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THE EXPRESSION OF THE FUTURE

In many languages, even those with a complex inflectional system, the future is often expressed by a form of the verbs 'be', 'have', 'wish' or 'go', or in some cases by a form that has been derived historically from one of these verbs. Thus German uses *werden*, French *j'aimerai* is derived from Latin *amare habeo*, Modern Greek has *θα* (from *θέλω*) and Spanish uses *ir*. But these expressions often retain grammatical¹ and semantic features of the verbs to which they are related and are, therefore, not strictly future tenses. I wish to illustrate the semantic point in some detail from English.

English uses *be*, *will* and *go* (or *be going to*) as auxiliaries or 'semi-auxiliaries' to refer to future time (*He is to speak*, *He will speak*, *He is going to speak*). I shall not deal in detail with *be* except to note that it is commonly used to refer to planned futures (*They are to be married in June*) and for 'future in the past' — to refer to events that took place subsequently to other past events (*They were to arrive on the following day*). My attention will be directed to the uses of *will* and *be going to*.

Will is used for what Jespersen² called 'volition', 'power' and 'habit'. These all refer to some characteristic of the subject of the sentence and are examples of what I have called 'subject-oriented' *will*³. They do not

1. Cf. I. Warburton and N.S. Prabhu, 'Diachronic processes and synchronic grammars', *Glossa* 9, 202-17.

2. O. Jespersen, *A modern English grammar* IV 239. (Heidelberg: Karl Winter, Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard and London: Allen and Unwin, 1909-49).

3. F.R. Palmer, *The English verb*, 100-3 (London: Longman 1974) and *Modality and the English modals*, 108-11 (London: Longman 1979).

necessarily have any reference to future time, but still belong essentially to the original 'wish' sense of the verb. Examples⁴ are:

Volition

1. I'm seeing if Methuen will stump up any money to cover the man's time.
2. 'But she loves him and she won't leave him; so she sells herself'.
3. Hang on a minute and I'll try and find it.
4. If you stay at home this evening, will you make sure the water's hot?
5. Perhaps he'll let me know.
6. All right, we'll do that, Judith.

Power

7. You know that certain drugs will improve the condition.
8. Why do you think this ought to be put in a little box, as it were, with Shakespeare's work? — Because it won't fit into any little box. It's not really a tragedy.

Habit

9. These are visual things. You don't need words to convey them and countries as far apart as China and Wales will use the dragon to convey basically the same concepts without any words.
10. So one kid will say to another, one kid will make a suggestion to another, he'll say the moon's further away from the earth than the sun.
11. You will keep on saying that the hunting of foxes is the merciful way of doing it.

These examples show, then, that *will* still retains some of its original uses, associated with willingness or volition, but extended to the 'power' of inanimate objects or to habitual, but voluntary, action.

My interest is with *will* used to refer to the future. (I shall not say much about *shall* here except to note that with *I* or *we* as the subject it is sometimes, but not always, used instead of *will* with no apparent difference of meaning⁵). The most characteristic use of *will* is to refer not to 'real' futures but to conditional futures, *eg*:

12. If he feels like doing it, that'll save me the trouble.
13. Look, if she didn't grudge you the weekend, she won't grudge you an alibi.

4. All examples are from the Survey of English usage located in the Department of English at University College London collected under the supervision of Professor Randolph Quirk.

5. The traditional treatment of *will* and *shall* (*I shall, thou wilt, he will, etc.*) was completely demolished as long ago as 1925 by the great American linguist, C.C. Fries. ('The periphrastic future with *shall* and *will* in modern English'. *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 40. 963-1024. Cf. also 'The expression of the future'. *Language* 3. 853-70).

14. You put it under your pillow, and a fairy will come and give you --
15. When the demand for labour exceeds its supply, wages rise... When there is a surplus of labour, prices will not rise.
16. As the orchestra plays, the music from the instruments on the left will be heard predominantly with your left ear, but also, a fraction later, with your right.
17. Yes, that will be fine.
18. My secretary will tell you how to find her.

