

A Study on "Directional Noun + を + 見る" in Japanese: Focusing on Its Semantic Functions

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the particularities of the Japanese construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る," and the semantic features of the verb "見る" within this construction. First, the particularities of this construction is analyzed from two perspectives: its semantic distinctiveness and syntactic distinctiveness. Regarding semantics, the paper clarifies how the meaning of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" differs from that of "General Noun + を + 見る," emphasizing that the former primarily indicates the direction of gaze with weak intention to obtain visual information. As for syntactic distinctiveness, a comparison with other world languages reveals that, in Japanese, the verbal phrase remains unchanged while the nominal phrase undergoes modification. Furthermore, this paper elaborates on the event complexity, momentariness and continuity, transitional nature to motion verbs, and event suddenness of the verb "見る" to highlight the semantic features of the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る."

1. Introduction

The Japanese construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る," is a special structure involving the visual verb "見る," which often functions to indicate the direction of one's gaze rather than to obtain visual information. Moreover, this construction exhibits syntactic distinctiveness when compared to other languages. However, the semantic features of this construction and the role of the verb "見る" within it have not been thoroughly studied. This paper aims to clarify how "Directional Noun + を + 見る" reflects the semantic and syntactic distinctiveness of Japanese, while exploring the semantic properties of "見る" in this construction.

This paper first examines the particularities of "Directional Noun + を + 見る," by dividing the analysis into semantic and syntactic distinctiveness. Regarding semantic distinctiveness, the paper highlights how the construction differs from "General Noun + を + 見る," emphasizing its role in indicating gaze direction and the weak intention to acquire visual information. Regarding syntactic distinctiveness, a comparison with other languages reveals the special syntactic features of this construction in Japanese.

Furthermore, the study delves into the event complexity, momentariness and continuity, transitional nature to motion verbs, and event suddenness of the verb "見る," exploring how these aspects contribute to the semantic features of the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る."

2. Literature Review

There has been extensive research on the Japanese verb "見る" to date. Kindaichi (1976) analyzed the aspect of verbs, while Nitta (1991) examined verb voice. Takahashi (1994) focused on the inherent nature of verbs and their transformations, Muraki (1996) explored verb morphology and syntactic properties, and Tsunoda (2010) analyzed Japanese verbs, including "見る," from the perspective of linguistic typology. However, the specific semantic features of "見る" within the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" have not been thoroughly discussed.

Tanaka (1996) analyzed the polysemy of "見る," pointing out that it encompasses not only visual perception but also psychological activities such as recognition and judgment. Specifically, she stated that "to see something is, for instance, to recognize it as a tree or a dog, and also to direct one's eyes toward a certain direction, thus perceiving the existence or arrangement of objects within the field of vision as an act of 〈recognition〉 via 〈visual perception〉." She demonstrated that the fundamental meaning of the verb "見る" in both "General Noun + を + 見る" and "Directional Noun + を + 見る" is to 〈recognize〉 objects through 〈visual perception〉. However, Tanaka's research does not delve deeply into the semantic features of "見る" in the specific construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る."

Furthermore, Koike and Tanabe (2002) studied the relationship between the intransitive verb "向く" and the case particle "を" and made references to the special characteristics of "見る" in "Directional Noun + を + 見る." They pointed out that even though sentences such as "右を見る" are transitive constructions, passive forms like "右は見られる" do not hold. They argued that even verbs that take object-like noun phrases as complements may acquire special characteristics when a direction serves as the complement. While their findings align with this study, their research primarily focuses on "向く" and does not sufficiently address the semantic features of "見る."

Additionally, Jin (2015) analyzed the aspectuality and syntactic structures of verbs, discussing the dynamic nature of "見る" in terms of aspect. She highlighted that the aspect of the verb "見る" varies depending on the placement of mental focus. Her research provides important insights into the momentariness and continuity of "見る" in "Directional Noun + を + 見る," yet it does not sufficiently address the semantic features of directional expressions within this structure or their differences from other usages of "見る."

