A Study of Lexical Change of Word Meaning under the ECM

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Abstract

The changes of word-meaning can be classified into five categories: expansion, contraction, degradation, elevation, and transfer. The event-domain cognitive model (ECM) is a cognitive model proposed by Wang Yin, which makes up for the shortcomings of cognitive models proposed by Langacker, Talmy, Lakoff, and others, and has strong explanatory power. Applying ECM for the explanation of word-meaning changes, we can have a better understanding of the classification of word-meaning changes and the word itself. Besides, we can also figure out the relationships between different classifications of word-meaning changes, which enables us to understand the changes at multiple levels.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

ECM, Lexical Change of Word Meaning

1. Introduction

An important assumption of cognitive semantics is that conception is embodied. The basic idea is that our physical experience of being and acting in the world—of perceiving the environment, moving our bodies, exerting and experiencing force, and so on—underlie the formation of our basic conceptual structures which we then use to organize thought across a range of more abstract domains (Saeed, 2016: 358) [1]. Language, as one of the cognitive activities, is also the same. With the development and advancement of human society, people's daily experiences have undergone tremendous changes, and language, as the carrier of thought expression, inevitably changes with it. Among the elements of language, vocabulary changes the fastest and most significantly, as seen in the creation of

new words, the disappearance of old words, the borrowing of foreign words, and the addition of new meanings to old words (Gao, 2013) [2].

Wang Yin summarizes five types of word-meaning changes in his "Cognitive Linguistics": expansion, contraction, degradation, elevation, and transfer, in which the theory of Event-Domain Cognitive Model (ECM) is used for explanation (Wang, 2005) [3]. However, he did not provide a detailed analysis of the examples in the book. Although other scholars later made exhaustive analyses of some of these changes, these analyses are relatively isolated. Guo (2009) [4] discussed the expansion, contraction and transfer of the changes in word meaning under ECM, without taking into account degradation and elevation. Gao (2013 [2], 2014 [5]) respectively elucidated the metaphorical and metonymical transfers of word-meaning changes and both the elevation and degradation of different kinds of words in her two works, in which contraction and expansion were not considered.

This paper tries to give a systematical and comprehensive investigation of these five classifications as well as the relationship between them from the perspective of ECM, which may generate a clearer print of how this model works in the process of word-meaning changes.

First, the theory of the Event-Domain Cognitive Model (ECM) will be introduced, then each change will be elucidated under ECM, and last, we will see the relationship between them from ECM.

2. Event-Domain Cognitive Model (ECM)

It's believed that people experience and understand the world in units of "event domains", which are stored as knowledge blocks in their brains. Based on the experience and understanding of numerous specific events, people gradually generalize the abstract concept of events that underpin the various expressions in language. In ECM, a basic event domain EVENT (abbreviated as E) mainly includes two core elements: Action and Being, which constitute the first level of the event domain. An action, including dynamic and static actions, is composed of many sub-actions or sub-actions (such as A1, A2 ... An in Figure 1). A Being, including people, objects, tools and other entities, as well as abstract or virtual concepts, is composed of many individuals (such as B1, B2 ... Bn in the figure). Countless sub-actions and sub-beings constitute the second level. An action or being also have many typical characteristic or classificatory information D or C, which constitutes the third level. Compared with previous cognitive models, ECM takes into account both linear and hierarchical analysis, dynamic and static analysis, and not only explains the cause of basic syntactic construction but also strives to provide a unified explanation for language lexicalization, morphology, semantics, communication, etc.

