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Pragmatic Particles as Speech Strategies: The Case of *Leh* and its Tonal Variants in Colloquial Singapore English

Abstract

This paper discusses the particle *leh* in Colloquial Singapore English, one of the least examined particles in the current literature. Our study shows that the particle *leh* has three tonal variants; each variant performs a specific discourse function, namely, as a marker of compromise, as a marker of speaker's intent and as a marker of assertion. It is proposed that the three variants should not be taken as independent particles, as some scholars have suggested, but as derivations from a single pragmatic core. Specifically, the particle *leh* is generally used to negotiate a proposition in conversational discourse, with each tonal variant representing one specific property of it in particular speech contexts. This study suggests that the pragmatics of the tonal variants of a single pragmatic particle can be traced back to a fundamental core, and the specific discourse functions of each variant are instantiations of this core in different contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

The existence of pragmatic particles as a distinctive discourse phenomenon has long been recognized in the literature on Colloquial Singapore English (CSE¹) (Platt 1987; Platt and Ho 1989; Gupta 1992; Wee 2002; Wong 2004). Gupta (1992) proposes eleven CSE particles and suggests that they express different degrees of assertiveness. Platt (1987: 392) adopts the more general perspective that pragmatic particles 'convey additional meaning over and above that

expressed by the rest of the utterance.’ This can be illustrated by the fact that different pragmatic particles can be affixed to a single utterance to derive different speaker meanings, as shown in example (1) below.

- (1) a. I want to drink *mah*.²
 b. I want to drink *lah*.
 c. I want to drink *leh*.
 d. I want to drink *lor*.
 e. I want to drink *hor*.
 f. I want to drink *a*.

In (1a-f), the head clause ‘I want to drink’ is invariant. The clause-final particles are syntactically and semantically optional, as their omission affects neither the grammaticality nor the basic meaning of the matrix clause. In actual CSE discourse, however, the communicative function of each clause is rendered unique by the clause-final particle. For instance, *mah* in (1a) performs the ‘contradictory function’ of correcting an interlocutor ‘by presenting what is being said as an absolute and even obvious fact’, whereas *lah* in (1b) performs the ‘assertive function’ of indicating a speaker’s commitment to what is said. (Gupta 1992: 43) This demonstrates that these particles perform a discourse-pragmatic rather than a syntactic/semantic function.

One distinctive feature of CSE particles is their tonal variation. As most CSE particles have their origins in the southern varieties of Chinese, they each carry a lexical tone like any other Chinese syllable. Scholars have noted that the functions of CSE particles vary with the tones they carry. Platt and Ho (1989: 217) have also noted that ‘the basic distinction, not only with *la* but also other particles, seems to be tone.’ Loke and Low (1988: 159) propose a ‘tonal-intonational descriptive framework to account for the full range of pragmatic meanings’ for *lah* in CSE, and identify nine tonal variants of *lah*, falling into the three major groups of ‘high’, ‘mid’ and ‘low’. On the other hand, Kwan-Terry (1992: 64-66) distinguishes between two tonally distinct *lahs* (low-level tone and mid-rising tone), proposing them as ‘two different particles’.

In this paper, I focus on the particle *leh*, one of the least examined particles in CSE. In the next section, I will provide a critical survey of previous studies on the particle, namely Platt (1987), Platt and Ho (1989) and Gupta (1992). In Section 3, I propose three tonal variants for the particle *leh*: *leh1*, *leh3* and *leh4*. The pragmatic functions of each tonal variant will be discussed in detail. In Section 4, I shall give an account of how the functions of these tonal variants might be reconciled under a common pragmatic core. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON *LEH*.

2.1 Platt (1987) and Platt and Ho (1989)

Platt (1987) and Platt and Ho (1989) analyse two variants of *leh* (*le*). The rising or high-level tone *leh* occurs in questions where the speaker feels uncertain about the answer,³ in which case it carries the meaning of ‘what about?’ For instance:

(2) Siew Lian *leh*, going or not?⁴

In example (2), *leh* is a question particle following the subject of the question, and the first clause could be rendered as ‘what about Siew Lian?’

