

**Separable verbs in Cantonese**  
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## 1. Introduction

As noted as early as in Cheung’s (1972/2007: 92-93) seminal work on Cantonese grammar, a number of verbs can be “separated” (or “ionized” in Cheung’s terms, adopted from Chao 1968), such as 肥佬 *feilou* ‘fail’ separated by an aspectual suffix as 肥咗佬 *fei-zo lou* ‘failed’ (see also Matthews & Yip 1994/2011: 58-62; 229-230). This set of verbs is traditionally called “separable verbs/compounds” or “discontinuous predicates/compounds” (離合詞) in Chinese linguistics (see, e.g., Chao 1968; Huang 1984; Pan & Ye 2015, henceforth PY15; for Mandarin Chinese). The study of separable verbs serves as an important window into wordhood, as well as the boundary between morphology and syntax. The signature example 肥咗佬 *fei-zo lou* ‘failed’ represents a case of mono-morphemic verb being separated as if the single morphological unit is treated as a syntactic phrase.

There has been a long tradition of studying separable verbs in Mandarin, dating back to the at least 1940s (Wang 1946). In Cantonese, however, there has only been scattered work on the separation of Verb-Object (VO) compounds since Cheung (Chin 2003; Yu 2003), not until recently with more systematic studies on various separable verbs beyond the VO type (Fu 2016; CC20, henceforth CC20; Yip, Lee & Chan 2021, henceforth YLC21; Chan, Lee & Yip 2022; Lee & Yip 2024, henceforth LY24; Ho 2024). This survey aims to review the structural properties of Cantonese separable verbs and highlights their differences with the more studied Mandarin ones. It will be shown that these distinctive properties of Cantonese reveal a lack of robust nominalization processes (*cf.* Tang 2011) in the language, and thus call for a derivation process different from Mandarin. Also, the difference may be attributable to a language-specific bias toward monosyllabicity of verbs in Cantonese (*cf.* Luke and Lau 2008; Li et al. 2016; Cheung 2022).

We begin by defining the notion of wordhood. A separable verb must at least be disyllabic, most of which are compound words (i.e., bi-morphemic). Chin (2003) and Yu (2003) adopt the traditional definition of compounds from the Mandarin literature (e.g., Chao 1968; Huang 1984), where compounds are considered to exhibit the following semantic, morphological, and syntactic properties:

- (1) The traditional definition of compounds
  - a. *Non-compositionality*, i.e., the meaning of the word is not composed of merely adding up the two morphemes;
  - b. *Boundness*, i.e., one or both morphemes are bound;
  - c. *Lexical integrity*, i.e., the two morphemes cannot be separated by phrases and/or undergo movement.<sup>1</sup>

The very nature of separable verbs is that they violate (1c), and to a certain extent (1b), leaving (1a) as the crucial criterion. As a result, many VO expressions like 沖涼 *cungloeng* ‘take showers, (lit.) wash coolness’ or even 食煙 *sikjan* ‘take cigarettes, (lit.) eat smoke’ were regarded as separable compounds due to their opaque meaning (Yu 2003; Matthews & Yip 1994/2011; CC20; Ho 2024). This definition maintains strict compositionality in the syntax. Nevertheless, it is less clear whether non-compositionality is exclusively in the lexicon, given the existence of idiomatic phrases like 搭錯線 *daap-co sin* ‘not on the same page, (lit.) connect

to the wrong line’ and even sentential idioms like 死雞撐飯蓋 *seigai caang faangoi* ‘refuse to admit fault, (lit.) dead chicken props up the lid of a rice pot’. Indeed, most previous studies arrive at the conclusion that separable verbs are phrasal in some sense (phrasal compounds in Chin 2003; idiomatic phrases in Yu 2003; pseudo-incorporation in Ho 2024), which requires recognition of non-compositionality in the syntax.

Yip et al. (2021) and subsequent work, in contrast, maintain a purely morphological definition of verbs (see also Cheung 1972/2007: 149; Chin 2003: 88-89; Tang 2015: 73-74):

- (2) Morphological definition of verbs and phrases (YLC21: 96; adapted)  
Verbs can be followed by a verbal suffix, but verb phrases cannot.

Since 肥佬 *feilou* ‘fail’ may be suffixed (肥佬咗三次 *feilou-zo saamci* ‘failed three times’), whereas 沖涼 *cungloeng* cannot (\*沖涼咗三次 \**cungloeng-zo saamci* ‘showered three times’), the latter should not be considered as a VO compound, but a VO phrase with an (idiomatic) cognate object. This definition provides a formal basis for the wordhood of separable verbs, avoiding conflating words (genuine compounds) with (idiomatic) phrases. As we shall see, this definition also enables us to uncover the variations between Mandarin and Cantonese, which were largely masked by the inclusion of VO idiomatic phrases in the previous literature.

In the rest of this chapter, we will survey the central debates and questions in the study of separable verbs. (3a-d) concerns mainly empirical issues, whereas (3e-f) discusses the analysis and theoretical implications of separable verbs.

- (3) a. What are the types of verbs that may be separated? (Section 2)  
b. What are the forms of separation? (Section 2)  
c. What is the syntactic status of the separated parts? (Section 3)  
d. How do separable verbs in Cantonese differ from Mandarin? (Section 3)  
e. How to explain the apparent dual word-phrase status of separable verbs in a principled way? (Section 4)  
f. How do separable verbs shed light on the general properties of Cantonese? (Section 5)

## 2. Basic properties of separable verbs

### 2.1. Types of separable verbs

Separable verbs in Cantonese are commonly identified as VO compounds (Chin 2003; Yu 2003; Ho 2024). The examples in (4) can either take verbal suffixes or can be separated by them.

