

On the role of the (lexical) individual in grammatical variation: The future in Canadian English

James Walker & Rena Torres Cacoullos
York University & University of New Mexico

Reference to future time in English is expressed by a variety of morphosyntactic constructions: the modal construction with will (1a), the periphrastic go-future (1b), the simple present (1c) and the present progressive (1d).

- (1) a. I said, "I'll get in touch with Madame and see if I'll get them."(QEP.QC/006)
- b. "You wanted honesty, I'm gonna give you honesty."(QEP.QC/021)
- c. 'Cause when I have the baby, I'm planning on braiding her hair.(QEP.QC/023)
- d. And I said, "If things don't change around here, I'm getting out of here."(QEP.QC/037)

Opinion is divided on whether these constructions are interchangeable (e.g. Binnick 1971;Palmer 1987) or whether each form expresses different nuances of meaning (e.g. Leech 1971; Wekker 1976), with a plethora of explanations offered for the choice of variant. However, since most of these explanations rely on speaker intent or attitude towards the realization of the future eventuality, they do not readily lend themselves to empirical testing. Moreover, the choice of variant may be determined by a combination of factors, making it difficult to assess the contribution of each explanation on a one-by-one basis.

This paper reports on a multivariate analysis of the expression of future time in a corpus of contemporary Canadian English (Poplack & Walker 2002, 2003). From transcribed sociolinguistic interviews with 74 speakers from Quebec City and Montreal, we extracted every reference to the future, yielding a dataset of 3,235 tokens. We classified each token according to distinctions that could be reliably operationalized and subjected the data to multiple regression using GoldVarb 2.1 (Rand & Sankoff 1991).

Results show that will and going to are roughly equally divided in these data, together occupying over 80% of future temporal reference, with the remainder occupied by the present progressive and, to a lesser extent, the simple present. The will future is preferred with stative and transitive verbs, first-person and non-agentive subjects, indefinite temporal adverbials, and in the apodoses of conditional if-clauses. The going to future is preferred with negative and interrogative sentences, second-person subjects, and subordinate clauses, and dispreferred with verbs of motion. The present-tense forms are preferred with motion and other intransitive verbs, interrogative sentences, agentive and second-person subjects, definite temporal adverbials and main clauses. We find no straightforward correlation between temporal distance and any one of the four variants. However, a closer examination of the results reveals a great deal of interaction between factors. Most importantly, many of the putative semantic distinctions can in fact be attributed to the effect of individual lexical verbs and/or frequent subject-verb collocations. These findings suggest that the lexicon plays a greater role in grammatical variation than is generally acknowledged.

References

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