Future alternations in English and Norwegian: A contrastive corpus study

The choice between the future constructions *will/shall* and *BE going to* is certainly among the most well-investigated topics in English linguistics (see e.g. Binnick 1971, Haegeman 1989, Szmrecsanyi 2003, Hilpert 2008, Denis & Tagliamonte 2018, among many others). A host of semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic factors has been suggested to drive the alternation between these constructions. In this talk, we revisit one particular aspect pertaining to the syntactic factors that have been said to influence the alternation: Based on spoken data from both British and American English corpora, Szmrecsanyi (2003) has shown that the alternation is sensitive to syntactic complexity. While *going to* is preferred in syntactically complex contexts – e.g. *if*-clauses, contexts of negation, and generally in longer sentences –, *will/shall* is preferred in syntactically independent contexts and shorter sentences. Rohdenburg's (1996) "complexity principle", according to which "[i]n the case of more or less explicit grammatical options the more explicit one(s) will tend to be favored in cognitively more complex environments" offers an explanation for this observation, especially if we follow Hopper & Traugott (2003: 73), who characterize *BE going to* as "more substantive (phonologically longer) and therefore more accessible to hearers" than *will*.

Szmrecsanyi's analysis is based on a series of monofactorial analyses. The aim of the present paper is twofold: On the one hand, (a) we replicate Szmrecsanyi's study using multifactorial statistical modelling drawing on new datasets. On the other hand, (b) we address the question of whether this account can be generalized to other languages that show a similar alternation as well. A particularly well-suited candidate for the latter is Norwegian, in which both *skal/vil* and *kommer til å* are used to indicate future time reference. For the replication study (a), we use samples from the spoken BNC 2014 and the Open American National Corpus (OANC). For the comparative study (b), we use spoken data from the Norwegian Speech Corpus (NoTa) and the BigBrother corpus. The data are annotated using the clause type and syntactic context variables operationalized by Szmrecsanyi (2003). The results confirm Szmrecsanyi's observations for the English data, but syntactic complexity correlates with the shorter form *skal* in the Norwegian data. This suggests that at least in the case of Norwegian, other factors are more influential; for English, it raises the question of whether the complexity principle can adequately account for the choice between constructions or if the observed complexity effects are actually side effects of other (e.g. semantic and pragmatic) factors.

Corpora

BNC	=	*The British National Corpus*, version 3 (BNC XML Edition). 2007. Distributed by Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, on behalf of the BNC Consortium. URL: http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/
OANC	=	Open American National Corpus. http://www.anc.org/
BigBrother	=	BigBrother-korpuset, Tekstlaboratoriet, ILN, Universitetet i Oslo. http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/bigbrother/
NoTa	=	Norsk talespråkskorpus - Oslodelen, Tekstlaboratoriet, ILN, Universitetet i Oslo. http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/oslo/index.html

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