THE PERSISTANCE OF PRESCRIPTIVISM
IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR

Individuals have attempted to «ascertain» and «fix» languages for religious, philosophical and even social reasons from the beginning of grammatical studies in India and Greece to the present day. An understanding and appreciation of this general development are important since it places in their proper historical context the attitudes of contemporary English and American grammarians to be discussed in detail later on. The following sketch attempts to point up only those aspects of Greek, Roman, Medieval and Renaissance grammars and theories of grammar that are important for an understanding of the Early Modern and Modern periods.

The Greek philosophers approached the study of grammar only indirectly, since they were more interested in classifying linguistic and other phenomena into various philosophical categories (such as *onoma* meaning name, noun, or subject, *rhema* meaning verbal or predicate, and *syndesmoi* or linking particles) than they were in analysing the language as such. The oldest extant Greek grammar is the *Techne Grammatice* of Dionysius Thrax (first century B. C.), on which virtually all traditional grammars in the west are ultimately based. Apollonius Dyscolus (second century A. D.) complemented the work of Dionysius by writing a systematic Syntax of Greek, which Dionysius had failed to do, but most of Appolonius' work has unfortunately been lost (see Robins, 1967: pp. 9-44; Dinneen, 1967: pp. 72-113).

The Romans added little to what they borrowed from the Greeks. They were aware of the absence of the article, por example, and

the presence of the ablative case in Latin, among other things, but since the two languages are so similar, Greek categories were for the most part simply superimposed on Latin. This is already apparent in the extant books (numbers five through ten) of Varro's, *De Lingua Latina* (first century B. C), the first grammar of Latin and at the same time the most innovative with regard to the demonstrable grammatical categories of Latin (see Robins, 1967: pp. 45-64; Dinneen, 1967: pp. 104-123).

Greek grammars, then, were based on an analysis of Greek (even if this was primarily literary Greek), since those who made them had no prior models to help them. The Romans, however, hardly had a chance to make an independent analysis of their own language, since educated Romans were taught spoken as well as written Greek —the former usually by what we might call the «direct method»; that is, orally by an educated Greek slave— and were, therefore, virtually bilingual. Consequently, the grammars the Romans constructed inevitably followed a Greek model. (This situation was often repeated in the Post-Renaissance period when educated Englishmen, who were taught spoken as well as written Latin, and who in many cases were also virtually bilingual, usually wrote grammars of English based on a Latin model.)

During the Medieval period in Europe, Latin was moribund as a first language, but a knowledge of it was essential to anyone wanting to advance especially within, though also outside, the Church. As a consequence, people had to be taught Latin from Latin grammars, beginning usually with Aelius Donatus's *Ars minor* (fourth century A. D.) and continuing with Priscian's *Institutiones Grammaticae* (sixth century A. D.).

Excepting some revisions of these grammars during the late Middle-Ages, bringing them more in line with scholastic logic and other later philosophical developments, they remained the most important grammatical treatises well into the Renaissance —when writers of various vernacular grammars, such as Dante, Erasmus, Scaliger, Sanctius and Lyly tried to apply the principles of Latin grammar to their native languages. These grammars were usually related to Latin grammar very much the way Latin grammars were related to Greek grammar, though making English, not to mention other Germanic languages, fit the framework of Latin was conside-

rably more difficult than making Latin grammar fit the framework of Greek (see Robins, 1967: pp. 66-128; Dinneen, 1967: pp. 126-166).

In England at the beginning of the Modern period, and later in the United States as well, when the effects of the industrial revolution and the important demographic and social changes caused by it were being initiated, a need was felt primarily by the rising lower and middle classes for a definitive grammar of English. Only two, however, according to Ian Michael (1970: p. 588), were published in England before 1600, one in English by William Bullokar in 1586 and another in Latin by Paul Greaves in 1594. In the seventeenth century thirty-two more appeared, and in the eighteenth century well over five hundred were published, again according to Michael (1970: pp. 588-594).

