

# ***A Study on the Semantics of the Sichuan Dialect Word “Ba (巴)” Based on the Cognitive Perspective***

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**Abstract:** The Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)” is widely used and has a high frequency of occurrence within the dialect area. It is characterized by its rich semantic meanings and diverse parts of speech, making it one of the most representative common words in Sichuan dialect. However, existing dialect dictionaries have issues such as incomplete definitions, unclear interpretations, and uncertain grammatical properties, which call for further careful revisions. Cognitive linguistics, one of the current research hotspots in linguistics, can fundamentally explain the intrinsic mechanisms and external manifestations of lexical semantic formation. This paper, based on the cognitive perspective and within the macro-framework of Prototype Category Theory, employs the theories of metaphor, metonymy, and image schema to conduct a micro-level analysis and clarification of the original meaning and extended meanings of the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)”. It attempts to provide cognitive reasoning for interpreting the meanings of dialect words in dictionaries, as well as to offer new perspectives and cases for exploring the semantics of dialect words.

**Keywords:** Sichuan dialect, “ba(巴)”, Prototype Category Theory, Metaphor and Metonymy, Image Schema

## **1. Introduction**

The Table of General Standard Chinese Characters released by the State Council of the People's Republic of China in late 2013 includes “ba (巴)” as a first-level general standard Chinese character. In the “The Standard for Chinese Proficiency in International Chinese Language Education” released in 2021, “ba (巴)” is listed in the fourth-level character list, indicating that it is not only a commonly used Chinese character but also an important component of Chinese language education. In the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, “ba (巴)” has six senses, three of which belong to the Sichuan dialect category. In the *Great Chinese Dictionary*, there are 17 senses of “ba (巴)”, with five of them being related to the Ba-Shu region. This demonstrates that the word “ba (巴)” is closely associated with the daily life of the people in the Sichuan dialect region, embodying vitality and regional characteristics as a morpheme.

Existing dialect dictionaries have inconsistent interpretations of the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)”. Taking the *Sichuan Dialect Dictionary* and the *Great Dictionary of Modern Chinese Dialects*

as examples, the former has seven senses for “ba (巴)”, including six verb senses and one affix sense. The latter provides 38 interpretations for “ba (巴),” with 12 of them belonging to the Sichuan dialect category, including eight verb senses, two noun senses, one preposition sense, and one affix sense. It can be seen that existing dialect dictionaries have issues with incomplete senses, unclear interpretations, and uncertain grammatical attributes for the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)”, and further careful revisions are needed.

In this paper, we combine current linguistic research trends and adopt a perspective of cognitive linguistics to analyze the original and extended meanings of the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)”. By integrating authentic language data with theoretical studies, we conduct systematic analysis to examine the interconnections between various semantic senses. The goal is to reveal the complete semantic profile of “ba (巴)” and provide valuable insights for the compilation of dialect dictionaries and the study of dialect word meanings.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Prototype Category Theory

From a cognitive perspective, categorization is a fundamental method used by humans to perceive and understand the world. It refers to the subjective process of generalizing and classifying similar objects, events, phenomena, etc., based on our experiences. This cognitive process enables us to form concepts and develop the ability to organize and make sense of the world around us. From Aristotle to Wittgenstein, over a span of more than 2,000 years, the classical theory of categories dominated the field of linguistic research in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, with the reevaluation of its theoretical foundations by cognitive scientists, traditional theories have revealed various issues. In the 1950s, Wittgenstein discovered through his study of the word “game” that there are certain categories that cannot be adequately captured by classical models. As a result, he proposed the principle of family resemblance [1]. Berlin & Kay’s research on color terms led them to a conclusion that contradicts structural linguistic theory, demonstrating that the categorization of language is inevitably influenced by human perception and cognitive factors [2]. Building upon this, psychologist Rosch conducted further investigations on color terms, elucidating that “Prototype” are a crucial mode of categorization and formally proposing the Prototype Category Theory [3]. In 1987, Lakoff proposed the Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM) in his cognitive linguistic work “Woman, Fire, and Dangerous Things,” further developing and refining the Prototype Category Theory [4].

