Phonology Constrains the Distribution of the Particle *lah* in Singapore English

James Sneed German
Linguistics and Multilingual Studies
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Laurent Prévot
Aix-Marseille Université & CNRS
Laboratoire Parole et Langage

Overview

- The particle *lah* is associated with specific discourse functions and is assumed to appear whenever those functions are necessitated by the context.
- Since *lah* also has specific prosodic characteristics, its use may lead to more or less preferred prosodic structures (e.g., long sequence of unstressed syllables)
- A corpus analysis tested whether the influence of such structural effects can be detected in its distribution.
- Results suggest that constraints on prosodic structure can interfere with the expression of pragmatically optimal forms.

Background

What? Where? Why?

- A pragmatic particle that appears at the ends of statements, directives and negations (Gupta, 1992)
- Solidarity marker (Richards & Tay, 1977), pragmatic functions related to obviousness, disapproval, highlighting (Platt & Ho, 1980), discourse presupposition (Besemeres & Wierzbicka, 2003), social indexicality (Leimgruber, 2013)
- **Consensus:** The use and distribution of *lah* is driven by social/pragmatic function (i.e., it is used because it *means* something)

(1) Example from the *NIE Corpus of Spoken Singapore English* (Deterding & Low, 2001)

A: *Mmm ... where would I want to go, New Zealand ... is one place ... I I prefer more scenic places ... yeah.*
B: *Right, so New Zealand is very scenic. Is that your ... that's first on your list?*
A: *Yy ... yeah ... Europe also <u>lah</u> … but Europe is further and more expensive.*

Prosodic Characteristics of Singapore English and *lah*

- Lexical stress of Brit. English is largely preserved (Bao, 2006)
- Intonation is primarily phrase-based: (LH)(LH)…(LHL) (see Chong, 2013)
- *Lah* is never stressed/prominence bearing: *I found it THERE / # I found it LAH*
- Most common variant of *lah* involves a low falling pitch

Problem 1: Adding non-prominent *lah* to the end of a sequence of unstressed syllables leads to increased conflict with principles of eurythmy (Hayes, 1984)

Problem 2: Utterance/IP-final stress requires realization of LHL on a single syllable – adding *lah* in such cases can relieve tonal crowding.

Question: Can the effects of prosodic context be detected in the distribution of *lah*? If so, what does this imply for the interpretation of *lah* as a marker of pragmatic function?
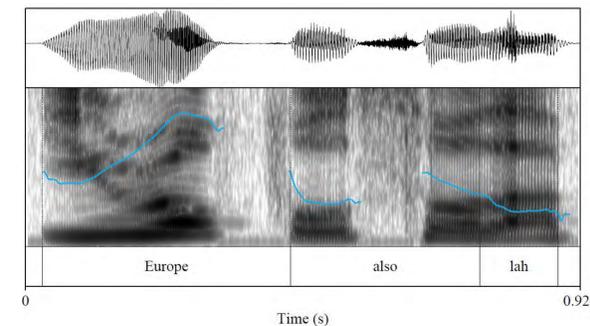

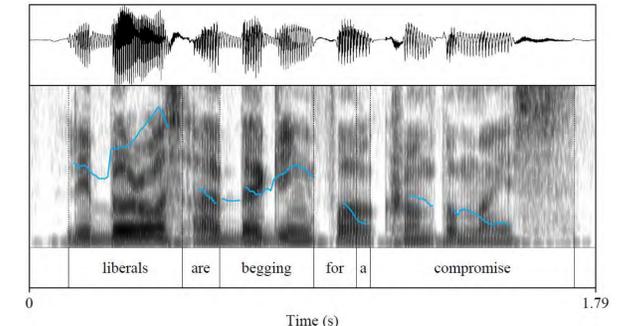Figure 1. F0 contour for a typical use of *lah*.

Figure 2. F0 contour for a typical declarative in Singapore English.

Methods

- Explored the distribution of *lah* in a text-based corpus of conversational spoken Singapore English (*ICE-SIN*, Greenbaum & Nelson, 1996)
    - "Private Dialogues" (S1A) in which *lah* is well-represented
    - Total for analysis: 892 tokens of *lah* / 27,844 utterance-final contexts
- Estimated final stress pattern by cross-indexing with Celex2 (English wordforms)
- Coded the last 4 syllables based on distance from the last stress to the utterance end
    - For example: *it's im'possible* → "x100"; *he's per'suasive* → "xx10"
- **Prediction**: If prosodic context matters, *lah* should be overrepresented for short unstressed sequences, and underrepresented for longer ones

Results

Table 1. Frequency of utternace-final tokens with and without *lah* by stress pattern.

Stress	*lah*	no *lah*	%
xxx1	644	17969	3.5
xx10	198	7055	2.7
x100	44	1682	2.5
1000	6	219	2.7
0000	0	27	0

Table 2. Percent deviation from the expected value under the null hypothesis Chi-square=11.77, p<0.01

Stress	*lah*	no *lah*
xxx1	+7.9%	-0.3%
xx10	-14.9%	+0.5%
x100	-20.5%	+0.7%
1000	-16.8%	+0.6%
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Discussion/Conclusions

- Use of *lah* is not determined solely by its discourse function/meaning
    - Nuclear accent placement and information structure for Br/Am English (German et al., 2006; Calhoun, 2010)
    - Phrase initial rise and focus for French (German & D'Imperio, 2010 & under review)
- Strong effect of final stress suggests dominance of a recruitment strategy (i.e., to relieve crowding) rather than an avoidance strategy
    - → Predicted by speaking rate? Segmental composition (e.g., little voiced material as in *check*)?
- Other SgE particles make "stronger" pragmatic contributions (*lor*, *leh*, *hor*, *meh*, etc.)
- Similar particles in other languages (esp. *quoi* for French)

Selected References

Bao, Z. (2006). Clash avoidance and metrical opacity in Singapore English. STUF-Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung, 59(2/2006), 133-147. / Chong, A. J. (2013). Towards a model of Singaporean English intonational phonology. POMA, 19, 1-9. / Deterding, D., & Low, E. L. (2001). The NIE corpus of spoken Singapore English (NIECSSE). *SAAL Quarterly*, 56(1), 2-5. / Greenbaum, S. and Nelson, G. (1996). The international corpus of English project. *World Englishes*, 15(1), 3-15.