

Whoop her up, hit it, go it alone: the role of the personal pronoun in the fossilization process

Laure Gardelle

► To cite this version:

Laure Gardelle. Whoop her up, hit it, go it alone: the role of the personal pronoun in the fossilization process. Yearbook of Phraseology, 2011, 2, pp. 163-178. ensl-00681594

HAL Id: ensl-00681594

<https://hal-ens-lyon.archives-ouvertes.fr/ensl-00681594>

Submitted on 30 Apr 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Whoop her up, hit it, go it alone:
the role of the personal pronoun in the fossilization process

Laure Gardelle

Whoop her up, hit it, go it alone:
the role of the personal pronoun in the fossilization process

Abstract

The present study looks into verbal phrasemes with a *verb + it* pattern, which have received very little attention beyond the well-established fact that the pronoun there loses some of its referentiality. It focuses more specifically on the role and morphological features of the pronoun in those phrasemes. A corpus-based study shows that the *verb + it* pattern licenses a number of prototypically intransitive verbs; it is argued that this capacity of the transitive pattern to override individual argument realisations is related to the prototypical semantics associated with the syntactic function of direct object. The study also seeks to determine why personal pronouns are the only type of pronoun licensed in those phrases. They are shown to be the default pronouns in terms of procedural information. Another issue is that of gender: a few phrasemes license alternation between the neuter and the feminine in several varieties of nonstandard English.

Studies in English phraseology have given considerable attention to what Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 273) term “verbal idioms”, that is, to lexicalised predicates whose major element is a verb. Research interests, to name just a few, range from syntax and morphology (as in Chafe 1968, Jackendoff 1975 or Marantz 1984) to semantics (see for instance Newmeyer 1974, Bennett 1996, Goldberg 2006), typological differences (as in Fillmore et al. 1988, Nunberg and Sag 1994, Cowie 1994, or Fellbaum 2007), pragmatics (for example, Naciscione 2010), automatic retrieval in texts (such as Pankhurst 2001), or acquisition and natural language processing (see for instance Abel 2003) — for more detailed references and a discussion of the various areas of research, see Burger et al. (2007).

One aspect, however, has been very little studied to this day: the specificities of the personal pronoun in verbal phrasemes with a *verb + it* pattern. This disregard is partly due to the data used in analyses, which typically display a *verb + full NP* pattern – as in *hit the deck*, *pull strings* or *pay the devil his due*. The present study therefore looks specifically into verbal phrasemes that show a *verb + pronoun (+ adverbial particle or adjective)* pattern, such as *hit it* or *go it alone*, and focuses on the pronoun in this pattern.

In the narrow sense of the word, these verbal phrasemes are not idioms (Croft 1986), or at least not “pure idioms” (Cowie 1994). An idiom is semantically non-compositional and morphologically inflexible. The verbal phrasemes under study do form semantic units and are more than just collocations, but, as the present article will show, they allow for a partly compositional analysis. In addition, although *go it alone*, for instance, cannot be altered in any way, most of the phrasemes have to compete with other forms – for instance, *hit it / hit the road*. Consequently, they are less idioms than constructions, that is, units of syntactic representation that are not just the combination of the isolated meanings of their components, but which have their own syntactic and semantic properties (Croft and Cruse [2004: 237], Fried and Östman [2004: 12]). From here on, therefore, they will be termed “verbal constructions”, in a narrow acception of the word (Fried and Östman [2004: 1]), or “phrasemes”.

In order to allow for reliable analyses and statistics, the study is based on a corpus made up of all the lexicalised constructions showing a *verb + pronoun (+ adverbial particle or adjective)* pattern registered in the OED (2009), with the addition of data collected from Svartengren (1927) and Gardelle (2006) for nonstandard or very informal English. This yields a total of 62 different phrasemes.

What is well established today about the objective personal pronoun in verbal constructions is that it does not have an identifiable referent in context; for instance, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1481) state that “*it* appears with no identifiable meaning in a large number of generally colloquial idioms”. Hence a clear-cut contrast between the following utterances:

(1) She said she was going to pack her bag and leave it in the entrance.

(2) She said she was going to pack her bag and beat it back to Tennessee.