However, my observation shows that the phrase ‘what about’ cannot adequately capture the meaning of every occurrence of *leh*. Contextual factors have to be taken into account when interpreting the meaning of the question particle. For instance, if we omit the interrogative clause ‘going or not’ in example (2), *leh* becomes the marker of a truncated question, as in:

(3) Siew Lian *leh*?

In this case, the entire clause could be rendered either as ‘what about Siew Lian’ or ‘where is Siew Lian’, depending on the context in question. Consider the following examples:

(4)

A: Everyone’s here. Let’s go.

B: Wait. Siew Lian *leh*?

(5)

A: Alan will wipe the tables, and John will sweep the floor.

B: Then Siew Lian *leh*?

The clause containing *leh* in example (4) should be rendered as ‘where is Siew Lian’, where the location of Siew Lian is in question. In example (5) however, where speaker A is dispatching classroom duties, B’s utterance is related not to the location of Siew Lian but to the type of duties allocated to her, and hence should be rendered as ‘what about Siew Lian’. This means that contrary to what Platt (1987) and Platt and Ho (1989) have suggested, high-level tone *leh* does not carry the invariant meaning of ‘what about?’ when used as a question particle. Moreover, as I shall argue below, *leh* as being used in a truncated question should not be considered as a pragmatic particle in the strictest sense.

It is also suggested that the low-level tone *leh* occurs in utterances containing information which the speaker assumes to be new to the addressee. Specifically, *leh* can be used ‘when the speaker is in disagreement with the addressee’s suggestion’, for instance (Platt and Ho 1989: 219):

(6) You call walk her there, very far *leh*.

(i.e. You asked her to walk there. That’s pretty far)

In addition, *leh* be used ‘in forestalling a possible disagreement’ (Platt 1987: 398), as illustrated in following example:

(7) A to B (looking at a dress): Forty dollars only *leh*.

(i.e. Even if you don’t think it’s cheap, I do.)

As I will attempt to show below, the case is much more complex than this, as there are actually two variants within the tonal category labeled ‘low-level’, and each tonal variant has its more specific pragmatic function. In fact, the interpretations of the meaning of *leh* in (6) and (7) are rather strained, as there is no inherent opposition in the quoted discourse to warrant any sense

of disagreement. Rather, as I would suggest in this paper, the particle is used to express the speaker's intent or assertiveness with respect to a certain proposition when used in the third or fourth tones respectively.

It is also curious that Platt and Ho (1989: 220), having established the dichotomy between the high-level tone and low-level tone *leh*, suggest that 'particles in Chinese do not have lexical tone and this would seem to be the case when they are used in Singapore English.' This paper rejects this view and recognizes that pragmatic particles have their own inherent lexical tones, which in turn have a bearing on their distinct discourse functions.

2.2 Gupta (1992)

Gupta (1992) proposes three main groups of pragmatic particles in CSE: the maximally assertive (contradictory), the assertive and the minimally assertive (tentative). The particle *leh*, which falls under the 'assertive' category, is used to 'express a commitment that an interlocutor is expected to act upon.' (Ibid 42) The following example is extracted from Gupta (1992):

(8) I want to drink *leh*. I want to take my vitamin C.

Although Gupta's explanation is a valid interpretation of the use of *leh* in the above context, it does not encompass the various pragmatics of the particle. As we shall see later, "assertiveness" describes the function of only one tonal variant of *leh*.

In example (9) below, Gupta presents another use of the particle:

(9)
 [YG finds passing-out parade picture]
 YG Soldier is like that one *leh*? [high rise]
 AG Yes.

In this example, YG is looking at a photograph of her father's passing-out parade and expresses surprise that her father is wearing a uniform that is considerably different from that of the typical soldier she has seen. On the basis of this example, Gupta (1992: 42) proposes that one other

function of *leh* is to express surprise, whereby the speaker ‘makes an observation, about which there is no doubt, but which is unexpected.’

