

What about *be about*? Walking the tightrope between tense and aspect¹

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Abstract

While there is an abundance of literature discussing the future constructions *will* and *be going to V* (e.g. Wekker 1977, Comrie 1985, Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004, Hilpert 2008) as well as a remarkable body of studies of the aspectualizing constructions *begin to V* and *start to V* (Freed 1979, Brinton 1988, Duffley 2006), little has been said about the pattern *be about to V*. Common reference grammars describe *be about to V* as a future construction on a par with *be going to V*. The latter is often used to paraphrase the former, suggesting semantic-functional overlap. The present study analyzes *be about to V* as a construction falling in between futurate and aspectualizing forms. First, diachronic data retrieved from the OED show that while *be about to V* underwent a development as a future form similar to the much-described emergence of *be going to V*, more recently *be about to V* has taken on characteristics associated with *start/begin to V*. Next, a distinctive collexeme analysis of synchronic data taken from the BNC is presented. *Be going to V*, *be about to V* and *start to V* are discussed with respect to semantic and aspectual characteristics of verbs which are significantly associated with each construction. In conclusion, *be about to V* is best described as a construction profiling the lead-up section to the onset of an event and thus fits neatly into the tense-aspect ecology of the grammar of English.

Keywords: tense, aspect, grammaticalization, history of English, tense-aspect continuum, functional and ecological motivation, distinctive collexeme analysis

1 Introduction

While there is an abundance of literature discussing the future constructions *will* and *be going to V* (e.g. Wekker 1977, Comrie 1985, Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004, Hilpert 2008), and also a growing body of studies concerning the aspectualizing constructions *begin to V* and *start to V* (e.g. Freed 1979, Brinton 1988, Mair 2003, Duffley 2006), little has been said about the pattern *be about to V*. Common reference grammars describe *be about to V* as a future construction on a par with *be going to V*, the latter often used to paraphrase the former, indicating semantic-functional overlap. Quirk et al. (1985: 217), for example, present *be about to* as a “quasi-auxiliary” denoting near future, which might be paraphrased as ‘be (just) going to.’ Pertejo (1999: 137) mentions the common treatment of periphrastic expressions such as *be about to* (and also *be upon*

¹ I would like to thank Arian Shahrokny-Prehn and one anonymous reviewer for insightful comments and constructive criticism. All remaining errors are my own.

Ving) as true synonyms of *be going to*.² On the other hand, certain similarities between *be about to V* and *start to V* cannot be dismissed either, suggesting a linguistic *ménage à trois*. The present study will portray *be about to V* as a construction which seemingly falls somewhere in between the categories of futurate forms and ingressive aspectualizers, drawing on data obtained from the BNC and employing recent corpus-linguistic inferential statistical methods.

The investigation presented here is couched in Cognitive Construction Grammar (Goldberg 2006, Langacker 2008, *inter alia*), which takes as its basic assumption that all constructions are motivated. As Goldberg succinctly summarizes,

Cognitive Construction Grammar seeks to provide motivation for each construction that is posited. Motivation aims to explain why it is at least possible and at best natural that this particular form-meaning correspondence should exist in a given language. [...] **Functional** and **historical** generalizations count as explanations, but they are not predictive in the strict sense [...] (2006: 217, emphasis added, SH).

Besides functional and historical circumstances, linguistic motivation may arise from cognitive, experiential, perceptual and communicative phenomena (cf. Radden & Panther 2004), but also from the structure of language as a system itself. This latter type, labelled ‘ecological motivation’ (Lakoff 1987, Taylor 2004) renders a linguistic unit as motivated “to the extent that it is related to other structures in the language” (Taylor 2004: 57), owing to the fact that linguistic forms do not exist in isolation. That is, linguistic constructions neatly fit into or develop within ecological niches provided by the system, being related formally and/or semantically to other constructions. The aim of the present study is to elaborate on selected spaces of the tense-aspect ecology of present-day English. While from a diachronic point of view, *be about to V* underwent a development similar to the much-described emergence of *be going to* as a future form, in more recent stages it has taken on characteristics which are comparable to those of the aspectualizing patterns *start/begin to V*. Assuming an aspectual segmentation of events into onset, nucleus, and coda (cf. Freed 1979), I will argue that *be about to V* is best captured as a construction profiling³ the lead-up section to the onset of an event, thus occupying a particular ecological niche in the neighbourhood of *be going to V* and *start to V*. Starting with a descriptive outline of the ‘biographies’ of the three forms in Section 2, in Section 3 I present the results of an empirical, usage-based analysis of the constructions with a particular focus on the type of verbs they attract – a measure which reveals interesting nuances of constructional meaning.

2 *Be going to V, be about to V and start to V: diachronic notes*

This section will briefly outline the diachronic development of the three constructions investigated in this paper. The data used here to trace the emergence and institutionalization of *be going to V*, *be about to V* and *start to V* are based on the representation of these forms in the quotation base of the electronic version of the

² She adds that unlike *be going to* “in most cases [...] they are not capable of expressing other shades of future connotation as they usually have a rather fixed meaning” (137), the nature of which remains unexplained.

³ Here and in the following, I use the term profile as applied to linguistic description by Langacker (e.g. 2008: 66f.). Put simply, within a particular conceptual domain (in our case, event structure, i.e. time), an expression singles out a particular portion or substructure within that domain.

Oxford English Dictionary (OED).⁴ This version provides the means to systematically search all of the quotations included in the dictionary, offering the user several options to design elaborate search queries both for the analysis of single units (morphemes, lexemes) and larger phrases and constructions. It has proven to be an excellent source for the detection of grammatical changes throughout the different stages of English (Hoffmann 2001; Mair 2003, 2006). While, of course, such a corpus of isolated quotations is unsuited for the detection of linguistic or stylistic phenomena, it yields sufficient linguistic material for the study of clause-level grammatical characteristics and changes. And even though not all centuries in the history of English are equally well covered by the quotations included, a balanced view can be achieved on the basis of normalized data (Mair 2006).

For the purpose of the present study, I collected all instances that were retrieved from the OED's quotation base by (lemmatized) search queries, i.e. *about to*, *going to* and *start* to* as well as all their orthographical and syntactic variants (e.g. *abuten to*, *abuten for to*, *about for to*). The data were then manually selected in order to exclude examples which obeyed the formal criteria but in fact instantiated different constructions or meanings (see footnote 6). This procedure yielded 2,579 examples of *be going to V*, 763 examples of *be about to V* and 395 examples of *start to V*.

