To Will or Not to Will: The Evolution of *willy-nilley*
Author(s): Paula Kadose Radetzky

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via [http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/](http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/).

*The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* is published online via [eLanguage](http://www.elanguage.org), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.
To will or not to will: the evolution of willy-nilly*

Paula Kadose Radetzky
University of California, Berkeley

INTRODUCTION

1. While retaining its original meaning of ‘unwillingly’, the expression willy-nilly has acquired various other senses in current English, such as ‘undecidedly’, ‘unthinkingly’, ‘out of control’, and even ‘howsoever one pleases’, which is almost diametrically opposed to the original meaning of ‘unwillingly’. The shift exhibited by willy-nilly raises several theoretical questions about semantic change. First of all, how does an expression go from meaning one thing to meaning another—even its opposite? What constraints on semantic change are imposed by the meaning of the original word or expression? Secondly, it has been noted that the phonological form of a word can influence meaning change (Bolinger 1940, 1949, 1950, Malkiel 1952, 1979, among others). Willy-nilly had the characteristic shape (but not the semantics) of many English reduplicative words, so what evidence does it give us concerning how the phonological form of a word constrains or fuels semantic shift? Finally, how do such semantic and sound-symbolic factors interact in semantic shift? By using data from elicitation and from a variety of corpora, this paper examines the history of willy-nilly and sheds light on these theoretical questions.

HISTORY

2.1. WILL AND NILL. The word will (< OE willan) originally meant ‘wants, is willing’. Nill, which was its negative, came from the combination of ne and will (> nwill, nuill > nill) and meant ‘does not want, is unwilling’. Will and nill could be used as main verbs; in addition, nill, like will, could be put into other tenses:

(8 cent.) Ic hine ne mihte, pa Metod nolde, ganges getwæman
  ‘I him not was able since God did not want going hinder
  ‘I could not prevent him going, since God did not wish it’ (Beowulf)
(1600) Thinke how I...Was wronged, yet I nould reuengement take. (Fairfax)

2.2. WILL [x], NILL [x]. The expression willy-nilly is etymologically derived from clausal collocations such as: will I, nill I; will ye, nill ye; will he, nill he; and will we, nill we. As such, they were often set off from the main clause as parenthesis statements. Literally, the collocation will [x], nill [x] meant ‘irrespective of [x]’s wishes’, ‘whether [x] is willing or not willing’, ‘whether [x] wants to or not’. This neutral will [x], nill [x] was used mostly in the context of sermons or philosophical treatises, where the compulsion to (not) act was imposed by divine decree, universal reason, or law, truly irrespective of whether or not a particular person was willing. Some examples of this are given below.

(c1000) Fordan pe we synd synfulle and sceolan beon eadmode, wille we, because we are sinful and shall be humble, nelle we.
  ‘Because we are sinful and shall be humble, will we, nill we.’ (Ælfric)
Old age cometh upon us all, will wee, or nill wee, and this waie nature provided for vs, that we should waxe yong again in our children and nephewes.... (Wilson)

...by submitting our wills to God's will, we shalbe sure both to have our wills effected, yea also that to be effected, which is the best. God's will, will we, nill we, shalbe accomplished. (Gouge)

The days must come when, whether we will or nill, we shall say, with the preacher, "i haue no pleasure in them." (T. Fuller)

During the same period but in different contexts, the collocation will [x], nill [x] meant 'unwillingly'. Aside from when it was used in sermons and philosophical treatises, the collocation will [x], nill [x] meaning 'whether [x] is willing or not' was an apparent tautology. It therefore violated Grice's maxim of Quantity, since it added no new information to the exchange. One way to resolve such a violation is to make the collocation less redundant by focusing on one of the disjuncts and effectively ignoring the other.

