The Cantonese Utterance Particle LA and
the Accomplishment of Common Understandings in Conversation

Luke kang kwong

1. The Study of Utterance Particles

Linguists have long been puzzled and intrigued by certain classes of morphemes, words, and 'tiny expressions' in many languages which are syntactically and semantically elusive. These objects have been studied under such nomenclatures as clitics, modal particles, sentence particles, and discourse markers.¹ The problematic nature of these objects have raised many challenging questions: Are they no more than loose items that somehow do not integrate with other elements of the linguistic systems of which they form a part? What kinds of analytical instrument would be needed for their description? And how can their pragmatic and discourse functions be characterized?

1.1 Problems in the Study of Utterance Particles in Chinese

Within the tradition of language studies in China, a class of words known as ‘empty words’ (xuzi) has long been recognized. These have been identified in modern Chinese grammars variously as helping words, mood words, or sentence-final particles.² In the terminology of most existing accounts, these are typically 'form words' with no apparent semantic content, which are attached as bound forms (sometimes in combination) to the end of sentences to indicate their mood, tone of voice, or various emotive and attitudinal meanings.

¹ IPrA Papers in Pragmatics 3, No. 1 (1989), 39-87
² DOI: 10.1075/iprapip.3.1.02kwo
One striking yet seldom mentioned feature of these particles is that they have a pervasive presence in naturally occurring talk. The regularity with which they occur in natural conversation in Cantonese is truly astounding. A rough count reveals that an utterance particle is found in continuous talk on the average every 1.5 seconds. It is no exaggeration to say that they constitute one of the hallmarks of natural conversation in Cantonese. I will henceforth refer to these objects as utterance particles.3

Attempts to study the meanings or functions of these utterance particles and to provide conventional dictionary definitions or glosses are fraught with difficulties. Without recourse to contextual information such as who is speaking to whom, when, and what about, the sense of an isolated sentence can mean a variety of things. (1), for instance, can be glossed variously as a, b, or c (and in many more ways besides).

(1) \textit{toi seungmin yau pun faa LA}
table on there-be pot flower PARTICLE

a. ‘There must be a pot of flowers on the table then?’
   (seeking confirmation)
b. ‘One of the things that I noticed was that there was a pot of flowers on the table.’ (reporting or listing)
c. ‘Let us suppose that there is a pot of flowers on the table.’
   (planning or hypothesizing)

Assuming that the meaning of the matrix sentence (without the particle) is a constant, what are the properties of the particle which would allow it to contribute in so many different ways to the overall sense of an utterance? In general, utterance particles in Cantonese are highly fluid and seem particularly resistant to conventional syntactic and semantic analysis.

1.2 The Cantonese Utterance Particle LA4

A survey of existing accounts and definitions provides a wide range of features and attributes. Thus, for instance, two dictionaries which have LA as an entry have described it in terms of the categories "requests" and "agreement": Huang (1970) describes it as a sentence-final particle that is "used with commands or requests, or final agreement"; and Lau (1977) has the following entry: "a final particle that expresses the idea of requesting, commanding, or advising at the end of imperative sentences; [also,] it expresses the idea of
some kind of agreement having been reached". Similarly, Gibbons (1980:767) glosses LA briefly as "request". More recently, Kwok (1984) identifies a number of previously unmentioned features, including "enumeration" and "incompleteness" (p.55-57).

LA would thus emerge from these accounts as a remarkably versatile object, which can perform quite a range of functions. This alone would seem to call for an account. Furthermore, the relations amongst these functions are not immediately apparent. Each of the existing descriptions provides a partial picture of the particle by giving special emphasis to one or two uses, while ignoring or playing down others. But the question remains: what makes it possible for LA to be used in such a large variety of ways?

One of the difficulties that previous studies have faced seems to stem from the common assumption that for every particle there is an essential feature --a core meaning-- waiting to be discovered. The approach of this paper is fundamentally different. I have started by documenting the different uses of the particle in naturally occurring talk, without necessarily assuming a unique, basic function. After such an investigation, I have found that, contrary to previous accounts, LA does not have one or two central meanings. Instead, my analysis reveals a number of different uses, related to each other through a chain of family resemblances (cf. Wittgenstein 1953). To the extent that such a chain of relations can be systematically delineated, a basis would be furnished for the particle's functional diversity. This would imply a certain degree of fluidity in the use of the particle, which would in turn provide for the possibility of linguistic creativity and change. In addition, I wish to show that a fuller picture of this particle can be built on the basis of a proper appreciation of its conversation organizational properties.

