power asymmetry with the aim of expressing greater equality and solidarity (democratization proper)" (Farrelly and Seoane 2012: 393). Examples of overt markers of power asymmetry include a decreasing use of titular nouns (e.g. *Mr*, *Mrs*, *Dr*) and a corresponding increasing use of personal names; an increasing frequency of gender-neutral, non-sexist language (illustrated at the lexical level in forms such as *fireman* vs. *fire-fighter*, and at the grammatical level by means of epicene pronouns such as *he* vs. *they* or *he or she*, as in *every student should turn in his homework on time*); and a decreasing use of deontic modals in favor of less face-threatening forms.

The latter was firstly identified by Myhill (1995), who found that around the time of the American Civil war some changes in the modal domain could be explained as a result of changes in the social hierarchy. Deontic modals are indeed one of the most often cited examples of a linguistic variable subject to undergo changes as a result of social changes. Core modal *must* is usually considered too face-threatening, and, for that reason, more egalitarian *have (got) to*, *need (to)* or *want to* have increased their

frequency in the past decades in inner-circle varieties of English (see, for example, Krug 2000; Smith 2003; Mair 2006; Nokkonen 2006; Leech *et al.* 2009: 71–73; Leech 2011, 2013; Mair 2015), up to the point that in American English conversation "*have to*, *got to* and *need to* are all nowadays more common than *must*, the modal auxiliary in the same semantic field of obligation/necessity" (Leech 2014: 55–56). The following examples illustrate British and American use of these verbs, as found in Leech *et al.* (2009: 87, 110, 109, 113):

(1) That woman **must** go! (F-LOB P20)

(2) I'm not a feminist, but I do think you **need to** hear a balanced view of matters. (F-LOB F13)

(3) The question **has to** be asked: Are we ready? (F-LOB R03)

(4) "My, you're peaked. You **want to** watch out that you don't get burned to an ash, first sunny day." (Brown P23)

The frequency of these modals has also been studied in outer-circle varieties of English. Thus, for example, Collins (2009) focuses on the varieties spoken in Hong Kong, India, Singapore, Philippines and Kenya; Loureiro-Porto (2016) studies Hong Kong and India and in (2019) adds Singapore and the Philippines; Hansen (2018) pays attention to Hong Kong and India. All of these studies confirm that the same tendency observed in inner-circle varieties of English is taking place in the outer-circle, namely the frequency of *must* appears to be decreasing in favor of its semi-modal competitors. Nevertheless, studies on South African English provide some counter-evidence (e.g. Rossouw and van Rooy 2012; Wasserman and van Rooy 2014; Kotze and van Rooy 2020).

Of particular interest for this paper are the studies on HKE, all of which coincide in that the replacement of *must* is less advanced in this variety than in British English, but more advanced than in Indian English (e.g. Collins 2009; Loureiro-Porto 2016). These differences have been found to correlate with the different degrees of grammaticalization that the semi-modals exhibit in each of the varieties (Loureiro-Porto 2019). However, none of these previous studies approach the analysis from the perspective of democratization and register variation.

As mentioned, the elimination of gender bias from language is also one of the often cited examples of the linguistic evidence of democratization (Leech *et al.* 2009; Farrelly and Seoane 2012). In Baker's (2010: 69) words: "as (patriarchal) societies become more democratic, there would be reductions in gender-based bias, which would hopefully be reflected in language use." In fact, the relation between this process and gender-neutrality has been studied in detail by Loureiro-Porto and Hiltunen (2020: 224–226), who show that there is a certain degree of overlapping between both phenomena and also some differences. For one thing, gender-neutrality in language is shown to have a longer history, since its roots are to be found in Lakoff's (1975) pioneering work, which identifies patterns that contribute to male dominance.[2] The identification of those patterns paves the ground for the development of linguistic policies that aim at eroding that dominance by leading campaigns that promote the use of non-sexist linguistic forms. Democratization, in turn, is diffused from one individual to another and it refers to an unplanned process.

Nevertheless, there is a general agreement that the policies in favor of non-sexist language results in a more democratic discourse and, therefore, both processes overlap to a certain extent. This is nicely illustrated by epicene pronouns, used in general contexts, such as in the following often quoted example (adapted from Huddleston, Pullum *et al*. 2002: 493):

(5)   But journalist should never be forced to reveal **his / his or her / their** sources.

The use of generic *he* is clearly sexist and non-democratic, while *he or she* makes women visible, and *they* is gender-neutral (i.e. it may refer to any gender, other than the gender binary), which makes both options democratic alternatives to generic *he*.[3] The use of these three pronouns has been studied in detail for inner-circle varieties of English. Balhorn (2004), for example, conducts a diachronic study of British English using the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as corpus and finds a sharp increase from

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[2] Later work by Tannen (1990) came to complement that view by focusing on the different speeches of men and women and giving rise to the study of genderlects. And yet gender linguistics kept on developing different approaches under the influence of post-feminism (Butler 1990). Because of space constraints, this is not the place to provide a full account of the history and evolution of gender linguistics, but the reader is referred to Eckert (2012), Baker (2014) and Meyerhoff (2014), among others, for a comprehensive review.

[3] From the perspective of gender diversity, singular *they* would be the true democratic pronoun, because it may refer to any individual, no matter what their gender is. Combined *he or she*, in turn, is claimed to make women more visible by inserting a feminine pronoun in the discourse (e.g. Paterson 2020). For the purposes of this paper, and without any intention to enter this debate, both *he or she* and singular *they* will be considered democratic options, as opposed to generic *he*, which is the non-democratic counterpart.

the sixteenth century (9% of singular *they* with epicene antecedents) to the twentieth (45%). Zooming in the twentieth century, Paterson (2011: 179) also finds an increase from the 1960s (11%) to the 2000s (80%). Similar results are obtained for American English (Balhorn 2009) and Australian English (Pauwels 2001). Outer-circle varieties have not been much explored in this respect, a notable exception being Loureiro-Porto (2020), which studies HKE, Indian English and Singapore English, illustrated in (6)–(8) below.

