Promising Approaches for the Analysis of

Sentence-final Particles in Cantonese: the Case of [aa3]

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the meanings and moods of the most frequently used particle [aa3] in various types of modern Cantonese sentences. Promising and feasible approaches of 'Minimal Pair' and 'Maximal Common Induction' are introduced to depict the pattern of the use of Cantonese particles microscopically and macroscopically so as to establish a better grammatical description of the language. The possibilities that may occur when a sentence ends with a final particle are also discussed in this work.

Keywords: Syntax, Sentence-final Particles, Cantonese

1. Introduction

1.1 Sentence-final particles

Chinese has a number of communication-oriented particles to clarify a speaker's intention. They are called 'Sentence-final particles', which are morphemes that occur at the end of a sentence. Chinese sentence-final particles are a peculiar form in spoken language. In syntax, semantics and language usage, it has a large influence on a sentence. In English, the mood or meaning of a sentence is usually modified by uttering it in a different tone. However, since Chinese is a tonal language, where changing the tone of a word may actually change the meaning of the word. This is where the sentence-final particles come in. These particles are often used to modify the mood or sometimes even the meaning of a sentence.

Sentence-final particles are bound linguistic forms that are suffixed to units higher in rank than words. They are traditionally referred to as 'tone-of-voice words' which are usually used to express moods, attitudes, feelings and emotions. In this study, they will be referred to as sentence-final particles, for the obvious reason that these words mainly appear at the end of sentences, as well as clauses or phrases. To express moods, attitudes, feelings and emotions, other than sentence-final particles a number of means can also be employed in Cantonese and some other languages. For example, they can be expressed by full words, adverbs, conjunctions, inflections, interjections or intonations. In Cantonese however sentence-final particles are one of the most well developed means to express such moods.

1.2 Cantonese sentence-final particles

It is said that sentence particles are commonly used in Cantonese. Luke (1990:11) remarks that:

It is no exaggeration to say that they constitute one of the hallmarks of natural conversation in Cantonese.

This suggests the irreplaceable role that they must be playing in spoken interaction. In recent years, more works have been published that are devoted specifically to sentence-final particles. Such studies include Cheung (1972), Gibbons (1980), Yau (1980), Kwok (1984), Bourgeries (1987), Luke (1990), Leung (1992), Matthews (1994) and Fung (2000). Being a pioneering work in the study of Cantonese sentence-final particles, Cheung (1972:172-192) pointed out that there are as many as fifteen particles commonly found in everyday conversation (note 1), and they are often used in clusters of two to four to express different moods. For instance, with reference to the examples he cited from a radio play, there are as many as twenty-four particle-clusters formed with [ge3] (consonant + vowel + tone) being the main particle used in combination with others (note 2). People are easily thrown into confusion by the varieties of their combinations and their complicated meaning. Before going further I would like to quote Cheung (1972:195), who says:

Non-native speakers may have difficulties learning Cantonese, one of the main reasons being the fact that using the wrong particles can disrupt the original meanings of the sentences. We, therefore, ought to be aware of the particles whether one is to learn or do research on Cantonese.

One may have an impression that there are very few rules to follow with respect to the use of particles and that one

seems to have a great deal of freedom using them. However, it is very difficult for foreigners to learn Cantonese because the sentence-final particles (and their lexical tones), the meanings of which being very complex, are not easy to be mastered. As we know, the usage of particles is not exactly related to syntactic structure but often relies on pragmatic factors and the speaker's intuition and knowledge. When people take part in conversations, the utterance is tightly related to the context giving full play to the communicative function. Syntax studies, therefore, cannot be figured out without the conversational context. In this connection, the meanings of particles should not only be constructed at the lexical and grammatical levels, but also confirmed both semantically and syntactically. Accordingly, this paper attempts to introduce promising and practical approaches to analyze Cantonese particles, by taking the most frequently used particle [aa3], a syllable in mid-level tone (tone 3) without a consonant onset, as an example.

