

A quirky progressive? A corpus-based exploration of the *will + be + -ing* construction in recent and present day British English.¹

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1 Introduction

1.1 Outline

This paper investigates the properties and text distribution of English modal auxiliaries, especially *will*, in construction with *be + -ing* (as in *I'll be leaving tomorrow*, *You should be going*) in recent and present day English.² Constructions of this kind are said to have some unusual aspectual and other semantic properties, quite against the grain of “regular” uses of the progressive. I consider the apparent eccentricity of the *will + be + -ing* construction especially. I investigate its use in corpora of late twentieth British English in an attempt to discover more about the nature of the construction, including the respects in which recent, and possibly ongoing, changes in use have been occurring.

1.2 A quirky progressive?

The chief reason that the combination of a modal auxiliary with the *be + -ing* form of a verb might be deemed “quirky” is that two opposite aspectual values appear to be permissible within one and the same construction. In the case of *will be + -ing*, for example, many linguists identify a “regular” use, in the sense of an event or situation located in the future and viewed as unfolding – in progress – at the time of reference, cf. (1) and (2); and more strikingly, a use in which seemingly the event or situation is construed as an indivisible whole, with the notion of progressivity playing no part, cf. (3) and (4). A similar contrast seems to arise with other modal auxiliaries + *be + -ing*, cf. (5) and (6) against (7) and (8), although here the difference also involves temporal reference.

- (1) *When you reach the end of the bridge, I'll be waiting there to show you the way.* (Quirk et al. 1985 : 216)
- (2) *Don't phone me at 7 o'clock – I'll be watching my favourite TV programme.* (Leech 1987: 67)
- (3) *The train will be arriving at 8 o'clock.* (Leech 1987: 51)
- (4) *Not in June! I'll be having my baby in June!* (Adamczewski 1982 : 175)
- (5) *He can't be working at this hour!* (Leech 1987: 98)
- (6) *She may be bluffing.* (Leech 1987: 98)
- (7) *She can't be coming on Monday.* (Palmer 1979: 54)
- (8) *Jill says she might be calling this afternoon.* (Quirk et al. 1985 : 236)

The nature of and speaker's motivation for the second use of *will + be + -ing* are far from clear-cut. For some commentators it provides compelling evidence that “progressive” is a misnomer for the *be + -ing* construction (cf. Adamczewski 1982, Celle 2001, for example). Many see it as deriving from a need to refer to the future unclouded by attitudinal overtones such as volition, intention or promise - overtones that are liable to figure in the use of *will + bare infinitive* and *be going to*, for example. Indeed this factor has even been claimed to provide a continuing source of growth in the use of *will + be + -ing* in the present day (cf. Samuels 1972, Leech 1987, Close 1988). I would like to explore the viability of this claim with respect to registers of written English, and also assess whether the construction can truly be described as “progressive in form but non-progressive in meaning” (Wekker 1975: 116).

1.3 Historical growth in frequency

Historians of English tend to deal primarily with those modal + *be + -ing* combinations that have overtly future time reference, i.e. *will + be + -ing*, *shall + be + -ing*. According to Mossé (1938), these constructions are attested as early as Old English, but usage remains very rare right through Middle English, picking up again in the Modern era. It is claimed that before each construction became widespread, it was more frequent in texts from the north of England and Scotland (Mossé 1938, Mustanoja 1960, Strang 1970). Thus it is quite probable that the modal + *be + -ing* has its origins in Celtic varieties of English, or contact with Celtic languages (cf. Visser 1973: 2023 and below, 2.2.).

¹ I would like to thank Geoffrey Leech, Anna Siewierska, Amy Wang and Christopher Williams for their very helpful discussion and comments at various points in the preparation of this paper; and Agnès Celle for sending me a copy of her paper on *will + be + -ing*.

² I have tried to avoid the term “modal progressive” as it has already been used by Wright (1994) to denote something else: affective or experiential (rather than aspectual) uses of *be + -ing*, rather than the combination of *be + -ing* with a modal auxiliary.

In examining nineteenth century British English, Smitherberg (2002: 193-198) provides the first quantitative evidence that I can find. Across a range of genres sampled at three time intervals, he reports that *will + be + -ing* actually declines significantly in use, while all other modal *+ be + -ing* constructions either decline or stagnate. Smitherberg's findings run counter to what we might expect, given that in the course of Modern English other parts of the progressive paradigm (permutations of tense, aspect and voice, such as the perfect progressive, passive progressive) have emerged or been realised with increasing frequency (cf., Rissanen 1998, Görlach 1999, Strang 1982). It seems necessary, therefore, to explain the gap between the depressed usage in the nineteenth century and the current healthy situation in the present day. My analysis attempts to shed some light on latter-day developments. First, I give an overview of recent changes in frequency distribution, then try to determine if stylistic or semantic factors, or both, are involved.

