

# A corpus study of periphrastic prospective constructions in West Germanic

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# What is prospective aspect?

Here's a classic example: (1) *The ship is about to sail*

(Comrie 1976:64)

“temporal phase located close before the initial boundary of the situation [...] with (crucially) no implication about whether the situation actually occurred or not”

(Kuteva et al. 2019:859)

Hill (in press):  $\text{PREP}(e, e', w)$  and  $\text{CLOSE}(e, e')$

$\text{PREP}(e, e', w)$  “relation which states that at world  $w$ ,  $e$  is a preparatory state for  $e'$  such that  $e$  causes  $e'$  (p.6)

$\text{CLOSE}(e, e')$  “relation that [...] asserts  $e'$  is temporally close to  $e$ ” (p.6-7)

Bogaards & Fleischhauer (2023):  $\text{PRE-STATE}$  and  $\text{IMM}(x)$

$\text{PRE-STATE}$  state prior to  $x$  ( $x$  does not hold)

$\text{IMM}(x)$  state such that at any point sampled from it,  $x$  could obtain (possibility) (p.12)

# Claims

1. Prospective aspect constructions develop from various (non-)spatial metaphors, which persist in prospective construal
2. Prospectivity and Imminence may grammaticalize separately (constrained by metaphor type)
3. Telicity constraint is independent from metaphor type (but may be related to grammaticalization)

(bonus topics: futures vs. prospectives, syntax, and the effect of negation)

# German and Dutch

- (2) *Er stand/war kurz davor zu fliehen.*  
 he stood/was short in.front.of to flee
- (3) *Hij stond op het punt om te vluchten.*  
 he stood on the point COMP to flee

matrix verb

metaphor

adverb

‘He was about to flee.’

*Kurz* ‘short’: temporal closeness, imminence—cf. Dutch *net/juist* ‘just’, *bijna* ‘almost’

Bogaards & Fleischhauer (in press): Sharp distributional difference

Table 11. Number of close-in-time modifiers.

	German	Dutch
Close-in-time modifiers	764 (92.4%)	9 (1.1%)
No close-in-time modifiers	66 (7.6%)	845 (98.9%)

- ▶ Derivable from **matrix verb**?

matrix verb	close-in-time modifiers
‘stand’	92.4%
‘be’	99.3%

- ▶ Derivable from **metaphor**?

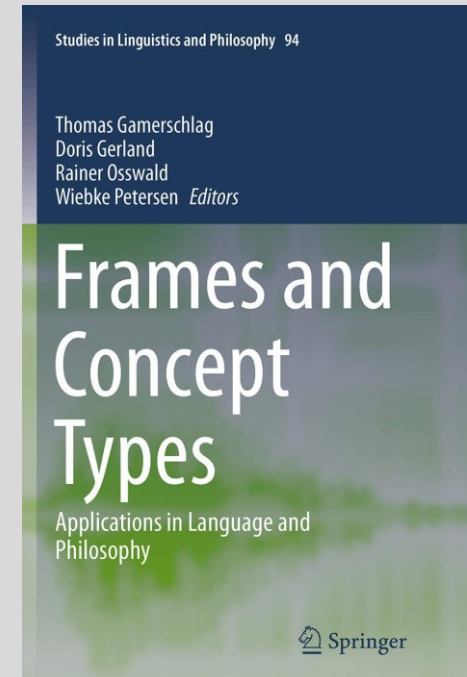
# Frames

Frames are a cognitively plausible format for representing conceptual and lexical knowledge  
(Barsalou 1992)

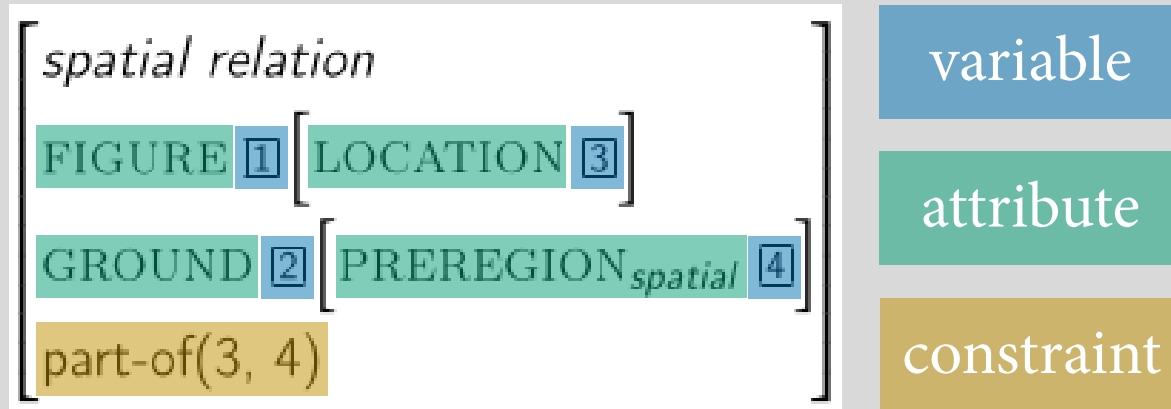
Frames describe their referents in terms of typed recursive attribute-value structures (e.g., Löbner 2014, 2021)

Attributes are functional and assign a unique value to the bearer of the attribute

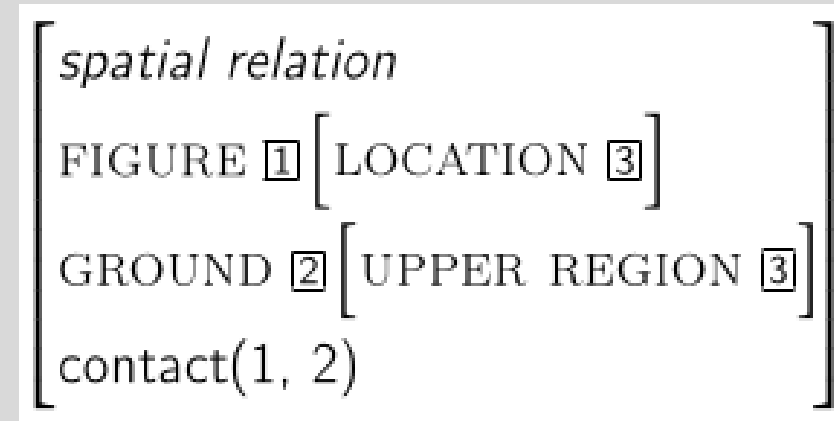
- ▶ Compositional approach



# Spatial prepositions: A frame analysis



**Fig. 1** Frame representation of German spatial *vor*.



**Fig. 2** Frame representation of Dutch spatial *op*.

# *op het bed staan* : A frame analysis

$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \textit{spatial relation} \\ \text{FIGURE } \boxed{1} \left[ \text{LOCATION } \boxed{3} \right] \\ \text{GROUND } \boxed{2} \left[ \text{UPPER REGION } \boxed{3} \right] \\ \text{contact}(1, 2) \end{array} \right]$$