- (4) VO compounds
- a. 阿明            移咗            民。  
Aaming        **ji-zo**            **man.**  
Ming            migrate-PFV    migrate  
‘Ming migrated.’ (Matthews & Yip 2011: 61; adapted)
- b. 第四期        已經        出咗        版            喇。  
Daiseikei    **jiging**        **ceot-zo**        **baan**        laa3  
fourth.issue already    publish-PFV    publish        SFP  
‘The fourth issue (of Resonate Cantonese) has been published!’ (LY24: ex.14a)

Separable verbs are not only observed with VO compounds, but also other non-VO types (CC20). Separation of four types of non-VO compounds is attested, as in (5)-(8).<sup>ii</sup>

(5) Coordinative verb-verb compounds (VV)

a. 等 我 休吓 息 得 啱。  
 deng ngo **jau**-haa **sik** dak gwaa  
 let 1SG rest-del rest possible SFP  
 ‘Can (you) let me have a short rest?’ (Cheung 2007: 93)

b. 比完 賽 去 食 飯。  
**Bei**-jyun **coi** heoi sik faan  
 compete-finish compete go eat meal  
 ‘Go grab a meal after the competition.’ (CC20: 191)

(6) Subordinative modifier-head compounds (MH)

a. 遲咗 到 就 衰 喇。  
**Ci**-zo **dou** zau seoi laa3.  
 be.late-PFV be.late then bad SFP  
 ‘It will be bad if (we) are late’ (Cheung 2007: 93)

b. 佢 今年 相咗 三次 體。  
 Keoi gamnin **soeng**-zo saam-ci **tai**.  
 3SG this.year blind.date-PFV three-time blind.date  
 ‘He went to blind-dating three times this year.’ (CC20: 192)

(7) Subject-verb compounds (SV)

a. 今年 日本 地過 震。  
 Gamnin Jatbun **dei**-gwo **zan**.  
 this.year Japan earthquake-EXP earthquake  
 ‘Japan had an earthquake this year.’ (CC20: 192)

b. 大家 肚住 餓 等咗 成個 鐘 以上。  
 Daagaa **tou**-zyu **o** deng-zo sing-go **zung** jisoeng.  
 everyone hungry-CONT hungry wait-PFV whole-CL hour above  
 ‘Everyone has waited on an empty stomach for more than one hour.’ (LY24: ex.14g)

(8) Verb-resultative compounds (VR)

- a. 佢 打咗 低 300 個 參加者。  
 Keoi **daa-zo dai** 300-go caamgaaze.  
 3SG defeat-PFV defeat 300-CL participant  
 ‘He defeated three hundred participants.’ (CC20: 192)
- b. 拉翻 長 條 線 睇。  
**Laai-faan coeng** tiu sin tai.  
 lengthen-again lengthen CL line see  
 ‘Lengthen the line to see (the whole picture)’ (LY24: ex.14e)

These non-VO compounds are not exceptional cases. CC20 examine compound verbs in two major Cantonese dictionaries, and report that 29% out of 445 non-VO compounds can be separated. On a relevant note, they also find that not all VO compounds are separable. Only 62% out of 878 VO compounds are = separable. The following table details how frequent a compound is separable.

Catoery of non-VO	No. of verbs	No. of separable verbs	% of separable verbs
VR	175	82	47%
MH	90	18	20%
Monomorphemic	11	2	18%
other non-VO	32	5	16%
VV	111	18	16%
SV	26	2	8%
<b>Total of non-VO</b>	<b>445</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>29%</b>
<b>Total of VO</b>	<b>878</b>	<b>543</b>	<b>62%</b>
Total	1323	670	51%

Table 1. Overall separability of compounds (adapted from CC20)

Note that the 878 VO compounds are not controlled for the wordhood and might include VO phrases as well. The actual percentage of separable VO compounds is expected to be lower than 62%.

As indicated in Table 1, separable verbs are not strictly confined to compound verbs. 2 out of 11 monomorphemic verbs examined in CC20 can be separated. Furthermore, YLC21 report that out of 60 monomorphemic verbs they examined, 24 of them (40%) are separable. These cases are commonly observed with English loanwords.

(9) Monomorphemic, disyllabic verbs

- a. 考試 肥咗 佬。  
Haosi **fei-zo lou.**  
exam fail-PFV fail  
'(I) failed the exam.' (Cheung 2007: 93)
- b. 阿明 都 OK埋/ O埋 K。  
Aaming dou **oukei-maai/ ou-maai kei.**  
Ming also okay-also okay-also okay  
'Ming also (said) okay.' (YLC21: 95)
- c. 阿明 **farewell** 緊/ **fare** 緊 **well**。  
Aaming **feweu-gan/ fe-gan weu**  
Ming farewell-PROG farewell-PROG farewell  
'Ming is having a farewell.' (YLC21: 95)

Indeed, *native* monomorphemic verbs are also separable:

- (10) 除非 你 已經 曖緊 昧 or 拍緊 拖。  
Ceifei nei jiging **oi-gan mui** or pak-gan to.  
unless 2SG already flirt-prog flirt or have-PROG relationship  
'Unless you're already flirting with someone or you're having a relationship.'  
(Internet)
- (11) 掙住 扎 噉 練。  
**Zang-zyu zaak** gam lin.  
struggle-DUR struggle so practice  
'(I) struggle a lot during the practice.'  
(Internet)

As a side note, while trisyllabic verbs are rare in Cantonese, some English loanwords are borrowed and exhibit a certain degree of separability. Two examples are given in (12)-(13).

- (12) 之前 AL 前 報咗 **in** 埋 **terview**。  
Zicin AL cin bou-zo **in-maai tafiu.**  
before A-level (exam) before apply-PFV interview-also interview  
'Earlier on I've applied for it before the A-Level exam, and did the interview.'  
(LY24: fn25)
- (13) 我 **stay** 緊 **cation** 啫。  
Ngo **sdei-gan keiseon** ze1.  
1SG staycation-PROG staycation SFP  
'I am having a staycation.'  
(Internet)

## 2.2. Contexts that give rise to separation

### 2.2.1. Separation by verbal suffixes

As has been shown in previous sections, the most common separation is induced by verbal suffixes. Schematically, separable verbs exhibit flexibility over the position of suffixes. Note that AB represents the two syllables of a disyllabic separable verb. Most suffixes can intervene a separable verb, as long as they are semantically compatible with the verb.

- (14) a. AB-suffix  
b. A-suffix-B

### 2.2.2. Separation by frequency/duration/affectee phrases

Another type of elements that can induce separation is phrasal, including frequency, duration and affectee phrases:

- (15) 而家 好驚 唔知 要 失 幾年 業。  
Jigaa houngeng m-zi jiu sat **gei-nin** jip.  
now fear not-know need unemplotted how.many-year unemployed  
'(I) now fear that I might be unemployed for several years.' (Internet)
- (16) 你 知唔知 裝 一次 修 要 幾 錢?  
Nei zi-m-zi zong **jat-ci** sau jiu gei cin?  
2SG know-not-know furnish one-time furnish need how.much money  
'Do you know how much it takes to furnish (the house) once?' (Internet)
- (17) 點解 要 傷 佢 心 呢?  
Dimgaai jiu soeng **keoi** saam ne?  
why need break.heart 3SG break.heart SFP  
'Why do (you) break his/her heart?' (Internet)

Indeed, separating elements can be stacked. In (18), the suffix, the affectee, and the frequency phrase all intervene the separable verb 肥佬 *feilou*.

