Leg it, floor it, snuff it: A synchronic and diachronic analysis of dummy it.

*Research for the present paper forms part of a larger project on 'Determinants of language variation' funded by the University of Mainz.
(1) (...) when six or seven groups would bus it from city, (...).
[Detroit Free Press 1995]

but also diachronically …

(1) Let vs legge it a little. [OED 1601]

(2) I have the pleasure to inform you that your mother-in-law snuffed it. [OED 1896]

and in Boston …

Hungry?
CORNER it!
Advertisement: The Corner Mall, Boston
When considering to leg it, to snuff it, … we are faced with the question of:

“What motivates the occurrence of it?”
I. Introduction

II. Status of dummy *it*

III. Dummy *it* in previous research

IV. Imperatives and dummy *it*

V. Does dummy *it* enhance the verbal territory of a V?

VI. The role of pseudo-objects in (de)transitivization

VII. Conclusion
Dummy *it* violates Argument Structure Constraints

*frog* is generally assumed to be a \( V_{\text{intr}} \) (if a \( V \) at all …)

**OED:** “*intr.*, and *trans.* with *it*. *slang* (chiefly *U.S.*). To move quickly, to hurry; to leap or move like a frog.”

(1) He appeared in the evening **frogging \( \emptyset \)** up the steps of the dwelling opposite. [Cox, P. *Squibs of California*, 1874] \hspace{1cm} **intransitive use**

(2) The four of us **frogged** it along the dark lane. [Kitchen, F. *Brother to the Ox*, 1945] \hspace{1cm} **semi-transitive use**

But not with a fully-fledged \( O \):

(3) ***frogging** the steps of the dwelling opposite \hspace{1cm} **transitive use**

\( \Rightarrow \) pseudo-object *it* appears to be licensed by \( V_{\text{intr}} \)
What is the status of *it*?

Standard tests for direct objecthood:

a. Insertion test
b. Passivization test
c. Extraction test
Standard tests for direct objecthood:
a. Insertion test

Principle: V and Od tend to be adjacent [Kozinsky 1979: 158]

(1) Everybody out! Move it! [COCA 1991]

(2) *... move quickly it out!

⇒ dummy it behaves just like Ods by not allowing insertions between V and NP.
b. Passivization Test

(1) I have the pleasure to inform you that your mother-in-law snuffed it. [OED 1896] active

(2) *(...) that it was snuffed by your mother-in-law. passive

⇒ unlike canonical Ods dummy it does not allow passivization
Extraction Test

(1) Every year, your mother-in-law insists on planning the entire Thanksgiving meal (…). [COCA 2009]

(2) It is the entire Thanksgiving meal that your mother-in-law insists on planning. Od extractable

(3) ... your mother-in-law snuffed it.

(4) *it was it that your mother-in-law snuffed. Od non-extractable

⇒ unlike canonical Ods dummy it does not allow extraction
Tab. 1. Tests for direct objecthood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Insertion</th>
<th>Passivization</th>
<th>Extraction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct objects</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dummy <em>it</em></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⇒ *it* ~ pseudo-object
Structure

I. Introduction

II. Status of dummy *it*

III. Dummy *it* in previous research

IV. Imperatives and dummy *it*

V. Does dummy *it* enhance the verbal territory of a V?

VI. The role of pseudo-objects in (de)transitivization

VII. Conclusion
a. Listed as an idiomatic use that causes pitfalls in automatic POS tagging. [cf. Boyd et al. 2005: 40]

b. Cited as part of a set of resultative constructions [cf. Salkoff 1988: 55]

c. Mentioned as a structure that extends from OE to EModE associated with a change from Synthetic > Analytic [cf. Rissanen 1999: 261]
Extending Salkoff’s [1988: 45] list of resultatives in the “way-construction paradigm”

7 pseudo-objects that share some degree of functional overlap illustrated for the V MOV E:

(1) They run in laughing (...) as Virgil moves his way into the center (...). [COCA 1999]

(2) Move yourself, Porter, said the uniformed figure brusquely. [BNC wridom1]

(3) Hurry up! Tom yelled from the living room a couple of days later. Move it, Judy.

