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# Metonymy and coercion:

## The interaction of grammatical and lexical meaning

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# Structure of the talk

1. Tuning in: Some intriguing data
2. What is coercion?
3. Constructional meaning coercing lexical meaning
  - 3.1. Nouns: COUNT-to-MASS coercion, and vice versa
  - 3.2. Predicates: STATE-to-ACTION coercion in speech act constructions
4. Aspectual coercion
5. Conclusions

# 1. Tuning in: Some intriguing data

The tourists **began** **their** hike to Shipton's Arch at 11 o'clock.





The student **began** reading the book on Shakespeare.

The student **began** the book on Shakespeare.



# The *argument* structure of *begin* (1)

The verb *begin* has two arguments: a subject (**S**) and an object complement (**O**):

(1) *The tourists* began *their hike* at 11 o'clock.

**S**

**O**

(2) *The student* began *reading the book*.

**S**

**O**

*Begin* requires an **O** that denotes an EVENT:

(1) EVENT (*hiking*);

(2) EVENT (*reading the book*)

## The *argument* structure of *begin* (2)

The verb *begin* has two arguments: a subject (**S**) and an object complement (**O**).

*Begin* **requires** an **O** that denotes an EVENT. However, it is possible to say:

(3) *The student* began *the book*.

**S**

**O**

Noun phrases such as *the book* usually denote a THING!

The verb *begin* **coerces** the meaning of *the book* into an EVENT interpretation: e.g. '*read the book*'.

## 2. What is coercion?

# Semantic Shift/Coercion

When the specification of two forms in a sentence are **in conflict**, one kind of reconciliation is for the specification of one of the forms to change so as to come **into accord with** the other form.

[Talmy 2000: 324]

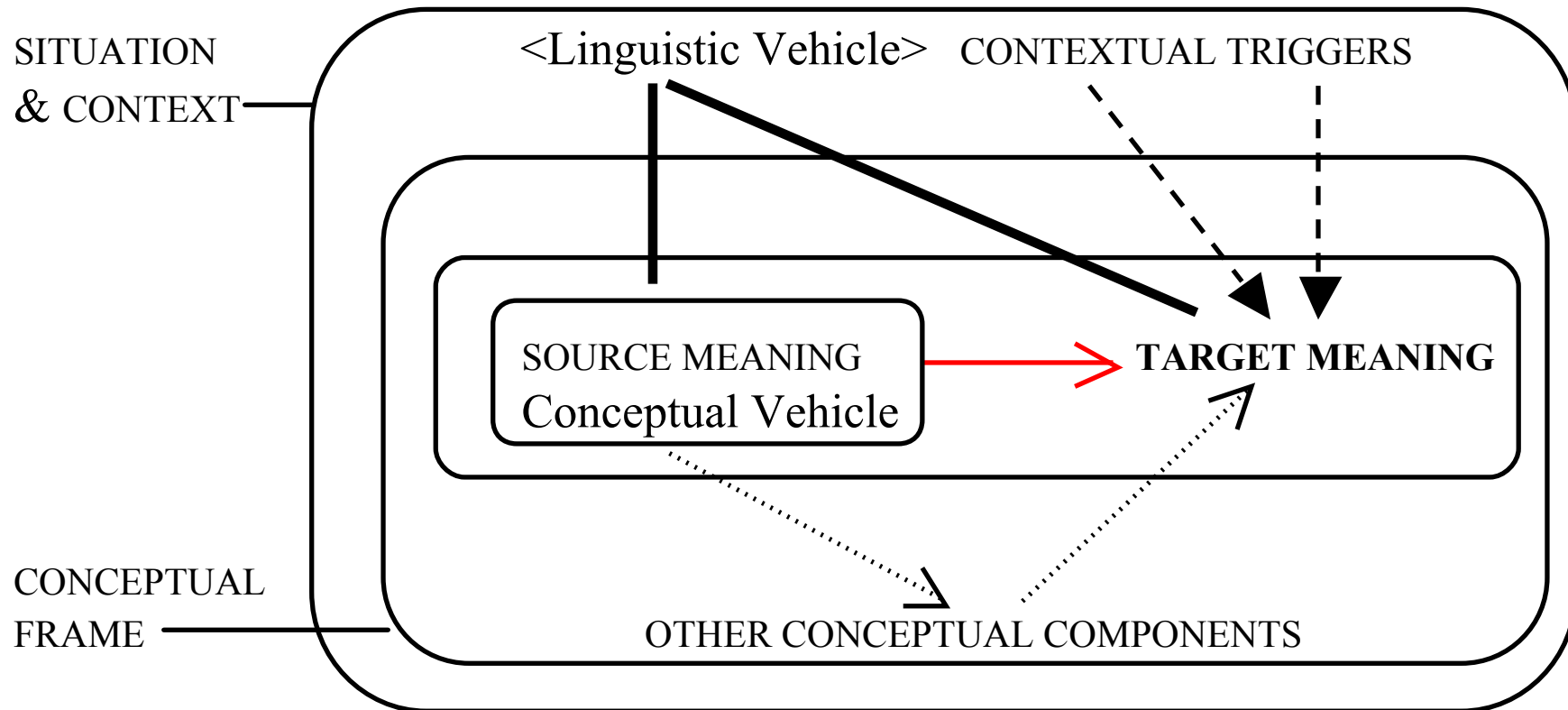
# Coercion triggered by mismatch\*

“[A]t the basis of coercion, there is a **mismatch** [...] between **the semantic properties** of a **selector** (be it a construction, a word class, a temporal or aspectual marker) and the inherent semantic properties of a **selected element**, the latter being not expected in that particular context.”

[Lauwers & Willems 2011: 1219]

\*For history of the notion of coercion and recent research on this topic, see the special issue of *Linguistics* 49(6) (2011); in particular, the introductory article by Lauwers & Willems (2011: 1219–1235).

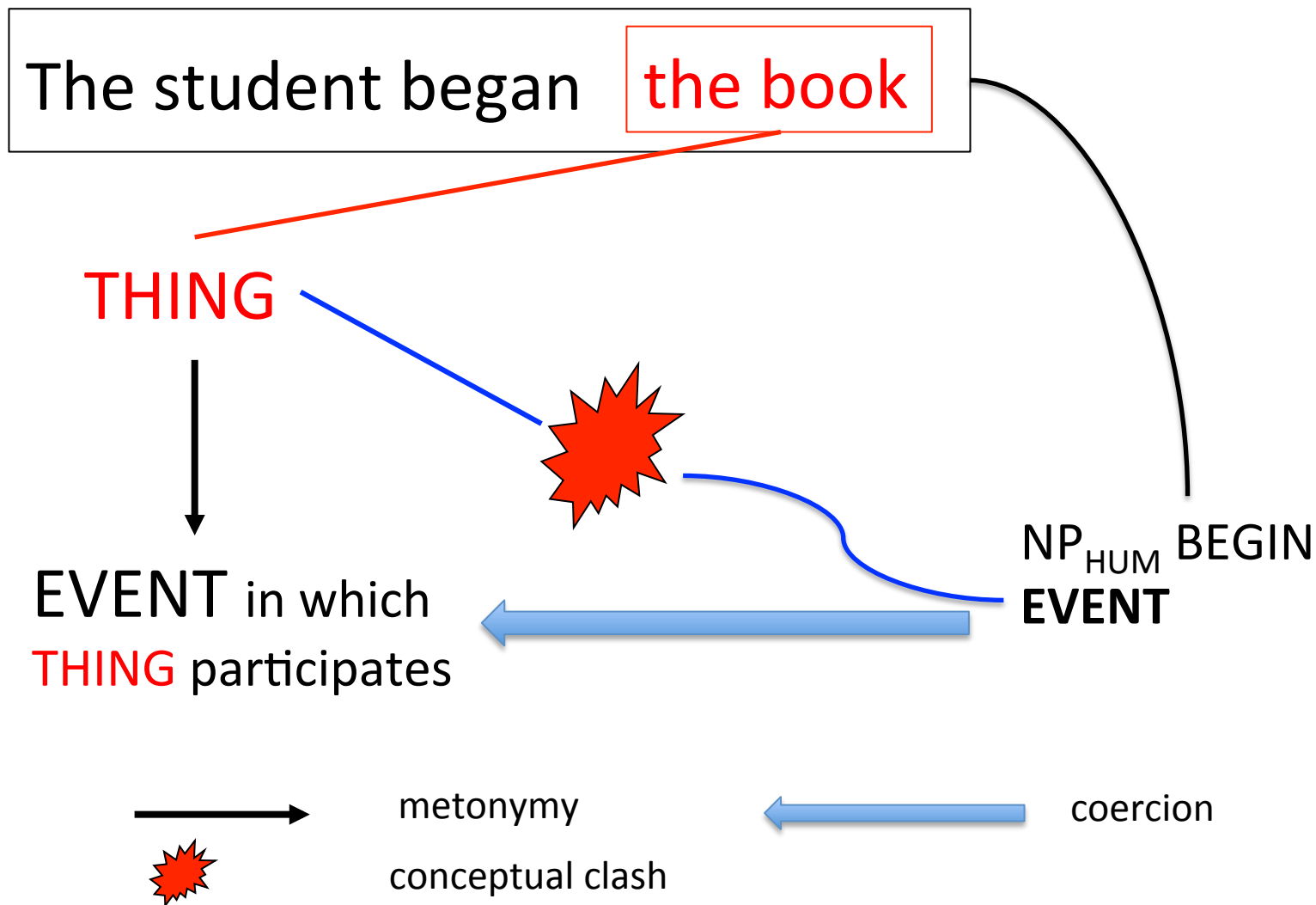
# A crucial concept: **metonymy**



- symbolic relation
- **indexical** relation
- ... possibly non-activated indexical links
- - - contextual triggers of target meaning



# Coercing a THING sense into an EVENT sense



### 3. Constructional meaning coercing lexical meaning

# Override Principle

**“The Override Principle.** If a lexical item is semantically incompatible with its syntactic context, the meaning of the lexical item conforms to the meaning of the structure in which it is embedded.”

[Michaelis 2002: 10]

### 3.1. Nouns: COUNT-to-MASS coercion, and vice versa

# Count Noun

Common noun that denotes an **individual thing**,  
e.g. *apple*

- occurs in the **singular** and plural, e.g. *apple* vs. *apples*
- takes **articles, numerals, quantifiers**, e.g. *a/the apple, four apples, every apple, several apples*

# Mass Noun

Common noun that denotes e.g. a **substance**,  
e.g. *dirt*

- (usually) occurs only in the **singular, not** in the **plural** (*\*dirts*)
- takes definite article (*the dirt*), but not the indefinite article (*\*a dirt*),
- incompatible with numerals and quantifiers:  
*\*three dirts, \*many dirts*

# THING→ SUBSTANCE coercion

Compare:

(1) You have **coffee** on your shirt.

**coffee**: mass noun: SUBSTANCE

(2) You have **apple** on your shirt.

**apple**: count noun: THING

In (1): no conceptual mismatch between **coffee** and the context in which it appears.

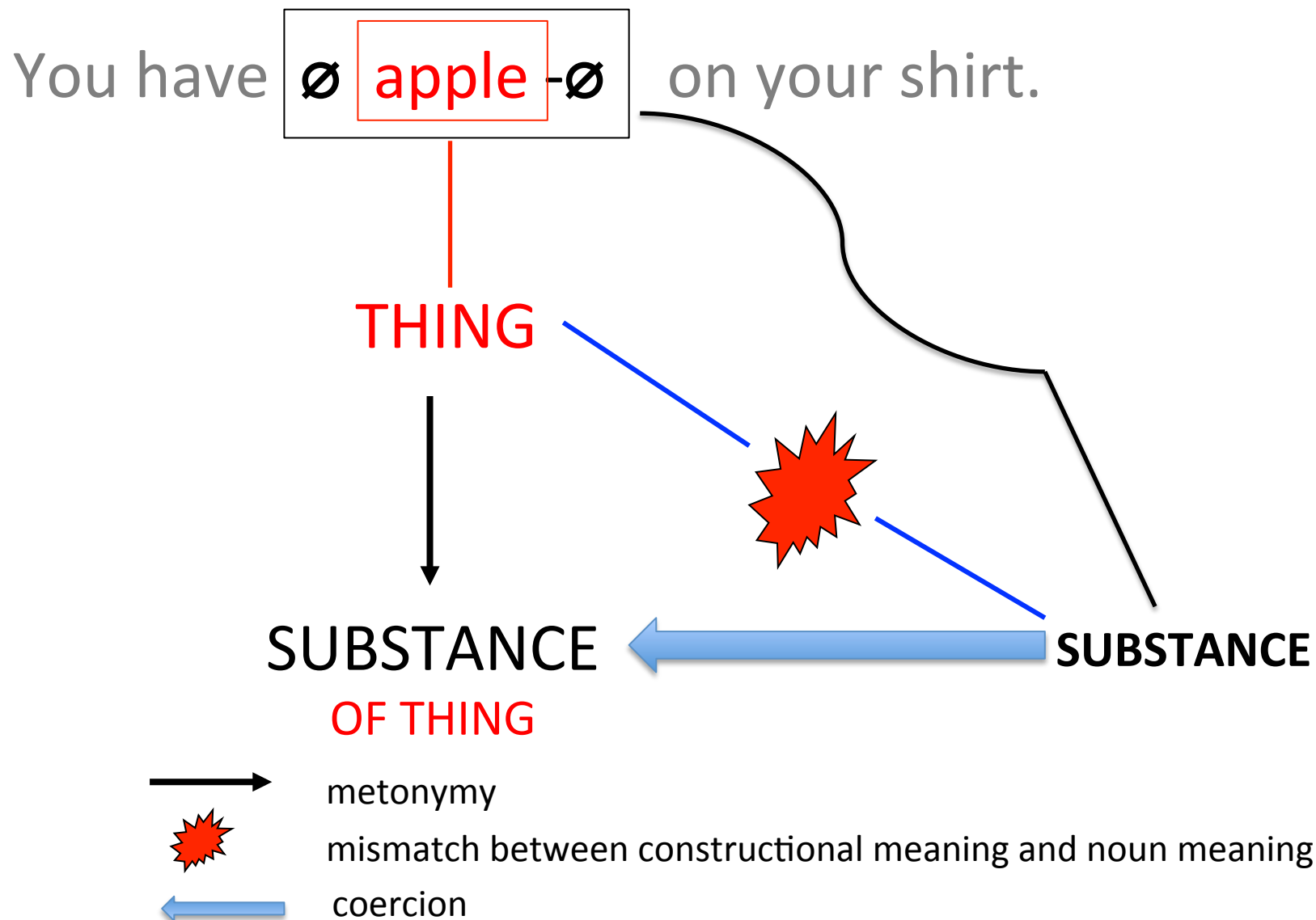
In (2): **conceptual mismatch** between count noun **apple** and the the **nominal construction** in which it appears: *zero article* and *singular*.

