

Will, shall, be going to, and want to: The Modals and Semi-modals of Prediction and Volition in Modern English

Author

Peter C. Collins
Linguistics Department
University of NSW
Sydney 2052

Abstract

This paper examines the meanings of the modals *will* and *shall*, and of the semi-modals *be going to* and *want to*, in contemporary English. The findings indicate that the status of *will* as the primary exponent of epistemic 'prediction' is under challenge from *be going to* (a change in which 'colloquialization' is playing a role) and that its position as the main exponent of root 'volition' is under threat from *want to* (a development in which American English leads the way). *Shall* is moribund, though less spectacularly so in British English than in the other two varieties, and less so in writing than speech.

Keywords

will, shall, be going to, want to, modals, semi-modals, corpus, British English, American English, Australian English

1. Introduction

This paper examines the uses and distribution of the modal expressions *will*, *shall*, *be going to/gonna*, and *want to/wanna* in contemporary English. Every instance of these expressions was identified and analysed in three corpora. Two of these, ICE-GB (the British corpus of the International Corpus of English collection) and ICE-AUS (its Australian counterpart) conform to a common design. Each comprises 500 texts, of 2,000-words, sampled in the early 1990s (300 spoken texts — 180 dialogic and 120 monologic; and 200 written texts — 50 non-printed and 150 printed). The third corpus, referred to as ‘C-US’ in this paper, was constructed by the author, in the absence of any ‘ICE-US’. C-US parallels ICE-GB and ICE-AUS in both the sampling period and in the proportion of spoken texts (116,458 words from the Santa Barbara Corpus, or ‘SBC’) to written texts (80,000 words extracted from the Freiburg-Brown Corpus of Written American English, or ‘Frown’). There is however some incomparability in the types of texts (SBC has no monologic categories, and Frown no non-printed categories), so comparisons drawn with American English must be regarded as provisional. Frequencies for the modals and semi-modals examined are presented in Table 1, with those for C-US normalized to tokens per one million words, to match those for ICE-AUS and ICE-GB.

	ICE-AUS	ICE-GB	C-US	TOTAL
<i>will</i>	3868	3861	3950 (776)	(8505)
<i>shall</i>	100	223	102 (20)	(343)
<i>be going to/gonna</i>	1191	1056	2413 (474)	(2721)
<i>want to/wanna</i>	1039	578	1425 (280)	(1897)
Total	6400	5909	8094 (1590)	(13899)

Table 1. Frequencies of the modals/semi-modals of prediction and volition

(C-US figures normalized to tokens per one million words; raw figures in parentheses)

The semantic analysis applied in the study is based on the broad distinction between ‘root’ and ‘epistemic’ modality (as argued for by Coates 1983 and others). Epistemic modality involves the speaker’s inferences about the truth of a proposition, while root modality relates to the potential for an action to occur, as determined either deontically (via the imposition of an obligation, giving of a permission, etc., or intrinsically (via the will, ability, etc. of one of the parties, typically the subject-referent). The root category is admittedly somewhat semantically heterogeneous (leading a number of linguists to

recognize more than one primary class here, most influentially Palmer 1990 with his distinction between ‘deontic’ and ‘dynamic’ modality).

2. Will

As Table 1 above shows, *will* was by far the most frequently occurring of the modals and semi-modals examined and, we shall see, the primary exponent in English of its two basic meanings.

2.1 Epistemic *will*

The clearest cases of epistemic *will* are those involving reference to other-than-future situations (as noted by Palmer (1990:57) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002:188), as in:

- (1) a. yeah like, every light switch **will** have its own computer or something you know. [C-US SBC-017: 236.590-240.275]
- b. Her father is a Welsh Labour M.P. so the election results **will** have been a disappointment for them. [ICE-AUS W1B-008(noone):38]

Palmer (1990) excludes from this category cases where *will* is used with reference to a future situation, basing his case on instances such as (2) which, in his view, do not involve an element of speaker judgement (Palmer 1990:163).