(4) He shouted at Mariana, grabbing at her arms and dragging her upright. Move Ø! he yelled. Quick-! [BNC wridom1]
7 Pseudo-objects illustrated for the V MOVE

All these pseudo-objects are semantically light, ie they do not carry a significant semantic load.
Structure

I. State of the art

II. Status of dummy *it*

III. Imperatives and dummy *it*

IV. Does dummy *it* enhance the verbal territory of a V?

V. The role of pseudo-objects in (de)transitivization

VI. Conclusion
Imperatives and dummy *it*

Dummy *it* occurs strikingly often with imperatives.

- Rissanen [1999:256]: originally intr. motion Vs can take a coreferential O in the imperative:

  (1) Good Margaret **runne** thee to the parlour [Shakespeare. *Much Ado about Nothing*, c. 1598]

  “They seem to be retained longest in imperatives“ [Rissanen 1999:256]. Explanation in terms of transitivization to express “involvement“ or “emphasis“

- Henry [1995:50]: imperatives in Belfast often involve a coreferential O.

  (2) Run youse to the telephone!

- Similar uses appear to be found in German:

  (3) Geh du ans **Telefon**! (contrastive stress) ‘answer the phone‘

  Geh Ø ans Telefon!
Strikingly, other pseudo-objects also tend to occur with imperatives …

particles:

(1) Geh mal! Nimm nur! Schau doch!

- Are move it! shove it! somehow related to these strategies? Do they reinforce the imperative?

- Is a monosyllabic V not sufficient to express an illocutionary act as forceful as the imperative?

**But:** This cannot be the whole story because dummy *it* is not restricted to imperatives.
Structure

I. State of the art

II. Status of dummy *it*

III. Imperatives and dummy *it*

IV. Does dummy *it* enhance the verbal territory of a V?

V. The role of pseudo-objects in (de)transitivization

VI. Conclusion
Rissanen [1999: 26]: “It can often be found with verbs recently converted from adjectives or nouns. The dummy object probably made it easier to analyse the new derivative as a verb“:

(1) The Turks could not **French** it so handsomely. [OED, cited in Rissanen 1999: 261]

⇒ Dummy *it* highlights the verbiness of weakly established Vs
Are the Vs listed in the OED or Merriam-Webster’s?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>leg</th>
<th>Merriam-Webster</th>
<th>OED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, explicitly mentions the phrase leg it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intr. V “to use the legs in walking; especially: run”</td>
<td>“intr. to leg it : To use the legs, to walk fast or run; also simply to leg (Sc. and dial.)”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>rough</th>
<th>Merriam-Webster</th>
<th>OED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, explicitly mentions the phrase rough it</td>
<td>Yes, explicitly mentions the phrase rough it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“rought it : to live under harsh or primitive conditions“</td>
<td>“trans. to rough it : to face or submit to hardships, rough or basic accommodation, etc.; to do without ordinary conveniences or luxuries; to live in a rough way.“</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⇒ Vs taking dummy *it* are inconsistently treated as trans. or intr.
Does *it* enhance the verbal territory of already existing Vs?

*floor* is well-established in the sense: ‘to cover with a floor’ or “to bring to the floor, knock down (boxing), have a fall. [OED]

(40) Eke pave or **floore** it wele in somer tyde. [OED: *Palladius’ De Re Rustica*, c. 1420] well-established sense

(41) He commanded them all to shoote at once, and **flore** the enemie, if possible they could. [OED: *Lancashire Tracts* 1642] well-established sense

But no OED entry for:

(42) "Mansell said: “I got a good start and I just **floored** it.” [The Guardian 1997] new sense ‘accelerate’