**Fig. 2** Frame representation of Dutch spatial *op*.

## ► Frame unification

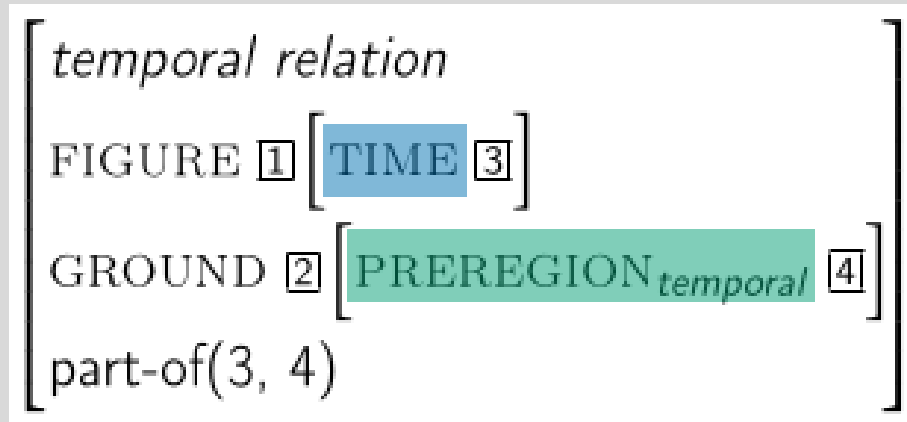
$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \textit{loc-posture-state} \\ \text{THEME } \boxed{1} \left[ \textit{dog} \right] \\ \text{FIGURE } \boxed{1} \left[ \text{LOCATION } \boxed{3} \right] \\ \text{GROUND } \boxed{2} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \textit{bed} \\ \text{UPPER REGION } \boxed{3} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{POSTURE } \textit{upright} \\ \text{contact}(1, 2) \end{array} \right]$$

**Fig. 3** Frame representation of Dutch *De hond staat op het bed*  
'The dog is standing on the bed'

# Metaphorical mapping

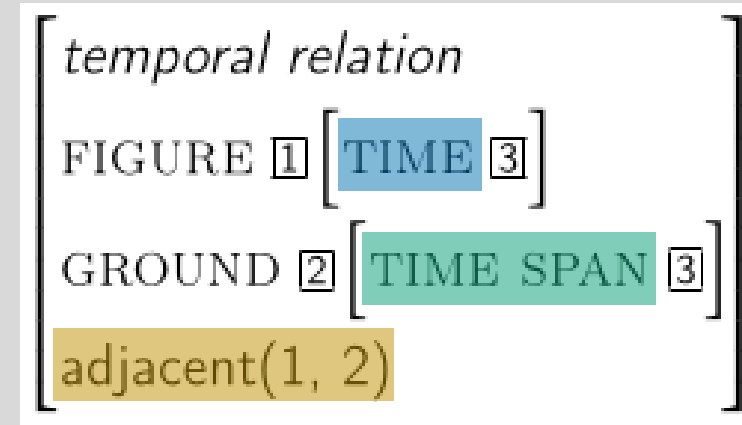
We derive the metaphorical interpretation of the spatial prepositions by a **structure preserving** of the spatial attributes onto corresponding temporal attributes.

**Fig. 4** Prospective *vor* (German).



LOCATION → TIME  
PREREGION<sub>spatial</sub> → PREREGION<sub>temporal</sub>

**Fig. 5** Prospective *op* (Dutch).

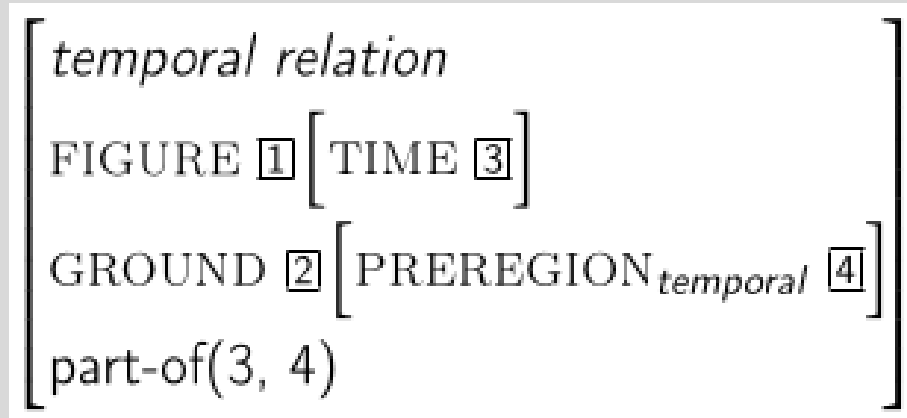


LOCATION → TIME  
UPPER REGION → TIME SPAN  
contact(1,2) → adjacent(1,2)

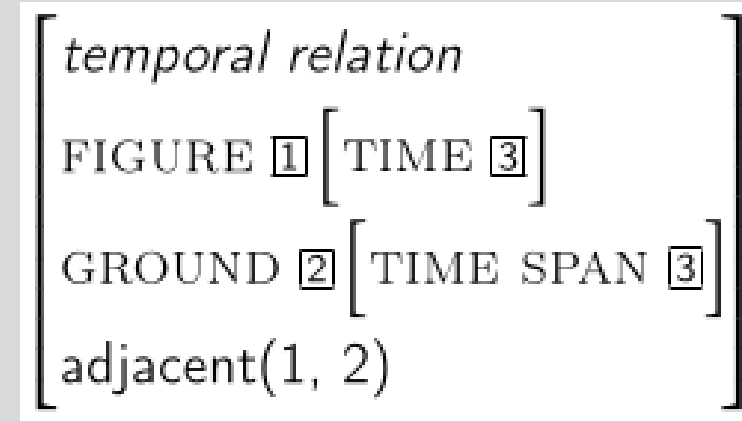


# Deriving Adverb Effects

**Fig. 4** Prospective *vor* (German).



**Fig. 5** Prospective *op* (Dutch).



Temporal prerregion (DE) vs. Adjacency constraint (NL) ▶ *kurz* 'short' modifies PREREGION

Cf. Dik (1997:240): Prospective vs. Immediate Prosp.

ASPECT	LOCATIVE METAPHOR
Prospective	X before SoA
Imm. Prosp.	X on brink of SoA

A bit more abstractly: Adverbs designating Discrete vs. Non-discrete Intervals

# Deriving Adverb Effects

Temporal preregion (DE) vs. Adjacency constraint (NL) ▶ *kurz* ‘short’ modifies PREREGION

A bit more abstractly: Adverbs designating Discrete vs. Non-discrete Intervals

Discrete

(2) *Er stand/war kurz davor zu fliehen.*  
 he stood/was short in.front.of to flee

(3') *Hij stond net op het punt om te vluchten.* ▶ **redundant**  
 he stood just on the point COMP to flee (statistically infrequent)  
 ‘He was just/right about to flee.’

