

The semantics of the Cantonese utterance particle *laa1*

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Abstract. This paper will carry out an in-depth semantic analysis of one of the most salient and frequently used Cantonese utterance particles, *laa1* (high level tone). Cantonese utterance particles occur in continuous talk every 1.5 seconds on average, and play a very important role in Cantonese speakers' self-expression. There are approximately one hundred utterance particles in Cantonese, outnumbering those in Mandarin. However, it has been suggested that the particles have no meaning, and there has not been much comprehensive semantic analysis of individual particles. Where utterance particles have previously been described, the descriptions do not fully and accurately convey their meanings.

In this study, a range of naturally occurring examples of *laa1* from the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus will be examined, and an invariant meaning of *laa1* proposed using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). This approach offers advantages over previous descriptions of *laa1*, and will allow a simple, precise and translatable definition to be constructed. It is found that *laa1* indicates some shared knowledge between a speaker and an addressee. This study addresses the current gap in Cantonese linguistics, and contributes to the understanding of Cantonese utterance particles.

Keywords. Cantonese, semantics, Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), utterance particle, sentence-final particle

1. Introduction¹

Utterance particles are a distinctive hallmark of Cantonese. Although Cantonese utterance particles are not grammatically obligatory, they have important functions and are very noticeable in everyday conversation. Ordinary speech becomes unnatural when the particles are omitted. Despite their frequency and significance in conversation, there has not been much in-depth research focused on the meanings of individual utterance particles. This study aims to perform a comprehensive semantic analysis of one of the most recognisable Cantonese utterance particles, *laa1* (high level tone).

To begin with, an overview of Cantonese utterance particles and of prior work on *laa1* will be given. It will be shown that there are many problems with previous descriptions of *laa1*. Some problems with these analyses include being contradictory, vague, or inaccurate. One clear and testable explication will be proposed for *laa1* using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), which will allow these problems to be overcome. Examples of *laa1* from ordinary conversation, taken from the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus, will help in examining and justifying the proposed explication. It is expected that the explication will be able to account for all of the wide-ranging uses of *laa1*.

2. Cantonese utterance particles

It is necessary for people to understand what particles mean in order to achieve semantic and communicative competence (Goddard 2011:162; Wierzbicka 2003:341). Particles have a particularly high frequency in ordinary speech, and allow complex pragmatic meanings to be expressed easily. Utterance particles in Cantonese are bound morphemes that attach to the ends of utterances. They have no direct counterpart in English, but it has been argued that they belong to the ‘complementiser’ category. Their function has been compared to that of English

¹ I am indebted to Dr Zhengdao Ye for her valuable advice and encouragement. She also supervised my Honours thesis, upon part of which this paper is based. I am grateful to Pr Kang Kwong Luke for kindly helping me with the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus. I also wish to thank Pr Cliff Goddard, as well as two anonymous reviewers.

question tags (Matthews & Yip 1994:65). Cantonese utterance particles have also been called ‘sentence particles’ or ‘sentence-final particles’, although they can occur at the end of syntactic units which are not sentences (Wakefield 2011:12; Luke 1990:6-10; Matthews & Yip 1994:338).

Though the regularity with which Cantonese utterance particles occur varies greatly depending on the mode of language use (i.e. less in formal situations), they have a very high frequency in ordinary conversation. An informal count revealed that on average, an utterance particle is found in continuous talk every 1.5 seconds (Luke 1990:11). Approximately thirty or more Cantonese utterance particles have been identified, but because they can be used together in combinations of more than one particle, the actual number of particles (simple and compound) currently in use in spoken Cantonese is approximately one hundred (Luke 1990:1; Kwok 1984:8-11; Wakefield 2011:13, 19; Yip & Matthews 2000:131). In terms of sheer numbers, Cantonese utterance particles far outnumber their Mandarin counterparts, or possibly any other language studied (Chan 1999:88; Luke 1990:1; Wakefield 2011:2). In the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus (see Section 5), the most frequently used particle, *aa3*, is also, revealingly, the second most frequently used word in the entire Corpus. It comes second only to the word *hai6*, which means ‘is’, or ‘yes’.

Many Cantonese speakers agree that a conversation without any utterance particles sounds unnatural (Luke 1990:14; Yip & Matthews 2000:130). Furthermore, James (2001), Ho (2003), and Wong (2009) have reported that Cantonese speakers use Cantonese utterance particles when communicating online, even if writing in English. The use of the particles in these cases suggests that there is something in their meanings that is unable to be easily translated into English. Moreover, this untranslatable meaning is so important for Cantonese speakers that it cannot be omitted.

Utterance particles are especially important for Cantonese speakers because they are a vital means for Cantonese speakers to express their emotions, feelings, moods, and attitudes. Much of the meaning conveyed by intonation in languages such as English is expressed via particles in Cantonese (Wakefield 2011; Yip & Matthews 2001:156; Chan 1999:88). Cantonese is a tonal language, with the rich tonal system severely restricting Cantonese speakers’ ability to manipulate pitch.

Therefore, many speaker-oriented discourse meanings typically expressed with intonation in a language such as English are instead expressed in Cantonese using utterance particles (Wakefield 2011; Yip & Matthews 2001:156; Chan 1999:88). For example, some utterance particles perform one of the tasks of English intonation of changing a declarative sentence into a question. Given that Mandarin has fewer tones than Cantonese, perhaps it is of no surprise then that Mandarin has fewer utterance particles.

While most modern grammars of Chinese have mentioned Cantonese utterance particles, the particles have not been the focus of many studies. Language studies in the Chinese tradition have drawn the distinction between *shíwù* ‘full words’ and *xūwù* ‘empty words’, and Cantonese utterance particles have been placed in the category of *xūwù* ‘empty words’ (Luke 1990:3-4). This signals that they do not have specifiable, truth-conditional meanings, instead serving grammatical functions. This general agreement that the particles have no semantic content has been listed by Luke (1990:3) as one of their distinctive features.

Contrary to this idea, I will argue and demonstrate here that Cantonese utterance particles do have meanings, and furthermore, that their meanings can be captured and stated. The idea that ‘empty words’ do not have meanings has already been challenged by Ye (2004), whose study of Mandarin ‘emotional adverbs’ (which in the Chinese linguistic tradition are ‘empty words’) used NSM to show that the ‘empty words’ are rich in semantic content. Recently, Wakefield (2011) also proposed that all Cantonese utterance particles have intrinsic meanings. Wakefield believes that descriptions of utterance particles are inadequate when they include meanings from the sentences the particles attach to, or the discourse contexts in which they appear. This would be similar to supposing that the plural morpheme ‘s’ in ‘cats’ means ‘more than one cat’, which is undesirable because it includes the meaning of ‘cat’ in the meaning of ‘s’ (Wakefield 2011:71-74). Wakefield believes this to be the reason many scholars have concluded that utterance particles have no meanings independent of context. This study will investigate the ‘intrinsic’ or ‘core’ meaning of only one particle, *laa1*; the explication proposed will aim to present an invariant definition which will hold in all contexts.

Laa1 is one of the most salient and frequently used utterance particles in Cantonese. In the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus, *laa1* is the 3rd most frequently

used particle (after *aa3* and *gaa3*), and the 14th most frequently used word overall. It is the most highly used Cantonese utterance particle in Wong's (2009:102) data from MSN Messenger and ICQ chats. It has even been suggested that the source of the Singapore English *la* (sometimes spelt *lah*) lies in Cantonese (Kwan-Terry 1978; Gupta 1992). Non-Cantonese speakers often imitate Cantonese speakers by adding a *laa* sound to the ends of their sentences. This study will follow the precedent given in previous work on Cantonese utterance particles, including that of Yau (1965), Kwok (1984), and Luke (1990), by considering the Cantonese tones as lexical. In other words, the utterance particles *laa3* and *laa4* will be considered different to *laa1*, and will not be studied here.

