

What about *about to*?

A Proposal for Proximate Future Reference

Angelica Hill

1. Introduction

Proximate futures are constructions such as English's *be about to* used in the sentence below.

- (1) Christina is about to go to the store.

Intuitively, they are expressions used to pick out a close future event. The sentence above describes a situation where Christina is getting ready to go to the store some time in the near future. Maybe the speaker sees her reaching for her keys in the doorway and hoisting a shopping bag over her shoulders. Or perhaps the speaker knows that Christina always goes to the store at 5pm once she's off of work and they utter the sentence at 4:55pm. English has other proximate futures besides *be about to*. For example, *be going to* (bgt). One can utter "Christina is going to go to the store," in the same contexts mentioned above. Proximate futures are not unique to English. Below are some instances of proximate futures in Italian, German, and Gitksan.

- (2) Lei sta per partire.
PRO.FEM.3SG be-PRES-3SG for leave-INF
"She is about to leave." *Italian* (p.c.)

- (3) Sie geht gleich los.
PRO.FEM.3SG go-PRES.3SG soon away
"She is about to leave." *German* (p.c.)

- (4) Hlaa dim=in k'ots=hl ges-in
PROX PROSP-1SG cut hair-2SG
"I'm about to cut your hair." *Gitksan* (Matthewson et al. 2022: p.31)

In this paper I introduce some properties of proximate futures which differentiate them from other future-denoting constructions. Specifically, I argue that although in some cases *be about to* and bgt's meanings overlap, *be about to* is far more restricted than bgt. I claim that languages have obligatory proximate futures, such as English's *be about to*, and that obligatory proximate futures should be analyzed independently from bgt-like constructions. *Be about to* and other obligatory proximate future constructions are analyzed as expressing a non-modal perfective that denotes a preparation state for some contextually close future event. This proposal captures the unique properties of obligatory proximate futures as well as introduces future avenues of research into proximate future reference.

2. Properties of Proximate Futures

Proximate Futures have unique properties that suggest the need for a separate analysis from other future constructions, such as bgt-like constructions. In this section I present some of these properties.

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2.1. Proximity

The first very obvious property of proximate futures is that they must denote some proximate event. Consider the sentences below.

- (5) a. The vase is about to fall.
b. There's about to be another COVID wave.

Both sentences refer to a future event and assert that such event is close to the time of utterance. However, what it means to be a “close” event is context dependent. In the first sentence, the vase falling is likely to be in a couple of minutes, or seconds. In the second sentence, the next COVID wave is probably predicted to occur in the next few weeks or months. The future event that the proximate future picks out is determined by the nature of the event itself, which is based on world knowledge.

2.2. Stativity

Proximate futures behave like stative predicates. That is, they seem to fail the classic tests for stativity.

- (6) a. #Be about to leave!
b. #She is being about to dance.

They cannot be used as commands, nor can they be used in the progressive form. These classic tests for stativity are known for being somewhat controversial and prone to counterexamples (Dowty 1979, Deo 2009). Cable & Crippen (2023) have argued to instead use Maienborn (2005)'s Happen test, which they claim to be more reliable cross-linguistically. The Happen test can successfully describe events, but not states. Yet again, we find that proximate futures also fail the Happen test.

- (7) Julie was about to dance. #While that was happening...

2.3. Adverbial Modification

Adverbs can only refer to evaluation time, not the future event denoted by proximate futures.

- (8) a. Now/#Next year/#Tomorrow they're about to go to Schiphol.
b. #She's about to go to Schiphol when she leaves.
c. I was about to go to school when suddenly I got ill.

It's not possible to say, “Tomorrow they are about to go to Schiphol,” to mean that the event of going to the airport takes place tomorrow. The adverb can only refer to evaluation time suggesting that there's another ongoing event, a preparation state, that the adverb is modifying. This is why it is perfectly fine to say, “Now they're about to go to Schiphol,” or “I was about to go to Schiphol when suddenly I got ill.” In the latter, the event of getting ill interrupts the preparation which takes place before going to Schiphol, not the event of going to Schiphol.

2.4. Conditionals

Proximate futures can only be used in a limited set of conditionals. Consider the bomb warning example from Klecha 2011, 2016,

- (9) Don't open that door, the bomb is about to go-off!

This sentence is fine when uttered in a context where the bomb going off is inevitable. For example, perhaps the bomb is on a timer. However, the sentence becomes unacceptable if we consider a scenario where the door is connected to the bomb via a string, such that when the door is opened, the string pulls a lever that detonates the bomb. Copley (2011) and others have described this latter scenario as requiring an implicit conditional antecedent: if you open the door, the bomb will go off, and if you don't open the door, the bomb will not go off.