Non-discrete

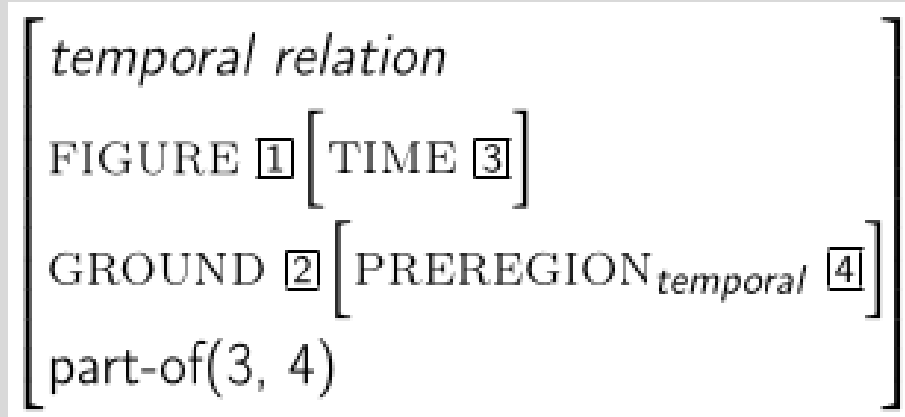
(4) *Die Soldaten seien nur zwei Sekunden davor gewesen, auf die Flugzeuge zu feuern [...]*  
 the soldiers were only two seconds in.front.of been on the airplane to fire  
[RHZ06/NOV.08660 Rhein-Zeitung, 10.11.2006; Franzosen bedroht]

‘The soldiers were two seconds away from shooting at the airplane.’

(5) *De soldaten stonden (\*twee seconden) op het punt om te schieten.* ▶ **incompatible**  
 the soldiers stood two seconds on the point COMP to shoot (categorically excluded)  
 ‘The soldiers were (\*two seconds) about to shoot.’

# Deriving Adverb Effects

## *German type*



Discrete

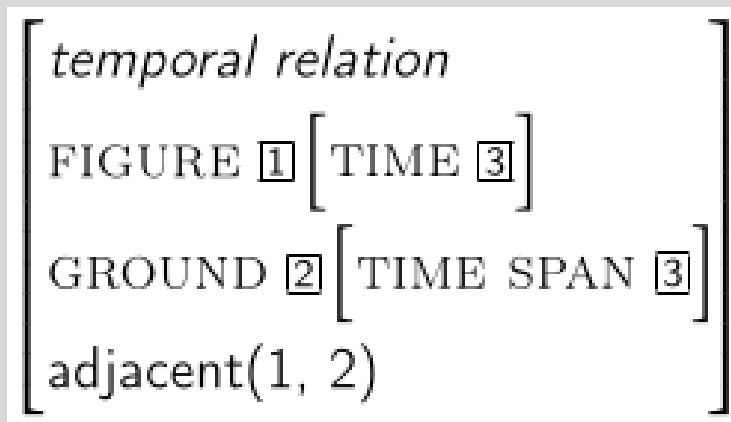
▶ reduce interval

Non-discrete

▶ quantify over interval

## **Adverbs**

## *Dutch type*



Discrete

▶ **redundant**  
(statistically infrequent)

Non-discrete

▶ **incompatible**  
(categorically excluded)

# Deriving Adverb Effects

## Adverbs

*German  
type*

Discrete ▶ reduce interval

Non-discrete ▶ quantify over interval

*Dutch  
type*

Discrete ▶ **redundant**  
(statistically infrequent)

Non-discrete ▶ **incompatible**  
(categorically excluded)

Table 11. Number of close-in-time modifiers.

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Close-in-time modifiers	764 (92.4%)	9 (1.1%)
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## Remainder of this talk:

Do these predictions hold  
for a broader set of data?

Does metaphor type account for other  
distributional facts—here, telicity?

# Broadening the scope

## Afrikaans

*Hy was/het op die punt gestaan om te vlug.*

## Dutch

*Hij stond op het punt te vluchten.*

*Hij stond op vluchten.*

## English

*He was on the verge/brink/cusp/point of fleeing.*

*He was about to flee.*

## German

*Er stand/war kurz davor zu fliehen.*

*Die Arbeiter stünden/sein kurz vor der Rente.*

‘on the point’  
type

‘in front of’  
type

?

# Broadening the scope

## Afrikaans

*Hy was/het op die punt gestaan om te vlug.*

## Dutch

*Hij stond op het punt te vluchten.*

*Hij stond op vluchten.*

## English

*He was on the verge/brink/cusp/point of fleeing.*

*He was about to flee.* compare... She's **about** 1m70 tall  
I'm just **about** done

## German

*Er stand/war kurz davor zu fliehen.*

*Die Arbeiter stünden/sein kurz vor der Rente.*

Spatial

'on the point'  
type

'in front of'  
type

spatial  
Non-

approximative  
type

# Broadening the scope

## Afrikaans

*Hy was/het op die punt gestaan om te vlug.*

## Dutch

*Hij stond op het punt te vluchten.*

*Hij stond op vluchten.*

## English

*He was on the verge/brink/cusp/point of fleeing.*

*He was about to flee.*

## German

*Er stand/war kurz davor zu fliehen.*

*Die Arbeiter stünden/sein kurz vor der Rente.*

Spatial

‘on the point’  
type

‘in front of’  
type

spatial  
Non-

approximative  
type

- ▶ check for (non-) discrete temporal adverbials in several corpora

**Afrikaans** Language Commission Corpus  
**Dutch** SoNaR Corpus  
**English** British National Corpus  
**German** Reference Corpus (DeReKo)

# Corpus study

## Dutch

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>op het punt staan</i>	9 (1.1%)		845 (98.9%)

## German

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>davor stehen zu</i>	764 (92.4%)		63 (7.6%)



# Corpus study

## Dutch

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>op het punt staan</i>	9 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	845 (98.9%)

## German

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>davor stehen zu</i>	764 (92.4%)	3 (3.6%)	63 (7.6%)

# Corpus study

## Dutch

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>op het punt staan</i>	9 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	845 (98.9%)
<i>op...staan</i>	4 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	848 (99.5%)

## German

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>davor stehen zu</i>	764 (92.4%)	3 (3.6%)	63 (7.6%)

# Corpus study

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### Two components:

1. Non-redundancy of imminential (discrete) adverbial (contrast NL vs. DE)
2. Conventionalization of *kurz* as part of *davor*-construction (contrast within DE)

## German

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>davor stehen zu</i>	764 (92.4%)	3 (3.6%)	63 (7.6%)
<i>stehen vor</i>	513 (32%)	5 (3.1%)	1085 (67.7%)

- ▶ Frame analysis, in principle, accounts for both outcomes

# Corpus study

NL	ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
	<i>op het punt staan</i>	9 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	845 (98.9%)
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## Afrikaans


# Corpus study

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	<i>stehen vor</i>	513 (32%)	5 (3.1%)	1085 (67.7%)

## Afrikaans

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>op die punt staan</i>	11 (4.7%)	0 (0%)	221 (95.3%)
<i>op die punt wees</i>	3 (4.2%)	0 (0%)	69 (95.8%)

(6) *Hy is net op die punt om te loop toe sy om die hoek van die gebou verskyn.*  
 he is just on the point COMP to walk when she around the corner of the building appear  
 [Taalkommissiekorpus]

‘He’s just about to walk when she appears from around the corner of the building.’

