

## A future for *willen*

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- Dutch *willen* is at least three-way ambiguous between a desire, a habitual and a future meaning.
- Focusing on the future meaning, *willen* aligns with root modals (and not, for instance, with tenses).
- This current ambiguity between desire and future *willen* fits in with a well-known pattern of language change.

Cross-linguistically, desire verbs tend to acquire non-desire future meanings.

- Classic example: English *will* < Old English *willan* “want” (1)

- (1) a. ... þa hi to scipan **woldon**.  
when they to ships wanted  
‘... when they wanted to go to their ships.’ (OE, Traugott 1989)  
b. They **will** go to their ships.

- Also reported for Danish, Georgian, Inuit, Malay/Indonesian, Buli (Niger-Congo), Nimboran (Papuan), Bongu (Papuan) and Dakota (Siouan) (Bybee et al. 1994; Harris & Campbell 1995).

We ask two questions:

1. How many uses does Dutch *willen* currently have and how do they relate to each other?

Standard approach in diachronic research: deduce semantic and syntactic properties at various stages through corpora.

In Dutch, at least a desire, a future, and a habitual use are available.  
→ A case of ambiguity (as opposed to, e.g., generality).

- (2) Jan **wil** slapen.  
Jan wants sleep  
‘John wants to sleep.’  
(3) Jan **wil** nog wel slapen.  
Jan wants still wel sleep  
‘John will (manage to) go to sleep.’

More Dutch examples:

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- (4) Looking at the sky: Het **wil** nog wel (gaan) regenen vandaag.  
it wants still wel go rain today  
'It will rain today.'
- (5) Deze bank **wil** nog wel een rondje mee.  
this couch wants still wel a round with  
'This couch will last for a while longer.' (<https://www.contactzuid.nl/marktplein/758/deze-bank-wil-nog-een-rondje-mee>)
- (6) Een vertaling uit het Engels of Frans te jureren **wil** nog wel gaan.  
A translation out the English or French to judge wants still wel go  
'I will manage to translate something from English or Dutch.'  
([https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_vri013boek08\\_01/\\_vri013boek08\\_01\\_0336.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_vri013boek08_01/_vri013boek08_01_0336.php))
- (7) Dat kruid **wil** nog wel op veel plaatsen groeien.  
that herb wants still wel at many places grow  
'That herb will grow in many places.'

Note 1: There always seems to be a 'manage' or 'succeed' interpretation present.

Note 2: The future reading is not accepted in all cases by all speakers of Dutch; speakers from the South of the Netherlands (Brabant, Limburg) seem to accept more cases than speakers from other parts of the country. I do not have data on Belgian-Dutch.

I will argue that the future use is yet different from the habitual use of **willen**, described by Barbiers (1995), Rooryck (2017)

- (8) Jan **wil** {wel eens/ geregeld} helpen.  
Jan wants WEL sometimes/ regularly help.inf  
i. 'John wants to help.'  
ii. 'John tends to help.'
- (9) Ziekenhuiskosten **willen** wel eens uit de hand lopen.  
hospital.costs want WEL sometimes out the hand walk  
'Hospital costs tend to spin out of control.'

## 2. What kind of future does *willen* become?

Focusing on the undescribed future meaning, I will argue that **willen** patterns syntactically and semantically like a root modal.

- (10) **Root modal** = A modal with a circumstantial modal base (Kratzer 1991), grouping together ability, deontic, circumstantial, teleological modals.
1. E.g. English *We have to* give a talk, *able to*, ...
  2. In contrast with epistemic modals, e.g. *We might* be in Ohio.