(1) is a prototypical case of anaphora in a free sequence: the pronoun *it* is co-referential with its textual antecedent *her bag* and gives access to a salient, clearly identifiable referent. In (2), on the other hand, *beat it* is a verbal construction, the whole of which denotes the idea of leaving. The pronoun *it* still appears to have an element of referentiality there: it is possible to substitute a full NP for it (*beat the road, beat her way*). It does not have an antecedent, however, and cannot be replaced *freely* by an NP: **beat the way, *beat her route*, for instance, are impossible. Moreover, when using the pronoun, the speaker may not have thought out the referent precisely as being the *way* back. In some constructions, as in (3), it is even totally impossible to substitute any NP for the pronoun:

(3) Defence sources told the Jerusalem Post they were considering going it alone in a strike on Iran. It would be ungrammatical, for instance, to use **going the project alone* or **going their way alone*. It should be added that even when a full NP can be substituted for the pronoun, the NP and the pronoun are not simply co-referential. For example, while the phrase *whoop her up* shows a singular pronoun, the only full NP that can be substituted is plural: *whoop things up*. Even in the case of *beat it / beat one's way*, the OED indicates that the two constructions are not simply synonymous, but that they carry different connotations: *beat one's way* is used especially for someone travelling “by illicit means”.

These few examples raise several questions. First, from a syntactic point of view, (3) stands out, in that while it has a typically intransitive verb, it shows a personal pronoun in the syntactic position of direct object. This is not an isolated case, although it does not appear to have been noted in previous studies: it concerns 24 constructions out of the 62 under study. This capacity of some syntactic patterns to override the individual argument structures of verbs is not restricted to verbal constructions; it is also the case with some resultative structures, such as *he sang the baby to sleep*, or in isolated patterns such as *look me in the face*. But why does the *verb + object* pattern prevail in no less than 24 verbal constructions? Why does it concern only the *verb + pronoun* pattern, and not verbal phrasemes with full NPs? Is the personal pronoun a true direct object there? Finally, are there any constraints on this overriding, or could any intransitive verb potentially enter the pattern one day?

A closer look at the morphology of the pronoun in verbal constructions also raises several questions. First, as the few examples given so far show, it is always a personal pronoun — and not a demonstrative, for instance. This fact, which has been taken for granted in studies, needs to be accounted for: why is the procedural information coded by a personal pronoun more adapted to verbal constructions than that of a demonstrative? Another issue is that of pronominal gender. All the examples given in the OED show the neuter; but in nonstandard American and Canadian English, at least 5 verbal constructions show an alternation between the neuter and the feminine: *hit it/her up* (get started), *whoop it/her up* (keep up the excitement, for instance at a party), *touch it/her off* (fire a weapon), *get it/her made* (succeed in life), all of which were found in authentic utterances, and *go it/her alone* (the feminine was found in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* [1939: 443]). Such alternations confirm that the pronoun is still felt to be somewhat referential: in those varieties of English, the feminine is never used for dummy pronouns, for example in extraposed constructions or cleft structures¹. The alternations also raise the question of the criterion for gender use in those constructions: is it similar to “free” uses of the pronoun?

In order to answer these questions, Section 1 looks specifically into verbal constructions that display prototypically intransitive verbs, as they reveal a number of phenomena. The findings are then extended to constructions that contain prototypically transitive verbs. Section 3 addresses more theoretical considerations about the morphological characteristics of the pronoun in *verb + pronoun* constructions.

1. Verbal constructions involving prototypically intransitive verbs

Prototypically intransitive verbs, as stated in the introduction, were found in 24 different phrasemes of the corpus. They fall down into four categories:

1. verbs indicating the institution with which the event is achieved: *hotel it*, defined by the OED as ‘stay at a hotel’; similarly *inn it*, *camp it* and *pub it*. For instance one reads:

(4) Could I ask a question please. This summer will be my first time in France with the van, and I too am staying in Des Quatre Vents for my first week. How do people manage with regard to security on the sites. When you hotel it, you have safes or security boxes, but how do you store your valuables safely in a caravan when you go out for the day? Or do sites typically have safety deposit boxes that you can hire?

2. verbs expressing the means of transport thanks to which the event is achieved: *train it*, which can be glossed as “go by train”, as in (5):

(5) From Aberdeen to Edinburgh we trained it by easy stages.

Other examples include *boat it*, *bus it*, *cab it*, *coach it*, *foot it*, *oar it*, *sledge it* and *tube it*.