Conceptual conflict resolution: by (i) **coercion** and (ii) **metonymy**.

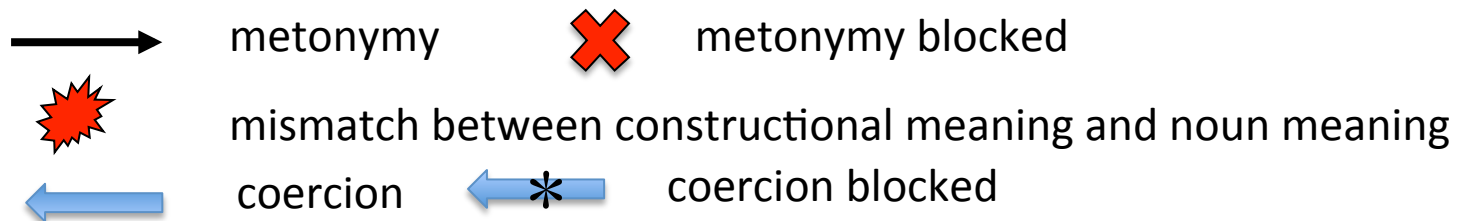
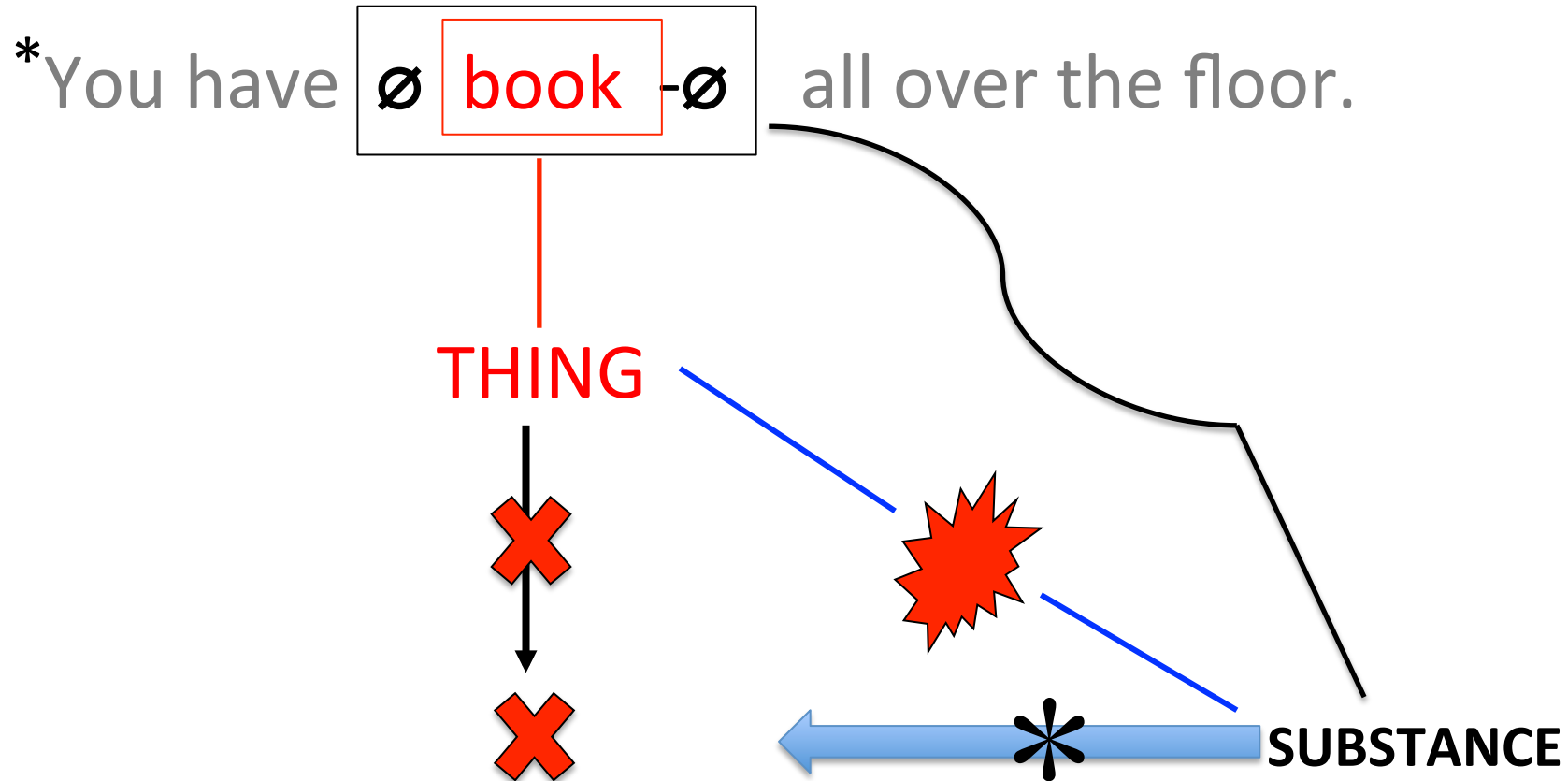


# Coercing a count noun into a mass noun

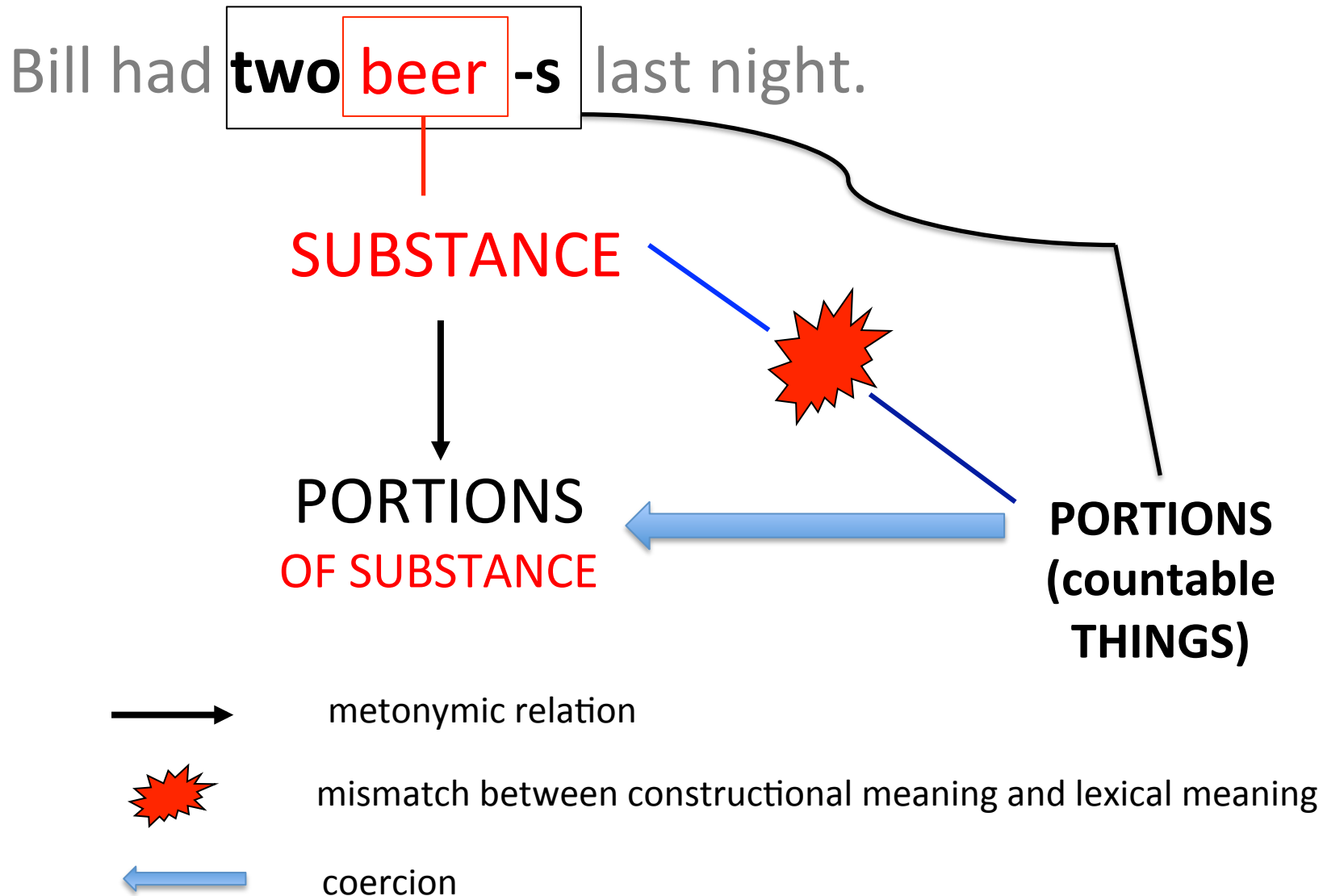
Example from Michaelis (2002)



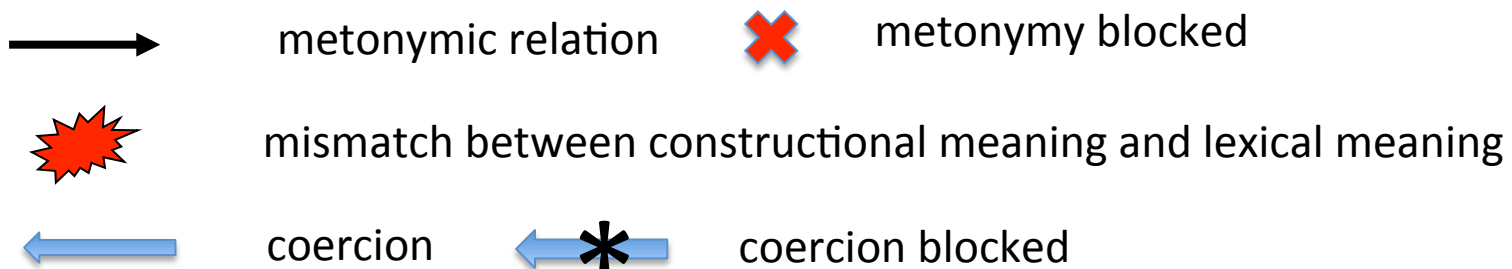
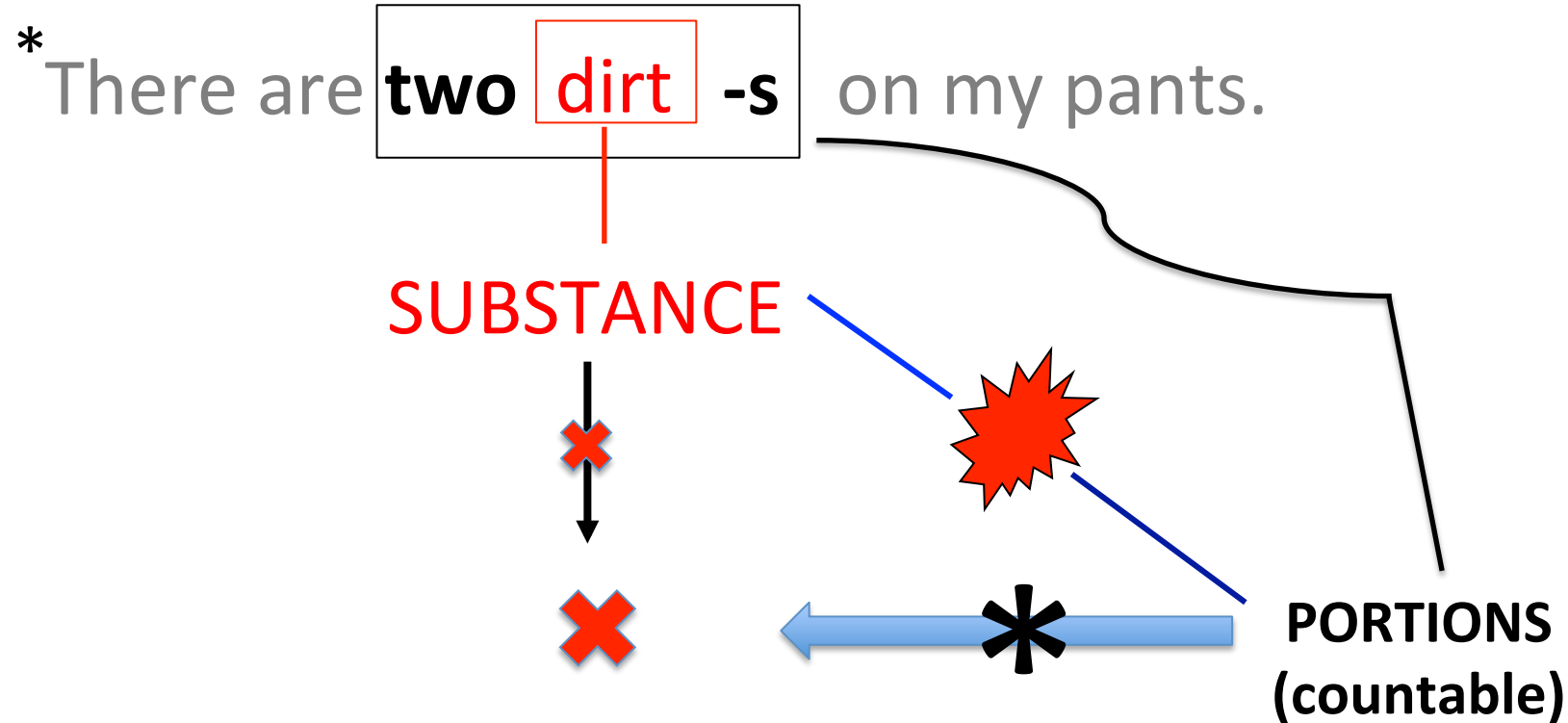
# Coercion from count N to mass N **blocked**



# Coercing a mass noun into a count noun



# Coercion from mass N to count N **blocked**



# Beer vs. dirt

- **Beer**, like other beverages, is served in glasses (PORTIONS) and thereby acquires THING-like properties.
- **Dirt** is usually considered a non-functional substance that serves no useful purpose in human life. Dirt does not manifest itself in PORTIONS, but merely as “matter”.