(6') *Hy is (\*twee sekondes) op die punt om te loop ...*  
 he is two seconds on the point COMP to walk ...

- ▶ Afrikaans patterns with Dutch, in line with Frame account

# Corpus study

## English

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>be on the verge of</i>			
<i>be on the brink of</i>			
<i>be on the cusp of</i>			
<i>be on the point of</i>			
<i>be about to</i>			

NL	ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
	<i>op het punt staan</i>	9 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	845 (98.9%)
	<i>op...staan</i>	4 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	848 (99.5%)

AF	ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
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‘on the point’  
type

‘in front of’  
type

# Corpus study

## English

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>be on the verge of</i>	41 (1.2%)	0	2548 (98.8%)
<i>be on the brink/cusp/point of</i>	3 (3%)	0	97 (97%)
<i>be on the cusp of</i>	0	0	2 (100%)
<i>be on the point of</i>	4 (2.3%)	0	171 (97.7%)
<i>be about to</i>			

(7) (...I was likely to make a major mistake.) I think I was **just** on the verge of making one.

[BNC, Written books and periodicals]

(7') I think I'm on the verge of making a mistake (**\*in two seconds**).

- ▶ English 'point' type constructions pattern with Afrikaans/Dutch

NL	ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
	<i>op het punt staan</i>	9 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	845 (98.9%)
	<i>op...staan</i>	4 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	848 (99.5%)
AF	ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
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# Corpus study

## English

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>be on the verge/ brink/cusp/point of</i>	11 (2%)	0	548 (98%)
<i>be about to</i>			

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(7) (...I was likely to make a major mistake.) I think I was **just** on the verge of making one.  
[BNC, Written books and periodicals]

(7') I think I'm on the verge of making a mistake (**\*in two seconds**).



# Corpus study

## English

ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
<i>be on the verge/ brink/cusp/point of</i>	11 (2%)	0	548 (98%)
<i>be about to</i>	245 (6.4%)	0	3607 (93.6%)

NL	ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
	<i>op het punt staan</i>	9 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	845 (98.9%)
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(7) (...I was likely to make a major mistake.) I think I was **just** on the verge of making one.

[BNC, Written books and periodicals]

(7') I think I'm on the verge of making a mistake (**\*in two seconds**).

(8) she was **just** about to go back to her room when she heard Mr Sandy the receptionist in the back room talking to her assistant

[BNC, Spoken demographic]

(8') she was about (**\*two seconds**) to go back to her room (**\*in two seconds**)

▶ English 'approximative' type patterns with 'point' type

# Corpus study

NL	ADVERBIALS ▶	discrete	non-discrete	none
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‘on the point’  
type

‘approximative’  
type

‘in front of’  
type

# Corpus study

## Findings

- ▶ only ‘in front of’ type accepts non-discrete measures: PREREGION as prerequisite (rather than ADJACENCY or APPROXIMATION as blocker)
- ▶ redundancy of discrete (imminential) measures not just for ‘on the point’ type but also approximative *about to*: APPROXIMATION entails ADJACENCY? (more research on approximative prospectives needed)
- ▶ big gap in discrete (imminential) measures between ‘in front of’ constructions: [*kurz davor stehen zu*] as conventionalized pattern (PREREGION ▶ ADJACENCY) vs. optionality for [*stehen vor*]

‘on the point’ type	‘approximative’ type	‘in front of’ type
---------------------	----------------------	--------------------

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- ▶ Broader set of (corpus) data supports our Frame-semantic formalization

‘on the point’ type	‘approximative’ type	‘in front of’ type
---------------------	----------------------	--------------------

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# Corpus study 2: Telicity

Related issue: Telicity of embedded verb—Does this also follow from metaphorical mapping?

Possible expectation for spatial metaphors:

- ▶ **ADJACENCY** — *to* telic transition
- ▶ **PREREGION** — *of* (a)telic event
- ▶ **APPROX.** — ?

'on the point'  
type

'in front of'  
type

'approximative'  
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TRANSITION ▶	telic	atelic	unclear
AF <i>op die punt wees</i>			
NL <i>op het punt staan</i>			
NL <i>op...staan</i>			
DE <i>davor stehen zu</i>			
EN <i>be about to</i>			

(restricted to patterns with only verbal complements)

(sample of 300~400, except AF: 232 total hits)

# Corpus study 2: Telicity

Related issue: Telicity of embedded verb—Does this also follow from metaphorical mapping?

Possible expectation for spatial metaphors:

- ▶ **ADJACENCY** — *to* telic transition
- ▶ **PREREGION** — *of* (a)telic event
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Possible expectation for spatial metaphors:

‘on the point’ type	‘in front of’ type	‘approximative’ type
------------------------	-----------------------	-------------------------

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(9) *We staan op het punt om te eten.*  
 we stand on the point COMPL to eat  
 ‘We’re about to eat.’

(10)\* *We staan op eten.*  
 we stand on eat  
 (Intended: ‘We’re about to eat.’)

# Corpus study 2: Telicity

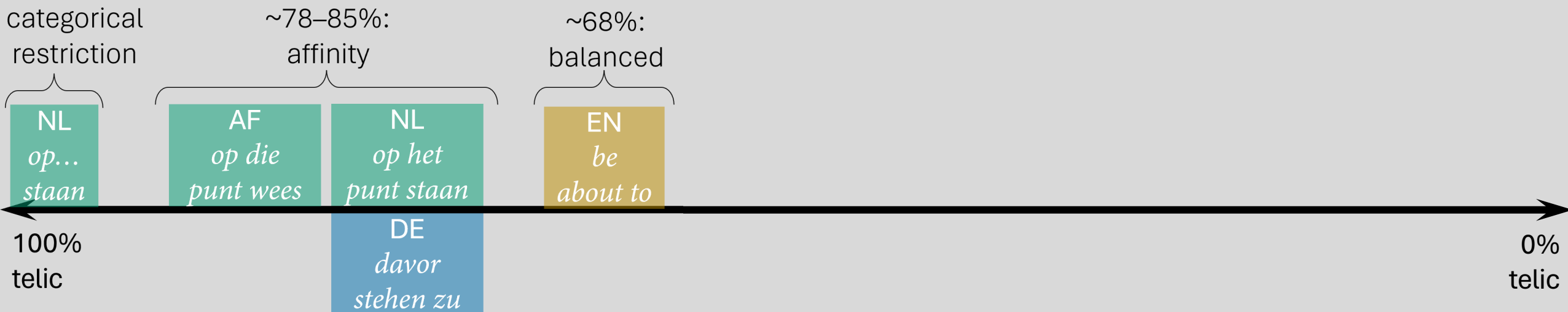
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- ▶ Three types, independent of metaphorical mapping:

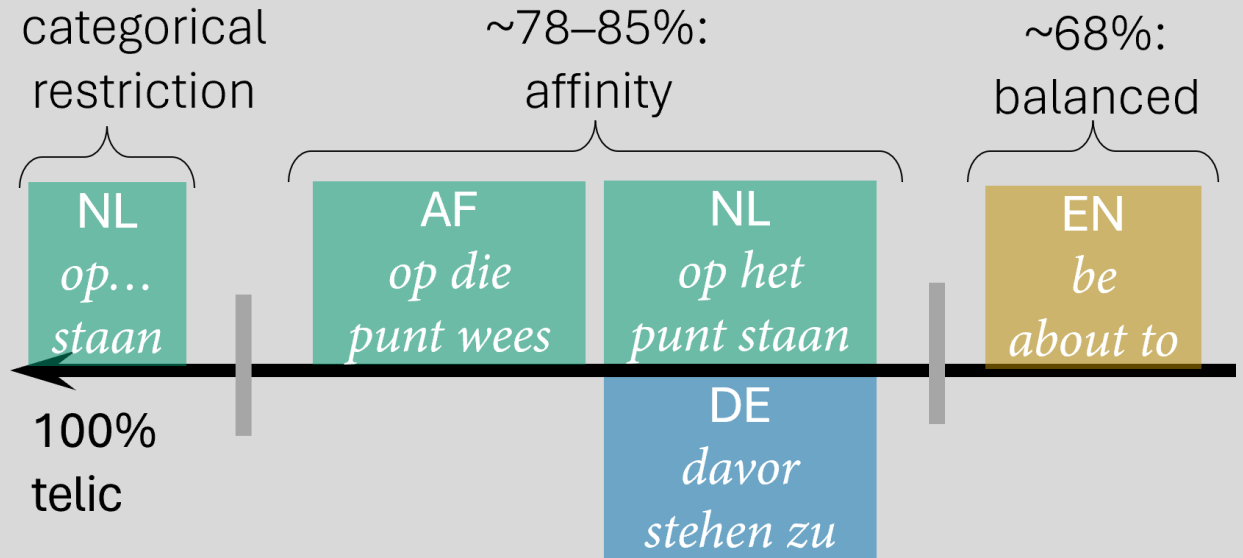


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Alternative explanation:  
Grammaticalization/Productivity?

Synchronic proxy measures:

- ▶ Type Frequency—here: TTR  
(Bybee 2003; Van Olmen & Mortelmans 2009)
- ▶  $\mathcal{P}$  = Hapaxes/Tokens  
(Baayen & Lieber 1991; Baayen 1993)



PROXY MEASURES ▶	TTR	$\mathcal{P}$
NL <i>op...staan</i>		
AF <i>op die punt wees</i>		
NL <i>op het punt staan</i>		
DE <i>davor stehen zu</i>		
EN <i>be about to</i>		