3. verbs expressing the attitude with which the event is achieved, for instance *lord it*, defined by the OED as “behave in a lordly manner, assume airs of grandeur”. *Lord it* is used chiefly with *over* + NP, as in the following utterance:

(6) Direct my steps according to your word, and let no iniquity lord it over me.

The other verbs of the corpus in this category are *coquet it* (now obsolete), *king it*, *queen it*, *brave it*, *flaunt it* and *trip it* (in the sense of moving lightly and nimbly).

4. other prototypically intransitive verbs: *go*, in *go it* (do something recklessly), *go it alone* (act alone) and *go it blind* (plunge into a course of action without regarding the consequences), and *sleep*, with the phrase *sleep it rough* (sleep in the street).

Most of the verbs in the first three categories are historically derived from nouns (17 out of 20), but all of them are true, well-established intransitive verbs. Their use as verbs, therefore, is not restricted to the idiomatic *verb + it* pattern.

For 22 out of the 24 constructions cited above², the *verb + it* pattern is in competition with the verb used intransitively. For instance, beside *hotel it*, one finds the verb *hotel*, as in (7):

(7) Why anyone would want to hotel is beyond me though.

The definition given by the OED is similar for the two variants: stay at a hotel. Similarly, one finds *camp Ø*, *boat Ø*, *foot Ø* (obsolete, in the sense of “move one’s foot”), *brave Ø* (now obsolete), *sleep Ø rough* and so on. This alternation between intransitive and transitive constructions raises two questions: which pattern appeared first diachronically, and what is the choice criterion? From a diachronic point of view, the occurrences collected by the OED suggest that the *verb + it* construction is more recent than the intransitive use of those verbs. For verbs in categories 1 to 3, in at least 16 cases out of 19³, the word was first used as a noun, then converted to an intransitive verb, and then used in the *verb + it* pattern. The *it* variant appeared typically about 15 to 20 years later than the intransitive use (at least in known sources): for instance, *boat Ø* is dated back to 1673, while *boat it* is first recorded in 1687⁴. The data also show that the *prototypically intransitive verb + it* pattern is not a recent one: it was used at least from the 16th century for *foot it* (1576) and *trip it* (1579), from the 17th for *boat it* (1687) and *coach it* (c. 1632), from the 19th for *bus it* (1838), *cab it* (1860) and *train it* (1888), and from the early 20th century for *tube it* (1902). It is therefore a productive pattern, which

integrates new verbs as they enter the language in the wake of technological inventions. There are no occurrences of *car (it)*, possibly because the verb *drive* already provides the meaning. As for verbs of category 4, *go it* and *go Ø* phrases are not in competition, and as the OED does not record *sleep it rough*, no comparison of the intransitive and *it* patterns is possible.

Regarding choice criteria, the two structures are so close that only 2 utterances could be found in which one could not be substituted for the other; both concern the verb *hotel* (utterances 8 and 9):

(8) (personal description) I love hoteling (**hotel*ing *it*), shopping, music, movies and poetry.

The structural parallelism alone (one word for each complement) does not explain the use of the intransitive pattern: the variant **I love hoteling it, listening to music, watching movies* is not acceptable either. Rather, *hotel*ing Ø only denotes the type of accommodation, whereas with *it*, the notion of a patient would be added – in other words, the idea of an element, even though not a clearly identified one, to which the way of achieving the event (*hotel*ing) is applied. This point of view is incompatible with the purely generic perspective of the extract, which lists a series of tastes. This utterance, therefore, is different from (8’):

(8’) When I go on holiday, I love hoteling *it*.

Here, *hotel*ing *it* is acceptable despite the generic perspective because the cotext (*when I go on holiday*) delimitates a frame for the event, so that the situation⁵ denoted by the verb (*hotel*ing) can be felt to apply to an element. *Hotel*ing Ø would have been possible as well, but would only have foregrounded the type of accommodation. In other words, *hotel*ing Ø can be glossed as “staying in hotels”, while *hotel*ing *it* is closer to “achieving (the trip) using hotels”.

The other utterance that yields a different interpretation according to which variant is used is (9):
(9) (Gary Stout) Having been to Le Mans for a few years, sleeping outside, in a tent, in a car, a caravan, I suppose a hotel is out of the question near the circuit, booking at this later date. Any ideas? Many thanks, still wet from 2001. – (reply from the administrator) Our Le Mans resident contributor, Gilles, will be along in a minute to advise. Watch this space. Why anyone would want to hotel is beyond me though.....