What remains is the issue of which disjunct to focus on. In its 'be willing' sense, will does not impute any particular desire to its subject. On the other hand, we can ordinarily infer from nill 'be unwilling' that the subject desires to not do something. For example, if Mary is willing to go jogging, it might not matter to her whether she goes jogging or not. If her mother orders her to go jogging, there is nothing remarkable about the situation, since she was willing to go anyway. However, if Mary is unwilling to, we usually infer that she desires to not go jogging (although this is not a logical entailment). If her mother disregards her wishes and forces her to go, then it is worth noting that Mary went against her will. Commenting on someone's willingness, therefore, is not as remarkable as commenting on the person's unwillingness; hence, will [x], nill [x] would tend to be uttered in contexts where somebody was unwilling more than in situations where the person was presumed to be willing. For these reasons, the disjunct that was focused on as more salient was nill [x], so that will [x], nill [x] (literally 'regardless of [x]'s wishes') had the pragmatic force of 'against [x]'s wishes'. In other words, to say 'He did it willed he, nilled he,' literally 'He did it regardless of his own wishes', pragmatically meant 'He did it against his own wishes' or 'He did it unwillingly'. And, the prototypical frame which was set up by the use of will [x], nill [x] was one in which there was some external compulsion exerted upon an unwilling participant.

Below, I give examples where will [x], nill [x] is more likely to be interpreted in the sense 'unwillingly' than 'whether [x] wants to or not', although, for certain examples, both interpretations are possible.

She commaunded that he shold no lengyr abyde ne dwelle there and thenne he yssued out anone wold he nold he by flux of the wombe. (Caxton)

If my lorde wyll needes coste and inuade my inwarde manne, wyll i nyll i, and breake violently into my harte, i feare mee i shall eyther displease my lorde of london, which i would be verye loth, or els my lord god, whiche i would be more loth.... (Latimer)

...he pardoned all the parties, and advanced the wench to high honor, farre aboue those that had rule of hir afore, so that she ruled them (willed they nilled they:) for he vsed hir as his paramour.... (Holinshed)
(1578) ...for the horse beeyng so hurte and galled, ranne vpon hym with suche force, that (willed or nilled his maister) strikyng hym with his twoo hinder feete, he burste his paunche.... (Jennings)

(1600) The nobles were so neere driven and to such streights, that will they, nill they, yeeld they must.... (Livy, tr. Holland) [translates expressit hoc necessitas patribus ‘necessity extorted this from the senators’]

2.3. Development of the Adverb. In the next stage of development, there was a phonetic contraction whereby all of the finite clause types of the form will [x], nill [x] collapsed into the expression willy-nilley, and it took on the form of an adverb. When all of the clausal collocations collapsed into willy-nilley, the pronouns disappeared and it became unclear who the subject of will and nill was—it could have been the speaker(s), the addressee(s), or a third party. Thus, a sentence such as the next could have several interpretations, among them ‘will I, nill I’, as in (a), or ‘will he, nill he’, as in (b).

I visit him willy-nilley every weekend.
(a) I visit him will I, nill I every weekend.
(b) I visit him will he, nill he every weekend.

The earliest instances of the contracted form of willy-nilley predicate unwillingness of the subject in active sentences, as in the next two examples.

(1608) Thou shalt trust me spite of thy teeth, furnish me with some money wille nille, and ride up with me thyself contra voluntatem et professionem.
(Middleton)

(1797) But her Ladyship would, willi nilli, constantly join the one who drank the waters every morning, and converse with her. (Berkeley)

We must remember that willy-nilley at this point was in transition from being a subordinate clause to becoming an adverb. Absent evidence to the contrary, there is a strong tendency to interpret the subject of a subordinate clause as coreferential with the subject of the main clause. Perhaps the residual subordinate character of the expression willy-nilley led to its predicating unwillingness of the syntactic subject. In addition, the fact that the subject of an active sentence is prototypically volitional may explain why, in the earliest use of willy-nilley, the unwillingness was predicated of the subject of active sentences.

However, there is no particular reason why, in the semantically and pragmatically appropriate contexts, unwillingness could not be predicated of other participants. There are multiple factors, such as volitionality of the participants, passivization, and the placement of willy-nilley, which enter into play in determining which participant has unwillingness predicated of it. For example, in the next two examples, there is only one volitional participant; it is therefore unambiguously the volitional participant (John) who is the unwilling entity.

(active) John willy-nilley solved his math problems.
(passive) The math problems were solved willy-nilley by John.