⇒ in assuming new V senses *floor* is equipped with the pseudo-object *it* thereby modulating its transitivity.
(1) "I was going about 55kph [34mph] on a slight descent and he [the motorbike rider] just floored it to get through a gap from behind (…) [The Guardian 2003]

no gas pedal involved that might be floored, but a handle bar

(2) Highway panic as snake legs it to freedom. [The Guardian 2000 Headline]
Dummy *it* as an instance of grammaticalization

1. Loss of number opposition
   (1) The man legged *it*.
   (2) *The men legged them.*

2. Transition of meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concrete</th>
<th>Abstract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literal</td>
<td>Figurative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OED: earliest sense of *snuff* (14. cent.): “That portion of a wick, etc., which is partly consumed in the course of burning (...)

   to snuff a candle > person snuffs *it*

3. Semantic bleaching of *it*: non-referential
Structure

I. State of the art

II. Status of dummy *it*

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VI. Conclusion
Theoretical Prerequisites: Transitivity

Hopper/Thompson’s theory of transitivity: moves beyond the single criterion of the presence or absence of a Od

10 criteria:
measure the extent to which a clause is transitive

Transitivity$_1$ = “the effectiveness with which an action takes place (...)” [Hopper/Thompson 1980: 251]

Transitivity$_2$ = effectiveness with which an action is transferred to a patient
## 10 Criteria for measuring transitivity [Hopper/Thompson 1980]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High Transitivity</th>
<th>Low Transitivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>2 or more participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Kinesis</td>
<td>action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Aspect silence</td>
<td>telic (completed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Punctuality</td>
<td>punctual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Volitionality</td>
<td>volitional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>affirmative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>realis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>agent high in potency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Affectedness of the object</td>
<td>object totally affected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Individuation of the object</td>
<td>object highly individuated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Criterion A: Participants

A high degree of transitivity implies 2 or more participants:

1. A moved B.  
   Verbal action *move* is ‘effectively transferred to a patient’

2. A moved himself.
   A moved it.

3. A moved Ø.

Why can we argue that “effectiveness with which an action takes place” is lower with reflexives? After all A is also moved.

- patient is semantically the agent, can stop the movement (control).
- With dummy *it*, there is no semantic patient.

No patient. ‘Effectiveness with which an action *is transferred to a patient*’ cannot even be assessed.
Criterion B: Kinesis

- Actions are more strongly associated with transitivity than non-actions.

- A high degree of kinesis also seems to be required if Vs take the pseudo-object *it*:

  bike it, bus it, floor it, frog it, hike it, hoove it, leg it, move it, shift it, shove it, walk it, wing it

  … are highly dynamic

But: *stay it, *wait it

⇒ dummy *it* occurs with dynamic Vs.
Transitivity and pseudo-objects

Pseudo-objects are semantically light, i.e. they do not carry a significant semantic load. The effect the V can have on the object is thus restricted.

she legged it/snuffed it/moved it S is affected, not the Od

⇒ Semantically this is a reflexive structure

Hopper/Thompson [1980: 277]:
“reflexives in many languages have properties which can be explained by appealing to their intermediate status between one-argument and two-argument clauses”.

The same goes for other pseudo-objects, such as dummy *it*.
Typological considerations: ambitransitivity in English and German

**Ambitransitive** = V that can be used transitively or intransitively without having to undergo a formal change.

(43) John *walks* Ø home.  
(44) John *walks* Mary home.

Contrastive data

(45) John *geht* Ø nach Hause.  
(46) *John geht* Mary nach Hause.  

German:

herrschen (intr.) ‘rule over’  –  beherrschen (trans.) ‘master sth.’

wachen (intr.) ‘be awake’  –  bewachen (trans.) ‘guard sth.’
German and English Vs according to valency for a randomly selected sample of 84 V [based on Schiefke 2009: 16]

⇒ Engl: remarkably few intr. Vs
⇒ Engl: few reflexive Vs
⇒ Engl: many ambitransitive Vs
More ambitransitive Vs in English than in German

Kilby [1984: 37]: categorization between trans. and intr. Vs is less clear-cut in English.

