Present or Future?

“Va bene, adesso _prendo_ un caffè poi me ne _vado_ a casa così _finisco_ di scrivere il blog”.

A literal translation of this simple sentence into English highlights a confusing aspect of the use of the present tense in Italian: ‘Okay, now I _have_ a coffee, then I _go_ home so that I _finish_ writing the blog’. A ‘correct’ translation would read something like: ‘okay, now I’m _going to have_ a coffee, then I’ll _go home_ to finish writing the blog.’

In fact, the rules for using the present and future tense in Italian are quite different from those in English. Generally speaking when we are talking about something in Italian that _will definitely happen_, we tend to use the present tense rather than the future tense. Here’s a typical example: ‘I’ll go to Sarzana tomorrow to see Maria Pia’. This uses the future tense in English, but in Italian I would say: ‘domani _vado_ a Sarzana a trovare Maria Pia’ (which uses the present tense: _vado_ = I go, instead of _andrò_ = I will go). Likewise the statement: ‘I’ll buy some of that nice pecorino this afternoon’ would become ‘questo pomeriggio _compro_ un po’ di quel buon pecorino’ (_compro_ = I buy, instead of _comprerò_ = I will buy). Another good example is the common expression _ci vediamo più tardi_ (literally ‘we _see_ each other later’ rather than ‘we _will see_ each other later’).

This is not to say that the future tense is redundant, far from it! In Italian we tend to use the future tense to express possibility and probability such as in English sentences that use ‘could be’, ‘would be’, ‘must be’, etc. Here are a few examples: _Sarà stato Giovanni che ha lasciato il libro?_ = could it have been Giovanni who left the book (literally: _will it have been_ Giovanni who left the book?); _saranno state le nove quando è partita_ = it must have been nine ‘o’ clock when she left (literally: _it will have been_ nine ‘o’clock when she left); _Franco _avrà_ un centinaio di pecore_ = Franco must have about a hundred sheep (literally: Franco _will have_ about a hundred sheep). In phrases such as _andrà tutto bene_ = everything _will be_ fine, or _vedrai che avevo ragione io_ = you’ll _see_ that I was right, the usage of the future tense is identical both in English and Italian.

We also use the future tense in certain idiomatic phrases and expressions, a very common one being _capirai_! literally ‘you will understand!’ As with many idioms this isn’t easy to translate, but this exclamation is commonly used throughout Italy to express irony, such as in the English expression ‘big deal!’ or ‘wow!’ (said with irony), e.g. _ho vinto due euro alla lotteria, capirai!_ = I won two euros in the lottery, big deal!
**Tempo Presente** (The Present tense)

Very often in Italian we use the present tense where you would normally use the future tense in English, and this tends to be a great source of confusion for English speaking students of Italian. As a general rule we use the present tense instead of the future tense in the following cases:

1. *when we are talking about something that will definitely happen, e.g.:

   **Parto domani e torno giovedì**
   I’m leaving tomorrow and coming back on Thursday

   *Mario: "Hai già comprato il biglietto?"
   Giorgio: "No, lo **compro** domani mattina"
   Mario: "Have you already bought the ticket?"
   Giorgio: "No, I’ll buy it tomorrow morning"

   **Allora d’accordo, ci vediamo alle due davanti al bar.**
   That’s OK then, I’ll see you in front of the bar at two o’clock.

2. *when we say what we are about to do, e.g.:

   **Pago io**
   I’ll pay

   **Io prendo un cappuccino**
   I’ll have a cappuccino

   **Manca il pane. Vado a prenderlo**
   There’s no bread. I’ll go and get it

   **Non ti preoccupare, ci pensiamo noi**
   Don’t worry, we’ll sort it out

3. *in a question that uses "shall … ?" in English, e.g.:

   **Vado io?**
   Shall I go?

   **Cosa facciamo?**
   What shall we do?

   **Dove lo metto?**
   Where shall I put it?

   So, when do we use the future tense?