Assuming similar reasoning, we predict that proximate futures are also unacceptable in offering contexts. Copley (2009) uses offering contexts to distinguish bgt-like constructions from simple future, *will*, constructions. She shows that the latter can be used in offering situations while the former cannot. Consider the following context: you and your loved ones are getting ready for a soirée this afternoon. You walk into the kitchen and your best friend tells you that you don't have any bubbles for the guests.

- (10) a. I'll get some prosecco!
b. #I'm going to get some prosecco!

Proximate futures also can't be used in offering scenarios. Considering the same context you cannot say,

- (11) #I'm about to get some prosecco!

This would be a fine declaration if you had already planned to get the prosecco and the fact that your friend mentioned that you needed more prosecco was a mere coincidence. The sentence could not, however, be used in response to your friend's implicit request.

Roberts (1989) claims that modal subordination is really just a covert conditional. Based on the evidence above then, we predict that proximate futures should not be able to undergo modal subordination. The idea of modal subordination is the following: if we assume a Kratzer (1986) theory of conditionals, then we assume there is an implicit operator whose domain is restricted by the *if*-clause. This implicit operator could be, for example, a modal or a generic operator. If there is an implicit operator present, then the *if*-clause should be able to restrict its domain if it appears in the consequent, but also its domain should be able to be restricted anaphorically in a subsequent clause (Frank & Kamp 1997, Klecha 2011). Example (12) (adapted from Klecha (2014)) below is an attempt to restrict the domain of *be about to* in the consequent of the conditional, as well as anaphorically in a subsequent clause.

- (12) a. #If Martina goes to NY, she's about to go shopping.
b. If Martina goes to NY, she'll go shopping. #She's about to buy shoes.

The shopping described in (12-a) cannot refer to the possible event of Martina going to NY. The sentence is unacceptable since the *if*-clause is looking for a set of worlds to restrict, yet the consequent seems to describe an event that is restricted to the actual world. Similarly, the shoe buying in (12-b) cannot refer to the shopping spree that will take place once Martina is in New York. "She's about to buy shoes," can only refer to a shoe-buying event taking place at a time soon after the sentence is uttered in the actual world.

If proximate futures are restricted to the actual world, then we predict the only type of conditionals in which they can be used in are ones that only make reference to the actual world, such as biscuit conditionals (Austin 1958), and epistemic conditionals (von Stechow 2011), such as the ones below.

- (13) a. If you want to buy something, the store is about to close.
b. If she took the pill, she's about to have a heart attack.

2.5. Start Time

Similar to other future-denoting constructions, the eventuality that proximate futures refer to cannot have already started at evaluation time.

- (14) a. #Julie is about to write a novel, she just needs to finish the last chapter.
b. Julie is about to publish a novel, she just needs to finish the last chapter.

The first sentence is unacceptable since finishing one last chapter implies that the rest of the novel is completed. *Be about to* requires the future eventuality to not have started yet at evaluation time. This is why it is fine to utter the sentence in example (14-b), where publishing occurs after the novel is finished.

2.6. Episodic Interpretation

Lastly, proximate futures cannot be used to convey generic, non-episodic, interpretations.

- (15) Everyone is about to die.

The sentence above is only felicitous in a somewhat catastrophic situation. For example, perhaps we're playing a video game and an enormous asteroid is set to hit the fictional Earth. However, one could not utter the sentence to convey the biological fact that everyone will die someday. Similarly, proximate futures cannot be used with individual-level predicates, as seen in (16) below, unless the individual-level predicate is pragmatically accommodated to be interpreted as a stage-level predicate given a particular context. For example, if Thomas is known to put on platform heels before a night on the town.

- (16) #Thomas is about to be tall.

In the next section I compare *be about to* to bgt with the aim to show the two constructions are distinct in ways that merit independent analyses. I argue that *be about to*-like constructions are obligatory proximate futures, while bgt-like constructions are less restricted. I propose that obligatory proximate futures are a non-modal perfective aspect, which accounts for their restricted behavior and their properties presented above.