The development of *be about to V* and *be going to V* in the history of English proceeded in somewhat similar stages and periods. Both constructions, involving originally spatial notions (i.e. 'go', 'about'), exemplify well-described patterns of grammaticalization. As has been explicated in much detail by grammaticalization theorists (Bybee & Dahl 1989, Traugott & König 1991, Danchev & Kytö 1993, *inter alia*), *be going to* follows the same grammaticalization path identified for a wide range of future constructions of languages all over the world, comprising the stages *allative / locative* > *purposive* > *future* (or, alternatively, *motion* > *intention* > *future*) (Bybee & Dahl 1989, Bybee et al. 1994, Heine et al. 1991). Similar observations hold for *be about to V*. Primarily a spatial preposition or adverb with the meaning '1. Around the outside, around; on every side. 2. Less definitely: on any side; near, in the neighbourhood' (OED, *about*), *about* became established in the phrase *be about + to*-infinitive to designate preparation or intention. As I have argued elsewhere (Höche in prep.), this might have come about by an extension of the preposition's spatial meaning to a mental domain, i.e. from being spatially near a location to being mentally near some action. In a further stage, the construction developed a future meaning, which most probably evolved from the 'intention, planning' sense due to pragmatic inferencing. Being busily involved in the preparation of something readily implies its occurrence in the imminent future. That is, similar to *be going to V*, the future meaning of *about to V*, which is ascribed to the construction in common reference grammars, was preceded by a locative and a purposive ('intention') stage.

⁴ Due to the rather low frequency of instances of *be about to* and its orthographical variants (*abuten /a-boute/aboute (for) to*) in other diachronic corpora I consulted, I decided to base my discussion solely on instances found in the OED.

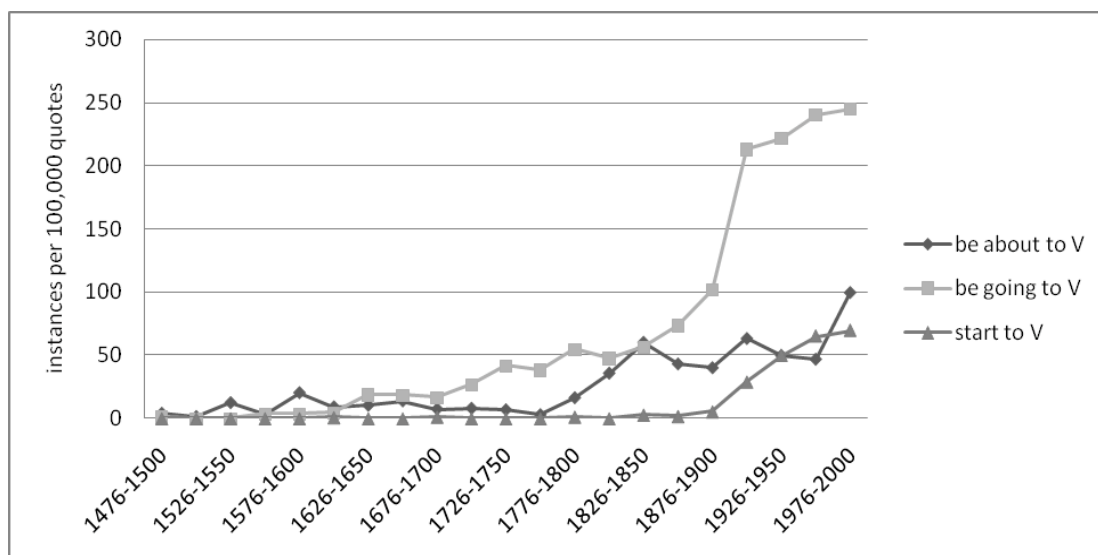


Figure 1. The diachronic development of *be about to*, *be going to* and *start to*

Interestingly, the constructional evolution of *be going to V* and *be about to V* took place within roughly the same periods. First sporadic instances of *be going to V* are dated to the end of the 15th century, often, however, still being ambiguous between an intentional and a future reading. The form became more established in the course of the 17th century, but full grammaticalization was not achieved before the end of the 18th century. As shown in Figure 1, the construction really ‘caught on’ only in the second half of the 19th century.⁵

For *be about to V*, the Oxford English Dictionary presents a quote from the year 1486 as a first genuine example of the construction in its non-spatial, i.e. future sense. Analyses of the quotation base of the OED and of selected diachronic corpora of the English language (Helsinki Corpus, Lampeter, ICAMET) confirm the birth of this form at around this time, i.e. the last quarter of the 15th century (see also Pertejo 1999). Yet, although there occur a few early uses of future *be about to V* in this period, the full shift from the ‘intention’ meaning to a ‘future’ meaning was accomplished only in the 19th century, where the construction cumulatively accepted features which are much more characteristic of a future construction than of a modal pattern expressing intentionality. These are, among others, its ability to be combined with a passive construction and to occur with inanimate subjects (both weakening the notion of an intentionally acting agent). As shown in Figure 1, this is precisely the period which saw a tremendous increase in the usage of *be about to V*, starting in the last quarter of the 18th century.

Already in their early stages of usage, *be about to V* and *be going to V* were felt to be synonymous by speakers, as expressed in the following quote.

About to, or going to, is the signe of the Participle of the future...: as my father when he was about to die, gave me this counsel. I am [about] or going [to] read. (Poole 1646: 26; square brackets in the source text, so quoted in Danchev & Kytö 1994: 67, emphasis added, SH)

⁵ The diachronic charts in Figure 1 draw on frequency information of the constructions as represented in the quotation base of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Since the number of quotations differs (tremendously) from century to century, I normalized the data on the basis of number of constructions per 100,000 quotes. Information on the number of quotations per century / quarter century in the OED is provided in Mair (2006).

This view on the meaning of the two patterns hasn't changed much. For present-day English, the constructions are often described as near synonymous forms. Both are said to express immediate future time, denoting, however, different degrees of prospectiveness (Jespersen 1931/1954: 362) or immediacy (Poutsma 1929, Quirk et. al 1985, Huddleston & Pullum 2001). Possibly motivated by the lexical meaning of *about* (i.e. 'close neighbourhood'), *be about to V* carries a higher degree of immediacy than *be going to V*, the latter still suggesting some motion towards something and thus at least some distance (spatial and temporal) to an entity (object or event). Other semantic features commonly assigned to both constructions are probability, intention and prediction, all being notions that are preserved from the formerly primary modal meanings of the patterns.

It should nevertheless be noted that the quasi-synonymy of *be about to V* and *be going to V* is questionable in two respects. First of all, assuming language economy and ecology (see above), one must expect a division of labor between the forms and thus a more specialized meaning of one of the two. Second, as the instances in the quotation base of the OED show, the development of *be about to V* seems to have taken a somewhat different course from the second half of the 19th century onwards. From there on, the construction increasingly developed an affinity to verbs with inceptive lexical aspect, i.e. verbs conveying the concept of initiation or beginning, such as *begin*, *break out*, *commence* or *enter*.

- (1) a. *The American war is **about to break out**; the low murmurs of the tempest rumble from afar...* (OED, *presaging*, 1852)
 b. *Thus were the various parties in the vast struggle which was **about to commence** gravitating into their places.* (OED, *gravitate v.*, 1856)

As will be demonstrated in Section 3, this feature is still highly characteristic of *be about to V* in present-day English, indicating a shift of *be about to V* into a spot close to *start to V*.

The history of the aspectualizing construction *start to V* is much younger than that of the two constructions described so far. With *start* (v.) originally designating rapid motion ('to leap, jump, caper', 'to move with a bound or sudden violent impulse from a position of rest', from OE *sturtjan*, 'to rush, fall headlong, to gush out'), *start + to V* developed into a construction expressing ingressive aspect. In that respect, it follows a tendency which has been noted for several aspectual constructions denoting the initiation of an event in English. As Brinton (1988: 115) comments,

[t]he choice of lexical verbs to become aspectualizers in the history of English seems to be based upon two spatial conceptions of ingressive aspect: either the subject moves towards or enters a situation (he takes himself to it), or the situation moves towards him (he takes it to himself).