Italian: **complete** coercion from MASS  
to COUNT interpretation

Italian *espresso* ‘dark-roasted coffee’

Due espressi al giorno tirano su grazie alla  
caffeina, un efficace antidepressivo  
contenuto anche nelle bevande a base di  
cola.<sup>1</sup>

‘Two coffees (espressi) a day cheer you up thanks to their caffeine content,  
an efficient antidepressant also contained in beverages containing cola’

Coercion supported by metonymy:

SUBSTANCE → PORTION of SUBSTANCE (THING)

<sup>1</sup> CorpusCORIS (Corpus of written Italian, 2011); 130 millions words)

English: also **complete** coercion from  
MASS to COUNT interpretation

English *beer*

Study: Drinking **Two Beers** Makes You Clever<sup>2</sup>

Coercion to an OBJECT meaning is possible  
because there is a metonymic connection  
between drinkable fluids and the containers  
(glasses) they are served in. Thus beer in a glass  
can be conceptualized as a countable object:

SUBSTANCE → THING: *a beer, two beers*

<sup>2</sup> <http://gizmodo.com/5901595/study-two-beers-makes-you-clever>



# German: partial MASS to COUNT coercion

German *Bier* 'beer'

Herr Ober, bitte zwei Bier!

Mr. waiter please two beer.SG

'Waiter, two beers, please.'

**Partial coercion** licensed by the metonymy SUBSTANCE

→ PORTION of SUBSTANCE (THING): However, unlike in English and Italian, the semantically plural target sense has no grammatical reflex: *Bier* is used in the **singular**!

# Pluralization of German *Bier* ‘beer’

However, the plural is possible with *Bier* if its meaning is ‘brand of beer’:

**Biertest: 2 Biere aus Costa Rica**<sup>3</sup>

beer-test 2 beer-PL from Costa Rica

‘Beer test: 2 beer brands from Costa Rica’

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bier-entdecken.de/biertest-2-biere-aus-costa-rica/>

## 3.2. Predicates: STATE-to-ACTION coercion in speech act constructions

# Speech Act constructions

Constructions that have are conventionally used to perform certain types of speech acts. For example:

- **Declaratives** are used to perform *assertive* speech acts, e.g.:

Mandarin has four tones.

- **Imperatives** are used to perform *directive* speech acts, e.g.:

Read the chapter on speech acts by Monday.

- **Interrogatives** are used to perform *questions*, e.g.:

Do you sell eBook readers?

- **Exclamatives** are used to convey *emotions*, e.g.:

What a beautiful day!

# Action constructions

Action constructions are constructions that require an ACTION verb, e.g. the imperative:

**Read** the chapter on speech acts by Monday!

*Read* is an action verb.

\***Intend** to go to India next summer!

*Intend* is not an action verb: the imperative is ungrammatical. There is a **mismatch** between the construction meaning and the lexical meaning of *intend*.

The Action construction **How to VP<sub>ACTION</sub>**

How to *VP*<sub>ACTION</sub>

*Example:*

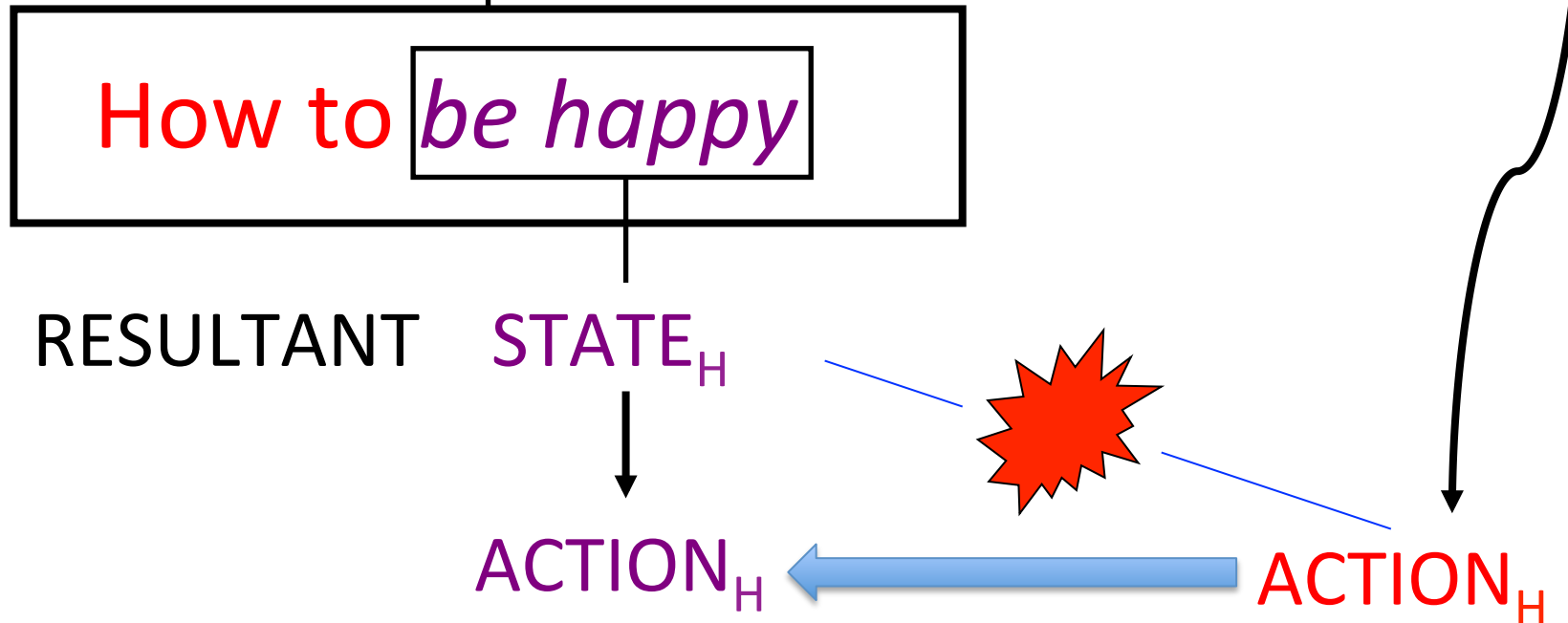
How to **write a term paper.**

*Meaning:*

‘The author offers/promises to teach the reader/hearer how to write a (good) term paper’

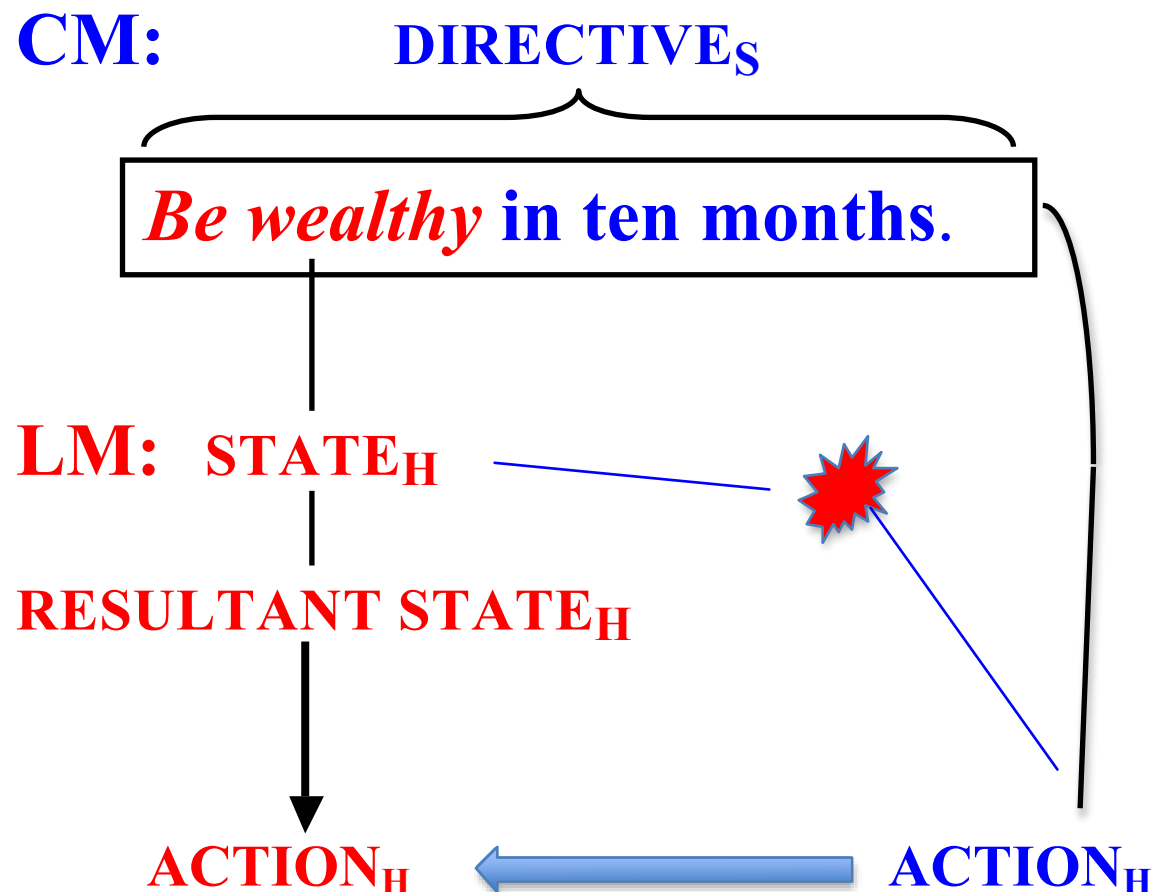
## Metonymy: RESULTANT STATE FOR ACTION

'S offers to teach H how to achieve happiness'