- (18) 阿明 肥過 佢 十幾次 佬。  
Aaming fei-gwo **keoi** **sapgei-ci** lou.  
Ming fail-EXP 3SG ten.several-time fail  
'Ming failed him a dozen times before.' (YLC21: 95, modified)

### 2.2.3. Separation by "what"-expression

A third context concerns the *wh*-expression 乜(嘢) *mat(je)* 'what' in Cantonese. The insertion of *mat(je)* does not give rise to a question reading, but a rhetorical or sarcastic reading, conveying the speaker's negative attitude towards the event denoted by the verb (Tang 2003, Tang 2022, Choi 2024). Some examples are given in (19)-(21). Note that 乜(嘢) *mat(je)* can also appear after the non-separated verb. In this sense, it is similar to verbal suffixes (see also LY24).

- (19) 你    pre 乜                    sent/    present 乜    啊?  
 Nei    pi-**mat**                    sen      pisen-**mat**    aa3?  
 2SG    present-what    present    present-what    SFP  
 ‘Why are you presenting?’ (Tang 2000: 3, adapted)
- (20) 佢      批乜      評/            批評乜?  
 Keoi    pai-**mat**    ping/        paiping-**mat**?  
 3SG     criticize   criticize   criticize-mat  
 ‘Why is s/he criticizing (something)?’ (Tang 2000: 3, adapted)
- (21) 擔乜嘢      心/      擔心乜嘢      呀?  
 Daam-**matje**   sam/      daamsam-**matje**   aa3?  
 worry-what   worry    worry-what      SFP  
 ‘Why are (you) worrying?’ (Matthews & Yip 2011: 61, adapted)

In some other cases, the intensifier 鬼 *gwai* ‘ghost’ can also be inserted between 乜嘢 *matje*, giving rise to multiple intervention in a separable verb.

- (22) 投乜            鬼      嘢      資?  
 Tau-**mat**        -gwai-    je      zi?  
 invest-what   -ghost-   what    invest  
 ‘Why are (you) investing?’ (Matthews & Yip 2011: 61, adapted)

#### 2.2.4. Displacement

The last context is of a slightly different kind. Separable verbs not only allow additional intervening elements, but also allow the second syllable to be displaced or fronted. This results in a form of separation that reverses the linear order of the two syllables of the separable verbs.

- (23) 後邊    連發            都      未      出,    前面    已經    打緊。  
 Haubi    **lin-fat**            dou      mei      **ceot**,    cinmin    jiging    daa-gan.  
 back    even-depart    also      not.yet    depart    front    already    fight-PROG  
 ‘The (people) at the back didn’t even depart, and the (people) in front are already fighting.’ (Internet)
- (24) 噉      佢地      以後      就      連修            都      唔使      裝。  
 Gam    keoidei    jihau    zau    **lin-sau**            dou    m-sai      **zong**.  
 then    3PL      later    then    even-furnish    also    no-need    furnish  
 ‘Then they don’t even need to furnish (the house) later.’ (Internet)

This pattern is also observed with monomorphemic verbs, such as the loanwords *soIwi4* ‘(say) sorry’ and *kitIsi4* ‘kiss’. It suggests that displacement of the second syllable of a separable verb is not confined by morpheme boundaries.<sup>iii</sup>

- (25) 連 **ry**            阿明            都            冇            **sor** °  
**Lin-wi**            Aaming            dou            mou            **so**.  
 even-sorry    Ming            also            not            sorry  
 ‘Ming even didn’t say sorry.’ (YLC21: 97)
- (26) 唔單只    未            mar 過            ry ,            連 **ss**            都            未            **ki** 過 °  
 Mdaanzi    mei            me-gwo            -wi,            **lin-si**            dou            mei            **kit**-gwo.  
 not.only    not.yet    marry-EXP    marry            even-kiss    also            not.yet    kiss-EXP  
 ‘Not only I haven’t been married, but I also haven’t even kissed someone before.’  
 (Movie *Eight Taels of Gold*, 1989)

### 2.2.5 Non-examples

Some cases are often taken to be instances of separable verbs in the literature, but they are excluded from the current discussion. These cases are listed below, all of which lack productivity, meaning that the form of separation is fossilized with a particular verb.

- (27) a. 幽佢一默 **jau keoi jat mak** ‘make fun of him/her once’ (Cheung 2007:93)  
 b. \*肥佢一佬 \***fei keoi jat lou** ‘fail him once’
- (28) a. 攞苦黎辛 **lo fu lai san** ‘make (oneself) suffer’ (Cheung 2007:93)  
 b. \*攞在黎自 \***lo zoi lai zi** ‘make (oneself) relaxed’
- (29) a. 有自唔在 **jau zi m zoi** ‘choose not to relax’ (Cheung 2007:93)  
 b. \*有辛唔苦 \***jau san m fu** ‘choose not to suffer’
- (30) a. 慷他人之慨 **hong taajan zi koi** ‘be generous at others’ expense’ (Cheung 2007:93)  
 b. \*荒他人之唐 \***fong taajan zi tong** ‘be ridiculous at other’s expense’
- (31) a. 荒天下之大唐 **fong tinhaa zi dai tong** ‘be very ridiculous’ (Cheung 2007:93)  
 b. \*慷天下之大慨 \***hong tinhaa zi dai koi** ‘be very generous’
- (32) a. 容乜易 **jung mat ji** ‘very easy’ (Tang 2000:1)  
 b. \*困乜難 \***kwan mat naan** ‘very difficult’

These cases should be excluded from the discussions of separable verbs, given that separable verbs discussed so far exhibit at least some degree of productivity.

