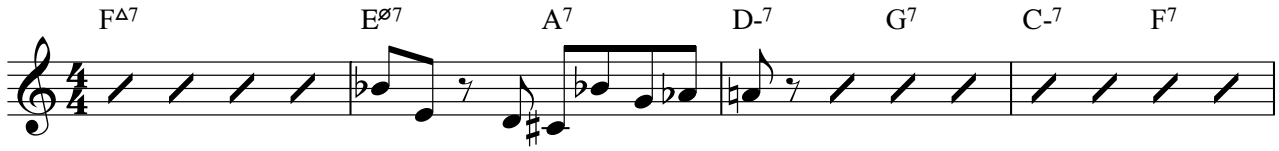
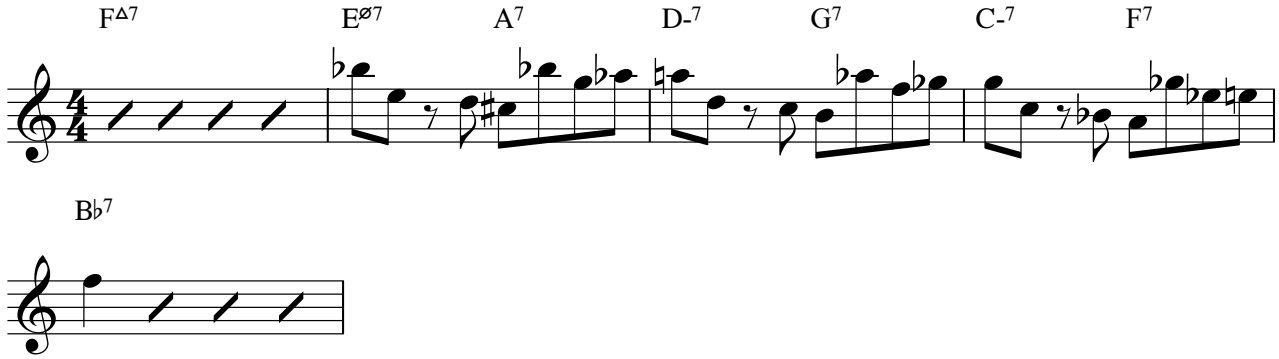
What I mean by that is: if I just learn the notes of a lick, and then plug it in exactly the same way chorus after chorus, I will sound like I'm reading a script off a teleprompter, rather than conversing freely in a language.

Let's use the phrase we learned from Charlie Parker as an example. Here it is again, with the changes that follow it written in:

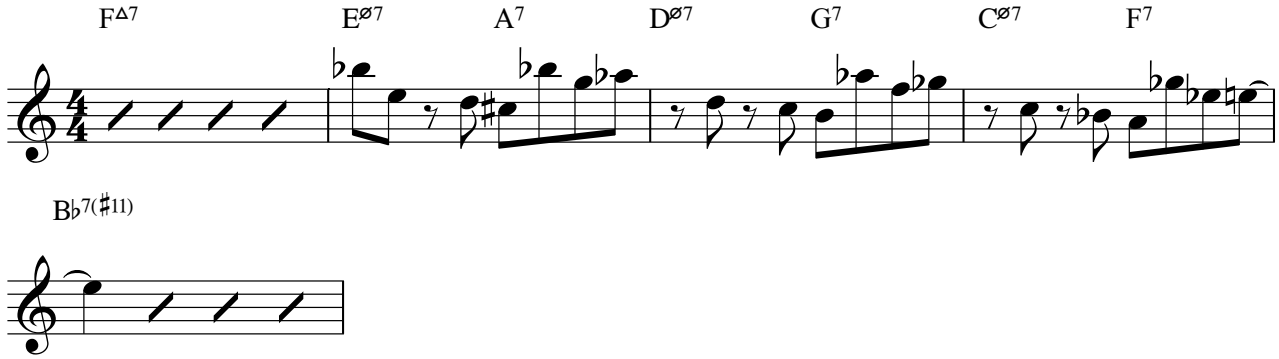


See how the changes after the second bar are following a pattern? It's II-V's going down in whole steps. The D-7 and C-7 chords are not half diminished, but that's ok. We're improvising, so we can make some decisions about that on the fly.