Almost all of these grammarians attempted to do for English grammar what, for example, the dictionary writers such as Robert Cawdrey, Nathaniel Bailey and Dr. Johnson had attempted to do for English vocabulary; and such phoneticians —or orthoepists— as John Hart, John Wallis and Christopher Cooper tried to do for English pronunciation. And all of these individual scholars were trying to do for English essentially the same thing that the academies of France, Italy and Spain were doing more or less successfully for their respective languages; that is, they were to one degree or another «ascertaining» and «fixing» it (see Baugh, 1957: pp. 306-355).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries most of the English grammars were basically of two kinds; that is, they were either directed to foreigners who wanted to learn English (which is why they were often written in Latin, French or some other important foreign language), or they were introductions to the study of Latin —using the student's knowledge of his native language to help him learn Latin grammar. The grammars of the eighteenth century, however, were usually English grammars written for English speaking people; their aim was to teach English speakers «correct English». The authors of these grammars were in general agreement with regard to the following purposes: to reduce the language to «rule», and to correct the usage of the English speaking people by making it conform to a standard of «reason». In order to achieve these goals, the eighteenth century grammarians had to repudiate the usage of even the best authors. And even though a few writers

such as Joseph Priestly, George Campbell and Noah Webster protested —at least in theory— the general tendency was simply to ignore usage.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite the developments of historical, descriptive and structural linguistics; the science of lexicography; and surveys of usage (see Hulbert, 1955; Lamberts, 1972), the distance between prescriptive or *a priori* rules and actual usage has often remained distressingly great. This is particularly true of long-standing distinctions, such as those concerning the various rules for the use of *shall* and *will* in statements, questions and subordinate clauses, which date (in part, at least) from the middle of the seventeenth century (John Wallis first presented these rules in his *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* in 1653). C. C. Fries summarizes the situation of the 1930's in the following way: «Although the present-day popular views of grammar do not, in medieval fashion, find 'divine inspiration in the eight parts of speech' and veiled references to the Trinity in 'the three persons of verbal conjugation', yet they do look upon the rules of the common school grammars as the infallible measure of correct language, and the one defence against the forces of corruption that continually beset it... Even a hundred years of the historical method in linguistic scholarship has failed to affect in any marked degree the common grammatical ideas and ideals of the general public» (1927: p. 221).

During the period which followed the publication of Fries's work quoted above to the present time, the «common grammatical ideas» have apparently not changed considerably either in the United States or England, at least so far as the general public and its educational training is concerned. In an important recent study undertaken at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, an English Education Research Group —headed by H. W. Mittins— made an inquiry into *Attitudes to English Usage*; or rather a survey of attitudes towards selected items of English usage. One of these items, number forty-eight, is of particular interest (457 respondents were polled concerning their immediate reaction to the underlined portion of an utterance) since it touches on the rules for the use of *shall/will*: «I *will* be twenty-one tomorrow» (1970: p. 97). The Mittins team made the following observations in summarizing the results: «Comments were

more frequent than usual, but, though most of them were adverse (e. g. 'I have never met just such a sentence —I mean one where the illogicality of this use of the modal verb is so clearly apparent'), the actual judgments were on the whole unexpectedly tolerant. This proved, in fact, to be one of the four items obtaining several majority votes; on the average over the four situations, most of the students, teachers and non-educationists (as well as nearly half of the lecturers) registered tolerance... Examiners (37 percent approval) were conspicuously harsher than the others. In all groups other than theirs the 'spread' of reaction between informal speech and formal writing was very wide» (1970: p. 102).

In a review of Mittins' inquiry, published in *Language* (49, 1973), the contemporary situation in the United States concerning popular opinions toward both linguistics and usage problems is presented by Edward Finegan as a rather bleak one: «Essentially zero», so the LSA assessed the impact of recent advances in linguistics on the general public in its 1964 report to the Commission on the Humanities. The members of the LSA committee (Ferguson, Halle, Hamp, Hill, Sebeok, and Moulton) conceded that «a fair portion of highly educated laymen see in linguistics the great enemy of all they hold dear». And they did not exaggerate in attributing this energetic, if not popular, disfavor largely to the furor stirred up by the critical reaction to the treatment of usage in Webster's Third. To recognize that a score of reviewers of one dictionary could deal linguistics a stinging political setback is to acknowledge the significance of usage for linguistics, and for its repute in society; for it is chiefly through matters of usage that grammar and linguistics make contact with the language-world of English teachers and educated laymen.