Dixon/Aikhenvald [2000: 4]: languages that have many ambitransitive V also have few valency changing morphemes.

⇒ with the erosion of morphological marking (be-), markers of transitivity might have been lost
Reflexives are on the decline in English


OE | ME | LModE
---|---|---
I washed *me* > I washed *myself* > I washed Ø
I overslept *myself* > I overslept Ø

Rohdenburg [2009]: shows that reflexive *self* is contracting its range of application in terms of V types and frequency. Spearheaded by AmE.

⇒ Indicative of a more general decline of reflexive *self* in English
Contrastive Data

German
reflexive structures of the following type are still fairly common:

(1) Er hat sich hochgearbeitet.
‘He has worked himself to the top’.

English
highly productive competitor in the form of the *way*-construction:

(2) a. (...) he worked his way down the steep bank toward the stream [FROWN]
b. Worked himself into a frenzy and gave himself indigestion. [BNC wridom1]
Fig. 1. Diachronic Development of *One's Way* vs. *Oneself* (N = 1146) [based on Mondorf 2011: 405]

10 Verbs: *cut*, *drink*, *eat*, *fight*, *grop*, *hit*, *wind*, *work*, *worm*, *wriggle*
Erosion of causative *BRING*

Early Modern English:

(1) She *brought* him to laugh.

Present-day English:

(3) ?She *brought* him to laugh.
Causative *BRING* +/- detransitivizing strategy (BrE) (N=1785) [Mondorf 2010b]

- without detransitivizing strategy
- no reflexive but other detransitivizing strategy
- reflexive

- Causative *BRING* is generally on the decline. If used at all, it is almost exclusively used with the reflexive.
- The decline is delayed when reflexives are present
Revisiting the 7 pseudo-objects illustrated for the V MOVE

- POSS way
- Reflexive self
- dummy it
- Ø
- Cognate objects
  - Particle
- Particle + Reflexive self
Another reason for the decline of the reflexive: The competition between reflexives vs. particles

(1) **Brace** yourself for the impact.  
   Reflexive

(2) (...) he said, in tones of mock-comfort, **Brace** up, Merrill.  
   Particle

[BNC wridom1]
Diachronic Development of the Competition between Reflexives and Particles (*out, up*) (*N* = 3619) [based on Mondorf 2010: 229]

⇒ The particle is replacing reflexive *self*
Let’s speculate ...
Thinking out aloud: The role of pseudo objects in (de)transitivization or “How does *it* fit into the larger picture“? 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>before PDE:</th>
<th>PDE:</th>
<th>Future:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>snore (V_{\text{intr}})</td>
<td><em>snore one's way</em> through a meeting[George W. Bush one's way to ...*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\emptyset)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>snuff (primary sense)</td>
<td>New V senses: <em>snuff</em> it (secondary ‘die’)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>move it! (primary)</td>
<td>move it! ‘hurry’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>leg it</em> ‘walk on foot’</td>
<td><em>leg</em> it ‘run away’ (snake)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### INTRANSITIVE

**Detransitivization**

### SEMI-TRANSITIVE

**Transitivization**

### TRANSITIVE

Pseudo objects might be the incipient stages of (de-)transitivization processes. They seem to usher out \(V_{\text{trans}}\) which decrease their verbal territory and usher in \(V_{\text{intr}}\) which enhance their verbal territory.
Thank you for your attention!
References

Primary Sources


References cont’d

Secondary Sources


References cont’d


Kirchner, Gustav (1951) “A Special Case of the Object of Result”. English Studies 32: 153-159.


Kozinskij, Isaak Š. (1979) Nekotorye grammatičeskie universalii v podsitemax vyraženija subjektno-objektnyx otноšenij (= Some grammatical universals in the subsystems of expression of subject and object relations). Dissertacija na soiskanie učenoj stepeni kandidata filologičeskix nauk. Moskva: MGU.


