

Sarkar, Anoop (1998): "The conflict between future tense and modality: The case of *will* in English". In: *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 5.2, 91–117.

Will: tense or modal?

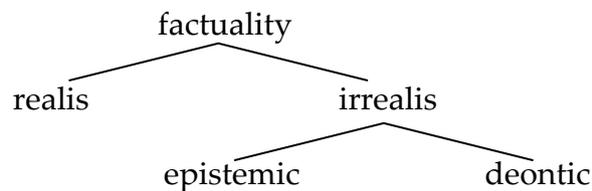
Guiding question: "Is *will* part of the tense system or the modal system or is it simply homonymous?" (p. 112)

Core philosophical problem: "Future states of affairs cannot be perceived or remembered, although they can be the subject of our hopes, plans, conjectures, and predictions." (Dahl 2006:704)

a. *Re: The composition of tensed situations*

1. Lexical verb → lexical aspect (inherent)
2. Grammatical aspect (e.g. progressive) (e.g. stative *be* → behaviour *be*)
3. Perfect ('current relevance')
4. Tense (temporally orders a situation (E ◦ R) w.r.t. the *now* S)
5. Modality (verbal mood, modal auxiliaries): shifts (E ◦ R) to a non-actual (irrealis) world

b. *Re: Modality*



- (1) a. Pedro has a full beard. ⇒ 'It's a fact that *p*.' (*realis, indicative verbal mood*)
 b. Pedro might have a full beard. ⇒ 'It's not a fact, but possible that *p*.' (*irrealis epistemic*)
 c. Pedro must have a full beard (in order to impress the ladies). ⇒ 'It is obligatory for *Subject* that *p*.' (*irrealis deontic*)

c. *How can we model modality diagrammatically?*

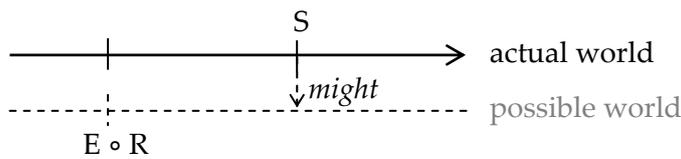
Possible worlds model

Modality = actual/real world *vs.* irrealis/alternative/possible world

Someone punched Silvio in the face. ⇒ 'It's a fact that, at a time $t < \text{NOW}$, *p*.'



Someone might have punched Silvio in the face. \Rightarrow 'At a time $t < \text{NOW}$, it was possible that p .'



Modal elements create a **possible world**, an **alternative timeline**, on which (E ◦ R) is placed.

d. *Future tense*

An event E is *after* S: $S > E$

	Absolute tenses (R ◦ E)	
E > S	past	Someone <u>punched</u> Silvio in the face.
S ◦ E	present	Someone <u>is punching</u> Silvio in the face.
S > E	future	?Someone <u>will punch</u> Silvio in the face.

Periphrastic (or: analytic) *vs.* synthetic tense

(1) *Periphrastic future: auxiliary + lexical verb*
 Someone *will* punch Silvio in the face.

(2) *Synthetic future: lexical verb + affix*

i. Quelqu'un cassera la gueule à Silvio. French
 someone break.FUT the mouth to Silvio

ii. ni- ta- som- a kesho Swahili
 1SG_{Subject}- FUT- read IND tomorrow
 'I will read tomorrow.'

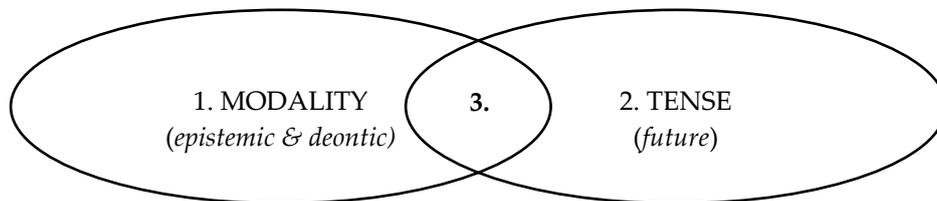
e. *Meanings of will*

- (3) *Futurity (tense)*
 It *will* rain tomorrow. TEMPORAL

- (4) *Epistemic modality* MODAL
 That *will* be the milkman.
- (5) *Dynamic modality*
 John *will* get angry over nothing.
- (6) *Generic statements (capability) (= prediction?)*
 Oil *will* float on water.
- (7) *Directives (speech act modality)*
 You *will* do as I say, at once
- (8) *Politeness*
Won't you take another pint of beer at least?

g. *Ambiguity*

As expected, apart from clearly modal (1) and clearly futurate (2) instances of *will*, we also encounter occurrences that are ambiguous between the two meanings (3).



1. [A: Where's Silvio?] B: Silvio *will* be in the hospital.