## 2.3. Separability as a matter of degree

An important issue raised by CC20 is that separability is a matter of degree, contingent on (at least) two dimensions: (i) the properties of the root/lexical verb, and (ii) the form of separation. An interaction between these two dimensions renders the empirical landscape of separable verbs difficult to depict, as there seems to be no clear rule governing the legitimacy of separable verbs. In most cases, whether a verb is separable or not cannot be accurately predicted, and thus the membership of separable verbs seems to be learnt individually (CC20).

### 2.3.1. The properties of the root/lexical verb

CC20 examine the issue via morphological structure, and report that in their 1323-word list, VO compounds are most separable, followed by MH compounds, VV compounds, and then VR compounds. SV compounds are least separable (see Figure 1).<sup>iv</sup>



<Figure 1 here>

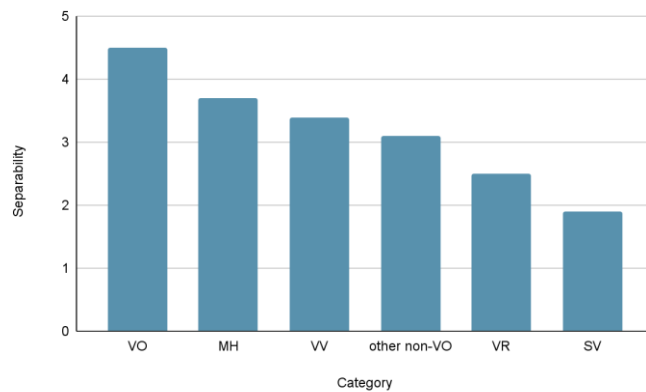


Figure 1. Mean separability by morphological structure (adapted from CC20)

It should be noted that within each category, there are examples that allow separation, and examples that strictly disallow separation. To what extent morphological structure imposes an effect on separation remains to be seen. What can be said for sure is that separability is a gradient notion, rather than a categorical one.

### 2.3.2. The form of separation

Separability of separable verbs also hinges on the form of separation. Separation allowed in one context does not guarantee separation in other contexts. CC20 reports that among non-VO compounds, the degree of separability is ordered as shown in Figure 2.

<Figure 2 here>

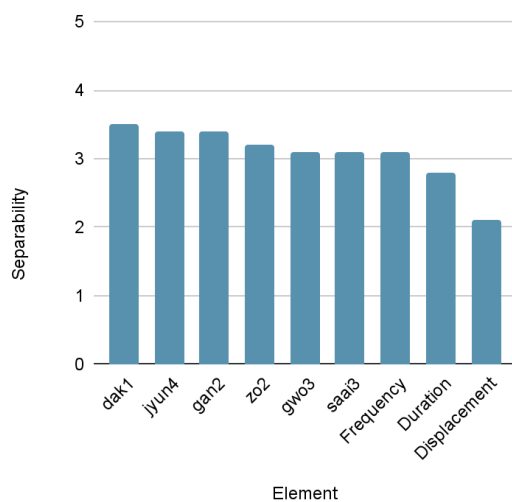


Figure 2. Mean separability by separating elements (non-VO compounds only) (CC20: 198; adapted)

While they conclude from their list of non-VO compounds that frequency and duration expressions, as well as displacement are generally not allowed or banned for insertion, it should be clear from Section 2.2.2., and Section 2.2.4. that at least some cases are acceptable. It again implies that verbs come with their idiosyncratic properties pertaining to separability.

They do not discuss separation by 乜(嘢) *mat(je)* ‘what,’ but to the best of our knowledge, it enjoys the highest degree of separability. All disyllabic/trisyllabic verbs can be separated by

乜(嘢) *mat(je)*. Separable verbs separated by 乜(嘢) *mat(je)* are also highly acceptable. It seems that 乜(嘢) *mat(je)* may even enjoy a higher degree of separability than verbal suffixes. The intervening 乜(嘢) *mat(je)* conveys a rhetorical or sarcastic reading that can be applied to most propositions/sentences, unlike verbal suffixes that are subject to additional meaning considerations such as aspect and temporal reference. As such, the degree of separability by forms of separation can be ordered as follows:

- (33) The degree of separability by forms of separation  
 乜(嘢) *Mat(je)* > Verbal suffixes > Frequency/Duration expressions > Displacement

It should be remarked that within the class of verbal suffixes, different suffixes actually come with their own separability. YLC21 observe that suffixes with identical meaning do not come with the same degree of separability. For example, among the two epistemic necessity suffixes 硬 *ngaang* and 梗 *gang* (Tang 2003), separable verbs are more acceptable with the former than the latter.

- (34) 佢 肥 {a. 硬/ b. ??梗} 佬。  
 Keoi fei {a. -ngaang/ b. ??-gang} lou.  
 3SG fail must must fail  
 ‘He must fail.’ (YLC21, p.96)

Verbal suffixes appear to form a continuum in terms of separability. In a pilot study conducted by the authors, 24 verbal suffixes (inventory from Tang 2015) are considered against 60 loanwords. Each loanword is judged by three native speakers based on how much it tolerates an intervening suffix on a five-point scale.<sup>v</sup> Comparing the z-scores of the 24 suffixes in Figure 3, it is found that 埋 *maai4* has the highest separability, followed by 到/倒 *dou2* and 得 *dak1*, whereas 梗 *gang2*, adversative 親 *can1* and 著 *zoek6* are least separable. It is however unclear to us what factors play a role in affecting separability.

<Figure 3 here>

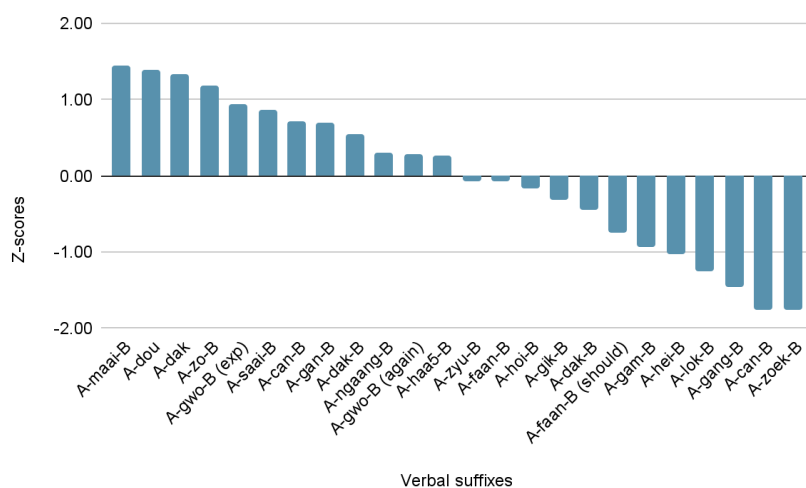


Figure 3. Separability of different verbal suffixes, based on 60 loanwords

Before we leave this subsection, it should be pointed out that some suffixes indeed prefer separation to non-separation, such as the universal suffix 親 *can* (used as a converb; see Tang 2022; Yip 2022a; 2022b). In these cases, the separated forms are more acceptable than the unseparated forms. The preference to separation represents yet another puzzle in the study of separable verbs.

