A re-study on the controversy of “future tense” in English

Jing Wu

Abstract: To identify the tense in English learning, analysis based on usage has been conducted. In English teaching, the future time representation should be fully introduced to students, so that they can correctly use the form, instead of simply defining the structure “will/shall+infinitive” as the future form of an English verb. Is there a Future-Tense form which is equal to the Present and Past Tense in the developing process of English? Grammarists have debated this for more than fifty years in order to certify the exact speech of the two auxiliary verbs, “will” and “shall”. From the standpoint of the author, it makes sense better to regard “will/shall” as a modal verb.

Keywords: future tense, traditional grammar, modern grammar

1 Introduction

In oldest English, there was no special form for the future tense. The present tense served for both a present and a future. As in English both will and shall are here employed and are used with different shades of meaning, it is necessary to examine closely the original force of these words. Originally will indicated a desire of the subject, while shall indicated that an act was due in accordance with the will of someone other than the subject of the verb. The meaning of both of these verbs suggested their use to denote the idea of futurity. It is natural to infer that if one desires to do something that the act will soon follow. Likewise it is natural to infer that if an act is due in accordance with the will of another that it will be forthcoming if this foreign will is powerful. This constraining force is usually the will or plan of God, fate, destiny, nature, the force of circumstances, or the will of the speaker\[1\]. The use of shall to indicate the will of the speaker was originally only employed in the second and third persons, and could not be used in the first person, for Germanic shall never indicated the will of the subject. Early in Middle English, however, it acquired an extension of force so it could indicate not only the speaker’s will with regard to others, but also his decisions and plans with regard to his own course of future action. Thus such expressions as “He shall (I intend that he shall) pass the winter here” led to “I shall (intend to) pass the winter here.” The original meaning in the first person am to did not disappear, but was retained alongside of the new meaning: “I cannot yet tell whether I shall (am to under the circumstances) pass the winter here.” The context usually distinguishes the two meanings. Sometimes even in Old English shall and will seem to have future force. We turn now to a careful examination of the state of usage for the future in English. Time Perspective (TP) is an important area of research within the ‘psychological time’ paradigm. TP, or the manner in which individuals conduct themselves as a reflection of their cogitation of the past, the present, and the future, is considered as a basic facet of human functioning. These perceptions of time have an influence on our actions, perceptions, and emotions\[1\].

Is there a “Future Tense” for English verbs? Traditional grammar usually thinks that “will/shall + infinitive” is the “future tense” of English verbs. Nothing is wrong. Some modern grammar scholars believe that English does not form a future-time form that is equal to the present and past tense in its long-term development. Grammarists have argued for the issue for over half a century. The purpose of the debate is, in the final analysis, the nature of the two auxiliary verbs (williary Verb). What kind of auxiliary verbs should will/shall be? “Future-tense verbs” or “Modal verbs” or dual-words? Gramologists have historically held different opinions. The first opinion is that will/shall is a “future auxiliary”, and they can also express modal meaning, but it is merely one of the various usages of “future-time verbs”. Many antique English grammar books, such as the Nash Grammar, which was once popular in China, hold this view. Nesfield believes that shall and will are two auxiliary
verbs that constitute the future. This “Future Tense” can represent three meanings: one is only the future time, and has no other meaning; the second is to indicate the future time with the meaning of the command; the third is the future time with the meaning of the intention. Nash pointed out that ‘shall’ is used for the first person subject, ‘will’ for the second and third person subject, only for the future, without the meaning of command or intention[3]. If ‘shall’ is used for the second and third person subject, it means not only the future, but also the meaning of command, promise or threat; if used in the first person subject, it means the speaker’s intention. Under the above circumstances, Nash further pointed out that both shall and will not be auxiliary verbs but active words (see Nesfield: Idiom, Grammar and Synthesis, p. 63)[2]. Nash’s point of view is a representative conventional view of the 18th century Prescriptive Grammar. This view has also been popular in English teaching in China. However, it is often out of place with the actual usage of will and shall. The second opinion considers shall/will as both a temporal auxiliary verb (a verb in the upcoming verb) and a modal verb (Modal Verb). This group of opinions believes that the will/shall representing the future tense must be distinguished from the will/shall representing the modal meaning, which belong to different grammatical categories[5]. This is the view of The English Grammar, edited by M. Ganshina, which was popular in China in the 1950s, and the English grammar book published in China in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, in this type of grammar book, the shall/will as the “future tense” auxiliary verb and the shall/will as the modal verb are often classified into different chapters, such as the “English Grammar Handbook” published in China. In the tenth chapter, when talking about “auxiliary verbs”, it is not meaningful to think that shall and will act as auxiliary verbs. They are only used in the first, the second and third-person future tenses. When the “modal verb” is mentioned in the eleventh chapter of the same book, will/shall is treated as an active word (notional verb), which can express a variety of modal meanings. This method of dealing with the first opinion mentioned above has both its commonalities and differences[4]. The common point is that there are two auxiliary verbs will and shall in English that specifically express future meaning. The difference between the performance of will/shall can also be used as a “modal verb”, which surely is a step forward, close to the language facts. However, the problem is that the “future meaning” and “modal meaning” represented by will/shall cannot be as clear as the grammar book. These two meanings are often entangled and difficult to separate. This raises a question: How much practical significance does it have to treat will/shall as two grammatical categories? The third opinion is that will/shall itself is a Modal Auxiliary, not a futuristic verb, as far as they can represent near-pure (without modal meaning) future tense in certain structures, that it is one of the usages of these two modal auxiliary verbs. Gramologists who hold this view are skeptical about the “future tense” of English verbs, or do not recognize that English has “future tense.” The Danish linguist Otto Jesperen, the famous American linguist George O.Curme, the British contemporary linguist Frank R. Palmer, Randolph Quirk, Geoffrey Leech, Sidney Greenbaum, and Henry Bradley are all representatives of this group of opinions.

