

***Shall* in Present-Day English**

Abstract

The paper aims at presenting the contemporary usage of the verb *shall* in Modern English. The traditional principles governing the usage of *shall* constitute a complex paradigm in which the implications of different forms change according to the person of the subject. The statistics show that the verb *shall* experienced a dramatic fall in frequency of use between the early 1960s and 1990s. The author is aiming at presenting the evolution of the verb *shall* throughout the centuries, its reorganization and the way it has altered. The Old English *shall* expressed obligation/necessity whereas the Middle English usage indicated to the predicative element of the verb in question. Furthermore, the author explores the difference in application between *will* and *shall*. The semantic shift of *shall* appears to be a natural consequence of the competition it lost to *will*. Moreover, *shall* seems to be retracting to the narrow niche of seldom usage. The article also indicates to the use of *shall* in present-day English both in American and British varieties. In American English, which is commonly assumed to be more advanced and open to change than British English, *shall* seems to survive in the contexts where it expresses deontic meaning.

Keywords: auxiliary, shall, predicate, Old English, deontic meaning

1. Introduction

It has become received wisdom in linguistics that the English auxiliary system is undergoing a reorganization (Bolinger 1980, Givón 1993, Krug 2000). Mair and Leech (2006) have reported a significant rise in the frequency of occurrence of the quasi-modals and a decrease in the frequency of occurrence of the modal auxiliaries. Of all modal verbs, *shall* experienced the most dramatic fall in frequency between the early 1960s and the early 1990s: 43.7% in written British English and 43.8% in written American English. According to Collins (2009:135), the frequency of *shall* is noticeably lower than that of *will*, with the

ratio of tokens 1:24.8. Such a decline in the use of *shall* is far from unnatural since closed classes typically reduce in size when one member increases in productivity and displaces other members, taking over their functions (cf. Bybee *et al.* 1994:8). This, however, raises the question of the future of *shall*. The aim of this paper is to assess *shall*'s chances of survival in the English auxiliary domain. I will examine the use of *shall* in present-day English, giving special attention to American English, to show that there are contexts in which *shall* cannot be replaced by *will* as *will* is not and has never been appropriate in these contexts. As noted by Visser (1969), the main notion originally expressed by *shall* (OE *sceal*) is that of (imposed) obligation. The construction 'sceal + infinitive' was used for events predestined by the disposer(s) of future events. This later came to be used for predestined events, and finally for events that were bound to happen independently of one's will. No future sense was involved. 'Will + infinitive' experienced a similar development. It originally expressed only a determination to take the action denoted by the infinitive, which was later suppressed by the notion of futurity (Visser 1969: 1581-82). Despite their similarity as future markers, *shall* and *will* are in fact semantically different. Therefore the displacement of *shall* by *will* in the context of futurity should not eliminate the use of *shall* in other contexts. This line of reasoning is supported by Bybee *et al.*, who claim that "certain more specific nuances of the source construction can be retained in certain contexts long after grammaticalisation has begun" (1994:16). The nuance of willingness is coded in *will*, whereas the nuance of obligation / promise is inherent in *shall*. Therefore it may be expected that *shall* has retained and will retain some of its original territory. *Shall* is not the dominant future marker any more, but it may survive in a specialised niche, as suggested by Bybee *et al.* (1994:16).

2. The evolution of *shall*

Shall occurs in Old English as a verb expressing obligation and necessity, prediction, and promising (Traugott 1972:198). *Shall* (*sceal*), like *will*, was originally a main verb, and it is as a main verb that it is most commonly found in Old English. As shown in (1), *sceal*, which translates Latin *debēre* 'to have to', expresses obligation, necessity or compulsion, like Modern English *must* and *ought to* (Traugott 1972:70, Visser 1969:1581).

1. Æghwīlc gylt be hys gebyrdum. Se byrdesta *sceall* gyldan fiftyne mearðes fell. 'Each pays (tribute) according-to his means. The richest has to-give fifteen martens' skins' (Traugott 1972: 70).

Traugott (1972: 70) postulates that the extension of *sceal*-of obligation to predicting may have been caused by its use in sentences like (2), where *sceal* can signal prediction as *niede* expresses obligation.

2. Ic *sceal* eac niede þara monegena gewinna geswigian þe on eastlondum gewurdon. 'I shall/must also of-necessity-of-those many fights be-silent that in eastlands come-to-be.'

