



UiO : **University of Oslo**

120 years of reporting clauses (1900-2019): stability or change?



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Never use a verb other than "said" to carry dialogue. The line of dialogue belongs to the character; the verb is the writer sticking his nose in. But "said" is far less intrusive than "grumbled", "gasped", "cautioned", "lied".

Elmore Leonard, The New York Times, 2001

The SAID Debate: There are two major sides to the said debate. One side argues that the only dialogue tags necessary are *said* and *asked*. [...] The other side, mainly composed of middle and high school English teachers around the world argue, "Said is Dead!"

<https://thewritepractice.com/dialogue-tags/>

If *say* constitutes the unmarked option, there may be a cline of increasingly informative verbs describing a response (*reply, respond, counter, deny, expostulate, storm, snap (back)*, etc.) or an initiation (*begin, remark, blurt, burst out, splutter*), while many verbs fill both these roles. [...]

In addition much more detailed attention could be directed to the occurrence and implications of the adverbial expressions, especially of manner, that so often accompany these verbs ... (Toolan 1990, *The Stylistics of Fiction : a Literary-linguistic Approach*)

Never use an adverb to modify the verb "said" ... [...]. To use an adverb this way (or almost any way) is a mortal sin. The writer is now exposing himself in earnest, using a word that distracts and can interrupt the rhythm of the exchange. I have a character in one of my books tell how she used to write historical romances "full of rape and adverbs".

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/20/ten-rules-for-writing-fiction-part-one>

Research questions

1. Has SAY gained ground at the expense of other reporting verbs over the past 120 years?
2. If so, has this change led to a change in how often the verb is accompanied by glossing phrases, as in 1) and 2) or a description of a following action, as in 3)?

Examples

- 1) "Yes," said Bianca, hurriedly.
- 2) "Good news," says Mark, in a flat monotone.
- 3) "I knew," said Agatha, coming up to the fire.

The Corpus of British Fiction (CBF)

- Novels published between 1900 and 2019 by British writers
- 1,036 texts (mostly complete novels, some shorter extracts and short story collections)
- Approx. 86 mill. words
- Sub-genres: adventure, crime, general, historical, humour, romance, spy, war
- No children's or juvenile literature / science fiction / fantasy literature
- Approx. 2/3 male authors
- Many authors are represented with more than one book (approx. 450 different authors)
- POS-tagged with CLAWS; lemmatised with TreeTagger; pre-/post-processed with Python/Perl scripts
- Indexed with CWB / searchable with CQP

Decade of publication	Number of texts	Number of words
1900-1909	84	7,805,279
1910-1919	97	8,032,519
1920-1929	123	10,769,919
1930-1939	111	9,320,832
1940-1949	68	5,795,150
1950-1959	100	8,055,512
1960-1969	83	7,099,502
1970-1979	70	6,00,4977
1980-1989	88	5,522,172
1990-1999	90	5,605,617
2000-2009	56	5,660,101
2010-2019	66	6,551,563
	1,036	86,223,143

