

Shall — Future and Time Specification

I,1. The contribution of the adverbs of time, adverbial phrases, and temporal clauses to the “temporal meanings” of the English verb tenses has recently received special attention. Although Jespersen is very much aware of the importance of “time indication” for various distinctions in the time reference of tenses and occasionally studies individual adverbs and the possibility of their co-occurrence with verb tenses,¹ it is Palmer² who explicitly states that the only formal feature in the distinction of various uses of certain tenses is the collocation with adverbs. “Failure to make clear these distinctions, which are formally marked only by collocation with adverbs, has been a cause of great confusion”.³ It is important to emphasize this view because grammarians, whatever systematic treatment they may give to the verb forms, tend to treat adverbs only casually. In practice, Palmer himself does not introduce radical changes in handling adverbs, but they do receive more attention in his book than it is usual in such works.

A resolutely new step in the direction of assessing the part of adverbials⁴ in establishing the temporal meanings of the main English verb tenses has been taken by D. Crystal in his short but comprehensive work on the problem.⁵ In this study, based on a large body of spoken and written material combined with the reactions of informants, the adverbial is viewed as equally important in the establishment of the meaning of tenses as the

¹ Jespersen, Otto, *Essentials of English Grammar*, reprinted by U. of Alabama, 1964, 23.4₃; 23.6₂; 23.6₃.

² Palmer, F. R., *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb*, Longmans, 1965.

³ *Ib.*, p. 61.

⁴ Adverbials include here adverbs and adverbial phrases.

⁵ “Specification and English tenses”. *Journal of Linguistics*. Vol. 2, No 1, April 1966. In this article Crystal’s notation will be followed and LV represents lexical verb.

verb itself. "It is not a question of tense form alone giving the relevant distinguishing indication of time, as has been traditionally assumed but of tense form with or without adverbial specification which gives unambiguous indication".⁶

In order to present evidence for this hypothesis the adverbs have been classified into notional groups according to whether they refer roughly to the frequency, duration, or specific time of the action, and subsequently correlated with certain tenses to establish their possible co-occurrence and restrictions on co-occurrence. After this he selected six tenses as a base and established their individual ranges of meanings due to the presence of various adverbial groups or to the absence of the adverbial.

The six verb forms, labelled tenses, which have been studied in colligation with notional groups of temporal adverbials are: 1. present (LV — be LV-ing); 2. preterite (LV-ed — was LV-ing); 3. perfect (have LV-ed — have been LV-ing); 4. pluperfect (had LV-ed — had been LV-ing); 5. conditional (would LV — would be LV-ing); 6. 'future' (will LV — will be LV-ing).

I.2. Crystal's approach suggests a number of directions for further research in this field. It is the intention of the present paper to dwell a little on his item 6, called 'future'.

On his choice to label *will LV — will be LV-ing* 'future' this is what Crystal says:

Will, in its unaccented form, is being used here with the label future, as is usual with traditional treatments of the verb, but it is not on a par with other tense-forms, because of its modal status (cf. also would). It is, however, the nearest we can get to 'pure futurity' in English, being when unaccented, the least marked auxiliary for modality.⁷

As is well known there is another auxiliary in British English which, in an admittedly restricted context (mainly with the first person subject), arrives as near to so called pure futurity as *will*, and that is, of course, *shall*. It is not as frequent as *will*, and in the body of material of written English⁸ on which our further considerations will be based, it accounts for 16 per cent of all the cases of *Shall/will/'ll LV* constructions. In a body of spoken English over the radio⁹ it makes about 13 per cent of

⁶ *Ib.*, p. 5.

⁷ *Ib.*, p. 16 (4).

⁸ The examples of *shall* have been extracted from the dialogues of 10 British English novels and plays published after 1950 and thus represent a style of written language.

⁹ The examples come from a transcript of the BBC programme called *Any Questions* of about 40,000 running words of impromptu talk.

all the occurrences of shall/will/'ll LV constructions. This is not a negligible frequency, and considerations about the temporal meanings of 'future' have to take into account, besides *will LV* — *will be LV-ing*, the constructions *shall LV* — *shall LV-ing*. This could be avoided only if it could be proved that the range of temporal meanings of the two constructions is equal. But according to the literature and the data that will be presented here, this does not appear to be possible.

Time specification within the sentence comes in the form of an adverb, adverbial phrase (at the beginning or at the end of the clause, or with some adverbs within the verb phrase itself), or of a temporal clause usually introduced by a temporal conjunction or other words functioning as such.

Our written material has yielded 437 examples of *shall LV* — *shall be LV-ing* constructions of which 102 co-occurred with adverbials, and 24 constructions were specified by temporal clauses. The rest had no overt specification within the clause or sentence. The following are the adverbials which occur in the material (presented here according to Crystal's classification):

How often? (frequency of occurrence):

again (8), ever (1), now and then (1), never (12), often (1).

How often? How long? (continuous occurrence/duration):

always (6), fairly frequently (1), fairly regularly (1), for ever (1), for a long time (1), long (9).

