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Visual Verb-Object Constructions in Chinese and English: A Review Centered on Chinese kan + NP and Its English Equivalents

Ruili Xiao
College of Foreign Studies, Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China
Email: xiaoruilireely@gmail.com

Abstract: Research on visual verbs has produced important findings on lexical classification, semantic extension, metaphor, metonymy, polysemy networks, and typology. However, the Chinese construction 看 (kan) + noun phrase (NP) and its English equivalents have not yet been reviewed systematically as a contrastive constructional unit. Based on a selective review of studies on visual verbs, perception verbs, construction grammar, corpus-based research, and Chinese-English contrast, this article argues that the meaning of kan + NP is shaped by the interaction between the verb, the object type, and the event frame activated by the object. In Chinese, kan + NP packages visual, cognitive, and social-interactional meanings within one productive pattern. In English, comparable meanings are distributed across see, look at, watch, read, visit, consult, look after, and related constructions. The review therefore calls for a construction-based framework that integrates object types, event frames, corpus evidence, and cross-linguistic correspondences.
Keywords: visual verbs; verb-object construction; kan + NP; Construction Grammar; Chinese-English contrast

I. Introduction

Vision is a major channel through which human beings perceive the external world. Visual verbs are therefore frequent and productive across languages. Typological and cognitive-semantic research has shown that visual verbs do more than encode perceptual experience: they regularly extend to cognition, judgment, attitude, and evidentiality [1], [2]. In Chinese linguistics, visual verbs have also been studied through classification, grammaticalization, cognitive semantics, metaphor, and corpus-based description [3].

This review focuses on Chinese kan + NP and its English equivalents. Expressions such as 看电影 kan dianying ('watch a movie'), 看书 kan shu ('read a book'), 看医生 kan yisheng ('see a doctor'), 看朋友 kan pengyou ('visit/see a friend'), 看孩子 kan haizi ('look after/watch a child'), and 看问题 kan wenti ('view/consider a problem') share the same surface pattern, but they activate different event frames. Their English equivalents are usually distributed across different verbs and phrasal constructions. This makes kan + NP a useful site for construction-level Chinese-English comparison.

Three terms are used consistently in this review. Constructional meaning refers to the relatively stable meaning licensed by the form-meaning pairing kan + NP. Event frame refers to the background situation activated by the object, such as medical consultation, visiting, caregiving, or evaluation. Interpretation refers to the context-specific reading selected in a particular utterance. Constructional meaning may be supported by an event frame, but it is not identical with either the frame itself or an individual contextual interpretation.

II. Methodology: Literature Selection and Review Scope

This article is a selective review rather than a full meta-analysis. The literature was gathered mainly from CNKI, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and major university thesis databases. Search terms included visual verbs, perception verbs, kan + NP, Chinese kan, see, look, watch, construction grammar, semantic extension, visual metaphor, corpus-based behavioral profile, and Chinese-English contrast. Both Chinese and English keywords were used where appropriate.

The review prioritized studies directly related to visual verbs, perception verbs, semantic extension, constructional analysis, corpus-based evidence, or Chinese-English comparison. Studies were excluded when they discussed sensory metaphor only in general terms or when they were not directly relevant to kan + NP or its English counterparts. This scope helps clarify the representativeness and limits of the review.

III. Major Perspectives in Visual-Verb Research

Research on visual verbs has moved from classification and lexicalization to grammaticalization, cognitive semantics, corpus-based analysis, and constructional explanation. These lines of work form the background for understanding kan + NP and its English equivalents.

3.1 Classification, lexicalization, and grammaticalization

Early work mainly addressed verb classification, semantic components, and lexicalization patterns. Bao [3] notes that Chinese visual-verb research generally involves classification, grammaticalization, semantics, and cognition. Wang and Zhou [4], using lexicalization theory and componential analysis, show that English and Chinese kan-type verbs share certain semantic components but differ in their preferences for encoding manner, intensity, attitude, and path. English

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more often uses phrasal verbs for directional or path-related visual meanings, whereas Chinese often uses compounds or direct verb-object combinations.

Grammaticalization studies show that kan is not only a visual perception verb but also a syntactically extensible element. These studies explain the formal and functional expansion of kan. What remains underexplained is how meanings become differentiated inside the pattern kan + NP itself.

3.2 Cognitive semantics, polysemy networks, and corpus-based research

Cognitive-semantic studies have explained visual-verb meanings through metaphor and metonymy. Gou [5], Hu [6], Chen [7], and Fang [8] examine visual metaphors in Chinese and in Chinese-English comparison, showing systematic mappings from vision to cognition, emotion, and attitude. Wang and Wang [9] further describe the semantic extension of kan as a chain from visual perception to action, social interaction, and psychological domains.