3. Previous descriptions of *laa1*

It will be instructive to begin by looking at previous descriptions of *laa1*. First, some problems with Cantonese-English dictionary definitions of *laa1* will be discussed. Cantonese grammar books and textbooks will also be touched upon briefly. Following this, scholarly work on Cantonese utterance particles will be examined. Although each academic source has its own advantages, some limitations exist.

While dictionaries can be a good starting point, the definitions are problematic. Some ideas appear to be contradictory. For example, Huang's (1970:414) ideas of 'commanding' and 'requesting' do not correspond with each other. In fact, 'commanding' and 'requesting' can be thought of as opposing speech acts. Cowles' (1965:489) and Meyer & Wempe's (1947:287) descriptions of 'urgency' also do not correspond with their other descriptions of 'completion', as 'urgency' implies something has not yet been completed. In other cases, the definitions may simply not be very informative. For example, O'Melia's (1941:83) description of *laa1* as 'final, declarative, imperative' does not reveal much about the meaning of *laa1*. Furthermore, some of these labels are used for multiple particles which are not truly synonymous.

One of the main problems with previous descriptions of *laa1* has been the lack of focus on particles' 'core' or invariant meaning. As mentioned above, Wakefield

(2011) also identified this as a widespread problem in the literature. This can be seen clearly here. Meyer & Wempe (1947:287) provide two supporting examples for their definition of ‘implying completion; certainty, or urgency’. The first is *zou6 bou2 laa1*, which they translate as ‘it is finished’. The second is *jat1-ding6 laa1*, which they translate as ‘certainly’. These two example sentences do imply ‘completion’ and ‘certainty’ respectively. However, it can be argued that this is due to the utterances themselves, and not the particle *laa1*. *Zou6 bou2 laa1* means ‘do complete/good *laa1*’, or simply ‘done’. This implies ‘completion’ with or without the particle *laa1*. Similarly, *jat1-ding6 laa1* is ‘definitely *laa1*’, where the word ‘definitely’ implies ‘certainty’, with or without *laa1*. It seems Meyer & Wempe may not have differentiated between the particle’s meaning and that of the utterance it is attached to.

More descriptions of *laa1* can be found in some Cantonese grammar books and textbooks. These can also be contradictory. Matthews and Yip (1994:351-352), for example, write that *laa1* can be used in ‘polite requests’ as well as in ‘straightforward commands’. Elsewhere, *laa1* is reported as functioning ‘purely to fill a pause’ (Matthews & Yip 1994:341). This may be related to the idea of Cantonese utterance particles being ‘empty words’ with no semantic content. In Yip & Matthews (2001:146), it is stated that *laa1* is ‘characteristic of imperatives’. This is not a very comprehensive explanation of its meaning. Other textbooks and grammar books admit that Cantonese utterance particles are pervasive in speech, important for communication, and one of the most challenging features of Cantonese for learners; however, they merely give advice such as ‘using particles appropriately is best learnt from practice and experience’ (Yip & Matthews 2001:156). Such statements also do not contribute to a reader’s understanding of particles’ meanings.

The first comprehensive and scholarly study of Cantonese utterance particles was that carried out by Yau (1965). Yau conducted two main ‘tests’, both encompassing the whole range of eighty-nine particles identified at the time. The ‘S-Q test’ was concerned with whether a statement with an utterance particle would be preserved as a statement, or be transformed into a question. In this test, *laa1* was categorised as a ‘Q-type’ particle, or one ‘demanding a verbal confirmation’ (Yau 1965:39-68). However, because all eighty-nine particles were

assessed based on just one criterion, this S-Q test did not provide much description of meaning and is not particularly informative. Each particle appears to have the same property as many other particles, with individual particles' unique meanings being overlooked.

The second test conducted by Yau, the 'C-test' (Yau 1965:82-120), was used to determine which particles contain which of twelve 'connotation concepts'. The twelve connotation concepts were 'coaxing', 'surprised', 'hesitating', 'fault-finding', 'patient', 'persuading', 'dissatisfied', 'conceited', 'reluctant', 'reminding', 'doubting', and 'politely urging'. Yau found that *laa1* was associated with 'coaxing', 'persuading', 'reminding', and 'politely urging'. This is slightly more helpful than Yau's S-Q test in identifying meaning, but is still flawed in that eighty-nine particles were restricted to twelve pre-determined connotation concepts. Each concept was inevitably assigned to more than one particle, and particles were assigned to more than one concept. Again, the concepts may be contradictory—for example, in the case of *laa1*, 'coaxing' and 'reminding'. Moreover, the twelve labels represent fairly complex ideas, even in English (the language in which Yau was writing).

The second study of Cantonese utterance particles was carried out by Gibbons (1980). Gibbons differentiated between *laa* with a high level tone and *laa* with a high falling tone, although both are transcribed as *laa1* in the Jyutping system. He described both of these as 'mands', requiring a response in terms of action (Gibbons 1980:768). *Laa* with a high level tone was given a 'strength' (a 'degree of expectation of a response') of 2 on a scale with 1 being the weakest and 3 being the strongest. *Laa* with a high falling tone was given a 'strength' of 3.

Gibbons (1980) also investigated the whole inventory of Cantonese utterance particles. As with Yau's (1965) study, all particles were considered under uniform criteria. Individual particles were mentioned only briefly, being described mainly in relation to other particles. The descriptions given may be helpful where comparisons between particles are necessary, especially since most of Gibbons' data is tabulated. However, the meaning of each particle is lost as soon as it is considered in isolation.

Another large-scale study of Cantonese utterance particles was carried out by Kwok (1984). Similarly to this study, Kwok was interested in isolating the ‘core meaning’ of each particle. That is, the ‘meaning shared by all occurrences of the particle in different contexts’ (Kwok 1984:13-14). However, it will be shown here that Kwok’s definition of *laa1* cannot be applied to all instances of *laa1* in varied contexts. Kwok writes that when suffixed to statements, *laa1* is similar in function to *la* in Putonghua, which is a particle of ‘lively enumeration’, and indicates ‘a certain lack of definiteness, a lack of finality or completeness’ (Kwok 1984:55). When used in imperative sentences, Kwok (1984:78) believes *laa1* to be the ‘neutral form’, being chosen as the suffix to commands and requests ‘except when one wishes to express some special meaning’.

Kwok (1984) also looked at the whole range of Cantonese utterance particles. Her work was more descriptive than Yau’s (1965) or Gibbons’ (1980), but still did not consider individual particles in adequate depth, and contained some ambiguity. For example, the statement that *laa1* is the ‘neutral form’ for imperative sentences is somewhat perplexing given that Kwok also states that imperative sentences do not always take an utterance particle (Kwok 1984:78). Secondly, the idea of *laa1* being used ‘except when one wishes to express some special meaning’ is ambiguous because without knowing the meaning of *laa1*, it is equally impossible to know when one wishes to convey a meaning not expressed by *laa1*. Kwok’s other description, ‘lively enumeration’, is also terminologically obscure. The idea of *laa1* conveying a lack of definiteness will be discussed further below.

Another concern is that Kwok (1984) had a tendency to link Cantonese utterance particles with a Mandarin counterpart. First of all, this is not helpful for people who do not speak Mandarin. The Mandarin counterparts were themselves not clearly defined by Kwok. The second problem with using Mandarin particles is that they are unlikely to be fully equivalent to particles in Cantonese. Particles are usually highly idiosyncratic, difficult to translate, and without exact equivalents in other languages (Wierzbicka 2003:341; Goddard 2011:163-164). As mentioned above, utterance particles in Cantonese outnumber those in Mandarin. Though Mandarin and Cantonese are related, they are very different and mutually unintelligible, especially in ordinary speech where Cantonese utterance particles are most abundant (Snow 2004:2, 46).

