

Metonymic *hitting*¹

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Abstract

The chapter is concerned with the metonymic use of *hit* in expressions such as *hit the road*. The metonymic nature underlying these expressions has already been noticed by Ruhl (1989) and Hirtle (2014). The present study focuses on the mapping of the literal use of *hit* as the metonymic source to its target. The metonymic source is characterized by the use of *hit* as an Achievement verb in sentences such as *The ball hit the window*. The metonymic target in *hit the road* comprises two events, motion to a goal and a subsequent action. The relevant part of meaning resides in the unexpressed action. The action is inferred from the close relationship between a type of thing and potential actions afforded by the thing. In *Let's hit the road*, the type noun *road* affords metonymic “routes” to three motivated kinds of actions: ‘travelling’, ‘beginning a journey’ and ‘leaving’.

Keywords: Achievement verb, affordance theory, complex event, force dynamics, metonymic route

1. Background

The present study deals with the metonymic use of *hit*, in particular in expressions such as *hit the road*. Dictionaries usually treat such expressions as idiomatic phrases. For example,

the *Longman Online Dictionary of Contemporary English* lists the following idiomatic *hit*-expressions and their meanings.

- (1) a. *hit the road/trail* *informal* ‘to begin a journey’
- b. *hit the shops/streets* ‘if a product hits the shops, it becomes available to buy’
- c. *hit the headlines* ‘to be reported widely on television, in newspapers, etc.’

These expressions are idiomatic in that their meanings are not compositional. The meanings of *road* and *trail* in (1a) are not present in the meaning of ‘begin a journey’. The meanings conveyed by these phrases are obviously only vaguely related to the meanings of their constituent words. This study argues that their meanings are to a large extent motivated by metonymy, a view that has already been taken by Ruhl (1989) and Hirtle (2013).

Ruhl (1989, p. 104) assumed that the idiomatic “set phrases” with *hit* are motivated by metonymy and contextually appropriate inferences, an approach he described as Pragmatic Metonymy. Thus, in *hit the road*, *the road* serves as a means or medium of an action that metonymically suggests the action and the sense of movement. Language exploits the “ever-present extralinguistic background” and enables us to distinguish multiple meanings. Thus, the phrase *hit the beach* in sentences (2a-c) displays a variety of meanings that cannot be accounted for in a polysemy approach.

- (2) a. Junior asks Dad if he’d like to *hit the beach*.
- b. To get yourself a bucket of clams, you ought to *hit the beach*.
- c. There was a splat of ocean breakers *hitting the beach*.

Hit the beach in sentence (2a) refers to swimming, in sentence (2b) to fishing-clamming, and in sentence (2c) to natural forces. Since these different meanings cannot be attributed to different senses of *hit*, Ruhl concludes that *hit* is monosemic.

Hirtle (2013, p. 262), on the other hand, distinguishes two senses of *hit*: the sense of ‘movement to(ward) a limit, strike, encounter, impact’, as in (3a), and the sense of ‘purpose, entailment’, as in (3b).

- (3) a. The car *hit the water* and dropped immediately out of sight.
b. Only thing to do on a day like this is *hit the water*.

Sentence (3a) illustrates the basic, literal sense of *hit*, ‘movement toward a limit’, while sentence (3b) indicates a derived, figurative sense of *hit*, ‘purpose, entailment’. This sentence would be understood to mean that we reach a pool or the sea with the purpose of swimming or surfing there. The difference between these two senses of *hit* shows up in the ambiguity of the sentence *I’d hit the house about four o’clock*. In the sense of ‘movement toward a limit’, the sentence would be understood to mean that I reached home at about four o’clock; in the sense of ‘purpose, entailment’, the sentence would be understood to mean that I undertook a set of activities after reaching home. The figurative sense involves a metonymic CONDITION-CONSEQUENCE link between the two senses: Reaching home establishes the condition for undertaking certain activities there as its consequence.