Start to V obviously exploits the former conception, i.e. that of a subject actively approaching an event or situation. As the data from the OED suggest, the construction comes to be used as an aspectual form in the early 18th century (see also Mair 2004).⁶ Although *start to V* slowly encroaches upon English during the 18th century, as shown

⁶ The quotation base of the OED includes an early example from the beginning of the 17th century which superficially exemplifies the form:

- (i) *The charitable man dreames of building Churches, but **starts to** thinke the vngodly Courtier will pull the down again* (OED, *ungodly a.*, 1614).

As Mair (2004: 143) correctly notes, however, this example is much more likely to be read as a combination of *start* in its old meaning ('shrink back suddenly') and an adverbial infinitive.

in Figure 1, it takes another century before its tremendous increase in usage marks it as a fully institutionalized pattern.

In its aspectual meaning, *start to V* is said to profile the preparatory phase of an event, i.e. its **onset**, which, according to the approach by Freed (1979), is the first of the three stages an event can be segmented into. It is followed by the **nucleus** (itself separable into beginning, middle and end), which describes the characteristic part of the event, and the **coda** (definite close). From a synchronic point of view, *start to V* shares considerable characteristics with the ingressive form *begin to V*.

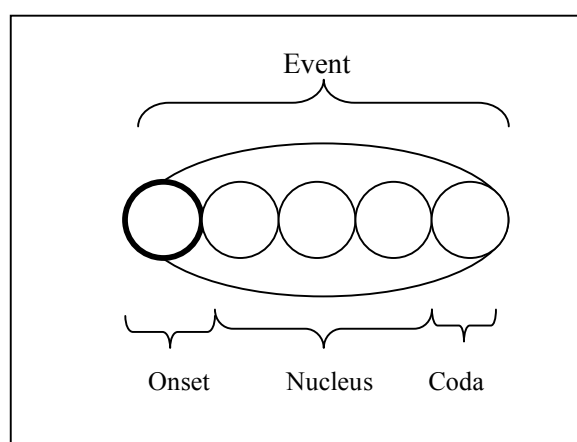


Figure 2. Event segmentation, with *start to V* profiling the onset

Yet, while there is some disagreement about the extent to which the two forms overlap in function and meaning (see, for example, Freed 1979, Mair 2003, Duffley 1999, 2006), full synonymy seems unlikely. As Mair (2004: 130) observes, the spread of *start to V*, which became established as an aspectual form much later than *begin to V*, “did not proceed at the expense of *begin*”. This clearly points at the existence of a particular semantic-functional niche in the aspectual system of English to be covered by *start to V*. The exact nature thereof is, however, not the focus of the present paper.

The purpose of this section was to provide an overview of the historical development of the constructions under discussion and to roughly sketch their contemporary meanings, thereby giving the reader an idea of the particular slots they occupy in the tense-aspect system of present-day English. Similarities between *be about to V* and *be going to V* on the one hand, and *be about to V* and *start to V* on the other have been pointed at, taking into account their diachronic emergence and their representation in reference grammars, dictionaries and selected studies. The fact that none of the constructions developed at the expense of the other (see Figure 1) should, however, be considered as an indicator of their performing specific functions. In the following sections, I shall discuss the synchronic status of the three patterns, consulting the British National Corpus (BNC) as one of the largest corpora of present-day English.

3 An empirical investigation of the tense-aspect continuum in Present-Day English

3.1 Methodological Preliminaries

The following discussion of data retrieved from the BNC employs recent inferential statistic procedures, introduced and developed for the particular needs of (cognitive) corpus linguists by Gries and Stefanowitsch (e.g. Gries 2004, 2008, Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004, Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003). So-called collostructional analysis investigates complex form-meaning units on the basis of significant associations between flexible slots particular constructions offer and the lexical material occurring in these slots. This is based on the conception of the most strongly attracted lexemes being reliable indicators of constructional meaning and behaviour of the pattern they occur in. Thus, what is of interest for a discussion of *about to V* etc. in the light of constructional analysis is the number and types of verbs speakers frequently or less frequently insert into the flexible V-slot the constructional templates offer.

Collostructional analysis is an umbrella term for a family of several different test procedures for the detailed description of constructional idiosyncrasies.⁷ *Collexeme analysis* (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003), for example, measures the attraction (or repulsion) between a single construction and the lexemes which occur in a particular slot of this form. While this is an insightful tool for the investigation of one particular pattern (see Section 3.3), so-called *distinctive collexeme analysis* (Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004) provides the means to discover asymmetries in the relative frequencies of collexemes which occur in equivalent slots of comparable constructions, identifying lexemes which “best *distinguish* between the constructions in question” (Stefanowitsch 2006: 258). This method is chosen in the present study for the direct comparison of semantic characteristics of *be going to V*, *about to V* and *start to V* in order to deduce functional overlaps and differences in the constructions’ potentials to profile temporal and aspectual nuances of event structure.

3.2 A first impression: raw frequency data of the constructions in the BNC

The British National Corpus, comprising 100 million words of contemporary spoken and written British English, was searched with the software program SARA for the occurrence of *be going to V* (including *gonna V*), *be about to V*, and *start to V*. *Be going to V* has an overall frequency of 39,490 in the corpus, compared to 4,468 instances of *be about to V* and 6,233 of *start to V*. The obtained concordance lines were then analysed for collocating material, from which frequency information about co-occurring verbs could be collected. Table 1 shows the top 20 of those verbs which most frequently combine with the respective constructions.

⁷ The authors assume that their analyses represent psychologically real computations in speakers. “[I]t is assumed that speakers subconsciously perform a statistical analysis of the input and that statistical associations found in the data are reflected psychological associations in the mind of the language user. For a discussion of the psychological reality of distinctive collexeme analysis” (Stefanowitsch 2006: 258, see also Gries, Hampe & Schönefeld 2005).

<i>start to V</i>		<i>be about to V</i>		<i>be going to V</i>	
1. get	222	1. be	491	1. be	7938
2. go	132	2. go	158	2. have	2668
3. make	131	3. say	156	3. get	2252
4. look	128	4. leave	131	4. do	2079
5. feel	123	5. start	114	5. say	1201
6. take	110	6. take	106	6. go	1174
7. work	91	7. make	100	7. take	917
8. come	93	8. become	85	8. make	736
9. move	81	9. do	81	9. happen	656
10. cry	81	10. begin	67	10. put	579
11. walk	85	11. happen	58	11. come	540
12. think	78	12. come	56	12. give	532
13. run	80	13. get	56	13. see	436
14. be	69	14. enter	53	14. tell	385
15. do	64	15. tell	51	15. work	367
16. build	58	16. turn	45	16. ask	364
17. laugh	55	17. change	45	17. look	290
18. talk	52	18. give	45	18. start	282
19. play	51	19. ask	43	19. need	278
20. become	48	20. embark	40	20. try	276