This is a clearly misguided induction, caused by the inadvertent use of an isolated example. Assuming no transcription error, the use of *leh* in (9) is typically unacceptable to a native CSE speaker. This is probably a case of a performance error, whereby the particle is being misused.⁵ The appropriate particle to be used here is *meh*, which is ‘used by a speaker who has experienced a change in perception about something, in the sense that a proposition which he previously held no longer seems valid.’ (Wong 2004: 781). The context in example (9) fully fits this exposition. I therefore reject Gupta’s claim that *leh* has the function of expressing surprise.

In addition to the assertive uses of *leh*, Gupta also identifies the truncated question particle *leh*, which, in line with Platt (1987), she renders as ‘what about’. Contrary to Platt (1987), Gupta regards this type of *leh* as a ‘non-pragmatic particle’, distinguishing it from the assertive *leh*, which ‘is entirely distinct in syntax and in function.’ (Gupta 1992: 36) However, Gupta does not provide an explanation as to why she makes such a distinction.

I agree that the function of *leh* in a truncated question is non-pragmatic in nature. This is because this type of *leh* has a very different behaviour from other CSE particles. As mentioned earlier, one typical feature of pragmatic particles is that their omission affects neither the grammaticality nor the basic meaning of the matrix clause. However, the use of *leh* in a truncated question violates this feature. For instance, a person looking for his pencil box may say the following in CSE:

- (10) (a) My pencil box *leh*?
 (b) My pencil box.

The presence of *leh* renders (10a) as the question ‘Where is my pencil box?’ If the particle is dropped, as in (10b), the utterance becomes a possessive statement rather than a question. The

absence of the particle thus changes both the grammatical nature as well as the meaning of the utterance. This means that the particle *leh* possesses a syntactic/semantic function when used in truncated questions. For this reason, I shall be excluding this type of *leh* from the following discussion.

3. THE THREE TONAL VARIANTS OF *LEH*

The data presented for this study are extracted from authentic instances of use from conversational interaction among native Singaporeans. Our analysis presents three tonal variants of *leh*, realized in tone 1, tone 3 and tone 4 of Mandarin Chinese respectively. Each particle has its own pragmatic function realized in specific speech contexts. In the following, I shall analyse each variant of *leh* in its most typical contexts and propose its general pragmatic meaning.

3.1 *Leh1*: Marker of Compromise

The first variant of *leh* to be discussed is that pronounced in the first tone of Mandarin Chinese. This particle typically occurs in three contexts: (1) as marker of a dispreferred second, (2) as a persuasive marker and (3) as a marker in *why* constructions where the speaker questions a given proposition.

3.1.1 Dispreferred Second

This use of *leh1* occurs in the second part of an adjacency pair, whereby the speaker is unable or unwilling to provide a preferred response with respect to a proposition introduced by the addressee in the first part of discourse. The first part of discourse could be an assertion as in example (11), a question as in example (12) or a request as in example (13). According to Yule (1996: 79), following Levinson, in considering assessments, invitations, offers, proposals or requests as first parts, agreements and acceptances are the preferred and structurally expected next acts, whereas disagreements and refusals are the dispreferred and structurally unexpected

next acts. In each of the three examples below, *leh1* is tagged to a dispreferred second part, indicating that the speaker is not producing a structurally expected response to the first part.

(11)

A: The Eiffel Tower is the tallest building in the world.

B: Not true *leh1*, the Petronas Tower surpass it already what.

(12)

A: Have you seen my wallet anywhere?

B: Never see *leh1*.

(13)

A: Can we go to the beach today?

B: Cannot *leh1*, I have a lot of homework to do.

Pragmatically speaking, the expression of a dispreferred second represents social distance and a lack of connection between interlocutors (Yule 1996: 82). On the other hand, pragmatic particles such as *leh* occurs only in colloquial speech and therefore has the effect of reinforcing social connections.⁶ The use of *leh1* in this context can therefore be seen a mitigating speech device used to offset the pragmatic effect of a dispreferred second. Specifically, the use of *leh1* expresses a compromising attitude on the part of the second speaker, who uses the particle pragmatically to compensate for the fact that a dispreferred second made. As a dispreferred second is an unexpected act, it may pose a threat to the first speaker's expectations regarding self-image. The use of *leh1* serves to mitigate this threat; in other words, the particle functions as a face saving act.

