

# *The Semantic Evolution and Grammaticalization of “Kanlai”*

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**Abstract:** The Chinese term “kanlai” is employed in three distinct contexts: “kanlai<sub>1</sub>” denotes visual observation or perception and falls within the domain of action; “kanlai<sub>2</sub>” signifies sensory perception or opinion and falls within the domain of knowledge; “kanlai<sub>3</sub>” conveys a conjectural mood and pertains to the domain of discourse. The semantic evolution of “kanlai” involves its transformation from a collocational phrase “kanlai” composed of “kan” (see) and “lai” (come), to a coalesced cognitive verb “kanlai<sub>2</sub>” and subsequently to a discourse marker “kanlai<sub>3</sub>” which is detached from any syntactic constituent. This trajectory embodies the process of grammaticalization. Throughout its diachronic evolution, mechanisms including disyllabification, semantic generalization, subjectification and syntactic position have contributed significantly to the grammaticalization of “kanlai”.

## 1. Introduction

The semantic uniqueness and functional specificity of “kanlai” have captured scholars’ extensive attention since the beginning of this century. However, research perspectives have mostly centered around pragmatic contrastive analyses of “kan”-type words, while a dedicated and systematic investigation of the term “kanlai” itself remains to be refined. Thus, this paper seeks to explore the intrinsic patterns and operational mechanisms underlying the semantic evolution and grammaticalization of “kanlai”, with the aim of enhancing its semantic and syntactic scrutiny.

By delving into the process of grammaticalization of “kanlai”, this paper provides a diachronic explication of the synchronic semantic and grammatical phenomena of “kanlai”. Currently, “kanlai” embodies three primary conceptual domains: acting, knowing and uttering, which are the ultimate outcomes of the diachronic development of “kanlai” through different historical stages <sup>[1]</sup>. The semantic transformation of “kanlai” goes hand in hand with its grammaticalization, a process wherein a lexical word shifts into a grammatical marker. Consequently, the exploration of the semantic evolution and grammaticalization mechanisms contributes to a deeper comprehension of the grammaticalization of “kanlai” and the search for diachronic explanations under the synchronic level.

Unless explicitly stated, all the linguistic data in this paper are translated versions of the Chinese data drawn from the Center for Chinese Linguistics PKU (CCL for short) and where “Kanlai” shows in the original version is marked within the translated version by means of brackets.

## 2. Semantic Evolution of “Kanlai”

The concepts of “acting”, “knowing” and “uttering” domains embody the process of semantic evolution and enrichment ranging from the physiological to the psychological and from the concrete to the abstract. The concept of three domains was initially proposed by Sweetser (1990) in the book *From Etymology to Pragmatics: Metaphorical and Cultural Aspects of Semantic Structure* [2]. The Chinese scholar Shen Jiakuan introduced this concept to the domestic context and further expounded upon them. Specifically, “acting” domain pertains to actions and conditions related to bodily movements, “knowing” domain relates to knowledge and cognition, and “uttering” domain corresponds to language and speech expressions [3].

### 2.1 “Kanlai<sub>1</sub>”: Acting Domain

This meaning mainly emerged during the period from the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties to the Tang and Five Dynasties, signifying “observing” or “looking”, and it could follow specific tangible objects. At this time, “Kan” serves as the predicate verb, and “Lai” indicates the direction of completed motion, implying movement from one direction to another [4]. The logical subject of “kanlai” is the initiator of this action, which highlights the active behavioral relation between the initiator and the action of “observing” or “looking”. For example:

(1) In the palace of the Han Dynasty in the early spring, the maidservant gazed the flowers and cherished its fragrance from dawn till dusk. She looked away, looked back(kanlai<sub>1</sub>) and still couldn't forget. Pulling and picking, she placed one flower on the mirror stand. (From the Tang Dynasty poem *Traveling is Hard: the Flowers in February and March Resemble Hail*)

In example (1), “kanlai<sub>1</sub>” objectively describes a certain action of the logical subject. It functions as the predicate verb, with the subject being the “maidservant”, and the observed object being the “flowers”. This conveys the process by which the maidservant's distracted gaze returned to the flowers. At this point, “kanlai<sub>1</sub>” plays a distinct role in the sentence. Firstly, at the structural level, it acts as the core verb, setting off a series of subsequent actions, and indicating their consecutive relation. Secondly, at the emotional level, “kanlai<sub>1</sub>” introduces “and still couldn't forget”, expressing the maidservant's depression after looking away and desire for looking back at the flowers.