Table 1. The 20 most frequent verbs in each constructions, based on the BNC

It should come as no surprise that verbs such as *be*, *get*, *go*, *do*, *make*, *take* etc. are among the most frequent lexemes in all three constructions. These are verbs with a high frequency in the corpus in general and thus must be expected to be used highly frequently in all kinds of verb constructions. Therefore, they do not reveal any particularities of a construction. In this respect, collexeme analysis provides a more reliable constructional account, incorporating into calculations the relations between word frequency and frequency of the respective construction in the corpus chosen. Another disadvantage of raw frequency data is that they do not allow for a direct comparison of the constructions since the relative frequency of the constructions is left unconsidered. This is remedied by distinctive collexeme analysis, which incorporates absolute and relative frequency information of verb and construction.⁸ The advantages of both types of collostructional analysis will be demonstrated in the following sections

3.3 Patterns of attraction: collexeme analysis

As noted above, collexeme analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003) yields a more subtle picture of constructional characteristics than can be read off the raw frequency information as provided in Table 1. The advantage of this procedure is that it takes into account the overall frequency of all verbs in *be about to V* (*be going to V*, *start to V*) and in all other infinitive constructions in the corpus, the overall amount of infinitive constructions in the corpus and the ratio between these figures. The program *Coll. analysis 3.2a. A program for R for Windows 2.x.* (Gries 2007), used here for the identification of collocational patterns, employs the statistical Fisher-Yates-Exact test. Feeding the program with the necessary data, it calculates the so-called *collostructional*

⁸ 'Relative' must be understood here in the sense of 'relative frequency in the one or the other construction'.

strength, a measure of attraction (or repulsion) between a construction and the lexemes occurring therein.⁹

<i>be about to V</i>		<i>be going to V</i>		<i>start to V</i>	
collexeme	coll. strength	collexeme	coll. strength	collexeme	coll. Strength
begin	83.8403	get	Inf	cry	94.457
leave	75.4033	happen	Inf	rain	57.997
start	68.3808	do	240.9301	walk	57.597
embark	65.3643	say	187.8841	laugh	51.183
happen	53.5298	die	126.4871	run	32.182
burst	43.9524	cost	95.7940	shake	30.422
enter	36.9662	put	95.7343	look	29.095
launch	32.8658	go	69.9268	move	27.600
become	30.4966	ask	53.7349	climb	27.132
say	29.4717	marry	52.5468	feel	26.426
protest	21.2711	kill	48.2218	build	25.028
fall	19.8084	start	44.4293	emerge	22.932
explode	18.9475	take	39.0358	roll	19.936
retire	18.3411	miss	38.2253	rise	19.816
turn	15.3119	let	36.1748	crumble	19.558
go	15.2525	sleep	34.0071	fall	18.718
break	15.1403	work	28.8126	work	18.339
die	14.1851	try	27.8504	snow	18.154
collapse	13.6339	win	27.5150	giggle	18.001
plunge	13.6101	faint	27.5150	arrive	17.581

Table 2. The 20 most strongly attracted collexemes of *be about to V*, *be going to V* and *start to V*

All in all, 97 significantly attracted verbs were identified for *be going to V*, 99 for *be about to V*, and 217 for *start to V*. These data are markedly different from those provided by raw frequency counts in that they clearly indicate, for example, that neither *be about to V* nor *start to V* is particularly attracted to lexically light verbs such as *be*, *make*, *take*, *get* etc. Only *be going to V* reveals a slight tendency towards these semantically unspecific verbs (*get*, *do*, *put*, *take* etc.).¹⁰

A closer look at the verbs attracted by *be about to V* confirms the tendency already observed on the basis of diachronic data from the OED and raw frequency information obtained from the BNC. It is verbs with ingressive meaning (e.g. *begin*, *leave*, *embark*, *enter*, *launch*) which are shown to be as strongly associated with the construction. The obvious preference of the construction for this particular class of verbs is in accordance with the assumption that the construction carries ingressive-like characteristics, or, at least expresses a high degree of immediacy. Moreover, *be about to V* seems particularly prone to occur with verbs of sudden change (e.g., *burst*, *explode*, *break*, *collapse*, *plunge*, *die*, *faint*).¹¹ Here, too, the assumed aspectual characteristics of the construction can account for this behaviour. Verbs of sudden

⁹ The results are presented in form of the negative logarithm to the base of 10 of the p-value, to be read as follows: Values bigger than 3 corresponds to a p-value smaller than 0.001, values bigger than 2 corresponds to a p-value lower than 0.01. Thus, collexemes with index > 3 are subject to highly significant distributions.

¹⁰ Some of the findings only mentioned briefly in the following will be discussed in greater detail in Sections 3.4 and 3.5.

¹¹ The semantic classes used here are based on the system developed in Levin (1988). In order to make the constructions comparable in terms of verb semantics, I used the more general categories suggested by Levin and left more subtle categorizations unconsidered.

change are punctual verbs (i.e., denoting events with a minimal temporal extension), and using them in the *be about to V* construction results in the profiling of the very last stage before the actual change of state sets in. In cases such as these the construction can be described as ‘tension-increasing’. Summarizing the findings presented here and in the preceding sections, *be about to V* might be captured as a construction which profiles the *lead-up section* to the onset of an event (depicted in Figure 3), i.e. the section in the structure of an event which immediately precedes its initial phase.

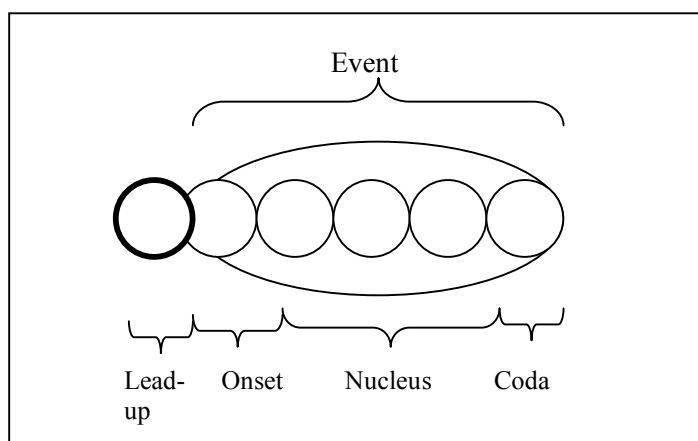


Figure 3. *Be about to V*'s function of profiling the lead-up to the onset of an event

The verbs measured as significantly associated with *be going to V*, on the other hand, seemingly render the construction highly flexible, no coherent semantic grouping is possible. The list contains stative verbs (*cost, sleep, miss*), highly transitive, dynamic verbs (*put, kill*), but also unaccusative verbs (*die, faint*), where the verbal subject undergoes a process instead of being actively involved therein. This tendency is supported by the preference of the construction for semantically light verbs which are themselves highly flexible as regards their complementation.

The top 20 of the collexemes attracted by *start to V* show hardly any overlap with the other two forms. The results indicate an affinity of the construction for verbs of motion (*walk, run, move, climb, roll, etc.*), pointing to a high degree of dynamicity of the pattern, verbs of nonverbal communication (*cry, laugh, giggle*), and verbs denoting weather phenomena (*rain, snow*). What most of these have in common is their cyclic / semelfactive nature, i.e. these processes consist of quasi-identical components which might be infinitely repeated. *Start to V*, being an ingressive aspectualizer, could then be said to focus on the first of these processual components. This is in full accordance with the description of the construction provided in Section 2.

