

A Semantic-Contrastive Study of the Chinese Verb “Kai” and the Korean Verb “Yeolda”

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Abstract. Based on corpus analysis and meaning chain theory, this paper conducted a contrastive study on the basic verbs of Chinese “Kai” and Korean “Yeolda”. The study found that under their basic meanings, the noun constituents collocated with the verbs “Kai” and “Yeolda” share the common semantic features of [+closed] or [+restrictive]. Additionally, compared to Korean “Yeolda”, Chinese “Kai” places greater emphasis on the result of the action, while “Yeolda” emphasizes both the manner in which the action is conducted and the result of the action. Overall, Chinese “Kai” is semantically more versatile, flexible, and inclusive, indicating a greater degree of semantic transferability and acceptance among native Chinese speakers compared to Korean “Yeolda”.

Keywords: contrastive linguistics, semantic contrast, meaning chain, Kai, Yeolda

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, the more fundamental a word is within a language system, the broader its semantic range, the more meanings it encompasses, and the more flexibly it is used within the language. Such basic vocabulary often represents the most critical and challenging aspects of foreign language teaching and serves as a primary focus in contrastive linguistics research. For instance, the Chinese verb “Kai”, typically translated as “open” in English and “Yeolda” in Korean, is a frequently used and foundational word across multiple languages. According to the Modern Chinese Frequency Dictionary, compiled by the Institute of Linguistic Studies at Beijing Language and Culture University, “Kai” ranks 94th out of 4,574 common Chinese characters. [1] In textbooks used by Chinese undergraduates majoring in Korean, “Yeolda” appears as a vocabulary word in Yonsei Korean 1 and other elementary Korean textbooks. [2]

The earliest research on the Chinese verb “Kai” was conducted by Zhao Yuanren (1979), who classified its usage into two categories: transitive and intransitive verbs. [3] Cui Xiliang (2009) revealed the semantic evolution of “Kai” and “Guan” through a diachronic study, proposing that the noun constituents collocated with “Kai” should share a common semantic feature of [+closed]. He also elaborated on the asymmetry between “Kai” and “Guan”. [4] For the Korean verb “Yeolda”, Park Bo-yeon (2011) analyzed its semantic diversity and argued that it possesses the feature of spatial openness. [5] In the contrastive study of Chinese “Kai” and Korean “Yeolda”, Jin Meihong (2015) described the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic differences between the two verbs. [6] Zhang Yufeng (2018) further explored the semantic expansion paths of “Kai” and “Yeolda” by examining the purpose of the action, the object of the action, the result of the action, the state accompanying the action, and the subject of the action. [7]

This paper focuses on a semantic contrastive study of the Chinese lexical verb “Kai” and the Korean transitive verb “Yeolda”, revealing their common semantic meanings through a combination of description and analysis. Particular attention is given to the individual semantics of the two verbs, with the aim of providing useful references for foreign language teaching.

2. Semantic Analysis of Chinese “Kai” and Korean “Yeolda”

2.1. Meaning Chain Framing of the Lexical Verb “Kai”

Taylor (1989:108) proposed the “Meaning Chain” theory, which posits that the various semantic items of polysemous words may not be unified on the basis of a common semantic denominator. Some discrete items may appear far apart and are sometimes regarded as homonyms. However, different meanings are related through ‘meaning chains’, with adjacent members on the chain

usually sharing one or more common properties. [8] Similarly, when analyzing the semantics of "Kai" and "Yeolda", starting from the basic meaning and expanding to the extended meanings will better elucidate the shared attributes of multiple semantic items. Therefore, this paper attempts to propose a meaning chain by referring to the research of scholars such as Peng Qingyu (2013) [9], Cui Xiliang (2009), Wang Yin (2001:212) [10], and Zhang Yufeng (2018). The method involves first organizing all the meanings of the lexical verb "Kai" according to the Modern Chinese Dictionary (7th edition), and then filtering and integrating them, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The definition of the lexical verb "Kai" in the 7th edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary

No.	Definition	Mark ¹
1	Make what is closed no longer closed; open	○
2	Remove a block; open up	○
3	Unfold or separate something that is folded or joined together	○
4	River thawing	△
5	Lift of embargoes, bans, restrictions, etc.	△
6	Start or operate guns, vehicles, boats, airplanes, machines, etc.	○
7	Troops set out	△
8	Start (a business etc.)	○
9	Start to do	○
10	Hold (conference, symposium, exhibition, etc.)	○
11	Write out (bills, letters, etc.); make a price	○*
12	Pay	○*
13	Discharge; dismiss	×
14	(Liquid) boiling	△
15	Eat	×
16	Divide something in fractions of a tenth	△

Second, determining the basic meaning of "Kai". According to Dirven & Verspoor (1998), there are three main methods to determine the basic meaning of a polysemous word. First, the empirical method considers the meaning that first comes to mind when a word is mentioned. Second, the statistical method identifies the meaning used more frequently than other meanings. Third, the extension method identifies the meaning that serves as the basis for expanding other meanings. [12] The final meaning chain is completed by referring to previous studies on the semantic expansion of "Kai". Since the focus of this paper is not on the formulation process, the author will not detail the specific process but will present the final meaning chain as follows.

Meaning chain of Chinese lexical verb "Kai":

1) Make what is closed no longer closed; open → 2) Remove a block; open up → 3) Unfold or separate something that is folded or joined together → 4) Start to do → 5) Start (a business etc.) → 6) Hold (conference, symposium, exhibition, etc.) → 7) Give → 8) Start or operate guns, vehicles, boats, airplanes, machines, etc.

2.2. Semantic Analysis of "Kai"

"Kai" as a verb can be used both as a lexical verb and as a directional verb. When it is used as a lexical verb, it usually appears in the form of "Kai + N/NP," while when it is used as a directional verb, it is typically placed after a verb or an adjective. In the following section, the semantic analysis of "Kai" as a lexical verb will follow the order of the meaning chain integrated above.

2.2.1. *Kai₁: Make What Is Closed No Longer Closed; Open*

This semantic item is the basic meaning of the verb "Kai". As mentioned above, one of the criteria for determining the basic meaning of a word is the meaning that first comes to mind when the word is spoken. When we say "Kai", the image of opening a door usually comes to mind. In fact, this is also the earliest usage of "Kai". When we look at the traditional Chinese character for "開", it looks like a person pushing a door open on both sides with their hands. In modern Chinese, the noun that can be used after the basic meaning of "Kai" is not only limited to "door", but has also expanded to more uses, such as:

¹ The label "○" or "○*" after a meaning item indicates that it is within the research scope of this paper, with "○*" signifying that the author has integrated the meaning item. Conversely, the label "△" or "×" indicates that it falls outside the research scope, where "△" suggests a fixed grammaticalization trend, and "×" denotes a dialectal usage.

- (1) 晚上一开窗,月光就照进房里。 [11]
- (2) 非是老人先提起来,我实在不敢开口。
- (3) 谁知道呢,钥匙在他身上,只见他开箱子拿钱,可不许人家问他拿钱作什么。

As shown in the examples above, under the basic meaning of "Kai," it is often followed by result objects or cause objects. [14] In addition, some scholars have suggested that the noun constituents collocated with "Kai" used in the basic sense should have a common semantic feature of [+closed]. [4] The author would like to add to this by providing the following example:

- (4) 抓住了一个拧开房间的锁的小偷,但是,原来这不是拧开锁的小偷的过错,而是锁门的主人的过错,因为他逼得小偷不得不设法开锁,偷进别人的房子里。

As shown in example (4), when discussing feature of [+closed], for the thief, is it the lock itself that is closed, or is it someone's house that is closed? Obviously, the lock is just a tool, and the house is more closed. Although the verb "Kai" acts directly on the lock, the action that follows the opening of the lock or the final purpose of opening the lock is to enter the room. In this case, the direct object of the verb "Kai" is a tool, and the author proposes that under this circumstance, the noun constituents collocated with "Kai" should have the common feature [+restrictive] rather than [+closed] in terms of semantic properties.

