The history of *be fixing to:* grammaticization, sociolinguistic distribution and emerging literary spaces

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The *be fixing to* structure not only has a long and fascinating history but also a highly contemporary presence in Internet communication

Introduction

The rise of the futurate verbal periphrasis *be fixing to* + V shows an essentially textbook example of grammaticization, not so different in many ways from the development of *be going to*. However, there are some important differences too. While *be going to* has a wide distribution among speakers of Englishes in the world, having much to do with its sixteenth century development and subsequent global diffusion in the colonial period, *be fixing to* grammaticized in Southern US English in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a fact which resulted in a relatively small circumscribed geographical distribution in its earliest uses.

However, *be fixing to* has been shown to be expanding in recent years. While Bailey (1991) and Bailey, Wilke, Tillery & Sand (1991) document the increased use of the form in varieties of Southern US English (Texas) and peripheral Southern US varieties (Oklahoma), *be fixing to* has also spread extensively throughout the US generally, particularly in urban areas, as large numbers of speakers of African American English (AAE) migrated out of the south into northern cities and suburbs during the twentieth century. Thus, PDE study of *be fixing to* necessarily involves both racially affiliated sociolectal and geographic distribution patterns.

Studied in this way, it can be argued that the AAE reflex of *be fixing to*, specifically the variant phonetically realized as [fɪnə] (see e.g. Green, 2002), is more grammaticized than the non-AAE Southernate variants. The position for the greater grammatical status of [fɪnə] is based on evidence concerning formal development, semantic distribution and frequency of use.

The grammaticization of *be fixing to*

A lexical history of fix

The grammaticization of *be fixing to* begins with the lexical history of *fix*. Lexical *fix* appears to have come into English from the Medieval Latin past participle of *figo*, i.e. *fixus* 'to fix or fasten', and its earliest uses in English are adjectival, appearing mostly in scientific descriptions, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth OED). The earliest verbal uses, about a century later, may have been influenced by a second wave of Romance borrowing, in which the use involved the conventionalized construction of *fix one's eyes on something*. Perhaps too, this borrowed convention continued on in English and served as an analogical base



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(Bybee & Eddington, 2006) for similar types of expressions since it is clear enough that there was not a single point of entry for *fix* into the language in the dialectic relationship between Latin, Romance and English at a time when medieval writers strove to reconcile linguistic material among these languages. At any rate, by the fifteenth century, the central meaning of *fix* as 'fasten or render immobile' was well established. In the seventeenth century, *fix* begins to appear in several extended contexts. One such use is 'set in order' and out of this use there arose meanings such as 'get ready (prepare)' (OED). Zeigler (2003:32) suggests that it is the meaning of 'prepare' that gives rise to the futurate periphrasis, part of her argument relying on the fact that 'repair' meanings of *fix*, presumably also from 'prepare' meanings, and grammatical *fixing to* evolved as Americanisms from about the same time. However, it is more probable that the uses of *fix* that led to grammatical *fixing to* have much older meanings and are not even American in their earliest uses, at least not as recorded by the OED, a point I return to below.

While it is true that there appears to be a kind of semantic congruity between lexical instances of *fix* meaning 'prepare' and the burgeoning *fixing to* periphrasis, this is not evidence per se that 'prepare' is the point of divergence (Hopper, 1991) for grammatical *fixing to* from its lexical source. Instead, the similarity in meaning between lexical 'prepare' and grammatical *fixing to* may well not be direct but instead due to the persistence (Hopper, 1991) of earlier semantics in both continuing lexical (Bréal, 1991 [1882]), i.e. 'prepare' meanings, and grammatical uses (Bybee and Pagliuca, 1987), i.e. *be fixing to*.

In the case of the grammaticization of *fixing to*, the meaning of 'set in order' or 'settle' is also historically important since that meaning not only gives rise to the physical sense of 'arrange', but also an abstract notion of 'establish mentally', as in the example from 1646 in (1).

