

Aleksandra M. Radovanović¹
University of Kragujevac
Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja

ENGLISH SEMI-MODAL *BE ABOUT TO* SEEN THROUGH ITS SERBIAN TRANSLATION EQUIVALENTS

Given notable merit of translation in accessing meanings of a linguistic form, this study attempts to look into the English semi-modal *be about to* through the lens of its Serbian equivalents. The overall objective is to approach the construction from a contrastive and translation-descriptive perspective. A methodological framework comprises a contrastive and qualitative analysis, supported by quantitative data. The unilateral contrastive analysis was carried out on the sentential corpus composed of the excerpts from three English novels and their Serbian translations. It revealed as many as 16 various Serbian morphosyntactic, grammatical, and lexical forms which convey meanings of *be about to* in the present and/or past tense. Accordingly, it confirmed that immediate future time reference did not exhaust the semantics of *be about to* (Comrie 1985: 95) and had provided an account of its aspectual and modal meanings which are far from being sharply separable and mutually exclusive. In this regard, the meanings of dynamic modality surfacing through translation deserve a specific mention.

Keywords: *be about to*, the future time, aspectual meaning, modal meaning, Serbian

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. *Be about to* in linguistic description and theory

Overviewing the literature, certain shortages in precision and the details provided on the English periphrastic construction² *be about to* may be noticed. As already rightfully noted (Höche 2011: 118), the descriptive entries in grammars are characterised with notable terminological inconsistencies. Besides, the impression is that the status of *be about to* is open to debate. From a grammatical point of view, it is assigned to the English modality system which comprises nine central modals and many multi-word constructions that function like modal verbs. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 137–146) consider the latter the verb idioms which express modal or aspectual meaning and are introduced

1 aleksandra.radovanovic@kg.ac.rs

2 The terms *expression* and *construction* are used interchangeably in the study, the latter not being used with any reference to the Construction Grammar Approach but in the way it is commonly used in relevant literature (e.g. Comrie 1985).

by one of the primary verbs *have* and *be*, also labelled semi-auxiliaries, quasi-auxiliary constructions or marginal auxiliaries elsewhere. The members of this somewhat open-ended group are also referred to as semi-modals, lexico-modals, quasi-modals or periphrastic modals (Collins 2009; Depraetere, Reed 2006). As such, *be about to* is characterised by the following features: generally exhibits the so-called NICE³ properties in respect of the *be* part of its form, has non-finite forms, it inflects for person and number (Depraetere, Reed 2006: 272–273), and conveys epistemic and dynamic modal meanings (Collins 2009:155).

The general consensus is that this construction belongs to a large inventory of devices that express actions conceived of in future time.⁴ In addition to lexical means, in English futurity is expressed by way of a number of verb forms, including modals and semi-modals, each of which has its subtle nuances of meaning (Leech ³2004: 55). More to the point, the accounts of *be about to* rest on the notions of immediate future or immediacy (Comrie 1985: 95; Declerck *et al.* 2006: 356; Leech ³2004), near future (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 217) and extreme closeness (Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 212). Echoing Jespersen's (1949: V, 213) view that *about to* means *at the point of, just going to, beginning to*, the descriptions commonly encapsulate drawing comparisons with functionally similar constructions, i.e. *be on the point of* and *be going to* (Declerck *et al.* 2006: 356; Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 212; Leech ³2004: 59; Quirk *et al.* 1985: 217). Considering its temporal semantics, *be about to* has been regarded a futurish form (Declerck *et al.* 2006)⁵ or even considered a tense form (Jirsa 1997) which apparently conflicts Comrie's (1985: 95) claim that it is idiomatic rather than grammaticalised. This, in fact, raises the issue of subsuming *be about to* under the category of aspectuality. In accord with Jespersen's (1949: IV, 362) view that it is one of the "phrases which often serve to denote 'prospectiveness' with various degrees of proximity" with relation to the present time (a prospective present) or the past time (a prospective past), Comrie (1976: 64–65) treats *be about to* as an expression indicating prospective aspectual meaning which establishes a relation between a state at one time and some subsequent situation.