2 Corpus data and frequency analysis

2.1 The corpora

The data used in this empirical investigation are the LOB corpus of British English written texts published in 1961, and its counterpart, FLOB, containing texts published in 1991–92. Each corpus contains one million words spread across fifteen text categories, nine of non-fiction, six of fiction. As they were originally intended for publication, the texts tend to be more formal in character and more carefully edited than private forms of writing, such as personal letters. (Further details of all these corpora are provided in Mair 1997). The categories and proportions of words within them are designed to match as closely as possible across the two corpora. The great benefit of this design is that it facilitates empirical investigation (both quantitative and qualitative) of very recent changes in the development of written English. I briefly look at four further corpora: two corpora of American English, Brown and Frown, that correspond to LOB and FLOB in terms of dates and other sampling criteria; and two supplementary corpora of British English: the ICE-GB and BNC (spoken part), in which the majority of texts are contemporaneous with FLOB (early 1990s).

2.2 Frequencies of modal *+ be + -ing* constructions

Changes in frequency are expressed firstly in percentages, i.e. the difference between the two frequencies as a percentage of the first, and secondly by a probability value if this is calculated to be statistically significant.³

Table 1: Frequencies of modal *+ be + -ing* constructions in recent British and American English⁴

| | British English | | | | American English | | | |
|---------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|
| | LOB (1961) | FLOB (1991) | Change % | Probab- ility | Brown (1961) | Frown (1991) | Change % | Probab- ility |
| <i>can</i> | 0 | 4 | + % | | 4 | 1 | -75.0% | |
| <i>could</i> | 4 | 6 | +49.6% | | 4 | 7 | +75.0% | |
| <i>may</i> | 10 | 15 | +49.6% | | 9 | 8 | -11.1% | |
| <i>might</i> | 12 | 12 | -0.3% | | 14 | 18 | +28.6% | |
| <i>must</i> | 10 | 7 | -30.2% | | 16 | 1 | -93.8% | p < 0.05 |
| <i>shall</i> | 7 | 5 | -28.8% | | 1 | 1 | - | |
| <i>should</i> | 9 | 18 | +99.5% | | 11 | 9 | -18.2% | |
| <i>will</i> | 66 | 87 | +33.0% | | 40 | 46 | +15.0% | |
| <i>would</i> | 32 | 34 | +6.0% | | 36 | 41 | +13.9% | |
| Total | 150 | 190 | +25.0% | p < .05 | 135 | 132 | -2.2% | |

Collectively, modal *+ be + -ing* constructions in British English have increased in use since the 1960s, with the most significant increase in *will + be + -ing*. This general buoyancy is in sharp contrast to a spectacular decline of almost all the modal auxiliaries in non-progressive environments (Table 2). Even though the ratio of progressives to non-progressives is rising, the former are still relatively few.

³ The probability was obtained using the log likelihood test of significance.

⁴ *Need + be + -ing* and *ought (to) + be + -ing* do not occur in these corpora.

Table 2: Frequencies of modal auxiliaries + simple infinitive in British and American English

| | British English | | | | American English | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|-------------|----------|-------------|------------------|--------------|----------|-------------|
| | LOB (1961) | FLOB (1991) | Change % | Probability | Brown (1961) | Frown (1991) | Change % | Probability |
| <i>can</i> | 1997 | 2037 | +1.7% | | 2189 | 2159 | -1.3% | |
| <i>could</i> | 1736 | 1776 | +2.0% | | 1772 | 1648 | -6.9% | p < .05 |
| <i>may</i> | 1323 | 1086 | -18.1% | p < .01 | 1289 | 870 | -32.4% | p < .01 |
| <i>might</i> | 765 | 648 | -15.5% | p < .01 | 649 | 634 | -2.2% | |
| <i>must</i> | 1136 | 807 | -29.2% | p < .01 | 1004 | 650 | -35.2% | p < .01 |
| <i>need</i> | 78 | 44 | -43.7% | p < .01 | 40 | 35 | -12.4% | |
| <i>ought (to)</i> | 104 | 58 | -44.4% | p < .01 | 70 | 49 | -29.9% | |
| <i>shall</i> | 348 | 195 | -44.1% | p < .01 | 266 | 149 | -43.9% | p < .01 |
| <i>should</i> | 1292 | 1129 | -12.9% | p < .01 | 899 | 778 | -13.4% | p < .01 |
| <i>will</i> | 2756 | 2631 | -4.8% | | 2662 | 2356 | -11.4% | p < .01 |
| <i>would</i> | 2996 | 2660 | -11.5% | p < .01 | 3017 | 2827 | -6.2% | p < .05 |
| Total | 14531 | 13071 | -10.3% | p < .01 | 13857 | 12155 | -12.2% | p < .01 |