The Prototype Category Theory suggests that within the same prototype category, individual sense members have unequal status. They represent varying degrees of typicality based on the quantity of features inherent to the category they possess. Among them, the prototype serves as the most concrete and typical representative within the category. Generally, the prototype sense member is at the center, and other sense members are arranged around this center based on their typicality in terms of family resemblance. From the prototype member to the peripheral members, there is a decreasing typicality of family resemblance. Lakoff argues that all categories in language are prototype categories, and The Prototype Category Theory provides the most reasonable explanation for semantic extension. For vocabulary, a polysemous word is a category with central and peripheral senses. The central sense, equivalent to the prototype sense, is the first sense acquired by people and represents the most primitive and fundamental sense of the linguistic sign [5]. As human society evolves and new things and concepts emerge, the central sense may no longer satisfy the linguistic needs of individuals, leading to the emergence of new senses. As a result, the semantic category of vocabulary is thus formed by continuously expanding outward around the prototype sense.

## 2.2. Metaphor and Metonymy

The Prototype Category Theory explains that the generation of polysemous words is a result of the division of central sense and the extension of peripheral senses. Metaphor and metonymy serve as the pathways for this process. In traditional linguistics, metaphor and metonymy are considered as two figures of speech, while in cognitive linguistics, they are regarded as fundamental modes of human thinking and cognitive tools, constituting the two primary ways of lexical extension.

Metaphor is a systematic projection from a concrete conceptual domain (source domain) to an abstract conceptual domain (target domain) based on the "similarity" between two different cognitive domains [6]. From a cognitive perspective, humans often start their cognition from simple and concrete objects. Once a stable understanding of an object is formed, familiar conceptual domains can be used to comprehend unfamiliar ones, thereby triggering the mechanism of metaphor. In the case of polysemous words in the Chinese language, for example, in ancient times, people referred to the repeated training of a small bird to fly as "xi (习)". Therefore, the central sense, or prototype sense, of "xi (习)" is "to fly repeatedly", which belongs to a simple and concrete conceptual domain. Over time, with social development and the need for linguistic expression, the extended meaning of "复习(review)" emerged. This is the result of people projecting the concrete conceptual domain onto the abstract conceptual domain based on the similarity between the two concepts, both involving the idea of "repetition."

Metonymy can be regarded as a cognitive mechanism parallel to metaphor, and there are evident differences between the two, which are manifested in the following three aspects. Firstly, they have different triggering factors. Unlike the "similarity" in metaphor, metonymy is based on the "proximity" of two conceptual entities in the mental space, with one entity (vehicle) providing mental access to another entity (target) [7]. Secondly, they involve different conceptual domains. Metaphor projection involves two distinct conceptual domains, typically a concrete domain and an abstract domain. In contrast, metonymy projection only occurs within the same domain. Thirdly, they have different directions of projection. Metaphor projection is fixed and unidirectional, moving from the source domain to the target domain. Metonymy projection, on the other hand, demonstrates a flexible and bidirectional projection that often enables substitutions in forms such as "part and whole," "result and cause," "person's name and occupation," or "place name and institution", etc. For example, "bread" represents "food", "pen" represents "writer", and so on.

According to cognitive linguistics, within the framework of the Prototype Category Theory, there is systematicity between the extended senses derived through metaphor and metonymy. Based on the different membership relationships of sense members, three modes can be inferred: (1) Chain mode: It begins with the prototype sense as the starting point, where each subsequent sense builds upon the preceding one. The sense members progress in the same direction, forming a chain-like structure of "A→B→C→D..." The extended senses are connected to the prototype sense but gradually weaken as the chain extends. This mode is primarily achieved through metonymy. (2) Radial mode, the mode centers around the prototype sense and extends to other sense members in multiple different directions, forming a radial structure. There is no apparent correlation between the extended sense members, but they are closely related to the prototype sense. This mode primarily achieves its manifestation through metaphor. (3) Integrated mode, the mode involves the cross-utilization of the two aforementioned modes, resulting in the simultaneous extension of multiple sense members. In the mode, both metaphor and metonymy play a collaborative role.