The constructional characteristics presented so far describe the three patterns investigated in more absolute terms. The guiding question of this study, however, concerned functional and semantic differences or overlap between them. Here, the following trends can be summarized on the basis of the collexemes strongly attracted by the constructions. *Be going to V* is more flexible than *be about to V*, the latter obviously expressing incipient, sudden action. However, 5 verbs in the top 20 list (i.e. *start, happen, say, go, die*) were shown to be attracted collexemes for both *be about V* and *be going to V*, a finding which suggests semantic structure shared by both forms.

In contrast to *be about to V*'s affinity to punctual verbs, *start to V* attracts semelfactive, i.e. durative, verbs, and also carries a stronger notion of dynamicity.

These somewhat preliminary observations are to be refined in the following by a direct comparison of the constructions, employing distinctive collexeme analysis.

3.4 Measuring the difference 1: *be about to V* vs. *be going to V*

Coll. Analysis 3.2a. A program for R for Windows 2.x. also provides the option to identify distinctive collexemes, i.e. lexemes which might occur in either of the two constructions compared, but which are significantly more frequently used in one of them. The program calculates the so-called *index of distinctiveness* (IoD), which is indicative of the degree to which a collexeme is preferred by either of the patterns. For the calculation of this measure, four types of ‘input frequency’ are needed. the lemma frequency of the verb collexeme in *be about to V*, the lemma frequency of the verb collexeme in *be going to V* (or *start to V*), and the frequencies of *be about to V* and *be going to V* (or *start to V*) with verbs other than the investigated collexeme. As an example, the frequencies which are necessary for the pair *be about to / be going to SAY* are given in Table 3.

	SAY	¬ SAY	Row totals
<i>be about to X</i>	156	4,312	4,468
<i>be going to X</i>	1,201	38,289	39,490
Column totals	1,357	42,601	43,958

Table 3. Frequency information necessary for distinctive collexeme analysis

Table 4 provides the 20 most distinctive collexemes of each construction, all of them preferred by the respective form at the significance level of $p < 0.001$ (i.e., $\text{IoD} > 3$).¹² After the actual computation of distinctively attracted collexemes, a second step for the recognition of possible meaning differences between the constructions involves the grouping of the collexemes of each pattern on the basis of selected verbal features, such as semantic verb class, lexical aspect / aktionsart, transitivity, dynamicity or specificity (Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004, Hilpert 2008).

¹² Taken together, 86 of all verbs were measured to be distinctive of *be about to V* at the significance level of $p < 0.001$, 31 verbs for *be going to V*. These verbs form the basis for all further discussions presented here.

<i>be about to V</i>			<i>be going to V</i>		
Collexeme	IoD		Collexeme	IoD	
1. begin	52.6306		1. have	78.4595	
2. leave	45.6068		2. be	55.3249	
3. enter	43.4963		3. get	49.4898	
4. become	42.2149		4. do	29.8754	
5. embark	35.7213		5. work	17.2724	
6. launch	29.0049		6. need	13.0697	
7. start	24.3748		7. cost	9.2055	
8. burst	18.4844		8. stay	7.6715	
9. protest	15.9719		9. live	6.8530	
10. return	12.4221		10. keep	6.5239	
11. retire	12.3802		11. help	6.1708	
12. undergo	11.8884		12. put	5.8419	
13. reply	10.9449		13. look	5.2201	
14. break	10.9211		14. miss	5.2080	
15. fall	10.3620		15. talk	4.8716	
16. plunge	9.9061		16. use	4.7633	
17. open	9.2099		17. win	4.7303	
18. emerge	9.0904		18. want	4.5503	
19. speak	9.0263		19. try	3.9049	
20. explode	8.7836		20. sleep	3.6380	

Table 4. Top 20 of distinctive collexemes of *be about to V* and *be going to V*

In the following, I will focus on two selected features: the semantic classes and aktionsart/ aspectual features of the distinctive verbs, which I consider most useful for the purpose of this paper. It should be noted here again that *distinctive collexeme analysis* highlights **the contrasts** between two constructions. Thus, some of the constructional characteristics read off from *distinctive collexeme analysis* are exaggerated and do not present absolute values of the patterns under investigation.

3.4.1 Semantic verb classes

Table 4 gives an overview of the semantic verb classes which are particularly preferred by *be about to V* and *be going to V* according to the distinctive collexeme analysis.¹³ The distribution of the classes is indicative of the different semantic preferences of each construction.

<i>be about to V</i>		<i>be going to V</i>	
1. Begin	15.12%	1. Psych Verbs	15.63%
2. Motion	15.12%	2. Perception	12.50%
3. Change of state	12.34%	3. Auxiliary	9.47%
4. Communication	8.14%	4. Communication	6.26%
5. Completion	6.97%	5. Desire	6.26%

Table 5. Semantic classes attracted by *be about to* and *be going to*

¹³ In the following sections, discussing the results of distinctive collexeme analysis, all uses of notions such as ‘preference’, ‘attraction’ etc. for the characterization of one of the two forms compared must be understood in a relative sense, i.e. ‘in comparison to the other construction’.

A tendency already observed from other types of data discussed above turns out to be one of the features that strongly distinguishes *be about to V* from *be going to V*. The former attracts ‘begin’-verbs, i.e. verbs which have a notion of ‘beginning’ as part of their lexical meaning. These are *begin, start, launch, embark, enter*¹⁴, *commence, resume* etc., exemplified by the following utterances.

- (2) a. *Stirling was told that the army was **about to launch** an attack. (AR8: 1108)*
 b. [...] *the show **was about to begin**, and the audience were in their seats. (C8E: 3062)*
 c. *He **was about to embark** on a new life in New York with the most boring woman in Britain. (FB0: 806)*

Of all the 86 verb types which were measured to be highly distinctive (i.e. IoD > 3) of *be about to V*, 13 (15.12%) belong to this semantic class. Not one single instance of ‘begin’-verbs was found to be distinctive of *be going to V*. These findings support assumptions on the somewhat aspectual and more prospective character of *be about to V*, i.e. its profiling a stage of an event which lies closer to its onset, if compared to *be going to V*.

Equally frequently represented are verbs denoting motion, e.g. *fall, walk, cross, sail*, although their individual IoDs do not rank them as distinctive as many of the ‘begin’-verbs. This particular preference may also be traced back to the higher degree of immediacy the construction is taken to express. **If one assumes a strong correlation between the degree of immediacy of an event and the recognisability of markers pointing at its initiation**, the high dominance of concrete motion verbs can be explained by the visibility of the (expected) onset of the action. If, for example, something is *about to fall*, the chances are good that several signs (particular spatial constellations, instable position of the object etc.) point at the likelihood of the event to set in soon.

Finally, it is the class of verbs denoting sudden change which characterize *be about to V* relative to *be going to V*. 10 verbs of this class (e.g. *burst, break, explode, collapse*) appear on the list, no such verbs being found with *be going to V*.