How long? (restricted duration)

meanwhile (3), in the meantime (1), most of the day (1), a bit (1), for half-an-hour (1), a little longer (1), for the rest of my life (1), for a week (1), till New Year (1), till hall (1).

When? (time reference explicit):

In future: at the next parish meeting (1), next time (1), one of these days (1), tonight (4), tomorrow (5), tomorrow morning (1);

In present: now (6);

In past: \emptyset

In daytime: between eight and nine this evening (1), this evening (1);

Unspecified as to past, present, future: at such moments (1), by nine (1), in a couple of nights (1), in one minute (1), in a moment (1), one day (1), one night (1), some time (1), within ten minutes (1), yet (1);

When? (require previously explicit time reference):

after the autopsy (1), before one (1), before then (1), just (1), (again)soon (1), soon (7), then (5).

The following are the types of temporal clauses and their conjunctions which acted as time specifiers to 24 *shall LV* constructions:

| Conjunction | Subordinate cl. | Main cl. |
|----------------|----------------------------|----------|
| when (12) | present (12) | shall LV |
| as soon as (3) | pres. (2), pres. perf. (1) | shall LV |
| until (3) | present (3) | shall LV |
| till (2) | present (2) | shall LV |
| before (2) | present (2) | shall LV |
| while (1) | pres. perf. (1) | shall LV |
| the moment (1) | pres. perf. (1) | shall LV |

I.3. If the temporally specified *shall LV* constructions are studied carefully and then compared with those that have no time specification it becomes clear that the temporal meanings of the two groups do not show a very wide range, and that their fundamental time reference is always future. Both adverbials and temporal clauses add to the already existing future time reference the notion of frequency, duration and of the explicit time the action is to take place.

This constant reference to the future that is found with *shall LV* constructions distinguishes these from *will LV* constructions. The study of the presence and absence of the temporal adverbial with the latter shows that its range of temporal meanings is somewhat wider including "timelessness" (Oil will float on water)¹⁰ and "past frequency of occurrence (habitual)" (John will come in at 6 o'clock /i. e. has come in on each occasion at.../).¹¹ These two temporal meanings cannot be established with *shall LV* neither in the presence nor in the absence of the time adverbial.

Following Crystal the difference in the temporal meanings of the two constructions can be presented in this way:¹²

| | Temporal meanings | will LV | shall LV |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|--|
| no specific- cation | (i) future activity (± modal overtones) time unspecified | e. g. I will stop smoking | I shall miss you. |
| | (ii) statement of fact seen as timeless | e. g. Oil will float on water | ∅ |
| obligatory specific- cation | (iii) future activity (± modal overtones) time specified | e. g. I will come next week | But I shall come down to Yewtree Lodge this evening. |
| | (iv) future duration (± modal overtones) | e. g. We'll be coming for a few days | I shall be nursing him for a week. |

¹⁰ Crystal, David, *ib.*, p. 28.

¹¹ *Ib.*

¹² *Ib.*

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| obligatory specification | { | (v) future frequency (± modal overtones) | e. g. We'll call in every now and then | We shall need to meet fairly regularly. |
| | | (vi) past frequency of occurrence (habitual) | e. g. John will come in at 6 o'clock (i. e. has come on each occasion at...) | ∅ |

This presentation shows clearly that two slots are left empty in the *shall* column.

Six temporal meanings have been established for *will LV* — *will be LV-ing* in colligation with temporal adverbials and in their absence, and *shall LV* — *shall be LV-ing* in a similar contextual situation shows only four temporal meanings, all of them referring only to the future. Thus the two modal verbs which come nearest to the pure futurity in English, besides the difference in frequency and in contextual restrictions, have a different range of temporal meanings. This points to the complexity of the future tense made with modals in British English, and to the inadequacy of representing this future by the formula *will LV* — *will be LV-ing*. These remarks have not been meant as a criticism of Crystal's approach, because he stated clearly that he had avoided factual detail and was primarily interested in the principle of adverb-tense colligation, but merely as a reminder of what the situation is like in the British English texts.

I.4. Crystal's systematic study of tenses with and without time specification, and the resulting range of temporal meanings, shed, perhaps unexpectedly, some new light on the gap which exists between the, formally, "real tenses" in English i. e. present and past, and the "secondary" tense as *shall/will* future may be labelled. While fifteen temporal meanings can be established for the present, *will-future* shows only six, and it has just been demonstrated that *shall-future* has only four. The fifteen temporal meanings of the present refer to the present, to the past (Three weeks ago, I am walking along this street, when . . .) to the future (I'm staying in France from now on) and to "timelessness" (Bread contains . . .). *Will-future* shows only a trace of this "temporal flexibility", and *shall-future* has apparently none in the current language, as it points exclusively to the future. This also means that the tense-adverb colligation is more potent in the case of e. g. the past, which in colligation with the future time adverb may refer to the "hypothetical future" (I was coming next week), than with the *shall-future* the fundamental time reference of which cannot be significantly altered by colligation

with adverbials. It also means then *that some tense forms carry their distinguishing indication of time in themselves more than others.*

II.1. The *shall LV* material which has been analysed suggests that there seems to exist a link between certain grammatical structures and the frequency of time specifiers. It should be clear that the word here is not about absolute restrictions on the use of time specifiers but only about certain tendencies of usage.

