

**THE ENGLISH FUTURE: ITS
ORIGIN
AND DEVELOPMENT, A
DISSERTATION**

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The English Future: Its Origin and Development, a Dissertation by Francis Adelbert Blackburn

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**THE ENGLISH FUTURE;
ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT.**

A DISSERTATION

WRITTEN FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FROM THE

UNIVERSITY OF LEIPZIG

BY

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THE ENGLISH FUTURE;

ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT.

The student of English, at the outset of his work in the grammar of the language, finds in the inflection of the verb a paradigm called the "future tense", made up of the two verbs *shall* and *will* combined with the verb that serves as the model of conjugation; e. g.

<i>I shall love,</i>	<i>We shall love,</i>
<i>Thou wilt love,</i>	<i>You will love,</i>
<i>He will love,</i>	<i>They will love.</i>

He is told, moreover, in the text of his book or by his teacher that in English the future tense is composed of the "auxiliary verbs" *shall* and *will* prefixed to the infinitive of the verb whose future he may wish to form, *shall* being used in the first person and *will* in the second and third.

This statement of the elementary instruction books, though not complete, is in a certain sense true; to express a future action the language often makes use of the formula given, though not to the exclusion of other modes of expression, and though this combination, in spite of the name given to it, does not always have the sense of a future. Whether it should be called a "tense" at all is a question of terminology, the answer depending on the definition of the word "tense", but when it expresses the same meaning as the future tense of other languages there is no impropriety in calling it a "future". In the following discussion this name is used to denote the periphrasis composed of *shall* or *will* and the infinitive, when it has only the future meaning, i. e.,

when *shall* or *will* has sunk to a mere tense-sign and no longer suggests to the speaker or hearer any idea of obligation or wish, but only that of time; the same that was suggested to a Roman by the *b* of the Latin future. When it is desirable to make a distinction between this purely temporal meaning and that which originally belonged to the auxiliary, the name "pure future" or "simple future" is used to denote the former and the latter is characterized as a "mixed future".

The variation between *shall* and *will* according to the person of the subject of the verb takes place in modern usage only in two cases; 1st., when the formula has become a simple future and is used to state that an action is to take place later; 2nd., when it contains beside the future meaning that of a promise or threat, or the expression of a resolve or determination of the speaker. In the former case modern usage requires the use of *shall* in the first person and *will* in the second and third; in the latter, on the contrary, *will* is generally, though not invariably, used in the first person and *shall* in the others. When the formula retains anything of the original meaning of the auxiliary verb, the choice of that verb depends not on the person of the subject but on the desired meaning.

The use of a periphrasis to express the modification in time that is expressed in other languages by a flexional form called the "future tense" is common to all the Teutonic languages, but the same auxiliary verb is not used in all, and the variation of the auxiliary according to the person of the subject is peculiar to English. The purpose of the following essay is to trace the growth of the English usage from its beginning to the time when it became the normal mode of expressing the future. In doing so the following topics are considered; —

1. The methods of expressing the future used in the primitive Teutonic speech.
2. The formulas for such expression of the future that the English tongue, at the beginning of its existence as a separate language, inherited from the mother-speech.

3. The various modes of expressing the future that have been in use at different periods of the language, and the development of the present usage.¹

I.

Among the various formations that are called futures in the grammars of the various Indo-European languages is one which is found in several widely separated groups and which serves as a future in all. It may therefore be assumed that this form existed and performed the function of a future in the primitive Indo-European speech. Its special characteristic is a stem formed from the verbal root by means of the suffix *-sje*, and its original force is assumed to have been modal, suggesting the idea of willingness or inclination. It is impossible to decide, of course, whether the use of this form in the sense of a future was at a remote period universal and was afterwards dropped by some of the groups of derivative languages and kept by others, or whether its use was a dialectical peculiarity shared by certain dialects and surviving in the corresponding groups of languages that have been developed from them. That a flexional future may be lost and replaced by a new formation is shown in the case of French, for example, where a periphrasis with *habeo*, "have", replaced the older future of the Latin, and that the same loss of the older future has taken place in certain cases is proved by the Balto-slavic group, for the Baltic languages have kept the old form though the Slavic branch has lost it, only a single form surviving to prove its former existence. Whether the Teutonic languages ever possessed it cannot be proved; no trace of it is found in any language of the

¹ The statistics given in the following pages are the result of personal examination; none are taken from other sources. It cannot be claimed, of course, that they are absolutely without error, but they have been made with care and it is believed that the errors are too few to affect the correctness of the conclusions drawn from them.

group and there is no evidence that it existed in the primitive mother-tongue from which they have sprung. If we assume its existence in some remote period we must also assume that it was already lost before the development of the separate dialects.

