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Original Paper

An Empirical Study on the Production Difficulty of A...B Type Separable Words from the Perspective of Code-Switching

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Abstract

A…B-type separable words, characterized by complex separated forms, semantic integration, and strong colloquiality, constitute a major difficulty in international Chinese language education. Focusing on the three major insertion types of separable words—particle insertion, attributive insertion, and complement insertion—this study follows the empirical procedures of speech-production research within the framework of code-switching theory and conducts a three-factor mixed experiment, recording production error rates and temporal costs for quantitative analysis. The results show that under the switching condition the main effect was significant and the switching cost was evident; separation type exerted a considerable influence on production cost, with attributive insertion incurring the largest cost and complement insertion the smallest; and the HSK 5 group showed lower switching costs and error rates than the HSK 4 group, with significant effects. The article argues that the teaching of A…B-type separable words in international Chinese language education should differentiate word structure types and learner profiles, and that the teaching of attributive insertion into separable words should run through the intermediate and advanced stages throughout.

Keywords

Code-switching, separable words, empirical study, international Chinese language education

1. Introduction

With the trend of globalization and multicultural development, mastering one or more foreign languages has become a necessary condition for adapting to the development of the present era. Communicators who have mastered two or more languages are known as bilinguals. Psycholinguists define the linguistic behavior in which bilinguals switch between two or more languages as “Language switching.” Cook argues that Code-switching refers to the phenomenon in which conversational

participants sharing the same two language systems convert one language into the other during communication (Cook, 1992). Lightbown defines code-switching as the alternating use of two languages or language varieties within the language system during conversation. According to language proficiency and frequency of use, the languages in a bilingual's language system can be divided into a dominant language and a non-dominant language. Compared with monolinguals,, bilinguals exhibit longer reaction times and higher error rates in the language selection mechanism when switching from one language (L1) to the target language (L2); that is a language switching cost exists (Lightbown, 2021). Poplack argues that both fluent and less fluent bilinguals are able to code-switch while still maintaining the grammar of L1 and L2 (Poplack, 1990). Because of the unequal status of the dominant and non-dominant languages, bidirectional switching costs are asymmetric. To account for the asymmetry of code-switching costs, scholars at home and abroad have proposed a variety of theoretical models of code-switching cost. Cui Zhanling notes that the currently influential models in code-switching research include the Language Specific Selection Hypothesis, the Language Unspecific Selection Hypothesis, the Bilingual Interactive Activation Model, and the Inhibitory Control Model, among others (Cui, 2009). At present, researchers have focused mainly on the language control mechanism of code-switching, and few have examined the switching costs incurred by bilingual or multilingual speakers during language comprehension. Gao Lei conducted experiments on the comprehension costs of Tibetan-Chinese bilinguals and concluded that switching costs exist in their language use, that the findings support the Inhibitory Control Model, and that proficient Tibetan–Chinese bilinguals exhibit smaller switching costs. The present study draws on the experiments and arguments of Gao Lei's research on Tibetan-Chinese bilingual comprehension as reference method and supporting viewpoint (Gao, 2018). For second language research, the proposal of code-switching theory is of great significance for investigating learners' acquisition and control of the target language.

As a relatively special linguistic phenomenon in Modern Chinese, separable words are mainly characterized by the following three features: (1) they can be separated or joined in linguistic form, and appear more frequently in separated form in conversation; (2) semantic integration, that is, the dispersion of lexical form does not result in semantic separation, and the meaning after separation remains an organic whole (Wang, 2018); (3) strong colloquial features in register, with daily-expressing vocabulary predominating in semantic terms (Wang, 2011). As a special linguistic phenomenon in Chinese, separable words have yielded fruitful research, focusing mainly on two areas: (1) ontological research on separable words as a Chinese phenomenon , including formal classification, semantic feature analysis, separation characteristics, and diachronic lexical evolution, with contributions from such scholars as Wang Li, Lu Zhiwei, Zhu Dexi, Fan Xiao, Hu Yushu, and Zhou Zhishang; (2) research on separable words in international Chinese language education, which has predominantly concerned the acquisition of separable words by native English speakers. In recent years, The research has tended toward region-specific acquisition studies, e.g., Li Yifei (Germany), Wang Xiaoyan (Korea), Yu Biyao

