

The Spectrum of Future

Main Session – Tense & Modality

There has been a long debate whether the category “future tense” indicates future reference (tense) or whether it should be classified as a type of modality (Jespersen 1924; Prior 1967; Bertinetto 1979; Smith 1978; Haegeman 1983; Thomason 1984; Comrie 1985; Palmer 1987; 1986; Enç 1996; Sarkar 1998; Copley 2002; Condoravdi 2002; Squartini 2004; Jaszczolt 2006; Kissine 2008; Mari 2009; Giannakidou & Mari 2012, among many others). I argue in this paper that Greek *tha* ‘will’ and English *will* morphemes are underspecified between a temporal and a modal interpretation, and not ambiguous between two readings or semantically predetermined. Greek and English future morphemes (henceforth FUT), I argue, convey epistemic, deontic modality and future reference from one common knowledge base (including and not limited to information, norms, goals, evidence, stereotypes).

In the next example, one expresses a logical judgment on the basis of certain **indirect** evidence/information (a piece of knowledge inferred by the speaker) and circumstances surrounding a situation or event. The reading is not future but **epistemic**:

(1) Popi: Ti les na kani tora o Janis?

What do you think John is up to now?

Me: **Tha** taksidevi

epistemic reading

FUT travelling.3sg

He **must** be travelling

In the next example, the interpretation is **deontic**. The morpheme *tha* ‘will’ and *will* in both languages is equivalent to modal verb *prepi* ‘have to’ expressing a goal (a norm determined by the speaker or society) that has to be achieved; for example, the child has to take the medicine.

(2) Mum: Maria, **tha** paris to farmako tora! *deontic reading*
Maria, you **FUT** take the medicine now!

Maria, you **will** take the medicine now!

Equivalent: Maria, **prepi na** paris to farmako tora!
Maria, you **have to** take the medicine now!

Now let us see the following example where we have a purely future reference based on **direct** evidence (a piece of knowledge known to the speaker):

(3) I Maria **tha** erthi avrio stis pende. *temporal reading*

The Maria **FUT** come tomorrow at 5pm.

Maria **will** arrive at 5pm tomorrow.

Based on the data provided, we understand that in all examples *tha* ‘will’ and *will* depend on a common knowledge base represents either direct or indirect knowledge. The interpretative difference of the morphemes of future *tha* and *will* comes from the difference between the ordering sources that are employed by the speaker, for example:

(4) **Epistemic:** D-Best_{g(w)} selects the most ideal worlds from the knowledge base $\cap KB(w)$ given the ordering source provided by $\leq_{g(w)}$ and corresponds to **doxastically** best worlds that are based on the speaker’s beliefs and indirect evidence.

(5) **Deontic:** N-Best_{g(w)} selects the most ideal worlds from the knowledge base $\cap KB(w)$ given the ordering source provided by $\leq_{g(w)}$ and corresponds to **normative** best worlds that are based on the speaker’s and/or the world’s goals and norms.

(6) **Temporal:** S-Best_{g(w)} selects the most ideal worlds from the knowledge base $\cap KB(w)$ given the ordering source provided by $\leq_{g(w)}$ and corresponds to **stereotypical** best worlds that are real possibilities to eventually become the actual world.

In this paper, I propose that the future morpheme in Greek and English is an underspecified modal operator that depends on a common knowledge base. When it involves indirect evidence it has a modal interpretation, and when it accesses direct evidence then the interpretation is future. The analysis, I offer, provides a simple account of all possible readings of FUT morphemes.

Selected References

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