Over the past several decades, certain members of the LSA have directed their atention to the question of usage. Noteworthy among them are three former presidents of the Society: Leonard Bloomfield, Charles Fries, and Albert Marckwardt... Observing that the bulk of their work on usage was completed long before the appearance of the infamous Third in 1961, we begin to understand the tenacity of the stranglehold which myths about «good grammar» exercise on popular and educated views of language» (1973: pp. 939-940).

Despite attempts like these to promote tolerance with regard to matters of usage, certain recent works have actually maintained

an inflexible attitude concerning such «rules» as those referring to
the use of *shall* and *will*. Perhaps the most notorius examples of
recent intolerance can be found in Wilson Follett's, *Modern Ameri-
can Usage*, which makes the following statement concerning the
uses of *shall* and *will*: «We have, then, *shall* in the first person to
express futurity, *will* to express volition. The rest of the pattern is:
for futurity, *will* in the second and third persons; for volition, *shall*
in the second and third. This conjugation, surveyed by itself, looks
like a contrivance of school grammarians cunningly devised to
torment the young and to make English complicated for the foreig-
ner. Acutally, it is the product of a slow and intelligible evolution.
It was in answer to the practical necessities of communication that
Old English *willan* and *sculan* (*sceal*) grew into what they are.
Given a firm hold on the foregoing paradigm, the remaining tenses
and moods present no stumbling block, because they involve either
no change of auxiliary or only a change of *shall* to *should* and or
will to *would*» (1966: p. 374).

The present study takes as its point of departure the first im-
portant scholarly attempt to trace this development —the doctoral
thesis of Charles Fries, published in *PMLA* in 1925 under the title,
«The Periphrastic Future with *Shall* and *Will* in Modern English».
In this study, Fries did not conclude that the development of the
rules governing the use of *shall* and *will* was «the product of a
slow and intelligible evolution»; instead he noted that: «Thus after
more than a century of discussion of the problem of *shall* and *will*
there are no thoroughly accepted views of what the actual usage
of these two words is, of the meaning and trend of the development
of that usage, and of the causes which gave rise to it. Instead, the
student is confronted with a multitude of articles presenting a
many-sided conflict of opinion» (1925: p. 966).

Since the publication of Fries's doctoral thesis in 1925 several
attempts have been made to redefine the rules governing the use
of *shall* and *will* in the light of more recent scholarship, even by
Fries himself, whose thesis has been republished wholly or partly
several times since.

However, most of these studies restrict themselves either to
surveys of usage using a limited corpus (see Finegan, 1973: pp. 939-
943), or simply to a more or less superficial treatment of *shall* and

will in declarative sentences —either following or totally abandoning the traditional rules. A few contemporary grammarians have, however, undertaken more far-reaching and novel examinations of these auxiliaries in an attempt to clarify and schematize their use in modern English. In the recent Mittins' study mentioned earlier, *Attitudes to English Usage*, modern British usage is summarized as follows: «Gowers (*The Complete Plain Words*, 1954) comes down in favor of the «textbook orthodoxy» that still prescribes *shall* with the first person for the plain future... Collins (*Collins' Everyday English Usage*, 1960) thinks that if —as seems possible— the rule is decaying and *shall* and *will* are becoming interchangeable, «certain subtleties of meaning are likely to disappear». Golding (*Common Errors in English Language*, 1964) repeats the traditional future tense paradigm with first-person *shall*. Barber (*Linguistic Change in Present-Day English*, 1964) points out —without the hint of disapproval that attends earlier noticing of the practice— that the abbreviated *'ll* form (e. g. *I'll see you*) often obviates difficult choice; in his view, where the full words are employed, the commoner *will* is spreading at the expense of *shall* and «is likely to be the winner in any levelling process» (1970: p. 101).