Important in light of recent research showing that languages encode future in diverse ways (Cinque 1999; see Bochnak 2019 for a recent review):

- Tense: English *will* (Kissine 2008), MC *jiang* (Huang 2015),
- Modal (epistemic, root, etc.): English *will* (Palmer 1987; Copley 2009; Giannakidou & Mari 2018; Klecha 2013); Greek *tha* and the Italian future morpheme (Giannakidou & Mari 2018); St'át'imcets *kelh* (Matthewson 2006); Indonesian *akan* (Copley 2009); MC *jiang, hui, yao* (Lin 2006; Wu & Kuo 2010; Santana LaBarge 2016),

- Aspect: Indonesian *mau* and English *be going to* (Copley 2009), Gitksan *dim* (Matthewson 2013), MC *yao* (Lin 2012).

#### Outline

- An ambiguity in **willen**
- History of future **willen**
- Future **willen** as a root modal
- Discussion and conclusion

## 1. Ambiguity of *willen*

English **want** can be used in a non-bouletic way, although not productively.

- (11) a. %The key doesn't **want** to fit.  
 b. %It **wants** to rain.

In Dutch, however, non-bouletic **willen** is productive. We show below that *want* is ambiguous between a desire, future, and habitual reading.

### 1.1 Desire vs. future & habitual *willen*

- **Willen** imposes different restrictions on its subject in the different uses.

Desire *willen*-sentences must have a sentient subject. In contrast, future *willen*-sentences and habitual *willen*-sentences do not.

- (12) a. De koffie **wil** nog wel opraken. future  
 the coffee wants still WEL run.out  
 'The coffee will run out.'  
 b. Ziekenhuiskosten **willen** wel eens uit de hand lopen. habitual  
 hospital.costs want WEL sometimes out the hand walk  
 'Hospital costs tend to spin out of control.'

Future and habitual **willen** can occur with clausal idioms.

- (13) a. Het kwartje **wil** nog wel vallen. future  
 the quarter wants still WEL fall  
 Lit. 'The quarter wants to fall.' (It's going to become clear.)  
 b. De moed **wil** hem wel eens in de schoenen zinken. habitual  
 The courage wants him WEL sometimes in the shoes sink  
 'His heart tends to sink.'

- If *want*-sentences are ambiguous, then they should pass Zwicky & Sadock's (1973) ambiguity tests.

Alternative hypothesis: in these languages, **want**'s semantics is general, compatible with both desire and future readings.

- Cf. *teacher*, compatible with any subject of instruction.
- Cf. *pen*, ambiguous between 'animal enclosure' or 'writing tool.'

- (14) John and Mary are **teachers**.  
 1. → John is a math teacher, Mary is also a math teacher. "uniform reading"

2. → John is a math teacher, Mary is a physics teacher. “mixed reading”

(15) a. Jan en Marie **willen** nog wel slapen.  
John and Mary want still want sleep.

Readings:

- |  |         |
|--|---------|
| 1. ‘John and Mary want to sleep.’              | uniform |
| 2. ‘John and Mary will (manage to) sleep.’     | uniform |
| 3. #‘John wants to sleep and Mary will sleep.’ | #mixed  |
| 4. #‘John will sleep and Mary wants to sleep.’ | #mixed  |

(16) a. Jan en Marie **willen** nog wel slapen.  
John and Mary want still want sleep.

Readings:

- |  |         |
|--|---------|
| 1. ‘John and Mary want to sleep.’                  | uniform |
| 2. ‘John and Mary tend to sleep.’                  | uniform |
| 3. #‘John wants to sleep and Mary tends to sleep.’ | #mixed  |
| 4. #‘John tends to sleep and Mary wants to sleep.’ | #mixed  |

## 1.2. Future vs. habitual *willen*

Future **willen** can take a complement with no overt verb (17). Habitual **willen** cannot (18).

(17) a. Die koffie **wil** nog wel op vandaag.  
that coffee wants still WEL out today  
‘The coffee will probably run out today.’

b. Deze bank **wil** nog wel een rondje mee.  
this couch wants still WEL a round with  
‘This couch will manage to last for a while longer.’

(18) De koffie **wil** nog wel eens op \*(raken/gaan).  
the coffee wants still wel sometimes out run go  
‘The coffee tends to run out.’