Ruhl’s pragmatic view of metonymy and Hirtle’s distinction between two senses of *hit* have provided important insights into the metonymic potential of a lexical item. Recent research has provided a deeper understanding of metonymy. This study focuses on the motivation of metonymies of *hitting* within a cognitive framework. The notion of *metonymy* is understood as defined by Barcelona (2015, pp. 146,147):

Metonymy is an asymmetric mapping of a conceptual entity, the source, onto another conceptual entity, the target. Source and target are in the same frame and their roles are linked by a pragmatic function, so that the target is mentally activated.

The notion of *mapping* refers to the conceptualization of the metonymic target, which is understood from the *perspective* imposed by the source (Barcelona, 2011, p. 13).

Metonymy involves an *asymmetric mapping* as opposed to the symmetric mapping of metaphor. Asymmetric mappings refer to the functional non-equivalence of the elements mapped. The notion of *mental activation* refers to the “inferential role” of metonymy “to mentally *activate* the implicit pre-existing connection of a certain element of knowledge or experience to another” (Barcelona, 2009, p. 369). For convenience, the traditional way of referring to metonymic relationships as A FOR B has been retained in this paper but is not understood in the sense of substitution.

Ruhl’s and Hirtle’s studies have focused on the target meaning of metonymic expressions with *hit*. Hirtle’s distinction between the two senses of *hit*, ‘movement to a limit’ and ‘purpose’, was found to be particularly relevant to this work. The motivation of a figurative expression, however, resides in the mapping from a source to a target and the perspective imposed by the conceptual source. The present study, therefore, starts out by examining the basic, non-metonymic uses of *hit* in simple events. Its metonymic uses emerge in complex events and are considered in Section 4.

2. Use of *hit* in simple sentences describing simple events

The sentences under (4) illustrate uses of *hit* in simple sentences. The senses of *hit* are specified according to their use in a situation type, i.e. as a member of an aspectual class. *Hit* is a punctual verb and typically occurs in the following three situation types.

- (4) a. The car hit the lamppost. [Achievement]
 b. Susan hit her little brother. [Semelfactive]
 c. Let's hit the road. [Accomplishment]

Achievements are punctual, telic, non-volitional and uncontrolled events that imply a preceding culminating phase. The most likely interpretation of sentence (4a) would be that of a driver losing control of the car and, therefore, accidentally coming into violent contact with a lamppost. If the person was crazy enough to steer the car against a lamppost on purpose, we would no longer understand the event in the sense of an Achievement but in the sense of a deliberately performed action. Achievements focus on the endpoint of a preceding culminating phase – the crash after losing control of the car. The endpoint also serves as the transitional point leading over to a new state of affairs. The result of the car crash, however, is left open: The car could have been demolished or the lamppost could have been bent over or, possibly, both the car and the lamppost have been damaged.

The conceptual structure of an Achievement is schematically represented in Fig. 1. The dotted arrow indicates the implied culmination, or build-up phase leading to a climax at its endpoint. The culmination of an Achievement follows a given course and its endpoint is the only element that is profiled. The ensuing new state is not part of the event.

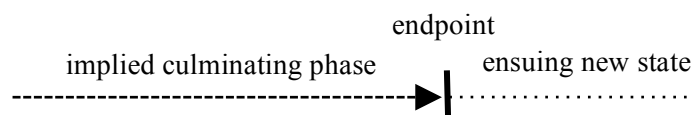


Figure 1: Schematic structure of an Achievement.

The Semelfactive and Accomplishment uses of *hit* in sentences (4b) and (4c) represent Actions. Semelfactives are instantaneous events and, as suggested by the term

semelfactive ‘once only’, have a single momentary occurrence and no preceding culminating phase. In contrast to Achievements, Semelfactive events can be brought about volitionally. Sentence (4b) is understood in the sense of a person’s volitional and controlled action of striking another person once.

Accomplishments are telic and durative events whose cumulative phase leads to a natural and conclusive endpoint. Accomplishments are typically brought about by volitionally acting humans. The speaker of sentence (4c) intends to carry out a volitional action that leads to the conclusive endpoint of hitting the road, i.e. making contact with the road. This Accomplishment thus also involves an Achievement as part of its meaning.