2.2.2. *Kai₂: Remove A Block; Open up*

Figurative meaning refers to the meaning of a word that is generated by analogy, and is derived through the similarity between things. The figurative meaning of words cannot be constructed without a foundation and has a direct bearing on people's metaphorical thought. [15] "Kai₂" can be regarded as the figurative meaning of "Kai". The basic meaning of "Kai" is usually conducted by hand or other parts of the human body, while "Kai₂" has the meaning of removing obstacles. The action is usually not directly related to the human body but can be realized with the help of some kind of tool.

- (5) 工兵们、炮兵们则是研究如何作到及时给步兵开路,医务卫生人员们,则是如何减少伤员的痛苦。
- (6) 席中山川的大儿子和胡瑛谈了些中国矿山开矿的事。

2.2.3. *Kai₃: Unfold or Separate Something That Is Folded or Joined Together*

The range of nouns that can be used with "Kai" under this semantic item is further expanded. Additionally, "Kai" possesses the properties of an intransitive verb, i.e., it has [+autonomy, +action]. The subject of the action does not have to be a human being; it can be an animate or inanimate subject, most of which are [+separable].

2.2.4. *Kai₄: Start to Do*

It denotes a transition in the state of action from the beginning, i.e., the initial starting point of the action. Therefore, "Kai" is generally not applied to momentary verbs when denoting the beginning, as shown in (7). Instead, it is always used in conjunction with monosyllabic verbs with [+persistence] and is lexicalized in conjunction with some specific nouns, which can be interpreted as "begin to do something" or "the beginning of something," as shown in (8).

- (7) 开借*, 开给*, 开买*, 开死*
- (8) 开学 (the beginning of a term), 开工 (begin to work), 开春: 春天的开始 (the beginning of the spring)

2.2.5. *Kai₅: Start (A Business etc.)*

"Kai₅" can be seen as derived from "Kai₄". "Kai₄" is mainly followed by a verb to establish something new in the space category. While "Kai₅" is primarily used with nouns of places, ranging from small stores to large factories. It can also be understood as "the beginning of an undertaking," as shown in (9).

- (9) 开工厂, 开医院, 开了一家百货店

2.2.6. *Kai₆: Hold (Conference, Symposium, Exhibition and etc.)*

In contrast to "Kai₅", "Kai₆" is used to organize something new within a time category, which is more colloquial. However, the scope of use is limited to the category of "~Hui", and not all activities can be held or organized using the verb "Kai," as shown in (10) and (11).

- (10) 开会, 开研讨会, 开奥运会, 开演唱会

(11) 开婚礼* (举行婚礼), 开考试* (举行考试)

2.2.7. *Kai₇: Give*

The author has integrated the two lexical items of "Kai" and summarized them as "Give". In "Kai₇", the thing given can be a bill, a letter, money, etc. It can be an actual action, as in (12) and (13), or verbally uttered, as in (14), which needs to be judged flexibly in context.

(12) 不开发票是否就要漏税?

(13) 我去到柳江煤矿做工,有一年三个月没有开工钱,工人没钱怎能活?

(14) 徐义德心里盘算:开价一百万,总不能出十万八万啊。

2.2.8. *Kai₈: Start or Operate Guns, Vehicles, Boats, Airplanes, Machines and etc.*

Whether to start or to operate something, "Kai₈" involves human control of objects, with the object and the manner of control being the primary differences. When "Kai₈" is used to express "start", it is a momentary verb, commonly used as in "shoot, fire" or "turn on (the air conditioner, the TV, etc.)." However, when it is used to express "operate", it is a durative verb, usually connected with machines that can be operated by hand, such as cars, airplanes, or boats. Additionally, the antonym of "Kai₁" is "Guan", while the antonym of "Kai₈" can be either "Guan" or "Ting".

2.3. Semantic Analysis of "Yeolda"

According to the Standard National language big Dictionary compiled by National Institute of Korean Language, the verb "Yeolda" can be used either as a transitive verb or as an intransitive verb. When used as a transitive verb, its basic meaning is close to that of the Chinese verb "Kai". However, when used as an intransitive verb, it means "bearing fruit", which is difficult to correlate with the meaning of the Chinese verb "Kai", and its etymology differs from that of the transitive verb "Yeolda"². Therefore, this paper will not study the intransitive use of "Yeolda". To analyze the semantic meaning of the transitive verb "Yeolda", the author will first organize the semantic items of "Yeolda" according to the Standard National language big Dictionary. Secondly, the author will analyze the semantic items of "Yeolda" in accordance with the order of the semantic items of the Chinese verb "Kai".

