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Interrogative Sentence Final Particles of Cantonese – aa4 and me1

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Section 1 – Introduction

Sentence-final particles (SFPs) in Chinese are words occurring in the sentence final position. They express some semantic meaning and pragmatic information, and form a crucial grammatical category in the language. A wide range of meanings such as aspect, focus, modality, speech acts and temporal information are expressed via using SFPs. Cantonese is a tonal language and the change of tone may lead to a change of meaning. Hence, in early studies (e.g. Kwok 1984), it is believed that SFPs are similar to intonation in non-tonal languages as they both carry emotion of the speaker. Previous studies have outlined the whole selection of SFP in Cantonese (e.g. Kwok 1984, Leung 1992 and Matthews and Yip 1994), but fall short of one that is more elaborative and precise. Furthermore, for studies concerning SFPs, most of them only focus on their semantics and pragmatics, while very few on their syntactic properties. The goal of this paper is to present an overview of SFPs in Cantonese with a primary focus on two interrogative particles – *aa4* and *me1*, with an additional discussion on Mandarin counterparts. The phenomena of SFP clusters, several SFPs co-occurring, would also be discussed in this paper.

This paper is sectioned as follows: Section 2 presents the empirical data, where three research questions are introduced based on the distribution of *aa4* and *me1*. Section 3 reviews the empirical data and provides syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties to the two particles and SFP clusters. Section 4 concludes the paper.

Section 2 – Empirical Data

2.1 呀 *aa4*

A common interrogative particle that can be found in daily usage is *aa4*. Despite its frequent appearance, this particle does not receive much attention in previous research and its semantic meaning was not properly defined. The compatibility of *aa4* is tested with three types of questions: particle, A-not-A and wh-questions. As instantiated in (1) – (3), *aa4* is only compatible with particle questions, but not the other two.

- (1) 今日星期五呀？(~ “今天是星期五，對嗎？”)
- (2) *你識唔識佢呀？(~ “*你認不認識他，對嗎？”)
- (3) *佢係邊個呀？(~ “*他是誰，對嗎？”)

2.2 咩 *me1*

Another interrogative particle that is frequently used by Cantonese speakers is *me1*. As claimed by Matthew & Yip (1994), the speaker presupposes a negative answer with the use of *me1*. The particle also conveys the emotion of disbelief (Kwok 1984) and surprise (Yau 1980, Law 1990). Similar to *aa4*, *me1* can only appear in particle questions, but not in A-not-A and wh-questions (in (4) - (6)).

- (4) 今日星期五咩？(~ “今天是星期五嗎？”)
- (5) *你識唔識佢咩？(~ “*你認不認識他嗎？”)
- (6) *佢係邊個咩？(~ “*他是誰嗎？”)

2.3 SFP cluster

It is observed that the SFPs mentioned above can form SFP clusters with other SFPs. Nonetheless, there are some obligatory restrictions for them to follow. The first one is that the particles must follow a certain order, otherwise they are ill-formed (in (7) – (11)).

- (7) 你識講法文咋咩？(~ “你只會說法語嗎？”)
- (8) 你仲識講法文添咋咩？(~ “你還只會說法語嗎？”)
- (9) 你仲識講法文添呀？(~ “你還會說法語，對嗎？”)

- (10) *你識講法文咩咋？
- (11) *你仲識講法文咩添咋？

Based on the above data, three research questions are raised: (1) Why *me1* and *aa4* can only appear in particle questions but not in A-not-A and wh-questions? (2) What are the semantic and pragmatic features of *aa4* and *me1*? (3) Why the particles must follow a certain order in SFP clusters and what scope does the two particles take?

Section 3 – Analysis

3.1 呀 aa4

Aa4 is a particle that is seldom discussed. As shown in (1), it transforms a proposition into a question. Law (2002) proposed that *aa4* is a genuine question particle as it clause-types a question. This provides an explanation to why *aa4* can only occur in particle questions but not in A-not-A and wh-questions. In A-not-A and wh-questions, the structure itself already clause-typed the utterance as a question. If the two types of question construction co-occur with a question particle, a clash of feature values would happen and leads to ungrammaticality (in (2) & (3)).

- (12) Scenario: Agnes bumped into Vlad on the plane to Iceland, and she said:
- a. 你去冰島旅行呀？(~ “你去冰島旅行，對嗎？”)
 - b. #你去唔去冰島旅行呀(aa3)？(~ # “你去不去冰島旅行呢？”)

The semantic and pragmatic features of *aa4* were not discussed in previous studies, so a scenario is provided for further elaboration. In (12), only (12a) is felicitous, while a plain A-not-A question (12b) does not sound natural in the above context. The speaker (Agnes) has gathered some knowledge of Vlad that he is traveling to Iceland and she wants to seek confirmation by asking the question. By using the particle *aa4*, the speaker presupposes that the proposition “你去冰島旅行” is true and has a positive bias towards it.