3. Analysis of Word-Meaning Change in ECM

3.1. Expansion

The expansion of meaning refers to the extended meaning of a word that goes
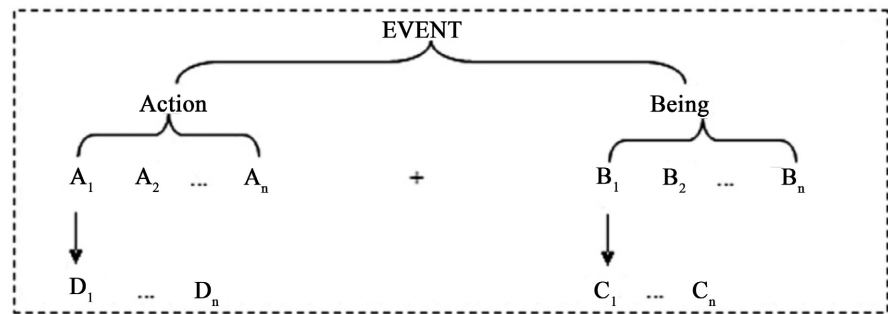
Figure 1. Event-domain cognitive model.

beyond its original definition, in which the range of meaning is expanded. Expanding the meaning of a word actually means that the meaning has changed from representing lower-level concepts to representing higher-level concepts, and the concept of representing parts has changed to represent the whole (Guo, 2009) [4]. People's cognitive scope has expanded and their cognitive perspective has shifted upwards. For example, in Figure 2, we can see that the word "salary" in English used to mean "salt money", which now extends to represent "wage (an amount of money that you earn for working,)". Other examples include "holiday," which originally referred to a holy day, a day with religious significance, but today it refers to any day on which we don't have to work. Similarly, the word "myriad" originally meant "ten thousand," but in the 19th century it began to be used as an adjective, expanding to mean "countless".

3.2. Contraction

When the meaning of a word is narrowed down from its general sense to a specific sense, it is called contraction. In other words, the original upper-level usage is transformed into lower-level usage, and the whole is shifted to represent the part. In this case, people's cognitive range becomes smaller and their cognitive perspective shifts downward. For instance, in Figure 3, we can find that the word "deer" in Old English means "any quadruped", which is narrowed to represent "deer (an animal with long legs, that eats grass, leaves, etc. and can run fast.)" itself in modern English. Other words that undergo contraction include: "Liquor", which originally referred to "any liquid", but now refers to "alcoholic beverages made by distillation or fermentation"; and the word "meat" in the 17th century referred to "food", but now only refers to "edible flesh".

These two kinds of shifts in word meaning can be summarized into a formula like Figure 4. It's not difficult to find that the shift in these two changes are vertical movements.

3.3. Degradation

The degradation of word meaning refers to the change of a word's meaning from its original "positive" or "neutral" connotation to a "negative" one, such as in English, where "silly" has degraded from "happy" to "stupid", shown as Figure 5.
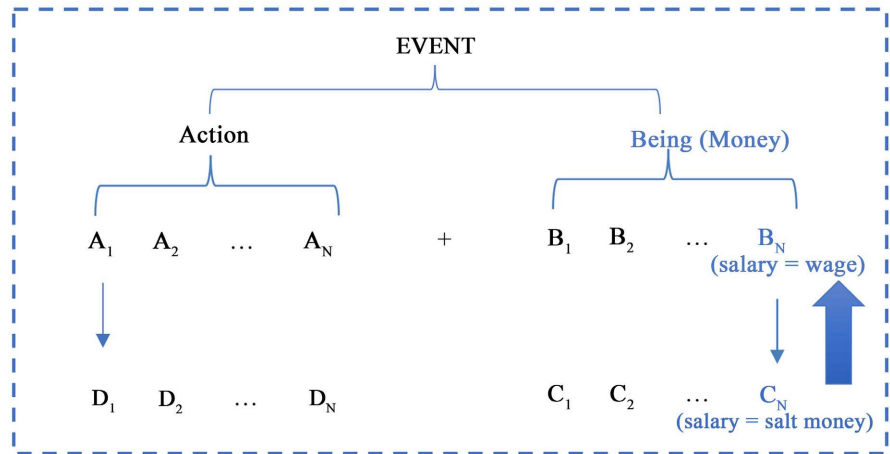
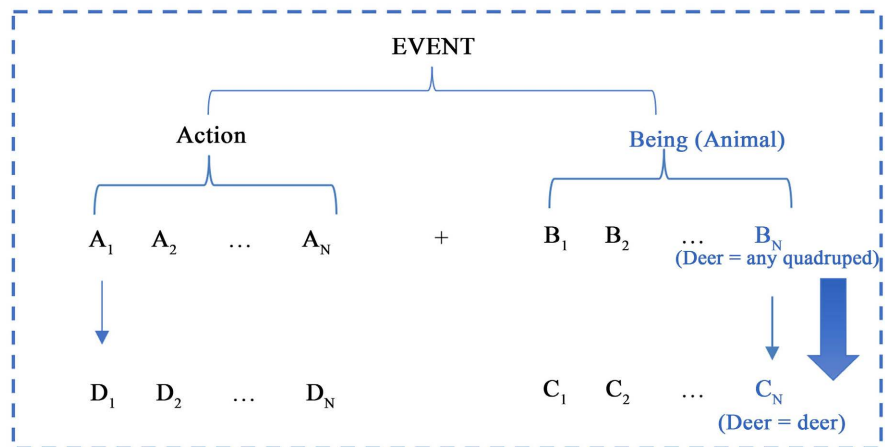**Figure 2.** Example of expansion.

