

## Research Forum

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### **A Study of *Will* and *Going to* in Plans and Predictions**

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#### **1. Introduction**

Martin (1978, p. 186) states that the *going to* form is used when the speaker has objective evidence. In the sentence, "Look at those clouds, it's going to rain," the evidence is the clouds. Aitken (1990, p. 70), however, says the structure depends on the kind of evidence. If the evidence is concrete, *going to* is used, but if the evidence is rational or mental, then *will* is used. Her example of the second kind of evidence is the sentence, "I will be sick (if I eat any more)" (p. 70). Lewis (1986, p. 81) says in cases where the speaker is looking forward to something, the *going to* form is used and both external and internal evidence are admissible. Sheen (1991, p. 5) says that time is crucial. If the decision is made at the moment of speaking, *will* is used. If the intention is decided beforehand, *going to* is used. Aitken (1990, p. 5) agrees with Sheen that the time one makes the plan is crucial, but goes on to add that the degree of certainty is also important. Thomson and Martinet (1986, p. 187) seem to agree that *will* is used to indicate the intention at the moment of decision, adding that *will* expresses stronger determination whereas *going to* is used for intention and prediction; however very often either form can be used. Celce-Murcia and Larson-Freeman (1983, p. 67) continue this line of thought and suggest that *will* is the true form of the future, but give examples that suggest that *will* or *going to* can be used interchangeably. Haegeman (1989, p. 309) clearly states that no hard and fast rule is possible or even desirable because at the sentence level there is no clear distinction between the meaning of *will* and *going to*. Clearly there is no consensus on these issues.

Three research questions are addressed. The first question is, which form, *will* or *going to*, is used by NS and NNS for discussing immediate plans and which form is used for making predictions? It is strongly suggested (Aitken, 1990, p.70; Lewis, 1986, p 81; Martin, 1978, p. 186; Thomson & Martinet, 1986, p. 186) that if there is evidence to support the prediction, the *going to* form is used. Therefore, the second question is, does the presence of evidence

result in the *going to* form? It is strongly suggested (Aitken, 1990, p. 70; Lewis, 1986, p. 117; Martin, 1978, p. 186; Sheen, 1991 p. 5) that if the decision is made at the moment of speaking, the *will* form is used. Therefore, the third question is, if the decision is made at the time of speaking, is the *will* form used?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Subjects

The NNS subjects were five second-year, female Japanese students at Joshi Seigakuin Junior College ranging in age from 19 to 21, and were selected because they were students in the researcher's class. All were from the Tokyo metropolitan area. All were volunteers and no special selection criteria, other than gender, were used. The study was conducted in April, 1992. Base-line data were obtained from a similar group of five female North American English native speakers ranging in age from early 20s to middle 40s. All were residents of the U.S., originally from central or northeast Ohio. All were volunteers and no special selection criteria, other than gender, were used. Their study was conducted February, 1992.

### 2.2 Procedures

Both groups were given two tasks in the form of questions in order to predispose speakers toward the use of either *will* or *going to*. Task one was aimed at plans and task two at predictions. Both task questions were framed so as to avoid using either *will* or *going to*. The first question was "What are your summer plans?" and the second question was "Changes are likely to take place in US (or Japan) in the next ten years. What changes do you expect to see?" All four conversations were recorded and transcribed.

## 3. Results

Table 1 indicates that in discussing immediate plans both NS and NNS prefer *will* over *going to* by a two to one margin. The only difference between the NS and the NNS groups is that the NS tended to use the *I'll* contraction (five out of eight times), whereas the NNS never used the *I'll* form. In making predictions the NS group showed a preference for *going to* (14 out of 18 times), and when using the *will* form used the contracted *I'll* two out of four times. The

Table 1.  
Summary of Results

	Immediate plans			Predictions		
	going to	will	Totals	going to	will	Totals
NS	4	8	12	14	4	18
NNS	4	8	12	0	2	2

NNS group used only the *will* form, but in fact used neither form very often. Both the NS and the NNS used forms other than *will* and *going to* in both plans and predictions, using, for example *may*, *it might be fun to*, *I'd like to take*, and *I plan to*. When discussing immediate plans, the NS used the first person, singular pronoun 10 out of 12 times, while the NNS used it seven out of 12 times. The most typical way for the NS in this study to express short term plans was, "I'll (probably) + be verb."