(9’) (...) Why anyone would want to hotel *it* is beyond me though.....

The reference would be different according to the variant used: in (9), *hotel* is the notion in general, the means of accommodation, not specifically applied to anything. Conversely, in (9’) it is applied to trips to Le Mans only; again, it is the cotext that serves to delimitate the frame within which *hotel* is felt to be applied.

It can be concluded from these few analyses, therefore, that the intransitive pattern denotes just the [situation], whereas the *verb + it* pattern denotes [situation] + [element affected]. Although that element cannot be clearly identified, the action is still felt to be applied to something. This distinction applies to all the utterances in the corpus, including those in which both variants are acceptable. For instance in (10):

(10) Well all is said and done now. Tomorrow the instance will reset. So if those few want to camp it again tonight, so be it... life and the game will still go on!

(10') Well all is said and done now. Tomorrow the instance will reset. So if those few want to camp again tonight, so be it... life and the game will still go on!

Camp it can be subdivided into [sleep under a tent] + [applied to an element] (the night), while *camp* \emptyset would only give the type of accommodation ([sleep under a tent]). Both are possible because the context again provides a delimitating frame (*tonight*), but the difference between the two variants is one of degree of foregrounding of the idea that the situation applies to an element. The same analysis applies to (11):

(11) So exhausted were the men from the effect of the previous day's ride that all trained from Winchester to Farnham.

(11') So exhausted were the men from the effect of the previous day's ride that all trained it from Winchester to Farnham.

In (11), *train* \emptyset is preferred because the focus is on the means of transportation only: *train* stands in contrast with *ride*. *Trained it* would have been possible, as *from Winchester to Farnham* delimits an element to which the mode of transport can be applied, but it would have foregrounded the idea of achieving a journey. Due to that focus, *it* would be less appropriate for (11) than it is in (12), in which the utterer details a pre-planned stage in his trip:

(12) From Aberdeen to Edinburgh we trained it by easy stages.

Here again, *from Aberdeen to Edinburgh* delimits the element that was achieved, and *train* denotes the manner. *Trained it* can be glossed as "did the journey by train", whereas *trained* \emptyset would merely have denoted "took the train".

These analyses enable to answer several questions. One concerns the syntactic function of the pronoun: can it be a direct object when it is used with a prototypically intransitive verb? The OED is rather inconclusive in that respect: indications about the verbs range from "intransitive with *it*" (for *tree it* and *trip it*), "intransitive – mostly with *it*" (e.g. *king / queen it*) to "intransitive (and constr. *to brave it*)" (*brave it*), "quasi-transitive with *it*" (*flaunt it*) and "transitive" (*hotel it*). There does not seem to be any logical criteria for such differences in the treatment of the pronoun. I would suggest rather that because *it* is felt to denote a patient, it is syntactically a direct object in all the constructions under study: the syntactic function of direct object is the one that is prototypically associated with the semantic role of patient. The phraseme therefore derives part of its semantics from what Construction Grammar calls the "argument structure construction" [_{VP} V + OBJ] (Gries 2008: 8). In that respect, *camp it*, for instance, is little different from a prototypical transitive construction such as *leave the bag*: this predicate, too, can be divided into [situation] + [element affected]. The only difference between *it* in verbal constructions and the NP in *leave the bag* is that the former is not a *prototypical* direct object; for instance, it fails the passive (**it can be camped*, **it is slept rough by people* and so on). But this restriction holds, too, for many verbal constructions with clearly transitive patterns; for

instance, *beat one's way* cannot yield **her way to Tennessee was beaten*. The constraints on direct object behaviour have to do with reference and not with syntactic function: the direct object is not an argument in verbal constructions (Kleiber 1994: 88, Simatos 1996: 78).

Let us now consider the origin of the *verb + it* pattern for prototypically intransitive verbs: what makes it powerful enough to override the individual argument realisations of those verbs? The OED suggests that the *verb + it* pattern might be derived from the proform *do it*: “There may have been some influence from *do it* as a substitute, not only for any transitive verb and its object, but for an intransitive verb of action, as in ‘he tried to swim, but could not do it’, where *it* is the action in question.” (2009, online edition, entry “it”). There is evidently a link since the proform *do it*, too, divides the event into [situation] + [element affected], as evidenced by (13):

(13) I did it — graduated nursing school 2009!

