

Revealing the Cognitive Mechanism in the Semantic Evolution of Hester's Scarlet Letter "A"

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Abstract

The letter "A" in Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, has rich symbolic meanings. This paper intends to reveal the mysterious mechanism working behind the development of the different symbolic meanings of "A" on Hester's. In other words, this paper intends to explore the mastery of how the letter "A" acquires different symbolic meanings by applying a cognitive approach. From the perspective of category, the letter "A" carried by Hester undergoes an evolution from the derogatory category Adultery to the transitional category such as Agony, and then to the final commendatory category such as Angel. During the process of evolution, the symbolic meaning of "A" changes from Adultery to Alone, Agony to Art, Amazon, Able, Admirable, and Angel. Two linguistic theories are required to reveal the semantic evolution of the letter "A", that is, the prototype theory and the conceptual blending theory. There are two major factors contributing to the semantic evolution of "A", one is the characteristics of the letter "A" itself, the other is Hester herself.

Keywords: The Scarlet Letter "A", The semantic evolution, The prototype theory, The conceptual blending theory

1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a great romanticist of American literature, published his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850. This is American's first literary masterpiece and one of the perennial classics of the Western world, which is still very influential, while the scarlet letter "A" has many metaphorical uses nowadays. In this paper, we focus on the various semantic evolution of Hester's Scarlet Letter "A" from a cognitive point of view.

The Scarlet Letter takes the 17th century Puritan New England under the colonial rule as the background. It tells people a love tragedy taking place in Boston. Hester Prynne, the young heroine who thought her husband had died from a sea accident, had a love affair with Dimmesdale, and gave birth to an illegitimate daughter. Nevertheless, her husband, Chillingworth, safely returned to New England and concealed his identity. He found that his wife was forced to wear a scarlet letter "A" on her bosom. When he found Hester's lover was Dimmesdale, the leader who urged Hester to speak out the name of her children's illegal father, Chillingworth began to torture the young priest who was full of painful sense of guilt. Ultimately, Chillingworth was ruined because of his paranoid revenge; Dimmesdale could not bear the physical and moral damages, before dying in Hester's arms, he admitted the fact of adultery; at this moment, Hester alone faced the future and she was ready to take her daughter to Europe for a new life. Finally, Hester returned to Boston and died there. In this novel, Hester is the only person who got final salvation.

There are many novels with a setting of Puritan New England, but *The Scarlet Letter* remains the single classic of the group, appealing to the tastes of different generations in different ways. For decades, there have been a good number of critical studies on him and his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* both at home and abroad. Particularly, lots of scholars and critics were deeply interested in the symbolic meanings of "A". They have made a lot of exploration. In this paper, a new cognitive view will be introduced to probe into the evolution of the symbolic meanings of "A". It is by way of combining the prototype theory and the mental space blending theory that we explore to reveal the mystery of the semantic evolution of "A". We can understand this masterpiece with a much deeper insight by understanding the psychological working mechanism behind the semantic evolution.

2. The Prototype Theory and the Conceptual Blending Theory

2.1 The Prototype Theory

The common assumption of the prototype theory is that a concept is represented as the abstraction of

characteristic features (Posner & Keele, 1970). That is, as a person experiences various instances of a category, he or she abstracts the common attributes, and the abstracted representation is the concept. Like the classical theory, prototype theory assumes that concepts are abstract because the representation of the concept is different from any particular instance. On the other hand, prototype theory does not assume that the abstracted features are necessary or defining features. This approach is more probabilistic than is the classical view. In order to be classified as a member of the category defined by the concept, the instance does not have to share the defining features but, rather, only has to overlap sufficiently with the prototype. A prototype is the best representation of a category in the sense that it consists of the features most commonly represented by the instances. For example, a prototypical fish might be about the size of a trout (12 to 15 inches), have scales and fins, and swim in an ocean, a lake, or a river. We have a general or abstract conception of fish, which somehow is typical or representative of the variety of examples with which we are familiar. When given a particular example, we compare it to this abstract prototype of the category. If it is sufficiently similar to the prototype, we then judge it to be an instance of the category (R. Reed Hunt & Henry C. Ellis, 2006).

In other words, we can understand the prototype theory in this way, that is, a concept or an idea is represented by the best example. This best example is the representative of a category. People usually identify each category on the basis of a mental picture which typically represents all that the category stands for, and the best example of this idea is the prototype. In this theory, the inclusion of an item in the extension of a word depends on the resemblances between this word and the prototype. Members which bear a strong resemblance to the prototype are called central members. Those which do not have a strong resemblance to the prototype are called peripheral members.

To our attention, the prototypes of cognitive categories are not fixed, but may change when a particular context is introduced, and the same is true for category boundaries. More generally, the whole internal structure of a category seems to depend on the context and, in a wider sense, on our social and cultural knowledge, which is thought to be organized in cognitive and cultural models (Li zheng Peng, 2006). The semantic evolution of the letter "A" is influenced by the surroundings around Hester. In different social situations, people's cognitive models towards Hester are different, thus the prototype of "A" is different in accordance with the change of context.

