

A corpus-based description of particles in spoken Singapore English

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Introduction

Particles in Singapore English (SgE) have been extensively described in previous works (Richards & Tay 1977; Kwan-Terry 1978; Bell & Ser 1983; Loke & Low 1988; Platt & Ho 1989; Gupta 1992; Wong 1994; Wee 1998; Low & Brown 2003:100–103). These studies have looked at whether the particles are positioned after specific word classes like nouns and verbs, possible substratum influences that could account for their existence, and their pragmatic or discourse functions.

These particles have been often referred to as *discourse particles* or *pragmatic particles* in recognition of the important discourse functions they serve in SgE (Platt & Ho 1989; Gupta 1992). The present study deliberately omits the use of either of the premodifiers *discourse* and *pragmatic* before the noun *particles* since one research question is to investigate their role and determine whether it is syntactic or discursal.

The occurrence of particles has been often associated with the colloquial variety of Singapore English (SCE) and they are sometimes called SCE particles (Gupta 1992). However, our data represents a relatively formal speech situation, a conversation between a British lecturer (the second author) and his students. The appearance of particles in this formal setting where one would expect the use of Singapore Standard English (SSE) is somewhat surprising and it is therefore interesting to investigate their functions in this context.

Studies on particles in Singapore English

The particle that has received most scholarly attention is *lah* (also spelt *la*). Researchers have tended to focus on two main issues:

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- its use as a solidarity marker between fellow interlocutors
- its pragmatic functions

Richards & Tay (1977) provide the first reference to the use of *lah* as a marker to establish solidarity and support. However, later works recognise other multiple pragmatic functions of *lah*.

Kwan-Terry (1978) identifies two types of *lah*: the stressed and the unstressed version. The stressed version is associated with a persuasive, conciliatory or explanatory attitude, while the unstressed version is often used to suggest impatience or annoyance. She also links the occurrence of the stressed *lah* with the emotive sentence-final particles found in Chinese and suggests that the appearance of the *lah* particle in SgE is the result of transfer from Chinese.

Bell & Ser (1983) endorse Kwan-Terry's (1978) suggestion of two variants of *lah* and label them as 'long' versus 'short', where the long variant is roughly twice the duration of the short *lah*. The long *lah* is roughly equivalent to Kwan-Terry's stressed *lah* while the short *lah* may be analogous to the unstressed version of *lah*. However, they found the pragmatic roles of the two variants to be diametrically opposite to those described by Kwan-Terry. The short or unstressed *lah* was found to be associated with a reduction of social distance between the interlocutors while the stressed or long *lah* was associated with power-signalling and social-distancing.

Loke & Low (1988) claim that there are at least nine tonal variants of *lah*, each of which signals a different pragmatic function.

Platt & Ho (1989) confirm the different pragmatic functions of SgE particles: to indicate obviousness, disapproval or intimacy and to highlight a particular lexical item for example. However, in addition, they also suggest that the particles serve important discursual functions since they appear to carry nuclear pitch movement which may be associated with a proclaiming tone (fall) and a referring tone (rise) in Brazil's discourse model of intonation. As the nucleus tends to fall on the most important lexical item in British English (BrE), its association with sentence-final particles in SgE suggests that these particles serve important discursual functions in SgE.

Gupta (1992) proposes that there are eleven pragmatic particles in SCE, and divides them into three different categories along a scale of assertiveness: contradictory (*ma, what*), assertive (*me, ge, lei, na, la, lo*) and tentative (*ho, ha, a*). In other words, the contradictory particles are ranked the most assertive while the tentative particles are the least assertive. The contradictory particles serve as explicit rebuttals, and the assertive

particles seek the interlocutor's attention, agreement and cooperation, while the tentative particles merely assume and suggest.

Wong (1994) employs a semantic framework to explain the meanings of three particles, *what*, *ma* and *me* in terms of the status a particular proposition has in a discourse context. This is similar to Gupta's (1992) scale of assertiveness and expresses similar ideas using a different framework. For example, a contradictory particle in Wong's framework is a means of indicating that X disagrees with Y's proposition.

Wee (1998) and Low & Brown (2003) have summarised the various discursal functions served by the particles as described by previous researchers.

It appears that, although much research has focused on the particles in SgE, not much new data has emerged in the last ten years, even though a number of corpora of SgE speech have become available. In addition to providing new data, this study hopes to introduce a new perspective on the study of the particles by focusing on their syntactic functions. One purpose is to compare their role as sentence-final syntactic boundary markers with their function in signaling new topics in a conversation.

