A temporal structure-based analysis of the be to-construction
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The tense theory adopted in my studies (Wada 1996, 2000, 2001, 2009, 2011, 2013) has been used to account for English future-referring expressions such as will, be going to, the present progressive, the simple present, the will be –ing form, and be about to. Therefore, it has the potential to be extended to the analysis of future-referring sentences with be to (BT-sentences), as in The new play is to be staged at the Century Theatre next week (Leech 2004: 70), another issue to be discussed. This presentation aims to systematically explain the characteristics and uses of BT-sentences in present-day English, especially those in main clauses, using my tense theory.

BT-sentences, often considered to express a variety of modal and temporal meanings (e.g. arrangements, plans, orders, destiny, ‘future-tense’), have been described in most English grammar books (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985, Thomson & Martinet 1986, Huddleston & Pullum 2002, Swan 2005) and monographs concerning tense and modality (e.g. Palmer 1990, Leech 2004, Nesselhauf 2006, Collins 2009). However, almost all of the previous studies have not analyzed BT-sentences in detail, let alone in a general theory of tense.

Only Declerck (2010), using corpus data, has offered a detailed synchronic analysis of the semantics and uses of BT-sentences in his own theory. He argues (a) that the BT-sentence consists of the M(modal)-state (the necessity of some kind) expressed by be to and the residue-situation expressed by the sentence minus be to; (b) that be to is primarily a modal expressing the future actualization of the residue-situation; (c) that be to expresses eight origins of (i.e. modal meanings associated with) the necessity; and (d) that the ‘future-tense’ use is derived by the bleaching of the M-state and the foregrounding of the residue-situation.

However, Declerck’s analysis has three drawbacks. First, he does not specify why the modal uses of be to are basic and the ‘future-tense’ use derivative. Second, he does not state how BT-sentences receive those modal meanings. Third, his analysis does not reflect the fact that be is separate from to at a lexical and/or syntactic level (Seppänen 1979, Sugayama 1998).

My analysis can accommodate Declerck’s drawbacks, but inherit the spirit of his analysis, and give a more comprehensive and systematic analysis. In particular, my points are (a) the BT-sentence is a ‘construction’ (a unit consisting of the syntactic and semantic components) in which be is finite, accompanied by ‘assertion,’ and syntactically separate from to, but be to constitutes a ‘semantic’ unit; (b) the construction is divided into three sub-constructions according to their temporal structures; (c) the factors contributing to the temporal structures are the two types of event times (i.e. the ‘pure’ and the ‘orientational’ types) represented by be and the event time associated with the infinitive, the posterior relationship indicated by to, and the position of temporal focus; and (d) the uses of BT-sentences (including the above-mentioned modal and ‘future-tense’ meanings/uses) are pragmatic interpretations deriving from the interaction between the temporal-structure and constructional information, on the one hand, and the semantic content of the elements constituting the BT-sentence involved and the contextual information, on the other.
References


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