



THE DEGREE OF PROBABILITY OF VERB SITUATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF HYPOTHETICAL MOOD WITHIN FUTURE TIME

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Abstract:

This paper explores the idea that each of the finite verb forms available for referring to future events in English expresses a different degree of probability regarding the realization of those events. These degrees of likelihood vary in relation to the present state of affairs, allowing us to evaluate how likely or unlikely a given verb situation is to occur. The research is conducted within the grammatical category of mood, particularly focusing on hypothetical opposition within it, and is focused on how finite verb forms contribute to expressing different probability levels within the temporal sector of the future. Future time, as inherently hypothetical, is always marked by modality. Yet, it can be referred to through the unmarked mood — the indicative — which is entirely factual in grammatical terms. Thus, the future becomes accessible through the grammatical category of tense, even though its realization remains a matter of hypothetical projection.

Keywords: future time, modality, tense, factual, verb situation

1. Introduction

While the past can be viewed as predominantly indicative, the present as mostly indicative, the future temporal sector is entirely hypothetical, and none of the verb situation (neither its beginning nor its progress or end) is realized in the moment of referring to it (i.e. *now*). In English linguistics, therefore, modality and tense often intersect when it comes to the reference to future events. The indicative mood is traditionally used to express statements of fact or high certainty, while other modal verbs (e.g., *might*, *may*, *could*, *would*) indicate various levels of uncertainty. The future tense itself does not exist in the morphological sense in English, but constructions such as 'will + verb' or 'going to + verb' are used to project events into the future. These constructions carry varying semantic weights of probability. This paper aims to classify and analyze the verbal forms used to express future events based on their degree of likelihood and syntactic framing, in the context of hypothetical meaning.

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2. Literature Review

The study is mostly grounded in the theories of modality and tense proposed by Palmer (2001), Comrie (1985) and Leech (2004), who argue that hypothetical property is a key aspect of expressing any future verb situation. Reichenbach's (1947) temporal model also supports the idea that the reference to the future always involves a subjective element, since the event has not yet occurred. It is, therefore, only possible to express various degrees of probability of what is stated or referred to from the deictic centre (*now, speech time - S*), and is expected to be realized at a particular time in the future. So, the whole future time reference is best understood as within the grammatical category of mood, where there is the differentiation to the indicative and the hypothetical; the future itself being entirely hypothetical, as none of the verb situations it refers to is realized until or at the moment of speech (*S*) but is expected to be realized after it is referred to by a particular grammatical form.

There are different grammatical forms available for future time reference in English, such as *will* future, *going to* future, *present simple*, *present progressive* and *future perfect*. English relies on modal auxiliaries to express shades of probability, ranging from strong certainty to weak possibility, modal *will* being one of them and is available for future time reference. In the following section, a reference will be given to each of the aforementioned grammatical forms for expressing future time verb situations, in terms of a detailed discussion about the verb situations and the whole sentential context in the particular excerpts.

3. Material and Methods

For the purpose of illustration, fifteen authentic examples are excerpted from contemporary English literature and analyzed in the context of the degree of probability of their being realized in the future. Each example is examined for modal verb usage, tense structure, and contextual clues that influence the perceived degree of probability. Methodologically, we relied on the qualitative analysis, distributional method and synthesis. The main premise is that various verb patterns allow for the different degree of probability of the realisation of verb situations in the future. The aim of the paper is to scale the degree of probability of the realisation of verb situations expressed by particular verb forms and classify each example into one of three categories: high probability, medium probability, or low probability of their being realized in the future. The essence of the paper is envisioned to be the in-depth analysis of some of the most frequent grammatical possibilities for the future time reference, and the degree of probability of the occurrence of the verb situations that they express.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The contextual reference and the corresponding analysis will be provided for each example, with the estimation and scaling of the degree of probability for them to occur. The reference is given following Reichenbach's philosophy of temporal composition of the verb situations in time, within the combination of three points: *speech time (S)*, *event time (E)* and *reference time (R)*. First

reference will be given to the examples of sentences with the verb phrase consisting of the modal construction *will/shall* future:

- 1) 'I shall go on shining as a brilliantly meaningless figure in a meaningless world.' (*The Beautiful and Damned*)
- 2) 'When we fall in love, we hope... that we shall be finally, truly seen: judged and approved.' (*Nothing to be Frightened of*)
- 3) 'This is how it will be when I grow up. I shall go there, da this, discover that, love her, and then her and her and her. I shall live as people in novels live and have lived.' (*The Sense of an Ending*)

In the aforementioned examples (1-3), the future time reference is realized through the use of the modal verb phrase *will/shall* + the infinitive of the main verb. Most generally, these forms are considered to be expressing the lower degree of probability of the realisation of verb situations that they convey. However, there are various degrees of probability within the modal phrases themselves, and the following discussion of these three examples is going to show it.

