

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE
MODALS *WILL* AND *SHALL*

PIOTR KAKIETEK

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

This paper sets out to discuss some of the problems that suggest themselves in connection with the traditional presentation of the modals *will* and *shall*. The standpoint adopted here is that represented by Boyd and Thorne in their joint paper "The Deep Grammar of Modal Verbs" (*Journal of Linguistics* 5, 1969: 57 - 74).

Underlying their main argument is the notion of 'speech act' formulated for the first time by J. L. Austin in his *How To Do Things With Words* (ed. Urmson, T. O. 1962, London: O.U.P.). In this book Austin is particularly concerned with utterances of the type 'I apologise', 'I promise to go', 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth'. These, he insists, should be clearly distinguished from utterances like 'Jane is reading' and 'He is going'. The important thing about the sentences 'I apologise' and 'I promise to go' is that eliciting them the speaker is at the same time performing the act of apologising and promising, respectively. In Austin's own words: "...in saying what I do, I actually perform that action. When I say 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' I do not describe the christening ceremony, I actually perform the christening." (Austin's *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 1962: 220 - 39).

The basic difference between the utterances 'I promise to go' and 'He is reading' is not that in pronouncing the first utterance the speaker is performing an act and in the second he is not — but that the speaker is performing a different act in each case, that is, an act of promising and an act of stating. In other words, the 'illocutionary potential' (the kind of speech act) of 'I promise to go' is a promise, whereas the illocutionary potential of 'He is reading' is a statement (see also Boyd and Thorne, 1969: 57).

The idea of 'speech act' (or illocutionary potential) as adumbrated above has been utilized by Boyd and Thorne in their definition of the modal verb which they consider to be a marker of the illocutionary potential in the surface structure of the sentence in which it appears¹ (Boyd and Thorne, 1969: 57 - 62, 7ff.).

Let us now consider the following pair of sentences:

1. He goes to London tomorrow
2. He will go to London tomorrow

According to the traditional interpretation it would be said that both (1) and (2) are future tense (Jespersen's future time in *Philosophy of Grammar*, 1924), but that in each case the future time reference is expressed in a different way; in (1) the element of futurity is brought out by the combination of the present tense form *goes* and the adverbial expression of time *tomorrow*, in (2) it is conveyed by *will* (future tense marker). Thus the traditional account of (1) and (2) presupposes the existence of two tenses, present and future, and it describes future tense as being represented in the surface structure either by *will* alone or by the combination of present tense forms and adverbial expressions of time such as *tomorrow*, *next year*, *next Tuesday*, etc. From the present point of view, however, the recognition of two tenses, present and future (construed as notional categories) appears to be unnecessary for accounting for the difference between (1) and (2).

(1) and (2) are regarded here to represent two different kinds of speech act, that is to say, they have different illocutionary potentials, (1) being potentially a statement about *his going to London tomorrow*, and (2) a prediction about it. The deep structure of (1) and (2) would be thus:

3. I state// he goes to London tomorrow
4. I predict// he goes to London tomorrow

It may be noted that to say that (2) is a prediction is not tantamount to saying that it is future tense. Following the example of Boyd and Thorne it is claimed here that there exist only two tenses in English viz. past and non-past.

The traditional treatment of the modals concerned is unsatisfactory in two major respects: first, it tends often quite unnecessarily to attribute to each of them meanings which are, in fact, certain tendencies of the context; second, it fails to provide a single formula for the two forms such as could account for all their possible occurrences².

¹ Boyd and Thorne are the first to have introduced the notion of 'speech act' or illocutionary potential into linguistic theory.

² The term 'traditional' is used here to refer to the following works: G. O. Curme. 1931. *A Grammar of the English Language*. P. III. Boston: D. C. Heath and Co.; B. M. Charleston. 1941. *Studies on the Syntax of the English Verb*. Diss. Bern; G. Fridén. 1948. *Studies on the Tenses of the English Verb from Chaucer to Shakespeare with Special Reference to the Late XVIIth Century*. Upsala.; O. Jespersen. 1909. *A Modern English Grammar*. P. IV. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung; E. Krusinga. 1931. *A Handbook of Present-Day English*. P. II. Groningen; F. R. Palmer. 1968. *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb*. London: Longmans; *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 1961. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

It seems that the two important requirements are fully met by the kind of analysis of the modals proposed by Boyd and Thorne, according to which, it will be remembered, the modals are treated as forms marking the illocutionary potential of the utterances in which they appear.

In the works examined for the purpose of this discussion the usually accepted method of presenting *will* and *shall* (as well as the other modals) is by setting up a frequently lengthy list of 'meanings' or 'uses' for each of them. Thus, for instance, in the OED the article for *will* spreads over four pages (including the discussion of *would*) and consists of no less than 46 rules.