## 2.3. Image Schema

Ancient Greek philosophers were the first to provide interpretations of schema, considering it as fixed templates. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Kant discussed the philosophical significance of schema, viewing it as

a bridge between percepts and concepts [8]. In the 1920s and 1930s, schema was introduced into the field of psychology research. British psychologist Bartlett formally defined the theory of schema in 1932, schema is cognitive structures stored in individuals' memories, consisting of various information and experiences organized together. [9] Later, Swiss psychologist Piaget proposed the influential "Cognitive Schema Theory," emphasizing that cognition primarily originates from the interaction between the subject and the object, allowing the subject to assimilate the object into their schema through self-regulation [10]. Consequently, the Schema Theory has been widely applied in empirical studies across various disciplines.

Cognitive linguists have embraced and developed the Schema Theory. In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson combined "schema" and "image" to form "image schema," defining it as a recurring, dynamic pattern in human perceptual interaction and motor processes that provides coherence and structure to experience. Image schema serve as an intermediary link between perception and reason. The activities of human beings, such as understanding objects, acquiring experiences, and constructing knowledge all require abstract generalization based on repeated perceptual experiences, gradually forming stable image schema that are stored as cognitive models in memory. Regarding semantic analysis, image schema facilitates the transformation of abstract concepts into concrete images, providing a basis and support for understanding underlying hidden logic, and are significant for forming semantic concepts, constructing polysemous categories, and analyzing metaphor and metonymy.

### 3. Analysis of the Senses of the Sichuan Dialect Word "Ba (巴) "

The research finds that the semantic extension mode of the Sichuan dialect word "ba (巴) " belongs to the integrated mode. Starting from the prototype sense, it radiates outwards in different directions to form three senses with strong typicality, constituting the three major central categories apart from the prototype sense. The newly generated senses subsequently extend outward in a similar manner, forming a surrounding radiation structure, with a chain-link structure running through the mode. Within the framework of the Prototype Category Theory, this paper starts from the original sense of the Sichuan dialect word "ba (巴) " and utilizes image schema to explicate the formation of its three major central categories. Furthermore, it employs theories of metaphor and metonymy to elucidate the connections between various peripheral senses, aiming to reveal the complete semantic profile of "ba (巴) " and explore the cognitive rationale behind its senses.

#### 3.1. The Senses of the Sichuan Dialect Word "Ba (巴) "

The original sense, or the primitive meaning of a word, represents the earliest and fundamental understanding that individuals derive from the external world. According to the *Shuowen Jiezi*, it explains "巴, 虫也, 或曰食象蛇( 'ba (巴) ' refers to an insect or is sometimes called a snake that eats elephants)." In *Wen Shi*, Binglin Zhang further elaborates that according to the *Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, it states, "巴蛇食象, 三步而出其骨(There is a kind of snake called "ba (巴) " that is capable of devouring elephants. After swallowing an elephant, it takes three years for the snake to digest it before regurgitating the bones)," implying that the original meaning of "ba (巴) " is a snake, particularly referring to a mythical serpent capable of devouring elephants. Based on existing dialect dictionaries, Southwestern Mandarin Corpus, and representative literary and artistic works from the Ba-Shu region, and without considering exhaustiveness, the author has collected a total of 17 senses for the word "ba (巴) ", as shown in the specific table below:

Table 1: The Senses of the Sichuan Dialect Word "Ba (巴)".