Corpus-based studies have made this line of research more empirical. Huang et al. [10], using behavioral profile analysis, show that the prototypical sense of kan remains visual perception and that its visual, cognitive, and social-interactional senses form a hierarchical semantic network. Their study also indicates that object and complement type are central to sense differentiation. Similarly, Ou [11] finds that the diachronic development of English see is closely related to object and complement types. These findings suggest that metaphor and metonymy motivate visual-verb polysemy, but specific meanings are realized through syntactic-semantic configurations. Building on these perspectives, the following section turns to a constructional reanalysis of kan + NP specifically.

IV. Findings: From Lexical Items to Constructions

4.1 From lexical polysemy to constructional meaning

Meanings such as 'reading', 'seeking medical treatment', 'visiting', 'taking care of', and 'judging' have often been treated as derived senses of kan. This lexical account is useful, but it does not fully explain why these meanings arise stably with particular object nouns. A constructional perspective shifts the focus from listing verbal senses to explaining how verb and object jointly generate meaning in recurrent verb-object combinations.

Liu and Wang [12] propose a semantic network model of kan + NP and treat it as a constructional unit. They argue that different objects guide the construction along different construal paths, including visual contact, visual appreciation, visual cognition, and visual performative action. Their study is important because it moves kan research from the lexical level to the constructional level. It also shows that the object is not a passive slot; it actively triggers constructional meaning.

4.2 Object types, corpus examples, and constructional meanings

Previous studies have not established a unified classification system, but they converge on one point: object types and constructional meanings in kan + NP show relatively stable correspondences. Constructional meaning is not determined by the polysemy of kan alone. It is also shaped by the semantic properties, social roles, and event frames activated by the object. Deng and Huang [13] show that verbal semantics, object form, and object semantics jointly constrain constructional meaning, while metaphor and metonymy provide cognitive mechanisms for constructional extension. Table 1 summarizes major object types, constructional meanings, and typical English equivalents of kan + NP.

Table 4-1. Major Object Types, Constructional Meanings, and Typical English Equivalents of kan + NP

Objecttype	Typicalexample	Mainconstructionalmeaning	TypicalEnglishequivalent
Natural scenery / visible entity	看月亮 kan yueliang ('look at the moon')	Visual contact; looking or watching [12]	look at the moon
Image / performance content	看电影 kan dianying ('watch a movie')	Content appreciation; viewing [12]	watch a movie
Textual material	看书 kan shu ('read a book'); 看报 kan bao ('read a newspaper')	Reading; information acquisition [10]	read a book / newspaper
Institutional role: person	看医生 kan yisheng ('see a doctor')	Seeking medical treatment; medical consultation [12]	see / consult a doctor
Social relation: person	看朋友 kan pengyou ('visit/see a friend')	Visiting; paying a visit	visit / see a friend
Care recipient: person	看孩子 kan haizi ('look after/watch a child')	Caregiving; looking after	watch the kids / look after / take care of a child
Abstract object	看问题 kan wenti ('view a problem'); 看情况 kan qingkuang ('assess the situation'); 看前途 kan qiantu ('view the prospects')	Cognitive judgment; situational assessment; evaluation of prospects [8], [9]	consider a problem / assess the situation / view the prospects

Note. The English equivalents in Table 4-1 are typical options rather than fixed one-to-one translations. Register and context may shift the preferred equivalent. For example, 看朋友 kan pengyou may correspond to visit a friend or see a

friend, and 看孩子 kan haizi may correspond to watch the kids in informal usage or to look after/take care of a child in more explicit caregiving contexts.

To avoid relying only on examples discussed in previous literature, this review adds a small illustrative corpus check. Six BCC examples were selected to represent the main Chinese patterns, and six COCA examples were selected to represent typical English equivalents [14], [15]. The BCC examples include 同去看电影《卡萨布兰卡》 (*go together to watch the film Casablanca*), 我会看书、写作 (*I can read books and write*), 回北京看医生 (*return to Beijing to see a doctor*), 出去看朋友 (*go out to visit a friend*), 持家看孩子 (*manage the household and take care of the children*), and 换个角度看问题 (*look at/consider the problem from another angle*). The COCA examples cover corresponding patterns such as *watch a movie*, *read a book*, *see a doctor*, *see/visit a friend*, *watch the kids/take care of a child*, and *consider a problem/assess the situation*. These twelve examples are used qualitatively to illustrate constructional correspondences; they are not intended as frequency evidence.

These examples show that kan + NP is not a simple transitive pattern. It is a constructional network driven by object types. 看医生 kan yisheng, 看朋友 kan pengyou, and 看孩子 kan haizi all take person-denoting nouns as objects, yet they activate medical consultation, social visiting, and caregiving frames respectively. Similarly, 看月亮 kan yueliang and 看电影 kan dianying both involve visual access, but the former encodes visual contact while the latter encodes content appreciation. Meaning construction therefore depends on object type, social role, and object function, not on the verb kan alone.

