

Comparing the Syntax of the Verb /lên/ in Thai and /wán/ in Mandarin: Structural Patterns and Structural Constraints

การเปรียบเทียบวากยสัมพันธ์ของคำกริยา เล่น ในภาษาไทยและ 玩 ในภาษาจีนกลาง: รูปแบบโครงสร้างและข้อจำกัดเชิงโครงสร้าง

Peng Bo*

เบ้ง โป

Mayuree Thawornpat

มยุรี ทาวอร์พัตน์

Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, Thailand

Corresponding author*

e-mail: bo.pen@student.mahidol.ac.th

Received 24-11-2025**Revised** 04-03-2026**Accepted** 15-03-2026**Doi:** 10.69598/artssu.2026.6040.**How to Cite:**

Bo, P., & Thawornpat, M. (2026).
Comparing the Syntax of the
Verb /lên/ in Thai and /wán/ in
Mandarin: Structural Patterns
and Structural Constraints.
*Journal of Arts and Thai
Studies*, 48(2), E6040 (1-20).

Keywords: Thai verb /lên/,
Mandarin verb /wán/, tagmemics,
construction grammar

คำสำคัญ: กริยา เล่น ภาษาไทย,
กริยา 玩 ภาษาจีน, แท็กเมมิกส์,
ไวยากรณ์เชิงโครงสร้าง

Abstract

Background and Objectives: Although Thai /lên/ and Mandarin /wán/ are commonly glossed as 'play', they diverge in how meanings are distributed across constructions, so lexical equivalence does not guarantee structural equivalence. In particular, they contrast in object realization, complement packaging (Thai more analytic vs. Mandarin more compact patterns), and the licensing of figurative and stance readings (Thai more template-bound vs. Mandarin more productive /wán/ + X frames). This study aims to identify and compare the core construction types of /lên/ and /wán/, specify where functional equivalence holds, and show that cross-linguistic substitutability is construction-dependent rather than word-to-word.

Methods: A qualitative, corpus-based comparison employed Tagmemic slot-filler analysis for structural classification and Construction Grammar for construction-specific interpretations and constraints. The Thai data were drawn from the Thai National Corpus (TNC) and Thairath Online (2021–2023), with reference to the Royal Institute Dictionary (2011) and Khlang Kham; the Mandarin data were drawn from the CCL corpus (1990s–2020s). After screening and deduplication within construction types, the observation set contains 977 Thai and 885 Mandarin instances.

Results: Thai /lên/ clusters into seven recurrent patterns, with a strong preference for nominal fillers in the object slot; extended readings were typically licensed by specific templates such as /lên kàp/ + NP (co-participation/interaction targets and conventional figurative uses), V/VP + /lên/ and /lên-lên/ (stance marking and mitigating seriousness), and clause-linked complements. Mandarin /wán/ showed ten recurrent patterns with greater flexibility, including nominalized/elliptical object expressions, compact complements (e.g., V-de-Adj), stance templates (V-zhe-/wán/), and reduplication (/wánwán/). Overall, the similarities between the two languages are most evident in literal "play" contexts, while notable differences emerge in object patterns, complement encoding, and the licensing of figurative/stance meanings.

Application of this study: The findings support teaching, bilingual lexicography, and translation by turning recurrent patterns into practical templates and mapping rules. For pedagogy and dictionaries, senses can be presented by construction and idioms treated as fixed form-meaning pairings with usage constraints. For translation, the construction inventory helps select structure-level equivalents when direct verb substitution fails, especially in figurative uses, stance-marking constructions, and complement constructions.

Conclusions: This research aimed to study and compare the use of the verbs /lên/ ("play") in Thai and /wán/ (玩) in Mandarin Chinese in order to explain the relationship between meaning and linguistic structure that governs their usage. Drawing on corpus-based data and employing a combination of Tagmemic analysis and Construction Grammar, the study found that although both verbs share the basic meaning of "play," they differ significantly in terms of object patterns, complement encoding, and the extension of metaphorical and attitudinal meanings. The equivalence between "เล่น" and "玩" is therefore structural rather than word-for-word. Thai exhibits extended meanings that are tied to specific constructional patterns, whereas Chinese shows greater flexibility and is more conducive to semantic extension through the "玩 + X" framework. The findings can be applied to language teaching, bilingual lexicography, and cross-linguistic translation. Future studies should incorporate spoken language data and quantitative analysis to more comprehensively examine differences across idiomatic expressions and text types.

บทคัดย่อ

ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์: แม้ว่า เล่น ในภาษาไทยและ 玩 ในภาษาจีนกลางมักถูกกลอสว่า “play/เล่น” แต่การเทียบเท่าระดับคำไม่ได้รับประกันความเทียบเท่าระดับโครงสร้าง เนื่องจากความหมายของกริยาทั้งสองกระจายตัวต่างกันตามโครงสร้างที่ใช้ โดยเฉพาะความต่างด้านการปรากฏของกรรม การเข้ารหัสส่วนเติมเต็ม (ภาษาไทยมีแนวโน้มใช้วิธีเชิงวิเคราะห์มากกว่า ขณะที่ภาษาจีนมักใช้โครงสร้างที่กระชับกว่า) และการอนุญาตความหมายเชิงอุปมาและเชิงทำที่ (ภาษาไทยมักผูกกับแม่แบบมากกว่า ขณะที่ภาษาจีนเอื้อต่อการรอบ 玩+X ที่ผลิตได้สูงกว่า) งานวิจัยนี้มีเป้าหมายเพื่อระบุและเปรียบเทียบประเภทโครงสร้างหลักของ เล่น และ 玩 ระบุขอบเขตที่ความเทียบเท่าทางหน้าที่เกิดขึ้นจริง และชี้ว่า “ความแทนกันได้” ระหว่างสองภาษาเป็นแบบขึ้นกับโครงสร้าง ไม่ใช่การเทียบคำแบบคำต่อคำ

วิธีการศึกษา: ใช้การเปรียบเทียบเชิงคุณภาพบนฐานข้อมูลคลังภาษา โดยผสานการวิเคราะห์แบบแท็กเมมิกส์ (การจัดจำแนกเชิงโครงสร้างแบบช่อง-ตัวเติม) กับไวยากรณ์เชิงโครงสร้าง (construction grammar) เพื่ออธิบายความหมายและข้อจำกัดเฉพาะโครงสร้าง ข้อมูลภาษาไทยมาจาก Thai National Corpus (TNC) และ Thairath Online (ค.ศ. 2021–2023) โดยอ้างอิงพจนานุกรมราชบัณฑิตยสถาน (ค.ศ. 2011) และ Khlang Kham; ข้อมูลภาษาจีนมาจากคลังข้อมูล CCL (ช่วงทศวรรษ 1990–2020) หลังการคัดกรองและการตัดซ้ำภายในแต่ละประเภทโครงสร้าง ชุดข้อมูลที่ใช้วิเคราะห์มีภาษาไทย 977 หน่วย และภาษาจีน 885 หน่วย

ผลการศึกษา: ภาษาไทยพบ เล่น 7 โครงสร้างหลัก และมีแนวโน้มเลือก “นาม” เป็นตัวเติมในตำแหน่งกรรมอย่างเด่นชัด ความหมายขยายมักได้รับอนุญาตโดยแม่แบบเฉพาะ เช่น เล่นกับ+ NP (ผู้ร่วมกระทำ/เป้าหมายการปฏิสัมพันธ์และการใช้เชิงอุปมาแบบคงรูป), V/VP + เล่น และ เล่น ๆ (การทำหน้าที่เชิงทำที่/ลดความจริงจัง) รวมถึงส่วนเติมเต็มแบบเชื่อมอนุประโยค ขณะที่ภาษาจีนพบ 玩 10 โครงสร้างหลักและมีความยืดหยุ่นสูงกว่า ได้แก่ กรรมที่เป็นส่วนวนหรือกรรมที่เกิดจากการนามานุภาพ/การละนาม ส่วนเติมเต็มแบบกระชับ (เช่น V-得-Adj) แม่แบบเชิงทำที่ (V-着-玩) และรูปซ้ำ (玩玩) โดยรวม ความคล้ายคลึงของสองภาษาระดับสูงสุดในบริบท “การละเล่น” แบบตรงตัว แต่แตกต่างเด่นชัดในรูปแบบกรรม การเข้ารหัสส่วนเติมเต็ม และการอนุญาตความหมายเชิงอุปมา/เชิงทำที่