Thus, previous studies suggest that the verb "見る" exhibits special semantic features within the specific construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る." While these studies provide a wealth of knowledge about "見る," there remains significant room to further explore the semantic features of this specific construction and the role of "見る" within it. This study focuses on these aspects and attempts a more detailed analysis.

3. The Particularities of "Directional Noun + を + 見る"

3.1 The Semantic Distinctiveness of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" in Japanese

The meaning of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" in Japanese differs from that of "General Noun + を + 見る." To examine this semantic distinctiveness, this paper treats "General Noun

+ のほう " as a process of converting a general noun into a directional noun (in this paper, "General Noun + のほう " is regarded as a directional noun) and compares the meanings of "General Noun + のほう + を + 見る" and "General Noun + を + 見る."

(1) a. △星を見たけど、見えなかった。

(1) b. 星のほうを見たけど、見えなかった。

Both of the sentences above are grammatically valid. However, sentence (1)a is semantically contradictory under normal circumstances unless specific conditions or contexts are considered. In (1)a, the act of "星を見た" is completed, but the result, "見えなかった," contradicts the action, making it difficult to interpret under ordinary contexts. Specific conditions or contexts, such as a visually impaired person attempting to observe celestial bodies, may allow the action of "見た" to represent an attempt at observation, while the result, "見えなかった," indicates failure in achieving visual recognition. In other words, "General Noun + を + 見る" is characterized by a strong intention to see a specific object, where the primary purpose is to obtain visual information, assuming that the object is directly viewed.

In contrast, sentence (1)b is both syntactically and semantically coherent. It signifies that the gaze was directed toward the direction of the star, but due to obstacles or weather conditions, the star itself did not enter the field of vision. That is, "Directional Noun + を + 見る" assumes the act of looking in a specific direction and serves to indicate the direction of the gaze, with a weak intention to obtain visual information.

As demonstrated above, the meaning of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" in Japanese is distinct from that of "General Noun + を + 見る." Next, this paper will explore the syntactic features that realize the semantic distinctiveness of "Directional Noun + を + 見る."

3.2 The Syntactic Distinctiveness of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" in World Languages

In world languages, the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" exhibits the following syntactic distinctiveness:

3.2.1 Japanese

(2)a-1. 李さんが張さんを見た。

(2)b-1. 李さんが張さんのほうを見た。

In Japanese, neither the verb nor the particle undergoes any change. By adding the formal noun "のほう" after a general noun to form a directional noun, the meaning of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" changes. This process shifts the focus away from visual intention, instead indicating the direction of the action.

3.2.2 Chinese

(2)a-2. 小李看见了小张。

(2)b-2. 小李看向了小张。

In Chinese, while the verb "看" remains unchanged, the verb phrase shifts from "看见" (verb + complement) to "看向" (verb + preposition) to express directionality.

3.2.3 English

(2)a-3. Li saw Zhang.

(2)b-3. Li looked at Zhang.

In English, "looked" and "saw" correspond to distinct verbs, "look" and "see," respectively. To indicate directionality, "looked at" requires the preposition "at."

3.2.4 Ukrainian

(2)a-4. Чжан побачив Лі.

(2)b-4. Чжан подивився на Лі.

In Ukrainian, "подивився" and "побачив" correspond to distinct verbs, "дивиться" and "бачить." To express directionality, "подивився на" requires the preposition "на."

3.2.5 German

(2)a-5. Li sah Zhang.

(2)b-5. Li sah Zhang an.

In German, while the verb "sah" itself does not change, the addition of the postposition "an" is necessary to indicate directionality.

From the examples above, it is evident that, in many languages, verbs themselves undergo changes to emphasize the directionality of an action. Even when the verb itself does not change, as in Chinese "向," English "at," Ukrainian "на," or German "an," additional prepositions or postpositions are used to express directionality, resulting in changes to the verb phrase.

In contrast, in Japanese, the meaning of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" changes by adding the formal noun "のほう" to the noun phrase, shifting the focus from visual intention to include directionality. However, neither the particle nor the verb undergoes any modification. In other words, when the semantic distinctiveness of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" is realized, the syntactic structure in Japanese involves changes to the noun phrase rather than the verb phrase.