However, if there is more than one volitional participant, in many instances it becomes ambiguous as to who is “nilling.” Of the next three examples, only when willy-nilley is placed preverbally in an active sentence (the first example) is it
unambiguously the gangster-turned-informer who is unwilling; where *willy-nilly* is postverbal or in a passive sentence (as in the last two examples), either the gangster or Toby can be interpreted as the unwilling participant.

(active, preverbal) The gangster-turned-informer *willy-nilly* delivered his friend Toby to the police.

(active, postverbal) The gangster-turned-informer delivered his friend Toby *willy-nilly* to the police.

(passive) Toby was delivered *willy-nilly* to the police by the gangster-turned-informer.

From these examples, we see that volition and the syntactic position of *willy-nilly* play a role in determining which participant gets the unwillingness predicated of it.

The observation that modals—which include historical *will* and *nill*—do not always impose their modality on the agent is helpful here. As R. Lakoff (1972) notes, “The decision as to whether a modal is two or three (or one) place, and the decision as to which of the nouns in the sentence is the bearer of the obligation...is based on the context of the utterance, and the pragmatic factors involved in uttering the sentence.” Sweetser (1990) goes on to say,

...[W]ith a few pushes from the context we can see the imposed modality as being incumbent on almost any entity in (or outside of) the sentence. Modals are not simply “voice-neutral”; they are semantically neutral towards the choice of the imposee from among the sentence’s NPs (or even from the context). Compare the following examples (from Lakoff):

The witch must be kissed by every man in the room,
(a) or the leader of the coven will demote her to leprechaun.
(b) or they’ll all be turned into star-nosed moles.
(c) because that’s the law.

In (a) the obligation to get kissed rests primarily with the witch; in (b) the men are the ones responsible; and in (c) the obligation rests on all the participants, or even the world at large. Another possible interpretation of the first clause...in isolation would be that the hearer is to see to it that the kissing occurs—hence the obligation would devolve on the hearer. In short, any pragmatically reasonable interpretation of the identities of the modal imposer and imposee is possible.

We have seen the process by which the use of *willy-nilly*, originally in active sentences expressing the unwillingness of the subject, could have been extended—through the interaction of both syntactic and pragmatic factors—to show the unwillingness of any of the arguments of the verb. This is exactly what happened: by the early nineteenth century, *willy-nilly* was predicated of participants other than the prototypical agent-subject. For instance, in the first two examples below, the participants who are unwilling are patients, and they are the subject of passive sentences with no overt agent. In the third example, the unwilling participant is also a patient, this time with the grammatical function of direct object.

(1807) *He was sure, willy nilly, to be drenched with a deluge of decoctions.*

(Irving)
In these Italian Commonwealths, as we have seen, poets are forced, nilly-willy, to be platonic. (Lee)

He...conceived an idea of carrying her off and marrying her nilly nilly at Gretna Green. (Griffiths)

COEXISTENCE OF MANY WILLY-NILLYS

3. The development of willy-nilly until the nineteenth century, described above, was fairly linear. During the nineteenth century, however, the situation became more complicated, and the uses of willy-nilly multiplied. One must keep in mind that willy-nilly almost never looked clausal any more and could pragmatically be attributed to any volitional participant in the frame, thereby leading to ambiguity. In addition, the verb nil was no longer current; also, will did not mean ‘want’ any more, and there existed only relic uses meaning ‘be willing’ as in “See if John will help you” (Sweeters 1990). These factors presumably contributed to the proliferation of willy-nillys from this period to the present.

3.1. USES MEANING ‘UNWILLINGLY’. In many cases, willy-nilly retained its use meaning ‘unwillingly’. There are three ways in which willy-nilly was used in this sense: (1) as a pseudo-clausal relic retaining the full pronouns, (2) as a semantically adverbial adjective, and (3) as an adverb. These uses are explained individually below.

• PSEUDO-CLAUSAL (AFFECTED) USE WITH FULL PRONOUNS. In some literary genres, there remained a relic, pseudo-clausal use of the collocation which retained the full pronouns. However, these were used in ways which would have been unacceptable previously. For example, Byron says

(1822) And then he called his Brethren to his aid, And sent one on a summons to the pair, That they must instantly be well arrayed, And above all be combed even to a hair, And brought before the Empress, who had made Enquiries after them with kindest care: At which Dudù looked strange, and Juan silly; But go they must at once, and will I-nill I. (Byron)

In this passage, it is not I who is unwilling, but Dudù and Juan. The rhyme supports this conclusion, since only if will I-nill I is read willy-nilly does it rhyme with silly in the previous line. The next example must also be interpreted as willy-nilly, since it is man who is unwilling, not I.