   **Tempo Futuro** (The Future Tense)

   We normally use the future tense in the following cases:
1. In linked sentences after se (if), quando (when), and appena (as soon as), where in English the present tense is used, e.g.:

Se **avrò** tempo domani **passerò** da te  
If I have time tomorrow I’ll come round to see you

Quando **sarò** grande **farò** il medico  
When I’m grown up I’m going to be a doctor

Appena **arriveremo** a Roma **ti** **telefoneremo**  
As soon as we arrive in Rome we will phone you

Note that we usually use the future tense in both halves of the sentence.

2. To express disbelief, uncertainty, or probability, i.e. as the equivalent of ‘may/might be’, ‘could’, ‘must’ or ‘probably’, e.g.:

**Saranno** le nove  
It must be nine o’clock

**Hanno suonato alla porta,** **sarà** Mario?  
The doorbell rang, could it be Mario?

**Avrà** anche sessant’anni, ma non lì dimostra davvero!  
He may well be sixty, but he certainly doesn’t look it!

**Saranno andati al cinema**  
They have probably gone to the cinema

**Adesso vado a dare da mangiare ai gatti!** (Now I’m going to feed the cats!) **Arrivederci a presto!**

In English the future tense is built by putting will or shall in front of the verb. In Italian however, as with all the other tenses, we change the verb endings.

To make the future tense of regular verbs:

For regular verbs ending in –are: take away the suffix –are and add the following endings: –erò, –erai, –erà, –eremo, –erete, –eranno. For example, the future of the verb parlare (to talk) is:

**io** **parlerò** (I will talk), **tu** **parlerai** (you will talk, informal), **lui/lei** **parlerà** (he/she will talk; you will talk, formal), **noi** **parleremo** (we will talk), **voi** **parlerete** (you will talk, plural), **loro** **parleranno** (they will talk).

For regular verbs in –ere and –ire take away the last two letters –re and add the following endings: –rò, –rai, –rà, –remo, –rete, –ranno. For example, the future of the verb leggere (to read) is:

**io** **leggerò** (I will read), **tu** **leggerai** (you will read, informal), **lui/lei** **leggerà** (he/she will read; you will read, formal), **noi** **leggeremo** (we will read), **voi** **leggerete** (you will read, plural), **loro** **leggeranno** (they will read).

The future of the verb finire (to finish, to end) is:
io finirò (I will finish), tu finirai (you will finish, informal), lui/lei finirà (he/she will finish; you will finish, formal), noi finiremo (we will finish), voi finirete (you will finish, plural), loro finiranno (they will finish).

The future tense is used:

To talk about something that will happen or will become true in the future, e.g. a Pasqua andremo a Venezia (at Easter we’ll go to Venice).

After quando (when), in cases where ‘when’ is followed by the present tense in English, e.g. quando smetterà di piovere andrò a fare la spesa (when it stops raining I’ll go shopping literally: when it will stop raining).

When we guess something, or express a doubt or an uncertainty, e.g. hanno suonato alla porta, sarà Giovanni? (Someone’s rung the doorbell, could it be Giovanni? literally: will it be Giovanni?), Sarà vero quello che ha detto Giulio? (Could what Giulio said be true? literally: will it be true what Giulio said?).

However, in spoken Italian we normally use the present tense to say what we are about to do, or what we will do in the near future, e.g. Giovanni: Hai una matita? Francesca: Sì, tela passo (Giovanni: ‘Do you have a pencil?’ Francesca: ‘Yes, I’ll pass it to you’, literally: I pass it to you), domani parto per Roma (‘tomorrow I’m leaving for Roma literally: ‘tomorrow I leave for Roma’), ti telefono più tardi (‘I’ll phone you later’ literally: I phone you later).

To return to our propositi per l’anno nuovo, bear in mind that in order to express a commitment or decision we use the present tense instead of the future, e.g. prendo un cappuccino (I’ll have a cappuccino literally: I take a cappuccino), pago io (I’ll pay, literally: I pay), So... since we traditionally use the future tense when expressing i propositi per l’anno nuovo, this probably indicates that we might not be one hundred per cent committed to our ‘resolutions’. Perhaps that’s why we fail so miserably!