The next major work on Cantonese utterance particles was carried out by Luke (1990). Luke studied three particles, one of which was *laa1*. Importantly, Luke's study also aimed to include the full range of use of each particle. His work, though narrower in focus, was a significant improvement on previous studies. Luke's descriptions appear to be the most in-depth for any individual Cantonese utterance particles. Another noticeable development in Luke's (1990) work is that he appears to be the first to analyse real examples of utterance particles from naturally occurring, ordinary conversations. Luke gives a valid argument that invented examples are no substitute for spontaneous conversation (Luke 1990:2).

Luke summarised *laa1* as being 'sensitive to the establishment of common ground as an organisational issue' (Luke 1990:117). 'Seeking common ground' was also one of the functions of *laa1* identified by Matthews and Yip (1994:341). The kinds of sequences identified by Luke (1990) for *laa1* were 'reportings and story-tellings', 'listings and instructions', 'understanding checks', 'suggestions', 'agreements', and 'pre-closings'. However, some of the sequences identified by Luke are themselves contradictory. For example, he identified both 'suggestions' and 'agreements' as possible sequences, but these imply that the same particle is used in very different ways. As mentioned, despite his in-depth analyses, Luke states clearly that Cantonese utterance particles have no semantic content (Luke 1990:3-4).

There is still a need for thorough and accurate semantic analyses of Cantonese utterance particles. Dictionaries, textbooks and grammar books were clearly not written as in-depth investigations into particles' meanings. Luke (1990) has a Conversation Analysis background, and his work was written from what he describes broadly as a sociolinguistic perspective. Other studies have been broader, and focused less on individual particles. Gibbons (1980:764) stated that one of his article's objectives was the stimulation of debate that would hopefully lead to more adequate description of the particles in Chinese languages. This study will address this gap which still exists in Cantonese linguistics. The next section will introduce the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach to be used in this study.

4. Methodology: the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach will be used in this study (see e.g. Wierzbicka 1992; 1996; 1997; Goddard & Wierzbicka (eds) 1994; 2002a; 2002b; Goddard (ed) 2008; Goddard 2011; Peeters (ed) 2006). The aim here is to capture the semantic invariant of the particle *laa1* and express it by means of a paraphrase. The language of the paraphrase is limited to a minimal ‘core’ of ‘semantic primes’. These are commonly used, everyday words which represent the most basic meanings. It is important that these primes are semantically simple, in order to avoid circularity and terminological obscurity. A list of the semantic primes in English and Cantonese is available in the appendix.

Because semantic primes represent fundamental, shared human concepts, semantic equivalents are expected to exist in all natural languages. In fact, empirical studies have confirmed the existence of the primes in an array of geographically and typologically diverse languages (see e.g. Goddard & Wierzbicka (eds) 1994; 2002a; 2002b; Goddard (ed) 2008; Peeters (ed) 2006). The primes also share a universal syntax, and therefore any NSM explication can be translated into any other natural language to give an identical meaning. With the use of NSM, we can accurately describe meaning in any language, as if from inside, while using our own language. This is a great advantage, as ethnocentrism has been one of the main pitfalls in explaining meaning (Goddard 2002:8; Wierzbicka 1996:22; Wong 2004:752). Moreover, NSM explications using natural language are intelligible to native speakers, and can be tested by substitution in place of the words they represent (Goddard 2002:6; 2011:65; Besemeres & Wierzbicka 2003:9-11; Wong 2005:245). Explications may also have the potential to be adapted for language learners and non-linguists.

Another advantage of the NSM method, particularly in explaining particles, is that they can be written from the speaker’s point of view. Cantonese utterance particles concern interaction between the speaker and addressee, and therefore references to ‘I’ and ‘you’, two semantic primes, are necessary (Wakefield 2011:75-76). The NSM approach has been applied to particles in various languages (e.g. Besemeres & Wierzbicka 2003; Chappell 1991; Goddard 1994; 2011; Travis 2005; Waters 2009; Wierzbicka 1986; Wong 2004; 2005). Recently, Wakefield (2011) used the NSM framework in the process of equating some Cantonese utterance

particles to specific English intonation patterns. However, Wakefield did not study the particle *laa1*.

The goal in this study is to find an NSM explication that can be applied to all instances of *laa1*. As Wakefield (2011:70) explains, explications of Cantonese utterance particles should be context-bound rather than context-specific. The NSM explication will be written from the speaker's point of view, and will allow substitution and testing, as well as maximum translatability.

5. Data

In this paper, 'Cantonese' refers only to the variety spoken in Hong Kong. This is the so-called 'Standard Cantonese' or 'Hong Kong Cantonese'. Cantonese is the primary spoken language of Hong Kong, and the most widely known and influential variety of Chinese besides Mandarin (Matthews & Yip 1994:2). In 2011 there were almost 6,100,000 people in Hong Kong (roughly 90% of the population) who were aged over five and spoke Cantonese as their main language (Census and Statistics Department 2012).

The data used in this study comes from the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus, created by Luke and Nancarrow (see *Corpus of Hong Kong Cantonese*, <http://www0.hku.hk/hkcancor/intro.html>). The Corpus contains 180,000 words of naturally occurring Cantonese, recorded in the late 1990s. The data consists of spontaneous speech either in ordinary settings among family, friends and colleagues, or from radio talk shows. As mentioned, Luke (1990:18-27) argues that naturally occurring, 'raw', 'everyday' data is better than constructed or elicited data. Furthermore, linguists agree that Cantonese utterance particles are used primarily in informal or colloquial speech (Gibbons 1980; Luke 1990; Wakefield 2011). Therefore, it is best if the data and examples used in this study are from real, spontaneous, naturally occurring and informal conversation. Data from the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus satisfies all these criteria.

A Cantonese romanisation system, 'Jyutping', has been used here to present all Cantonese words and data. Proposed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong in 1993, it is also known as 'The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong Cantonese

Romanisation Scheme’ (Linguistic Society of Hong Kong 2011). For standardisation, examples from texts using different romanisation systems have been given here in Jyutping.

6. NSM explication of *laa1* with examples and discussion

An NSM explication will now be proposed for the Cantonese utterance particle *laa1*. This explication was arrived at after looking at one hundred naturally occurring examples of *laa1* from the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus. Some of these examples will be given below to test and demonstrate the explication’s validity. It will be shown that the explication can be used to fully and clearly explain all instances of *laa1*, in a range of situations and contexts. It also has some links with previous descriptions of *laa1*. The NSM explication proposed for *laa1* is as follows:

laa1

- a. I say this because I want you to know what I think
- b. I think like this now: ‘you know what I think about this’
- c. because I think like this now, I can not-say more

Several comments about the explication may be relevant here. Note that when *laa1* is used, the knowledge which is shared and understood by the speaker and addressee may be more than what is explicitly stated in the utterance *laa1* is attached to. In other words, what is known can go beyond what was said. It should also be noted that the last part of the explication is ‘I can not say more’, and not ‘I cannot say more’. ‘Not’ and ‘say’ have been hyphenated above to highlight this. This is acceptable in NSM, and would also be acceptable in, for example, the Cantonese version of this explication. The three lines of the explication should be considered as part of the one definition. NSM explications may be long compared to ‘traditional’ definitions, but following this grammar allows maximum clarity and translatability. Let us now look at examples of *laa1* in use.

6.1 Example 1

- (1) *Gam2* *zik1-bai6* *pei3-jyu4* *nei5* *zau6* *haan1-zo2*
 so meaning for-example you then save-PFV
cing4- *haan1-zo2* *cing4* *syun4* *jau6* *bou2* *aa3*,
 journey- save-PFV journey boat also good PRT
fo2-ce1 *jau6* *bou2* *aa3*, *whatsoever*
 train also good PRT *whatsoever*
gam2-joeng2 ***laa1***
 this-way ***laa1***

‘So that means for example you’ve saved money on a journey—perhaps saved on a boat journey, or a train, whatsoever, like that.’