การประยุกต์ใช้: ผลการศึกษานับสนับสนุนการสอน พจนานุกรมสองภาษา และการแปล โดยเปลี่ยนรูปแบบที่พบซ้ำให้เป็นแม่แบบที่ใช้ได้จริงและกฎการจับคู่เชิงโครงสร้าง สำหรับการสอนและพจนานุกรม ควรนำเสนอความหมายโดยยึด “โครงสร้าง” เป็นแกน และจัดสำนวนเป็นหน่วยรูป-ความหมายที่ตายตัวพร้อมข้อจำกัดการใช้ สำหรับการแปล รายการโครงสร้างช่วยเลือกโครงสร้างที่เทียบเท่าเมื่อการแทนกริยาโดยตรงใช้ไม่ได้ โดยเฉพาะในบริบทเชิงอุปมา/เชิงทำที่และในโครงสร้างส่วนเติมเต็ม

บทสรุป: การวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาและเปรียบเทียบการใช้คำกริยา “เล่น” ในภาษาไทยและ “玩” ในภาษาจีนกลาง เพื่ออธิบายความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างความหมายและโครงสร้างทางภาษาที่กำหนดการใช้งานของคำทั้งสอง โดยใช้ข้อมูลจากคลังภาษาและวิเคราะห์ด้วยแนวคิดแท็กเมมิกส์ร่วมกับไวยากรณ์เชิงโครงสร้าง ผลการศึกษาพบว่า แม้คำทั้งสองจะมีความหมายพื้นฐานเกี่ยวกับ “การเล่น” เหมือนกัน แต่แตกต่างกันอย่างชัดเจนในด้านรูปแบบกรรม การเข้ารหัสส่วนเติมเต็ม และการขยายความหมายเชิงอุปมาและเชิงทำที่ ความเทียบเท่าระหว่าง “เล่น” และ “玩” จึงเป็นความเทียบเท่าเชิงโครงสร้างมากกว่าการเทียบคำแบบคำต่อคำ โดยภาษาไทยมีความหมายขยายที่ผูกกับแม่แบบเฉพาะ ขณะที่ภาษาจีนมีความยืดหยุ่นและเอื้อต่อการขยายความหมายผ่านกรอบ 玩+X มากกว่า ผลการวิจัยสามารถนำไปประยุกต์ใช้ในการเรียนการสอนภาษา การจัดทำพจนานุกรมสองภาษา และการแปลข้ามภาษา ส่วนการศึกษาครั้งต่อไปควรเพิ่มข้อมูลภาษาพูดและการวิเคราะห์เชิงปริมาณเพื่อทดสอบความแตกต่างตามสำนวนภาษาและประเภทข้อความให้ครอบคลุมยิ่งขึ้น

Introduction

In cross-linguistic description and second-language pedagogy, a recurring challenge is that lexical items that appear to be straightforward translation equivalents often differ in their grammatical realizations. Similar-meaning verb pairs across languages may share a core conceptual domain while diverging in argument selection, complement strategies, and construction-specific constraints. Such mismatches are not limited to a single lexical pair; rather, they represent a broader pattern in which semantic proximity does not guarantee structural equivalence. Investigating these pairs therefore contributes not only to contrastive linguistics but also to bilingual lexicography, translation, and classroom practice, where learners are prone to negative transfer when they rely on word-to-word substitution.

Against this background, the verbs /lên/ (เล่น) in Thai and /wán/ (玩) in Mandarin Chinese are particularly instructive. In everyday language use, both occur with high frequency across a wide range of communicative contexts.

In corpus retrieval, both target forms return on the order of 10⁵ hits in their respective datasets (Thai /lên/ in TNC plus the Thairath Online news dataset; Mandarin /wán/ in the Modern Chinese range of the CCL corpus, 1990s–2020s), indicating that both are well attested for constructional analysis. They frequently appear in contexts describing daily activities, entertainment, or speaker attitudes and manners of action, which leads many dictionaries and teaching materials to treat them as close semantic equivalents.

Importantly, however, the relationship between /lên/ and /wán/ is not one of uniform difference. In prototypical entertainment contexts, the two verbs overlap in both meaning and broad constructional profile—for example, ‘play a game/sport’ and other literal recreational uses often permit relatively direct cross-linguistic correspondence. At the same time, systematic contrasts emerge once the analysis moves beyond these core contexts. Beyond the shared “play” domain, the two verbs diverge in how they build constructions—especially in what can fill the object position, how additional meanings are expressed through complements or prepositional phrases, and how far extended and idiomatic uses remain productive. In other words, surface-level substitutability is real in some domains, but it is restricted by construction-specific constraints that are not captured by lexical glossing alone.

This study therefore takes syntactic structure as the principal entry point while also examining the semantic extensions and interpretations associated with constructional variation. It asks how the two verbs pattern across recurring constructions and how these constructions relate to their literal and extended uses in authentic data. For Mandarin Chinese, the analysis draws primarily on the CCL corpus. For Thai, in addition to the TNC—which contains relatively concentrated and repetitive content—examples are supplemented by the Royal Institute Dictionary and the Khlang Kham lexical database to better capture frequent constructions and conventional collocations involving /lên/.

Accordingly, this paper provides a comparative analysis of /lên/ in Thai and /wán/ in Mandarin Chinese. Using an integrated framework of Tagmemics and Construction Grammar, it systematically identifies their core structural patterns and examines both similarities and differences in syntactic behavior, semantic scope, and constructional productivity. Focusing on constructions helps explain when /lên/ and /wán/ are interchangeable and when translation and teaching must use different structures instead of word-for-word substitution.

Research Objectives

This research seeks:

1. To systematically identify and categorize the syntactic structures that distinguish Thai /lên/ from Mandarin /wán/.
2. To analyze the extent to which their major collocations display functional and semantic equivalence across different contexts.
3. To investigate how differences in constructional realization and semantic scope reflect distinct grammaticalization paths in the two languages.

Literature Review

This section reviews related studies on polysemous verbs in Thai and Mandarin Chinese and identifies the research gap addressed by the present study. It also clarifies how prior scholarship motivates a construction-oriented comparison of Thai /lên/ and Mandarin /wán/.

1. Polysemous Verbs in Thai and Research on /lên/

Thai polysemous verbs have received sustained attention, particularly in studies of semantic features and meaning extension. Yeekaphaet (2014) offers an in-depth analysis of the Thai verb /chàp/, identifying two major meaning categories and showing that semantic expansion is driven primarily by metaphor, with metonymy playing a smaller role. Using Thai National Corpus data, Khamsuwan, Tansiri, & Sungkaman (2019) investigates /ta:m/ and documents its multiple functions and meanings, likewise identifying metaphor as a key mechanism of extension. Somphetch (2020) analyzes /kàt/ and proposes meanings ranging from concrete actions to metaphorical uses, demonstrating that metaphor and metonymy jointly link physical and figurative contexts. Lu (2022) examines the semantic extension of /phà:n/ ('pass') using a prototype-based motion-event schema approach and highlights metaphorical mapping as a central process.

