
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

\[
\text{factuality} \\
\text{realis} \quad \text{irrealis} \\
\text{epistemic} \quad \text{deontic}
\]

(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. ⇒ ‘At a time \( t < \text{NOW} \), it was possible that \( p \).’

![Diagram](image)

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

d. **Future tense**

An event \( E \) is after \( S; S > E \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Absolute tenses ((R \circ E))</th>
<th>Someone punched Silvio in the face.</th>
<th>Someone is punching Silvio in the face.</th>
<th>‘Someone will punch Silvio in the face.’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( E &gt; S )</td>
<td>past</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( S \circ E )</td>
<td>present</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( S &gt; E )</td>
<td>future</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**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.  
      someone break.FUT the mouth to Silvio
   
   ii. ni-ta-som-a kesho  
      1SGSubject- FUT- read IND tomorrow
      ‘I will read tomorrow.’

**e. Meanings of will**

1. **Futurity (tense)**
   
   It will rain tomorrow.

2. **Epistemic modality**
   
   That will be the milkman.

3. **Dynamic modality**
   
   John will get angry over nothing.

4. **Generic statements (capability) (= prediction?)**
   
   Oil will float on water.

5. **Directives (speech act modality)**
   
   You will do as I say, at once

6. **Politeness**
   
   Won’t you take another pint of beer at least?
Deontic modality (volitionality)?
a. Shut up if you will!
b. ’He will go swimming in dangerous waters.
c. Will you do this for me? – I will do it!

Problem 0: Is will a future or a modal auxiliary?

Utterances containing (apparent) future time reference pretty much always carry a modal flavour. This is due to the fact that the concept of futurity (future time) is inherently uncertain (as to its actualisation, its factuality):

While past time reference implies the certainty of an eventuality (i.e. realis), the same simply cannot be true of future time reference, for the future is unwritten:

(10) Yesterday, Silvio was beaten in the face. ⇒ ‘It’s a fact that p.’
(11) Tomorrow, Silvio will be beaten in the face. ≠ ‘It’s a fact that p.’

The closest one can get to a ‘certain future’ is with predictive–prophetic statements:

(12) [Says the Mayan high priest:] “Civilisation will end in 2012. [I know for sure that the event of the world ending will actualise in 2012 as I have the gift of foreseeing the future.]”

But this is rather an extremely high degree of certainty than a actualised situation!

f. The modality-futurity connection

Even worse, while future time reference always implies a modality, modals – vice versa – commonly imply futurity. The situation a modal auxiliary has scope over is temporally always placed after S – in the future:

(13) John must study harder. ⇒ S > study
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem 2: Does a category like future tense exist at all?</th>
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</table>

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

world 1
E \& R
world 2
\ldots
world n
world 3
S

```

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):

![Diagram of modal and temporal structures]

⇒ ‘It’s possible that p right now.’

⇒ ‘It will be the case, at some time in the future, that p.’

| 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, will, ...}* ) 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)  
French will: From VOLITION (WANT/DESIRE) to PREDICTION (from Bybee & Pagliuca 1987)

   a. VOLITION  
      Beowulf is min nama, wille ic aseccgan suna Healfdenes, mærum þeoðne, 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 guennan 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LATIN</th>
<th>OLD FRENCH</th>
<th>FRENCH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cantare</td>
<td>chantar-ayo</td>
<td>chanter-ai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sing.INF</td>
<td>sing-have.1SG</td>
<td>sing.FUT.1SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I have to sing.’</td>
<td>‘I have to/will sing.’</td>
<td>‘I will sing.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
k. Anoop’s thesis

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

\[
\text{will} \\
\text{PRESENT} \quad \text{PREDICTION}
\]

Argument 1: *Will* inflects for tense \(\rightarrow\) abstract morphological root WOLL.

(18) \(\text{WOLL} + \text{PRES} \rightarrow \text{will}\)

(19) \(\text{WOLL} + \text{PAST} \rightarrow \text{would}\)

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 (futurate)

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

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

\[\text{Present tense lacks modality of prediction}\]

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

a. When the sun sets, we’ll be frozen.

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

c. Now, Salomé *will* 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) \(\rightarrow\) context forces future interpretation.

1. 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:
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.