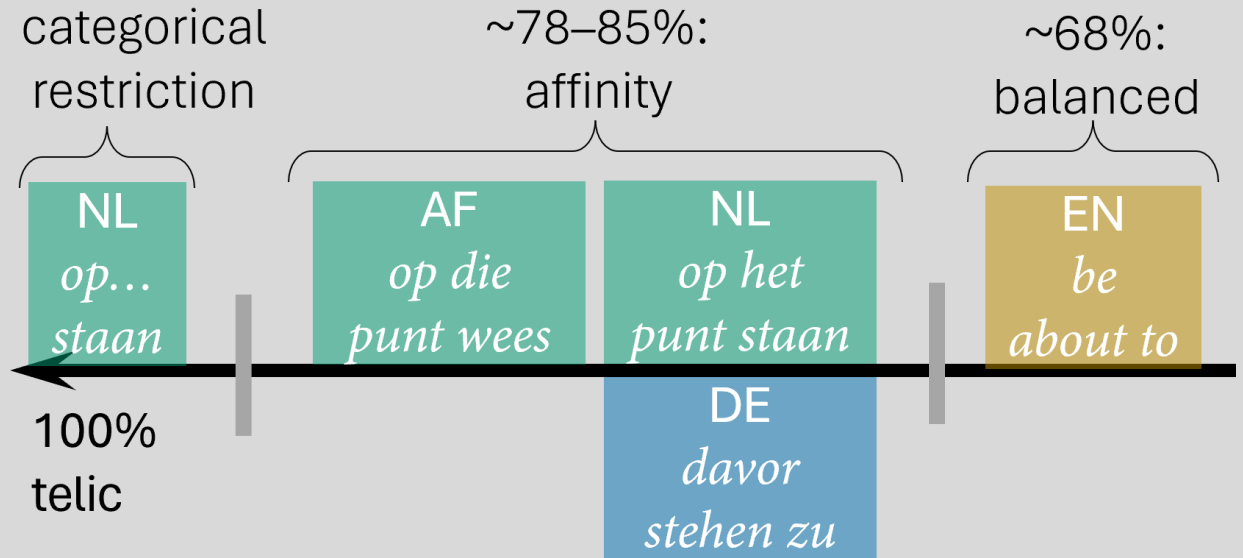
(sample of ~854,  
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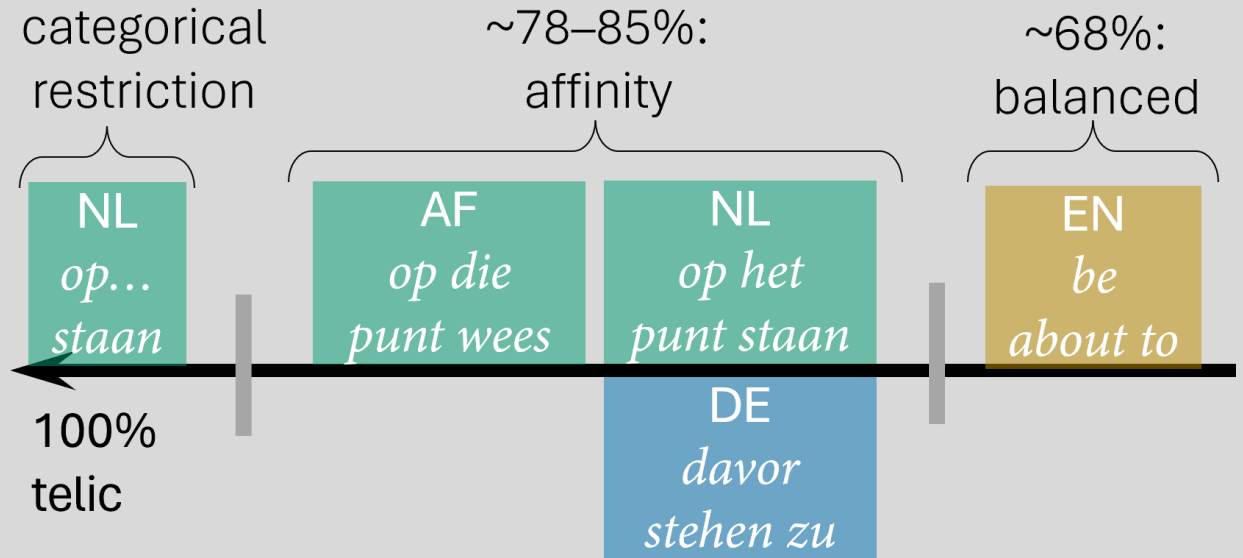
PROXY MEASURES ▶	TTR	$\mathcal{P}$
NL <i>op...staan</i>	64/852	34/852
AF <i>op die punt wees</i>		
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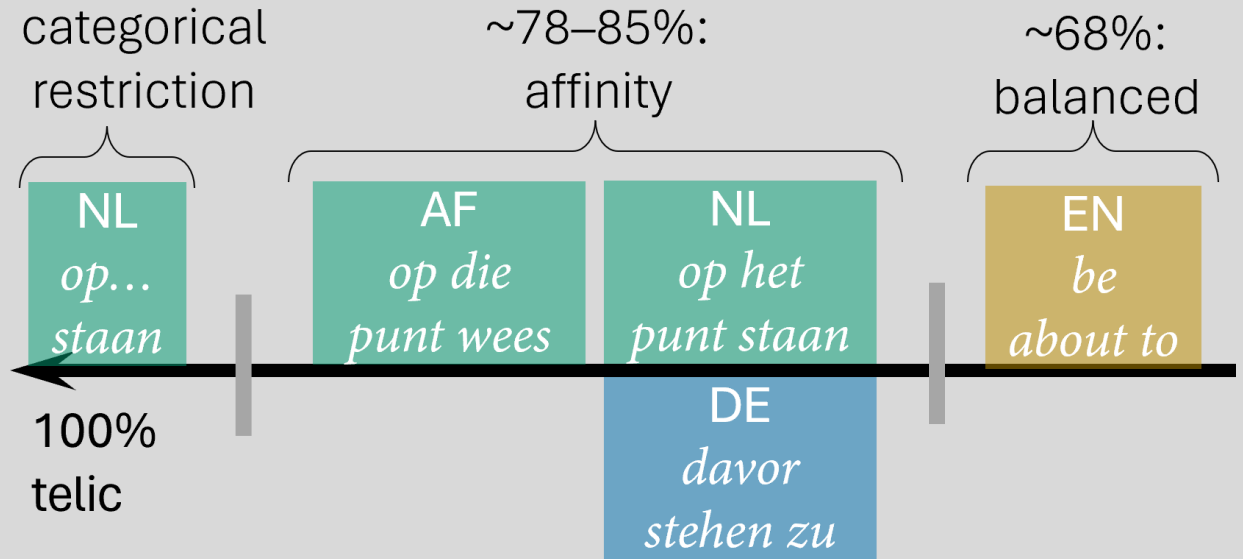
PROXY MEASURES ▶	TTR	$\mathcal{P}$
NL <i>op...staan</i>	64/852	34/852
AF <i>op die punt wees</i>		
NL <i>op het punt staan</i>	375/854	244/854
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DE <i>davor stehen zu</i>	381/854	253/854
EN <i>be about to</i>	331/854	200/854

