WILL*: MODAL OR FUTURE TENSE MARKER?*

Valentina STOG
ULIM, Moldova

Abstract: *There have been various views in the literature on what the semantics of* ***will*** *should constitute. Some consider* ***will*** *to be homonymous between a modal and a periphrastic future tense, while some deny that it is a future tense, indicating that its futurity is derived from its modality. The debate concerning the semantics for* ***will*** *can be summarized as follows: Can the use of* ***will*** *in sentences like He will speak tomorrow be part of the morphological tense-system of English or should sentences like He will have left already (epistemic* ***will****) be taken as evidence that* ***will*** *is part of the modal system, parallel to He must/can/may … speak.*

The purpose of this paper is to review the evidence for both views by identifying and arguing for a basic distinction between two and showing how that distinction can lead to a unified account of semantics for ***will.***

Key words*: Modality, Future tense, Semantics.*

Introduction

Most of the contemporary semantic literature endorses one of the following assumptions: (a) the English auxiliary *will* has a modal component within its semantics (e.g. PALMER 1987; SMITH 1978; ENÇ 1996; HAEGEMAN 1983), (b) *will* is ambiguous between modal and non-modal meanings (e.g. COMRIE 1985; HORNSTEIN 1990; KAMP and REYLE 1993).

Whereas both camps agree that examples like (2-5) instantiate the inherent modality of *will*, only the second maintains that in 'future tense' cases like (1) *will* does not function as a modal.

(1) Mary will come. [future/ prediction]

(2) Oil will float on water. [generic]

(3) Mary will be at the opera now. [epistemic]

(4) In winter, Mary will always wear a green coat. [habitual/ dispositional/

volitional]

(5) You will leave tomorrow by the first train. [deontic]

In this paper I will review the evidence for both sides and try to motivate the need for a unified semantics for *will*, trying to answer the following two questions and then evaluate various extant analyses of *will* to see if they can account for the data.

- Can the future be empirically shown to be different from the past?
- Is the future distinguished from modality?

The Data

As mentioned before, *will* is not uniquely used to refer to future time. *Will* is also commonly used as a modal with reference to present or past time.

BDD-A5713 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:45:22 UTC)

Futurity

a. Tomorrow morning I will wake up in this first-class hotel suite.
b. He will go to London tomorrow. (BOYD and THRONE (1969))
c. I'll be 21 next week. (HAEGEMAN (1983))
d. Between 6 and 7 I'll be having my bath. (duration) (HAEGEMAN (1983))
e. Well, I'll ring you tonight sometime. (volition) (PALMER (1986))
f. I will do it. (volition) (HAEGEMAN (1983))
g. The queen will now hand the trophy to the captain. (immediate future) (HAEGEMAN (1983))

Epistemic modality

a. That will be the milkman.
b. Tell him Professor Cressage is involved – he will know Professor Cressage. (PALMER (1979))
c. In the 1920 Wilkinson Sword introduced the stroppable razor and then the 'Empire' range which many people will remember. (PALMER (1970))
d. He will have read it yesterday. (HUDDLESTON (1995))

Dynamic modality

a. John will get angry over nothing.
b. John will work one day and loaf the next.
c. Ed will lie in bed all day, reading trashy novels. (HUDDLESTON (1995))

Capability/generic

a. Nitric acid will dissolve zinc. (BOYD and THORNE (1969))
b. Oil will float on water. (HAEGEMAN (1983))
c. Accidents will happen. (Elvis Costello)
d. The French will be on holiday today. (PALMER (1979))
e. In 20 years, cockroaches will prey on humans.
f. According to predictions, typhoons will arise in this part of the Pacific.

Directives

a. You will do as I say, at once.
b. Will you please stop that racket?
c. You will report back for duty on Friday morning. (HUDDLESTON (1995))

Of course, these examples do not exhaustively cover the various modalities that *will* can participate in. Both (PALMER (1979)) and (HAEGEMAN (1983)) attempt to give a more exhaustive list of contexts in which *will* can be used. For the purpose of this paper, I'll simply try to distinguish the modal uses of *will* from its temporal use to refer to future time.