### 2.2 “Kanlai<sub>2</sub>”: Knowing Domain

This meaning emerged mainly during the Song and Yuan dynasties, followed by abstract events and signifying cognitive aspects. During this phase, the appearance of a new predicate verb, more specific in meaning and more intense in emotion, within the structure of a sentence consequently diminishes the prominence of “kanlai” and weakens its sense of observation. Moreover, the succeeding elements tend to involve abstract events, such as viewpoints. “Kanlai” reflects conclusions and judgments made after observation and thus based on facts. “Kanlai<sub>2</sub>” gradually shifts from an external behavioral manifestation to an internal cognitive output. For example:

(2) To distinguish truth and deception, it must be grounded in actual statements. It requires a shift in expressions to truly grasp the King Wen's intentions. This insight reveals(kanlai<sub>2</sub>) the essence of the relationship between subjects and the ruler, as it is understood that subjects should not deceive their ruler. (From the Song Dynasty anthology *Compilation of Zhu Xi's Collected Sayings*)

In example (2), the sentence with “kanlai<sub>2</sub>” can be understood as “Even though there may be cases where the ruler is not in the right, subjects should not and dare not recklessly speak it out to them. This is where the fundamental righteousness between the ruler and subjects lies”. In this context, the content preceding “kanlai<sub>2</sub>” serves as its observed object, comprising a series of events. After undergoing the speaker's contemplation and insights, the conclusion “Subjects should not discuss

matters where rulers and fathers are in the wrong” is drawn following “kanlai<sub>2</sub>”. “Kanlai” transitions from the concrete to the abstract, considering that the observed object preceding “kanlai<sub>2</sub>” shifts from objects to events and the content following “kanlai” becomes abstract cognitive viewpoints.

(3) Lao Niang said, “My son, as the saying goes, wealth and poverty are both determined by fate. If it was your destiny to enjoy, you wouldn't have been born into a family with an oil burden. According to my observation (preposition + cognitive subject + kanlai<sub>2</sub>), this silver has not been gained by your deliberate planning, but neither has it been earned by your hard work”. (From the Yuan Dynasty play *Selected Collection of Yuan Dynasty Stories*)

In example (3), a fixed structure of “preposition + cognitive subject + kanlai<sub>2</sub>” appears, representing the cognitive meaning of “kanlai<sub>2</sub>”. This structure still embodies the specific use of “kanlai” in a cognitive sense, but its role in connecting the preceding and following sentences becomes more prominent in the sentence and its specific meaning is further weakened. Semantically, the preceding sentence presents a conclusion made by “Lao Niang”, and the subsequent sentence serves as her explanation. The structure “preposition + cognitive subject + kanlai<sub>2</sub>” thus provides a natural transition between these two sentences, ensuring a smooth progression and a more reasonable expression of viewpoints.

By now, “kanlai” has undergone a transition from the acting domain to the knowing domain. From a semantic perspective, the shift from “kanlai<sub>1</sub>” to “kanlai<sub>2</sub>” marks the transformation from denoting action to denoting cognition, gradually leading to its weakening in lexical function. In terms of syntactic function, its cognitive meaning gradually diminishes within “kanlai<sub>2</sub>”, particularly within the fixed structure of “preposition + cognitive subject + kanlai<sub>2</sub>”. This structure serves as a link between preceding and following sentences, ensuring semantic coherence, and laying the groundwork for the emergence of its function as a discourse marker in later stages.

By combining the semantic evolution of “kanlai” with its syntactic functions, we can depict its evolutionary path as shown in Figure 1 [5].

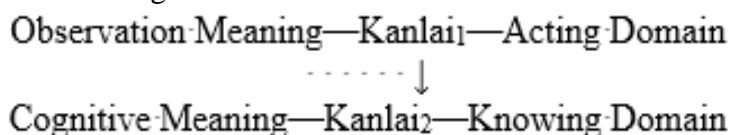


Figure 1: Evolution of “kanlai” from Acting Domain to Knowing Domain

### 2.3 “Kanlai<sub>3</sub>”: Uttering Domain

This usage mainly occurs in the period from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the present days, serving as a discourse marker to express a speculative mood. During this stage, the specific semantic content of “kanlai” further diminishes to the extent of near disappearance. It merely carries on the function of connecting sentences shown in the knowing domain, serving as a fixed structure that introduces subsequent viewpoints. In general, it functions as an independent construction, shouldering grammatical functions, facilitating discourse connection and introducing the central topic. However, due to its former cognitive sense, “kanlai<sub>3</sub>” carries a sense of self-speculation and a euphemistic tone. “Kanlai” advances further from its cognitive meaning towards a discourse-oriented semantic attenuation. For instance:

(4) Ming Gao replied, “That works too. However, in my view (preposition + cognitive subject + kanlai<sub>3</sub>), if our plan fails by any chance, it will burden brother Zhou Xian. How should we deal with that?” (From the Qing Dynasty novel *Seven Swords and Thirteen Heroes* - Part 1)

In example (4), the fixed structure “preposition + cognitive subject + kanlai<sub>3</sub>” serves as a parenthesis and functions as a discourse marker. The subsequent sentences “if our plan fails...How should we deal with that” are not the conclusions drawn from “That works too”. Thus, in this context,

“kanlai<sub>3</sub>” functions solely as a discourse marker, with its semantic role diminished and its syntactic function enhanced. The structure “preposition + cognitive subject + kanlai<sub>3</sub>” introduces Ming Gao's viewpoint and echos the interrogation of the sentence, which indicates his speculation about the situation and conveys a euphemistic tone. Furthermore, due to the primary function of “however” in linking the meanings of the preceding and subsequent sentences, the necessity of “preposition + cognitive subject + kanlai<sub>3</sub>” in the sentence diminishes. Its removal would not affect the semantic output, but would make the transition somewhat abrupt.

(5) Regarding the social functions of historiography, various introductory books on historiography do not fully agree with each other, but generally(adverb + kanlai<sub>3</sub>), it can be said to encompass the following three aspects: 1) The positive role of historiography in human cognitive activities. 2) The significant importance of historical cognitive activities for human social practices. (From a collection of papers and theories by contemporary renowned scholars)

Example (5) is a contemporary case where the term “adverb + kanlai<sub>3</sub>” is used as a discourse marker. However, in this structure “adverb + kanlai<sub>3</sub>”, the cognitive subject is further omitted. This omission eliminates a clear subject marker, allowing the listener to understand that the forthcoming viewpoint is expressed by the speaker, thereby intensifying subjectivity. In this context, the typical characteristics of the verb category of “kanlai<sub>3</sub>” are almost lost, and “kanlai<sub>3</sub>” functions only as a mood adverb that conveys the subjective attitude of the speaker.

As a result, “kanlai” gradually completes the transition from the knowing domain to the uttering domain. Semantically, “kanlai<sub>3</sub>” is employed to convey the speaker's presumption and estimate, similar to “I think”. Functionally, “kanlai<sub>3</sub>” has completely lost its verbal function and now serves as a discourse marker in order to introduce viewpoints and to change topics. It no longer serves as an important constituent in the sentence, and its removal has little effect on the semantic output of the sentence.

By combining its acting and knowing domain, we can further illustrate the evolution of semantic and syntactic functions of “kanlai”, as shown in Figure 2 below:

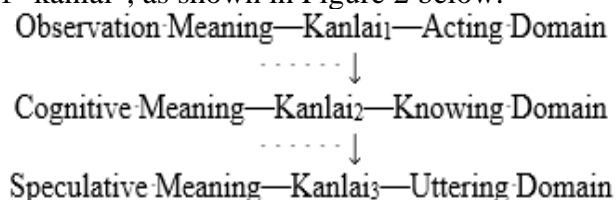


Figure 2: Illustration of the Semantic Evolution and Functional Changes of “kanlai”

### 3. Grammaticalization Mechanism of “Kanlai”

#### 3.1 Disyllabification

Chinese vocabulary evolves from monosyllabic to disyllabic structure. Disyllabification refers to the phenomenon in Chinese vocabulary development where the phonological form of a word tends to become disyllabic. In other words, two closely adjacent monosyllabic words lose their respective lexical boundaries and form a disyllabic linguistic unit during this process <sup>[6]</sup>.

The monosyllabic verb “kan” combined with “lai” under the influence of disyllabification has resulted in the compound disyllabic verb “kanlai”. Originally, “lai” was a directional verb. During the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties periods, the combination of “verb+lai” appeared, indicating the movement of the agent towards the speaker. The combination of “kan” and “lai” thus appears. Due to the effect of disyllabic rhyming units in Chinese, the frequency of “kan” and “lai” appearing adjacent to each other has increased. However, “kan” carries strong acting meaning, which restricts

the meaning of “lai”, leading to an intensified attachment of “lai” to “kan” [7]. The lexical boundary between “kan” and “lai” gradually weakened and solidified two words into one. By the time of Sui and Tang dynasties, “lai” completely lost its lexical meaning, changing from a directional verb to a resultative particle and ultimately consolidating with “kan” to form the disyllabic verb “kanlai”.

