

The use of 'will' in present tense narrative

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Over the past decade, more writers of English have begun to employ the present tense as the primary mode for their narratives instead of the past tense, which has up until recently been regarded as the norm for narrative tense. One example which illustrates this current trend is that out of 102 novels which were shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in the UK between 2000 and 2016, 31 of them, that is 30.4%, narrate in the present tense.

The choice of tense in fiction is not a mere syntactic operation but a stylistic and narratological decision. Genette (1980) explains the function of tense in narrative as that 'in which the relationship between the time of the story and the time of the discourse is expressed' (p.29). When this narratological perspective is applied to each tense, the past tense in a narrative signifies that the narrated events occurred prior to the act of narration. On the other hand, in fiction in which the present tense is used as the narrative mode throughout, this time lag between the occurrences of events and the speaker's enunciation is supposed to disappear. This simultaneity of narration and events seems to be the aspect that contemporary present tense narratives exploit and benefit from most. The use of the present tense, however, is not restricted to expressing the narrator's or a character's here-and-now. In fact, as Fludernik (2003: 201) and Huber (2016: 13-14) point out, literary usage of the present tense does not necessarily correspond with the time being narrated. As well as laying out the situation of narration, the present tense can be used to portray past events and a character's memories or to depict a character's inner monologue.

The present tense in narrative not only signifies a simultaneity of action and narration but also implies a state that is open to the unknown future, where neither the narrator nor the character knows the consequences of the present action. A keyword analysis, using two small corpora reveals an aspect which can stylistically distinguish present tense narrative from past tense narrative. One corpus which I used for this study was reproduced from the serious fiction section of the Lancaster Speech, Writing and Thought Presentation corpus (Semino and Short 2004). Out of the twenty different fictional texts constituting this section in the original corpus, 1st-person narratives and present tense narratives were excluded. The remaining ten texts, each of which was comprised of 2,000 words, were used for a smaller corpus of past tense narrative (the past-tense corpus). A new corpus was compiled from 2,000 word texts of ten novels written in the present tense published after the year 2000 (the present-tense corpus). The narratives in both corpora all have 3rd-person narrators instead of 1st-person or 2nd-person narrators.

Two keyword lists were created based on these two corpora by comparing the two word lists, each of which was created from one of the two corpora, using the corpus concordancer Wordsmith Tools (Scott 2016). One of the pronounced features of the lists is the high keyness value of the modal verbs 'will' in the present-tense corpus and 'could' in the past-tense corpus. Other verbs on the keyword lists tend to correspond to the tense feature of each text: the keywords in the present-tense corpus compared with the past-tense corpus include 'is', 'says', 'has', 'does' and 'thinks' while

the keywords in the past-tense corpus compared with the present-tense corpus include 'was', 'had', 'said', 'were', 'looked'.

It can easily be assumed that the modal verb 'will' will appear in a character's direct speech/ thoughts in the narratives of both tenses. It does in both corpora. However, the number of occurrences in the past-tense corpus is very small, and the occurrences are limited to particular texts. On the other hand, in the present-tense corpus 'will' occurs in all the texts except one and not only in characters' direct speech and thought presentation but also in narration and characters' indirect discourse presentation.

The concordance lines containing 'will' show the stylistic peculiarity of present tense narrative which allows the use of 'will' in narration and indirect forms of discourse presentation. Particularly in narration, the modal verb 'will' seems to reflect the viewpoints of both a character and the narrator to whom the consequences of the present events or actions are unknown. One example which illustrates this stylistic function in present-tense narrative is from Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies*:

(1) 'Well, you know,' he (Thomas Cromwell) says. 'We can't go throwing ambassadors out. Because then we don't get to know anything at all.'

Truth is, he is not afraid of Katherine's intrigues: the mood between France and the Empire is at the moment unremittingly hostile, and if open war breaks out, the Emperor *will* have no troops to spare for invading England.

(Mantel 2012: 76, my emphasis)

If the passage above is rewritten in the past tense, the same degree of intensity and incompleteness due to the unknown future state which is implied by the modal verb might not be maintained by the substituted 'would'.

Although the use of modal verb 'will' in narration and indirect forms of discourse presentation is grammatically possible only in present tense narrative, the tense system needs to be considered separately from the modal system in analysis as Palmer (1990) argues. 'Will' belongs to the modal system, not the tense system, which is morphologically marked as present or past. The modal verb 'will' tends to be used where there is reference to a general envisaged, planned, intended or hoped for state of affairs, as opposed to a statement that a specific event will in fact take place (Palmer 1990: 140). In the example above, the situation in which the Emperor cannot afford troops for invading England is envisaged by Cromwell (and the narrator), not forecasted neutrally as a future state. Futurity implied by 'will' derives from modality rather than tense.

Another modal verb 'could' is found on the keyword list of the past-tense corpus. The concordance lines of 'could' in the past-tense corpus show that approximately 72.7% of the occurrences of 'could' are associated with the past tense especially when it expresses the ability of the subject or the possibility of the event discussed. On the other hand, about 27.3% of the occurrences function as a means of indirectness, or as a part of conditionals and metaphorical expressions. This suggests that such usage of 'could' is related more to pragmatic politeness and rhetorical effects than to the past tense of the narrative.

References

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