A similar situation has been noted by Panther & Thornburg (2009, pp. 24–26). The verb *find* is used in the sense of an Achievement in *Mary found the ten-dollar bill in the gutter* and in the sense of an Action in *Can you find me a chair*. The sense of an Action can be paraphrased as ‘look for/seek (intentionally) x with the envisaged goal/result of finding x’. The paraphrase describes a metonymic relationship between two events: the Achievement of finding x is the result of the Action of looking for x. The relationship between these usages of *find* involves the metonymy ACHIEVEMENT FOR ACCOMPLISHMENT or, more generally, RESULT FOR ACTION. The Achievement sense is present in both uses of *find* and, therefore, represents its basic sense.

Likewise, the Achievement sense of *hit* is present in the sense of the volitional Accomplishment *Let’s hit the road*. The sentence may be paraphrased as ‘move to the road with the envisaged goal/result of hitting it, i.e. making contact with the road’. Here, the ACHIEVEMENT sense of ‘hitting x’ metonymically activates the ACCOMPLISHMENT sense of ‘moving to x’ and also confirms the basicness of the Achievement sense.

The preceding discussion of the three usages of *hit* leads to further aspects that are addressed in the following sections. In its sense of Action, *hit* is obviously used in situations whose “entities interact with respect to force” (Talmy, 2000, p. 409). Section 3 is

devoted to the question of whether *hit* in its Achievement sense also involves force-dynamic scenarios.

The sentences discussed in this section are syntactically simple. Sentence (4c), *Let's hit the road*, however, has been shown to be conceptually complex in that it consists of an Accomplishment and an Achievement. The conceptual basis of such sentences is explored in Section 4.

3. The Achievement verb *hit* in force-dynamic scenarios

Everyday examples of Achievements are *We lost the game*, *Fred fell asleep*, as well as *The ball hit the window*, *Michael hit his head against the wall* and *Antonio hit upon a great idea*. In all these cases, the culminating phase represents a non-controllable course of events. In the hitting scenario, the implied culminating phase typically involves motion, and the Achievement is understood to occur at the moment when a moving entity comes into physical contact with the surface of another entity. An Achievement of hitting thus involves the interacting elements that characterize a force-dynamic scenario (Talmy, 2000). It also includes a source generating energy and an “energy sink”, where the energy is finally absorbed. This scenario is based on a folk model that Langacker (1991, p. 281; 2008, p. 355) metaphorically describes as *billiard-ball model*.

This is our conception of objects moving through space and impacting one another through forceful physical contact. Some objects supply the requisite energy through their own internal forces; others merely transmit or absorb it.

Let us first consider the scenario in which an object “merely transmits” energy. In the sentence *The ball hit the window*, the ball probably received its energy from a human

Agent kicking it, such as a football player, and transmits the energy in its flight. The player did probably not intend to hit the window with his shot, but this is immaterial in the present situation. All we see is the ball coming into forceful contact with a windowpane. As pointed out by Fillmore (1970), *hit* is a “surface-contact” verb that asserts the occurrence of a physical contact between two objects and, as a result, one of the objects may, or may not, undergo a change of state. The window breaks when it absorbs the ball’s energy, and it does not break when the ball keeps transmitting its energy and bounces back from the windowpane. In the former situation, the window is seen as an object that undergoes a change of state, in the latter situation, the window is seen as a location that does not change its state. This hitting scenario with its two outcomes is illustrated in Fig. 2. TR stands for “trajector” and represents the moving entity, the ball, and LM stands for “landmark” and represents the stationary entity, the window. The profiled elements are printed in full lines and the implied elements are printed in broken lines. The energy source and the energy sink are defocuseded.