In Example 1, the speaker is giving a lengthy explanation about cheap ways to travel. He/she is explaining that a British Airways promotional offer will allow a free flight from any European city to London, if boarding a direct flight from London to Hong Kong. We can test the proposed explication of *laa1* with its use in Example 1. In Example 1, the speaker is (component (a) from the NSM explication) saying this now because he/she wants the other person to know that they will be able to save money from certain modes of transport. The speaker gives a few examples of modes of transport which the other person can save on, but ends the list with *laa1* because (component (b)) the speaker thinks that the other person knows what he/she thinks about this. In other words, the other person will themselves be able to think of modes of transport that could be saved on. The speaker thus stops listing, because since it is assumed the other person can understand him/her and will be able to continue the list themselves (component (c)), there is no need to say any more. Related to Example 1 is part of Kwok’s (1984:55) description that when suffixed to statements, *laa1* indicates a ‘lack of finality or completeness’. The list in Example 1 is indeed not exhaustive. However, as we shall see in other examples, not all cases of *laa1* correspond with Kwok’s idea that it conveys lack of finality.

To further justify the proposed explication, it will be revealing to substitute *laa1* in Example 1 with some other particles. For example, a particle that seems to contradict component (a) when substituted for *laa1* in Example 1 is the particle

aa4. This particular utterance, with particle *aa4*, becomes a question, as if the speaker is asking for confirmation. Particles contradicting component (b) include *wo3* and *lo1*. Substitution for *wo3* in this example gives the interpretation that the speaker is pointing out or explaining the offer to the addressee, where the addressee either does not know or understand something, or does not see the significance of something. There is a feeling that if the addressee understood what the speaker was saying, he/she might change their mind about something. Use of *lo1* in Example 1 implies that the speaker thinks this is something the addressee does not, but should, know. A particle that contradicts components (b) and (c) is *gaa3*, which when substituted into Example 1 implies that the speaker does not expect the addressee to know about or understand this offer, and that the speaker might then explain. *Wo3* also allows this opportunity to explain more. The particles chosen for substitution here do not cause the new utterance to sound unnatural, but do change the attitude or meaning conveyed.

6.2 Example 2

- (2) A. *Bat1-jyu4 gai3-zuk6 tau4-sin1 gong2*
 let's continue earlier speak
ge3 je5 laa1.
 LP thing(s) **laa1**
 'Let's continue the conversation from earlier.'
- B. *Hou2 aa1 bou2 aa1 bou2 aa1. Gam2*
 good PRT good PRT good PRT so
hai6 laa1, gong2 faan1 ngo5-dei6
 yes **laa1** speak back we
gan6-fong3 aa1.
 recent-situation PRT
 'Good, good, good. So yes, going back to talk about our recent situation.'

Example 2 is the beginning of one of the recorded conversations in the Corpus. Let us first look at *laa1* as used by Person A. The proposed explication of *laa1* can be tested again here. Person A's use of *laa1* can be interpreted as (component (a))

Person A saying ‘let’s continue the conversation from earlier’ because Person A wants Person B to know that he/she wants them to, or thinks that they should. Next, (component (b)) Person A thinks that Person B knows what he/she thinks about this. This may refer to, for example, which conversation/topic is meant, or why Person A wants to continue talking about it. The exact reasoning would not be necessary to detail in the explication, as it would then become too narrow and unable to cover the whole range of uses of *laa1*. Lastly, (component (c)) because Person A assumes that Person B knows what he/she thinks, Person A can not say more. Person A does not need to, for example, repeat the earlier conversation, or explain anything else.

This utterance by Person A in Example 2 could easily be described as ‘persuasive’ by a Cantonese speaker explaining the utterance to an English speaker. In fact, this is a commonly used description of *laa1*, with Matthews and Yip (1994:351-352) classifying *laa1* in the group of ‘imperative and persuasive particles’, and Yau (1965:82-120) attributing to it the ‘connotation concepts’ of ‘persuading’ and its synonym, ‘coaxing’. In the English gloss for this sentence, there are remnants of this persuasiveness, although the English formula ‘let us’, used often by English speakers to sound less imposing, seems to have countered this feeling (Wierzbicka 2006:183-203).

To better explain the difference between Person A’s use of *laa1* here and the English meaning of *persuade*, it would be useful to look at an explication of *persuade*, proposed by Wierzbicka (1987:62-64). It is necessary to point out here that Wierzbicka’s explication uses older primes and syntax from an earlier version of the NSM. Words such as *cause*, *should*, and *different* are no longer used as semantic primes. Nonetheless, the general idea of the explication still holds true. Note that the explication of *persuade* given below is for the syntactic frame ‘X persuaded Y to do Z’, or in this case, ‘Person A persuaded Person B to continue the earlier conversation’.

persuade

I think that you should do X

I know that you don’t want to do it

I think I can say things which will cause you to think about it in a different way

I want you to come to think about it in a different way

I want to say why I think that you should do it

I say: (...)

I say this, in this way, because I want to cause you to come to think that you should do X, and do it (Wierzbicka 1987:62-64)

Parts of the meanings of *laa1* and of *persuade* are compatible, although other parts are not. Firstly, someone who *persuades* says something because they want the addressee to do something ('I say this... because I want to cause you to come to think that you should do X, and do it'). Similarly, Person A's use of *laa1* in Example 2 signals, according to component (a) of the explication, something like 'I want you to know that I think we should (/I want us to) continue the earlier conversation'. In this respect, the use of *laa1* and the use of *persuade* are compatible because the speaker wants the addressee to do something in both cases, and says something to try to make it happen. This can explain why Cantonese speakers sometimes describe *laa1* as being persuasive.

However, the word 'persuasive' implies that the other person is less willing than the speaker to do something. This is clearly not the case in Example 2, as we can see that Person B responds by stating his/her agreement more than once. The English speaker who *persuades* would anticipate resistance ('I know that you don't want to do it'), whereas the Cantonese speaker who uses *laa1* would not. Furthermore, because of this resistance, to *persuade*, the English speaker has to say a number of things in the process of making the addressee change his/her mind about something ('I think I can say things which will cause you to think about it in a different way'). These aspects of *persuade* are incompatible with *laa1*. This can be seen by looking at components (b) and (c) of the explication for *laa1*. According to components (b) and (c), a Cantonese speaker using *laa1* would assume the other person understands and knows what he/she thinks, and that there is no need to say more. In Example 2, Person B responds agreeably although there has been no process of Person A saying things to change his/her mind. Thus we can see that definitions like 'persuasive' are inadequate.

Let us now turn to Person B's use of *laa1* in Example 2. The proposed explication can be used to explain *laa1* here as well. Person B's use of *laa1* is clearly not persuasive, since Person A has already indicated that he/she would like to continue the conversation. Here, Person B is in agreement. 'Agreement', as mentioned above, has been offered as one of the attributes of *laa1*, for example in Huang (1970:414) and Lau (1977:480). However, the particle itself does not indicate agreement. As a response from 'let's continue the conversation from earlier', the utterance 'good, good, good... going back to talk about our recent situation' conveys agreement even when the three words 'so yes *laa1*' are omitted. *Laa1* can be used as part of an agreement, but to say that *laa1* means 'agreement' would be making the common mistake of considering the meaning of the whole utterance as the meaning of the particle.

It may be interesting to note that an earlier version of the explication for *laa1* included the semantic prime 'can' in component (b). This earlier component was 'I think you can know what I think'. However, 'can' was omitted from component (b) in the final explication due to instances of *laa1* like Person B's in Example 2. Since Person A has already expressed his/her opinion, and the two speakers are in agreement, it is unlikely that Person B did not simply assume Person A knew what he/she was thinking. A component including 'can' made the speaker seem too uncertain, and was rejected in favour of the current component in which the speaker is more confident in his/her assumption ('I think like this now: "you know what I think about this"'). Many other examples from the Corpus also support this change. The related idea of 'certainty' will be looked at more closely further below, with reference to the use of *gang2-hai6* 'of course'.

