Singlish pragmatic particles: Tone or intonation?   E-Ching Ng · University of Chicago
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(1) **Singlish pragmatic particles**

a. My parents very old fashion *ah*²¹? Then your parents *leh*⁵⁵? (Lim 2007)
'Are you saying that my parents are old-fashioned? Then what about your parents?'

b. 14 different tones for *lah* (Loke & Low 1988) or just intonation (Tongue 1974; Gupta 1992)?

(2) **Pragmatic particles analysed with lexical tone (Kwan-Terry 1992; Wong 2004; Lim 2007)**

	High (55)	Mid (33)	Low (21)	Falling (51)	Rising (24)
lah	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
leh	✓				
lor		✓			
mah		✓			
meh	✓				
ah			✓		✓
what			✓		
hor					✓

(3) **Tones in Hokkien Chinese (cf. Teochew, Cantonese)**

a. | 55 or 44 | 33 or 22 | 21 or 11 | 51 or 52 | 24 or 13 |
    |----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
    | High level | Mid level | Low level | Falling | Rising |

b. The Min tone circle (59-year-old male speaker, 2008)

$$24 \longrightarrow 21 \nearrow 51 \searrow 55 \nearrow 33 \swarrow$$
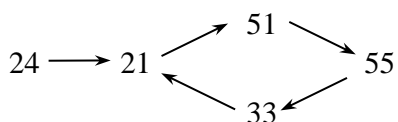
Note: The rules for closed syllables are slightly different and have been excluded from this diagram.

c. Particles are not parsed

i. [maj⁵¹ kjã²⁴]   don't walk
[maj⁵¹ kjã²⁴] la²¹   don't walk PARTICLE
[maj⁵¹ kjã¹¹ lɔ¹¹]   don't walk road

ii. [ɔ³³ kaw⁵¹]   black dog
[ɔ³³ kaw⁵¹] la¹¹ black dog PARTICLE
[kaw⁵⁵ mŋ²⁴]   dog fur

(4) **Intonation at the word level (Wee 2008; Ng 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2019; Siraj 2008)**
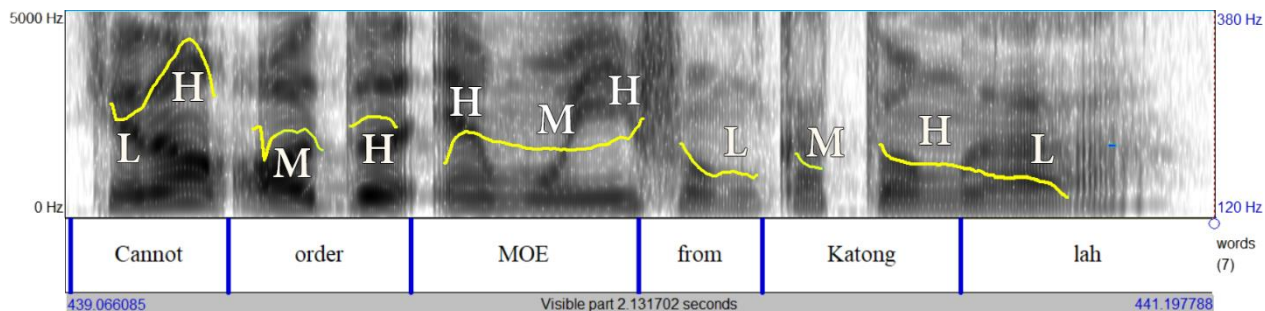
(5)   Tone assignment at the word level

    a. Basic pattern (Ng 2009)

        ‣ High tone on last syllable of prosodic word   H   L M H   MMMMH
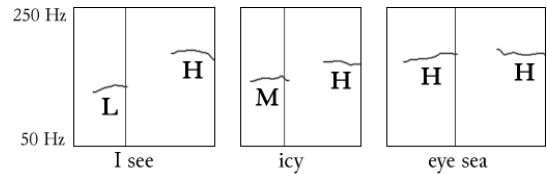
        ‣ Mid tone from first stress onwards   *name*   *Malaysia*   *minimisation*