(1845) In the matter of phrenology, for example, we first determined, naturally enough, that it was the design of the Deity that man should eat. We then assigned to man an organ of alimentiveness, and this organ is the scourge with which the Deity compels man, will-I null-I, into eating. (Poe)

• SEMANTICALLY ADVERBIAL ADJECTIVE. At the same time, willy-nilly developed into a semantically adverbial adjective. In the first example below, the willy-nilly nun is unwilling to be (or was unwilling to become) a nun. The same is true for the willy-nilly spinsters in the second example.
(1877) And some one saw thy willy-nilly nun
Vying a tress against our golden fern. (Tennyson)

(1880) All willy-nilly spinsters went to the canine race to be consoled for the evils of imperfect civilisation. (Cornhill Magazine)

**CONTINUATION OF ADVERB.** The use of willy-nilly as an adverb meaning 'unwillingly' (discussed above) also continued:

(1947) The procedure was for the pupil...at a signal from the pilot [to] clamber along the lower wing.... The pupil let go his hold on the strut, and willy-nilly he became a parachutist. This was known as the 'pull-off' method. (Newnham)

(1948) And shame was there. I had willy-nilly to get accustomed to living with it—it was guilt in a new guise. (Beauvoir, tr. Moyse and Senhouse)

(1955) Thus a heist mob is one which brooks no interference and robs the victim willy-nilly. (Maurer)

(1959) Willy-nilly I had had existentialism forced upon me. (Mailer)

(1995) The student took the exams willy-nilly. (informant)

(1995) He approached the project willy-nilly. (informant)

(1995) When questioned by the teacher, the pupil willy-nilly admitted to having cheated. (informant)

3.2. NEW USES FROM 'LACK OF CONTROL'. One might wonder how willy-nilly went from meaning 'unwillingly' to having its current senses, which include 'undecided', 'out of control', and 'howssoever one pleases'. As mentioned above, in the frame evoked by use of willy-nilly as 'unwillingly', there is some external compulsion which is exerted on a participant lacking control. In such a frame, there are two "correlative notions" (Stern 1931) present: (1) the notion that the participant is 'unwilling' and (2) the notion that the participant is 'lacking in control'. The shift from willy-nilly 'unwillingly' to 'without control' is the result of what Stern calls *permutation*: a shift in focus from the first of the correlative notions to the second. Once this happened, the expression willy-nilly was free to be applied to other frames (where there was no external compulsion necessarily present), and this is what gave rise to the divergent senses of willy-nilly. In other words, the concept of 'lack of control' was extracted from the frame by metonymy (in the sense of Traugott 1989, Traugott & König 1991) and applied to other situations.

**LACKING OR UNABLE TO TAKE CONTROL > UNDECIDED.** From using a word adverbially to connote passivity and inability to take control, it is a logical extension to use willy-nilly adjectivally to mean, as the OED puts it, "erron. Undecided, shilly-shally." Examples of willy-nilly in its 'undecided' sense are given below; as might be expected, some of them also have connotations of passivity and inability to take control or to assert one's will. It is significant to note that this adjectival willy-nilly can be attributed to inanimate entities (as shown in all of the next examples); this constitutes a significant break from previous usage, which applied only to volitional participants.

(1883) One notable peculiarity in the character of the woman is that she is capricious and coy, and has less straightforwardness than the man.... If any race of animals existed in whom the sexual passions of the female
were as quickly and as directly stirred as those of the male, each would mate with the first who approached her, and one essential condition of sexual selection would be absent.... The drama of courtship, with its prolonged strivings and doubtful success, would be cut quite short, and the race would degenerate through the absence of sexual selection.... The willy-nilly disposition of the female in matters of love is as apparent in the butterfly as in the man. It is the factor in the great theory of sexual selection that corresponds to the insistence and directness of the male. Coyness and caprice have in consequence become a heritage of the sex, together with a cohort of allied weaknesses and petty deceits, that men have come to think venial and even amiable in women, but which they would not tolerate among themselves. (Galton)

