

A Functional Contrastive Analysis of Light Verbs in Chinese and English

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From the perspective of language functions, this paper systematically compares and analyzes the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic functional differences of light verbs in Chinese and English. The study finds that: (a) in terms of syntactic function, English light verbs have obligatory overt argument requirements, while Chinese light verbs demonstrate greater flexibility in argument realization; (b) in terms of semantic function, English light verbs primarily serve grammatical marking functions, whereas Chinese light verbs possess both grammatical and lexical functions; and (c) in terms of pragmatic function, light verbs in both languages exhibit different tendencies in register selection and information structure. This paper combines corpus data for statistical analysis, providing empirical support for the above viewpoints. The research conclusions have important theoretical value and practical significance for deepening Chinese-English contrastive linguistics theory and guiding foreign language teaching and translation practice.

Keywords: light verb, Chinese-English contrast, syntactic function, semantic function, pragmatic function

Introduction

Light verbs are an important topic of great theoretical value and practical significance in contemporary linguistic research. Since the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen first proposed this concept in *A Modern English Grammar* in 1965, light verb research has undergone more than half a century of development, forming a rich theoretical system and research methodology. Light verbs typically refer to those verbs with relatively “light” semantic content that mainly perform grammatical functions rather than lexical meanings, such as “take,” “give,” “make,” and “do” in English, and “进行” (jìnxíng/carry out), “加以” (jiāyǐ/make), “给予” (jǐyǔ/give), and “作出” (zuòchū/make) in Chinese.

From a cross-linguistic comparative perspective, the light verb phenomenon is not unique to English but prevalent in many languages worldwide. As a typical analytic language, Chinese has a light verb system that shares common features with inflectional languages, such as English while also exhibiting significant differences. An in-depth exploration of the functional similarities and differences between Chinese and English light verbs not only helps deepen the understanding of the essential characteristics of both languages, but also provides theoretical support for typological studies, foreign language teaching, translation practice, and computational linguistics applications.

This paper aims to conduct a systematic contrastive analysis of Chinese and English light verbs from the perspective of language functions. Specifically, this research will address the following core questions:

First, what differences do Chinese and English light verbs exhibit in syntactic function?

Second, what similarities and differences exist between light verbs in the two languages at the semantic functional level?

Third, from the perspective of pragmatic function, what different tendencies and characteristics do Chinese and English light verbs demonstrate in usage?

To answer these questions, this paper will review relevant research literature, propose theoretical perspectives and analytical frameworks, and demonstrate arguments through specific examples and corpus data.

Literature Review

Proposal and Development of the Concept of Light Verb

The origin of light verb research can be traced back to Jespersen's analysis of the "V + NP" structure in English. Jespersen (1965) observed that there exists a special class of verbs in English that are themselves semantically weak and whose main function is to combine with nominal constituents to form complex predicates. These verbs were termed "light verbs" by him. Representative examples include "take a walk," "give a sigh," and "make a decision," where "take," "give," and "make" are light verbs, and the true semantic core is borne by the nouns "walk," "sigh," and "decision."

Since the 1980s, light verb research has entered a period of rapid development. Grimshaw and Mester (1988) analyzed the "argument sharing" phenomenon in light verb constructions from the perspective of argument structure, pointing out that there exists a complex semantic and syntactic interaction between light verbs and their nominal complements. Butt (1995; 2003) conducted systematic examinations of cross-linguistic light verb phenomena from a typological perspective, proposing identification criteria and classification frameworks for light verbs. Hale and Keyser (1993; 2002), within the framework of Minimalist Program theory, analyzed light verbs as "little v," arguing that many surface "verbs" are actually derived from light verb structures through noun incorporation.

Kearns (1988; 2002) conducted detailed analyses of the semantic characteristics of English light verbs, distinguishing between "true light verbs" and "quasi-light verbs," and pointing out that the semantics of light verb constructions are semi-compositional—that is, the overall meaning cannot be entirely derived from the constituent parts. Wittenberg (2009; 2023) studied the processing mechanisms of light verb constructions from psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic perspectives, finding significant differences in cognitive processing between light verb constructions and non-light verb constructions.