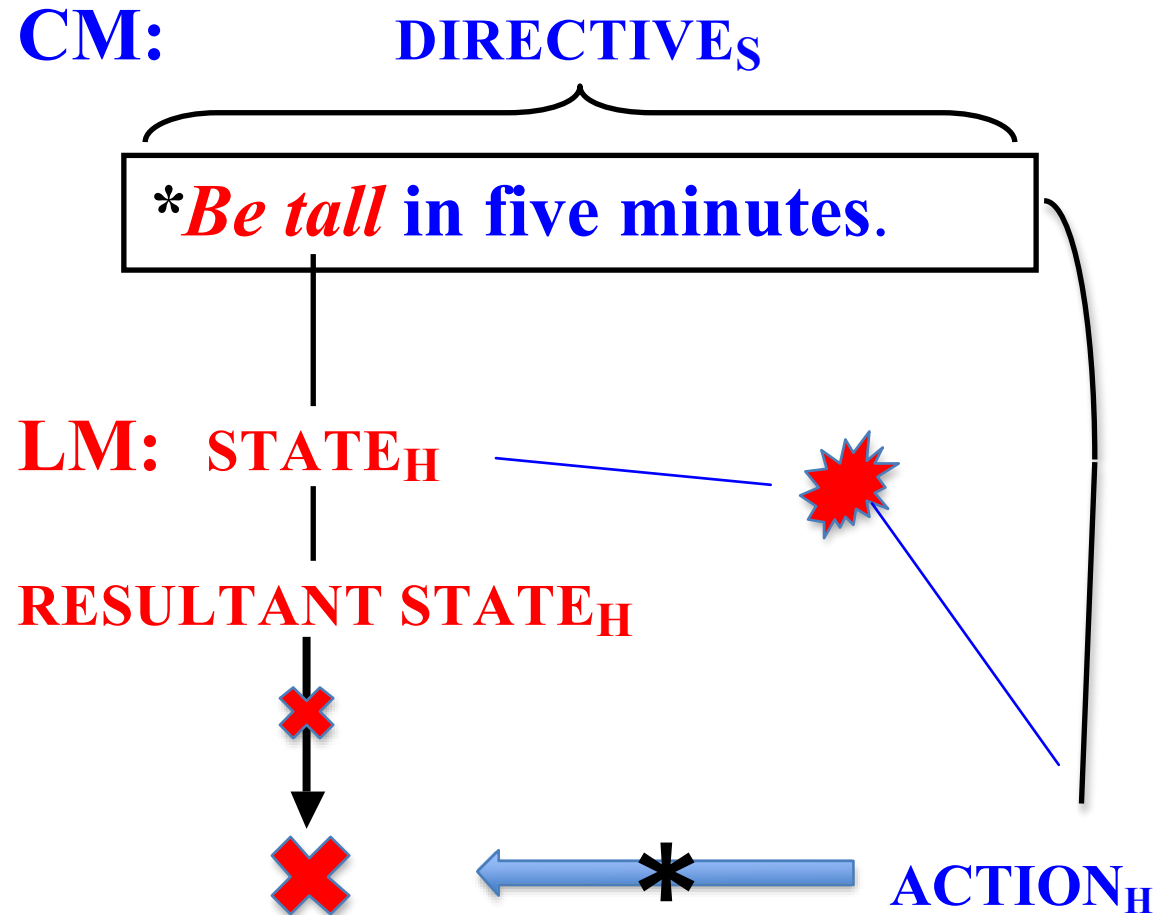


# Imperative with a stative predicate (1)



CM: Construction Meaning; LM: Lexical Meaning;  
S: Speaker; H: Hearer

# Imperative with a stative predicate (2)



CM: Construction Meaning; LM: Lexical Meaning;  
S: Speaker; H: Hearer

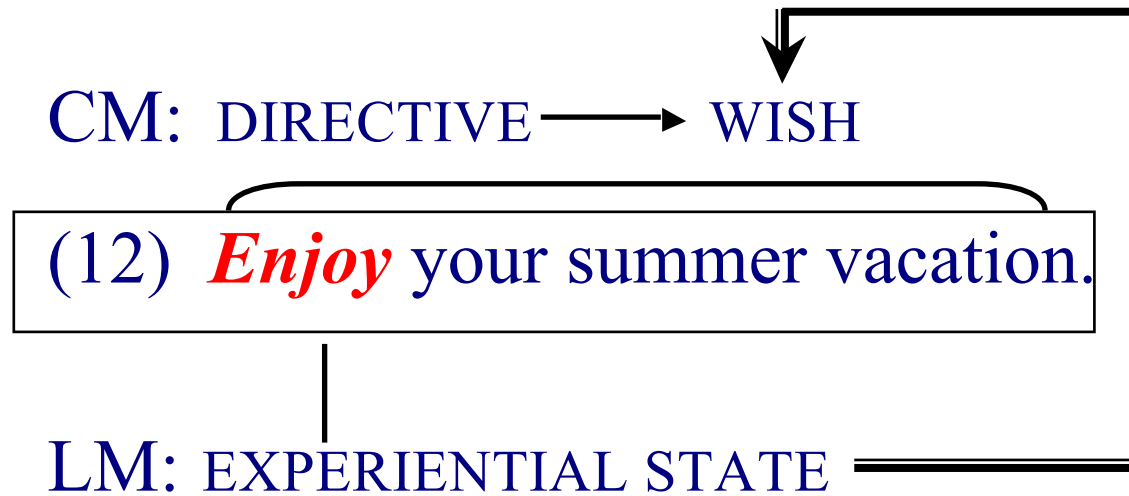
## *Be wealthy vs. be tall (1)*

To become *wealthy* can be a person's *intention*; and the person will *act* accordingly. Therefore imperative sentences with *healthy* make sense. The imperative construction can *coerce* the state predicate WEALTHY into an ACTION predicate because the STATE 'wealthy' can be understood as the RESULT of an ACTION (metonymy: RESULT FOR ACTION).

## *Be wealthy vs. be tall (2)*

To become *tall* cannot be a (reasonable) person's *intention*. Our *world knowledge* tells us that we cannot bring about 'to be tall in five minutes'. The imperative construction *cannot coerce* the state predicate TALL into an ACTION predicate because the metonymy RESULT FOR ACTION is not applicable.

## Metonymic coercion of a construction meaning by a lexical item?



CM: Construction Meaning

LM: Lexical Meaning

→ : metonymic relation

⇒ : coercion

## 4. Aspectual coercion

## 4. Aspectual classes (situation types)

# Grammatical Aspect, Lexical Aspect (Aktionsart), Tense

- *Lexical Aspect (Aktionsart)*: conceptualization of a situation by *lexical means* (especially, by verbs); e.g. *stand* is a stative verb
- *Aspect*: conceptualization of a situation by *grammatical means* (function words, grammatical affixes); e.g. the Progressive in English: *She is writing a book.*
- *Tense*: location of a situation in time; e.g. Past Tense in English.



# Lexical Aspect (Aktionsart)

- The type of situation expressed by verbs:

Basic distinction:

***stative vs. dynamic verbs:***

e.g. *know* [stative] vs. *learn* [dynamic]

# Situation Types (based on Vendler 1957)

SITUATIONS	STATIC	DURATIVE	TELIC
<b>States</b> <i>John wants more coffee</i>	+	+	–
<b>Activities</b> <i>Mary ran in the park</i>	–	+	–
<b>Accomplishments</b> <i>John painted his house</i>	–	+	+
<b>Semelfactives</b> <i>The light flashed</i>	–	–	–
<b>Achievements</b> <i>They reached the top of the mountain</i>	–	–	+

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<b>Accomplishments</b> <i>John painted his house</i>	–	+	+
<b>Semelfactives</b> <i>The light flashed</i>	–	–	–
<b>Achievements</b> <i>They reached the top of the mountain</i>	–	–	+

# States

*Atelic* or *unbounded, durative, homogeneous*  
(no internal change):

1. Mary is taller than Bill.
2. The light is on.
3. Nobody believes him.
4. Clive knows my brother.
5. France borders on Italy.

[For the characterization of states, activities, accomplishment, achievements  
cf. Kearns (2000: 201ff.).]

# Activities (Processes)

*Unbounded, durative, heterogeneous* (internal change occurs):

1. John and Mary chatted.
2. The ladies played chess.
3. The tourists swam in the river.
4. The leaves fluttered in the wind. (Kearns 2000: 202)
5. Bill jogged in the park.

# Accomplishments

*Durative, telic* (bounded); consist of an activity (process) leading up to a culmination point:

1. John built a house.
2. Mary ate an apple.
3. Jones ran a mile.
4. We washed the dishes.
5. Raphael painted a triptych.

[Examples from Kearns (2000: 203)]

# Achievements

**Transition** from one situation to another;  
**bounded** (or **telic**); **punctual**:

1. Clive realized that Deirdre was gone.
2. Then he recognized her.
3. They reached the summit.
4. James noticed a mark on the wallpaper.
5. Mary found a coin.

[Examples (1) - (4) from Kearns (2000: 203)]

# The conceptual structure of *find*

1. Mary **found** a ten-dollar bill in the street.

*find*<sub>1</sub>: 'discover or perceive by chance or unexpectedly' [ACHIEVEMENT]

2. Democrat Otis Hensley [...] promised to **find** a way to get legislators not to tie up coal severance tax dollars [...].

*find*<sub>2</sub>: 'discover or perceive after a deliberate search' [ACCOMPLISHMENT]



# The conceptual structure of *find*<sub>2</sub> (1)

2. Democrat Otis Hensley [...] **promised to find** a way to get legislators not to tie up coal severance tax dollars [...].

*find*<sub>2</sub>: ‘discover or perceive after a deliberate search’ [ACCOMPLISHMENT]

Notice that *find*<sub>2</sub> is embedded in an **Action** construction: *promise* requires an infinitival clause that expression an ACTION.

## The conceptual structure of *find*<sub>2</sub> (2)

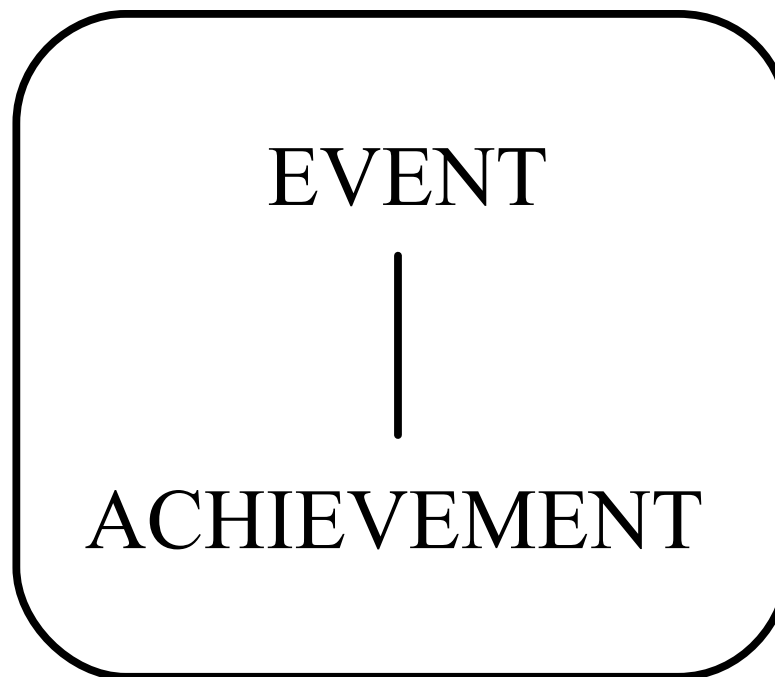
2. Democrat Otis Hensley [...] **promised to find** a way to get legislators not to tie up coal severance tax dollars [...].

*find*<sub>2</sub>: ‘discover or perceive after a deliberate search’ [ACCOMPLISHMENT]

**Thesis:** The verb *promise* coerces the ACHIEVEMENT sense of *find*<sub>1</sub> into the ACCOMPLISHMENT (i.e. ACTION) sense of *find*<sub>2</sub>.