One previous description more applicable to Person B's use of *laa1* in Example 2 is Luke's (1990) idea of 'common ground establishment'. Person B can be interpreted as signalling to Person A that there is mutual understanding or agreement, and that they are thinking the same thing. Luke's description will be discussed further with respect to Example 3.

6.3 Example 3

Example 3 is similar to Example 2 in that the speaker using *laa1* is referring back to some prior knowledge. The conversation stops temporarily as Person A

answers the phone, and upon resuming, *laa1* is used when referring to an earlier point in the original conversation. The proposed explication again sheds light on the use of *laa1* here. The interlinear gloss will only be provided immediately surrounding the use of *laa1*.

(3) A. ‘Ei, I have a call, let’s pause for a while.’

A. ‘Okay, we can continue.’

B. ‘Mm.’

A. *Gam2 tau4-sin1 gong2 dou3 ne1, zau6 waa6*
 so previously speak to PRT then say
tung4 di1 jan4 lyun4-lok3 laa1. Gam2 zau6
 with CL people contact ***laa1*** so then
zik1-bai6 seng4-jat6 zeoi1 lo1 di1 je5.
 that-is always chase PRT CL things
Zik1-bai6 keoi5-dei6 m4 wui5 zi6-dung6-zi6-gok3
 that-is they not will self/automatically
bei2 nei5 gaa3.
 give you PRT

‘So we were talking about contacting people before. I mean constantly chasing things up. That is, they don’t automatically give you things.’

The utterance in Example 3 is not ‘persuasive’, ‘commanding’, or ‘requesting’, and does not imply ‘urgency’ or ‘completion’. Furthermore, *laa1* here does not, however strongly or weakly, require a response in terms of action, or demand a verbal confirmation. This suggests that Gibbons’ (1980) label of ‘mand’ and Yau’s (1965) categorisation of *laa1* as a ‘Q-type particle’ are both unable to be applied to all cases of *laa1*. This highlights again the fact that most previous descriptions are inadequate, at least when considering the whole range of uses of *laa1*. The more relevant descriptions of *laa1* for Example 3 are Kwok’s (1984:55) ‘lack of finality or completeness’, since the speaker is continuing something that was unable to be finished previously (although it is not a list like Example 1); Yau’s (1965:82-120) ‘reminding’, and Luke’s (1990) ‘common ground establishment’.

According to Luke (1990:56), there can be organisational problems where speakers have to sustain mutual orientation as to what they are doing, where they

are in a conversation, and what to do next. Therefore, in reportings and story-tellings, *laa1* is sometimes ‘used to segment an extended reporting into chunks’. Furthermore, a related use of *laa1* suggested by Luke (1990:63-64) is that *laa1* helps to announce a topic on which extended talk is about to be delivered. Through the use of *laa1*, the topic introducer displays his/her assumption that the addressee can know what the topic is. This allows the speaker to secure an extended slot for its delivery.

Luke’s view can be seen in Example 3 as Person A using the utterance with *laa1* to provide ‘orientation’ as to what they were doing, where they are, and what to do next. When Person A restates the previous topic after having answered the phone, this may be interpreted as a kind of brief summary of their earlier conversation, or as a brief introduction as to what he/she will say next. Either way, it ‘organises’ the conversation and makes clear what was said before and what will be said next. Although Luke’s ‘segmenting’ into ‘chunks’ is not particularly descriptive in itself, we can interpret the first ‘chunk’ of conversation in Example 3 as that which occurred before the phone was answered. The second ‘chunk’ would be the part of the conversation to take place after the phone has been answered.

The important point here is that this organisation and mutual understanding in Example 3 corresponds with the proposed explication for *laa1*. After the speaker states what he/she thinks (component (a)), the speaker then indicates the expectation that the addressee knows what he/she thinks about it (component (b)). Once speakers have mutually ‘organised’ their conversation, the speaker does not have to say more about the earlier part of the conversation (component (c)). Through this organisation, the use of *laa1* has helped Person A ‘announce’ (or in this case, re-announce) the topic he/she wants to talk about, i.e. contacting people.

The tendency identified by Luke (1990:56-59) for *laa1* to secure an extended slot for the speaker in this type of sequence does not seem to be true here. Although in Example 3 Person A does continue talking with a longer turn, the same sentence without *laa1* would still allow for an extended slot. Another indication can also be found in the rest of the conversation. Before answering the phone, Person A already had many extended turns where he/she was talking at length,

while Person B's responses were much shorter. Person B's responses included saying things like 'yes', or asking questions so that Person A could continue the narrative. When Person A says they can continue after having answered the phone, Person B merely says 'mm' instead of contributing anything more significant or informative. This seems likely to be because it has already been established in some other way that Person A has a lot more than Person B to say on the topic. This idea of *laa1* introducing something for a longer turn has not been included in the proposed explication for *laa1*.

Next, it will be beneficial to examine utterances conveying 'certainty', a description of *laa1* given by Cowles (1965:489) and Meyer & Wempe (1947:287). Utterances with *laa1* which convey 'certainty' occur very frequently in conversation and in the Corpus. As explained above, the proposed NSM explication aims to be general enough to cover all uses of *laa1*. The explication should be valid in all contexts, regardless of the content of the rest of the utterance. Since 'certainty' is not part of the proposed meaning of *laa1*, testing the explication with some utterances which convey certainty will help reveal whether or not it is applicable in such common situations. Consider Example 4, which is a response to someone talking about their sister's pet guinea pigs smelling very badly.

6.4 Example 4

- (4) *Nei5 dou1 m4 tung4 keoi5 cung1-loeng4*
 you even not with it shower
 gang2-hai6 laa1.
 of-course *laa1*
 'Of course, since you don't even give it showers/washes.'

The *laa1* in Example 4 can be considered against the explication proposed. The speaker wants the addressee to know that he/she thinks it is obvious that guinea pigs that do not get washed become smelly (component (a)). Since this is a fairly natural, logical or 'common sense' conclusion to come to, the speaker assumes the addressee understands what he/she thinks (component (b)). Since this idea, and the link between washing (or dirtiness) and smell is so 'obvious' or logical, the speaker does not feel the need to explain further, and indeed does not say

anything more in this turn (component (c)). Thus the explication can be applied to this example.

It would not be surprising for Example 4 to be described in English by a Cantonese speaker as conveying ‘certainty’ or ‘persuasiveness’. ‘Persuasiveness’ has been discussed above in relation to Example 2, and the same points are valid in this example. The idea of ‘certainty’ can be examined further. The use of *gang2-hai6*, or ‘of course’, needs to be highlighted. A more direct translation of the characters separately might be ‘definitely-is’. It seems reasonable, then, to assign the feeling of ‘certainty’ to *gang2-hai6*, and not *laa1*. This sense of certainty is felt even in the free English translation of Example 4, and even without *laa1*. The word *dou1*, which is very roughly glossed as ‘even’, also contributes to the feeling of certainty here. It has a complex meaning that is not easily translatable into English, but seems to add some ‘strength’ to the speaker’s position.

Gang2-hai6 ‘of course’, as well as *hou2 ming4-bin2* ‘very clear’, and other similar phrases like *jat1-ding6* ‘for certain’/‘definitely’, are often used in the same utterance as *laa1*. The frequent use of *laa1* with phrases such as these can easily lead Cantonese speakers to say that *laa1* conveys ‘certainty’. There must be something in the meaning of *laa1* that is highly compatible with such words and phrases, which leads speakers to choose the particle *laa1*. The proposed explication can help explain this too. Component (b) ‘I think like this now: “you know what I think about this”’ and component (c) ‘because I think like this now, I can not say more’ correspond well with a sense of ‘obviousness’ or something being ‘very clear’. From the speaker’s point of view, what he/she is thinking must be in some way clear or obvious to the addressee, such that the addressee can understand without further explanation.