Meanwhile in American English there has been barely any change in the overall use of modal + *be* + *-ing*, while modal auxiliaries as a whole appear to be going out of fashion even faster than in British English. (For details, see Leech, forthcoming). The other main difference from British English is the significantly lower rate of use of *will* + *be* + *-ing* in American. While at first sight this might appear an unusual case of Britain leading the way in a grammatical change, evidence from other dialects of English suggests that this is not the case. Contrastive data provided by Filppula (2002), for example, point strongly to a much higher rate of usage of all variants of the progressive in the Celtic varieties of English (e.g. Irish English, Welsh English and Hebridean English), suggesting that these dialects are a more likely source of innovation, and standard British English may be influenced by contact with them. Since Filppula's data is mostly spoken and sampled in a very different way to the Brown family of corpora, his results are not directly comparable with my own. No doubt future construction of more closely matching dialectal corpora, ideally sampled at chronological intervals, could help to shed more light on underlying Celtic influence.

Because the frequency of most individual modal auxiliaries combining with the progressive in these corpora is still too low to gain a more detailed picture, from this point on I will concentrate on *will* + *be* + *-ing*.

2.3 Genre / medium breakdown of *will* + *be* + *-ing*

Table 3: genre comparison of *will* + *be* + *-ing* in written British English

| | LOB (1961) | | FLOB (1991) | | Change in frequency | |
|---------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|
| | raw frequency | per million | raw frequency | per million | % | probability |
| Press | 24 | 135 | 32 | 180 | 32.7% | |
| General prose | 12 | 29 | 32 | 77 | 166.7% | p < .01 |
| Learned | 4 | 25 | 5 | 31 | 24.3% | |
| Fiction | 26 | 102 | 19 | 74 | -27.2% | |
| Total | 66 | 66 | 88 | 87 | 33.0% | |

The increase in frequency occurs in non-fictional genres, most significantly in the general prose category. Probably the lack of increase in fiction is because in fictional narrative it is unusual for the narrator to have call to refer to future plans, arrangements or expectations, while in fictional dialogue, in the 1960s a good approximation of everyday speech may already been achieved.

An interesting question is whether the rise in press and general prose genres in FLOB is the result of conversational or informal influence on written language (a change "from below"). It is claimed by Close (1988: 53) and Leech (1987: 69), for example, that *will* + *be* + *-ing*, particularly in its so-called non-progressive use, is especially common in conversation. A direct sign of such influence would be a higher use of contracted forms ('*ll/won't*) in the FLOB examples. Yet most of the additional cases are not contracted but rather take the full form *will*. Moreover it is noteworthy that the frequency of *will* + *be* + *-ing* is not especially high in two conversational spoken corpora sampled around the same time as FLOB (early 1990s). In the BNC conversational part the frequency is 139 per million words,

while in direct conversations in ICE-GB it is around 92 per million, and the entire spoken part of ICE-GB records less than 110 per million. These frequencies are all lower than the press reportage and editorials section of FLOB.⁵

The most striking finding in the *written* section of ICE-GB is the vastly higher rate of use in letter-writing: 34 occurrences (more than 500 per million words), spread almost equally between social and business correspondence. One of the important functions of both types of correspondence is to describe or make arrangements for the future. In these examples from business letters, using the progressive seems to add tact or politeness, not informality.

