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**WHERE HAVE ALL THE MODALS GONE? – ON THE DECLINING FREQUENCY OF MODAL
AUXILIARIES IN AMERICAN AND BRITISH ENGLISH**

Recent corpus research has shown that the core modal auxiliaries in standard British and American written English have been declining in frequency, and in the early years of the twenty-first century this trend appears to have been accelerating. More precisely, in British English, the highest-frequency modals (*will, can, would, could*) have been roughly holding their own, whereas lower-frequency modals (e.g. *may, must, shall, ought*) have been declining rather rapidly. On the other hand, some so-called semi-modals such as *have to, want to* and *need to* have been on the increase: yet this countervailing trend does not account to the ‘missing modals’, nor are they easily accounted for by other expressions of modality such as nominal and adjectival constructions.

In this presentation I will explore various reasons for this apparent loss of modal usage, and present evidence mainly from the Brown family of corpora, tracing corpus evidence from the beginning of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century.

Geoffrey Leech is Emeritus Professor of English Linguistics at Lancaster University (in the UK), where he has been a faculty member for 40 years. He has published many books and articles in the fields of English grammar, stylistics, pragmatics, semantics and corpus linguistics. His research career dates from the 1960s, when he produced three books (*English in Advertising, A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry, and Towards a Semantic Description of English*), and extends to the present time: his recent works include *Language in Literature* (2008) and (with Marianne Hundt, Christian Mair and Nicholas Smith) *Change in Contemporary English: A Grammatical Study* (2009). Among his best known books are *Meaning and the English Verb* (1971; 3rd edn. 2004), *Principles of Pragmatics* (1983), and (with R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum and J. Svartvik) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985). In the 1970s, he was a pioneer in the development of computer corpus linguistics, creating with Stig Johansson and others the first available corpus of British English: the Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen Corpus. Later he led the Lancaster team as part of the BNC consortium that created the British National Corpus (1991-5). He studied at MIT for a year in 1964-5, and has held visiting positions in Australia, China, France, Japan, New Zealand and the USA.