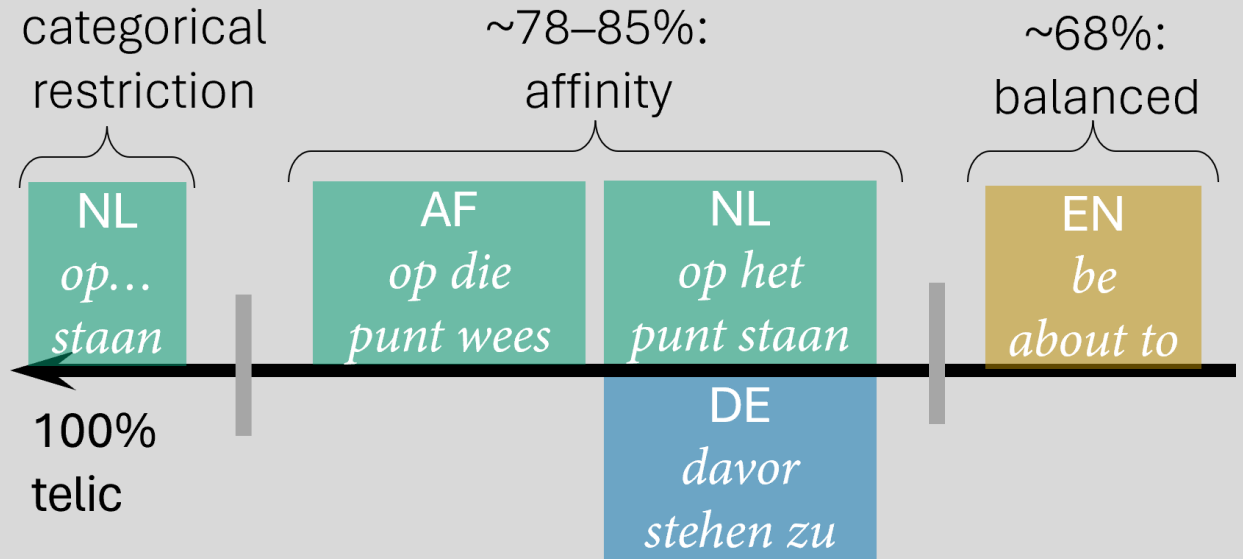


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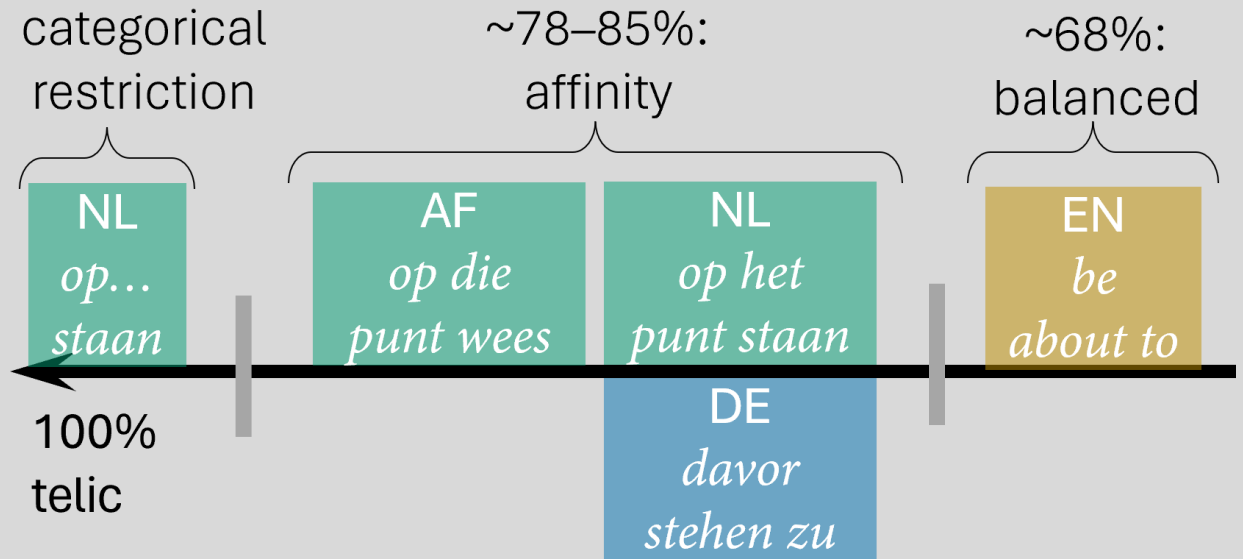
PROXY MEASURES ▶	TTR	$\mathcal{P}$
NL <i>op...staan</i>	64/852	34/852
AF <i>op die punt wees</i>	148/232	110/232
NL <i>op het punt staan</i>	375/854	244/854
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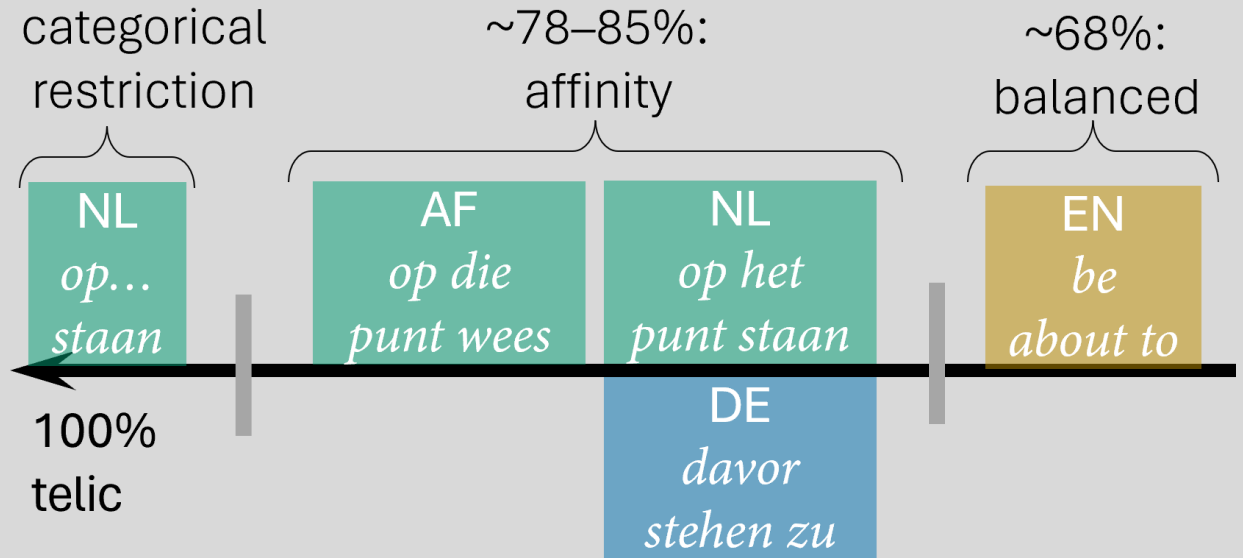
PROXY MEASURES ▶	TTR	$\mathcal{P}$
NL <i>op...staan</i>	7.5%	4%
AF <i>op die punt wees</i>	64%	47%
NL <i>op het punt staan</i>	43%	29%
DE <i>davor stehen zu</i>	45%	30%
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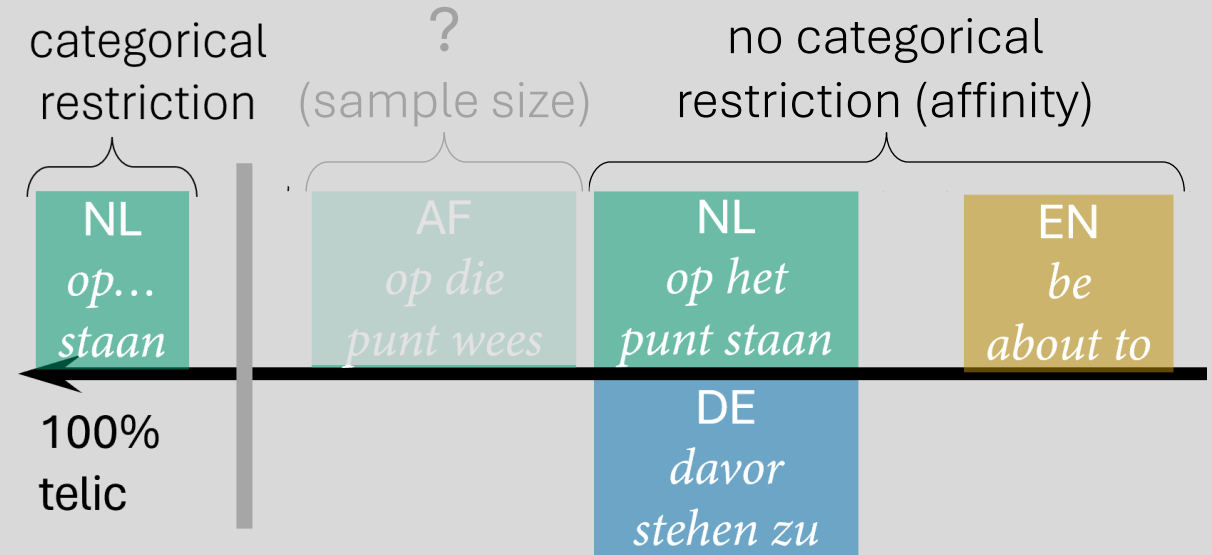


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sample size?

# Corpus study 2: Telicity

PROXY MEASURES ▶	Types	$\mathcal{P}$
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- ▶ Proxy measures support only two types: Categorical Restriction vs. No Categorical Restriction
- ▶ Independent from metaphorical mapping
- ▶ Are there 'in front of' and 'approximative' type constructions which pattern with NL [*op...staan*]?