1 Your hope **fixeth** upon seeing him in heaven. (1646, OED)

In extended uses, the meaning of *fix* is nearly synonymous with 'decide', as in the 1788 example in (2).

2 He **fix'd** to come with some eclat to Town. (1788, OED)

The example in (2) expresses the meaning of 'settle in one's mind' or 'decide', thereby also signaling intention, a meaning element that is central in the development of future markers (Bybee & Pagliuca, 1987; and Bybee et al., 1994). However, the meaning of intention is only part of the historical formula and, as I will argue in the next section, progressive aspect and the infinitival complement within the construction are important for the grammaticization of *be fixing to* into a futurate auxiliary.

The intersection of lexical meaning and grammatical meaning in the rise of be fixing to

The earliest tokens of *be fixing to*

The earliest uses of the *be fixing to* periphrasis are attested in eighteenth and nineteenth century Southern US English. As in most historical language research, we do not have actual records of speech and take our data from written texts. The texts for this part of the study were located in the on-line library at the University of North Carolina in a section titled *The Library of Southern Literature*. The entire collection of approximately 100 texts, constituting a database of several million words, was exhaustively searched.

Not surprisingly, the search turned up a mere 14 tokens of the *fixing to* periphrasis, a typical example of which is given in (3).

3 'I thought you knew they **were fixing to run away** and get married.' I heard father say, (Ida May Beard, born 1862, text retrievable under author's name at <http:// docsouth. unc.edu/southlit/>)

The semantic congruity between such uses and earlier uses of lexical *fix* such as that back in (2) is clear; both instances share the meaning of 'settle in one's mind' or 'decide', that is they state intention.

The semantic development of be *fixing to*

That the elements of 'decide' and 'intend' are central to the meaning of the earliest uses of *be fixing to* collected for this study is shown by the fact that all but one of the tokens have animate volitional agentive subjects, i.e. subjects that are fixing to or 'deciding on' the execution of some immediate future action.

In only one instance among these earliest examples do we find a non-volitional, inanimate subject, shown in (4).

4 storm clouds **a-fixin'** to gether (Ruth McEnery Stuart, born 1856, text retrievable

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under author's name at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/>)

In this case, I have analyzed *gether* as a variant spelling of the verb *gather* based on similar spellings in the OED and on the fact that the infinitival *to* is written separately.

By metaphorical extension, we might understand the clouds to have intention. Metaphorical extension is important because it is the means by which a given construction breaks from contextual constraints and comes to appear in a wider variety of contexts (Hopper & Traugott, 2003:104). When used with inanimate subjects however, the interpretation of intention for *be fixing to* is no longer tenable and its meaning becomes centered in prediction.

Despite the fact that only one of these 14 earliest tokens of *be fixing to* occurs with an inanimate subject, modern use of the construction shows few if any constraints against such subjects, and utterances like 'That chair's fixin' to break' or 'My head's fixin' to split open' are ubiquitous. The historical relationship to the 'decide' meaning, qua extension of a non-volitional subject, is evident in the fact that the meaning of these utterances is not a strong prediction of a future event or state, but concerns the confluence of conditions that has the potential of leading to some future event/situation.

The potentiality of futurity in *fixing to* is seen most clearly when we compare it to other types of futurity in English, such as *going to* in which case we find that they are not coterminous, the difference having to do with their lexical sources. The difference between *I am fixing to leave* and *I am going to leave* is that *going to* makes a stronger commitment to the intent of leaving, while *fixing to* retains the meaning of 'coming to a decision about leaving'.

In a similar way, if we compare non-animate subjects with *going to* and *fixing to* (*It's fixing to break*. ~ *It's going to break*.), *going to* makes a greater prediction about the future event, whereas *fixing to* does not allow for a firmly committed position about what will happen since the confluencing factors that might bring about such an event have not yet come together. In other words, *going to* predicts the future event itself, while *fixing to* reports on an animate subject's formation of the decision to do such and such or, in the case of an inanimate subject, on the speaker's/writer's judgment that conditions are favorable for such and such a prediction to come true, although either use of *fixing to* is said with the realization that the future event may not come about (Ching, 1987: 342–43).