References cont’d


References cont’d


1. Dummy *it* can be related to a series of (de-)transitivization processes

2. 7 pseudo-objects occur in semi-transitive environments with some degree of functional overlap
   - *way*-constructions
   - Reflexives
   - particles
   - dummy *it*

3. Is the function of dummy *it* to modulate transitivity in accordance with the changing entrenchment of the V (or V sense) with which it is used?

4. *it*-support to increase the transitivity of weakly established Vs or V senses?
Pilot Study: Diachronic development of dummy *it* with 10 Vs in AmE (COHA, N = 697)

**Occurrences per million words**

- **Publication of Mark Twain's travelogue "Roughing it" in 1872**

- **1810-1829**
- **1830-1849**
- **1850-1869**
- **1870-1889**
- **1890-1909**
- **1910-1929**
- **1930-1949**
- **1950-1969**
- **1970-1989**
- **1990-2009**

- **LEG it**
- **FUCK it**
- **SNUFF it**
- **FROG it**
- **FLOOR it**
- **WING it**
- **SHOVE it**
- **HIKE it**
- **MOVE it**
- **ROUGH it**

Occurrences for all Vs apart from *snuff it* in COHA
A New Book by a Well Known Author.

ROUGHING IT

BY

MARK TWAIN.

SHOWING HOW A THREE-MONTHS PLEASURE TRIP WAS EXTENDED TO A TERM OF SEVEN YEARS, AND THE CAUSES THEREFOR; WITH A RELATION OF MANY BOTH HUMOROUS AND INSTRUCTIVE INCIDENTS CONNECTED WITH THE EDUCATION OF AN INNOCENT.

Hundreds of Characteristic Engravings Executed by Some of the Best Artists in the Land Add Interest to the Text.

The volume will consist of Between 600 and 700 Octavo Pages, and will be found to contain not only matter of an amusing character, but to be a valuable and correct history of an intensely interesting period, with authentic descriptions of scenes never before written up.
Vs found with dummy *it*

bike, blow, brave, bus
cocquet
floor, French, frog, fuck
hike, hoove
Leg, lose
move
rough
shift, shove, snuff
tongue
walk, wing
1. Rohdenburg [1996]: expressions which enhance a lexeme’s transitivity can reinforce its V status.

2. Salkoff [1988]: support Vs are occasionally required to turn Ns into Vs.

3. Similarly, the way-construction equips novel Vs with transitivity by providing them with a pseudo-object (one's way).
### The Data

#### British Corpora

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corpora</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Mio Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early English Prose Fiction</td>
<td>*1460 – 1682</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighteenth Century Fiction</td>
<td>*1660 – 1752</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nineteenth Century Fiction</td>
<td>*1728 – 1869</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British National Corpus (wridom1)</td>
<td>p1960 – 1993</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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#### American Corpora

<table>
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<th>Period</th>
<th>Mio Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>*1744 – 1799</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early American Fiction 2</td>
<td>*1800 – 1827</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American National Corpus (2. release)</td>
<td>p1728 – 1869</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>57</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* birth dates, p publication dates
Reflexive object as 'pseudo-object'

Spanish

(33) a. Juan ð durmió (toda la noche). 'slept' intransitive
b. Juan se durmió *(toda la noche). 'fell asleep'
     semi-transitive (pseudo-object se)

French

(34) a. ouvrir ‘open’, terminer ‘end’ transitive
     b. s’ouvrir ‘open’, se terminer ‘end’ semi-transitive

Russian

(35) a. načinát ‘begin’, končat ‘end’ transitive
     b. načinát’šja ‘begin’, končat’šja ‘end’ semi-transitive

[Hopper/Thompson 1980]
1. This is the '90s equivalent of one of those '60s shows when six or seven groups would **bus it** from city, doing their three or four hits and heading on. [Detroit Free Press 1995]
• While dummy *it* in subject position has received much scholarly attention

\((6) \text{ It is raining} \)

*its* use in object position has rarely been investigated.