# Conclusion

Prospectivity and Imminence as separable notions (cf. Dik's 1997 prosp. vs. imm.prosp.)  
drawing on metaphorical mappings in Frame-Semantic model

Discrete vs. non-discrete temporal measures (e.g., *just* vs. *(in) two seconds*)  
follow from Frame-Semantic formalization

(A)telicity doesn't follow from our model:

- ▶ independent from 'point', 'in front of' and 'approximative' types (but: possible syntactic story)

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# Thank you!

Roné Wierenga



Maarten Bogaards



Jens Fleischhauer



corresponding author



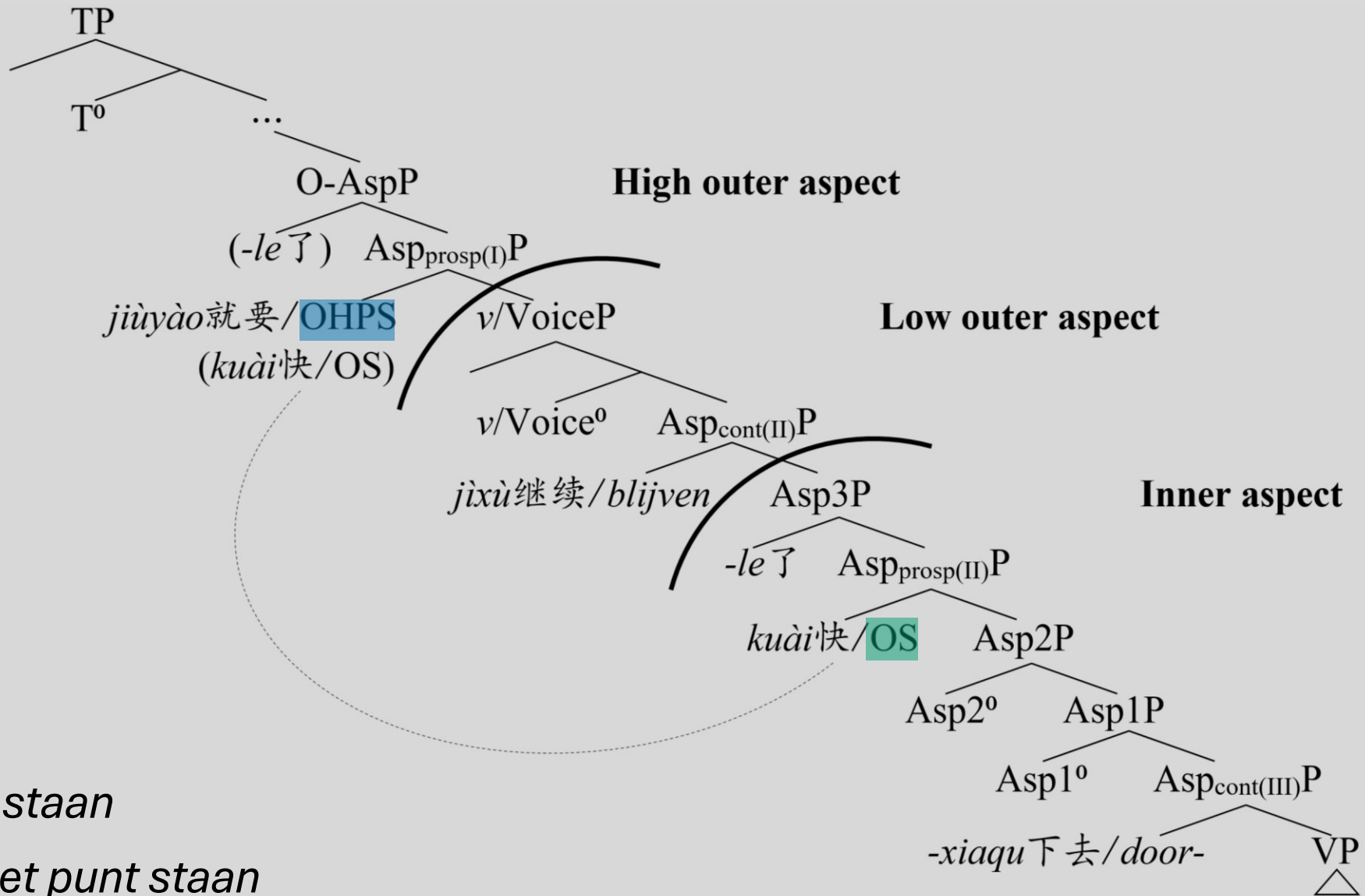
[m.p.m.bogaards@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:m.p.m.bogaards@hum.leidenuniv.nl)



[www.maartenbogaards.nl](http://www.maartenbogaards.nl)

(bonus topics:  
futures vs.  
prospectives,  
syntax, and the  
effect of negation)

# Syntax



**OS** = *op...staan*

**OHPS** = *op het punt staan*



# Negation

*Be about to* gets a special interpretation under negation:

- (11) a. *I haven't smoked my entire life and... I'm not about to start.* ≈ “I have no intention of starting.”  
EN b. # *I'm not on the brink/cusp/point/verge of starting.*  
AF c. # *Ek is nie op die punt om te begin nie.*  
NL d. # *Ik sta niet op (het punt om te) beginnen.*  
DE e. # *Ich stehe nicht davor, damit anzufangen.*

*I'm not about to start now.* ≈ *I'm not going to start now.*

*Be about to* patterns with near future (*be going to*)

Speculation: Is *be about to* an intermediate category between prospective and future?

# *Be about to vs. be going to*

*Be going to* (bgt) has been identified as a prospective device (Bohnemeyer 2014; Matthewson ea 2022)  
But bgt (and A/D *gaan*) pattern with epistemic futures in terms of speaker commitment

<i>about to</i> -type	bgt-type	epistemic future
The company's <i>about to</i> be sold. But I'm sure it won't in the end.		.

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<i>about to-type</i>	bgt-type	epistemic future
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Hij <i>staat op het punt z'n</i> bedrijf te verkopen. Maar ik weet zeker dat het uiteindelijk niet doorgaat.	Het bedrijf <i>gaat</i> verkocht worden. #Maar ik weet zeker dat het uiteindelijk niet doorgaat.	Het bedrijf <i>zal</i> verkocht worden. #Maar ik weet zeker dat het uiteindelijk niet doorgaat.

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Die maatskappy <i>is/staan op die punt</i> om verkoop te word. Maar ek weet dit sal nie gebeur nie.	Die maatskappy <i>gaan</i> verkoop word. #Maar ek weet dit sal nie gebeur nie.	Die maatskappy <i>sal</i> verkoop word. #Maar ek weet dit sal nie gebeur nie.

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Die Firma <i>steht davor verkauft zu werden</i> . Aber ich bin sicher, dass sie letztlich nicht verkauft werden wird.		Die Firma <i>wird</i> verkauft werden. #Aber ich bin sicher, dass sie letztlich nicht verkauft werden wird.

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This is consistent with IMM() as possibility; not with PREP() as causation  
(Fleischhauer & Bogaards in press) (Hill in press)