However, very much like *going to*, it is not accidental that the grammatical constructions that evolved into a future marker in both cases involve a lexeme within a progressive construction along with an allative marker *to*. The importance of imperfectivity and specifically progressivity in the development of certain futures has been stressed many times (Bybee & Pagliuca, 1987; Bybee et al., 1991, 1994; Hopper & Traugott, 2003). Imperfective meanings, such as the progressive, are temporally unbounded (Comrie, 1976) and thus report on an activity in medias res, while the allative marker *to* expresses movement towards a goal.

In the case of *going to*, the early lexical based meanings have a subject moving physically along a path toward some goal, which gives rise to the intention > prediction >future meanings of that construction. In the case of early *fixing to,* the subject is moving along not a physical path but a mental one, i.e. making a decision about a future action, thus also setting up an intention > prediction interpretation as discussed above. If one compares the sentences in (2) and (3), repeated here as (5) and (6) for convenience, we see that the difference does not involve the meaning of *fix*, but has to do with the grammatical constructions that each instance of *fix* occurs in.

5 He **fix'd** to come with some eclat to Town.
6 'I thought you knew they **were fixing to run away** and get married.' I heard father say

In the case of (5), *fix* is past and thus reports on the subject's already having come to the decision 'to come to town'. In (6), however, *fix* is in the progressive with the meaning of being in the process of making the decision 'to run away'. It is the use of *fix* in the progressive that supports its grammaticization into a type of future since the event is still to happen, that is, allows for an inference about a volitional subject's intention or a prediction about what might happen with a non-volitional subject.

Formal developments of be fixing to

So far I have been talking about the construction simply as *be fixing to*; however there are a number of phonological variants of that construction, a selection of which is given in (7a–e).

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7a [fɪksɪŋtu]
7b [fɪksɪntə]
7c [əfɪksɪntə]
7d [fɪʔna]
7e [fɪsə]
7f [fɪnə]

The full pronunciation in (7a) is undoubtedly rare, and for many users of the construction, the participle in [–n], as in (7b), is regular. The a-prefixed variant in (7c) is still possible among speakers who use the a-prefixed participle more generally, while other users show rather reduced variants like those in (7d), (7e) and (7f).

The reductions observable in (7d–f) are indicative of syntactic reanalysis, schematized in (8).

8 $[_{VP}[_{aux}$ BE] $[_{v}$ fixing] $[_{inf}$ to + VERB]] ➔ $[_{VP}$ $[_{aux}$ BE fixing to] $_{v}$VERB]

(8) shows that the grammaticization of *fixing to* involved recategorialization of *fixing* from its status as V to an element within a complex AUX, and concomitantly a reinterpretation of the infinitival complement as the head V. Additionally, reanalysis also led to the loss of internal constituent structure within the phrase at certain places, most dramatically between *fixing* and the erstwhile infinitival *to*. It is at the site of constituent loss, i.e. between *fixing* and *to*, that the greatest formal changes are found. For instance, in (7e and f), the [t] of the infinitival marker has assimilated and deleted in response to [s] in (e) and [n] in (f). In both (8e) and (8f), the form *fixing* has also undergone much reduction: loss of [k] and [ɪŋ] in (e) and loss of [ksɪ] in (f). Given the strong correlation between formal reduction and grammaticalized age (Bybee et al., 1994), the indication is that forms like [fɪsə] and [fɪnə] represent the most gramamticized variants of *be fixing to*. This assessment is supported for [fɪnə] by its semantic distribution, as we will see in the next section.

