

Will and be going to

We have been taught that *will* is the basic tool that we use for talking about events and states in the future. In the sentences below, however, we see that *will* is not restricted to the future.

- I'll go tomorrow.
- She'll cry if you tell her she can't go with us.
- Three gallons of milk? That'll be \$5, ma'am. (JH thinks it possible to say "That's going to be \$5" and mean the same thing.)
- (Struggling to open the door) This door won't open!
- (The telephone rings.) Oh, that'll be Bill. Tell him I'm not here. (JH thinks it possible to say "That's going to be Bill" and mean the same thing.)
- "Thank you, Sergeant-Major, that will be all," said the colonel. (meaning "I am finished talking with you.")
- You didn't pay me the \$10 I loaned you last year. That'll be the last time I ever loan you money. (I think it possible to say "That's going to be the last time" and mean the same thing, but another native speaker—a linguist—doesn't.)
- I was on Chejudo last year. That'll be the fifth time I've been there.

Two aspects for your consideration

Attitude or fact?: Is the verb presented as fact (*be going to*), or as attitude (*will*)?

Basis of the verb: Is the verb based on the present (*be going to*), or isn't it (*will*)?

Future

be going to do

Attitude or fact?: *Be going to* is used when a fact is involved, and it is the closest tool that English has to a true future verb form. The speaker is not expressing his attitude, he's uttering the verb as a fact. So, in the sentence "A steep rise in welfare costs will deplete the nation's budget from the late 2020s," we use *will* and not *be going to* because the attitude expressed in this prediction is not factual but subjective. If the speaker wanted to express certitude about this prediction, *be going to* would be proper.

Basis of the verb: Quirk¹ and Leech² say *be going to* expresses future fulfillment of the present, something *on the way*:

- future of present plan: *When are you going to get married?*
- future of present cause: *It's going to rain.*

Use this tool for...

- talking about plans; often emphasizes the idea of a decision that has already been made, an intention existing before the time of speaking.
- talking about the future on the basis of present evidence, to say that a future event is on the way, or starting to happen.

Remember, the utterance has some relation with the present. It is based on present reality.

Mnemonic keyword: PRESENT (because the utterance is based on the present)

will do

Attitude or fact?: *Will*, as a modal, expresses the speaker's subjective attitude about the verb's happening. It expresses the speaker's assurance about something happening or not happening in the present or future, and even the past; the speaker, though, is not stating that the event's happening is a fact.

Basis of the verb: Leech calls *will* the "neutral future." Swan³ explains this by saying that it is used simply for giving (or asking for) information about the future, or predicting future events which are not already decided or obviously on the way. [JFH: It can express commitment or intention, but that is felt at the time of speaking, not before; we use *be going to* if the intention existed before the time of speaking.] Swan adds that the *will* structure may be used in cases where there is no reason to use *be going to*.

Mnemonic keyword: FUTURE (because it's predicting the future without basis in the present)

In a few situations we can use both *will* and *be going to* (but each has its own meaning or nuance). In other situations, only one is used (see "Future in the past" below).

- This door won't open. (Use *won't* for present meaning, and *isn't going to* for predicting the future.)
- I will go to Australia next year. (Neutral expression of intention, or commitment Use *going to* if you are presenting it as the outcome of a plan. *Going to* is the most common utterance, because an event like a trip is usually the outcome of a plan made previously to the utterance.)
- Look at her—she's going to cry! (This prediction is based on present reality—her changing face—and *will* would not be appropriate here.)
- She'll cry if you tell her she can't go with us. (The condition is in the future, so the result is not based on the present. We could also say *be going to* if the speaker's utterance is based on knowledge about the situation.)
- It's going to rain. (Most situations of weather prediction require *be going to* because this utterance is almost always based on evidence, either what one sees or what one has heard.)
- If I don't take my umbrella I'm sure it'll rain. (The condition is in the future, so the result is not based on the present.)
- David came in to Margaret's office. He wasn't in a very good mood. He seemed like he was worried about something. And he was in a big hurry to see Mr. Russo. I think that David *was going to* tell Bob about everything and details happened between Marsha and him. (David was planning to tell Bob even before he entered Bob's office. *Would* would be wrong here.)

Future in the past

Consider the rules for using *will* and *be going to*. Those rules also apply when we want to express future in the past.

- I thought that no one *would / was going to* come to class today, but all of you came! (*would* if no evidence or agreement, just opinion; *was going to* if evidence or agreement).
- Marsha was worried that she *would / was going to* lose her job because she didn't interview Prof. Daniels. ("I *will / am going to* lose my job because I didn't interview Prof. Daniels.")
- Marsha worried that she would lose her job if she missed another interview. ("If I miss another interview I *will / am going to* lose my job.")

The unrealized past

We never use *would* by itself when we are talking about the unrealized past. We use *was going to*:

- David *was going to* (~~would~~) do the whole story on the hospital, but Marsha stopped him.
- I was going to (~~would~~) give you a quiz today, but I'm afraid I'll get strangled if I do.

In order to use *would*, we would have to use *have -en* with it:

- David *would have* done the whole story on the hospital, but Marsha stopped him [*or*: if Marsha hadn't stopped him].

Unrealized (or unreal) present / future

- Thank you for offering. I *would* (~~am going to~~) accept your offer, but I don't want to put you to any trouble.
- I *would* (~~am going to~~) give you a quiz today, but I'm afraid I'd get strangled if I did.

There is usually no *conscious* discrimination between *will* and *be going to*, as far as I know, either on the part of the speaker or the listener. When I say "I'll go tomorrow," I don't think to myself, "I'm assuring, not stating as fact," and the listener doesn't think, "That's his attitude, not a fact." But, in fact, when you study samples of actual utterances, we see that that's how they work. For example, if I ask, "When are you going to the States?" I am assuming subconsciously that the listener has a plan. The fact that the decision is usually made subconsciously means that true mastery of *will* and *be going to* comes only with lots of exposure to educated native speech and writing.

References

- ¹Quirk, R. 1972. *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. London: Longman.
²Leech, G. 1975. *A Communicative Grammar of English*. London: Longman.
³Swan, M. 1995. *Practical English Usage*. London: Oxford.