What Made Each Writer Write Differently in the *Cely Letters*?

**OHARA Osamu**

1. Introduction

Letters were the only means of long-distance communication for people who lived and worked away from home in medieval times. Although medieval private letters shared several characteristics of style, each writer also wrote in his own style, which was influenced by the social relationships between the writer and the recipient of the letter. For example, Alison Hanham wrote, "... after he [= William Cely] became free of the Staple he remained in the position of factor, first to Richard I and then to George and Richard II, to whom he always wrote with great deference."¹ In the present historical sociolinguistic study, which focuses on the uses of the auxiliaries "will," "shall," "should," and "would" in the first, second and third persons and their semantic relations with the verbs following them, I will discuss how the writers of the *Cely Letters* used these markers and expressed their positions in the social hierarchical structure of the family. I have used the term "markers" here. "Marker" is a technical term used in sociolinguistics. Ronald Wardhaugh wrote, "People are aware of markers and the distribution of markers is clearly related to social groupings and to styles of speaking."² I will examine whether "will," "shall," "should," and "would" function well as social markers in the *Cely Letters*.

* This is a revised and combined version of two papers read at Session 304, International Medieval Congress 2007 held on July 9, 2007, and at Session 809, International Medieval Congress 2008 held on July 8, 2008 at the University of Leeds, Leeds, UK.

¹ Hanham (1975), p. xi.

² Wardhaugh (1998), p. 140. In this case, "the distribution of markers" is not related to "styles of speaking" but related to "styles of writing".

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(77)
2. Richard I

Table 1 shows the numbers of times “shall,” “will,” “should,” and “would” appeared in the letters of Richard I to his sons George, Richard II, and Robert. In the letters of Richard I, “shall” and “will” were used with the first person singular 19 times and 43 times, respectively, and were used with the second person singular 18 times and once, respectively. These figures suggest that Richard I used “will” more often when he was the subject of the sentence and used “shall” more often when his sons were the subjects.

Table 1. “Shall,” “will,” “should,” and “would” in the letters of Richard I to George, Richard II, and Robert.

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<td>would</td>
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According to Fredericus T. Visser, “It [= “will”] originally expressed nothing but a present determination to perform the action denoted by the infinitive with which it formed an immediate constituent.” Tauno F. Mustanoja wrote, “In early ME works… the periphrasis with shall is the usual means of indicating futurity.” He goes on to say, “… will is also found, but its modal character is rather pronounced, and it occurs mostly in promises, wishes, threats, and resolutions. It is not until later in ME period that will begins to express a pure future by the side of shall.” From what Visser and Mustanoja wrote, we can infer that “will” kept its original modal meaning during the time the Cely Letters were written. In fact, the 26 appearances of “I will …” from the letters of Richard I show that “will” was also used as a full verb signifying “desire” or “wish,” as in the following two examples from his letters.

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3 Richard I and other writers used several allomorphs signifying these auxiliaries in their letters. In this study, however, morphological variations were not important. Therefore, I will use the forms with modern English spellings in the tables and for the discussion of this paper.


6 Warner (1993, p. 202) wrote, “The use with a clausal object … survives longer, and remnants of it are found today.”
"Shall" derives from OE “sculan” which originally expressed “obligation” or “constraint.” According to Mustanoja, this auxiliary “implies that the action is going to take place independently of the will of the subject.” This independence of action from “the will of the subject” is the reason “shall” has been used to express a simple future. The fact that “shall” can also be used in direction questions in the first person and for a speaker’s guarantee in the second and third persons signifies that the original modal meaning of this auxiliary has been partly remained in Modern English. In other words, “will” signifies the determination or wish of the subject of the sentence and “shall” suggests that of the other party or parties.

3. Richard II

Table 2 shows the numbers of times “shall,” “will,” “should,” and “would” appeared in the letters of Richard II to George. “Shall” and “will” were used with the first person singular 22 times and 7 times, respectively, and with second person singular 9 times and 14 times, respectively.

Table 2. “Shall,” “will,” “should,” and “would” in the letters of Richard II to George.

