Analysis of Different Usage Between “Kan” (Seeing) and “Jian” (Meeting)

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“Kan” and “Jian” are both sense verbs in Chinese, but they can develop into multiple meanings and usage. In order to prove that the language in communication assumes the collective cultural experience and historical background, this article attempts, from the connection and differentiation between various meanings, to sort out how the semantic structure is defined in accordance with the situations where the words are used. In addition, based on the methods of the diachronic research and synchronic research, this article also observes the semantic evolution and the extensive concepts of imitation and implication.

Keywords: “Kan” (seeing), “Jian” (meeting), diachronic research, synchronic research

Origin of the Meanings of “Kan” and “Jian”

Comparing Sounds and Meanings of Pictograph, Oracle Bone Script, Bronze Script, Large Seal Script and Small Seal Script

(1) “Kan”: Absent from both Pictograph and Oracle Bone Script. The Seal Script for this word are 𠄎 meaning using hand to shade light for observing from a far distant place. 目 the two words indicate the figures of eyes. 𠄎, Bronze script marks “kan” as 𠄎, indicating an army banner. 目 is to show observation, meaning the general has to take an observation before a war.

(2) “Jian”: Oracle Bone Script is 𠄎; Seal Script for this are: 𠄎 and 𠄎 and Small Seal Script is 𠄎. The book *Shuowen Jiezi* (Analytical Dictionary of Characters language) explains: “the meaning for the word is ‘to see’, its radical letters are 目 and 𠄎. All the words structure with 𠄎 part, have the radical meaning of 𠄎” (2nd-century, Han Dynasty, p. 412). Duan Yu-Cai interpreted: “for seeing, there might be nothing noted after seeing; nothing heard after hearing. Precisely saying, to see does not mean to notice; to hear does not mean can listen and understand. Roughly saying though, ‘kan’, ‘jian’, ‘wen’ and ‘tieng’ almost the same.” (1801, p. 412) 𠄎 is the shape of a human body. The word “jian” is initially just to indicate see something with eyes.

(3) “Kan” and “Jian” both mean “sight”, whose meanings are very close. Sometimes they are interchangeable and sometimes each word has its own meaning, unable to be replaced with each other. If they are interchangeable, they mean “seeing,” for example, to catch sight of, to see a friend, to have caught sight of, to lose sight of, to have seen, to take a look, to see at a glance, to be worth seeing, to be visible, etc. However, most of the time, they are not interchangeable.

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Evolution of the Meaning of “Kan”

“Kan” and “Jian” both belong to sense verbs with multiple meanings. Take “Kan” as an example. The extension of its meaning is multidirectional and has more than fifteen semantic items, such as reading, looking, diagnosing, observing, considering, deciding and bewaring (Lü Shu-Xiang, 1999); examining, visiting, appreciating, understanding, modeling, judging and tolerating (Zhong, 2001); treating and knowing (Guo, Yong-Song, 2007);¹ inspecting and measuring (Huang, Pao-Shan, 2017).

In the performance of semantic cognition, the sememe of sense verbs is composed of major words. For the items used in the scope of event type, the differences lie in the extension of the situation and speaker’s mood.

Evolution of the Meaning of “Jian”

According to *Shuowen Jiezi* (i.e., Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters), “Jian” is equivalent to “sight.” It also has the extensive meanings of inspecting, interviewing, reviewing, reconnoitering, etc. After the Eastern Han Dynasty, it gradually developed into the “Jian V” structure with an auxiliary verb, which is placed in front of a verb, and had the tendency to become virtual (Lü Shu-Xiang, “Wen Yian Xu zi”). These types are divided into active and passive meanings involving objects. For example,