3. Proximate Futures and other Futures

At a first consideration it's not unreasonable to assume that we could just extend an analysis of bgt to account for *be about to*. However, after a closer comparison, it's clear they require independent analyses. Bgt and *be about to* are similar in the fact that they both can make reference to proximate future events. However, *be about to*-like constructions obligatorily make reference to proximate events, while bgt-like constructions can, but don't have to. As evident from example (17-b), bgt can describe a future event, but such an event doesn't necessarily have to be close to evaluation time. Likewise, bgt can also be used to describe an apocalyptic situation where everyone is going to die, but it can also describe the biological fact that all things must come to an end. Also similar to *be about to*, bgt behaves like a stative and is unacceptable in the Happen test. Additionally, like other future constructions, bgt also requires that the start time of the future eventuality to have not yet started at evaluation time.

- (17) a. The vase is going to fall.
 b. It's going to rain someday.
 c. Everyone is going to die (someday/right now).
 d. Julie was going to dance. #While that was happening...
 e. #Julie is going to write a novel, she just needs to finish the last chapter.

However, the two constructions differ in irrevocable ways. Unlike *be about to*, bgt is able to modify the future eventuality it describes as shown in the sentences below.

- (18) a. Now/Next year/Tomorrow they're going to go to Schiphol.
 b. She's going to go to Schiphol when she leaves.
 c. I was going to go to school when suddenly I got ill.

Perhaps the most crucial difference is the fact that bgt can be used in a wider range of conditionals. Not only is it able to be used in biscuit and epistemic conditionals, but it's different from *be about to*-like constructions in that it can undergo modal subordination.

- (19) a. If Martina goes to NY, she's going to go shopping.
 b. If Martina goes to NY, she'll go shopping. She's going to buy shoes.

We observed above that *be about to*-like constructions are limited to interpretation in the actual world. Bgt's domain on the other hand is able to be restricted to whatever condition is specified in the *if*-clause, both when it is appearing in the consequent as well as anaphorically in a subsequent clause. Recall the bomb warning scenario.

(20) Don't open that door, the bomb is going to go off!

The same sentence with *be about to* was only felicitous in the inevitable explosion scenario, where the bomb was on a timer and it was set to go off around the same time when someone just so happened to go near the door. *Be about to* was infelicitous in the conditional warning scenario, where opening the door would trigger the bomb to go off, such that the bomb would not go off so long as no one opened the door. Previously it has been argued that bgt patterns similarly to *be about to* for both the inevitable and conditional warning scenarios (Copley 2009). However, after conducting an acceptability judgement task (n = 30), it seems that people do in fact accept the sentence with bgt in both the inevitable and the conditional warning scenarios. This makes sense considering the fact that bgt has been shown to undergo modal subordination, and if the conditional warning scenario provides an implicit conditional antecedent then it follows that bgt should be able to be interpreted in the context. And this is the key difference between the two constructions: it's evident that bgt has some sort of implicit operator whose domain is able to be restricted by an *if*-clause. It's for this reason that we find modal analyses of bgt in the literature (Klecha 2014, Matthewson et al. 2022). It is also evident, given what has been shown thus far, that *be about to*-like proximate futures do not share this ability, suggesting that they should receive a different kind of analysis.

Below is a table summarizing the similarities and differences between *be about to* and bgt. In the next section I present a non-modal analysis of obligatory proximate futures, treating them as a type of perfective aspect and I show that the analysis captures their unique properties.

Property	<i>Be about to</i>	Bgt
Proximity	obligatory	optional
Stativity	yes	yes
Adverbial modification	no	yes
Modal subordination	no	yes
Offering contexts	no	no
Biscuit conditional	yes	yes
Inevitable warning	yes	yes
Conditional warning	no	yes
Start time	yes	yes
Generic use	no	yes
Episodic use	obligatory	optional

Table 1: A Comparison of Future Constructions

4. A Non-modal Proposal

What motivation do we have to assume obligatory proximate futures are non-modal? Up to this point we've seen that obligatory proximate futures cannot undergo modal subordination. However, Klecha (2014) discusses other tests for modality beyond modal subordination, such as non-veridicality in morphological variants, and the lack of personal experience requirement for predicates of personal taste. Klecha uses these three tests to argue that bgt is modal and behaves similarly to *woll* in certain environments.¹ However, when we try and use these tests with *be about to* we get mixed results.

Klecha argues that a tell-tale sign of modality is displacement, the shifting of evaluation away from the actual world, and that the only modals that give rise to displacement are the non-veridical ones. Thus, non-veridicality is a strong indicator of modality. *Be about to* in its morphological variant, the past tense, does in fact give rise to a non-veridical interpretation as seen in example (21-a) below. However, even in the past tense it is still unacceptable in conditionals, seen here with an intended future-less-vivid interpretation (Iatridou 2000).