For instance, in example (11), B's response is a rejection, and therefore a dispreferred second, to A's assertion that the Eiffel Tower is the tallest building in the world. The omission of *leh1* would render B's response ('Not true') an outright rejection without concession. On the other hand, the inclusion of the particle presents B's response as a negotiating utterance rather than a

contradictory one, with the suggestion that B is seeking A's compromise on his apparent inability to produce a preferred response.

There is however, one particular context in CSE in which *leh1* is used as a face threatening act instead of a face saving act. For instance, below is a dialogue between two primary school students:

(14)

A: Can you lend me this pencil?

B: Don't want *leh1*, I don't want to lend you *leh1*.

In this example, *leh1* is also used to mark a dispreferred second, as B rejects A's request for a pencil. However, the particle pragmatically reinforces the contradictory force of the defiance of a given first part, instead of expressing a request for compromise. Our data shows that this occurrence of *leh1* is atypical. It is probably the pragmatic extension of the general function of *leh1* from a situation in which a speaker produces a dispreferred second with a face saving intention, to situations in which the speaker produces a dispreferred second with the intention of conflict. The typical function of *leh1* here is to indicate the speaker's desire to express a dispreferred second without threatening the face of either party.

3.1.2 Persuasion

The second use of *leh1* occurs in situations where the speaker brings up a proposition in contradiction to the addressee's wishes or intentions, with the aim of persuading the latter to change his earlier view and accept the new (or speaker's) proposition.

(15)

A: I am not going to the zoo with you today.

B: Go *leh1*, go *leh1*, you don't go not fun already.

(16)

A: I am going to tell Mum you broke the vase.

B: Don't like that *leh1*, don't tell Mummy *leh1*. Please *lah*.

In the examples above, the head clauses to which *leh1* is tagged present a contradiction to a certain proposition mentioned earlier. Here the particle has the crucial pragmatic function of changing the nature of the directive in B's response. Without the particle, B's utterances in (15) and (16) are interpreted as direct commands ('go'; 'don't tell Mummy'). With the particle, however, there is the added element of persuasion, which renders the directives more request-like.

Notice that although B's utterances above are syntactically non-questions, they are pragmatically interpreted as questions, in the sense of 'Can you go?' in (15) and 'Can you not tell Mummy?' in (16) respectively. In this case, the function of the particle *leh1* is to scale down the degree of intent of the speaker producing the command-directive (which contradicts an earlier proposition). The command-directive pragmatically becomes a request-directive, serving to solicit a concession on the part of the addressee on his earlier proposition. In other words, the particle is a persuasion marker, expressing the speaker's desire for the addressee to compromise on an earlier proposition. For instance, in example (15), A rejects the idea of going to the zoo; B's utterance 'go *leh1*' is a directive speech act that contradicts A's intention and requests for a compromise. Similarly, in example (16), B's utterance 'don't like that *leh1*' is a request for A not to complain about B's breaking the vase (which A had earlier threatened to do), and this request is made in the form of a directive plus *leh1* particle. In this context, *leh1* serves as a persuasive device, used to invite the addressee to perform an action against his original intentions.

3.1.3 *Why* Constructions

The third use of *leh1* occurs in *why* constructions where the speaker questions a stated proposition, with the implicature that the reverse situation is preferred. For instance:

(17)

A: I heard our school will be closed down next year.

B: Why *leh1*?

A: I think because there are not enough students.

(18)

[B visits A's house]

A: Why you didn't call me first before you come *leh1*?

B: I want to give you a surprise *mah*.

Without the particle, the utterances of A above are simply wh-questions seeking the addressee's explanation of a given state of affair. The particle *leh1* expresses the additional meaning that the speaker feels the given state of affair should not have happened and seeks compromise or agreement from the addressee on this. In (17), B's response implies that he feels the school should not be closed down. B does not merely ask for A's explanation of the reason behind the school's closing down (which can be accomplished by the wh-question itself), but also seeks to gain A's recognition that the reverse state of affair is preferred. Similarly, in (18), the *leh*-tagged question suggests that A feels B should have given him a call before the visit and invites B to agree on this point.

