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## A Cognitive Semantic Analysis of the Result State in the English Conative Construction \*

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キーワード：English conative construction, English preposition *at*, result state

本稿では、動詞の目的語の位置に前置詞 *at* 句を従える英語の動能構文 ([S [V [at NP]]) が有する複雑な意味について、動能構文が表す結果状態を認知意味論的視点から分析することで、入り組んだ意味現象がなぜ生じているのかを議論する。

動能構文が表す意味は多様である。*John shot at the elephant* で撃つという行為が完了していないことを指す場合もあれば、撃つ行為が成功していることを表す場合もある。*Margaret cut at the bread* では、切るという行為がなされていることを前提にしつつも、思ったようには切れなかった状況を描写することができる。さらに *The cat scratched at the door* では、音を立てて誰かの注意を惹きつけようとして、繰り返し引っ掻くという行為がなされている状況を表すこともできる。このように動能構文の意味は複雑な広がりを見せる。

しかしながら、動能構文が有するこれらの複雑な意味がなぜ生じているのかを明らかにした研究は、管見の限りあまり見当たらない。先行研究の多くは動能構文に使用可能な動詞の分類とその説明に終始している。

そこで本稿では、動能構文がどのような結果状態を表すのかを分析して、動能構文の意味の広がり方を考察する。まず、先行研究では動能構文と共起できる動詞が限定的であるとされているものの、動能構文は実際にはより広い範囲で使用可能であることを確認する。その理由は、動能構文の意味要素として挙げられている「接触 (contact)」の概念を拓げることで、動作の向かう目標を表す接触前の段階から接触後の段階までを意味的にカバーできるようになっていることだと示す。そして前置詞 *at* が「起点 (a starting point)」と「着点 (an ending point)」の2つの点を導いていることを示し、それゆえに動能構文に動作の成功や失敗、繰り返しなどの多様な意味が生じているということを主張する。

\* 英語の動能構文が表す結果状態の認知意味論的分析 (田尾 俊輔)

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both of which are based on what we regard as a point. The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 surveys previous important studies of the English conative construction from the perspectives of verbal aspect, transitivity, and ablative / allative meanings. Additionally, based on the earlier analyses, this section presents the issue in this paper. Section 3 shows the groups of verbs that can appear in this construction and finds the importance of the semantic feature “contact.” There are some cases where the verb list can be changed depending on the result states denoted by this construction. Section 4 examines the semantic behaviors of the preposition *at* in this construction and proposes that both the starting point and the ending point that *at* indicates entail complicated meanings of this construction. Finally, Section 5 concludes the whole discussion in this paper.

## 2 Previous Analyses

This section reviews previous relevant studies of the English conative construction. We observe what kinds of verb are more suitable for this construction in terms of verbal aspect, transitivity, and the allative and ablative *at*-constructions.

### 2.1 Verbal Aspect in the English Conative Construction

Several studies have pointed out that the aspect of the verb affects the meaning of the English conative construction (Okamoto et al., 1998; Nakamoto, 1999). In particular, accomplishment and activity verbs are related to this construction. Let us compare *shot the bear* in (4a) and *shot at the bear* in (4b). According to Okamoto et al. (1998), the transitive form (4a) gives *the bear* the role of patient, a participant that is directly influenced and successfully changed by the agent doing the action.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the verb *shot* in (4a) is an accomplishment verb. On the other hand, the conative form (4b) assigns *the bear* the role of goal, which is regarded as the ending point of the agent’s action, but which is not necessarily reached or changed. Levin (1993: 42) also says that an English conative construction like (4b) describes an attempted action and does not specify whether the action is implemented. In fact, (4b) focuses on the motion or process of the action, where the verb *shot* indicates activity (cf. Okamoto et al., 1998: 13; Nakamoto, 1999: 191–197).

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<sup>2</sup> Note that the agents in (4a–b) and (5a–b) are not stated, but they could appear.

- (4) a. shot the bear<sub>patient</sub> → accomplishment, patient [+ change]  
 b. shot at the bear<sub>goal</sub> → activity, goal [ ± change] (Okamoto et al., 1998: 13)

Okamoto et al. (1998) point out that the English conative construction has another type, as shown in (5) below. The transitive form (5a) gives *the man* the role of patient, but unlike (4a), the beating action is originally activity. The conative form (5b) shows that *the man* plays the role of goal and the motion is emphasized, similar to (4b). In other words, both the verb *beat* and the verb-preposition combination *beat at* focus on the motion and repetition of beating, which is why there seems to be little semantic difference between (5a) and its corresponding conative form (5b).

