“Kan” as a Performative Verb in Mandarin Chinese: A Case of Interaction between Semantics/Pragmatics and Syntactic Structure*

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating a particular use of the Chinese perception verb “kan” (to see) in explicit performative utterances as a performative verb. It is interesting to note that the perception verb “kan” pragmatically functions as a performative verb with the semantic content ‘to suggest/to advise’ in such sentences as Wo kan ni bie qu le (I suggest that you should not go). First of all, the syntactic structure of the kan-performative utterance will be examined. Then the felicity conditions for the kan-performative utterance will be discussed. Finally the semantic shift from a perception verb meaning ‘to see’ to a pragmatically performative verb meaning ‘to suggest/to advise’ will be explicated in terms of cognitive linguistics in general and in terms of conceptual metaphor, i.e. vision/intellection metaphor, and subjectivity in particular. The data examined and analyzed are extracted both from the Balanced Corpus of Academia Sinica in Taiwan and from ordinary daily natural conversations. It is hoped that the present study will shed some light on the interface between Semantics/Pragmatics and Syntax.

Key Words: performatives; performative verbs; felicity conditions; trajectors; landmarks; figure; perspective; grounding; subjective/objective asymmetry; metaphorical extension.

* This is a slightly revised version of the paper presented at SICOL2006 (Seoul International Conference on Linguistics 2006) at Seoul, Korea on July 25, 2006.
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1. Introduction

Verbs of sense perception have been an interesting area for cognitive linguistics investigation. Sweetser 1990 explicates how through historical development verbs of sense perception in Indo-European languages undergo semantic change which shifts from the physical domain to the mental domain. Thus the sense perception verb “see” in English today is polysemous, meaning both “to perceive with the eye” as in “I see a dog” and “to understand” as in “I see what Mary means.” Sweetser claims that the vocabulary of physical perception shows systematic metaphorical connections with the vocabulary of internal self and internal sensations, and thus the internal self is pervasively understood in terms of the bodily external self and is described by the vocabulary drawn from the physical domain. She suggests that some aspect of the instantiation of this conceptual metaphor may be fairly common cross-culturally as can be seen in the connection between vision and knowledge and between hearing and obedience.

The Mandarin Chinese “kan” (to see) is a sense perception verb which means “to perceive with the eye”. Based on the semantic meaning, the Chinese “kan” and the English “see” can be considered near equivalents. However, “kan”, in addition to its basic meaning of perceiving with the eye, exhibits a pragmatic function meaning “to suggest / to advise”. That is, “kan” is both a sense verb and a performative verb in Chinese. Thus it would be interesting to explore how a sense perception verb “kan” comes to function as a performative verb and if Sweetser’s discussion of metaphorical extension of sense perception vocabulary can be applied to explain the pragmatic meaning of “kan” in Mandarin Chinese.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the particular use of “kan” as a performative verb in explicit performative utterances. The kan-performative utterances will be presented first, then the syntactic structure of these utterances will

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1 The italics is the transliteration according to hanyu pinyin; included in the parenthesis is the meaning in English.
2 In this study, “sentence” will be used loosely and interchangeably with “utterance”.
3 This means the performative utterances containing “kan” as the performative verb.
be examined, then their felicity conditions will be discussed, and finally the semantic shift from a perception verb meaning ‘to perceive with the eye’ to a pragmatically performative verb meaning “to suggest / to advise” will be explicated. A conclusion will be given at the end.

2. **“Kan” as a performative verb in explicit performative utterances**

“Kan” (to see) is a very common sense perception verb in Mandarin Chinese. Thus when it was used as a key character to search in the Balanced Corpus of Academia Sinica in Taiwan, five thousand example sentences were found. Two of the examples are listed in the following.

(1) 我 看 到 三 個 人。
    Wo kan dao san ge ren
    I see three persons.

(2) 我 看 見 一 隻 小 狗。
    Wo kan jian yi zhi xiao gou
    I see a small dog.

In all these utterances, “kan” has as its prototypical meaning “to see with the eye”. They are not what the present study is concerned with since as has mentioned above, the present study will focus on “kan” used in the explicit performative

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4 Since Chinese is a logographic language, ‘character’ will be used instead of ‘word’ to mean that the morpheme concerned, be it monosyllabic or polysyllabic, can be used alone to express a complete idea or meaning.
utterance and functioning as a performative verb.