- (35) 失親                    業/                    ??失業親                    都係    後生仔。  
 Sat-**can**                    jip                    ??satjip-**can**                    douhai    hausaangzai.  
 unemployed-all    unemployed    unemployed-all    be    young.people  
 ‘(If someone got) unemployed, he is always a young person.’    (Internet, adapted)

### 3. The syntactic status of separable verbs

The apparent dual status of separable verbs is that they behave like a morphological unit before separation, but after separation, they resemble a VO phrase at least on the surface. A VO phrase can also be inserted by aspectual suffixes (V-suffix O), duration/frequency phrases (V DurP/FreqP O), and participate in movement (‘even’-O ... V). An often-asked question is what their syntactic status is, specifically, whether the separated parts possess the corresponding properties: nominal objecthood for the second syllable (called  $\sigma$ -B below) and verbhood for the first syllable (called  $\sigma$ -A below).

#### 3.1. The lack of nominal objecthood of the second part ( $\sigma$ -B)

As it turns out,  $\sigma$ -B in Cantonese does not behave like a canonical object. First,  $\sigma$ -B cannot take individual classifiers as in (36), and is at least less acceptable with prenominal modification markers *ge* as in (37) (Yu 2003; YLC21). Mandarin, on the other hand, allows for the former and sometimes requires the latter, as in (38)-(39) (PY15; see Yuan 2018 for cases with obligatory *de*).

- (36) \*佢    出咗                    三個/本                    版。  
 \*Keoi    coet-zo                    **saam-go/bun**                    baan.  
 3SG    publish-PFV    three-CL                    publish  
 Int.: ‘He published three books.’                    (YLC21:98)
- (37) 登                    一個                    記  
 deng    **yi-ge**                    ji  
 register    one-CL                    register  
 ‘Do one registration’                    (Guo 2017:225)
- (38) 佢    甩咗                    我    (?嘅)    底。  
 Keoi    lat-zo                    ngo    (?ge)    dai  
 3SG    discard-PFV    1SG    GE                    bottom  
 ‘S/he stood me up.’                    (Yu 2003:63)
- (39) 我    盯                    隔壁                    張三                    \*(的)    稍。  
 Wo    ding                    gebi                    Zhangsan                    \*(de)    shao  
 1SG    stare    neighboring    Zhangsan    DE                    top.of.tree  
 ‘I shadow my next-door neighbor Zhangsan.’                    (Yu 2003:64)

Second,  $\sigma$ -B cannot undergo 將 *zoeng* disposal object fronting, as opposed to Mandarin using the counterpart 把 *ba*.

- (40) \*佢 未 將 [(個) **ry**] sor 完。  
 \*Keoi mei zoeng [(go) **-wi**] so-jyun.  
 3SG not.yet DISP CL sorry sorry-finish  
 Int.: ‘He has not yet finished the apology.’ (Chan, Lee & Yip 2022: 28)
- (41) 我 把 [這 三天 的 忙] 幫完了。 [Mandarin]  
 Wo ba [zhe santian de **mang**] bang-wan-le.  
 1SG BA this three.day DE help help-finish-PFV  
 ‘I’ve already done a three-day favor.’ (PY15: 309)

Last but not least,  $\sigma$ -B cannot be relativized, even though it is semantically plausible. Again, this is possible for Mandarin separable verbs.

- (42) \*呢個 就 係 [佢 sor 咗 \_] 嘅 **ry**。  
 \*Ni-go zau hai [keoi so-zo \_] ge **wi**.  
 this-CL then be 3SG sorry-PFV GE sorry  
 Int.: ‘This is the apology that he said.’ (YLC21:97)
- (43) 幫 [別人 不 願意 幫 \_] 的 忙。  
 Bang [bieren bu yuanyi bang \_] de **mang**.  
 help others not willing help DE help  
 ‘Do a favor that no ones want to do.’ (PY15:309)

### 3.2. The lack of full-fledged verbhood of the first part ( $\sigma$ -A)

While  $\sigma$ -B lacks nominal objecthood,  $\sigma$ -A also does not possess full verbhood. Although morphologically verbal suffixes may attach to  $\sigma$ -A,  $\sigma$ -A fails to undergo syntactic operations that specifically target verbs (LY24). For example, verb doubling (see Lee 2024) must target the whole verb AB rather than just  $\sigma$ -A, the latter of which is however possible in Mandarin.

- (44) 連 **O\*(T)** 我 都 已經 O埋 T 畀 你 喇 啲!  
 Lin-ou-\*(**ti**) ngo dou jiging ou-maai -ti bei nei laa3 wo3!  
 even-OT 1SG also already OT-ADD OT to 2SG SFP SFP  
 ‘I’ve even already worked overtime for you!’ (LY24: ex.30; adapted)
- (45) 她 卻 連幫 都 幫不上 忙。  
 Ta que lian-**bang** dou bang-bu-shang mang.  
 3SG yet even-help also help-not-up help  
 ‘Yet, she cannot even help (us).’ (Internet)

### 3.3. Object-taking ability of the separated verb ( $\sigma$ -A... $\sigma$ -B)

We now turn to the separated  $\sigma$ -A... $\sigma$ -B as a whole. Given that a transitive verb cannot take two (postverbal) objects (cf. Huang’s 1982’s Postverbal Structure Constraint), object-taking

ability serves as a useful test for VO phrasal status. We expect a VO phrase cannot further take a second object. Nevertheless, separated verbs may still take an object, such as the classifier phrase in (46) (YLC21) and the postverbal resumptive pronoun with the fronted object in (47) (cf. Yip & Ahenkorah 2023):

- (46) 放翻 大 [啲 人偶]  
 Fong-faan daai [di janngau]  
 enlarge-again enlarge CL.PL doll  
 ‘enlarge the dolls again’ (YLC21: 98; from Internet)
- (47) 將 [啲 銀紙] 影晒 印 [佢]。  
 Zoeng [di nganzi] jing-saai jan [keoi].  
 DISP CL.PL money.bill photocopy-all photocopy 3SG  
 ‘Photocopied all the bills.’ (Internet)

Verbs separated by *mat(je)* ‘what’ or its variant *me* ‘what’, can also take objects easily (Choi 2024).

