

Ask about English

Using didn't and wouldn't



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Nyu Shvei in Hong Kong asks:

When should I use the two sentences, "I didn't go home," "I wouldn't go home"?

Martin Parrot answers:

Oh this is a very interesting example. I think "I didn't go home" is quite easy. That's not the problem. "I didn't go home" is a simple statement of fact. It's completely neutral; it's just giving the information. The minute we come across a word like 'wouldn't' – a modal verb, there's more involved and the interesting thing about "I wouldn't go home" is that it could have two completely different meanings. Of course we need to learn these and use these in context. And without a context we can't know which one it is.

There are two meanings as I said. The first is, "I wouldn't go home", would mean I refused to go home. People wanted me to go home, people tried to persuade me to go home but I insisted on staying, on not going home, I refused to go home. That's the first meaning.

The second meaning is related to the use of the word 'would' to express a habit in the past, something which is done repeatedly. And there "I wouldn't go home" means that on a large number of occasions I didn't go home. So perhaps I might be talking about my childhood and I might be talking about the fact that my parents worked and the house was empty at the end of the day so that when I finished school I wouldn't go home – I'd go to my grandmother's or to some friend's houses and I wouldn't go home. This is a regular habit.

Question:

Is there anything similar to that in the present?

Martin:

Now that is an interesting question. Because of course grammatically we can see 'would' as the past of 'will' or 'wouldn't' as the past of 'won't' and we do talk about somebody who refuses to do something using 'won't' in the present – not in the future – in the present. She 'won't go home' means she is standing there saying "I'm not going home, I'm staying here." So yes, it's very similar.

And we also, although interestingly this is often not taught, we use 'will' and 'won't' in the present, not in the future, in the present, to express things that happen repeatedly.

So you know, I might say, "when I get up I'll go, I will go into the bathroom and gargle and swallow some water and clean my throat and make a noise with it every morning." And there the meaning of will is a present meaning and not a future meaning. I might say, "When I get up, I won't have breakfast, I'm in too much of a hurry – I go straight to work", and there that 'won't' – like the 'wouldn't' in 'wouldn't go home' is expressing something that I don't do on a very regular basis in the present.

Question:

So that's quite an easy way for learners to remember it – it's something that happens on a regular basis – it's something quite normal in their lives.

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Martin:

And the interesting thing is that when they come across these – the 'wouldn't's' and the 'won'ts' like all modal verbs they need to look at the context because one of the things about modal verbs is that they can have lots of different meanings and we need to spot the meaning by looking at the context in which it's being used.

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