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<td>sg.</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>would</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
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Table 2 shows that Richard II used “will” with the third person singular 42 times. Eleven of these times, his father, Richard I was the subject of the clause. On the

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8 The terms “direction questions” and “speaker’s guarantee” are from Huddleston, Rodney and Geoffrey K. Pullum (2002), pp. 194-5.
other hand, Richard II used “shall” with the third person singular 19 times, but Richard I was the subject of the clause only twice. These figures suggest that Richard II used “will” more often when his father or, probably, his brother was the subject, and used “shall” more often when he himself was the subject.

4. Socially superior or inferior

The use of auxiliaries shown in Tables 1 and 2 indicates how each writer thought of the other members of his family. Since “will” signifies the determination or wish of the subject of the sentence and “shall” suggests that of the other party or parties, we can assume that Richard I used “I will” and “ye shall” more often to his sons because he was socially superior to them. Accordingly, those who used “I will” and “ye shall” often in their letters forced their determination or wish upon the recipient. Richard II, on the other hand, used “I shall” and “you will” more often in his letters and showed respect toward his father (and even his younger brother).

Tables 1 and 2 also show the numbers of times “would” and “should” were used. Although “would” and “should” were each used only a few times, their distribution in the letters of Richard I is the same as that of “will” and “shall.” Richard I used “would” with the first person 8 times and used “should” with the second person twice. A member of the Cely family who used “would” many times was Richard II. Table 2 shows that he used “would” 19 times with the first person singular and 5 times with the second person singular. Table 2 also suggests that he preferred “would” to “will” with the first person singular. Both “will” and “would” were used as full verbs with the subordinate clauses following them. Richard II used “will” as a full verb once with the second person and 6 times with the third person, as in the following two examples.

… and 3e wyll that whe schaull by any wholl the next 3eyr …

(Hanham (1975), no. 169)

… qwerfor owre father wyll that 3e kepe the pawyn [= pledge] in your handys …

(Hanham (1975), no. 71)

Richard II also used the full verb “would” 4 times with the first person singular. Hanna Rutkowska wrote, “In many examples WOULD preserves its original
meaning of volition (and can be translated as "would like"). The following two examples represent this group. The first example also shows that Richard II used "would fain.”

... byt I wolde fayne that ze whor her tyll he be better mendyt.

(Hanham (1975), no. 95)

... and I wholde whe wher doyng among bodyr men ....

(Hanham (1975), no. 111)

On the basis of these examples and the data in Table 2, we can infer that when the subject of the clause was the father or brother of Richard II, he would use "will," but when the subject was himself, he would use "would." "Will" and "would" indicate different strengths of a determination or wish. In the two examples with "would," the verb of the subordinate clause is in the subjunctive mood and shows hypothetical action or condition. Richard II used "would" to weaken the meaning of his own determination or wish so that he could show respect for the other party in the sentence. Richard II skillfully used the two auxiliaries "will" and "would."

5. George Cely

In this way, "shall," "will," "should," and "would" seem to have functioned well as social markers in the Cely Letters. The actual circumstances, however, were not so simple. Table 3 shows the number of times George used "will" and "shall" in his letters to Richard I.

Table 3. "Shall," "will," "should," and "would" in the letters of George to Richard I.

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<tr>
<td>shall</td>
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<tr>
<td>will</td>
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<tr>
<td>should</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>would</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

Table 3 shows that in his letters to Richard I, George Cely used “will” 7 times and “shall” 10 times with the first person singular. With the second person singular, he used “will” 3 times and “shall” 11 times. George used “shall” many times with either the first person singular or the second person singular. This usage pattern differs from the patterns of Richard I or Richard II. In other words, in the letters of George Cely, these auxiliaries did not work well as social markers. To explain this result we need to find out some other markers. Probably the different usage pattern is due to the difference in the style of writing. For example, “sir” appears as a form of address 150 times in the 44 letters Richard II wrote to George. Furthermore, “sir” appears 181 times in the 30 letters William Cely wrote to George and the 2 letters he wrote to Richard II. George, however, did not use “sir” at all in the 9 letters he wrote to his father. His failure to use “sir” might suggest that George wrote in a more casual or businesslike style and did not show much respect to the recipients of his letters regardless of his social relations with them. However, before jumping to this conclusion, we should examine the verbs that follow “will” and “shall.” The three examples below are from letters George sent to Richard I.

