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Deverbal Nominalization as Layered Metaphorical Construal: An ECMT-Cognitive Grammar Account

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This paper proposes an integrated framework that combines Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT) and Cognitive Grammar (CG) to explain deverbal nominalization in English and Chinese. It argues that deverbal nominalization is not a mere profile shift from process to thing, but a grammatically induced realization of the image-schema metaphor EVENTS ARE ENTITIES, unfolding across four cascading levels: image schema, domain, frame, and mental space. Context and embodiment are constitutive rather than peripheral, especially at the mental-space level. English conventionalizes reification morphologically through suffixes such as *-tion, -ment*, and *-ance*, whereas Chinese, lacking overt nominalizing morphology, compensates through zero-derivation, metonymic shift, and online mental-space construction. The contrast reveals a typological principle: Morphosyntax interacts with metaphorical layering to shape nominal semantics.

Keywords: deverbal nominalization, Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Cognitive Grammar, construal, contextual adaptability

Introduction

Since Lakoff and Johnson proposed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), metaphor has been treated as a fundamental cognitive mechanism. Its two-domain model, however, handles abstraction and context inadequately. Kövecses (2020) addresses this limitation through Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT), which distinguishes image schema, domain, frame, and mental space—and foregrounds contextual adaptability. Cognitive Grammar(CG) explains deverbal nominalization as reification: verbs profile processes scanned sequentially, while nouns profile things scanned summarily.

Cognitive Grammar (CG) describes the profile shift but does not fully explain its motivation or cross-linguistic variation. This paper integrates CG's symbolic mechanism with ECMT's metaphorical hierarchy to explain why events are construed as entities and how English and Chinese differ. The central claim is that deverbal nominalization is layered metaphorical construal: the image-schema metaphor EVENTS ARE ENTITIES motivates reification, which is specified at domain, frame, and mental-space levels. The paper examines how these levels interact, how context and embodiment constrain them, and what English–Chinese differences they reveal.

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Theoretical Integration: From Profile Shift to Layered Metaphor

The Cognitive Grammar Account

In CG, meaning is construal. A verb such as explode profiles a temporally unfolding process; explosion profiles a thing through summary scanning. The event remains conceptually available, but temporality is backgrounded and entityhood foregrounded. This explains why explosion can denote an event, result, or instance, and why a walk is countable. Yet the motivation for this shift requires a metaphorical account: an event is construed as an entity.

ECMT: Four Levels and Contextual Adaptability

ECMT refines CMT by distinguishing four levels: image schemas, cross-domain mappings, frames, and mental spaces. ECMT also treats situational, discourse, conceptual-cognitive, and bodily contexts as active forces shaping metaphor, not merely filters on fixed meanings. A nominal may therefore profile different event facets in different contexts.

An Integrated ECMT-CG Framework

In the integrated framework, CG supplies the symbolic profile shift, while EVENTS ARE ENTITIES motivates it. The four ECMT levels describe the cascade of reification; context operates throughout and is especially visible in mental-space construction. This account avoids reducing nominalization either to a lexical-syntactic operation or to metaphor without a grammatical mechanism.

The ECMT-CG Mechanism of Deverbal Nominalization

Image-Schema Level

Event schemas such as path and force are mapped onto the entity's container schema, turning temporal unfolding into a bounded region. English a walk construes an activity as countable; Chinese 调查 is process-oriented in 进行调查 but reified as a result in 调查的结果. Both instantiate EVENTS ARE ENTITIES. English allows two explosions or several arrivals, unlike the corresponding clauses. Chinese bounds events with measure words, e.g., 进行了三次调查. English contrasts the process-oriented the exploding of the tanker with explosion of the tanker, which allows result or instance readings. Chinese commonly marks this distinction lexically or syntactically, as in 爆炸 and 爆炸事件.

Domain Level

The action domain's agent–action–patient relation is mapped onto an entity with properties. English destruction may denote a process or result; Chinese 建筑 can refer to building activity or a building. The mapping changes the construed ontology rather than simply renaming an event. Modification diagnoses readings: the destruction of the city took three years profiles a process, while the destruction is still visible profiles a result. Manner adjectives (careful destruction) favor process readings; degree adjectives (complete destruction) favor results. Chinese similarly contrasts 建设持续了三年 with 城市建设的成就, and 对经济产生了影响 with 影响是深远的. Reified events can be modified, quantified, and referred to as entities.

