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## The modal and the temporal in *will*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Salkie (2010) argues that *will* is essentially a marker of the future tense in English, stating that the evidence against analyzing it as tense is weak and that ‘the arguments in favour of treating it as a modal also turn out to be poor’.

In an attempt to draw a clear dividing line between tense and modality he tends to overemphasize the similarity of *will* with inflectional future tense and to downplay the significance of the modal ingredients, leaving diachronic development altogether out of consideration. Although his title can be seen as suggesting a gradience or at least compatibility between the two elements, his conclusion is that in Modern English *will* is not a modal in its conceptual content: it is better analyzed as a marker of the future tense.

Rather than looking for evidence that can decide between strict dichotomies, the cognitive analysis given here aims to highlight the integrated nature of the tense-modal complex: two essential ingredients of Langacker’s *grounding predication*. In this paper, a critique of Salkie’s view, I do not argue against the validity of the temporal element in *will*. Instead, my aim is to give evidence that the modal and the temporal may be inseparable in the complex (often metaphorical) routes of the sense development of this modal (put forward in Pelyvás 2008), proposing that the real answer to Salkie’s question is: *both*.

*Keywords:* diachronic data, tense-modal complex, subject-oriented vs. speaker-oriented modality, epistemic grounding, metaphorical extension

### 1 Salkie’s claims and the outline of an alternative

Salkie (2010: *Will: tense or modal or both?*) argues that, contrary to the majority view, *will* is essentially a marker of the future tense in English, stating that the evidence against analyzing it as tense is weak and that ‘the arguments in favour of treating it as a modal also turn out to be poor’.

In an effort to draw a clear dividing line between tense and modality Salkie, while admitting the often emphasized element of uncertainty and prediction inherent in the future tense, tends to overemphasize the similarity of *will* to inflectional future tense (as in French), and to downplay the significance of the modal ingredients, especially of the subject-oriented variety of the root senses (dynamic and bouletic modality).

Although Salkie’s title can be seen as suggesting a gradience or at least compatibility between the two elements, the conclusion of the paper is that in Modern English *will* is not a modal in its conceptual content:

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<sup>1</sup> This is an extended and updated version of a paper read at the conference Beyond Dichotomies, organized by the DIAGRAM Research Group in functional linguistics at ELTE, Budapest on 25-26 October, 2010.

We argue that *will* should be treated as a marker of future tense and that its so-called modal uses are either not modal or have independent explanations. The only exception is the volitional use of *will*: to account for this, we propose that willingness is a semantic relic from an earlier meaning of the word' (Salkie 2010: 187).

Rather than looking for evidence that can decide between strict dichotomies, holistic cognitive analysis is more likely to highlight the integrated nature of the tense-modal complex: in Langacker's treatment they are two essential ingredients of his *grounding predication*. In my paper, a critique of Salkie's view, I will not argue against the validity of the temporal element in *will*. Instead, I will endeavour to give evidence that the modal and the temporal may be inseparable in the complex (often metaphorical) routes of the sense development of this modal (put forward in Pelyvás 2008), proposing that the real answer to Salkie's question is: *both*.

I will highlight the importance of subject-oriented senses in the modal system, the role they play in the development of modern deontic and epistemic senses and the intrinsic connection between the deictic tense meaning of *will* (a relatively late development) and its most recently developed epistemic sense.

These processes can be clearly traced in the historical development of *will*, one facet of the problem that is admittedly not taken seriously into consideration in Salkie's paper.

## 2 Problems with Salkie's claims

### 2.1 *Temporality, modality and prediction: distorted data*

Salkie argues against one member of what he regards as a dichotomy (a mutually exclusive relation) in favour of the other by trying to minimize the latter's contribution. This may be ill-founded, since the growing consensus in linguistic analysis in general<sup>2</sup> and the basic point of departure in Cognitive Grammar is that tense and modality are inseparable and form an organic unit in Langacker's grounding predication:

An entity is epistemically grounded when its location is specified relative to the speaker and hearer and their spheres of knowledge. For verbs, tense and mood ground an entity epistemically ... (Langacker 1987: 489).

