

# Deriving separable verbs in Cantonese

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# 1 Introduction

In this talk, we discuss an issue concerning the separability of disyllabic verbs in Cantonese.

Types	Examples	Literal meaning	Meaning	Separation by affix
Verb + Object	daam-saam 擔心	bear + heart	worry	daam- <b>gwo</b> -saam 擔過心
Verb + Verb	ying-yan 影印	reflect + print	photocopy	ying- <b>zo</b> -yan 影咗印
Modifier + Verb	zi-sak 自殺	self + kill	commit suicide	zi- <b>maai</b> -sak 自埋殺
Verb + Result	laai-coeng 拉長	pull + long	lengthen by pulling	laai- <b>faan</b> -coeng 拉翻長
Subject + Verb	jat-sik 日食	sun + eat	(solar) eclipse	jat- <b>jyun</b> -sik 日完食

Table 1: Various types of disyllabic verbs (w.r.t. the relation between the two morphemes)

While these above verbs commonly allow separation by verbal suffixes, even monomorphemic disyllabic verbs (mostly English loanwords) allow separation.

(1) Separation of monomorphemic verbs

- a. 阿明**肥佬**咗 / 阿明**肥**咗佬  
Aaming **feilou**-zo/ **fei**<zo>**lou**  
Aaming fail-PERF/ fail<PERF>  
'Aaming failed.'

- b. 阿明**OK**咗 / 阿明**O**咗**K**  
Aaming **oukei**-zo/ **ou**<zo>**kei**  
Aaming okay-PERF/ okay<PERF>  
'Aaming said okay.'

The central question is how such separation is sanctioned by the computational system.

- A prevailing approach in the literature: reanalysis, e.g. the two syllables are reanalyzed as a V+O structure.

We propose a **formal** approach to separable verbs, taking advantage of syntactic head movement and a syllable deletion rule in the post-syntactic component.

## Road map for today

§2: More properties of separable verbs

§4: Proposal: movement + syllable deletion

§3: Arguments against a reanalysis approach

§5: Loose ends

## 2 More properties of separable verbs

- Separation by verbal suffixes

The separation patterns are not exclusive to *-zo* but it applies to all the other verbal suffixes, e.g. experiential *-gwo*, progressive *-gan*, modal *-dak* and *-ngaang*, universal *-saai* and *-can* etc.

### (2) Separation by verbal suffixes

- a. 阿明肥咗佬

Aaming **fei<zo>lou**

(=(1))

Aaming fail<PERF>

‘Aaming failed.’

- b. 阿明肥過佬

Aaming **fei<gwo>lou**

Aaming fail<EXP>

‘Aaming has failed before.’

- In some cases, certain affixes such as *-can* require obligatory separation, in contrast with *-zo*, which allows non-separation (=1)).

(3) Obligatory separation

a. \*阿明肥佬親都俾人鬧

\*Aaming **feilou**-can      dou bei    jan      naau

Aaming fail-WHENEVER all    PASS person scold

Int: 'Whenever Aaming failed, he got scolded.'

b. 阿明肥親佬都俾人鬧

Aaming **fei<can>lou**      dou bei    jan      naau

Aaming fail<WHENEVER> all    PASS person scold

'Whenever Aaming failed, he got scolded.'

- Separation by phrasal elements

Notably, phrasal elements like frequency phrases may be ‘inserted’ after the affix, separating the two syllables of the verb. Note that they can only be inserted when the affix is ‘infix’ (=b), but not ‘suffix’ (=c).

(4) Separation by frequency phrases

- a. 肥佬咗十幾次

feilou-zo **sapgeici**

fail-PERF ten.several.time

‘failed a dozen times.’

- b. 肥 咗 十幾次 佬

fei<**zo**><**sapgeici**>lou

fail<PERF><ten.several.time>

‘failed a dozen times.’

- c. \*肥 十幾次 佬 咗

\*fei<**sapgeici**>lou-zo

fail<ten.several.time>-PERF

Int.:‘failed a dozen times.’



- Other than frequency phrases, affectees may also be ‘inserted’. Separation by multiple phrasal elements is also possible as in (b).

(5) Separation by affectees

a. 老師肥咗佢佬

Lousi    fei<ZO><**keoi**>lou

Teacher fail<PERF><3SG>

‘The teacher failed him.’

b. 老師肥咗 佢 十幾次 佬

Lousi    fei<ZO><**keoi**><**sapgeici**>lou

Teacher fail<PERF><3SG><ten.several.time>

‘The teacher failed him a dozen times.’

### **3 Arguments against reanalysis approaches**

Previous studies suggested that separable verbs are reanalyzed as verb-object phrases (Chao [1968](#); Huang [1984](#); Her [2010](#)). It is reasonable for VO compounds to be reanalyzed as VO phrases but the approach also poses some issues as below.

- Relativization

While a genuine object may be relativized and serve as the head noun of a relative clause, the second syllable of a separable verb cannot be relativized.

(6) 呢齣就係 [佢睇咗 *t*] 嘅戲

ni ceot zau hai [keoi tai-zo *t*] ge **hei** (true VO)

this CL then be 3SG watch-PERF MOD movie

‘This is the movie that he watched.’