Table 2. The definition of the verb "Yeolda" in the Standard National language big Dictionary

No.	Lexical Category	Definition	Mark
1	Transitive Verb	Open or unlock something that is closed or locked	○
2		Start a meeting or conference	○
3		Start a day's business	△
4		Start a career or a business	○
5		Build a new foundation	○
6		Open one's heart to others or accept others' hearts.	△
7	Intransitive Verb	Open up or start talking about something to another person	△
8		Establish a relationship	○
9		Bear fruit	☆ ³

2.3.1. *Yeolda₁: Open or Unlock Something That Is Closed or Locked*

The basic meaning of "Yeolda" focuses on the manner and result of opening, which is achieved through simple actions such as pushing or pulling, as in the case of a door, a window, a book, etc. It implies a change from whole to separate and from closed to open. In the case of more complex actions, "Yeolda" may not focus on the action of pushing or pulling but rather on the purpose of the action.

(15) 우리가 책을 열 때마다 새롭게 길을 떠난다. [17]

² According to the Standard National language big Dictionary, the etymology of "Yeolda", when used as a transitive verb, traces back to the Yongbieocheonga, while as an intransitive verb, it originates from the Seokbosangjeol.

³ The symbol ☆ denotes a different etymology, indicating that the meaning of this item falls outside the scope of this paper.

(16) 기사가 와서 에어컨을 설치했는데 전문기사가 아닌지 창문을 연 채로 에어컨을 사용하게 해놓았다.

2.3.2. *Yeolda₂: Build A New Foundation*

This is a figurative meaning of the verb “Yeolda”. Unlike the basic meaning, “Yeolda₂” is not paired with a substantive noun but rather with a conceptual noun. The noun is usually modified by an adjective with the semantic property of [+new], conveying the meaning of "new, symbolic, unprecedented", as shown in the following examples.

(17) 이번 회담이 한반도에 평화를 정착시키고, 한민족의 공동번영을 이룩할 수 있는 새 국면을 열 것이라는 관측이다.

(18) 이런 상황에서 대통령이 우리 연구소를 방문하는 것이므로 뭔가 새로운 돌파구를 열 수 있는 기회로 삼을 수 있을 것 같았다.

2.3.3. *Yeolda₃: Start A Career or A Business*

This is also a figurative meaning of the verb “Yeolda”, which emphasizes the creation of a new place in a spatial category or the opening up of a place, extending to the establishment of a career or business. “Yeolda₃” focuses more on the state or result of opening and has little connection with the action itself, which is emphasized in the basic meaning of the verb “Yeolda”.

2.3.4. *Yeolda₄: Start A Meeting or Conference*

“Yeolda₄” can be used with activities such as "meetings, competitions, and concerts," which are often held at a specific time and place and involve many people, as shown in (19) and (20). However, it is not used with all activities, as shown in (21).

(19) 안양시가 4 백 58 억여원을 들여 2 만 3 천여㎡ 부지에 신축한 빙상장은 국제 경기를 열 수 있는 원형트랙과 1 천 2 백 84 개 관중석을 갖췄다.

(20) 양측은 7 일까지 회의를 열 예정이나 상견례 이상의 성과가 나오기는 힘들 전망이다.

(21) 시험을 열다* (시험을 치르다)

2.3.5. *Yeolda₅: Establish A Relationship*

This connotation of “Yeolda” has a more restricted use in modern Korean and is mostly used for the conclusion of relations between nations rather than the formation of human relations, as shown in examples (22) and (23).

(22) 푸틴 대통령은 부시 대통령에게 미국의 대(對)러시아 무역제재 해제와 러시아의 대미(對美) 석유수출 등을 포함한 광범위한 경제적 동반자 관계를 열 것을 제안했다.