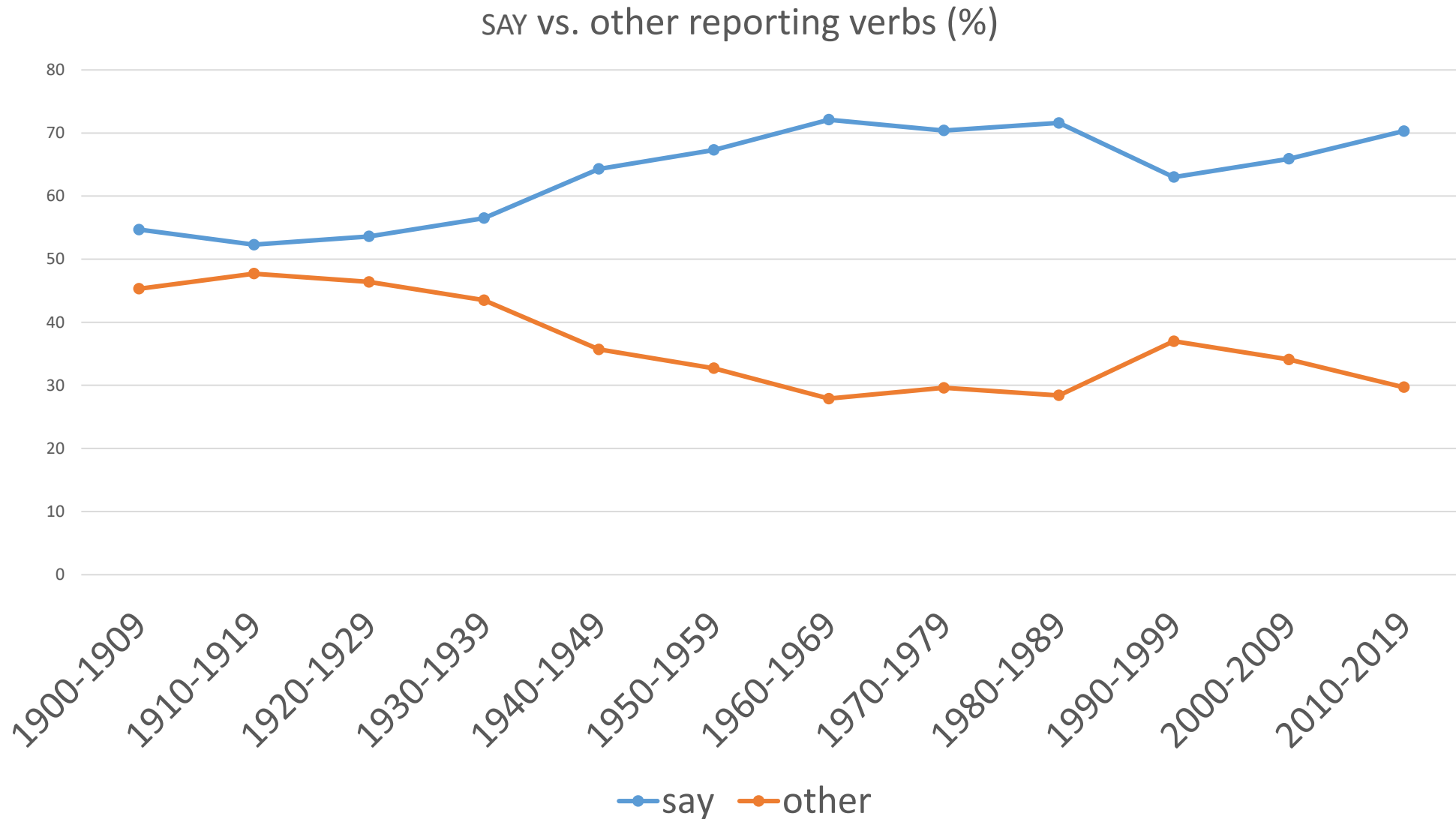


Figure 1. The proportion of SAY versus all other reporting verbs

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Year of publication

P1: 1900-1939 (1,000 occ.)

P2: 1940-1979 (1,000 occ.)

P3: 1980-2019 (1,000 occ.)

Table 2. Annotation scheme

Annotation scheme	Annotation	Explanation
<i>Reporting verb</i>	say	
<i>Glossing type</i>	pp	pp = prepositional phrase (adv = adverb, ing = <i>-ing</i> (form or clause))
<i>Position of reporting clause</i>	a	a = after (b = before, s = suspended quotation) in relation to the reported clause
<i>The gloss</i>	in a whisper	
<i>The meaning of the glossing</i>	manner	
<i>Instance</i>	"Oh, Gwilym," my mother said, <u>in a whisper</u> .	

Table 3. Annotation scheme cont.