1.2. Previous research

Despite the notable interest in the related verb forms, *be about to* has received only limited attention. Neither some of the highly influential extensive research on the future time reference in English includes it (e.g. Wekker, 1976), nor has it been given a mention in the widely quoted seminal studies on modality and (English) modals (e.g. Palmer 1986, ²2001), probably due to its relatively low frequency of occurrences (Collins 2009: 155).

3 The acronym typically used to indicate the following properties of the central modals: *Negation, Inversion, Code, and Emphasis*. For details, see Declerck, Reed (2006).

4 When used in the past tense, it refers to a projected future time span seen from the point in the past, the future in the past (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 217).

5 The forms with a dual (the future and the present) time reference (Declerck *et al.* 2006: 106).

So far, a diachronic portrayal of *be about to* has received significant attention. Aiming to investigate the level of its grammaticalisation and what diachrony can reveal of its synchronous uses and meaning, several studies have addressed its development within different theoretical frameworks. Jirsa (1997) examines the sources of *be about to* in the framework of grammaticalisation theory. Similarly, Watanabe (2011) sheds light on how *be about to* has evolved into a grammaticalised form and provides a detailed survey of three text genres in Late Modern English to determine the factors that caused the change. Building on this research, Mee (2013) combines grammaticalisation theory with a construction grammar perspective to account for the development of *be about to* based on the data in three relevant corpora from different time periods. Finding it important to draw an analogy between *be about to* and other forms “that may be used for similar conceptual and social experiences” (Mee 2013: 69), he also points to the grammaticalisation of *be going to* for the purpose of comparison. This, in fact, is not an isolated case of the scholarly attention drawn at their seemingly shared semantics.

Motivated by the assumed interchangeability of *be going to* and *be about to*, the few detailed studies have addressed their semantic-pragmatic (dis)similarities. Wada (2010) focuses on their different behaviour in certain environments. Specifically, she accounts for the difference in the co-occurrence of the two constructions with future time adverbials and their different behaviour in the past tense in so-called third-person narrative texts. Starting out with the diachronic notes, Höche (2010, 2011) provides a usage-based account of *be going to* and *be about to* approached from a Cognitive Construction Grammar. Constructional properties that distinguish *be about to* from *be going to* are worked out on the basis of large sets of data of authentic language which are subjected to a collocation analysis. Both studies describe *be about to* as a construction which falls somewhere in between the categories of futurate forms and ingressive aspectualisers. In a nutshell, Höche (2010, 2011) claims that *be about to* should be considered an aspectual construction rather than a future construction for it profiles the lead-up section to the onset of an event and occupies a particular ecological niche in the neighbourhood of *be going to* V and *start to* V.

1.3. Aims of the study

In addition to intralinguistic, cross-linguistic comparisons could be a valuable commodity in accessing meanings of a linguistic item. Considering the already noted merit of translation in this respect,⁶ this study set out to investigate *be about to* through the lens of Serbian with the primary purpose to approach the construction from a contrastive and translation-descriptive point of view. Therefore, the underlying aim of the study is twofold: 1) to juxtapose the translation equivalents of *be about to* in Serbian and reach

6 Johansson (2007: 57), for instance, states that one of the most fascinating aspects of electronic corpora is that “they can make meanings visible through translation”.

conclusions about differences and similarities of the contrasted languages, and 2) to observe and classify the nature and variety of the investigated construction on the basis of the juxtaposed linguistic items.