This is even more true of the future tense, in which uncertainty and prediction are seen by many as inherent, cf. Langacker's *dynamic evolutionary model* (Langacker 1991: 240–249, 275–281): only a difference in the degree of probability between *projected reality* and *potential reality*. Predictions in this system are based on the speaker's assessment of the normal course of events for the future, which is in turn based partially on the speaker's '*known reality*' (a factor of uncertainty itself) plus on his/her knowledge of a factor of '*unknown reality*'.<sup>3</sup>

Salkie disregards any such argument as 'weak' and regards prediction as a purely tense element which, incidentally, tips the balance in favour of the tense meanings in his assessment of the data from Coates (1983), *Survey of English Usage corpus* (725,000 words, 200 instances of *will*):

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Palmer (1990), Lightfoot (1979), Warner (1993). Recent analyses in Generative Grammar treat modals, in contrast to other auxiliaries, as base-generated in the Head position of the TP (or IP). There may be other reasons as well for this, but it is a major difference from Chomsky's original *Aux* → *Tense (M) (Aspect)*.

<sup>3</sup> Elements of reality that the speaker is not certain about or simply unaware of.

*Willingness: 26 instances*

(1) Give them the name of someone who will sign for it and take it in.

*Predictability: 19 instances*

(2) A commotion in the hall. 'That will be Celia,' said Janet.

*Intention: 46 instances*

(3) But I will bring you more today I promise

*Prediction: 96 instances*

(4) **It will be lovely to see you.** (Emphasis is mine –PP)

Salkie's conclusion is: '*All in all, the corpus findings seem to support the tense analysis.*'<sup>4</sup>

Palmer (1990) draws a radically different conclusion from the same set of data: '*There are very few examples in the Survey of futurity will and shall that can, without any doubt at all, be regarded as simply predicting a future event.*' (Palmer 1990: 137–138).

## 2.2 Subject-oriented and speaker-oriented modality

In his analysis Salkie disregards the subject-oriented (dynamic, bouletic) modalities, tending to focus on the more complex speaker-oriented (deontic and epistemic) modalities. Subject-oriented modality is obviously important in *will*, and its chief representative, the *volitional 'use'* is perhaps not as easily dismissed as 'a semantic relic from an earlier meaning of the word'<sup>5</sup> (Salkie 2010: 187), quoted in Section 1.

One facet of Salkie's argument against the modal nature of *will* is that it does not have the modal senses that the typical 'root' modals *must* and *may* have. This is a significant statement if only partly true, since although *will* does not have anything like a deontic (permission or obligation) meaning that the other two have, it does share with them a relatively recent epistemic sense (c. 1700, reaching Standard English as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century). For us, the statement raises the more intriguing question of how modal meanings develop over time.

### 2.2.1 The sense development of the modals – facts and hypotheses

Since Sweetser (1990) the sense development of the modals has been discussed in cognitive grammar in terms of metaphorical extension. Old English preterite-present verbs have always had a marked tendency to develop into 'root' modals, since preterite-present forms convey(ed) the idea of potentiality or non-reality in the present or future, an essential ingredient of both deontic and epistemic modality (cf. Lightfoot (1979), Warner (1993)). Deontic modals are characterized by a rich conceptual structure based on a high level of force dynamics, i.e. relationships of interacting forces that can be associated with the participants of the situation (cf. e.g. Pelyvás 2006). 'Root' modals (especially of the deontic group) have in their turn had a strong tendency to develop epistemic (probability) meanings in the course of their sense development. Cognitive linguists agree that at least this second process is based on metaphorical extension.

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<sup>4</sup> In Larreya (1984), a corpus that does not make a distinction between prediction and volition in *will*, the figures for this combined category reach 90%. (Salkie 2010: 193)

<sup>5</sup> All the less so since according to OED the volitional '*wish, choose*' sense appears as early as *non-deictic tense* (both c. 1000, †, in fact, the earliest senses) and centuries before *deictic tense* (c. 1400). We will be returning for a detailed discussion in Section 3.

Two modals, *can* and *will*, have, however, been lagging behind in developing epistemic senses and this may be connected with the fact that they did not develop (or, in the case of *can*, have only recently developed), a deontic meaning, probably owing to the lack or relatively weak level of force-dynamicity in their initial (main verb) senses.<sup>6</sup>

*Can*, although a preterite-present verb in OE, is originally not force dynamic (an ingredient of most modals) in its original Main Verb sense (*to know or to have learned a thing*, c1000) or even in its early modal sense (*to know how to do anything, to have learned, to be intellectually able* 1154).<sup>7</sup>

*Will* was not a preterite-present verb in OE, but it was at least partially accommodated to that group at an early stage of its development.<sup>8</sup> It is weakly force-dynamic at best and has not developed a ‘real’ deontic sense. I can see few signs that it will,<sup>9</sup> but the epistemic sense, although only developed by c. 1700 appears to be a real gap-filler on the epistemic scale, since its closest match, epistemic *must* cannot be used to qualify the probability of future events. Looked at from this angle, epistemic *will* can be seen as a real blend of the modal and temporal elements.

