

kansas
working
papers
in
linguistics

volume 11

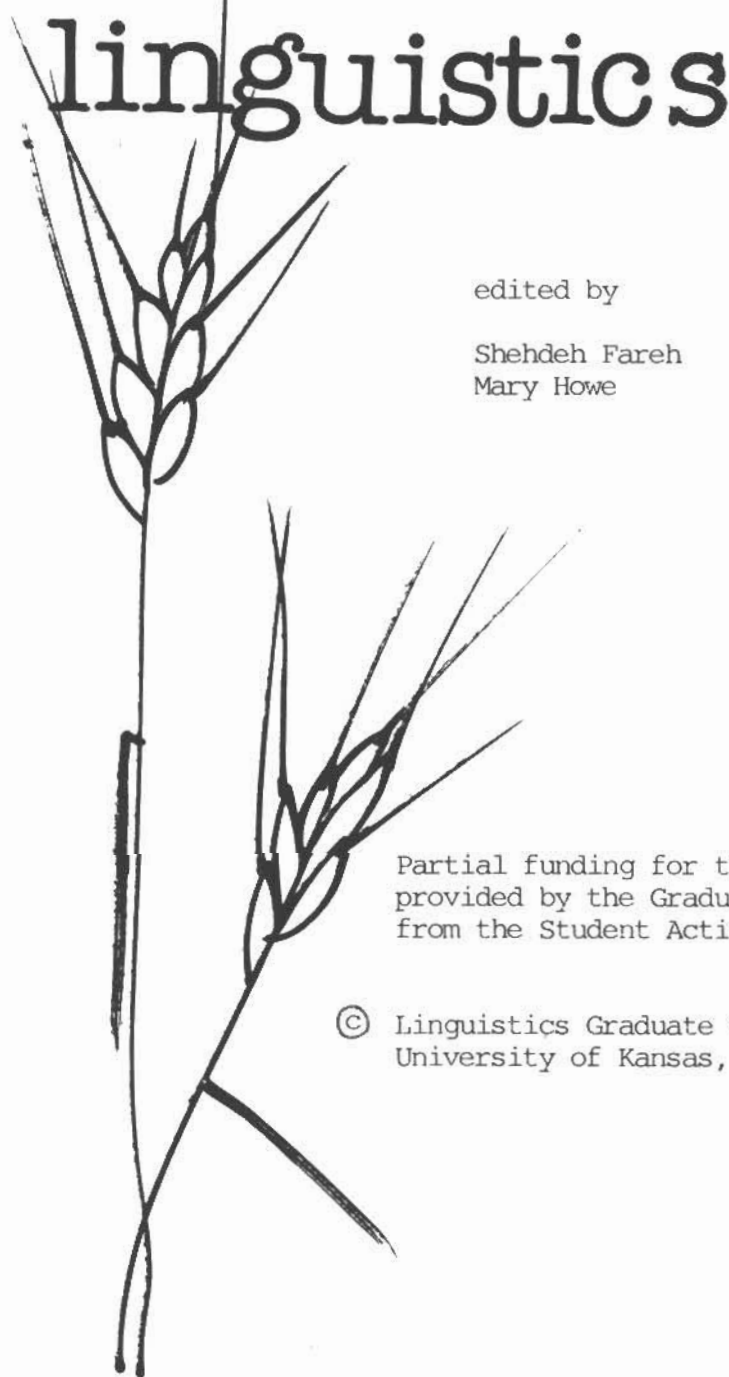
1986

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Partial funding for this journal is
provided by the Graduate Student Council
from the Student Activity Fee.

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Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics is a regular publication of the Linguistics Graduate Student Association, Department of Linguistics, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045

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Lawrence, KS 66045 USA

Requests for individual volumes should be addressed to Linguistics Graduate Student Association at the above address. Institutions producing a similar publication may request a reciprocal agreement.

The cost per issue for Volumes 1 through 6 and Volume 8, number 1, is US\$4.50 postpaid. The cost for Volume 7, Volume 8, number 2, Volume 10, number 1 and Volume 11 is US\$7.50 postpaid. The cost for Volume 9 and Volume 10, number 2 is US\$10.00 postpaid. Reprints of individual articles may be requested for US\$1.50 postpaid. For orders outside the United States and Canada, please add US\$1.50 per volume to help defray the costs of postage (a cumulative index to volumes 1-11 can be found at the back of this issue).