- ⇒ 'It's likely/possible that *p*.' (*epistemic*)
- ⇒ 'Silvio is willing to be in the hospital.' (*deontic*)
- ⇒ 'It will be the case at $t < S$ that *p*.' (*futurity*)

2. The train *will* arrive at 6:15.

- ⇒ 'It's likely/possible that *p*.' (*epistemic*)
- ⇒ 'Silvio is willing to be in the hospital.' (*deontic*)
- ⇒ 'It will be the case at $t < S, t = 6:15$, that *p*.' (*futurity*)

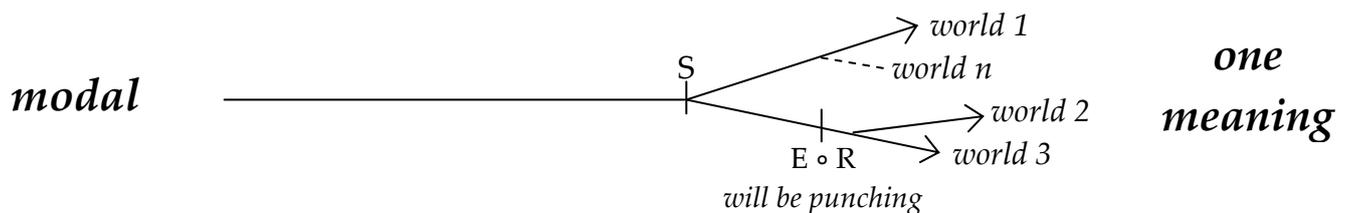
3. [A: Who'll call Nicolas?] B: I *will* do it.

- ⇒ 'It's likely/possible that *p*.' (*epistemic*)
- ⇒ 'I am willing to call Nicolas.' (*deontic*)
- ⇒ 'It will be the case at $t < S$ that *p*.' (*futurity*)

h. *How to model the meaning(s) of will*

Problem ②: Does a category like future tense exist at all?

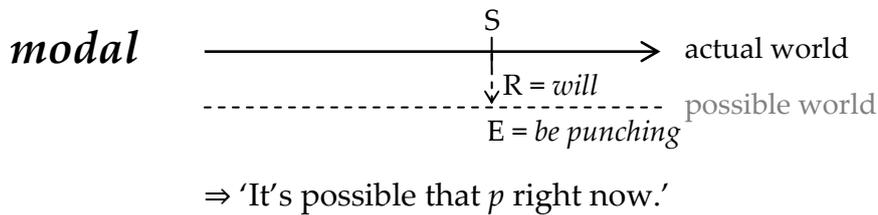
This is a philosophical question. Considerations as those laid out above (the inherent uncertainty of future time reference) may lead one to deny the existence of future tense, it being merely *epiphenomenal* to another, modal category. This is what is captured in the possible worlds model *proper* (going back to Kripke), which denies a *future timeline* in favour of possible worlds (here, "time looks like a tree rather than a line"; cf. Dahl 2006:704):



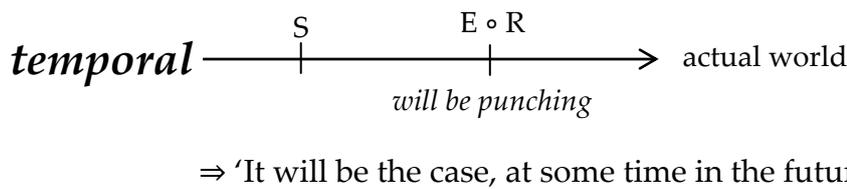
Modal *will* + CONTEXT → *futurity*

'It is possible that *p* (right now).' (*primary meaning*) ⇒ ADD *tomorrow* ⇒ 'It will be the case that *p* tomorrow.'

In my version above, both a *possible world line* and a *timeline* exist (thus it rather resembles the 'modal-temporal model', p. 94):



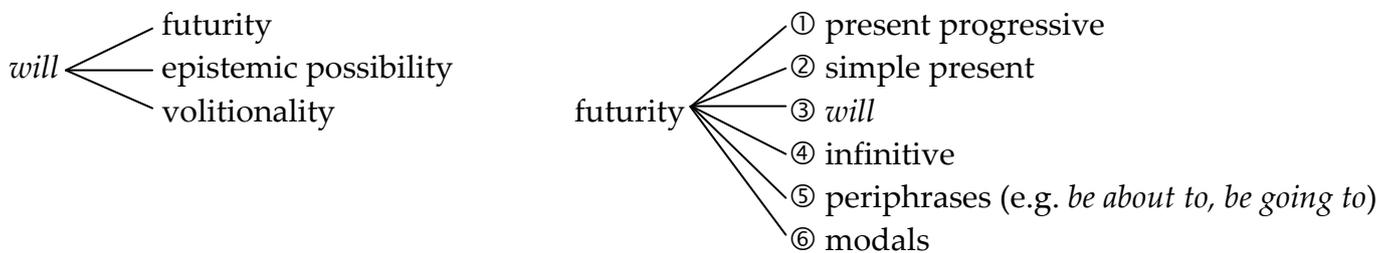
two meanings



Will + CONTEXT → *futurity* or *modality* (ambiguity possible)

i. *Form-function fit*

Neither is futurity a **necessary condition** to define *will* (it can have other, non-temporal meanings), nor is it a **sufficient condition** (futurity may be expressed by a variety of other forms):



- ① Dieter is converting to Judaism this summer.
- ② The Sopranos are on Channel 2 tomorrow night. (schedule; cf. *It rains tomorrow)
- ③ I'll be back (tomorrow)!
- ④ My wife wants me to make dinner.
- ⑤ I'm about to puke!
- ⑥ You must study harder (in the future)!