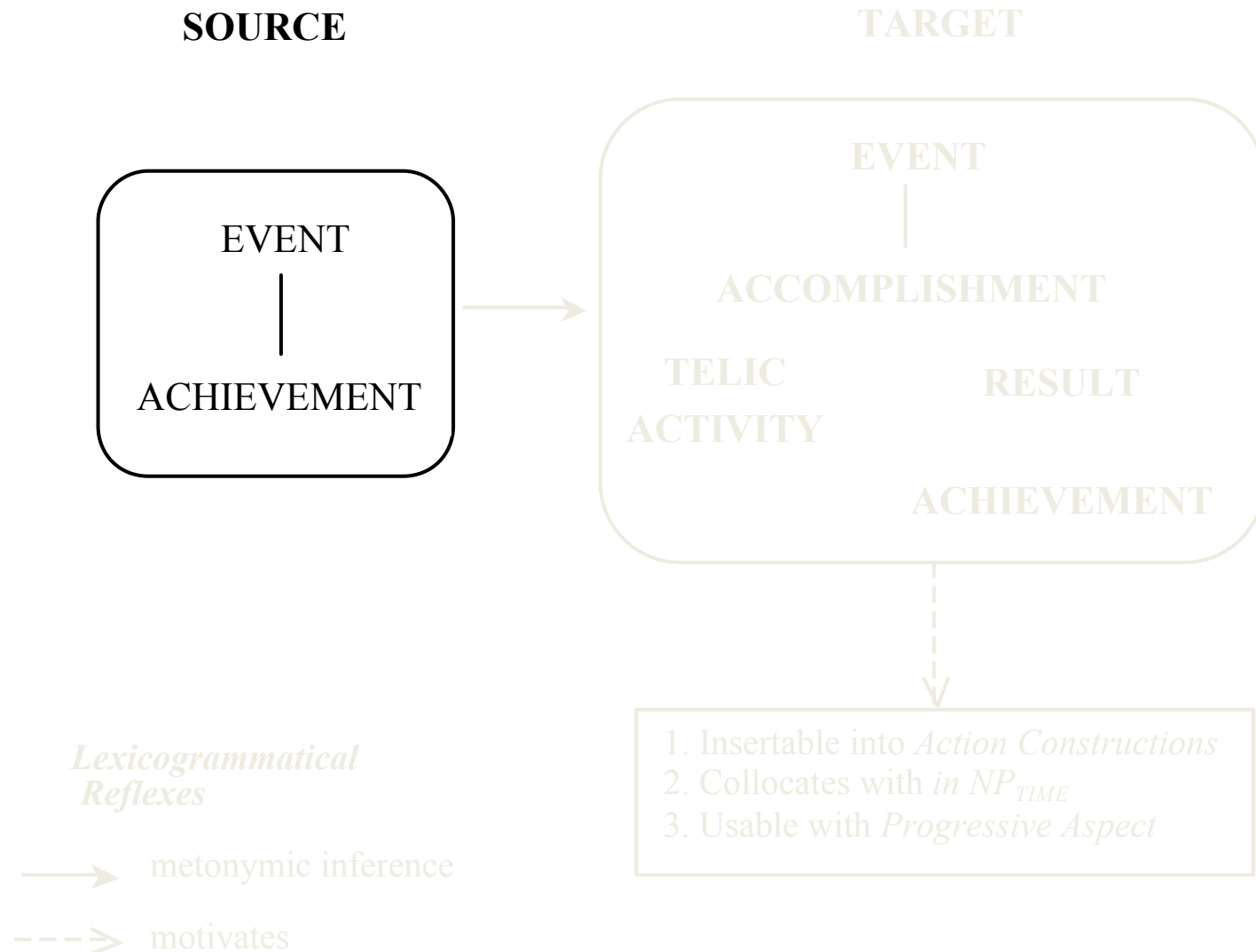
*find*<sub>1</sub>

***Conceptual Structure of find<sub>1</sub>***



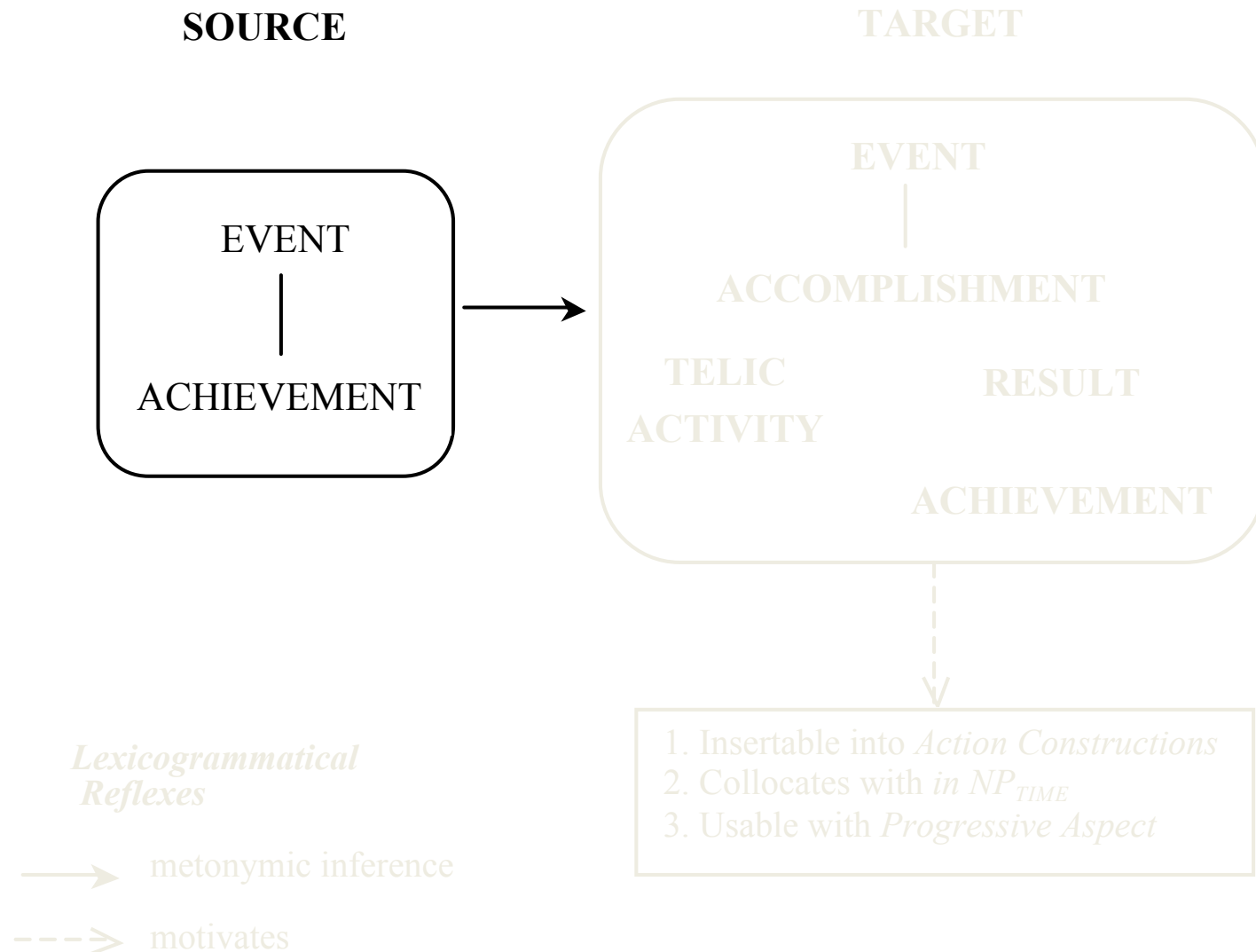
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



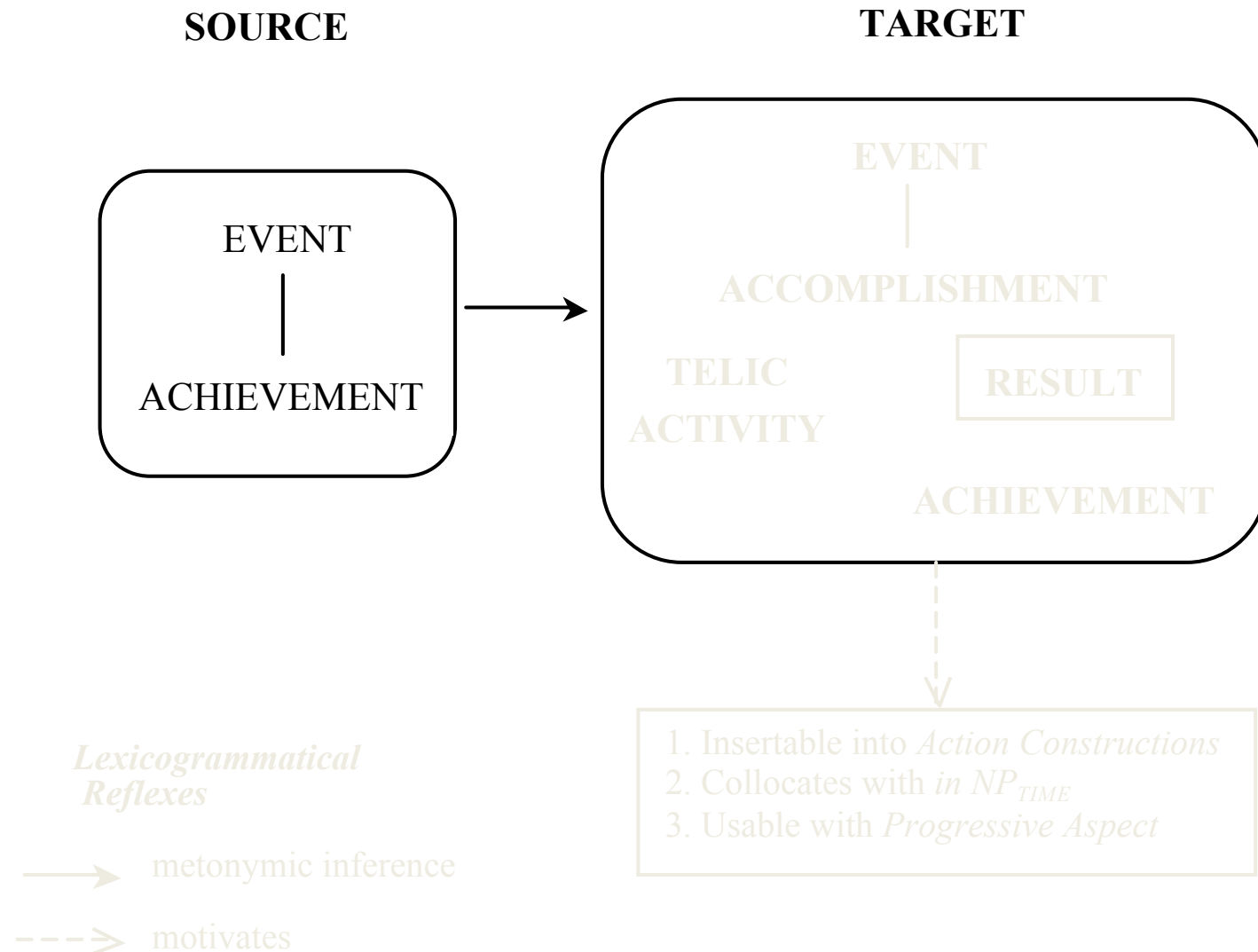
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



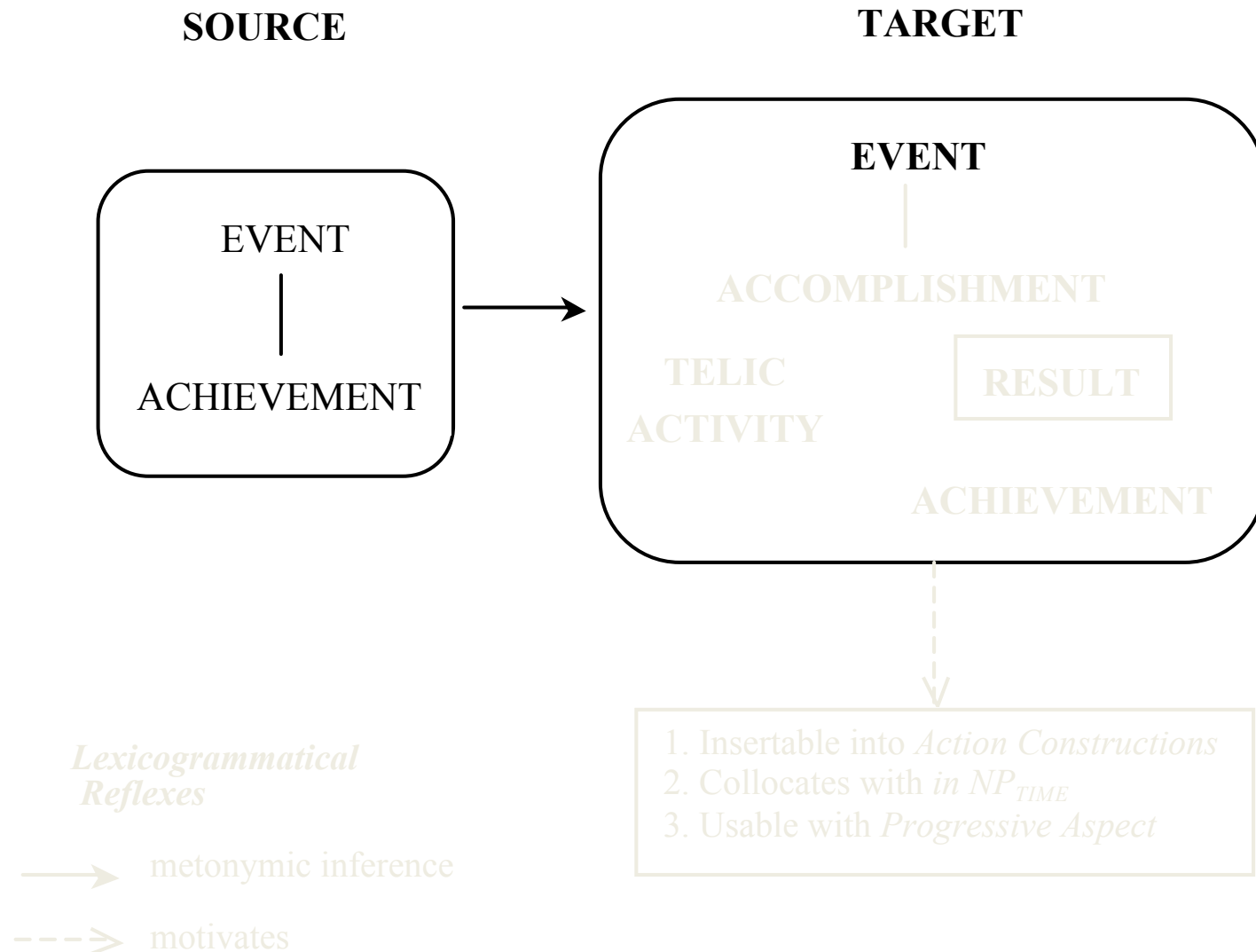
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