We would like to thank the faculty of the Linguistics Department and the Graduate Student Council for their continuing encouragement and support.

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CONFLICTING SPEECH FORMULAS:
About To and Not About To

Mary Howe

Abstract: Many formulaic linguistic expressions are not generated by grammatical rules, nor do they fit neatly into the lexicon. Two such strings in English are be about to and not be about to. These expressions are not semantically positive and negative forms of the same string. The first signals preinceptive meaning and the second signals negative intention. These expressions are discussed in detail in this paper.

Given the grammatical rules of a language and its lexicon, a single idea may be expressed in numerous ways. But it appears that native speakers choose from among a narrow range of conventionalized expressions. In fact, a native speaker is able to select sentences that are "natural and idiomatic from among a range of grammatically correct paraphrases, many of which are non-nativelike or highly marked usages" (Pawley and Syder 1983:191). Such strings may be entirely regular grammatical constructions (sorry to have kept you waiting), in which case it may be argued that there is no need to include them in a description of native speaker competence, since they seem to require no further knowledge of the language than what is provided by the lexicon and the syntactic rules and thus could be more properly accounted for in a description of performance. On the other hand, every language has many strings whose forms cannot be accounted for by a simple set of general rules of grammar (assuming an elegant and economical grammar), whose meanings can be deduced from the meanings of the individual words (and thus which do not fall into the traditional category of idioms such as cut the cackle or ivory tower), and which occur frequently in native speech. For example:

1. She came right out and told me the truth.

2. Tired though he was, he refused to go and lie down.
3. The more I write, the more ideas I come up with.
4. Boring lecture that it was, I fell asleep.
5. Had I but known, I would have come over right away.
6. I'm about to call my mother.

(Examples 2-4 are based on examples given by Charles Fillmore in a lecture presented on July 15, 1985 to the LSA Institute.)

Such constructions contain some variable elements and some fixed elements and are thus more productive than frozen idioms. Their production involves a kind of linguistic knowledge which falls between the grammar and the lexicon. Therefore it seems that these conventionalized expressions must be accounted for in a theory of competence. Pawley and Syder refer to such constructions as lexicalized sentence stems:

A lexicalized sentence stem is a unit of clause length or longer whose grammatical form and lexical content is wholly or largely fixed; its fixed elements form a standard label for a culturally recognized concept, a term in the language (1983:191).

In spite of the fact that these constructions seem to be lexicalized, one cannot simply say that they are part of the lexicon. They appear to be stored as complete units and yet they are also available for syntactic processing. They then violate the theoretical emphasis on economy since the grammar must account for them twice.

In this paper I will discuss in detail two variants of one such lexicalized sentence stem: be about to VERB and be not about to VERB. Pawley 1982 lists a number of criteria for lexicalized expressions. The expressions I am considering here meet at least three of those criteria: transformational defectiveness, defective phrase structure, and inseparability of constituents. I will examine the syntactic form and constraints on the use of these two expressions, and then discuss semantic

and pragmatic considerations necessary for their use and interpretation.

This set is a particularly interesting pair of expressions, first because both have the same unusual syntactic form, and second because although they are formally alike, they are semantically and pragmatically different.

To be about to do something means 'to be on the point of doing something.'

7. I'm about to go downtown.

This can be negated and have the opposite meaning:

8. I'm not about to go downtown now, so we can go together later.

The negative form more commonly has the meaning of 'intend not to do something under any circumstances.'

9. I'm not about to call Ralph. I'm mad at him.

For purposes of this discussion I will refer to these as the pre-inceptive meaning (as in (7)), the negative pre-inceptive meaning (as in (8)), and the negative intention meaning (as in (9)). It should be noted that I use these terms for ease of discussion and they do not purport to cover all aspects of the meaning of the expressions. Further semantic and pragmatic information will be described later in the paper.

Be about to VERB is a construction whose meaning can probably be figured out by speakers. In English about can act as an adverb modifying predicate adjectives with the temporal meaning 'on the verge of being ADJ,' (as in "I'm about ready to feed the dogs"), so by analogy with this construction, speakers can understand to be about to VERB as meaning 'on the verge of VERBing.' Thus this expression can be called an encoding idiom; that is, an expression which would be understood on first hearing but which would not be produced by someone who did not know it as a conventional expression in English (Fillmore et al. 1983:4).