More substitutions of *laa1* for other Cantonese utterance particles can be revealing. If in Example 4 the use of *laa1* were substituted for a particle such as *ze1* or *lo1*, the utterance would not sound correct. Use of *ze1* in this utterance would minimise the situation or imply something like ‘only’ or ‘just’, which is incompatible with ‘of course’ or ‘definitely’. Use of *lo1* in this utterance would imply that the addressee did not know that dirty guinea pigs would smell, and would again sound unnatural because the sentence is one where something is supposed to be very clear, obvious, or ‘certain’.

6.5 Example 5

Example 5 also contains *gang2-bai6* ‘of course’. In this scenario, one of two speakers announces that he/she would not go on vacation during summer holidays. Without *gang2-bai6* (and perhaps even *zau6*, glossed as ‘then’ but also not easily translatable), the utterance does not sound very strong or certain. This supports the idea that certainty is not part of the meaning of *laa1*. Again, the proposed explication is applicable here, and can shed light on the use of *laa1*.

- (5) *Ngo5 zau6 gang2-bai6 m4 wui5 syu2-gaa3*
 me then of-course not will summer-holiday (go)
laa1. Tung4 jan4-dei6 bik1.
laa1 with other-people crowd
 ‘I of course wouldn’t go during summer holidays. Crowded with other people.’

The numerous examples of *laa1* with *gang2-bai6* ‘of course’ and its synonyms support the decision, mentioned earlier, to omit ‘can’ from component (b). The earlier component ‘I think you can know what I think’ makes the speaker seem somewhat tentative and unsure, although it seems from many examples that the speaker is confident in what is being said. The current component for (b) is more fitting with *gang2-bai6* ‘of course’ and its synonyms. At the same time, it can explain those utterances that do not contain a word like *gang2-bai6*. The speaker seems to always assume that the addressee knows what he/she thinks, and that there is no possibility that the addressee does not know.

However, the observation that *laa1* is used very often with words conveying certainty or obviousness does not correspond with Kwok’s (1984) description. Kwok states that when suffixed onto statements, *laa1* has a ‘lack of definiteness’ (Kwok 1984:56), and may be reinforced by words like *dou2* meaning ‘about’ or ‘approximately’, or *waak6-ze2* meaning ‘maybe’ or ‘perhaps’. An example used by Kwok is ‘*sei3 jyut3 dou2 laa1*’, which she translates as ‘around April’. She states that this ‘shows the idea of something which is approximate and not definite’ (Kwok 1984:56).

It seems, though, that Kwok (1984) has made the common mistake of confusing the meaning of *laa1* with the meaning of the utterance it is attached to. In a

sentence with *dou2* ‘about’/‘approximately’, or *waak6-ɬe2* ‘maybe’/‘perhaps’, it seems logical and straightforward to say that the words ‘*dou2*’ and ‘*waak6-ɬe2*’ convey indefiniteness and approximation. In Kwok’s example ‘*sei3 jyut3 dou2 laa1*’, which means ‘four month about *laa1*’, or ‘around April’, ‘*sei3 jyut3 dou2*’ itself would still be translated into English as ‘around April’, without the presence of *laa1*. Kwok (1984:56) herself glosses ‘*dou2*’ as ‘about’, ‘approximately’, and so any translation of ‘*sei3 jyut3 dou2*’ would naturally be expected to include a meaning like that. Despite Kwok’s intention to isolate a ‘core’ meaning for each particle, indefiniteness and approximation are not parts of the invariant meaning of *laa1*. This is supported by the real and naturally occurring examples above which convey certainty. Although sentences with ‘about’ or ‘maybe’ might seem different from previous examples where the speaker was very sure or certain about something, the proposed explication for *laa1* is still valid, even for Kwok’s example.

6.6 Example 6

Example 6 is similar to Examples 4 and 5, but uses *laa1* with *hou2 ming4-bin2* ‘very clear’. This is a conversation between three people. One of these three people, Person A, owns a rabbit, which sharpened its teeth on a bicycle seat. Another speaker, Person B, believes that the rabbit is doing this because Person A is not taking care of it properly. This leads to a disagreement. Person C does not say much. The uses of *laa1* in this example can be explained using the proposed explication.

(6) A. ‘It was grinding its teeth. Like a carrot.’

B. ‘Grinding its teeth? Your rabbit?’

A. ‘The rabbit.’

B. <i>Laa4</i>	<i>hou2</i>	<i>ming4-bin2</i>	<i>nei5</i>	<i>ɬiu3-gu3</i>	<i>dak1</i>
PRT	very	clear	you	take-care	ADV
<i>keoi5</i>	<i>m4</i>	<i>hou2</i>	<i>laa1</i>	<i>Tou5-ngo6</i>	<i>aa3 keoi5</i> .
it	not	good	<i>laa1</i>	hungry	PRT it

‘Look, clearly you didn’t take good care of it. It was hungry.’

A. ‘No. This is their nature, to sharpen their teeth.’

B. ‘Then you should give—then you should give it normal things to grind its teeth on.’

C. ‘Yes.’

A. ‘Yes. That was my bicycle.’

B. <i>Hou2</i>	<i>ming4-bin2</i>	<i>nei5</i>	<i>zɿu3-gu3</i>	<i>dak1</i>	<i>keoi5</i>
very	clear	you	take-care	ADV	it
<i>m4</i>	<i>gau3</i>	<i>hou2</i>	<i>laa1</i>		
not	enough	good	<i>laa1</i>		

‘Clearly you didn’t take good enough care of it.’

A. ‘No. Very good.’

As Example 6 shows, despite the speaker’s assumption that the addressee will know what he/she thinks (component (b): ‘I think like this now: “you know what I think about this”’), the other person disagrees. However, this does not mean that the speaker thought the addressee would disagree, and so does not require the explication to be changed. Component (b) indicates that the speaker believed what he/she was saying to be something the addressee would understand, but the explication in itself gives no expectation of what the addressee’s response will be. As can be seen in this example, as well as in Example 7, what the speaker anticipates does not exclude the possibility of the other person doing something different. The explication is therefore still valid.

In Example 6, it needs to be furthermore remembered that although Person C does not contribute much to the conversation, Person B is speaking not only to Person A but also to this other person. The ‘you’ in the explication could refer to Person C, and the explication would also still be valid. It seems Person C does indeed know what Person B thinks, since Person C states his/her agreement. As the Corpus is currently only available in text form, it is impossible to tell whom Person B is really speaking to.

It may be interesting to explain the rejection of another component here. Initially, a component such as ‘I want you to think the same’ was considered for the explication. It is feasible that in Example 6, Person B wanted Person A to think that he/she had not taken good care of the rabbit, as it was hungry. This would have been more ‘persuasive’. However, this component is questionable when we

see that Person B responds to Person A's 'no' and explanation that this is the nature of rabbits by then saying that Person A should give his/her rabbit something normal to sharpen its teeth with. In other words, after being challenged or corrected, Person B quickly changed his/her stance from believing the rabbit was underfed, to suggesting the rabbit was not given something appropriate to grind its teeth on. It seems that if *laa1* included a component like 'I want you to think the same', the speaker would not have given up on the idea of the rabbit being hungry so quickly or easily. Example 7, from a conversation about holidays and leave from work, is similar, and also supports the rejection of such a component.

6.7 Example 7

- (7) A. *Jyu4-gwo2 heoi3 jing1-gwok3, ngo5 seng4-jat6*
 if go England I always
gok3-dak1. Zik1-hai6 nei5 heoi3 au1-ɣau1 nei5
 feel meaning you go Europe you
gang2-hai6 heoi3 heoi3 jat1 go3 jyut6
 of-course go go one CL month
dai2 laa1.
 cheap/good value **laa1**
 'If going to England, I always feel. I mean if going to Europe of course going—going for one month is more worth it.'
- B. 'No. The worst thing is you need to find someone to act in your position.'
- A. 'Oh yeah.'

