Motivation of metonymy:
The story of hitting

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The puzzling use of the verb *hit* in phrases such as:

- You’ve heard it for years: to lose weight *hit the gym*.
- If you want to see Route 66, why not just get in a car and *hit the road*?
- His marriage broke up and he *hit the bottle*.
- A disturbing report *hit the desks* of U.S. counterintelligence officials.
Roadmap

1. Approaches to *hit* and “*hit*-phrases”
2. Force dynamics of *hit*-schemas
3. Survey results
4. Novel usages of *hit*
1. Approaches to *hit* and “*hit*-phrases”

1. Dictionary approach
2. Monosemic approach
3. Polysemeic approach
4. Verb-class approach
5. Cognitive approach
1. Dictionary approach
Meanings of *hit* distinguished in dictionaries

*Merriam Webster online*
‘to reach with or as if with a sudden blow’
   *His mom told him to stop hitting his sister.*
‘to come into quick forceful contact with’
   *The ball hit the window.*
‘to strike something with an object so as to impart or redirect motion’
   *hit a fastball into outfield.*

*Cambridge Dictionary, Idioms*
*I’d love to stay longer but I must be hitting the road.*
   (‘to leave a place’ or ‘begin a journey or trip’)
*I have to hit the books – I have two exams next week.*
   (‘to study’ or ‘begin to study in a serious and determined way’)

31.01.19 Story of hitting
2. Monosemic approach
Charles Ruhl 1989. On Monosemy

Words are inherently indeterminate, highly abstract and typically only have a **single meaning**.

The single meaning of *hit* could be described as ‘meet, encounter’.

The particular meanings of a word in its use are **pragmatic modulations** of its basic sense, e.g. in *The thief took the jewels*, *take* means ‘steal’.

**Pragmatic metonymy** allows us to infer the full meaning of an utterance by supplying contiguous circumstances.

The “**full meaning**” of the utterance

*He broke an artery,*

includes the result that blood flowed. If the speaker said,

*He broke an artery and the artery started bleeding,*

the utterance might sound insulting because it implies that the hearer needed to be told a basic fact of life.
Monosemic approach

The “method of metonymy” proposed by Ruhl is based on the assumption that speakers rely on what their words suggest or evoke, assuming that certain information has been conveyed even if not expressed.

Thus, a stated cause can suggest an unstated effect (I struck the match), an intention its realization (I decided to go to the movies), an action its purpose (We went to bed), and the means or medium of an action the action (We hit the road).
Monosemic approach
Means or medium of an action suggesting the action

Junior asks Dad if he’d like to hit the beach. (= for fishing)
They can’t wait to get another boat and hit the sea again. (= for fishing)
It’s payday, kid! I gotta hit the bank and run a personal errand. (= for cashing a check)
He hit the pillow and slept for a fragment of uneasy time. (= for sleeping)
He switched off the light and felt his way across the room in the darkness and hit the bed. (= for sleeping)
3. Polysemic approach
Walter Hirtle 2014, Making Sense of Meaning.

Hirtle distinguishes two basic senses of *hit*:

1. ‘movement to(ward) a limit, strike, encounter, impact’, as in:
   *The car hit the water and dropped immediately out of sight.*
2. ‘purpose, entailment’, referring to the phase arising after a limit is attained, as in:
   *Only thing to do on a day like this is hit the water.*

Without a particular context, sentences with *hit* may be understood in either sense:

   *I’d hit the house about four o’clock.*

   a) ‘movement toward a limit’ sense, i.e. reaching home, or
   b) ‘purpose, entailment’ sense, i.e. undertaking a set of activities.
4. Verb classes: *break* and *hit*
Charles Fillmore (1970) and Beth Levin (2011, 2017)

*break* belongs to the class of *change-of-state* or *result verbs* along with *bend, fold, shatter* and *crack.*

*hit* belongs to the class of *surface-contact* or *manner verbs* along with *slap, strike, bump* and *stroke.*
Break and hit
Charles Fillmore (1970)

1. Passive and stative adjectives:

   The window was *broken*. (= passive or state)
   The window was *hit*. (= passive, but not state)

2. Locative prepositional phrase:

   affected object      affected location
   I broke his leg.     *I broke him on the leg.
   I hit his leg.        I hit him on the leg.

3. Object:

   I broke the *top of the table*. (= more or less separable part)
   I hit the *top of the table*. (= part of an object or location)
   I broke the dog.        (= figurine or frozen dog)
   I hit the dog.          (= ordinary dog)
The same event

*A vandal throws a rock at a store window and the window breaks.*

can be described in different ways:

(a) *The vandal broke the window with the rock.*
(b) *The vandal hit the window with the rock.*

(a) asserts that the window is *no longer intact*, but is silent about how it happened.