Being genetically related languages, English and Serbian show typological similarities in expressing temporality, modality, and aspectuality. Previous contrastive research has demonstrated that these are common bases shared by the two languages, but expressed with different formal systems in English and Serbian (Novakov 2008; Radovanović 2017; Trbojević-Milošević 2004). As for the future time reference, in English, there are five forms typically regarded as the main forms for expressing future time (see Quirk *et al.* 1985, Wekker 1976), whereas in Serbian three members of the tense system are commonly used. Therefore, through a contrastive analysis, a one-to-one correspondence can hardly be expected. Also, Serbian does not have the grammatical means to make a systematic distinction related to the remoteness/nearness of a future event and a precise equivalent of *be about to* does not exist. In view of this, this study may yield informative insights.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework comprises a contrastive and a qualitative analysis, supported by quantitative data. A contrastive analysis method relied on the principles outlined by Đorđević (1994): the translation equivalence is seen in terms of semantic equivalence, i.e. a semantically based *tertium comparationis* was used in the study. A unilateral analysis was carried out on the sentential corpus compiled for the purpose of this research. Three acclaimed novels (two of which written by K. Ishiguro (*The Unconsoled* and *Never Let Me Go*)⁷ were searched for the relevant instances of *be about to*,⁸ and their translations were then excerpted from the novels published in Serbian, which resulted in the corpus comprising 116 examples in both languages. To gain deeper qualitative insights, the translation equivalents (TEs) were manually counted and classified according to the grammatical tense of *be about to*.

The study takes an eclectic approach and relies on the theoretical tools of the aforementioned descriptive grammars and relevant theoretical studies, particularly those from the field of language typology (Frawley 1992; Palmer 1986). A significant contribution comes from previous contrastive research on expressing temporality (Novakov 2008) and modality (Radovanović 2017, Trbojević-Milošević 2004) in the same pair of languages, as well as from other relevant studies on the Serbian verb system (modality (Hansen 2007) and prospectivity (Popović 2008)). It adopts the terminology on the Serbian tenses used by Novakov (2008) and relies on the classifications of modality markers previously applied in relevant contrastive and descriptive research. The analysis

7 Bibliographical descriptions of the textual material, along with the abbreviations used in this study, are provided in *Sources*.

8 The instances of shifts or transpositions in translation (Newmark 1988) involving a change from a verb form to a nominal phrase (e.g. *you're about to operate*, *pred operaciju*) were disregarded in the analysis.

adheres to a commonly accepted tripartite classification of modality and takes the following as its cornerstones: epistemic modality (concerned with belief, knowledge, truth, etc. in relation to the proposition), deontic modality (deals with actions by others and by the speaker himself), and dynamic modality (related to the dispositions and properties of the subject-referent) (Huddleston, Pullum 2002; Palmer 1986, *inter alia*).

3. TRANSLATION EQUIVALENTS OF *BE ABOUT TO* IN SERBIAN

Of 116 instances of *be about to* in our corpus, the majority are the past tense forms, 92 or 79.3%, whereas only 38 (32.7%) are in the present tense. This large discrepancy may be attributed to the genre as the past tense narration is more common in fiction. Since in Serbian, there is no verb form congruent with *be about to*, the findings of the contrastive analysis point, unsurprisingly, to the *one-to-many* relationship between English and Serbian. The juxtaposed equivalents of *be about to* in our data include various Serbian morphosyntactic, grammatical and lexical means, 16 linguistic items altogether, as shown in Table 1. For the ease of reference, these are classified based on their grammato-semantic features and the numbers of their occurrences (NOC) are presented in two separate columns based on the tense forms of *be about to*.

Table 1. Serbian equivalents of *be about to*

TEs in Serbian		<i>am/is/are about to</i>	<i>was/were about to</i>		
Type	Linguistic item	NOC.	NOC	Total NOC	
Tense form	<i>futur 1 (indicative)</i>	14	20	34	36
	<i>preterit</i>		2	2	
Aspectual construction	<i>samo što nije</i>	3	4	7	11
	<i>na putu da</i>	1		1	
	<i>nije počeo da</i>	1		1	
	<i>na pragu da</i>		1	1	
	<i>umalo nije</i>	1	1	2	
Modal	<i>trebati</i>	3	7	10	11
	<i>voleti</i>	1		1	
Semi-modal	<i>hteti</i>		31	31	31
Modal lexeme	<i>spremati se</i>	13	5	18	25
	<i>pripremati se</i>	1		1	
	<i>želeti</i>	1	3	4	
	<i>nastojati</i>	1		1	
	<i>nameravati</i>		1	1	
Modal adjective	<i>spreman</i>		2	2	2