In his account of the finite verb in the early 18th cent. English, Charleston notes the following 'meanings' of *will*:

- a. decision or resolution
- b. desire, willingness
- c. emphatic determination
- d. resolution combined with an exhortation or command or suggestion addressed to, one or more persons, urging them to act with the speaker
- e. supposition or probability
- f. habit or repetition

With perhaps slight differences, the same set of 'meanings' is suggested in the other works (see Jespersen 1931: 237 - 65). It has to be made clear that all of these works describe *will* (*shall*) in terms of its capability to express various 'meanings' entirely on its own. To take an example, in the OED article 8 reads: "Has the habit, or a way of -ing: is addicted or accustomed to -ing: habitually does; sometimes connoting 'may be expected'". To take one more example article 9 states that *will* "expresses potentiality, capacity, or sufficiency: can, may, is able to, is capable of -ing: is large enough or sufficient to".

On p. 11 of his book Palmer notes a so-called 'induction' use of *will* attested in sentences like:

5. Oil will float on water
6. Pigs'll eat anything

Adding to the number of 'meanings' of *will*, Palmer interprets *will* in (5) and (6) as being capable to denote "general timeless truths that can be proved inductively".

However, one would wish to account for cases like (5) and (6) otherwise than by ascribing to *will* an additional 'meaning' or function of denoting 'universal truths'. Notice that (7) and (8) are legitimate paraphrases of (5) and (6):

7. Oil floats on water
8. Pigs eat anything

The deep structure representations of (5) - (8) would be respectively:

9. I predict// oil floats on water
10. I predict// pigs eat anything
12. I state// oil floats on water
13. I state// pigs eat anything

It can be noticed that (5) and (7) contain the same information only in each case it is transmitted in a different way; thus in (5) the speaker is making a prediction about a certain property of oil (*oil floats on water*), and in (7) he is making a statement about it. Thorne contends that making a statement about a natural law is equal to its prediction (65).

At this juncture it might be of some interest to mention that Anderson proposes a different interpretation of (5) and (6). He argues that (5) and (6) might be accounted for by means of the semantic ingredients of the noun phrases of the sentences. He points out that in (5) and (6) and like examples the noun phrases seem to be restricted to the "general mass or general indefinite noun varieties". Then he concludes by saying that "It would seem to be the nature of the NP that is decisive with respect to this particular distinction". (J. Anderson, 'Some Proposals Concerning the Modal Verb in English', 8 - 9; forthcoming).

Let us now focus attention on the following sentences:

13. The French will be having a holiday today
14. That'll be the postman
15. Where is John? He'll be in his study at the moment

will in (13) - (15) and similar utterances is customarily referred to as a 'probability' or 'supposition' *will* (Jespersen 1909, Fridén 1948, Palmer 1966). In this connection we find in the OED the following rule: "with the notion of futurity obscured or lost: =will prove or turn out, will be found on enquiry to; may be supposed to, presumably does. Hence, ...in estimates of amount or in uncertain or approximate statements, the future becoming equivalent to a present with qualification..." One of the examples quoted in the Dictionary is:

16. The agriculture of this territory will be very similar to that of Kentucky

It would seem that to answer "Where is John?" by means of "He is in his study" (17) is to give the same sort of information as if we answered the question by saying "He will be in his study". When we choose to say "He is in his study" on one occasion, and "He will be in his study" on another, it does not imply that we use a different tense on each occasion (present and future). What we really do is change the mode of conveying some kind of information (in this particular case *his being in his study at the moment*). Accordingly, in (17) the speaker is making a statement about his being in his study (*at the moment*), and in (15) a prediction about the same thing.

Another 'meaning' usually associated with *will* is one where the modal is said to express the habitual nature of the action or the state implied in the lexical verb (Jespersen's *habitual will*; Palmer's characteristic use of *will*). Consider:

18. Many will swoon when they do look on blood
19. Women are generous — they will give you what they can
20. Some will praise from politeness, and some will criticize from vanity
21. He will often fall into a musing posture to attract observation

Jespersen argues that the habitual *will* is directly related to *will* denoting volition (240). In this he is followed by Fridén who declares in this connection that "It seems therefore reasonable to assume that iterative *will* is connected with *will* expressing volition. A person who does a thing willingly may often have a tendency to do it frequently. Thus *will* has come to denote a habitual action which is a consequence of a person's nature or a character" (Fridén 1948: 200). However, one cannot but be surprised to learn a little further that "*will* is also used with the implication of volition in speaking of animals or lifeless things". This statement would simply lead us to think that, for example, the subjects of (22) - (24) are capable of volitional behaviour.