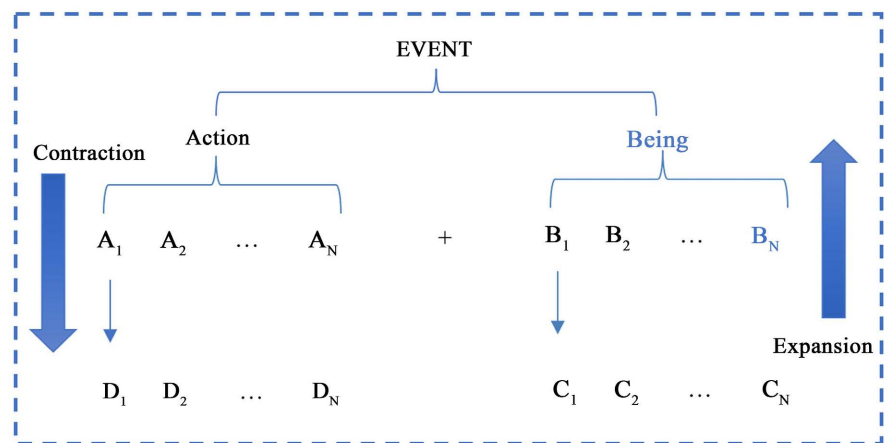**Figure 3.** Example of contraction.

Figure 4. Formula for two kinds of the shift in word meaning.

In ancient Chinese, the original meaning of "臭" was "气味(odor)", which could refer to both "香气(pleasant smells)" and "秽气(unpleasant smells)" and had a neutral connotation. However, after the Warring States period, the
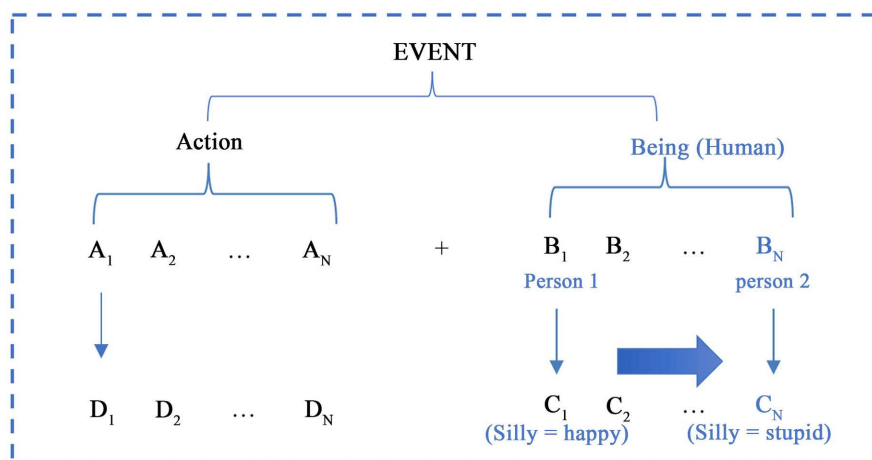
Figure 5. Example 1 of degradation.