(6) You've told us the meaning of <.> secre </.> a secretor. That is <u>a person</u> <,> would be expected to posses [sic] appreciable quantity of **their** blood group substance in the other body fluids such as semen. (ICE-HK:S1B-069)

(7) <[> They will not </[> </{> ordinarily occur <,> in <u>a person</u> who has got minor problems And then there are indicators that the doctor will ask you immedietly [sic] to stop.[. . .] No no further tests should be <{> <[> done </[> on **him or her**. (ICE-IND:S1A-068)

(8) <u>A child</u> needs to be taught his heritage early, or it would be difficult to force it upon **him** when the influence of other cultures sets in. One effective way is by telling him stories. (ICE-SIN:W2D-020)

Although all three varieties exhibit the three types of epicene pronouns, the frequencies observed vary to a high extent: HKE exhibits, by far, the highest proportion of democratic pronouns (some 43% of all epicene pronouns), while Indian English is at the other end of the cline, with a clear preference for generic *he*. Singapore English, as found in Loureiro-Porto (2020), exhibits a clear contrast between private conversations and all other text-types included in ICE corpora (see Section 3 below for more details), which reveals that register variation must be a very important variable to take into account in the study of these items.

2.2. Linguistic prescriptivism

Prescriptivism has been defined as "as a state of mind: an attitude which favours certain usages and rejects others, often without good reason" (Leech 2014: 60), and those attitudes are usually maintained and diffused by teachers, textbooks, publishers, etc., with the aim of shaping the language used by individuals particularly in written English. Examples of the effects of prescriptivism on written usage can be found in the declining frequency of the passive in scientific discourse, particularly in American English

(Seoane and Williams 2006) and of the relativizer *which* in restrictive relative clauses (Leech 2014: 61).

While prescriptivism is usually seen as the "bad guy" (Curzan 2014: 12) or the "threatening Other" (Cameron 1995: 5), in contrast with descriptivism, Cameron (1995) was the first to assert that prescriptivism is certainly inevitable, since in every speech community there will emerge rules and some speakers will start telling others how to speak 'better' (something also discussed in Milroy and Milroy 1985). This, which Cameron calls 'verbal hygiene', is not good or bad, but is simply natural and, according to her, the debate on prescriptivism should move away from those simplistic considerations to discuss "who prescribes for whom, what they prescribe, how, and for what purposes" (Cameron 1995: 11). It is not the aim of this paper to discuss those questions, but to assess the possible role played by prescriptivism in language change related to democratization, because it has been shown that prescriptivism does affect usage, regarding double negation (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1982), preposition stranding in the eighteenth century (Yáñez-Bouza 2008) and variable past-tense forms (Anderwald 2012). To that end, we will follow the four-strand classification of prescriptivism proposed by Curzan (2014), according to which the rules that promote specific usage respond to different aims. These four strands are: (i) standardizing prescriptivism, (ii) stylistic prescriptivism, (iii) restorative prescriptivism and (iv) politically responsive prescriptivism.

Standardizing prescriptivism has a very self-evident aim: to promote rules that enforce standardization. A very clear example is the standardization of spelling, and the stigmatization of *ain't*, which, despite its high frequency, is considered by speakers of American English as "violating fundamental principles or laws of English" (Curzan 2014: 31). Another well-known example is the use of *me* and *I* in conjoined constructions, as in *Me and my mom drove over to Chicago* (Curzan 2014: 31). Without any intention to make a list of further examples, let us just conclude that this type of prescriptivism raises the standard varieties of English to the status of 'correct' varieties, which logically considers all other varieties 'incorrect'.

Stylistic prescriptivism does not define standard language, but distinguishes different styles within the standard variety and determines which one is appropriate and when. This linguistic etiquette establishes a difference between those speakers who master it and those who do not. One of the examples mentioned by Curzan (2014: 33–

34) is the use of *hopefully* as sentence adverb, which is considered ambiguous (who is hoping is said to be not clear) and is banned as stylistically wrong from the 1960s. Another older example is the above-mentioned preposition stranding, which is proscribed from the eighteenth century. To sum up, stylistic prescriptivism has usually been compared with table manners: the context determines the rules.

Restorative prescriptivism aims at restoring "earlier, but now relatively obsolete, usage and/or turn to older forms to purify usage" (Curzan 2014: 24). This kind of nostalgic prescriptivism subsumes a rather small number of rules. A lexical example concerns the meaning of the word *nauseous*, which, according to this view, should be 'that causes nausea', and a grammatical one is the distinction between future *shall* (to be used with the first person pronouns) and *will* (with second and third person pronouns). The only criterion at work in this strand is older rules were better than current ones, similar to how parents set up rules for their children on the basis of how things were done in the past.

Finally, politically responsive prescriptivism aims at promoting "inclusive, nondiscriminatory, politically correct, and/or politically expedient usage" (Curzan 2014: 24). Examples of this strand include policies in favor of non-sexist language as well as the terms preferred to refer to minority groups in the United States. The effects of this type of prescriptivism on epicene pronouns are summarized in Loureiro-Porto (2020: 285). While eighteenth-century grammars (such as Kirby 1746, cited in Bodine 1975) proscribed the use of singular *they* (which had been used since Chaucer's times) and prescribed the use of generic *he*, the former survived in spoken mode and came to be promoted as a non-sexist option after second wave feminism (Paterson 2014: 2–5). This is clearly reflected in grammars such as Quirk *et al.*'s (1985), which accepts some uses of singular *they* (as do Biber *et al.* 1999: 316–317 and Huddleston and Pullum *et al.* 2002: 494); Quirk *et al.* (1972), by contrast, note its use as "frowned on in formal usage" (Meyers 1993: 182). As opposed to the other three strands of prescriptivism, this one is usually considered progressive and inclusive (*versus* the traditional ones). For this very reason, these prescriptions are more commonly referred to as 'language reform' than as 'prescriptivism' (Curzan 2014: 38). Curzan hypothesizes that some of these reforms that start off as instances of politically responsive prescriptivism may become stylistic prescriptivism in the course of time, because prescriptivism is a

dynamic phenomenon, even if the classification summarized here focuses on prototypical examples of each type.

