

Compounding

Compound nouns

Nouns with head noun in the final position examples:

- 眼仁 [ŋan55 ŋin21] eye-kernel → eyeball
- 咸虾 [ham22 ma21] salty-shrimp → shrimp paste
- 籐篮 [təŋ21 lam21] food-basket → food-basket
- 发糍 [fat33 ti225] raised-cake → cupcake
- 纸牌 [dzi55 pai225] paper-card → playing cards
- 酒店 [diu55 iam33] wine-shop → hotel
- 映画 [yein55 va325] projection-picture → movies
- 新闻纸 [hin33 mun22 dzi55] news-paper → newspaper
- 鸡毛纓 [gai33 məu22 yein325] chicken-feather-tassel → shuttlecock

Nouns with head noun in the initial position are rare. However, two cases are worth mentioning. One is the still active suffix 干[gən21] which denotes the end product of the drying process for meat, fruit, and other food items. Another case is the suffixes 公[gəŋ21], 𪊑[na55], and 仔[dəi55] apply to animals.

- 菜干 [təi33 gən21], dried *bok choy*
- 饼干 [biaŋ55 gən21], crackers
- 番薯干 [fan33 si22 gən21], dried yams
- 牛肉干 [ŋəu22 ŋək32 gən21] beef jerky
- 猪肉干 [dzi33 ŋək32 gən21] pork jerky

- 鸡公 [gai33 gəŋ21] rooster
- 鸡𪊑 [gai33 na55] hen
- 猪公 [dzi33 gəŋ21] boar
- 猪𪊑 [dzi33 na55] sow
- 狗仔 [gəu55 dəi55] puppy

A few others:

- 赛波 [səi33 bə335] contest-ball → ballgame
- 赛马 [səi33 ma21] contest-horse → horse race
- 鱼生 [ŋui22 saŋ33] fish-raw → *sashimi*
- 捉手 [dzək33 siu55] catch-hand → handrail, armrest

Compound adjectives

(a) adjective + noun → adjective:

- 好价 [həu55 ga33] good-price → expensive
- 只眼 [dziak21 ŋan55] single-eye → one-eyed
- 诡仔 [gi55 dəi55] cunning-person → cunning
- 好码 [həu55 ma215] good-size → strong, brave
- 惯势 [gan33 sai335] usual-tendency → habitual

(b) adjective + adjective → adjective:

奇巧 [ki22 kəu55] strange-coincidental → strange, marvelous
安乐 [ən33 lək32] peaceful-happy → peaceful, content, happy
孱弱 [san22 ŋiak32] frail-weak → (physically) weak, feeble
悭俭 [han33 giam32] thrifty-frugal → frugal, economical
是非 [si32 fi335] right-wrong → gossipy
湿热 [sip55 ŋet32] wet-hot → sultry
西南 [lai33 nam22] west-south → southwest
东北 [əŋ33 bak55] east-north → northeast
甜酸 [hiam22 lən335] sweet-sour → sweet and sour
黑白 [hak55 bak32] black-white → black and white

(c) noun + adjective → adjective:

This type of compounding is not common. Examples:

心喜 [him33 hi335] heart-happy → happy
心烦 [him33 fan22] heart-troublesome → upset, worried
自私 [du32 lu33(5)] self-private → selfish
自大 [du32 ai32(5)] self-big → arrogant

(d) verb + noun → adjective:

有 [yiu33] + noun (meaning having something) is a productive way of forming adjectives (as well as nouns). 有 [mou33], 'have no', is the counter part.

有宝 [yiu33 bou55] have-treasure → precious	
有路 [yiu33 lu325] have-path → well-connected	有路 [mou33 lu325] no-path → hopeless
有钱 [yiu33 tein335] have-money → rich	有钱 [mou33 tein335] no-money → not rich
有用 [yiu33 yəŋ32] have-use → useful	有用 [mou33 yəŋ32] no-use → useless
有病 [yiu33 biaŋ32] have-sickness → sick	有病 [mou33 biaŋ32] no-sickness → not sick
有心 [yiu33 him33] have-heart → kind, thoughtful	有心 [mou33 him33] no-heart → unintentional
有脑 [yiu33 nou55] have-brain → brainy	有脑 [mou33 nou55] no-brain → foolish
有礼貌 [yiu33 lai21 mou32] have-manner → polite	有礼貌 [mou33 lai21 mou32] no-manner → impolite

Verb-object compounds

A verb-object compound typically corresponds to an intransitive verb in English. Most can also function as noun phrases.