As Table 1 presents, 11 items cover the meanings of *be about to* present tense forms, with future 1 indicative and modal lexeme *spremati se* standing out for their frequency. There is a slightly greater divergence in the variety of employed means for rendering *be about to*, used for the past time reference as the translators also resort to a semi-modal and a modal adjective. Overall, the linguistic items conveying modality meanings prevail in translation. Serbian TEs presented in Table 1 can be roughly grouped into three semantically distinctive grammatical categories (tense forms, aspectual constructions and modality markers), thereby giving solid grounds for the ensuing qualitative analysis.

3. Semantics of *be about to*

3.1. Temporal meaning

The future time meaning of *be about to* is especially prominent in renderings with the Serbian future tense. In Serbian, future 1 indicative is a general future tense which locates situations after the moment of speech (Novakov 2008: 47). Judging from its occurrence in translation, including (1S), *be about to* can do no more than locate a situation in the future. Hence, it seems to indicate a pure (Declerck *et al.* 2006: 343) or colourless future, i.e. a pure predictive meaning typically recognised with 3rd person animate or inanimate subjects as in (1) and (2) respectively. This is in accord with the observation that *be about to* converts the present into the implicit future tense (Popović 2008: 298).

- (1) Just talk to them about your general impressions, they're *not about to complain*. (UNC)
- (1S) Samo porazgovarajte sa njima o svojim opštim utiscima, *neće se žaliti* (BU: 340)
- (2) And the old apartment *isn't about to go away*, is it? (UNC)
- (2S) A i stari stan *neće pobeći* zar ne? (BU: 234)

However, (1S) and (2S) fail to capture the imminence sense typically recognised with *be about to*, thus indicating that it may not be its necessary feature. To compensate for the lack of this shade of temporal meaning, time adverbials signalling immediacy of expected situations are typically added in translation. In over a third of future 1 instances in our data (13 out of 34), *uskoro* 'soon', *upravo* 'just', *kroz nekoliko trenutaka* 'in a few moments', or *svakog trenutka* 'every moment' modify and complement the primary meaning of the verb form in its indicative or relative use,⁹ as in (3S) and (4S). The adverbials harmoniously reinforce the temporal nearness meaning,¹⁰ otherwise lacking from the future 1 semantics.

- (3) Something *is about to give*. (SAT)

9 Future 1 relative expresses an event that is future in relation to some other past or future event.

10 It metaphorically derives from the sense of spatial nearness of about in *be about to* sentences (Wada 2000: 402).

(3S) Nešto će svakog trenutka pući. (SUB: 19)

(4) ... I could sense I *was about to enter* a quite different atmosphere. (UNC)

(4S) ... osećao sam da ću kroz nekoliko trenutaka ući u sasvim drugačije okruženje. (BU: 41)

Arguably, examples like (4S) contradict the claim that *be about to* for the future in the past usually implies unfulfillment (Jirsa 1997; Quirk *et al.* 1985) since future 1 carries strong actuality implications. An interruption of the realisation (Wada 2000: 412) can be captured in one instance of rendering *be about to* with the Serbian preterite (5S) due to the *when* clause in the example.