To better understand the influences the context-dependence has on the change of the prototype, we may refer to the lapdog example by Ungerer & Schmid (2001). The following four sentences show influences of the context on the prototype.

- (1) The hunter took his gun, left the lodge and called his dog.
- (2) Right from the start of the race the dogs began chasing the rabbit.
- (3) She took her dog to the salon to have its curls reset.
- (4) The policemen lined up with dogs to face the rioters.

We can easily assume that for each of the four sentences you will have formed a different image of the kind of dog that is denoted. In a hunting context like example (1), the most likely dog would probably be some kind of retriever; in the dog racing context of example (2), it would certainly be a greyhound that would first come to mind. In examples (3) and (4), you will presumably have imagined a poodle and an Alsatian respectively. These examples suggest that what turns out the most likely member of a certain category depends on the context. Since we may expect the prototype to be our first choice, the result of our little experiment indicates that, depending on the context, the prototype shifts.

The prototype in a certain category has many attributes in a certain context. If the attributes change, the prototype is certain to change. When we view a category in terms of attributes, context seems to have a twofold effect: first, the context can change the weight of attributes that seem to be relevant for a certain category. Attributes of the category DOG that seem to be decisive in the goodness -of-example ratings and attribute-based typicality ratings (e.g. 'barks', 'has four legs', wags tail when happy, 'likes to chase cats', etc.) apparently lose weight in specific contexts; second, the context can emphasize attributes that are not prominent and even introduce new attributes which would not be mentioned at all in non-contextualized attribute-listing experiments. In the hunting-dog context, attributes like 'brings back the kill' or 'points out the position of animals for shooting' increase in importance. In the dog-racing context, 'has long, thin legs', 'can run fast', 'is enduring' and others become crucial. With the introduction of new attributes and the re-evaluation of the weights of existing ones the attribute list for a member of a category changes completely.

2.2 The Conceptual Blending Theory

The conceptual blending theory is indispensable to analyzing the semantic evolution of the letter “A” from the sense of category.

Conceptual blending theory was brought forward by Fauconnier in the 1990s. On the basis of the mental space theory, Fauconnier advanced this striking theory, called Conceptual Integration theory (also known as Conceptual Blending theory or Blending theory). Central to this conceptual blending theory is the notion of the conceptual blending network (or conceptual integration network), an array of mental spaces in which the processes of blending unfold (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998). A basic conceptual integration network contains four mental spaces. Two are called input spaces, and a cross-space mapping may set up between them. The cross-space mapping creates, or reflects, a more abstract and schematic structure or organization which is common to both inputs and shared by them. This schematic structure belongs to the third space, called the generic space, which defines the cross-space mapping between elements and their counterparts. A fourth one, the blended space, arises by selective projection from the inputs. This fourth space develops emergent structure in various ways and works according to its own logic. Besides, the new emergent structure can be projected back to the inputs. The expected or unexpected outcome right emerges due to the blending. A full four-space model is as follows:

Insert Figure 1 Here

The input 1 and input 2 exist in our mind, when they interact with each other, they blend further into a new category in our mind. This new category is the so-called blended space. During the blending process, the generic space plays a role as the basis of blending. In other words, the generic space is the foundation of blending.

In the blended space, the square stands for the emergent structure in the blended space. The diagram indicates that when counterparts are projected into the blended space, they may be fused into a single element, or projected separately (Liu Dunning, 2005).

Interestingly, the prototype theory together with the conceptual blending theory can help us to reveal the mysterious evolution of the symbolic meanings of “A”.

3. Major factors contributing to the Semantic Evolution of “A”

3.1 The Letter “A” itself

The letter “A” is of an abbreviation form. The single abbreviation letter provides a formal possibility for the extension and development of its full name. The more simple and vague the letter “A” is, the more likely for the readers to produce different interpretations due to their different experiences, educational background, level of cognitive knowledge and other factors. The original meaning of “A” is Adultery, but the single representative “A” can provide many possibilities that “A” could be understood as any other words whose initial letter is “A”. From the abbreviation form of Adultery to those words which begin with the first letter “A”, it presupposes the possibilities of the change from form to meaning.

3.2 The influences of Hester’s behavior

3.2.1 Hester’s Character

The most remarkable about Hester is the strength of her character. While Hawthorne does not give a great deal of information about her life before she came to Boston, he does demonstrate her remarkable character through the public humiliation and subsequent as well as the isolated life in the Puritan society. Her inner strength, her defiance of convention and her compassion may have been in her character all along, but the scarlet letter brings them to our attention. She is the final survivor (Naiqiang Yao, 1998).