... and ther I woll speke wyth John Vandyrhay ... (Hanham(1975), no. 22)  
... and I may be whell payd as my hoppe ys Y shall be. (Hanham(1975), no. 22)  
Be the grace of Godd Y shall fenshe all thyngys heuyr that .... (Hanham (1975), no. 109)

The verb used in the first example is speke (“speak”). This is an activity-verb, especially for communication.10 “Speak” expresses volitional activity, and the subject must decide whether to perform an action. If I decide to perform the action, I say “I will speak,” and if I decide not to perform the action, I say, “I will not speak.” It is quite natural to consider that the use of the auxiliary “will” with this type of verb (phrase) signifies a determination or wish of the subject of the clause.

In the second example, if we make up for the compliment omitted after be (“be”), the last clause becomes “I shall be well paid.” In this case, whether he is “being well

10 Here I have made use of the terms classifying the verbs into semantic domains provided in Douglas, Biber, et al. (1999), pp. 360-71.
paid” or not cannot be controlled by the subject’s decision. Instead, “being well paid” depends on something outside the subject’s will. In other words, this kind of verb phrase signifies a non-volitional result. In this example, shall (“shall”) is thought to have the meaning of simple future.11

In the third example, the verb fenyshe ("finish") is an aspectual verb, which "characterizes the stage of progress of some other event or activity."12 When the subject of the sentence is animate, “finish” is a volitional verb. Whether this action will be performed or not has to be decided. In this case, however, the auxiliary is sshall (“shall”), and the person who was supposed to wish the subject to perform the action was not the subject himself but the other party, in this case, the recipient of the letter. When “shall” was used with this kind of verb in the first person, it suggested the determination or wish of the recipient.

In this way, the auxiliary “shall” showed two different meanings according to the semantic nature of the verb (phrase) following it. If a verb (phrase) signifying the non-volitional result followed, “shall” was most likely to have the meaning of simple future. On the other hand, if a volitional verb (phrase) followed, “shall” retained its original meaning of “obligation” or “constraint.” Therefore, writers who used “I will” and “you shall” with a volitional verb (phrase) more often can usually be regarded as having considered themselves socially superior to the recipient of the letter. This belief in social superiority is signified by “shall” in the second person with a volitional verb (phrase) suggesting the determination or wish of the writer of the letter. On the other hand, when used in the first person, “shall” with a volitional verb (phrase) can be regarded as having suggested the determination or wish of the recipient of the letter, and those who used “I shall” and “you will” more often with the volitional verb (phrase) are considered to have thought (or to have tried to show) he was socially inferior to the recipient of the letter. It is true that this is only a general principle. However, if we closely re-

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11 When deciding whether a verb (phrase) is volitional or non-volitional, we should be careful about dealing with a “be” followed by a past participle. For example, “be demeaned,” which can be found very often in the Cely Letters, should be thought of as volitional. OED (demean v.1, 7) explains that “demean” was used passively to signify “to behave or conduct oneself.” According to MED (demeinen v. 4. (b)), ben demeaned meant “behave or act (in a certain way).”

examine the clauses with “will” or “shall” while keeping this principle in mind, we can notice some interesting things.

Table 3 shows that George used “shall” 10 times with the first person singular in his letters to Richard I. Among the 10 examples, “shall” appears only 3 times with a non-volitional verb (phrase). One example with “be well paid” has already been cited above.13 In the remaining 7 examples, he used “shall” with a volitional verb. On the other hand, all 11 examples of “shall” with the second person singular have a non-volitional verb (phrase), as do the two examples below.

\[
\text{... yffther come any ze shall undyrstonnd.} \quad \text{(Hanham (1975), no. 46)}
\]

\[
\text{When all thyng ys ffeneshyd than shall ze have the clerones of all thyngys.} \quad \text{(Hanham (1975), no. 112)}
\]

Although George used “shall” often with either the first or second person, these figures suggest that he correctly showed respect to his father by using proper combinations of the auxiliary and a verb (phrase).