- (5) a. beat the man<sub>patient</sub> → activity, patient [ ± change]  
 b. beat at the man<sub>goal</sub> → activity, goal [ ± change] (*ibid.*)

Put simply, the English conative construction makes the verbs in the construction take on the aspect of activity rather than accomplishment.

## 2.2 Transitivity in the English Conative Construction

Transitivity refers to the amount of an agent's influence on the patient. It relates to a wide range of factors, such as the number of participants (e.g., 2 or more participants / 1 participant), kinesis (i.e., action / non-action), aspect (i.e., telic / atelic), volitionality (i.e., volitional / non-volitional) and affectedness (Hopper and Thompson, 1980: 252). The higher the degree of transitivity, the more transitive the verb is.

Some studies have claimed that the degree of transitivity in the English conative construction is lower than in its corresponding transitive construction (Okamoto et al., 1998: 13; Kuno and Takami, 2017: 105). For instance, the transitive form *shot the bear* in (4a) implies that the state of *the bear* has been changed by the shooting action (that is, it should be injured), while the conative form *shot at the bear* in (4b) does not necessarily change the state of *the bear*. In this respect, (4a) has a greater impact on *the bear* and (4a) is thus more transitive than (4b). Let us look at another example in (6). Kuno and Takami (2017: 95) suggest that the transitive form (6a) should focus on the result state of *the cat* clawing *my arm* (that is, my arm should be injured), but the conative form (6b) should spotlight the clawing action to attract the speaker's attention to *the cat* itself. Therefore, in

terms of transitivity, the English conative construction is less transitive than the English transitive construction.

- (6) a. \* The cat clawed my arm, but he held back and I only suffered some superficial scratches.  
 b. The cat clawed at my arm, but he held back and I only suffered some superficial scratches. (Kuno and Takami, 2017: 95)

In addition, the English conative construction does not cooccur with verbs that are highly transitive such as *break*, which is why (7a–b) are unacceptable.

- (7) a. \* Janet broke at the bread. (Levin, 1993: 41)  
 b. \* He devoured at (/on) his lunch. (Kuno and Takami, 2017: 93)

Furthermore, the English conative construction can express the repetition of action, as seen in (5b) and the following sentence (8). Kuno and Takami (2017: 100) say that this is because the agent's influence on the prepositional object referent (cf. patient) is weak and it is necessary to repeat the action in order for the agent to get the "intended result" (cf. Goldberg, 1995: 63). In the case of (8), for instance, the cat tried to get someone's attention with its scratching action (Kuno and Takami, 2017: 96).

- (8) The cat scratched at the door. (Kuno and Takami, 2017: 96)

We should note that transitivity is related to aspect (i.e., telic / atelic), as we have already checked. Accordingly, the discussion in Section 2. 2 follows as an extension of Section 2. 1.

### 2.3 The Allative and Ablative *At*-Constructions

The English conative construction shown in such examples as (4b), (5b), (6b), (8) above, and (9) below is the allative *at*-construction. Broccias (2001) points out that the allative *at*-construction is connected with translational movement, which is construed as the emission of a force. It should be noted, however, that it can convey affectedness, as explained above in Section 2. 2, and it does not necessarily exclude verbs such as *break* that do not mainly refer to the emission of a force but designate a change of state (cf. (7) in

Section 2. 2). However, more importantly, it is suitable for verbs that specify a final configuration like *clutch* or forceful impact such as *slap* or *smash*. *Clutch* refers to simply holding something; this state is a goal. *Slap* or *smash* focuses on the means or manner of striking (with a hand / a flat object or with great force). In these cases, the notion of affectedness is not implied (cf. Broccias, 2001: 74).

- (9) Sally kicked at the wall. (Broccias, 2001: 73)

On the other hand, the English conative construction as in (10a–b) is the ablative *at*-construction. According to Broccias (2001), this construction is associated with continuous actions such as removal (= (10a)), release (= (10b)), and creation / destruction (= (11)) and contains a component indicating the movement of an entity. (10a) shows a removal case that evokes attempted movement of the prepositional object referent. The cart can move toward the horse and the original place of the cart can be empty. In a release case (10b), the agent wanted to get *his mother's* attention by the pulling action. This case implies the release of a perceptual state.

