

# SYNCHRONIC APPLICATIONS FOR DIACHRONIC SYNTAX: THE GRAMMATICALIZATION OF *TO BE ABOUT TO* IN ENGLISH

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The Present Day English construction *to be about to*, a SEMI-AUXILIARY which locates the event frame of the main verb in the immediate future, exhibits some unique characteristics in aspect and modality when it occurs in the negative or in the past tense (future-in-the-past). These specific semantic properties appear to be rather difficult to account for in a strictly synchronic framework. An investigation into the diachronic sources of this construction in the framework of grammaticalization theory reveals that these divergent properties are actually vestiges of the original structures from which the Present Day English form grammaticalized. Thus, an account of the diachronic origin of *to be about to* is appealing for both its explanatory and its theoretical significance: first, it offers a unified explanation of the semantics of the Present Day English form and, second, it demonstrates the application of diachronic analysis to the explanation of the properties of synchronic structures.

**1.0 INTRODUCTION.** Since Saussure's introduction of the concepts in his *Course in General Linguistics*, modern linguistics has been marked by a deeply codified division between synchronic and diachronic fields of study. However, more recent research into what has become known as grammaticalization indicates that, as a consequence of preserving this distinction, the relationship between the contemporary properties of a structure and the historical origin of that structure has perhaps too often been overlooked (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 25-30). Certainly, the knowledge gained from historical investigations is not directed at developing a synchronic grammar in the sense that such a grammar will provide a model of what an ideal speaker knows (Givón 1979: 237), i.e. speaker COMPETENCE--such historical knowledge is rarely available to the language learner. However, applying what can be discerned about a structure from its history nevertheless enables a more thorough understanding of the syntactic and semantic properties of the contemporary structure, and why those particular properties occur with it (Givón, 236).

In the case of *to be about to* in English, an explanation that invokes grammaticalization motivates a unified account of the apparently disparate semantic properties of this construction described in section 2.0. Section 3.0 demonstrates that the contemporary future tense *to be about to* developed during the Middle English and early Modern English periods out of a sentence pattern which locates *about*, functioning as a prepositional adverb of manner, directly after verbs which routinely are followed by an infinitive clause expressing purpose or intention. It is the collocation with clauses expressing notions such as intention and purpose that gave rise to the modal and aspectual properties of this construction. The synchronic implications of this fact are the subject of section 4.0

**2.0 THE *TO BE ABOUT TO* CONSTRUCTION IN PRESENT DAY ENGLISH.** Part of the grammatical means of expressing the future time frame of an event in Present Day English is a construction with a form of the copular verb *be* followed by the contemporary preposition *about* introducing a *to*-infinitive complement. This construction expresses the notion that an action will take place in the immediate future:

(1) *The train is about to leave.* (Quirk and Greenbaum 1985:217)

In addition to placing the event in the very near future, it also encodes an INCIPIENT aspectual element. The action or event is viewed from a point immediately prior to its execution. The event in the reference has not yet been actuated.

With inflection of the copula, the aspectual and modal elements of this construction are foregrounded. Namely some specific changes in meaning accompany past tense and negation in the copula. When the copular form is in the past tense, the *to be about to* construction encodes a temporal notion similar to the present tense form, only viewed from the past:

(2) *He was about to hit me* (Quirk and Greenbaum 1985:218)

The past form retains much of the original aspectual contour; the point of view is still immediately prior to the event. However, it also encodes the distinction that the intended action was unfulfilled or that the anticipated event was prevented. The action referred to in sentence 2 did not come about.

Also, when the construction is accompanied by a negator, the focus is on the controller's intention:

- (3)a. *I'm not about to eat broccoli*  
 b. *I'm about to eat broccoli*

Notice that the meaning in 3a is not simply a negation of the meaning in 3b. In fact, it is not clear that there is any of the incipient aspect in 3a. Instead, the construction serves to deny emphatically any intention on the part of the controller or agent (Quirk and Greenbaum 1990:57). The speaker of 3a has no intention whatsoever of eating broccoli, now or in the future. Locating the time frame of the reference is not the primary function of this construction in the negative. Instead *to be about to* foregrounds modal elements when used in the negative.