3.2 咩 me1

The distribution of *me1* is comparable to *aa4*. As seen in (4) – (6), it can only appear in particle questions but not in A-not-A and wh-questions. The explanation for the occurrence of *me1* is essentially the same to *aa4* so they are not repeated here. The difference is semantic, where for *me1*, the speaker presupposes that the proposition is false.

- (13) Scenario: Vlad told Agnes that he is traveling to Norway tomorrow. However, Agnes bumped into Vlad on the plane to Iceland the next day, and she said:
- a. 你去冰島旅行咩？(~ “你去冰島旅行嗎？”)

- b. #你去唔去冰島旅行呀(aa3)? (~ # “你去不去冰島旅行呢?”)

The *me1* question in (13a) would be more well-suited in the above circumstance instead of a neutral A-not-A question in (13b). *me1* would be felicitous if the speaker has gathered enough knowledge of the addressee to expect a negative answer. Agnes was surprised to see Vlad on the plane to Iceland, as “Vlad is not going to Iceland” was what she was expecting. However, it is not the case to require the speaker to commit to the truth value of the utterance. In (13), the chance of Vlad abandoning the idea of going to Norway is relatively high as Agnes could have guessed. Instead, she is just expressing her surprise and her assumption of John not going to Iceland.

Note that the exact counterpart of *aa4* and *me1* cannot be found in Mandarin particles. The meaning of *aa4* and *me1* can only be interpreted by intonation or further elaboration in Mandarin. Like the *me1* question in (13a), the closest translation would be “你去冰島旅行嗎？我還以為你是去挪威呢。”

Another point worth mentioning is that in some Cantonese learning websites, *aa3* is marked as a variation of *aa4*, since it can appear in questions as well (e.g. in (12b) & (13b)). However, it does not classify as a genuine question particle by Law as it cannot clause type a question. It just acts as a tone softener (Matthews and Yip 1994) that carry very little semantic meaning (Kwok 1984). The counterpart of *aa3* in Mandarin would be *ne*, as it just functions as a suffix to questions without changing the intended meaning. So (12b) & (13b) would be translated to “你去不去冰島旅行呢?” in Mandarin.

3.3 SFP cluster

Before examining the formation of SFP clusters, it is necessary to consider the syntactic position of the particles. Early studies claimed that SFPs can only appear on root level but not in embedded clauses. It is no exception to the two particles mentioned above. They always take the highest scope of the utterance as they are inherently speaker-oriented.

- (14) 張三話[李四會去冰島]呀/咩? (~ “張三說[李四會去冰島]，對嗎/嗎?”)

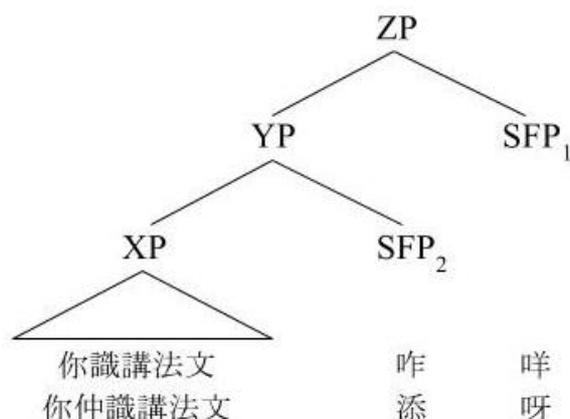
- (15) *張三話[李四會去冰島咩/呀]? (~ “*張三說[李四會去冰島，對嗎/嗎?]”)

In (16 & 17), a yes-no question can only be constructed on the matrix level, whereas the reading of indirect question cannot be generated.

Law (2002) proposed that there are two positions for SFPs in the CP domain – SFP₁ and SFP₂. SFP₁ are those in general encode speech acts, speaker-oriented modality and epistemic knowledge. It must be placed before SFP₂ as they always take the highest scope. The [+Q] subclass in SFP₁ includes three question particles: *aa4*, *maa3* and *me1* and also other [-Q] particles such as *aa3*, *bo3*, *ge3* etc. SFP₂ is a smaller class compared to SFP₁ and it includes the two focus particles *zaa3* (‘only’) and *tim1* (‘also’) and also the inchoative particle *laa3*. The rule is that SFP₁ must precede SFP₂.

- (16) 你識講法文咩? (~ “你只會說法語嗎?”)
 (17) 你仲識講法文添呀? (~ “你還會說法語，對嗎?”)
 (18) *你識講法文咩咋?