(b) asserts that something *forcefully came into contact* with the window, but is silent as to whether this contact had any effect on the window.
5. Cognitive approach

*Hit* displays different semantic and grammatical behavior from *break*. But *hit* also exhibits different uses:

(a) *I hit my head* would be interpreted as an accidental event
(b) *I hit the gym* would be interpreted as beginning a workout.

(a) describes a single event: my head got affected.
(b) comprises two events: I went to the gym and I began a workout.

Why should these similar-looking structures display such differences in meaning?

To answer such questions, we will adopt George Lakoff’s defining assumptions formulated in his theory of conceptual metaphor.

**Generalization commitment:** To seek generalizations in all areas of language (polysemy, patterns of inference, novel metaphor, etc.)

**Cognitive commitment:** Principles of linguistic structure should reflect what is known about human cognition from other disciplines.
Interim results

Dictionaries provide shorthand information on meanings and usages of words on the basis of intuitive and selected data. The **monosemic** approach relies exclusively on pragmatic factors determining the interpretation of linguistic utterances. The **polysemic** approach distinguishes basic senses of a word and seeks to detect motivated connections between them. The **verb-class** approach identifies classes of verbs on the basis of shared semantic and grammatical behavior. The **cognitive** approach focuses on principles underlying the motivation of linguistic structures and their meanings.
2. Force dynamics of hit events
Force dynamics of an action chain: Deliberate action of breaking

Canonical force-dynamic breaking event:

_The vandal broke the window with a rock._

An **Agent** or **Trajector** (the vandal) generates energy with the **intention** of affecting an object (the window) by **transmitting** the energy via an **Instrument** (a rock) towards an **object** or **Landmark** (the window), which is completely **affected** by the energy (broken) and, as an “**energy sink**”, absorbs the energy.
Billiard ball model (Langacker)

The vandal broke the window with a rock.

Agent (TR)  Instrument  Object (LM)  Result

the vandal  a rock  the window  shards

energy source  energy transmitter  change of state  energy sink
Types of hitting schemas

“Literal” hitting:
An inanimate or a human hits a thing without being in control of the act.

>The ball hit the window.
I hit the bull’s eye.

Metonymic hitting (comprising two events):
A potent inanimate entity affects itself without being in control of the act.

>The story hit the headlines.

A human deliberately hits a thing affecting (a) the thing or (b) himself.

a) Trump hit the ball.
b) Trump hit the desk.

A human deliberately hits a type of thing in order to pursue a purpose.

Trump hit the golf course.
1. An inanimate entity or a human hits a thing without being in control of the act

   *The ball hit the window.*
   *I hit the bull’s eye.*

A moving entity (TR) comes into sudden contact (hit) with the surface of a thing (ACTIVE ZONE of LM). The hitting event is a punctual (semelfactive) occurrence. The potential energy source of hitting and its potential effect are “hidden”.

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Story of hitting
1. An inanimate entity hits a thing

*The ball hit the window.*

TR comes into contact with LM

THING (window) for ACTIVE ZONE OF THE THING (surface)
2. A potent immaterial entity affects itself

*The story hit the headlines.*

An entity (the story) has the potential to generate energy and come into contact (hit) with another entity (headlines), where it undergoes a change of state in becoming a published news item, i.e. it is reflexive. The magnitude of event determines the potential of a story to become the headline.
2. A potent immaterial entity affects itself

The story *hit* the headlines.

A potent immaterial entity brings about its own change (reflexive)

CONTENT (story) for CONTAINER (headlines) for PROPERTY (published)
3. A human deliberately hits a thing and affects the thing or himself

(a) Trump hit the ball.
(b) Trump hit the desk.

(a) Hitting a mobile thing normally sets the thing in motion. This is usually our intention when hitting a mobile thing.

(b) Hitting a stationary thing normally has no noticeable effect on the thing. Why do we sometimes hit stationary things? The energy generated by the Agent is blocked at the surface of the thing and diverted back to the Agent.

This “reflexive schema” typically applies to situations in which we may want to underline our words or vent our feeling in order to relieve stress.
3. A human deliberately hits and (a) affects a thing or (b) affects himself

(a) *Trump hit the ball.*
The Agent’s energy causes a mobile thing to move.

(b) *Trump hit the desk.*
The Agent’s energy bounces back from a stationary thing.
4. A human deliberately hits a type of entity

Let’s hit the road. (purpose: leave, begin a journey)

• An Agent generates energy directed towards achieving a goal.
• The goal lies beyond the thing or place (road), which serves as an intermediate goal, or mediator, in the energy chain.
• The mediator represents a definite type of entity, i.e. an idealised, prototypical thing or place.
• The type of entity hit (road) affords possibilities for typical kinds of activities (leaving, travelling, driving).
Affordance

• According to affordance theory (Gibson 1979), one perceives the world not only in terms of object shapes and special relations but also as **possibilities for action** evoked by objects. Affordances arise from the relation between a goal-directed actor and objects, especially artifacts.