- (2) 'Cos she's she'**ll** be seventeen after August so seventeen's normal but most people are seventeen turning eighteen and she's sixteen turning seventeen [ICE-AUS S1A-036(B):75]

While it is true that here *will* comes close to being merely a marker of futurity, there is nevertheless an epistemic modal component, albeit minimal, relating to limitations to the speaker's knowledge (the truth of the proposition in (2) being contingent upon the subject-referent's surviving until August). Examples like (2), where the modal component is minimal, are in fact rare. Typically the speaker is understood to be making a prediction rather than a factual statement about the future, with the modal component often being reinforced by an epistemic adjunct, such as *probably* in (3):

- (3) I'm sitting here st- worrying about this one right here, and there probably **won't** even be l- one like this on the test. [C-US SBC 09 1155.92-1160.37]

Further grounds for treating such cases as belonging to epistemic modality rather than futurity are the co-occurrence patterns that they share with the use of *will* to make comments about present time situations. In the following examples *will* is used with a non-future situation in (a), and a future situation in (b). In (4) both are used with the progressive aspect; in (5) both are used with the passive voice; in (6) both are used with stative verbs; and in (7) both are used in the existential *there*-construction.

- (4) a. Well you gotta sort of cos you're tryna do your homework and they'**ll** be ringing you up and you gotta take them places [ICE-AUS S1A-060(B):189]

- b. I might do it this week-end because if I don't I'll be doing it while I'm trying to study [ICE-AUS S1A-087(B):307]
- (5) a. No and the level of acceleration ah at any point **will** be ah related to the ah instantaneous radius that it's turning [ICE-AUS S1B-064(B):261]
 - b. And uh his hope is that sufficient employment **will** be found, for all the people at the different shrines who are in fact already Levites in Jerusalem [ICE-GB:S1B-001 #101:1:A]
- (6) a. Sometimes the importance of getting an officer to the destination quickly **will** outweigh the cost of transport. [ICE-AUS W2D-003:238]
 - b. It **will** fall for Shalimov who's just a little way out from goal but still, trying to persistently force the ball through [ICE-GB S2A-010 #220:1:A]
- (7) a. There **will** almost always be a discrepancy in the perception of the conduct between the parties to a complaint. [ICE-AUS W2D-004(noone):74]
 - b. Do you reckon there'll be the same questions in this test [ICE-AUS S1A-087(B):12]

2.2 Root *will*

Root *will* expresses a dynamic meaning, involving the potential for an activity or event deriving, characteristically, from the subject-referent's willingness or intention. It covers a range of uses: 'intention', where the focus is upon a future event that is planned, promised, threatened, as in (8); and two uses in which the focus is upon the mind of a 'volitioner': 'willingness', where the volition is weak (comparable in strength to *want to*), as in (9), and 'insistence', where it is stronger, with the modal typically stressed and not contractible to 'll, as in (10):

- (8) In that case I **will** use a yellow pepper for this evening. [C-US SBC-03 9.51-12.96]
- (9) But there's a lot of people you get who who **won't** accept that aren't willing to argue [ICE-GB:S1A-084 #117:1:B]
- (10) I **will** most certainly bow to your ruling and I **will** state that I am I am a chartered surveyor [ICE-GB S1B-051 #152:1:A]

The volitional component in dynamic *will* may moreover, as Huddleston and Pullum (2002:193) note, be heightened by such factors as negativeness (as in (9) above), by the selection of a closed interrogative - especially with a 2nd person subject, which questions the addressee's willingness and indirectly conveys a request - as in (11) below, or by occurrence in a conditional protasis, as in (12) below:

- (11) **Will** you please explain to me the meaning of the phrase "Currently, NRMA's profits are 'locked up'" used in answer to L. G. Norman's letter? [ICE-AUS W1B-026]

- (12) She paused, embarrassed but amused, being after all sure of her welcome. “That is, if you’ll put up with me next week again, Ella.” [ICE-AUS W2F-020(noone):28]

Finally, there are two dynamic uses of *will* whose analysis is somewhat problematical. The first of these, exemplified in (13) is identified by Huddleston and Pullum (2002:194) as deriving via implicature from futurity.

- (13) I’ll withdraw that Above your right eye You’ll say he headbutted you [ICE-AUS S1B 067(A):88]

An alternative explanation - proposed here - is that *will* serves to express the speaker’s will or insistence (such that the utterance would be most likely understood to have the illocutionary force of a directive).