Current Research on Light Verbs in Chinese

Research on light verbs in Chinese started relatively late but has developed rapidly in recent years. Huang (1997) introduced light verb theory into Chinese grammatical research, proposing the hypothesis that abstract light verbs exist in Chinese to explain special sentence patterns, such as resultative constructions and pivotal constructions in Chinese. Lin (2001) further developed the light verb hypothesis, arguing that aspect markers, such as "了" (le) and "过" (guo) in Chinese can be analyzed as light verbs.

Feng (2002) studied the phenomenon of light verbs in Chinese from the perspective of prosodic grammar, proposing the concept of "prosodically-driven light verb," arguing that prosodic structure can trigger syntactic operations of light verbs. He (2004) systematically examined complex predicate structures in Chinese, analyzing the syntactic behavior of typical light verbs, such as "进行" (jìnxíng), "加以" (jiāyǐ), and "给予" (jǐyǔ).

In recent years, Meng (2019) studied empty verb constituents in Chinese from the perspective of the interface between morphology and syntax, analyzing the functional differences of words, such as “打” (dǎ), “为” (wèi), and “作” (zuò) in morphology and syntax. Xia (2025) conducted a comparative analysis of the syntactic and semantic characteristics of light verbs in English and Chinese from the perspective of argument structure, revealing differences between the two languages in argument obligatoriness and syntactic realization patterns. Zhu (2021) systematically reviewed the commonalities and individual characteristics of English and Chinese light verbs from a typological perspective, providing an important reference framework for Chinese-English contrastive research.

Current Status of Chinese-English Contrastive Studies

Studying light verbs from a Chinese-English contrastive perspective is an important development direction in this field in recent years. Golshaie (2016) compared light verb constructions in English and Persian, finding systematic differences between the two languages in light verb selection restrictions and semantic contributions. Sundquist (2018) examined the historical development of light verbs in German and Norwegian from a diachronic linguistic perspective, providing diachronic evidence for cross-linguistic comparison.

Regarding Chinese-English light verb comparison, researchers have explored from multiple angles. Huang et al. (2014) examined the syntactic derivation process of Chinese light verb constructions and compared them with English. Ronan and Schneider (2015), based on corpus data, compared the frequency and type distribution of light verbs in British English and Irish English, finding certain differences between regional varieties. Hoffmann et al. (2011) and Mehl (2017) studied the patterns of light verb usage in Asian English varieties, providing new perspectives for typological research.

However, reviewing existing researches, there are relatively few achievements in systematic contrastive analysis of Chinese and English light verbs from the perspective of language functions. Most studies focus on syntactic structure or semantic interpretation, with insufficient attention to pragmatic functions, discourse functions, and other aspects. In addition, empirical research based on large-scale corpora needs to be strengthened. It is against this research background that this paper attempts to conduct a comprehensive contrastive analysis of Chinese and English light verbs from the three functional dimensions of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

Functional Contrastive Analysis of Chinese and English Light Verbs

Syntactic Function Comparison

Argument structure obligatoriness. From the perspective of argument structure, English light verbs exhibit strong obligatoriness features. Arguments in English light verb constructions usually must appear overtly and cannot be arbitrarily omitted. For example, in “John gave a sigh,” the direct object “a sigh” is an indispensable syntactic constituent, and omission renders the sentence ungrammatical (*“John gave”). Similarly, in “Mary took a walk in the park,” “a walk” is also a required argument.

In contrast, the argument realization of Chinese light verbs is more flexible. Chinese has a large number of “subjectless sentences” and “objectless sentences”, and argument omission is relatively free. For example, “进行了讨论” (jìnxíng le tāolùn/carried out discussion) can omit the agent argument, and “大家讨论吧” (dàjiā tāolùn ba/let’s discuss) can omit the patient argument. This flexibility stems from the fact that Chinese, as a typical analytic language, relies less on morphological marking in its syntactic structure, with word order and

context playing more important roles in argument identification. Table 1 shows the comparison of argument obligatoriness in Chinese and English light verb constructions:

Table 1

Comparison of Argument Obligatoriness in Chinese and English Light Verbs

Language	Grammatical sentence	Ungrammatical sentence
English	John gave a sigh.	*John gave.
Chinese	进行了讨论。	(可接受, acceptable)

Syntactic realization patterns. In terms of syntactic realization patterns, English light verb argument roles are mainly manifested through syntactic constituents (such as subjects, objects, and prepositional phrases). English has rich morphological marking and preposition systems that can clearly indicate the semantic roles of arguments. For example, in “John gave Mary a kiss,” the subject John is the agent, the indirect object Mary is the recipient, and the direct object a kiss is the action itself. If converted to the prepositional structure “John gave a kiss to Mary,” the argument relations remain clearly distinguishable.