- (9) *I regret to now inform you that we will be terminating all our contracts with you as of Monday 22nd of July 1991.* (ICE-GB W1B-028 #46:4)
- (10) *Following our telephone conversation yesterday, I am writing to confirm that the theatre will be undergoing a reorganisation of staffing following the departure of the Deputy Manager William Brown.* (ICE-GB W1B-018 #139:18)

2.4 A brief comparison with other constructions referring to future time

Table 4: Constructions referring to the future: comparative frequencies in British English (LOB and FLOB)

| | LOB (1961) | | FLOB (1991) | | Change in frequency | |
|------------------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|
| | raw frequency | per million | raw frequency | per million | % | probability |
| <i>will + infin.</i> | | | | | | |
| Press | 617 | 3481 | 680 | 3817 | +9.7% | |
| General Prose | 990 | 2395 | 1013 | 2452 | +2.3% | |
| Learned/academic | 293 | 1845 | 301 | 1885 | +2.2% | |
| Fiction | 856 | 3344 | 637 | 2478 | -25.9% | p < .01 |
| Total | 2756 | 2741 | 2631 | 2610 | -4.8% | |
| <i>shall + infin.</i> | | | | | | |
| Press | 27 | 152 | 20 | 112 | -26.3% | |
| General prose | 169 | 409 | 85 | 206 | -49.7% | p < .01 |
| Learned/academic | 60 | 378 | 40 | 251 | -33.7% | p < .05 |
| Fiction | 99 | 387 | 55 | 214 | -44.7% | p < .01 |
| Total | 355 | 353 | 200 | 198 | -43.8% | p < .01 |
| <i>be going to (Present)</i> | | | | | | |
| Press | 24 | 135 | 42 | 236 | +74.1% | p < .05 |
| General prose | 46 | 111 | 23 | 56 | -50.0% | p < .05 |
| Learned/academic | 5 | 31 | 5 | 31 | -0.6% | |
| Fiction | 99 | 387 | 93 | 362 | -6.5% | |
| Total | 174 | 173 | 163 | 162 | -6.6% | |
| <i>be to: Present tense</i> | | | | | | |
| Press | 85 | 480 | 45 | 253 | -47.3% | p < .01 |
| General Prose | 107 | 259 | 93 | 225 | -13.1% | |
| Learned/academic | 42 | 265 | 35 | 219 | -17.1% | |
| Fiction | 18 | 70 | 14 | 54 | -22.6% | |
| Total | 252 | 251 | 187 | 186 | -26.0% | p < .01 |

This very rudimentary survey shows some intriguing tendencies. Firstly, the rise of *will + be + -ing* reported earlier may not be so closely connected to a usurping of *will + simple infinitive* as one might assume. The decline of *will + simple infinitive*, rather than being part of a summary decline of the core modal auxiliaries, seems to be limited to the fiction section. In fact, if one breaks the corpora down into smaller subcategories of genre, one finds that two of the fiction sections (adventure fiction and romance fiction) account for most of the downturn, while other genre subcategories fluctuate wildly (e.g. frequency in press reportage jumps up, but in press reviews it tumbles).

On the other hand at least three other rival constructions do not appear to fare as well as *will + be + -ing*. There is a marked decline in *shall* and *be to*, while *be going to* rises only in the press sections. This last is puzzling since over the

⁵ Clearly it will be necessary in the future to examine the frequency of a host of other indicators of conversational style across the two corpora, to get a better idea of the extent to which speech habits are increasingly mimicked in writing intended for publication.

last several centuries *be going to* (including its variant *gonna*) has grown considerably (see e.g. Krug 2000), and in the matching American corpora (Brown and Frown) and corpora of spoken British English this trend has continued apace (see Leech forthcoming).

Two important constructions not tabulated here are the present progressive and simple present with future time reference. In both cases it has proven very difficult to identify them positively as future-referring because of their strong basis in present time (plans or arrangements in existence at speech time). Regarding present progressive, if I limit examples to those where the culmination phase of the event does not appear to be “under way” at speech time, I retrieved around 45-55 occurrences in LOB and 30-40 in FLOB.⁶ Thus in the sample of written British English most of the major constructions that compete with *will + be + -ing* to refer to future time based on a present situation have either declined in use or shown growth in a few registers only.

3 Semantic factors

3.1 Semantic character and the rise of *will + be + -ing*

Here I am especially interested in the motivation for the “non-progressive” use of *will + be + -ing*: What are its semantic characteristics? Should it really be considered eccentric? Why is it emerging in present day usage as an important means of marking future events? For reasons of space, my discussion is limited to the theories that I find the most persuasive.