Contemporaneous with the publication in England of Mittins' study, an important compendium of attitudes toward English usage in America was published by Roy H. Copperud: *American Usage: The Consensus*, 1970. Copperud initially dismisses the whole dilemma in a perfunctory way by pointing out that the distinction between the use of *shall* and *will* is generally ignored: «The traditional rule for the use of *shall* and *will* is that to express the simple future, or to indicate a simple intention, *shall* should be used with the first person and *will* with the second and third persons... In the United States, however, this distinction is almost universally ignored, and *will* is used indiscriminately with all persons to express both the simple future and determination. This is the consensus of Bernstein, Bryant, Copperud, Evans, Flesch, Fowler, and *American Heritage*; only Follett insists on the traditional usage, which is still observed, more or less, in Britain, though Fowler concedes that the American practice has made enormous inroads there and that insistence on the traditional pattern may soon be considered 'insular pedantry'» (1970: p. 243). Later, however, Copperud almost appears to contra-

dict himself when he notes that certain distinctions can be made by following one's «ear», since «idiom shows the way»: «No fewer than twenty pages (in an appendix) are devoted to discussing the ins and outs of *shall, should, will, would* by Follett. It is a complicated subject, but most of the questions that arise in this connection are readily solved by ear, since idiom shows the way. For example, the survival of *shall* in questions: 'Shall I answer the phone?' *Will* is impossible here, even to those ignorant or uncaring of grammar, and the prescription of *shall* seems hardly worth making» (1970: p. 243).

Two more studies recently published in England help indicate the state of the art: *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb*, by F. R. Palmer (1965), and, *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, by Randolph Quirk, et al. (1972).

Palmer points up three criteria for the classification of *will*, which sugest six categories; the criteria are: «a) The possibility of collocation with future time adverbials will distinguish between the future and non-future uses (collocation with other adverbials (habitual and present time) permits further distinctions) b) In one use only (reference simply to the future) *will* is not used after *if* (in conditional clauses) c) In one use there is the possibility of the substitution of *will* by *shall* (in limited contexts) and in others of the verbal form by a form with no modal» (1965: 109).

The first of the six categories is reserved for «plain» indications of futurity, which is apparently where the greatest difficulties are encountered distinguishing the uses of *will* from *shall*, and at this point Palmer asks the reader to look ahead to the section on *shall* and *will* together where he summarizes their essential characteristics as follows: «It might, perhaps, be possible to account for the uses of *will* and *shall* by considering first, those that are not 'plain future' but refer to action initiated by the speaker or the person addressed. We may suggest that *will* indicates internal initiation, by the subject of the verb (his willingness), but *shall* indicates external initiation, by someone else. It follows from this that since, in statements, the speaker will usually announce activity initiated by himself, he will say I *will*. On the other hand since, when he asks a question, he is concerned about activity initiated by the person addressed, he will say *Shall I...?* but *Will you...?* Whether the speaker or the person

addressed initiates the activity it will always be external with *he*, so we shall find both *He shall...?* and *Shall he...?»* (1965: pp. 114-115). Palmer then schematizes the foregoing by presenting the following paradigm:

I will.	Shall I?
You shall.	Will you?
He shall.	Shall he?
We will.	Shall we?
They shall.	Shall they?

He continues by noting that with regard to the forms relating to the «pure future», the following paradigm would be expected:

I shall.	Will I?
You will.	Shall you?
He will.	Will he?
We shall.	Will we?
They will.	Will they?

«This is indeed a familiar, traditional, picture», he adds. «But it is not wholly correct. Two minor modifications are needed: 1) With *I* and *we, will* and *shall* are both used in the statement as well as the question. 2) *Shall you* is found in literature but not in colloquial English —at least in my own speech. *Will you* may occur in its place» (1965: p. 115).

The second category that refers to the future is «*volition*», which «suggests willingness or agreement» (1965: p. 110). The third category is *induction*, which is used for «general, timeless truths, that may be proved inductively» (1965: p. 111); for example: *Oil will float on water.* The fourth category refers to uses «that express characteristic activity» (1965: p. 111), of the type: *He'll tell you anything.* The fifth category refers to the probability of something happening, as in: *That'll be enough.* The last category refers to an insistence upon acting, as in: *You will do these things»* (1965: p. 113).

In the section on *shall* only two uses are listed, «*futurity*» —which has already been discussed— and «*promise*», which Palmer borrows from Jespersen's category «obligational», and defines by noting that, «*shall* cannot, in this use, be replaced by *will*, and that it may occur

in conditionals» (1965: p. 113). An example of the first qualification would be: *Shall I come?* and of the second: *If he shall do it...* In several instances —such as the last example given— differences between British and American usage could have been pointed out, but apparently the analysis was based primarily on peculiarities «at least in my own speech».