Even though much of the force dynamics associated with the ‘root’ modals is generally lost or radically reinterpreted (through subjectification) in the extension into the epistemic domain, this does not necessarily mean that the original force dynamics has no role at all in the process (perhaps in a hypothetical ‘blending’ phase of metaphorization). The delayed development of epistemic senses in *can* and *will* could be symptomatic of this relationship, which deserves further investigation.

### 2.3 Diachronic development

Salkie admittedly disregards the diachronic development of the different senses, although he list the question as one that might need further discussion (Salkie 2010: 212). As we have already suggested in Section 2.2 and will discuss in detail in Section 3, he loses important information in this decision, some of which may have serious consequences for the credibility of his analysis.

Our main objective in Section 3 will be to present in detail the development of *will* as a series of extensions (some of which are metaphorical in the sense of Sweetser 1990). The working hypothesis is that the conceptual structures suggested reveal an interdependence of temporal and modal elements in the development of *will*: without one, the other would not have had sufficient basis for development.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the discussion in 2.2 and Pelyvas (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> A detailed cognitive analysis of the sense development of *can* is provided in Pelyvas (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> This can serve as an argument against the ‘arbitrariness of factors’ in historical development in the tense/modal complex, cf. Salkie (2010: 189).

<sup>9</sup> Sentences like *Private Jones will report at 11.00!*, which can be read as expressing obligation, are probably based on a minor modification of the deontic conceptual structure postulated for *must*. In deontic *must* a weak counterforce of resistance to the order, associated with the potential doer of the action, is postulated. This force is reduced to a minimum in this use of *will* (cf. the similar case of *The sergeant marched his men into the icy water*, analyzed in Pelyvas (2011)).



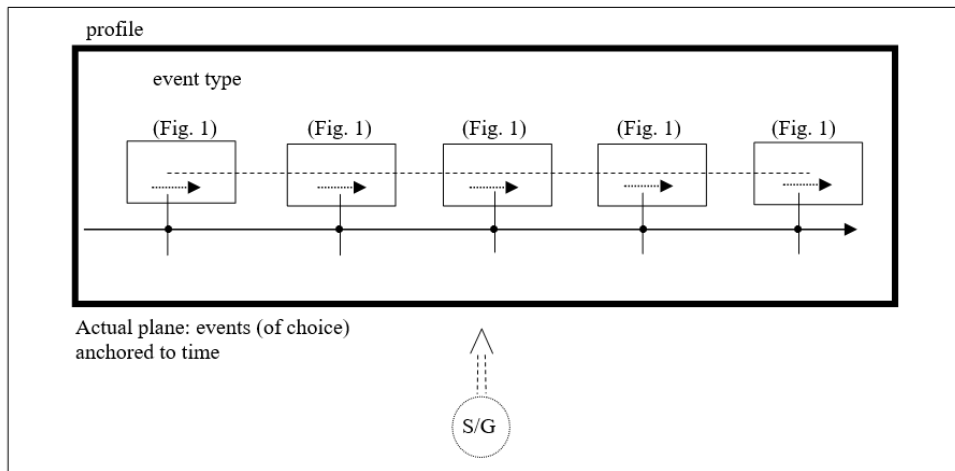


Figure 2. Will – repetitive ‘John will (forever) leave the door open’ (Basis: Langacker 1999: 252)

### 3.3 Will – ‘characteristic’ (c. 1400)

In this sense there are two major changes.

- Recurring events are no longer anchored to time and in this way lose some of their actuality. Langacker (1999: 251). A shift occurs from the actual plane to the structural one: *this is how the world is made*. This can be attributed to the conceptualizing activity of the speaker who makes a further step in the process of generalization and abstraction begun with the *prediction* element in habitual *will*. (Please notice that we still have the recurrence of an *identical* action or situation here.)