- (3) a. [...] *with every breath my own stomach was swelling and **about to burst**. (CDM: 2870)*
 b. [...] *Felicity announced that her spine felt as though it **were about to collapse**. (FSC: 253)*

This idiosyncrasy of *be about to V* was explained by its so-called ‘tension-increasing’ effect (see above). Obviously, the notion is much more prominent in this construction than in *be going to V*.

With respect to *be going to V*, there are 3 semantic verb classes which stand out from the rest of the categories of highly distinctive verbs (31 types). First, most representative are verbs of perception (*look, see, feel, watch*) and psych verbs (*need, miss, like, think*) which are attracted by *be going to V* if compared to *be about to V*.

- (4) a. *It was silly to have come at all if she was **going to feel** so shaky and helpless. (G12: 1325)*

¹⁴ Note that only in a few instances *enter* is used in a spatial/motion sense.

- b. *I don't know what the parents of some of my students are going to think*
[...]. (H61: 18)

This preference can be attributed to the abstract nature (and thus their non-visibility) of the events these verbs designate - their usage in *be about to V* is less felicitous since visible markers which hint at an initiation of the actions are hard to 'spot' for the speaker (unless the speaker reports on him/herself). Note that not only are these verbs distinctive of *be going to V*, but that of the class of psych verbs no verb is even attested in *be about to V* in the BNC. The third group of verbs more strongly associated with *be going to V* is the class of semantically light verbs (*have, be, get, do*), which were calculated as those verbs which are most distinctive for the construction. As noted above, all of these are highly flexible in their usage. *Have*, for example, can express possession, may be used as a light verb (*have a look*) or in the periphrastic perfect construction; *be* has a copular use, is part of the passive or progressive construction etc. Thus, in order to evaluate their contribution to the distinctiveness of *be going to V*, all of the examples containing these verbs would need to be (sub)categorized on a case-by-case basis, which would obviously lead to a different ranking. For reasons of space, a detailed discussion of these matters must be excluded here. What should be mentioned nonetheless is that in the majority of their usage in *be going to V* these verbs express rather stative relations, lacking dynamicity and agentivity, and hence, intention. This is an important finding regarding the secondary modal meaning of *be going to V*, which is commonly captured in terms of 'intention'.

3.4.2 Aspectual classes

As has been pointed out already several times, *be about to V* displays characteristics which appear aspectual. Thus, a second feature to be looked at is that of the lexical aspect of the verbs listed as distinctive collexemes in order to find out whether the aspectual characteristics assumed for *be about to V* are concordant with those of the verbs distinctively attracted by it. The verbs were categorized into the four Vendlerian classes *achievement, accomplishment, activity, state*, which differ with respect to dimensions such as 'duration', 'telicity' and 'dynamicity'. To these four classes I added a fifth one, viz. *inceptive*, for the purpose of my study. The results of this analysis support and refine the observations on the quite different behaviour of the two constructions.

<i>be about to V</i>		<i>be going to V</i>	
1. Achievement	38.4%	1. Activity	46.9%
2. Accomplishment	32.6%	2. State	34.4%
3. Activity	16.3%	3. Accomplishment	9.4%
4. Incept.	10.4%	4. Achievement	9.4%
5. State	1.2%	5. Inceptive	-

Table 6. Aspectual classed preferably attracted by *be about to V* and *be going to V*

The stronger preference of verbs which are of a very limited temporal extension, i.e. achievements, is one aspectual characteristic which clearly distinguishes *be about to V* from *be going to V*. 38.4% of the verbs (e.g. *burst, break, explode*) listed for the former are of a punctual nature. Their combination with *be about to V* is in accordance with the 'tension-increasing' nuance of the pattern. The class of achievement verbs is followed closely by accomplishment verbs (e.g. *return, announce, invade*), which make up almost 33%. That is, more than 70% of the verbs measured

distinctive for *be about to V* are telic verbs, which stands in stark contrast to the situational types denoted by the distinctive collexemes of *be going to V*. These are overwhelmingly of an atelic nature, i.e. activities (*work, talk, use*) (46.9%) and states (*stay, need, cost, know, like*) (34.4%). This finding is in line with observations presented by Hilpert (2008: 119), who found that while in its early stages, *be going to V* was predominantly used with telic and dynamic verbs, in later stages such preferences did no longer figure.

From another perspective, these results are novel or unexpected in two ways. Firstly, telicity is said to be connected with intention (Hilpert 2008: 53f.), which would suggest that *be about to V* expresses intention to a higher degree than *be going to V*, and thus has preserved its 'former' meaning as a *secondary modal meaning* more strongly than the latter. Secondly, these findings complement results obtained by Gries & Stefanowitsch (2004), who noticed that, compared to the *will* future, *be going to V* prefers highly dynamic verbs. The authors interpreted this behaviour as a possible indicator of a higher degree of premeditation expressed by *be going to V*. Compared to *be about to V*, however, the pattern is characterized by a great number of collexemes which denote stative situations. This in turn would present *be about to V* as describing actions which are premeditated and hence, intended to a stronger extent than if expressed by *be going to V*. That is, on the basis of these two criteria, i.e. the telicity and dynamicity of the distinctive collexemes, *be about to V* must be considered to express the modal notion of intention more strongly than *be going to V*.

Finally, 10.3% of all the verbs measured distinctive of *be about to V* carry an inceptive lexical aspect, e.g. *start, enter, leave, launch, depart*. These verbs highlight the beginning of an action or activity and thus strongly harmonize with the aspectual characteristics described so far for the construction. The virtual absence of distinctive stative verbs in the construction is in accordance with Binnick's observation that "statives do not normally occur with **aspectual** auxiliary verbs such as **start, stop, finish**" (1991: 174, emphasis added, SH), highlighting *be about to V*'s similarity to aspectualizing forms. Note that no single verb with inceptive lexical aspect was measured distinctive for *be going to V*, a finding which is in accordance with the more specific meaning ascribed here to *be about to V*.

Taken together, the semantics and aspectual characteristics of the verbs distinctively associated with the two constructions under discussion clearly point towards a higher degree of immediacy, probability and intention on the side of *be about to V*, which supports the description of the construction as profiling the lead-up section to the onset of an event.

Bearing some (assumed) resemblance to *start to V*, does *be about to V* belong to the class of ingressive aspectualizers then? Duffley's (2006: 107) comment on the function of *start to V* actually implies a certain degree of semantic overlap, given that *be about to V* indeed has the meaning described here (i.e. profiling the lead-up section).

Due to the fact that *start* [...] does not inherently designate a segment of an event, the notion of breaking out of a state of rest or inactivity which it denotes can also be construed merely as **preparatory** movement towards the first moment of the infinitive's event. (emphasis added, SH)

If Duffley's assumption on *start to V* is correct, then – with regard to temporal proximity to the event – the two constructions are similar in profiling stages outside the actual event. They seemingly differ, however, in terms of initiation, with the dynamic *start to V* suggesting a higher degree of initiative on the side of the agent than the stative *be about to V*. On the basis of a *distinctive collexeme analysis* of the

two forms, these hypotheses are to be tested, refined or corrected on an empirical basis in the following.

