Synchronic and Diachronic Aspects of English Modal Auxiliary verbs WILL, SHALL

Eun-Hee Choi¹, Mun-Koo Kang²

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explain the meanings and uses of the English auxiliaries WILL and SHALL. The complexity of modern usage of WILL and SHALL has been one of the most disputable themes of traditional English grammar. Originally SHALL(OE sculan) and WILL(OE willan) were independent verbs. The original meaning of SHALL was ‘to owe’ and that of WILL was ‘to desire or wish’. Just before the Middle English period, these auxiliaries were reduced to auxiliaries, retaining their strong original meanings.

As the present determination or obligation implies future action, the notion of futurity gradually displaced, partly or wholly, the original modal meaning with the result that the two verbs became future auxiliaries in many contexts. Though WILL and SHALL are at times used as tense auxiliaries referring to future time, it is often the case that these auxiliaries express some of various modal meanings associated with the volitional or emotional attitude of the speaker without implying futurity.

Keywords: future, volition, denote, obligation, tense

I The nature of WILL/SHALL and their change in meanings

A general view of the figures of Fries’ survey shows a decided development or change of use in the words WILL and SHALL from the 16th century to the present only with the second and third persons in independent-declarative statements. In these two situations the older more frequent use of SHALL has been displaced by a decidedly greater use of WILL. With the first

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1(Graduate student) 32588, Dept. of English Education Kongju National University 56 Gongjudaejak-Ro Gongju-Si Chungcheongnam-Do Province, Korea.
email: memi95@naver.com

2(Professor, Corresponding Author) 32588, Dept. of English Education Kongju National University 56 Gongjudaejak-Ro Gongju-Si Chungcheongnam-Do Province, Korea.
email: kangmunkoo@hanmail.net

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person in independent-declarative statements the relation of WILL to SHALL as expressed by the percentages seems to have been fairly constant throughout the 350 years of the survey. In this situation WILL has always been used in more than 70% of the instances. The total figures for questions and subordinate clauses show the predominance of SHALL only with the first person. (Questions-1 Sh. 97%; subordinate clauses- 1 Sh. 53.4%) With the second and third persons in questions and subordinate clauses WILL very obviously predominates. (Questions-2W. 98.6%; 3W. 72%; subordinate clauses-2W. 83.4%; 3W. 70%)

Historically speaking, George Mason and John Wallis in the 17th century, Samuel Johnson and Lindley Murray in the 18th century contributed much to form the rules into an established system. As generally explained in school grammars, the rules state that SHALL with the first person in a declarative sentence denotes pure futurity, but with the second and third persons, promise, or command, and that WILL, on the contrary, with the first person expresses volition, and with the second and third persons, futurity.

And if the speaker’s going to the picnic is not a forced act, one can say he goes to the picnic based on his own will and there is no problem if the sentence is rephrased as “I will go to the picnic tomorrow.” Suppose I said “I shall go to the dentist.” Obviously I have a tremendous fear about dentists and am afraid to go to the dentist, but I am going there on my volition for my dental health. So it is better to restate the sentence as “I will go to the dentist[4].”

Therefore, one can distinguish if the auxiliary is used to denote volition or obligation in most sentences where WILL/SHALL is used because their modal force is reduced. If one can emphasize its modal force, he may as well say “I am obliged to go to the picnic, though I don’t want to.” or “I really want to go to the dentist.” Speakers who insist SHALL in the first person do so due to their own habit of using language not because they are perfectly aware of the difference between the modal forces of the two auxiliaries. There would be few people who consider as illogical “I will be disappointed if you can’t come.”

In Old English, there were only two forms of inflection in Verbal tense — the present and the past — and because there was no particular way to indicate future, the present tense was used with an adverb that represents future[6].