These studies provide valuable foundations for describing Thai verbal polysemy and extension mechanisms, but they largely foreground semantic processes; fewer studies present a construction-oriented inventory and constraint profile for a single high-frequency verb across major patterns in contemporary usage. For the target verb /lên/, authoritative lexicographic resources—such as the Royal Institute Dictionary (Royal Institute, 2011) and Khlang Kham (Panthumetha, 2005)—document its sense range and conventionalized uses, yet they do not provide a token-based account of how /lên/ distributes across recurrent syntactic patterns. This motivates a corpus-based analysis that maps /lên/ to recurrent constructions and compares them with a Mandarin counterpart often glossed as an equivalent.

2. Polysemous Verbs in Mandarin Chinese and Research on /wán/

Early work on Modern Chinese polysemous verbs centered on lexicography and language teaching, proposing standards for sense division that prioritize meaning while also considering grammatical and rhetorical cues (Wang, 1982; Liu, 2000). Jia (2002) argues that dictionary compilation should be grounded in linguistic theory and empirical evidence, and later studies on learners' dictionaries recommend organizing senses with attention to metaphorical mechanisms and clear accounts of basic meanings (Li, 2006; Gao, 2008). Research subsequently extended to second language acquisition, addressing learner errors and developmental patterns: Liu (2001) notes difficulties arising from one-to-one L1–L2 mapping, and Fu (2007) uses databases and corpora to examine distributional tendencies and learner trajectories.

Other strands investigate syntactic–semantic properties of verb classes more broadly, such as diachronic and synchronic patterns in “saying” verbs (Tian, 2007) and meaning systems, syntactic distribution, and historical change in “hitting” verbs based on dictionary and corpus evidence (Sun, 2012). Within this landscape, /wán/ has been discussed as a verb showing semantic expansion and structural flexibility. Studies describe its polysemy and object-domain range (Li, 2002), its diachronic etymology and contemporary meanings in comparison with other general verbs (Zhao, 2008), and construction-specific behavior in patterns such as /wán/ + object (Jiang, 2020), [/wán/ + /ke/ + X] (Han, 2012), and [V + zhe + wán], where /wán/ contributes an amusement/non-serious stance (Liu, 2023). Dialect work further supports its versatility: Zhou (1998) notes /wán/'s overlap with general verbs such as /nòng/ and /gǎo/ in Beijing spoken Chinese, and Tong (2005) characterizes Xuzhou /wǎn/ as broadly transitive and compatible with diverse object types in meanings such as ‘play with’ and ‘tease’.

Overall, prior research provides substantial descriptions of /wán/ in semantic scope, object domains, and several salient structures. However, systematic Thai–Mandarin comparison remains limited, especially work that aligns construction inventories and constraint profiles for specific verb pairs.

3. Thai–Chinese Comparative Studies of Polysemous Verbs

Comparative studies between Thai and Mandarin polysemous verbs provide important precedents. Wichayapreechar (2013) compares Mandarin /kàn/ with Thai /duː/, describing semantic and syntactic features and reporting both overlap and divergence in extended meanings. Kitprapasiri (2021) compares Mandarin /da/ and Thai /tiː/ and reports shared traits in prototypical meanings and derived meanings.

These studies demonstrate the value of Thai–Chinese comparison in the domain of verbal polysemy and meaning extension. Nevertheless, many comparative studies foreground semantic extension, while fewer provide a construction inventory and constraint profile for a specific verb pair. The present study builds on this tradition by integrating a systematic classification of recurrent syntactic patterns with construction-based interpretation, focusing on Thai /lên/ and Mandarin /wán/—a pair frequently treated as translational equivalents in pedagogical and lexicographic practice.

Theoretical Framework

The present study employs an integrated framework in which Tagmemics provides structural classification, Construction Grammar supports construction-level interpretation and constraints, and grammaticalization/semantic change scholarship offers a conceptual baseline for discussing semantic extension and conventionalization. These approaches play complementary roles, dividing the analysis between syntactic mapping, form–meaning pairing, and meaning-related extension.

The primary analytical tool is Tagmemics, which models grammatical organization through a hierarchical slot–filler approach. Grammatical structure is analyzed across levels (e.g., sentence, clause, phrase, word, morpheme), and the tagmeme captures the correlation between a functional slot and the class of fillers that can occupy it. In this study, Tagmemics is used to classify the recurrent syntactic patterns in which Thai /lên/ and Mandarin /wán/ occur and to identify the functional roles of constituents within each pattern. This standardized metalanguage supports cross-linguistic comparison by keeping descriptive categories structurally neutral and consistent across the two languages.

Construction Grammar complements this structural description by treating recurrent patterns as conventional form–meaning pairings. Following Goldberg (1995), a construction is posited when some aspect of its form or meaning is not strictly predictable from its component parts alone. Constructions may carry schematic meaning independently of particular lexical items, while verb semantics and constructional meaning interact in constraining distribution. Accordingly, “constructional constraints” refer to pattern-specific restrictions on permissible fillers and on which literal versus extended readings are conventionally associated with a construction.

Finally, semantic extension and grammaticalization are used as background notions from grammaticalization and semantic change research to describe how meanings expand and become conventionalized in recurring usage patterns (Heine, Claudi, & Hünnemeyer, 1991; Traugott & Dasher, 2002). Here, semantic extension refers to extended readings beyond literal entertainment (including abstract, strategic, and evaluative uses) as observed in corpus tokens. Grammaticalization is used in a broad, descriptive sense to capture increasing schematicity and construction-bound fixation, where certain readings become closely associated with particular construction types. The analysis remains grounded in attested corpus distributions and does not attempt diachronic reconstruction.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, construction-oriented comparative approach. Tagmemics is used for structural classification (slot–filler analysis), and Construction Grammar is used for construction-level interpretation and constraint description. The study does not estimate corpus frequencies or conduct statistical inference; instead, it reports descriptive evidence counts to document coverage of each construction type and to support the construction inventory.

1. Data Sources and Evidence Partition (Counted vs. Illustrative)

Mandarin Chinese data were retrieved from the CCL corpus (Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.), restricted to Modern Chinese texts from the 1990s to the 2020s to align broadly with the time span of the Thai dataset. Thai candidate data were pooled from the Thai National Corpus (Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, n.d.) and Thairath Online news texts (headlines and article bodies, 2021–2023). Because TNC materials tend to reflect certain text types and online news sources may contain recurring templates, Thai examples from TNC and Thairath Online were pooled into a single candidate set prior to screening to improve coverage of usage patterns and to avoid treating source overlap as independent evidence.

Lexicographic resources and lexical databases (e.g., the Royal Institute Dictionary, Khlang Kham) were used as reference materials to support qualitative discussion of conventionalized expressions and established collocations involving the target verbs. These reference materials were not included in the deduplicated observation set used for Tables 1–2.

2. Unit of Analysis and Inclusion Criteria

The unit of analysis in both languages is a sentence-level token in which the target form occurs in a predicate-related construction at the clause level. Tokens were retained when the target form participates in a clause-level construction analyzed in this study, either as the main predicate or as part of a recurrent predicate complex (e.g., Thai /lên/ + NP, V/VP + /lên/, reduplicated /lên-lên/; Mandarin /wán/ + NP, V + /zhe/ + /wán/), and when the example provides sufficient context for structural coding. Tokens were excluded when the target form is purely nominal, metalinguistic, or otherwise not functioning in the clause's predicate construction, and when examples are incomplete or fragmentary.

The same predicate-based inclusion criterion was applied to both languages to ensure comparability of the analysis unit.