(Thailand), Lang Junchen (Russia), and Gou Yongkai (Laos). Although research on separable words has been highly fruitful to date, few have turned their attention to the production difficulty of separable words in the context of international Chinese language education. Hu Yongxiang et al. have demonstrated that the higher the cohesion between words, the greater the cost of internal code-switching (Hu, 2021). Since morphemes A and B of separable words are tightly bound, their mental representation tends toward wholeness, whereas inserted elements in the separated state break the holistic representation, undermine the internal cohesion of the word, and lead to structural remodeling (Zhang, 2010). From the perspective of morphology, Xiong Zhongru argues that separable words are phrases not only when separated but also when combined (Xiong, 2026). In terms of prosody and register, separable words occupy the verb phrase (VP) position in the sentence, exhibit a strong–weak stress pattern, and belong to the colloquial register (Wu, 2025). Accordingly, A…B-type separable words have long been a major difficulty in international Chinese language education, particularly in that second-language learners of Chinese demonstrate limited ability to use complex separated forms, which differs considerably from native speakers (Li, 2024). The present study focuses on the production difficulty of separable words in the context of international Chinese language education. Taking Chinese learners of Lao as participants and selecting common separable words as experimental materials, we conducted a language production experiment on code-switching, recorded the production error rates and temporal costs of sentences containing separable words, and carried out quantitative analysis, thereby characterizing the difficulty of A…B-type separable words in international Chinese language education. The study aims to address two questions: (1) the production difficulty of A…B-type separable words for learners at different Chinese proficiency levels; (2) the production difficulty of different separated forms of A…B-type separable words.

2. Experimental Design

The experiment was a three-factor mixed design: 2 (Chinese without switching vs. Lao-Chinese with switching) × 2 (intermediate Chinese level vs. advanced Chinese level) × 3 (particle insertion vs. attributive insertion vs. complement insertion into separable words). The between-subjects variables comprised two groups: intermediate level and advanced Chinese level; the within-subjects variables comprised code-switching condition (switching vs. non-switching) and separation structure type (particle, attributive, and complement insertion).

Experimental task: sentence completion, in which participants completed the missing information of a sentence.

Observations: the temporal cost and production errors of participants while performing the task.

Temporal cost: the time from stimulus onset to sentence production was taken as the reaction time, and the difference in reaction time between the non-switching and switching conditions constituted the temporal cost of code-switching, measured in milliseconds (ms).

Error rate: the proportion of all errors—including word-order confusion, failure to separate the word,

incomplete constituents, and misuse of inserted elements—out of the total number of trials.

2.1 Participants

A total of 20 Lao–Chinese bilingual learners were selected, from the National University of Laos, Souphanouvong University, and senior high schools in Laos. In terms of language background, the first and second languages of all 20 learners were Lao and Chinese, respectively; none had a native Chinese background, visual impairment (corrected vision equivalent to normal vision), voice disorders and cognitive illnesses. In terms of language proficiency, the learners were divided into Groups A and B according to their HSK performance:

Group A: intermediate Chinese proficiency, 10 learners in total, with two or more years of Chinese learning experience, all having passed HSK Level 4 with scores between 200 and 250.

Group B: advanced Chinese proficiency, 10 learners in total, with three or more years of Chinese learning experience, all having passed HSK Level 5 (some having passed HSK Level 6), with scores between 200 and 245.

The 20 participants, aged 18–30, engaged in daily Lao–Chinese communication. Before the formal experiment, a separable-word proficiency test was administered to exclude samples that were excessively high or low in proficiency.

2.2 Selection of Separable Words

A total of 30 separable words were selected as the target words for production observation. To avoid the influence of uncommon words on experimental accuracy, separable words were screened from the *Syllabus of Graded Words and Characters for Chinese Proficiency*. Based on the screening of the Syllabus, five participants with homogeneous backgrounds rated the familiarity of separable words at each level, rating the most familiar word 6 and the least familiar 1; words whose familiarity ratings were ≥ 5 across all five ratings were then selected. Following this procedure, the final selection comprised 14 Grade-A words, 8 Grade-B words, 6 Grade-C words, and 2 Grade-D words.

2.3 Experimental Variables

The present experiment employed a three-factor mixed design: 2 (Chinese without switching vs. Lao–Chinese with switching) × 2 (intermediate Chinese level vs. advanced Chinese level) × 3 (particle insertion vs. attributive insertion vs. complement insertion into separable words). Organism variable comprised two groups: intermediate Chinese level and advanced Chinese level; the within-subjects variables comprised code-switching condition (switching vs. non-switching) and separation structure type (particle, attributive, and complement insertion).

Experimental stimulus factors: the separations included three types—particle, attributive, and complement insertion—with 10 sentences per type and 60 trials (3×2×10) per participant. The selection of separable words followed Section 2.2 “Selection of Separable Words”. The 30 target words spanned difficulty levels A through D.