Serial Number	Definition	Grammatical Properties	Example Sentences
1	The state of two objects being in close contact with each other, with no or minimal space in between.	Verb	背心大了点，不巴身。[11]
2	To paste.	Verb	你们没看见中间军乐台前巴的那张布告，不是明明写着？[12]
3	To be next to to; To lean against; To hold onto.	Verb	朱之洪巴着梯头往城外看。
4	The shriveled entity in a block-like shape.	Noun	牛肉曰牛肉巴，盐块曰盐巴，土块曰土巴。[13]
5	Pastry-based food items.	Noun	荞饼曰荞巴。
6	To subsidize	Verb	你不送礼也罢，这酒菜也舍不得巴一点儿？[14]
7	To signify emphasis.	Affix	牛把路蹶得稀巴烂。[15]
8	To implicate.	Verb	那年子我爸关进“牛棚”，张叔见我理都不理，生怕把他巴倒了。
9	To ingratiate.	Verb	要是巴结上了，顾三贡爷现正想讨小老婆哩！[16]
10	To establish closeness with...	Verb	他太凶，娃娃都不巴他。
11	To taking care of.	Verb	不巴家的婆娘，不要开腔。[17]
12	Along.	Preposition	巴到河边走，没得好远就到了。
13	To follow.	Verb	李强没得票，只有巴到电影院的老王入了场。
14	To correspond to...	Verb	说得不巴谱。[18]
15	To climb.	Verb	我费了一天人工气力，巴山越岭所为何事？
16	To network with the powerful or influential individuals.	Verb	我从不巴高枝儿。
17	To anticipate.	Verb	好久没下雨了，巴不得下场大雨。

### 3.2. The Cognitive Rationale of "Ba (巴)"

In the semantic category of the Sichuan dialect word "ba(巴)", senses 1, 12, and 15 exhibit substantial features of similarity with the prototype sense, displaying a prominent degree of typicality. They originate from the prototype sense and undergo radial extension through metaphorical means, thereby forming three central categories distinct from the prototype sense. Specifically, the emergence of sense 1 "the state of two objects being in close contact with each other, with no or minimal space in between", is based on the similarity to the crawling action of snakes. When a snake crawls, it needs to use its abdominal muscles to maintain a close and tight contact with the ground surface to carry

out movement. Sense 1 captures the similarity to a snake "moving closely in contact with the ground", triggering the metaphorical mechanism. The similarities between sense 12 "along" and 15 "to climb" with the original meaning lie in the directional aspect of snake crawling. From a horizontal perspective, snakes generally make horizontal undulations on the ground, moving forward in an "S" shape. In order to ensure the direction of movement, snakes rely on references such as riverbanks or walls to maintain "consistency of direction" with the reference. This provides cognitive rationale for the semantics of "along", resulting in the emergence of sense 12. From a vertical perspective, snakes possess excellent climbing abilities, especially Morelia, vine snakes, etc., which cleverly employ body coiling and support from ventral scales to climb vertical surfaces, enabling them to seek food and evade predators. Similarly, this gives rise to the extension of sense 15 "to climb". These aforementioned three senses originate from a relationship of similarity, projecting from the "animal domain" of the original meaning to different "action domains", facilitating the transition from noun to verb and preposition. This reflects the cognitive thinking process of metaphor.

Langacker divided image schema into trajector (TR), landmark (LM), and path, together demonstrating a certain static or dynamic asymmetrical relationship between the trajector and landmark. Among these, the trajector (TR) serves as the primary participant and the entity being located, evaluated, or described, with its spatial direction yet to be determined. The landmark is a secondary participant and serves as a reference point, providing directional reference for the trajector. The Path represents the route taken by the trajector [19]. Based on the image schema of "trajector-landmark-path," we can designate the initiator of the action of "ba (巴)" as the TR, the reference point as the LM, and the TR passes through the LM, generating the Path, thereby illustrating the image schema of the three central categories.

### 3.2.1. Central Category 1: The state of two objects being in close contact with each other, with no or minimal space in between

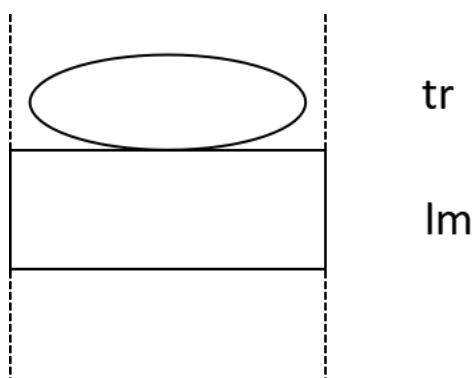


Figure 1: Illustration of the Image Schema for the Central Category 1.