¹ Though there is some overlap, bgt and *woll* differ in significant ways. See Copley (2009), Klecha (2011, 2014), and Matthewson et al. (2022) for more discussion.

- (21) a. She was about to sneeze, when suddenly she lost the urge.
 b. #We were about to freak out if Beyoncé came into the cafe.²

However, in the previous sections we've seen that obligatory proximate futures do not shift their evaluation away from the actual world and that they can only be evaluated in the actual world. Moreover, it's not necessarily true that non-veridicality is a strong indicator of modality. If it's true that the only kinds of modals that give rise to displacement are the non-veridical ones, it does not follow that all non-veridical things are modal. It also does not follow that all non-veridical things give rise to displacement. It's very well possible that there are non-modal things which are non-veridical. In the paper Klecha mentions one such exception: negation. So, it could be that obligatory proximate futures are simply another exception to this expectation.

The last test for modality is the fact that modals obviate the personal experience requirement for predicates of personal taste. Predicates of personal taste require the speaker's experience of the truth of the predicate. For example you cannot follow the sentence, "These cookies are tasty," with "#but I've never tried them." It has been observed that this personal experience requirement is obviated by scoping an evidential or a modal above the predicate.

- (22) These cookies must be tasty, but I've never tried them.

However, obligatory proximate futures in general are unacceptable with predicates of personal taste. Moreover, the sentences do not get better by adding an evidential.

- (23) a. #These cookies are about to be tasty.³
 b. ?/#Apparently, these cookies are about to be tasty.

So it seems that obligatory proximate futures only pass one of the tests for modality, non-veridicality in the past tense, and it is known that not all non-veridical expressions are modal (negation). If it's true that displacement is a "tell-tale" sign of modality, then from what I have presented here obligatory proximate futures are not modal.⁴ So let's assume then that they require non-modal semantics.

I propose that obligatory proximate futures are lexicalizations of an aspectual operator, *PROX*, which takes a property of events (an infinitive) as argument. *PROX* introduces a preparatory state *e*, an eventuality *e'*, and relates them by means of a proximate relation *CLOSE*. A sentence containing an obligatory proximate future will have the following structure: [*PAST/PRES*[*PROX*[*VP*...]]], and the semantics of *PROX* is given below.

- (24) $\llbracket \text{PROX} \rrbracket^{g,c,w} = \lambda P_{\langle v \langle s,t \rangle \rangle} . \lambda t_i . \lambda w_s . \exists e \exists e' \exists t' [\tau(e) \subset t \wedge \tau(e') = t' \wedge \text{PREP}(e, e', w) \wedge \text{CLOSE}(e, e') \wedge P(e', w)]$
- a. *PREP* is a relation which states that at world *w*, *e* is a preparatory state for *e'* such that *e* causes *e'* ($e \gg e'$)
- b. *CLOSE* is a relation that takes two eventualities in a contextually determined set and asserts *e'* is temporally close to *e*

² Klecha (2014) points out that in its past form *bgt* also cannot give rise to a future-less-vivid interpretation.

³ This sentence is said to be acceptable for some speakers of African American English (AAE). This is not the only context where *be about to* use differs for speakers of AAE. For example, it is reported that example (21-b) is also fine for some speakers. A comparison of obligatory proximate futures cross-linguistically and across English varieties is beyond the scope of this paper, but will be explored future work.

⁴ The fact that *be about to* doesn't "tick all the boxes" when it comes to Klecha's tests for modality is an interesting puzzle from a methodological perspective. Is there some minimum number of tests a construction must pass in order to be declared modal? Does the construction have to pass all the tests? Is modal subordination the "strongest" test for modality? If a construction can have non-veridical interpretations but can't be used in conditionals, what does that mean for the relationship between non-veridicality and modality? Answering these questions and developing a rigorous methodology for testing modality, specifically implicit modality, is desirable and would make our formal analysis of modality stronger as a result. But this is the topic of another paper.