In (12) and (13) the condition is clearly indicated by *if* in the protasis, while the apodosis typically contains *will*. In (14) the condition is given in the first sentence, while in (15) it is introduced by *when*. In (16) (17) and (18) there is an implicit condition: in (16) the music will only be heard if the equipment is switched on, etc.; in (17) the proposed action 'will be fine' if it is carried out; in (18) the secretary will 'tell you' if you ask. ((18) could be explained in terms of volition, but this shows that volition is like conditionality; to say that some one is willing to act is to say that he will act if requested, etc.).

When *will* appears not to indicate conditionality, the future time reference is often first introduced not by *will*, but by some other verb such as *envisage* or *pray*, or even by *be going to* or *is to*, *eg*:

19. Is it ever envisaged that the College will hive itself off from the University?
20. What we ask in fact is that God will give us the grace to stand up against the enemies which assail us.
21. Yet here we are going to find that there's going to be a National Enterprise Board which will be expected to do things in Scotland.
22. The TUC is to launch a publicity campaign against Britain's entry into the Common Market. After the vote against membership at last month's annual congress, posters calling for a general election on the issue will go up all over the country.

It is also used, however, in more formal contexts to refer to planned or arranged futures. The following are from the Queen's Speech to Parliament and from a commentary on a state occasion:

23. My government will make it their special duty to protect the freedom of the individual under the law.
24. The fanfare will now sound.

Be going to is essentially an indication of the 'future in the present'. In many cases the future is seen as emanating from present conditions and events, *eg*:

25. Free kick given Scullion's way; it's going to be taken by Trevor Hockey.
26. At the moment they're decorating their house and they're going to alter odd parts of it.
27. I'm going to play that same chord as loudly as possible but immediately release those keys.

In (25) the commentator can see the football player actually moving up to take the free kick. In (26) the people are now in the process both of decorating and planning alterations. In (27) the future event is all part of a continuing demonstration. *Be going to* thus involves 'current orientation'. (It is worth noting that its meaning mirrors that of *have used* for the perfect, in that *have* relates past events to the present time just as *be going to* relates future events to the present). Often, as was noted above, *be going to* is used to make the first introduction of the future, with *will* used subsequently; it is almost as if it provides a necessary bridge from the present time to the future. A further example is:

28. The National Enterprise Board is going to be in this difficult situation because it is the servant but it will have two masters.

In most cases, then, choice of *will* or *be going to* is important and significant. In particular, the choice of one is sometimes made in order to deny the special sense of the other. Thus *be going to* denies conditionality and volition in:

29. I'm buying an awful lot of books here. It's going to cost me a fortune to get them home.
30. So, are you going to leave a message or shall I say something?

In (29) the speaker makes it quite clear that there is no doubt about 'costing a fortune'; it is in no way conditional upon his buying more books. Conversely there is no current orientation in:

31. My babe-in-arms will be fifty-nine on my eighty-ninth birthday... The year two thousand and fifteen when I shall be ninety.

Nothing I do now will affect these future events. There is a contrast, however, in:

32. I shall be back tomorrow, and then I'm going to do some work this evening.

The point here seems to be that I am planning or thinking about working this evening, whereas coming back tomorrow is just part of a routine future. Finally, here are two examples in which *be going to* is used to indicate an inevitable future:

33. But I said 'Don't have any doubt about this, dear friends, that if you are going ahead with doing that, you are going to be dealing with me!'

34. But are we not approaching the time when a totally different way of looking at things is going to come, about refectories, when refectories are going to be places where food, prefrozen, is brought into the establishment and then warmed up and served?

Although (33) is clearly conditional, the implication is that the events really are going to take place so that *be going to* relates both to the present intentions of the 'dear friends' and to a present threat being made by the speaker. In (34) events are simply 'rolling on' and the future is developing out of the present; *are going* merely reflects the meaning of *are... approaching*.

I have shown, then, how both *will* and *be going to* have clear semantic characteristics of their own that are not those of simple future time markers. It is worth noting, however, that *will* is formally one of the modal verbs in English, together with *shall*, *can*, *may* and *ought* (and, to a lesser extent, *dare* and *need*). In many languages there is a close connection between mood and futurity; in Classical Greek there are examples of the subjunctive used simply to refer to the future. *Will* should not, then, be seen as the auxiliary of future tense as so many grammar books have suggested, but the mark of a 'modal futurity' while *be going to* is required for the expression of a non-modal, more factual, future, but one that is essentially linked to the present.