(5) ...and I *was about to hurry* past before she spotted me... (SAT)

(5S) ...i požurila sam da brzo prođem pre no što me spazi... (SUB: 48)

3.2. Aspectual meaning

Concerning its aspectual features, *be about to* is generally accepted as displaying prospectivity. The TEs of *be about to* present (6S) or the past tense (7S), (8S), (9S) forms are somewhat in line with Comrie's (1976: 64) remark that in some languages it may be difficult to find exact equivalents of expressions with prospective meaning without going into long periphrases. Serbian does not have a prospective aspect, yet it has devices capable of expressing prospectivity, or encoding "a point just prior to the beginning of an event" (Frawley 1992: 322). These include lexical means, mostly adverbs and particles, used alone or in combination with appropriate verbs, and the adverbial construction *samo što nije* (Popović 2008). The juxtaposed items in our corpus, with a strong preference of 3rd person subjects, as in (6S) – (9S), confirm the verbalisation of temporal-aspectual fragment which precedes the very beginning of the action (Popović 2008: 306).

(6) ...there is always a storm *about to break*. (UNC)

(6S) ...uvek ima oluje koja *samo što nije počela*. (BU: 387)

(7) ...I thought he *was about to follow* Parkhurst. (UNC)

(7S) ...ja sam pomislio da *samo što nije krenuo* za Parherstom. (BU: 347)

(8) ...the hotel manager did not notice Stephan until they *were* virtually *about to collide*. (SAT)

(8S) ...Upravnik hotela nije primetio Štefana dok *se umalo nisu sudarili*. (SUB: 533)

(9) ...what had so far been a miraculously successful evening *was about to come down* in tatters around them. (SAT)

(9S) ... ono što je bilo uspešno veče *bilo na pragu da* sasvim *propadne*. (SUB: 8)

The negative form in (6S) – (8S) deserves a mention as it signals that the situation itself "has not yet come to pass" (Frawley 1992: 322). These sentences just like the English original ones do not predict prospective situations since

these may be prevented in some way or the other (Jespersen 1949: IV, 362), or blocked by intervening events (Comrie 1985: 95). That the situation *be about to* describes is not necessarily realised also holds for the instances when its semantics is viewed in terms of the concepts of *initiation* or *preparation*, as suggested by Höche (2010), which are closely related to the historical development of the construction. Mee (2013: 80) proposes the semantic cline for *be about to* displayed in two dimensions as:

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{MOTION} \rightarrow \text{INTENTION} \rightarrow \text{FUTURE} \\ \text{PHYSICAL PROXIMITY} \rightarrow \text{TEMPORAL PROXIMITY} \end{array} \right]$$

Likewise, Höche (2010) maintains that *about* started from a primarily a spatial preposition or adverb with the meaning ‘around the outside, around; on every side’ or less definitely ‘on any side; near’ and became established in the phrase *be about+to infinitive* to designate preparation or intention, and in a further stage, the construction developed a future meaning. The relics of the original meaning of the preposition surface in (10S).

(10) *They're about to have* one of their set-pieces - and so soon. (M SAT)

(10S) *Na putu su da upadnu* u dobro poznatu šemu – tako rano. (M SUB: 173)

As Höche (2010) argues, in more recent stages of its development, *be about to* has taken on characteristics comparable to those of the patterns with aspectualising verbs *start/begin*. That *be about to* refers to the initial stages of the situation is evident from the translation with the aspectual construction, again in negative, containing verb *početi* ‘begin’ (11S), which fits well with Binnick’s (2006: 254) claim that in the prospective, processes receive inchoative and ingressive interpretations. The same aspectual interpretation is achieved by using the preterit of the imperfective verb created by means of prefixation (12S) to indicate the initial phases of the situation. These clearly provide further support to Höche’s view.

(11) *Is he about to become* that man, that modern fool of a certain age,... (SAT)

(11S) *Nije valjda počeo* da se pretvara u onog modernog budalaša u izvesnim godinama, ... (SUB: 31)

(12) *I was about to say* something further to explain about Number Nine ... (SAT)

(12S) *Zaustio sam* da još nešto kažem da bih objasnio ko je devetka... (SUB: 58)

Preparation as a semantic component of *be about to* appears to be more salient in renderings with a modal lexical verb *spremati se* ‘prepare oneself’ and a modal adjective *spreman* ‘prepared, ready’. Whereas *spremati se* is a common TE of *be about to* in both tense forms, as (13S) and (14S) show, a rare use of a corresponding adjective is restricted to the past time contexts (15S). In addition, the former allows for adverbial modifications to convey a higher degree of immediacy of the preparing events as in (14S).