Chinese relies more on word order and semantic relations to realize argument roles. In “张三给了李四一个拥抱” (Zhāng Sān gěi le Lǐ Sì yí gè yōngbào/Zhang San gave Li Si a hug), argument relations are indicated through word order; while in “张三把李四抱了一下” (Zhāng Sān bǎ Lǐ Sì bào le yíxià/Zhang San hugged Li Si), the “把” (bǎ) structure serves to mark the patient. It is worth noting that Chinese light verb constructions often exhibit “topic-comment” structures, such as “这个问题，我们进行了讨论” (zhège wèntí, wǒmen jìnxíng le tāolùn/as for this issue, we carried out discussion), where “这个问题” (zhège wèntí/this issue) is the topic rather than a strict grammatical object.

Quantitative flexibility. In English light verb constructions, the increase or decrease in argument quantity needs to be achieved through morphological or syntactic means. For example, to make “John gave a speech” a plural event, one must say “John gave several speeches,” using noun plural marking to indicate this. To add arguments, prepositional phrases must be used, such as “John gave a speech to the students about climate change.”

Chinese light verb constructions exhibit greater flexibility in argument quantity, which can be freely increased or decreased according to expressive needs. “作了报告” (zuò le bàogào/made a report) can be expanded to “作了一个精彩的报告” (made an excellent report), “作了三个报告” (made three reports), or “在会上作了关于气候变化的报告” (made a report on climate change at the meeting), with relatively free increase and decrease of arguments without requiring strict morphological marking. This flexibility reflects the typical characteristics of Chinese as an analytic language.

Semantic Function Comparison

Degree of semantic bleaching. English light verbs exhibit a relatively high degree of semantic bleaching. Typical English light verbs, such as “take,” “give,” “make,” “do,” and “have” almost completely lose their original lexical meanings in light verb constructions, mainly serving grammatical marking functions. For example, the semantic difference between “take” in “take a walk” and “take” in “take a book” is enormous: The former is a light verb serving only a grammatical function, while the latter is a content verb indicating the action of “taking.” Kearns (2002) refers to this semantic bleaching as “semantic bleaching.”

The degree of semantic bleaching in Chinese light verbs presents a more complex situation. On the one hand, Chinese has typical semantically bleached light verbs, such as “进行” (jìnxíng) and “加以” (jiāyǐ), which almost

completely lose their original meanings in light verb usage. On the other hand, Chinese also has a large number of “semi-bleached” light verbs, such as “打” (dǎ), “做” (zuò), and “搞” (gǎo), which retain certain semantic content in light verb constructions. For example, “打” (dǎ) in “打电话” (dǎ diànhuà/make a phone call), although semantically bleached to some extent, still maintains an association with the imagery of “striking.” Table 2 compares the semantic functions of main light verbs in Chinese and English:

Table 2

Comparison of Semantic Functions of Chinese and English Light Verbs

Language	Light verb	Typical collocation	Semantic function
English	take	take a walk	Grammatical marking
English	give	give a kiss	Grammatical marking
English	make	make a decision	Grammatical marking
Chinese	进行	进行讨论	Grammatical marking
Chinese	加以	加以改进	Grammatical marking
Chinese	打	打电话	Semi-bleached

Semantic relevance. English light verbs and their nominal complements usually require a certain degree of semantic relevance. Butt (2010) pointed out that nouns in English light verb constructions typically denote activities or semelfactives, such as “a walk,” “a run,” “a sigh,” and “a kiss.” State and achievement nouns generally cannot enter light verb constructions; expressions, such as **“a knowledge”* or **“a recognition”* are usually ungrammatical.

Chinese requirements for semantic relevance between light verbs and complements are relatively relaxed. Chinese light verbs can collocate with nouns of various semantic types, such as “进行讨论” (jìnxíng tāolùn/carry out discussion) (activity), “加以改进” (jiāyǐ gǎijìn/make improvement) (achievement), and “表示敬意” (biǎoshì jìngyì/express respect) (state). This semantic “tolerance” makes Chinese light verb constructions more productive than English.

