The Encoding of Hitting Events:
An Investigation into Crosslinguistic Similarities and Divergences

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Beavers, Levin & Tham (2010) propose that differences among languages in the encoding of motion events can be traced to the interaction of crosslinguistically applicable argument realization principles with language-specific lexical and morphosyntactic resources. Here I extend this proposal beyond motion events by presenting an ongoing study of hitting events. The encoding of such events has not received systematic crosslinguistic investigation, even though hitting verbs provide a counterpoint to the more extensively studied breaking verbs in Fillmore's (1970) well-known case study, "The Grammar of Hitting and Breaking".

A hallmark of English hitting verbs is the alternative attested realizations of the argument denoting the surface contacted: though usually expressed as an object (Smith hit his attacker), it may also be expressed in a PP (Smith hit at his attacker, Smith hit a stick against the fence). Available studies of hitting events in a range of languages reveal some amount of crosslinguistic diversity in their encoding: languages make use not only of the strategies for expressing the surface argument attested in English, but also some additional ones. If any generalization unifies these strategies, it is that languages show some resistance in expressing the surface as a direct object, consistent with Tsunoda's (1985) placement of hitting verbs just below change of state verbs in his transitivity hierarchy. Hitting verbs, then, contrast with breaking verbs, which across languages consistently express their patient argument only as a direct object when transitive.

I argue that hitting verbs show the attested argument realization options because they are manner---and not result---verbs. Rappaport Hovav & Levin (1998, 2005, 2010) show that the manner/result verb dichotomy matters to argument realization. Among English two-argument verbs, manner verbs, including hitting verbs, show more argument realization options than result verbs, including breaking verbs. The reason, they suggest, is that result verbs, as verbs of scalar change, must express their patient argument as their object. This restriction does not apply to manner verbs, opening the door for the multiple realizations of the surface argument of hitting verbs witnessed in English and beyond. In the final part of the talk, I discuss how the range of encoding options observed for hitting events, including not only the varied realization of the surface, but also variation in the expression of the hitting predicate itself, stem at least in part from differences in the lexical and morphosyntactic resources available to the languages under consideration. These independent differences among languages, then, hide considerable commonalities among them.