The second question was, does the presence of evidence result in the going to form? Evidence can be defined as a present factor that relates to and suggests the plausibility of a future occurrence. As previously mentioned, dark clouds in the sky can be seen as objective or external evidence of rain, and a feeling that if one continues to eat, sickness will ensue can be interpreted as subjective or internal evidence. In this study the criterion for deciding the presence of evidence is the presence of a marker that indicates a plausible reason or evidence of intention for the action. An example of evidence is speaker S saying that she is going to be getting married and three lines later mentioning the name of her fiancée. When evidence is present in immediate plans (Table 2), the NS used *going to* once, and used *will* eight times. The NNS follow the same pattern. This would seem to suggest that the answer to Research Question two is no. When evidence is present in predictions, however, the NS group (Table 3) used *going to* six times and *will* three times. This exploratory study seems to suggest that the answer to Research Question two is yes for predictions and no for plans.

Table 2.  
Summary of Evidence in Immediate Plans

	Immediate plans						Totals
	no evidence	going to	will	evidence	going to	will	
NS	3	3	0	9	1	8	12
NNS	8	4	4	4	1	3	12

Table 3.  
Summary of Evidence in Predictions

	Predictions						Totals
	no evidence	going to	will	evidence	going to	will	
NS	9	8	1	9	6	3	18
NNS	1	0	1	1	0	1	2

The third question was, if the decision is made at the time of speaking, is the will form used? In this study the criterion for deciding if the decision was made at the time of speaking is the presence of a marker that indicates spontaneity. Examples of markers include *it just depends on, probably, I think,* and *I don't care*. When markers indicating spontaneous decision are present in immediate plans (Table 4) the NS used *going to* three times and used *will* seven times, but the NNS show only one instance, using the *will* form. When markers indicating spontaneous decision are present in predictions (Table 5), the NS show 15 instances with 12 uses of *going to* and three uses of *will*, and the NNS show no marked utterances. This seems to indicate that the answer to Research Question three is yes for plans and no for predictions.

Table 4.  
Summary of Spontaneous Decision Markers in Immediate Plans

Immediate plans							
	no marker	going to	will	marker	going to	will	Totals
NS	2	1	1	10	3	7	12
NNS	11	4	7	1	0	1	12

Table 5.  
Summary of Spontaneous Decision Markers in Predictions

Predictions							
	no marker	going to	will	marker	going to	will	Totals
NS	3	2	1	15	12	3	18
NNS	2	0	2	0	0	0	2

#### 4. Discussion

This study shows that generally NS prefer *will* when discussing immediate plans and *going to* when making long-range predictions. If evidence is considered, NS still prefer *will* when discussing plans and *going to* when making predictions. If the decision appears to have been made at the moment of speaking, NS still prefer *will* when discussing plans and *going to* when making predictions. This pattern seems to indicate that the deciding factor is whether the utterance is a plan or a prediction, rather than the presence of evidence or the time of the decision.

NNS, on the other hand, show a preference for the *will* form for predictions as well as long-range plans to the point where it can be said that NNS overuse the *will* form. Is this because the *will* form was taught and acquired before *going to*, and it seems to the learners that it is the true form of the future? It is not possible to make a conclusive statement based on these results.

## 5. Conclusion

Two strong claims concerning the use of *will* and *going to* were examined, but the results of this study were inconclusive, neither substantiating the claims nor contradicting them. Several factors should be taken into consideration before reaching conclusions based on this tentative research study. One is that the results of this study may be flawed by an unclear definition of what constitutes evidence. For example, one NNS said, "I will work next year so I will visit company." Both of these instances of *will* were counted as having evidence. As any teacher who has taught second-year junior college students knows, finding a job for the following year is their top priority. Does this concern constitute evidence in the same sense that clouds give evidence of coming rain? Perhaps this study should be taken as a pointer toward future research rather than disproof of generally held usage rules. Another factor might be that speakers have personal styles or preferred modes of speaking and that my small speaker sample is skewed. For example native speaker S says *going to* 12 times and *will* twice. Native speaker B, on the other hand, never once used either term, preferring terms such as "I plan to." Native speakers J and A prefer *will* (J: 4 to 1, and A: 4 to 0). It is interesting to speculate on the relation of personality to speaker style. Finally, it remains a possibility that writers of pedagogical grammar books have tended to rely more on common knowledge than empirical studies, which may indicate that some commonly accepted rules may not, in fact, be completely true. This is an area that could benefit from more classroom research.

## References

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