As the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is a female with a kind of bravery. At the same time, she has an evident spirit of defiance and compromise. Her courage is mainly embodied in her behavior when pursuing her own happiness and when accepting punishment as an adulteress. What we know about Hester from the days prior to her punishment is that she came from a “genteel but impoverished English family” of notable lineage. She married the much older Chillingworth, who spent long hours on his books and experiments, yet she convinced herself that she was happy. When they left Amsterdam for the New World, he sent her ahead, but he was reported lost at sea, leaving Hester alone among the Puritans of Boston. As a widow, though Hester herself was not a puritan, she turned to Arthur Dimmesdale, the priest, for comfort and spiritual guidance. During their frequent contacts, their solace became passion and love, thus resulted in the birth of Pearl, an illegitimate child. This event manifests her courage for the first time. The second time is when she calmly exposed herself on the scaffold accepting punishment for committing adultery. The reader first meets the incredibly strong Hester on the

scaffold with Pearl in her arms, beginning her punishment. Before she stood on the scaffold, she had shown her courage. When the town beadle led her out of the prison, she “repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free will.” When standing fully exposed to the crowd, she looked at her townspeople and neighbors with a “disdainful smile”. When asked of the name of the adulterer, she refused to answer. Hester said “Never. It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!” When asked again, she said “I will not speak.” She herself alone bore all of the contempt, shame and humiliation. Confronting so much painful sufferings and miseries, Hester was not defeated. She selflessly sacrificed herself for her love and the lover Rushou Li, 2005).

Hester’s courage is not limited to these events. After she went out of the prison, she and Pearl were isolated by the townspeople. They lived in a small cottage which was on the outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close vicinity to any other habitation. No friends dared to visit. Bad situation as it is, Hester was not defeated due to her unyielding character and persevering spirit. Confronting loneliness and the townspeople’s indifference, Hester lived with little Pearl toughly. Fortunately, Hester is good at a skill, that is, her needle work. The letter “A” on her bosom is a symbol of her delicate and imaginative skill. By degrees, her handiwork became what would now be termed as the fashion. Her needle work was seen on the ruff of the Governor, in the scarves of the military men, on the band of the minister as well as on the baby’s little cap. It is Hester’s needle work that guaranteed their daily life and Pearl’s growth. The most important factor which helps them live through various sufferings is Hester’s courage and her unyielding character.

Apart from the inner strength, there is also the evident spirit of defiance. The scarlet letter “A” on her bosom is a powerful proof which shows her spirit of defiance of the Puritan Patriarchy. Hawthorne writes that “On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter “A”. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.”

The Puritan Patriarchy was meant to humiliate her by forcing her to wear the scarlet letter “A”, however, she embroidered it as a gorgeous piece of art work which attracted great attention and admiration. The opposite effect was of what the Puritan Patriarchy had expected. This is the evidence which can show that Hester was not feeling guilty at all for what she had done and she inwardly resisted to this imposed Puritan punishment on her.

Her defiance and wisdom are also manifested in her fight for the guardianship of Pearl. When the governor determined to take Pearl away from her, she refused firmly. Hawthorne writes that “Hester caught hold of Pearl, and drew her forcibly into her arms, confronting the old Puritan magistrate with almost a fierce expression. Alone in the world, cast off by it, and with this sole treasure to keep her heart alive, she felt that she possessed indefeasible rights against the world, and was ready to defend them to the death. ‘God gave me the child!’ Cried she. ‘He gave her, in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness!-she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin? Ye shall not take her! I will die first!’”

Hitting the banner of God, the Puritan Patriarchy was meant to deprive Hester of the guardianship of Pearl to let the little Pearl get better Puritan education. They thought Hester had no right to teach Pearl the Puritan doctrine because she had committed adultery which had been regarded as a kind of insult to the Puritan Doctrine. In Hester’s eyes, she thought she was the very person who could teach Pearl better than any one else. The reason is that Hester regarded the living A-Pearl as a precious gift that God sent to her, a gift that deserved to be protected with her life. Indeed, she protested the deprivation of guardianship with death. In addition, she gets a reasonable excuse to keep Pearl by taking her as a scarlet letter “A” and punishment to her. This fully demonstrates her spirit of defiance as well as her wisdom.

Compassion is an important quality which cannot be ignored in Hester’s character.

“She was quick to acknowledge her sisterhood with the race of man, whenever benefits were to be conferred. None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty; even though the bitter-hearted pauper threw back a gibe in requital of the food brought regularly to his door, or to the garments wrought for him by the fingers that could have embroidered a monarch’s robe. None so self-devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town. In all seasons of calamity, indeed, whether general or of individuals, the outcast of society at once found her place. She came, not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble; as if its gloomy twilight were a medium in which she was entitled to hold intercourse with

her fellow-creatures. There glimmered the embroidered letter, with comfort in its unearthly ray.”