Annotation scheme	Annotation	Comment
Reporting verb	explain	
Glossing type	ing	ing = <i>-ing</i> (form or clause))
Position of reporting clause	s	s = suspension
The gloss	smiling	
The meaning of the glossing	attitude (?)	
Length of suspension	3 words	Including speaker and verb
Instance	"I just turned it around, you imbecile," <u>Gaffar explained, smiling</u> , "and hid the burn under the sofa."	

Table 4. Counts (raw frequencies)

	Period:	1900-1930	1940-1979	1980-2019
Speaker+Verb only		664	752	716
Glossing phrases/types				
Single adverb (e.g. (SAY) <i>calmly</i>)		143	127	118
Prepositional phrase (e.g. <i>in a low voice</i>)		94	36	43
Following/Simultaneous action (body language)		53	57	83
Speech descriptive adverbials (e.g. <i>smiling, laughing</i>)		13	2	7
Other form of modification (ADJ <i>-ed</i> , NP)		5	9	9
Placement of reporting clause				
After reported clause		783	728	756
Suspended quotation		170	125	118
Before reported clause		47	147	126

Examples

Speaker+Verb only (66-75% of all occurrences in the material)

1. "By the window, then, if you would," Harry said.
2. "Well?" the old woman said.

Single adverb modification (11-14%)

3. "My dear boy, of course," said Eleanor benignly.
4. "You'll have to do better than that," he said huskily.

Prepositional phrase

5. "It's here," said Pierce in a cracked voice.
6. "I catch more fish than you do, anyhow!" said Erebus with some heat...

Following/Simultaneous action

7. "We met in the drive," she said and, turning her back on them, leant on the piano to talk to Mercer.
8. "Since when," asked the minister, looking as though he would greatly like to annihilate Mr. Wycherly; "since when has my wife needed a go-between to spare her the necessity of telling me anything?"