游水 [yiu22 sui55] swim-water → swim
读书 [ək32 si33] read-book → go to school, study
睇书 [hai55 si33] watch-book → read (book)
行路 [haŋ22 lu32] walk-road → walk
行山 [haŋ22 san33] walk-hill → visit burial grounds
吃肴 [hak33 ŋou225] eat-meat → feast
发气 [fat33 hi335] raise-temper → get angry

饮茶 [ŋim55 tsa22] drink-tea → have dim sum
 种痘 [dzəŋ33 əu325] plant-vaccine → vaccinate
 剪毛 [dein55 məu22] cut-hair → have haircut
 吃烟 [hiak33 yian335] eat-cigarette → smoke
 裹粽 [gə55 dəŋ215] wrap-dumpling → make leave-wrapped dumplings of glutinous rice
 打工 [a55 gəŋ33] do-work → be employed
 耕田 [gəŋ33 hein22] till-field → farm
 逃学 [həu22 hək32] escape-school → play truant
 降职 [gəŋ33 dzet55] lower-position → demote
 吃饭 [hiak33 fan32] eat-rice → have a meal
 搵钱 [vun55 tein335] search-money → earn money
 移民 [yi22 min22] move-people → emigrate, immigrate
 叹世界 [tan33 sai33 gai33] enjoy-world → enjoy life
 睇门口 [hai55 mən22 həu55] watch-doorway → watch the house

Verb-object compounds can be separated in various contexts.

(a) Aspect marker examples:

Perfective marker 㗎³³:

我饮 诶 茶 㗎 [ŋoi33 ŋim55 ə33 tsa22 lə33]
 I drink PFV tea SFP
 I had Dim Sum already.

佢游 诶 水 未曾 啊? [kui33 yiu22 ə33 sui55 mian21 a33]
 s/h swim PFV water not yet SFP
 Has he swum?

Progressive marker 紧 [gin55]:

我饮 紧 茶 [ŋoi33 ŋim55 gin55 tsa22]
 I drink PROG tea
 I am having Dim Sum.

佢游 紧 水 么? [kui33 yiu22 gin55 sui55 mə21]
 s/h swim PROG water SFP
 Is she swimming?

Experiential marker 过 [gə33]:

我饮 过 茶 㗎 [ŋoi33 ŋim55 gə33 tsa22 lə33]
 I drink EXP tea SFP
 I had Dim Sum before.

佢游 过 水 未曾 啊? [kui33 yiu22 gə33 sui55 mian21 a33]
 s/h swim EXP water not yet SFP
 Had he swum before?

Resumative marker 返 [fan33]:

我饮返茶嘢 [ŋɔi33 ŋim55 fan33 tsa22 lɔ33]

I drink again tea SFP

I have resumed having Dim Sum.

佢游返水未曾啊? [kui33 yiu22 fan33 sui55 mian21 a33]

s/h swim again water not yet SFP

Does she start swimming again?

Completive marker 完 [yɔn33] / 埋 [mɔi22]:

我饮完茶嘢 [ŋɔi33 ŋim55 yɔn33 tsa22 lɔ33]

I drink finish tea SFP

I finish having Dim Sum already.

饮埋茶讲去 咁 [ŋim55 mɔi22 tsa22 gɔŋ55 hui33 ya22]

drink CMPL tea first go SFP

Finish Dim Sum before you go.

佢游完水未曾啊? [kui33 yiu22 yɔn22 sui55 mian21 a33]

s/h swim finish water not yet SFP

Has she finished swimming?