Traugott (1972:70) notes that also other contexts may have contributed to the extension of *sceal* to predicting. For instance (3) expresses prediction of what must happen by an authoritative order.

3. Uton nu brucan þisses undernmetes swa þa *sculon* þe hiora æfengifl on helle gefeccean *sculon*. 'Let-us now enjoy-of-this breakfast as they shall/must who their supper in hell get must.'

As shown above, obligation and necessity are the first/basic use of *shall* in English. The predictive use of auxiliary *sceal* is infrequent in Old English. Generally, prediction in Old English is realized by the verbs of saying or adverbs of future time, not by auxiliaries (Traugott 1972:68). Prediction, however, is an

important context since first, *sceal* is an auxiliary when used predictively, second, it is the context where *sceal* “meets” *willan*, its competitor to be. If an auxiliary is used to express prediction in Old English, it is either *willan* or *sceal*, with any person (Traugott 1972:68). The third context in which *sceal* starts occurring is promising. In sentences as that in (4), the expectation is very strong, it is more than prediction or reporting, as Traugott (1972:71) notes. In general, promising includes a sense of necessity that evolves from the actions performed by the speaker, God in this case (Traugott 1972:71).

4. Ðu scealt deaðe sweltan ‘Thou shalt death die’ (Genesis 2.17)

Predicting and promising come to be regularly realized by *shall* in Middle English. At this time the competition between *shall* and *will* can be observed. As noted by Traugott, both *shall* and *will* are used to express prediction. There is a general preference, however, to use *shall* for all persons. The use of predictive *will* is avoided, probably due to *will*'s strong volitional quality at that time. It is Early Modern English that witnesses the more frequent use of the second and third person predictive *will*. *Shall*, however, is still used for all three persons. By the end of the 16th century the use of predictive *shall* recedes so that it is used mainly for first person, and *will* is used for second and third persons. *Shall*, however, is still more common than *will* in timeless predictive generalizations, as in (5a), and in nonperformative expressions of prediction introduced by a temporal subordinator, as in (5b). The latter context is, of course, ungrammatical in Modern English (1972:114-116).

5. a) You can play no part but Pyramus: for Pyramus is a sweet-faced man; a proper man, as one shall see in a summer's day.
 b) But when they shall see, sir, his crest up again ... they will out of their burrows, like connies (=rabbits) after rain.

In Middle English, as explained by Traugott, *will* is more commonly used to express volition, its original sense, than prediction. As for the context of promising, *will* is used, if it is used at all, only for the first, and *shall* for all persons. This is a growing tendency in Early Modern English: promissory *will* is preferred over *shall* for first person, promissory *shall* for second and third (1972:117). In Modern English the use of *shall* and *will* is regularized. The 17th- and 18th-century grammars clearly state the context for each verb, which is summarized in Table 1 (Lowth 1775:78-79, cited in Traugott 1972:169).

Table 1. *Will* and *shall* in explicative sentences (in interrogative sentences the reverse is usually observed).

VERB	CONTEXT
Will (1 st person)	Promising, threatening
Will (2 nd and 3 rd persons)	Foretelling
Shall (1 st person)	Foretelling
Shall (2 nd and 3 rd persons)	Promising, commanding, threatening

As Traugott (1972:169) states, *shall* was originally associated with external obligation, whereas *will* with one's own volition. The original sense is reflected in Modern English uses of both verbs. When a speaker is promising to do something, they are usually willing to do that thing, so they use *will*. When a speaker is foretelling something about themselves, they usually predict something over which they have no control, thus no volition is involved. The distinction is illustrated in (6) below (Traugott 1972:169).

6. I will [promise] endeavour to say something now, and shall [prediction] hope for something in return.

As Traugott further explains, the situation is different when the speaker is not the subject of the sentence. Telling somebody else what they will do is imposing the speaker's will on them (an external obligation), hence the use of *shall*, as in (7a). When a speaker predicts about someone else's future actions, external obligation is not relevant, hence in (7b) *will* is used (1972:169).

7. a) If you will [volition] be pleased to give me a good Word in your Paper, you shall [promise] be every Night a Spectator at my show for nothing.
 b) I foresee there will be but little method in my letter.