2 Analysis

2.1 An Analysis Based on the usage

According to the actual usage of will/shall in modern English, the meaning expressed by it is mainly modal; sometimes it can also indicate that “foresighting” is coming, but this kind of future meaning is often difficult to be completely divided with other modal meanings. As for the use of shall in the first person subject, it mainly means modal meaning.

Example 1:
Where shall I meet you?
I shall send my two boys to Harvard. (indicating determination or intention)[5]
We shall fight the enemy to the last drop of our blood.
I shall do nothing of the kind. (indicating will and determination)[6]

In modern English, using shall to mean “pure” future usage.

Example 2:
I shall be twenty-one on Thursday[7].
Although this usage exists occasionally, it has become less and less common, especially in American English, even the first person subject usually use will, instead of shall, how can we say that the use of the first person subject must be a “future tense” auxiliary verb? Look at the usage of will: Will even use the second, three-person subject does not necessarily mean the future.

Example 3:
He will do it even you say[8].
Every morning she will sit in the garden reading newspapers[8].
Who’s knocking? That’ll be John[9].
Oil will float on water.( = Oil floats on water.) (represents an objective process that is not subject to time
limits)\[10\]

In the above examples, although will be used for the second and three-person subject, it does not mean the future. How can we say that will be used for the second and three-person subjects must be “future time” auxiliary verbs? Sometimes, will be either a schematic diagram or a future, and its exact meaning depends on the context\[11\].

**Example 4:**

John will come tomorrow. Here, will has both modal meaning (indicating will) and future meaning. Where is the focus, it should be judged according to the context\[11\].

**Example 5:**

John will come tomorrow. If he comes, will you say to him? Here, will in the first sentence focuses on future meaning, because the if-clause below clearly indicates future time\[12, 13\].

**Example 6:**

John will come tomorrow. If he will come, will you say to him?

Here, will in the first sentence mainly represents modal meaning, because will in the if-clause below is indicative of will. Since the exact meaning of will sometimes depends on the context, how can it be said that will be used for the second, three-person subject must be the “future tense” auxiliary verb? Even in structures such as “will be + present participle” and “will have + past participle”, will not necessarily means the future without expressing modality. Try to compare:

He will be flying to London tomorrow morning. (meaning pure future meaning) Please don’t phone him now. He will be having a nap at the moment. (indicating the current situation – he may be taking a nap, please don’t call him) He will have finished the work by the end of the week. (representing the foresight of things that have already been done in the future) You will all have heard the news last night. (indicating the speculation of the past, it has nothing to do with the future) It can be seen that will/shall itself is a modal auxiliary verb, but sometimes it can also express future meaning. Just as can, may, must these modal auxiliary verbs sometimes have the same meaning in the future. If will/shall can express the meaning of the future as the “future time” auxiliary verb, then why “can, may, must” cannot be called “future tense” auxiliary verb? According to the above actual situation, the author believes that the will/shall is defined as a modal auxiliary verb, which is more realistic and more convincing. Since will/shall itself is a modal auxiliary verb rather than a “future time” auxiliary verb, then the English verb with or without “future time” can be put on a full stop.

### 2.2 An analysis based on various expressions

That the English verbs have no “future time” does not mean that English does not have the ability to express future time. On the contrary, modern English means that the means of future time is rich and colorful. There are at least five or six grammatical means of future time. They are will/shall + infinitive, will/shall be + -ing, be going to + infinitive, be + -ing, be to + infinitive, and generally used the simple present tense to indicate the future. These clarify that the grammatical approaches of the future have their own meanings, each with its own use.

### 3 Conclusion

In summary, will/shall is not a verb in the future, but just a modal verb, that is, does not recognize English. There is a special verb form that represents the future time – “Future Tense”. In English teaching and textbook writing, the future time representation should be fully introduced to students, so that they can know where to use the form, instead of simply defining the structure “will/shall+infinitive” as the future form of an English verb. The “future tense” is placed in a prominent position, and the other expressions are taken only one by one. Don’t give beginners an illusion, as if “will/shall” is equivalent to the word “will” in Chinese, causing many misunderstandings and misuses. Therefore, whether or not English has a “future tense” dispute is not only theoretical but also practical.

### References