**2.1 TO BE ABOUT TO AS FUTURE TENSE.** Given the properties described above, one may wonder if the *to be about to* construction should be considered a future tense at all. In a certain sense, obviously, all of the grammatical means of obtaining a future time reference available in English differ from the morphological, or 'simple,' past tense. English, like many other Germanic languages, does not make use of a system of simple future tense. Instead, English employs various periphrastic expressions to obtain a future reference, including the *to be about to* construction. While it may sacrifice some precision typologically, it is certainly legitimate to consider these periphrastic means part of the grammatical inventory of means for encoding the temporal reference of an event, and therefore to call them a tense system. Thus, setting aside this cross-linguistic question of terminology for English, the question of whether *to be about to* is a future tense becomes an empirical matter: does it encode a future time reference rather than obtain it as a secondary function of encoding the volition of the actor or agent?

The conclusion that *to be about to* encodes future reference directly is based upon two types of distributional evidence. First, *to be about to* takes nominal subjects that denote inanimate objects, or objects that clearly cannot be ascribed volition or intention in any literal sense.<sup>1</sup> In case this is ambiguous in sentence 2 above, consider the following:

- (4)a. *That rock is about to roll.*  
 b. *?That rock wants to roll.*

When taken in their literal sense, only sentence 4b sounds odd. The construction *to want to* encodes the volition of the actor or agent. The fact that a rock cannot serve as the referent of the

<sup>1</sup> Even if this construction encodes a future reference by metaphorical attribution of volition or intention to an inanimate object, this is on the grammatical level, and is therefore a grammaticalized property of the construction. While it may be the case that the construction accepts inanimate referents as subjects because of an historical process of metaphor, it nevertheless encodes the immediate future for such subjects when this metaphorical process is opaque. This process has therefore delivered a means of encoding future reference which functions without restrictions on what types of noun phrases may serve as subjects, i.e. a grammaticalized future tense. Also, it should be noted that this is not a matter of whether the creative use of this construction by an individual to ascribe metaphorical intentions to inanimate objects on a single occasion is possible.

agent in 4b demonstrates that it is difficult at best to ascribe volition to it. Yet, 4a is an acceptable sentence which locates the time of the reference in the very near future.

Second, *to be about to* accepts as subjects complement clauses whose reference is an abstract proposition (Frege 1892):

- (5)a. *The fact that Bob Dole lost is about to be confirmed.*  
 b. \**The fact that Bob Dole lost wants to be confirmed.*

Clearly the unacceptability of 5b indicates that an abstract proposition cannot be the agent of volition. Sentence 5a contains the same *that*-clause, and acceptably locates the reference in the immediate future. In examples of the types seen in 4 and 5, *to be about to* successfully encodes a future reference directly, that is, not as a secondary function of encoding volition or intention. Hence, *to be about to* should be considered a member of the class of expressions in English which are future tense operators.

**2.2 SYNCHRONIC EXPLANATIONS.** The divergent aspectual and modal meanings that are encoded by this construction are difficult to account for in a synchronic analysis that begins with the primary function of encoding future time. Also, given only the synchronic data, and the peculiar effects that negation and past tense have on the grammatical meaning, no theory adequately explains WHY these properties are associated with this particular construction. If we consider *to be about to* in the present affirmative to be a genuine future tense, as I have argued we should, then these semantic properties cannot be explained as a function of the compositionality of the grammatical construction without straining credulity about the properties of negation and past tense. Neither does ascribing these semantic properties to a single predicate or construction template answer why the present situation exists; it simply shifts the problem to another domain. In order to adequately explain the semantic properties of *to be about to*, any analysis must look to the sources and grammaticalization of the present construction.

**3.0 SOURCES AND GRAMMATICALIZATION OF *TO BE ABOUT TO*.** The Present Day English form *about* derives from the Old English form *onbutan* (also *abutan*) which is composed of the elements *on* 'on, in' and *butan* 'outside of, without' (from *be* 'by, near' and *utan* 'out') (Oxford English Dictionary). In Old English, its primary function is as a locative preposition, meaning "by the outside of; around; on all sides." It takes as its complement a noun or pronoun in the dative or accusative case (Clark Hall 1962:2).