The central category 1 of "ba (巴)" can be represented as a static image schema. In the image, the ellipse represents the trajector, while the rectangle represents the landmark. The starting point and endpoint of the trajector coincide, resulting in zero movement path, where it is merely fixed on the surface of the landmark. This establishes an static asymmetrical relationship with the landmark. Within this semantic category, senses 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 undergo radial extension through metaphor and metonymy.

Specifically, sense 2 "to paste", sense 3 "to be next to ; to lean against; to hold onto", and sense 4 "the shriveled entity in a block-like shape" all derive metonymically from the concept of "the state of two objects being in close contact with each other, with no or minimal space in between", and they all belong to an interchanging relationship of "cause and effect": In real life, there are various causes



that lead to "the state of two objects being in close contact with each other", including pressure, gravity, friction, adhesive force, electromagnetic force, etc. Among them, the concept of "to paste" reflects adhesive force, while the terms "to be next to; to lean against; to hold onto" convey the notion of pressure. These two aspects can be seen as substituting the cause for the effect. On the contrary, the "the shriveled entity in a block-like shape" is the result of long-term weathering, erosion, and sedimentation due to another object being tightly attached to its surface, thus using the effect to replace the cause. Both cases exemplify the cognitive thinking of metonymy. Based on sense 4, sense 5 "pastry-based food items" is a part of the "the shriveled entity in a block-like shape" and highlights the state of the part through the form of "part represents whole", also illustrating metonymical thinking.

Sense 6 "to subsidize" and sense 7 "to signify emphasis" are derived from the metaphor of "the state of two objects being in close contact with each other, with no or minimal space in between": The metaphor of sense 6 can be divided into two steps. Firstly, based on the similarity of "closeness", it projects from the concrete "action domain" to the "casting domain". At this point, the word "ba (巴)" represents "adding additional material to the casting area to avoid shrinkage or porosity defects". Secondly, based on the similarity of "compensation for inadequacy", it projects from the "casting domain" to the abstract "sociological domain", representing "subsidies or welfare". This is a typical metaphorical thinking process. Sense 7, as a suffix, is also a characteristic vocabulary of Sichuan dialect. Its usage is quite unique, often inserted as an infix in disyllabic adjectives to emphasize their meaning, such as "稀巴烂 (extremely rotten)" and "焦巴酸 (extremely sour)". In general, the maintenance of the state of "close contact" requires the continuous application of force. Sense 7 captures the semantic of "intensifying degree" and achieves cross-domain projection between different conceptual domains, reflecting metaphorical thinking.

It should be noted that sense 3 "to be next to; to lean against; to hold onto" shares various aspects of similarity with senses 8, 9, and 10, allowing for metaphorical extension on these grounds. The occurrence of actions in the series represented by sense 3, namely "to be next to; to lean against; to hold onto", signifies the "contact" between the subject and object of the action. The basic condition for triggering metaphor lies in the similarity of "contact." Based on different highlighted states, three categories of discussion can be generated: First, emphasizing the deepening degree of contact, leading to the metaphorical extension of sense 10 "establish closeness with..."; Second, emphasizing the benefit obtained by the recipient through the contact, leading to the metaphorical extension of sense 9 "to ingratiate"; and finally, emphasizing the disadvantages incurred by the recipient through the contact, leading to the metaphorical extension of sense 8 "to implicate." Overall, the three categories of relationships mentioned above are mappings from concrete "action domain" to abstract "interpersonal relationship domain" within Sense 3, illustrating metaphorical cognitive thinking. Additionally, the expression of sense 10 "intimacy" can take on various forms, with "to taking care of" being one of them, indicating that sense 11 and sense 10 exemplify the metonymical thinking of "part represents whole."

### 3.2.2. Central Category 2: Along

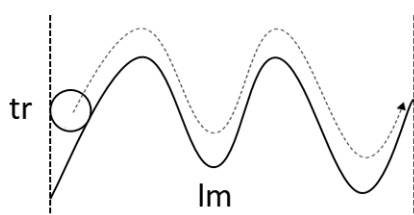


Figure 2: Illustration of the Image Schema for the Central Category 2.