3.1.4 Interim Summary

As can be seen from the above analysis, the use of *leh1* typically entails some kind of contradiction between the head utterance to which the particle is affixed and a certain proposition mentioned in prior discourse. The particle serves as a speech strategy used by the speaker to seek compromise from the addressee on a certain point. In the situation where the speaker produces a dispreferred second in discourse, *leh1* restores social connection by canceling the possible face threatening act of disagreement or rejection, with which the addressee is asked to compromise. In the situation in which the speaker attempts to persuade the addressee to perform an act in contrary to the latter's intention, *leh1* converts a command-directive pragmatically into a request-

directive, thus implicating a request for the addressee to compromise on a certain proposition.

Lastly, the particle is also used in *why* constructions when the speaker does not prefer or agree to a given state of affair and invites the addressee to compromise with him.

3.2 *Leh3*: Marker of Intent

The next variant of *leh* I shall discuss here is that pronounced in tone 3 of Mandarin Chinese. This particle occurs in the following situations: (1) where the speaker reports a state of affair assumed to be beyond the addressee's knowledge; (2) as an emphatic marker and (3) where the speaker challenges the addressee's state of belief.

3.2.1 Reporting a new state of affair

In the context where the speaker informs the addressee of an event or state of affair that is assumed to be new to the latter, *leh3* is used to indicate the speaker's intent in bringing across the new information to the addressee. For instance,

(19)

A: I heard a new teacher is coming to our school today *leh3*.

B: Is it? Male or female?

(20)

A: Hey, today is a special day *leh3*.

B: What special day?

A: My birthday *lor*.

In example (19), A informs about the coming of a new teacher, which is assumed to be new information to B. In example (20), A informs B about a 'special day', which is supposedly unknown to B. The particle *leh3* suggests that the speaker is trying to highlight the saliency of this new information and establish it as shared information. The addressee is invited to come to terms with or acknowledge this new information. In this sense, the pragmatics of *leh3* is similar to *you know*, a common discourse marker which serves two functions in several English varieties: (1) as 'an information state marker' that indicates knowledge shared between speaker and hearer

(Schiffrin 1987: 294); (2) as ‘an information state enhancer’ which orientates ‘both speaker and hearer to the importance and saliency of certain information.’ (He and Lindsey 1998: 150) In other words, the particle *leh3* is an indicator of the speaker’s intent in introducing new information to the addressee and rendering it as shared knowledge.

3.2.2 Emphatic Marker

The pragmatic use of *leh3* in coding salient and shared information can be extended to its use as an emphatic marker. Example (21) illustrates this point.

(21) [A mother to her son, who is about to leave the house]

A: Remember to come back for dinner *leh3*

(5 seconds pass)

A: *leh3*.

(22)

A: Wait for me another five minutes.

B: I’m late already *leh3*.

This is a fairly common use of *leh3* in CSE, where the particle is used to emphasize the importance of the message given in the head utterance and seeks the addressee to either perform a desired action or agree to an assertion. The speaker uses the particle to draw the addressee’s attention to some desired course of action and to imply that it is pertinent for the addressee to perform that action. In (21), the action desired of B is to remember to come home for dinner. Similarly, in (22), B does not only mean that he is late, but also to imply that A should respond to this fact and thus expedite. The implicature of *leh3* is thus the following: the addressee is invited to come to terms with the message expressed in the head utterance. This is proven by the fact that in (20), when A’s directive was not acknowledged, the particle *leh3* occurs again, this time as an independent TCU (turn-constructive-unit). This is a further emphasis on the earlier information given and solicits a positive response and/or action on the part of the addressee.

3.2.3 Challenging a given state of belief

This function is similar to that of *leh1* as a marker of a dispreferred second, where the particle is used to invite the addressee's compromise on a proposition made in prior discourse, as outlined in (3.1.1). However, the use of tone 3 instead of tone 1 renders the particle a stronger sense of intent on the part of the speaker. Example (11) is reproduced as (23) below.