- (48) 你 批咩 評 [陳奕迅] 啊? !  
 nei pai-me ping [Can Jik-Seon] aa3?!  
 2SG criticize-what criticize Eason Chan SFP  
 ‘How dare you criticize Eason Chan?!’ (Choi 2024: 59)

In contrast, Pan & Ye (2015, 2018) claims that separable verbs in Mandarin are mainly intransitive (but see Yuan 2018 for objections). A thematic object can only be inserted in-between  $\sigma$ -A... $\sigma$ -B but cannot follow the whole verb even without separation.

- (49) 那 人 威脅 要 告 [小顧] 的 狀。 [Mandarin]  
 Na ren weixie yao gao [Xiaogu] de zhuang.  
 that person threaten will report Xiaogu DE report  
 ‘That person threatens to report Xiaogu.’ (Pan & Ye 2018: 609, from *Suizi Wuyu*)
- (50) \*告狀 [小顧]。 [Mandarin]  
 \*Gaozhuang [Xiaogu].  
 report Xiaogu  
 Int.: ‘Report Xiaogu.’ (Pan & Ye 2018: 609)

From the above, it can be concluded that neither  $\sigma$ -A is a full-fledged verb nor  $\sigma$ -B is a nominal object in Cantonese. The whole separated verb also does not behave like a VO phrase. In other words, the subparts of the word do *not* acquire independent wordhood or phrasehood after separation. According to YLC21 and LY24, the separated parts are “deficient/reduced” instances of the original verb. This speaks against the findings in Chin (2003), Yu (2003), and Ho (2024) that separable verbs are phrasal, which minimally entails the wordhood of both parts. The discrepancy stems from their inventory of separable “compounds” with quite a few VO phrases. This masks potential language differences given that VO phrases are highly similar in Cantonese and Mandarin. When this confound is eliminated, however, it becomes immediately

clear that Cantonese separable verbs exhibit striking variations from Mandarin in which the separable verbs possess VO phrasehood. The comparison is summarized in Table 2. It raises some burning questions as to what the mechanisms available in the languages are to account for the apparent dual status of separable verbs, and what underlyingly leads to the variations.

Syntactic status	Syntactic tests	Cantonese	Mandarin
Nominal objecthood of $\sigma$ -B	Individual classifier	X	✓
	Adnominal modification	X	✓
	Disposal object fronting	X	✓
	Object relativization	X	✓
Full-fledged verbhood of $\sigma$ -A	Verb doubling	X	✓
VO phrasehood of $\sigma$ -A... $\sigma$ -B	Failure to take postverbal objects	✓	✓

Table 2. Variations in the syntactic status of separable verbs in Cantonese and Mandarin

#### 4. Syntactic derivations of separable verbs

##### 4.1. Approaches in Mandarin

Previous studies in Mandarin often suggest that separable verbs have undergone reanalysis and become a VO phrase (Chao 1968; Huang 1984; Packard 2000, *i.a.*). The leading idea behind a reanalysis approach is to capture the dual syntactic status of separable verbs: they act like verbs without separation, but they act like phrases when separated.<sup>vi</sup> As such, reanalysis is proposed to turn a verb into a phrase or vice versa. Under a reanalysis approach, the first syllable of a disyllabic verb is reanalyzed as a monosyllabic verb and the second syllable a nominal object. Variants of proposals differ in terms of the application level and the directionality of reanalysis, but they all share the idea that the second syllable of separable verbs behaves like a nominal. Using the Mandarin VO compound 出版 *chu-ban* ‘publish’ as an example, Chao (1968) and Packard (2000) suggest that the two morphemes in the compound are reanalyzed as, or coerced into a verb phrase containing a verb and an object NP. Huang’s (1984) proposal differs from these approaches in that he takes a VO compound like 出版 *ceot-baan* ‘publish’ to be a phrase in the first place, and then undergoes reanalysis to become a compound (i.e. lexicalization) in the syntax.<sup>vii</sup> These ideas can be illustrated in (52) and (53), respectively.

(51) Reanalysis in the syntax/lexicon (e.g., Chao 1968; Packard 2000)

Head-to-phrase: [v [v *chu* [N *ban*]]] → [VP [v *chu* [NP *ban*]]]

(52) Reanalysis of phrases into compounds (lexicalization) in the syntax (Huang 1984)

Phrase-to-head: [VP [v *chu* [NP *ban*]]] → [v [v *chu* [N *ban*]]]

Setting aside the precise implementation of reanalysis, it is undoubtedly a powerful mechanism that handles the dual status of VO compounds. In principle, it should be extendable to non-VO compounds, if one assumes that the two syllables can be coerced into a VO object phrase (see, however, YLC21 for both empirical and conceptual criticisms).

Taking a different path, PY15 crucially suggest that separable verbs involve no genuine separation of a verb. They compare separable verbs to VP structures containing a cognate

object, similar to the English example in (39). To take the Mandarin verb 幫忙 *bangmang* ‘help’ as an example, they suggest that the verb is first nominalized and serves as a cognate object of the verb, as shown in (40a). A subsequent distributed deletion process applies and delete second syllable of the verb (due to head-initiality of Mandarin VP), and the first syllable of the cognate object (due to head-finality of Mandarin NP). The separation in (40c) is thus an illusion—the “separated” parts are indeed partial realization of two instances of 幫忙 *bangmang*.<sup>viii</sup>

- (53) He laughed a sad laugh.  
 (54) a. Base structure: V taking a (nominalized) cognate object  
       [VP *bangmang ta-de* [NP *bangmang* ] ]  
       b. Distributed deletion  
       [VP ~~*bangmang*~~ *ta-de* [NP ~~*bangmang*~~ ] ]  
       c. Final representation:  
       *bang ta-de mang* ‘to help him’

Evaluating the reanalysis and cognate object approach to separable verbs goes beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it should be stressed that these approaches address primarily separable verbs in Mandarin, and we have seen in section 3 that separable verbs in Cantonese show substantially different linguistic properties. Especially, the second syllable does not acquire nominal status even when it is separated from the first syllable. Furthermore, it has been independently suggested that Cantonese lacks a robust nominalization process, unlike Mandarin (Tang 2011). As such, while these approaches may be promising when handling Mandarin separable verbs, Cantonese separable verbs deserve an analysis on their own.

