

The Conflict between Future Tense and Modality: The Case of *Will* in English by Anoop Sarkar

1. Introduction

Is *will* part of the tense system or the modal system, or is it homonymous?

will can be seen as

- a) a part of the tense system -> *He will speak tomorrow.* (future)
- b) a part of the modal system -> *He will have left already.* (epistemic will)

- a. *It will rain for hours in Stockport.* (generic statement about a place)
- b. *John will have left already.* (epistemic)
- c. *John will leave right now.* (directive)

by changing the context

- a. *It will rain for hours in Stockport tomorrow night due to a low pressure system moving into the area.* (future)
- b. *John will have left by eight o'clock tomorrow night.* (future perfect)
- c. *John will leave tomorrow.* (future)

***will* shifts from its modal use to its tense use**

2. Uses of *will*

futurity: *He will go to London tomorrow.*

epistemic modality: *That will be the milkman.*

dynamic modality: *John will get angry over nothing.*

capability/generic: *Accidents will happen.*

directives: *You will do what I say, at once.*

3. Futurity vs. Modality

Does the *will* used for futurity differ from the *will* of modality?

3.1. Passivisation

Wekker and Davidson-Nielsen differentiate between *will* as a future tense and *will* as a modal by looking at the effect of passivisation on *will*-sentences:

- a. *John won't meet Mary.* (active)
- b. *Mary won't be met by John.* (passive)

The sentences are synonymous in their future reading (voice-neutral); however in their volitional reading they differ in meaning.

but

- a. *John will have finished the job yesterday.*
- b. *The job will have been finished by John yesterday.*

The epistemic *will* doesn't change its meaning through passivisation.

and

- a. *The rain delayed/may delay/will delay the start.*
- b. *The start was delayed/may be delayed/will be delayed by the rain.*

The future *will* patterns like the past tense morphology and the modal auxiliary *may*.

-> no satisfying differentiation between future tense *will* and modal *will*

3.2. Conditionals

Wekker, Davidson-Nielsen and Declerck and Depraetere claim that the future tense *will* doesn't appear in the antecedents of conditionals, as opposed to the modal *will*.

- a. *And I will greatly appreciate it if you will not tell your husband.*
- b. *I'll have a drink, then, if you'll have one with me.*

Future tense *will* can appear in the antecedent of conditionals.

-> not true

3.3. Adverbial Modifiers and *Any*

Hornstein says that the future tense *will* can be distinguished from the modal *will* by modifying it with a present tense adverb.

- a. *John will go to school tomorrow.* (modal *will* or future *will*)
- b. *John will go to school now.* (only modal *will*)

Hornstein distinguishes between the modal *will*, which he sees as ambiguous and other modals like *may*, *can*, and *must*, which he sees as not being ambiguous.

but

- a. *Tomorrow, John will leave for Paris in a week.*
- b. *Tomorrow, John must leave for Paris in a week.*

***Must* too is ambiguous between a sense compatible only with future time modifiers and a sense compatible with present time modifiers.**

-> all modals seem to be ambiguous

Hornstein also claims that *any* can be used to distinguish the modal use of *will* from the future use of *will*.

- a. *Leave this instant on any available flight.*
- b. *John will leave this very instant on any available flight.* (only modal use)
- c. *John left yesterday on any available flight.*
- d. *You will leave tomorrow on any flight.* (only modal use)
- e. *I simply believe that you will leave tomorrow on any flight.* (future use)

-> e) is odd because of a lack of directive force, as opposed to d).

Future use of *will* in a sentence with *any* impossible?

but

- a. *John told/assured me that Mary will catch any available flight tomorrow in order to reach the meeting on time.* (future use working with *any*)

-> ***any* is not an adequate criterion to differentiate between the modal use of *will* and the future use of *will***

3.4. The Future Perfect

Furthermore, Hornstein tries to distinguish the modal *will* from the future *will* by looking at the future perfect.

assumption

- a. future perfect *will have* = S-E-R
- b. modal + have *will have* = E, R-S

b) is shared with all other modals, whereas in a) other modals get different tense diagrams.

- a. John must have eaten at 3 pm.
- b. At 3 pm, John should have eaten.
- c. John will have left the office at 3 pm.
- d. At 3 pm, John will have left the office.

In c) and d) John's leaving can occur either at or before 3 pm, whereas a) and b) are not ambiguous. Thus, *will have* has a modifiable R point, which is strong evidence for a tense interpretation of *will*.

but

- a. John might have eaten his lunch at 3 pm.
- b. At 3 pm, John may have eaten his lunch.
- c. The train must have left by now.
- d. The train will have left by now.

These examples seem to allow modification of the R point.

-> Hornstein is probably not right

After all, it can be noted that the underlying tense of all *modal have*, including *will have*, sentences seems to be the present perfect = E-S, R. Hence, all modals always have present tense.

3.5 Conclusion

→ There seems to be no good argument against a unified treatment of *will* as a modal.

4. The Futurate

Comparison of the *will* future and the futurate construction:

- a. Tomorrow, the Yankees will play well. (will future)
- b. Tomorrow, the Yankees play well. (futate)
- c. Tomorrow, the astronauts will splash down safely. (will future)
- d. Tomorrow, the astronauts splash down safely. (futate)

The futurate behaves differently from sentences with *will*.

-> The futurity of *will* is distinct from the futurity of the futurate. Hence, reference to future time is not uniform.

5. Would

Abusch and Ogihara claim that *would* is synchronically related to *will*, i.e. *would* = *will* + PAST.

- a. John decided a week ago that in ten days at breakfast he would say to his mother that they were having their last meal together.
- b. John decided a week ago that in ten days at breakfast he will say to his mother that they were having their last meal together.

a) is co-temporal, meaning that John talking to his mother and their last meal together are at the same time; whereas b) is shifted, meaning that they already had their last meal together.

but

- a. Few months' later, John would hear that Mary failed the test.
- b. Sally would think that John drank the beer.

The co-temporal meaning of *would* vanishes when the complement clause is an event where only the shifted reading is available.

***would* can also be modified by a future adverbial and not be co-temporal:**

- a. Phoebe didn't realize that the Yankees would play the Red Sox the next day.

temporal contrast between *would* and *will*:

- a. *I have no money on me but he won't lend me any.* (volitional modal)
- b. *I had no money on me but he wouldn't lend me any.* (volitional modal)
- c. *In a few months' time their love will change to hate.* (future)
- d. *Only a few months' later their love would change to hate.* (future)

-> **good evidence for *would* = *will* + PAST**

6. Conclusion

- *Will* (in its future temporal interpretation) has distinct effects on temporal modifiers, aspectual markers and sequence of tense in sentences.
- There is no convincing argument against the treatment of *will* as a modal.
- While *will* can be suitably treated as a modal of prediction, the prediction does not always have the utterance time as the reference point.
- *Would* can be thought of as a modality of prediction plus PAST tense morphology.

Is *will* part of the tense system or the modal system, or is it homonymous?

→ To form a semantics of *will*, it is necessary to look at both the tense system and the modal system.