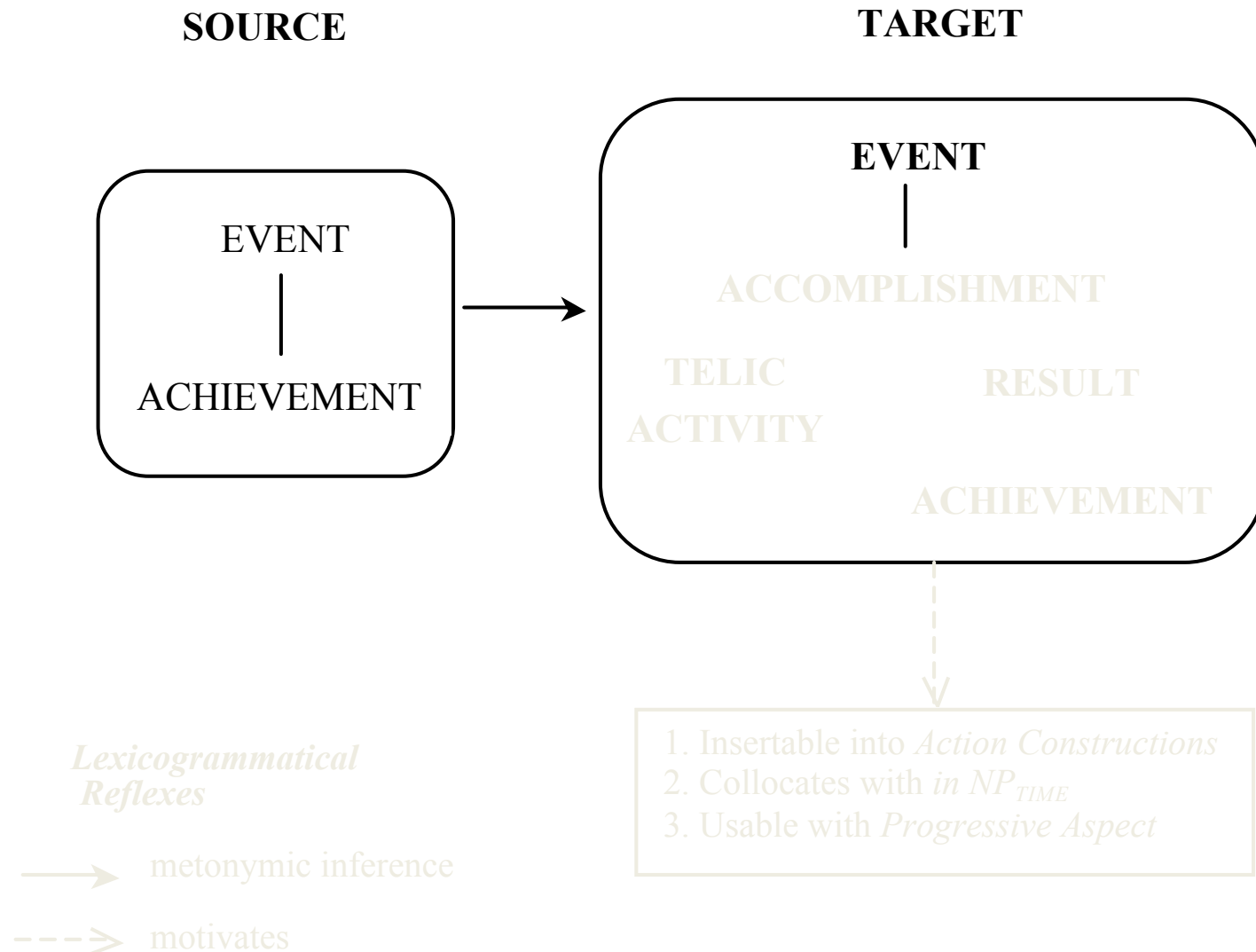
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



# *find*<sub>2</sub>

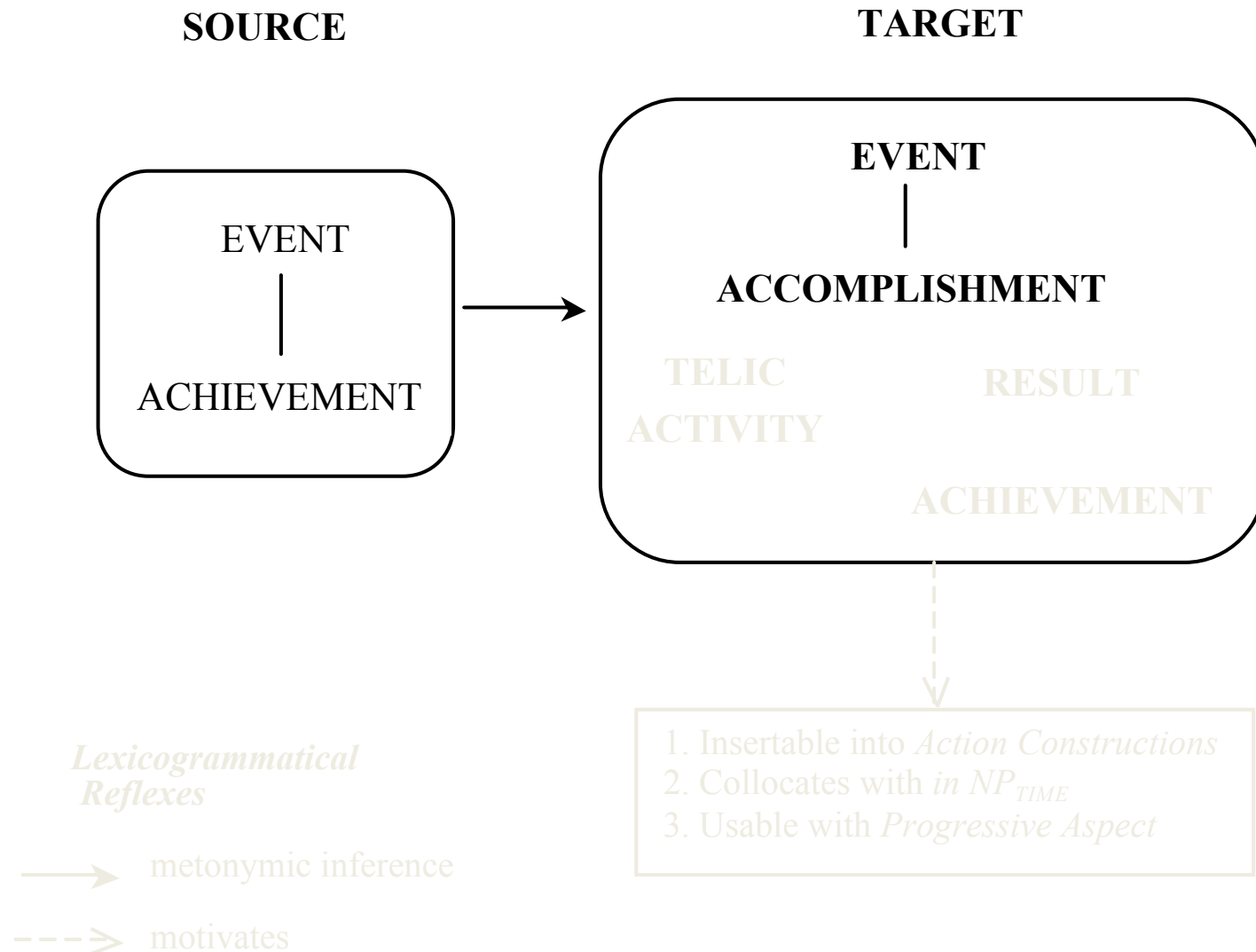
## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>





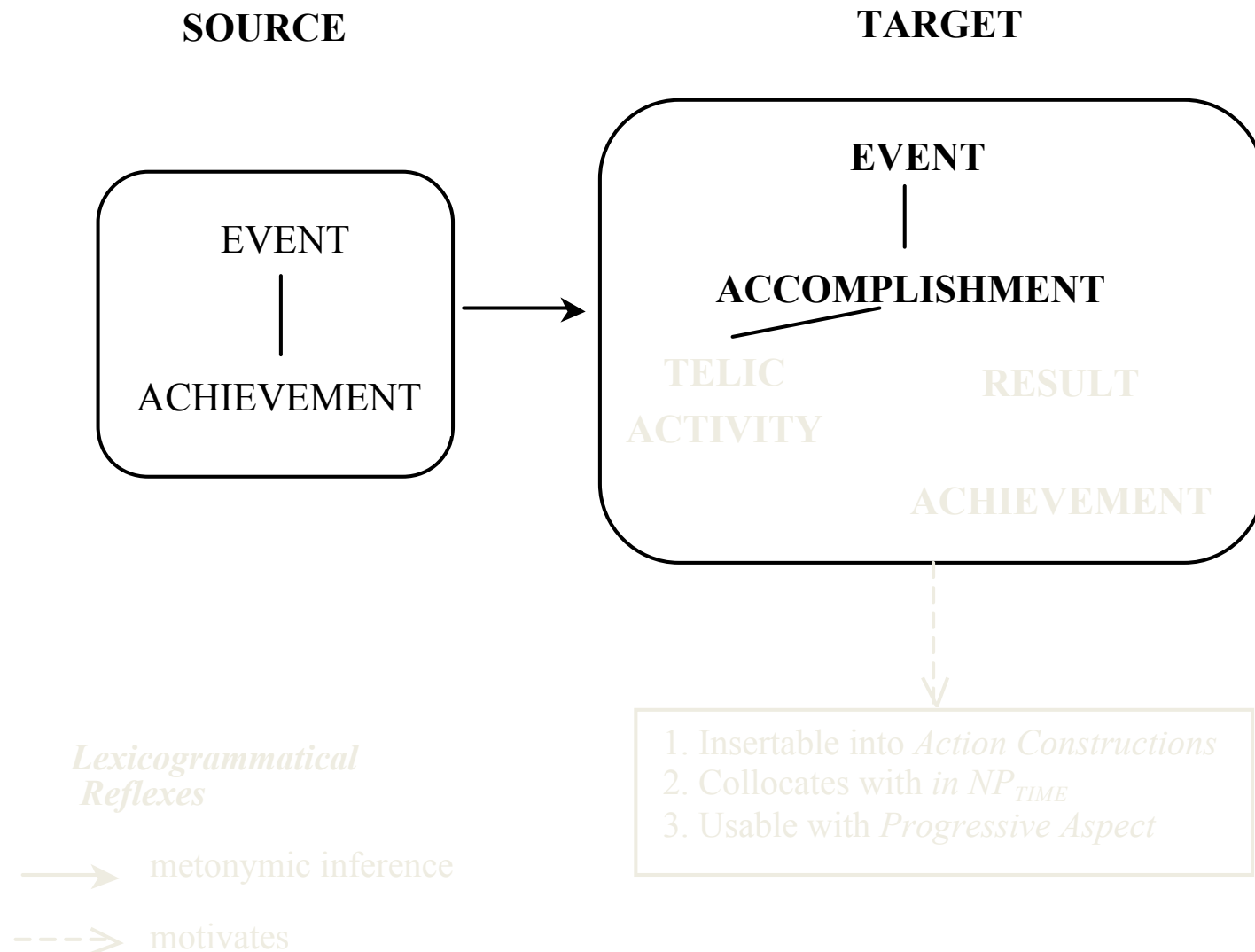
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



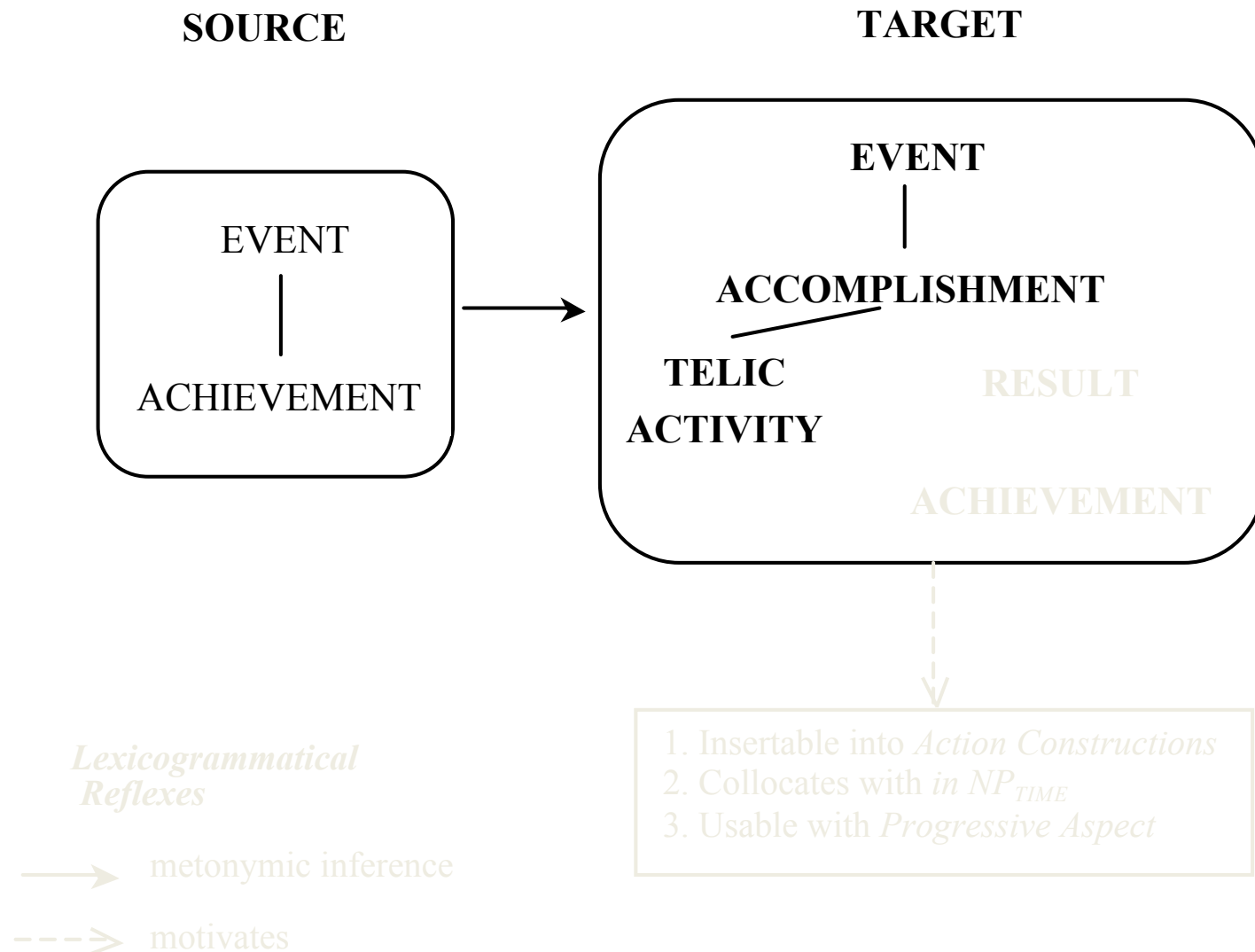
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