2. A close look at sentences and final-particles

A collection of examples is adopted here to make this study more objective. The book *How celebrities learn languages – interview series (1999)* 名人學語文訪問系列 edited by the Hong Kong Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) is chosen for the study. The corpus consists of about 3 hours of recorded materials which reveal that the use of [aa3] accounts for 34% in everyday Cantonese. This is followed by the use of [ne1] and [lo1], the percentages use of which are 23% and 19%, respectively. Some examples in this paper also come from the author's intuition as a native speaker. The abbreviations used and their meanings are listed at the end of the paper.

A number of examples will be discussed in the rest of this paper and the properties of [aa3] will be noted based on the ways it is used. The following discussion is neither conclusive nor definitive, but should give us some insight into how the approaches can be adopted to elucidate the meanings of Cantonese particles.

2.1 Differences between sentences with and without final particles

As a matter of fact, the tone of a sentence is a reflection of wishes, aspiration and feelings. During conversations, the mood of a sentence is determined by the interactions of intonation, word order, sentence structure, verbal context, particles and so on. In addition, Jin (1992) pointed out that the mood of a sentence is based on a number of factors such as intonation, particles, some of the adverbs and grammatical forms, etc. The fact would be more complicated than one could expect. Semantic criteria may therefore also be taken into consideration. Thus, the meaning of a particle does not necessarily confer its meaning to the original sentence. For example, the sentence 'ngo5 jam2 zo2 tong1 laa3' (I drink PERF soup PT -- I have had the soup) indicates the perfection of the activity performed at the time. However, it is inappropriate to say that the final particle [laa3] is a perfective particle. In the discussion that follows, the meanings of particles will be verified in the context of grammatical form.

Generally, in order to distinguish various possible meanings of a particle, we can compare two sentences that are exactly the same except for the presence or absence of that particle. In other words, if a sentence (S) carries a meaning (M1) and is changed to another meaning (M2) by adding the final particle (P), we can find out what P exactly means by comparing M1 and M2. On the other hand, if M1 and M2 are the same, it implies that S possesses that meaning originally and P does not carry the meaning of either M1 or M2. For example,

(1a) Ting1   ziu1   go3   talk   nei2   heoi3   m4   heoi3?

       Tomorrow morning   DET   talk   you   go   NEG go

       "Are you attending the talk tomorrow morning?"

(1b) Ting1   ziu1   go3   talk   nei2   heoi3   m4   heoi3   aa3?

       Tomorrow morning   DET   talk   you   go   NEG   go   PT

       "Are you attending the talk tomorrow morning?"

(2a) Jat7 zan6 heoi3 bin1 dou6   sik6?

       Later   go   where   eat

       "Where are you going to eat?"

(2b) Jat7 zan6 heoi3 bin1 dou6 sik6 aa3?

       Later   go   where   eat   PT

       "Where are you going to eat?"

Examples (1a) to (2b) are interrogative sentences. Particle [aa3] does not modify the meaning of these sentences. The grammatical form 'X-not-X' in the affirmative-negative question already tells the hearer that (1a) & (1b) are interrogative with or without a particle. To reply to an affirmative-negative question, one picks the positive predicate for a positive answer and the negative predicate for a negative answer. In this case, the answer should be restricted to 'go'

or 'not go'. In (2a) & (2b), the interrogative expression is shown by the interrogative word 'bin1 dou6' (where); hence, the final particle [aa3] cannot be considered as an expression of the interrogative mood.

On the contrary, a final particle that makes a marked difference between M1 and M2 is equivalent to M2 because the meaning has been changed after adding the particle.

(3a) Keoi3 m4 heoi3 tai2 hei3

    He   NEG go   see movie

    "He is not going to see the movie"

(3b) Keoi3 m4   heoi3 tai2 hei3 <u>me1</u>?

    He   NEG go   see movie PT

    "He is not going to see the movie, isn't he?"

(4a) Lau4 haa6 gaan1 zaap6 fo3 pou2 zap1 zo2 lap1

    downstairs DET   store   close PERF

    "The store downstairs was closed down"

(4b) Lau4 haa6 gaan1 zaap6 fo3 pou2 zap1 zo2 lap1 <u>aa4</u> ?

    downstairs DET   store   close PERF   PT

    "Was the store downstairs closed down?"