The explication proposed can be applied to Example 7. The current component of 'I think like this now: "you know what I think about this"' in (b) fits more accurately than the rejected component 'I want you to think the same'. In Example 7, Person A says (again with *gang2-hai6* 'of course') that if going to Europe, it is more worth it to stay for a month. Person B disagrees, and gives a reason for this, perhaps because Person B knows that Person A expects him/her to know what he/she thinks. As in Example 6, Person A then changes his/her view and agrees with Person B. Thus we can see that it is not unusual for a

speaker to change his/her stance when corrected or questioned. This provides further evidence that English definitions like ‘commanding’ or ‘persuading’ are inaccurate, as these words imply some sort of rigidity whereby the speaker will not change his/her position.

6.8 Example 8

The proposed explication for *laa1* can also be tested with Example 8, in which two speakers agree with each other. Person A is telling Person B about his/her recent trip to Guilin as part of a tour group. In one place, Person A was being pushed to buy Chinese medicine, and there were lots of people heavily promoting the products. Person A and B agree that there was no need to buy Chinese medicine there as they could not be sure of their trustworthiness, and there are good doctors in Hong Kong. In all three uses of *laa1* in Example 8, the proposed explication can be substituted.

(8) A. ‘Mm, there were these kinds of things to buy. We—we didn’t buy any.’

B. *M6. M6. M6. M6. Gang2-bai6*
mm mm mm mm of-course
m4-bou2 maa5 laa1 sing4-joe6.
not-good buy laa1 medicine
M4 ʒi1 mat1-je5 lai4 ge2.
not know what come PRT

‘Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Of course it’s not good to buy medicine. Don’t know what it is.’

A. *Gang2-bai6 laa1. Hoeng1-gong2 gam3 bou2 ji-sang1,*
of-course laa1 Hong-Kong such good doctor
m4-sai2 laa1, sai2 sai2 mat1 beoi3
not-need laa1 need need what go
beoi3 beoi3 go2-dou6 aa3? Ci1-sin3, bai6
go go there PRT crazy is
m4-bai6 gam2 gong2 aa3?
not-is this say PRT

‘Of course. There are such good doctors in Hong Kong, what’s the need

to go there? Crazy, wouldn't you say?

B. 'So how many days were you there for? At the time?'

A. 'Five days.'

The interesting part of this excerpt from their conversation is how quickly the speakers transition into the next topic. When Person A asks 'Crazy, wouldn't you say?' this appears to be for effect or emphasis and is not a question that Person A expects to be answered seriously. This is signalled by various things including Person B's previous turn in which he/she has already made clear his/her stance, or perhaps both speakers' use of *gang2-hai6*, but also, it would seem, their recurrent use of *laa1*. At least partly through their use of *laa1*, both speakers have indicated to each other that they think the same thing. Mutual understanding and 'common ground establishment' (Luke 1990) have occurred. This is proven by the quick way that the topic is brought back to that of holidaying in Guilin. Person B almost 'abruptly', as an English speaker might see it, asks how many days Person A was there for. This does not sound 'abrupt' in Cantonese and Person A simply moves on and answers this question, which suggests that it sounded natural to him/her as well.

6.9 Example 9

The proposed explication can also explain the use of *laa1* in Example 9. Two people, A and B, are having a conversation when somebody, C, enters. It appears that Person C is some sort of IT worker who has come to fix a machine. Person C asks if they can enter the network, and when Person A and Person B reply that they could in the morning, Person C concludes that this must mean that the machine works. After the brief exchange, Person A and Person B indicate that Person C can now leave by thanking him and saying goodbye, with Person B using '*hou2 laa1*', which means 'good/done/complete *laa1*'. Unfortunately, the data does not indicate explicitly whether Person C then left, but as he does not appear any more in the conversation after that, it is most likely that he did. Native speaker intuition and the surrounding utterances such as thanking, which can also be used in English to indicate the end of a conversation, also suggest it would have been unnatural for him to stay after that. Component (c) ('because I think

like this now, I can not say more’) is valid in all the examples above, but can be seen particularly clearly in Example 9.

- (9) A. ‘Come in!’
 B. ‘Come in!’
 A. ‘Yes.’
 B. ‘Oh, Mr. Lee.’
 C. ‘I came over to help Jane, um, fix the machine. Can you enter the network here?’
 B. ‘We could earlier, in the morning.’
 A. ‘Yes, could enter in the morning, yes.’
 C. ‘Oh, that means it works. Yes.’
 B. ‘Yes. Haven’t tried this afternoon.’
 A. *O5. M4-goi1 nei5.*
 oh thank-you you
 ‘Oh. Thank you.’
 B. *Hou2 laa1, m4-goi1 saai3.*
 good ***laa1*** thank-you all
 ‘Good, thanks a lot.’
 A. *Baai1-baai3!*
 bye-bye
 ‘Bye bye!’

To link Example 9 back to some previous studies of *laa1*, we can see that this fits some, but not all, of the descriptions. It does convey a sense of ‘completion’, as suggested by Meyer & Wempe (1947:287) and Cowles (1965:489), but does not imply ‘urgency’, as they also suggest. It does not correspond with Yau’s (1965:39-68, 82-120) suggestion that *laa1* demands a verbal confirmation; nor does it indicate ‘coaxing’, ‘persuading’, ‘reminding’, or ‘politely urging’. It is also in clear contrast with Kwok’s (1984:55) description of ‘lack of finality or completeness’.

The existing description of *laa1* most relevant to Example 9 can be found in Luke’s section on ‘pre-closings’. According to Luke (1990:102), *laa1* has a ‘pervasive presence in pre-closing sequences’, or near the ends of conversations.

Indeed, *laa1* is very common even at the ends of telephone conversations. This makes sense if we consider the proposed explication, because *laa1* has the meaning component ‘I can not say more’. Luke (1990:109-110) explains that when a ‘pre-closing favourable environment’ has been constructed, preparatory work can be made towards conversational disengagement. One of the main ways to achieve this environment is to produce a ‘contentless’ signal, like ‘*bou2 laa1*’ in Example 9. This ‘records the speaker’s assumption that mutual understanding and agreement obtains, but adds nothing new to what has been said so far in the conversation, and, in so doing, proposes to yield the turn’ (Luke 1990:110).

The three requirements identified by Luke as necessary for ‘pre-closing initiators’ can be related to Example 9, and also closely correspond with the explication proposed. The first requirement is to express the assumption that whatever needed to be dealt with in the conversation has been dealt with to the satisfaction of both parties (Luke 1990:110). This is consistent with components (a) and (b). The second requirement is to signal that there are no further matters to raise (Luke 1990:110). This is consistent with component (c). Lastly, with the first two requirements satisfied, the next activity is closing (Luke 1990:110). These three requirements have all been fulfilled in Example 9, and furthermore, have parallels with the NSM explication proposed for *laa1*. Since there is understanding that the matter of the machine has been settled and that there are no more matters to be raised, nothing more needs to be said and Person C leaves. It should be pointed out, however, that although Luke (1990:110) labels utterances such as ‘*bou2 laa1*’ as ‘contentless’ and ‘adding nothing new to what has been said so far in the conversation’, it has been demonstrated in this study that these utterances are far from contentless.

7. Concluding Remarks

Cantonese utterance particles are very important for Cantonese speakers. The particles are used extremely frequently in conversation, and contribute something about a speaker’s emotions or attitudes. Without understanding utterance particles, one cannot fully acquire semantic or communicative competence in Cantonese. However, Cantonese utterance particles have not been the focus of

much study, and the existing literature does not seem to be sufficiently helpful or reliable. *Laa1* is one of the most salient and frequently used utterance particles in Cantonese, but many descriptions of *laa1* have been vague, contradictory, or inaccurate. It has even been questioned whether Cantonese utterance particles contain meaning.