3.5 Measuring the difference 2: *be about to V* vs. *start to V*

The same procedure described above for the first pair of constructions was used to identify the distinctive collexemes for *be about to V* vs. *start to V*. Table 7 shows the top 20 of those lexemes which are most distinctive of either construction, all of them being significant at the significance level of $p < 0.001$ (i.e. $\text{IoD} > 3$)¹⁵. Here, again, a closer look at semantic and aspectual features of the distinctive verbs is to shed light on obvious and assumed similarities and differences in usage.

3.5.1 Semantic verb classes

The great significance of *be* in *be about V* immediately strikes the eye. None of the other verbs even comes close to it as regards their index of distinctiveness. Yet, *be*'s being distinctive of *be about to V* and its comparably low general frequency in *start to V* (see Table 1) seems highly plausible for two reasons. First of all, *start to V* has a greater degree of initiation, causation and thus dynamicity inherent in its meaning, which is a relic of the verb's original lexical meaning (i.e. 'movement') (Freed 1979: 77). This is incompatible with the stative sense of *be*. Second, as a closer inspection of the use of *be* in *be about to V* reveals, it is the auxiliary form of the verb as part of the passive construction which accounts for more than 97% of all its instances.

- (5) a. *Her findings are **about to be published** by Oxford University Press in a book called *The Adapted Mind*. (AHD: 9)*
- b. *The sharks are learning fast that Kylie isn't **about to be eaten** for supper. (ADR: 972)*

As is well known, the passive construction takes away the focus from an active, initiating AGENT, which, again, would be highly awkward in combination with *start to V*, expressing initiation and causation. Moreover, the instances of *be* in *start to V* which are included in the BNC exhibit a somewhat different behaviour. The passive construction does make up a good part of the examples (60 %), but *be* used as a copula occurs frequently (38%), too, a usage which at least leaves the subject in a focused position.

- (6) a. *But this is where I must **start to be careful** in talking about our love affair with the car.*
- b. *Anyway, one day I **started to be** sick in reaction to some drugs, and this guy jumped out of bed – the nurses were busy. (K5D: 8830)*

¹⁵ Taken together, 35 of all verbs were measured to be distinctive for *be about to* at the significance level of $p < 0.001$, 37 verbs for *start to V*. These verbs form the basis for all further discussions presented here.

<i>be about to V</i>		<i>start to V</i>	
Collexeme	IoD	Collexeme	IoD
1. be	118.7475	1. feel	29.0920
2. start	43.2247	2. work	21.4802
3. leave	32.8252	3. look	19.2853
4. begin	25.5399	4. think	18.3966
5. say	24.9711	5. get	14.0499
6. enter	17.4610	6. build	13.6625
7. embark	15.2167	7. laugh	12.9534
8. launch	12.5412	8. cry	10.5752
9. burst	8.6792	9. rain	8.9401
10. happen	7.9843	10. talk	8.9230
11. retire	7.5970	11. read	7.7614
12. meet	7.2166	12. walk	6.2231
13. let	6.8362	13. show	6.0853
14. become	6.7369	14. grow	5.9192
15. tell	5.9828	15. sing	5.8769
16. explode	5.6956	16. worry	5.8769
17. die	5.1893	17. write	5.7031
18. go	4.9354	18. develop	5.0764
19. announce	4.8009	19. grow	4.9353
20. set	4.6839	20. wonder	4.9353

Table 7. Top 20 distinctive collexemes of *be about to V* and *start to V*

Concerning a more general analysis of the semantic classes of all distinctive verbs, a certain amount of overlap as well as differences between the constructions can be read off the data. As shown in Table 7, *be about to V* and *start to V* share a certain preference for communication verbs (which, however, is much stronger for *be about to V*), a group which is said to commonly combine with ingressive aspectualizers (Brinton 1988: 117) and verbs denoting motion. The affinity of both constructions to verbs of motion might be of a different origin though. For *be about to V* it has been noted above that this preference is possibly due to the secondary modal meaning of the construction, i.e. expressing strong probability for concrete actions on the basis of visible clues. For *start to V*, on the other hand, the original lexical meaning of the verb *start*, which to some degree still figures in the grammaticalized form, literally describes a first step towards the activity denoted by the verb (e.g. *to climb*, *to run*, *to walk*) and thus strongly evokes initiation.

<i>be about to V</i>		<i>start to V</i>	
1. Communication	21.6%	1. Psych	17.5%
2. Begin	16.2%	2. Motion	12.5%
3. Motion	13.5%	3. Nonverb. Comm.	7.5%
4. Change of state	5.4%	4. Perception	7.5%
5. Contact	5.4%	5. Communication	5%
6. Light verbs	5.4%	6. Appearance	2.5%

Table 8. Semantic classes preferably attracted by *be about to* and *be going to*

More striking than the commonalities, however, are the differences between the constructions in their verb class preferences. *Start to V* is characterized by a strong association with psych verbs (*think, relieve, relax, worry*) if contrasted with *be about to V*, for which a virtual absence of such verbs must be observed.

- (7) a. *Now that she **started to think** about it, she could guess what they were after.*(HTR: 2187)
b. *Halfway through, I **started to worry** that an airplane would crash into the preview theatre.* (CAJ: 1481)

The reason for such constructional behaviour can be found once more in the modal meaning of *be about to V*, which *start to V* as a true aspectualizing form lacks. With the former construction expressing strong probability, it is highly incompatible with verbs designating abstract inner, non-visible processes and states. Moreover, these verbs denote processes which, although executed by a more or less conscious agent, need no prior planning or preparation, a stage profiled by *be about to V*. The same explanation accounts for the occurrence of perception verbs (*notice, feel, look*) in *start to V*, describing unplanned, even uncontrolled processes. The occurrence of psych and perception verbs as distinctive collexemes, referring to events which are incompatible with the notion of a preparatory stage, imply that the concept of preparation is less pronounced in *start to V* than in *be about to V*.

Furthermore, the significant inclination of *be about to V* towards ‘begin’ verbs and the absence of these in *start to V* calls for further comment. While in the direct comparison of *be about to V* and *be going to V* this finding was interpreted as an indicator of the construction’s aspectual behaviour, it must be considered here as a sign of *be about to V*’s not having grammaticalized this meaning yet. Whereas the concept of initiation is fully incorporated in the constructional meaning of *start to V*, which therefore shows no need or affinity to combine with verbs which explicitly express this notion, *about to V* attracts ‘begin’ verbs for the clear designation of initiation or preparation. It is, however, exactly this strong attraction of this class of verbs which has it move closer to ingressive aspectualizers if compared to *be going to V*.

Finally, verbs of sudden change of state (*burst, explode*) and verbs of contact (*hit, strike*), which are equally distinctive of *be about to V*, have in common that they denote events which take place in a matter of seconds but may have tremendous consequences. The tension increasing facet of the construction most probably motivates the significantly more frequent usage of these verbs in *be about to V*. This is closely related to aspectual characteristics of the verbs, to which I will turn now.

3.5.2 Aspectual classes

As shown in Table 8, *be about to V* and *be start to V* behave strikingly different as to the aspectual verb types they are preferably used with when contrasted directly.