In this example, *did* indicates that there was an action and *it* instantiates the patient, in other words, the idea that the “doing” bore on something (which is then developed as *graduate nursing school 2009*). It seems unlikely, however, that the sole proform *do it* should be powerful enough to allow for the argument realisations of intransitive verbs to be overridden. Rather, I propose that the ultimate source is a more abstract one: the transitive pattern itself — in other words, the prototypical semantics associated with the syntactic function of direct object. The proform *do it* would then be just one manifestation of the semantics generated by default by the transitive pattern.

As a consequence, there are constraints on the semantics of the verbs that could theoretically enter the *verb + it* pattern. For instance, one could never find **the sea glistened it* or **she glowed it*. The denotation of the verb must contribute to the achievement of the event, as in prototypical transitive patterns, which is not the case with verbs such as *glisten* and *glow*. Conversely, it must be noted that there is an element of arbitrariness in the language: among verbs of category 1, for instance, *camp it* is less frequent than *camp*, whereas *hotel it* is more common than *hotel*, and there does not seem to be any semantic explanation in context for this difference in frequency.

We now turn to *verb + it* constructions involving prototypically transitive verbs, to see whether the findings for intransitive verbs can be extended to them.

2. Verbal constructions involving prototypically transitive verbs

The corpus shows 38 different constructions of this type. For 36 of them, the alternation is between a *verb + it* structure (as in [14]) and a *verb + NP* pattern, in which the object can be a free NP (15) or one constrained by a phraseme (16)⁶:

(14) chance it [= take risks], carry it [= win]

(15) Don't chance a general insurance broker, use a professions specialist.

(16) carry the day

Only two constructions in the corpus do not allow a free NP to be substituted for *it*: *have it away* and *have it off*, in the sense of *have sex*.

As with intransitive verbs, the *it* pattern appears to be more recent than the *verb + free complement* sequence⁷. For most, the OED shows a gap of several decades (e.g. *chance sth* 1859 / *chance it* 1870), sometimes several centuries (e.g. *fight sth* 1300 / *fight it* 1769). One verb, *whoop up*, does not show any gap (*sth* 1884, *it* 1885), but again, the findings can only be based on written sources and might therefore be unreliable.

The semantics of the verbs in these constructions are extremely varied, but as with prototypically intransitive verbs used in the *verb + it* pattern, all are dynamic predicates — for instance *chance it*, *blow it* or *push it*⁸. As regards the semantics of the construction as a whole, one difference with prototypically intransitive verbs is the frequency of polysemous phrasemes: out of the 38 *transitive vb + it* phrases in the corpus, no less than 10 (i.e. over a quarter) are or have been polysemous. More specifically, 6 have 2 possible meanings. For instance, *push it* can mean either “press one’s claim strongly” or “go too far”, while *have it away* means either “escape from prison” or “have sex”. 4 have at least 4 meanings: *hit it* (4 meanings), *make it* (4), *make it up* (4) and *have it* (6). For example, *make it up* may mean “compensate”, “make up one’s mind / agree to”, “get married” or “be reconciled”. The most polysemous phrase, *have it*, has a rather poorly informative verb, which probably enables more extensive applications and hence more polysemy.

As regards syntax, the constructions do not all show the same degree of flexibility. 32 out of the 38 can be inserted freely in a sentence, like the constructions involving prototypically intransitive verbs. For instance, *blow it* can be inserted in the past (*they blew it*), in the imperative (*don’t blow it*), after a modal auxiliary (*he will blow it*), in a question (*are we going to blow it?*), ... Only 6 belong to a larger structure that is more or less fossilized: 4 can only be used in the imperative (*come off it*, *confound it*, *damn it* and *hang it*), 1 has to be used with a negation (*push it: you shouldn’t push it*, *don’t push it*), and 1 is restricted to two constructions (*do it* conveying exasperation: *that does it / that did it*).

Turning to semantics, it remains to be determined why a speaker would use a *verb + it* construction rather than a *verb + NP* sequence with those transitive verbs. Indeed, in both cases, due to the transitive pattern, the *verb + object* sequence can be subdivided into [situation] + [element affected]. Again, the criterion is one of foregrounding. Because a personal pronoun does not give lexical information, it enables to foreground the senses of the verb, as is confirmed by a comparison between (17) and (18):

(17) Sethill, CEO of Frontier Silicon whooped up the benefits of his company's new product.