6. William Cely

Let us go back to the first quotation from Hanham (1975). Although William Cely is considered to be a member of the Cely family, he was not a brother of Richard II and George. Hanham stated, “… he always wrote with great deference.” William wrote 30 letters to George, 2 letters to Richard II, and 34 letters addressed to both Richard II and George. Table 4 shows the numbers of times William used “shall,” “will,” “should,” and “would” in his letters to them.15

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13 There are some clauses in which a verb or part of the verb phrase is omitted after the auxiliary as in the example of “be well paid.” In this case, I have inserted the omitted word(s) and decided whether they are volitional or non-volitional.

14 In this example, vndyrstonnd means “hear, learn, perceive”. Cf. Hanham (1975), p. 342 and MED understood v. 13. (e).

15 It is almost impossible to be certain whether the subject of the second person was singular or plural in the case of the letters sent to both Richard II and George because “ye” was usually used for the subject. However, because these letters were sent to both persons, it is reasonable to regard the subject as plural. Therefore, I have counted all the second person subjects in the letters of this group as plural.
Table 4. "Shall," "will," "should," and "would" in the letters of William to George, or Richard II or both.

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<td>sg.</td>
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<tr>
<td>shall</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
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<td>would</td>
<td>16</td>
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With the first person singular, "will" was used 5 times and "shall" was used 53 times. With the second person, if the singular and plural uses should be considered together because the group of 34 letters was addressed to both Richard II and George, in these letters "will" was used a total of 16 times and "shall" was used a total of 32 times.

Table 4 shows that William used "I shall" far more frequently than "I will," and we can infer that he tried to show himself to be socially inferior to the recipient or recipients of the letters. With the second and third persons, "will" appears more often than "would." However, with the first person singular, "would" appears more often than "will." We can infer again that William used "will" more often when the subject of the clause was Richard II or George or both and used "would" more often when the subject was himself. His choice of "will" or "would" was another way to show his social inferiority to the recipient or recipients of the letters. The numbers of times "shall" and "will" appeared with the second person, however, will not strengthen these inferences, because, as did George Cely, William used "shall" more often than he did "will." We need to re-examine what kind of verb follows the auxiliary in the letters of William.

Table 5 shows the numbers of non-volitional and volitional verbs and that-clauses after each auxiliary in the letters of William Cely. N stands for non-volitional verbs or verb phrases, V stands for volitional verbs or verb phrases, and T stands for that-clauses.¹⁶

¹⁶ There are some clauses in which a verb or verb phrase cannot be read because of paper damage or other reasons. These clauses have been excluded and do not appear in Table 5. Their exclusion is the reason the total numbers of N, V and T verbs after each auxiliary in Table 5 are smaller than the numbers for the corresponding auxiliaries in Table 4.
Table 5. Non-volitional verbs or verb phrases, volitional verbs or verb phrases, and that-clauses after each auxiliary in the letters of William.

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We find that “shall” was more often used with volitional verbs in the first person singular and with non-volitional verbs in the second person. This distribution pattern agrees with that of George, and we can draw a similar conclusion. In the letters of William, whereas “shall” with the first person singular most often signifies the determination or wish of the recipient or recipients, “shall” with the second person is most likely to have the meaning of simple future, which will not weaken our inference that William tried to show himself to be socially inferior to the recipient or recipients of the letters.

“Shall” and “should” have a rather similar tendency in William’s letters. It is true that with the first person singular the numbers of times volitional and non-volitional verbs appeared after “should” were similar, but with the second person “should” was most often followed by non-volitional verbs. Rutkowska has written, “The original meaning, expressing obligation, is felt stronger in clauses with SHOULD than in those with SHALL. This modal function usually overshadows the meaning of futurity, even if the latter is implied by the context.” However, she

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has also written, "SHOULD indicates future in the past, referring to a hypothetical action. In such cases, the main or dependent clause containing WOULD is often followed by an object noun clause containing SHOULD."