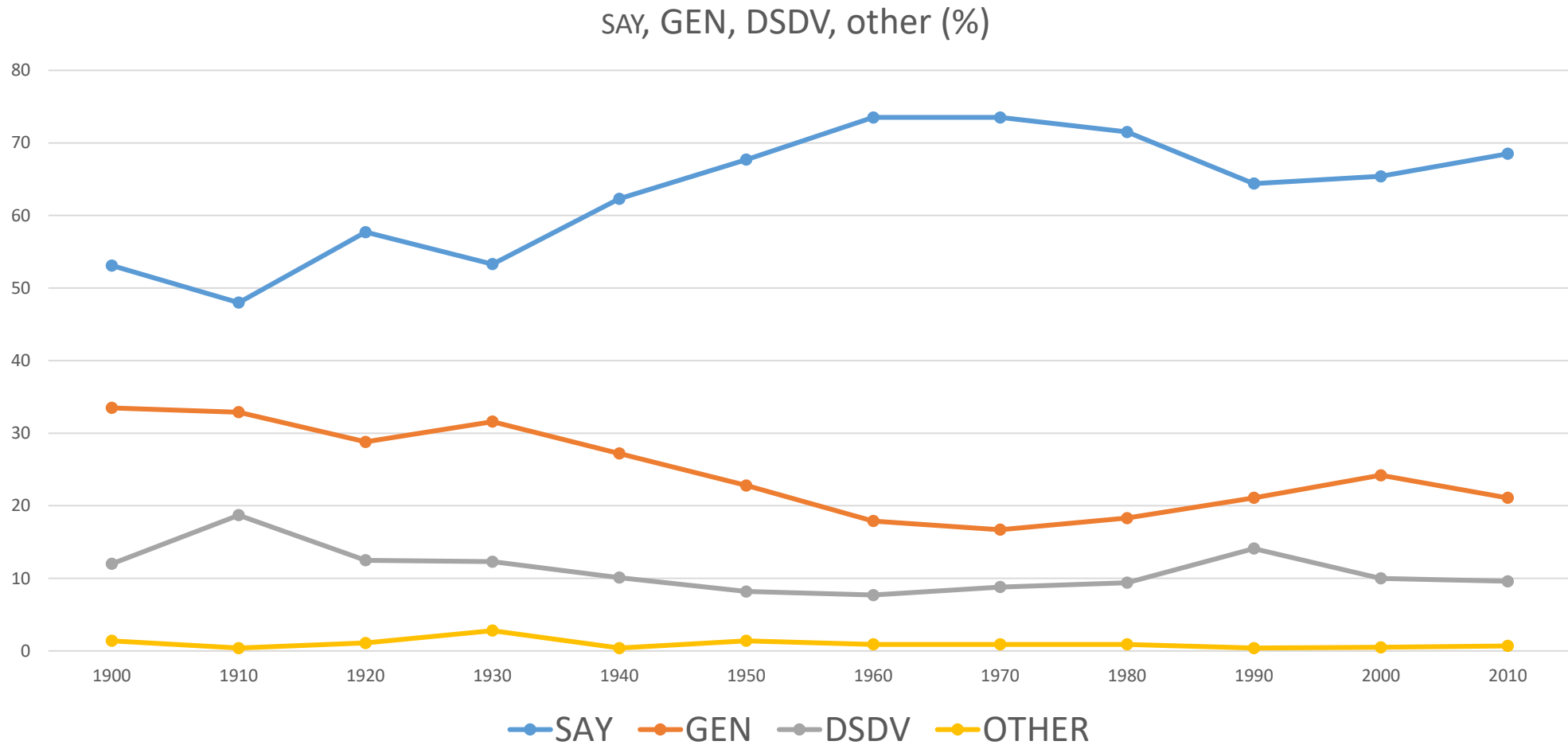


Figure 2. SAY vs. general speech verbs (GEN) , direct speech descriptive verbs (DSDV) & other (mainly mental and gesture verbs, i.e. not speech verbs)