Traugott notes that generalized prediction, often expressing habits, was the construction where *will* and *shall* were used interchangeably, *shall* being very common. However, at the end of the 19th century *will* displaced *shall* almost completely. The prescriptive distinction between *shall* and *will* is based on one variety of English: Southern British English. Other varieties (Irish, Scottish or American) generally have not differentiated between the two forms in this way since the 18th century. In American English *will* is generally used for all persons, whether one is predicting or promising. *Shall* is only found in questions indicating offers or suggestions (external obligation) (1972:170). The following section, which focuses on the use of *shall* in present-day English, will partly confirm Traugott's observation. *Shall* indeed is rather infrequently used to express prediction. However, it is not found only in questions indicating offers or suggestions. Even in American English, which is commonly assumed to be more advanced and open to change than British English, *shall* seems to survive in the contexts where it expresses deontic meaning.

3. *Shall* in present-day English

In present-day English the meanings expressed by *shall* and *will* may be similar, but the proportions in which they occur are inverse. This is summarized in Table 2 (based on Collins 2009:126, 135¹).

Table 2. Meanings of *shall* and *will*

meaning*	shall		will	
Epistemic (predictability, (future) prediction)	46 (21)	10.8%	6,913 (5603)	59.2%
Dynamic (intension, volition)	179 (146)	42.1%	3,522 (2296)	30.4%
Deontic (permission, obligation)	196 (171)	46.1%	203 (162)	1.7%
Indeterminate	5 (5)	1.2%	612 (444)	5.2%
Total	425 (343)		11,679 (8,505)	

1 In his study of the meanings of the modal auxiliaries, Collins (2009) uses the British and Australian components of the *International Corpus of English* and a specially assembled corpus of American English. All the texts used to gather the material for the study date from 1990-1994 inclusive. Table 2 gives the total results (the sum of the British, Australian and American English results), where tokens per one million words are unbracketed, and raw frequencies are bracketed. For details see Collins (2009).

* Collins (2009) adopts a tripartite scheme of modal meanings. Epistemic modality is concerned with the speaker's belief or judgement about the validity of the proposition, located along a scale ranging from weak possibility, as in *It may be the case*, to strong necessity, as in *It must be the case*. Deontic modality expresses permission and obligation. The speaker gives permission, threatens or makes a promise, expresses a wish or places someone under an obligation. Dynamic modality classifies those uses of modality which express ability, volition, and non-deontic circumstantial meanings (Collins 2009:21-23).

Modality is defined into different domains by various researchers, and the distinctions are often not only terminological. In general, the basic distinction is between what is referred to as agent-oriented, deontic, root, objective, or pragmatic modality on the one hand, and epistemic, hypothetical or subjective modality on the other. For various definitions of modality domain see, for instance, Coates (1983), Bybee and Fleischman (1995), or Palmer (2001).

Table 2 clearly shows that deontic modality is the principal meaning of *shall*, and minor for *will*, whereas epistemic modality/futurity is principal for *will*, but minor for *shall*. As Collins reports, *shall* has three deontic uses. The most common is a "regulative" one, characteristic of legal documents, as in (8a). In the second use, illustrated in (8b), the speaker undertakes an obligation or guarantees to do something. The third deontic use of *shall* is found in direct questions (8c), also including tag questions (8d), usually with a 1st person subject. *Shall* is also found in interrogative tags attached to a 1st person imperative (8e). Finally, as (8f) illustrates, *shall* is found in the formulaic expression *shall we say*, which is used when the speaker expects the addressee to accept (2009:137-8).

8. a) Once an issue has been considered and appropriately addressed by council, relevant papers shall no longer be considered "Council-in-Confidence" material.
- b) We shall see.
- c) Shall I do something civilized, like clear the table?
- d) I'll go out and get it, shall I?
- e) Let's stop for the moment, shall we?
- f) He did all sorts of things and he became a shall we say suburban Australian archaeological hero.

In contrast, *will* is rarely used deontically, always with a 2nd person subject, and the speaker as the authority that requires an action on the part of the subject. This is illustrated in (9) (Collins 2009:134).

9. a) I'll withdraw that above your right eye. You'll say he headbutted you.
- b) You'll clear the table.

As Collins (2009:126-131) shows, *will* is mainly used epistemically, in contexts where it expresses predictability (10a), or (future) prediction (10b). In contrast, epistemic modality/futurity is the minor meaning for *shall*. It can be found in the sentences as that in (10c), reports Collins (2009:136).

10. a) In other words, referring to a particular instance of the total idea, a home truth or a particular type of truth then it will have those properties.
- b) It'll be Christmas soon.
- c) I shall probably look in at the College once or twice during the autumn, and hope to see you then.

