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Плеханова Е.А. Проблема будущего времени в современном английском языке

Plekhanova E.A. The problem of the usage of future tense in modern English language

В современном английском языке все многообразие средств выражения будущего может быть сведено в единую систему и представлено в виде функционально-семантического поля с двумя доминантами, которыми являются формы будущего неопределенного и будущего продолженного времени, наиболее специализированно отражающие семантику данного поля

Ключевые слова: время, будущее время, способы выражения будущего времени

In modern English the diversity of means of expression of the future can be brought into a single system and might be represented as a functional – semantic field with two dominants, which is a form of the Future Indefinite tense and the Future Continuous tense, the most specialized reflecting the semantics of this field

Key words: tense, future tense, the ways of expressing the future tense

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'English has no future tense.' What linguistic means are there of indicating future time in English? Despite the fact, that for several decades, linguistic analysis has supported that English has no future tense, people, even native English speakers, tend to consider this at least unacceptable. 'How then can we speak or write in English about the future?' This is the most common response. Are there indeed any languages that lack specific tenses or even don't have tenses at all? And if so, then how is time indicated?

The first thing we need to do is establish the definition of and consequently the distinction between these two terms. 'Tense' refers to the inflected forms in the conjugation of a verb, such as past or present, as well as the continuance or completion of a particular action or state; it indicates the time, but it is not the time reference. The latter is rather what the word 'future' indicates. Thus, there is a distinction to be drawn between these two, since future is commonly thought of as the tense, which is not all the case.

In fact, the reason why English does not 'have' Future tense is because there is not a compound form referring to the future; there is no inflection in the verb to indicate such a reference, in the way there is in Spanish, French or Turkish for example. Rather, it is formed by the modal verb 'will' and the bare infinitive form of the main verb. So, there has been a conflict as to whether 'will' can be part of the morphological tense-system, or of the modal system of English, or perhaps simply homonymous.

However, there are still a number of ways of expressing future in English besides the one mentioned above (which is the commonest, though), all of which have their particular nuances of meaning and are generally not interchangeable.

Although English does not have a simple verb form for "future time" that corresponds to the simple present tense and the simple past tense, we have many different ways to talk about future time. Or, better, we can talk about the future in many different ways. Like the old example that claims that Native Peoples in Canada and Alaska have many different words for "snow" or words for many different types of "snow" English has many different ways to talk about different aspects of future time. I'm belaboring this point because I think it is important to realize that all of these ways of talking about the future are not just synonyms for each other. You can't always substitute one for another and maintain the same meaning.

Future tense uses a wide range of techniques to express future time (such as will/shall, be going to, be about to, and future adverbs). Here are the future time uses of a variety of verb forms.

Present simple form will be appropriate for events in Future Time when the speaker sees the future event as occurring quite independently of his understanding, perception, volition etc. This may be natural, or an appropriate timetable-making body: Christmas day falls on a Thursday this year. What time does the sun rise next Saturday? Arsenal plays away next weekend. We leave at 4 o'clock tomorrow afternoon" [Lewis, 1986: 86].

The structures "shall I/we?" can be used to ask for instructions and decisions, and to make offers and suggestions: Examples: What on earth shall we do? What day shall we meet up? Shall I come and pick you up?

We use the structure "be going to + base form" to talk about plans, decisions, and firm intentions. "This form is used if, at the moment of speaking, the speaker has evidence for the future event. That evidence may be either external (clouds or a tickle in the nose) or internal (a plan or decision): It's going to rain. I'm going to sneeze. I'm not going to tell you" [Lewis, 1986: 96].

We tend to use the present progressive when talking about personal arrangements and plans that have already been made. People are likely to use progressive forms for an action which is "in progress" ("progressive aspect"). The time, date or place is often mentioned in the interaction: What are you doing this evening? I'm having a drink with Tom. We're moving house next month.

The structure "will + progressive infinitive" may be used for activities that will be in progress at a specific time in the future: This time next year I'll be sailing round the Black Sea. I can't meet you for lunch tomorrow because I'll be having a meeting with the new team. Good luck with the exam. We'll be thinking of you.

We can talk about the future by saying that something is to happen. It is rather formal and occurs more often in writing (e.g. newspapers) than in speech (be + infinitive): The president is to visit Houston next week. The meeting is to be held at head office.

We often use future tense to express the following functions: prediction (The weather will get much warmer in the next few years), offer (I'll drive if you map-read), promise (I promise I'll stop smoking tomorrow!), threat (I'll resign if I don't get a pay rise).

In conclusion, I would like to mention that some grammar books say that we form the simple future tense with the modal verb will; others say that English has no future tenses. What is clear, and what must be made clear to learners, is that future time can be expressed using a variety of verb structures. The choice of verb structure depends on meaning and context.

We need to find the contexts where future time is used and to work from those contexts to provide our students with materials that show them how the future time verbs are used and then give them opportunities to learn to make such use in their own communication.

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