<i>be about to V</i>		<i>start to V</i>	
1. Achievement	24.3%	1. Activity	80.0%
2. Activity	24.3%	2. State	12.5%
3. Accomplishment	24.3%	3. Accomplishment	5.0%
4. Incept.	18.9%	4. Achievement	2.5%
5. State	8.1%	5. Incept.	-

Table 9. Aspectual classes preferably attracted by *be about to V* and *start to V*

Both forms frequently combine with activity verbs, i.e. verbs denoting events which are durative, internally homogeneous and inherently unbounded (=atelic). ‘Unbounded’ here implies the absence of an inherent endpoint of the event rather than that of a definite initial phase. The latter notion being present in activity verbs, they more readily enter *start to V* - telicity than being no criterion for the combinability of verb and construction. *About to V* attracts activity verbs as well, yet not as overwhelmingly as *start to V*, which comes as the result of other constructional idiosyncrasies and restrictions. As already indicated, in contrast to *start to V*, *be about to V* exhibits a particular affinity to verbs with a minimal temporal extension, i.e. achievements. This is confirmed by the data presented in Table 8. Almost a quarter of the verbs distinctive of *be about to V* denote punctual events, while verbs of this class are hardly used in *start to V*. The low frequency of achievement verbs in *start to V* can be readily explained on the basis of their temporal ‘non-duration.’ Since their temporal extension is reduced to a minimum, a segmentation of these events into different stages is implausible and unlikely. Hence, their combination with an aspectualizer profiling the event’s onset appears awkward and illogical. This observation is in accordance with descriptions provided by other authors. Freed (1979: 51, 56f., 74f.) states that *start* occurs freely with activities and accomplishments, but less so with states, and is “frequently unacceptable” (83) with achievements.¹⁶ Brinton (1988: 85) observes that ingressive aspectualizers cannot occur with achievements, unless the achievement is repeatable (e.g. taking plural subjects). The only achievement verb used in *start to V* in the present study is *appear*, occurring 44 times in this combination in the BNC.

- (8) a. *Given the right conditions the growth of the foliage will be quite fast and as the days get longer the flower buds will **start to appear**.* (CLT: 201)
 b. *It was when the 12 started to discuss what would happen next that differences **started to appear**.* (A9: M212)
 c. *And in between his magnificent platform orations, Mr Kinnock has **started to appear** cocky.* (AHN: 1766)

Indeed, as Brinton’s statement predicts, the majority of instances of *start to appear* in the BNC occur with a plural subject, indicating repeatability of the event. The few cases which deviate from this pattern are examples such as (8c), in which *appear* is used in the sense of ‘seem’, where it cannot be classified as an achievement. This finding provides further evidence in favour of *start to V*’s potentially profiling a stage internal to an event, since otherwise the construction would not exhibit such a strong incompatibility with verbs which are not segmentable into stages due to their minimal temporal extension.

¹⁶ Not that this observation was first stated for both *start to V* and *start Ving*. Freed goes on to refine her description in stating that states are likely to occur in a *start* construction if complemented by a *to*-infinitive, which has aspectual characteristics which are much different from an gerundial complement (1979: 51).

Of further interest is the distribution of distinctive verbs with an inceptive lexical aspect (*set, launch, embark*), which are strongly associated with *be about to V*, but occur not at all in *start to V*. These data support my assumption concerning the grammaticalization status of *be about to V* as a genuine aspectualizing form. In contrast to *start to V*, the construction has not incorporated the notion of initiation into its constant meaning. Using lexical verbs with an inceptive aspect in *start to V*, on the other hand, would be highly redundant since inception is a core feature of its constructional meaning.

Taken together, the following differences between *start to V* and *be about to V* worked out in the preceding sections provide evidence for their different status in the tense-aspect system of English. Compared to *be about to V*, *start to V* is highly sensitive to the segmentability of events into internal stages, which is indicative of its status as a true aspectual construction, i.e. highlighting facets of an event's *internal* make-up. *Be about to V*, on the other hand, behaves neutral towards segmentability, readily occurring both with verbs that can be segmented (accomplishments and activities) and those that cannot (i.e. achievements). This contributes to the assumption that *be about to V* profiles the lead-up section, i.e. a stage *external* to the actual event, making segmentability a feature of no relevance to this construction. In this specific function, *be about to V* has an affinity for verbs denoting punctual events, where it has a *tension-increasing* effect, profiling the very last stage before the onset of the particular event. The strong preference of *be about to V* for 'begin' verbs and verbs with an inceptive lexical aspect in contrast to *start to V* strongly indicate the different grammaticalized meanings of the two forms. While *start to V* is a genuine ingressive aspectualizer, *be about to V* has settled in close neighbourhood to the former, taking on a clear sense of inception, however, only in combination with inceptive verbs.

4 Summary and conclusion

One of the main purposes of the paper was to provide a usage-based description and discussion of selected tense and aspect constructions of English, starting from the assumption of a structured system which is motivated by diachronic, functional and ecological factors. Having outlined a diachronic portrayal of the three constructions investigated here, which brought to light parallels with respect to the grammaticalization paths they have taken, I went on to present the synchronic status of *be about to V*, *be going to V* and *start to V*, employing recent inferential statistical procedures. The characterization of the trio by means of verbs they attract and their direct comparison on the basis of those verbs which were measured to be statistically distinctive of each construction revealed idiosyncratic patterns of usage and demonstrated the strengths and advantages of statistical corpus investigations.

The thread which runs through the analysis of *be about to V* as compared with *be going to V* is its development towards a more specialized form. This specialization was most probably triggered by the coexistence of and competition with *be going to V*, which developed roughly within the same period. The statistical data adduced for the description and comparison of the two patterns, gained from (distinctive) collexeme analysis, bring out their specific constructional characteristics. Most of the findings suggest that *be about to V* has developed a stronger sense of prospectiveness and immediacy, profiling the lead-up section to the onset of an action. This empirically confirms descriptions intuitively formulated by some grammarians, and positions the construction in the close neighbourhood of aspectualizing expressions such as *begin to/ start to V*. However, as the direct comparison of *be about to V* and *start to V* has

demonstrated, although the former may inhabit an ecological niche close to ingressive forms in the tense-aspect system of present-day English, it also lacks essential characteristics of a true ingressive form, one being its indifference to the notion of event segmentability. Moreover, the fact that *be about to V* focuses on a temporal segment lying outside the actual event speaks against its classification as an aspectual construction, because such constructions typically convey facets of internal event structure.

While it might be premature and exaggerated to talk about a tense-aspect continuum in English, where the transition from tense to aspect is established by *be about V*, it cannot be denied that *be about to V* is at least ‘in touch’ with *start to V*. This is most obvious in utterances like the following, where *start to V* displays its potential to focus on sections external to the actual event.

- (9) a. He **started to protest**, **but** then he seemed to remember his promise and made a conscious effort to stop himself. (GW0: 859)
b. Rose was **about to protest**, **but** thought better of it. (AEB: 343)

What both constructions share here is the concept of initiation and preparation, and the fact that the event they describe as being approached is not necessarily realized (cf. Freed 1979: 72, Duffley 2006: 105f.)

The discussion provided here could only portray one section of a neatly organized tense-aspect system of neighboring forms. A closer inspection and statistical investigation of constructions similar to *be about to V*, such as *be on the verge / point of*, *get to V* or *come on to V*, should be worthwhile and rewarding regarding future explorations of such a constructional network.

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