SHALL—WILL

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Ancient Teutonic, a highly inflected language, probably had a future tense for its verbs. But the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes seem to have lost it by the time they invaded the British Isles in the fifth and sixth centuries. The closest they came to speaking of the future was such statements as "I go tomorrow".

The Scandinavians, on the other hand, had two constructions for the future tense: weljan, meaning to choose to do something in the future, and skaljan, meaning to be obligated to do something in the future. Skal goes back to an ancient root meaning "I have offended and am under the penalty to do something to atone".

The Scandinavian invasion of the British Isles introduced these words and they were absorbed into the pre-Conquest vocabulary we call Old English. They also survived the Norman Conquest, becoming Middle English words, adopting their present spelling in about 1300.

By this time, the words had lost their original Scandinavian meaning. We find that Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) was indiscriminate in his use of will and shall for the simple future, regardless of person. And he tended to reverse the later rule for promises and threats.

It has been said that a French grammarian, George Mason, first formulated the shall-will rule in 1622: shall, in the first person, foretells, and in the second and third, threats or promises. Will, in the first person, threats or promises, and in the second and third, foretells.

Ben Jonson, who considered himself at least Shakespeare’s equal, wrote a "Grammar" in 1640 in which he made no distinction between shall and will.

The completely unpleasant, if multi-talented, John Wallis wrote in 1653 a Latin text on English grammar, Grammatica Linguæ Anglicæ, in which he presented the rule. It is doubtful that he was influenced by Mason since he was thoroughly opposed to anyone or anything French. Today, Wallis is chiefly remembered for his mathematical work which inspired Newton to invent the calculus. But in his time, his chief renown was his ability as a cryptanalyst.

The following century saw the rise of the Authoritarian Grammarians who vainly but valiantly tried to force the distributive English into the inflective Latin manner.

A dissenting English Grammarian, in 1761, he decreed the only authority in the English language.

Almost at that time, Priestley in his Introduction to Logic which came out in 1761 and a half. Even Priestley, had Wallis as a grammarian writing.

So, the battle raged. But it was as a grammarian that Priestley fought today as the dissenters, including me, were writing.

To complete, seen. The Grammar appeared in 1664 and 1608, but shillyshally.
inflective Latin grammar pattern.

A dissenting voice was that of the famous chemist, Joseph Priestley. In 1761, he wrote his "Rudiments of English Grammar" in which he decried the shall-will rule, stating "... custom is supreme and the only authority is the people".

Almost at the same time, in 1762, Robert Lowth wrote "A Short Introduction to English Grammar" in which he set down the ironclad logic which clamped and stifled English grammar for the next century and a half. Even though he presented the shall-will rule of Mason and Wallis as a grammatical law, he did not always follow it in his own writing.

So, the battle was joined between the Authoritarians and the Humanists. But it was a one-sided fight. Lowth attacked Priestley not only as a grammarians, but as a cleric and a scientist. There is no record that Priestley fought back. The upshot is that Priestley is remembered today as the discoverer of oxygen. Generations of schoolchildren, including me, were made to believe that any transgression of a law of grammar, including will-shall, would be punished by social ostracism.

To complete the picture, the first contraction, written sha'nt, appeared in 1664 and won't in 1667. Willy-nilly showed up as early as 1608, but shilly-shally waited until 1703 to be invented.

QUERY

The editor has an anagrammatic listing of Webster's Second arranged by word length, consisting of about 2000 pages of computer printout. A sample of consecutive entries:

ACEIMNRSU muscarine, sucramine
ACEIMNRTU nectarium
ACEIMNSTU mint sauce

Would any Word Ways readers be interested in obtaining a photographic reproduction, printed on both sides of 1000 8 1/2-by-11 sheets of paper (like Levine's pattern word lists, but unbound)? If at least five orders are received, it is possible to supply them for $120 apiece, assuming no change in the printer's price (obtained in August 1982).