No matter what kind of prescriptivism, this is expected to manifest itself more evidently in written than in spoken language, because the planned character of the former makes it more suitable for the editor to focus on 'correctness' (Curzan 2014: 56). Differences between speech and writing have been considered crucial in studies on language variation from Biber (1988) onwards. In this foundational work on cross-register variation, Biber sets the differences between the spoken and the written mode, using face-to-face conversation and expository prose as core examples of each mode (1988: 38–42). In short, spoken and written English differ in:

1. Physical channel: prosodic and paralinguistic elements are available in speech, but not in writing.

2. Cultural use: in Western societies, writing is usually more valuable than speech, and it serves to maintain a social status.

3. Relation of communicative participants to each other: speech allows the speaker to interact with the listener and to negotiate topic and communicative goal, while writing does not.

4. Relation of the communicative participants to the external context: in spoken registers, speaker and listener share time (and usually space), while this is not the case in writing.

5. Relation of communicative participants to the text: writing is permanent, while speech is usually not, and, in addition, the production of speech is faster than that of writing.

6. Purpose: speech is usually aimed at expressing feelings or to reaffirm the relationship between the participants, while writing has more ideational purposes, it conveys propositional information.

These differences between spoken and written registers have an effect to language variation, which is well attested in the linguistic items studied in this paper. To begin with, the increasing frequency of semi-modals (to the detriment of core modals) is particularly conspicuous in spoken English (Leech 2014: 55–56). In fact, the extended use of semi-modals in written registers has sometimes been explained as a case of

colloquialization (e.g. Leech *et al.* 2009: 100; Leech 2013: 114). As regards epicene pronouns, singular *they* is also found to be more frequent in spoken conversation than in written text, while generic *he* and combined *he or she* are mainly restricted to written registers in American English (Balhorn 2009: 399; see also Pauwels 2001). Whether or not these differences hold for HKE and can be explained as a consequence of prescriptivism will be the subject of this paper.

2.3. HKE: An overview

HKE is a postcolonial variety of English, a second language variety and, as such, in its earlier history it has been subject to the pressure exerted by the rules governing the standard inner-circle variety. In order to fully capture the links between British English and HKE, we need to resort to Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model, which places postcolonial varieties in five different phases as regards their evolution:

1. Foundation: Native English-speaking settlers establish themselves in the new territory and use different regional varieties.

2. Exonormative stabilization: English is stabilized in the territory according to British English rules, although the lexicon starts to incorporate localisms.

3. Nativization: Mixed codes are commonly used, and grammar sees the emergence of new word formation processes, varying prepositional usage, etc.

4. Endonormative stabilization: After political independence, descendants of settlers consider themselves different from their country of origin and are aware of the new language variety they use; national dictionaries are published.

5. Differentiation: New varieties emerge out of the newly standardized variety.

As can be seen, in phase 2, exonormative stabilization, British English rules still govern in the postcolonial variety. Phase 3, nativization, marks the origin of the separation from the matrilect, and phase 4, endonormative stabilization, definitely marks the total linguistic independence from British English.

As regards Hong Kong, English arrived there right after it became a British colony, in 1841–1842, "in the wake of the first Opium War" (Schneider 2007: 133), and that marked the beginning of the foundation phase in Schneider's (2007) Dynamic

Model, which lasted until 1898, when Britain and China signed the Second Convention of Peking that guaranteed Hong Kong's colonial status for the next 99 years. Phase 2, exonormative stabilization, lasted for the first 70 years of this period, in which education in English was restricted to a small, elitist section of the population (Schneider 2007: 135). Phase 3, nativization, is considered to have started in the 1960s when Hong Kong began to become a "wealthy, commercial and entrepreneurial powerhouse" (Bolton 2000a: 268) and it is still the phase in which HKE is said to be at present (Schneider 2007: 135–139), although Setter *et al.* (2010: 116) consider that it is moving towards phase 4, endonormative stabilization.

A characteristic of phase 3, nativization, is that speakers are aware of the deviance from the exonormative rules and provokes insecurity regarding local forms that causes internal debates which have been termed "complaint tradition" (Milroy and Milroy 1985), as an instance of what Curzan (2014) terms restorative prescriptivism (see Schneider 2007: 43). In Schneider's (2007: 43) terms:

> Such issues are typically raised among the educated echelons of a society, and of but limited concern to working-class people. They are also symptomatic of the tension between spoken and written norms in literate societies in general; it may be doubted whether they affect vernacular speech forms.

In HKE, this took place in the 1970s, when a new middle class emerged as the result of the negotiations between the UK and China regarding the handover of Hong Kong, and this had linguistic consequences, such as the emergence of prescriptivism: widespread complaints arose among academics in the 1970s regarding allegedly falling English standards (Bolton 2003: 108–111; see also Collins 2013: 157). It remains to be seen whether this form of prescriptivism plays a role in the use the modals and semi-modals studied in this paper, as well as on the epicene pronouns used by speakers in different written and spoken registers. In order to explore its possible role, spoken and written registers will be analyzed in search for the 'tension' referred to by Schneider.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. The corpus

The corpus used to conduct this study on HKE is the Hong Kong component of the ICE family of corpora, a project that aims at providing comparative corpora of varieties of

English all over the world (Greenbaum 1996; Nelson 2009). Each ICE corpus consists of one million words (60% of spoken material, 40% of written material) in 12 broad text-types, as shown in Table 1.