Sópliance heo cwæd, Gif ic furdon his reafes æt-hrine, ic beo hál. (for she said,
“If only I may touch His clothes, I shall be made well.” - The New King James Version

-Mark, 5,28

On ðam dæge ge gecnáwað, ðæt ic eom on minum fæder, and ge synd on me, and ic eom on eow. (At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in me, and I in you. - The New King James Version

-John, 14,20

However, as culture developed and human life sophisticated, the two tense system, which was one of the characteristics of the Germanic language,

But the outstanding feature of the Germanic verb is that it has properly only two tenses a present and a past, which are indicated by the primary forms of the other tenses being shown by means of auxiliary verbs and compound tenses, etc.

collapsed and [SHALL/ WILL + Verb] indicated the time sphere of future. SHALL and WILL were not auxiliary verbs in Old English but main verbs sculan and willan

Therefore we found in the more advanced OE authors a number of Compound Tenses coming into use, to express more accurately the meanings of Present Perfect, Pluperfect, and so forth, and towards the close of the OE period we have the Tense system developed almost to its present extent.

So they were used independently or took infinitives as Objects. As we have looked into in the previous chapter, the original meaning of willan was ‘to will, to desire, to want, to exercise the faculty of willing’ and that of sculan was ‘to owe, to be obliged, to be destined.’ The reason why these two verbs came to function as auxiliaries, which had such specific meanings, seems to be because the action or state denoted by the two verbs generally imply futurity[7].

SHALL had the meaning of command or obligation, and WILL of wish. But as commands and wishes are concerned mainly with the future, it was natural that a future tense auxiliary should be developed out of these two verbs

The use of SHALL in the first person as a pure future has developed out of its modal meanings, am to, indicating a constraint of circumstances, or the will
of another, a meaning still common:

The use of will in the second and third persons as a future developed out of its modal meaning of wish, desire. The idea of desire was overshadowed in the second and third persons by the conception of future occurrence, pure futurity, which is often implied in the idea of desire.

As stated above, the present tense and the past tense do not sufficiently indicate time relation and hence separate auxiliaries developed to compensate for the original tense form. In the later period of Old English, a tense system was established in a way that resembles that of today[8].

So long as the language remained simply a means of expressing thought in speech for everybody purposes, these two tense-forms were adequate enough, as the various shades of time, present, past, or future, could be readily indicated by means of adverbs or adverb-equivalents. But when language began to be committed to writing, ambiguities would arise, which, with the increasing complexity of the thoughts to be expressed, made a more elaborate and accurate system of tenses necessary. Sentences which might be perfectly understood when spoken were not intelligible when written. Therefore we find in the more advanced O.E. authors a number of Compound Tenses coming into use, to express more accurately the meanings of Present Perfect, Pluperfect, and so forth, and towards the close of the O.E. Period we have Tense system developed almost to its present extent. In some writers, however, the two Simple tenses are almost the only ones actually employed.

II Distributional properties of Auxiliaries WILL or SHALL

Since the main verb that had a consistent and specific meaning was WILL or SHALL, they transformed into auxiliaries with the same meaning as main verbs magnified to the surface. Due to this ambivalence, the simple future tense developed to indicate a specific time in the future, resulting in more a complicated system. Therefore, the simple future in a general sense is when WILL or SHALL is employed as auxiliaries to constitute the simple future form. In the volitive future, WILL or SHALL functions as both an auxiliary constructing the future tense and the source of the specific meaning that rises to surface. This is why the usage of the future tense is so complex[9].
The complexity of modern usage of shall and will stems from the fact that they have acquired pure future meaning without altogether losing their modal force of obligation and volition. They shift from modal meaning to future meaning, not only according to context but also according to speaker.

SHALL and WILL are fundamentally different from the auxiliary have in that its underlying meaning is magnified. When have occurs in the perfect tense as in have done or have written and not as a main verb that means ‘to possess,’ it only functions as a tense auxiliary without any specific meaning otherwise as a main verb.

On the other hand, SHALL/WILL maintains their modal meaning even in some cases when, although to indicate a secondary meaning, they are used purely for tense. In addition, the future tense employing WILL/SHALL shows a prominent contrast with the present and the past, which represents the time relation rather precisely.

This is because the speaker talks with certainty about past events but is rather uncertain when talking about events to occur in the upcoming future. Hence the presentation of future time is diverse as well as unsettled. If there were three auxiliaries in English that respectively indicate obligation, will, and future as is in German, there would have been no such complexity in their usage.