The most recent attempt at a systematic categorization of the uses of *shall* and *will* from the British point of view is found in the work by Randolph Quirk, et al. referred to earlier: *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. In this study the uses of *shall* have been reduced to three categories and those of *will* to four; the statements about *shall*, however, are qualified by references to American English usage. The following schema represents the uses of *shall*:

1) Willingness on the part of the speaker in 2nd and 3rd person («weak volition»). Restricted use: e. g. He *shall* get his money. You *shall* do exactly as you wish.
2) Intention on the part of the speaker, only in 1st person («intermediate volition»). Especially British English: e. g. I *shan't* be long. We *shall* let you know our decision. We *shall* overcome.
3) a. Insistence («strong volition»). Restricted use. b) Legal and quasilegal: e. g. You *shall* do as I say. He *shall* be punished. The vendor *shall* maintain the equipment in good repair (1972: p. 99).

This schema is followed by some qualifying remarks, indicating that only category two is widely used today and that «*shall* is, on the whole and especially outside British English, an infrequent auxiliary with restricted use compared with *should, will,* and *would*. It is only in the first person singular of questions that it cannot be replaced by *will*» (1972: p. 99). (This is the first instance in any grammar I have seen where a distinction was made between singular and plural in questions in the first person.)

The following schema represents the uses of *will*:

1) Willingness («weak volition») unstressed, especially second person. «Downtoners» like *please* may be used to soften the tone in requests: e. g. He'll help you if you ask him. Will you have another cup of coffee? Will you (please, kindly, etc.) open the window.

2) Intention («intermediate volition»). Usually contracted *'ll*; mainly 1st person: e. g. I'll write as soon as I can. We won't stay longer than two hours.

3) Insistence («strong volition» = insist on). Stressed, hence no *'ll* contraction. An uncommon meaning: e. g. He *will* do it, whatever you say (He insists on doing it...). (*Cf.* He *shall* do it, whatever you say = 'I insist on his doing it').

4) Prediction. *Cf.* the similar meanings of other expressions for logical necessity and habitual present. The contracted form *'ll* is common. a) Specific prediction: e. g. The game will/must/should be finished by now. b) Timeless prediction: e. g. Oil will float/floats on water. (This possibility is not mentioned by Palmer.) c) Habitual predictions: e. g. He'll (always) talk for hours if you give him the chance (1972: pp. 100-101).

Quirk succinctly summarizes the future in English by noting that there is no «time/tense parallel» for the future corresponding to the present and past, and that instead there are a number of ways in indicating future time. This is undoubtedly an important reason why there are many more confusions with regard to the employment of the future tense than the past; «Futurity, modality, and aspect are closely related, and future time is rendered by means of modal auxiliaries or semi-auxiliaries, or by simple present or progressive forms» (1972: p. 87).

A number of studies of the use of *shall* and *will* have also appeared in the United States but only recently have these become extensive, innovative attempts to schematize the various uses of these auxiliaries in contemporary English. One of these recent studies, *The English Verb: Form and Meanings,* by Martin Joos, is a stimulating and generally systematic treatment of the modals —especially of *shall* and *will.*

In Joos's study an «abstract semiological cube» (1966: p. 149) is suggested, with the modals at the eight corners; he then proceeds to list those characteristics belonging to the faces of the cube:

Casual modals (will, shall, can, may) take their relation from the minimal social matrix of events, where the determining factors are the resultant of chance and whim operating upon the items that populate the factual world of accepted reality; but the

> Stable modals (must, ought to, dare, need) find their relation in the maximal social matrix of events, where the determining factors are eternal and omnipresent: they are the community mores. Accordingly, stable modals exclude remote tense.
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> Adequate modals (will, can, must, dare) derive their force from completeness in the set of determining factors; but the
>
> Contingent modals (shall, may, ought to, need) get their weakness from some deficiency in the determining factors.
>
> Assurance (will, shall, must, ought to) comes from *penalties* for failure of the specified event to occur; but
>
> Potentiality (can, may, dare, need) comes from immunity in case the actor brings the event to completion (1966: pp. 149-150).