(3a) is a determinative which has been changed to an interrogative sentence (3b) after adding a final particle [me1], which is therefore considered as an interrogative particle. The same applies to (4a) & (4b). The determinative sentence (4a) is changed to a question as (4b) after the particle [aa4] is attached to the end of the sentence. This method appears reasonable and feasible, but in view of the complicated meanings of particles and the variety of effects the particles can impart to a sentence, a more sophisticated way to analyze various meanings of particles is needed.

Let us then look into the moods of sentences. According to systemic functional grammar, moods are closely related to a complicated, multi-leveled semantic system, which can be divided into a few main categories that are classified into smaller groups based on the different roles of a speaker in conversation. For instance, Chinese grammarians always classify the various moods into 'declarative', 'interrogative', 'exclamatory' and 'optative'. The last one may be further subdivided into such lower levels as 'order', 'urge', 'appeal', 'seriousness' and so forth. With this in mind, the comparison of 'S+P' and S is on the basis of different levels. After adding a particle, the meaning, M2 (S+P), of a sentence can be totally different from that of its original sentence, M1 (S), in terms of the categories of mood at the first level.

(5a) Gaau2 dim6

    Do   well

    "Done!"

(5b) Gaau2 dim6 <u>laa4</u>?

    Do   well   PT

    "Has it been done?"

Example (5a) is a declarative sentence, while (5b) is apparently an interrogative. Thus, the sentence-final particle [laa4] is apparently conclusive in determining the sentence type.

The other case is when a particle follows a sentence, the meanings of M1 and M2 may be similar in mood at higher levels, but carry a difference when one goes further down the various levels of mood categories.

(6a) Nei2 sik6 m4 sik6?

    You   eat NEG eat?

    "Would you like to eat?"

(6b) Nei2 sik6 m4 sik6 <u>aa3</u>?

    You   eat NEG eat   PT?

    "Would you like to eat?"

Both (6a) & (6b) are interrogatives, which require the hearer to give an answer to 'X-not-X'. The difference between the two sentences is that (6a) is more straightforward than (6b); nevertheless, the latter confers a softer tone than the former does. The final particle [aa3] is used together with an interrogative sentence to form a question.

As a result, one cannot simply look superficially when examining the differences between 'S' and 'S + P'. Instead, the

underlying levels of mood should be investigated to elucidate the differences. To compare the possible differences between 'S' and 'S+P', the distinctive mood morpheme should be found out in the test used later. Only in this way can the meanings of the particles be found out. We hereby put forward the concept of 'mood morphemes' to differentiate between the attitudes different sentences carry as well as to look closer at the meanings of particles.

2.2 The relationships between sentences and final particles

From the concepts introduced in the last section, there is no doubt that P can change the whole mood of a sentence in different ways. The situation is, however, more complicated than one would expect. Let us look more closely at the relationship between S and P. The final particle [aa3] is used as an example to illustrate that the relationships between a sentence and a particle in Cantonese are of four types as follows.

2.2.1 The whole sentence has changed its meaning with a particle

Firstly, S originally does not have the meaning of P, but P confers the new meaning to the whole sentence.

(7a) Saam1 fan6 bat1 gei3 dou1 jing2   saai3

    Three   CL   notes   all   copy complete

    "All three sets of notes have been photocopied."

(7b) Saam1 fan6 bat1 gei3 dou1 jing2 saai3   <u>laa4</u>

    Three   CL   notes   all copy complete   PT

    "All three sets of notes have been photocopied"

Here, (7b) is an interrogative. There is neither interrogative pronoun nor interrogative form in the sentence and the intonation is no different from that in the declarative (7a). Supposedly, it is the particle [laa4], appearing at the end of the interrogation, that transforms the sentence into an interrogative. It now expresses a distinctly different meaning compared with (7b). In the absence of [laa4], both (7a) & (7b) will become declaratives with no differences in meaning between them.

2.2.2 A new meaning is produced by the combination of S+P

Secondly, S and P can combine to form S+P to produce a new meaning, which neither S nor P alone carries. The difference between S and S+P may be seen from the following:

(8a) A: nei3 jiu3 ping4 gwo2 ding6 sai1 gwaa1?

    You want   apple   or   watermelon

    "Would you prefer an apple or a watermelon?"