Frame Level

Nominalization backgrounds participants and foregrounds the event as a whole. Give becomes gift, suppressing giver and receiver; 他的死 presents death as a bounded event rather than an ongoing relation.

Argument structure reveals degrees of reification. The army's destruction of the city retains agent and patient, while result nominals may lose internal arguments. Chinese 他的到来 packages 来 as a referable event, unlike 主席来了. The possessive 的 helps detach events from the here-and-now and integrate them into a nominal frame. English often achieves this defocusing morphologically; Chinese relies more on constructions and reduced aspect marking.

Mental-Space Level

Discourse determines a nominal's current value: refusal profiles an act in His refusal of the offer was polite but an event in The refusal came as a surprise. Likewise, 研究 denotes activity in 他正在做研究 but a result in 他的研究很扎实. Chinese 编辑 may also shift metonymically from action to agent, as in 这本书的编辑很负责. Anaphora shows that nominalized events become discourse entities: The refusal came as a surprise; it was widely discussed. Chinese likewise uses 这 or 那, as in 这次会谈很成功，它为后续谈判奠定了基础. Reified events become topics for evaluation and reference. Since Chinese nominal forms may lack aspect marking, discourse helps determine whether 调查 is ongoing or completed.

Context and Embodiment in Deverbal Nominal Construal

Situational and Discourse Context

Situational and discourse contexts shape construal: 研究 may denote an activity at a conference but its outcome in a report. Predicates such as polite or surprising guide the reading of refusal by making a particular metaphorical layer salient. Academic and legal English condenses clauses into nominal groups, making events topics for further discussion. Headlines do likewise: President's arrival delayed by storm. Chinese headlines use unmarked forms, as in 中美会谈取得进展. Repeated genre use entrenches EVENTS ARE ENTITIES.

Conceptual-Cognitive and Bodily Context

Conceptual-cognitive context includes cultural knowledge; bodily context includes embodied force dynamics. Chinese 有吃有穿 and 吃得很开心 show culturally grounded extensions of 吃, whereas English eat has more restricted nominal uses. Chinese expressions such as 吃苦、吃亏、吃惊、吃苦耐劳 and 有吃有穿 construe experience through ingestion imagery without direct productive English equivalents. 学问 reifies studying as scholarship, while 教育 packages a process as an institution. Cultural knowledge helps determine which reifications become conventional.

Embodied force experience favors result and patient readings: a find, discovery, invention, or purchase often denotes an event's trace rather than its unfolding. Chinese 发明、发现 and 印刷 also profile outcomes; 裁判 and 编辑 shift from action to agent. Instrument nouns such as opener and cleaner, and 洗涤剂 and 起子 in Chinese, construe tools through function. Reificanvtion thus favors entities that can be seen, held, possessed, or used. The framework is testable. Corpus analysis can compare process/result readings through collocates of English -tion nouns in COCA and BNC, and Chinese nominal co-occurrence with measure words, 的-phrases, and result predicates in BCC. Acceptability judgments, self-paced reading, eye-tracking, and ERP can test contextual shifts and processing costs.

English-Chinese Typological Differences

Morphological Transparency and Layer Entrenchment

English suffixes such as -tion, -ment, and -ance overtly mark reification, entrenching image-schema and domain shifts. Chinese relies more on zero-derivation and syntax, leaving frame integration and mental-space construction to carry more interpretive weight.

Context Dependence and Metonymic Compensation

Chinese 编辑 may denote an activity, an editor, or editorial work; 写生 may be verbal or nominal according to context. English affixes more often stabilize process/result readings. Thus English foregrounds morphology, while Chinese relies more on syntax, context, frame integration, and metonymic compensation.

Conclusion

This paper integrates ECMT and CG to explain deverbal nominalization. CG accounts for the process-to-thing profile shift; ECMT motivates it through EVENTS ARE ENTITIES and models its progression across image schema, domain, frame, and mental space. Context and embodiment are constitutive, not peripheral. English more often entrenches reification through overt suffixes, while Chinese relies on zero-derivation, syntactic environment, frame integration, mental-space context, and metonymy. Nominalization is therefore an interaction of metaphor, construal, morphology, and context. Future work can test the framework through corpus and psycholinguistic methods.

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