(1898) Let us have no more shilly shally, willy nilly talk. (Besant)
(1995) The plans were willy-nilly. (informant)
(1995) That was kind of a willy-nilly decision. (informant)

• LACK OF CONTROL > UNWILLINGLY WITHOUT SELF-CONTROL. The idea of lack of control has been extended to mean that a particular participant has no self-control. When somebody has no self-control, it is usually unwillingly, as in the examples below:

(1961) Colmore thought of his own parents, now safely dead: his mother’s wen, his father’s lack of aspirates. With such a background one could never be really safe however brilliant one was. There were a score of things that could betray one’s weakness.... [H]is accent, which had carefully acquired a neutrality as unidentified as some composite creature evolved by statisticians, could break down.... Or, more subtly, his whole habit of mind and body, formed in the uncultured, nagging, parsimonious, penurious household of his childhood might, at a crucial moment of his life, reveal him as utterly unsuitable for further [career] advancement—not necessarily...by a word or gesture or family connection, but through the image of himself that had willy-nilly and over an extended period been fixed in the eyes of those who controlled his destiny. (R. Fuller)

(post-1980) But nowadays, it’s all too easy to get carried away. So many people have credit cards, because it is quite tough to get through daily life today without one. That’s not to say that everyone will succumb to the temptation to use their credit cards willy-nilly, but for addictive personalities credit cards can lead all too easily into temptation. (Hector Corpus)

(1995) A pipe burst in John’s basement, and so he was running around willy-nilly. (informant)
(1995) He’s gambling willy-nilly. (Informant: “He’s addicted to gambling and can’t choose whether he gambles or not.”)

• LACK OF CONTROL > WILLINGLY WITHOUT SELF-CONTROL. There are, however, instances where the participant is willingly out of control, having relinquished it voluntarily:

(1995) He was at the buffet table eating willy-nilly. (Informant: “He chose not to take control.”)
Before the divorce, Gene was using Nancy's money just willy-nilly. (Informant: "Spending it as he pleased, out of control, without restraint on his part.")

The children were running around the playground willy-nilly. (Informant: "Out of control but having fun.")

LACK OF CONTROL > UNTHINKINGLY > AUTOMATICALLY. If somebody does not have control over his actions, we tend to extend that to mean he is acting without thinking. It is only natural, then, that for some people willy-nilly has come to mean 'unthinkingly'. 'Unthinkingly' can be extended in two ways: (1) if someone is not thinking, then he is acting 'automatically', or (2) if someone is not thinking, he is acting 'illogically', 'unsystematically', and 'without any plan or forethought'. The use of willy-nilly to mean 'automatically' (seen in the first example below) is the first syntactically adverbial use in which the willy-nilly participant is inanimate. Some examples of the first extension, where willy-nilly is used to imply 'unthinkingly' or 'automatically' are:

Indeed, reunification may just follow economics willy-nilly. As of 1 January 1990, and perhaps even by Christmas, the freedom to travel will be a two-way street. (Right now, West Germans still have to go through the old, stultifying visa procedures.) Capital will inevitably flow in with people....and Western-organised production will soon follow. That will force some kind of East German currency reform.... (The Independent)

We have a burglar alarm for our house; we set it at night, and we disarm it in the morning; if we don't disarm it, and accidentally open a door or a window, we immediately hear a helluva big noise, the sheriff's office is phoned, and we have to get on the phone and act fast with all sorts of codes and passwords to stop them from driving to our house. This morning, I knew that the alarm had already been disarmed; my wife didn't. I went out the front door to fetch the newspaper; she expressed her shock by saying, "You just walked willy-nilly out of the house without checking the alarm?!" (informant)

LACK OF CONTROL > UNTHINKINGLY > ILLOGICALLY, UNSYSTEMATICALLY. Below are examples of the second extension, in which willy-nilly is used to mean 'unthinking(ly)', 'illogical(ly)' or 'unsystematic(ally)'.

