

# Investigating the past of the futurate present

Elizabeth Cowper (Toronto) 7 Daniel Currie Hall (Saint Mary's) 7 Bronwyn Bjorkman (Queen's) 7 Rebecca Tollan (Toronto) 7 Neil Banerjee (Toronto)

## 1. Talking about the future in the present

IN PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH (PDE; 1800–), future time-reference is marked by the modal auxiliaries *will* and *shall*, or, increasingly, by periphrastic constructions such as *be going to*:

- (1) a. *The Assizes will be the first week in November.*  
 b. *It was an experience I shall never forget.*  
 c. *What are you going to do next?* (examples from Sayers 1935)

The simple present and present progressive tenses can be used with future time-reference in talking about events that are **scheduled** to happen, but not ones that are merely **predicted** (Lakoff 1971; Vetter 1973):

- (2) a. ✓ *The Habs are playing the Leafs tomorrow.*  
 b. ✗ *The Habs are beating the Leafs 2–1 tomorrow.*  
 (3) a. ✓ *It will snow next week.*  
 b. ✗ *It snows next week.*

Future-referring present tenses are also possible in conditional clauses with *if*, *unless*, *until*, etc. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002):

- (4) *If it snows next week, we'll have to shovel the walk.*

Like 'future' tense in languages such as French or Spanish, the English modals can have an **epistemic** meaning. They can mark not only predictions about the future, but also inferences about the present or past (Cowper 2005; Mari 2016):

- (5) a. *That will be the letter carrier (at the door now).*  
 b. *Ce sera le facteur.*

Both the English modals and the French future tense are markers of a feature MODALITY, whose presence indicates that a clause refers to what **may be** (now or in the future) rather than to what **is** (Cowper 2005; Cowper and Hall 2013).

## 2. Shifting systems of contrast

*Dans la langue, il n'y a que des différences.*  
 Saussure (1916)

IN OLD ENGLISH (OE; 450–1100), the precursors of the modals did not mark MODALITY; they were just ordinary verbs. While OE had ways of talking about futurity, the feature MODALITY was not yet part of the grammar.

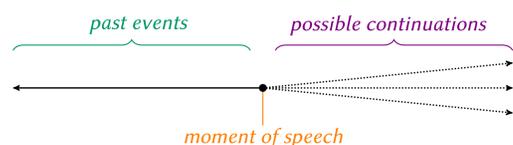


Figure 1: Past, present, and future

If a grammar lacks MODALITY, the absence of this feature from any utterance is not contrastive. Such a language divides the timeline into past and non-past, rather than past, present, and future. (Number works similarly: if a language has a grammatical dual, then plural means 'more than two'; if not, plural means 'more than one.') As the modals changed from lexical verbs to functional auxiliaries (Lightfoot 1979), we should be able to see the meaning of the English present tense constricting accordingly—changing from merely non-past to non-past, non-modal.

## 3. Found in translation

HOW CAN WE COMPARE the expression of future time-reference in different stages of English? We need a corpus that will allow us...

- to tell whether any given present-tense clause refers to the present or to the future, and
- to be confident that differences we observe between periods reflect differences in the grammar, rather than differences in subject matter, genre, etc.

Our answer: Look at a single text that was translated into English at several different stages—in this case, the Christian Gospels. We made a database containing the original Greek text, the Latin Vulgate, and three English translations:

**Anglo-Saxon Gospels (ASG)**– Old English, ca. 993; translated from Latin  
**Wycliffe Bible (Purvey version)**– Middle English, ca. 1388; translated from Latin; edited by Purvey to a more idiomatic English

**King James Version (KJV)**– Early Modern English, 1605–11; translated from Greek (with recourse to earlier translations)

Figure 2: Comparing translations in the database

Advantages and disadvantages of this approach:

- The three English versions all express (approximately) the same meaning.
- We can use the original Greek (which has a future tense) to identify future-referring clauses that might otherwise have been ambiguous.
- The texts are translations of scripture, rather than spontaneous colloquial speech, so they may reflect their periods imperfectly.

As expected, future-referring clauses went from mostly plain present tenses in ASG to overwhelmingly modal in KJV. A typical example from Luke 13:24:

- (6) a. ASG: [...] *manega sēcaþ ðæt hig in gān, and hī ne magon.*  
 b. Purvey: [...] *many seken to entre, and thei schulen not mowe.*  
 c. KJV: [...] *many [...] will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.*

- ASG: present indicative *sēcaþ* (seek) and *magon* (be able)
- Purvey: present indicative or subjunctive *seken*; *schulen not mowe* uses *shall* to express futurity, with *mowe* (> Modern English *may*) in the infinitive
- KJV: modal auxiliaries *will* and *shall*

