NELS 56 - For consideration as a talk or poster in the main session.

Proximate futures in English and Turkish: An analogy between spatial and temporal proximity

Overview. In many languages (e.g., English, Turkish, Spanish, etc.), proximate futures (e.g., *be about to*) are expressed via forms used in other sentential contexts to denote spatial (rather than temporal) proximity. Based on this, I provide a semantic analysis of proximate futures that combines insights from spatial (Zwarts & Winter, 2000) and temporal semantics: proximate futures introduce a future time interval that is restricted to be temporally close to the reference time (RT) from tense. This interval contains either the duration of the relevant eventuality or its start, depending on viewpoint aspect, making proximate futures analogous to existential perfects (e.g., Pancheva, 2003). The current proposal differentiates the semantics of proximate futures from other futures (e.g., WOLL or *be going to*), reflecting differences in their interpretations (Copley, 2002; Klecha, 2014; Hill, 2025).

Semantic properties of proximate futures. Zooming in on English and Turkish, proximate futures are expressed via an infinitival form of a verb appearing beneath the morpheme *about* or *üzere*, respectively (1). In both, temporal reference is shifted to a future time that is close to the RT introduced by tense. What counts as temporally close is context-dependent: longer intervals, even ones spanning years (1c), may be sufficiently close to license proximate futures in certain contexts.

(1) a. Daphne **is about to** sit.

   b. Defne otur-mak **üzere**.
   Defne sit-INF   **PROX**
   'Defne is about to sit.'

   c. When the American Revolution ended in 1783, France **was about to** undergo their own revolution, which began in 1789.

Along with temporal closeness, both of the proximate futures in (1) display additional properties which are not found with future expressions like WOLL or *be going to* (e.g., Copley, 2000; Klecha, 2014; Hill, 2025), three of which I discuss here. **First**, the eventuality in question cannot have been instantiated already. In (2), a proximate future is only available if the speaker has not yet begun working. Infinitives in English can also appear with progressive morphology, and in such cases, this property still holds (2a).

(2) *Context: It's almost noon, and you've been tirelessly working at your desk all day. You plan to continue doing so throughout the afternoon. Your colleague asks what you'll do when it hits 12PM.*

   a. I will/am going to/**#am about to** work/be working.

   b. (Ben) {çalış-acağ-ım} / {**#çalış-mak üzere-yim**}
   1.SG {work-FUT-1.SG} / {**work-INF   PROX-1.SG**}
   'I will/**#am about to** work.'

Second, many speakers judge these futures as infelicitous with predicates of personal taste (PPTs) (3). In both English and Turkish, these judgments are variable: some speakers find the proximate futures in (3) fully unacceptable, while others find them appropriate in contexts where a future change of state is expected (e.g., a new ingredient will be added to the bread dough). **Third**, objective individual-level predicates (ILPs) are also infelicitous under proximate futures (3), unless accommodated as stage-level (see Hill, 2025).

(3) a. The bread will/is going to/%**is about to** be tasty/organic.

   b. Ekmek lezzetli/organik {ol-acak} / {%**ol-mak üzere**}
   bread   tasty/organic   {be-FUT} / {**be-INF   PROX**}
   'The bread will/%**is about to** be tasty/organic.'

The behavior of proximate futures with PPTs has previously been taken as evidence that they are non-modal (Hill, 2025). This is because other future expressions/modal operators are not only acceptable with PPTs, but also obviate their acquaintance inference (e.g., Pearson, 2013; Klecha, 2014; etc.). However, I point out that if this were an indicator of non-modality, PPTs would still be expected to be compatible with proximate futures, but generate an acquaintance inference like simple present sentences (e.g., "The bread is tasty"). It is also not clear how a non-modal semantics captures the related infelicity of other ILPs under proximate futures. For this reason, I will trace the interaction between PPTs/ILPs and proximate futures not to a lack of modality, but to the temporal relation they introduce: since proximate futures require the eventuality to have not begun yet, PPTs/ILPs are infelicitous because they describe a permanent property of the object.

Analogies between temporal and spatial proximity. In addition to expressing proximate futures, both forms used in (1) lead double lives as locative prepositions in other sentential contexts (4). Crucially, a common semantic core between these prepositions is that they denote spatial proximity: for both *about* and *üzerinde* "on" in (4), it is entailed that the relevant objects are near the entity scoping beneath the preposition.

(4) a. Glass was scattered **about** the room.   b. Zarf   masa-nın **üzerinde**-ydi
                                                  envelope table-GEN **on**-PST
                                                  'The envelope was on the table.'