• In the metonymic *hit*-construction, the affordance may be provided by a thing or place. Thus, a typical action afforded by the thing ‘phone’ is calling someone, a typical action afforded by the place ‘road’ is traveling somewhere. The metonymies involved in the hitting events are therefore:

  THING FOR TYPICAL ACTION AFFORDED BY THE THING
  PLACE FOR TYPICAL ACTION AFFORDED BY THE PLACE
4. A human deliberately hits a type of entity

Let’s hit the road. (‘leave, begin a journey’)

The Agent moves to an intermediate goal, the mediator, and continues his route to the intended goal.

ENDPOINT OF MOTION FOR MOTION
THING (road) FOR AFFORDED ACTION (leave > journey)
4. A human deliberately hits a type of entity

- The deliberate hitting of a type of entity thus comprises two events:
  - a hitting event and an ensuing intended activity.
  - The hitting event is profiled, the intended activity is inferred.
  - The momentariness of the hitting event implies immediate proximity between the motion event and the ensuing action – in fact, the two events are seen as bordering on each other. This contiguous situation gives rise to further inferences.
4. A human deliberately hits a type of entity
Impression of causality
Albert Michotte (1944)
Impression of causality
Albert Michotte (1944)

a

Launcher

Target

b

c

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Story of hitting
4. A human deliberately hits a type of entity

The motion event and its ensuing action in the hit-construction are closely interrelated:

• the motion event comes into contact with the action,
• their encounter gives the causal impression of a launcher pushing a launchee,
• the place where the two events come into contact, i.e. at the type entity, affords an appropriate kind of action,
• the two events are conceptualized and coded as a single event.

Hirtle’s proposal of linking the two events in terms of condition and consequence can be seen as basically confirmed.

The force-dynamic situation, however, suggests a relation between an enabling condition and its actualization. This relation is a subtype of the well-known POTENTIAL FOR ACTUAL metonymy and will be described as: ENABLING CONDITION FOR ITS ACTUALIZATION.
Metonymic chain motivating the sense of *hit the road* ‘leave, go home’

1. PUNCTUAL OCCURRENCE FOR MOTION TO ENDPOINT
2. ENDPOINT OF MOTION FOR THING (road)
3. THING FOR ACTIVE ZONE OF THE THING (surface)
4. UNCONTROLLED FOR CONTROLLED (action)
5. SPECIFIC FOR GENERIC (road as type)
6. ENTITY FOR ACTION ENABLED BY ENTITY TYPE
   (affordance of road > drive)
7. GENERIC FOR SPECIFIC (driving)
8. ACTION FOR ONSET OF ACTION (leave)
9. BEGINNING OF ACTION FOR ACTION (going home)
Subtypes of the *hit*-construction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>open effect</th>
<th>inferred effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>non-controlled</strong></td>
<td>accidental effect <em>The ball hit the window.</em></td>
<td>reflexive effect <em>The story hit the news.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>controlled deliberate</td>
<td></td>
<td>rebounding effect <em>Trump hit the desk.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>affected object <em>Trump hit the ball.</em></td>
<td>affected TYPE <em>Trump hit the golf course.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary
The metonymic uses of English *hit*

The non-metonymic sense of *hit* refers to non-controlled semelfactive events with open effects, as in *The ball hit the window.* English *hit* is also used in describing controlled, or deliberate, events. These events are composed of two subevents. The first subevent implicitly refers to motion, the second subevent to an inferred effect. Four such metonymic hitting events can be distinguished on the basis of their force-dynamic structure and the inferred effect. The entity hit is an individuative token except in usages such as *hit the road* in the sense of ‘leave’, where the entity hit represents a type. The type entity, i.e. a thing or a place, offers affordances for the kind of ensuing action. The phrase *hit the N_{type}* establishes a non-compositional form-meaning pairing and hence represents a construction of its own.
3. Survey results
Survey results
British vs. American subjects

Imagine a situation where the sentence might be used.

*The story hit the headlines.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses from British speakers</th>
<th>Responses from American speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 major political event</td>
<td>5 big, important, major news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 scandal</td>
<td>2 any type of news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 celebrity scandal</td>
<td>12 other answers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The British and American speakers tend to interpret the sentences on the basis of their socio-cultural background.
Survey results
Same target, different sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At 9.00 p.m.</th>
<th>Acceptability</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Token</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>they hit the sack.</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>13 (12 sleep, 1 sex)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they hit the sheets.</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>11 (6 sleep, 5 sex)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they hit the pillow.</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>9 (8 sleep, 1 sex)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they hit the mattress.</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>9 (4 sleep, 5 sex)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a) Is it because the sheets were hanging up somewhere and someone wanted to fight them? Is that why the sheets were hit?
b) Did they hit the pillow because they were angry and were trying to take out their aggressions on an inanimate object?
c) Cleaned the mattress at around the same time.

