shall, will

Shall and *will* have attracted a great deal of attention from usage commentators. Let us begin with a clear expression of present-day American use:

> ▸ The old distinction between these words is no longer observed by most people. *Shall,* which was once considered the only correct form for the expression of the simple future in the first person, has been replaced by *will* in the speech and writing of most people. … In a few expressions *shall* is the only form ever used and so presents no usage problem: *Shall* we go? *Shall* I help you? To use *will* in these expressions would change the meaning. With the exception of these special uses, *will* is as correct as *shall* —Warriner 1986

And let us contrast that with the traditional rule, as expressed in a British usage book:

> ▸ In its simplest form, the rule governing the use of *shall* and *will* is as follows: to express a simple future tense, use *shall* with *I* or *we, will* with *you, he, they,* etc.; to express permission, obligation, determination, compulsion, etc., use *will* with *I* and *we, shall* elsewhere —Chambers 1985

Chambers goes on to note that there are "many exceptions" to this rule, especially in American, Scottish, and Irish English (as distinguished from the English of England itself).

The reason that things have come to this pass is history. The traditional rule given by Chambers was first set down in the 17th century by John Wallis, a bishop and a well-known mathematician. Wallis's grammar was written in Latin for the edification of foreigners; modern commentators assume it was a sort of learner's grammar. Wallis's rules were probably simplified. Strang says they do not reflect the practice of the preceding century, and thinks they might have been closer to the actual usage of Wallis's own time than that of any other. A few randomly collected examples of 17th-century usage cast doubt even on that cautious assessment; sometimes usages match the rules and sometimes they do not. A good part of the problem is in interpretation—both of the terms used by the grammarians to make the distinctions and of the intentions of old writers. With this warning, here are some 17th-century examples:

> ▸ If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts —Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning,* 1605

> ▸ … I shall speak when I have spoken of the Passions —Thomas Hobbes, *Of Speech,* 1651

> ▸ … I hope I shall not be thought arrogant —John Dryden, "Defence of the Epilogue," 1672

> ▸ … I will only add this in defence of our present Writers —John Dryden, "Defence of the Epilogue," 1672

> ▸ "He that will have a May Pole shall have a May Pole." This is a maxim with them —William Congreve, "Concerning Humour in Comedy," 1695

> ▸ … the two great Seminaries we have, are without comparison the *Greatest,* I won't say the *Best* in the World —Daniel Defoe, *Of Academies,* 1697

These examples seem to us to follow the theory sometimes and sometimes not. If the usage of Wallis's own century was not exactly uniform, you can well imagine that over time the rules came to match actual usage even less.

By the 18th century, grammarians were finding Wallis's rules too simple. Lowth 1762 added rules for interrogatives, and later grammarians elaborated even further. But William Cobbett 1823 did not bother with rules; he told his son, to whom his grammar was addressed, that the uses of the auxiliaries, "various as they are, are as well known to us all as the uses of our teeth and noses." He had nothing more to say about *shall* and *will,* relying instead on the native speaker's instinct. Such reliance was not uncommon in the 19th century. Alford 1864 commented that he never heard an Englishman who misused *shall* and *will* but had never heard an Irishman or Scotchman who did not misuse them sometimes. On this side of the Atlantic, Richard Grant White 1870 was employing the same method to distinguish the "correct" New England use from that of the provincial folk and immigrants (mostly Irish at that time). A somewhat similar attitude can be found in Fowler 1926, in which a distinction is made between those "to the manner born"—in this case, the English—and those not so lucky.

Fowler listed several pages of what he regarded as misuses culled from British newspapers, but his faith in the English English rules never wavered, perhaps because of his belief that the British press was controlled by Scots.

Had he looked to literary rather than journalistic sources, however, he could have found plenty of variation among non-Scots:

▸ If you procure the young gentleman in the library to write out … , I will send to Mr. Prince the bookseller to pay him —Samuel Johnson, letter, 7 Aug. 1755

▸ If I come to live at Oxford, I shall take up my abode at Trinity —Samuel Johnson, 1754, quoted by Thomas Warton, in James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson,* 1791

▸ I have no desire to return to England, nor shall I, unless compelled —Lord Byron, letter, 12 Nov. 1809

▸ I will write when I can —Lord Byron, letter, 12 Nov. 1809

▸ As plainly as I behold what happened, I will try to write it down —Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield,* 1850

▸ His French author I never saw, but have read fifty in the same strain, and shall read no more —Thomas Gray, letter, 18 Aug. 1758

▸ … as soon as I am settled there, I will propose a day for fetching my newest little friend —Lewis Carroll, letter, 1 July 1892

Notice how easily first person *will* slips in when it is part of a contraction:

▸ I'll send her book from Oxford —Lewis Carroll, letter, 9 June 1892

▸ Well, I won't talk about myself, it is not a healthy topic —Lewis Carroll, letter, 29 July 1885

Notice too that *will* and *would* can be used with second and third persons to give directions or to show determination:

▸ You will therefore retain the manuscript in your own care —Lord Byron, letter, 23 Aug. 1811

▸ … he would carve a fowl, which he did very ill favordly, because ‘we did not know how indispensible it was for a Barrister to do all those sort of things well …’ —Charles Lamb, letter, 24 May 1830

Fowler dismissed the use of *shall* and *will* in the same construction as “elegant variation.” We have seen two or three examples of such usage from the 17th century already. Here is one from the 19th century:

▸ … I shall delay it till it can be made in person, and then I will shorten it as much as I can —Lord Byron, letter, 29 Feb. 1816

It is clear that even in the English of England there has always been some deviance from Wallis's (and Fowler's) norm.

In America, of course, there has been considerable straying from the Wallis rules. *Will* has by no means entirely supplanted *shall* for marking simple futurity, but *will* and *would* are certainly fully established as standard with the first person:

▸ I have no idea on what continent I will be in September —Alexander Woollcott, letter, 8 Jan. 1936

▸ We would all like it if the bards would make themselves plain, or we think we would —E. B. White, in *The Practical Cogitator,* ed. Charles P. Curtis, Jr., & Ferris Greenslet, 1945

▸ The mechanics … were perfect, I would say —Philip Hamburger, *New Yorker,* 12 Aug. 1950

▸ Tomorrow morning I will wake up in this first-class hotel suite … and I will appreciate its elegance —Tennessee Williams, *Story,* Spring 1948

▸ Tell Stan I have a textbook out, on English usage and style, and will send him a copy —E. B. White, letter, 16

June 1959

▸ … since I will be seeing you in a fortnight, we can then talk until the cows come home —Groucho Marx, letter, 16 Sept. 1960

▸ I know beforehand what I will not like about Jane later (she'll be too thin, of course. … What will I find to talk to her about? …) —Joseph Heller, *Something Happened,* 1974

As for *shall,* it has become a bit fashionable in recent years to disparage its use in American English. Its critics allow that it is entrenched in legal usage and in the questions mentioned at the beginning of the article, but in other uses they tend to regard it as affected or precious. Some allowance is made for the expression of determination or resolve, in which it is used with pronouns of all persons:

▸ I shall return —General Douglas MacArthur, on leaving the Philippines, 11 Mar. 1942

▸ I can't approve of such goings on and I shall never approve it —Harry S. Truman, letter, 18 Aug. 1948

▸ … those who frustrate communication and threaten identity by insisting that everybody else shall speak and write as they themselves do —James Sledd, in Greenbaum 1985

Shall and *should* are also used in more ordinary functions, however, by those Americans to whom they are natural (some of whom also use *will* and *would* in the same ways).

▸ So I've sent Hopkins to Moscow and Davies to London. We shall see what we shall see —Harry S. Truman, diary, 22 May 1945

▸ Perhaps I shall get down in January —Flannery O'Connor, letter, 15 Dec. 1948

▸ We shall call *I, we, he, she,* and *they* the subject forms —Roberts 1962

▸ I shall always remember two sentences he handed me —James Thurber, letter, 21 May 1954

▸ … and "I did not think to tell them"—I should use in conversation without a second thought —Barnard 1979

▸ … I shall be embarrassed by the check —Archibald MacLeish, letter, March 1972

▸ … I should love to settle myself uncomfortably into a chair by Josef Hoffmann but I can't afford it —William J. Gass, *N.Y. Times Book Rev.,* 3 Aug. 1986

Our conclusion is that the traditional rules about *shall* and *will* do not appear to have described real usage of these words very precisely at any time, although there is no question that they do describe the usage of some people some of the time and that they are more applicable in England than elsewhere. In current American English, *shall* and *should, will* and *would* are pretty much interchangeable, with the second pair more common. There is perhaps only one thing to concern the learner of English, and that is the business of questions mentioned by Warriner. Consider these two examples:

▸ … shall I be compassionate or shall I be uncompassionate? —William Faulkner, 25 Feb. 1957, in *Faulkner in the University,* 1959

▸ Shall we be relativists, and leave everybody's language alone … ? —James Sledd, *American Speech,* Fall 1978

Both of these ask for an opinion, a preference, a decision. What do we want to do? If *will* replaces *shall,* the meaning changes. A prediction is asked for. What is going to happen? *Shall* also occurs in an interjected question of fixed rhetorical form. No answer is expected, and *will* is simply not used:

▸ He was 6 foot 2. I was somewhat shorter, shall I say, and from the city —Stephen A. Howard, quoted in Wallace Terry, *Bloods,* 1984