  B: sai1 gwaa1.

    Watermelon.

    "Watermelon, please."

(8b) A: Syut3 gwai6 ting4 zo2   din6   wo3! Syut3 gou1 tung4 bou3 din1 dou1 bin3 waai6…

    Refrigerator stop PERF electricity PT   ice-cream and   pudding   also change bad.

    "The refrigerator is not working. The ice creams and puddings have gone bad."

  B: sai1 gwaa1   <u>ne1</u>?

    Watermelon   PT

    "What about the watermelon?"

Let us compare the above pairs of examples. In (8a) B is a declarative while in (8b) the sentence 'watermelon' has been changed to a question by adding the particle [ne1] that does not represent the interrogative mood itself (note 3). The interrogative is a product of the combination of 'watermelon' and particle [ne1] in the context (note 4). The particle [ne1] in the high tone is associated closely with the interrogative mood.

2.2.3 The particle strengthens the whole meaning

Thirdly, S originally has a similar meaning as P. Under this circumstance, the particle attached to the sentence strengthens the whole meaning.

(9a) Saan1 zo2   pou3

   Close PERF shop

   "Has the shop door been locked?"

(9b) Saan1 zo2   pou3 <u>me1</u>

   Close PERF shop PT

   "Has the shop door been locked?"

Both the above examples illustrate the interrogative mood and require confirmation from the other party. Without the particle [me1], (9a) with rising tone is still an interrogative sentence but (9b) implies to us a sense of 'surprise'.

2.2.4 The meanings of the sentence and the particle have no interactions

Fourthly, S has a certain meaning and remains the same even after a final particle has been added. There is no direct relationship between the sentence and the particle. They do not appear to be related to each other in the following examples:

(10a) Haang4 hoi1

   Walk   away

   "Get away!"

(10b) Haang4 hoi1 <u>laa1</u>

   Walk   away PT

   "Get away!"

It is seen that the [laa1]-suffixed utterance (10b) sounds softer in tone while (10a) sounds harsher and more abrupt. Both sentences are imperatives. The particle [laa1] itself does not have the meaning and is not related to the imperative mood in (20).

To summarize, the above are the four possibilities that may occur when a sentence ends with a final particle. The relationships can be illustrated as follows:

Table 1. Possible relationships when P attaches to S

Relationships	Sentence	Particle	Results
First	✘	✔	The whole sentence changes its meaning.
Second	✘	✘	A new meaning is produced by the combination of S+P.
Third	✔	✔	The particle strengthens the whole meaning.
Fourth	✔	✘	The sentence and the particle have no direct relationship.

2.3 Further approaches for analyzing sentence-final particles

It is agreed that the meaning of a final particle can be distinguished by comparing M1 and M2. The prerequisite for finding out the meaning of a particle is to identify the semantic relationship of P and M1. This approach for comparing S and 'S+P' is termed 'Minimal Pair'. It has long been realized that differences in meanings exist between a sentence that ends with a particle and another which does not. 'Minimal Pair' is a tool and basic procedure to elucidate the meanings of the final particles and the various possible interactions between the particles and the mood in the original sentences by examining only one phoneme.

Another tool, 'Maximal Common Induction', is in contrast to the method of Minimal Pair. One ought to first identify the possible sentences to which a particle P can be attached. The meaning of P in each sentence can then be elucidated by applying Minimal Pair, comparing P-bearing and non-P-bearing twin sentences. The meanings of P in various sentences can then be pooled together for comparison. The actual meaning of P can be determined if that meaning is commonly found in all the sentences (S+P); otherwise, that meaning of P ought to be excluded.

Essentially, Minimal Pair assists *microscopically* to reveal the various possible meanings of P in one single sentence; whereas Maximal Common Induction *macroscopically* compares and contrasts all the sentences, thus serves to deduce the typical meanings of P and exclude those that are not commonly used. In this respect, Maximal Common Induction must precede Minimal Pair in particle studies.

3. The analysis of [aa3]

3.1 Minimal Pair

In this section, I would like to discuss the use of [aa3], which is the most frequently used particle in modern Cantonese. The particle [aa3] can appear at the end of different types of sentences and sometimes even in the middle (note 5). Here I will discuss examples of the use of [aa3] in the various types of sentences, using the approaches of 'Minimal Pair' and 'Maximal Common Induction'.

