

Futures and Intentions

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Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca (1994: 256) stated that ‘the intention stage [is] essential to the understanding of the development of the prediction function’ in future grams which derive diachronically from morphemes expressing desire and willingness. Heine (1995: 125) widened this claim to all future grams.

There are good reasons to doubt this. Linguistic issues include these: Firstly, Bybee et al. only give one example of a language where ‘intention’ is a possible sense of the future marker: Nimburan (Papuan, Indonesia) (1994: 254). Even for this language they include the term as part of a list that also includes ‘desire, present inceptive, and polite imperative’, which is hardly definitive; and descriptions of Nimburan such as Anceaux (1965) do not analyse its future forms in this way. Secondly, there is no other instance in the literature, to my knowledge, where an expression meaning ‘X intends to V’ is presented as a clear source for a future gram. If Heine was correct, we would expect many. Thirdly, there is no reason to accept the common assumption in the literature that intending is a modal notion. Fourthly, Wekker (1976) found very few first person instances of English *will* in his corpus which express intention – again, not what we would expect if intention was a crucial stage in the history of future grams.

Some of the issues are conceptual: Firstly, volition (‘wanting’ to do something) and desire are not the same as ‘intending’ to do something. Advocates of the ‘intention stage’ need to explain how one develops into the other. Secondly, there is a large literature in the Philosophy of Action about intention, showing that it is a complex and controversial notion with several different subtypes, only some of them future-oriented (cf. Setiya 2018 for a good summary).

In this paper I revisit the history of English *will* and German *werden*, and argue that the notion of intention has no role to play in either case.

References: Bybee, J., R. Perkins & W. Pagliuca (1994). *The evolution of grammar: Tense, aspect, and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Wekker, H. (1976). The expression of future time in contemporary British English. Amsterdam, North-Holland. Heine, B. (1995). On the German *werden* future. In W. Abraham, T. Givon, and S. A. Thompson (eds.), *Discourse, Grammar and Typology*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 119–138. Anceaux, J.C. (1965). The Nimburan language: phonology and morphology. Berlin, Springer. Setiya, K. (2018). Intention. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Online at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/intention/>.

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