To give examples of “kan” in explicit performative utterances functioning as a performative verb, “wo kan ni /nimen” (I see you (singular) / you (plural)) and “wo kan women” (I see us)\textsuperscript{8} were used as the key characters to search the Balanced Corpus of Academia Sinica in Taiwan. However, none of the examples were found. That is, in the corpus none of the explicit performative utterances in which “kan” is the performative verb is available.\textsuperscript{9} Nonetheless, in Chinese ordinary daily natural conversations, it is easy to find examples where “kan” occurs in explicit performative utterances as a performative verb. Some of the examples are shown as follows:

(3) 我 看 你 / 你們 別 再 投資 了。
\begin{verbatim}
Wo kan ni / nimen bie zai touzi le.
\end{verbatim}
I see you (sg.) / you (pl.) not again invest CRS\textsuperscript{10}
I suggest (advise you) that you should not invest any more.

(4a) 我 看 你 / 你們 辭職 好 了。
\begin{verbatim}
Wo kan ni / nimen cizhi hao le.
\end{verbatim}
I see you (sg.) / you (pl.) quit good CRS
I suggest (advise you) that you quit your job.

(4b) 我 看 你 / 你們 辭職 吧！
\begin{verbatim}
Wo kan ni / nimen cizhi ba!
\end{verbatim}
I see you (sg.) / you (pl.) quit SA\textsuperscript{11}
I suggest (advise you) that you quit your job.

\textsuperscript{8} The search keys are in accordance with the syntactic structures of kan-performatives.
\textsuperscript{9} The reason for this fact is discussed in Section 7.
\textsuperscript{10} “CRS” means currently relevant state. Cf. Li and Thompson 1981.
\textsuperscript{11} “SA” means solicit agreement. Cf. Li and Thompson 1981.
The sense perception verb “kan” in all the above utterances does not mean “to see with the eye”, and all the above utterances are not what Austin 1962 terms constative utterances which make assertions or statements. Instead, all of the above utterances are performative utterances since viewed from the speech act theory, they all perform the act of suggesting or advising and simultaneously describe overtly the act of suggesting or advising by the use of “kan” in the main clause. In other words, all the above utterances are explicit performative utterances with the sense perception verb “kan” functioning as a performative verb meaning “to suggest” or “to advise”.

3. Syntactic structure of kan-performative utterances

Syntactically speaking, the structural characteristics of kan-performative utterances can be extracted from the examples in Section 2. First of all, the kan-performative utterance is in the form of a complex sentence which is composed of a matrix or main clause and an embedded nominal clause serving as the object of the transitive verb of the matrix clause. The matrix clause has as its subject the first person singular person pronoun “wo” (I). Furthermore, the verb “kan” in the matrix clause is a transitive verb and pragmatically speaking functions as a performative verb. Thus the kan-performative utterance is an explicit performative sentence. Secondly, the subject of the embedded nominal clause is either the
second person singular pronoun “ni” (you) or the second person plural pronoun “nimen” (you). It is interesting to see that when the subject of the embedded nominal clause is the first person singular pronoun “wo” (I), the first person plural pronoun “women” (we), the third person singular pronoun “ta’” (he/her), or the third person plural pronoun “tamen” (they), the utterance would not have the illocutionary force of being an explicit performative utterance. The reason is that in these cases, 我看 “Wo kan” means “I think / in my opinion” rather than “I suggest or I advise”. This is clear from example (7).

(7) 我 看 / 我 / 我們 / 他(她) / 他(她)們 別 再 投資 了。

I think I / we / they should not invest any more.

Thirdly, if the verb in the embedded nominal clause is a stative verb describing a static or an unchanging situation, the utterance will not be counted as an explicit performative utterance although the sentence does exhibit the two syntactic characteristics discussed above, i.e. the utterance is a complex sentence with an embedded nominal clause used as the object of “kan”; and the subject in the matrix clause is the first person pronoun and the subject in the embedded nominal clause, a second person singular or plural pronoun. Consider example (8).

(8) 我 看 你 / 你們 是 台灣人。

I think you (sg.) / you (pl.) are Taiwanese.

To summarize, the characteristics of the syntactic structure of kan-performative utterances are as follows:
1. The performative verb “kan” (see) occurs in the matrix clause of a complex sentence as the transitive verb which has as its object an embedded nominal clause.

2. The subject of the matrix clause is the first person singular pronoun “wo” (I).

3. The embedded nominal clause has as its subject the second person singular pronoun “ni” (you) or the second person plural pronoun “nimen” (you).