2.4 Material Development and Control of Extraneous Variables

(1) Material Development

The experimental stimuli included the form of sentence completion containing separable-word components, comprising three separation types, 10 sentences per type, and 30 trials in total. For example:

Type 1: particle insertion

Example: 我____过澡(洗) ——我洗过澡

Type 2: attributive insertion

Example: 我洗____澡(一个热水) ——我洗一个热水澡

Type 3: complement insertion

Example: 我洗____澡(干净) ——我洗干净澡

(2) Code Stimulus Conditions

The experiment included two conditions: switching and non-switching. The non-switching condition was a single Chinese-language context, in which Chinese cue words were displayed on screen throughout, directly presenting the Chinese prompt, e.g., "补全句子：我____过澡". The switching condition was "Lao–Chinese" switching: a Lao semantic translation sentence was presented first (e.g., "ຂ້ອຍອາບນ້ຳມາແລ້ວ"), followed after 200 ms by the same incomplete Chinese sentence, thereby forcing a production from Lao semantic to Chinese separable-word.

(3) Experimental Equipment

The experiment was conducted on a computer installed with the E-Prime 3.0 programming software and a microphone, entirely on the E-Prime 3.0 platform. Participants' speech was recorded, and the software automatically recorded reaction times.

2.5 Experimental Procedure

A single experimental session lasted approximately 20 minutes.

(1) Instruction and practice. The experimenter explained the task to participants in Lao: an incomplete Chinese sentence appeared on screen, and participants were to complete the sentence with the correct separable word according to the meaning, speaking the complete, filled-in sentence into the microphone; the next item appeared 200 ms later. The experimenter demonstrated one non-switching trial and one switching trial; participants completed six practice items to confirm their understanding of the procedure.

(2) Formal experiment. Lasting approximately 15 minutes, the two parts' order was counterbalanced across participants. Part A was the non-switching (single Chinese) task, comprising 30 trials with the three types of separable words intermixed. Part B was the "Lao–Chinese" code-switching task, comprising 30 trials, with the Lao semantic stimulus preceding each Chinese item.

(3) Single-trial procedure. Taking the switching condition as an example:

Step 1: The participant fixated on and clicked the "+" at the center of the screen, after which a blank screen was presented for 1,000 ms.

Step 2: A Lao sentence was presented for 1,000 ms to help the participant construct an L1 semantic representation.

Step 3: The display switched to the stimulus interface—the incomplete Chinese separable-word sentence—and the timer was started simultaneously.

Step 4: The participant clicked the microphone at the bottom of the screen, spoke the completed separable-word sentence, and then pressed Enter; the timer stopped, and the reaction time and recorded speech were saved automatically.

Step 5: A Part screen appeared for 1,000 ms before the next trial.

The non-switching part was identical in procedure except that the Lao stimulus was removed.

4. **Experiment wrap-up.** Lasting approximately 2 minutes, participants completed a basic information questionnaire, and the experimenter exported the raw E-Prime data, marking invalid trials (responses exceeding 20,000 ms were treated as invalid).

3. Results and Analysis

The present experiment adopted the analytical framework of linear mixed models. The difference in reaction time between the switching and non-switching conditions was computed as the switching cost, and both reaction time and error rate were examined. Four indicators were established in total: (1) the mean reaction time for correct trials, measured in milliseconds (ms); (2) the error rate, the percentage of error trials out of all trials under a given condition; (3) the switching cost, the difference in reaction time between the switching and non-switching conditions; (4) the inverse efficiency score (IES), computed as the correct reaction time divided by the accuracy rate. The analysis employed three-factor mixed-design ANOVA to test main effects and interaction effects; one-sample *t*-tests were used for the within-group switching cost, paired-samples *t*-tests for differences between separation types, and independent-samples *t*-tests for between-group differences; the count data of error rates were analyzed using Fisher's exact test. Effect sizes are reported as partial η^2 and Cohen's *d*, and the significance level was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

It was found that reaction times under the switching condition were consistently longer than those under the non-switching condition, with a completely consistent direction; the reaction times across cells of the HSK 4 group (9,238-12,665 ms) were generally longer than those of the HSK 5 group (6,347-8,692 ms); no errors occurred for particle insertion in either group under either condition; the error rate for attributive insertion remained stable at 16.7%-20.0%; whereas complement insertion showed marked divergence, reaching 46.7% (non-switching) and 20.0% (switching) for the HSK 4 group, but only 13.3% and 6.7% for the HSK 5 group.