2. LA and the Problem of Descriptive Adequacy

2.1 Descriptive Adequacy

One useful starting point for investigating the uses of LA is to consider its role in various procedures that are sensitive to the problem of descriptive adequacy. A pervasive and recurrent concern for participants in conversation is the recognizability or otherwise of descriptions --what one might call the problem of the descriptive adequacy of referential terms. In the course of a conversation, participants may from time to time find themselves at junc-
tures where the question of the identity of an object, a person, a place, a time, an event, or a state-of-affairs somehow comes to the fore; where, for one reason or another, the question arises as to whether a description is such that the interlocutor can, on the basis of the particular way in which it is formulated, successfully recognize or identify the thing-beings-talked-about.

An object, an event, a state-of-affairs -anything at all- can be described in innumerable ways from innumerable standpoints to any degree of detail. No description, however dispassionate or painstaking, can ever be ‘neutral’ or ‘complete’. Descriptive terms used in everyday conversation are not primarily designed in response to a call for logical clarity or completeness. They serve more like indices, whose meanings depend in part on the recipient’s work in ‘filling in’ the essential incompleteness that is part and parcel of their indexicality (Garfinkel 1984).

A question therefore arises: how is the problem of a referential term’s descriptive adequacy dealt with in an ongoing conversation? What procedures are available for the references of descriptive terms to be established to the participants’ satisfaction?

This last phrase is underscored to stress that adequacy is not evaluated using a priori universal criteria, but is relative to, among other things, the purpose at hand (e.g. the interactional goal that the use of that particular term is intended to serve). Adequacy then is dependent upon background assumptions about each other’s membership, status, what the co-participants know, etc. These being practical matters through and through, can only be dealt with in situ.

Schegloff (1972) and Sacks & Schegloff (1979) provide a vantage point from which it is possible to view the particular form that a referential term takes on a given occasion in terms of the analysis and definition of the situation in which it occurs and of which it forms an integral part. That is, any reference to places (Schegloff 1972), persons (Sacks & Schegloff 1979), times, situations, and the rest, in naturally occurring talk, may be construed as a solution to the problem of the ‘choice’ of a formulation. That is, particular descriptions produced on particular occasions of use can be seen as context-sensitive selections from an indefinitely large set of equivalent descriptions of ‘the same thing’.
In these papers, Sacks and Schegloff argue that one kind of consideration relevant to the selection of a formulation (e.g. whether to say *America, California, San Diego* or *Miramar Street*) is "recipient design": it has to do with the shaping of information in such a way as to take into account who the interlocutor is and what he or she knows. The question about whether a particular description selected and presented is an adequate one is a constant and pervasive conversational concern. A description is adequate in so far as the recipient, upon hearing the description, can work out its sense and import (e.g. what interactional work is being accomplished through that sense). The question of whether a description is adequate will therefore surface from time to time, as members' analysis of the situation varies. This often requires constant monitoring of the recipient's understanding, constant checking to see if the shared understandings that are being assumed are actually available.

2.2 *Constructions with which LA has privilege of co-occurrence*

A convenient and hopefully revealing way of beginning an account of LA is to examine closely the kinds of environments in which it is most likely to occur. When we look at a number of constructions in which this particle is regularly found, it becomes apparent that one kind of environment in which LA occurs are places where, in one way or another, the question of the adequacy of a description arises. I will illustrate in this section a number of constructions with which LA has privilege of co-occurrence, i.e. positions where LA is much more likely to occur than any other utterance particle in the language.

2.2.1 *The 'and the like LA' construction*

One of the environments in which LA is regularly found is at the end of the *and the like* construction. In Cantonese conversation, this construction is regularly used to display an orientation to the problem of descriptive adequacy and the speaker's reliance on the recipient's ability to establish the identity of a category through the enumeration of a small number of category members. An example of this can be seen in (2).
M: saam-bak-ng man dak-m-dak aa
(0.4)
J: m-sai aa saam-bak-yi jaa::=
M: =o ngo lam-jyu hai gamseungha [gala haa ]
J: [gam lin-maai]
be-jau wo:[]:
-->M: [hei-seui aa go-di gam-ge-ye LA:
[hamaa
J: [haa::[:: gam
M: [hahaha]
(.)
J: dou gei dai aa o go[k-dak hou dai] aa
M: [haahaahahaa ]