(6) *Seo firmamentum tyrnð onbutan us*  
 DEF.f.sg.NOM heavens(LAT) turn-PRE.3.sg about 1.pl.ACC  
 'The heavens turn about us.' (Ælfric's *de Temporibus Anni*, p. 42) c.1000

(7) & *æfter ðam wendon eft abutan Penwiht*  
 and after DEM.m.sg.DAT go-PAST.pl again about Penwiht(ACC)  
 'And after that (they) went again about Penwiht.' (The Saxon Chronicles, p.131.)

This function survives in Present Day English, though in this strict spatial locative sense, it is no longer the primary use of *about* as a preposition.

In Old English, just as in Present Day English, many prepositions also serve as spatial adverbs, where no noun phrase complement is apparent. Descriptions of both Old English and Present Day English describe prepositions that alternately modify verbs as PREPOSITIONAL ADVERBS (Mitchell §1061; Quirk and Greenbaum 1985:1151). In this adverbial function, *abutan* can modify verbs of movement or travel with the notion 'in a circuitous or winding course; with frequent turnings; hither and thither; to and fro...' (OED, A.8.)

- (8) & *seo*                      *sunne* *glit*                      *onbutan*                      *be*                      *Godes*  
       and DEF.f.sg.NOM sun        glide-PRE.3.sg about                      by                      God-GEN  
*gestmysse*  
 design/creation

'And the sun glides about by God's design.' (Ælfric's *de Temporibus Anni*, p. 48) c.1000

- (9) *He*                      *bereð*                      *abuten*  
       3.m.sg.NOM                      carry-PRE.3.sg about  
       'He carries (it) about'                      (trin. coll. Hom. 37) 1200

- (10) *Help*                      *ðe*                      *poure men*                      *ðe*                      *gangen*                      *abuten*  
       help                      DEM                      poor men                      REL                      go-PAST.pl                      about  
       'Help the poor men who go about' (A *Beastuary*, p. 6) c1250

This function also survives in Present Day English (Quirk and Greenbaum 1151), especially British English (e.g. *to wander about*) where American English would have *around*.

By at least the Middle English period, the process of semiotic metonymy invests the prepositional adverb *about* with additional meaning (in the following example the orthography reflects the the Great Vowel Shift, yielding a form obviously cognate with that of Present Day English). Through its constant collocation with verbs of motion, *about*, which originally contributed a spatial dimension to a given motion, was taken to signify something of the motion itself. Thus, the spatial adverb *about* also encodes some unspecified movement or more properly, mobilization. This becomes clear from examples such as 11 in which *about* is paired with the copula (which cannot specifically entail movement by itself), and yet in which some sense of this movement or mobilization is clearly meant.

- (11) *curt lincolne & berkele & oðer courtes also were aboute in ðe lond*  
       'Court Lincoln and Berkeley and other Courts were about in the land.'  
       (The *Metrical Chronicle* of Robert of Gloucester, 748) 1297

The fact that a prepositional phrase, 'in the land,' has been deployed to denote a spatial or locative element in 11, reinforces the point that *about* is serving some other function in this clause. The form can be taken to mean that the various *courtes* were 'On the move, afoot, astir: going moving; acting, in action' (OED, A.9).

This development is critical to the grammaticalization of the contemporary *be about to* future construction. Beginning in the Early Middle English period, many clauses with the prepositional adverb *about* can be found with a *to* infinitive dependent clause expressing the notion of purpose or intention (i.e. the reason or goal for which the action in the main clause is being undertaken). A great number of verbs of motion occur in such constructions, but particularly the verb *to go*. In fact, up until the Early Modern period, it appears that *go about* plus a *to* infinitive was a particularly common construction (OED, A.10.), although it never seems to acquire any grammatical ability to encode futurity. But in light of later developments, early examples such as 12 reveal the pattern that eventually allowed the reanalysis of a *to* infinitive clause with the prepositional adverb and a form of the copula.