(13) *We're not about to split*... (NLM: 178)

- (13S) *Mi se ne spremamo da raskinemo...* (NDM: 203)
 (14) ...*I was about to abandon* the cubicle angrily... (UNC)
 (14S) ... *upravo sam se spremao da besno napustim kabinu...* (BU: 382)
 (15) *I was about to get up* and clear a path... (SAT)
 (15S) *Bila sam spremna da ustanem i raskrčim joj put...* (SUB: 268)

Clearly, the verb forms in (13) – (15S) express only the propensity to a future situation (Comrie 1985: 95). As Höche (2010: 54) notes, “being busily involved in the preparation of something readily implies its occurrence in the imminent future”. Yet, since *spremati se* features in the sentences with animate subjects, each example above carries a significant amount of modal meaning, which conforms to the view of prospectivity as a complex of aspectual-modal features (Popović 2008). It is questionable, though, whether any example cited so far is completely devoid of modal overtones. The claim that the modality import may be accessed in terms of epistemic and dynamic modal notions¹¹ is further discussed below.

3.3. Modal meanings

Be about to is not used to mark the epistemic meanings in the narrow sense, i.e. predictability. Subscribing to the view that modality is inherently present in the future time reference,¹² we may argue that the examples expressing the future time convey epistemic meaning of another kind, i.e. predictivity. By way of illustration, examples (2) – (6S), repeated here for convenience, are of a predictive character and epistemic in nature as they refer to the subject’s evaluation of the occurrence of a prospective situation. As Binnick (2006: 249) notes, *be about to* presupposes a reasonable expectation as the grounds for the prediction of a future event. Future 1 in translation (2S) may, in turn, only indicate a certain degree of the speaker’s certainty of the occurrence in question. Hence, (6) and (6S) can be interpreted that, based on all available evidence, the subject makes a prediction of the immediate occurrence of a storm.

- (2) And the old apartment *isn’t about to go away*, is it? (UNC)
 (2S) A i stari stan *neće pobeći*, zar ne? (BU: 234)
 (6) ...there is always a storm *about to break*. (UNC)
 (6S) ...uvek ima oluje koja *samo što nije počela*. (BU: 387)

An additional layer of modal meaning is noticeable. The overtone present is the subjects’ expectation that the action will be in the last moment prevented from happening. Moreover, the linguistic context possibly gives rise to further ambiguities, as in (1), which accords with the observation that *be about to* is

¹¹ Our analysis confirms Collins’s (2009) findings that *be about to* does not express deontic modality.

¹² Considerable controversy surrounds the future tense, notably in English (see Huddleston, Pullum 2002), making its theoretical status the object of a long-standing debate.

constantly used in an ambiguous context (Watanabe 2011: 85). Namely, (1) and (1S) can mean either ‘I predict that they will not complain’ or ‘it is not their intention to complain’, the latter being related to dynamic modality and more salient as *be about to* in the negative form exhibits a peculiar meaning related to intention (Jirsa 1997: 30–31).

(1) Just talk to them about your general impressions, they’re *not about to complain*. (UNC)

(1S) Samo porazgovarajte sa njima o svojim opštim utiscima, *neće se žaliti* (BU: 340)

Collins (2009: 155–156) argues that epistemic meaning of *be about to* is dominant whereas non-epistemic senses are rare and only found with negation. In contrast, our findings suggest that the construction readily lends itself to an interpretation in terms of modal notions which fall within the broad semantic domain of dynamic modality.¹³ Certainly, these meanings are most readily ascribable under the proper contextual conditions: with animate subjects and activity verbs as in (1). In such instances, epistemic prediction meaning is not easily distinguished from volition, an umbrella notion covering at least three senses primarily related to *will*: volition, intention, and willingness (Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 193), since by showing volition and readiness, the speaker also predicts a future event.