#### 4.2. A deletion approach in Cantonese

Yip et al. (2021), Chan et al. (2022), and Lee & Yip (2024) propose to link separability to affixes when handling separable verbs. They suggest that separable verbs involve two distinct deletion operations in the derivation. The first one is that language-specific deletion rule, given in (55). It suggests that affixes, including all verbal suffixes and suffix-like 乜(嘢) *mat(je)*, may optionally trigger syllable deletion on their hosts.

- (55) Syllable Subtraction in Cantonese (LY24: ex.49)  
 Affixes may trigger deletion on the adjacent syllable of their host to form a foot.

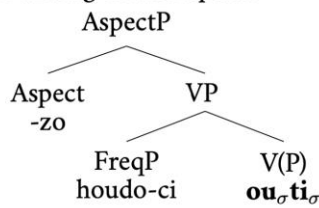
It is precisely because of this prior deletion rule that affects the subsequent deletion on the other copy of the verb. To take (56) as an example, they propose that *outi* ‘overtime work’ with the derivation in Figure 4 in the syntax, and Figure 5 in the post-syntactic component.

- (56) (我) O 咗 好多次 T。  
 (Ngo) ou-zo houdo-ci -ti  
 1SG OT- many-time OT  
 ‘(I) worked overtime many times.’

They assume that verbs move into verbal suffixes (Tang 2003), as in Figure 4b. In the post-syntactic component, the perfective suffix 咗 *-zo* triggers Syllable Subtraction on the syllable *ti* in Figure 5a, and subsequent copy deletion applies only in a partial fashion, resulting in deletion of the syllable *ou* in Figure 5b.

<Figure 4 here>

a. Building of the AspectP



b. Verb movement to Aspect head

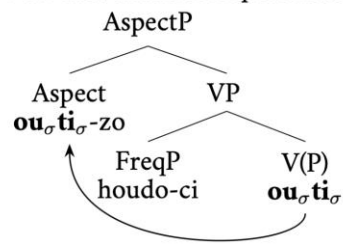
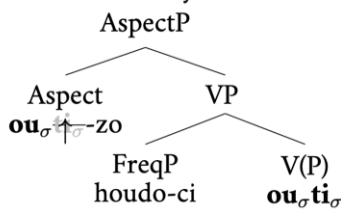


Figure 4. Syntactic components of LY24's proposal .

<Figure 5 here>

a. Suffix-induced Syllable Subtraction



b. Partial CD

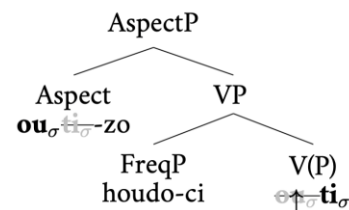


Figure 5. Post-syntactic syntactic components of LY24's proposal .

Their proposal handles the displacement case of separable verbs such as (44) in a novel way. Instead of positing nominal fronting of *-sen* in (44), they suggest that *-sen* is a partial copy of *pi-sen* 'present'. It is only partially realized because the prefix *lin-* triggers Syllable Subtraction on *pi-*. This contrasts with the suffix cases in the directionality of separation, since the adjacent syllable to the affix is different in the two cases.

- (57) 連 *sent*      阿明      都      唔想      *pre* ◦  
 Lin-*sen*      Aaming    dou      m-soeng    pi-  
 even-present   Ming      also      not-want    present  
 'Ming even doesn't want to PRESENT.'

Their proposal thus does not only link separability to affixes, but also correlates different forms of separation to a suffix-prefix distinction, representing a novel attempt on the derivation of separable verbs.<sup>ix</sup>

### 5. Monosyllabic preference of verbs and adjectives in Hong Kong Cantonese

Before we conclude this chapter, it should be remarked that Cantonese is reported to exhibit a *monosyllabic preference* in an array of phenomena in independent works. We suggest that separable verbs in Cantonese represent yet another case of this preference as well. Luke & Lau (2008) report a number of observations that are believed to exhibit monosyllabic preference of verbs and adjectives, listed in (58).

(58) Major findings in Luke & Lau (2008)

- a. In their corpus of 1447 loanwords, monosyllabic truncation of loanword is more commonly observed in verbs (36 out of 76; 47.4%), than in nouns (23 out of 76; 30.3%);
- b. Experimental evidence confirms a noun-verb asymmetry when a loanword can serve either as a verb or as a noun. For example, the source word *pass* is preferred to be truncated as *paas1* when used as a verb, but as *paalsi4* when used as a noun.



- c. Verb-Object combinations strongly favor a pattern of a monosyllabic verb plus a disyllabic noun, but not vice versa.
- d. In their Cantonese translation of the Swadesh word list, they found that 90.6% of the verbs and 97.1% of the adjectives are monosyllabic, compared to a mere 72.1% of nouns.
- e. Based on a 190,000-word corpus, *Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus (HKCanCor)*, it is found that the average word length of verbs and adjectives 1.384 ( $N = 7,338$ ) and 1.273 ( $N = 44,612$ ), respectively, both of which are shorter than that of nouns (1.771 for nouns ( $N = 18,682$ )).

The findings highlight “an age-old preference for monosyllabicity in verbs and adjectives remained latent in the language” (2008: 356), despite of the modern trend of disyllabicity affecting mostly nouns.

Li et al. (2016) report a consistent finding in this regard. They examined 674 Cantonese equivalents of Mandarin entries for the World Loanword Database, and found that Cantonese has a higher monosyllabic-polysyllabic ratio (290:384, roughly 3:4) than that of Mandarin (228:446, roughly 2:4). They generalize the above findings and hypothesize a monosyllabic salience in Hong Kong Cantonese, given in (59).

- (59) Monosyllabic salience (Li et al. 2016: 28)  
 A typological characteristic in Hong Kong Cantonese, facilitates the borrowing of monosyllabic English words] as insertions or integrated loanwords, including polysyllabic words of any word class which are truncated to monosyllables and used like Cantonese morphemes.