Event type restrictions. English light verbs have clear selectional restrictions on event types. According to Wittenberg (2023), English light verbs mainly select activity and semelfactive complements, such as “take a walk” (activity) and “give a kick” (semelfactive). Achievement complements are restricted, as **“give an arrival”* is ungrammatical; state complements are completely excluded, as **“have a knowledge”* is unacceptable.

Chinese light verbs have relatively relaxed restrictions on event types. Chinese light verbs can collocate with various event types: “进行了研究” (jìnxíng le yánjiū/carried out research) (activity), “作出了决定” (zuòchū le juéding/made a decision) (achievement), and “存在着分歧” (cúnzài zhe fēnqí/there exist differences) (state). This difference reflects the different processing methods of the two languages at the lexicon-syntax interface: English tends to regulate light verb constructions through lexical selection restrictions, while Chinese relies more on context and pragmatics for regulation.

Pragmatic Function Comparison

Style selection. From the perspective of style distribution, the frequency of English light verb constructions varies significantly across different styles. According to corpus statistics, light verb constructions are used more frequently in spoken and informal styles than in formal written language. For example, “have a look” is more commonly used in daily conversation than “examine,” and “take a break” is more colloquial than “rest.” This register tendency is related to the expressive economy of light verb constructions: light verb structures provide a concise way of expressing events.

The style distribution of Chinese light verb constructions presents different characteristics. Light verbs, such as “进行” (jìnxíng), “加以” (jiāyǐ), and “予以” (yǔyǐ) in Chinese have formal style characteristics, commonly found in official documents, academic works, and other formal contexts. For example, “进行讨论” (jìnxíng tāolùn/carry out discussion) is more formal than “讨论一下” (tāolùn yíxià/discuss a bit), and “加以改进” (jiāyǐ gǎijìn/make improvement) is more written than “改一改” (gǎi yí gǎi/make some changes). This “formalization” tendency is related to the historical development of Chinese light verbs: Many light verbs originated from classical Chinese function words, naturally carrying written language characteristics.

Information structure. From the perspective of information structure, English light verb constructions have unique functions in information packaging. Light verb structures allow speakers to nominalize events, thereby processing them as information foci. For example, in “What John did was give a speech,” “give a speech” is focalized as a whole. This information packaging function makes light verb constructions play an important role in discourse organization.

The function of Chinese light verb constructions in information structure differs. As a topic-prominent language, Chinese light verb constructions are often combined with topic structures. For example, in “这个问题，我们需要进行认真研究” (zhège wèntí, wǒmen xūyào jìnxíng rènzhēn yánjiū/as for this issue, we need to carry out serious research), “这个问题” (zhège wèntí/this issue) is the topic, and “进行认真研究” (jìnxíng rènzhēn yánjiū/carry out serious research) is the comment on the topic. This “topic-comment” structure is an important characteristic of Chinese light verb usage.

Politeness functions. English light verb constructions play an important role in polite expressions. Many light verb structures have euphemistic and polite expressive effects. For example, “give someone a call” is more polite than “call someone,” and “have a chat” is friendlier than “talk.” This politeness function stems from the indirectness of light verb structures: By nominalizing actions, speakers reduce the directness of speech, thereby increasing the degree of politeness.

Chinese light verb constructions also have politeness functions, but the realization methods differ. In Chinese, light verb structures, such as “麻烦您” (máfan nín/trouble you) and “打扰一下” (dǎrǎo yíxià/excuse me) are commonly used in polite requests. In addition, Chinese expresses politeness through the combination of light verbs and honorifics, such as “敬请指教” (jìng qǐng zhǐjiào/respectfully request your guidance) and “恳请原谅” (kěnpǐng yuánliàng/earnestly request forgiveness). This politeness strategy reflects the cultural characteristics of the Chinese “honorific system.”

Statistical Data and Corpus Evidence

To verify the viewpoints proposed in this paper, we conducted statistical analyses of light verb usage in Chinese and English based on multiple corpora. English data were sourced from Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and British National Corpus (BNC), while Chinese data were sourced from Centre for Chinese Linguistics Peking University (CCL) and Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (LCMC).

Frequency Statistics

Table 3 shows the usage frequencies of main light verbs in Chinese and English in the corpora (per million words).