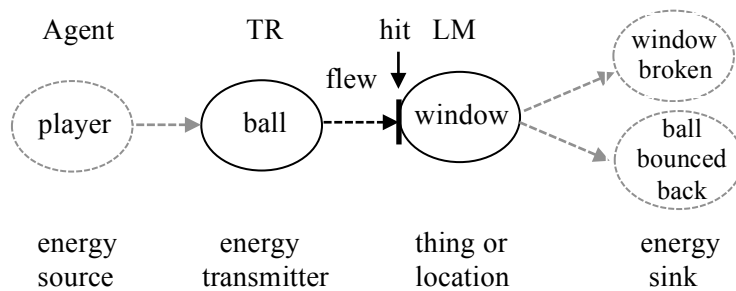


Figure 2: Force-dynamic scenario of *The ball hit the window*.

A force-dynamic variant of ‘a ball hitting the window’ would be ‘a bird hitting the window’. Here, the bird supplies the requisite energy through its own force by flapping its wings, but its flight went off course probably because the reflection in the window suggested a free air space. The bird’s mistaken flight route thus represents the culminating phase of an Achievement that reached its climax when the bird ultimately hit the window.

The use of the Progressive confirms the interpretation of an Achievement: *A bird is hitting the window* would be said when we see the bird flying straight onto the window just as it crashes into it. The crash releases the energy of the bird's flight but, again, nothing is said about the entity that absorbs the energy. It could have been the window, which would have gone to pieces, or the bird, which would have been severely hurt. We probably assume the latter outcome because, if the window had been broken, the speaker would have said so.

There are also Achievements in which entities supply their own requisite energy and lead to their expected outcome. The most obvious instances are natural forces and abstract things. The following sentences illustrate the impact of natural forces and their implied effects.

- (5) a. A hurricane hit Andalusia this morning.
b. The pandemic hit tourism hard.

The energies inherent in a hurricane and a pandemic take their irresistible, non-controllable course. We are normally concerned with the dramatic effects these conditions have on people and things. Our shift in focus from the conditions surrounding things to their ensuing effect is captured by the metonymy CONDITIONS FOR EFFECT.

Emotions can also be conceived of as forces that may affect a person. In his study of emotion concepts, Kövecses (1989, p. 54) has shown that ANGER is metaphorically conceptualized as heat in a container. Intense anger produces steam and pressure on the container, and when anger becomes too intense, the container-person explodes and parts of the person go up in the air, as in *I blew my top* and *She flipped her lid*, or the person as a whole goes up hitting the ceiling, as in (6a) or, even goes through the ceiling, hitting the roof of a house, as in (6b).

- (6) a. He hit the ceiling.
b. She hit the roof.

In these examples, anger represents a force whose energy sets the container-person into motion until they hit the ceiling or the roof. Since ceilings and roofs are fixed locations, it can only be the person who absorbs the energy and is affected by their collision with anger. An angry person metaphorically hits the ceiling or the roof, but these effects are afforded by the unstated condition of intense and forceful emotions, i.e. they are understood via the metonymy CONDITIONS FOR EFFECT.

The following sentences show that the internal force inherent in abstract entities can make them undergo a change of state.

- (7) a. Their love affair hit the headlines.
b. Lady Gaga's naked bondage pictures hit the front page.

Love affairs and celebrities generally arouse people's interest. They have a kind of internal potency, which can be seen from the synonymous expression of grabbing: *Their love affair grabbed the headlines*. Moreover, the love affair in (7a) and the pictures in (7b) do not refer to actual events but to stories representing reality, i.e. their representation activates reality. When these stories become headlines or appear on the front page of a paper, their new form of representation activates their change of state and instantly turns them into media events. The meaning evoked by the sentences thus derives from two chained metonymies.

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| (i) real events afford their representation: | REPRESENTATION FOR REALITY |
| (ii) the kind of representation affords attention: | CONDITIONS FOR EFFECT |

A similar analysis applies to expressions such as *My dream is to hit the front page*, *“The Water Man” hit the screens* and *Kids hit the airwaves*. Here, the front page, the screens and the airwaves focus on parts of well-known larger types of things that are metonymically evoked: the newspaper, the cinemas and broadcasting. Due to the implication of force and speed, the verb *hit* is particularly well suited to being used in describing media coverage.