22. accidents will occur in the best regulated families
23. oxen will suffer much more labour than horses will
24. when a man's heart is troubled within, his pulse will beat marvellously strongly

This point has also been criticized by W. Diver who noticed in this connection that attributing volition to the subject of "The hall will seat five hundred" would suggest that it belongs to a context like: „The hall will seat five hundred because it refuses to seat less" (W. Diver, *The Chronological System of the English Verb Word XIX* 1963: 141).

Notice that the NP's in (22) - (24) are either non-human inanimate or non-human animate nouns. With this in view accounting for *will* in (22) - (24) in terms of volition is untenable on the ground of the impossibility of reconciling the idea of volition with non-human objects.

Will in (17) - (24) is also labelled as a *characteristic will* (Palmer 1966: 111 - 2). It is, however, hard to see any reason why the characteristic *will* should be restricted to personal subjects only since instances with impersonal subjects are not at all infrequent with which a characteristic interpretation is also possible. It seems that (25) permits a characteristic interpretation equally well as (17) - (24):

25. It will rain for hours in Poznań
26. It rains for hours in Poznań

Both (25) and its non-modal paraphrase (26) are present tense and habit-

ual aspect. In brief, the feature habitual in (17) - (25) and like examples is best explicated by the non-continuous nature of the lexical verb involved in the matter rather than by the presence of *will*. It may be noted that in English most verbs when they are present tense they are at the same time habitual aspect.

Thus (25) and (26) are taken here to differ only in their having different illocutionary potentials, i.e. (25) is a prediction, and (27) a statement about the iterative character of the event involved. Consider also (27) and (28), its non-modal paraphrase;

27. He will sit for hours doing nothing

28. He sits for hours doing nothing

To quote Boyd and Thorne: "Making a statement about someone's habitual behaviour and making a prediction about it is to perform equivalent acts" (Boyd and Thorne, 12).

Contributing to further polysemy of *will*, some grammarians (Jespersen, Fridén, and also in the OED) distinguish one more 'meaning' which they readily assign to *will*.

29. The hall will seat five hundred

30. Then happy was he that was an ass, for nothing will kill an ass but cold.

As far as it can be seen in this paper, the only difference between the immediately preceding examples, and (29) - (30) is that the latter, unlike (17) - (25) and (27), happen to have in their verb phrases a 'causative' verb. This, and perhaps the fact (29) and (30) are easily paraphrasable by sentences with *can* or *may* may have been the main cause that has led the grammarians to assign to *will* an additional function of denoting "capacity" or "potentiality".

In their analysis of the sentence *He shall go* (31), Boyd and Thorne suggest *I will his going, I guarantee his going, I make myself responsible for his going, I commit myself to bring about his going*, as its approximate paraphrases. The deep structure representation of (31) would be thus:

I imp of myself He go non-past

In (31) and similar sentences (Anderson's independent *shall*, Ehrman's compulsive *shall*, Palmer's 'promise' use of *shall*) we have to do with a demand that the speaker makes of himself. Jespersen, Fridén, and Charleston put forward a different interpretation of sentences containing the independent *shall*. Thus in MEG under the heading "Volitional Obligation" (269ff.) Jespersen notes that "In the second and third persons *shall* most often serves to express that kind of obligation which is dependent on the speaker's will". A little further we are told that in certain contexts this *shall* may assume such "meanings" as a threat, a promise, a command, etc.

Consider the following:

32. He shall have (his desires with interest)

33. He shall pay for it

Shall in (32) and (33) would be normally interpreted as expressing a promise and a threat, respectively. However, it is assumed here that these "meanings" have, in fact, no linguistic expression. Thus it is thought wrong here to maintain that a promise and a threat constitute parts of the meaning of *shall*. All that is indicated by *shall* in (32) and (33) is that the speaker imposes some kind of obligation upon himself (and not upon the subjects of the sentences), or more correctly, that he makes a demand of himself that something take place. The corresponding deep structures of (32) and (33) are as follows:

I imp of myself He have non-past (32)

I imp of myself He pay non-past (33)

To conclude, the main objective of the present paper was to show some of the shortcomings accompanying the traditional approach to the problem in question. It was pointed out that many of the alleged meanings of *will* and *shall* suggested by some grammarians are, in fact, explainable by elements other than those directly to do with the modals themselves. The kind of analysis of the modal verb as proposed by Boyd and Thorne was adopted for this discussion for two important reasons: first, it is by far simpler than that professed by traditional grammarians; second, it has the virtue of being capable to offer an exhaustive and uniform account of the two forms in all their possible contexts.

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