Be not about to VERB, in its negative intention meaning, however, is an expression which "language users couldn't know the meaning of if they hadn't learned it separately" (Fillmore et al. 1983:3-4); that is, a decoding idiom. In preparing this paper I discussed these expressions with a number of native and non-native speakers of English. All the native speakers knew the meaning of both expressions, but the non-native speakers (all linguistics graduate students who are quite fluent in English) did not know the negative intention meaning although they knew the pre-inceptive and negative pre-inceptive meanings.

One interesting aspect of the negative-intention meaning is that it can be indicated by extra stress on the word about. That is, if there is any ambiguity between the negative-preinceptive meaning and the negative intention meaning, it may be disambiguated by stressing about. For example, the sentence

10. I'm not about to call Ralph now.

has the negative-intention meaning, as opposed to the negative-preinceptive meaning in

11. I'm not about to call Ralph now, I'll call him next week.

But it is also the case that in the non-negative meaning, about may be stressed without signalling anything like positive intention:

12. I'm about to go downtown.

It is also true that even without extra stress the negative intention meaning is clear.

Grammar

In this section I will discuss the form of the expressions, problems with the word about, variable elements in the form, and certain other syntactic characteristics. My treatment here is not intended to be exhaustive but simply to show differences between the

two expressions and to illustrate some of their syntactic peculiarities.

The form of these two expressions is as follows:

- (a) NP be-TENSE about to VP
- (b) NP be-TENSE not about to VP

The word about in these constructions presents an interesting problem. This word can act as either a preposition or an adverb in English. In this particular case it is clearly not a preposition, since it is followed by to - infinitive, and the only other preposition+to-infinitive sequence in English that I can find is the colloquial expression for+to-infinitive, which occurs only after get ready.

- 13. I'm getting ready for to go.

About acts as an adverb with a similar meaning to about in the pre-inceptive meaning:

- 14. I'm about ready.
- 15. We're about finished.
- 16. She's about exhausted.
- 17. We've about exhausted our resources.

At first it seems possible that the about-ADJ construction has the same underlying structure as about to VERB, and that to be has been deleted:

- 18. We're about to be finished.

However, such a possibility does not account for the use of about in the nearly synonymous sentence

- 19. We've about finished.

In addition, although sentences (15) and (19) are nearly synonymous, sentence (18) seems to have a slightly different meaning. Nor is it possible to assume that to be is inserted in an about-ADJ construction to produce the pre-inceptive meaning, given the difference between (20) and (21).

20. I'm about to be single again.
 21. * I'm about single again.

My conclusion regarding about in form (a) is that it has an adverbial function which is similar but not identical to about in the about-ADJ construction. One further reason to avoid claiming unequivocally that about is an adverb is that negative intention meaning cannot have an adjective following about.

22. * I'm not about ready, no matter how hard you try to make me hurry.

With the pre-inceptive meaning there seem to be no restrictions on what can occur in NP position.

23. I'm about to go downtown.
 24. They're about to start the movie.
 25. The dogs are about to escape from the yard.
 26. The sun is about to rise.
 27. Those books are about to slide off the desk.
 28. This problem is about to be resolved.
 29. His sincerity is about to drive me crazy.

On the other hand, with the negative intention meaning, the NP slot can only be filled with an animate noun. The prototypical case is probably the first person pronoun (reasons for which will be discussed later). Parenthetical information in the example sentences is included to disambiguate the negative intention meaning from the negative pre-inceptive meaning.

30. I'm not about to call her (no matter how often you tell me I should).
 31. We're not about to move to New York City (even if they double my pay).

Animate NPs other than first person are also acceptable in the negative-intention construction.

32. He's not about to sing in public (even though his brother said he would).
 33. Those dogs aren't about to eat dry kibbles (when they know we're having steak).

A few abstract nouns can appear in subject position:

- 34. This problem isn't about to go away.
- 35. ? His charm isn't about to distract me.
- 36. ? Your argument isn't about to convince me.

Sentences (35) and (36) are questionable although interpretable. It is more likely that they would take the following forms:

- 37. I'm not about to be distracted by his charm.
- 38. I'm not about to be convinced by your argument.

The other variable element in these formulas is the VP, which always occurs in to-infinitive form. With the pre-inceptive form, the verb in the VP seems to be restricted to non-stative verbs, at least when be is in the present tense, because of the pre-inceptive meaning of the expression.¹

- 39. I'm about to wash my hair.
- 40. I'm about to make a fool of myself.
- 41. * I'm about to want a chocolate éclair.
- 42. * I'm about to be intelligent.
- 43. * I'm about to believe you.