II.2. Questions

Direct questions containing *shall* show a low frequency co-occurrence with adverbials. Out of 71 questions in the written material only 6 are accompanied by adverbials and 1 is specified by a temporal clause, which is less than 10 per cent. Since the average *shall LV* — *adverbial* co-occurrence in the written material is about 35 per cent, questions are obviously infrequently specified for time. An explanation of this might be looked for in the degree of importance that is given to specific time in questions with *shall*, but this would entail an examination of adverbial co-occurrence of different types of questions referring to the future.

Among the above 71 questions there are 10 of them of a special type. Formally, they are usually inserted in statements, and, semantically, they are not real questions, as no answer to them is expected. They may be illustrated by the following examples:

“Since you started your analyses, you’ve been through some — *what shall I say?* — some very strongly marked phases”. (TWJ65)

“... who had encouraged her and provided her, *shall we say,* the motive for the deed”. (PERNa 119)

“He had a kind of — *oh, how shall I put it?* — arrogant insubordination”. (PFRPa 149)

In the case of this type of questions the restriction on adverbial specification is very considerable and none of the 10 examples from the written sources and of the 16 examples from the spoken material turned up in colligation with adverbials. There is, of course, no grammatical obstacle in the way of their being colligated with adverbials of time but such a colligation would change their status which is one of a *formulaic* expression, and would turn them into normal questions. Perhaps, very marginally, only certain adverbials co-occurring with the tense form could preserve this status for them (in the examples above: now, today). A characteristic feature of the formulaic expres-

¹⁸ M. Ivić has established the “non-omissible determiner” with the Serbo-Croatian present tense, and it is with the same tense in English that Crystal establishes the widest range of meanings in colligation with the time specifier.

sions in language is that they exist as "wholes and do not serve as substitution frames in the ordinary way of linguistic forms".¹⁴ Although this construction has a limited range of substitution possibilities (pronouns: I, we; verbs: say, put;) it certainly is nearest to the fixed expressions of language.

Most of what has been said above applies also to the situationally restricted question with *shall* and with the third person pronoun illustrated by the following example:

"Let me fill your glass. *Which shall it be?*" (MBr 155)

II.3. Second and third person subjects

The adverbial-tense co-occurrence shows a relatively low frequency in constructions with *shall* when used with second and third person subjects. Out of the 15 such examples from the written sources 11 are without time specification, 2 co-occur with adverbs and two examples are specified by a temporal clause. The body of spoken material has not yielded 2nd person examples, but out of the 16 examples of the third person *shall LV* constructions only one example contains a time specifier.

This tendency may be connected with the elements of futurity and modality which are both to be found in *shall LV* constructions. With the first person subject futurity is usually in the foreground, with second and third person subjects modality is emphasized. It seems that with the emphasis on modality the necessity for time specification recedes. Here are some examples from the written and spoken material:

"They are all liars in this house. Fire and brimstone shall be their portion. (PFRRams. 125)

"If I want to give it to you, you shall have it". (Ent. B 21)

"...they say that the last enemy that shall be conquered is death...". NF10, JR3

II.4. Conditional sentences

The conditional sentence is a syntactical construction in which *shall LV* co-occurs relatively infrequently with time specification. In the written material *shall LV* occurs 41 times in the main clauses of conditional sentences, of which 36 are without time specification, 4 examples co-occur with adverbials of time, and 1 example is specified by the temporal clause. The spoken material has yielded 7 examples of *shall* in the main clause of conditional sentences and only 1 example is specified by the time adverbial.

¹⁴ Strang, B. M. H., *Modern English Structure*, 2nd ed., Arnold, London, 1968, p. 152.

What is striking in the main clauses of most of these conditional sentences is the generality of the statement which hardly requires further time specification:

"If you want to see me, I shall see you". (SaCa 177)

"...if she tells me that once more I shall get up on the roof...". (EntA 53)

"If that turns out to be true, I shall be very sorry for it, Jago". (MCra 235)

"...if we fail to take his advice if we fail to do the right thing we shall have only ourselves to blame". (spoken, SRB 22,V)

The condition to be fulfilled, and the action which thereupon is to take place seem to be more essential to the conditional sentence with shall LV in its main clause than the specific future time of the action, its duration or its frequency.

It is to be expected that further scrutiny of *shall LV* material should uncover other links between grammatical features and the frequency of time specification.

In conclusion it should be said that formal time specification by adverbials and by temporal clauses within the sentence is, of course, not the only time specification device. An adverbial of time can be a strong enough signal to spread its time specification across whole passages. In the dialogue material an adverbial in the question may serve as time specifier to the answer. But these problems are beyond the scope of the present paper.