(23) 중국과 국교를 연 지 21 년째인 한국이지만, 대통령이 일본에 앞서 중국을 방문하는 것은 이번이 처음이다.

3. Semantic Contrast between Chinese "Kai" and Korean "Yeolda"

3.1. Contrast of the Basic Meanings of Chinese "Kai" and Korean "Yeolda"

From the above analysis, it is evident that the basic meaning of both the Chinese "Kai" and the Korean "Yeolda" is "to open". The noun constituents used with these verbs can be broadly categorized into three types based on their semantic properties. The first type is the open/close category, which includes items that are not inherently closed and can be operated with simple actions such as pushing or pulling, like doors and windows. The second type is the tool category, which includes items like locks and zippers. The third type is the container category, including items like boxes and bottles. Among these, the first two types of noun constituents share the common property [+restrictive], while the third type has the property [+closed]. Thus, noun constituents associated with the verbs "Kai" and "Yeolda" under their basic meanings typically exhibit the semantic features of either [+closed] or [+restrictive].

However, a key difference between the two is that Chinese “Kai” places more emphasis on the result of the action, whereas Korean “Yeolda” focuses on both the manner in which the action is performed and the result of the action.

(24) 책을 열다 (开书*/翻开书), 지퍼를 열다 (开拉链*/拉 (打) 开拉链)

As illustrated in example (24), for items like "book" and "zipper", when Chinese native speakers want to emphasize the manner in which an action is performed, the monosyllabic verb "Kai" alone does not suffice. Therefore, they prefer using supplementary compound words to emphasize the action's execution. A supplementary compound word is formed by combining two verbal morphemes, V1 and V2, with a temporal and logical relationship between the two verbs, such as "Da dao", "Ge duan", "Gong po", and "Shuo fu". [18] In the cases of the words "Fan kai" and "La kai", they adhere to these criteria and thus qualify as supplementary compound words. In other words, "Kai" supplements "Fan", which can be understood as performing "Fan" first and then "Kai", or as "Fan" representing a specific action while "Kai" denotes the result or final state. This point will be illustrated more concretely through example (25).

(25) 翻书/翻开书, 拉拉链/拉开拉链

The examples above are both grammatically correct. However, from a semantic perspective, "Fan shu" (which can mean simply flipping through it) and "La la lian" (which can refer to either pulling it open or pulling it closed) emphasize the action more. In contrast, when "Kai" is attached, the newly formed compound word emphasizes the state of being open or the result of being open.

In Korean, there are many compound words formed by combining two verbal morphemes, such as "Jabanaeda" (catch and remove), "Naeryeoboda" (look down), and "Bureooda" (blow in). However, combinations with "Yeolda" are almost nonexistent. This reflects the fact that the meaning of "Yeolda" is already relatively complete in Korean, encompassing both the action of opening and the state or result of opening.

3.2. Contrast of the Derived Meanings of Chinese "Kai" and Korean "Yeolda"

Derived meaning refers to meanings beyond the basic meaning. Generally, derived meanings can be further subdivided into extended meanings and figurative meanings. For the verb "Kai", the derived meanings include "Kai₃" and "Kai₇", while the derived meaning for "Yeolda" is "Yeolda₅". The figurative meanings of "Kai" are "Kai₂", "Kai₄", "Kai₅", "Kai₆", and "Kai₈", whereas the figurative meanings of "Yeolda" are "Yeolda₂", "Yeolda₃", and "Yeolda₄".

In the figurative meanings, there is a semantic similarity between "Kai₂" and "Yeolda₂". The main difference is that "Kai₂" is paired with a noun that has the property of [+substantiality], while "Yeolda₂" is paired with a noun that has the property of [-substantiality], representing abstract concepts. Many of these nouns also possess the property of [+new], conveying meanings such as "new," "symbolic," or "unprecedented". Additionally, "Kai₅" and "Yeolda₃" are largely similar in meaning, as are "Kai₆" and "Yeolda₄". However, "Yeolda₄" can be paired with a broader range of nouns, whereas "Kai₆" is limited to nouns in the category of "~Hui". Conversely, "Kai₄" and "Kai₈" do not have clear semantic correspondences with "Yeolda", representing unique semantics of the Chinese verb "Kai". In Korean, the verb for beginning is "Sijakhada". When it comes to starting or operating something, the situation becomes more complex and depends on the noun involved. For example, "Kyeoda" is commonly used for electrical appliances, "Ssoda" for weapons, and "Unjeonhada" for machinery and vehicles.