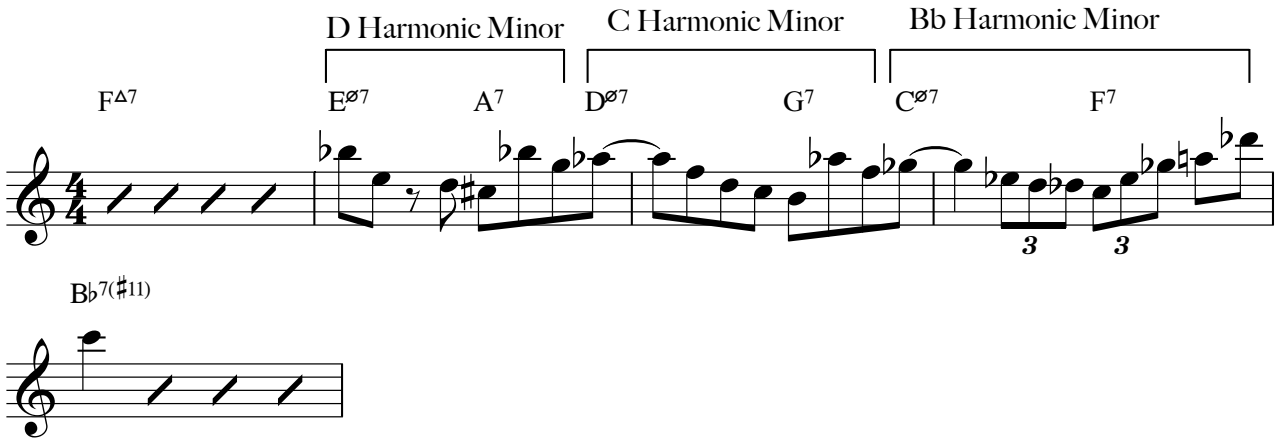
If I take Parker's lick and transpose it for the next two bars, adjusting it for the natural 5th on the D-7 and C-7, it looks like this:



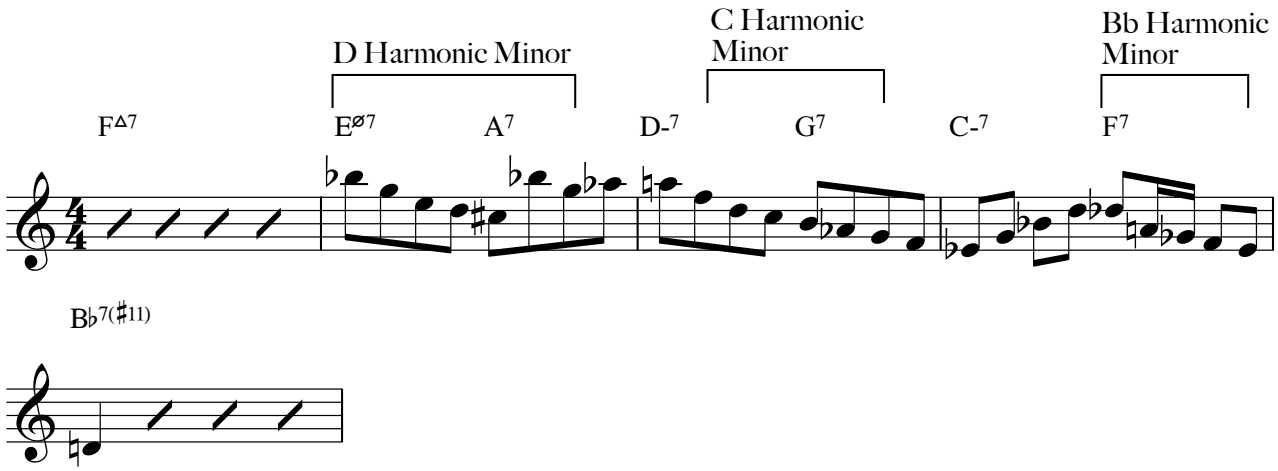
Try it. It sounds good, and the first time you play it, it will sound pretty smooth, like you have command of the changes. But if you play it again the same way on the second A section, it'll sound like something you've worked out over the changes, not like something you're imagining and pulling off in real time. You could be creative with the harmony, and make the minor 7ths into half diminished chords, like this:



Now you're working with the idea and making it your own, which is good, but if you leave it there, you'll be stuck with playing variations on a group of notes. That's where understanding the underlying harmony comes in handy. If you know that the lick is embedded in the harmonic minor scale, you can use that to widen your possibilities.



And here's one more iteration using Parker's idea as a starting point and making up my own set of lines.



Get the idea? If I can be clear, and find lines that sound good, I can improvise with more than just notes—I can create numerous variations on a simple idea. To return to the language analogy, I know that I need words (licks) to make sentences (lines), and I know that certain words are frequently used. Just because they're used a lot doesn't mean I should avoid them. What I want to do is use the words I know to make interesting sentences. In conversation we speak naturally about our thoughts and feelings in the moment. We don't make up sentences in advance and then repeat them verbatim. Same thing with the language of jazz.