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Re-appraising the role of alternations in construction grammar: the case of the conative construction

Verbs in the conative construction (non-exhaustive list):

Verbs of striking	<i>bang, batter, beat, bite, hammer, hit, jab, kick, lash, peck, poke, pound, prod, pummel, punch, shoot, slap, slash, stab, strike, whip</i>
Verbs of cutting	<i>chip, chop, claw, cut, hack, scratch, tear</i>
Verbs of pushing/pulling	<i>heave, jab, jerk, pluck, poke, prod, push, pull, shove, tug</i>
Verbs of seizing	<i>catch, claw, clutch, grab, grasp, grip, snatch</i>
Verbs of holding	<i>claw, clutch, grab, grip, hold</i>
Verbs of rubbing	<i>brush, dab, mop, rub, saw, scrape, scratch, scrub, sweep, wipe</i>
Verbs of ingestion	<i>chew, chomp, eat, gnaw, munch, nibble, peck, sip, suck</i>

No effect

- (1) She swallowed, **wiping** ineffectually at the wetness on her cheeks. [HGT 3149]
- (2) He **tugged** uselessly at the ropes, but could not free himself. [G1M 2112]
- (3) A large hand smacked into his mouth and although he **bit** at it the thumb was forced like a gag between his teeth. [ADA 1257]
- (4) When he arrived at the shop, Oliver was still **kicking** wildly at the cellar door. ‘Let me out!’ he shouted from the cellar, when he heard Mr Bumble's voice. [FRK 284]

No contact

- (5) Pushing himself off the wall, he **grabbed** at it, missed, and nearly fell. [AMU 2222]
- (6) Trent **kicked** at the man's right knee. Juanito was ready for him, and the Kalashnikov crashed down at Trent's calf. [AMU 2722]
- (7) I **kick** at a flint, hard, missing and catching my other ankle. [G02 2079]
- (8) I **kicked** at the ratbird, which fluttered off. [HA0 519]

No energy

- (9) In a sudden jerk of anger Stephen turned and **kicked** at his shins, but the blows didn't hurt because of Stephen's Wellington boots. [H7A 1211]
- (10) He **bit** lightly at her lower lip. [JY7 4139]

Minimal effect

(11) We watched the men bundle up their parachutes and move off through the dense undergrowth, **chopping** at it with jungle machetes. (HR7 2964)

Non-volitional agent

(12) Still she felt that breeze ruffling her hair, **biting** at her nose. [GOP 824]

(13) [...] ferns **whip** at my legs and branches **lash** at my face. [FP6 2110]

(14) Shrilling overhead, the hurricane **clawed** at the leaf canopy of the rain forest, tearing great holes in it. [AMU 2079]

No intended effect

(15) They wandered on, aimlessly **kicking** at the pine cones. [B3J 2291] => playfulness, idleness

(16) She **kicked** at the chair-leg and the black, angry words burst out of her. [AC4 254] => anger

(17) She moved restlessly and **kicked** at the crisp leaves at her feet. [HWE 682] => nervousness

(18) He hung from his arms and his body was quivering and his boots **kicked** at the snow. [CJT 904] => uncontrolled movements: the "agent" is unconscious and almost dead

(19) Albert closed his eyes and moaned, 'Oh, I hate myself!' Then he opened them and **kicked** savagely at a lump of dried mud, sending it sailing across the yard to explode against the side of the stable. [EFJ 2876]

=> the action has objectively an effect; but subjectively this effect was not the intention of the agent. It is merely concomitant, as the use of a gerund clause shows.

(20) Robyn **bit** worriedly at her lip. [HGT 3558] => anxiety

(21) She **bit** at her lower lip, stifling a feeling of rising panic. [JXW 1811] => fear, panic

(22) Her fingers running through the ruff of fur around the cat's neck tightened as Jehan spoke, and the cat yowled and it **bit** playfully at her hand. [G17 2212] => playfulness

(23) He turned his back on Hector, and walked deliberately over to Eachuinn Odhar's side, waiting in vain for him to look up from his fingers, nervously **rubbing** at his fur coverlet, and meet his son's eye. [APW 2545]

(24) Craig **rubbed** at his forehead in a mingling of anger and despair. [CKD 243]

Intensified contact

(25) He **grabbed** at the barrel and fell with it so that the power of the big man was added to his own strength. [AMU 2725]

(26) She saved herself from falling further by **clutching** at a branch with both hands and then drawing her feet up to safety on a big branch. [B0B 1357]