## 4. Quantitative summary

TABLE 1 SUMMARIZES how the 1118 future-referring clauses in the corpus were rendered in each of the three English translations:

n = 1118	Anglo-Saxon	Purvey	King James
Present indicative	784 70.1%	48 4.3%	7 0.6%
Present syncretic	104 9.3%	16 1.4%	–
Present subjunctive	60 5.4%	23 2.1%	–
<b>Total present</b>	<b>948 84.8%</b>	<b>87 7.8%</b>	<b>7 0.6%</b>
<i>may/magan</i>	5 0.4%	–	–
<i>shall/scealon</i>	4 0.4%	911 81.5%	824 73.7%
<i>should</i>	–	24 2.1%	42 3.8%
<i>will/nyll</i>	14 1.3%	4 0.4%	221 19.8%
<i>would</i>	–	4 0.4%	24 2.1%
<i>wurðan</i>	1 0.1%	–	–
<b>Total modal</b>	<b>24 2.1%</b>	<b>943 84.3%</b>	<b>1111 99.4%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>146 13.1%</b>	<b>88 7.9%</b>	–

Table 1: Future-referring forms in the three translations

**The Anglo-Saxon Gospels** mostly use present-tense forms with no modal to express future time-reference. Most of these are in the indicative mood, though some are subjunctive or ambiguous between the two. There are also other forms, such as *be*+infinitive, as in *de he to gefyllenne wæs* ('that he was to fulfil,' translating Latin *quem completurus erat* in Luke 9:31).

**Purvey's edition** still contains some future-referring present tenses, but primarily uses modals to express futurity. The overwhelming preference for *shall* over *will* may reflect an editorial policy decision: 94.4% of future indicatives in the Vulgate are rendered with *shall*, while other future-referring Latin forms are translated more variously.

**The King James Version** uses modals almost exclusively, with only seven future-referring plain present indicative forms.

## 5. What happens next?

THE KING JAMES VERSION uses modals to express futurity even in some contexts where PDE would not, such as conditionals; contrast (7) with (4):

- (7) *If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do [it]* (KJV, John 14:14).

*Shall* in conditionals "passed into desuetude" during the 18th century (Visser 1963–73: §1519). In PDE, modals continue to decline, mostly in favour of periphrases such as *be going to* (Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2007). But in a few contexts, they are being replaced by unmarked present tenses:

- (8) a. In the consequent of a conditional (*Damages*, S. 1, Ep. 1):  
*If I don't tell Patty about Katie, the clients lose the case.*  
 b. With adverbs like *hopefully* (*The West Wing*, S. 7, Ep. 13):  
*Hopefully Tarimov takes it as an indication of our commitment.*

Is MODALITY disappearing from the grammar, so that PDE is becoming more like OE? Or is MODALITY being encoded by other words (such as *if* or *hopefully*), making modals like *will* and *shall* redundant in these specific contexts?

## References

- Cowper, Elizabeth. 2005. The geometry of interpretable features. *Language* 81(1): 10–46.
- Cowper, Elizabeth and Daniel Currie Hall. 2013. A neoparametric approach to variation and change in English modals. Presented at GLOW 36, Lund University, April 2013. To appear in *Linguistic Variation*.
- Huddleston, Rodney and Geoffrey K. Pullum. 2002. *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, George. 1971. Presupposition and relative well-formedness. In *Semantics: An interdisciplinary reader in philosophy, linguistics and psychology*, eds. Danny D. Steinberg and Leon A. Jakobovits. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 329–340.
- Lightfoot, David. 1979. *Principles of diachronic syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mari, Alda. 2016. French future: Exploring the future ratification hypothesis. *Journal of French Language Studies* 26(1): 1–26.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1916. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot.
- Sayers, Dorothy L. 1935. *Clouds of witness*. Revised and corrected ed. London: Gollancz.
- Tagliamonte, Sali A. and Alexandra D'Arcy. 2007. The modals of obligation/necessity in Canadian perspective. *English World-Wide* 28(1): 47–87.
- Vetter, David C. 1973. Someone solves this problem tomorrow. *Linguistic Inquiry* 4(1): 104–108.
- Visser, Fredericus Theodorus. 1963–73. *An historical syntax of the English language*. Leiden: Brill.

## Contact information

- Elizabeth Cowper [cowper@chass.utoronto.ca](mailto:cowper@chass.utoronto.ca)  
Department of Linguistics, University of Toronto
- Daniel Currie Hall [daniel.hall@smu.ca](mailto:daniel.hall@smu.ca)  
Program in Linguistics & Department of English, Saint Mary's University  
(office: McNally North 305; tel.: 420-5707)
- Bronwyn Bjorkman [bronwyn.bjorkman@queensu.ca](mailto:bronwyn.bjorkman@queensu.ca)  
Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Queen's University
- Rebecca Tollan [becky.tollan@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:becky.tollan@mail.utoronto.ca)  
Department of Linguistics, University of Toronto
- Neil Banerjee [n.banerjee@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:n.banerjee@mail.utoronto.ca)  
Department of Linguistics, University of Toronto