- (10) a. The horse pulled at the cart. (Broccias, 2001: 75)  
 b. The child pulled at his mother's coat, wanting to be lifted up.

(Nakamoto, 1999: 160; Broccias, 2001: 78)

Moreover, these two constructions can be incorporated in another construction like (11). In (11a), a final configuration (i.e., *the trees*) and a continuous action or state (i.e., spraying or *with some insecticide*) that can be created by the spraying action are implied. (11b) indicates transitional movement (i.e., some efforts made by the *working* action) figuratively and a continuous state of *this painting*, which seems to be spoiled or regarded as a kind of destruction (Broccias, 2001: 80).

- (11) a. Sam sprayed at the trees with some insecticide.  
 b. He was working at this painting. (Broccias, 2001: 78)

Therefore, the English conative construction can potentially indicate both the actions

denoted by the verbs and the states after the actions.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.4 Summary and Issues

In Section 2, we have seen some features to determine the semantics of the English conative construction. It is important in this construction whether an agent's action is accomplished or not, and incidentally the transitivity becomes lower than its corresponding English transitive construction. However, some cases with activity verbs show little difference between the two constructions, but refer to repetitive actions. Furthermore, the English conative construction can indicate continuous actions after an agent's action.

Here arises a major issue: Why can the English conative construction convey such a complicated set of meanings? The previous studies introduced above cannot fully explain this. Accordingly, this paper examines this problem.

## 3 Acceptability of Verbs in the English Conative Construction

This section will discuss verbs that can be used in the English conative construction. In Section 3.1, we investigate Isono's (2010) list to check the verbs suitable for this construction and then give some counterexamples to the list. Section 3.2 examines such examples and confirms that the semantic feature "contact" and its influence on the result state are key factors in the semantics of this construction.

### 3.1 Verbs in the English Conative Construction

Based on Levin's (1993: 41–42) verb classification, Isono (2010: 120) exhibits the following Table 1. Arrows and shading boxes indicate the semantic features and central meanings of each verb class, respectively. According to Isono (2010: 119), the English conative construction cannot be used if the central meaning of each verb is eliminated or backgrounded by the construction.

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<sup>3</sup> Kusayama (2010) gives a similar explanation to Broccias (2001) and names the allative *at*-construction "the goal reading" and the ablative *at*-construction "the contact reading."



Table 1: Verbs accepted / unaccepted (\*) in the English conative construction (Isono (2010: 120) based on Levin (1993: 41–42), reorganized in this paper)

Verb class	Verb Examples	motion	contact	Change of state / change of location	
Verbs of Contact by Impact	<i>beat, hit, strike</i>	←	→		
	<i>*spank, *knife</i>	←	→		
Touch	<i>*touch</i>		←	→	
Verbs of Cutting	<i>cut, chip</i>		←	→	
	<i>*carve, *chip (potatoes)</i>		←	→	
Spray / Load Verbs	<i>spray, splash</i>	←		→	
	<i>*load, *cram, *stuff</i>			←	→
Verbs of Removing	<i>wipe</i>		←	→	
	<i>*trim</i>		←	→	
Verbs of Ingesting	<i>nibble</i>		←	→	
	<i>*swallow</i>		←	→	
-	<i>*break</i>			←	→
-	<i>*build</i>		←	→	

The schema in Table 1 affords us some benefits. First of all, the semantic features “motion,” “contact,” and “change of state / change of location” can cover aspects of verb (i.e., activity and accomplishment), because the verb should be an activity verb if the motion is spotlighted (see also Section 2. 1). Moreover, if there is an arrow in the “change of state / change of location” column, the verb can be highly transitive. This table handles transitivity as well (see also Section 2. 2), as well as revealing continuous actions or states after an agent’s action, which are relevant to ablative *at*-construction. As for the allative *at*-construction, the feature “contact” plays an important role in determining a final configuration, because the concept goal does not exist without this feature (see also Section 2.3).