### 3.2 Semantic Generalization

Given the close relationship between cognition and language, cognitive metaphors can play a significant role in driving the process of semantic generalization. A metaphor involves using a concrete concept to understand an abstract one, and it is often referred to as a projection from one cognitive domain to another [8]. The sequence of semantic generalization objectively and effectively reflects the projection in the cognitive domain: humans → objects → activities → space → time → attributes.

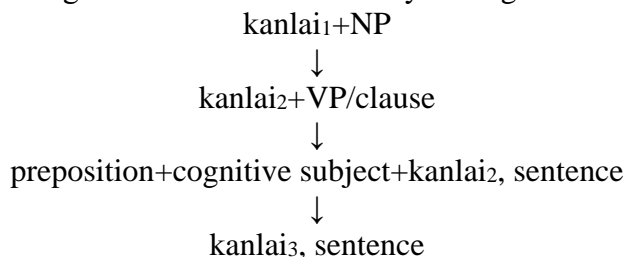
The grammatical evolution of “kanlai” essentially follows this sequence of cognitive projection. We can perceive the whole world as a container, with physical objects within it. Initially, the core meaning of “kanlai” emphasizes the physical objects that humans can perceive through visual observation. This is related to the activities of observing the natural world and falls within the cognitive domain of “objects”. As “kanlai” evolves to convey abstract meanings like “speculation” and becomes a discourse marker, the observed object metaphorically transformed into the spiritual objects, such as abstract concepts and states. This transformation allows these "objects" to be perceived through the "eye" of the mind, expressing human emotions, tones and attitudes and associated with the more abstract domain of "attributes". The semantic generalization develops from “objects” to “attributes” and involves a projection from physical acting behaviors to abstract psychological behaviors, which reflects the grammaticalization of “kanlai”.

### 3.3 Subjectification

The evolution of “kanlai” from a cognitive verb and then to a modal adverb reflects subjectification. Langacker defines subjectification as the disappearance of an objective relation and the persistence of a previously latent subjective relation in the process of conceptualization. In “kanlai<sub>2</sub>”, the structure “preposition + cognitive subject + kanlai” directly emphasizes the cognitive subject. However, in “kanlai<sub>3</sub>”, the cognitive subject is omitted, and the speaker himself is implied as the default cognitive subject embedded in the discourse. This shows the fading of the objective relation between the cognitive subject and the cognitive verb “kanlai<sub>2</sub>”, leading to an underlying subjective relation between the speaker and “kanlai”. Thus, the emergence of the modal adverb "kanlai<sub>3</sub>" is a result of subjectification.

### 3.4 Syntactic Position

The syntactic position changes of “kanlai” have mainly undergone four stages:



Four stages indicate a decreasing significance of the semantic role of “kanlai” within the sentence and an increasing possibility of its grammaticalization, considering that the position of “kanlai”

gradually moves forward when the semantic focus is usually at the end of the sentence. In the first position, “kanlai” functions as a predicate verb and is less likely to undergo grammaticalization. In the second position, “kanlai” can be followed by a verb phrase or a clause. When the verb in the phrase or the clause competes with “kanlai”, the predicate status of “kanlai” is thus challenged. In the third position, “kanlai” no longer functions as a predicate but is combined with “preposition + cognitive subject” and “adverb +” to form a fixed collocation, which is usually separated from the sentence by a pause and can be placed at the beginning, middle or end of the sentence. It modifies the whole sentence in function and has the features of a modal adverb. “Kanlai” becomes a discourse marker and finally completes grammaticalization.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the process of semantic evolution, "kanlai" changes from "kanlai<sub>1</sub>" in the domain of action, which means observing or looking, to "kanlai<sub>2</sub>" in the domain of knowledge, which means sensory perception or opinion, and further to "kanlai<sub>3</sub>" in the domain of discourse, which expresses a conjectural mood. Simultaneously, “kanlai<sub>1</sub>” is a loose structure composed of “kan” (see) and “lai” (come). “Kanlai<sub>2</sub>” is a composite cognitive verb that bridges two sentences, while “kanlai<sub>3</sub>” functions as a discourse marker that can be omitted without affecting the semantic output. Shifting from a concrete to abstract and further into even more abstract unit, “kanlai” undergoes grammaticalization, which is revealed through four underlying mechanisms disyllabification, semantic generalization, subjectification and syntactic position.

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