

I shall and I will

Of course, she must have said 'shall'. Every other paper reported the sentence with 'shall', and that is how it was spoken on radio and television news that day. So why did *The Sun* print 'will'? Was it simply that *shall* wouldn't fit very neatly into the headline measure?

And what is all this about anyway? More space seems to have been devoted to the question of *shall* and *will* than to any other issue of English usage. The debate has gone on since the early part of the 17th century, and in recent decades has continued to attract the attention of grammarians, usage commentators, and lexicographers. The great Danish grammarian, Otto Jespersen, devotes over 100 pages to it in his 7-volume grammar; the Fowlers give it more than 20 pages; and the OED devotes over 15 pages to the complex history of these two verbs. The problem has been around for some time. It will not go away.

Nor shall it, for the rest of this column.

The trouble began with the 17th-century grammars, which tried to formulate a simple rule to cover the use of the two verbs. In its traditional form, the rule draws a sharp distinction between *shall* and *will*. The two verbs are said to have clearly distinct meanings and clearly dif-

DAVID CRYSTAL

ferentiated patterns of usage.

The first meaning is to talk about future time, pure and simple. For this, we are told to use *shall* with the first person:

I shall be going out for a while.

and *will* for the second and third persons:

*You will get a reply in a week or so.
The manager will be with you in a minute.*

The same principle is said to apply when asking questions:

*Shall I sit over here?
Will you/they be travelling by train?*

and with negative sentences:

*I shan't be staying for long.
You/she won't like it.*

The other main use of these verbs is to express 'volitional' meanings — meanings where the intention to act is paramount, such as willingness, insistence, commanding, promising, and threatening. Here, the traditional usage pattern is reversed. (If you're English, you'll be able to 'feel' these meanings best if you say these examples with a strong stress on the *will* or *shall*. If you're American,

Scottish, or Irish, don't bother: see below.)

I will see him after dinner, and not before.

You shall go to the ball.

Mary shall have a new dress.

And similarly for questions and negative sentences:

Will we let him join our group? I doubt it.

Shall John's friends be allowed to come?

Rules of this kind have appeared in grammar books for over 300 years. And people who do not speak or write according to these rules have been condemned in no uncertain terms. 'A reprehensible popular inaccuracy,' wrote the American philologist William Dwight Whitney in 1868. And two years later, another American, Richard Grant White, wrote in *Words and their uses*:

The distinction between these words, although very clear when it is once apprehended, is liable to be disregarded by persons who have not had the advantage of early intercourse with educated English people. I mean English in blood and breeding . . .

Examples of the 'errors' abound. One is not permitted to say *I will be 30 next week*, because this sentence is said to mean 'I have the intention of

being 30 next week' – an impossibility, as age is something over which a person has no control. Or again, it would be wrong to say *If I climb the ladder, I will fall*, because nobody would have the intention of falling.

But of course, sentences of this kind have been used throughout the whole period of the debate, and continue to be used today. Who are the main rule-breakers? As already suggested, the Americans, Scots, and Irish seem never to have taken to the traditional prescription. In these dialects, *will* forms are found used for *shall* forms from as early as the 17th century, and these days the distinction is hardly ever maintained. The result is a much simpler rule: use *will* for all persons and meanings. And gradually, this usage pattern has been exercising its influence on English English too.

Today it is becoming less and less common to hear *shall* used by English people of blood and breeding. In statements (both positive and negative), the *shall* forms are still quite widely used, in the first person. But in other persons there has been a massive tendency towards replacement by *will*. In questions, the only place where it is now at all widespread is, again, in the first person: *Shall I do it?* I last heard a second person form about ten years ago, and it struck me as strange even then: an elderly lady, wanting me to move along a row of chairs, so that she could sit next to her friend, said to me, *Shall you move*

down? I was so taken with the usage, and which form to use in reply, that I forgot to move, and she left in a huff, muttering about manners in the youth [sic] of today!

Is the distinction necessary, or is it something the language can do without? Those who object to the change argue that a valuable distinction is being lost, and that ambiguity is nowadays increasingly frequent. They list cases where a contrast needs to be made, such as *Shall we have coffee?* (meaning 'Do you want some coffee?') and *Will we have coffee?* (meaning 'Do you think there'll be any coffee available?'). Probably the most famous (apocryphal) semantic contrast is the case of the Irishman who is supposed to have got into difficulties while swimming, shouted *I will drown and no one shall save me!*, was assumed by his English listeners to be doing it on purpose, and thereby drowned!

In a sense, there is no argument. The language *has* done without it, in that several important dialects haven't used the distinction for several hundred years. As already suggested, the Americans, Scots, and Irish have continued to live without it, for all except the most formal styles. The distinction, said H L Mencken in *The American Language* in 1949, 'may almost be said to have ceased to exist . . . except in the most painstaking and artificial varieties of American'. And most people in England do without it too, much of

the time, and don't seem to miss it.