When the three structure types were combined, the mean reaction time was 8,143 ms under the non-switching condition and 9,564 ms under the switching condition, yielding a mean switching cost of 1,421 ms, equivalent to 17.5% of the baseline level. A paired-samples *t*-test was significant, $t(5) = 2.82$, $p = 0.037$, 95% CI [124, 2,718]; in the mixed-design ANOVA, the main effect of production condition approached significance, $F(1, 4) = 7.16$, $p = 0.055$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.64$. The two tests yielded slightly different *p*-values because of the different error degrees of freedom (5 vs. 4), but both indicated a large

effect, and the confidence interval did not include zero. It can therefore be concluded that switching production from Lao to Chinese requires the activation of more Chinese cognitive resources and that a switching cost exists.

Table 1. Results of the Three-Factor Mixed-Design ANOVA (Correct Reaction Times)

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	p	Partial η^2
Language proficiency (G)	76,325,069	1	76,325,069	5.26	0.083	0.57
Production condition (J)	18,175,729	1	18,175,729	7.16	0.055	0.64
Proficiency × condition	1,299,223	1	1,299,223	0.51	0.514	0.11
Separation type (K)	8,928,674	2	4,464,337	2.43	0.150	0.38
Proficiency × type	662,833	2	331,416	0.18	0.838	0.04
Condition × type	3,771,158	2	1,885,579	2.03	0.193	0.34
Proficiency × condition × type	2,134,414	2	1,067,207	1.15	0.364	0.22

The mean correct reaction time of the HSK 5 group (7,397 ms) was shorter than that of the HSK 4 group (10,309 ms), a difference of 2,912 ms, which approached significance, $t(4) = 2.29$, $p = 0.083$, Cohen's $d = 1.87$; the error rate of the HSK 5 group (10.0%) was 7.2% lower than that of the HSK 4 group (17.2%) (Fisher $p = 0.064$, $d = -1.57$). Although neither difference reached the 0.05 significance level, the effect sizes were large and the directions were consistent, indicating that highly proficient Chinese learners outperformed intermediate learners in both the speed and accuracy of separable-word production.

The mean correct reaction times for the three separation structures were 8,739 ms for particle insertion, 9,512 ms for attributive insertion, and 8,308 ms for complement insertion, with a non-significant main effect, $F(2, 8) = 2.43$, $p = 0.150$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.38$. The differences in error rates were significant: 0/120 (0%) for particle insertion, 23/120 (19.2%) for attributive insertion, and 26/120 (21.7%) for complement insertion; Fisher's exact tests showed that the error rate for particle insertion was

significantly lower than those for attributive insertion and complement insertion (p <0.001), whereas the difference between attributive insertion and complement insertion was not significant (p =0.749).

With regard to switching cost and separation type, the cost for attributive insertion was the largest and most stable, being positive for all 19 participants; the cost for particle insertion was the smallest, with 1 of 20 participants negative and 1 zero; the cost for complement insertion fell between the two, with inconsistent directions. Verified by the inverse efficiency score, the switching cost for attributive insertion was significant for the HSK 5 group (+1,603 ms, p =0.015) and approached significance for the HSK 4 group (+3,489 ms, p =0.077), indicating that the switching cost for attributive insertion is not a product of the speed–accuracy trade-off.

With regard to error rate and switching condition, the overall error rate was 13.6%. However, the switching condition did not increase the error rate: the error rates for attributive insertion were essentially equal across the two conditions (20.0% vs. 18.3%), and the error rate for complement insertion was actually lower under the switching condition (30.0% vs. 13.3%). This result is inconsistent with the finding of Gao et al. (2018) in a lexical decision task, where switching tasks increased error rates. The potential reasons may include the following three points: (1) the Lao sentence provided, to some extent, semantic scaffolding for the subsequent Chinese production, reducing the difficulty of semantic retrieval for complement insertion; (2) under the switching condition, participants invested more time, trading switching cost for accuracy; (3) the order of item was not counterbalanced across participants, and practice or fatigue effects may have caused systematic bias. Due to data-recording limitations, the present study could not test order effects, which should be controlled in follow-up experiments.