(18) (headline) Fun in the Sun – Revellers whooped it up one last time as a star-studded line-up brought the curtain down on the festival of fun that was T in the Park.

In (17), by using a free complement, the speaker indicates what is actually whooped up, which is therefore as important as the whooping up; conversely, with the *verb + it* pattern (18), all that remains

is the action (*whoop up*) and the idea that something was affected by it (*it*), thus foregrounding the action itself. This contrast applies to all the utterances in the corpus. Two other subsidiary reasons might be added for a minority of cases. One, which concerns only three phrases in the corpus, has to do with the sex taboo; hence a pronoun is used instead of an explicit NP in *make it* (for *make love*), *have it away* and *have it off* (*with sb*). The other reason is specific to the verb *fight*:

(19) The senate dispatched their ambassadors to Alaric, desiring him to give them leave to fight it with him in the open field.

While *fight* \emptyset denotes an atelic event, with no hint as to how long it is to be performed, *fight it* applies the fighting to something, yielding a telic interpretation: it can be glossed as “solve the problem by fighting”.

Now that the properties of the two types of *verb + it* constructions have been studied, a few theoretical considerations as to the morphology of the pronoun can be addressed.

3. Morphological characteristics of the personal pronouns in *verb + it* constructions

The first characteristic to be accounted for is that of class: as noted in the introduction, the objective pronouns used in verbal constructions are all personal pronouns. This constraint is related to the procedural information that they encode: following Cornish (1999: 259) and Rotgé and Lapaire (2004: 30), Gardelle (2010: 92) showed that personal pronouns are the default thematic pronouns. They merely indicate mental contact; in other words, giving the gender and number information is felt to be sufficient for the hearer to access the referent, or at least, in the case of our verbal constructions, to consider that what is being talked about is not problematic. All other pronouns carry more information: *this / that* imply an additional pointing towards the referent, the possessives add a relation to someone’s sphere, relative pronouns indicate subordination, and interrogative pronouns encode an information deficit to be filled by the addressee. Personal pronouns are therefore the most appropriate pronouns for lexicalised phrases: speakers feel that they know what they are talking about, although they cannot point where the referent is to be accessed. Within the paradigm of personal pronouns, *it* is the default form: singular is the default number, and neuter is the default gender — the label *neuter* translates as “neither one nor the other”, neither masculine nor feminine. It is therefore the form that most conveniently applies to an inanimate element which, besides, is not clearly identifiable. Interestingly, in French, for example, it is also a personal pronoun that is used in *verb + pronoun* constructions, for instance *elle l’a emporté sur son concurrent* or *il se la ramène*.

Another issue is that of gender: as stated in the introduction, because a referent is still felt to exist, gender alternation is found in some verbal constructions in nonstandard American and Canadian English. The alternation is between the neuter and the feminine, and chiefly concerns phrasemes with prototypically transitive verbs: *hit it / her up* (set off), *whoop it / her up* (maintain or arouse excitement / enthusiasm), *touch it / her off* (fire a weapon) and *get it / her made* (succeed in life). In addition to

these, Steinbeck once uses *go her alone* in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1995 [1939]), although no authentic occurrence of this construction could be found. The question is whether the criteria for gender use in those phrasemes are the same as in free uses of the personal pronoun. In nonstandard English, use of the feminine signals that the referent is raised above the prototypical set of inanimates in order to signal an emotional involvement or a particular importance of the referent to the speaker (Gardelle forthcoming). This criterion holds for verbal constructions as well; for instance in (20), one reads:

(20) [thanks to] everyone from norman wells who treated us so fine. they sure know how to whoop her up. glenda and ken from ft.good hope, as always...

The adverb *sure* signals emotional involvement. *It* would have been possible instead of *her*, but seems to bring the enthusiasm one step below. As a consequence, gender alternation is restricted to verbs whose semantics allow such added closeness on the part of the speaker, either as a result of enthusiasm, exasperation or admiration. However, the use of the feminine is restricted by language register and region of use; *her* in verbal constructions was judged typical of “uneducated Americans”, especially of southern rural areas, by American informants (Gardelle [2006: 483-489]). That is why one finds instances of *whoop it up*, with the neuter pronoun, in utterances which, like (20), contain the adverb *sure* and convey obvious enthusiasm:

(21) Can you even remember the days BK (Before Kids) when you could just do whatever you wanted and did ? And now when you have time to yourself you get stuff done (scrapbooking, cleaning, videos, etc.) ? That’s so funny... I remember I spent something like 8 hours watching biographies of Great Britain’s Royal Family, LOL... / Woohoo ! We sure know how to whoop it up, LOL ! Hugs, V.