MODE	TYPE	SUB-TYPE	CODE	No of words
SPOKEN	Dialogues	Private	S1A	200,000
		Public	S1B	160,000
	Monologues	Unscripted	S2A	140,000
		Scripted	S2B	100,000
WRITTEN	Non-printed	Student writing	W1A	40,000
		Letters	W1B	60,000
	Printed	Academic writing	W2A	80,000
		Popular writing	W2B	80,000
		Reportage	W2C	40,000
		Instructional writing	W2D	40,000
		Persuasive writing	W2E	20,000
		Creative writing	W2F	40,000

Table 1: Text-types included in ICE

Out of these, three registers were included in this analysis, namely, private conversation (S1A, according to ICE codes), student writing (W1A) and academic writing (W2A). These text-types were selected because they represent two opposing ends in two of Biber's (1988) dimensions, namely Dimension 1 'Involved versus informational production' and Dimension 5 'Abstract versus non-abstract information'. Thus, face-to-face conversation is highly involved and very non-abstract, while academic prose is shown to be purely informational and very abstract, in Biber's terms.

In addition, academic prose is said to be an 'uptight' register (Hundt and Mair 1999), that is, it is less open to innovations and more prone to retain conservative forms than 'agile' registers, such as journalese. Student writing (though not present in Biber's dimensions) is considered a sub-register of academic writing (Biber and Conrad 2009: 140; Biber and Gray 2016: 14). Student writing is done with less time for planning and revising than printed academic prose, so, on the one hand, it can be expected to be closer to spoken registers than planned academic prose. On the other hand, however, student writing is also expected to be subject to prescriptivism: if students are taught that a given form is to be avoided, they are hypothesized to follow the rule, as that has an effect on their grades. Just the opposite is expected to happen with private conversations, often considered the least stylized variety and subject to the least

prescriptive pressure, since it is "the least monitored kind of data" (Hundt 2015: 389), where ongoing language change is usually more advanced (van der Auwera *et al*. 2012: 71).

Therefore, my hypothesis is that, for the particular linguistic items studied here, the more democratic options will be most common in private dialogues (S1A), followed by student writing (W1A), and, finally, academic writing (W2A).

3.2. The dataset

As mentioned, the two linguistic markers of democratization studied here are modal verbs and epicene pronouns. The analysis of each of them involved certain methodological decisions that are explained as follows.

The modal verb *must* is considered to be less democratic than the corresponding semi-modals of necessity *have (got) to*, *need (to)* and *want to*. It must be mentioned that only present tense forms of these semi-modals have been included in the dataset, in order to provide a more accurate comparison between these verbs and modal *must*, which does not exhibit past tense forms. The epicene pronouns considered include all inflectional forms of generic *he*, combined *he or she* and singular *they*. All in all, 10,689 forms were explored (4,885 on modals and 5,804 on pronouns), which were subsequently manually pruned, resulting in 1,143 valid examples, distributed as shown in Table 2.

		S1A (priv. conv)	W2A (Ac. wr.)	W1A (St. wr.)	TOTAL
MODALS	*must*	53	56	40	149
	semi-modals	613	77	49	739
EPICENE PRONOUNS	Generic *he*	46	15	84	145
	Epicene *they* + *he or she*	77	12	21	110
TOTAL		789	160	194	1,143

Table 2: Number of valid tokens per category

Several considerations are in order regarding the selection of examples of epicene pronouns, because all contexts which were considered not to be potential contexts for variation between generic *he* and singular *they* or *he or she* were not included in the dataset. Thus, when pruning examples of generic *he*, antecedents which were not

expected to accept other pronoun than *he* were excluded, as is the case of *God* and *the runner* (in Zeno's paradox). *God* may, in principle, be referred to as *she*, which is a highly marked use that falls out of the scope of this paper, but it is not likely to be referred as *they* or *he or she*. Likewise, *the runner* in Zeno's paradox could be any person who runs, but this is supposed to be a culture-bound masculine referent, as it is highly unlikely that Zeno was thinking of a female runner. In the same lines, when pruning the tokens with singular *they*, collective nouns were excluded (e.g. country names, companies, collective nouns), because when this pronoun is used with these antecedents, it does not stand in variation with *he* or *he or she*, but with *it*.

Table 2 does not distinguish between semi-modals of democratic epicene pronouns, because the aim here is to contrast democratic and non-democratic alternative forms, rather than to study other intra-linguistic factors that may condition the variation (this is done, for instance, in Loureiro-Porto 2019, regarding modal verbs, and 2020, regarding epicene pronouns). In addition, although Table 2 shows raw numbers, because the size of each corpus section differs, in what follows results will be presented in percentage form, in order to better illustrate the predominance of each form in each register.