        ‣ Low tone elsewhere

    b. Exceptions

        ‣ Rising tone: *don't, damn, can*

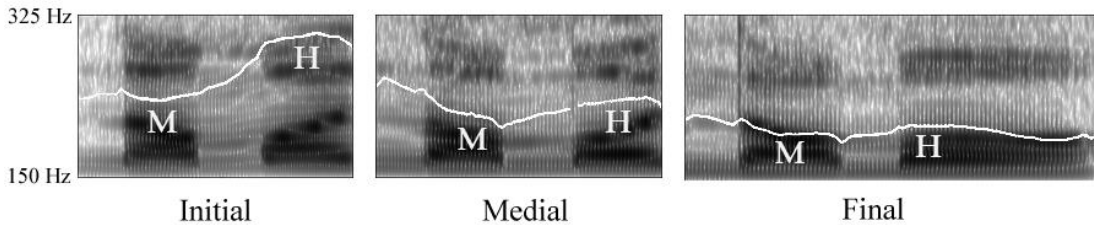   c. Variation: prosodic word parsing (Ng 2010)

        ‣ Cliticisation: ***It doesn't like it***

                 L (M H) (H)(**H**)

                 L (M H) (M **H**)

            ? L (M H) (**H**) L

250 Hz / 50 Hz — I see (L, H) · icy (M, H) · eye sea (H, H)

(6)   Intonation at the sentence level

    a. Sentence position: *normal* in H__L context (Ng 2011)

325 Hz / 150 Hz — Initial (M, H) · Medial (M, H) · Final (M, H)

Script: ALI say cannot	order. Normal deliver from Katong one no	
	order Normal deliver from Katong one. No	standard.
	order Normal. Deliver from Katong one no	

    b. Boundary tone proposals (Chong 2012; Chow 2016)

        ‣ Declarative statements: Low boundary tone

        ‣ Interrogatives (yes/no questions): High boundary tone

(7)   Pragmatic particles: Tone or intonation? (cf. Lee & Kim 2016; Chow 2016: 121, 143)

    a. Intonation: The distribution of possible tones should pattern like toneless words.

        i. Stressed monosyllables: high → falling (551)

        ii. Unstressed monosyllables cliticise: high → falling (551)

        iii. Other possibilities: downstep (high → mid), rising → rising-falling, unparsed (low tone)

    b. Tone: different meanings, or traceable to substrate tonal languages.

        ‣ Cantonese: similar to transcriptions in (2), except for *lah* (and *what*).

        ‣ Hokkien: neutral tone ≈ low (and unparsed).

(8)   **Elicitations**

    a. Try lah/leh/lor/mah/meh/nine.   (applying for something prestigious / Sudoku suggestion)

    b. Cannot lah/leh/lor/mah/meh/see.   (unexpected website error / child at museum)

    c. Liddat lah/leh/lor/mah/meh/one.   (responding to complaint about library fines)

(9)   **Grammaticality judgments (40f, 33m, 26m, 25f)**

	High (55)	Mid (33)	Low (21)	Falling (551)	Rising (24)
lah	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓
leh	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	?✓✓✓	??✓✓	??✓✓
lor	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	***?	**✓✓	***?
mah	✓?✓?	✓✓✓?	??✓?	??✓?	??**
meh	✓✓✓✓	**✓✓	**✓*	**✓✓	****
nine/see/one	✓✓ ✓✓	**✓✓	***✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓ → only echo Q

Note: All previously reported pronunciations were accepted, except for *mah*.
Two subjects (33m, 25f) mentioned that they didn't hear this particle much.

(10)   **Some observations**

    a. Toneless English words: none of the particles match this pattern of distribution.

      ‣ Try pronouns instead of *nine/see/one*?

      ‣ Final high level tone is grammatical, so phrase-final low boundary tone is optional?

      ‣ Mid tone has been reinterpreted as a downstepped high tone by younger consultants?

    b. Pragmatic particles:

      ‣ Mid tone patterns with high tone except for *meh* (yes-no Q).

      ‣ Low, falling, rising tones are more restricted.

    c. Tone or intonation?

      ‣ Particles seem to be acquiring more pronunciations over time.

      ‣ Consultants often repeated after me with different pronunciation.

Acknowledgments

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