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 prosodic context is well-preserved 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 (Besemer & Wierzbicka, 2003), social indexicity (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 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 *lah* ... 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?

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 Cellex2 (English wordforms)

• Coded the last 4 syllables based on distance from the last stress to the utterance end

  – For example: *it's impossible* → "x100"; *he's persuasive* → "xx10"

• Prediction: If prosodic context matters, *lah* should be overrepresented for short unstressed sequences, and underrepresented for longer ones

Results

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stress</th>
<th><em>lah</em></th>
<th>no <em>lah</em></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>xxxx1</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>17969</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xx10</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>7055</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x100</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1682</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 (for, *leh*, *hor*, *meh*, etc.)

• Similar particles in other languages (esp. *quoi* for French)

Selected References