4. RESULTS

The distribution of the 255 tokens of epicene pronouns by register is shown in Figure 1, which clearly describes a pattern according to which democratic forms are prevalent in private conversations, and more common in academic writing than in student writing.
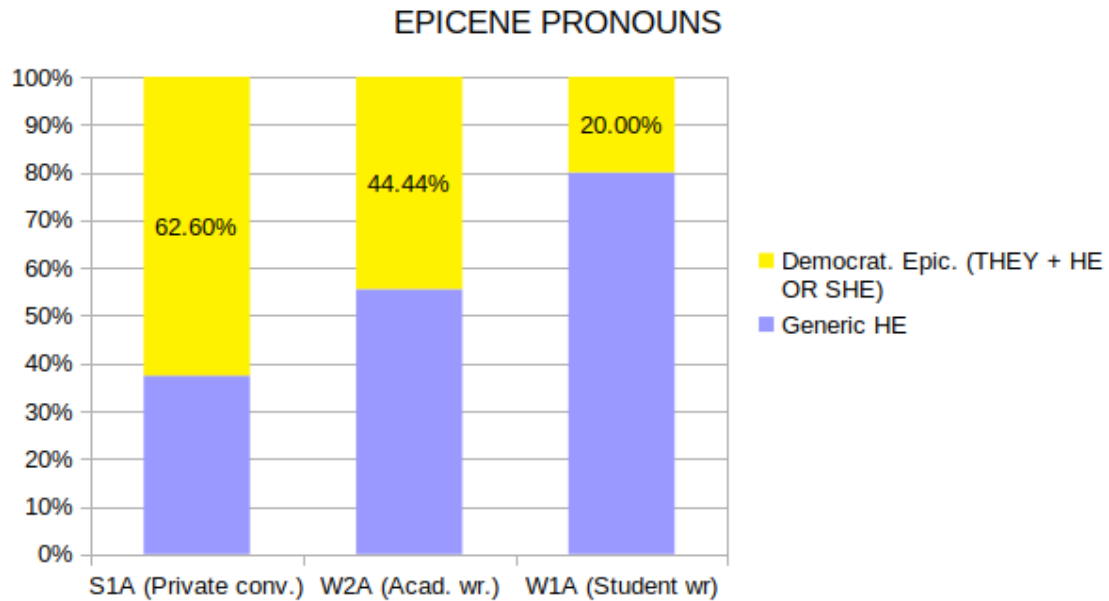
Figure 1: Distribution of democratic and non-democratic epicene pronouns

If we zoom in to see any difference regarding the specific democratic pronouns chosen in each register, we obtain Figure 2, which confirms previous literature: singular *they* is more common in the spoken register, while *he or she* prevails in written registers (as already shown by Balhorn 2009).
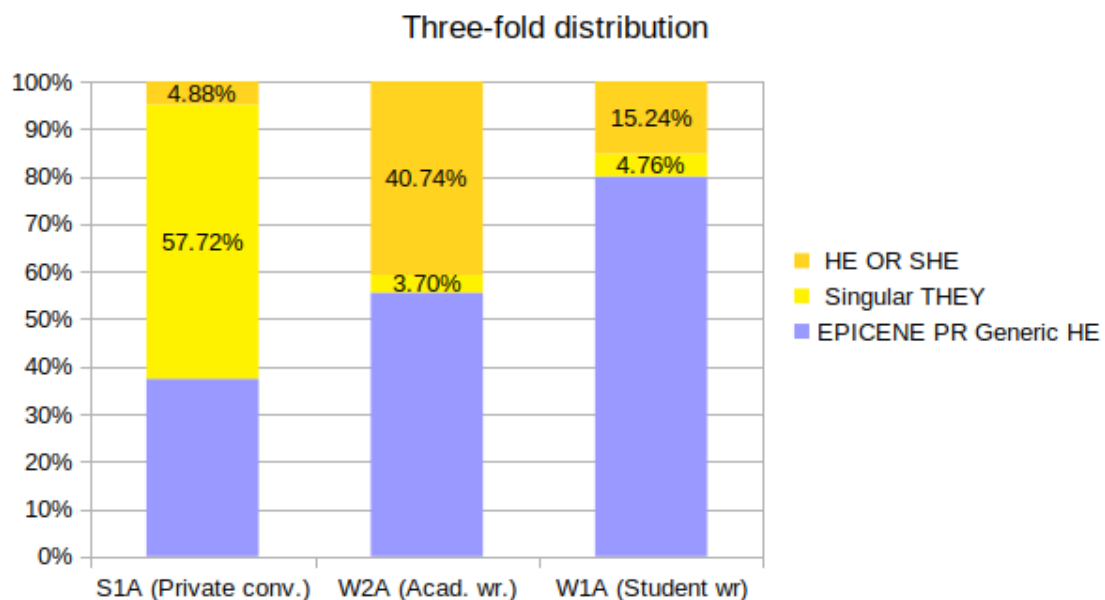

Figure 2: Threefold distribution of the epicene pronouns in the three registers

Exactly the same ranking is found in the distribution of modals across registers, as seen in Figure 3. In this case, the differences between academic writing and student writing are not so sharp, but they do get sharper if we only focus on *must* and the semi-modals

when they express deontic meanings, as seen in Figure 4. Deontic meanings, it must be recalled, constitute the domain in which democratization works: *must* is considered too face-threatening when it expresses obligation, but not when it expresses epistemic necessity.
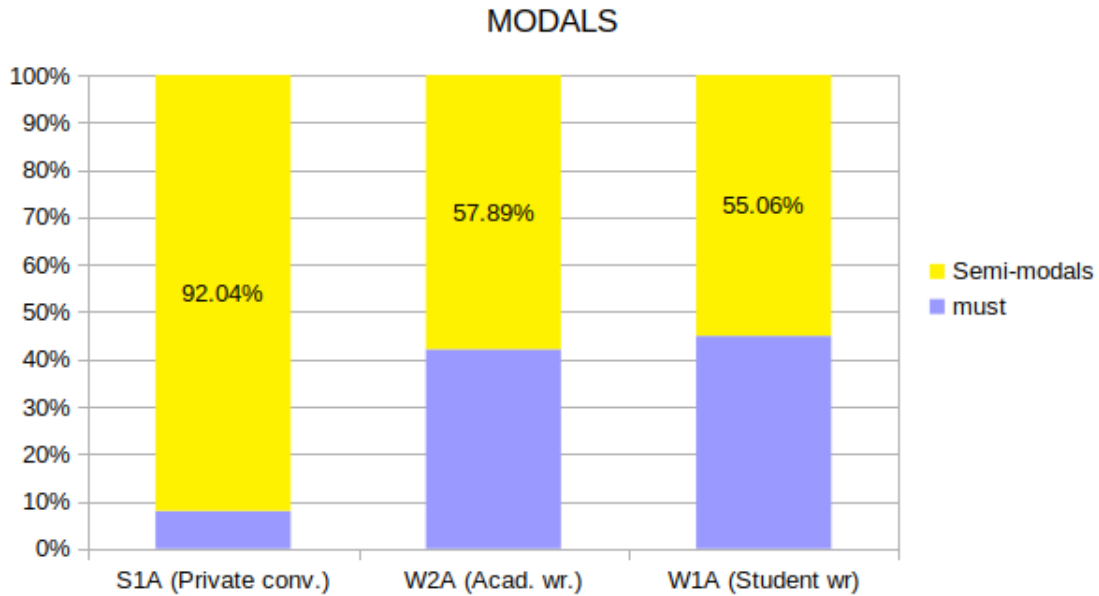
MODALS