## 1.3 Interim summary

Native speaker intuitions show that:

- **Willen**-sentences are currently ambiguous.
- Future, habitual and desire **willen** have different selectional requirements.

Focusing on the undescribed future **willen**:

- How old is it? Did it develop from desire **willen**?
- What kind of future is it: is it a tense, modal, aspect?

## 2. How old is future **willen**?

Attested since the 13th century

- ‘Infrequent’ in Early Middle Dutch (Pijnenburg&Schoonheim 1996); unambiguous future readings appear in Middle Dutch (Verwijs 1912).

(19) De geheele dijcxpoort **wil** omvallen ende storten.  
 the whole dyke.gate wants fall and collapse  
 'The whole dyke-gate will fall and collapse.' (Middle Dutch, from Middle Dutch Dictionary; lemma 'threaten, be about to'),

(20) Die offerhande der gaden **wil** vergaen  
 (Heiligenlevens, from Middle Dutch Dictionary; lemma 'will')

- *Wil* in Afrikaans, which originated from 17th century Dutch (Smith 1952), also has future uses (Conradie 2016).

(21) Dit **wil** reën.  
 this wants rain  
 'Rain is imminent.' (Conradie 2016:9)

- Desire *willen* appears earlier (Oudnederlands, Old Dutch Dictionary). Given the nature of diachronic data, at this time I cannot claim that future *willen* has developed from desire *willen*.

### 3 Future **willen** in the synchronic grammar

Distributionally, future **willen** patterns like a root modal, and not a tense or epistemic modal.

- We find the same for Brazilian Portuguese *querer* and Mandarin Chinese *yao*.
- Why would this be so? See van Dooren, Huang & Mendes (*accepted*) for our proposal.

#### 3.1 Future **want** is not a tense

As with desire **willen**, future **willen** is tensed. (For a similar argument showing Gitksan *dim* is not a tense, see Matthewson 2011).

(22) De koffie **wilde** nog wel een dagje mee (maar nu het hele voetbalelftal er is niet meer).  
 the coffee wanted yet still a day.DIM with but now the whole soccer.team there is not anymore  
 'The coffee was likely to last another day (but now that the soccer team is all here, not any longer.)'

Note: (22) has a counterfactual interpretation, providing semantic support for a modal analysis.

#### 3.2. Future **want** patterns with root modals, not epistemics

Future **want**, like root modals, can take a complement with no overt verb.

(23) a. Die koffie **wil** nog wel op vandaag.  
 that coffee wants still WEL out today  
 'The coffee will probably run out today.'  
 b. Deze bank **wil** nog wel een rondje mee.  
 this couch wants still WEL a round with  
 'This couch will manage to last for a while longer.'

Epistemic modals cannot (Barbiers 1995).

(24) a. Mijn grootouders **moeten** een hek.  
 my grandparents must-PL a fence  
 i) 'My grandparents are obliged to have/need a fence.' Root modal  
 ii) 'It is necessarily the case that my grandparents have a fence.' Epistemic modal

b. Mijn grootouders <b>moeten</b> een hek. my grandparents must-PL a fence	
i) 'My grandparents are obliged to have/they need a fence.'	Root modal
#ii) 'It is necessarily the case that my grandparents have a fence.'	Epistemic modal

→ Dutch future wants pattern with root modals.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

**Willen** is three-way ambiguous between a desire, a habitual, and a future meaning. Future **want**:

- aligns syntactically with root modals;
- shows indications of modal semantics.

If the future reading stems from the desire reading, these observations fit in with a well-known pattern of language change (Bybee et al. 1994; Harris & Campbell 1995).

Open questions:

- Did the future reading follow from the desire reading? If so, when did this happen?
- Where does the 'manage' or 'succeed' interpretation come from? Might there be an aspectual component, as for English *going to* (Copley 2009).

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