Marston Parish Council's plan to build thirty homes to help young people in the village has been turned down—because the council never explained what it wanted.... Members of the district council's northern area planning committee were asked to turn it down because it was looked at as just another speculative development. No-one knew differently until Mr. Norman Jones,...chairman of Marston Parish Council, told members what it was all about.... "We don't just want to build houses willy-nilly—we want to help our young people," said Mr. Jones. (Hector Corpus)

Willy-Nilly Wages? A Study of Board Director Pay Shows a Lack of Strategy. (Wall Street Journal headline, Nov. 2)

Don't just put the name tags around the table willy-nilly; the guests are supposed to be arranged in a particular order. (informant)

He was practicing guitar willy-nilly, without following any specific method. (informant)
Don’t arrange those books on the shelf willy-nilly. (informant)

[If you do long-range fiscal planning, you’ll still be going down in funding; the only difference is that] “You’ll have the satisfaction internally of knowing that you’ve done it systematically instead of willy-nilly.” (From the April 17th UC Berkeley Divisional Council Meeting)

[Organized Research Units eat up campus research money that might otherwise support the faculty’s general research funds, so] “There’s a reason not to just willy-nilly approve these things.” (From the May 1st UC Berkeley Divisional Council Meeting; different speaker from above)

• ILLOGICALLY, UNSYSTEMATICALLY > HOWEVER ONE PLEASIES. The use of willy-nilly to mean ‘illogically, unsystematically’ can be extended to mean ‘however one pleases’. In other words, willy-nilly, through the series of semantic extensions we have seen, has come to have a definition almost diametrically opposed to willy-nilly meaning ‘unwillingly’. In fact, the first two of the following examples even use willy-nilly in conjunction with will or willing—an unlikely combination when willy-nilly means ‘unwillingly’.

And other visitors begin, of course, at the end. They are the people without whom the exhibition could not exist, nor the country it trombones and floats in with its lions and unicorns made of ears of wheat, its birds that sing to the push of a button, its flaming water, and its raspberry fountains. They are the suspicious people over whose eyes no coloured Festival wool can possibly be pulled, the great undiddleable; they are the women who ‘will not queue on any account’ and who smuggle in dyspeptic dogs; the strangely calculating men who think that the last pavilion must be first because it is number twenty-two; the people who believe they are somewhere else, and never find out they are not; ...vaguely persecuted people, always losing their gloves, who know that the only way they could ever get around would be to begin at the end, which they do not want to; people of militant individuality who proclaim their right, as Englishmen, to look at the damfool place however they willynilly will.... (Thomas) (underlining mine)

From all this we can now see that two streams of development run through the history of twentieth-century American folklore. On the one side we have the university professors and their students, trained in Teutonic methods of research, who have sought out, collected and studied the true products of the oral traditions of the ethnic, regional and occupational groups that make up this nation. On the other we have the flag-wavers and the national sentimentalists who have been willing to use any patriotic, "frontier western" or colonial material willy-nilly. (Brown Corpus) (underlining mine)

They could live contentedly without world cruises and mansions, but they had been forced to trim away at the small pleasures and the basic needs.... The London days, when the Gowers' flat had been an open house, where friends arrived willy-nilly, sure of food and drink and good company, and any Saturday evening could turn into an impromptu party, seemed like another life. (Hector Corpus)
4. This section examines what sound symbolism had to do with the semantic shift from *willy-nilly* meaning ‘whether [x] wants to or not, *nolens volens*’ to *willy-nilly* evoking ideas, variously, of: indecisiveness; halfheartedness; fast, indiscriminate motion; being out of control; unsystematicity; doing something “any old way”; and the like.

4.1. REDUPLICATE SOUND SYMBOLISM. As mentioned in the introduction, *willy-nilly* has the appearance of involving reduplication. This superficial similarity to reduplicative words is important because there is both a cross-linguistic and an English-internal tendency for such reduplicative forms to be associated with the types of meanings which *willy-nilly* developed. I propose that the reduplicative appearance of *willy-nilly* actually pushed it toward acquiring its present meanings.