Despite her miseries, Hester did not forget to help those who need help. She offered comfort to the poor, the sick, and the downtrodden who even humiliated her, sneered at her and regarded her as a bitch. Her efforts and contributions were taken for granted by a small group of people who ever got food and clothes from Hester. These people did not appreciate her and even regard the action accepting food and clothes as a shame. If Hester was not compassionate and strong enough, she would be defeated by these people. Another group of people who also got help from Hester pretended not to know her when they met on the street. Of course, most people showed their admiration and appreciation to Hester. In these people’s eyes, Hester was no longer the woman as the symbol of sin. Due to her charitable deeds, Hester became a woman with compassion, kindness, mercy and diligence in most people’s eyes.

In the final chapter of the novel, Hester returned to Boston and resumed ,--of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it,--resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. But, in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and so self-devoted years that made up Hester’s life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. No matter who brought their sorrows to Hester’s cottage, Hester did her best to comfort them and counseled them. Women, more especially, -in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion,-or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielding, because unvalued and unsought,-came to Hester’s cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! She assured them of her firm belief that, at some brighter period, the whole relationship between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness would be established. She told the people how sacred love would make us happy by her own truest test in her life. The original image of Hester totally subverted and at the end of the novel she became an angel who conducted people pursuing happiness through their own efforts.

3.2.2 Hester’s Influences on the Semantic Evolution

In this section, we will apply the conceptual blending theory to explain the influences of Hester on the letter “A”.

Figure 1 demonstrates a four-space model. We can draw a similar figure to illustrate the influences Hester has on the semantic evolution of “A”. There are also four spaces in the following figure, that is, two input spaces, one generic space and one blended space. The first input space is the letter “A”, the second input space is Hester’s behavior features. The blended space is the various symbolic meanings developed in the form of words with an initial letter “A”. The generic space is a larger common category which if the reference for the blending of the two input spaces. In order to clearly demonstrate the semantic evolution of the letter “A”, we will draw two figures to explain the evolution. The figure 2 is the original Adultery “A” model, and the figure 3 is the final Angel model. The two figures tell us the reasons of the semantic evolution from a psychological point view.

Insert Figure 2 Here

Figure 2 illustrates that at the early stage, people had a bad impression on Hester because she had given birth to an illegitimate baby, which was severely prohibited in the Puritan society in her time. Her behavior is illegal, immoral and shameless, thus leading to contempt, insult, humiliation and she had to wear a scarlet letter “A” (which means Adultery) as a punishment. Under such a context, both Hester’s behavior features and the letter “A” belong to the negative category of Viciousness. So input 1 and input 2 blend in people’s mind on the basis of this common category. The result of blending is “Adultery”. In people’s mind, Hester is a woman who is sinful and shameless. People cannot see the merits of Hester at this time, so the beauty of the letter “A” is neglected. The letter “A” is only a symbol of sin without beauty and attraction. The symbolic meaning of “A” cannot be others but Adultery”.

Insert Figure 3 Here

With the development of the novel, people’s attitude towards Hester changed. Hester won people’s attraction and admiration through her painful efforts and sacrifices. Agility, courage, toughness, compassion and helpfulness are true reflections of Hester. All of these words belong to a positive category as well as the category of Beauty. The letter “A” on Hester’s bosom was a piece of gorgeous needle work exposed to the readers. It gave readers a kind of visual beauty, which belongs to the positive category Beauty. These two common categories provide the foundation for the mental blending between the first input space and the second input space. The visual beauty of the letter “A” moves to the change of its connotation. After blending between this two input spaces, the original symbolic meaning of A, “Adultery”, begin to fade from the memory. Only those positive symbolic meanings leave their footprints on people’s mind. At this time, Hester’s behavior features are not matched with the

attributes of the original symbolic meaning “Adultery”. The letter “A” no longer belongs to the category of Viciousness but belongs to the category of Beauty. So the symbolic meanings subverted totally from the original meaning. The letter “A” is no longer a symbol of sin because of the attributes of Hester’s behaviour. Finally, the bound of the category Viciousness is broken and the new category Beauty is built up. At the same time, Hester is no longer a woman who is discarded by the Puritan society. Hester and the letter “A” together result in the salvation which is finished by so much efforts and sacrifices.

4. The prototype theory and the semantic evolution of “A”

Considering the whole novel, the symbolic meanings of “A” develop from Adultery to Alone, Agony, Art, Amazon, Able, Admiration, Angel (Louxi chen, 2009). Among these symbolic meanings, Adultery belongs to the derogatory category; Alone and Agony belong to the transitional category; Art, Amazon, Able, Admiration and Angel belong to the commendatory category. The breakthrough of different categories depends on different contexts. It is the same to the evolution of symbolic meanings. Although these symbolic meanings belong to different categories, they also belong to a larger category, that is, the category of “A”. In this large category, every symbolic meaning can be a prototype. In different contexts, the letter “A” shows different attributes due to Hester’s different behavior. With the change of attributes, the prototype changes and then the category changes simultaneously.