word "臭" gradually began to be used to represent "秽气(unpleasant smells)". The change is exhibited in **Figure 6**.

3.4. Elevation

Word meaning elevation refers to words that originally had a negative or neutral connotation but have been elevated to a positive connotation. For example, the word "minister" is elevated from "servant" to "secretary (a senior member of the government who is in charge of a government department or a branch of one)". (**Figure 7**)

Or we can see the word "置" in Chinese in **Figure 8**, which had two meanings in ancient Chinese: "搁置(to put aside)" and "弃置(to abandon)". "搁置" can also be extended to mean "设立(to establish)". Nowadays, the more positive meaning of "设立" is commonly used.

Under the ECM analysis, we can find that when the meaning of a word is degraded or elevated, it may be expanded or contracted, or shifted on the same level. Both expansion and contraction are only concerned with the range of meaning and the direction of movement, without taking consideration of value judgement. On the contrary, both degradation and elevation only take the value of a word into consideration. So, the overlapping of different changes lies in different criteria for classification. Besides, we can also conclude that each kind of change is not categorical. A shift of word meaning can be classified into contraction as well as degradation as long as its meaning turns to a small range in a bad direction.

3.5. Transfer

When the meaning of a word transfers, it turns to a different direction compared with its original meaning. This kind of shift can be classified into 2 parts depending on whether the field changes:

1) if it transfers within the same semantic field, or a single entity, it can be considered a metonymical transfer;
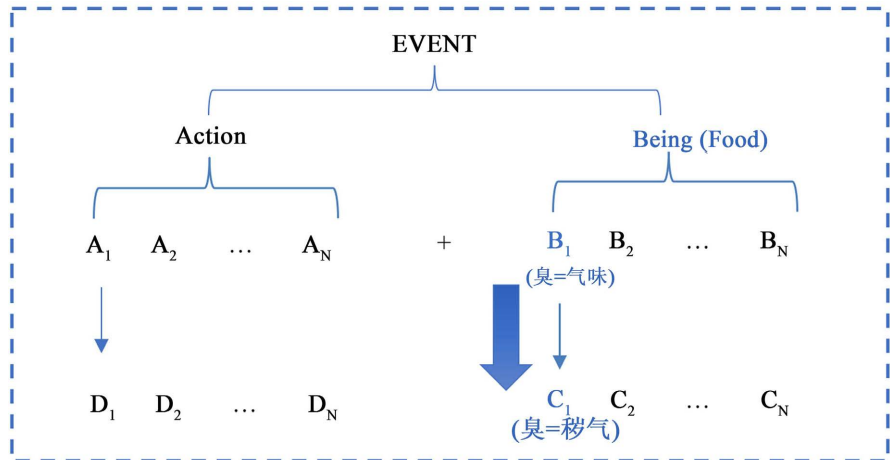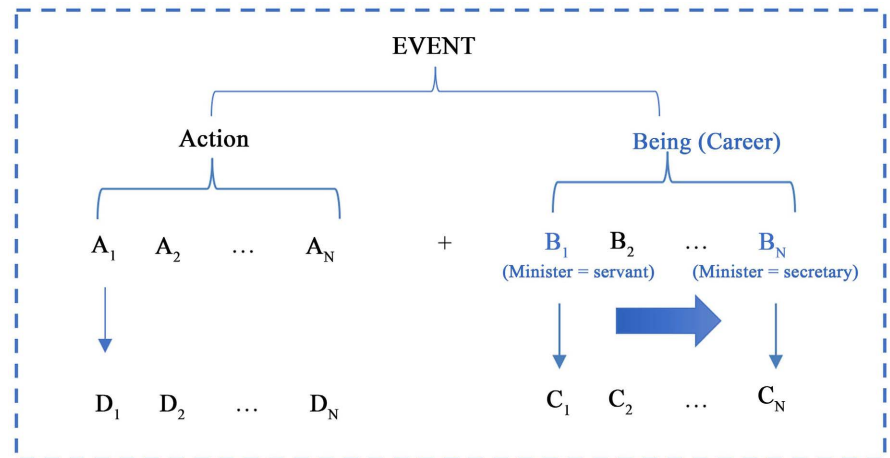
Figure 6. Example 2 of degradation.