How then was the future expressed in the primitive Teutonic speech? No positive answer to this question is possible; we can only infer Teutonic usage from the usage of the later tongues. If we find in these a general agreement in any point of grammatical usage, it is a fair inference that the usage is an inheritance from the parent speech, and in reconstructing the primitive forms and syntax of that speech we may properly introduce into it whatever is common to all the languages or to several of them. Moreover, we may assume, as a general proposition, that the older a language is, the nearer it stands in forms and usage to the primitive tongue. With these principles in mind we therefore take up the Teutonic languages separately with reference to their method of expressing the future.

1. Gothic.

In the Greek text corresponding to those portions of the Gothic Bible that have been preserved about 650 cases of the future indicative occur. In some of these the tense has a modal force; they are therefore not counted in the statistics given here. They include the use of the future in commands and in rhetorical questions, in modifying clauses of purpose, of condition and of result. About 75 such cases occur and the present optative is the regular construction in Gothic; the present indicative is found once or twice.

Aside from these modal uses of the Greek future and a few cases where the Greek form is the same as the aorist subjunctive, the syntax allowing either, or where the Greek construction is not clear or is changed in translation, we have the following cases with the corresponding construction in Gothic.

Direct statements, translated by	
The present indicative	456 ¹
The present optative	14 ²
Periphrasis, <i>haban</i> and the infinitive	2
" <i>duginnan</i> " " " "	2
Dependent statements with <i>ōri</i> , translated by	
The present indicative	46
The present optative	5 ³
Periphrasis, <i>haban</i> and the infinitive	1
Simple relative clauses, translated by	
The present indicative	28
The present optative	1 ⁴
Direct questions, translated by	
The present indicative	32
The present optative	6 ⁵
Periphrasis, opt. of <i>skudan</i> and the infn.	1

The Greek future indicative in the constructions named is therefore translated into Gothic

- By the present indicative, 562 times,
- By the present optative, 26 times,
- By a periphrasis, 6 times.

To these may be added the cases of *ōv μῆ* with the subjunctive used in the sense of a future indicative, as follows;

Direct statements, translated by	
The present indicative	20
The present optative	1 ⁶

¹ Including 7 cases in which the indicative and optative are alike in form. They are classified with the indicatives on account of the great preponderance of that construction.

² Viz. Jno. viii, 55; ix, 21, Luke i, 20; vi, 40; x, 6; xvii, 8; Mark ix, 35; II Cor. ix, 10, [twice]; xi, 30, xii, 6; Gal. v, 10; vi, 4; I Tim. vi, 8; Neh. vii, 3.

³ Viz. Mat. vi, 7; Jno. v, 45; xvi, 26; Rom. viii, 49; Phil. i, 22.

⁴ Viz. II Thess. iii, 3.

⁵ Viz. Jno. viii, 22; Luke iii, 14; xviii, 8, 18; xx, 15; Mark x, 17.

⁶ Viz. Jno. viii, 52.

Dependent statements with *ὅτι*, translated by

The present indicative 1

Of the six cases of periphrasis three are cases of a future coupled with the present of the same verb, viz.;

II Cor. XI. 12. *ὃ δὲ ποιῶ, καὶ ποιήσω,*

ip patei tauja, jah taujan haba;

Philip. I, 18. *ἐν τούτῳ χαίρω ἀλλὰ καὶ χαρήσομαι,*

in þamma fagino akei jah faginon duginna;

II Thess. III, 4. *ποιεῖτε καὶ ποιήσετε*

taujiþ jah taujan habaiþ.

The repetition of the present in these cases would fail to show the difference of the original, and the use of a periphrasis is justified as being the best means that the language possessed to express the idea of the Greek text.

In a fourth case

Luke I, 66, *τί ἄρα τὸ παιδίον τοῦτο ἔσται;*

Hwa skuli þata barn wairþan?

we have not only a periphrasis but also the optative of the auxiliary verb. The use of the optative is paralleled by its occurrence in other questions of like character, expressing wonder and surprise and not asked for the purpose of getting an answer, and in the use of the optative the question belongs with the other rhetorical questions, but is included in the above statistics because of the periphrasis. *Skulan* with the infinitive is common in Gothic, but is not used to translate the future, though it regularly renders *μέλλω* with the infinitive, which does not differ much in meaning from a future. As the connection gives to the question here the sense that belongs to *μέλλω*, it is possible that the translator purposely avoids a strict verbal translation in order to give the implied force of the question more clearly than the Greek word, aside from the context, expresses it.

In the two remaining cases of periphrasis it is not easy to see any good reason for departing from the usual method of translation. They are

John XII, 26, *ἔπιον εἰμὶ ἐγώ, ἐκεῖ καὶ ὁ διάκονος ὁ ἐμὸς ἔσται,*

parei im ik þaruh sa ambahts meins wisan habaiþ,