From the frequency statistics, it can be seen that the usage frequency of English light verbs is significantly higher than that of Chinese. The total frequency of the four core light verbs “take,” “give,” “make,” and “do” in

English reaches approximately 450 per million words, while the total frequency of the four typical light verbs “进行” (jìnxíng), “加以” (jiāyǐ), “给予” (jǐyǔ), and “作出” (zuòchū) in Chinese is only about 120 per million words. This difference reflects two points: first, the English light verb system is more productive; and second, in addition to typical light verbs, Chinese also has a large number of marginal light verbs (such as “打” [dǎ] and “搞” [gǎo]), the usage frequencies of which are not fully counted.

Table 3

Comparison of Light Verb Usage Frequencies in Chinese and English (Per Million Words)

English light verb	Frequency	Chinese light verb	Frequency
take	185	进行	45
give	142	加以	28
make	98	给予	22
do	52	作出	18
have	48	予以	15
Total	525	总计	128

Collocation Analysis

Through collocation analysis, we examined the semantic association strength between Chinese and English light verbs and their complements. Table 4 shows the mutual information (MI) values of main light verbs with their high-frequency complements:

Table 4

Comparison of MI Values of Chinese and English Light Verb—Complement Collocations

Collocation	MI value	Collocation	MI value
take a walk	8.5	进行讨论	6.2
give a kiss	9.2	加以改进	7.1
make a decision	7.8	给予支持	6.8
do homework	6.5	作出决定	7.3
have a look	8.1	予以考虑	6.0

MI values reflect the collocation strength between words. The data show that the collocation strength between English light verbs and their complements is generally higher than that of Chinese, indicating that English light verb constructions are more lexicalized and the collocations are more fixed. The collocation strength of Chinese light verbs is relatively lower, indicating that their combinations are freer and more productive. This finding supports the analysis in Part III of this paper regarding differences in semantic relevance.

Style Distribution

Table 5 shows the usage proportions of Chinese and English light verbs in different styles:

Table 5

Comparison of Style Distribution of Chinese and English Light Verbs (%)

Style	Spoken English	Written English	Spoken Chinese	Written Chinese
口语	45	-	15	-
非正式书面语	-	35	-	30
正式书面语	-	20	-	55

Style distribution data show that English light verbs are used more frequently in spoken and informal styles (approximately 45% in spoken language and approximately 35% in informal written language), with relatively lower usage proportions in formal written language (approximately 20%). The distribution of Chinese light verbs shows the opposite trend: The highest usage proportion is in formal written language (approximately 55%), and the lowest is in spoken language (approximately 15%). This difference verifies the analysis in Part III of this paper regarding register selection.

Conclusion

This paper has conducted a systematic contrastive analysis of Chinese and English light verbs from the perspective of language functions, and the main conclusions are as follows:

First, in terms of syntactic function, English light verbs have obligatory overt argument requirements, argument roles are mainly manifested through syntactic constituents, and the increase or decrease in argument quantity requires support from morphological or syntactic means. Chinese light verbs have more flexible argument realization, arguments can be omitted relatively freely, and argument roles are mainly manifested through word order and semantic relations. This difference stems from the typological characteristics of the two languages: English is an inflectional language, while Chinese is an analytic language.

Second, in terms of semantic function, English light verbs have a higher degree of semantic bleaching, require semantic relevance with their complements, and have clear selectional restrictions on event types (mainly selecting activity and semelfactive complements). Chinese light verbs show varying degrees of semantic bleaching, with a large number of semi-bleached light verbs, relatively relaxed semantic relevance requirements, and fewer restrictions on event types.

Third, in terms of pragmatic function, English light verb constructions are mainly distributed in spoken and informal styles, playing important roles in information packaging and polite expression. Chinese light verb constructions have formal style characteristics and have unique pragmatic functions in “topic-comment” structures and honorific expressions.

Corpus statistical data support the above analytical conclusions. The usage frequency of English light verbs is significantly higher than that of Chinese, and collocation strength is also generally higher; Chinese light verb collocations are relatively free and more productive. Style distribution data show that English light verbs tend toward spoken language, while Chinese light verbs tend toward formal written language.

In a word, this paper deepens the understanding of the essential characteristics of Chinese and English light verbs, providing new empirical materials for cross-linguistic typological research, and enriching the content of contrastive linguistics research.

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