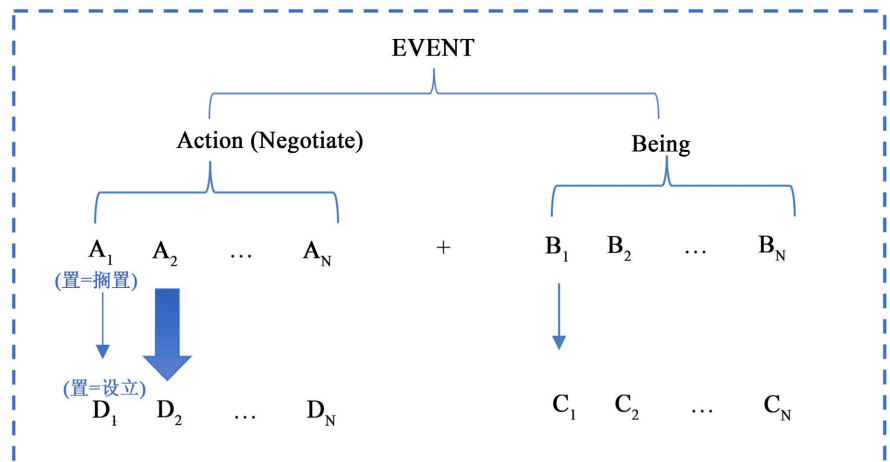**Figure 7.** Example of elevation (the word "minister").

Figure 8. Example of elevation (the word "置" in Chinese).

2) if it occurs between two semantic fields, namely two entities or concepts, it can be considered a metaphorical transfer.

Let's take the word "head" as an example. The transfer of "head" in the sentence *the university needs more clever heads* is a metonymy, in which the meaning of head changes from "the top part of the human body" to "human", as shown in Figure 9. In this case, the part "head" is used to represent the whole "human", and the shift is taking place in the same field. While in *the head of the company*, in the meaning of head transferred from "the top part of the human body" to "the leader of a group". The transfer can be seen as a metaphor. This is shown in Figure 10. The success of projection may be attributed to the same characteristic they have, namely, "the controlment". The head is able to control the whole body, while the leader is capable of taking charge of the whole group.

Actually, it's noticed that the boundary between metaphor and metonymy is very blurry here, even the same shift in meaning can be classified into both metaphor and metonymy. For instance, the word "走" originally meant "跑(run)", which is later extended to "步行(walk)". The shift in meaning of "走" can either be seen as metonymy or metaphor. When seen as a metonymy, the shift takes place in one field "运动", in which both "跑" and "步行" are sub-actions. It's the using of one part to replace another part in a whole, and the two actions have continuity. So the change from "跑" to "步行" is a metonymy in Figure 11.

But if we view "跑" and "步行" as two completely different concepts, that is, put them in different fields, the shift of "走" is a metaphor at this time, which is shown in Figure 12. So, it can be seen that the division between metaphor and metonymy has a certain relative nature.