The Future and Modality

Grammarians are not in general agreement on what items should be included among the English modal auxiliaries. In the classification put forward by C.C. Fries, the following verbs are treated as modal: may, might, can, could, should, ought to and must. These are distinguished from the other "function words" (i.e. auxiliaries) on a strictly semantic basis. FRIES (1940:104) made the following statement: "As function words, whatever meanings these old verbs now express seem to have to do with various attitudes toward "action" or "state" expressed by the verb to which they are attached".

BDD-A5713 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:45:22 UTC)

These function words can therefore with some justification, be called "modal auxiliaries". According to Fries classification then such forms as will and shall (also dare and need) are dismissed as non-modal verbs. At most they enjoy the status of mere auxiliaries of as be + to + infinitive, be + about + infinitive, and be + going + to + infinitive.

Shall and will, however, are regard as modal verbs by Barbara STRANG (1963: 139). For Strang the term "modal" is applied to the following items : will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, and must. They differ from the other "closed system" items which Strang labels "non – modal operators" in their having…" a different and a narrower function, which may be summarized as that of indicating mood".

In Strang's classification both the modal and non – modal operators, together forming the closed system of verbal forms are characterized by the following bundle of features : a. there is no possibility of adding to the catalogue; b. they are items complemented by a non – finite part of a lexical verb in the formation of a verb phrase; c. they form questions by simple inversion; d. they form negatives by addition of not; e. they do not form conjugations in the ordinary sense, and the modal auxiliaries do not have the inflection which ordinary distinguishes third person singular from the rest (1963: 131).

K. SCHIBSBYE, W. DIVER, M. EHRMAN (1967:76) add to this number three more items, namely "need, dare and used to". Sometimes the constructions "have to; be able to" are also listed as modal auxiliaries.

By contrast, BOYD and THRONE'S classification (1969:57) relies entirely on meaning. They propose treating the following forms as modal: "will, shall, should, ought to, must, may, might, can, and could".

On the other hand, Twaddel, Palmer, and Ehrman base their classification on purely formal (syntactic) criteria and in this way arrive at exactly the same number of modal verbs. Following these grammarians, those verbal forms which display the following set of characteristics: a. they invariably appear in the first position of the verb phrase; b. in contrast to the auxiliaries : be, have, and do they do not require the subject – verb agreement morpheme- s ; c. they invert with the subject in interrogation; d. they may be directly negated by not, should be called modal verbs.

The analysis of the modal verbs provided in traditional grammar books is deficient in one major respect, namely, it tends to describe them in terms of meanings which often turn out to be explainable by something in the surrounding context. In brief, in their treatment of the modals traditional grammarians usually provide little more than a list of modals each with a list of meanings and they display even less interest in trying to relate a systematic treatment of their semantics to the concrete facts of their syntax.

It is a generally known fact that the central problem of a semantic investigation of any kind is directly connected with the achievement of two objectives: a. the correct division of the meaning of a portion of the linguistic text among its constituent parts, and b. the assignment of the particular components of the meaning of the portion of the text to the particular constituents regarded as their sole exponents. It is clear that traditional semantic analyses really come close to attaining either of the two goals. The tendency towards burdening textual elements with meanings having nothing directly to do with them might be, of course, explained by the general conviction among traditional grammarians that every linguistic form must necessarily posses a great many meanings.

BDD-A5713 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:45:22 UTC)

For the sake of the present discussion let's concentrate on the modals will and shall, which seem to have created the greatest difficulty for many generations of grammarians. Thus the following meanings are habitually associated with will:

a. desire (or willingness)
b. decision
c. resolution with exhortation or command or suggestion addressed to one or more other persons, urging them to act with the speaker
d. supposition (or probability)
e. habit
f. general truth
g. capacity (or power)

Jespersen postulates the following meanings for shall:

a. obligation
b. command
c. threat
d. promise

The above list could be supplemented by meanings like: permission, concession, determination, and intention, all provided in CHARLESTONE (1941:49). He also speaks about shall in terms of its ability to express general truths on a par with will. To illustrate this particular use of shall, he produces the following example: 'a shilling shall be honored up with care, whilst that which is above the price of an estate is flung away'.

In the Oxford English Dictionary the article on will reads: "Has the habit or way of – ing: is addicted or accustomed to – ing; habitually does; sometimes connoting 'may be expected'". The, Article 9 states that will "expresses potentiality, capacity, or sufficiency: can, may, is able to, is capable of –ing: is large enough or sufficient to". Capacity is also said to constitute the meaning of will in Jespersen.

