

FACULTATEA LIMBI ȘI LITERATURII STRĂINE

A Functional Approach to the Ways of Expressing Future Actions in English

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Summary

Articolul vizează abordarea funcțională în procesul de predare a limbii străine, în special la nivelul intermediar și avansat. În acest context, autorul reflectează asupra utilizării timpului viitor în limba engleză vorbită. Articolul se bazează pe șapte forme ale timpului viitor: viitorul exprimat prin "will", viitorul exprimat prin "going to", viitorul continuu exprimat prin "will", viitorul continuu exprimat prin "going to", prezentul simplu și continuu care redau viitorul, viitorul exprimat prin "I think I'll".

Functional language teaching has been part of TEFL for more than 30 years and the new textbooks list both functions and structures in their summaries of language content. Functional and structural approaches in language teaching have different aims. When we teach a grammatical structure, we only practise *one* form (or one set of forms), whether with one of its meanings or more than one [4, p. 22].

Thus, we could practise the Future Continuous tense for:

- actions that will be in progress at a definite time in the future;
- activities that will occupy a certain period of time in future;
- future activities understood as a natural course of events;
- a polite way of asking about future actions [1, p. 73].

However, whether we practise one or several of these uses the students have no problem selecting the tense to use, because they know we are practising the Future Continuous tense.

But when we teach a function, the students must always make choices. Distinguishing differences of *appropriacy* is the essence of functional teaching.

It is often believed, that English does not have a future tense as many other languages do. Instead, there are several forms which express future events, and which one the user selects depends on how he/she sees the event, as much as on its certainty or nearness to the present [2, p. 136].

It should be noted that TEFL students in general do not adequately handle the future tenses in English. On the other hand, little attention is generally given to these tenses in the classroom; leave alone the functional approach to them.

But on closer examination we find that not only are the future tenses frequently used in conversational English, they also represent quite a complicated set of attitudes about the future. It is not just that we talk about the future *per se*, but along with the future we incorporate particular attitudinal orientations. It is these attitudinal orientations that many students fail to pick up, and this failure produces a general clumsiness if not outright errors in selecting and employing a communicatively appropriate future form [5, p. 199].

In this context some reflections on the use of the future tense in everyday spoken English can be offered. The focus will be on seven future expressions and the communicative significance of each. The seven future expressions are the "will" future, the "going to" future, the "will" continuous future, the "going to" continuous future, the "simple present" future, the "present continuous" future, and the "I think I'll" future.

One of the first things to notice about the future tenses is that there are a variety of future expressions in English. The tendency on the part of students to consider future time as a single

tense, or possibly two tenses, is an indicator of the problem to be faced. When asked to produce an utterance in future time, the vast majority of learners will produce the "will" future, which may or may not be *communicatively appropriate* for the context. Few learners are aware of the full variety of future-oriented expressions that we use typically in everyday English conversation. Let us examine these seven selected expressions and try to clarify the notional import of each.

"Going to" versus "will"

Probably the most commonly used future expression is not the "will" future that our students produce immediately, but rather the "going to" future. The "going to" future announces in the present the future initiation of some action or state, either as an intention of the speaker himself, or as an expected action to be initiated by someone or something else. Utterances such as *I'm going to study tonight* or *He's going to visit me tomorrow* are examples of this intention or expectation, stated in the present, that an action is to be initiated in the future. The point is that *now* the speaker is announcing his belief in favour of the occurrence of a future action or state.

Let us compare these two utterances with two other utterances using the "will" future. The utterances *I will study tonight* and *He will visit me tomorrow* delivered in unmarked intonation give us a slightly different attitude on the part of the speaker. Somehow there is less assertion of belief, intention, or expectation, and a rather more quiet statement of fact about the future. I am suggesting that communicative situations that demand more assertion in the present on the part of the speaker will tend to use the "going to" future rather than the "will" future. "Going to" says "I'm putting my beliefs about the future out in the open now." The "will" future seems to go about stating this information as a matter of fact, rather than a present assertion of belief [3, p. 117].

Intonationally marked "will" and "going to"

We can also compare the intonationally marked utterances *I will study tonight* and *He will visit me tomorrow* with the previous utterances. Here we have not simply a present assertion about a future occurrence; rather, the focus of the utterance is more directly on the future itself, with the notional context of resolve, or promise, or emphatic certainty. Interestingly enough, the "going to" future delivered with marked intonation is also future-located, but somehow seems less emphatic than the marked "will" form. Thus there seems to be a kind of inversion of stressed assertion between the marked forms of the "going to" and "will" future: that is, in their unmarked forms "going to" is a more assertive notion than "will" (especially when "will" is contracted), whereas in their marked forms the assertiveness reaches a higher degree in the "will" future, which is stronger in emphasis than "going to." [5, p. 200].

The future continuous

The continuous future tenses manifest a similar inversion in their assertiveness, although the temporal focus is a bit different. The point about the future continuous is that we are locating two future occurrences with respect to each other.

The utterance *At two o'clock tomorrow I will be studying* locates the occurrence of two o'clock with respect to the occurrence of the action of studying. Furthermore; it denotes that the action of studying will still be in progress when two o'clock occurs. The relational aspect of the continuous tense exists whether or not a second occurrence is mentioned explicitly. Thus, the utterance *Next year I will be studying Spanish* implies the relational notion "at a particular time" even though the utterance itself does not specifically include it [1, p. 73].

In their unmarked forms the future continuous tenses of "going to" and "will," like the simple "going to" and "will" future, manifest assertion more strongly in the "going to" variant

than in the "will" variant; and like the marked forms described above, the marked forms of these tenses reverse that comparative degree of assertiveness.

Present tenses with future meaning

Other future-oriented syntax involves the use of the "simple present" and the "continuous present," when activities are planned in advance or are part of a schedule. Thus a caller asking for airline flight information might ask *What time will the flight leave?* But just as conceivably, and in my view more probably, the caller could say *What time does the flight leave?* or *What time is the flight leaving?* Is there a difference in using the continuous present and the simple present in communicating planned or scheduled activity? I would say not much, although because of its notional characteristic of describing facts, the "present simple" future seems to have a more definite tone to it, while the "present continuous" future communicates more the idea of expectation [2, p. 136].

I think I'll...

The final future notion I am going to consider is the notion communicated by the expression *I think I'll...* Such an expression involves what we might term a "speculative" character, whereby one future occurrence is mentally sifted out among many as being the most likely. Thus the utterance *I think [I'll go shopping tomorrow* indicates that the speaker has been considering a number of future options, and has selected shopping as the activity he will be engaged in. Note that this utterance is slightly different in meaning and intonation from an expression of opinion, which is sometimes communicated by means of the utterance *I think*. Notionally and intonationally, consider the difference between *I think he's innocent*, which states an opinion, and *I think I'll go shopping*, which is more speculative in tone. Thus intonation and stress patterns in this future expression play an especially important role in communicating meaning. As we have seen, in general, intonation is a common feature of all of these future expressions in one way or another, and sensitizing our students to intonation is an important part of classroom work on future tenses.

Bibliography

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