(11a) Hai2 di1   ci4 wui6   fong1 min6 jau5 me1 lai6 zi2   ho2 yi5 dang2 ngo5 dei6 caam1

    In   DET vocabulary   aspect   have what example   can   let   I   PL   refer to

    haau2 haa5 <u>aa3</u>

        DEL PT

    "Could you show us some examples of vocabulary?"

(11b) Hai2 di1 ci4   wui6   fong1 min6 jau5 me1 lai6 zi2 ho2 yi5 dang2 ngo5 dei6 caam1haau2

    In   DET vocabulary   aspect   have what example   can   let   I   PL   refer to
    haa5

    DEL

    "Could you show us some examples of vocabulary?"

The above pair is an interrogative which the interrogative pronoun implies a stronger interrogative mood. Therefore it works even if there is no particle at the end of the sentence. In (11a), the sentence sounds neutral and moderate after adding [aa3], whereas (11b) is more direct.

(12a) Nei3 ho2 m4 ho2 ji5 jung6 jing1 man2 kau1 tung1 dak1 dou2 <u>aa3</u> ? dak1 m4 dak1 <u>aa3</u> ?

    You can NEG can   use   English   communicate CM done PT?   Can NEG can PT?

    "Are you able to communicate in English? Yes or no?"

(12b) Nei3 ho2 m4 ho2 ji5 jung6 jing1 man2 kau1 tung1 dak1 dou2?   dak1 m4   dak1?

    You can NEG can   use   English   communicate CM done?   Can NEG   can?

    "Are you able to communicate in English? Yes or no?"

In these two affirmative-negative questions, the one with [aa3] sounds more moderate and the one without appears more direct.

(13a) Zan1 hai6 seoi1 jiu3 zung6 daai6 ge3   goi2 gaak3 <u>aa3</u>

    Really   need   significant   GEN reformation PT

    "A significant reformation is definitely necessary."

(13b) Zan1 hai6 seoi1 jiu3 zung6 daai6 ge3   goi2 gaak3

    Really   need   significant   GEN reformation

    "A significant reformation is definitely necessary."

(13b) is to give objective comments. (13a), with [aa3], carries a sense of urge, thus adding personal opinion and expressing wish.

(14a) Nei2 duk6 jat1 geoi3 je5 ge3 si4 hau6, hai2 gam2 cing4 ge3 cyu2 lei5 <u>aa3</u>, bin1 go3
You read one CL thing GEN time, in emotion GEN solve PT, which CL

zi6 jing1 goi1 duk1 cung3 jam1 <u>aa3</u>, heng1 jam1 <u>aa3</u>, dim2 joeng2 duk6 jat1 go3 ming6
word should read stress PT, light tone PT, how read one CL order

ling6 sik1 ge3 geoi3 <u>aa3</u>, pou2 tung1 waa2 tung4 gwong2 dung1 waa2 gan1 bun2
type GEN sentence PT, Mandarin and Cantonese absolutely

m4 jat1 joeng6
NEG same

"When you read out a Cantonese sentence, you will realize that the ways you handle the
emotions, position the stressed and unstressed syllables in a sentence, as well as read an
imperative, are totally different from Mandarin when one reads a sentence."

(14b) Nei2 duk6 jat1 geoi3 je5 ge3 si4 hau6, hai2 gam2 cing4 ge3 cyu2 lei5 , bin1 go3
You read one CL thing GEN time, in emotion GEN solve , which CL

zi6 jing1 goi1 duk1 cung3 jam1, heng1 jam1, dim2 joeng2 duk6 jat1 go3 ming6 ling6
word should read stress light tone how read one CL order

sik1 ge3 geoi3 , pou2 tung1 waa2 tung4 gwong2 dung1 waa2 gan1 bun2 m4
type GEN sentence, Mandarin and Cantonese absolutely NEG

jat1 joeng6.
same

"When you read out a Cantonese sentence, you will realize that the ways you handle the
emotions, position the stressed and unstressed syllables in a sentence, as well as read an
imperative, are totally different from Mandarin when one reads a sentence."