The central category 2 "along" of "ba (巴)" can be illustrated as a dynamic image schema. In the schema, the circle represents the trajector, the curved solid line represents the landmark, and the dashed line with an arrow represents the trajectory of the trajector. The basic semantics can be summarized as follows: with the landmark as a reference, the object follows the situation of the landmark and undergoes or tends to undergo a certain displacement relationship. The essential requirement of "along" is the directional consistency between the subject of displacement and the reference object. By utilizing this characteristic to conceptualize the displacement of "maintaining proximity or synchronization", it can represent the related action of "following". Therefore, the metonymical extension from sense 12 to sense 13 possesses sufficient cognitive rationale. The category of "along" shares similarities with sense 14 "to correspond to...", as both emphasize "consistency" with a target. In the former, the target is the reference object, highlighting "directional consistency," while in the latter, the target can be requirements, standards, expectations, etc., emphasizing "content consistency." Thus, the mapping from a concrete "action domain" to an abstract conceptual domain represents a metaphorical extension.

### 3.2.3. Central Category 3: Climb

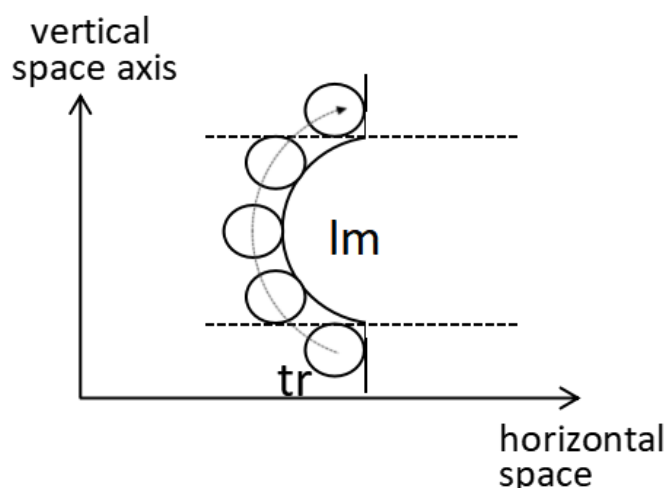


Figure 3: Illustration of the Image Schema for the Central Category 3.

The category 3 "climb" of "ba (巴)" can be illustrated as a dynamic image schema in three-dimensional space. In the schema, the horizontal and vertical axes represent the horizontal and vertical directions in three-dimensional space respectively. The circle represents the trajector, the curved solid line represents the landmark, and the dashed line with an arrow represents the trajectory of the trajector. According to the illustration, it is evident that the category of "climb" can be represented as follows: With a vertical or relatively vertical landmark as a reference, the trajector moves along the landmark from bottom to top, creating a specific displacement path. "Climb" represents an action of upward (forward) movement. Sense 16 "to network with the powerful or influential individuals" and sense 17 "to anticipate" share different aspects of similarity with it. The former can represent the upward movement of the subject in terms of status, power and benefits etc., projecting from the concrete "action domain" to abstract "interpersonal relationship domain". The latter can represent the forward movement of the subject in terms of goals, outcomes and intentions etc., projecting from the concrete "action domain" to the abstract "psychology domain". Therefore, both senses are the results of metaphorical extension.



## 4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the semantic system of the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)”, we can outline the process of semantic extension as follows (“M1” represents metaphor and “M2” represents metonymy):