Given the findings in these studies, Cantonese appears to exhibit a general monosyllabic preference, which is particularly salient in verbs and adjectives, as well as loanwords. Indeed, in a number of syntactic frames or constructions, there is also some evidence for this preference. In his study of 鬼 *gwai* ‘ghost’-insertion, Cheung (2022) observes that the insertion shows a monosyllabic preference of the preceding element. For example, while 黑鬼搵搵 *hak-gwai-mangmang* ‘black’ is acceptable, \*黑搵鬼搵 \**hakmang-gwai-mang* ‘black’ is not. LY24 also link the preference to A-not-A formation and V-one-V formation. They note that examples like (60) favor a monosyllabic variant over the disyllabic copy of the verbs, no matter whether the verb is a loanword or a native verb.

- (60) a. 你 {sor/??sorry} 唔 sorry 啊? (A-not-A)  
 Nei {so/??sowi} -m- sowi aa3?  
 2SG sorry not sorry SFP  
 ‘Will you (say) sorry?’ (LY24, ex.60)
- b. {解/\*解釋} 一 解釋 嗰件 事。 (V-one-V)  
 {gaai/\*gaaisik} -jat- gaaisik go-gin si .  
 explain one explain that-CL matter  
 ‘to quickly explain that matter’ (Lam 2020:176)

We suggest that separable verbs fall within the general preference of monosyllabicity in the language, connecting with a number of other phenomena in the language. Accordingly, while

separable verbs in Cantonese exhibit different properties from Mandarin separable verbs, they should not be considered exceptional cases in the language. It is thus no surprise that the mechanism deriving separable verbs in Cantonese may be substantially different from those in Mandarin, which relies primarily on some process of reanalysis/nominalization.

## 6. Conclusions

To conclude, we have surveyed the central debates and questions on separable verbs in Cantonese, summarized below:

- (61) a. What are the types of verbs that may be separated?  
*Answer: Mono-morphemic and bi-morphemic verbs, all the compounds (VO, VV, MH, SV, VR), di- and tri-syllabic verbs; with varying degrees of separability*
- b. What are the forms of separation?  
*Answer: Verbal suffixes, frequency/duration/affectee expressions, 乜(嘢) mat(je) 'what', displacement with 連 lin- 'even'; also with varying degrees of separability.*
- c. What is the syntactic status of the separated parts?  
*Answer: "Reduced" instances of the verb without independent word/phrasehood.*
- d. How do separable verbs in Cantonese differ from Mandarin?  
*Answer: Mandarin separable verbs are VO phrases with nominal objecthood of the second separated part and full-fledged verbhood of the first part, which are all absent in Cantonese.*
- e. How to explain the apparent dual word-phrase status of separable verbs in a principled way?  
*Answer: The verb is copied twice via syntactic movement, with syllable subtraction and partial deletion on the two instances. A single instance of the verb is never "separated" in the syntax.*
- f. How do separable verbs shed light on the general properties of Cantonese?  
*Answer: Unlike Mandarin, Cantonese lacks nominalization processes for separable verbs to acquire VO phrasehood. However, Cantonese has a strong monosyllabic preference for verbs to drive the syllable subtraction operation, yielding another type of separable verbs.*

The study of separable verbs is important in both our understanding of the grammar and the unique properties of Cantonese. First, there is still a clear boundary between morphology and syntax. As supported by rigorous formal diagnostics, a separable verb is a single morphological unit, and its apparent separation results from the interaction between copying via movement in syntax and deletion in post-syntactic components.

Second, even though the surface patterns in Cantonese might look similar to Mandarin, a closer scrutiny reveals significant differences. A major part of Cantonese studies has been driven largely by the word order differences between Mandarin (e.g., double-object constructions and comparative constructions). Nevertheless, it should *not* be taken for granted that a given construction is uniform across Sinitic languages even with similar word orders. More careful comparison of other phenomena in Cantonese that are superficially similar to Mandarin is desirable.

Last but not least, there are various syntactic mechanisms to derive separable verbs. Importantly, these mechanisms find their root in the independent properties of the languages, such as robust nominalization in Mandarin and strong monosyllabic preference in Cantonese. One next task is to theorize the correlated variations, for example, adopting the notion of

language (micro-)parameters (Tang 1998; Tang 2006; Huang 2014). Another promising line is to examine more language varieties, including Cantonese dialects and other Sinitic languages, to see whether the correlation is borne out. We hope that this survey will be a helpful basis for future research.

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## Further Readings

Luke & Lau (2008)

Li et al. (2016)

Chan & Cheung (2020)

Lee & Yip (2024)

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<sup>i</sup> Other definitions are also mentioned by Chin (2003) and Yu (2003), such as referential opaqueness, i.e., the nominal morphemes in a compound have generic interpretation and cannot be referred by anaphors, which is inapplicable to non-VO/Subject-Verb compounds; and phonological reduction, which is inapplicable in Cantonese due to the lack of neutral tones.

<sup>ii</sup> Non-VO separable compounds in Mandarin are sporadically noted in the literature (see Chao 1968, Huang 1984, Guo 2017, Huang et al. 2017).

<sup>iii</sup> CC20 notes that this form of separation is less acceptable compared to separation by verbal suffixes and by duration/frequency expressions.

<sup>iv</sup> Their study of separability does not include monomorphemic verbs, but see YLC21 for discussions.

<sup>v</sup> The selected loanwords include the most separable ones such as *pi6sen1* ‘present’, *fei4lou2* ‘fail’ and *so1wi4* ‘(say) sorry’ and the inseparable ones such as *fen1li4* ‘(be) friendly’, *aa6pufl* ‘approve’ and *fit1bek1* ‘(give) feedback’.

<sup>vi</sup> Another possibility is that a separable verb is dual-listed in the lexicon as a verb and as a phrase, as suggested in Her (1996).

<sup>vii</sup> See Huang et al. (2017) for another reanalysis approach in Mandarin based on prosodic grammar.

<sup>viii</sup> See also Guo (2017) for a similar proposal without relying on the notion of cognate objects.

<sup>ix</sup> Their proposal is further built on a chain faithfulness condition that governs the distribution of separable verbs in the language. They also make predictions on cases in the absence of affixes. See LY24 for details.