In German, werden indicates simple future; wollen is employed when a future event occurs based on the subject’s will; sollen represents a future to which the subject assigns obligation. Likewise, the German system of auxiliaries of the future tense is far more simple than that of English since the three auxiliaries in the future tense are used across all persons and indicates three concepts.

The reason why the future use and modal use of SHALL and WILL cause confusion lies in the nature of the future time itself; a future event cannot be expressed definitely unlike one in the past or present and even when there is a certain prognostication, the speaker’s attitude is reflected with a modal color. Jespersen analyzes the following factors as the reason for the complexity in the English future tense.

A. the uncertainty of future events  
B. the difficulty to represent the three concepts of obligation, will, and future using only two auxiliaries  
C. the difficulty of keeping these three notions apart, and the vagueness of the ideas of
volition (willingness, determination, etc.) and obligation (restraint, necessity, etc.)

D. the ascription of will to a lifeless entity

E. the natural linguistic tendency to extend grammatical means outside their proper sphere

F. the two powerful linguistic agencies, the desire for ease and desire for clearness

III Conclusion and Suggestions: The future tense and the usage of WILL, SHALL

There are various thoughts among scholars about the usage of WILL/SHALL due to its complexity and they can be summarized as the following three perspectives[10].

The first perspective tries to deal with the usage of WILL/SHALL within the scope of the future tense, based on the assumption that the modal meaning of WILL/SHALL is secondary to its future expression. This approach is what is generally accepted in school grammar; the expression of pure future of WILL/SHALL is represented with simple future while cases with modal color are explained in terms of emphatic future or future of determination. Myers, Thomson and Martinet and Millington-Ward all deals with the usage of shall/will + infinitive within the future tense and divides it into two usages. Notably, Christophersen and Sandved divides the future tense into the ‘pure future system’ and the ‘colored future system.’

The second approach is the complete opposite from the first one, one which denies the future tense. Including Jespersen, rather recent scholars Palmer, Joos, and Quirk takes this stance. Jespersen suggests the meaning of WILL/SHALL in each person as having four categories. Three categories respectively represent volition, obligation, and pure future and the last and fourth category is a rather ambivalent one that can be interpreted according to the context. A problematic one among these is the category indicating the future time.

Jespersen suggests that the only pure future expression can be seen in the first person I shall and in the second shall you?, which are often replaced with I will and Will you? respectively in American English, Scotch, and Irish.

Therefore, he holds that the English expression of the pure future tense is not possible and says there is no legitimate future tense in the English language. In his view, if WILL/SHALL are seen as auxiliaries of the present tense, the future function of these verbs are something fractional or derivational. So he refuses to set a future tense and deals with the usage of WILL/SHALL as an independent category from tense.

Palmer and Joos seem to agree with Jespersen’s approach. They regard tense as a formal category, where it is represented either with the inflectional ending -ed or without any
marker, hence the two tenses of the past and non-past.

From this view, WILL/SHALL are fundamentally modal auxiliaries and so are dealt with only within the range of auxiliaries, and denies the future tense as an independent category equivalent of the present or the past tense.

The last perspective is a rather compromissory approach, in which the meaning and function of WILL/SHALL are divided into the temporal and non-temporal aspect. From this view, the meaning of future time expression falls into the future tense while any modal meaning besides time relation is something to be dealt with independently within the scope of auxiliaries.

Due to the ambivalence of the meaning of WILL/SHALL, their modal meaning is limited to cases where they are used as modal auxiliaries, while their function as the future tense is also maintained.

This view is supported by scholars who take a rather traditional approach, among whom are Zandvoort, Curme, Scheurweghs, and Poutsma, and while they treat WILL/SHALL as auxiliaries, they commonly hold that these auxiliaries form the future tense when combined with a particular person.

Poutsma maintains that WILL/SHALL has the tense function that is distinguished from mood function and can for the future tense.

Close points out that WILL in the modal sense and in the temporal sense overlap with each other in their scope of meaning. The same form ‘will be’ can have a modal sense whose equivalent is can be or must be and can also have a temporal sense whose equivalent is was and is, hence the necessity to distinguish between these two usages.

**References**


