

**Singlish pragmatic particles: Tone or intonation?**

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Special session: N/A                      Subfields: phonology, phonetics  
 Language: Singlish (also known as Colloquial Singaporean English)

Sentence-final pragmatic particles are extremely common in Singlish (or Colloquial Singaporean English), a restructured variety of English spoken in Singapore. For example:

- (1) My parents very old fashion *ah*<sup>21</sup>? Then your parents *leh*<sup>55</sup>?  
 ‘Are you saying that my parents are old-fashioned? Then what about your parents?’ (Lim 2008: ex. 3)

Research on these particles has largely focused on their pragmatics and substrate origins in Chinese and Malay, but it was recognised early on that they have different prosodic variants, *lah* being the best studied (Kwan-Terry 1978; Bell & Ser 1983; Loke & Low 1988). The literature has showed a steady trend, initially characterising their prosody chiefly in terms of intonation (Platt 1987; Gupta 1992), later allowing for speaker variation between lexical tone and intonation (Platt & Ho 1989), then shifting to lexical tone (Lim 2004, 2008; Wong 2004; Lee 2007). Recent tonal transcriptions match the five tonal categories found in the most widely spoken Chinese language in Singapore, Hokkien Chinese:

- (2)    44 or 55      22 or 33      21 or 11      51 or 41      24 or 13  
          High level    Mid level      Low level      Falling        Rising

However, pragmatic particle prosody has not yet been analysed in the light of recent studies on Singlish intonation (Wee 2008; Ng 2008; Siraj 2008). These studies argue that low, mid and high tones are densely assigned to underlyingly toneless vocabulary (of English and Malay origin) based on stress. This raises the possibility that Singlish particles may sound tonal, but in fact be underlyingly toneless.

I propose that Singlish pragmatic particles are in the process of losing lexical tone, and that we can only account for certain aspects of their prosody if we allow for the possibility of postlexical tones assigned based on stress and utterance type. This requires three generalisations from the Singlish intonation literature: (i) unstressed monosyllables receive low tone, (ii) stressed monosyllables typically receive high tone, but occasionally rising tone (e.g. *don't*, *damn*, *no*, *yah*); (iii) declarative utterances and wh-questions may appear with a phrase-final low boundary tone, yes/no questions with a phrase-final high tone.

This study focuses on the five Singlish particles which have been transcribed as high level. They are listed in (3), along with their other possible realisations (less common ones given in parentheses).

- (3) a. *meh*    High  
      b. *lor*     High    Mid  
      c. *lah*     High    Mid    Low    Falling    Rising  
      d. *leh*     High    Mid    Low    (Falling) (Rising)  
      e. *mah*    (High)    Mid    (Low)    (Falling)    (Rising)

*Meh* is the only particle which can have high level tone, but not mid level. Note that it is also the only one restricted to yes/no questions (with phrase-final high boundary tone). I suggest that phrase-final low boundary tone can cause downstep, such that high level tone is transcribed as mid. This accounts for the first two columns in (3).

We may also observe that low, falling and rising tone cluster together: any particle which can have one of those *and* high level tone will have all of them. This is not straightforwardly accounted for in terms of lexical tone. I suggest that *meh* and *lor* can be analysed as possessing lexical high tone, which resists being realised with low or contour tone; in contrast; *lah* is underlyingly toneless, and *leh* and *mah* are in transition. Based on existing analyses of Singlish intonation, toneless monosyllables are predicted to receive a wide range of realisations: low tone when unstressed, and high (or rising) when stressed, which can interact with a phrase-final low boundary tone to result in a falling contour. This would account for the last three columns in (3).

A toneless analysis of *lah*, *leh* and *mah* is supported by the phonetics of their falling contours, which is much longer than Hokkien Chinese falling lexical tone. In fact, varying the duration of *lah* can actually force it to be interpreted as a different Chinese-derived lexical item instead of a pragmatic particle:

- (4) a. Cannot lah<sup>51</sup> (with long duration)  
       'I really can't!'  
       b. ? Cannot lah<sup>51</sup> (with short duration)  
       ? 'It cannot be spicy.' (Note: In Hokkien, [la<sup>51</sup>] means 'spicy'.)

Falling *lah* actually has the pitch contour and duration typical of sentence-final English-derived monosyllables like *law* (5b).<sup>1</sup>

- (5) a. Cannot break lah<sup>51</sup> (with long duration)  
       b. Cannot break law!

Both phonetically and phonologically, certain Singlish particles sometimes behave like underlyingly toneless vocabulary of English origin. By positing a prosodic system split between lexical tone and tonelessness, we can better understand the interaction between the pragmatics of particles and utterance types in this contact variety of English, as well as advancing our understanding of prosodic typology.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Note that *law* in (5b) can be given the same pitch contour as falling or high level *lah*, but, interestingly, not rising or mid level *lah*.