Data

The data used for this study comes from 45 interviews with Singaporeans that comprise the major portion of the NIECSSE corpus (Deterding & Low 2001). Of the subjects, 30 are female and 15 male. This corpus is available on CD-ROM, and it can also be accessed on-line at:

www.arts.nie.edu.sg/ell/DavidD/niecsse/index.htm

As researchers can easily access the data, the full environment for the occurrence of particles listed here can be checked and investigated further.

In the interviews, the subjects, who are nearly all trainee teachers at the NIE, are discussing their recent vacations and plans for the future with an expatriate British university lecturer. They all have good English, and they are using their formal variety of English. This study therefore considers the use of particles in SSE, in sharp contrast with the investigation of SCE that is more usual in other studies of Singapore particles.

In many ways, it is surprising that there are any particles at all in this data. Particles are generally considered a feature of SCE (Gupta 1994), so one would expect the speakers to avoid use of them when being

interviewed by an expatriate, especially one who is their academic tutor. Consideration of when particles can occur in this relatively formal environment therefore provides a new insight for the current study.

Instances of particles

All the instances of particles found in this corpus of data are listed below. In the identifying tag at the end of the line, 'F' indicates a female speaker and 'M' a male speaker. In some of the examples, in order to put the utterance in context, the interviewer's speech is also included, preceded by 'I', and then the Singaporean subject's response is preceded by 'S'. Pauses are shown with three dots ('...'), and incomplete words by a dash ('-'). In all cases, the particle of interest is underlined.

- 1 can cycle, not very well, but can cycle ah, knocked myself against a pillar (F13-c:05)
- 2 Japan, actually did a lot of shopping ah, window shopping actually (F13-g:01)
- 3 I mean he cannot afford to lose one of it ah ... he he must take (F18-e:22)
- 4 for us it's not that serious lah, yeah. (F18-e:51)
- 5 the locals ah, actually want- erm advised us to go there (F27-c:38)
- 6 I: ... if you didn't have enough money?
S: No lah, at the end of the day (F27-i:13)
- 7 just idle at home, read a lot of story-books, and that's about all lah. (M1-a:32)
- 8 I: Do you like Jakarta?
S: Erm, not really ah, the traffic is quite horrible (M3-a:26)
- 9 although people there is quite OK lah, I mean they are quite OK (M3-a:31)
- 10 I: So is your Japanese very good?
S: Erm, OK lah, I mean like (M3-c:21)
- 11 they think that I look like Japanese to them ah, I'm not very sure (M3-c:32)
- 12 there's one time they approach me ask me ah, where certain place is (M3-c:36)
- 13 usually the guys approach me ah, er never had the the female Japanese (M3-c:39)
- 14 it was er fun but sleepless ah, because they ... (M6-g:04)
- 15 Yes they do ah, more or less they do affect your grades (M6-c:20)
- 16 more than that, more than that lah, a half year, I don't know (M7-a:43)

- 17 get myself financially prepared as well ah, before er we get married (M10-b:48)
- 18 that's just a hearsay lah ... erm I guess ... it depends on the (M10-c:35)
- 19 I've always taught at primary schools only lah. (M10-d:10)
- 20 because of some dista-dist- er disciplinary problems ah ... erm, yeah (M10-e:20)
- 21 mmm, OK, erm, quite a colourful town to me lah. (M10-f:20)
- 22 probably she did s- mo- most parts ah, but there were some (M11-b:20)
- 23 yeah, that's in the day lah, in the day, it w- the weather was very good (M12-c:00)
- 24 the the type of life that they go through ah ... because we can't see it from (M13-e:16)
- 25 because we can't see it from ... from TVs ah. (M13-e:20)
- 26 it's not advisable to plunge in ah, but if you were to look at the (M13-g:11)
- 27 we were kind of ... s- feel sad for them ah. (M14-f:20)
- 28 gets all these people ah, she's one of the managers down there (M15-h:17)

Of the 28 instances of particles found in this data, ten are *lah* and 18 are *ah*, though one or two are actually indeterminate between these. (For example, in 7, the particle occurs after *all*, which ends in /l/, so we cannot be certain if it is *ah* or *lah*.) There are no instances of the other particles listed by various researchers. It is likely that the other particles such as those described in Gupta (1992) never occur in relatively formal contexts such as during interviews.

We will now consider the role of the particles and also the situational factors that may influence their usage.

Grammatical vs pragmatic role

All but one of the particles occur at the end of an utterance or between two clauses. The only exception is that 5 occurs between the subject and predicate, so that it might be analysed as marking the topic off from the comment:

- 5 the locals ah, actually want- erm advised us to go there

This marking off of the topic in this way is similar to the topic prominence that is characteristic of Mandarin Chinese (Li & Thompson 1981:19) and one might posit that the use of *ah* in SgE is a result of influence from Chinese.