Problem ③: Old question – do we have **homonymy** (i.e. multiple lexical entries: {*will*₁, *will*₂, ...}) or **polysemy** (one entry with *one* neutral meaning (**primary meaning**), and with *contextually* determined variants /**secondary meaning(s)**), e.g. by adverbials ➔ **contextualism**).

Re: Different meanings of *will* as determined by adverbials:

- (14) a. John *will* have left already. (*epistemic*)
 b. John *will* have left by 8 o'clock tomorrow night. (*future, predictive*)
- (15) a. John *will* leave right now. (*directive*)
 b. John *will* leave tomorrow. (*future*)

j. *Diachronic evolution of will; or: the modal origin of futurity*

Evidence for the close relation between future tense and modality comes from the *diachronic path* that not only English *will* but also future tense markers in (European) languages more generally tend to take:

- (16) *English will: From VOLITION (WANT/DESIRE) to PREDICTION* (from Bybee & Pagliuca 1987)

a. VOLITION

Beowulf is min nama, *wille* ic asecgan suna Healfdenes, mærum þeodne, min ærende... (line 343)

'Beowulf is my name. I wish to tell my errand to Healfdene's son, the great lord.'

b. WILLINGNESS

gif he us geunnan *wile* þæt we hine swa godne gretan moton. (line 346)

'If he will grant that we may greet him who is so gracious.'

c. VOLITION/INTENTION + PREDICTION

Wen ic þæt he *wille*... Geotena leode etan unforhte (line 442)

'I think that he wants to/will devour fearlessly the people of the Geats.'

c. PREDICTION (*1st with inanimate subjects incapable of volition*)

For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit never. (line 2512)

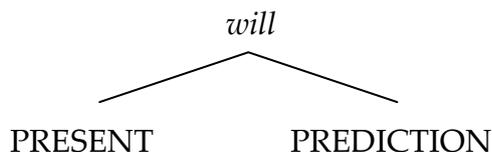
'For once it is attached, it will never come off.'

(17) *French futur simple*

LATIN	→	OLD FRENCH	→	FRENCH
<i>cantare habeo</i>		<i>chantar-ayo</i>		<i>chanter-ai</i>
sing.INF have.1SG		sing-have.1SG		sing.FUT.1SG
'I have to sing.'		'I have to/will sing.'		'I will sing.'

k. *Anoop's thesis*

Will is actually composed of present tense and modality of prediction **simultaneously**:



Argument 1: *Will* inflects for tense → abstract morphological root WOLL

(18) WOLL + PRES → *will*

(19) WOLL + PAST → *would*

Argument 2: *Will* behaves just like present tense (in some respects)

(20) *Both will and present can appear in generic statements*

a. Oil *will* float on water.

b. Oil *floats* on water.

(21) *Present tense may substitute for will in schedule contexts (fUTURE)*

a. Tomorrow, the Yankees (*will*) play the Red Sox.

b. Tomorrow, the Yankees *(*will*) play well.

☛ Present tense lacks modality of prediction

(22) *Will may be co-referential with present tense*

a. When the sun *sets*_i, we'll_i be frozen.

b. *Someday*_i Americans *will*_i be able to visit Albania.

c. *Now*_i Salomé *will*_i do her world-famous Dance of the Seven Ostrich Feathers.

The gist of it: Both present and *will* are **underspecified** for tense, hence, they can occur in various contexts (cf. historic, habitual, prophetic present) → **context forces future interpretation**.

l. *Conclusion*

The empirical data argue in favour of *will* as a modal. However, this does not exclude a derived futurate interpretation of *will* (secondary meaning), coerced by contextual factors. Moreover, such an account is more economical and elegant than assuming two homonymous *will*'s.

While the status of *will* in English remains ambiguous, a look at other, related languages shows us the despite formal resemblance, there are straightforward reasons to actually assume *two* homonymous items. Consider the German auxiliary *werden* 'lit. become' – in its futurate use, *werden* selects an infinitive:

- (23) Jemand *wird* Silvio ins Gesicht schlagen/*geschlagen. (future)
someone AUX.FUT Silvio in-the face beat/*beaten
'Someone will punch Silvio in the face.'

In its second, passive use, *werden* selects a participle:

- (24) Jemand *wird* von Silvio ins Gesicht geschlagen/*schlagen. (passive)
someone AUX.PASS by Silvio in-the face beaten/*beat
'Someone will be beaten in the face by Silvio.'

'Unfortunately', English *will* selects a bare verb ('infinitive') in both its modal and temporal use. But under a comparative view, one might extend the generalisation from German to English.