3. Deduplication Strategy

Because the research goal is to identify construction inventories and constraints rather than to measure token frequency, the dataset was deduplicated to avoid inflation from repeated templates (especially in news texts). Deduplication was performed within each construction type based on the verb's immediate structural environment and the core slot filler.

Concretely, once an example was assigned to a construction type, multiple tokens were collapsed into a single observation when they shared (i) the same construction type and (ii) the same core filler in the relevant slot (e.g., the head noun in NP objects/complements for /lên/ or /wán/ + NP; the head verb in VP complements; the complement marker and embedded predicate head for clause-linked patterns). Differences limited to subject choice or peripheral modifiers (time/place adverbials) were not treated as creating new observations unless they affected the constructional pattern.

Proper names in co-participant positions (e.g., /lên kàp/ + personal name) were treated as the same filler type (PERSON) for co-participant slots where relevant, to avoid counting referent identity as structural evidence.

Accordingly, the “n” values reported in tables are deduplicated observations (evidence counts) supporting each construction type, not raw corpus frequency. The totals reported for each language (Thai n = 977, Mandarin n = 885) refer to the post-screening, post-deduplication observation set, not raw retrieval totals. In practice, deduplication was implemented with a key combining construction type + relevant marker(s) (e.g., kàp, clause-linking elements, reduplication) + the head of the core filler in the relevant slot.

Highly conventionalized or idiomatic expressions were not used to inflate descriptive evidence counts: repeated tokens of the same expression were collapsed under the same construction type during deduplication. Where such expressions are discussed in the analysis, they are treated as constructional evidence for conventionalized form–meaning pairing rather than as indicators of productivity.

After screening and deduplication, the observation set contains 977 Thai and 885 Mandarin instances. Descriptive evidence counts (deduplicated observations) by construction type are summarized in Tables 1–2; these counts are used to document coverage of the construction inventory and are not interpreted as frequency estimates.

4. Analysis Procedure

Analysis proceeded in two steps: 1) Structural classification—annotating observations using Tagmemic slot–filler representation and grouping them into construction types; and 2) Constructional interpretation—describing how literal and extended readings align with specific constructions and what constraints license or block such readings.

In Tables 1–2, labels such as NP/VP/ADJ/ADV/PP are treated as slot ranges rather than unrestricted placeholders. NP fillers were coded into a fixed set of noun classes (e.g., games/sports, artifacts/instruments, roles/positions, interaction targets, abstract domains). VP fillers were coded by constructional role (object-like complement vs. serial/sequential VP vs. discourse/attitude VP). ADJ/ADV were distinguished by Mandarin POS categories: object-position “ADJ” cases were coded as nominalized/elliptical (ADJ + de ± [N]) and post-de adjectives as complements; ADV were predicate modifiers. PP fillers (e.g., /gēn/hé/ + NP; Thai /kàp/ + NP) were coded as co-participant/interaction-target phrases with corresponding NP restrictions.

Syntactic Structures and Functional Distribution

This section outlines the major constructions formed by Thai /lên/ and Mandarin /wán/. The discussion begins with Thai /lên/, describing its recurrent syntactic patterns and their functional distribution.

1. Syntactic Patterns of Thai /lên/

The Thai verb /lên/ exhibits systematic constructional behavior despite its semantic flexibility. Drawing on Tagmemics (slot–filler analysis) and Construction Grammar (form–meaning pairings), seven major syntactic patterns were identified based on data from the Thai National Corpus (TNC), the Royal Institute Dictionary, the Khlang Kham lexical database, and contemporary news sources.

Table 1 Overview of Syntactic Patterns of the Thai Verb /lên/

	Structure	Evidence(n)	Function	Example	Meaning
Post-verb	lên/ + NP	450	Predicate (V) + Object (N.concrete / abstract)	เล่นโทรศัพท์ /lên tho:rasàp/	Play phone
			Predicate (V) + unmarked oblique nominal	เล่นตำแหน่งกองหลัง /lên tamnɛŋ ko:ŋlǎŋ/	Play as a defender
			Predicate (Idiomatic uses)	เล่นหูเล่นตา /lên hǔ: lèn taː/	Flirt/play tricks
	/lên/ + /kàp/ + NP	74	Predicate (V) + Companion	เล่นกับพ่อ /lên kàp phǔ:/	Play with the father
			Predicate (V) + Manipulated Object	เล่นกับใจแฟนคลับ /lên kàp caj fɛ:n-khláp/	Toy with the fans' feelings
	/lên/ + V/VP	156	Predicate (V) + Complement	เล่นปาหิม่า? /lên pa: himáʔ/	Have a snowball fight
	/lên/ + ADV	73	Predicate (V) + Modifier	เล่นแรง /lên rɛ:ŋ/	Play intensely
	/lên/ + Clause	5	Predicate (V) + Complement	เล่นให้เกิด /lên hǎj kʰɔ:t/	Play to make it happen
Pre-verb	V/VP + /lên/	133	Predicate (V) + Modifier/Complement	พูดเล่น /phút lèn/	Speak playfully
	/lên-lên/	86	Modifier	ถามเล่น ๆ /thǎ:m lèn-lèn /	Ask casually

Note. n = deduplicated evidence count (unique observation), not corpus frequency.

1.1. /lên/ + NP

This is the canonical Verb–Object construction in Thai. Its interpretation varies with the semantic type of the noun, forming compositional and idiomatic subtypes. NP fillers can be summarized into broad classes: (i) physical entities/manipulable targets, (ii) activities or institutionalized practices, (iii) abstract domains/concepts, and (iv) role/position terms.

(a) Compositional uses

Here /lên/ retains its literal meaning ‘play/engage’, and the NP is referential and substitutable.

(1) เห็นหลานเล่นโทรศัพท์ ไม่มีสมาธิ

hǎn lǎ:n lèn tho:rasàp mǎj mi: sàma:thí
See nephew play phone not have concentration
'(He/she) saw the nephew playing on the phone without concentration.'

(Thairath Online, n.d.)

(2) ชนรุ่นใหม่ คนหน้าใหม่ ควรมีโอกาสได้เล่นการเมือง

chon rún mǎj khon nâ: mǎj khuan mi: ʔo:kà:t
People generation new people face new should have chance
dǎ:j lèn ka:nmuaŋ
get play politics

'The new generation and newcomers should have the opportunity to participate in politics.'

(Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, n.d.)

These examples illustrate concrete manipulation (phone) and metaphorical extension into abstract domains (politics) while remaining semantically compositional.

(3) นักกีฬาฟุตบอลเล่นตำแหน่งกองหลัง

nák ki:la: fútbɔ:nlên tamnèŋ kɔ:ŋlǎŋ
 athlete-football play position defender/backline
 'The football player plays as a defender.'

(Thairath Online, n.d.)

Example (3) represents a role/position subtype of /lên/ + NP, where the postverbal NP specifies the role assumed by the subject. Following Thai descriptions that some event-relevant oblique nominals may occur without an overt preposition (Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom, 2005, §9.3), such role/position NPs are treated as (unmarked) role/position NPs rather than patient-like objects.

(b) Idiomatic uses

Some /lên/ + NP combinations are conventionalized expressions whose meanings are not fully predictable from the verb and the noun. Examples include เล่นหูเล่นตา /lên hǔ: lèn ta:/ 'flirt using facial gestures' and เล่นลิ้น /lên lín/ 'speak manipulatively'. These expressions show limited substitutability and are treated here as conventionalized form–meaning pairings rather than transparent VO phrases; accordingly, they are presented for qualitative illustration and are not included in the counts.

1.2. /lên/ + /kàp/ + NP

This structure consists of a verb followed by a prepositional phrase introducing a co-participant or an interaction target/domain.