There are two distinct roles for the final particles. Those which occur at the end of an utterance seem to have a pragmatic role perhaps equivalent to a tag or a hedge (*isn't it, you know*):

- 7 just idle at home, read a lot of story-books, and that's about all lah.
 19 I've always taught at primary schools only lah.
 21 mmm, OK, erm, quite a colourful town to me lah.
 25 because we can't see it from ... from TVs ah.
 27 we were kind of ... s- feel sad for them ah.

However, some of the others seem to have more of a syntactic role, almost like an audible comma:

- 12 there's one time they approach me ask me ah, where certain place is
 14 it was er fun but sleepless ah, because they ...
 22 probably she did s- mo- most parts ah, but there were some
 26 it's not advisable to plunge in ah, but if you were to look at the
 28 gets all these people ah, she's one of the managers down there

In fact, as a subordinate clause may be one way of introducing a new topic, this second role might be regarded as analogous to the use of *ah* as a topic marker in 5. In terms of a difference between the two particles, *lah* seems more often to have a pragmatic role, while *ah* more often has a syntactic role.

This suggested pragmatic versus syntactic role of particles may be similar to the emotive and non-emotive sentence-final particles in Mandarin described by Kwan-Terry (1978): emotive particles serve to express the attitude of the speaker and thus play a pragmatic role, while non-emotive particles serve purely syntactic roles such as to indicate the end of a clause. Thus, from our data, *lah* appears to be an emotive particle while *ah* more often occurs as a non-emotive particle.

Conditioning factors

Some (but not all) of the instances of particle usage occur when the speakers get a little flustered. For example, 3 involves the subject discussing what may go wrong in her husband's work, and she is probably concerned about how much she should be discussing this sensitive topic:

- 3 I mean he cannot afford to lose one of it ah ... he he must take

In 11, 12 and 13, the speaker is talking about his failure to meet any nice Japanese girls despite devoting much time to learning Japanese:

- 11 they think that I look like Japanese to them ah, I'm not very sure
 12 there's one time they approach me ask me ah, where certain
 place is
 13 usually the guys approach me ah, er never had the the female
 Japanese

Instance 16 occurs when the speaker finds a need to correct himself, as he originally said he had gone to Bangkok a few months previously but then realises it was more than just a few months ago:

- 16 more than that, more than that lah, a half year, I don't know

Finally, in 20, the particle occurs after some stumbling over the word *disciplinary*, and in 22, it occurs after some stuttering.

- 20 because of some dista-dist- er disciplinary problems ah ... erm,
 yeah
 22 probably she did s- mo- most parts ah, but there were some

One of the most salient factors affecting the occurrence of these particles is that all but six were produced by male speakers, even though 30 out of 45 of the speakers are female. In other words, although two-thirds of the speech data in the corpus is from female speakers, over 78% of the particles occurred in the speech of the males. Furthermore, only three female speakers (10% of the total) used particles, while ten of the 15 male speakers (67% of the total) used at least one particle.

Two hypotheses can be suggested for this gender imbalance. It is possible that the male speakers were more at ease talking to the male interviewer, so they felt more comfortable using a relatively colloquial variety of speech, while the female subjects were less comfortable and maybe even felt somewhat threatened by the interview situation, so they maintained a more formal style of speech. However, this suggestion, that male speakers used a greater number of particles because they were more at ease, conflicts with the observation above, that particles tend to occur in this data when the speakers got flustered. An alternative hypothesis is that, as is well known, there is a tendency for female speakers in many speech communities around the world to use more prestigious forms of

language (Trudgill 1995:76; Labov 2001:266), so the greater use of particles by male subjects in the current study may reflect this tendency for men to use less prestigious forms of language.

Previous work (Richards & Tay 1977) has emphasised the use of particles as solidarity markers. In the current study, the particles do not establish solidarity between the interlocutors, because the interviewer, as a British speaker, never uses such particles. In terms of accommodation theory (Giles et al eds 1991), the use of particles here serves to increase the social distance between the participants in the conversation rather than to create social convergence. One possible interpretation is that the female speakers display a greater degree of positive accommodation by avoiding the use of particles.

Conclusion

This chapter presents some new data on the use of particles in relatively formal Singapore English. As this data is easily available, researchers are encouraged to investigate the usage further.

It is suggested that there are two functions of the particles found here: one as an utterance-final pragmatic marker, similar perhaps to a hedge, and one as an audible comma, separating the topic from the comment or marking the boundary between two clauses.

It was found that speakers are more likely to use particles when they get flustered. It was also found that there is a substantially greater usage of particles by male speakers, and this may reflect the tendency for female speakers to use more prestigious forms of language in formal situations.

All of these issues deserve to be researched further.

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