Next, this paper will explore the semantic features of "見る" in the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る," focusing on its semantic properties.

4. The Semantic Features of "見る" in "Directional Noun + を + 見る"

4.1 Event Complexity

As demonstrated in the examples above, in English, "see" refers to the state of having already captured the image of an object, whereas "look" refers to the effort to capture the image of an object (Tsunoda, 2010, p.117). In contrast, such a distinction does not exist in Japanese. The verb "見る" can refer to merely capturing the image of an object, as seen in (2)a-1, or it can also include the meaning of moving one's gaze toward the direction of the object, as seen in (2)b-1. The expression "effort to capture the image of an object" is not used in Japanese because, as previously mentioned, "Directional Noun + を + 見る" assumes looking at a direction, serving to indicate the direction of the gaze, with weak intention to obtain visual information.

A search for "見る" in the Japan Knowledge¹ database using Digital Daijisen yielded the following 12 definitions of the verb:

- ① To capture the existence of an object or similar with one's eyes; to place it in one's sight; to gaze. Example: "星空をみる" (to see the starry sky).
- ② To observe or inspect. Example: "映画をみる" (to watch a movie).
- ③ To handle or manage something. Example: "子供のめんどろをみる" (to look after a child).
- ④ To examine or verify. Example: "答案をみる" (to check an answer sheet).
- ⑤ To try or test. Example: "切れ味をみる" (to test sharpness).
- ⑥ To observe, judge, or evaluate. Example: "人をみる目がない" (to lack the ability to judge people).
- ⑦ To diagnose. Example: "脈をみる" (to check one's pulse).
- ⑧ To understand by reading. Example: "新聞でみた" (to read in the newspaper).
- ⑨ To experience something oneself. Example: "痛い目をみる" (to have a painful experience).
- ⑩ To infer or understand something. Example: "遭難したものとみられる" (to be regarded as

¹ Refer to <https://japanknowledge.com/>

having met with a disaster).

- ⑪ To become a couple or get married. Example: "さやうならむ人をこそみめ" (to marry someone).
- ⑫ (As an auxiliary verb) Attached to the te-form of a verb to:
 - (a) Express the idea of trying or doing something tentatively. Example: "一口、味わってみる" (to taste a mouthful).
 - (b) Indicate realization after attempting something. Example: "踏みこんでみるともぬけのからだだった" (after stepping in, it was found to be empty).

Among these definitions, the one corresponding to "Directional Noun + を + 見る" is definition ①: "To capture the existence of an object or similar with one's eyes; to place it in one's sight; to gaze." This explanation, particularly the terms "capture" and "place," suggests that "見る" emphasizes not only visual phenomena but also the dynamic process leading to "見える." This process involves the movement of gaze or body, indicating the presence of event complexity. As illustrated by the example (3)a extracted from the BCCWJ² corpus, "後ろを見る" involves not only visual phenomena but also movements of the body, head, and gaze toward the back, and it can be replaced by (3)b.

- (3)a. キングスレガリアは手ごたえ良さそうに見えたけど、アンカツはチラッと後ろを見る。
- (3)b. キングスレガリアは手ごたえ良さそうに見えたけど、アンカツはチラッと振り返って見る。

As evident from these two examples in (3), "後ろを見る" is equivalent to "振り返って見る", and "後ろを見る" comprises two actions: "後ろを向く" and "見る." Furthermore, the adverb "チラッと" modifies the dynamic process of the action and emphasizes the mobility of gaze and body movements through a quick glance when combined with "見る."

From the dictionary definition of "見る," analysis of actual usage, and its combination with adverbs, it is evident that "見る" in "Directional Noun + を + 見る" exhibits event complexity, encompassing both "visual phenomena" and "motion phenomena," which involve the dynamic process of moving toward capturing the image. Of course, as in (1)b, the "image" here may refer to clouds or the sky—objects not necessarily intended as the target. However, the gaze shifts toward the direction of the object, allowing some "image" to appear in the field of vision, thereby generating visual phenomena.