4. The verb in the embedded nominal clause is a dynamic verb rather than a stative verb.

4. **Felicity conditions of kan-performative utterances**

   Austin 1962 claims that for a performative utterance to work felicitously or successfully, there are social conventions to satisfy. This is because utterances in general or performative utterances in particular can be regarded as significant acts on a social level, e.g., confessions, bets, suggestions, advices, etc. In other words, in view of speech act theory if an illocutionary act or a performative utterance\(^{12}\) is to be carried out properly, successfully, or felicitously, there are felicity conditions, i.e., enabling conditions, to be fulfilled. Since the more typical context for the occurrence of kan-performative utterances is that when one goes to another person to ask for suggestions or advices, the typical answer one would get is usually in the form of a kan-performative utterance. It follows that the primary felicity condition is that kan-performative utterance occurs in a face-to-face interpersonal communication. This condition together with four other conditions will enable the act of suggesting or advising to be carried out successfully or felicitously. The four other conditions are presented below.

   The first one is that the speaker is superior to, or in authority over, the addressee, i.e., the hearer. Thus, if a student says to his/her teacher “我看你辭職吧！” (I suggest /advise you that you quit your job), it would sound odd because there is a certain incongruity, or anomalousness, or infelicity in the act of suggesting which is

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\(^{12}\) The performative utterance is a special kind of the illocutionary act.
carried out although it is not absolutely impossible for the student to suggest or to advise his/her teacher to quit the job. Furthermore, the speaker is likely to be considered by the hearer to be more knowledgeable, informative, and objective concerning the thing suggested or advised. Otherwise, there is no point for the hearer to follow the suggestion or advice.

The second one is that the speaker in his/her act of suggesting or advising tries to bring or defend the hearer’s benefits.

The third one is that what is suggested or advised is a thing which is to occur in the near future and which the hearer has difficulty dealing with.

The last one is that the given suggestion or advice may change the hearer’s current state or help solve the hearer’s puzzles or problems.

With the above-mentioned five felicity conditions satisfied, the speaker who produces the utterance containing kan with the syntactic form described in Section 3 will be thought of as producing a performative utterance and his/her utterance will be interpreted as such as well.

5. Semantic structure of the prototypical “kan”

According to Xing-yin-yi zong-he da-zi-dian (The Synthesized Form, Sound, and Meaning Dictionary), “kan” morphologically means “to see with the hand raising above the eye to keep from the shining sun”, and semantically has eight meanings with “to perceive attentively” listed as the first one. In Guo-yu-ri-bao ci-dian (The Dictionary of Chinese Mandarin News), “kan” is treated as a polysemous character with nine different meanings. The first meaning, which implies the most basic meaning, is “to perceive with the eye”. The interesting point to mention is that in both dictionaries “kan” is regarded as a polysemous character with as its basic semantic content “to perceive with the eye”. However, the performative verb “kan” with the meaning “to suggest / to advise” is not mentioned in either of the dictionaries. In fact, more than ten Chinese dictionaries have been checked and none of them has a performative verb reading in the entry of “kan”. This may suggest that the prototype of “kan” is “to perceive with the eye”, while
“kan” used as a performative verb is a marginal case or is a semantic extension/shift, and therefore the performative “kan” is not listed in the entry of “kan”. If this is the case, it would be worthwhile to investigate the semantic extension or shift involved in the meaning change from a prototypical sense perception verb meaning “to perceive with the eye” to a performative verb meaning “to suggest / to advise”. In this section, however, the semantic structure of the prototype of “kan” will be examined first, the semantic shift involved in the performative “kan” will be discussed in the next section.

“Kan” as a sense perception verb basically means “to perceive or to see with one’s eyes”. In cognitive grammar, the verb “kan” would be considered as a symbolic expression whose semantic pole designates a process and therefore is a relational predication. According to Langacker 1987, the internal structure of the relational predication includes the relation between the trajector and the landmark. Langacker (1987:217) claims that “In virtually every relational predication, an asymmetry can be observed between the profiled participants. One of them, called the trajector (tr), has a special status and is characterized as the figure within a relational profile….Other salient entities in a relational predication are referred to as landmarks (lm), so called because they are naturally viewed (in prototypical instances) as providing points of reference for locating the trajector.”