In expressing prospectivity, dynamic modality seems unavoidable. Popović (2008: 297) argues that the conceptual category of prospectivity is a universal category because it is based on the involvement of the factor of the subject’s will/volition in the phase of the transition from nonexistence (the absence of the action) towards the existence (the beginning of the realisation) of the action. The intertwinement of aspectual and dynamic meanings is the most salient when *spremati se* and *spreman* are employed in translation since the realisation of the situation relates to the subject’s readiness or intention to perform the action. It may be argued, in turn, that (13) – (15S) tend to be more a matter of dynamic modality. Also, these give grounds for the claim that *be about to* might be glossed as ‘is prepared/willing to’.

The unambiguous instances of volitional meaning are renderings of *be about to* with the Serbian modal lexeme *želiti* ‘wish’ and semi-modals *hteti* ‘want’ and *voleti* ‘like’, typically in the past time contexts, with one exception of each *želiti* and *voleti* used in the present forms (16) and (19) translations. Although it is harder to assign volitional meanings to 3rd person subjects, *želiti* and *hteti* are not uncommon with these as (18S) illustrates. Notably, when the preterit of *hteti* is used with 1st person subjects, the intensifying adverbs *upravo*, *taman* ‘just’, and *baš* ‘just, exactly’ are frequently added to bring a distinctive meaning of the temporal-aspectual domain. The modality markers in translation highlight certain segments of situations, thereby also indicating the altered focus of *be about to*. Accordingly, *be about to* denotes a state of the subject’s volition (16S), willingness ((17S) and (18S)), or tentative willingness

¹³ For more details, see Radovanović (2017).

(19S)¹⁴ obtaining at the time referred to, not a future situation as such, which further entails non-actualisation of the situation in question.

(16) ...I can see you're *about to ask*... (SAT)

(16S)... vidim *da želite da mi postavite pitanje*... (SUB: 390)

(17) I *was about to say* something... (SAT)

(17S) *Upravo sam hteo* nešto da kažem... (SUB: 73)

(18) Tommy gave a sigh and *was about to say* something... (NLM)

(18S) Tomi je uzdahnuo i *hteo* nešto *da kaže*... (NDM: 197)

(19) He's *about to try* again... (SAT)

(19S) *Voleo bi da pokuša* ponovo... (SUB: 252)

In our data, there are no instances of *be about to* indicating emphatic unwillingness of the subject to perform an action since it is something that would cause harm to the agent (Mee 2013: 109) or the stronger volitional sense of refusal (Collins 2009: 156). Interestingly, one instance of modal lexeme *nameravati* 'intend' used in translation may indicate that *be about to* can express intentionality, hence possibly adding an element of meaning not necessarily present in the English construction.¹⁵

The renderings with the Serbian modal *trebati* 'need' in the present conditional (20S) or indicative tense (21S) deserve a mention. Arguably, these allow for an interpretation in terms of dynamic modality as well, specifically of circumstantial necessity glossed as 'the circumstances compel'. In (21S), the necessity emerges from the given circumstantial factors, whereas in (20S) the verb form can be a means for the speaker to present his intention as a necessity imposed by external factors. It may be argued, then, that *be about to* is related to a circumstantially imposed future situation seen as necessary by the way the things are.

(20) I *am now about to go* on the stage ... (SAT)

(20S) *Sada bi trebalo da nastupim* ... (SUB: 566)

(21) Just when you're *about to do* your great favour for us. (SAT)

(21S) Baš kada *treba da nam učinite* veliku uslugu. (SUB: 471)

The explanation for this meaning could not arise from diachrony, however. Namely, most modal meanings of *be about to* that resonate on the backdrop of its Serbian TEs were either present or the most salient at different points in its evolution. This seems to sufficiently account for the notions of dynamic modality which attach to the expression of the future with *be about to*.