When the negative pre-inceptive meaning is intended, the same restrictions apply. But with the negative intention meaning, the VP seems not to be restricted in quite the same way.

- 44. I'm not about to believe you (no matter how much you try to persuade me).
- 45. ? I'm not about to be intelligent about this problem.²

Tense

There seem to be fewer restrictions on the tense of the verb be with the pre-inceptive and negative pre-inceptive meanings than with the negative intention meaning. Use of the future in the pre-inceptive and negative pre-inceptive meanings requires some kind of

temporal specifier which is not always necessary in the present tense.

46. If you call me at noon I'll be about to go out.
 47. I won't be about to go to sleep for another few hours.

But with the negative intention meaning, use of the future tense is rather peculiar, although interpretable.

48. In spite of my mother's wishes { I'm not
 ?I won't be }
 about to go home this weekend.

It should also be noted that use of be going to as a future marker with the pre-inceptive meanings renders these sentences distinctly odd:

49. If you call me at noon I'll be going to be about to go out...
 50. I won't be going to be about to go to sleep for another few hours.
 51. *In spite of my mother's wishes I'm not going to be about to go home this weekend.

Past tense seems to be acceptable for all of these expressions, although in sentences like (53) additional temporal information is necessary to obtain the negative pre-inceptive meaning.

52. George was about to eat supper when the fire siren blew.
 53. I wasn't about to go to the library yet but if you're going now I'll walk with you.
 54. Louise wasn't about to call her mother under any circumstances.

Another variable to consider in these formulas, based on Pawley's (1982) "inseparability of constituents" criterion for lexicalization, is the possible insertion of other words. In the pre-inceptive and negative pre-inceptive meaning, an adverb can be inserted before about, but in the negative intention meaning an adverb can only be inserted before not, as you can see in sentences 55-59. This seems to indicate

that in the negative-intention form, the two words not about are acting as a single constituent, while this is not the case in the pre-inceptive and negative-pre-inceptive forms.

There are also limitations on what kinds of adverbs can be inserted in these positions. The pre-inceptive and negative pre-inceptive meanings allow the use of a few temporal adverbs:

55. I'm {just } about to cook dinner.
 {almost }
56. I'm not {just } about to cook dinner, so we
 {almost }
 can talk now.
57. * I'm not {just } about to change my mind on
 {almost }
 this point.

With the negative intention meaning, a few adverbs with emphatic meaning can be inserted before not.

58. I'm {certainly } not about to change my mind
 {really }
 {honestly }
59. * I'm not {certainly } about to change my mind.
 {really }
 {honestly }

The non-negative expression can occur in nominalized forms, but the negative expressions cannot.

60. Being about to get divorced has changed my ideas about marriage.
61. * Not being about to get divorced has prevented me from going to graduate school
62. * Not being about to get divorced doesn't mean I want to have children.
63. To be about to leave for Europe and then get sick was very frustrating.

These expressions behave rather differently from each other in questions. The form with pre-inceptive meaning may be used in yes-no questions, wh-questions, and as declaratives with tag questions:

64. Are you about to eat dinner?

65. What are you about to do?
 66. You're about to eat dinner, aren't you?

The form with negative pre-inceptive meaning can occur in yes-no questions, but not in wh-questions, for obvious pragmatic reasons: there is an infinite number of possible answers to such a question. Tag questions attached to the negative sentences tend to be ambiguous between the two meanings. Extra stress on VERB results in the negative pre-inceptive meaning in this case, and extra stress on about produces the negative intention meaning. Tags are the only kind of question that can occur with this last meaning.

67. Aren't you about to eat dinner?
 68. * What aren't you about to do?
 69. You're not about to eat dinner, are you?
 70. You're not about to help him out, are you?

Semantic and Pragmatic Considerations

Although there are several syntactic differences between these two constructions, be about to VERB and be not about to VERB, their form is essentially the same. The differences lie largely in the greater restrictions on the structure with negative intention meaning. The meaning differences are considerably more substantial.

The pre-inceptive and negative pre-inceptive cases describe a situation with a primarily temporal meaning: something will (or will not) occur in the immediate future. There is no evaluation of the psychological state or moral values of the speaker or the hearer. The use of the pre-inceptive meaning presupposes that the speaker expects the action expressed by the verb to occur. In the past tense, that expectation is maintained even if the expected event did not occur.

