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

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

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

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. [G0P 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 intented 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]