In the following pair of examples will would be said to appear with the meaning of a general truth:

1. Oil will float on water.
2. Pigs will eat anything.

It is evident that 1 and 2 are neither future nor present, since they do not refer to any specific point or period of time. That are, simply, neutral with respect to the time distinction. Examples 3 and 4, respectively, are their legitimate paraphrases:

3. Oil floats on water.
4. Pigs eat anything.

The timelessness or the general validity of the content asserted in our examples seems to be best accounted for by the semantic ingredients of their noun phrases. In both cases they are either general class or indefinite nouns. And the best way to describe will in 1 and 2 is, simply, to regard it as 'predictive' in the sense that it merely indicates that the occurrence of the action implied by the main verb is assured. It does not by itself express anything like a general truth.

It should be perhaps made clear that in the case of 1 and 2, and their corresponding paraphrases, paraphrasability is not tantamount to full synonymy. The non-modal sentences present the action as unquestioned, whereas their modal counterparts leave room for a certain element of doubt.

'Probability' or 'supposition' is generally taken to constitute the meaning of will in sentences like 5 and 6 below. In this connection we find the following statement

BDD-A5713 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:45:22 UTC)

in the Oxford English Dictionary: "with the notion of futurity obscured or lost: = will prove or turn out, will be found on enquiry to; may be supposed to, presumably does. Hence … in estimates of amount or in uncertain or approximate statements, the future becoming equivalent to a present with qualification …" Examples:

5. That'll be the postman.

6. (Where is John?) He'll be in his study (at the moment).

It is obvious that none of these examples contains a future time reference. As a matter of fact, both refer to the actual situation occurring at the time of speaking. The connotation of probability noticeable in e.g. 5 and 6 seems to derive from the subject's prediction about a present state of affairs. Will here means only that "the action is assured by my view of the relevant situation". 'That's the postman' and 'He's in his study', the non-modal Present Indicative paraphrases of 5 and 6, are devoid of the 'tentativeness' characterizing the original modal sentences.

As pointed out above, 'habituality' appears as another meaning commonly associated with will in certain types of sentences. Here is what Jespersen has to say on this subject: "Another connected transition is a consequence of the fact that what one does willingly, one is apt to do frequently. Hence will comes to be the expression of a habit, especially a habit which is a consequence of one's character or natural disposition.

This usage goes back to Old English and Middle English.

In Zandvoort we come across a similar statement: "Will and would may express habit or repetition especially what is or was characteristic under certain circumstances (a); also a natural propensity (b)".

In arguing that the 'habitual' will is directly related to will denoting volition, Jespersen is followed by Friden who declares in this connection that "It seems therefore reasonable to assume that iterative will is connected with will expressing volition. A person who does a thing willingly may often have a tendency to do it frequently. Then will has come to denote a habitual action which is a consequence of a person's nature or character". However, one cannot but be surprised to learn a little further that "will is also used with this implication in speaking of animals or lifeless things". This statement would simply lead us to conclude that the subjects of 7 through 9, for example, are capable of volitional behavior. Examples:

7. Accidents will occur in the best regulated families.

8. Oxen will suffer much more labor than horses will.

9. When a man's heart is troubled within, his pulse will beat marvelous strongly.

This point has also been criticized by W. Diver, who argues that attributing volition to the subject of *'The hall will seat five hundred'*, would simply imply that it belongs to a context like *'That hall will seat five hundred because it refuses to seat less'*. It can be noticed that the subject noun phrases of sentences 7 though 9 are either non/human inanimate or non-human animate nouns. With this in mind, accounting for will in these sentences would, of course, be untenable on the grounds of the impossibility of reconciling the idea of volition with nonhuman objects.

The 'habitual' will is sometimes referred to as a 'characteristic' will. PALMER (1965:15) limits the 'characteristic' will to its occurrence with personal subjects only. On p. 12 we can note: "This use is very similar to the previous one, except for the fact that it will always have 'persona' subjects". It is however, hard to see any reason why the 'characteristic' will should be restricted to personal subjects only since instances of its use with impersonal subjects are not at all infrequent with

BDD-A5713 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:45:22 UTC)

which a 'characteristic' interpretation is also possible. It seems that 10 permits a 'characteristic' interpretation equally well as 11. Examples:

10. It will rain for hours in Poznan.
11. He will sit there for hours doing nothing.
12. It rains for hours in Poznan.
13. He sits there for hours doing nothing.