On the other hand, the analysis in Table 1 has a few crucial problems. The primary one is that Isono (2010: 119) says the central meaning of each verb is eliminated or backgrounded by the English conative construction, but the way in which this judgement is reached is not clear. For instance, *\*spank*, *\*knife* and *\*touch* are unacceptable because their central meaning “contact” is eliminated by the construction (Isono, 2010: 119). However, *cut* and *chip* are acceptable because the main feature “contact” is maintained, where the blade should make contact with a surface. There is no explanation why the

feature is not eliminated in this case. Another problem relevant to this is that there are counterexamples where \**touch* can be used in the English conative construction as in (12). (12a–b) are ablative *at*-constructions because they involve actions continuing beyond the touch, such as the removal of a stain. Meanwhile, (12c) is an allative *at*-construction because his mustache is a kind of goal of the touch.

- (12) a. He touched at his nose and then looked at the blood on his fingertips, ...  
 (Kuno and Takami, 2017: 89)
- b. He touched at his lips with a paper napkin, ... (COCA)
- c. He paused, touched at his mustache, and stared at me incredulously.  
 (Kuno and Takami, 2017: 89)

In order to expand Isono's (2010) explanation, which covers crucial aspects of the English conative construction introduced in Section 2, and offers a new proposal regarding the issue (see also Section 2. 4), we should investigate the range of verbs available in the English conative construction and the reason why the verb *touch* appears in this construction as in (12).

### 3.2 The Semantic Feature "Contact" and the Result State in the English Conative Construction: A Case Study

In order to treat these problems, this section reports a case study of the verbs *kick* and *punch*. These two verbs are regarded as belonging to the same group as *beat*, *hit* and *strike* (i.e., verbs of contact by impact) in Table 1.<sup>4</sup> Considering the verb class, it seems that not the ablative but the allative *at*-construction should be allowed. However, both the allative-*at* (13a) and the ablative-*at* (13b) are not problematic at all. Kusayama (2010: 126) points out that not only the characteristics of the verbs but also the contexts and socially accepted common sense are involved in these judgements. More concretely, it is probable that the agent's purpose of (13a) is to make contact with the ball,<sup>5</sup> while in (13b) it is likely that the agent intended to achieve something or express his / her feeling by means of a touch to the door.<sup>6</sup> That is, it is possible that (13b) has other intentions related to the

<sup>4</sup> More accurately, *punch* is classified into another group called "swat verbs." This group can be used in the English conative construction, and it constitutes a subclass of "verbs of contact by impact" (Levin, 1993: 41).

<sup>5</sup> Note that, however, it does not matter whether the agent succeeded in touching the ball.

<sup>6</sup> The verb-preposition combination *kick on* can also convey the same meaning as (13b). Examples are as

kicking action, which are linked with the ablative *at*-construction.

- (13) a. He kicked at the ball.  
 b. He kicked at the door. (Kusayama, 2010: 126)

Another ablative-*at* example is presented in (14) below, which shows a different purpose (i.e., *looked out over the field*) after the kicking action. The agent (repeatedly but possibly absent-mindedly) kicked the snow, and it enabled him to see the surface of the field.

- (14) He kicked at the snow with the toe of one boot and looked out over the field.  
 (COCA)

The verb *punch* can be used as well in both the allative *at*-construction (15a) and the ablative-*at* one (15b). In (15a), the agent (i.e., *the teen*) tried to give a series of kicks and punches with the main purpose of reaching the prepositional object referent (i.e., *the officers*). On the other hand, (15b) tells us that the intention of punching is to suppress the agent's anger and aggression.

- (15) a. Wegner explained in his police statement that he put Abrams on the ground with a leg sweep, but the teen continued to kick and punch at the officers.  
 (COCA)  
 b. ... because of exhaustion I became so aggressive toward the children that I locked myself in the bathroom and punched at a crumpled-up towel or else I would have beaten up the children. (COCA)

Table 1 shows that the verb cluster *beat*, *hit* and *strike* (including *kick* and *punch*) covers the first two semantic features, "motion" and "contact." However, the examples in (13b), (14), and (15b) indicate the succeeding feature "change of state / change of location," a kind of result state.<sup>7</sup> It is true that these result states do not necessarily

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follows: (i) *I hated the way he always kicked on the door to announce his arrival ...* / (ii) *I made my way up to the cockpit and kicked on the door, and Charlie Stewart, our flight engineer, opened it* (both (i) and (ii) are cited from COCA). These kicking actions were done to make sounds. Other similar verbs such as *knock* give similar examples: (iii) *I knocked at the door* (Saito, 2015: 496).