3.1.1 “Colourless future”

By far the most popular explanation for its emergence is a communicative need for speakers to refer to the future “colourlessly”, i.e. without implying volition, intention or promise. Samuels (1972) offers a brief historical account of how this state of affairs might have arisen. He argues that absence of volition was already an implicit element of meaning in the regular use of *will* (and *shall*) + *be + -ing*, i.e. for future situations viewed in progress, as in (1) above and (11) below. This non-volitional element was later extended to situations not viewed as being in progress (cf. [12]), because the established way of referring to such events – *will* + the simple infinitive (cf. [12]) – was liable to be interpreted as marked by a personal attitude.⁷

- (11) *I'll be leaving when you arrive.*
- (12) *I'll be leaving tomorrow.*
- (13) *I'll leave tomorrow.*

Samuels (1972: 57) adds: “It is therefore becoming more and more used as a colourless future without overtones of intention, wish, irritation and the like, and irrespective of whether the context demands a marked aspectual form”. It is difficult to confirm or reject this theory as no chronology or empirical data is provided,⁸ and no connection with other modal + *be + -ing* constructions is made. However, the transfer of colourlessness from one type of progressive to another is interesting in suggesting that the two types are not discrete.

3.1.2 “Already decided future”; “future as matter-of-course”

Several commentators on contemporary usage have pointed out that more than mere colourlessness is implied by *will + be + -ing* – and moreover by other modal + *be + -ing* constructions. A key additional ingredient according to Huddleston (2002: 172), for example, is the idea that the speaker feels that the future has already been settled in some way; he calls this “already decided future”. Thus in interrogative sentences like (14) below, a prior arrangement or plan is assumed, whereas *will* + infinitive (cf. [15]) is more likely to be taken as a direct request to the addressee, i.e. a decision has to be made on the spot whether to go to the shops.

- (14) *Will you be going to the shops this afternoon?* (Huddleston 2002: 171)
- (15) *Will you go to the shops this afternoon?* (Huddleston 2002: 171)

⁶ I have not yet attempted to count cases of the simple present referring to the future.

⁷ I have modified Samuels’ own example (*I shall/will be leaving*) by adding two kinds of adverbial, in order to clarify the aspectual differences.

⁸ Nor can I find such a historical record in any other source.

Most of the textbook examples chosen to illustrate the politeness and tact advantages of *will + be + -ing* are from conversational settings. But how far can this motivation explain the rising frequency of *will + be + -ing* in non-fictional written texts of LOB and FLOB, which are typically of a more impersonal, less interactive character?

A similar notion to “already decided future” is what Leech (1971/1987: 69) calls “future-as-matter-of-course”. By this, *will + be + -ing* implies a certain kind of knowledge on the part of the speaker: the predicted event is viewed as happening in accordance with the course of nature, a routine, schedule or some other flow of expectation. This is most apparent in the examples like (16), which seems to treat as normal (in keeping with expectation) an event that most people would find bizarre or improbable:⁹

(16) *Margot will be poisoning her husband when he gets home.* (Leech 1987: 69)

Although Leech (1987: 69) himself argues that “‘matter-of-courseness’ ... has little distinctive value” in situations lacking agentive subjects, such as (17) as opposed to (18), I feel (18) is more likely when the speaker wishes to convey a sense of judgement based on knowledge, as opposed to a bald prediction. Admittedly the difference is a subtle one, and it could also be treated as a case of stylistic preference. Quirk et al. (1985: 217) suggest that the latter type of sentence is more informal.

(17) *The sun will set in a minute.* (Leech 1987: 69)

(18) *The sun will be setting in a minute.* (Leech 1987: 69).

Leech (1987) and Quirk et al. (1985) illustrate matter-of-courseness with other modal auxiliaries + *be + -ing* besides *will*. Their examples are discussed in terms of absence of colouring of personal intention or choice made by the speaker or the grammatical subject, rather than predicted events in line with the speaker’s expectation. For instance, (21) is glossed by Quirk et al. as *It is just possible that Jill will be calling* and contrasted to *Jill might call this afternoon*, which “implies that the visit will depend on Jill’s decision”.

(19) *I may not be working this afternoon.* (Leech 1987: 98)

(20) *I must be going soon.* (Leech 1987: 99)

(21) *Jill might be calling this afternoon.* (Quirk et al. 1985: 236)

As stated earlier, historical commentary on modals + *be + -ing*, particularly on the emergence of a special aspectual use, is rather thin. Thus I cannot say whether these modals developed later or earlier than *will + be + -ing*.

It is not generally claimed that matter-of-courseness is implied in the following constructions: *be going to*, *be to*, futurate use of *be + -ing*, futurate use of simple present. However this is not to say that they do not overlap with *will + be + -ing* in several respects, the most important of which is that of a future prediction based on circumstances (typically arrangements or plans) existing in present time.