The second use is labelled ‘propensity’ by Huddleston and Pullum (2002:194) and described as being concerned with “characteristic or habitual behaviour of animates” (e.g. *She will sit there staring into space*) often with an attendant suggestion of the speaker’s disapproval or resignation, or “general properties of inanimates” (e.g. *Oil will float on water*.” A parallel analysis is found in Palmer (1990: 136-7), who distinguishes the two cases as different subtypes which he calls respectively ‘habit’ (“concerned with habitual (or better, ‘typical’) behaviour”) and ‘power’ (“volition applied to inanimate objects”). There is no doubt that ‘habit’ *will* belongs in the dynamic category when referring to a typical activity which the subject-referent insists upon engaging in. However examples of the following kind arguably require a different analysis:

- (14) Almost every female can expect to mother her own young but most males **will** live a life of perpetual frustration [ICE-AUS S2B-034(A):113]

Here the speaker makes an inference about the predictability of an activity based on its regular occurrence, and the disposition of the subject-referent is not salient. Such cases I have classified as epistemic rather than dynamic. Note, in this regard, that *used to* - excluded from this study on the grounds that it expresses aspectual rather than modal meaning - is used to express characteristic or habitual behaviour in the past, without any suggestion that the possibility of occurrence of the situation is attributable to properties of the subject-referent.

2.3 Frequencies of *will*

As Table 1 above shows, the most popular item by far of those under investigation was *will*, with well over twice as many tokens (11,679) as its closest rival *be going to* (4,660).

		ICE-AUS	ICE-GB	C-US	TOTAL
Root	Spoken	1403 (842)	1473 (884)	1752 (204)	(1930)
	Written	583 (233)	785 (314)	1575 (126)	(673)
	Total	1075 (1075)	1198 (1198)	1680 (330)	(2603)
Epistemic	Spoken	2867 (1720)	2345 (1407)	2421 (282)	(3409)
	Written	2683 (1073)	3140 (1256)	2052 (164)	(2493)
	Total	2793 (2793)	2663 (2663)	2270 (446)	(5902)
	TOTAL	3868 (3868)	3861 (3861)	3950 (776)	(8505)

Table 2. Frequencies for *will/won't'll* in ICE-AUS, ICE-GB, and C-US

(Figures normalized to tokens per one million words; raw figures in parentheses)

As Table 2 indicates, *will* is the primary exponent of both the epistemic and root meanings in all three varieties. However the dominance of epistemic *will* is not as great in AmE (where epistemic tokens outnumber root by a ratio of 1.4:1) than it is in AusE (where the ratio is 2.6:1) or BrE (2.2:1).

When we compare the overall frequencies of *will* across the spoken-written dimension we find that it is only marginally more common in speech (by a ratio of 1.1:1).

3. *Shall*

3.1 Epistemic *shall*

Epistemic *shall*, which may be used to express futurity or conditional consequence as in (15) and (16) below respectively is overwhelmingly outnumbered by epistemic *will*. There were only 21 tokens of epistemic *shall* in the three corpora (see Table 3 below), as against 5902 tokens of epistemic *will* (see Table 2 above).

(15) I **shall** probably look in at the College once or twice during the autumn, and hope to see you then. [ICE-GB W1B-014 #69:4]

(16) if we cannot keep up with the competition then we **shall** uh have the kind of dire consequences which at the beginning of his talk uh David Baldwin uh was referring to [ICE-GB S2A-031 #53:2:A]

According to Palmer (1990:162-3) *shall* is never epistemic in the narrow sense (i.e. with present or past reference, only in its futurity sense). Palmer presents this claim as supporting evidence for his treatment of future *will* and *shall* as non-epistemic. However examples do occur, as in (17):

- (17) Like those on the home front in earlier wars we shall often be imperfectly informed of what is happening, and this too puts our patience to the test. [ICE-GB W2E-007 #22:1]

A number of the co-occurrence patterns found with epistemic *will* are also in evidence with *shall*. These include compatibility with an epistemic adjunct as in (18), use with the progressive aspect as in (19), and use with a stative verb as in (20):

- (18) I **shall** probably look in at the College once or twice during the autumn, and hope to see you then. [ICE-GB W1B-014 #69:4]
- (19) I understand that I **shall** be using this under my own responsibility. [ICE-GB W1B-017 #115:14]
- (20) I **shall** have a fever by tonight, blood poisoning soon after. [ICE-GB W2F-015 #131:1]

3.2 Root *shall*

Root *shall* is sometimes volitional, more specifically intentional. It usually occurs with a 1st person subject (that with a 2nd or 3rd person subject more normally carrying a deontic implication). Examples follow:

- (21) a. We **shall** overcome [C-US Frown B02 79]
- b. However as usual I **shall** begin with a review of the economic situation and prospects. [ICE-GB S2B-041 #58:2:A]