Figure 3: Distribution of democratic semi-modals and undemocratic *must* across registers
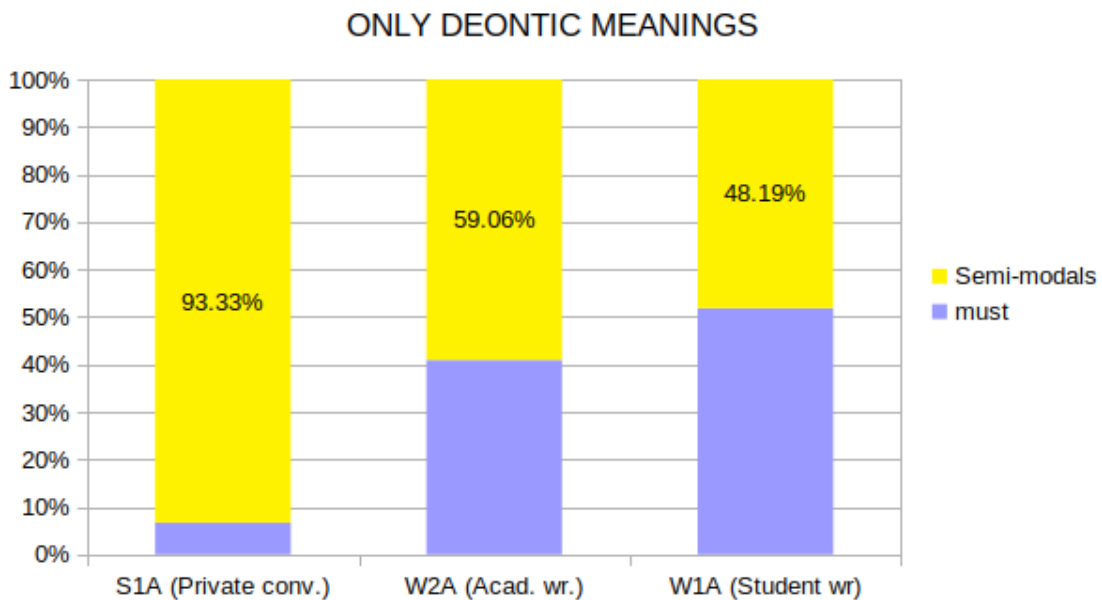
ONLY DEONTIC MEANINGS

Figure 4: Deontic *must* and deontic semi-modals across registers

The ranking obtained for the frequency of democratic epicene pronouns and democratic pronouns goes against my initial hypothesis: student writing is the farthest from private conversations regarding democratic markers, as academic writing is sensitively more

democratic than spontaneous writings produced by students. This is counter-intuitive behavior from a group which is expected to include the youngest speakers who participated in the compilation of ICE-HK. With the aim of shedding some light on this, Figure 5 shows the distribution of epicene pronouns across age groups, as found in the metadata for S1A files in ICE-HK, that is, private conversations (there is no similar metadata for the other registers studied in this paper).
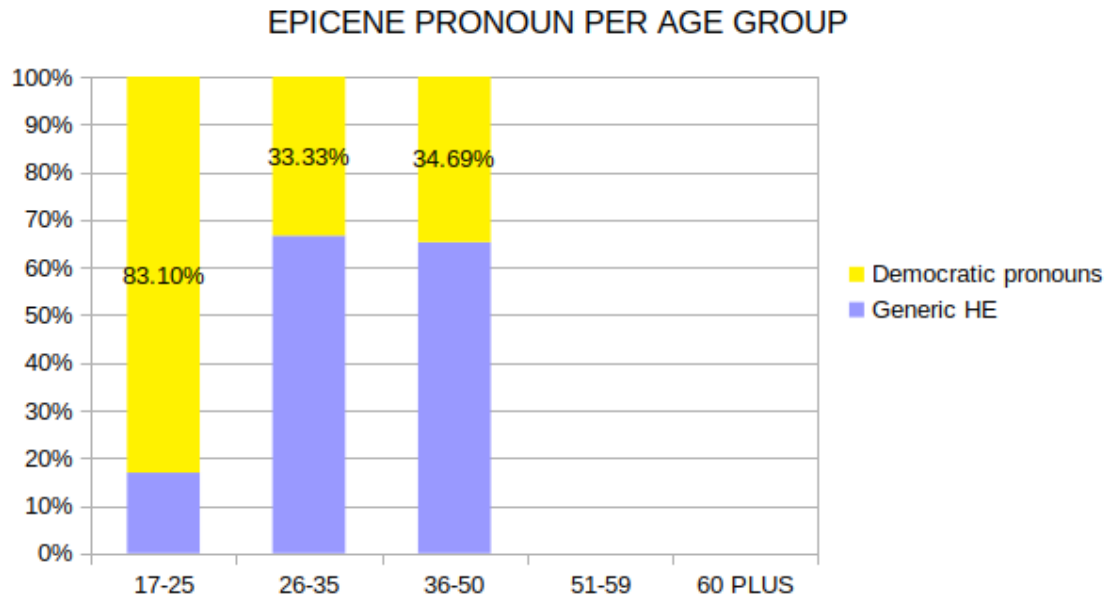

Figure 5: Distribution of democratic and non-democratic epicene pronouns per age groups (only S1A section)