(4) ลูกอยากเล่นกับพ่อ ก็ไปปลุกมาเล่นด้วย

lú:k já:k lèn kàp phǔ: kǐ: paj plùk ma: lèn dûaj
 Child want play with father then go wake up come play together
 'The child wanted to play with his father, so he went to wake him up to play together.'

(Thairath Online, n.d.)

Here, /kàp phǔ:/ 'with father' denotes reciprocal interpersonal engagement, profiling shared participation in the activity.

(5) อย่าเล่นกับใจแฟนคลับ

jà: lèn kàp caj fɛ:n-khláp
 NEG.IMP play with heart/mind fan-club
 'Don't toy with the fans' feelings.'

(Thairath Online, n.d.)

In this case, the PP marks an affected interaction target rather than a co-player: /kàp/ introduces the psychological domain and yields a conventional interpretation of manipulating or toying with others' emotions.

In addition to interpersonal targets, /lên kàp/ can also introduce a domain that is commonly interpreted metaphorically and evaluatively, as in the conventional expression เล่นกับไฟ /lên kàp faj/ 'play with fire'. In such cases, the construction does not describe literal play but conveys deliberate engagement with danger or risky behavior.

In /lên kàp + NP/, NP fillers range from animate co-participants to inanimate targets, activity/media domains, and abstract domains, indicating that /kàp/ licenses a broad "engagement" relation rather than only literal companionship.

1.3. /lên/ + V/VP

Syntactically, the structure consists of a main verb (/lên/) governing a verbal phrase as its complement, specifying the type or manner of engagement. VP fillers are typically activity predicates compatible with 'do for fun/engage in' (e.g., play-pretend, throw snowballs), rather than arbitrary stative predicates.

(6) ก็ไปเล่นปาหิมะกัน แค่นั้นแหละ

kô: paj lên pa: himá? kan khê: nán lè?
also go play throw snow together just that only

'We just went to have a snowball fight, that's all.'

(Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, n.d.)

The construction supports physical, mimetic, or imaginative activities, with varying degrees of compositionality.

1.4. /lên/ + ADV

In this pattern the adjective/adverb modifies the manner or evaluation of /lên/. Modifiers are typically manner/degree adverbs, not nominal complements.

(7) เธอเล่นแรงถึงบุพการี

thɔ: lên rɛ:ŋ thǎŋ búpphaka:rí
you play hard toward parents

'You went too far, even involving parents.'

(Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, n.d.)

The construction illustrates that /lên/ can combine with a manner/degree modifier, optionally followed by an extent phrase, without changing its basic syntactic configuration.

1.5. /lên/ + Clause

Clauses introduced by /hâj/ 'to cause/let' serve as complements expressing intended outcome or result.

(8) เราจะไม่เล่นให้เกิดมัวหมอง

raw cà? māj lên hāj kɔ:t mua: mǎ:ŋ
we will no play let/cause occur tarnish/gloom

'We will not let this become a stain.'

(Thairath Online, n.d.)

This example shows how Thai uses /lên/ + /hâj/ + clause to elaborate meaning through an analytic complement clause, specifying the resulting state licensed by the action.

1.6. V/VP + /lên/

In postverbal position, /lên/ functions as a secondary predicate expressing playfulness, unseriousness, or an evaluative stance. Clausal complements are typically result/state or outcome clauses, specifying an intended/avoided outcome.

- (9) อย่าพูดเล่น
jà: phû:t lèn
Don't speak play
'Don't joke around.'

(Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, n.d.)

Here /lên/ no longer denotes play itself but modifies the preceding verb semantically and pragmatically.

1.7. /lên-lên/

The reduplicated form marks a casual or non-serious stance.

- (10) มีคนถามเล่นๆว่ามีแฟนหรือยัง
mi: khon thǎ:m lèn-lên wá: mi: fɛ:n rǔ: jaŋ
have person ask play-REDUP that have partner Q yet
'Someone asked casually whether (you) have a boyfriend/girlfriend yet.'

(Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, n.d.)

Here, /lên-lên/ functions as a stance marker indicating that the question is posed lightly rather than as a serious inquiry. The reduplication signals attenuation of commitment and frames the speech act as informal.

Across these seven patterns, Thai /lên/ forms a coherent constructional network ranging from literal play to abstract engagement, role-related behavior, evaluative stance, and idiomatic expression. The verb's distribution reflects Thai's analytic typology: syntactic expansion is achieved through prepositional augmentation, clause chaining, serial-verb constructions, and reduplication rather than morphological change. These patterns jointly demonstrate /lên/'s central role in Thai verbal semantics and its progression along a grammaticalization cline from lexical verb to evaluative or idiomatic marker.

2. Syntactic Types of Chinese /wán/

The Mandarin verb /wán/ shows high syntactic versatility, combining with nouns, adjectives, verbs, and prepositional phrases, and occurring in both literal and extended domains. Corpus evidence indicates ten recurrent construction types, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Overview of Syntactic Patterns of the Chinese Verb /wán/

	Structure	Evidence(n)	Function	Example	Meaning
Post-verb	/wán/ + NP	328	Verb + Object	玩棒球 /wán bàngqiú/	Play baseball
			Predicate	玩命 /wán mìng/	Risk life and limb
	/wán/ + Noun Component	11	Verb + Object	玩新奇的 /wán xīnqí de/	Try out new things

Table 2 Overview of Syntactic Patterns of the Chinese Verb /wán/ (cont.)

	Structure	Evidence(n)	Function	Example	Meaning
Post-verb	/wán/ + ADJ	24	Verb + Object	玩潇洒 /wán xiāosǎ/	Play it cool
	/wán/ + VP	72	Verb + Object	玩赠送 /wán zèngsòng/	Play the “giveaway” card
	/wán/ + de ± (ADV)+ ADJ	45	Verb + particle + complement	玩得特别开心 /wán de tèbié kāixīn/	Play happily
Pre-verb	ADV+ /wán/	58	Modifier + Verb	痛快玩 /tòngkuài wán/	Have a blast
	VP + /wán/	65	VP + Verb (Sequential)	出家门玩 /chū jiāmén wán/	Leave home to play
	V + /zhe/ + /wán/	179	Verb + particle + Modifier	说着玩 /shuō zhe wán/	Say it for fun
	/gēn/ or /hé/ + N + /wán/	2	Prepositional phrase + Verb	跟小孩玩 /gēn xiǎohái wán/	Play with children
	/wán wán/	71	Predicate	玩玩球 /wánwan qiú/	Play ball

Note. n = deduplicated evidence count (unique observation), not corpus frequency.

2.1 /wán/ + NP

This is the most productive and prototypical pattern. The NP serves as the internal argument, and the construction is generally compositional across concrete and abstract domains:

- (1) 孩子一大早就在场上玩水。

háizi yīdǎozǎo jiù zài chǎng shàng wán shuǐ
Child early morning then at field play water

‘The child was playing with water on the field early in the morning.’

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

- (2) 孩子在玩棒球。

háizi zài wán bàngqiú
Child is play baseball

‘The child is playing baseball.’

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

- (3) 玩个性要注意场合和分寸。

wán gèxìng yào zhùyì chǎnghé hé fēncùn
Play personality need pay attention occasion and boundaries

‘When playing with personality, one must be mindful of the occasion and the boundaries.’

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

These examples illustrate the construction's range from concrete entities to organized activities and abstract domains. In all cases, the NP is referential and substitutable, showing the construction's compositionality.

Some NP objects lose referentiality and form idiomatic expressions:

(4) 他黑天白夜玩命干。

tā	hēitiān	báirì	wánmìng	gàn
He	night	day	mad	work

'He worked like mad day and night.'

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

Here, /wánmìng/ is lexicalized and non-compositional, with /mìng/ losing referential meaning. This pattern shows semantic bleaching and pragmatic specialization.