We have already reviewed the influences the context has on the change of a prototype, the following is to analyze the changes of the prototypes of “A”. At the beginning of the novel, “Adultery” is the prototype of “A”, because Hester committed adultery and gave birth to an illegitimate baby, thus she was punished for her sin to wear the scarlet letter “A” on her bosom, which symbolizes Shame, Humiliation and Disloyalty. She was punished to stand on the scaffold to expose the letter “A” to the townspeople. In this context, Adultery is no doubt the prototype of the category “A”. The attributes of Adultery are of Amoral, Disloyalty, Sinfulness, Viciousness, Shame and Humiliation which belong to the derogatory category. With the development of the story, the context of “A” changes too. Hester stood on the scaffold with little Pearl in her arms accepting punishment which ought to be borne together by Hester and the fellow-adulterer. Without any support, Hester alone bore the contempt and mockery from the townspeople. What supported her to confront with these cruel humiliations are her courage and toughness. When Hester accepted punishment on the scaffold, her legal husband, Chillingworth, witnessed the whole process. He interviewed Hester as a physician and asked her the name of the adulterer whom he really hated. Hester refused to answer his question and swore to keep the adulterer's name secret. However, Chillingworth made up his mind to find out the man who made his wife become a shame and at the same time, he demanded Hester to keep his true identity secret. So far, Hester not only shouldered the loneliness, but also the hatred from her legal husband and the guilt towards Dimmesdale. After she was released from prison, she and little Pearl were isolated by the Puritan society. They lived in a small cottage which was out sight of the townspeople. No friends visited them, no one could talk to them and they contacted no one. It is a kind of true solitude that people could hardly endure. Hester and Pearl depended on each other and lived an isolated life till Pearl was seven years old. In this context, the attributes of the original prototype are not so evident, but new attributes begin to take the place of them. The new attributes of “A” are Loneliness, Anguish, Bitterness, Courage and Toughness, most of which do not belong to the derogatory category, but some attributes belong to the transitional category. Yet, we can detect the beginning of a positive category such as Courage and Toughness. Here Alone and Agony become the typical family members of the prototype “A”. The breakthrough between the derogatory category and the transitional category is attributed to the change of the attributes of different members in the original category “A”. Bad attributes gradually disappear and transitional and good attributes are gradually added to the letter A because of the change of context.

Then along with the development of the novel, we can find the transitional category evolves into the commendatory category, which means the prototype of category “A” undergoes another significant change. To make a living, Hester grasped a good skill, that is, embroidery. The letter A on her bosom was a best needle work showing her fantastic skill of embroidery. Her needle work demonstrates agility and intelligence of Hester and the beauty of the embroidery itself. To some extent, the decoration of the letter “A” reflects a spirit of defiance to the Puritan society. In the Puritan society, due to the subtle simplicity that generally characterized the Puritan modes of dress, people were trying to avoid the luxurious and bright decorations on their dress. Hester's handiworks were gorgeous, fashionable and dazzling. Beautiful as they were, they were not in the harmonious tone with the Puritan society. In this context, new attributes came out. Agility, Beauty, Intelligence and Defiance add to the symbolic meaning of “A”, thus a new prototype produces, that is, Art. Art belongs to the commendatory category and become the first member of this category. From now on, the symbolic meanings of