As a conclusion, all uses of a *verb + it* pattern are motivated by a single pattern of perception of the event. That event is viewed as a situation (in the sense of what is denoted by the verb) affecting an element, although that element is not specifically identifiable. In other words, different constructions reflect different modes of perception, as evidenced by verbs such as *fight*, which license three different argument realisations: *fight* \emptyset foregrounds the sole action, *fight it* applies the action to an unidentified element, while *fight sth* presents the action and the patient as equally important.

It has been proposed here that because the transitive pattern is a fundamental one in the mapping of semantic relations, it has led to overriding of the syntactic possibilities of individual verbs, on condition that the object *it* be not clearly referential. Thus, a typically intransitive verb that licenses idiomatic *it* cannot take an NP complement (as was noted, for instance, with *go it alone*: **go the project alone*, ...). This fact would tend to suggest that the pronoun, far from being a “light” version of an NP, is in fact more fundamental in the grammar of the language than NPs. This conception of the pronoun, already put forward by Peirce (1893-1913) and, more recently, by Blanche-Benveniste et al. (1987), would need further exploration. More research is also needed to determine the extent of the influence of syntactic patterns on semantic interpretations in cases of overriding. The present study focused on intransitive verbs in phrasemes, but the phenomenon also occurs in non-lexicalised

predicates with nouns that are borrowed without lexicalised class conversion to instantiate a verbal function. For instance, in 2010 commercials in Britain, no less than two brands used the process in their slogans: “Don’t just book it. Thomas Cook it.” (Thomas Cook), and “Find it... Get it... Argos it.” (Argos).

¹ Gender alternation also occurs in some idioms with pronouns in subject position, such as *there she / it blows* in American and Canadian English, or *she/it’s apples, she/it’ll be jake* in Australian English.

² The only two exceptions in the corpus are *go it alone* and *go it blind*, which are not quasi-synonymous with *go alone* and *go blind*.

³ There are three possible exceptions:

- for *coach*, both variants are recorded around the same date (*coach* Ø 1630/ *coach it* c. 1632; .

- for *bus* and *coquet*, the *it* variant was found in older documents than the intransitive use: *bus it* 1838 / *bus* Ø 1889; *coquet it* 1701 / *coquet* Ø 1792.

It is difficult to determine, however, whether these are actually exceptions, or whether the data is restricted by the documents to which we have access today.

⁴ For *oar* and *trip*, however, the *it* variant is suggested to have appeared several centuries after the intransitive use (*oar* Ø 1616 / *oar it* 1894, *trip* Ø 1386 / *trip it* 1579).

⁵ “Situation” is meant here as what is denoted by the verb, and therefore as a hyperonym for actions, states, ..., whereas “event” is understood as what is denoted by the whole clause.

⁶ In addition, three verbs out of the 36 also license an intransitive pattern: *fight* (*fight* Ø / *fight it* / *fight sth*), *move* (*move* Ø / *move it* / *move sth*), and *make up* (*make up* Ø / *make it up* / *make sth up*, as in *make up lost ground*). For these, it is difficult to determine which construction is the initial one. According to the OED, the intransitive constructions are the oldest for *fight* (*fight* Ø c. 900, *fight sth* 1300, *fight it* 1769) and *move* (*move* Ø 1275, *move sth* 1382; *move it* is not mentioned), but not for *make up* (*make sth up* 1472, *make up* Ø 1711 and *make it up* 1860). What these data show, however, is that the *verb+ it* pattern is the most recent.

⁷ The only possible exception is *carry it* (in the sense of “win”), dated 1580 whereas the first occurrence of *carry sth* is recorded in 1607 and *carry the day* in 1685; this order might be linked to the limited sources of language use to which we have access today.

⁸ The only verb that is not truly dynamic is *have*, which merely denotes localisation; but in the context of the idioms, it implies acquiring a situation, and therefore can be considered as having a dynamic interpretation.