(14b) consists of several items with short pauses in between. Without [aa3] at the end of each item, the utterance sounds
more hurrying and formal. With the use of [aa3] in (14a), it sounds more relaxing and casual.

(15a) Co1 zung1 go2 zan6 si4 ne1 ngo5 uk1 kei2 hou2 kung4 gaa3, jat1 gaa1 ng5 go3
Secondary school DET time PT I home very poor PT, one family five CL

jan4, zyu6 hai2 jat1 gaan1fong2 dou6, lin4 so2 wai6 ci3 so2 <u>aa3</u>, dou1 hai6 hai2 go3
people live in one CL room place even so-called toilet PT also in CL

gwai6 ge3 hau6 min6 zai1 go3 maa5 tung2 hai2 dou6.
cabinet GEN back put CL chamber pot at place

"My family was very poor when I was in secondary school. Five of us lived in a small
room where the so-called toilet was just a chamber pot placed at the back of the cabinet."

(15b) Co1 zung1 go2 zan6 si4 ne1 ngo5 uk1 kei2 hou2 kung4 gaa3, jat1 gaa1 ng5 go3
Secondary school DET time PT I home very poor PT, one family five CL

jan4, zyu6 hai2 jat1 gaan1fong2 dou6, lin4 so2 wai6 ci3 so2, dou1 hai6 hai2 go3 gwai6
people live in one CL room place even so-called toilet also in CL cabinet

ge3 hau6 min6 zai1 go3 maa5 tung2 hai2 dou6.
GEN back put CL chamber pot at place

"My family was very poor when I was in secondary school. Five of us lived in a small
room where the so-called toilet was just a chamber pot placed at the back of the cabinet."

(15a) is a declarative sentence. With the use of [aa3], the speaker intends to emphasize the poverty by stating that they
did not even have a toilet at home when he was in secondary school. [aa3] is therefore an emphasis-carrier here. It helps
to indicate emphatic affirmation.

(16a) Gaa1 zoeng2 <u>aa3</u>, dou1 hou2 daam1 sam1

Parents PT all very concerned

"All the parents are very anxious"

(16b)Gaa1 zoeng2 dou1 hou2 daam1 sam1

    Parents   all   very   concerned

    "All the parents are very anxious"

There is a pause after [aa3] in (16a) with which the speaker either intends to direct the attention of the hearer to another point, or plan what to say afterwards; whereas (16b) gives one a sense of hurry.

(17a) Hai6 aa3, si6 sat6 soeng6 zing3 fu2   hai6 gam2 joeng2 gong2 gwo3 <u>aa3</u>

    Yes   PT, in fact   government be ADV   say   EXP PT

    "Yes, in fact, the government did have promised."

(17b) Hai6 aa3, si6 sat7 soeng6 zing3 fu2   hai6 gam3 joeng2 gong2 gwo3

    Yes   PT, in fact   government be ADV   say   EXP

    "Yes, in fact, the government did have promised."

There is a sense of certainty in (17a) & (17b), so that it is very likely that the speaker is correct. (17a) sounds more moderate whereas (17b) more awkward.

The previous seven pairs of examples, with and without [aa3], illustrate the fascinating ways final particles of different meanings can be used in sentences. In the following, another criterion termed 'Maximal Common Induction' will be set up, as mentioned before, to investigate the meanings of [aa3]. It is necessary here to emphasize again that the analysis should be conducted with 'Minimal Pair' as the primary tool.

3.2 Maximal Common Induction

It is obvious that the moods carried by [aa3] in the above sentences are not commonly found in all the examples. These include expressing doubt and hope, giving examples, emphasizing, pausing and offering guarantee. According to the principles of Maximal Common Induction, moods that are not commonly found are to be excluded. Therefore, the above moods cannot be interpreted as the meaning of the particle [aa3]. In other words, the particle [aa3] fails to represent those moods.