Cross-linguistically, there is a tendency for reduplication to be associated with ideas of repetition, intermittent activity, intensification, distributive and abundant activity, casualness, and random, inconclusive action (Sapir 1921, Gonda 1950, Malkiel 1959, Jakobson & Waugh 1979, Moravesik 1978, Haiman 1980, Kiyomi 1995 among others); the data below (Key 1965, Carlson & Thompson 1982) illustrate this:

• repetition: *wiyi* ‘say, do’ > *wiyiwiyi* ‘say often, do often’ (Yawelmani); *oso* ‘he goes’ > *osooso* ‘he goes again and again’ (Siriono)
• intermittent activity: *tuwo* ‘it is stirred up’ > *tuvo?tuvo?koye* ‘it keeps stirring about, moving about’ (Terena)
• intensification: *walapa* ‘to boil’ > *wawalapa* ‘to boil vigorously’ (Tonkawa); *a* ‘it’ + *joet* ‘rains’ > *ajoetjoet* ‘it rains much’, *a* ‘he’ + *kwiür* ‘run’ > *akwiürkwiür* ‘he runs much, continuously’ (Huave)
• distributive activity, abundance, multiplicity: ç ‘he’ + *ko* ‘possess’ > ç *koko* ‘he has lots and lots to eat’, ç ‘he’ + *sle* ‘count’ > ç *slesle* ‘he counts and counts’ (Kru)
• casualness: *panik* ‘climb’ > *mag panik panik* ‘he is just climbing around’, *panaw* ‘walk’ > *mag panaw panaw* ‘he is just walking around’ (Ilocano)
• random, inconclusive action: *kbas* ‘walk’ > *kib-ib-as* ‘pace back and forth’, *kax* ‘go’ > *kaxw-unxw* ‘go about in a dither accomplishing nothing’ (Lushootseed)

As explained above, the modern uses of *willy-nilly* have both denotations and connotations of repetition, intermittent activity, intensified and abundant activity (as in fast, indiscriminate motion), and casual activity (as in doing something unthinkingly and sloppily). Since there is a tendency for such ideas to be associated with reduplication, it is not surprising that seemingly reduplicated *willy-nilly* acquired them.

English-internally, reduplication is associated with back and forth movement and, by extension, hesitation and ambivalence, disorder, and confusion (Marchand 1969, Thun 1963):

• games characterized by two-phase movement: *wiggle-waggle, kit-cat, ping-pong*
• back and forth movement, hesitation: *crinkle-crankle* ‘zigzag’, *criss-cross, flip-flap, flip-flop, dingle-dangle, nid-nod, wibble-wobble, wigwag, zigzag, shilly-shally, dilly-dally, wiggle-waggle, bingle-bangle* (dial.)
ambivalence, double-faced character, implying dubious value of the referent: flimflam, jimjam, knick-knack, trimtrum, whimwham (originally 'trash, trifle')
idle talk: bible-babble, chitchat, fiddle-faddle, prattle-prattle, ribble-rabble (< rabble 'gabble'), tattle-tattle
disorder, confusion, tumult: hugger-mugger ('muddled, disorderly'), higgledy-piggledy, hurly-burly, hurry-scurry, helter-skelter, razzle-dazzle, hodgepodge
depreciative (often on the basis of 'ambivalence'), derogatory, contemptuous, or ridiculing: mishmash, mingle-mangle, slipslop, wish(y)-wash(y), songsong, riffraff, goody-goody, pretty-pretty, juddery-duddy, loco-foco, sacky-dacky, humdrum, fuzzy-wuzzy, hurdy-gurdy, rat tag, claptap, namby-pamby, flibbertygibberty, hoity-toity, rumble-tumble

These ideas are related to willy-nilly in that 'lack of control' may lead to hesitation and confusion; ambivalence may prevent control; and back and forth movement, or vacillation, is a metaphor for hesitation.
Among English reduplicative words such as the ones listed in this paper, there are several potential candidates for words which bled their meaning onto the semantics of willy-nilly. Such words include the familiar helter-skelter, harum-scarum, hodge-podge, higgledy-piggledy, and pell-mell. According to the OED, all of these expressions (even hodge-podge < hocepot, a French loan denoting a type of stew) are used in their modern sense starting from the 1500s and 1600s. It seems therefore probable that these words served as models for willy-nilly and aided in the semantic changes it has undergone.