[finə]: Sociolinguistic distribution

The PDE data

In order to study a large number of naturally occurring instances of *be fixing to* and some of its reduced variants, I chose to collect tokens from internet writing. I decided to investigate internet writing for two reasons. First, given that *be fixing to* still occurs only rarely in traditional print, study of its usage in that medium was not practical at all. Secondly, as I indicated earlier, *be fixing to* shows a lot of social stratification and the opportunity for any one researcher to observe its use among various groups in any kind of natural setting is extremely limited, while internet usage is open to all observers. In fact as it turns out, the study of *be fixing to* in internet writings reveals certain interesting aspects concerning its development and PDE use, aspects that might not be evident in either speech or traditional print.

For the internet data, I collected tokens of the variant spellings of *fixing to*, <fixing to>, <fixin' to> and <finna> by performing a simple Google search. Obviously this approach glosses over some of the finer phonological detail. Both *fixing to* and *fixin' to* are likely written by speakers who might use reduced forms such as [fɪʔnə] or [fɪsə] in speech; however, finer-grained study of those forms awaits further research and a different methodology because neither [fɪʔnə] or [fɪsə] has a conventionalized spelling that is machine searchable. <Finna>, however, is the conventionalized spelling for the phonological variant [fɪnə] and thus allows for a machine search and comparison with <fixing to> and <fixin' to>. For each of the three spellings, I determined an approximately equal number of websites, about 100 each. Then, I visited each of the websites and collected every instance of <fixing to>, <fixin' to> or <finna> occurring there. I included both instances of the BE + *fixing to* + VERB type and plain *fixing to* + VERB without copular BE. The absence of copular *be* occurs in some cases because the periphrasis is functioning as an adjunct (e.g. *Fixin' to start dinner, Mary took some celery out of the fridge*.) or a complement (*He yelled at John for fixin' to change the plan*.), and in other cases the copula was absent in the VP (*We finna leave out of here early*.). In the end, my search yielded 273 tokens. Despite the equal number of websites used to collect data, the total number of tokens for each spelling differs significantly. In the end, there were 51 instances of <fixing to>, 71 of <fixin' to>, and 151 of <finna>.

Interestingly, in no case did a website mix spellings and this fact is strongly suggestive of sociolinguistic stratification; <finna> is associated with varieties of African American English (AAE) while <fixing to> and <fixin' to> appear to be the regular non-AAE spellings. The identification of a given form of <be fixing

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to/be fixin' to/finna> as AAE or non-AAE is not intended to be about the ethnicity of a user. Indeed, such sociolinguistic boundaries have become blurred in PDE and especially in internet language; I suspect that many of the instances of <finna> that I studied were produced by Non-African Americans. Instead, 'AAE' and 'non-AAE' are more about the historical origins and spread of the construction (see e.g. Green, 2002). I will return to this aspect of the data below.

Having only 14 tokens of fixing to from the nineteenth century, one is reluctant to assign rigid constraints on its earliest uses. However, it is noteworthy that all of those early tokens involve telic verb situations like that given in (6) above; that is they have an expressed end goal. None of those early tokens collocates with a non-telic verb such as those with stative meanings.

However, whereas the nineteenth century tokens of *fixing to* show no uses in non-telic situations, the PDE tokens certainly do. Table 1 contrasts the occurrence of telic to that of non-telic situations in the nineteenth century and PDE internet data.

Table 1: Telic verbs with *fixing to*

	19th century	PDE
Telic	100%	73%
Non-telic	0%	27%

From Table 1, we see that telic situations still predominate. While the absence of *be fixing to* from non-telic situations in the nineteenth century data as contrasted to the PDE data is suggestive of a diachronic spread of the construction to more verb types, the argument for such a development is more strongly supported by comparing the frequency of stative situations (a type of non-telic situation) among <fixing to>, <fixin' to> and <finna>.

Table 2 shows that among the three variants <fixing to> shows the least number of states, while <fixin' to> and <finna> both show numbers above 20%, although <finna> occurs in a greater number of stative contexts at a rate of seven percentage points higher.