“A” begin to be of more positive meanings. With the development of the story, the context continues to change. The following context is fixed to the Governor’s hall. Hester heard a decision which was made by the Governor and some other priests, a decision which was about the deprivation of the guardianship of Pearl from Hester. Hester came to the Governor’s hall to do her best to win the guardianship of Pearl. Confronting the authorities of the Puritan society, Hester refused their decision firmly. No matter what kind of punishment she would accept, she still did her best to persuade the authorities to give up their decision. She informed the authorities of the fact that Pearl was the living “A” that tortured her all day long but Pearl was also her happiness because Pearl was the precious gift that God sent to her, a gift which could warn her not to commit other sins. Hester even protested the guardianship with death. Although she took every effort to get the guardianship, she failed. At the crucial time, she turned to Dimmesdale for help. Finally, with the help of Dimmesdale, she won the guardianship of Pearl. During the fight against the authorities, Hester dared speak out her own beliefs and were not afraid of punishment. It was her courage, wisdom and persistence that brought her strength and success. She was quick minded and was good at take the advantage of the outer valuable resources as was shown by asking for Dimmesdale’s help. The attributes of Courage, Toughness and Intelligence resulted in an image of Amazon. In this context, attributes of Loneliness, Anguish, Agility and Beauty were not as important and evident as these new attributes of Courage, Toughness and Intelligence. As a result, the prototype changed again. Amazon has become the prototype of the category “A” at present. The image of Amazon presents an everlasting impression on people’s mind. People began to look at Hester from a new perspective. During this stage, Hester is not the same as she was. Years had come and gone. Pearl grew to be seven years old. During these years of isolation, Hester lived a life of blameless purity. To Hester, with nothing now to lose, with no hope, and seemingly no wish of gaining anything, people regarded Hester with respect which could be a genuine regard for virtue. It was true that Hester never asked to share the world’s privileges, even the humblest ones. On the contrary, she was ready to help those who were in need of help. Poor as she was, she always gave her little substance to every demand of poverty. When pestilence stalked through the town, no one was so self-devoted as Hester. She tried her best to take care of the patients who were shocked by the pestilence. Her tenderness and diligence brought light and hope to those who were in trouble. At this moment, the letter “A” became a symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her, so much power to do, and power to sympathize, that many people refused to interpret the scarlet “A” by its original meaning. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength (Hawthorne, 1850). Within this context, these attributes, such as Mercifulness, Compassion and Kindness, were so salient and evident. It was this context that emphasized these attributes and it was also this context that wakened the importance of those attributes, such as Loneliness, Anguish and Bitterness. Up till now, the original bad attributes of the category “A” have totally disappeared. Instead, the new prototype became Able and Admirable. With the further development of the story, several main characters were experiencing great changes. Dimmesdale could not bear the damages both from the mental and physical. He revealed his status of the fellow adulterer before his death and got salvation (Geng Zhu, 2005). Chillingworth was ruined by himself because of his vicious soul and his persevering revenge. Due to Dimmesdale’s confession, Pearl was no longer an illegitimate child and became a normal child who could enjoy the happiness as other children. During a long period, the townspeople had no ideas about where Hester and Pearl had gone. One day, Hester returned to Boston and resumed the letter “A” on her bosom. This time, she wore it by her own free will. No one forced her to wear it. Significantly, never afterwards did the letter “A” leave her bosom. With the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years of Hester’s life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. Her small cottage also became a place where the townspeople could get comfort and counsel. Hester had become particularly important to women. When they were wounded, wasted, misplaced and downtrodden, they turned Hester for comfort and suggestions. Hester encouraged them with the reality of her own sufferings and convinced those of a brighter future when a new relation would established between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. She was just like an angel who conducted the townspeople seeks for happy life. So far, the whole story was ended in producing Hester as an image of Angel. During this stage, the whole commendatory attributes, including Courage, Toughness, Agility, Beauty, Intelligence, Diligence, Mercifulness and Kindness have taken the place of those derogatory attributes, such as Amorality, Disloyalty, Sinfulness, Viciousness, Shame and Humiliation. The attributes of category “A” have been totally subverted and at the same time Hester got salvation finally. To better illustrate the processes of the semantic evolution, we can draw a table as follows:

“+” indicates the possessing of certain attributes ; “_” indicates the blank of attributes

Attributes	Family Members of the Category A							
	Adultery	Alone	Agony	Art	Amazon	Able	Admirable	Angel
Amorality	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Disloyalty	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sinfulness	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Viciousness	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Shame	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Humiliation	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Loneliness	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-
Bitterness	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-
Courage	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Toughness	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Agility	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+
Beauty	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+
Intelligence	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+
Defiance	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Diligence	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Mercifulness	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+
Kindness	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+

Through the above table, we can find the category “A” has quite a few family members from Adultery to Angel, which become the prototypes of “A” at different stages along with the development of the story.

The table can be separated into three parts. The first part only consists of the family member Adultery. The context of it is that Hester committed adultery, thus Adultery is the prototypical member (the prototype) of the category “A” with the main attributes of Amorality, Disloyalty, Sinfulness, Viciousness, Shame and Humiliation. All of these attributes are derogatory. Loneliness and Bitterness are not the salient attributes at this stage because her real loneliness and bitterness begin after Hester went out of prison; Courage and Defiance are attributes which can be neglected because of their minute importance. Consequently, the derogatory attributes of “A” are salient and overwhelming, in other words, the prototype of “A” under such this context is Adultery.

The family members of the second part include Alone and Agony. The context of this part is that Hester and Pearl were isolated and discarded by the Puritan society. After Hester went out of prison, she lived a lonely life with no friends and no lover. She herself alone looked after Pearl and accepted the indifference and cruelty from the society. From this stage, the derogatory attributes begin to fade gradually from the category. In the first part, loneliness and agony are not evident but in the second part, these two attributes become evident and takes a main role, which means that loneliness and agony have become the prototype of “A”. This can be seen as the transitional category of “A”, which occurs between the categories of Beauty and Viciousness. Meanwhile, in this period, Courage, toughness and defiance also appear and gradually become important and clear. In the third part, the attributes of the family members change significantly. Such commendatory attributes as Toughness, Agility, Beauty, Intelligence, mercifulness, etc. add to the letter “A” and the original derogatory attributes disappear gradually. Finally, the attributes of “A” all become commendatory, in other words, all the derogatory attributes disappear. The prototype gradually becomes from Art, Amazon, Able to Admirable and finally becomes Angel, which demonstrate that the attributes of Angel are in sharp contrast with those of Adultery. The prototype of the category “A” finally becomes “Angel” and Hester gets her salvation. This process of evolution demonstrates how the boundary of the Adultery “A” is broken and gradually transferred to the Angel “A”.