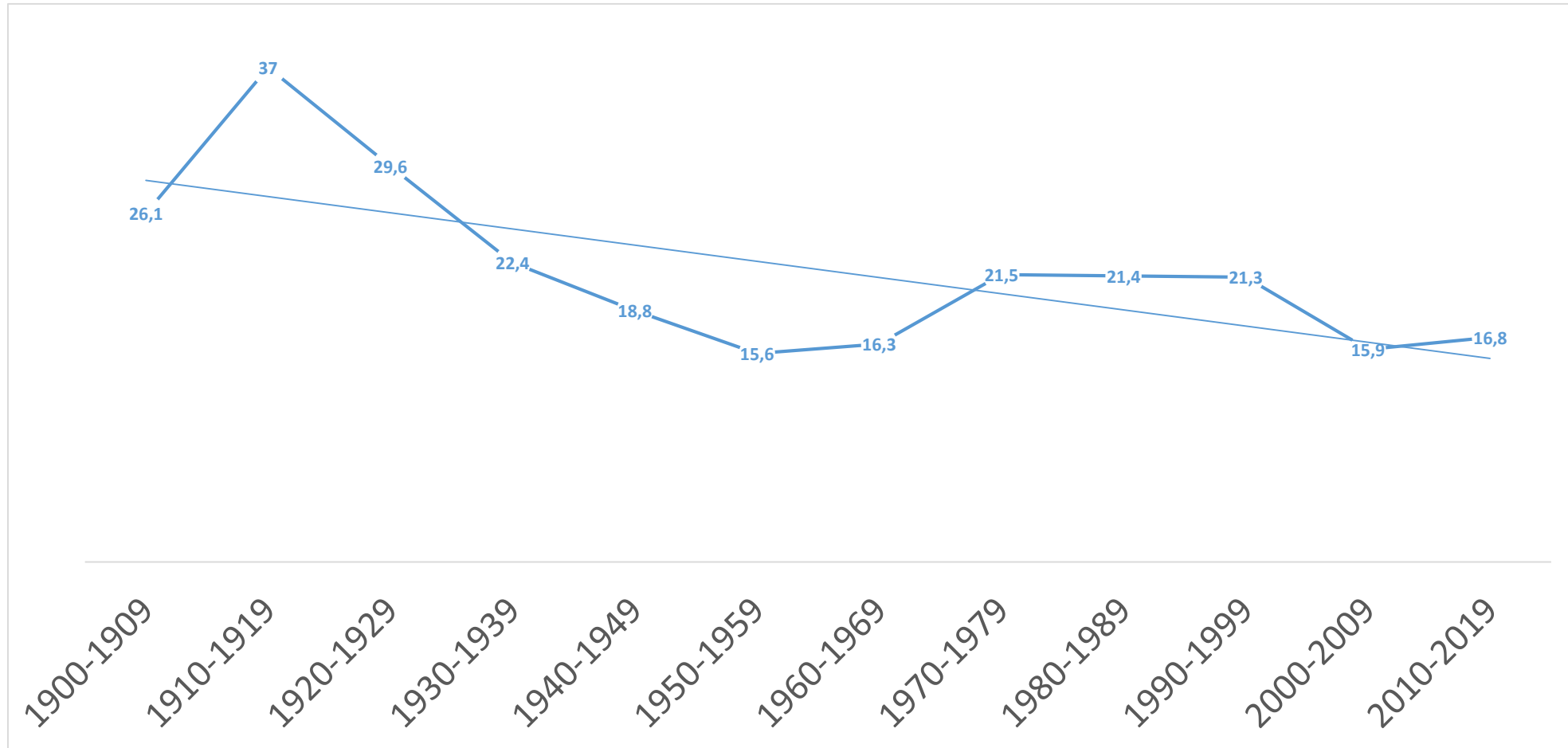


Figure 3. Proportion (%) of SAY with glossing phrases (adv, -ing, pp)
Overall freq.: 402