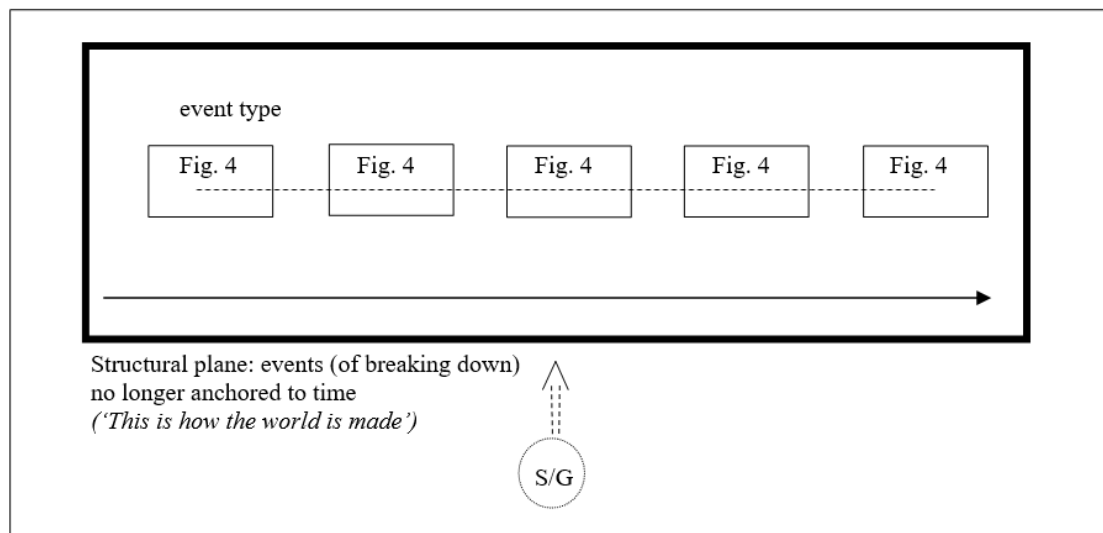


Figure 3. Will – ‘characteristic’: ‘A computer will always break down at the worst time’ (Basis: Langacker 1999: 253)

- Since recurrence is now part of the speaker's conceptual schema, the repeated events need no longer be seen as a result of any choice or special disposition on the part of the doer → there is a restriction of OS (immediate scope) in the recurring situation itself.<sup>11</sup> The force originally identified with the doer's disposition is now linked to the speaker's conceptualizing activity (through correspondence). This is closer to the 'wish' side of Figure 1: a developing 'wide scope' sense.

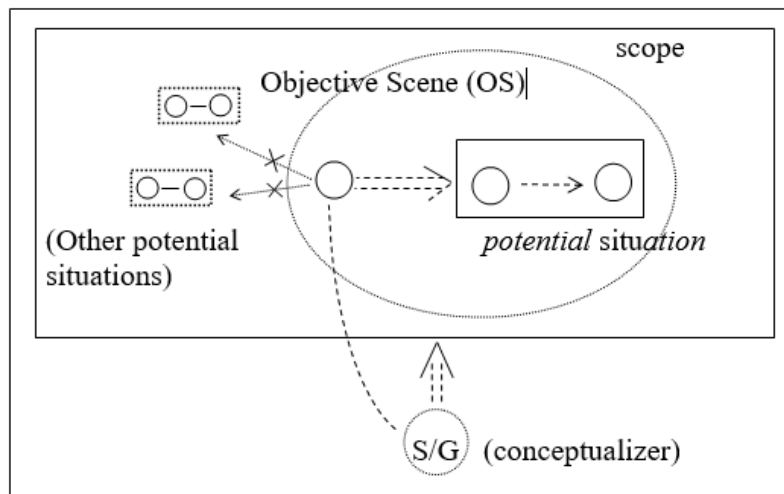


Figure 4. Will – 'wide scope'

The change in OS observed in this sense will be essential in the development of the future tenses and epistemic *will*, but at this point it may not be clearly marked yet. Can we be certain that a speaker, when (s)he utters '*A computer will always break down at the worst time*' does not attribute (bad) intentions to computers?