5. Conclusion

The abbreviation of “A” provides possibilities for the extension and development of its full name, while Hester’s behavior features contribute to the semantic evolution. We can find that the application of both the prototype theory and the Conceptual Blending Theory is necessary to reveal the secret of the symbolic semantic evolution of “A”.

The Conceptual Blending Theory is applied to interpret how the letter “A” category and the category of Hester blend and how Hester influences the semantic evolution of “A”. While the prototype theory helps us to analyze the different distribution of attributes within the Categories of “A” and Hester. The semantic evolution of “A” is actually the change of the prototype of the category “A”. Along with the change of context, the prototype changes simultaneously. From the prototype of Adultery to the final prototype of Angel, the attributes and family members of the letter “A” are totally subverted. The prototype of the original scarlet letter “A” is Adultery, the attributes of this prototype are immoral, loose, illegal, vicious, etc., which all belong to the derogatory category, VICIOUSNESS in semantic. While in the final prototype the original derogatory category is totally replaced by adding the new attributes of the commendatory category BEAUTY. The commendatory category has some prototypical members during Hester’s salvation course. At the beginning, it is Art, then Amazon, Able, Admirable and Angel. Finally, all these positive members of “A” combine together and fulfill the total subversion of the derogatory category of the scarlet letter A’s original Adultery semantic.

To conclude, this paper reveals the semantic evolution of the scarlet letter “A” in different contexts from the perspective of the cognitive linguistics illustrated by supplying figures and tables, as a result of which, readers can not only know the letter’s symbolic meanings, but also have an insight into the psychological mechanism behind them. Hester and the scarlet letter “A” is an entity in people’s eyes. The symbolic meanings of “A” developed mostly because of Hester’s behavior. The evolution of those symbolic meanings is also the evolution of Hester. Through the semantic evolution of the letter “A”, we can see Hester’s yielding to the social forces and the positive attitude in her tough character towards life despite her agonies and sufferings, all of which help her access salvation. In this sense, The Scarlet Letter is very much thought-provoking. Hopefully, this paper can provide people with a new perspective of the outstanding masterpiece, The Scarlet Letter.

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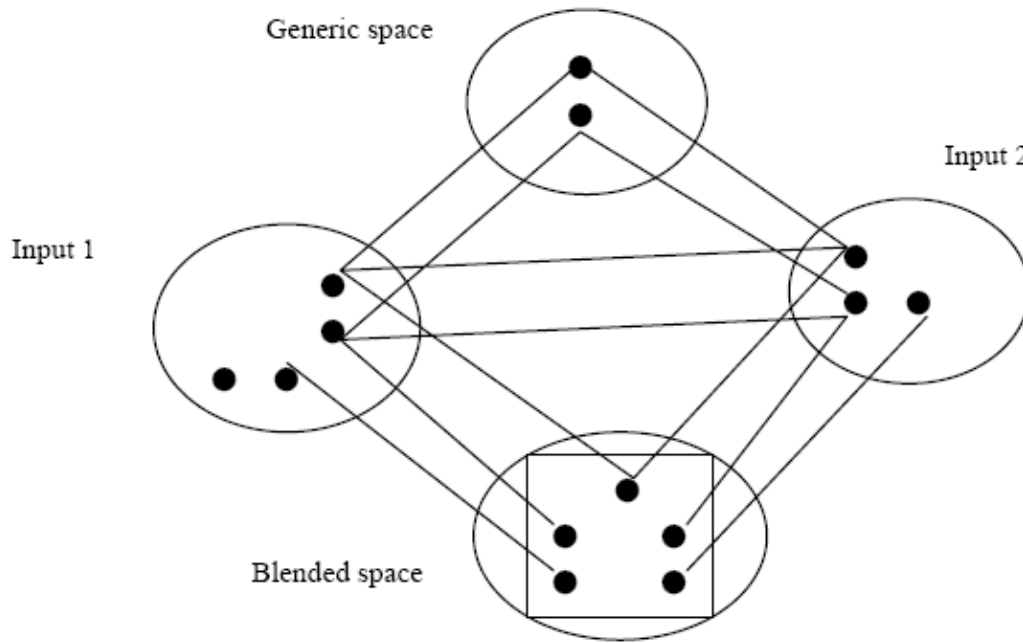


Figure 1.