(23)

A: The Eiffel Tower is the tallest building in the world.

B: Not true *leh3*, the Petronas Tower surpass it already what.

A comparison of (11) and (23) would demonstrate the subtle difference in the pragmatic implicatures of the two tonal variants of *leh*. In example (23), the speaker is not merely trying to seek compromise from the addressee, as is the case for *leh1*, but to establish his belief in a certain proposition (that the Eiffel Tower is not the tallest building in the world), with the implication that the addressee, who had earlier expressed the opposite view, should agree with him. In other words, the use of *leh1* expresses an uncertainty on the part of the speaker, implying that there is still possibility of concession and negotiation. The aim is not to challenge, but to seek compromise. On the other hand, the use of *leh3* expresses the belief state of the speaker on a certain proposition (usually in contradiction to the addressee's state of belief) and invites the addressee to comply accordingly.

3.2.4 Interim Summary

The above analysis shows that the particle *leh3* is used as a marker of speaker intent. It can be used to report new information, to emphasize the importance of a directive or to challenge a given state of belief. The common implicature of the particle in these contexts is to mark the speaker's state of belief on a given proposition and invite the addressee to accept it.

3.3 *Leh4*: Marker of Assertion

Previous researchers have not distinguished between the third and fourth tones of *leh*, but instead propose only a general ‘low tone’ variant for the particle (see Platt 1987; Platt and Ho 1989). However, my data shows a subtle distinction between the third and fourth tones of the particle in CSE. Specifically, while *leh3* marks the speaker’s intent on a certain proposition and invites the addressee’s acknowledgement or complaisance, *leh4* carries the speaker’s tone of assertion, the pragmatic implicature being that the addressee is expected to accept the speaker’s proposition without question. In other words, the difference lies in the degree of assertiveness on the part of the speaker. With the use of *leh4*, the speaker does not merely invite the addressee’s compromise on an earlier proposition (*leh1*), or challenge the addressee’s state of belief (*leh3*), but instead establishes the proposition as a matter of fact and leaves no further room for concession and negotiation. As an illustration, example (24) is a scenario in which a mother (B) warns her son (A) not to play football in the rain.

(24)

A: Mum, I’m going out to play football.

B: Cannot *leh3/leh4*, it’s raining outside ...

The pragmatic difference between *leh3* and *leh4* is discernible upon contrast. With the use of *leh3*, the mother is negotiating with her son on the issue of playing football in the rain. She emphasizes her belief that it is not advisable to play football in the rain and invites her son to acknowledge this fact and perform some desired action (of not playing football in the rain). By marking the speaker’s intent, *leh3* gives the utterance the tone of a strong advice. However, when *leh4* is used, the mother is establishing her message as a matter of fact and leaves no room for negotiation. The implicature is that the son must not question the fact that he cannot play football

in the rain and should thus act as told. In other words, *leh4* marks the speaker's assertion and gives the utterance the tone of a warning.

In other contexts, *leh4* may be used by the speaker to contradict the addressee's prior proposition, and affirm the status of his own opinion. For instance, if *leh3* is changed into *leh4* in (23), the speaker affirms the accuracy of the fact that Eiffel Tower is not the tallest building in the world, implying that the addressee is wrong and must correct his opinion. There is an element of imposition here, that is, the speaker is trying to change the addressee's state of thinking by imposing an idea on the latter. This is different from *leh3*, which is inclined towards suggesting to the addressee that an alternative opinion may be correct instead, hence suggesting that the addressee should change his earlier view. Here the difference in tonal shape is subtle but crucial, as it conveys different shades of speaker meaning and may affect the kind of response expected from the addressee.

4. LEH AS A NEGOTIATION STRATEGY: DISCOURSE FACTORS IN THE CHOICE OF TONAL VARIANTS

The above analysis presents three pragmatic functions of *leh*, each related to one tonal variant. However, the three *leh* variants are not discreet speech particles in terms of their pragmatics. I argue that the three variants of *leh* derive their respective meanings from one common pragmatic core. These variants can be placed in a progressive continuum according to the speaker's degree of certainty toward his proposition, the nature of conversation between speaker and hearer and the appropriate negotiation strategy to be employed. In other words, it is proposed that the particle *leh* plays one general discourse function in CSE discourse, with each tonal variant representing one specific property of it in particular speech contexts.