Assuming a pronominal theory of tense $\llbracket \text{PRES}_1 \rrbracket^g$ (Partee 1973, Heim 1994, Kratzer 1998) and PROX , the sentence “Angelica is about to go to the store,” receives the following truth conditions,

$$(25) \quad \llbracket \text{Angelica is about to go to the store} \rrbracket = \lambda w. \exists e \exists e' \exists t' [\tau(e) \subset g(1) \wedge \tau(e') = t' \wedge \text{PREP}(e, e', w) \wedge \text{CLOSE}(e, e') \wedge \text{go-to-store}(a, e', w)].$$

The sentence “Angelica is about to go to the store,” is true in a world w such that there exists a preparatory state e for some future event e' taking place within the evaluation time (that happens to be utterance time for the present tense) and this preparatory state is contextually close to and causes a future event e' at time t' , and such future event is a going-to-store event that Angelica is an agent of in world w .⁵

This analysis successfully captures the properties discussed above. We account for stativity since PROX is an aspectual operator that introduces a preparatory state e and asserts that e is contained within evaluation time. In this way PROX is a type of perfective aspect. PROX also asserts there is another eventuality and ensures that the preparatory state and second eventuality are contextually close. In this way the analysis captures the proximity requirement of obligatory proximate futures. PREP accounts for the observation that the future eventuality cannot have already started at evaluation time. PREP states that the future eventuality e' is caused by the preparatory state e . Given a standard theory of causation, PREP ensures the temporal ordering of $e < e'$ and also the distinctness of the two eventualities.

The motivation to make PROX the perfective comes from work by Wurmbbrand (2014), building on Todorovič (2013), who noted that the perfective forces episodic interpretations and resists certain temporal modification. As a perfective obligatory proximate futures are predicted to only receive non-generic, episodic interpretations and so, perfectivity captures the observation that sentences containing them only receive episodic interpretations. However, it's been shown the perfective resists certain, but not all, temporal modification (Wurmbbrand 2014). Recall that with obligatory proximate futures adverbs can only modify the preparatory state they introduce and never the future eventuality. Thus, simply having the perfective is not enough to capture this strict constraint. To ensure that the future eventuality can never be modified, PROX existentially closes both the future eventuality and its future time upon introduction, leaving only the time associated with the preparatory state to be existentially closed by the higher tense. This ensures that only the preparatory state is available for modification.

Lastly, I've shown that given our diagnostics for modality, obligatory proximate futures don't behave like modals: they don't shift the world of evaluation and must be evaluated in the actual world. How is this accounted for? If we assume that in conditionals *if*-clauses require an implicit operator (Kratzer 1986), then since obligatory proximate futures are not modal, the only world that can be restricted is the actual world, which is why they only occur in conditionals where there isn't restriction of possible worlds (biscuit conditionals) or conditionals where only the actual world is considered (epistemic conditionals).

This brings us to *bgt*. Matthewson et al. (2022) analyze *bgt* and its equivalent in Gitksan as $[\text{NON-FUT}[\text{PROG}[\text{MOD}[\text{dim}[\text{VP}]]]]$ where PROG is adapted from Portner (1998), and MOD is a covert circumstantial necessity modal that licenses the prospective marker *dim*. As mentioned above, *bgt* differs from *be about to*. Such differences can be accounted for given that *bgt* is a less restricted proximate future marker that shares qualities with other future constructions such as *woll*. Exactly how *bgt* allows for modification of its future event, is able to receive non-episodic interpretations, and can be used in the conditional dependent interpretation (bomb example) but not in offering contexts, is not accounted for in previous accounts by Copley 2009, Klecha 2014, Matthewson et al. 2022 and so a revised account for *bgt* is going to be the focus of future work (pun intended).

We find cross-linguistic variation due to lexicalization. For languages, such as English and Italian, where the obligatory proximate future takes an infinitive as argument, I follow a syntax and semantics for infinitives as given in Wurmbbrand (2014) in which infinitives receive tense from the matrix clause. In those languages, PROX is lexicalized as a proximate marker (*about/per*). Adopting accounts in which the copula *BE* has no semantic function (Carlson 1977, Jäger 1999), the presence of *BE* is provided at spell-out. In languages where the simple present and a proximate marker (adverb) are used, such as in German, the adverb is the lexicalization of PROX , and the verb, marked by the simple present, introduces

⁵ Theta roles are left out for simplicity.

the preparatory state *PREP*. Languages such as Gitksan follow similarly except *PREP* is lexicalized with the prospective marker *dim* (Matthewson 2013).

5. Conclusion

In this paper I introduced properties of obligatory proximate futures which differentiate them from other future-denoting constructions. Specifically, I showed that although in some cases *be about to* and *bgt*'s meanings overlap, *be about to*-like constructions are far more restricted than *bgt*. Obligatory proximate futures are non-modal since they do not behave like modals and do not pass standard tests for modality. It's for these reasons that they are analyzed as expressing a non-modal perfective denoting a preparation state for some contextually close future event.

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