According to the definitions of metonymical transfer and metaphorical transfer, as long as the change is occurring in the same field it can be called a metonymical transfer, then the first four changes are all included. Whether the meaning of a word is expanded or elevated, as long as the field doesn't change, the shift in meaning can be viewed as a metonymical transfer. This once again proves that these classifications are not categorical nor isolated. When describing the semantic change of a word, we can describe it from different perspectives and levels.
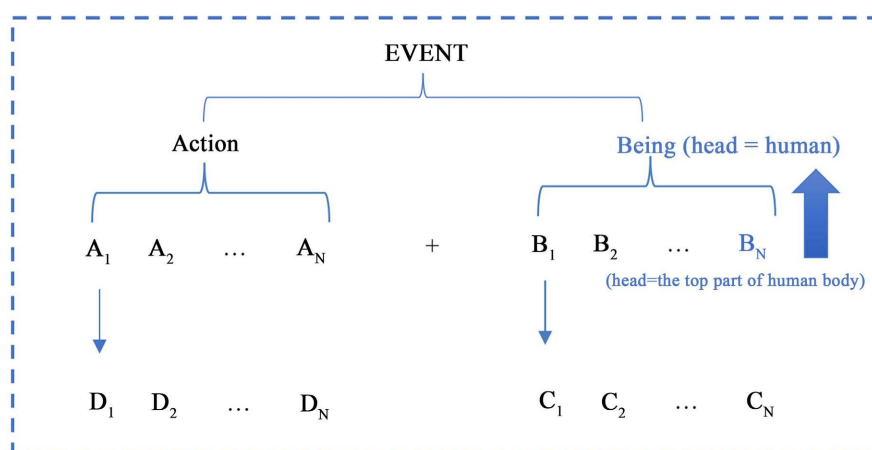
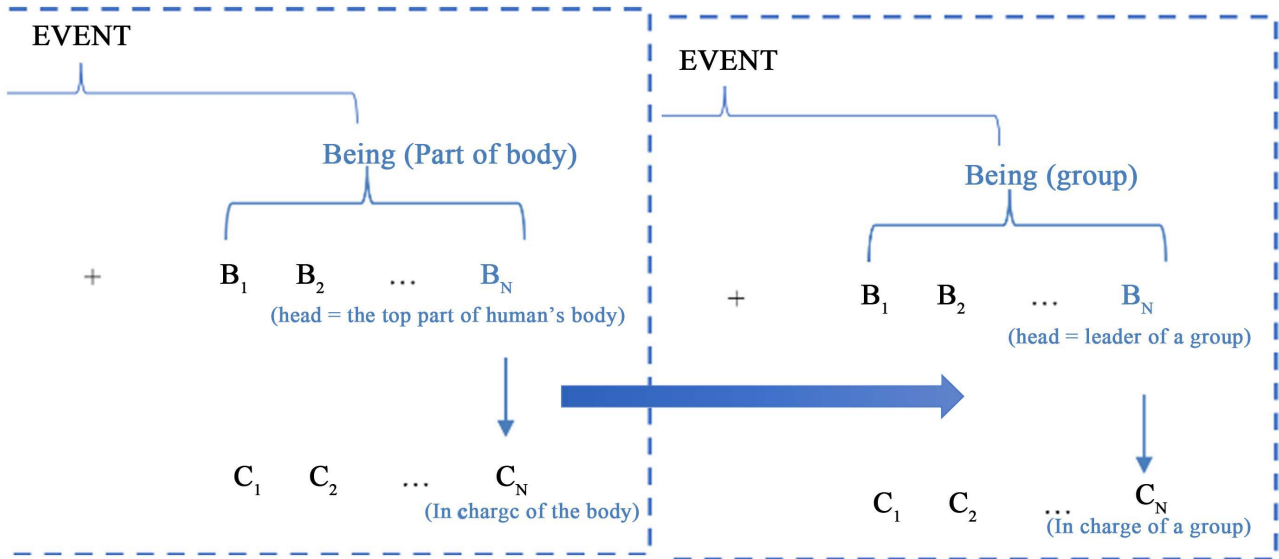