A close observation at the discourse contexts in the preceding examples shows that they all entail at least two contrasting ideas between interlocutors. The particle *leh* is typically used in an

utterance which presents a contrasting relationship with a preceding proposition.⁷ In other words, the particle *leh*, in all its variant tones, is used by the speaker to negotiate his point of view with the addressee. The general pragmatic function of *leh* in CSE can therefore be proposed as follows:

In the situation where the speaker and his addressee have different points of view with regard to a given proposition, *leh* is used as a speech device by the speaker to engage the addressee in negotiation, with the aim of eventually changing the latter's state of thinking or belief.

This general function serves as the pragmatic core of the particle *leh*. However, conversational interaction is a dynamic process, where different negotiation strategies are required to fulfill specific communication needs. This is manifested in the split of the particle *leh* into three tonal variants, each with a different pragmatic nuance. The preceding examples in this paper show that the particle *leh* can be used in three general discourse situations. *Leh1* is used in situations where the speaker introduces an idea in contrary to the expectations or assumptions of the addressee, but feels uncertain as to whether his idea would be accepted by the latter. In this case, the speaker negotiates a message by seeking compromise from the addressee, with the implication that there is still room for discussion. On the other hand, *leh3* is used in situations where the speaker expresses his intent on a certain point of view or emphasizes a state of belief, which is in contrast to that held by the addressee. In this case, the speaker negotiates a message by bringing across a certain point to the addressee, and invites the latter's acceptance or acknowledgement of it. Here the speaker is rather certain about the validity of his opinion, but does not preclude the possibility of concession. Lastly, *leh4* is used in situations where the speaker establishes the validity of his point beyond doubt and expects the addressee to comply

with him. In this case, there is no ‘negotiation’ in the strict sense but ‘imposition’ instead, as the speaker strongly affirms his opinion and imposes it on the addressee.

If we place the above analysis in a speech-act perspective, we realize that the perlocutionary effect of the particle *leh* is essentially to convince a hearer of a certain proposition beyond his prior knowledge, assumptions or expectations, either by means of persuasion (*leh1*), challenge (*leh3*) or imposition (*leh4*). The existence of tonal variants of the particle *leh* points to different communicative demands in particular contexts. Each particle represents a different strategy toward negotiation. The choice of particle to be deployed in actual communication depends on the following discourse factors:

Firstly, the speaker’s degree of certainty toward his proposition. As seen above, *leh1* is used in association with uncertainty on the part of the speaker, *leh3* indicates certainty and *leh4* reflects absolute certainty, i.e. assertiveness.

Secondly, the nature of conversation in which the speaker wishes to engage his addressee. This may depend on the relative social status of the speech participants, which affects the type of negotiation strategy to be used. Typically speaking, when a speaker is in disagreement with an addressee of a higher social status. For instance, when a student questions his teacher in an informal context, he is more likely to use *leh1* as a strategy of compromise to negotiate his point of view. As this particle creates room for negotiation, it invokes a sense of politeness and cooperation. On the other hand, *leh3*, the strategy of challenge, is commonly used among speech participants where there is no disparity of status, such as in conversations between friends. As this particle emphasizes the speaker’s viewpoint without excluding the possibility of concession, there is no intended hostility involved. Lastly, the strategy of imposition (*leh4*) is used in situations where politeness is not intentionally fostered, as for example, in an argument between

adversaries. As this particle signals the speaker's imposition upon the addressee, it is more likely to invoke hostile emotions.