3.1.3 Extended / virtual notion of “event in progress”

It was stated earlier that situations like those in (3), (4), (7) and (8) do not appear to fit the description of “event in progress at reference time”. If we wish to account for them in terms of aspect, it seems that we have either to view them as complete wholes – exceptional cases of the progressive construction, or find a way to view them as progressive in some virtual or extended sense. A number of scholars¹⁰ have taken the second route for the so-called “futate progressive” as in (22)

(22) *I’m leaving tomorrow.*

They consider that the speaker is saying it is *as if* the situation of leaving tomorrow has already begun and is ongoing at speech time. This is usually explained by the fact that some kind of preparation (mental or physical) for leaving has already begun; Hirtle (1967: 95) states: “The preparation stage may involve merely an engagement, yet the event may nevertheless be felt to be already started”. Williams (2002: 95-98) argues that examples like (22) as well as those with *will + be + -ing*, (23), convey a sense that the future actualisation of an event is part of a wider situation, consisting of implicit arrangements already begun, or states of affairs already in existence in the present. He adds that the difference

⁹ Celle (2001) offers a number of insightful refinements to the “matter-of-course” theory. See further, 3.3

¹⁰ For example, Hirtle (1967), Close (1988), Declerck (1991) and Williams (2002).

with (22) above is that the focus of *will + be + -ing* is on the future actualisation rather than present circumstances, on account of *will*.

(23) *I'll be leaving tomorrow.*

Williams goes on to draw a systematic distinction between two kinds of *be + -ing*, both called “progressive”: (i) the “regular” or “basic” progressive, in which the situation described can accurately said to be ongoing at reference time, and (ii) an extended type in which a wider situation is envisaged, with some part of this deemed to be in progress.¹¹ *Will + be + -ing*, he says, can be used both for regular progressive situations and for the extended type.

I feel Williams makes a plausible case for connecting different future uses of *be + -ing*, with the caveat that the two types may not be as discrete as he suggests. How reliably can we separate literally-ongoing from virtually-ongoing situations? Moreover, an important omission in his description is the “interpretative” use of *be + -ing*, cf. (24) and (25).¹² This too seems to require a “virtual” kind of construal if it is to qualify as an example of progressivity. It occurs across a range of tenses, not just with *will*.

(24) *If you pull that lever you will be killing me.* (Ljung 1980: 77)

(25) *When I said the ‘boss’ I was referring to you.* (Huddleston 2002: 165)

Here the same world situation is captured by two predications, one with, one without *be + -ing*, the latter serving to explain or interpret the former. Huddleston adds: “the internal (imperfective) view is appropriate to the explanatory function of the clause – in emphasising duration, the progressive metaphorically slows down or extends the situation in order to be able to focus on clarifying its nature”. (2002: 165)

3.2 Corpus analysis of semantic categories

Following the description presented above, I have opted for two basic categories of *will + be + -ing* in the corpus analysis of LOB and FLOB. This primary division is based on aspectual interpretations, namely:

Type I: future situation viewed as being in progress at reference time

Type II: future situations that cannot be viewed “literally” as in progress at reference time; they are either viewed perfectly (as proposed in most theories), or viewed progressively by a special interpretation, as hypothesised by Williams (2002) above.

Type I is clearest when a temporal frame can be assumed:

(26) *If the police don't keep me I'll be waiting for you when you finish tonight.* (LOB L)

Type II is clearest when it is difficult to impute durativity to the verb:

(27) *I'll be going out briefly at some stage, but Kay'll be here.* (FLOB K)

Within Type II, I try to distinguish cases where a volition-disclaiming effect is *not* a likely motivating factor for its use; and so-called “interpretative progressives” (see 4.1, and below, for discussion). However, epistemic uses of *will + be + -ing* with situations in present time (as in [28]) below) were given a category all on their own, even though their durative character puts them closer to Type I.

(28) *Castalia looked at her watch. The time was half-past nine.*

“Will she still be working now?”

“Very probably. Why? Do you intend to call?” (FLOB N)

In table 5, reporting the results of the semantic analysis, frequencies for each type are *estimated*. To give an idea of the extent of indeterminacy involved, I report both my own decisions (as “rater #1”) and those of another annotator (“rater #2”). It should be noted that rater #2 used “future-matter-of-course” as the basis for deciding on Type II, in other words the special aspectual value and the epistemic notion of matter-of-courseness were always felt to coincide. In my case

¹¹ Williams hypothesises an implicit wider situation in progress to explain other tense-aspect combinations with *be + -ing*, notably the indefinite use of the present perfect progressive, and the progressive imperative.