In terms of extended meanings, "Kai₃" and "Kai₇" do not correspond with the semantic meaning of "Yeolda₅", representing distinct semantic features within their respective languages. Additionally, some meanings of "Kai" and "Yeolda" are not covered in this paper due to their relatively fixed noun collocates, which exhibit a grammatically oriented trend and do not readily align with each other. These meanings fall outside the scope of this study, and hence, are not discussed.

In conclusion, Chinese lexical verb "Kai" exhibits more individual semantic variations compared to Korean "Yeolda". This reflects that "Kai" is semantically more versatile, flexible, and inclusive, indicating a greater degree of semantic transferability and acceptance among native Chinese speakers.

Table 4. Semantic Contrast between Chinese "Kai" and Korean "Yeolda" ⁴

Kai	Yeolda
Kai ₁ : Make what is closed no longer closed; open	Yeolda ₁ : Open or unlock something that is closed or locked
Kai ₂ : Remove a block; open up	Yeolda ₂ : Build a new foundation
Kai ₃ : Unfold or separate something that is folded or joined together	×
Kai ₄ : Start to do	×
Kai ₅ : Start (a business etc.)	Yeolda ₃ : Start a career or a business
Kai ₆ : Hold (conference, symposium, exhibition, etc.)	Yeolda ₄ : Start a meeting or conference
Kai ₇ : Give	×
Kai ₈ : Start or operate guns, vehicles, boats, airplanes, machines, etc.	×
×	Yeolda ₅ : Establish a relationship

⁴ Correspondence here does not imply that the semantics and usage are identical, but rather that they are broadly similar. The symbol "×" indicates that it is either difficult to find corresponding items or that the corresponding items fall outside the scope of this paper.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the author has selected the frequently used basic verbs "Kai" and "Yeolda" in Chinese and Korean for a contrastive semantic study, leading to the following conclusions:

First, the contrast of the basic meanings of "Kai" and "Yeolda" reveals that the range of noun constituents that can be used with both verbs is essentially the same. These noun constituents are categorized into three types: the open/close category, tools, and containers. Building on prior research that indicated noun constituents following "Kai" in its basic meaning should share the semantic feature [+closed], this study adds that some noun constituents share the semantic feature of [+restrictive]. Thus, under the basic meanings of both verbs, the noun constituents collocated with "Kai" and "Yeolda" exhibit the common semantic features of [+closed] or [+restrictive].

Second, there are numerous "~Kai" type supplementary compound words in Chinese, such as "Fan kai", "La kai", and "Xian kai", where "Kai" serves as a verbal morpheme complementing the preceding action. In contrast, while Korean does have many compound verbs, expressions like "~Yeolda" are absent, suggesting that the semantic meaning of "Yeolda" is already complete. Therefore, it is observed that Chinese "Kai" tends to emphasize the result of the action, whereas Korean "Yeolda" emphasizes both the manner of the action and its result.

Finally, the derived meanings of Chinese "Kai" are generally richer than those of Korean "Yeolda", especially when the action of "Kai" is performed by hand. In contrast, Korean tends to use other specific verbs to express these actions. This reflects that Chinese "Kai" is semantically more versatile, flexible, and inclusive, indicating a greater degree of semantic transferability and acceptance among native Chinese speakers. Additionally, due to the semantic asymmetry between "Kai" and its antonym "Guan", these derived meanings can be flexibly distinguished with the help of antonyms during language education.

In summary, while the semantic meanings of Chinese "Kai" and Korean "Yeolda" overlap to some extent, the differences between the two are more prominent. These differences reflect the distinct thinking patterns of Chinese and Korean speakers. Fully understanding and utilizing these differences will greatly benefit the practical teaching of both languages.

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