- (12) *Forte*                      *breoke* *ðis*                      *hus*                      *efter* *ðis*                      *tresor ...is moni*                      *ðeof*                      *abuten*  
       for to                      break this                      house after this                      treasure...is many                      thief                      about  
       'Many a thief is about (for) to break into this house for this treasure'  
       (Sawles Warde, 30) c.1225

Here we see the dependent clause, introduced by *forte* 'for to, for the purpose of', in front of the main clause where it is indicating the purpose of the thieves' actions. *Abuten* is contributing a meaning similar to that in 11: the thieves are 'on the move' around the area, or 'astir' in the vicinity with the intention of perpetrating a certain crime. The pragmatic force of such constructions can easily yield a future time inference, specifically one that lends the notion that the planned action is imminent: the thieves are in the immediate area and they want to break into the house, therefore, it is due to happen any moment now.

Finally, once the dependent clause is commonly located directly after the form *aboute*, the conditions are present for speakers to reanalyze the frequently co-occurring string of elements as a marker of this immediate future meaning in potentially ambiguous examples such as 13 and 14.

- (13) *Thou woldest falsley ben aboute to love my lady*  
 'You would have been about to love my lady.'  
 (Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, 284) 1386

- (14) *We schul be aboute to make vs clene of cotidian defautes*  
 'We shall be about to make us clean of daily faults.'  
 (Ælred of Rievaulx's *de Institutione Inclusarum*, p. 35)

It is unclear whether example 13 obtains a true grammatical future or not. Example 14 is complicated by the presence of the modal auxiliary *schul*, 'shall' but it appears that *aboute* is serving as part of a complex future tense. Most likely, it is the profusion of ambiguous examples like these, in which at least one reading yields *thebe about to future* (at least from a modern perspective), that made it possible for the future construction to arise.

As a result, by the Early Modern period, the existence of a truly grammatical means of expressing the immediate future with *aboute* is confirmed by examples like 15:

- (15) *They were aboute to go for to descrybe the londe*  
 'They were about to go to describe the land.'  
 (The Bible translation of Miles Coverdale, *Joshua 18:8*) 1535

Notice that the *for to* clause expressing purpose is governed by the preposition *aboute*. The notion of generalized movement or mobilization which *aboute* contains in earlier structures like this one (examples 8-12) has been 'bleached.' The verb *to go* is now serving this function in 15. Hence, the *be aboute to* in this instance, is clearly expressing the immediate future. In fact, the *New Revised Standard Version* translates the verb in this line with 'started to'.

**4.0 IMPLICATIONS OF THIS SOURCE AND PATH OF GRAMMATICALIZATION.** Identifying the source of part of the grammatical system of Present Day English is significant in itself, but the origin and the path of grammaticalization of a structure may have further implications. Of primary importance for the present investigation is an explanation of the synchronic structure and the semantic properties which it exhibits. We may be able to unify the variable meanings of the synchronic construction into one account based on the consequences of this structure's origin. When we observe that originally in the present tense form of this construction, the event is viewed from a temporal location where the action is merely an intention (not yet actuated), several consequences of tense and negation follow which serve to explain the other forms and their meanings. I will first examine the implications of this fact for the synchronic properties of *to be about to* in the past tense, and then the implications for *to be about to* in the negative.

**4.1 SYNCHRONIC PROPERTIES OF THE PAST TENSE OF *TO BE ABOUT TO*.** The specific meaning associated with the past tense form of the construction appears to be available throughout the existence of *be about to* as a future tense (Cf: 2 and 15). The notion encoded in the past form, that

a certain event did not come about, most likely grammaticalized along side the present form. This is supported by the fact that the meaning is a consequence of two semantic elements associated with the past form and intention. First, when the copula is in the past, the predictive value of a clause expressing intention is no longer available and the salient semantic element in the construction becomes the idea of intention itself. Thus, the construction comes to report the presence of an intention at a time in the past, rather than the execution of the intention. Second, the simple past tense most commonly reports events that have been completed, or for which the outcome is known. Thus reporting an event by way of the controller's intention (not the known outcome) is semantically highly marked, and biased toward a reading in which the action never progressed beyond the controller's intention. Hence, this construction can be taken to mark that the action was unfulfilled. In this way, it can be seen that in order to explain the presence of this specific semantic property in this construction the diachronic facts must be considered.