The use of the Achievement term *hit* listed in this section demonstrated its wide range in non-controllable force-dynamic situations. The following section discusses uses of *hit* in controllable force-dynamic situations, i.e. in actions. These situations differ from Semelfactive actions of ‘striking’, as in (4b) *Susan hit her little brother*. They are conceptually composed of two events and are the ones that dictionaries tend to describe as idiomatic and which Ruhl and Hirtle analyzed as metonymic.

4. ***Hit* in complex events describing actions**

4.1 The *hit the* N_{type}-construction

Some of the “idiomatic” expressions with *hit* have already been mentioned at the beginning of this paper: (1a) *hit the road/trail*, (1b) *hit the shops/streets* and (2a) *hit the beach*. A selection of “typical” *hit*-expressions of this kind is listed in Table 1. All expressions are understood metonymically. The expressions of the metonymic source are listed in the left column and their target meanings in the right columns. The target meaning comprises two events: (1) movement to a goal and (2) an intended Action to be performed after reaching the goal.

Table 1: Complex Actions involving the use of *hit*

Source expression	Target meaning	
Achievement	(1) motion to a goal	and (2) intended Action
<i>hit the road</i>	go onto the road	travel, begin a journey, leave
<i>hit the gym</i>	go to the gym	exercise, begin a workout
<i>hit the books</i>	open the books	study, begin to study
<i>hit the bottle, the booze</i>	reach for a bottle of alcohol	drink alcohol heavily, begin to ~
<i>hit the sea, the beach</i>	go into the sea, go to the beach	swim, surf

The source expressions share the same structure and establish a schematic construction in the sense of Goldberg (2006, p. 5):

Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist.

Neither formal nor functional aspects of this linguistic pattern are predictable from its component parts or other constructions. This is, in fact, the reason why expressions that have this structure are generally treated as idiomatic. It has been pointed out that the meaning of *hit the road* originated from horses hitting the road with their hooves.² Within its historical context, the meaning of *hit the road* might be seen as being partly predictable from its component parts, but this explanation does not, of course, apply to the whole set of expressions of this construction.

The construction consists of three elements: the Achievement verb *hit*, the definite article *the*, and a singular noun like *road* that refers to a type of thing. The construction can, therefore, be described as “*hit the* N_{type}-construction”. Fig. 3 illustrates the conceptual structure of the sentence *Let’s hit the road*. Its meaning is composed of two events, an

Achievement and an Action. The Achievement is expressed, and the Action is inferred. The relevant part of the meaning of the sentence, however, resides in the unexpressed Action, while the profiled Achievement is conceptually backgrounded. The construction thus involves a shift of focus. As shown in Fig. 3, the backgrounded event involves the Agent's motion to the road as its endpoint, but since the event is an Achievement, the motion has to be unintentional and uncontrolled. Why should a human Agent perform an unintended and uncontrolled motion?

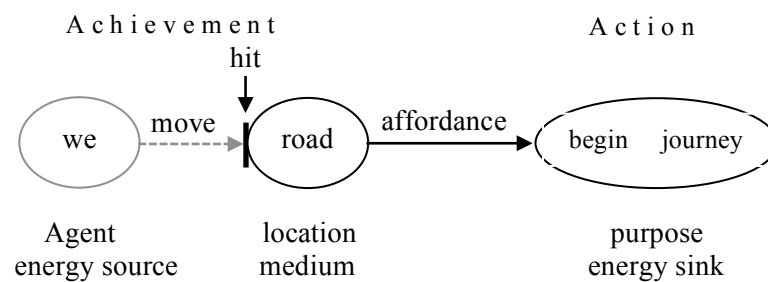


Figure 3: Force-dynamic scenario of *(Let's) hit the road*.

An answer to this puzzling question can be found in the situational context in which the *hit*-phrases are typically used. Let us look at the following examples found in various sources.

