Sentence final particles as epistemic modulators in Cantonese conversations: A discourse-pragmatic perspective

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A B S T R A C T

This paper attempts to extend the investigation of Cantonese sentence final particles (SFPs), and explore in particular their roles and functions in modulating the speaker's epistemic stance in conversational interactions. The stance of a speaker is emerging and continuously being negotiated and shaped in the course of the conversation; conversation participants will need to constantly modify and revise their stance and what they have already said as the conversation progresses. Because of their position as utterance final, SFPs are perfect grammatical devices to be employed to recalibrate and finalize the speaker's epistemic stance. Seeing epistemic modulation as a discourse process, this paper exemplifies how Cantonese SFPs can be deployed to reaffirm, as well as to modulate (i.e. upgrade or downgrade) the epistemic stance of the speaker in our conversational data. It is hoped that this paper could also shed light on other cross-linguistic studies on epistemic modulations and stance-taking.

1. Sentence final particles as epistemic modulators in Cantonese conversations

Knowing how to interpret a speaker's subjective stance and attitude is vital in human communication. When we interact with other people, we need to understand not only the word meaning, but also what the speaker is *trying to say* — we constantly need to recognize the speaker's intention, attitude, and state of mind. When people take part in everyday social activities, they routinely need to express their stance towards a certain situation — how the speaker evaluates the situation, how evident the speaker's conclusion of the situation is, etc. Many a time when the speaker is being queried or challenged, he or she will need to make evaluations of the current situation and this will inevitably involve the expression of the speaker's assessment of the situation as well as how and to what degree the speaker is committed to this judgment made. Consider the following conversation between two friends (both females) that was over-heard in the supermarket:

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(1) (A = female; B = female)

A: Ni^1 zek^3 $zyu^1gu^1lik^1$ hou^2ci^5 gei^2 $hou^2sik^{6.1}$

    this   CL   chocolate   seem   quite   delicious

    'This chocolate seems to be quite delicious.'

→ B: Ngo^5 m^4 zi^1 aa^3! Ngo^5 gu^2 $jing^1goi^1$ $maa^4maa^2dei^2$ $gwaa^3$!

    1SG   NEG   know   SFP   1SG   guess   probably   average   SFP

    Nei^1 zek^3 $paai^4zi^2$ do^1sou^3 dou^1 m^4 hou^2sik^6 gaa^3!

    this   CL   brand   mostly   also   NEG   delicious   SFP

    'I don't know! I guess, probably, it is average! Most of the chocolates from the

    same brand are not delicious!'

One common type of action that is frequently involved in daily interactions would be the seeking of opinions or suggestions from co-participants. When a conversation co-participant is asked about his or her opinion towards an object or event, he or she will need to present his or her stance and this stance- or perspective-display would inevitably involve assessment, which also regularly invokes the speaker's agreement or disagreement of the prior speaker. In (1), speaker B is making use of a range of strategies to express her opinion towards the chocolate. By saying ngo^5 m^4 zi^1 aa^3 'I don't know!', the speaker first expresses her detachment from the claim because of her insufficient first-hand experience that she has not tried the chocolate before. Then, she is making a guess that the chocolate is probably not very good. This uncertainty is indicated by the epistemic phrase ngo^5 gu^2 "I guess", the adverb $jing^1goi^1$ "probably", and the sentence-final particle (SFP) $gwaa^3$, marking the speaker's doubt. In fact, the use of m^4 zi^1 "don't' know", ngo^5 gu^2 "I guess", $jing^1goi^1$ "probably", and $gwaa^3$ together serves a face-saving function, especially that a disagreement is involved here. Previous studies on conversation analysis have long proven a bias for conversation participants to avoid possible conflicts and to maintain social solidarity (Schegloff et al., 1977; Pomerantz, 1978; Davidson, 1984; Heritage, 1984; Jefferson, 1987; Mori, 1999; among others). The organization of talk in general should favor the maintenance of agreement among participants. Thus, it is observed that the speaker would choose to mitigate the strength of his or her claim to avoid a potential conflict, as in (1). Speaker B's suggestion that the chocolate is probably not very good is then further supported by the reason that nei^1 zek^3 $paai^4zi^2$ do^1sou^3 dou^1 m^4 hou^2sik^6 'most of the chocolates from the same brand are not good'. What is more, this supportive evidence is further reinforced by the affirmative SFP gaa^3.

Example (1) illustrates how various strategies collaborate with one another to co-construct and express the speaker's stance — all these cues at different levels of grammar mark the overall epistemic stance of the speaker. For the purpose of our paper, we are narrowing down our focus to the role of sentence final particles (SFPs), particularly on how they are used to indicate, as well as to modulate, the speaker's epistemic stance. In other words, we are interested in finding out how SFPs are used to upgrade or downgrade the speaker's epistemic claim from a discourse-pragmatic perspective.

This phenomenon of "epistemic modulation" is, I believe, 'a prime example of how the study of grammar can, and should, be linked to the study of talk-in-interaction and how solutions to grammatical problems can often be found with the help of conversation analysis' (Ochs et al., 1996). When people are involved in daily interactions which include negotiations, they will inevitably need to either upgrade or downgrade their strength of epistemic claims when they are being queried or challenged. It is exactly when they will need to make use of different strategies to position themselves in that particular situation and discourse context. By adopting a discourse-pragmatic analytical approach, we can reveal how grammatical strategies, in particular SPFs, can be used to perform epistemic modulations.

In light of the above background, the aims of this paper can be rearticulated as follows:

(i) to extend beyond previous works on Cantonese SFPs (which have mostly been on the domains of tense, modality, and aspect), and examine how native speakers of Cantonese make use of them to express, as well as to modulate, the epistemic strength of their claims when they are queried or challenged, and;

(ii) to account for the interactions between SFPs and other strategies with different degrees of epistemic strength, so as to reaffirm, or recalibrate the speaker's epistemic stance.

The paper is structured in the following way. In the next section, I will first present what sentence final particles (SFPs) are in Cantonese. I will then outline the data used in the study. After that, I will briefly explain how speaker's epistemic stance is expressed in natural conversations, particularly, I will elaborate on how SFPs can be used as epistemic modulators to reaffirm the speaker's original stance, as well as to reformulate a revised stance. I will conclude and summarize the findings in the final section.

2. Cantonese sentence final particles (SFPS)

Cantonese is well-known for its rich inventory of grammatical elements for its speakers to present their own viewpoints in different situations. The pervasive use of sentence final particles (SFPs) marks the distinctiveness and uniqueness of

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[1] Cantonese tones are marked by numbers in superscript. The pitch levels of tone 1 to tone 6 are: 55, 35, 33, 11, 25, 22 respectively, with 5 being the highest pitch and 1 being the lowest. For transcription notations, please see Appendix at the end of the paper.