4.2 Momentariness and Continuity

The verb "見る" is classified as an "activity verb with processuality" (Moriyama, 1988, p.158). "'見る,' as a verb, encompasses the phases from the initiation of an action, through its progression, to its final result, and its aspectual fluctuation arises depending on where the mental focus is placed" (Jin, 2015, p.132).

In the example sentences provided above, as well as the example (4) below, the Perfective aspect "見た" highlights the initial stage of a complex event involving an instantaneous process, thereby demonstrating momentariness:

- (3)c. * キングスレガリアは手ごたえ良さそうに見えたけど、アンカツはゆっくりと後ろを見る。
- (4)a. ベランダで洗濯物を干していたところ、ふと視線に気がついて下を見たんです。
- (4)b. ベランダで洗濯物を干していたところ、ふと視線に気がついてちらっと下を見たんです。

² Refer to <https://chunagon.ninjal.ac.jp/>

(4)c. * ベランダで洗濯物を干していたところ、ふと視線に気がついてゆっくりと下を見たんです。

As seen in examples (3)a and (4)a, extracted from the BCCWJ corpus, "後ろを見る" and "下を見た" can be combined with "ちらっと," but they cannot be combined with "ゆっくりと," as seen in (3)c and (4)c. While the tenses of "見る" and "見た" differ between examples (3)a and (4)a, both represent the perfective aspect of "見る."

The author conducted a search for "ゆっくり見る" in the Asahi Newspaper³ database and retrieved 124 instances. In all of them, "見る" was used in the sense defined as "to observe or inspect" (definition ②), rather than "to capture the existence of an object or similar with one's eyes" (definition ①). This indicates that when "見る" represents its perfective aspect with the meaning described in definition ①, it cannot be combined with "ゆっくり," thereby demonstrating momentariness.

Compared to (4)a, the continuative aspect forms "見ている" and "見つづけた" in the following examples (5)a and (6)a concentrate the cognitive focus on the sustained progression of an action within a complex event, thereby demonstrating continuity:

(5)a. 心もちアゴを上げ、つねにななめ上を見ている。

(5)b. * 心もちアゴを上げ、ちらとななめ上を見ている。

(6)a. そして、そのままじっと上を見つづけた。

(6)b. * そして、そのままちらっと上を見つづけた。

In (5)a and (6)a, the continuative aspect form "見ている" and the past tense of the continuative aspect "見つづけた" can be combined with "つねに" and "じっと" respectively. In contrast, when "見る" in the continuative aspect is combined with "ちらっと," as in (5)b and (6)b, the sentences become ungrammatical. In these cases, the verbs "見る" in (5)a ("常に斜め上を見ている") and (6)a ("じっと上を見つづけた") emphasize the ongoing observation of the direction of the object rather than the movement of the body or gaze, highlighting the stillness of the event.

Therefore, while "見る" in "Directional Noun + を + 見る" is classified as an "activity verb with processuality" (Moriyama, 1988, p.158), whether it demonstrates momentariness or continuity depends on the "placement of the focus, which causes aspectual fluctuation" (Jin, 2015, p.132). When the structure employs the perfective aspect, it highlights the initial stage of an instantaneous process within a complex event. In contrast, when it employs the continuative aspect forms, such as "—ている" or "—つづけた," it emphasizes the sustained progression of an action within the same complex event.

4.3 Transitional Nature to Motion Verbs

The verb "見る" in the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" does not involve a change in the subject's position or induce a change in the position of the object, and therefore, it is not a typical motion verb. Regarding previous studies, the classification of the verb "見る" in the Japan Knowledge database under the Kakukawa Thesaurus Dictionary categorizes it as "behavior > observation > witnessing," excluding it from the category of motion verbs. Additionally, Koike and Tanabe (2002, p.67) stated that when motion verbs are associated with spatial expressions, "only nouns denoting spatial locations can function as adjuncts. If a noun not indicating spatial location is used in this position, the noun must undergo spatialization

³ Refer to <https://xsearch.asahi.com/>

procedures such as '～のなかを,' '～のうえを,' or '～のあいだを.' For instance, the phrase 'to walk on top of a finger' can be constructed as '指の上を歩く,' but not as '指を歩く.'" (Gengogaku Kenkyukai, 1983, p.140-141). Based on this criterion, "見る" can combine with nouns that indicate direction or positional relationships without the need for spatialization procedures like "のほうを," demonstrating that "見る" is not a purely motion verb.