Going back to Table 2, we can see that Richard II used "should" 3 times with the first person singular and 3 times with the second person singular. He used "should" twice in the second person singular with volitional verbs (intret ["entreat"] and sell ["sell"]) as can be seen in the following examples.

\[\ldots \text{my godfather wolde that ze schuld intret hym, and } \ldots\]
\[(\text{Hanham (1975), no. 80})\]

\[\ldots \text{he whoulde not that ze schulde sell them togeyddy, byt } \ldots\]
\[(\text{Hanham (1975), no. 96})\]

These verbs were, however, not in the main clause. In addition, the subjects of the main clause were not "I" but "my godfather" and "he" (in this case, Richard I). The auxiliary "would" was used as a full verb in the main clause and "should" with a volitional verb was placed in the subordinate clause. Both these examples are from letters sent to George, and what Richard II implied here was that George was not socially inferior to Richard II but to the father or godfather of Richard II. It is certain that "the original meaning expressing obligation" is implied in the clause with "should." On the other hand, when a non-volitional verb (phrase) follows "should," such an implication will not be felt, and "should" refers to "a hypothetical action," as in the following example from a letter of William's.

\[\ldots \text{and how he wuld ze schuld be content and plesyd affore all odar.}\]
\[(\text{Hanham (1975), no. 206})\]

From these examples we can see that just as did "shall," "should" showed two different meanings according to the semantic nature of the verb following the auxiliary and that not only "shall" and "will" but also "should" and "would," in combination with the verb following them, become good social markers that will

\[^{18}\text{ Rutkowska (2003), p. 234.}\]
allow us to infer a subject’s position in the social hierarchy.

7. Conclusion

I have very briefly examined the uses and collocations of “shall,” “will,” “should,” and “would” in the *Cely Letters*. My findings suggest that these four auxiliaries were used to express the writer’s attitude toward the other member or members of the family with respect to its social hierarchical structure. I also conclude that whether the original modal meanings of the auxiliaries appeared depended on the nature of the verb (phrase) following the auxiliaries. If the volitional verb (phrase) followed, the auxiliaries expressed their original meaning of “wish” or “obligation.” I have also mentioned that some writers tended to use “would” with the first person singular and to use “will” with the second person. This usage reflects the modal meaning of “would” being less strong than that of “will.” The complementary distribution of “would” and “will” between the first and second persons is evidence that these auxiliaries were used as social markers to express the writer’s hierarchical position in the family. What I have found here are some fragments of idiolect features of each writer of the *Cely Letters*. These fragments are, as it were, hidden treasures that will help us understand medieval people. To find such hidden treasures, we still have to be very careful about “the little things that count.”

References


What Made Each Writer Write Differently in the Cely Letters?


Jikei University School of Medicine
Synopsis of “What Made Each Writer Write Differently in the Cely Letters?”

Despite the shared characteristics of style, each writer used his own style, which was influenced by the social relationships between the writer and the recipient of the letter. Alison Hanham suggests that William Cely wrote to Richard II and George “with great deference.” In this historical sociolinguistic study, focusing on the uses of the auxiliaries “will,” “shall,” “should,” and “would” in the first, second and third persons and their semantic relations with the verb following them, I have discussed how the writers of the Cely Letters used these social markers. After examining the uses and collocations of these auxiliaries, I conclude that “will,” “shall,” “should,” and “would” express the writer’s attitude toward the other member or members of the family with respect to its social hierarchical structure. I also conclude that whether the original modal meanings of the auxiliaries appeared depended on the nature of the verb (phrase) following the auxiliaries. If the volitional verb (phrase) followed, the auxiliaries expressed their original meaning of “wish” or “obligation”. Furthermore, some writers tended to use “would” in the first person singular and to use “will” in the second person because the modal meaning of “would” was not as strong as that of “will.” The complementary distribution of “would” and “will” between the first person and the second person is evidence that these auxiliaries were used as social markers to express the writer’s hierarchical position in the family.