2.2 /wán/ + Noun Component (/ADJ + de/)

The object slot is filled by a nominalized adjective or descriptive phrase.

(5) 艺术家们可以玩洋的，玩新奇的。

yìshùjiā men	kěyǐ	wán	yángde	wán	xīnqí de
Artists	can	play	foreign	play	novelty

'Artists can play with foreign styles and novelty.'

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

In colloquial Mandarin, adjectival material may surface in the object position of /wán/ only when it is interpreted as nominal—either through overt nominalization (ADJ + de) or through ellipsis of a nominal head (e.g., wán xīnqí de (dōngxī) 'try out novel things'). In this paper, such cases are therefore classified as /wán/ + Noun Component, i.e., a nominalized/elliptical object expression (ADJ + de ± [N]). This construction forms an open template that permits variation. /wán/ contributes a schematic sense of strategic or stylistic manipulation.

2.3 /wán/ + Adjective

(6) 有人玩潇洒，将婚姻当作儿戏。

yǒurén	wán	xiāosǎ	jiāng	hūnyīn	dàngzuò	érxì
Some people	play	free and easy	treat	marriage	as	joke

'Some people play it cool and treat marriage as a joke.'

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

Here the adjective functions as a nominalized object, describing a behavioral style rather than a physical activity. The construction is compositional but involves evaluative semantics.

2.4 /wán/ + VP

(7) 厂家玩赠送，买者不冲动。

chǎngjiā	wán	zèngsòng	mǎizhě	bù	chōngdòng
Manufacturer	play	giveaway	buyers	not	impulsive

'The manufacturer plays the "giveaway" card, while the buyers are not "impulsive."'

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

These illustrate how verb-based expressions can function as objects, expanding /wán/'s combinatory potential into social, political, and economic domains.

2.5 /wán/ + de + ADJ (Result/Manner Complement)

(8) 孩子们总是玩得特别开心。

háizimen	zǒngshì	wán	de	tèbié	kāixīn
Children	always	play	complement marker	especially	happy

'The children always played very happily.'

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

This structure expresses manner or evaluative result. The complement does not affect the argument structure but adds experiential interpretation.

2.6 ADV + /wán/

(9) 玩的时候痛快玩。

wán	de	shíhòu	tòngkuài	wán
Play	linker	time	full delight	play

'When you play, have a blast.'

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

Adverbials modify the predicate, specifying degree or attitude. The construction is flexible and compatible with both main and subordinate clauses.

2.7 VP + /wán/ (Sequential Verb Construction)

(10) 现在也是经常出家门玩。

xiànzài	yě	shì	jīngcháng	chū	jiāmén	wán
Now	also	be	often	go out	home's door	play

'Now he also often leaves home to play.'

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

The preceding verb expresses a preparatory or facilitating action. The two verbs remain independent but form a temporal sequence.

2.8 V + /zhe/ + /wán/

(11) 我说着玩的。

wǒ	shuō	zhe	wán de
I	say	aspect marker	play nominalizer

'I was just saying it for fun.'

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

Here /wán/ modifies the manner of the main verb, indicating casual or non-serious intention. Direct objects are normally incompatible, as they disrupt the complement function.

2.9 /gēn/ or /hé/ + NP + /wán/

(12) 她喜欢和小孩玩。

tā	xǐhuan	hé	xiǎohái	wán
She	like	with	children	play

‘She likes to play with children.’

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

The prepositional phrase denotes a co-participant. Unlike Thai /lên kàp/, this structure remains strictly compositional and rarely extends metaphorically.

2.10 /wán wán/

(13) 何不去玩玩球。

hébù	qù	wánwan	qiú
why not	go	play play	ball

‘Why not go play ball for a bit?’

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

(14) 坐游艇玩玩吧。

zuò	yóutǐng	wánwan	ba
Sit	yacht	play play	particle

‘Take the yacht out and have some fun.’

(Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL), n.d.)

Reduplication signals casualness or attenuation and may appear with or without an object. It softens the action and indexes informality.

The Mandarin data yield ten recurrent /wán/-constructions, covering NP objects, nominalized complements, V-de-Adj complements, stance patterns (V-zhe-/wán/), and reduplication. These patterns provide the baseline for the Thai–Mandarin comparison in Section 3.

3. Syntactic Comparison

3.1 Object Structures

Thai /lên/ predominantly selects nominal constituents in the object slot (including concrete and abstract NPs). Non-nominal material (V/VP, ADJ) is generally not realized as a direct NP-like object; when verbal material occurs after /lên/, it is better analyzed as a complement (the /lên/ + V/VP pattern). Some /lên/ + NP combinations are idiomatic.

By contrast, the Chinese verb /wán/ exhibits broader syntactic flexibility in object selection. In addition to concrete nouns (e.g. /wán shuǐ/ ‘play with water’ and abstract nouns (e.g. 玩心机 /wán xīn jī/ ‘play mind games’, /wán/ can also take verb-based nominal phrases (e.g. 玩炒股 /wán chǎo gǔ/ ‘play the stock market’ and adjective-based noun phrases

(e.g. /wán xiāo sǎ/ 'play cool'.) These elements function syntactically as objects while deriving from verbs or adjectives through nominalization or contextual reinterpretation.

This contrast illustrates different object realization patterns in the two languages. Thai /lên/ exhibits a stable nominal selection preference, generally excluding verbal or adjectival elements unless lexicalized. Chinese /wán/, by contrast, supports more flexible object formation, allowing various syntactic categories to occupy the object position. This adaptability expands its constructional range while preserving its transitive core.

3.2 Complement and Modifier Structures

Thai /lên/ does not productively form resultative complements. Evaluative or resultative meanings are expressed analytically through clause chaining (e.g., เล่นให้สนุก /lên hâi sànnùk/), not via compact verb–complement structures.

Mandarin /wán/, however, readily forms V + de + Adj complements (e.g., /wán de kǎi xīn/), integrating evaluative outcomes directly into the predicate.

The two verbs also diverge in modification patterns. Thai typically employs adverbial modifiers following the verb (e.g., /lên rēng/), while Mandarin allows adjectives to occur directly after /wán/ as objects (e.g., /wán xiāo sǎ/), showing greater category flexibility.

A further distinction lies in secondary verb usage. Thai frequently uses /lên/ as a light or secondary verb in serial constructions (e.g., /phû:t lēn/ 'joke'), which is not productively mirrored in Mandarin. Mandarin uses V + /zhe/ + /wán/ for similar pragmatic effects (e.g., /shuō zhe wán/), but this pattern is more distributionally restricted and functions primarily as a stance/'for-fun' modifier rather than as a productive secondary predicate comparable to Thai V/VP + /lên/.

Overall, Thai favors analytic elaboration and post-verbal modification, while Mandarin favors compact predicate composition.

3.3 Prepositional Constructions

In Thai, /lên kàp/ + NP introduces a co-participant or an affected interaction target (e.g., /lên kàp phô:/ 'play with the father'). The construction also supports conventional figurative readings (e.g., /lên kàp faj/ 'play with fire'), where /kàp/ helps profile an "engagement-with-a-domain/target" relation beyond literal co-play.

In Mandarin, comparable co-participant meanings are typically expressed by /gēn/ or /hé/ + NP + /wán/ (e.g., /hé xiǎohái wán/ 'play with children'). This PP is generally adverbial and remains largely literal; figurative meanings such as 'play with fire' are more naturally encoded within the /wán/ + NP frame (e.g., /wán huǒ/), while /gēn huǒ wán/ is marked.

Overall, Thai /lên kàp/ shows stronger verb–preposition bonding and greater susceptibility to conventionalization, whereas Mandarin "with"-PPs are syntactically looser and more compositional.