Thus, the expansion of <fixin' to> and <finna> into more stative contexts provides further evidence of a diachronic movement of telicity to non-telicity generally and specifically shows <finna> to be the semantically most general of the three. In other words, it is the most grammatical since, again, the more grammaticized a given form is, the more contexts it tends to occur in.

Table 2: Telic verbs among <fixing to>, <fixin' to> and <finna>

	<fixing to>	<fixin' to>	<finna>
Non-stative	87%	79%	72%
Stative	13%	21%	28%

The more advanced semantic age of <finna> was further tested for this study in the following way. Among stative verbs are so-called private verbs (Biber, 1988), which denote internal thought processes, e,g. *think*. During grammaticization, as a construction moves away from concrete contexts (i.e. where its meaning is more lexical), it only slowly begins to allow abstract situations like private verbs (Brinton & Truagott, 2005:7). Searching the web for collocations of <fixing to>, <fixin' to> and <finna> with three very common private verbs, <think>, <believe>, <know>, the following results emerged: no results of <fixing to think> appeared; only one of <fixing to believe> and 4 instances of <fixing to know>. With <fixin' to>: <fixin' to think> yields 7 hits ; <fixin' to believe> gives one instance; and <fixin' to know> has two instances. <Finna>, however, shows little evidence of co-occurrence restrictions with any of these private verbs: <finna think> gave 31 results, <finna believe> 17, and <finna know> 16. Thus it is clear from such data that <finna> has the more generalized meaning as a future marker and has lost many of the constraints of its earlier lexical meanings.

Grammaticization and social spaces in a PDE context

Although Ziegler (2003) offers grammatical *be fixing to* as a newly evolved lexeme, it is more reasonable to follow Brinton and Traugott's (2005) distinction between grammatical and lexical, and recognize that the reanalysis and subsequent univerbation of *be fixing to* adds to the overall inventory of the language, not as a lexeme but as a new grammatical formant. In fact, that *fixing to* is not merely a new lexeme is supported by the objections it faces by those who would enforce Standard English. While new lexical items are often praised for their creativity or ability to fill a semantic gap, novel

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grammatical material is most often treated with hostility or as a threat to the structural integrity of the language, and this is certainly the case with *fixing to* which is still heavily stigmatized as wrong, bad, or improper English. In an instance from the internet data collected for this study, a use of <fixing to> that appeared on a chatboard was met with strong injunction in a response to the original message; that reaction is given in (9).

9 **The original posting**
I'm fixing to go to a university and I am fixing to have some hard classes. I don't know weather to do boxing one day a week or two days. I mean it would make it easier on me in college, but will I learn anything about boxing at all going one day a week? A friend of mine is a professional and she only goes one day a week and goes to college. I plan to stay in boxing for 3 years. What's your advice?

Response
Go to school and get an education. Your grammar sucks.
How about 'fixing' to do that!
(Accessed August 23, 2008, at <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=200706250945 59AAXaFiN>)

It is interesting to note that such reactions never occur in my data in response to <finna>.

Internet data, in fact, uniquely show another type of textual evidence for a relatively more advanced grammatical age for <finna> in so far as it has become so conventionalized in its futurate usage as to participate in certain kinds of post-grammaticization processes, whereby a grammatical form can be deployed into discourse as, say, a noun that refers to the abstract grammatical meaning, as in (10).

10 and I advise you for this ain't too many finna be too many finna be after this cause these bitch niggaz done got me pissed (http://www.lyricsdir.com/trae-drama-lyrics.html)

In (10), the use of <finna>, repeated here twice, is being used as a noun in an existential meaning where it warns that there are not going to be many more 'finnas' (i.e. warnings about what is likely to happen) and that action is imminent. Historically, such uses are important because they show a level of acceptance, or at least recognition of the form and its grammatical meaning, something that only happens after some time.