Langacker 1991 states that a linguistic expression’s precise semantic value is determined by numerous facets of construal, including the level of specificity, background assumptions and expectations, the relative prominence accorded various entities, and the perspective taken on the scene. Relevant to the present study among these facets of construal is perspective which is a particular viewing arrangement embodied in the invoked conception of a situation described by the linguistic expression concerned. In the case of the prototypical “kan”, the optimal viewing arrangement is that the viewer (V) has clear perceptual access to the onstage (OS) area, i.e., the immediate scope of predication, but is itself external to both the onstage area and the perceptual field (PF), i.e., the overall scope of predication, whereas the perceived (P) entity is the specific focus of attention within the onstage
area. Since the viewer is external to both the onstage area and the perceptual field, the construal of the viewer is subjective (subject of perception) and that of the perceived entity, objective (object of perception). Thus there exists a subjective/objective asymmetry in the grounding of the sense perception verb “kan” between the viewer and the perceived entity. This is shown in Figure 1 which is adapted from Langacker (1991:317).

Figure 1: Perspective of the prototypical “kan”

6. **Semantic shift from the prototypical “kan” to the performative “kan”**

The semantic shift from the prototypical “kan” to the performative “kan” can be investigated from two aspects: the grounding and the metaphorical extension of “kan”.

6.1 **The grounding of “kan”: the neutralization of subjective/objective asymmetry**

The semantic structure of the prototypical “kan” from the viewpoint of perspective is illustrated in the preceding section. In this section, the focus will be
on how the semantic content of “kan” is shifted from its prototypical meaning of perceiving with the eye to the pragmatic meaning of a performative verb, i.e. to suggest or to advise.

In discussing grounding, Langacker 1991 asserts that when the speech event itself constitutes a relationship capable of going onstage as the profile of a finite clause, and the immediate scope, i.e. the onstage area, is identified with the ground, the resulting sentences are traditionally known as “performatives”.

Following Lancaster’s idea of perspective and grounding, the performative “kan” is better represented by Figure 2. In the figure, G stands for the ground which refers to the speech event, its participants, and its immediate circumstances; OS, for onstage; S, for the speaker that is identified with the trajector (tr), i.e., the figure within the relational profile designated by “kan”; and H, for the hearer that is identified with the landmark (lm), i.e., the point of reference for locating the trajector.

![Figure 2: Grounding of the performative “kan”](image)

The important point here is that in the case of the performative “kan”, the subjective/objective asymmetry is lost. That is, the speaker’s/hearer’s subjective
role and the objective role of the profiled relationship coincide with each other. Thus in the examples of Section 2 (sentences 3 through 6), the speaker/hearer interaction has a degree of subjectivity that is the lowest possible for the ground, and the profiled relationship has a lowest possible degree of objectivity. In other words, the subjective/objective asymmetry existing in the prototypical “kan” between the viewer and the perceived entity is lost, removed, or neutralized in the performative “kan”. This is the same as saying that unlike declarative utterances, in kan-performative utterances, the speaker is not describing something to the hearer. Instead, the speaker and the hearer put themselves onstage to participate in the event being conceived. This is what is meant by saying that the subjective/objective asymmetry is lost, removed, or neutralized.

6.2 The metaphorical extension of “kan”: the vision/intellection metaphor

In addition to the removal of the subjective/objective asymmetry, there is a metaphorical semantic extension involved in the performative “kan”. This semantic extension is what Sweetser 1990 refers to as vision/intellection metaphor.

Sweetser 1990, in investigating the historical development of polysemy, lexical semantic change, and pragmatic ambiguity, claims that there is a unifying pattern, i.e. the metaphorical structure, which underlies the network of semantic changes in Indo-European languages and results in the semantic shift from the physical domain to the mental domain. For example, words of seeing come to mean understanding, and words of hearing, obeying. Sweetser’s argument of the vision/intellection metaphor is in essence relevant to the present study. According to Sweetser (1990:38), “vision and intellection are viewed in parallel ways, partly because of the focusing ability of our visual sense—the ability to pick out one stimulus at will from many is a salient characteristic of vision and of thought, but certainly not characteristic of any of the other physical senses except hearing.” In addition, she suggests that the ability of vision to reach out is a significant parallel between vision
and intellection because the objective\(^{13}\) and intellectual domain is understood as being an area of personal distance in contrast to the intimacy or closeness of the subjective and emotional domain. Furthermore, she proposes that the identity of vision for different people when standing in the same place is a highly objective characteristic and is one of the main reasons why vision resembles our folk understanding of our intellectual process as being objective. She comments that the vision/intellection metaphor is thoroughly alive today and highly structured, and thus in modern English much of the detailed vocabulary of our visual domain can be used to structure the description of our intellectual processes. In a word, the vision/intellection metaphor is, for Sweetser, cognitively well motivated.

The vision/intellection metaphor proposed by Sweetser 1990 can be applied to justify the semantic extension, change, or shift, which underlies the semantic meaning of the performative verb “kan”.