- (8) a. I'd love to stay longer but I *must be hitting the road*.
 b. After all the overeating, I really have to *hit the gym*.
 c. I have two exams next week. I need to *hit the books*.
 d. Let's *hit the beach* this weekend. The weather will be beautiful.
 e. Kayaks were packed and the weather was as pretty as it can get. Ohoy, *let's hit the sea*.

The first three examples involve the interaction of two opposing forces in a person's psyche: the force of the person's desires and the force of external circumstances. Talmy (2000, p. 431-432) refers to these force-dynamic situations as "divided self". In (8a), one part of the self wants to stay and another part wants to leave, and the conjunction *but* communicates the speaker's regret at having to leave. The modal verbs *must*, *have to* and *need* express the compulsion to do something that one would not otherwise do. In sentence (8a), the speaker's desire to leave is explicitly expressed, in sentences (8b) and (8c), the use of the modal verbs lets us infer that the speaker's desire is to lead a life as before. Sentences (8d) and (8e) describe situations in which external circumstances support a person's desire. These force-dynamic situations might be described as "supported self".

The impression that the action implied by *hit*-clauses is subject to the force of external circumstances shows in their use of tense. Let us compare the frequencies in Google of the volitional wording *go to the bathroom* and its non-volitional counterpart *hit the bathroom* in the Past and Future Tense (accessed 2021-09-18). We visit a bathroom when we want to do so or when we feel the urge to do so. Sentences (9a) and (9b) show that our volitional visits to the bathroom have roughly the same frequency in the Past and Future Tenses. The frequencies of non-volitional visits in the Past in (9c) also match those of volitional visits. However, the frequencies of (9d) show that we hardly ever speak of hitting the bathroom in the Future Tense. The sense of 'volition' and 'intention' of the future marker *will* apparently conflicts with the 'non-volitional' and 'unintentional' sense of the Achievement verb *hit*.

(9)	a.	I went to the bathroom.	6,970,000
	b.	I'll/will go to the bathroom.	5,896,000
	c.	I hit the bathroom.	6,940,000
	d.	I'll/will hit the bathroom.	33 ³

4.2 *Multiple senses of hit-expressions*

Once we accept the fact that the notion of Achievement is still present in the metonymic target of *hit*-expressions, we are in the position to explain the variation in meanings exhibited by many of these expressions. Consider the three meanings of *hit the road* stated in Table 1: ‘travel’, ‘begin a journey’ and ‘leave’. Achievements describe transitions, and when a trajector has reached the transitional point, a new situation arises, and the moment of its beginning attracts our immediate attention. In the case of *hit the road*, we immediately focus on the beginning of a journey. This common experience can be captured by the metonymy END OF A SITUATION FOR BEGINNING OF A NEW SITUATION.

Dictionaries usually list the beginning of a situation as the first sense of *hit*-expressions. The beginning of a situation typically activates the whole situation. Thus, we speak of *going to the doctor* when we mean ‘visiting a doctor for a medical treatment’. The same applies to *hit*-expressions. *Hit the road* not only refers to ‘beginning a journey’ but also to the whole activity of ‘journeying’ or ‘travelling’. The sense of ‘travelling’ derives via the metonymy PART FOR WHOLE or, more specifically, INITIAL SUB-EVENT FOR WHOLE EVENT.

Finally, *hit the road* is also understood to mean ‘leave a place’. This sense is based on a different deictic perspective of the same event. A mover’s perspective at the starting point is directed towards the goal, an observer’s perspective at the starting point is that of the person moving away from their position, i.e. of leaving the place. The three senses of *hit the road*, i.e. ‘travelling’, ‘beginning a journey’ and ‘leaving a place’, are thus well motivated.