4.2. OTHER SOUND SYMBOLISM. There are other sound-symbolic factors which may have pushed willy-nilly to its present meanings. For example, Marchand (1969) and Rhodes (1994) give evidence that an initial [w] in words correlates with denotations of unsteady, uncertain, back-and-forth motion, as in wag, waddle, waggle, wander, waver, wishing-washy, wobble, wonder, whiffle-waffle 'a person of unsteady, vacillating character', waffle, whittie-whattie 'undecided', widdy-waddy 'weak, vacillating, unreliable', wiggle-waggle 'vacillating', willy-wally 'a person without backbone', wither-wither 'hesitating, stopping to consider', wheegee 'beat around the bush' (examples from myself, Marchand 1969, and Thun 1963). Perhaps having an initial [w] (like so many words which mean 'indecisive', 'vacillating', 'shilly-shallying', and the like) pushed willy-nilly toward these meanings.
Finally, Marchand points out that the deverbal suffix -y tends to derive adjectives meaning 'having the undesirable or unpleasant tendency to [verb]', such as clingly, crumby, fidgety, fussy, jittery, mopey, raspy, shaggy, snappy, sticky, sulky, and weepy. Significantly, adjectival (as well as adverbial) uses of willy-nilly in current English have a distinctly derogatory feel to them.

CONCLUSION

5. For some speakers, willy-nilly has managed to keep its sense of 'unwillingly'. However, for most people, it has come to have such meanings as 'out of control', 'without any system or logic', and 'unthinkingly'. This was due to two factors: (1) the metonymic extraction of the concept of control and application of it to other frames, and (2) the sound symbolic characteristics of the expression, which provided additional motivation for willy-nilly to acquire these meanings. This historical account of willy-nilly provides an example of meaning change fueled and
constrained by semantic and sound-symbolic factors. We would hope to find other items having reduplicative shape but without reduplicative semantics which, reinforced by form, have undergone a similar meaning shift towards these prototypical reduplicative meanings. One candidate was mentioned above: *hodgepodge*, from the French *hochepot* ‘stew’. Another is the expression *shilly-shally* ‘undecided’, which is from the reduplication of *shall I*? Finally, a third is from the Old French verb *dalier* ‘chat’ which, reduplicated, gave *dilly-dally* ‘loiter in vacillation’ (and is, as the *OED* states, “A varied reduplication of *DALLY* v., with the same alternation as in *zig-zag*, *shilly-shally*, etc., expressing see-saw action”). As for what sort of new semantics the expression acquires, we have seen that it is constrained by its original semantics and metonymic extensions thereof. In this way, *willy-nilly*, a collocation involving obsolete volitional modals, came to be associated—surely more naturally—with similar-sounding reduplicative expressions.

**NOTE**

*I would like to thank Charles Fillmore, Andrew Garrett, Gary Holland, David Peterson, Joyce Tang Boyland, William Weigel, and above all Eve Sweetser for their comments and ideas. The usual disclaimers apply.

**SOURCES**

ÆLFRIC. *c1000*. Saints’ lives, xvi, 121.


BERKELEY, GEORGE M. 1797. Poems of George-Monck Berkeley; with a preface by the editor, consisting of some anecdotes of Mr. Monck Berkeley and several of his friends, preface, cxxxix. London: J. Nichols.


BYRON, GEORGE GORDON. 1822. Don Juan, canto VI, cxviii.

CAXTON, WILLIAM. 1483. The golden legende, fol. clxxxxvii/1.


FAIRFAX, EDWARD. 1600. Godfrey of Bulloigne, V, xlvii.


HOLINSHED, RAPHAEL. 1577. The chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland, i.233/a.

JENNINGS, M. 1578. Maisonneuve gerileon (tr.), i.52b.

LATIMER, HUGH. 1555. Foxe’s martyrs, 1324/2.


LIVY. The history of Rome, tr. by Holland (1600), III.xxx, 1081.


MIDDLETON, THOMAS. 1608. A trick to catch the old one, I, ii.

NEWNHAM, M. Prelude to glory, iv, 14.


WILSON, THOMAS. 1553. The arte of rhetorique, 57.


REFERENCES


_____ 1949. The sign is not arbitrary. Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo 5:52-62.


SAPIR, EDWARD. 1921. Language: an introduction to the study of speech.

Department of Linguistics
2337 Dwinelle Hall
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA. 94720
progers@violet.berkeley.edu