However, while "見る" in "Directional Noun + を + 見る" is a non-motion verb, it exhibits properties characteristic of motion verbs. First, as noted above, when "見る" in "Directional Noun + を + 見る" occurs in the perfective aspect, its action includes gaze and bodily movement, emphasizing continuous movement processes and directionality, thereby embodying the characteristics of motion verbs. Second, when directional nouns are combined with "を見る," the verb "見る" indicates direction rather than the object being observed. This can be confirmed by adding "のほう" after non-positional nouns, effectively spatializing them.

(7)a. ウィルはこちらを向いて私を見た。

(7)b. 私はウィルに見られた。

(8)a. 私がどうするか決めかねて立っていると、チャミアンが振り返って私のほうを見た。

(8)b. 私がどうするか決めかねて立っていると、私のほうはチャミアンに見られた。

In example (7)a, extracted from the BCCWJ database, "私を見た" indicates that Will looked at "me." The particle "を" denotes the accusative case, specifying "me" as the object of the action. This can be rephrased as (7)b, "私はウィルに見られた." By contrast, in (8)a, "私のほうを見た" does not mean merely "looking at me," but rather that "のほうを" denotes the direction of the gaze. This cannot be rephrased as (8)b, "私のほうはチャミアンに見られた." Therefore, when directional nouns combine with "を見る," the verb "見る" indicates direction rather than the object of observation. Conversely, when combined with non-positional nouns, the "spatialization procedure" of adding "のほう" is unnecessary. Nevertheless, the structure "Directional Noun + を + 見る" demonstrates semantic and syntactic distinctions. In other words, adding "のほう" to general nouns and constructing "General Noun + のほう + を + 見る" activates the transitional nature of "見る" to a motion verb.

Since the properties of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" align with those of "General Noun + のほう + を + 見る," adding "のほう" after general nouns emphasizes the directionality of "見る." This highlights not merely the act of "observing," but also the concern for the direction in which the directional noun is located. Hence, in this structure, "見る" exhibits a transitional nature toward motion verbs.

4.4 Event Suddenness

The aspect of "見る" in the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" creates different contexts depending on its usage. As described in 4.1, "見る" within this structure involves complex events, namely "visual phenomena" and "motion phenomena," encompassing the process leading to capturing the image. Additionally, in 4.3, it was discussed that the structure "Directional Noun + を + 見る" emphasizes the directionality of "見る," highlighting not merely the visual act but also interest in the direction indicated by the directional noun.

Based on these two points, the author extracted examples of the "Directional Noun + を + 見た" structure from the BCCWJ corpus and attempted to analyze its contextual characteristics:

(9). 「人の髪の毛だよ」晴行が、彼女の足もとをみつめながら叫んだ。ぎょっとして、彼女は下を見た。汚らしい毛布の間から、長い髪が揺れるように、はみ出している。「死体だわ！」

(10). 「だめだ！」だれかが叫んだ。一斉にオールの動きが止まった。初めて前を見た。

黒い巨体は悠々と乱氷の彼方に消えようとしている。

- (11). 「おい、どこへ行くんだ？」赤ランプをつけていないパトカーだった。フランクはかがみこんで中を見た。運転している男には見おぼえがない。
- (12). 翌朝、二人は同時に目を目覚ました。最初にピアックが起きあがり、ドアのほうへ行き、外を見た。「霧だ！」ピアックが言った。

From a contextual perspective, the common feature of the four sentences above is the presence of a new trigger prompting the agent to consciously direct their gaze toward a specific direction before the use of "Directional Noun + を + 見た." This new trigger often takes the form of sudden exclamations or dialogue, as in (9), (10), and (11), but can also include events such as waking up abruptly, as in (12). These triggers lead the agent to develop an interest in the movement or condition of that direction.

In many cases, the clauses following "Directional Noun + を + 見た" reveal surprising new discoveries or sudden events. For example, (9) describes human hair, (10) reveals a black mass, (11) notes an unfamiliar driver, and (12) highlights the fog outside. This type of structure enhances tension and suspense.