4.3 *Actions afforded by types of things*

Let us now turn to the noun phrase of the *hit the* N_{type}-construction. We tacitly assumed that phrases like *hit the road* refer to ‘travelling’ *hit the bottle* to ‘drinking (too much) alcohol’ and *hit the sack* to ‘going to bed’. Why should definite noun phrases evoke these actions? The definite referents of the direct objects *the road*, *the bottle* and *the sack* have not even been introduced in the discourse. The reason why these definite referents need not be introduced is that they are generic referents and refer to a type, or kind of thing. Types are prototypical, culturally well-established categories (Radden, 2009). Kind nouns have a special status. They cannot be pluralized (**We hit the pools*) because one instance stands for the whole category, cannot be modified (**He hit the long road*) because a modified thing does not count as a well-established category, and cannot take the indefinite article (**She hit a bottle*) because the generic referent is well known – *She hit a bottle* can only refer to a specific bottle, not to the bottle as such. The types POOL, ROAD and BOTTLE can afford mental access to actions that are typically associated with the types, such as swimming, travelling and drinking.

The close connection between objects and potential actions has been studied within the framework of affordance theory developed by Gibson (1979). According to affordance theory, we perceive the environment as possibilities for action. Thus, knobs are for turning, slots are for inserting things into and balls are for throwing and bouncing. Likewise roads are for traveling and books are for reading. Affordances evoked by objects are thus powerful metonymic triggers, and the metonymies triggered can be described as TYPE OF THING FOR ACTION AFFORDED BY THE THING, where ‘thing’ is to be understood in the widest sense including locations.

The affordances prompted by things are rarely unequivocal, as in *hit the road* for ‘travelling’, *hit the pool* for ‘swimming’ or *hit the gym* for ‘doing a workout’. An affordance may have multiple potential targets. For example, *hit the pavement* may afford

‘walking outside’ or ‘taking part in a strike’ and, to take one of Ruhl’s (1989, p. 111) examples, *hit the street* affords ‘selling’, ‘going outside’, ‘being in search of jobs’ and ‘being a prostitute’. Affordances may have been motivated historically and are presently only familiar as idiomatic expressions, as in *hit the hay* and *hit the sack*,⁴ or they may have been formed by analogy to related expressions, as in *hit the needle* formed in analogy with *hit the bottle*.⁵

Many *hit*-expressions are characterized in dictionaries as informal, colloquial, slang or funky English. Especially among young teenagers, the *hit the N_{type}*-construction has become a convenient template for slang expressions. The *Urban Dictionary* lists many such underworld expressions that are, or may be, unknown to everyday language users. Existing *hit*-expressions are given new meanings, as in (10a), or, more frequently, expressions are newly created, as in (10b-d).

- (10) a. *hit the pedal* ‘to go faster in sex’
 b. *hit the feet* ‘to run or sprint away as fast as one could go’
 c. *hit the rope* ‘to commit suicide’
 d. *hit The Hillary* ‘the action of deleting messages/emails to hide things’

The attraction these expressions enjoy lies in their imaginative and witty description of exotic situations. The actions afforded by the nouns are unusual or even absurd. The fact that we can, after a short moment of reflection, see a conceptual link between a generic noun and an inferred action indicates that we have internalized the *hit the N_{type}*-construction and its complex interaction of metonymies.

The metonymies that enable us to understand such complex constructions of hitting are, in conclusion, summarized in the following section.

4.4 Metonymic routes leading to the senses of hit the road

The unequivocal sentence (*Let's hit the road*) is used to illustrate the metonymies that guide us to the meanings that are usually associated with this phrase: 'travel', 'begin to travel', and 'leaving a place'. For each metonymic step, three pieces of information are given: first, a verbal description of the process; second, the change of meaning involved (indicated by an arrow); third, the conceptual metonymy or metonymies in their specific notation and, if possible, in their general notation. Finally, the three metonymic routes are summarized in Fig. 4.

The starting point for all three senses is the Achievement sense of 'hitting the road' with the road at its endpoint.

1. Metonymic route to the sense of 'travel'

- a) The endpoint of the Achievement of hitting is 'the road'. 'The road' is a definite, specific referent, but it is understood as a generic referent, i.e. it activates ROAD as a type.