More commonly root *shall* used with a 3rd person subject expresses a deontic meaning, as in legal documents, regulations, and the like, as in (22):

- (22) Any time or place nominated for settlement **shall** merely be for convenience of the parties and their legal representatives [ICE-AUS W1B(noone):196]

Further uses of *shall* which are identified by Huddleston and Pullum (2002:194) and Palmer (1990:74) as deontic might equally well be treated (and are as such in the present study) as volitional on the grounds that *shall* alternates readily with *will*. These include the type exemplified in (23), where the speaker indicates a readiness to carry out the activity, and the type as in *You shall have it tomorrow* (of which no corpus examples were found), where again the speaker indicates a readiness to carry out the activity but further, perhaps, undertakes an obligation or gives a guarantee to do so.

- (23) **Shall** I tell you what I did today and didn't do today [ICE-AUS S1A-100(M):2]

3.3 Frequencies of *shall*

In Leech's (2003) study *shall* was found to have suffered a drastic decrease in frequency between 1961 and 1991/2. In the present study it was outstripped by *will* by a ratio of 24.8:1. There were some striking differences between the dialects, BrE (with 223 tokens per million words) displaying a significantly stronger preference than both AusE (100

and AmE (102). The numbers for *shall* in C-US would have been considerably smaller had it not been for their high frequency in one, religious, text (SBC-020).

A comparison of the frequencies for *shall* across the spoken and written categories provides further insights into its relative unpopularity (see Table 3 below). If we focus on root *shall*, whose 322 tokens vastly outnumbered those of its epistemic counterpart (21 tokens), we find a major difference between speech and writing in the ICE-AUS results (the ratio for root *shall* being 1:3.5) suggestive of a decline in progress. Were it not for the skewing resulting from the presence of a religious text in C-US (SBC-020), as mentioned above, a similar ratio might have occurred for AmE: as it was, the ratio was 1:1.5.

		ICE-AUS	ICE-GB	C-US	TOTAL
Root	Spoken	50 (30)	213 (128)	59 (7)	(165)
	Written	173 (69)	203 (81)	88 (7)	(157)
	Total	99 (99)	209 (209)	71 (14)	(322)
Epistemic	Spoken	0 (0)	5 (3)	52 (6)	(9)
	Written	3 (1)	28 (11)	0 (0)	(12)
	Total	1 (1)	14 (14)	31 (6)	(21)
TOTAL		100 (100)	223 (223)	102 (20)	(343)

Table 3. Frequencies for *shall/shan't* in ICE-AUS, ICE-GB, and C-US

(Figures normalized to tokens per one million words; raw figures in parentheses)

4. *Be going to*

4.1 Epistemic *be going to*

Epistemic *be going to* differs from *will* in always locating the situation in future time. When *be* is present tense it carries an implicature of immediacy, typically being used with situations that are about to occur or are already in train. In (24), for example, the game referred to is understood to be in progress and nearing completion:

- (24) You're of course **gonna** win. Oh my God, here you go. We - oh you got him. [C-US SBC-024 727.760-736.230]

A number of the familiar co-occurrence patterns that are associated with epistemic modality were again in evidence, including compatibility with epistemic adjuncts as in (25), use with the progressive aspect as in (26), use with stative verbs as in (27), and use in the existential-*there* construction as in (28):

- (25) Given the fact that most people see libraries as being to them as a user a relatively cost free if there's going to be a cost put on accessing electronic source material **is** this perhaps **going to** diminish the general usage of libraries [ICE-AUS S1B-043(A):199]
- (26) Um, the other thing I realize is, ... uh, ... think about how much of the time you're **gonna** be doing that. [C-US SBC-016 151.199-157.981]
- (27) I want you to put that down. ... cause it's **gonna** be important. [C-US SBC 1077.43-1082.27]
- (28) There's **going to** be dozens of celebrities twenty bands and in actual fact over two thousand five hundred people taking part in the parade [ICE-AUS S2A-010(A):8]

4.2 Root *be going to*

Like *will* and *shall*, *be going to* can be dynamic, but it tends to have the weaker sense of intention rather than willingness. Thus in (29) *I'm not going to talk about my credibility* would be appropriately paraphrased by "I don't intend to" whereas *I won't talk about my credibility* expresses the stronger sense of refusal ("I refuse to").