The American native speakers tend to prefer the token interpretation when an “idiomatic” type interpretation is not readily available.
Survey results
Awareness of type-token ambiguity

At 9.00 p.m. they hit the mattress.

- It's understandable what is meant, but this is not a commonly uttered phrase. In fact someone might think people are actually punching a mattress.
- This one isn't used. So because it's not used, I could think it meant literally hitting a mattress, versus meaning going to sleep.
- This would probably mean, again, that "they" went to bed to have sex – but it could mean "they" just went to bed to get some sleep.
- Are they sex workers? Are they passionately making love and fell over onto a mattress?
Survey results
Decision on either token or type

Imagine a situation where the sentence might be used.

*Tomorrow I will hit the desk.*

- I've never heard this phrase. You will go to a desk or physically assault one, I guess.
- They will actually hit the desk.
- This would mean that someone is going to take their fist and strike a desk.
- This means you will simply hit, pound, slap or bang a desk.
- I'm not sure what this means, maybe someone is going to work and will be working hard for the day.
- This may imply that the person is about to study, but it could also mean working at a desk.
Summary
Survey results

The questionnaire focused on interpretations of sentences involving the $hit \text{ the } N_{\text{type}}$-construction. Familiar idiomatic phrases received high acceptability ratings and could evoke situations in which they might be used.

The highest-rated phrases were (in this order): $hit \text{ the library}$, $hit \text{ the books}$, $hit \text{ the beach}$, $hit \text{ the waves}$, $hit \text{ the sack}$. The lowest-rated phrases were $hit \text{ the desk}$, $hit \text{ the pillow}$ and $hit \text{ the mattress}$.

Low-rated phrases were rejected or interpreted in the token sense.

An often cited criterion for rejecting a phrase was that the speaker had never herd it.
4. Novel usages of *hit*
### Novel *hit*-phrases created by analogy

*Urban Dictionary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hit the phrase</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>door</strong></td>
<td>‘tell someone to leave’; “Why don’t you just hit the door.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>shower</strong></td>
<td>‘take a shower’; “Time to hit the shower.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>wet</strong></td>
<td>‘go take a shower, go bathe’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>sticks</strong></td>
<td>‘play video games’ - the sticks that are being hit are the joysticks on the controller’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>tube</strong></td>
<td>‘two or more friends watching Youtube videos and discussing them through IM, Text, Chat, etc.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>wik up</strong></td>
<td>‘researching on Wikipedia’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>feet</strong></td>
<td>‘run or sprint away as fast as one could go’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>rope</strong></td>
<td>‘committing suicide’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>rug</strong></td>
<td>‘pray, usually on a prayer rug, in a prostrated position’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hit the <strong>Hillary</strong></td>
<td>‘the action of deleting messages/emails to hide things’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Oh no my significant other will find out I messaged him, time to hit the Hillary.”
Novel figurative senses of *hit*-phrases

*Urban Dictionary*

*hit the pedal*  
‘go faster in sex’; “I want you to hit the pedal tonight.”

*hit the gas*  
‘run away from consequences or danger EXTREMELY fast’; “Oh shit! It's the cops! hit the gas!”

*hit the streets*  
‘engage in prostitution or drug dealing on the streets’, ‘get lost’; “She hit the streets at the tender age of 14 to fend for herself.”

*hit the track*  
‘act of prostitution’

*hit the library*  
‘smoke some bud’

*hit the mattresses*  
‘going into hiding, usually finding an unknown, empty house, room, or apartment and sleeping on just a single mattress’

*hit the bull’s eye*  
‘When you think someone is gay and then your suspicions get confirmed’; “I saw this girl and my gaydar pinged. Then I started speaking to her and said she had a girlfriend, I hit the bull’s eye.”
Summary
Novel slang *hit*-phrases

*Hit*-phrases, especially in the *hit the N*$_{\text{type}}$-construction, are highly productive in American teenage slang. Their popularity may be due to the following reasons:

- The *hit*-construction is available in informal speech and hence lends itself to be exploited by way of analogy and figuration.
- *Hit*-phrases are extremely condensed (by fusing two events) and shortened (*hit the wik up for look something up in the Wikipedia*).
- The semelfactive verb *hit* conveys suddenness, forcefulness and non-involvement (*Hit the door*).
- A *hit*-phrase may fill an ecological niche (*hit the pedal*) or provide a sensible alternate construal (*Active Zone in hit the feet*).
- Most *hit*-phrases have a strong experiential basis (*hit the sticks*).
- Many *hit*-phrases are highly imaginative and witty in their description of exotic situations (*hit the Hillary*)
References