It therefore seems that there is a general pattern that relates the tone of the particle *leh* and its pragmatics. On the one end is tone 1, where the speaker holds a reserved attitude toward his proposition, and deploys the strategy of compromise that invokes politeness and cooperation between interlocutors. On the other end is tone 4, where the speaker holds an affirmative attitude toward his proposition, and uses the strategy of imposition that possibly invokes hostility. This general observation is in line with two out of three dichotomies postulated in Platt (1987: 400), with respect to the functions of pragmatic particles. Accordingly, pragmatic particles

- (1) convey either uncertainty, tentativeness, feeling unsure about outcome (rise or high level tone) or certainty with regard to the utterance, assert and stress the speaker's conviction (low level tone)
- (2) convey either friendliness, informality and enthusiasm (rise or high level tone) or abruptness, greater formality, offhandedness (low level tone, particularly if the step down to it is fairly obvious)⁸

In summary, the three tonal variants of *leh* can be arranged along a continuum (Table 1) according to the speaker's degree of certainty toward his proposition, the nature of conversation and the strategy of negotiation used. All three particles are bound by a central pragmatic (speech-act) function, which is to convince an addressee to accept a certain point of view.

Particle	<i>Leh</i>		
Tonal Variants	<i>Leh1</i>	<i>Leh3</i>	<i>Leh4</i>
Degree of Speaker's Certainty	Low	Mid	High
Nature of Conversation	Polite	Neutral	Hostile
Negotiation Strategy	Compromise	Challenge	Imposition

Table 1: The three tonal variants of *leh* in continuum.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that the particle *leh* has three tonal variants in CSE, in tone 1, tone 3 and tone 4 of Mandarin Chinese respectively. Each variant performs a specific discourse function, namely, as a marker of compromise, as a marker of speaker's intent and as a marker of assertion respectively. I have also shown that the three variants should not be taken as independent particles but as derivations from a single pragmatic core. Previous research has not attempted to form a connection among the tonal variants of a single particle. Some scholars have in fact suggested that they should be taken as different particles. This contribution has shown the contrary. The pragmatics of the tonal variants of a single particle are traceable to a fundamental core, and the specific discourse functions of each variant should be taken as instantiations of this core in different contexts. The next step along this line of research is to investigate the common pragmatic meaning of the tonal variants of other CSE particles and explain the discourse factors behind the choice of their usage.

Notes

¹ According to Gupta (1992: 32), CSE is a contact language which functions as the L-form of a diglossic English in Singapore, where the H-form is Singapore Standard English. The L and H forms represent the informal and formal choices of a diglossic language respectively.

² Orthographic realizations of pragmatic particles may vary with convention. Platt (1987) and Gupta (1992) glosses *mah*, *lah*, *leh*, *lor* and *hor* as *ma*, *la*, *le*, *lo* and *ho* respectively.

³ This point is subsequently revised in Platt and Ho (1989: 217), who suggest that the high-level tone *leh* (as well as the particles *a* and *ho*) is used 'when the speaker feels the proposition questioned is probably true. Our data shows that this is incorrect, as far as *leh* is concerned.

⁴ In order to maintain a uniform orthographic convention in this paper, the original transcriptions used by Platt (1987), Platt and Ho (1989) (*le*) and Gupta (1992) (*lei*) are changed to *leh*.

⁵ Wee (2002: 713-714) reports one other instance in Gupta (1992), where a possible performance error is made in the use of the particle *lor*.

⁶ According to Richards and Tay (1977: 42), the particle *la* functions as 'a code-marker which identifies rapport, solidarity, familiarity and informality between participants in the speech event.' Kwan-Terry (1978: 24) suggests that the use of *la* 'suggests a certain explanatory nuance, a certain softness of attitude, reflecting that the speaker is amenable to discussion.' The socio-pragmatic function of *la* can indeed be extended to CSE particles in general. As CSE particles are exclusively used in informal speech situations, their use pragmatically suggests social proximity.

⁷ This is in line with Li's (1999: 217) observation that the Taiwanese particle *le* always signals a contrastive relation holding between its head utterance and some existing idea in discourse.

⁸ One other dichotomy postulated in Platt (1987: 400) is that particles 'function either to highlight shared information (rise or high level tone) or highlight new information (low level tone)'. This dichotomy does not seem to be observed by the particle *leh*. As the preceding analysis shows, *leh3* (a low level tone) indicates shared information.

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