**4.2 SYNCHRONIC PROPERTIES OF THE NEGATIVE *TO BE ABOUT TO*.** The meaning encoded by the negative form of this construction is a slightly more complicated issue. A synchronic evaluation of the focus on the controller's intention in the negative (see 3a) might look to the pragmatic value of the primary use of *to be about to* as an immediate future. If the negation can be construed to imply an emphatic and probably sarcastic denial of even the nearest future proximity, then it might be possible to arrive at the present day meaning of the negative construction. However, this explanation lacks any real evidence and relies rather heavily on a metaphorical extension for which there appears to be no other correlate.

An explanation which invokes the diachronic source of the *to be about to* construction is quite plausible and much simpler on semantic grounds than the former account. While the Oxford English Dictionary marks the earliest appearance of this construction in writing in the twentieth century, suggesting that this construction may be a later development, the authors note that this construction is considered 'colloquial' and 'Chiefly North American'. Quirk and Greenbaum (1990: 57) also note that this expression is 'especially casual'. Given these characterizations it is most probable that this expression's absence from older documents is due to the fact that it is rarely found in written language. Thus, pending further evidence which documents the time frame of its emergence, the analysis offered below is meant as an exploration of the implications of grammaticalization for explaining the synchronic behavior of the *to be not about to* expression.

The original meaning of purpose or intention in the *to* infinitive clause could account for the focus on the controller's intention when the contemporary construction is negated. By limiting the scope of the negator to the intention or purpose in the *to* infinitive, at one time the salient semantic element of this construction (see 12), the entire expression would then serve to deny only the intention. That is, in a sentence like *I'm not about to eat broccoli*, the negator operates on the intention, 'it is not the case that I want (intend) to eat broccoli', rather than the futurity 'it is not the case that I will (am going to) eat broccoli'. This is completely in line with a trajectory of grammaticalization which places the emergence of the future meaning some time after the common use of *to be about to* with expressions that encode intention. It is simply the case that the grammatical meaning of the contemporary construction in the negative codified before the emergence of the future reference in the affirmative.

Furthermore, if the future reference of *to be about to* is indeed a property that grammaticalized from the collocation with purpose and intention clauses, an explanation for the absence of a negative future meaning (e.g. *I'm not about to eat broccoli* for 'I will not eat broccoli in the future') is readily found. Because the capability of negating a clause expressing intention would have existed before any future meaning grammaticalized with the affirmative construction, the meaning of the negative construction would surely block the possibility of gaining any future semantic value and thus, prevent a negative future meaning from grammaticalizing. In other words, if one denies the existence of intention at the present time, there isn't much chance of that intention being realized in the future, and likewise, not much chance that the construction used to deny the existence of intention can take on the grammatical function of future expression. So this

explains why the contemporary construction exhibits a peculiar meaning in the negative; it is a vestige of the history of this construction.

**5.0 CONCLUSION.** By establishing the source and the path of grammaticalization of this particular construction, I have been able to demonstrate how it obtained its unique semantic profile. The path of grammaticalization also suggests explanations for the secondary aspectual and modal distinctions that accompany past tense and negation. Thus, an illustration of the diachronic trajectory of this construction illuminates its contemporary semantic properties, and thus demonstrates the applicability of diachronic knowledge in explanations of synchronically viewed structures. From this analysis it appears that the semantic properties of the contemporary structure are actually the product of three separate stages of grammaticalization, only one of which, the affirmative present tense *to be about to*, has ultimately yielded a future tense. The significance of this for our synchronic view is that we can sustain our analysis of *to be about to* as a future tense while unifying the other semantic properties into our explanation. Conversely, a synchronic analysis which does not include knowledge of the source of the construction must either deny its status as a future tense in the face of evidence to the contrary, or construct an explanation of the negative form and the past tense form derived from a future reference.

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