Interestingly enough, the youngest group of speakers (who are assumed to include students) is the group that exhibits the highest proportion of democratic epicene pronouns singular *they* and *he or she*). A similar picture can be found if we focus on the distribution of modal *must* and semi-modals across age groups (Figure 6).
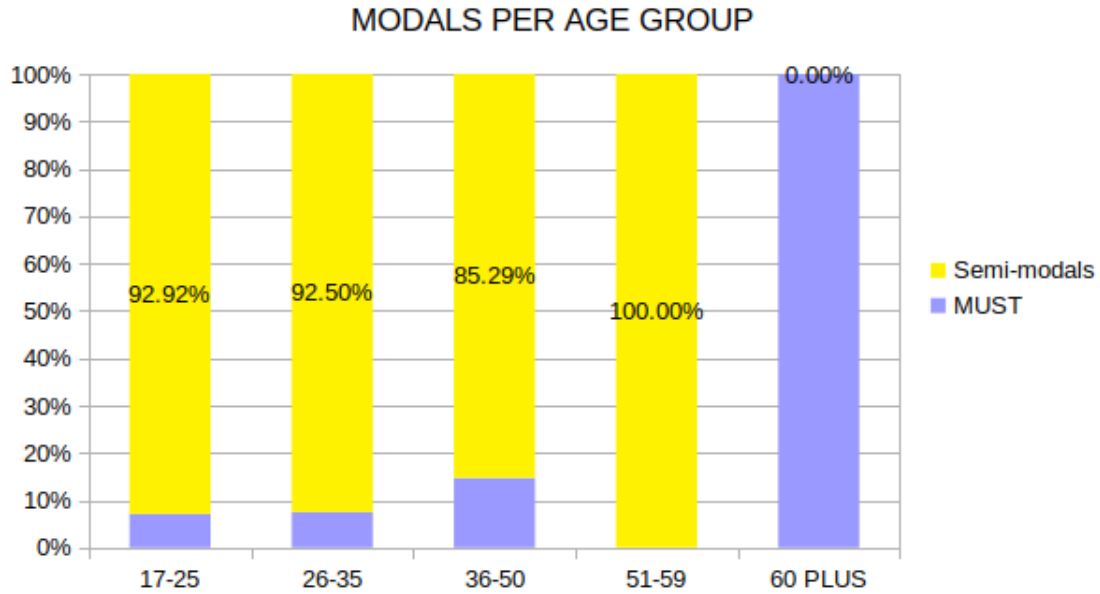
MODALS PER AGE GROUP

Figure 6: Distribution of modal *must* and semi-modals per age groups (only S1A section)

Therefore, the hypothesis that student writing exhibits the lowest rate of democratic epicene pronouns and semi-modals because the youngest group of speakers do not use these markers regularly proves false. It is fitting, therefore, to further explore the prescriptivism hypothesis, which is discussed in the next section.

5. DISCUSSION

Prescriptivism, as mentioned, is more likely to be evident in written than in spoken registers, because of the planned character of the former. For that reason, my initial hypothesis was that student writing would be closer to spoken registers than academic writing, because students have less time to plan their writing than academics. However, as seen in Section 4, this has turned out not to be true. Nonetheless, I still think that prescriptivism may be the key to understand the clear pattern found across registers in this paper. Before proceeding, though, and because I am studying two different democratic markers, namely semi-modals and epicene pronouns, it is important to discuss which of the five strands of prescriptivism described by Curzan (2014) applies for each case.

The variation between (non-democratic) *must* and the (democratic) semi-modals *have (got) to*, *need (to)* and *want to* seems to fit into Curzan's (2014) stylistic prescriptivism. To be more precise, because semi-modals are most common in spoken

registers across varieties of English, the use of this group of verbs in other registers would constitute the flouting of stylistic prescriptivism, which, as seen above, distinguishes different styles and determines which one is appropriate and when. That is, just like table manners are determined by context, so would be the use of semi-modals. In fact, although no grammar book mentions that semi-modals should only be used in spoken registers, a sort of 'prestige barrier' holds among speakers, a "taboo that discourages the use of highly colloquial forms in written (especially printed) texts" (Leech 2013: 110–111). My interpretation is that some kind of 'unconscious register awareness' could be playing a role in the speakers' choice of (semi-)modal in written texts, but why this would be more clearly marked in student writing than in academic writing can only be answered if looked in combination with the other democratic markers in this study, namely singular *they* and *he or she*.

The use of democratic epicene pronouns illustrates the contrast between restorative prescriptivism and politically responsive prescriptivism. The prescription of generic *he* in 1960s grammars, when forms such as *he or she* were being promoted (and centuries after the expansion of singular *they*; see Section 2.2) can be understood as the last effort to restore a rule that a growing number of speakers have abandoned, at least in the spoken mode. At the same time, the favoring of inclusive, gender-neutral pronouns after Second Wave feminism is a clear example of politically responsive prescriptivism, also called language reform.

Despite the number of studies that show that singular *they* is increasingly common in different registers in several varieties of English (see Section 2.1 above), the idea that this pronoun is 'incorrect' still holds in the twenty-first century, as evidenced in that the *Online Writing Lab* at Purdue University (used and consulted by students all over the United States) still includes the following frequently asked question: [4]

Isn't this incorrect grammar?

In short, no. Grammar shifts and changes over time; for instance, the clunky *he or she* that a singular *they* replaces is actually a fairly recent introduction into the language. Singular *they* has been used for a long time and is used in most casual situations; you probably do it yourself without realizing it. We are simply witnessing a reorientation of the rule, mostly with the intention of including more people in language.

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[4] https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/pronouns/gendered_pronouns_and_singular_they.html

If students today still think that there might be something incorrect in the singular use of *they*, we should not be surprised to learn about the situation in the 1970s:

> we also use these words [generic HE or singular THEY] because we are rewarded for doing so ('*he* is good grammar', 'A+') and punished for not doing so ('*they* is bad grammar', 'C-') (Silveira 1980: 174, as cited in Paterson 2011: 92).