As can be seen, both the modal as well the non-modal statements are present time plus habitual aspect. In my opinion, the habitual character of 10 and 11 is best explained by the non-progressive nature of the lexical verb involved (Present Simple) plus an adverbial of frequency rather than by the presence of the modal alone in the sentence. Will in examples 10 and 11 marks prediction. The addition of the be + - ing construction to thee verb phrases of the sentences in question would render the 'habitual' interpretation for these rather unlikely, Thus, the following sentences containing the progressive form refer to a specific period of time in the future:

14. It will be raining for hours in Poznan.
15. He will be sitting there for hours doing nothing.

'Capacity' also appears as one of the meanings traditional grammarians readily ascribe to will. In connection with this meaning of the modal Jespersen remarks: "Applied to lifeless things will often denotes power, capacity, etc. (1965:266)". Once again, relevant to this distinction seems to be the fact that Examples 16 and 17, unlike the previous ones, happen to have in their verb phrases a 'causative' verb. Consider:

16. The boat will hold only half of those that have taken tickets.
17. Will the ice bear?

ZAGONA (1989: 45) points out that while ambiguity between present or future interpretations of an event is always possible, such a "shifting" between past and present is not. The following examples are taken.

As the comparison in 18 and 19 shows, unlike morphologically present sentences, morphologically past sentences cannot be construed as contemporaneous with the utterance time (the *now* in (19) crucially has to refer to utterance time for ungrammaticality) or to some future time.

18. a. John sang now/tomorrow.
    b. John is singing now/tomorrow.
19. a. John was singing now/tomorrow.
    b. John sings now/tomorrow.

Also, non-past tense morphology does not admit a past adverbial as in 20. But, by contrast, non-past tense morphology can take future interpretation as in 21. ZAGONA (1989: 31) also cites a similar ambiguity between past and non-past morphology in Spanish.

20. a. Placido sings yesterday.
    b. Placido is singing yesterday.
    c. Placido will be singing yesterday.
21. a. Juan sings tomorrow.
    b. Juan is singing tomorrow.

Thus, past and non-past morphology do not behave alike when it comes to temporal modification.

BDD-A5713 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:45:22 UTC)

Conclusion

In this paper, I began with the following question: Is *will* part of the tense system or the modal system or it is simply homonymous? After reviewing several arguments presented for and against the two sides of this question, I can conclude that the question was ill-posed since neither alternative alone could account for the empirical facts. Any semantics for *will* must account for a simultaneous contribution from the modal as well as the tense system. Note that this is distinct from stating that *will* is ambiguous between a modal and a future tense. In comparison to existing analyses, by increasing the dependence on contextual information a much simpler account for the semantics of *will* can be afforded.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boyd, J., and J.P. Throne, *The Semantics of Modal Verbs*, Journal of Linguistics 5, 1969

Comrie, B., *Tense*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985

Ehrman, M., *The Meaning of the Modals in Present-Day American English*, Mouton, 1967

Enç, M., *Tense and Modality*, in S. Lappin, ed., *The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory*, Cambridge, 1996

Fries, C., *Amercican Englisg Grammar*, New York, 1940

Haegeman, L.M., *The semantics of will in present- day British English: a unified account*, Brussels, 1983

Hornstein, N., *As Time Goes By: Tense and Universal Grammar, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1990*

Huddlestone, R., *The case against a Future Tense in English*, London, 1995

Jepersen, O., *A Modern English Grammar*, London, 1965

Kamp, H. and U. Reyle, *From discourse to logic: introduction to modeltheoretic semantics of natural language, formal logic and discourse representation theory*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1993

Palmer, H., *A Grammar of Spoken English*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976

Smith, C.S., *The temporal Reference of the English Futurate*, in L. Tasmowski and D. Willems, eds., *Problems in Syntax, Studies in Language*, Series № 2, Ghent, 1983

Strang, B., *Modern English Structure*, London, 1963

Zagona, K., *On the Non-Identity of Morphological Tense and Temporal Interpretation*, Amsterdam, 1989

Zandvoort, R,W., *A Handbook of English Grammar*, London, 1960.

BDD-A5713 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:45:22 UTC)