<sup>7</sup> The term "result state" seems awkward because it usually refers to a change of scale or degree. This could be called a "result event" as well.

directly pertain to the prepositional object referent, but it can be said that they stem from the effects that the prepositional object referent brings. Thus, the arrow in Table 1 potentially extends to the right end of the table. Moreover, these changes assume success in a “contact.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the feature “contact” is also important in the allative *at*-construction, as discussed in Section 3. 1. Here, the “contact” is seen as a final configuration or a goal, and the result state can possibly be an intended one for the agents. For instance, shooting at something involves a goal for the bullet, and the question is whether the bullet reaches the goal. Therefore, the semantic characteristic “contact” is key to the meanings of the English conative construction.

Now, let us look back at the *touch at* sentences in (12). (12a) and (12b) imply other purposes such as looking at the blood on his fingertips or making the lips clean, which are associated with the ablative *at*-construction. In (12c), it is somewhat difficult to find other intentions, but (12c) expresses a slight touch on the mustache, which can be seen as a final configuration in the allative *at*-construction. Accordingly, it is more reasonable to propose that the English conative construction extends the coverage from “motion” to “change of state / change of location” in Table 1 and that this construction can adjust the meanings of verbs than to say that the construction needs verbs whose meanings suit the construction itself.<sup>9</sup> As a matter of course, highly transitive verbs (for instance, *break*) are unlikely to be influenced by the construction, but this is not a counterargument to the proposal above. The question in the last part of Section 3. 1 has been tackled.

#### 4 The Preposition *At* in the English Conative Construction

In the last section, we checked the verbs used in the English conative construction and argued that this construction has broad meanings from “motion” to “change of state / change of location.” This section discusses why the construction has such a complex range of meanings from the perspective of the preposition *at*, which is the main issue in this paper.

Many previous studies have argued that the central meaning of *at* is a “point,” as (16a–c) illustrate (Herskovits, 1986: 128; Isono, 2010: 116; Ando, 2012: 12). Places such as *the post-office* and *school* in (16a–b) are construed as a point. A short period can also be

<sup>8</sup> Kusayama (2010: 126) also refers to the premise of “contact” in (13b).

<sup>9</sup> The discussion here can be more explored from the perspective of Construction Grammar (for example, Goldberg (1995)).

regarded as a point in (16c).

- (16) a. Julie is at the post-office. (Herskovits, 1986: 128)  
 b. He met her at school. (Isono, 2010: 116)  
 c. She will have arrived in France at the end of June. (Ando, 2012: 13)

Unfortunately, only describing a prepositional object referent as a point is not sufficient to adequately explain the semantics of the English conative construction. Taking into account the discussion in Sections 2–3, it is more reasonable to propose that the point of *at* is one of the following two types: a starting point or an ending point.<sup>10</sup>

The ending point is easy to understand, as it indicates a final configuration or a goal<sup>11</sup> (= (17a–b), i.e., allative *at*-construction). It also points to the result state itself, which can trigger continuous actions or states (= (18a–c), i.e., ablative *at*-construction).

- (17) a. John shot at the elephant. (= (1a))  
 b. He paused, touched at his mustache, and stared at me incredulously. (= (12c))  
 (18) a. Margaret cut at the bread. (= (2a))  
 b. He nibbled at (/on) a piece of raw carrot. (= (3a))  
 c. The cat scratched at the door. (= (8))

On the other hand, regarding the starting point, *at* can refer to causal incidents in (19). (19a–c) are different expressions, but the contents of the *at*-phrases explain why the agents did the actions denoted in main clauses (i.e., *the man was sent for* in (19a), *she wept* in (19b), and *he was astonished* in (19c)).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the *at*-phrases act as starting points of the causal actions.

- (19) a. The man was sent for at my request. (Saito, 2015: 487)  
 b. She wept at the sad news. (Saito, 2015: 488)

<sup>10</sup> Isono (2010: 116) states that the preposition *at* expresses a point but not a path. However, considering that a path has a starting point and an ending point, they can constitute an imaginary path. *At* seems to play a similar role to the prepositions *from* and *to*.