On the other hand, the common characteristics shared by the seven examples with [aa3] are that, they all make the sentences sound more neutral. In contrast, those without [aa3] sound more direct, rushing and straightforward. That is to say, all the sentences with [aa3], compared to those without, carry a common attitude – 'moderate'. If the common attitude shared by all types of sentences with a P is the meaning of P, 'making a sentence sound moderate' is more likely to be the core function of the particle [aa3]. When [aa3] is said to make the sentence sound more moderate, we are only comparing with respect to those without [aa3], but not suggesting that all sentences with [aa3] sound more moderate in general. When [aa3] is attached to a sentence, its function is to make the original sentence sound more moderate, no matter what kind of attitude the sentence originally carries. For example, if the original sentence is a question, the particle attached brings a sense of doubt. This implies that the speaker knows something about the question he asks and has an expectation on the answer, but he is just doubtful and asking for confirmation. In this respect, the speaker does not seem to be too direct and abrupt and the atmosphere is more neutral. Besides, it also appears that the speaker is not so confident if the other side is willing to co-operate and therefore it leaves room for possible rejection.

3.3 meanings of [aa3]

After discussing the accurate meaning of [aa3], let us look back and see how the attitude is produced in the above sentences with [aa3]. The four possible relations of P and S in 'S + P' sentences are pointed out in the previous section: (i) adding a new meaning to S; (ii) combining S and P to develop a new meaning; (iii) P strengthening the attitude in S; and (iv) P and S not having any direct relations. It can be noted from those sentences with [aa3] in examples (11a)-(17b) that only the fourth relationship can be found. That is to say, [aa3] adds to S the attitude of 'moderate', which does not exist in S originally. The original attitude in S co-exists with the attitude carried by [aa3]. There are no obvious interactions between [aa3] and S. In the above examples, whether or not [aa3] appears at the end of the sentences does not affect the original attitudes, namely expressing doubt in (11b) and (12b), expressing hope in (13b), giving examples in (14b), emphasizing in (15b), pausing in (16b) and offering guarantee in (17b) in the original sentences. Questions remain as questions and optatives remain as optatives. However, the sentences with [aa3] carry the sense of 'moderate', and this attitude is brought to S by [aa3].

4. Conclusion

The main objective of this paper is to depict the pattern of use of Cantonese particles and to establish a better grammatical description of the language. It must be noted that the analysis performed in this paper does not mean to be comprehensive, and only the general outlines of the particle studies have been presented. Essentially, there are many other approaches to analyze the meanings of particles. In order to come to a more accurate conclusion, an appropriate research process must be carried out in the further analysis of particle use in Cantonese. [aa3] is used as an example to suggest a more strict examination device. That is to say, 'Minimal Pair' is proposed as the basis, together with 'Maximal Common Induction' to argue against the possibility of the lack of a general meaning in a particle and to explore its actual meaning. In addition, in order to examine the functions of particles in day-to-day conversations, the investigation of pragmatics is of paramount importance. For example, in a conversation, whether a particle can appear at the end of a sentence depends on the mapping between the function of the particle and the speaker's attitude. Therefore, the study of particles is worth profound investigation. In modern Cantonese, particles are crucial to the fluency of a conversation and the listener's understanding of the utterance. I do hope that this paper has served its objectives and that the discussion will be of some value to other researchers in the field of Cantonese linguistics.

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Notes

Note 1. They are [lo1], [bo3], [aa3], [wo2], [tim1], [gwaa3], [me1], [je1], [maa3], [ne1], [ge2], [lai4], [sin1], [zyu6] and [faat8].

Note 2. The Romanization scheme promoted by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong is used in this paper.

Note 3. Concerning the particle [ne1], Shao (1989) has this to say: "ne1 does not have an interrogative expression in any grammatical form…… its basic grammatical function is to remind, or go into a matter of fact seriously in an interrogative as a derivative function……"

Note 4. Shao (1989) claimed that the interrogative mood is expressed by the conversational context itself.

Note 5. According to Cheung (1972) there are seven classes of sentences ended with [aa3] that can be found syntactically; they are interrogative, optative, emphasis, guarantee, address, enumeration and pause.

List of abbreviations

ADV   Adverb

CL   Classifier

CM   Complement marker

DEL   Delimitative aspect marker

DET   Determiner

EXP   Experiential aspect marker

GEN   Genitive

NEG   Negative

PERF   Perfective aspect marker

PL   Plural

PT   Particle