According to Leech (2004), *will* and *shall* are modals of epistemic or extrinsic modality, referring to human judgement of what is likely to happen and what is not. Modal *shall*, however, can be considered to express a strong assertion in the context of formal future, and, consequently, the higher degree of probability of the verb situation, as evident in example 1. However, the situation is somewhat different in examples 2 and 3. In example 2, *shall* future expresses a desire and aspiration, within a wider time span. The situation is similar to the verb situations in example 3. Namely, the verb situations expressed in these modal phrases imply hopes and expectations. All these modal meanings express a lower degree of probability of the verb situations to occur than the one in example 1.

The inflectional grammatical forms for present time reference, such as present simple and present progressive, may also be used for future time reference. This is possible due to the broad referential span of the present, which can vary from instantaneous to omnitemporal. It is, therefore, possible to refer to future time within the sector of the present that is subsequent to *now*. The discussion of the following examples will reveal that possibility. We begin with the *present simple* for future time reference:

- 4) 'In a few minutes, the service starts.' (*The Sense of an Ending*)
- 5) 'Tomorrow, I leave for the West Country.' (*The Remains of the Day*)

The future time reference is recognised in the aforementioned examples on the basis of time adverbials *In a few minutes* and *Tomorrow*. Both the examples refer to the definite future – a scheduled near-future plan (example 4) or a definite future plan (example 5). It can, therefore, be argued that the degree of probability of the verb situations in these examples is high, as

expressed within the omnitemporal present that encompasses parts of the future and is anchored in the inflected grammatical form. Another property of both situations is that they refer to the near future, the sector that is closer to *now*.

The present progressive can also be argued to express a high level of probability of the verb situations, as evident from the example that refers to a planned meeting, also in the near future:

6) 'I'm meeting him tomorrow at the café.' (*Staring at the Sun*)

7) 'We're going to Norfolk next week.' (*Never Let Me Go*)

The use of *going to* for future reference is linked to the present state of affairs, something that is seen as strong evidence for the realisation of the verb situation in the future. The sentential context itself sets the stage for a higher degree of probability of the situations occurring in the future. The use of this verb form with the future reference is evident in the following examples:

8) 'I'm going to ask her when I see her.' (*Never Let Me Go*)

9) 'If you are going to have decent lives. Then you've got to know and know properly. None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars... Your lives are set out for you.' (*Never Let Me Go*)

10) 'Either way, they were jolly and were going to stay that way.' (*The Sense of an Ending*)

11) 'I thought I was going to live differently, but it turned out otherwise.' (*Metroland*)

12) 'I was sure I was going to say something, but then I stayed silent.' (*The Remains of the Day*)

The analysis of the aforementioned examples begins with the ones that are located in the present temporal sector (8 and 9). Example 8 expresses a person's intention, within a character-driven dialogue. The *going to* verb phrase is used to convey the intention based on the current state of affairs, i.e. one's decision based on the dialogue that preceded it. Example 9 provides a wider context to convey the situations expressed by *going to* and *will* patterns. The *going to* verb phrase in the first sentence in the example is used to set up expectations about life paths and futures that are preordained. The *will* sentences, consequently, convey the promises based on the present state of affairs.

Examples 10-12 are all located in the past temporal sector, within the temporal philosophy of the *future in the past*. Example 10 expresses determination about how things are going to be like in the future (in the past). In example 11, there is the statement about how one believed was going to live, based on one's preferences, decisions and the state of affairs, but it turned out otherwise. Finally, example 12 conveys the verb situation related to the anticipation

of a future action that appeared to be inevitable based on the state of affairs in the past, but there was a sudden turning point, and the situation never happened. All the aforementioned examples express a high degree of certainty that the verb situations they convey were going to happen, with the evident state of affairs implying them. What can be further argued about these verb situations is that it is evident from the moment of speech (now) if they happened in the past or not, which portrays the whole context that they are in in the sense of them being indicative, at least regarding their outcome.

The following example refers to the conditional future: it is an omnitemporal statement, implying moral consequences. The degree of probability of the verb situation occurring is entirely linked to one's moral choices:

13) 'If you don't tell the truth about yourself, you cannot tell it about other people.' (The Diary)

6. Conclusion

This paper was envisioned as a brief contribution to the philosophy of the future time reference and the grammatical means that convey it. As there is no inflectional form or tense for expressing the future, the reference to the future is made by means of the available verb forms and patterns. For the purpose of the research in this paper, the reference is made to *will/shall* future, *going to* future, *present simple* and *present progressive*. Each of the verb patterns convey different levels of probability for the verb situations that they express occur. The analysis of the relevant linguistic material confirmed the premise that different patterns convey a different level of probability of the occurrence of verb situations in the future. While the modal *will/shall* constructions mostly allow for flexible, nuanced projections into the future, the indicative mood within the *present simple*, *present progressive* and *going to* allow for the interpretation that indicates a higher degree of probability for the occurrence of the situations that they convey.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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