### 3.4 Non-deictic tense (c 1000, †)

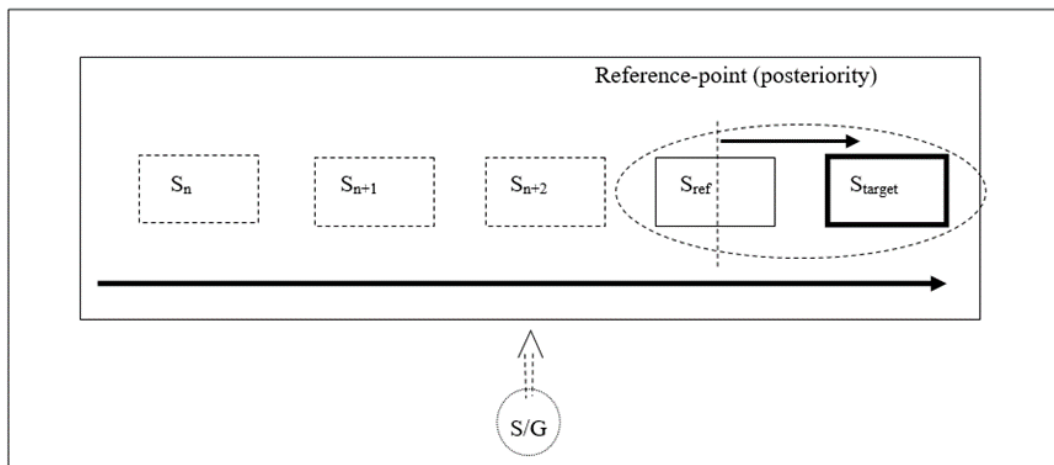


Figure 5. Will – non-deictic tense

<sup>11</sup> Although the objective scene is restricted here, I call this a 'wide scope' sense in compliance with the logical tradition.

This is an early and now extinct sense, the first clear appearance of temporal ordering in the meanings of *will*. One important difference is that the events need no longer be identical. The modal expresses mere temporal sequence (posteriority) without selection of the time of speaking as a reference-point. It is, nevertheless, already a reference-point construction, with the preceding event serving as reference-point for the highlighted one. This sense of *will* can be compared to *relative tense* in Hungarian.

### 3.5 *Deictic tense (c. 1400)*

In deictic tense the time of speaking becomes a reference-point for the target situation. It inherits the idea of posteriority from non-deictic tense but conforms to the past vs. non-past distinction of the basic tense system in selecting the time of speaking as a reference-point. No sequence of events encountered in non-deictic tense is required for its interpretation. This is truly a grounding predication in Langacker's (1991) sense.

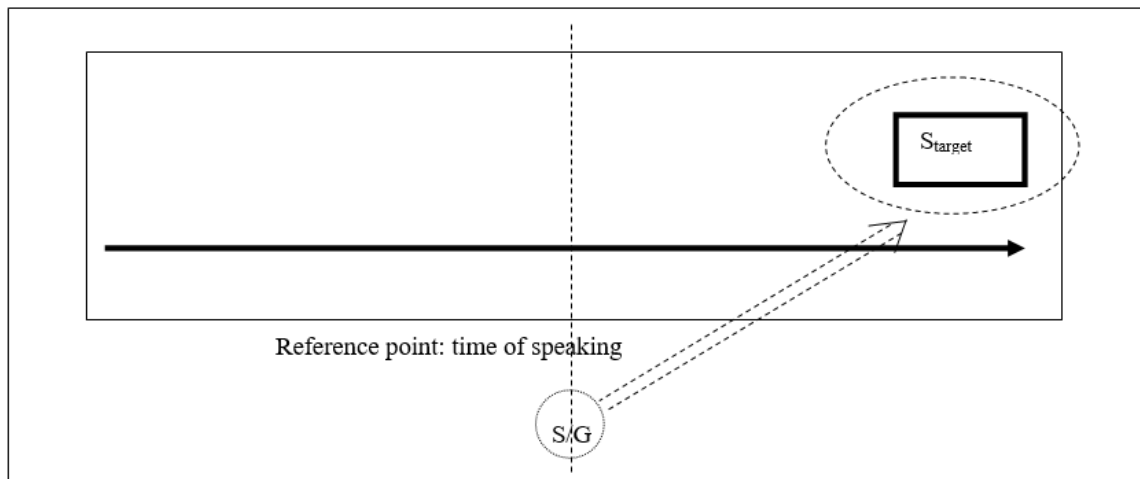


Figure 6. Will – deictic tense

### 3.6 *The epistemic sense (c. 1700)*

The epistemic sense, which only appears in Standard English as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, can be conveniently described as a result of subjectification.