- Sheng hai liu yue, ci fu *jian* bei (Since I was six-month child, my father left me). (Mee Lee “*Chen Qing biao*”)—active;
- Ling di *jian* fang, que yu cong rong, ji wen yiao zhi, yi guo jiang yi (Your brother came to see me while I was busy, and he had gone already when I invited him later.) (Wang An-Shi, *Da yu Shiu lao shu*)—active;
- Yin wang *jian* SituWang-yun, zi cheng Zuo-Qi *jian* sha zhi zhuang (I met SituWang-yun to tell him that Zuo-Qi had been killed.) (“Hou Han Shu, Lü-Buzhuan”)—passive;
- Fuzi he yi zhi qi jiang *jian* sha? (For what reason you think he would be killed?) (“Mencius”)—passive
- Xi Lian Po, Ma Yuan yi nian lao *jian* yi. (Lian Po and Ma Yuan were abandoned for their aged life.) (“Nan Shi”)—passive.

Wei You-Ming (2001), who analyzed the behaviors of “Jian₁ V” (passive) and “Jian₂ V” (active), presented that the objects omitted after “Jian₂. V” structure can be the first, second or third person. In that case, “Jian” cannot be classified as the pronoun. He thought that the words of “Jian Ze” (to blame), “Jian Xie” (to thank) and “Jian Wen” (to enquire) originated from a continuous verbal structure. At first, they had objects, then developed into omitting objects over time and finally tended to be the active form of “Jian₂, V.” Hence, the word “Jian” started with the active meaning of “Jian Mian” (to meet) and then developed into the phenomena of being with or without objects.

Analysis of Differences

The Difference Between “Kan” and “Jian” Is Not Simply the Sense Action of “Seeing With Eyes”

The choice of words depends on the ways of seeing, for example, “Ni Kan” ≠ “Ni Jian”, “Yi Ni Kan” (how you think) ≠ “Yi Ni Zhi Jian” (according your opinion); “Kan Hu” (nuring) and “Kan Guan” (look after) cannot be replaced with “Jian Hu” and “Jian Guan”, respectively. In addition, “Kan Dai” (to treat), “KanZuo” (to treat

¹ Ou, De-Fen, (2012) *A Cognitive Study of the Chinese Polysemous Verb “看/Kan”*. (Ph.D. thesis) National Taiwan Normal University. p. 5.

as), “Kan Die” (put option), “Kan Zhang” (call option), “Kan Hao” (optimistic), “Kan Kai” (take it easy), “Kan Bian” (look down on), “Kan Di” (look down on), “Kan Qing” (look down on), “Kan Zhong” (to regard as important), “Zen Me Kan” (how do you think), “Kan Jia” (look after the house), “Kan Shou Suo” (detention center), “Ke Kan Xing” (viewability), “Guan Kan” (watch), “Kan Ban” (board), “Kan Dian Shi” (watch TV), “Kan Po” (see through), “Kan Fa” (opinion), “Kan Bu Qi” (look down on) and “Hao Kan” (good looking), have fixed usage, which cannot be mixed up with “Jian.” The words with “Jian”, like “Jian Jie”, “Jian Gui”, “Jian Hao Jiu Shou”, “Jian Qian Yan Kai”, “Jian Xian Si Qi”, “Jian Shu Bu Jian Lin”, “Jian Guai”, “Jian Xiao”, “Jian Ze”, “Bu Duo Jian”, “Suo Jian Xiang/ Bu Tong”, “Duan Jian” and “Yuan Jian”, are obviously quite different from those with “Kan.”

Dissimilarities

(1) Category “Kan”: The action of “Kan” gives rise to such meanings as trying, detecting, measuring, estimating, observing, inspecting, understanding, researching, thinking and considering, which are more active.

(2) Category “Jian”: The action of “Jian” leads to a second-level metameaning, such as judging, assessing, evaluating and selecting, which are more theoretic and analytic.

Conclusions

Language is a tool of communication that mainly conveys what the speaker wants to express in his/her mind. Human sensory organs are the windows to the world. By means of sensory activities, the world can be understood and annotated. Through the process of language communication after cognizing and understanding the world, the selection of the vocabulary words will naturally be generated, which is a mutual agreement of collective consciousness. Bearing the diachronic and synchronic cultural background, people will inherently choose the appropriate words, according to their willingness, without any confusion or mistake.

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