'hit the (specific) road' → 'hit the (generic) road'

SPECIFIC INDIVIDUATIVE THING FOR TYPE OF THING

SPECIFIC FOR GENERIC

- b) The type ROAD affords activities such as driving, travelling and journeying.

'hit the road' → 'drive, travel, journey'

TYPE OF THING FOR ACTION AFFORDED BY THE THING

THING FOR ACTION

2. Metonymic route to the sense of 'begin to travel' and 'travel'

The transitional point of an Achievement at the end of its culminating phase

activates the beginning of a new situation. The initial part of the new situation is ‘beginning to travel’, and the whole situation is ‘travel’.

‘hit the road’ → ‘begin to travel’

END OF A SITUATION FOR BEGINNING OF A NEW SITUATION

‘begin to travel’ → ‘travel’

INITIAL SUB-EVENT FOR WHOLE EVENT

PART FOR WHOLE

3. Metonymic route to the sense of ‘leaving a place’

- a) This sense involves a shift of perspective from the end of the motion event to its beginning. Since leaving a place represents a volitional movement away from a place, the Achievement of hitting first needs to activate the action of volitional movement (note that the sense of Achievement is not lost but only backgrounded).

‘hit the road’ → ‘movement to the road’

REACHED ENDPOINT FOR MOVEMENT TO A GOAL

ACHIEVEMENT FOR ACTION

- b) The perspective of the movement is directed to its beginning.

‘movement to the road’ → ‘leave a place’

MOVEMENT FOR START OF MOVEMENT

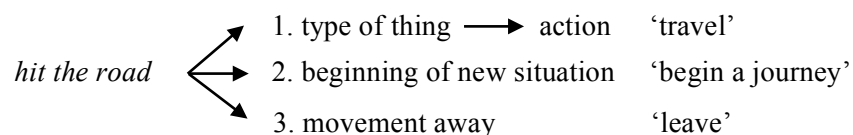


Figure 4: Metonymic routes leading to the three senses of *hit the road*

5. Conclusion

The present study has shown that the uses of *hit* are motivated by cognitive principles, especially metonymy and force dynamics. The metonymic usages of *hit* are particularly salient in complex events, as in *Let's hit the road*. Here, the metonymic source, the Achievement of hitting, is profiled but backgrounded, while the metonymic target, the action of travelling, is inferred but highlighted. Apparent incompatibilities such as the use of *hit* for 'movement' require an explanation; here, the notions of 'divided self' and 'supported self' are invoked. The notion of metonymic activation in language is corroborated by affordance theory in perception. Metonymic routes provide the conceptual links to the intended meanings. The *hit*-construction enjoys great popularity in slang expressions and shows that its complex metonymic processes do not form an obstacle for its use.

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² This explanation was found in *English Language & Usage*, s.v. *hit the road*. (<https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/257010/hit-the-road-meaning-in-context>) and *The Idioms*, s.v. *hit the road* (<https://www.theidioms.com/hit-the-road/>) accessed August 24, 2021.

³ The enTenTen20 corpus of 38 billion running words shows different frequencies of the four sentences but confirms the tendencies, in particular the low, or non-existent, use of *I'll/ will hit the bathroom*.

a. I went to the bathroom. 1,407

b.	I'll/ will go to the bathroom.	25
c.	I hit the bathroom.	22
d.	I'll/ will hit the bathroom.	0

⁴ Several explanations of the origins *hit the hay* and *hit the sack* can be found on the Internet. Their origin relates to sleeping on a sack filled with hay or straw. It is debatable, though, whether this former practice also explains the use of *hit*, as suggested in one explanation: “Before they [people] lay down to sleep, they used to keep hitting the sack till the stray/hay was evenly spread. Hence the expression ‘hit the hay’.” (<https://englishwithsunil.wordpress.com/2011/02/10/what-is-the-meaning-and-origin-of-hit-the-sack/>)

⁵ Ruhl (1988, p. 102) refers to an unpublished paper by Greenberg (1966), who noted the analogy of *hit the needle* in the sense of ‘injecting a drug such as heroin’ with *hit the bottle*.

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