In this sense

- the speaker/conceptualizer is directly included in overall scope as a reference-point: as in *must* or the other epistemic senses, *will* marks his/her probability judgment and is undoubtedly a grounding predication;
- the probability judgment is based on the *natural course of events*, which Langacker (1999: 309) calls the *evolutionary momentum of reality* (cf. 2.1).

This is slightly different from our suggestion in *must* in Pelyvás (2000), which is a somewhat weaker form, where forces of unknown reality, also part of Langacker's dynamic evolutionary model, provide a relatively weak counterforce. This property of the schema can be extended directly from non-deictic tense where situations leading up to the event provide a reference-point, and indirectly from the '*characteristic*' sense where the same situation is construed as recurring in time. Both are 'wide scope' senses, with significant attenuation of subject control



compared to *habitual will*, a ‘narrow scope’ sense held together by the construed intention or disposition of a doer (the subject of the clause) to perform some purposeful action.

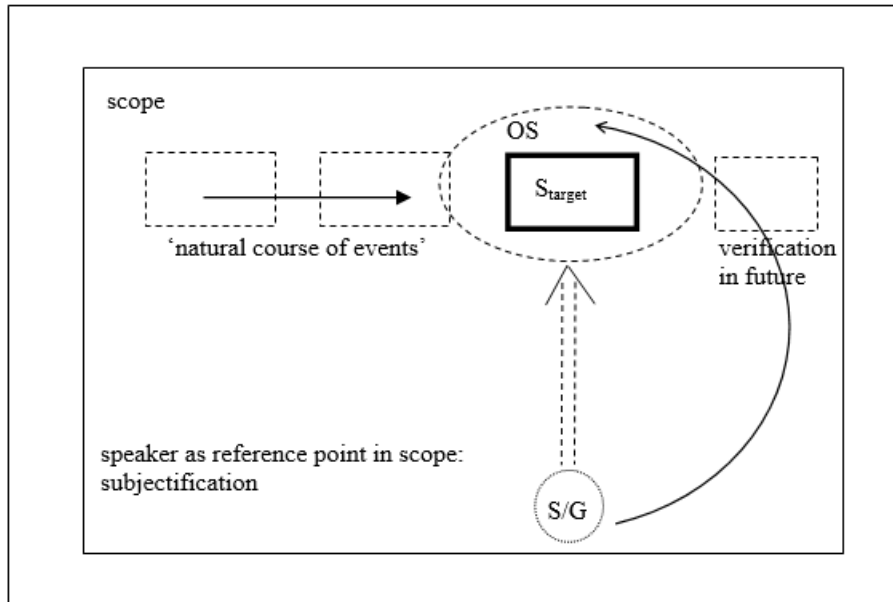


Figure 7. Epistemic will

- Although epistemic *will*, contrary to intuition, can hardly be seen as a direct extension of the *deictic tense* meaning, it also utilizes at least one of its properties. The highlighted situation is not in the future, but its *verification* is very probably posterior to the situation, and judging from the possibility of use with the Perfect Infinitive, to the time of speaking as well.

#### 4 Conclusion

Salkie’s title (and also much of his evidence) would suggest the conclusion that *will* is an integration of tense and modal elements, and this paper has attempted an argument in that direction on the basis of Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar.

Salkie’s analysis leaves three obviously interrelated weak points worthy of discussion:

- He thinks of the relationship between tense and modality as a strict dichotomy and argues for a tense analysis on the basis of a very restricted view on what can and cannot count as modality, which inevitably distorts his findings.
- In this spirit, he chooses to disregard subject-oriented modality, a factor that is very significant in *will* and can serve as the basis for all of its meanings in a cognitive analysis.
- Such an analysis is unthinkable in a cognitive framework without examining details of diachronic change in the development of the modal system. It is not surprising that he draws some conclusions that a cognitive analysis finds erroneous.

In arguing for an integrated approach to the tense/modal complex on the basis of Langacker’s *grounding predication*, this paper has attempted to show how the different senses of *will* have been cooperating in developing new senses. This is certainly not a straight line of development (the ‘*wish, choose*’ sense and the *non-deictic tense* sense appeared at roughly the same time), but it is not difficult to see that some meanings could not have developed without

others (cf. higher level schemas integrating already existing schemas into new patterns) and that the tense and modal schemas are indeed inseparable in this development.

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