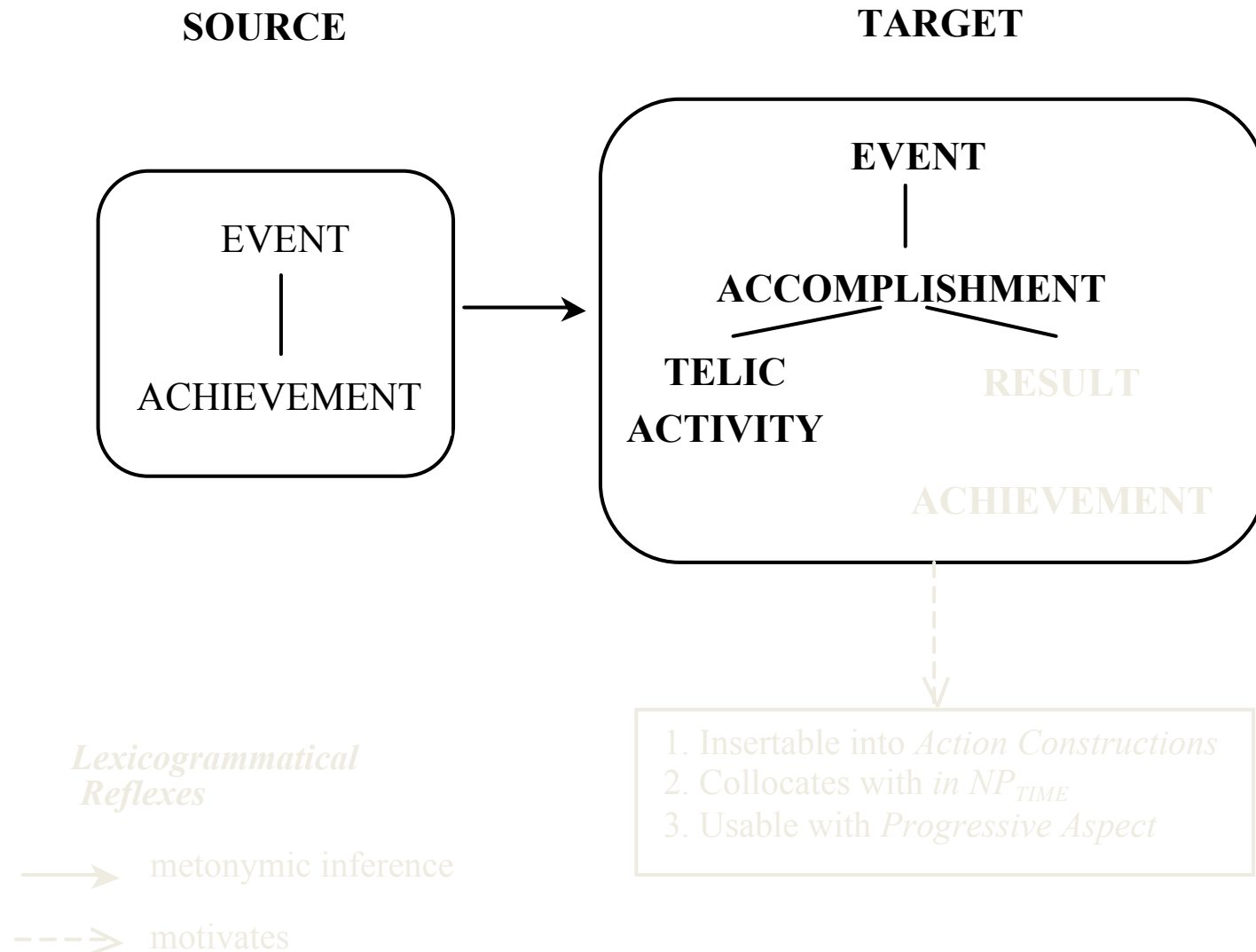
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



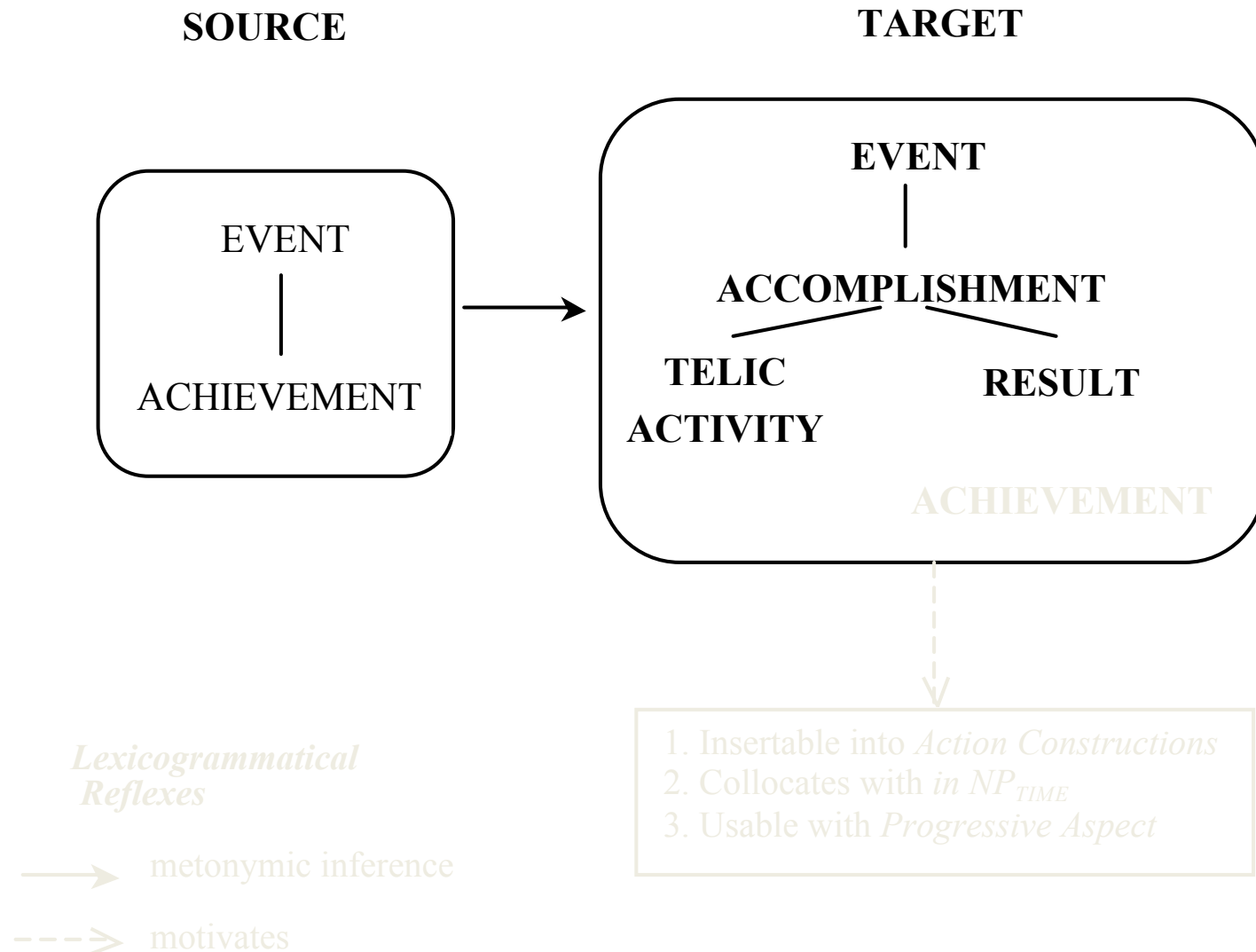
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



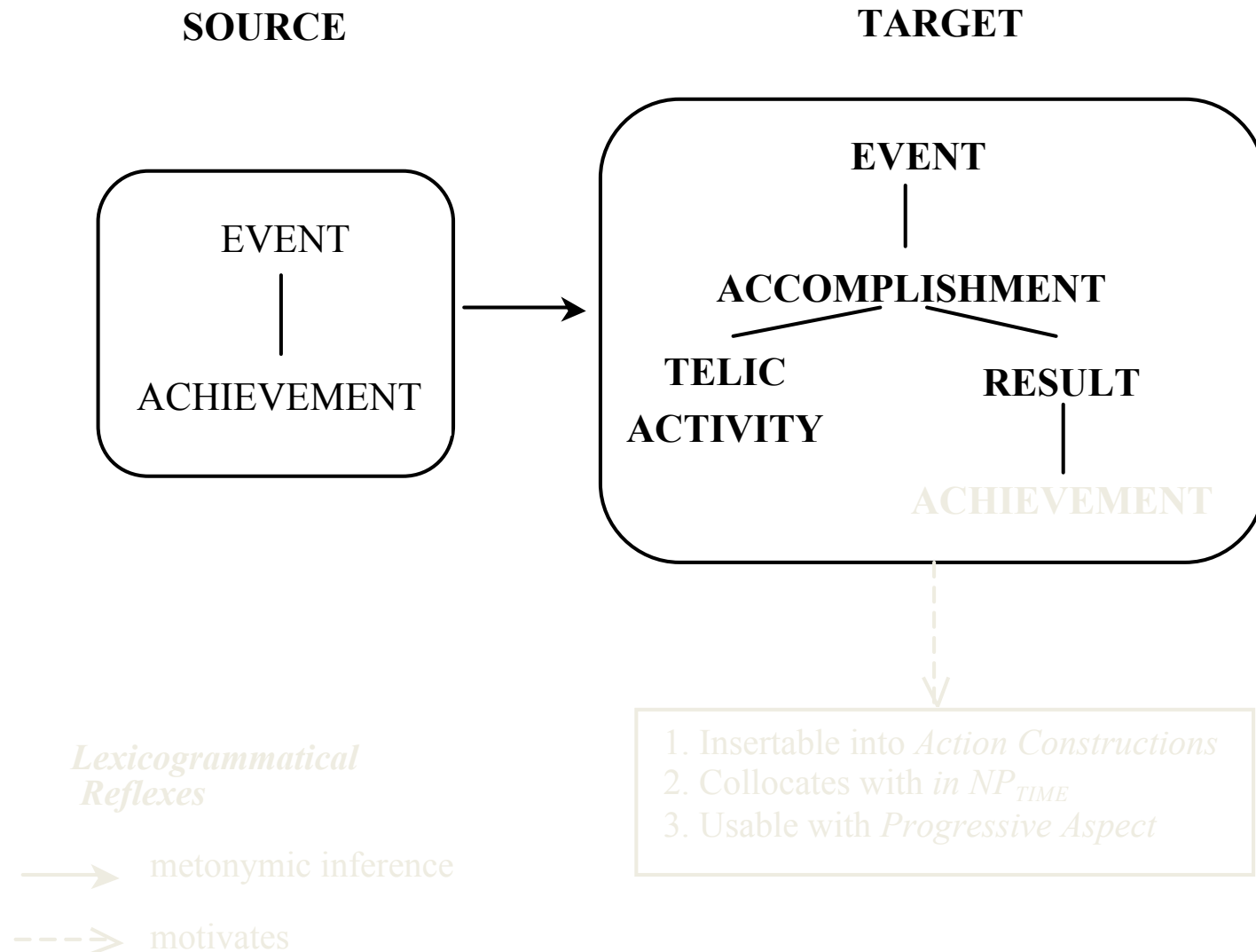
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



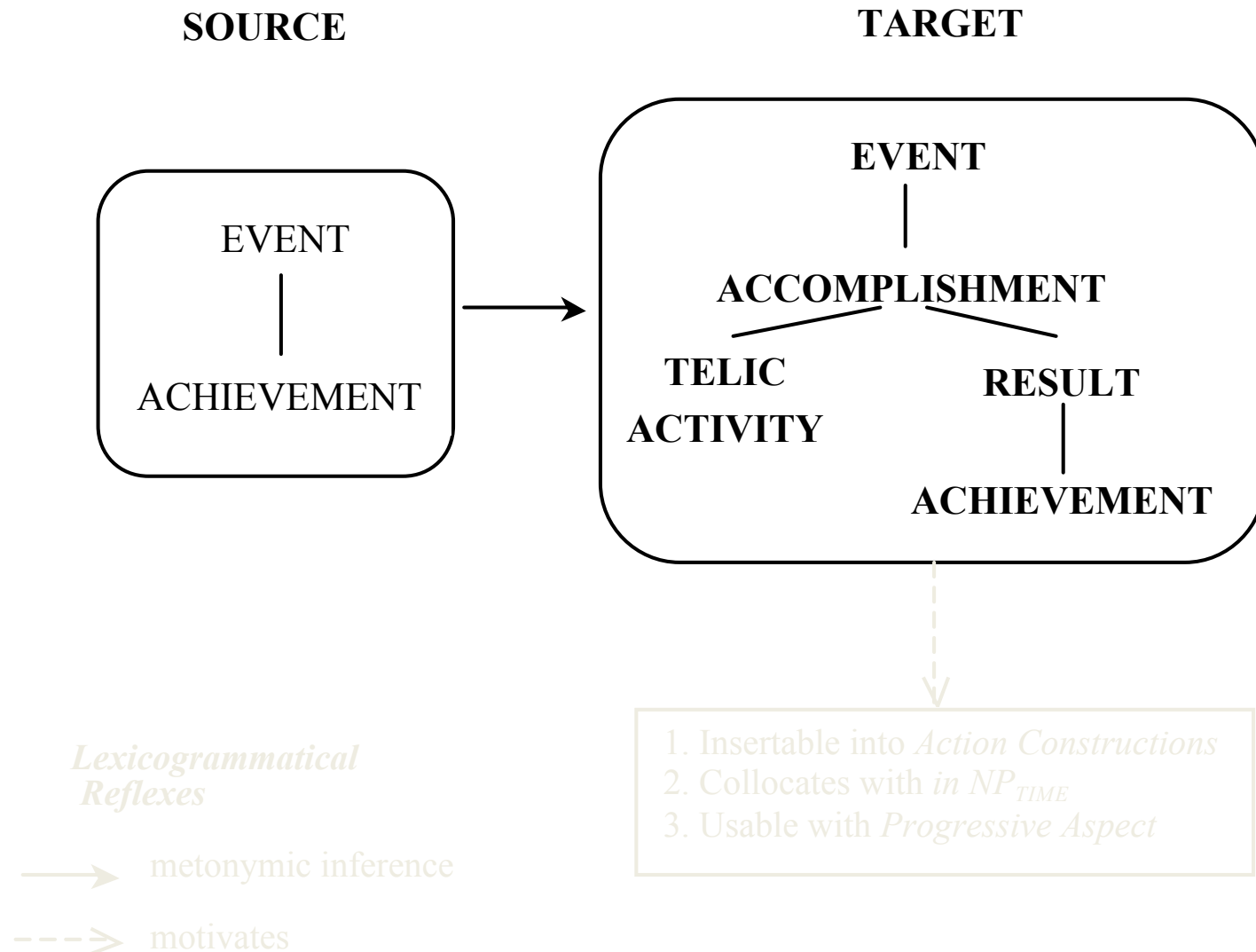
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