Finally, dynamic volitionality is the second most common meaning of both *shall* and *will*. As Collins (2009:131-134) notes, dynamic *will* expresses volition, intention, or willingness, as in (11a, b), and habitual behaviour, as illustrated in (11c).

11. a) We have submitted Purchasers Requisitions to the Vendor. We will undertake the usual searches as soon as we receive your advices that finance has been approved.

- b) 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?
- c) Remember too that heavy rain will raise creek and stream levels and may render them impassable.

As for dynamic *shall*, it takes 1st person subject, and expresses intentionality, and rather infrequently also willingness. This is shown in (12a) and (12b) respectively (Collins 2009:137).

12. a) Everything in Turkey is very cheap – which reminds me Cath, I shall send you some Turkish money.
- b) Well I shan’t see her.

Although dynamic uses of *shall* constitute 42.1% of all uses, it does not seem probable that *shall* will withstand the direct competition of *will* in this context. It is most likely that *shall* will survive as an expression of deontic modality (permission, obligation). This is its original territory which it is able to hold, and which has not been invaded by *will*.

4. *Shall* in present-day American English

Since American English is seen as a main driving force of change (Krug 2000, Collins 2009), an analysis of the occurrence of *shall* in this variety can be used to predict the future use of *shall* in general. As the data gathered from TIME Magazine Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)² show, the use of *shall* has decreased drastically in American English. As shown in Table 3³, the Time Corpus records 8358 occurrences of *shall*: 1769 occurrences in the 1920s, and 65 occurrences in the 2000s, which equals a fall in the frequency of occurrence by approximately 96%.

Table 3. *Shall* in the Time Corpus (Davies 2007)

	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
FREQ	1769	1650	1646	1304	891	530	332	171	65
PER MIL	231,69	130,36	106,51	77,67	55,41	38,99	29,19	17,56	10,11

In the Time articles published this century, *shall* is mostly deontic. Among deontic uses, obligation, threatening and promising, as illustrated in (13), outnumber the use of *shall* in questions and in the formulaic expression *shall we say*. This is shown in Table 4.

13. a) Q: Will we know on Dec. 18 how the electors voted? A: Probably. The Constitution says they shall submit their voted “sealed” to the president of the Senate.
- b) Ray planted the seeds for an accord at his swearing-in as Starr’s successor, in October 1999, when he said it is more important to assure that “justice shall be done” than to win cases.

2 TIME Magazine Corpus totals 100 million words of text, spanning the time between 1923 and 2006. The Corpus of Contemporary American English contains 400+ million words of text. It is equally divided among spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers and academic texts. The corpus includes 20 million words each from 1990 to 2009 (Davies 2007, 2008).

3 FREQ = raw frequency, PER MIL = per one million words

- c) “If America continues to shield people from the truth,” says an al-Zarqawi loyalist, “we shall transport the battle to where the public can not but see it.”
- d) But as Jesus noted, the last shall be first.

Table 4. *Shall* in Time Magazine (2000–2006).

Total	65	
Epistemic	10	15%
Dynamic	2	3%
Deontic	53	82%
including:		
questions	17	
interrogative tags	1	
<i>shall we say</i>	8	
obligation/promising/threatening	27	

COCA, which is based on a variety of written and spoken texts, also reports a decline in the frequency of occurrence of *shall*, but the figures here seem more optimistic. As Table 5 shows, the frequency has fallen by 59%. As far as the distribution among the registers is concerned, *shall* is mostly used in fiction and in academic texts. This clearly shows that *shall* is disappearing from every-day language, both spoken and written. However, it seems to survive in formal written language. In fact, fiction is the only register in which *shall*, unexpectedly, has experienced a rise in the frequency of use. This is shown in Table 6, which focuses on three years: 1990, 2000 and 2009. The tendency for a general decrease is evident, with 1297 tokens in 1990, and only 402 tokens in 2009. The situation in particular registers is slightly different, though. There has been a substantial fall in speech, in magazines, newspapers and academic texts, and an increase in fiction, with 342 tokens in 1990, 212 tokens in 2000, and 270 tokens in 2009.