This paper has proposed one NSM explication to represent the ‘core’ or invariant meaning of *laa1*. Analysis of data from the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus has revealed that *laa1* asserts a particular relationship or expectation between a speaker and addressee. The utterance attached to *laa1* does not seem to directly determine whether or not *laa1* is used. Rather, use of *laa1* indicates the speaker’s assumption that the addressee knows what the speaker is thinking. Because of this, *laa1* often appears to be able to attach to any utterance, or to change meaning depending on context. This may help to explain why utterance particles like *laa1* are sometimes perceived as having no meaning.

The NSM method used in this study allows common pitfalls in defining terms to be avoided, while also providing useful advantages. It allows the proposed explication of *laa1* to be accessible to speakers of all languages, including Cantonese. The explication has been presented from the point of view of the speaker, and is able to be substituted for testing. It can be expected to encompass the particle’s wide range of uses as found in the Corpus, and challenges perceptions that Cantonese utterance particles are ‘empty words’ with no meaning. It has also been demonstrated that it is more accurate and more descriptive than previous definitions of *laa1*.

There are still many questions we can ask about the semantics of Cantonese utterance particles. Semantic analyses will allow and encourage many future research opportunities. These analyses could be useful not only for linguists, but with some adaptation, potentially for Cantonese learners or non-Cantonese speakers in general. Unsurprisingly, most potential research areas will first require systematic investigation of individual particles. Once the meanings of individual utterance particles have been identified, many more questions can begin to be answered.

For example, particle ‘clusters’ and ‘contractions’ of more than one particle have often been claimed to have the combined meaning of the separate particles of which they are made up (Yau 1965:120; Kwok 1984:8-15; Wakefield 2011:13; Yip & Matthews 2000:131-132). However, this does not seem to have been rigorously tested. Moreover, this would be a futile exercise if the meanings of the particles which make up the clusters and contractions were not first accurately identified. Similarly, the question of whether there are ‘families’ of particles semantically related by common smaller meaningful units (such as the same initial or same tone) has been asked by Law (1990), Fung (2000), and Sybesma and Li (2007). However, their findings seem to contradict each other, and at least in some aspects, are ambiguous or even inaccurate. With more precise definitions for more particles, studies in these areas can be better carried out. Such studies may also reveal, for example, why not every combination of utterance particles is possible.

In addition, semantic analyses of *laa1* and of other utterance particles may eventually help to reveal clues about the culture or mindset of Cantonese speakers. Empirical evidence consistently confirms that lexical variation between languages, and key expressions like particles, reveal cultural differences between speech communities (e.g. Wierzbicka 1992; 1997; 2003). For example, it has been claimed that meanings contained in Singapore English particles (including Singapore English *la*) reveal information about the culture of Singapore English speakers (Besemeres & Wierzbicka 2003; Wong 2004; 2005). NSM is particularly useful in this regard as it allows ethnocentrism and cultural bias to be overcome.

An appreciation of differences in ways of thinking and interactional style can always improve understanding across cultures. It can help to reveal why Cantonese speakers talk the way they do. For example, it could suggest reasons why *laa1* is used so frequently by Cantonese speakers in ordinary conversation, when English speakers do not repeatedly express such meanings in ordinary English conversation. As mentioned, Cantonese speakers use Cantonese utterance particles even when communicating in English. The particles must therefore contain some meanings important to Cantonese speakers. Perhaps, as appears to be the case for Singapore English speakers (Besemeres & Wierzbicka 2003; Wong

2005), Cantonese speakers talk like part of a close-knit group, or ‘insiders’ in a close community.

It is beyond the scope of the present study, however, to include a comprehensive cultural analysis. Furthermore, in order to do so, it would be beneficial to look at more than one Cantonese utterance particle. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that differences are expected to exist between English speakers’ and Cantonese speakers’ culture and communicative styles, and that language-specific words such as Cantonese utterance particles may be particularly revealing in this respect.

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Appendix

Table 1 below lists the semantic primes of English and Cantonese. The English exponents and the grouping of the primes have been taken from Goddard (2011:66). A full list of Cantonese exponents has never been published, although partial lists were given by Tong *et al.* (1997) and Wakefield (2011). A full list of Cantonese exponents has been proposed in Table 1 below. Those exponents marked with the symbol '*' are the same as those in Wakefield (2011), while those marked with the symbol '†' are the same as those in Tong *et al.* (1997). Cantonese exponents being newly proposed are unmarked. Note that exponents of semantic primes have been identified in Standard Mandarin (see Chappell 1994; 2002), although it should be remembered that Cantonese and Mandarin are mutually

unintelligible, differing not only in phonology but also in grammar and vocabulary.

English	Cantonese	
I	<i>ngo5*</i>	Substantives
YOU	<i>lei5*</i>	
SOMEONE	<i>jan4</i>	
SOMETHING/THING	<i>je5</i>	
PEOPLE	<i>jan4</i>	
BODY	<i>san1tai2</i>	
KIND	<i>zung2</i>	Relational substantives
PART	<i>bou6fan6</i>	
THIS	<i>li1</i>	Determiners
THE SAME	<i>tung4</i>	
OTHER/ELSE	<i>ling6ngoi6 / ling6jat1</i>	
ONE	<i>jat1†</i>	Quantifiers
TWO	<i>loeng5†</i>	
MUCH/MANY	<i>do1†</i>	
SOME	<i>di1</i>	
ALL	<i>dou1 / cyun4bou6</i>	
GOOD	<i>bou2</i>	Evaluators
BAD	<i>m4bou2</i>	
BIG	<i>daai6</i>	Descriptors
SMALL	<i>sai3</i>	
THINK	<i>lam2*</i>	Mental predicates
KNOW	<i>zi1dou3*</i>	
WANT	<i>soeng2</i>	
FEEL	<i>gok3dak1</i>	
SEE	<i>gin3dou2 / tai2dou2</i>	
HEAR	<i>teng1dou2</i>	
SAY	<i>gong2 / waa6*</i>	
WORDS	<i>zi6</i>	Speech
TRUE	<i>zan1</i>	
DO	<i>zu6</i>	Actions, events, movement, contact
HAPPEN	<i>faat3sang1*</i>	
MOVE	<i>juk1</i>	
TOUCH	<i>dim3</i>	
BE (SOMEWHERE)	<i>hai2</i>	Location, existence, possession, specification
THERE IS	<i>jan5†</i>	
HAVE	<i>jan5</i>	
BE	<i>hai6</i>	
LIVE	<i>sang1cyun4 / sang1wut6</i>	Life and death
DIE	<i>sei2</i>	

WHEN/TIME	<i>si4han6†</i>	Time
NOW	<i>ji4gaa1†</i>	
BEFORE	<i>zi1cin4†</i>	
AFTER	<i>zi1han6†</i>	
A LONG TIME	<i>noi6†</i>	
A SHORT TIME	<i>dynn2si4gaan3</i>	
FOR SOME TIME	<i>(jan5)jat1dynn6si4gaan3</i>	
MOMENT	<i>jat1zan6</i>	
WHERE/PLACE	<i>dou6†</i>	Space
HERE	<i>ni1dou6†</i>	
ABOVE	<i>seong6gou1†</i>	
BELOW	<i>baa6min6†</i>	
FAR	<i>jyun5†</i>	
NEAR	<i>kan6†</i>	
SIDE	<i>bin6†</i>	
INSIDE	<i>lei5min6†</i>	
NOT	<i>m4</i>	Logical concepts
MAYBE	<i>ho2lang4/waa6ze2</i>	
CAN	<i>ho2ji5</i>	
BECAUSE	<i>jan1wai6*</i>	
IF	<i>jyu4gwo2</i>	
VERY	<i>hou2</i>	Intensifier, augmentor
MORE	<i>do1</i>	
LIKE~WAY	<i>ci5/gam2joeng2*</i>	Similarity

Table 1. Exponents of NSM semantic primes in English and Cantonese.