This presentation examines the questions concerning diachronic change of the English auxiliary will: i) the constructions in which will has been used, and ii) the period when its epistemic meanings have developed. See (1a, b), for the schematic representations for each question:

(1)  a. full verb > auxiliary  
    b. root > epistemic

We will first briefly review widely known syntactic approach of Hopper and Traugott (1993) and semantic study of Wischer (2006), and have a closer look on how the epistemic meanings have derived from the original (volitional) sense, and in what construction (1b) has got triggered.

The materials of this study are Matthew and Mark of the four Gospels. The representatives of each period are: Skeat’s Anglo-Saxon Gospel for Old English, Wycliffe’s Bible for Middle English, Authorized Version for Early Modern English, and Good News Bible for Present-day English.

Based on the Oxford English Dictionary five categories are set to label the meanings of will: volition, imperative, request, conjecture, and mere future. All examples are categorized into these groups.

The total number of the examples of will has gradually increased from Old English text to the Wycliffe’s, and grown rapidly from Early Modern English to Present-day English. When it comes to the persons of the subject, will with second person subjects increased in Middle English. Also it is clearly shown that its use with third person subjects increases from Middle English to Present-day English. First-person wills also gained, doubled in the Authorized Version, and decreased in Present-day English, as Figure 1 shows:

Concerning the complements of will, Noun Phrase objects amount to 30% of all cases in the Anglo-Saxon Gospels, and gradually got lost from Middle English to Present-day English, as Figure 2 shows:

On the other hand, the data taken by the meanings shows that the number of epistemic (Conjectural/future) wills grew rapidly from Middle English to Present-day English.
Imperative use had a remarkable share until Middle English, but disappeared completely in Early Modern English, as Figure 3 shows.

Though the total number of will increased in Present-day English, 40 examples in Early Modern English text are lost in Present-day English, and verbs for volition are used there instead. Figure 4 shows the percentages of will in Early Modern English replaced by verbs of volition in Present-day English.

I examine the factors that set off the rise of epistemic meanings of will. Figure 4 shows that the numbers of the epistemic wills increased from Early Modern English to Present-day English, accompanied with the examples co-occurring with inanimate subjects and passive complements.

Language materials

References