Table 5. *Shall* in American English, 1990–2009 (COCA)

	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAG	NEW	ACAD	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009
FREQ	1874	5494	1834	1120	5220	4846	4321	3534	2856
PER MIL	22,94	69,76	22,02	14,11	65,83	46,90	41,99	34,45	30,55

Table 6. *Shall* in American English, raw frequencies, 1990, 2000 and 2009 (COCA)

	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAG	NEW	ACAD	Total (freq)
1990	96	342	111	72	676	1297
2000	142	212	101	54	227	736
2009	30	270	22	17	63	402

In the 2009 fiction, deontic modality is the main meaning of *shall*: out of 270 tokens, 35 tokens (13%) express epistemic modality, 45 tokens (17%) express dynamic modality and 190 tokens (70%) express deontic modality. The most common use of *shall* is the one illustrated in (14a), where the speaker undertakes an obligation or guarantees to do something. This use constitutes 60% of all deontic uses. The second most common use of deontic *shall*, exemplified in (14b), is found in questions, the minority of which, however, are tag questions (only 4 tokens out of 51, which is 8%). The direct questions constitute 27% of deontic uses. The remaining uses: regulative *shall* (14c) and formulaic *shall we say* (14d) constitute 11% and 2% of all deontic uses, respectively. As for other registers, the situation is the same: deontic uses form the majority of the examples found in the corpus. The data are summarised in Table 7.

14. a) I swear to serve you ... In seven ways I shall serve you. In seven ways I shall offer my life to you.
 b) Shall I send for his doctor?
 c) All offenders against this law shall suffer death by drowning.
 d) An audience member has just handed me a far more, shall we say... intriguing introduction.

Table 7. *Shall* in American English in 2009 (COCA)

	FICTION		ACADEMIC		SPOKEN		MAGAZINES		NEWSPAPERS	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
Deontic	190	70%	51	81%	29	97%	17	77%	17	100%
Dynamic	45	17%	4	6%	1	3%	3	14%	0	–
Epistemic	35	13%	8	13%	0	–	2	9%	0	–
Total	270		63		30		22		17	

The data above clearly show that deontic modality is the main meaning of *shall* in present-day American English. Although *shall* does not occur frequently in the innovative, spoken data, when used, it is generally used deontically. *Shall* is more frequent in the conservative, written data, where the deontic use is by far the dominant one. Finally, *shall* is not most commonly used in tag questions or formulaic expressions, which indicates that it is not a frozen expression, but a verb with a considerable semantic potential.

Concluding Remarks

The observations presented here call for a comment on the (de)grammaticalisation of *shall*. According to Hopper and Traugott (1993), the grammaticalisation process goes from more central, lexical categories to more peripheral, functional categories. In English, and in other Germanic languages, some modal verbs have both deontic and epistemic meanings. Importantly, epistemic uses have developed out of agent-oriented (deontic, dynamic) uses⁴ (Traugott 1989, Sweetser 1990, Bybee et al. 1994, Heine 1995). In

4 Agent-oriented modality in various sources equals event modality, and they both embrace deontic and dynamic meanings.

the case of the modal verbs that have both agent-oriented and future (epistemic) meanings, for instance *will* and *shall*, the development has gone from agent-oriented to future (Palmer 2001). As shown in the present paper, *shall*, which experienced an extension from agent-oriented to epistemic/future modality in Middle English, seems to have been moving back to its older semantic meaning. Grammaticalisation is characterized as a unidirectional process, and unidirectionality is claimed to apply at all levels, including the semantic one, where the evolution proceeds from a fully referential to a bleached / grammatical meaning, and from a less subjective to a more subjective one. Since *shall* shows a reverse semantic shift, it seems to violate the principle of unidirectionality. This, however, is not the case on the assumption that only the reversal of grammaticalisation violates unidirectionality. As Haspelmath (2004:27-28) argues, only antigrammaticalisation, “a change that leads from the endpoint to the starting point of a potential grammaticalisation and also shows the same intermediate stages” is an exception to unidirectionality. A similar view is expressed in Norde (2001, 2009), who points out that counterdirectional change must result in a new structure, it is not “a mirror-image reversal” of grammaticalisation. What *shall* has experienced is rather a case of retraction (cf. Haspelmath 2004:33-34): a more grammaticalised usage has become marginalized, and *shall* continues a less grammatical function that has always been present. This kind of change is not ruled out, and is not expected to be exceptional.

In conclusion, the semantic shift that *shall* has experienced is a natural consequence of the competition it lost to *will*. As its older meaning has been maintained, *shall* does stand a chance of surviving in the English auxiliary domain. Although it is used infrequently, it has retained its original territory. *Shall* has moved to a niche (deontic modality), in which it is not likely to be endangered by *will*, its main competitor. Both verbs are inherently different, and it is in *shall*, not in *will*, that obligation is inherent.

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