Under a vector-based semantics for spatial reference (e.g., Zwarts & Winter, 2000), spatial proximity for prepositions is encoded by restricting the length of the relevant vector, exemplified by (5). In (5), EXT(v,A) denotes a vector v that extends outward from the boundary of a set of points A. The length of v, $|v|$, is restricted by a contextually dependent variable r. The analogy I draw with temporal proximity is as follows: like how prepositions restrict the start/end of v, minimizing its length, I propose that proximate futures introduce a future time interval whose boundaries are contextually restricted, resulting in temporal closeness. This complements the analogy drawn between times and space by Iatridou (2014) for the perfect. Since the domains of vectors (Zwarts & Winter, 2000), times (e.g., Klein, 1994), and degrees (e.g., Rett, 2015) are all ordered, it follows that relations between entities in these domains could be expressed via similar logic.

(5) $[\![$on$]\!] = \lambda A.\lambda v.$EXT($v$,a) & $|v| < r_0$
     where r_0 is a small positive number s.t. $r_0 \approx 0$ (from Zwarts & Winter, 2000)

Analysis. In (6), I give a semantics for proximate futures like those in (1). Under (6), proximate futures quantify over possible worlds and introduce a future time interval t'' whose left boundary (LB) is the RT. As a result, the temporal future-shifting is modeled as a mirror of an XN semantics for the perfect: rather than introducing a past interval (PTS) whose right boundary is equivalent to the RT (e.g., Pancheva & von Stechow, 2004), t'' instead extends forward into the future. t'' is contextually restricted to be a subset of *g(i)* (akin to (5)), resulting in both temporal closeness and context-dependence. Thus, proximate futures are like the "hot news" perfect in that they come with an additional restriction that t'' is near the UT, but without the added pragmatic component of the eventuality being noteworthy (e.g., Portner, 2003).

(6) $[\![$PROX$]\!]^{g,c,w} = \lambda p.\lambda t'.\lambda w.\forall w'$ compatible with w at t' [$\exists t''$[LB(t',t'') & $t'' \subset$ g(i) & p(t')(w')]]

An example of how this semantics derives the expected truth conditions is shown in (7), where I treat the infinitive *to sit* as perfective (Wurmbrand, 2014). The fact that the eventuality has not yet begun results from the containment relation introduced by the perfective: because the duration of the eventuality must fall within the interval introduced by PROX, it cannot have started at a time preceding it.

(7) $[\![$Daphne is about to sit$]\!]^{g,c,w} = \exists t'$[t' = t_c & $\forall w'$ compatible with w at t' [$\exists t''$[LB(t',t'') & $t'' \subset$ g(i) &
     $\exists e$[$\tau(e) \subseteq t''$ & sit(e, d, w')]]]]

For concreteness, I treat infinitives with progressive morphology in (8) as having a "neutral" imperfective aspect in order to disallow overlap between the eventuality and the RT, following treatments of statives with the experiential perfect (e.g., Pancheva, 2003). Here, the future interval from PROX contains the start of the eventuality. While a "neutral" imperfective is not without issue, its problems are not unique to proximate futures and also arise for existential perfects. (See Altshuler, 2014 for an alternative to "neutral" aspects.)

(8) $[\![$Delilah is about to be crying$]\!]^{g,c,w} = \exists t'$[t' = t_c & $\forall w'$ compatible with w at t' [$\exists t''$[LB(t',t'') & $t'' \subset$
     g(i) & $\exists e$[$t'' \cap \tau(e) \neq \varnothing$ & cry(e, d, w') & $\exists t'''$[t''' $\in$ t'' & t''' $\notin \tau(e)$ & $\forall t''''$[t'''' $\in \tau(e) \rightarrow$ t''' < t''']]]]]]

Conclusion. Through English and Turkish data, this analysis captures the semantic properties of proximate futures while formally differentiating them from other futures. This work also contributes a parallel between temporal and spatial semantics via the future, compatible with existing work on the perfect (Iatridou, 2014).

Selected references. Hill, A. (2025). What about *about to*? A proposal for proximate future reference; Iatridou, S. (2014). About determiners on event descriptions, about time being like space (when we talk), and (…); Klecha, P. (2014). Diagnosing modality in predictive expressions; Pancheva, R., & von Stechow, A. (2004). On the present perfect puzzle; Zwarts, J., & Winter, Y. (2000). Vector space semantics: A model-theoretic analysis of locative prepositions.