¹² See also (for example) Buysens (1968) and Ljung (1980) for extensive further discussion of the interpretative progressive.

the notions of “prior arrangement” or “matter-of-courseness expectation” were too subtle to be identified reliably, and my decisions were driven more by the aspectual interpretation. Moreover, rater #2 categorized interpretative examples as Type I, whereas I treated these as Type II. Both annotators made a distinction between clear and probable cases.

Table 5: Semantic analysis of *will + be + -ing*: estimated frequencies in British English

| | LOB (1961) frequency | | FLOB (1991) frequency | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------|-----------------------|----------|
| | rater #1 | rater #2 | rater #1 | rater #2 |
| Type I: clear | 4 | 13 | 2 | 6 |
| Type I: probable | 15 | 9 | 21 | 10 |
| Type II: clear | 23 | 27 | 39 | 50 |
| Type II : probable | 21 | 12 | 30 | 21 |
| Present epistemic: clear | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| Present epistemic: probable | 4 | 3 | 3 | 0 |

3.3 Discussion

The aspectually marked (Type II) use of *will + be + -ing* appears to be more common in each corpus and to be rising in frequency. It is difficult to say whether this is a genuine trend or an accident of annotation, since the indeterminacy in aspectual properties and meanings such as absence of volition and matter-of-courseness is considerable.

Type II cases where volition-disclaiming is likely include the following:

- (29) *But if golfers are seeing trophies-before-the-eyes, I should point out that Joe Carr will be defending his title.* (LOB A)
 (30) *WEDNESDAY, apparently, is National Vegetarian Day. I will not be taking part.* (FLOB B)

Among the Type II examples there are a small number in LOB (3 clear cases), and a slightly higher number in FLOB (8 clear cases) where colourlessness seems an improbable motivation because because the verb phrase (even if *will + be + -ing* were replaced by *will + infinitive*) contains an inanimate subjects or a non-agentive verb.

- (31) *The bursary made all the difference and, since last summer, Lindsay's been the proud owner of a wooden clarinet. It will be going with her at Easter when she tours Germany with the Rutland Concert Band (...) And it will be going with her to Austria this year and to America in 1992.* (FLOB E)
 (32) *In fact, it may well be that by the time these children have their children, the majority of girls will be maturing at ten.* (LOB F)

A slightly more convincing piece of evidence that volition is *not* (contrary to many theories) the only factor involved in the rise of *will + be + -ing* is the fact that the majority of grammatical subjects are third person, and in FLOB third singular grammatical subjects have increased more than other subjects (from 25 to 45 cases). It is more difficult – although of course not impossible – to impute volition to the subject in such contexts.

This leads one to ask what other factors could be involved in the rise of *will + be + -ing*. One motivation could be “matter-of-courseness”, not so much in the sense of disclaiming volition, as “in the natural or expected order of things”. Celle (2001) has observed that this notion need not be confined to situations perceived as developing in a “natural” or ordinary way; it can also apply in a new or unexpected situation to which the speaker can adjust. Example (32) above occurs in a context where a “revolution” in the average age for onset of adolescence may be considered abnormal, but the consequence that “the girls will be maturing at 10’ is in keeping with the ‘revolution’ referred to and not with the natural course of events.” (Celle 2001: 33). The fuller context is supplied below:

- (32') *For example, on an average, a girl of eight in 1959 was as tall and heavy as a girl of eight-and-a-half in 1949. And in ten years the average height of a ten-year-old has increased by half an inch, the average weight by three-and-a-half pounds. Nor does the advance show any signs of halting. In fact, it may well be that by the time these children have their children, the majority of girls will be maturing at ten. Doctors who are delving into the reasons why this revolution is taking place have come up with some intriguing theories.* (LOB F)

Celle goes further and treats matter-of-courseness as a property of *all* instances of *will + be + -ing*. In practice I found it difficult to detect the presence of this feature in the corpora because it is very subtle. The following is a rare case

where the co-text provides support for matter-of-courseness (*This year ... And next [year] ... if all goes according to plan*):

- (33) *This year, Denbies release their first commercial wine. And next, if all goes according to plan, we will be raising a glass of sparkling Denbies to a new phase in English viticulture.* (FLOB E)

Why is it so difficult to establish the aspectual interpretation or establish the presence of additional meanings like colourlessness, matter-of-courseness? I believe this is because the distinctions are rather subtle and in many cases cannot be distinguished with confidence. This is most likely because of overlaps between the different aspectual readings, and between the other semantic categories:

(a) Difficulties in aspectual categorization

As noticed by Celle (2001: 23), many authors give the erroneous impression that the future-in-progress meaning (Type I here) is perfectly “regular” and requires no further comment. Although a salient temporal framing effect is a helpful guide to classification, the absence of such a frame should not necessitate construal as a “special” aspectual use.