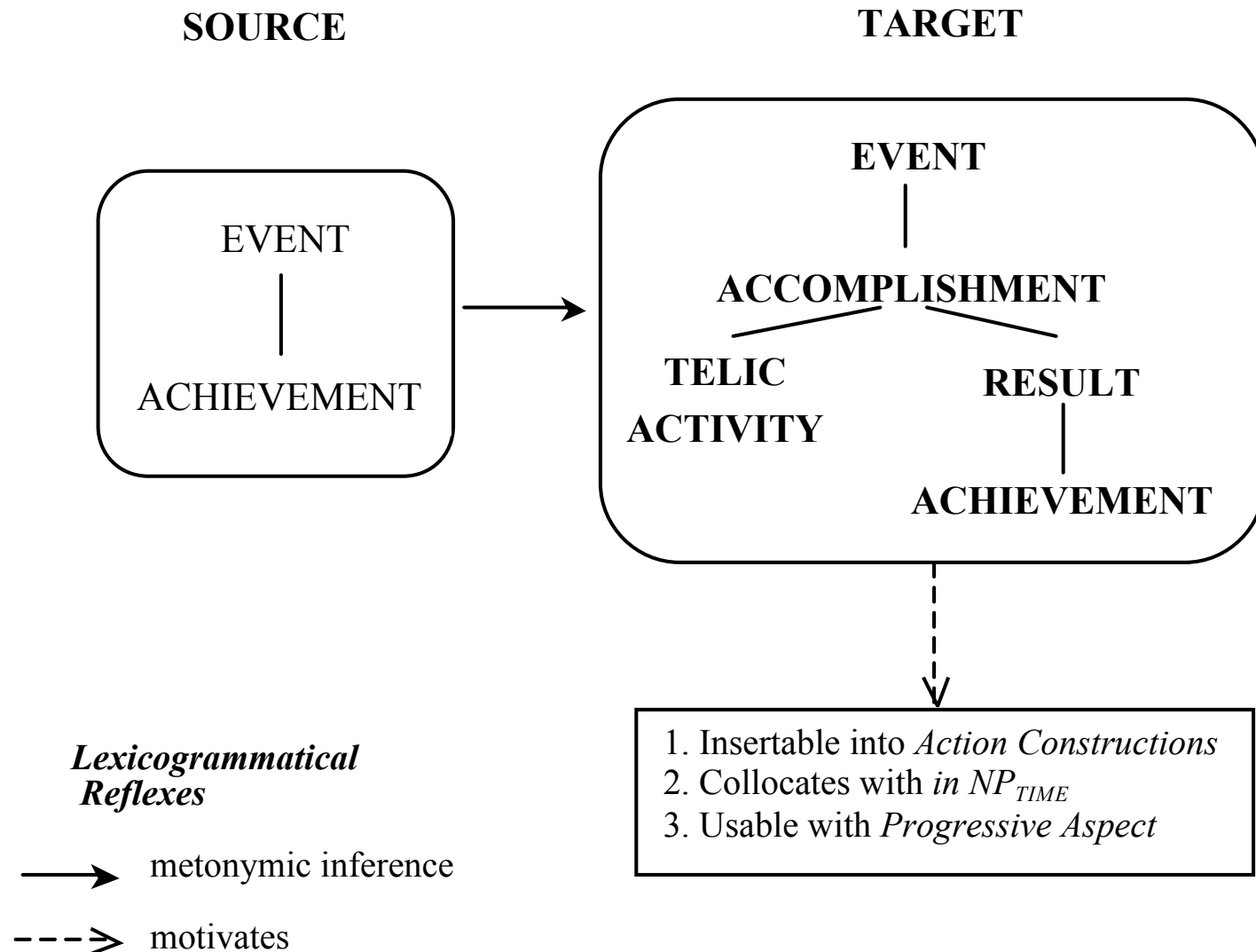
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## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



*find*<sub>2</sub>

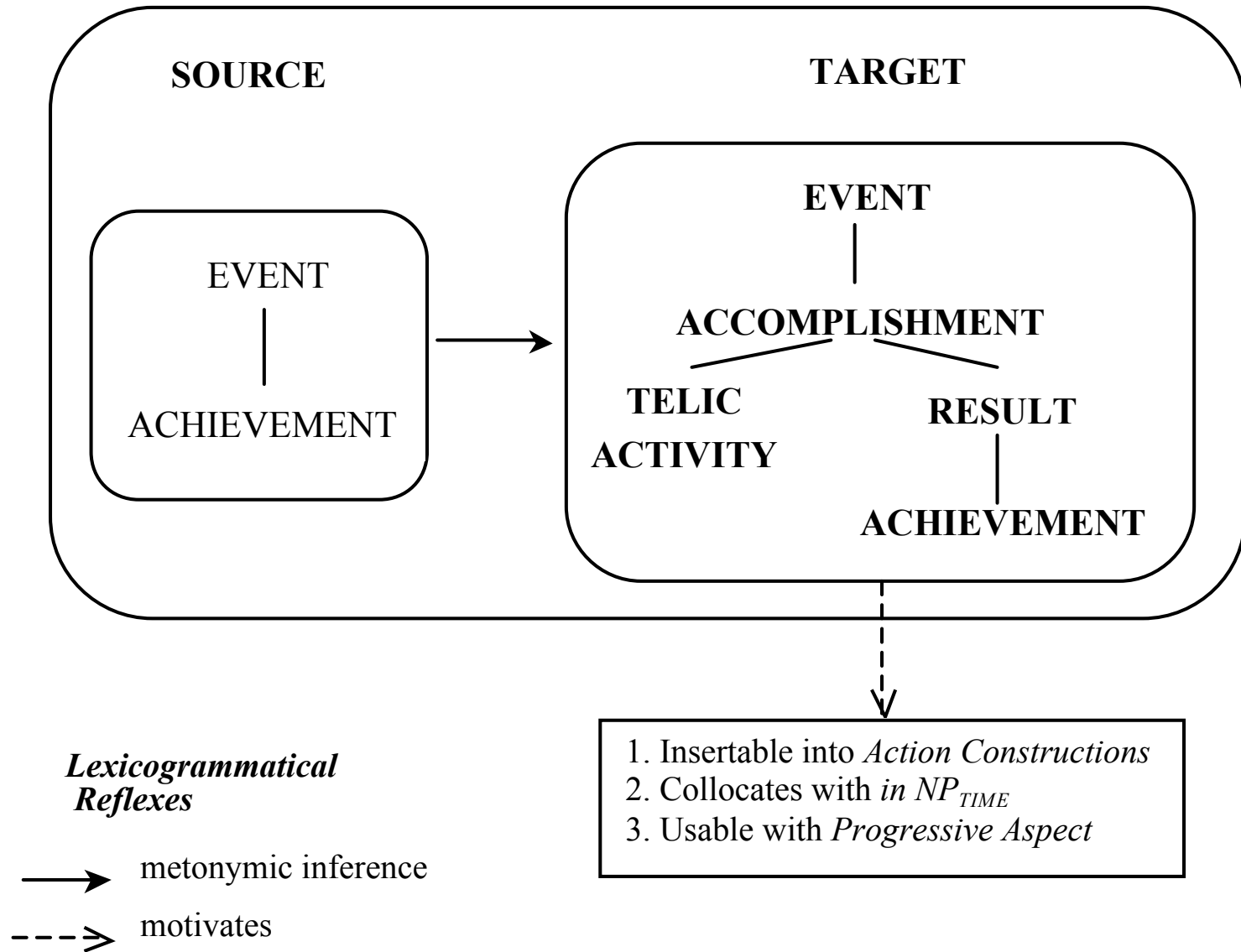
*Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>





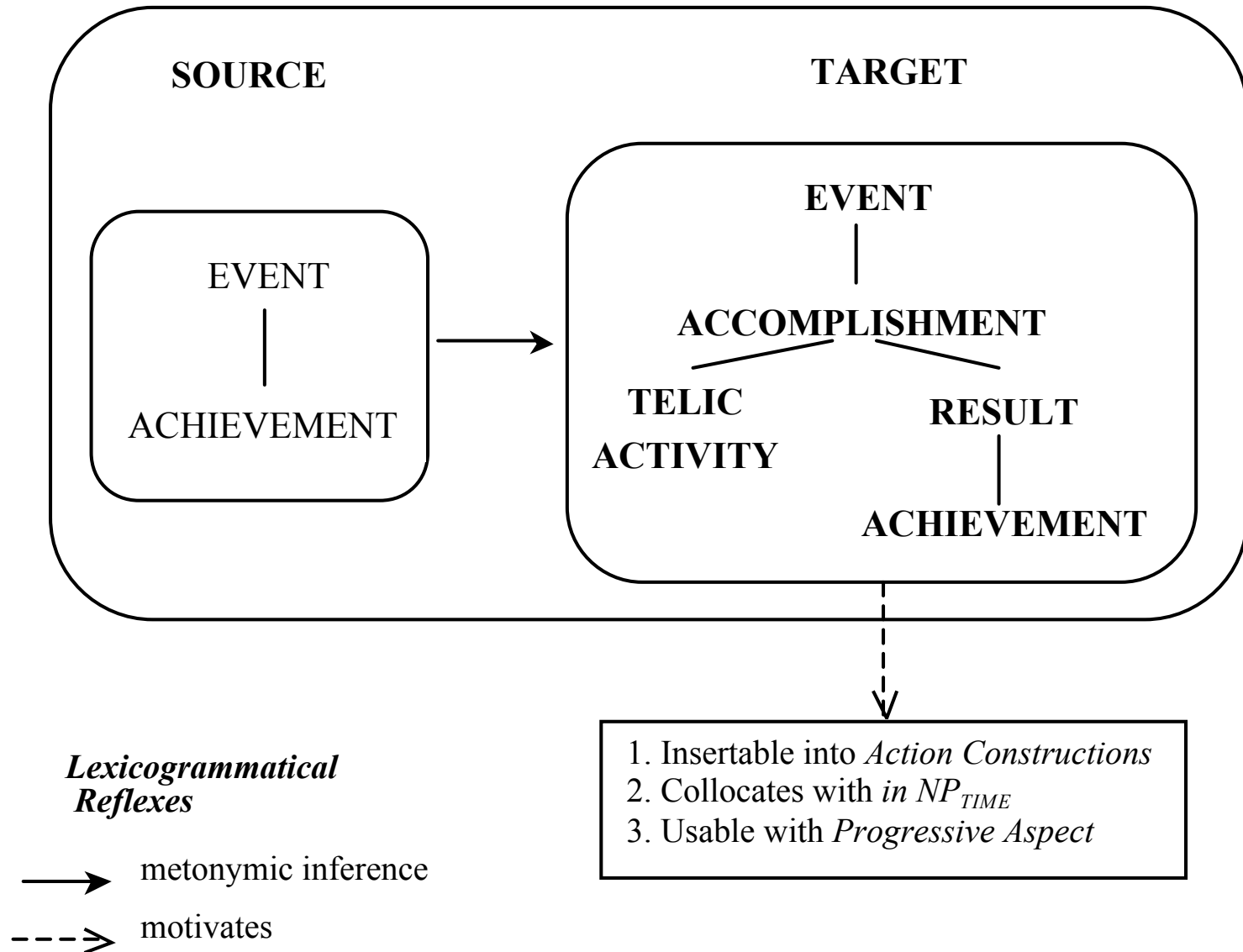
# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



# *find*<sub>2</sub>

## *Conceptual Structure of find*<sub>2</sub>



# 5. Conclusions

# Conclusions (1)

1. Coercion applies when there is a *conceptual mismatch* between two linguistic units, especially between the *meaning* of a **construction** and the *meaning* of a **lexical** item.
2. The resolution of the conceptual mismatch is usually that the **constructional meaning** forces the **lexical meaning** to accommodate to the constructional meaning.

## Conclusions (2)

3. Coercion is successful, i.e. accepted by the language user, if there exists a *natural inference schema*, viz. *metonymy*, that connects the **coerced** element with the **coercing** element.
4. If a metonymic connection between coerced element and coercing element cannot be established for conceptual or encyclopedic reasons, **unacceptability** arises.

## Conclusions (3)

5. Mastering the **coercive** mechanisms of a language is an important part of the acquisition of a foreign language.
6. 'Coercion' is an important concept for both **theoretical** and **practical** reasons.