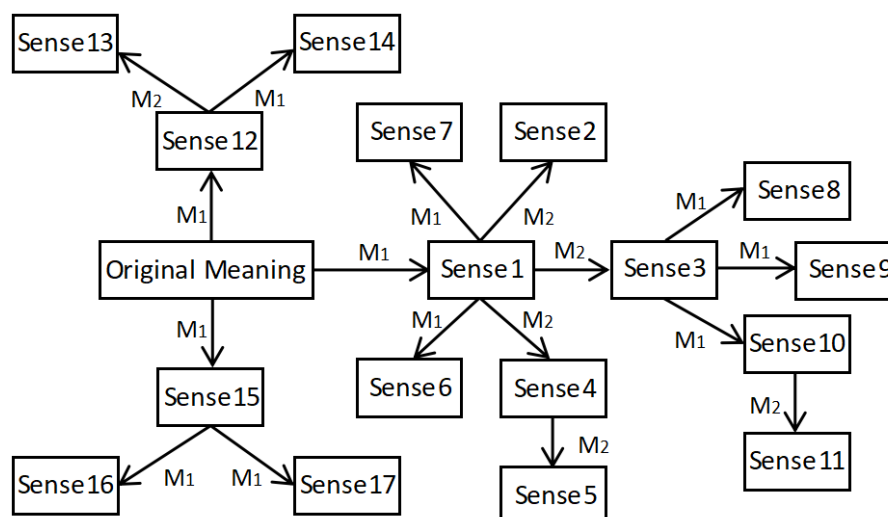


Figure 4: Semantic Extension Process of the Sichuan Dialect Word “Ba (巴)”.

Based on the image above, it can be observed that among the collected senses, there are a total of 17 senses derived from the original meaning of “ba (巴)”. Among these, 11 are metaphorical extensions and 6 are metonymical extensions, collectively constituting the semantic system of the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)”.

Taking a cognitive linguistic perspective and utilizing the macro-framework of Prototype Category Theory, along with the theories of metaphor, metonymy, and image schema, the author conducts a micro-level analysis of the senses of the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)” based on authoritative linguistic data. The study reveals the following findings:

(1) The prototype sense of the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)” is “snake”, and the other senses revolve around this prototype sense through metaphorical and metonymical extensions. Metaphor involves the unidirectional mapping across domains based on similarity, while metonymy involves the bidirectional mapping across domains based on relevance. Both modes of thinking play a significant role in the expansion of sense.

(2) The sense extension of the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)” primarily occurs through metaphorical processes. Based on the similarity between the crawling action and direction of snakes, people in the dialect region project simple, familiar, and concrete action domains onto complex, unfamiliar, and abstract concept domains. This leads to the formation of three senses with strong typicality, which constitute the central categories apart from the prototype sense. During the extension of peripheral senses derived from these central categories, metaphor also plays a major role.

(3) The sense extension of the Sichuan dialect word “ba (巴)” follows an integrated mode. In this mode, the three central categories, senses 1, 12, and 15, radiate from the prototype sense, and the other senses continue to expand outward from these central categories, forming a surrounding radiation structure. A chain-like structure composed of “prototype sense - sense 1 - sense 3” runs through this framework.

(4) Image schema offers strong explanatory power in the formation of semantic concepts, the construction of polysemous categories, as well as the analysis of metaphor and metonymy associated

with "ba (巴)". It helps transform abstract concepts into concrete images, facilitating a deeper understanding of the underlying hidden logic.

(5) Through the combined effects of metaphor and metonymy, the Sichuan dialect word "ba (巴)" exhibits a rich range of senses and diverse grammatical properties, serving as a dynamic and regionally distinctive constituent in the lexicon of the Sichuan dialect.

Chinese dialects serve as tools for regional communication and carriers of cultural heritage, playing a significant role in the development of the Chinese language and culture. Exploring the semantic formation of vocabulary from a cognitive perspective is a current focus of linguistic research. By applying cognitive linguistics theories to study the semantic aspects of Chinese dialect vocabulary, it not only helps to clarify the senses of lexical items and provide cognitive rationale for the compilation of dialect dictionaries, but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the abstract and associative thinking of the Chinese ethnic group, inspiring research approaches in language and culture. It is worth noting that the study of dialect words is also influenced by factors such as phonetic structure, lexical structure, grammatical structure, as well as the political, economic, and cultural aspects of the dialect regions. Therefore, there is room for further in-depth investigation into the semantic research of Sichuan dialect words. The author hopes that this study can serve as a starting point and provide inspiration for scholars researching Sichuan dialect words, looking forward to future theoretical applications that will bring more value to the study of dialect words.

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