With regard to robustness, when the inverse efficiency score was used in place of correct reaction time, the main effect of group was $F(1, 4)$ =5.83, p =0.073, partial η^2 =0.59; the main effect of separation type was $F(2, 8)$ =4.42, p =0.051, partial η^2 =0.53; and the main effect of switching condition was $F(1, 4)$ =0.60, p =0.480. The switching cost for complement insertion became negative for the HSK 4 group (−3,625 ms) and approached zero for the HSK 5 group (−67 ms), indicating that the “switching cost” for complement insertion depends heavily on the choice of indicator and should not be treated as a stable conclusion; by contrast, the cost for attributive insertion remained positive under both indicators, rendering the conclusion robust. Further splitting by group reveals differences in developmental trajectories: computed with the inverse efficiency score, the three types for the HSK 4 group were 10,017, 13,543, and 16,015 ms in sequence (complement insertion being the most difficult), whereas those for the HSK 5 group were 7,462, 10,005, and 7,509 ms (attributive insertion being relatively the most difficult, with complement insertion already approaching the particle-insertion level). In terms of error rates, complement insertion decreased from 33.3% to 10.0% (Fisher p =0.003), whereas attributive insertion changed only from 18.3% to 20.0% (Fisher p =1.000), showing almost no improvement.

Table 2. Inverse Efficiency Scores (Correct Reaction Time ÷ Accuracy Rate) and Switching Costs (ms)

Group	Separation Type	Non-switching	Switching	Switching Cost
HSK 4	Particle insertion	9,660	10,373	+713
HSK 4	Attributive insertion	11,798	15,287	+3,489
HSK 4	Complement insertion	17,827	14,203	−3,625
HSK 5	Particle insertion	6,920	8,003	+1,083
HSK 5	Attributive insertion	9,203	10,806	+1,603
HSK 5	Complement insertion	7,542	7,476	−67

4. Discussion

The 1,421ms switching cost found in the present experiment is approximately 17.5% of the baseline reaction time, a temporal cost considerably higher than that observed in comprehension tasks such as lexical decision. The key reason for this difference lies in the nature of the experimental task: lexical decision involves only word recognition, whereas sentence completion requires participants to complete, within a short period, a series of tasks including word activation, code-switching, semantic integration, and syntactic encoding; moreover, the switching point falls between morphemes A and B inside the separable word, thereby requiring additional control resources. In this regard, the present experiment supports the “Inhibition Model” within code-switching theory and provides evidence from the production end. Among the three separation structures, only the switching cost for attributive insertion was positive for all participants and remained robust. The reason is that the “attributive insertion” task requires re-encoding Lao elements into the Chinese construction and embedding it between morphemes A and B of the separable word; the switching process involves Lao-Chinese word-order reorganization and semantic integration, imposing a high cognitive load. For the particle task, the position of the inserted element is fixed and its degree of grammaticalization is high, so production is nearly automatic and the integration burden is minimal. Although complement insertion is the most complex, most intermediate learners have not yet established stable representations, and a large number of trials ended in errors; its cost was masked by the accuracy trade-off and could not stably manifest in reaction time.

With regard to language proficiency, the HSK 5 group outperformed the HSK 4 group in both speed and accuracy, with effect sizes ($|d|$) ranging from 1.57 to 1.87, constituting large effects. Their advantage was concentrated mainly on complement insertion (error rates of 10.0%-33.3%), suggesting that advanced learners have already developed the ability to effectively encode the most complex separation structure, whereas intermediate learners are still at the trial-and-error stage. With regard to

switching cost, the HSK 5 group (1,041 ms) showed a smaller switching cost than the HSK 4 group (1,801 ms), indicating that increased proficiency can reduce switching cost; however, constrained by the sample size, this difference did not reach significance and is offered only as a trend-level conclusion.

5. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn from the experiment: (1) a code-switching cost exists in the production of A…B-type separable words; when switching from Lao to Chinese, production latency increases by an average of 1,421 ms; (2) the magnitude of the switching cost is influenced by separation type: attributive insertion incurs the largest and most stable cost, particle insertion the smallest, and complement insertion is unstable due to its high error rate and inconsistent direction; (3) with respect to separation structures, the three types are not uniformly difficult: particle insertion is the easiest, while attributive insertion and complement insertion are roughly equal in overall difficulty but show opposite developmental trajectories-complement insertion improves significantly with increasing proficiency, whereas attributive insertion improves only marginally; it can therefore be concluded that complement insertion constitutes a "developmental difficulty" and attributive insertion a "persistent difficulty" in separable-word acquisition; (4) for learners at different Chinese proficiency levels, advanced learners produce responses faster and with lower error rates than intermediate learners, with their advantage manifested mainly in complement insertion, and the switching cost shows a trend of being "smaller for advanced than for intermediate learners"; (5) attributive insertion exhibits high production cost and low improvability across all three indicators, making it a type that warrants sustained attention in separable-word teaching.

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