Thus, it can be said that "見る" in the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" demonstrates event suddenness through its aspect and context, playing a role in creating tension and suspense for the reader.

5. Conclusion

In Japanese, the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" exhibits semantic distinctiveness compared to "General Noun + を + 見る." The latter emphasizes the act of observing the object itself, with a strong intention to obtain visual information, assuming that the specific object is directly seen. In contrast, "Directional Noun + を + 見る" presupposes looking in a certain direction and serves to indicate the gaze's direction, with a weak intention to obtain visual information.

In world languages, the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" demonstrates syntactic distinctiveness. In many languages, such as English and Ukrainian, the verb itself changes to emphasize the directionality of the action of "見る." Furthermore, in languages other than Japanese, additional prepositions or postpositions, such as Chinese "向," English "at," Ukrainian "на," or German "an," are required to express directionality, leading to changes in the verb phrase. In Japanese, however, by adding the formal noun "のほう" to the noun phrase, the meaning of "Directional Noun + を + 見る" shifts from simply emphasizing visual intention to incorporating directionality, while the particle remains unchanged.

The meaning of "見る" in the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" encompasses both "the state of having already captured the image of the object" and "the process of moving one's gaze toward the direction of the object." This aligns with Definition ① of "見る" in Digital Daijisen: "To capture the existence of an object or similar with one's eyes; to place it in one's sight; to gaze." Within this structure, "見る" is characterized by event complexity, momentariness and continuity, transitional nature to motion verbs, and event suddenness.

The event complexity of "見る" signifies that it includes not only "visual phenomena" but also "motion phenomena," referring to the dynamic process of moving toward capturing the image. This dynamic process emphasizes the progression leading to "見える," involving the movement of gaze and body. This is supported by the modification of the verb "見る" with adverbs such as "ちらっと," which highlights the dynamic process.

While "見る" itself is classified as an "activity verb with processuality" (Moriyama, 1988,

p.158), whether it demonstrates momentariness or continuity depends on "the placement of the focus, which causes aspectual fluctuation" (Jin, 2015, p.132). When "見る" in "Directional Noun + を + 見る" is in the perfective aspect, it highlights the "initial phase of an instantaneous process" within a complex event, demonstrating momentariness. In contrast, when "見る" takes continuative aspect forms such as "—ている" or "—つづけた," it emphasizes the sustained progression of an action within the same complex event, demonstrating continuity.

The transitional nature of "見る" to a motion verb refers to the fact that while "見る" is not a typical motion verb, it simultaneously possesses characteristics of motion verbs. The action of "見る" in the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" does not involve changes in the position of the agent or the object, making it a non-motion verb. However, "見る" includes gaze and body movement, emphasizes continuous motion processes, and exhibits directionality, thereby acquiring the characteristics of motion verbs. Additionally, adding "のほう" after a general noun reveals that when combined with a directional noun, the focus shifts from the object being observed to the direction of observation. Furthermore, the construction "Directional Noun + を + 見る" emphasizes the directionality of "見る," highlighting not just the act of observing but also an interest in the direction indicated by the directional noun.

From a contextual perspective, when "見る" in "Directional Noun + を + 見る" is in the perfective aspect, the construction emphasizes the suddenness of events. In preceding clauses, there is often a new trigger prompting the agent to consciously direct their gaze toward a specific direction. These triggers are frequently sudden exclamations or voices, as seen in examples (9), (10), and (11), but may also include events such as waking up abruptly, as in example (12). These triggers lead the agent to develop an interest in the direction's movement or condition. Subsequent clauses often reveal surprising new discoveries or unexpected events, such as human hair in (9), a black mass in (10), an unfamiliar driver in (11), or fog in (12). This structure enhances tension and suspense.

In summary, "Directional Noun + を + 見る" in Japanese exhibits semantic distinctiveness, and the construction demonstrates syntactic distinctiveness in world languages. The characteristics of "見る" within this construction, including event complexity, momentariness and continuity, transitional nature to motion verbs, and event suddenness, play significant roles in various contexts.

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