(16) is well-formed because *zaa3* is a SFP₂ and *me1* is a SFP₁. The same goes to (17) where *tim1* is a SFP₂ and *aa4* is a SFP₁. In contrast to (16) & (17), (18) is ill-formed as SFP₂ *zaa3* is in the position followed by SFP₁. The structures of the two grammatical sentences are shown in the following:

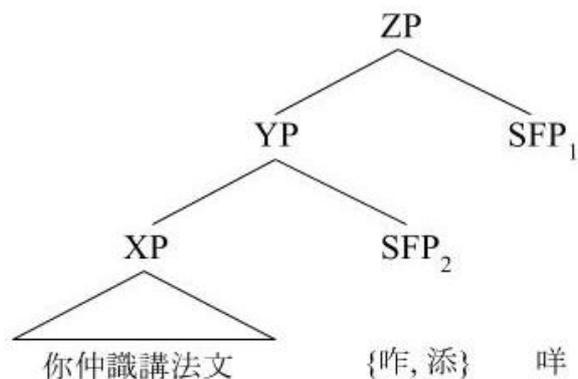


The proposal also applies to three-particle clusters; they are well-formed as long as there is only one SFP₁ (if any) in the sequence. Like in (23), there are two SFP₂ (*tim1*, *zaa3*) and only one SFP₁ (*me1*) in the utterance. It is impossible to rearrange the sequence *tim1 zaa3 me1* freely

(in (24)). The syntactic tree of (23) is presented below.

(19) 你仲識講法文添咋咩？(~ “你還只會說法語嗎？”)

(20) *你仲識講法文咩添咋？



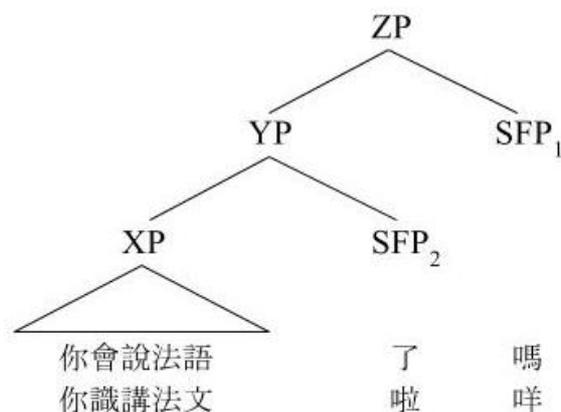
Another unsolved question is that the order of *zaa3* and *tim1* cannot be reversed although they are both SFP₂. However, the answer to this has not been explained in Law's proposal.

SFP clusters can also be found in Mandarin but the inventory is significantly smaller than Cantonese.

(21) 你會說法語了嗎？

(22) 你識講法文啦咩？

In (21), *le* is an inchoative particle and *ma* is a question particle. Their counterparts in Cantonese would be *laa3* and *me3* respectively (in (22)). So *le* can be classified as SFP₂ and *ma* as SFP₁. The syntactic tree would be as follows:



Section 4 – Conclusion

In this paper, the semantic, pragmatic and syntactic properties of two Cantonese interrogative particles, *aa4* and *me1*, are shown. After testing them in scenarios, it is concluded that for *aa4*, the speaker presupposes a positive answer while *me1* presupposes a negative answer. Using the two positions of SFPs (i.e. SFP₁ and SFP₂) proposed by Law (2002), the two particles both belong to SFP₁ as they both are speaker oriented and take the highest scope in utterances. SFP₂, like *zaa3* and *tim1* occupy the position lower than SFP₁. This provided explanation to why several SFPs can co-occur and they are called SFP clusters.

Section 5 – References

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Section 6 – Appendix

Table (1) – All sentence final particles in CP proposed by Law (2002)

SFP ₂	SFP ₁ [±Q]
<i>zaa3</i> ('only')	[+Q]:
<i>tim1</i> ('also/even')	<i>aa4</i>
<i>laa3</i> ('inchoative')	<i>maa3</i>
	<i>me1</i>
	[-Q]:
	<i>aa3</i> ('neutral softener')
	<i>bo3</i> ('reminder')
	<i>ge3</i> ('assertion')
	<i>gwaa3</i> ('probably')
	<i>laa1</i> ('lack of definiteness')
	<i>le1/ne1</i> ('tentative')
	<i>lo1</i> ('obviousness')
	<i>lo3</i> ('irrevocability')
	<i>lok3</i> ('irrevocability')
	<i>wo3</i> ('reminder')
	<i>wo4</i> ('surprise')
	<i>wo5</i> ('hearsay')
	<i>ze1</i> ('downplay')
	<i>zek1</i> ('intimate')