- (29) Well I'm not **going to** talk about my credibility [ICE-AUS S1B-046(B):176]

4.3 Frequencies of *be going to*

As Table 1 above indicates, *be going to* is more than twice as frequent in the American corpus as in the Australian or British corpora.

		ICE-AUS	ICE-GB	C-US	TOTAL
Root	Spoken	743 (446)	722 (433)	1743 (203)	(1082)
	Written	90 (36)	53 (21)	125 (10)	(67)
	Total	482 (482)	454 (454)	1084 (213)	(1149)
Epistemic	Spoken	1110 (666)	920 (552)	2078 (242)	(1460)
	Written	108 (43)	125 (50)	238 (19)	(112)
	Total	709 (709)	602 (602)	1329 (261)	(1572)
TOTAL		1191 (1191)	1056 (1056)	2413 (474)	(2721)

Table 4. Frequencies for *be going to/gonna* in ICE-AUS, ICE-GB, and C-US

(Figures normalized to tokens per one million words; raw figures in parentheses)

Of the items under review, as Table 4 above shows, *be going to* evidences by far the greatest preference for occurrence in speech over writing (by a ratio of 9.9:1). This finding, taken in conjunction with Leech's (2003) claim that *be going to* has enjoyed a spectacular increase in popularity in recent decades, suggests that colloquialization is a relevant factor in the growing popularity of *be going to*.

5. *Want to*

5.1 Meanings of *want to*

In Modern English *want to* is the item most consistently associated with the expression of volition, with a meaning comparable to that of willingness *will*. In the following examples *want to* is paraphraseable by "be willing to".

- (30) a. when it comes to the the test before it you think oh I don't **want to** study again
[ICE-AUS S1A-087(B):220]
- b. "My brother **wanted to live my** life for me" [C-US Frown P05 88]

As Krug (2000:117ff) observes, *want to* is undergoing modalization in its assumption of such features as the incorporation of the infinitival *to* into a compound (*wanna*) that is often found in informal styles, and in the semantic development of the same type of root/epistemic duality that is characteristic of the modal class. The latter development is instantiated in (31), where *wanna* is used to make a prediction about the consequences for Agassi (implicitly, loss of the match) of failing to win the second set against Martin.

- (31) Tough games for Agassi now. He wouldn't **wanna** get behind two sets to love against a big serve volleyer like Martin who's got some good groundies too [ICE-AUS S2A-004(B):138]

5.2 Frequencies of *want to*

The semi-modal *want to* was found to be more than twice as popular in the American corpus than in the British (2.5:1), and almost 50% more popular than in the Australian corpus (1.4:1), findings compatible with those of two recent diachronic investigations that attest to the rising popularity of *want to* (Krug 2000 and Leech 2003).

Want to was more strongly preferred in speech than in writing (by a ratio of 3.3:1), a finding which confirms both the validity of Krug's suggestion that "spoken performance data are influencing the written medium towards a greater use of this lexeme" (2000:136); in other words, that colloquialization has had an important role to play in the frequency gains experienced by *want to* in contemporary English.

		ICE-AUS	ICE-GB	C-US	TOTAL
Root	Spoken	1450 (870)	815 (489)	1958 (228)	(1587)
	Written	413 (165)	218 (87)	613 (49)	(301)
	Total	1035 (1035)	576 (576)	1410 (277)	(1888)
Epistemic	Spoken	6 (4)	3 (2)	9 (1)	(7)
	Written	0 (0)	0 (0)	25 (2)	(2)
	Total	4 (4)	2 (2)	15 (3)	(9)
TOTAL		1039 (1039)	578 (578)	1425 (280)	(1897)

Table 5. Frequencies for *want to/wanna* in ICE-AUS, ICE-GB, and C-US

(Figures normalized to tokens per one million words; raw figures in parentheses)

6. Conclusion

Will is the primary exponent of both epistemic ‘prediction’ and root ‘volition’ in contemporary BrE, AmE and AusE, but the supremacy of root *will* is under threat from *want to*, and that of epistemic *will* from *be going to*. The larger degree of colloquialization evidenced for *want to* in AmE (as reflected in its greater popularity in speech over writing in AmE than in the other varieties), combined with the finding that it has a higher overall frequency in AmE, suggests that AmE may be leading the way in the expansion of this semi-modal. The growth of *be going to*, preferred in speech over writing by a ratio of almost ten to one, is being pushed even more strongly by colloquialization. *Shall* appears to be moribund, though less spectacularly so in BrE than in AusE and BrE, and in writing than speech.

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