3.4 Reduplication and Constructionalization

Thai reduplication /lên lēn/ signals a casual or non-serious manner of action, often implying lack of intention or engagement, as in ทำเล่น ๆ/tham lēn lēn/ 'just doing it for fun'.

Mandarin shows a comparable reduplicated form /wán wán/, which similarly softens intensity and conveys non-commitment, e.g. 玩玩水 /wán wan shuǐ/ 'play with water a bit'.

Both languages feature lexicalized combinations. Thai includes highly fixed and semantically opaque idioms such as /lên hǔ: lēn ta:/ 'flirt through gestures' and /lên talòk/ 'joke or deceive'. Mandarin also has lexicalized items, but many /wán/ + NP expressions (e.g., 玩花样 /wán huāyàng/ 'play tricks', 玩文字 /wán wénzì/ 'play with words') remain relatively transparent and more amenable to analogical extension.

In sum, Thai favors idiomatic fixation and semantic stability, whereas Mandarin allows productive extensions within its /wán/ + NP frame. Both systems, however, use reduplication and constructionalization to modulate speaker stance and soften commitment.

3.5 Substitutability and Constraints

In core domains such as entertainment and interaction, Thai /lên/ and Mandarin /wán/ are broadly substitutable. For example, เล่นเกม /lên ke:m/ and 玩游戏 /wán yóu xì/ 'play a game' display parallel structure and meaning.

Beyond these basic uses, substitutability narrows. Mandarin allows /wán/ to combine with verb-derived or abstract nouns (e.g. 玩炒股 /wán chǎo gǔ/ 'speculate in stocks', 玩经营 /wán jīng yíng/ 'dabble in business'), which lack Thai equivalents. Thai /lên/ does not naturally take such objects, and alternative constructions are required. Conversely, Thai frequently employs /lên/ as a secondary verb in serial constructions (e.g. /phû:t lên/ 'speak playfully'), which Mandarin does not productively replicate.

Thai also uses /lên kàp/ + NP metaphorically (e.g. /lên kàp faj/ 'take risks'), while the Mandarin /gēn...wán/ counterpart remains literal.

The constraints underlying these differences operate at three levels:

(1) Syntactic: Thai lacks resultative complements like /wán de kāi xīn/ 'play happily' and shows stricter object selection.

(2) Constructional: Thai favors fixed VO or serial-verb patterns, while Mandarin supports analogical and productive formations.

(3) Stance/secondary predicate packaging: Thai frequently uses V/VP + /lên/ and /lên-lên/ to encode non-serious stance, while Mandarin packages comparable stance meanings via V-zhe-/wán/ and /wánwán/ with different distributional constraints.

Overall, /lên/ and /wán/ overlap in core 'play' uses but diverge in object realization, complement packaging, and the licensing of figurative/stance readings. These contrasts indicate that translation equivalence is typically construction-dependent rather than based on lexical substitution alone.

4. Semantic Attributes and Functional Behavior

4.1 Semantic Generalization

Thai /lên/ does show semantic extension beyond literal recreation, but these extensions are strongly construction-bound. Extended readings are typically licensed by specific templates (e.g., /lên kàp/ + NP for interaction/target domains, V/VP + /lên/ for non-serious stance, and /lên/ + clause for outcome elaboration), rather than by open-ended analogical expansion in a single highly productive frame.

Mandarin /wán/ shows far broader semantic generalization. It routinely extends into abstract or metaphorical domains (e.g., 玩资本 /wán zī běn/ 'manipulate capital', 玩学问 /wán xué wèn/ 'play with scholarship'), where it signals symbolic manipulation, casual engagement, or rhetorical stance. In such contexts, it approaches functional verbs like 弄 /nòng/ or 搞 /gǎo/, contributing schematic meaning rather than concrete lexical content. This represents semantic bleaching and wide functional expansion.

In short, Thai /lên/ maintains narrower semantic boundaries and remains construction-bound, while Mandarin /wán/ demonstrates extensive generalization and productivity. The contrast reflects two grammaticalization pathways: Thai moves toward specialized, fixed constructions, while Mandarin develops broad, flexible usage across domains.

4.2 Idiomatic, Metaphorical, and Evaluative Extensions

Thai metaphorical extensions are more construction-bound and more likely to be conventionalized within a small set of templates, rather than freely expanding in a single productive /lên/+X frame. Pragmatically, /lên/ expresses

playfulness or non-seriousness mainly through idioms (e.g., /phû:t lên/ 'just joking') and culturally embedded expressions such as /lên hủ: lên ta:/ and /lên lín/, which are opaque and non-productive.

Mandarin /wán/, by contrast, shows systematic metaphorical and evaluative expansion. It combines productively with abstract nouns to express manipulation or strategic behavior (e.g., 玩观念 /wán guānniàn/ 'play with concepts', 玩话术 /wán huàshù/ 'manipulate discourse', 玩男人 /wán nánrén/ 'mess around with men'). It also marks modality and stance in expressions such as /shuō zhe wán/ 'say for fun' and supports evaluative uses like /wán gǎnqíng/ 'toy with emotions', 玩花样 /wán huāyàng/ 'play tricks', 玩文字 /wán wénzì/ 'play with words'. These constructions remain compositional and open to analogy, enabling creative extension.

Cross-linguistically, Thai /lên/ relies on culturally entrenched, opaque idioms with limited flexibility, while Mandarin /wán/ supports productive, transparent, and extendable constructions. Thai prioritizes fixedness and cultural specificity; Mandarin promotes extensibility and semantic adaptability.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study compared Thai /lên/ and Mandarin /wán/ from a construction-based perspective, using Tagmemic slot-filler analysis to establish construction inventories and Construction Grammar to describe construction-specific interpretations and constraints. The results show that apparent lexical equivalence in the core "play" domain does not guarantee structural equivalence across languages; instead, correspondences are licensed (or blocked) by construction-level constraints.

Three findings are central. First, the two verbs differ in how the object slot is realized: Thai /lên/ strongly favors nominal fillers (including unmarked role/position NPs), whereas Mandarin /wán/ more readily admits object expressions derived from adjectives or verbs via nominalization/ellipsis and contextual reinterpretation. Second, they diverge in complement strategies: Thai primarily expresses evaluative or result-like meanings through analytic devices (e.g., clause-linking and additional markers), while Mandarin frequently packages such meanings in compact predicate composition (e.g., V-de-Adj). Third, prepositional constructions pattern differently: Thai /lên kàp/ shows tighter verb-preposition bonding and is more prone to conventionalized figurative extensions, whereas Mandarin gēn/hé + NP + /wán/ remains largely compositional and is less regularly extended beyond literal co-participation.

In addition, stance-related uses are distributed across different templates in the two languages. Thai systematically employs V/VP + /lên/ and /lên-lên/ to mark non-seriousness and reduced commitment, while Mandarin relies on V-zhe-/wán/ and /wánwán/ to achieve similar discourse effects, but with different distributional constraints. Taken together, these contrasts suggest different constructional tendencies: Thai extensions are more template-bound and often conventionalized within specific constructions, whereas Mandarin extensions are more amenable to analogical expansion within productive /wán/+X frames.

Pedagogically, the findings support teaching /lên/ and /wán/ through constructional templates rather than word-to-word substitution. Learners benefit from explicitly learning which fillers and meanings are licensed by each construction (e.g., /lên/ + /kàp/ + NP vs. /wán/ + abstract-noun templates; V-zhe-/wán/ as a stance pattern), and from treating idiomatic forms as fixed form-meaning pairings with usage constraints. The study is limited by its reliance on written Thai data and qualitative comparison without statistical frequency modeling. Future work can incorporate spoken corpora and quantitative analyses to test the robustness of these constructional constraints across genres and registers.