As I stated in the Introduction, there is good evidence that both AAE and non-AAE uses of *fixing to* are expanding in American English. This expansion, a phenomenon intimately related to and causal of increased frequency of use, provides further evidence of grammatical status since the more grammaticized a construction is the more frequent it is (Bybee et al., 1994). Here again <finna> shows strong evidence of being more grammaticized than the non-AAE forms. First regarding the non-AAE *be fixing to* or *be fixin' to* uses, I have found instances occurring on websites geared toward audiences in New Mexico (University of New Mexico student newspaper on line), Colorado and Iowa (Iowa Farmers' Bureau). While complete ethnographic information on the authors of these web texts is unknown, the fact that the forms appear for non-Southern US audiences is significant and suggests a general spread of the form from its original geographic space. As also mentioned in the Introduction, such spread is well documented in the move from rural to urban settings in certain varieties of English such as Texan and Oklahoman English (Bailey, 1991; and Bailey, Wikle, Tillery & Sand, 1991).

In the case of <finna>, the spread of varieties of AAE out of the US South has also made it geographically more extensive. However, the spread of <finna> is not only explained through geographic movement but sociological expansion as well. Researchers have shown that there has arisen during the last part of the twentieth century a sharper division between AAE and non-AAE varieties and that AAE has spread to include a greater number of speakers who identify culturally with an African American identity (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006: 225–26). African American cultural cache and the concomitant expansion of the use of AAE is broad enough so that my internet data turned up uses of <finna> on websites in South Africa and Ghana!

Since the internet has opened up an important discourse space for <finna>, it has been instrumental in the development and covert acceptance of <finna> by providing a medium free from the prescriptions of white, upper-class usage, a fact underscored by the relative frequency of <finna> in web texts. As stated earlier, my data collection from the internet yielded 51 tokens of <fixing to> and 71 of <fixin' to>. It is important to know that these numbers came from an exhaustive search of all

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of the websites that turned up for the spelling indicated – again about 100 each. Obviously not every instance of <fixing to> or <fixin' to> represented the verbal periphrasis (e.g. in the headline *Price Fixing to be Prosecuted*) and several sites contained texts that were repetitions of earlier searched sites. Thus in the case of <fixing to> or <fixin' to> , the collectable tokens were less than the ca. 100 websites searched for each. However, my search of ca. 100 websites with <finna> gave 151 tokens, meaning that despite repetition of texts (which was actually more often the case than with either <fixing to> or <fixin' to>, <finna> often appeared several times in a single web-text. It should be further noted that while I was able to exhaustively search the web for <fixing to> and <fixin' to>, after my collection of 100 websites for <finna>, several hundred sites remained.

I might mention too that while this study has not focused on speech, there are good indications that [fina] is highly frequent in spoken AAE varieties, and perhaps even more frequent than the non-AAE forms in non-AAE Englishes. For instance, on one of the websites visited for this study, the writer makes the observation regarding the frequency of [fɪnə] read in (11).

11 Sorry for this depressing post, I think the hospital makes me think of things like that alot [sic], that and the insane frequency that black people say the word 'finna'...
(Last accessed March 23, 2008, at <http://sausage-fest.livejournal.com/>)

Thus the internet data and, if the author of the text in (11) is accurate, possibly speech too, show <finna>/[fɪnə] to be more frequent than non-AAE forms, a fact that indicates its more advanced grammatical age.

Conclusion

Data sources for language inquiry are notoriously problematized within linguistic theory. The advent and use of web text for data collection will surely only complicate the issue. Obviously web language neither can nor should be ignored. And in fact, I hope this paper has shown that data from the web can give us unique perspectives on certain aspects of language use that might not be so obvious in more traditional kinds of sources. In this way, we extend an understanding of the intersection of historical linguistic theory and text worlds. If that has been successful, then the advanced grammatical status for <finna> (e.g. [fɪnə]) is evidenced not only by semantic distribution and formal shape, but also by its very high frequency and broader acceptance in an emerging web literacy. ■

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