The semantic content of the prototypical “kan” involves the objective\(^{14}\) viewing or perception because in a normal situation one stands in some place and views or perceives some entity objectively. The viewing or the perceiving is highly or wholly objective. The semantic content of the performative verb “kan” is that of being objective, too. As discussed in Section 2, the performative “kan” means “to suggest/advise”. Imagine an unmarked\(^{15}\) situation in which one gives suggestions or advices to the other people. Who would be considered qualified to give suggestions/advices to the other people? No one would deny the fact that usually, though not always, the one who is qualified to suggest/advise the other people should or must be a person who is, mentally and intellectually speaking, more richly experienced, more knowledgeable, more learned, cooler in reasoning, and in the last resort, more objective in judgment than the people being suggested/advised. When

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\(^{13}\) The “objective” and “subjective” used here mean differently from what they mean in Section 6.1. Here they mean the subjective or objective judgment.

\(^{14}\) The “objective” here means “not influenced by personal feelings or opinions”. It is not the same as “objectivity”, i.e. the object of viewing, which is discussed in grounding in 6.1.

\(^{15}\) “Unmarked” here, following Hyman 1975, means more basic, natural, and frequent.
one suggests/advises the other people, one is either trying to put his/her viewpoints, ideas, or opinions forward for the other people’s consideration in order to direct the other people to behave in the particular way he/she suggests/advises, or trying to change the other people’s original idea or opinion to cope with his/her suggestions/advises. If the one suggesting/advising the other people is mentally and intellectually subjective rather than objective, his/her suggestions/advises will not be considered worthwhile to follow. In summary, the semantic content of the performative verb “kan” includes the feature of being objective in considering things and reasoning when suggesting/advising the other people.

It is the very salient feature of being objective found both in perceiving and in suggesting/advising with cool reasoning that structures the vision/intellection metaphor. That is, the physical domain of vision which the prototypical “kan” belongs to serves as the source domain for the metaphorical mapping of the abstract target domain of intellection which the performative “kan” belongs to. This metaphorical mapping results in the semantic extension and shift that are exhibited in the semantic content of the performative “kan”. This metaphorical extension together with the grounding discussed in Section 6.1 explains the semantic process and shift involved in the use of “kan” as a performative verb meaning to suggest/advise.

7. Conclusion

Based on the preceding discussion, a short conclusion will be drawn in this section. First of all, the performative “kan” seems to be a marginal member or maybe a newly developed member in the category of “kan” since none of the Chinese dictionaries consulted lists the performative “kan” as one of the meanings in the entry of “kan”. Secondly, the performative “kan” seems to be used primarily as an answer form in the face-to-face interpersonal communication. Although none of the examples can be found in the corpus and the dictionaries checked, native
speakers of Chinese find no difficulty\textsuperscript{16} in recognizing the illocutionary force of the explicit \textit{kan}-performative utterance. Thirdly, the performative “\textit{kan}” always occurs in an explicit performative utterance. Finally, for the \textit{kan}-performative to carry out its illocutionary force successfully, the particular syntactic structures examined in Section 3, the felicity conditions proposed in Section 4, the subjectivity/objectivity neutralization discussed in Section 6.1, and the metaphorical extension suggested in Section 6.2 have to take effect simultaneously.

\textbf{References}


\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{16} I have checked with my graduate and undergraduate students, and the people around me; they all agreed on the performative use of “\textit{kan}”.\
\end{footnotesize}

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從語意、語用、和句法之整合論漢語動詞「看」：由「感官動詞」轉化成「施為動詞」

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摘 要

本文旨在探討漢語動詞「看」如何在語意、語用、和句法的整合之下，從一個「感官動詞」轉化成「施為動詞」（performative verb）。同時，語意內涵亦轉變成為「建議」或「勸告」。

首先，討論含有「看」之「顯性施為句」（explicit performatives）之句法結構特性。然後，討論這些「施為句」之「合適條件」（felicity conditions）。最後，從認知語意學的觀點探討「看」在調整其「視角」（perspective）及「背景」（grounding）並經隱喻之語意延申之後如何由原來的「感官動詞」變成一個「施為動詞」。

本研究之語料取材自中央研究院平衡語料庫及日常對話。作者希望以本研究作為一個例子，來說明語意、語用、和句法在語言使用上之實際整合現象，而這種整合現象應為語言使用的一種必然現象。

關鍵詞：施為句、施為動詞、合適條件、射體、界標、圖形、視角、背景、
主題客體之不對稱性、隱喻引申

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