71. * I'm about to write a paper, but I'm not.
 72. I was about to write a paper, but I didn't.

One further condition on the use of the expression with the pre-inceptive meaning concerns the length of time between the utterance and the action referred to. Originally it seemed to me that the prototypical case

was that this length of time must be less than the length of time it takes to do the action. Thus a speaker can say

73. I'm about to bathe the dog

if the dog's bath will begin in a few minutes but not if the speaker plans to bathe the dog the following day. It is possible to use sentence (74), however, several months before the semester begins.

74. I'm about to begin graduate school.

However, it was pointed out to me that temporal expressions like this are relative to a time scale within a discourse³. Therefore, it is possible to say something like "Mount St. Helen's is about to erupt" where the eruption may take place in six months and last only a day.

The negative intention meaning, on the other hand, provides no temporal information at all. The truth conditions for this sentence are the same as for the expression not to be going to VERB, which is a non-evaluative statement about the future. The negative intention meaning also carries two conventional implicatures which are not implied in the statement of negative future action above.

- I. The speaker strongly believes Event X (whatever is expressed in the sentence) will not occur.
- II. There is some external expectation that Event X should occur.

Implicature (I) seems to be the reason why the NP is so often the first person pronoun, since use of this form is a personal statement of the speaker's values. We can speak with certainty about our own states of mind but with less certainty (and thus probably with less frequency) about another person's psychological state. Further evidence for this point is that it is possible to make a statement about a third person which appears to impose the speaker's values on that person:

75. He's not about to move into his own apartment.

while it is not possible to do this in addressing someone. Sentence (76) is not likely to occur without a tag question, as in (77).

76. You're not about to move into your own apartment.

77. You're not about to move into your own apartment, are you?

Further evidence for implicature (I) is that the expression cannot be used if the speaker is incapable of VERBing:

78. ? I'm not about to drive from New York to Los Angeles in one day.

Evidence for implicature (II) comes from extensions to the expression (see also examples 30, 31, 32, 33, 44, and 48).

79. I'm not about to buy you a car, no matter what.

80. I'm not about to give you an extension on your paper under any circumstances.

One further point about this expression is that it is cancellable in the past tense but not in the present tense:

81. I was not about to call Aunt Harriet until my sister talked me into it.

82. *I'm not about to call Aunt Harriet but my sister is talking me into it.

This seems to be related to a similar phenomenon that occurs with the word misunderstood, as Charles Fillmore points out (personal communication).

83. I misunderstood what you said.

84. * I misunderstand what you're saying.

In both present tense cases one is describing a complete psychological state which one believes to hold true. It is not possible for the same state not to hold true at

the same time. One cannot simultaneously understand that one misunderstands, nor can one have a firm resolve and at the same time not have a firm resolve.

Conclusion

I have reviewed two common related expressions in English: be about to VERB and be not about to VERB. Although this pair is of particular interest in that they are syntactically unusual and the negative form is not semantically the negation of the non-negative form, they do not form an isolated set. There are many such conventionalized expressions which occur frequently in everyday speech. These expressions must be accounted for if we are to provide a complete description of the linguistic competence of native speakers of a particular language. Various researchers have begun to try to account for different aspects of strings such as these (e.g. Fillmore et al. 1983, Pawley 1982, Pawley & Syder 1983, Weinreich 1969) both within and outside the framework of transformational grammar. Further consideration of lexicalized expressions such as the ones I have discussed is important for both the lexicographer and for descriptive linguists who wish to provide a complete account of a given language, and for the theoretical linguist seeking explanations of linguistic competence. It is clear that there will have to be some duplication of description so that lexicalized sentence stems can appear as chunks in the lexicon and also as strings of individual words analyzable by the grammar. The traditional emphasis on economy of description does not seem to accord with the way speakers store and process such common chunks of language.

NOTES

1. Sentences 39-40 present something of a problem in the past tense, because they are at least possible:
 - 41a. I was about to be intelligent on that test but then I had a memory lapse and wrote down the wrong answer.
 - 43a. I was about to believe you when you smirked and I realized you were joking.
2. This is probably better using the third person:
 - 45a. He's not about to be intelligent now; he never has been before.
3. I wish to thank Kenneth Miner for pointing this out to me.

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