<sup>11</sup> Note that the success or the failure of the actions directed toward the object referent denoted by the ending point are both possible. However, (17b) seems to be successful because the mustache is a part of the agent's body and it is rather difficult to suppose a failure in touching it (cf. Kuno and Takami, 2017: 90).

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, in (19b–c), the agents perceived or looked at the object referent (i.e., *the news*) before their actions, which can also be regarded as an ending point.

- c. He was astonished at the news. (*ibid.*)

This starting-point role of *at* is also taken in English conative constructions (20) below.

- (20) a. The horse pulled at the cart. (= (10a))  
 b. Margaret cut at the bread. (= (18a))  
 c. The cat scratched at the door. (= (18c))  
 d. Sam sprayed at the trees with some insecticide. (= (11a))  
 e. John shot at the elephant. (= (17a))

The *at*-phrase in the ablative-*at* sentence (20a) indicates the current position of the cart and that it moved under the agent's pulling action.<sup>13</sup> In the ablative-*at* cases (20b–c), the agents performed a cutting or a scratching action and checked the result states. In particular, the agent in (20c) might try to make sounds to get someone's attention. If the states were not their intended ones, then they tried to do the same actions. The meanings such as cutting not in a good way or the repetition of scratching are then incidental. More interestingly, in the allative-*at* and ablative-*at* expression (20d), which assumes some period for trees to be coated with insecticide, the agent's repetitive actions of spraying and checking the result state are emphasized. When we consider the starting point of *at* in this way, we see that in the allative-*at* sentence (20e), the *at*-phrase implies that the elephant can be uninjured in the result state, and that in this case the agent might have tried the shooting action again. That is to say, the situations implied by the *at*-phrases can lead to the next actions or states in the English conative construction in the almost same way as in (19).

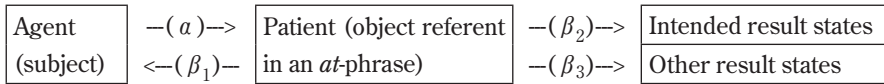
The discussion above is schematized as (21) in the light of Langacker's (1990) action chain. The dotted arrow ( $\alpha$ ) means an ending point or a goal of the agent's action (i.e., the allative *at*-construction) such as (20e), while the dotted arrows ( $\beta_1$ ), ( $\beta_2$ ), and ( $\beta_3$ ) show the starting points or triggers for continuous actions or states (i.e., the ablative *at*-construction) as in (20a–d). ( $\beta_1$ ) causes repetitive actions, which can also be applied to the allative-*at* case (20e), and ( $\beta_2$ ) leads to the intended purposes or result states as in (20a).<sup>14</sup> As for ( $\beta_1$ ), the situation of the patient, particularly failure in the action, can afford

<sup>13</sup> Note that (20a) could be used if the cart does not move (cf. Isono, 2010: 117).

<sup>14</sup> In the case of (20c), when the cat succeeds in getting someone's attention, it accomplishes the intended

the agent an opportunity to perform the same action again. The remaining arrow ( $\beta_3$ ) indicates other result states, cutting not in an intended way, etc., which are exemplified in (20b).

(21) A schematization of the semantics of the English conative construction



In both the allative and the ablative *at*-constructions, the main focus is on ( $a$ ) because it is important whether the agent reaches or influences the patient (i.e., whether contact is achieved). Additionally, ( $\beta_2$ ) is evoked when the action is done well, and ( $\beta_1$ ) applies when the agent perceives the failure of the action. Furthermore, in the ablative *at*-construction, the flow ( $\beta_3$ ) to another result state is also possible. Compared with the English transitive construction, which typically focuses on affectedness of the object referent, the arrows ( $\beta_1$ ) and ( $\beta_3$ ) are characteristic of the English conative construction.

In brief, the semantics of the preposition *at* in the English conative construction consists of both a starting point and an ending point. This is an answer to the question why the English conative construction can convey such a complicated range of meanings.

## 5 Conclusion and Prospects

This paper concludes that the preposition *at* introduces both a starting point and an ending point to the English conative construction, and the construal of these points gives rise to the complicated range of meanings shown in the diagram (21). This discussion and schematization need to be elaborated in the future studies. It is also necessary to examine what kinds of purposes or result states render the English conative construction more acceptable.

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