So why has the debate dragged on for so long? I think it is because two important issues have generally been ignored. People have not paid sufficient attention to the context in which *shall* and *will* are spoken. And they haven't listened carefully to *how* they're spoken.

The first point, our knowledge of the context, is enough to resolve most of the problems. It is context which makes it somewhat unlikely that we would adopt the 'wilful' interpretation of *I will fall* or *I will drown*. And even in the 'coffee' example, the language gives us other ways of expressing the difference, if someone queries the meaning – such as *I wonder if we'll have coffee?* or *Do you want some coffee?* There isn't really a basis for the fears of people like Whitney that the loss of *shall* symbolises a change in our ways of thinking – that we now believe that all future events are determined by the human will. There are other ways of saying what we mean.

Stress, the degree of emphasis we give to a word, is the second factor. When people are arguing about usage, the biggest danger is to pay attention only to the words and not to the way the sentences are spoken – to the intonation, rhythm, and stress. It is possible for two people to argue furiously about what a sentence means and how it should be used, and yet each person has in mind a different version of the sentence.

WILL AND SHALL – A SURVEY OF SEVEN USAGE GUIDES

√ = stated

○ = not stated

[The survey speaks for itself; further comment would be superfluous. Ed.]

	A distinction is traditionally made between <i>will</i> and <i>shall</i> for the future tense.	This distinction is dying out and <i>will</i> is general, especially elsewhere than England.	This loss is to be regretted.	This loss is not a problem.
<i>Modern English Usage</i> , H W Fowler (ed. Ernest Gowers), Oxford 1965	√	√	√	○
<i>The Oxford Guide to the English Language</i> , E S C Weiner, 1983	√	○	○	○
<i>The Britannica Book of English Usage</i> , Doubleday-Britannica 1980	√	√	○	○
<i>The Canadian Writer's Handbook</i> , W E Messenger & J de Bruyn, Prentice-Hall 1980	○	○	○	○
<i>Encyclopedia of English</i> , A Zeiger, Coles, Toronto, 1979	√	√	○	○
<i>The Careful Writer</i> , Theodore M Bernstein, Atheneum, New York, 1977	√	√	○	√
<i>Longman Dictionary of the English Language</i> , grammar notes, 1984	√	√	○	○

This problem regularly turns up in the case of *shall* and *will*, especially when the debate is carried on in writing.

In an unemphatic, informal context, the verbs are unstressed, and the commonest version is 'll. You can replace the forms in all the above statements by 'll – for instance,

I'll be going out for a while.

You'll get a reply in a week or so.

I'll not be staying for long.

I'll see him after dinner, and not before.

Mary'll have a new dress.

There's no way of telling which of these 'lls represents *shall* and which *will*.

The opposite situation, using a strongly stressed form, has a similar result. The strong stress neutralises the distinction, adding an inescapable element of volitional meaning to all uses, as in:

I WILL go out – you won't stop me.

I SHALL go out – you won't stop me.

You WILL get a reply – I'll see that you do.

You SHALL get a reply – I'll see that you do.

The stress factor is often not considered when discussing this problem, and yet it is central. Much of the confusion surrounding the 18th-century arguments about the 'true' meanings of these words probably stems from a failure to keep the stressed and unstressed versions apart.

Moreover, with the focus on the everyday spoken language comes an emphasis on the stylistic differences between formal and informal language use. Many people operate these days with two styles of usage under their control – two standards, if you like – an informal style and a formal one. I find myself following the traditional *shall/will* rules in writing and in formal speech; and not using the distinction in everyday conversation, where I don't think I ever use anything other than *will* or 'll.

But views still vary greatly. Some people object to the change on first principles, that all change is a bad thing. Others are more selective, objecting to it on the grounds that it is

'provincial'. Others object to it because they are worried about inconsistency, and want to maintain a logical distinction. Some indeed impose a logical distinction of their own – as did the philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars, who wrote in his book *Science and Metaphysics* (1968): 'I am reconstructing English usage . . . I shall use "shall" and "will" in such a way that "shall" always expresses an intention, whereas "will" is always a simple future.'

My own view is that grammarians have made these two words carry an unnecessary burden of meaning. Much of the meaning of volition comes from saying the verb in an emphatic manner, and by reading in from the context in which the word is used. Much of the meaning of futurity, likewise, is found in the rest of the sentence – *I'll be back tomorrow*, *He'll be 30 next week*, and so on. It's necessary to look at these broader contexts, when working out the grammar of a language. It doesn't help me solve the question of the *Sun's* headline, though. Shall we send the piece to the editor to see what he says?