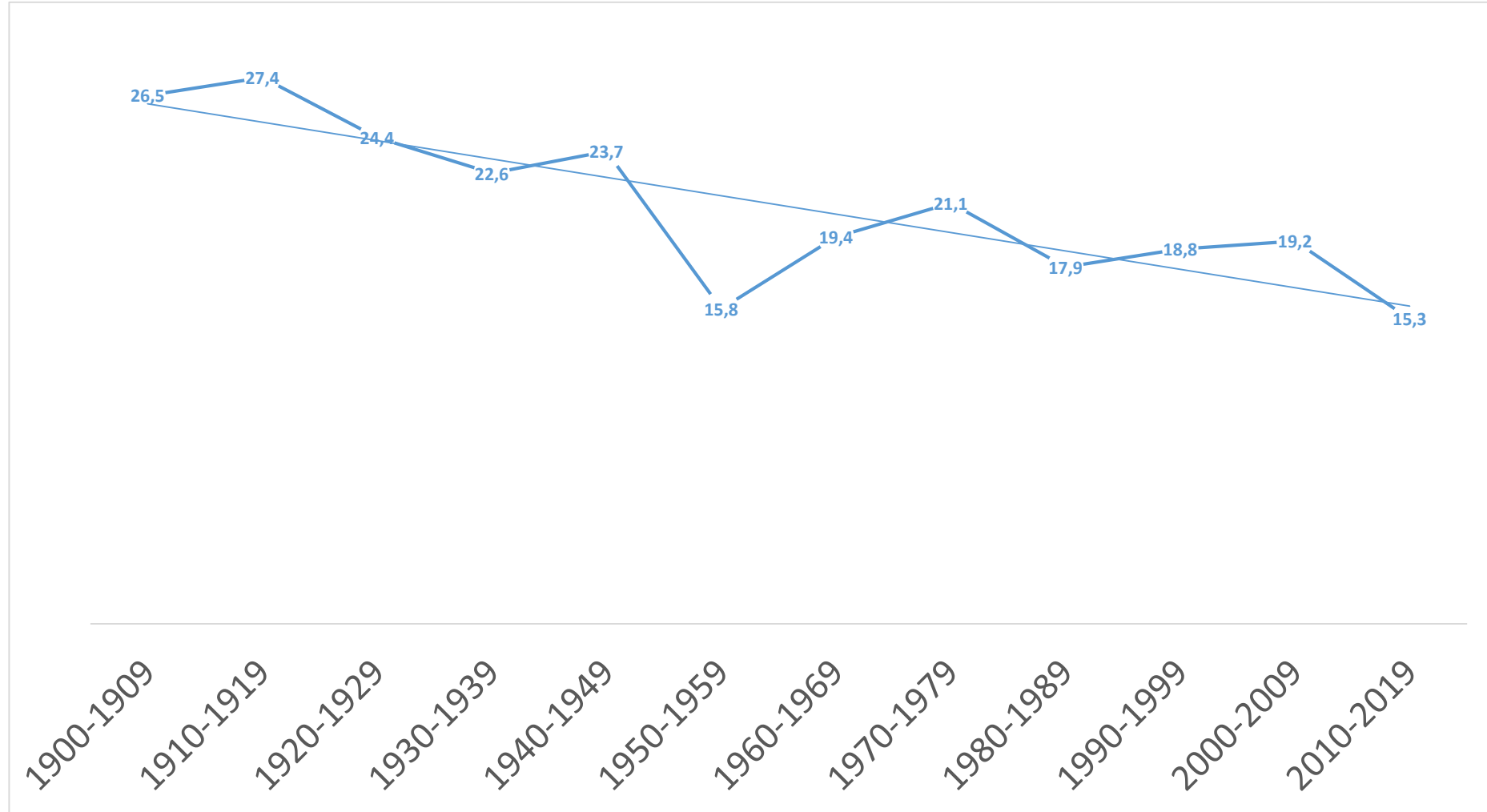


Figure 4. Proportion (%) of 'other' verbs with glossing phrases (adv, *-ing*, pp)
Overall freq.: 237