14 The conditional present of the semi-modal conveys tentativeness.

15 Intentionality is typically assigned to *be going to*.

4. Concluding remarks

This study has attempted to investigate *be about to* via its Serbian TEs. Adding to the descriptive treatments of the investigated expression, it has shed some additional light on the nature and variety of *be about to*. Our small-scale contrastive analysis has revealed as many as 16 juxtaposed linguistic items of different grammatical categories in Serbian which convey the meaning(s) of English *be about to*. In view of this, the study has provided additional insights into the similarities and differences between English and Serbian in expressing temporal, aspectual, and modal meanings. Certain insights could also serve to advance our understanding of the verb forms in Serbian. The findings indicate that it is not always easy to give an adequate translation of *be about to* without adding or downplaying some element of meaning. This particularly holds true for the translations in which the situation *be about to* refers to in the source text is not within the immanent time span typically associated with this expression.

From a theoretical point of view, the analysis has confirmed that immediate future time reference does not exhaust the meaning of *be about to* (Comrie 1985: 95), and revealed its more or less distinctive meanings which are far from being sharply separable and mutually exclusive. Specifically, it has brought to the fore various meaning distinctions conveyed by *be about to* beyond those of time. In this regard, the study has yielded interesting findings notably those concerning dynamic modal meanings which are not frequently pointed out in the available literature. Interestingly, Serbian modality expressions are recurrent in translation, which further points to the modality character of the construction. Overall, the semantic peculiarities surfacing in translation allow for a twofold interpretation. On the one hand, these can be regarded as relics preserved from the earlier stages *be about to* has gone through on the path of grammaticalisation (see Höche 2011, Mee 2013), or can be considered a recent development, as Collins (2009) suggests, on the other. A firm conclusion would, however, require a different approach and a more comprehensive analysis. Also, given the major limitation of our analysis regarding the corpus size, an extensive contrastive study of *be about to* in other genres would be of great value. Nonetheless, the current study has proved, once again, that tackling modality turns out to be unavoidable in an in-depth semantic analysis of tense and aspect categories. Hence, we may claim that modality permeates most verbal forms, which paves the way for much future research on the tense-aspect-modality complex in different languages from a descriptive or contrastive perspective.

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Александра М. Радовановић

ЕНГЛЕСКИ ПОЛУМОДАЛ *BE ABOUT TO* САГЛЕДАН КРОЗ ПРЕВОДНЕ ЕКВИВАЛЕНТЕ У СРПСКОМ ЈЕЗИКУ

Резиме

Будући да преводи могу пружити корисне увиде о значењу језичког израза, овај рад покушава да испита полумодал *be about to* у енглеском језику кроз призму српских преводних еквивалената. Основни циљ рада је да овај израз испита примењујући контрастивни и преводно-дескриптивни приступ. Методолошки оквир обухвата контрастивну и квалитативну анализу поткрепљену квантитативним подацима. Једносмерна контрастивна анализа спроведена је на корпусу реченица ексцерпираних из три енглеска романа и њихових превода на српски. Како резултати показују, значења *be about to* у садашњем и/или прошлом времену реализују се са чак 16 различитих морфосинтаксичких, граматичких и лексичких форми у српском језику. Следствено, квалитативна анализа значења истакнутих путем превода указује да је овом полумодалу могуће приписати различита у мањој или већој мери дистинктивна значења која често превазилазе домен темпоралности. Семантика испитиваног полумодала, дакле, не може се свести на значење блиске будућности. Неретко, међутим, темпорална, аспектуална и модална значења тешко је прецизно раздвојити јер нису међусобно искључива, већ

се умногоме преплићу. У том погледу, модална обојеност посебно се истиче, било због честе употребе израза са модалним значењима у преводу, или због, чини се, инхерентно присутне модалне компоненте у примерима који се могу тумачити у терминима темпоралности и/или аспектуалности. Посебно су интересантна значења динамичке модалности која су путем превода често наглашена, а која су у релевантној литератури неретко занемарена.

Кључне речи: *be about to*, будуће време, аспектуално значење, модално значење, српски језик

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