Other studies around that date obtained similar results (such as Bodine 1975; Zuber and Reed 1993). All of these warnings, however, concern inner-circle varieties of English, and this paper deals with HKE, so it is necessary to explore the books used in that territory. Because ICE-HK was compiled in the 1990s, the students who participated as informants in its compilation must have gone to primary and secondary school in the 1980s. If we want to know which grammar books were used in Hong Kong schools back in that decade, Bolton (2000b: 269) is clear enough:

> By the 1980s, [t]he earlier system of elite schooling in English and 'elitist bilingualism' began to shift towards a system of mass bilingualism (or folk bilingualism), which, in spite of great imperfections, gave a large proportion of children at least the opportunity to acquire some English in 'Anglo-Chinese' secondary schools, where English textbooks were used. (Bolton 2000b: 269, my emphasis)

If Bolton (2000b) says that English textbooks were used, Tsui and Bunton (2002: 71) clarify that both native and non-native teachers of English referred to *Collins Cobuild Grammar* (Sinclair 1990) and Swan's *Practical English Usage*. A quick look at Swan (1986) reveals that singular *they* is said to be used in an "informal style," while "[i]n a more formal style, we usually use *he*, *him* and *his*" (Swan 1986: 236, Section 307). This book, meant to serve as a guide to users of English, surely takes this information from more authoritative grammar books aimed at an academic audience, such as Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 182), who affirm that the use of singular *they* "is frowned upon in formal English, where the tendency is to use *he* as the 'unmarked' form."

Interestingly enough, Quirk *et al.*'s (1985) grammar had already shifted their view from their 1970s version: "At one time restricted to informal usage, it [singular *they*] is now increasingly accepted even in formal usage, especially in AmE" (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 770). That is, what was "frowned upon" in the 1970s was "increasingly accepted in formal usage" in the 1980s. This means that academics had already recognized the change in the level of acceptability of singular *they*, by the time users' guides were still reproducing somewhat older usages. This delayed actualization of works addressed to

users as opposed to works addressed at scientists is not restricted to linguistics,[5] but it can indeed help us explain why academic writing in HKE in the 1990s included a higher percentage of newer democratic forms than student writing did: attitudes towards sexist language were changing in the 1990s (i.e. formal, academic writing, already accepted democratic options previously proscribed), but usage books and other prescriptive works had not yet included this type of usage as a possibility (and students tend to rely on books with a rather prescriptive approach).

Wrapping up the discussion on the effects of prescriptivism on the cases of variation studied here, we have seen that register variation can indeed shed some light on the diffusion of democratic markers. In the case of *must* and semi-modals, although their use is not prescribed in grammar books, speakers feel the effects of a prestige barrier which conditions the distribution of certain markers across registers; that is, speakers feel some sort of underlying stylistic prescriptivism. The higher frequency of semi-modals in private conversations reveals that the democratic markers are readily available for speakers, but these refrain from using these markers in written registers to the same extent. Why academic writing exhibits a higher frequency of semi-modals than student writing can be related to what we have just seen as for democratic epicene pronouns: as certain democratic linguistic items become more accepted in formal contexts, these markers appear first in texts written by academics than by students. The differences between the three strands of prescriptivism illustrated by these democratic markers do not have an effect on register variation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored two pairs of (un-)democratic markers, namely (i) modal *must* vs. semi- modals *have (got) to*, *need (to)* and *want to*, and (ii) generic *he* vs. singular *they* and *he or she*, in a HKE corpus including three registers (private conversations, academic writing, and student writing). The data were analyzed under the umbrella of register variation and the effects of prescriptivism on the speakers' choice of democratic or undemocratic items, and the discussion in Section 5 allows us to answer the three initial research questions.

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[5] Analogical delays are observed, for instance, in scientific advancements regarding nutrition: Harvard's MyPlate was proposed among scientists in 2011, while some popular writings still refer to the old-fashioned food pyramid diagram.

RQ1: Are these 'democratizing' changes taking place in HKE at the same pace as in inner-circle varieties of English? The answer is yes, they are. The analysis of private conversation shows that the expansion of semi-modals is very advanced in this variety of English. As for democratic epicene pronouns, they prove to be less frequent than inner-circle varieties of English, but the evolution in that direction seems to be in progress if we take into account that younger speakers exhibit the highest rate of democratic *they* and *he or she*. The cross-register analysis shows that democratization has reached written registers at different rates, which is interpreted as an effect of prescriptivism.

RQ2: What is the role played by prescriptivism, as evidenced in register variation? The two set of items studied here seem to be subject to the effects of different types of prescriptivism (Curzan 2014), namely stylistic prescriptivism (*must* and semi-modals), restorative prescriptivism (generic *he*) and politically responsive prescriptivism (singular *they* and *he or she*). Nonetheless, these differences do not seem to have an effect on the actual use of the democratic members of the pairs, which are most frequent in private conversations, and more frequent in academic writing than in student writing. Since democratization is a change in progress, democratic markers are readily available to speakers in private conversations. In addition, students turn out to be more conservative when writing school assignments than their professors. This was interpreted as the effects of the students' reliance on prescriptive grammar books based on somewhat old-fashioned rules.

RQ3: Are these changes conscious or unconscious? This question is more challenging than the other two. On the one hand, the high frequency of democratic markers in private conversations leads to the conclusion that speakers choose these forms unconsciously. On the other hand, the writers' tendency to refrain themselves from writing the same forms they use when they speak reveals that they are certainly conscious of the choices available to them. For these reasons, the answer to this question must be a cautious "yes, it's either or both,"[6] until further research on other varieties of English and other registers help us shed more light in this respect.

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[6] This was Albert Einstein's ingenious answer to the question *Is light a particle or a wave?* (Metcalf 2011: 6–7).

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