Acknowledgments

This article is a revised version of the author's master's thesis. This research received no external funding. The author thanks her advisors for their constructive guidance and acknowledges the use of TNC, RID, Khlang Kham, and CCL as major data sources.

The authors used AI tools for language editing and grammar checking. The authors reviewed and take full responsibility for all content in the manuscript.

References

- Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL). (n.d.). *CCL Corpus Retrieval System*. [Database]. Retrieved 25 March 2023, from http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus
- Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. (n.d.). *Thai National Corpus (TNC), Third Edition*. [Database]. Retrieved 25 March 2023, from <https://www.arts.chula.ac.th/ling/tnc/>
- Fu, J. (2007). *HSK Duoyici Yixiang De Tongji Fenxi Ji Liuxuesheng Yixiang Shiyong Qingkuang Diaocha* [Statistic and Analysis on Senses of Chinese Polysemes in HSK and the Survey on Sense Use by L2 Learners]. Master's thesis, M.A. in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Beijing Language and Culture University, China. (In Chinese)
- Gao, Y. A. (2008). Cong Duoyici Ciyi Xitong Kan Hanyu Xuexi Cidian De Shiye Yaoqiu [Requirements for Definitions in Chinese Learners' Dictionaries From the Perspective of Polysemy Sense Systems]. *Cishu Yanjiu [Lexicographical Studies]*, (4), 45–51. (In Chinese)
- Goldberg, A. E. (1995). *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Han, K. Y. (2012). *Jiyu Yuliaoku De “v ge x” Yanjiu* [Corpus-Based Study on “v + ge + x”: The Case of “wan ge x”]. Master's thesis, M.A. in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Jilin University, China. (In Chinese)
- Heine, B., Claudi, U., & Hünemeyer, F. (1991). *Grammaticalization: A Conceptual Framework*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Iwasaki, S., & Ingkaphirom, P. (2005). *A Reference Grammar of Thai*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jia, B. S. (2002). Cidian Bianzuan Zhong De “Yishi Tongming” Yu Yici Duoyi [“Different Referents With the Same Name” and Polysemy in Dictionary Compilation]. *Cishu Yanjiu [Lexicographical Studies]*, (1), 69–76. (In Chinese)
- Jiang, L. (2020). *Xiandai Hanyu “wan + binyu” Xingshi Danwei De Renzhi Yuyi Yanjiu* [A Cognitive Semantic Study of The Chinese “wan + object” Construction]. Master's thesis, M.A. in English Linguistics, Hunan Normal University, China. (In Chinese)
- Kitprapasiri, P. (2021). *A Comparative Study of Chinese Words and Expressions Containing the Term “DA” With Their Thai Equivalents Containing the Term “TI”*. Master's thesis, M.A. in Chinese Language, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. (In Thai)
- Khamsuwan, P., Tansiri, K., & Sungkaman, U. (2019). A Study of /taam/ in Thai. *Vannavidat*, 19(2), 179–207. (In Thai)
- Li, A. H. (2006). Yinyu Jizhi Xia Duoyici De Yixiang Jian Lianxi Ji Qi Cidian Biaozheng Fangshi [A Metaphor-Based Study of the Relationships Among Senses of Polysemous Words and Their Representation in Dictionaries]. *Xibei Nonglin Keji Daxue Xuebao (Shehui Kexueban) [Journal of Northwest A&F University (Social Science Edition)]*, (1), 132–136. (In Chinese)

- Li, X. Y. (2002). Shuo “wan” [On the Verb wan]. *Liuzhou Zhiye Jishu Xueyuan Xuebao [Journal of Liuzhou Vocational & Technical College]*, (1), 21–23. (In Chinese)
- Liu, F. (2023). Hanyu Weicixing Chengfen Lianyong De Canzhao Moshi Xintan—Yi “v zhe wan” Wei Li [The Point-Of-View (POV) Patterns of Predicate Series in Mandarin: A Case Study of “v-zhe-wan”]. *Hanyu Xuexi [Chinese Language Learning]*, (6), 57–65. (In Chinese)
- Liu, X. M. (2000). Duoyici Yufa Shuxing De Diwei Yu Zuoyong—Jian Lun Fenli Yixiang De Yufa Biaozhun [The Status and Role of Grammatical Attributes of Polysemous Words: On the Grammatical Criteria for Distinguishing Word Senses]. In Academic Committee of the Chinese Lexicographical Society (Ed.), *Zhongguo Cishu Lunji 2000 [Studies in Chinese Lexicography 2000]*, (pp. 90–105). China Encyclopedia Publishing House. (In Chinese)
- Liu, Z. X. (2001). *Hanyu Duoyi Dongci De Yixiang Xide Guocheng Yanjiu [A Study on the Acquisition Process of Senses of Chinese Polysemous Verbs]*. Master’s thesis, M.A. in Curriculum and Instruction, Beijing Language and Culture University, China. (In Chinese)
- Lu, X. H. (2022). Meaning Extension of The Motion Verb “/phàan/ ‘pass’” in Thai: A Study on Cognitive Semantics. *Journal of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University*, 17(2), 7–22. (In Thai)
- Panthumetha, N. (2005). *Khlang Kham*. [A Treasury of Words]. Bangkok: Amarin Publishing. (In Thai)
- Royal Institute. (2011). *Royal Institute Dictionary, B.E. 2554 [Thai–Thai dictionary]*. Bangkok: Royal Institute.
- Somphetch, S. (2020). The Semantic Extension of /kàt/ In Thai: A Cognitive Semantic Study. *Thai Language and Literature*, 37(2), 1–20. (In Thai)
- Sun, J. Y. (2012). *Xiandai Hanyu Daji Lei Dongci Yanjiu [On Striking-Category Verbs in Modern Chinese]*. Master’s thesis, M.A. in English Linguistics, Hunan University, China. (In Chinese)
- Thairath Online. (n.d.). *Thairath Online*. Retrieved 13 March 2024, from <https://www.thairath.co.th>
- Tian, Y. (2007). *Hanyu “shuo” Lei Dongci Yanjiu [A Study of the “shuo” Verb Group in Chinese]*. Master’s thesis, M.A. in English Linguistics, Central China Normal University, China. (In Chinese)
- Tong, Q. M. (2005). Xuzhou Fangyan Zhong De Fanyi Dongci “wan” [The General-Meaning Verb “wan” in Xuzhou Dialect]. *Guangxi Jiaoyu Xueyuan Xuebao [Journal of Guangxi Institute of Education]*, (1), 106–108. (In Chinese)
- Traugott, E. C., & Dasher, R. B. (2002). *Regularity in Semantic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, Y. N. (1982). Duoyici Yixiang De Gaikuo Yu Qufen [Generalization and Differentiation of Senses of Polysemous Words]. *Cishu Yanjiu [Lexicographical Studies]*, (2), 99–106. (In Chinese)
- Wichayapreechar, K. (2013). *A Comparative Study of Verb Kan in Mandarin Chinese and Duu in Thai*. Master’s thesis, M.A. in Chinese Language, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. (In Thai)
- Yeekaphaet, R. (2014). *Chap: A Polysemous Word in Thai*. Master’s thesis, M.A. in Thai Language, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. (In Thai)
- Zhao, C. (2008). *“Wan” Zai Xiandai Hanyu Zhong De Yiyi Kaocha [A Study of the Semantic Meanings of “Wan” in Modern Chinese]*. Master’s thesis, M.A. in Chinese Linguistics, Beijing Language and Culture University. (In Chinese)
- Zhou, Y. M. (1998). *Beijing Kouyu Yufa (Cifa Juan) [Grammar of Beijing Spoken Chinese: Morphology Volume]*. Beijing: Language & Culture Press. (In Chinese)