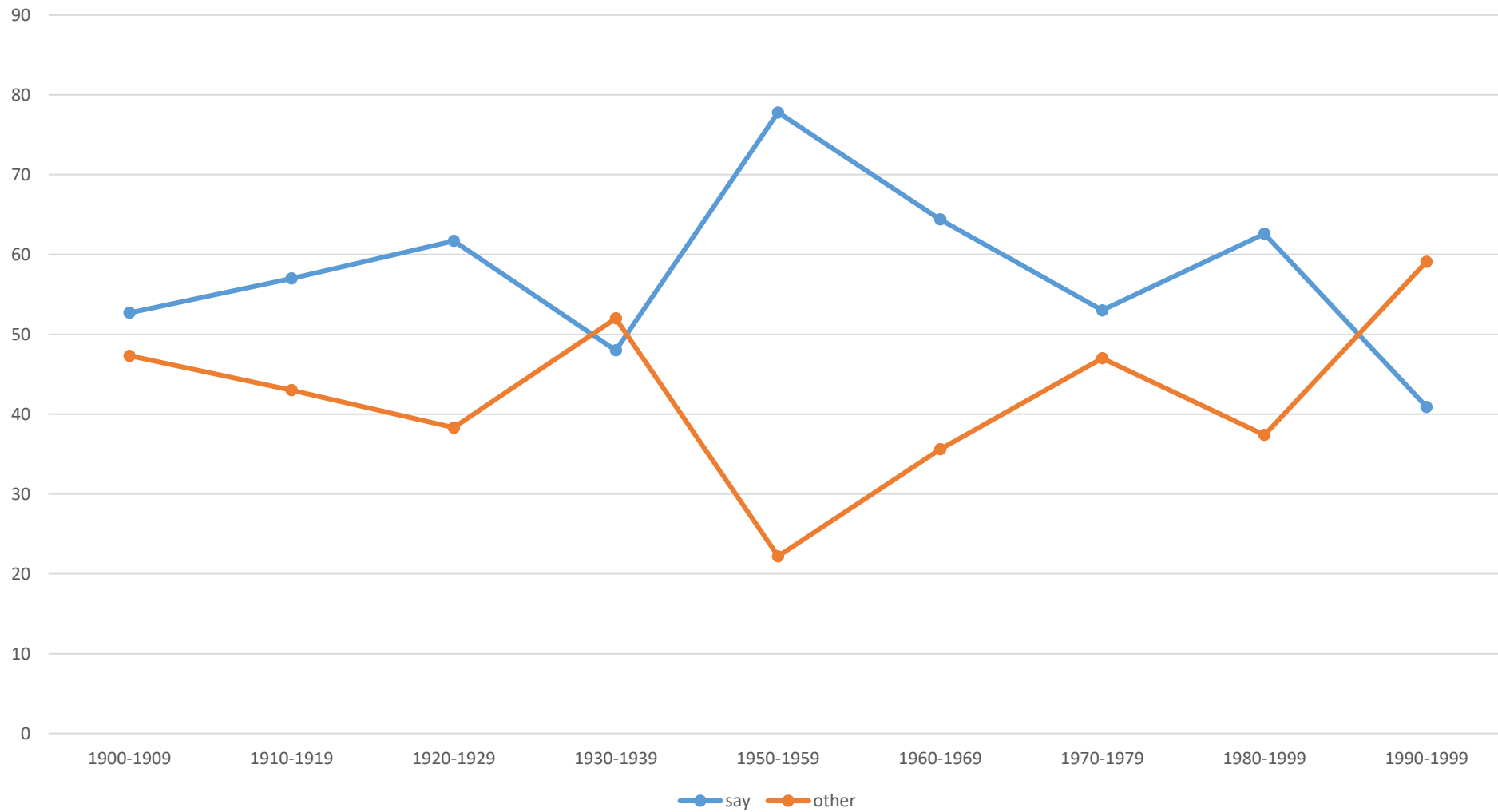
"Undoubtedly *cry* becomes less important as we move into the nineteenth century and then on to the twentieth: but this decline is not steady and wants analysis. One would like to know, of course, which nineteenth-century novelists retain a taste for *cry*; but one would also like to know where the decibel level of novelistic conversation really becomes lower and where *cry* is simply displaced by more learned synonyms (*exclaim, ejaculate*)."

Lambert 1981: 18

"In diachronic studies, the focus is often on linguistic change. However, linguistic stability is also an essential object of study, as the possibility of tracing conditioning factors, both linguistic and extralinguistic, allows comparison of the situations that appear to encourage change with those which seem to promote stability."

Kytö et al. 2006: 9

Figure X. SAY vs. other verbs in romance fiction



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<https://www.cis.uni-muenchen.de/~schmid/tools/TreeTagger/data/tree-tagger1.pdf>
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Challenge: How to capture direct speech when quotation marks are missing

1. No overt marking or use of dash

Dorian remained where he was, and the intense man – who was the volunteer co-ordinator at the project – joined him. **Who's he?** *the man spat in the direction of Wotton's retreating back.* His own name was a classless John.

—'**Enry Wotton**, Dorian sneered, despising himself for the way he automatically dropped into Mockney. '**E's Phyllis's son.**

2. Use of no marking or colon only to mark direct speech

From our high perch we watched the black and white feather twist down out of the grey sky. **Come on**, *I said: I'll race you to catch it.* Marie-Angèle hesitated. **Supposing someone sees us?** I blew out my cheeks at her. **Cowardy-custard. I dare you.**

3. Drama-style dialogue marking

GENTLY [tagged RR by CLAWS!]

You may be sure I'm listening.

STEPHEN

Well, that's entirely what I've come to tell you.

And once more Stephen hesitates, as though again weighed down by a word of thunder, such a word as, when spoken, may chain-react to infinity.