List of References

-
- Abel, Beate. 2003. English idioms in the first language and second language lexicon: a dual representation approach. *Second Language Research* 19. 329-358.
- Bennett, Paul. 1996. Compositionnalité et figement des locutions: étude comparative du français et de l'anglais. In Pierre Fiala, Pierre Lafon and Marie-France Piguet (eds.), *La locution, entre lexique, syntaxe et pragmatique : identification en corpus, traitement, apprentissage*, 11-17. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Blanche-Benveniste, Claire, José Deulofeu, Jean Stefanini & Karel Van der Eynde. 1987. *Pronom et syntaxe: L'approche pronominale et son application en français*. 2nd edn. Paris: SELAF.
- Burger, Harald, Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij, Peter Kühn & Neal R. Norrick. *Phraseology: An international handbook of contemporary research*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007.
- Chafe, William. 1968. Idiomaticity as an anomaly within the Chomskyan paradigm. *Foundations of Language* 4. 109-127.
- Cornish, Francis. 1999. *Anaphora, discourse and understanding*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Cowie, Anthony P. 1994. Phraseology. In R.E. Asher (ed.), *The encyclopedia of language and linguistics*, 3168-3171. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Croft, William. 1986. *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Croft, William & D. Alan Cruse. 2004. *Cognitive linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Fellbaum, Christiane (ed.). 2007. *Idioms and collocations : Corpus-based linguistic and lexicographic studies*. London: Continuum.
- Fillmore, Charles J., Paul Kay & Mary Catherine O'Connor. 1988. Regularity and idiomaticity in grammatical constructions : the case of *let alone*. *Language* 64. 501-38.
- Fried, Mirjam & Jan-Ola Östman (eds.). 2004. *Construction grammar in a cross-language perspective*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gardelle, Laure. 2006. *Le genre en anglais moderne (XVI^e siècle à nos jours) : le système des pronoms*. Paris: Paris IV-Sorbonne, doctoral dissertation.
- Gardelle, Laure. 2010. Article défini, pronoms personnels de 3^e personne et démonstratifs : approche comparée de l'accès à la référence. *Anglophonia* 26. 92-104.
- Gardelle, Laure. Forthcoming. The contribution of pronominal gender to the representation of hybrid linguistic identity. In Guignery, Vanessa (ed.), *Hybridity : forms and figures in literature and the visual arts*.
- Goldberg, Adele E. 2006. *Constructions at work: The nature of generalization in language*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Gries, Stefan Th. 2008. Phraseology and linguistic theory: a brief survey. In Sylviane Granger & Fanny Meunier (eds.), *Phraseology: an interdisciplinary perspective*, 3-25. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

-
- Huddleston, Rodney & Geoffrey K. Pullum. 2002. *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Jackendoff, Ray. 1975. Morphological and semantic regularities in the lexicon. *Language* 51. 639-671.
- Kleiber, Georges. 1994. *Anaphores et pronoms*. Paris: Duculot.
- Marantz, Alec P. 1984. *On the nature of grammatical relations*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Naciscione, Anita. 2010. *Stylistic use of phraseological units in discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Newmeyer, Frederick. 1974. The regularity of idiom behavior. *Lingua* 34:327-42.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey, Ivan A. Sag & Thomas Wasow. 1994. Idioms. *Language* 70 (3). 491-538.
- Oxford English dictionary* online edition. 2009. Oxford: Oxford UP. <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed January 2011).
- Pankhurst, Rachel. 2001. Les unités verbales polylexicales: problèmes de repérage en traitement automatique. In Tollis, Francis (ed.), *La locution et la périphrase du lexique à la grammaire*. Actes des journées d'étude sur la locution organisées à l'université de Pau les 16 et 17 octobre 1998, 55-63. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1998 [1893-1913]. *The essential Peirce: Selected philosophical writings Vol. 2*. Peirce Edition Project (ed.). Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Rotgé, Wilfrid & Jean-Rémi Lapaire. 2004. *Réussir le commentaire grammatical de textes*. Paris: Ellipses.
- Simatos, Isabelle. 1996. Référence et argumentalité du GN dans les locutions verbales. In Pierre Fiala, Pierre Lafon & Marie-France Piguet (eds.), *La locution, entre lexique, syntaxe et pragmatique : identification en corpus, traitement, apprentissage*, 77-102. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Steinbeck, John. 1995 [1939]. *The grapes of wrath*. London: Mandarin.
- Svartengren, T. Hilding. 1927. The feminine gender for inanimate things in Anglo-American. *American Speech* 3. 83-113.