Misc. other examples: 到 [ɔu55], be able to; 得 [(d)ak33], be OK to; and 开 [hɔi33], habitual.

饮到茶 [ŋim55 ɔu55 tsa22] be able to have Dim Sum (i.e. the restaurant is not full)

饮唔到茶 [ŋim55 m22 ɔu55 tsa22] be not able to have Dim Sum

饮得茶 [ŋim55 ak33 tsa22] be OK to have Dim Sum (i.e. had recovered fully from the stomach-ache)

饮开茶 [ŋim55 hɔi33 tsa22] have been having Dim Sum

(b) Modifier examples:

游早水 [yiu22 dɔu55 sui55] swim-early-water → go for a morning swim

读得好书 [ɔk32 ak33 hɔu55 si33] read-able-well-book → be able to study well

饮早茶 [ŋim55 dɔu55 tsa22] drink-early-tea → have early morning Dim Sum

落大水 [lɔk32 ai32 sui55] fall-big-water → rain heavily

打散工 [du33 ɬan55 gɔŋ33(5)] do-loose-work → do odd jobs

(c) Duration/frequency phrase examples:

读两点表书 [ɔk32 lian55 iam55 biau335 si33]

read two hour clock book

study for two hours

逃几次学 [hɔu22 gi55 lu33 hɔk32]

escape several times school

skip class a few times

(d) Personal object examples:

发我气 [fat33 ŋɔi33 hi335] raise-me-temper → get angry at me

降佢职 [gɔŋ33 kui33 dzet55] lower-s/he-position → demote him

(e) Splitting up by fronting the object for emphasis:

书 一定要 读 好 [si33 yit55 ein32 yiau33 ək32 həu55]
book must need read well
You must study well!

钱 唔使 搵 该多, 民 就 一定要 移
money no-need search so much people then must need move
Never mind earning money, (we) must emigrate!
[tein225 m22 səi55 vun55 kəi21 ə335 min22 diu32 yit55 ein32 yiau33 yi22]

According to M&Y, verb-object compounds should be distinguished from other look-alike compound verbs, examples shown below, that are not separable in most of the above ways:

担心 [am33 lim33] burden-heart → worry

关心 [gan33 lim33] care-heart → concerned (about)

投资 [həu22 du33] throw-resources → invest

搵吃 [vun55 hiak33] seek-eat → make a living

知随 [i33 tui22] know-smell → know

去外 [hui33 ηai325] go-outside → go abroad

肿颈 [dzəŋ55 giaŋ55] swell-neck → have the mumps

讲 fan⁵ [gəŋ55 fan55] talk-fun → joke

去村 [hui33 tun21] go-village → visit parental home by married daughters (Mandarin 回娘家)

A verb-object compound loses its idiomatic meaning when separated by a classifier or measure phrase:

饮⁵³ 好 几 杯 茶 [ŋim553 həu55 gi55 bəi33 tsa22]
drank very several CL (cup) tea
(We) drank quite a few cups of tea.

Many verb-subject compounds and others behave just like the verb-object type. Examples:

落水 [lək32 sui55] fall-water → rain

落雹 [lək32 dək215] fall-snow → hail

冧屋 [ləm33 ək55] fall-house → house collapse

死人 [hi55 ŋin22] die-people → people die

冲凉 [tsəŋ33 liaŋ22] pour-cool → take bath, take shower

冲紧凉 [tsəŋ33 gin55 liaŋ22] pour-PROG-cool → (be) taking a bath

冲完凉 [tsəŋ33 yən22 liaŋ22] pour-finish-cool → finish taking a bath

冲两次凉 [tsəŋ33 liaŋ55 lu33 liaŋ22] pour-two-times-cool → take bath twice

Subject-verb compounds

Subject-verb compound verbs are made up of a subject and an intransitive verb and function as stative verbs:

头赤 [həu22 tiak33] head-ache → have a headache

肚饥 [u55 gi33] stomach-hunger → hungry

眼瞓 [ŋan55 fun33] eye-sleep → feel sleepy

颈渴 [giaŋ55 hət33] neck-thirst → thirsty