Joos then explains that the minimal matrix of events «always has a center», and that the occupant of the center «determines its extent and boundary» (1966: p. 150). Apparently, the whole «background of the world of accepted reality» that one learns about throughout his life constitutes the total «minimal social matrix» (1966: p. 150). The maximal social matrix, however, seems to refer to the community mores «which one is not aware of having learned anything about...» (1966: p. 151).

Joos presents this system *a priori,* and then notes that the «readers have been warned that a survey of the whole modal system would precede the verification of any of it; accordingly, it must be understood that I have been very cautious, very careful not to say anything in these pages which is not verified by the data in *Trial»* (1966: p. 152). (Actually, it was based on Sybille Bedford's, *The Trial of Dr. Adams* —the American title—, or, *The Best We Can Do,* Collins, 1958 —the British title. Joos quotes Henry Lee Smith, Jr. in order to justify his use of the book: «In my opinion *The Trial of Dr. Adams* is unique in English writing. There is no other work to my knowledge that so carefully mirrors actual English speech...» (1966: p. 8). It is true, however, that Joos's corpus is limited and that his abstract semiological cube is based exclusively on British English.)

A still more recent attempt to clarify the present-day uses of *shall* and *will* in the United States is found in J. J. Lamberts' *A Short Introduction to English Usage;* interestingly, Lamberts bases an important part of his analysis on Joos's study of the English verb. In fact, much of what Lamberts has to say on the

use of *shall* and *will* is a much needed simplification of Joos's abstract, almost mathematical presentation, as well as a reapplication of it to contemporary American English.

After noting that English verb constructions usually refer to «factual events and circumstances» Lamberts points out with regard to modals that «on the other hand they emphasize not event or circumstance but the relation between what is supposed to exist or to take place and the objective world as the speaker knows it. In the case of *may* and *can* Joos suggests that the event will probably happen since in his opinion the circumstances seem favorable» (1972: p. 245). Already a sizable portion of the «abstract semiological cube» that Joos suggested has been treated, and at least two modals defined within the system.

More specifically with regard to *shall* and *will*, Lamberts indicates that they «do not first of all predict an event. Instead they say that the speaker has confidence that the event will happen sooner or later: I *will* be there at noon. *Shall* further suggests that certain conditions need to be met: I *shall* be there at noon. *Shall* further suggests that certain conditions need to be met: I *shall* be there at noon (if I can get a ride). There is even the further suggestion that the speaker or writer expects to assume charge of the conditions: You *shall* have our finest service (even if we have to engage additional employees» (1972: pp. 245-246). It is worth noting with regard to these statements on the use of *shall* and *will* that *shall* is not treated simply as a stylistic variant of *will*.

Lamberts then makes a further point concerning another present-day use of *will*: «In spite of what the handbooks tell us, *will* is commonly used to note events or situations which the speaker knows to be true:

You *will* need an umbrella and a raincoat.
There *will* be someone at the box office with tickets for you.

If these things do not turn out that way, the speaker's reliability rather than his intelligence will be called into question. There is little evidence in actual usage to suggest that we need to be greatly concerned about whether the subject is in the first person or the second or the third:

I'm getting my books; I *will* be there in a minute.
You *will* find us in the Minneapolis phone book.
Our tree expert *will* be happy to inspect your elm tree.

That is the way the language works, though it is not the rule that a seventeenth-century mathematician dreamed up» (1972: pp. 246-247).

The last remark brings this study full-circle —or almost so, since the reference is of course to John Wallis who first formulated the «rules» for the use of *shall* and *will*. It was mentioned at the outset that the Greek and especially the Latin grammarians were less and less able to make their descriptions of the language reflect actual usage, and in seventeenth and especially eighteenth-century England almost the only true descriptions of the language were found in the lists of «grievous errors» committed against the mother tongue. In the twentieth century, the effects of most of the rules laid down from two to three hundred years ago concerning *shall* and *will* still are found to one degree or another in many of the grammars and handbooks of English; fortunately, however, a number of works such as those just examined, containing fresh insights on the subject, are also available.

RONALD TAUBITZ

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