Regarding the “special” aspectual use of *will + be + ing*, the kind of canonical examples found in many textbooks are in fact extremely rare in the corpora. Close (1988: 54), for example, speaks of “an event expected to take place at a definite hour rather than ... a process continuing over a period of time” and provides a clear accomplishment situation, *The plane will be leaving at 9.25*.

By generalizing into more than one aspectual value, it seems the construction *will + be + ing* (like other modals + *be + ing*) has lost specificity, and become “blurred”. I believe the fuzziness between the two types, as revealed in the corpus investigation, is better understood if Type II is not the opposite aspectual value from Type I, but instead a metaphorical or virtual extension of Type I.

Different linguists (and different speakers) may view the same examples in different ways. Several textbooks offer “clear” cases of the special use of *be + ing* (e.g. Williams 2002: 204 example [34] below), or clear cases of the regular use (e.g. Palmer 1979: 133, example [35]), which I find difficult to agree with. Thus the disagreements between the two annotators in the LOB-FLOB data appears not to be exceptional.

- (34) *I'll be waiting for you outside the station tomorrow.*
(35) *In a moment the queen will be alighting from her coach.*

An important sub-type of *will + be + ing* that was consistently coded differently by both annotators of our data was the so-called interpretative use. I regarded these as Type II (metaphorical extension), the other annotator regarded these as regular use of Type I.

- (36) *When the consultant surgeon puts his case, he will be speaking from the heart.* (FLOB B)

(b) Overlapping of other semantic categories

As remarked by Samuels (1972: 57) in his theory of the origin of two uses of *will + be + ing*, colourlessness (absence of volition) was probably originally an incidental property of Type I, before it was extended to Type II. Thus we can probably expect there to be traces of colourlessness in *both* types, and so it is not always a distinctive feature.

- (37) [from a parliamentary debate] *Now that he has had a day to reflect, the whole House will be waiting for his answer to some vital questions.* (FLOB H)

Sometimes one annotator saw a sentence as “matter-of-course” while the other saw it as “interpretative”. This example could be viewed as one statement interpreting the deeper significance of another (interpretative), or as an event fully congruent with the speaker’s expectation, with no personal choice involved (matter-of-course):

- (38) *It is not practical to assume that just because you stop using tropical timber you will be automatically maintaining the rainforest.* (FLOB E)

4 Conclusions

Evidence from two matching corpora of British English texts has pointed to a small but significant rise in recent times of modal auxiliary + *be* + *-ing* constructions, particularly as compared to a sharp fall in modal auxiliaries as a whole. I have explored the most frequent of these constructions, *will* + *be* + *-ing*, which has become more common outside of fictional texts. Its frequency is highest in correspondence registers, where there is common call for describing or making arrangements. (I cannot yet say whether there has been a *diachronic* shift in correspondence because this register is not included in the matching corpora surveyed.) In a brief comparison with other constructions it emerges that four other future-referring constructions have either declined or at least not risen in frequency (*be to*, *shall*, futurate present progressive, and – surprisingly – *be going to*), whereas *will* + infinitive presents a mixed picture. In terms of semantic developments, there are signs that disclaiming of volition might not be the only motivation for the rise of *will* + *be* + *-ing*. The aspectual and other semantic categories investigated proved extremely difficult to identify with confidence in the corpora, seemingly because of considerable overlaps between the categories, and the subjective nature of construal. The paradox of two “opposite” aspectual classes may be explainable by a classification into “literally-ongoing” and “metaphorically-ongoing” types (along the lines of e.g. Williams 2002). This allows us (a) to retain the notion of progressive aspect for the construction as a whole and (b) perhaps explain better the fuzziness between the aspectual categories. For the distinction between literally and virtually progressive situations is not likely to be as sharply defined as that between progressive and non-progressive. There is plenty of scope for future research, in particular: earlier phases in the development of *will* and other modals + *be* + *-ing*; connections to other constructions referring to future time; and connection to the infinitive in *be* + *-ing*.

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