(7) \*呢個就係 [佢pre咗 *t*] 嘅 **sent**

\*ni go zau hai [keoi pi-zo *t*] ge **-sen** (separable verbs)

this CL then be 3SG present-PERF MOD present

Int.: ‘This is the presentation that he made.’



- Other arguments (see full handout)
  - Object preposing (*zoeng & lin*)
  - Lack of semantic and prosodic basis of reanalysis
  - Conceptual difficulties in a generative framework

## 4 Proposal: syllable deletion

### (10) Affix-induced Syllable Deletion

Affixes optionally trigger deletion on an adjacent syllable of their hosts.

### (11) Derivation steps for separable verbs

- a.  $[-x [AB]]$  (base structure)
- b.  $[<AB>-x [<AB>]]$  (verb movement)
- c.  $[<\cancel{AB}>-x [<AB>]] = A-x-AB$  (affix-induced syllable deletion)
- d.  $[<\cancel{AB}>-x [<\cancel{AB}>]] = A-x-B$  (partial copy deletion)

Note: We assume that verbal suffixation generally involve syntactic verb movement to the suffix (Tang 2003). We also assume the copy theory of movement (Chomsky 1995; Nunes 1995, 2004; Bošković 2007), and that if the higher copy is not fully spelt out, the remaining part would be spelt out in the lower copy.

An immediate consequence is that it explains why the following patterns below are unattested:

Examples	Schema	Syllable Deletion	Copy Deletion
a. *lou<zo>fei 佬㗎肥	*B-x-A	<b>X</b> <sub>non-adjacent deletion</sub>	
b. *fei<zo>fei 肥㗎肥	*A-x-A		<b>X</b> <sub>fail to apply</sub>
c. *lou<zo>feilou 佬㗎肥佬	*B-x-AB	<b>X</b> <sub>non-adjacent deletion</sub>	<b>X</b> <sub>fail to apply</sub>
d. *fei<zo>feilou 肥㗎肥佬	*A-x-AB		<b>X</b> <sub>fail to apply</sub>

- Derivation of insertion of phrasal elements

(12) a. 肥咗十幾次佬

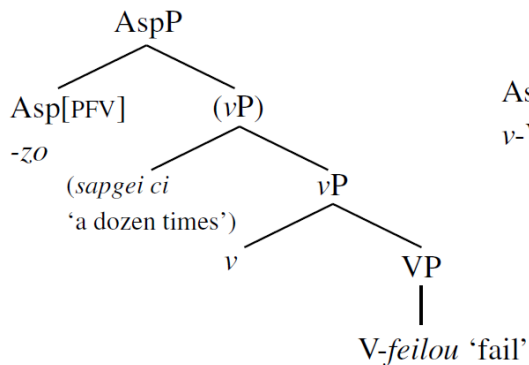
fei<zO><**sapgeici**>lou (=4b)

fail<PERF><ten.several.time>

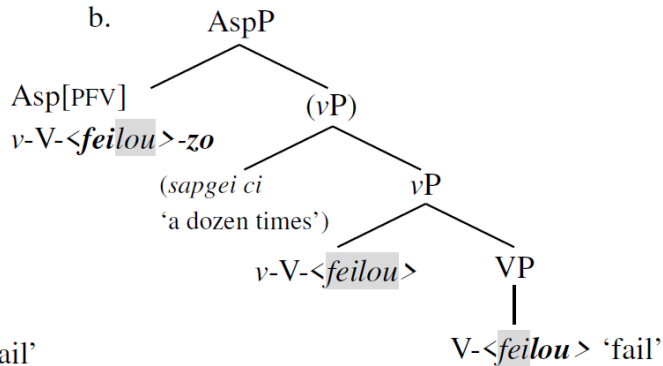
‘failed a dozen times.’

(13)

a.



b.





## 5 Loose ends

- **Complications # 1: Root specificity**

Only certain verbs allow separation.

- VO compounds: 62% (Chan and Cheung [2021](#))
- Non-VO compounds: 29% (Chan and Cheung [2021](#))
- Mono-morphemic verbs (mostly loanwords): 40% (24 out of 60, this study)
- They also seem to interact with suffixes, i.e. some roots are more separable with certain suffixes.

Next step: Capture the idiosyncrasy

- **Complications # 2: Separability of suffixes**

Some suffixes prefer separation more than other suffixes. Preliminary results on 30 suffixes:

- Group I: Prefer separation, e.g. *gwo* 過, *zo* 咗, *maai* 埋, *can<sub>universal</sub>* 親, *saai* 晒 etc.
- Group II: Degraded separation, e.g. *zyu* 住, *hoi* 開, *haa5* 吓, *faan* 翻, *dak<sub>only</sub>* 得 etc.
- Group III: No separation, e.g. *hei* 起, *can<sub>adversive</sub>* 親, *zoek* 著, *gam* 噉, *gang* 梗 etc.

- **Beyond Cantonese: Micro-variations with Mandarin**
  - Mandarin generally disallows separation of non-VO compounds and monomorphemic words.
  - Even for VO compounds, Mandarin disfavors separation as compared to Cantonese.
  - Obligatoriness of Syllable Deletion rule?

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