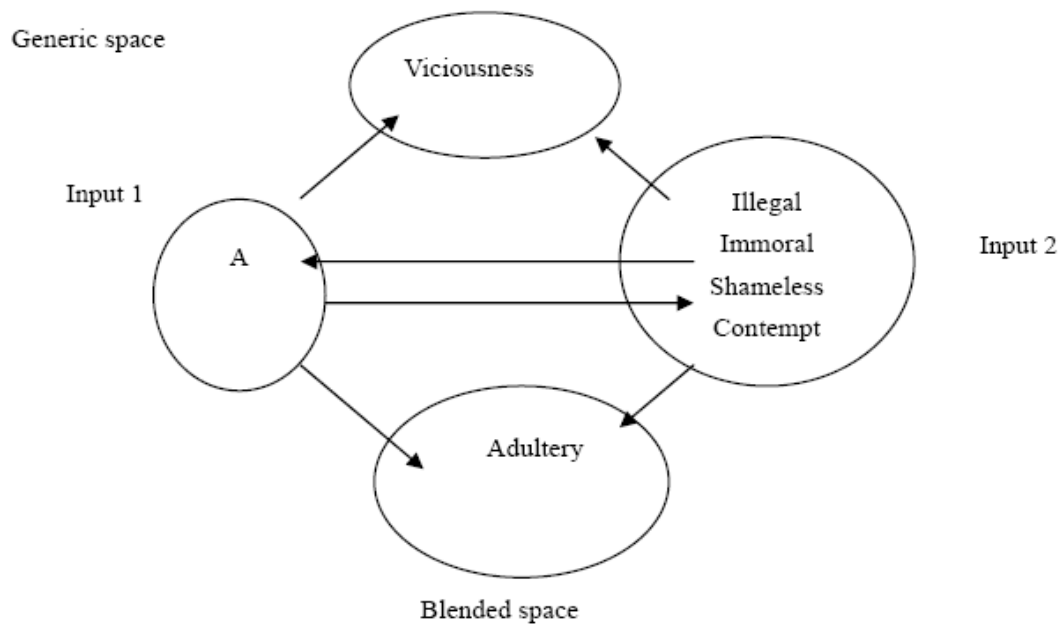


Figure 2. The Original Adultery "A" model

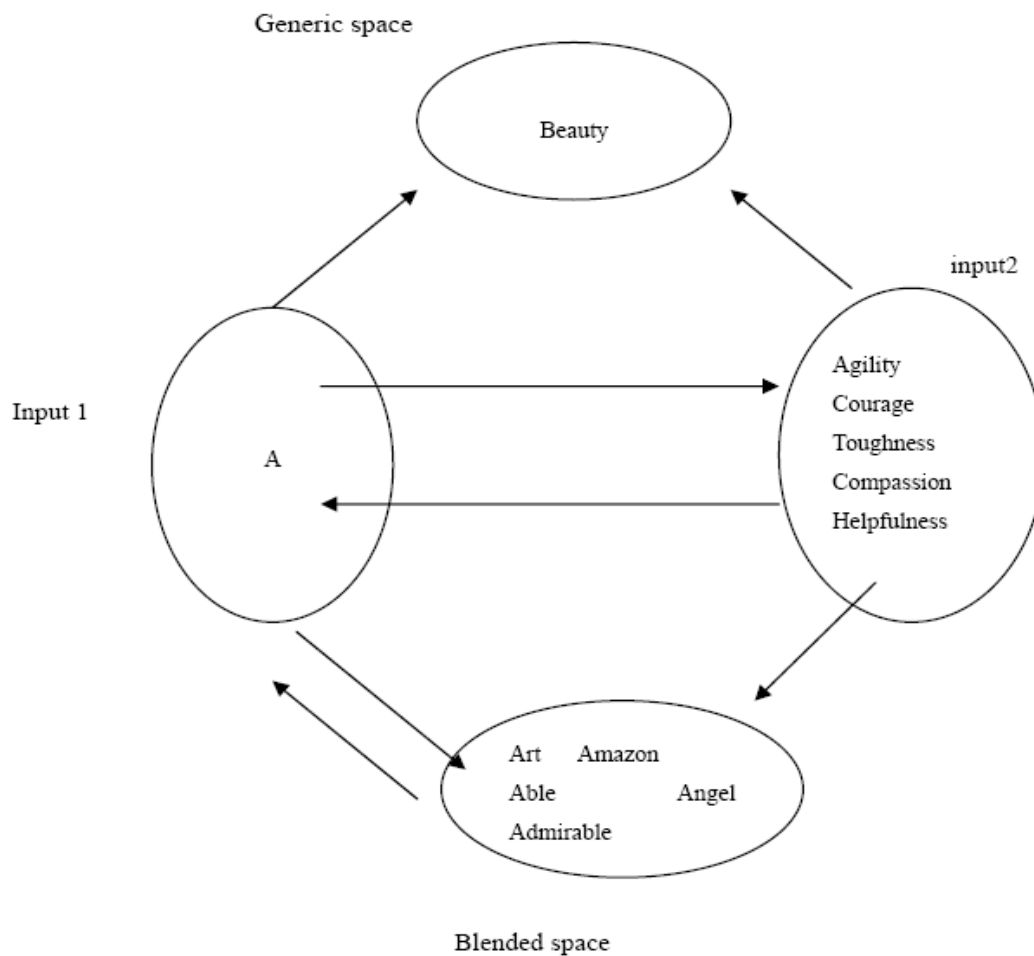


Figure 3. The Commendatory Category Model