4.3 Theoretical resources for constructional explanation

Construction Grammar provides a useful framework for explaining kan + NP. Goldberg [16] argues that constructions are pairings of form and meaning and that syntactic patterns participate in meaning construction. This view makes it possible to explain why the same verb kan yields systematic differences when it combines with different objects. Related Chinese-English constructional work also supports treating constructional design as an interaction between form and meaning [17].

A more fine-grained account can also draw on Pustejovsky's [18] notions of coercion and qualia structure. Object nouns carry functional and event-related information that triggers coercion of the verb's interpretation within the construction. For example, the telic role of 书 shu ('book') points to reading, so 看书 kan shu is construed as 'reading' rather than mere visual contact. 医生 yisheng ('doctor'), as an institutional role, activates a medical-consultation frame. 孩子 haizi ('child'), as a care recipient, activates a caregiving frame. If analysis remains at the level of lexical senses, it cannot fully explain how object types contribute to constructional meaning.

V. Constructional Distribution in English Visual-Verb Expressions

English expressions corresponding to Chinese kan + NP show a more distributed division of constructional labor. Existing research indicates that see commonly encodes visual experience and its extension to cognition, while look often combines with prepositions or adverbs to form phrasal patterns. Forms such as watch, read, visit, see, look after, and take care of are used for more specific event types [19], [20].

This distribution should not be treated as a rigid one-to-one system. See a friend may denote a casual encounter or a planned social visit, depending on context, and watch the kids may overlap with caregiving in informal usage. Thus, the English equivalents in Table 1 indicate typical tendencies rather than fixed replacements. The contrast is better described as a difference in event packaging: Chinese often extends meanings within the high-frequency kan + NP pattern, while English usually distributes related meanings across several lexical and phrasal constructions.

The contrast also reflects broader tendencies in event-semantic encoding. Although Talmy's [21] discussion mainly concerns motion events, his insight that event components can be distributed across different grammatical resources applies equally to perception-event packaging: where English uses distinct lexical items to differentiate visual, reading, medical, and caregiving meanings, Chinese concentrates these within the single high-frequency pattern kan + NP. Ma and Barlow [22] show that Mandarin visual path expressions with different subject types do not follow identical lexicalization patterns. Dai and Wu [23] further show that kan-type controlled visual activity verbs occupy a central position in Modern Chinese visual verbs. These findings support the view that Chinese kan + NP represents a concentrated mode of encoding, whereas English more often differentiates related meanings through distinct lexical items and phrasal constructions.

VI. Contributions and Limitations of Existing Research

Existing research has made three main contributions. First, it has shown that visual meanings regularly extend to cognitive, emotional, and social-interactional meanings [2], [8], [11]. Second, work on polysemy networks, corpus linguistics, and typology has clarified the central status and productivity of kan in Modern Chinese [9], [23]. Third, recent studies have begun to move from isolated lexical items toward constructional units, making kan + NP visible as an object of analysis [12]. The contribution of the present review is to connect these strands and argue that object-triggered event frames are the key link between lexical polysemy and constructional comparison.

Several limitations remain. Methodologically, many studies still rely on monolingual data or selected examples. Parallel-corpus research has begun to show that visual domains differ across languages in correspondence frequency and structural organization [24]. Research on kan + NP and its English equivalents should therefore use more corpus and parallel-corpus evidence to identify cross-linguistic mappings across event frames.

Theoretically, a unified standard for constructional analysis has not yet been established. Some studies classify meanings by semantic outcomes, others by cognitive-extension pathways, and still others by behavioral-profile clustering. Future

work should keep four levels distinct: the lexical meaning of kan, the constructional meaning of kan + NP, the event frame activated by the object, and the context-specific interpretation selected in discourse.

VII. Future Directions

Future research should foreground kan + NP as a verb-object construction rather than treating it only as an extension of the lexical item kan. A more explanatory approach can be built around three interrelated dimensions: object type, event frame, and English equivalent. Empirical validation should be strengthened through monolingual, comparable, and parallel corpora. Deng, Cheng, and Xu's [25] diachronic study of Chinese and English psychological adjective-object constructions shows that contrastive constructional research can link semantic type, pragmatic tendency, and diachronic change. Inspired by this approach, research on kan + NP may examine stable mappings and changing tendencies across object types, event frames, and English forms.

VIII. Conclusion

Visual-verb research has moved from lexical classification to cognitive-semantic, corpus-based, typological, and constructional analysis. This review has argued that Chinese kan + NP should be examined as a constructional unit whose meanings are shaped by object type and event-frame activation. Its English equivalents do not form a single parallel pattern; instead, they are distributed across see, look at, watch, read, visit, look after, and related constructions. Future research should test these correspondences through larger corpus and parallel-corpus data. Such work can refine the analysis of kan + NP and contribute to construction-level Chinese-English comparison.

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