Figure 9. Example of transfer (the word "head").
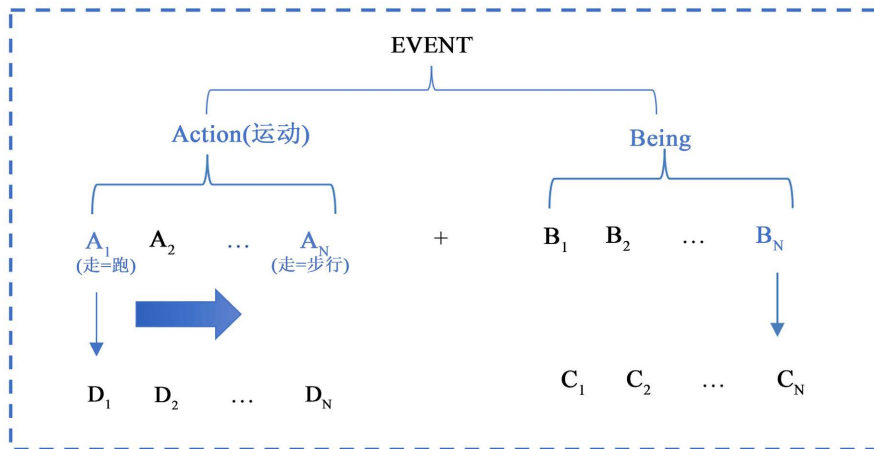
Figure 10. Example of metonymical transfer.

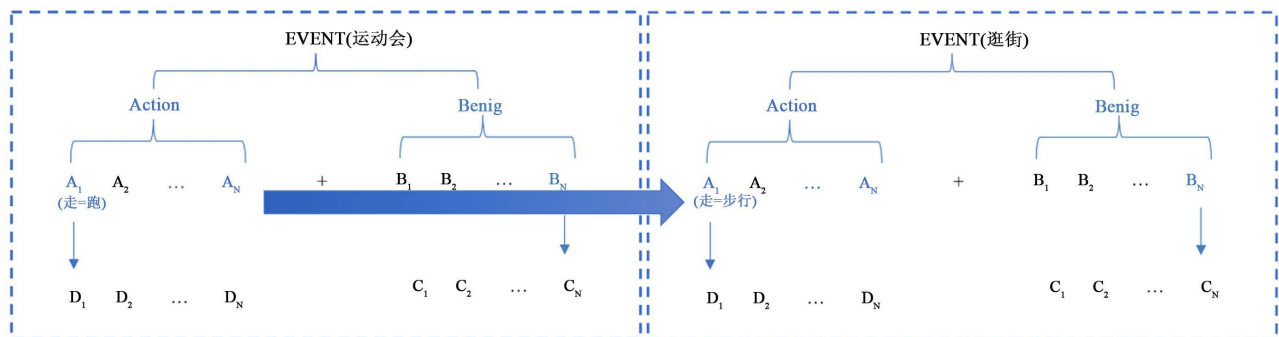**Figure 11.** Example of transfer (the word "走" in Chinese).

Figure 12. Example of metaphorical transfer.

4. Conclusions

Using the ECM for word meaning analysis, we can have a clearer view of how the meaning of a word changes in a relatively systematic way as well as a better

understanding the word meaning. And we can also see the relationships among different classifications of word-meaning changes. These classifications are not categorical, there are overlapping among changes and a shift in meaning may be classified into several kinds of changes, which render us to perceive the meaning

change of words from multiple aspects. However, there are inevitably some limitations in this paper, such as the deficiency in the type of words as well as languages considered. If possible, each change should contain all kinds of content words and more changes in different languages should be delivered.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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