M: could the price be as low as three hundred and fifty dollars? (is my estimate too low?)
(0.4)
J: even less, it only cost three hundred and twenty
M: oh, I thought it was about [that
J: [and that included beer
[too
-->M: [soft drinks and the like LA, [right?
J: [yeah [so
M: *[yeah yeah
(.)
J: it was rather reasonable,
I [think it was very reasonable
M: [yeah yeah yeah yeah

The use of the and-the-like LA construction allows M to display her understanding of J's reference ("beer" being used to include, not exclude, soft drinks) and import (J's mentioning of "beer" as an additional piece of evidence to strengthen her claim that the cost of the meal is very reasonable indeed). Sympathy and support are thus offered through this LA-suffixed understanding display.
2.2.2 The "... or something LA" construction

This is a similar construction used to describe something in a 'vague' and 'imprecise' sort of way, by explicitly signalling the speaker's reliance on the interlocutor's ability to recognize the import, if not the sense, of the description. Again, LA is a regular feature of this kind of procedure.

(3) [SS:CH:1:327]
A: o sik yat-go
L: mm
A: yigaa jung heung ngodei hokhaau duk ge
L: [mm
A: [hou dakyi ge=
L: =mm
A: .hh jau:::
(0.3)
A: m-ji heui haimai mee-si LA
--> sanfu ding mee mee gaau-go lai LA
L: mm

-----------------------------------------------
A: I know one such person
L: mm
A: he's still studying in our school
L: [mm
A: [he's really funny=
L: =mm
A: .hh and:::
(0.3)
A: don't know what has happened to him
--> he's been taught by a priest or something LA
L: mm

The arrowed utterance (he's been taught by a priest or something LA), while in a sense incomplete, is presented here as a description on the basis of which the recipient can be relied on to work out, if not its reference, at least its import: later in the story, the person being portrayed here turns out to be somewhat mentally unstable, the implication being that this may have been a result of religious fanaticism. Thus, the utterance in question, together with
(6) [SS:CH:1:384]
L: lei seun-m-seun aa lei m seun
(0.6)
-->A: leung tai LA
--------------------------------------------------
L: do you believe it you don't
(0.6)
-->A: it depends LA

(7) [DJ1:1:118]
B: yanwai keui:: hou hoisam jaulei yau gaulik sannin
gwo aa
C: ha#=
B: =haawaa
 (.)
-->A: mmmm mm-jì aa (.) siusiu LA
B: hhh heh heh
--------------------------------------------------
B: because he's very happy that it'll be Chinese New
Year soon
C: yeah=
B: =is that right?
( .)
-->A: mmmm I don't know, a little bit LA
B: hhh heh heh

2.2.5 In all of the examples discussed in this section, LA occurs in constructions which present descriptions as 'imprecise' or 'incomplete', and display the assumption that the recipient can be trusted to work out the sense and import of a description.

2.3 Appeals to reason and common knowledge

A piece of supporting evidence comes from another pervasive regularity, namely, LA, but not any other utterance particle in the language, has privilege of co-occurrence with you know and similar expressions that appeal to reason or common knowledge. For example:
(8) [FEEL1:1:306]
--C: goum keui a yigaa nei ji LA
--hou do di ye hou kapyan saiman jai LA::=
P: =mm mm=
C: =gogo wan dinjiyauheigei aa

--C: so he um these days you know LA
    such a lot of things that attract children's
--attention LA
P: =mm mm=
C: =everybody's playing video games

The following extract contains an example of the use of LA in an appeal to reason (the statement in question being logically tautologous, its truth self-evident), and through that, to solicit sympathy.

(9) [SS:CH:1:468]
  A: janhai hou heuigaa lidi jaidou lai jimaai::
  L: [mm
  A: [doyu
  L: [yausi: lidi:: hai:::
      (0.3)
  L: .hhh jee:::
      (0.7)
--L: housiu ge sihau jau housiu ge LA
--mou baanfaat LA hai[maii
A: [mm

A: it's really pretentious, they're institutions,
    that's [all
  L: [mm
A: [unnecessary
L: [sometimes these are
    (0.3)
L: .hhh I mean
    (0.7)
--L: when things are funny they're funny LA
--you can't help it LA, [right?
A: [mm
LA also has a propensity to co-occur with the verbs ji ‘know’ and ming ‘understand’ within the same turn, where the speaker seeks the interlocutor’s understanding and sympathy. The following list contains expressions that are very common in Cantonese conversation:

(10)  
   a. lei ji LA  
       ‘you know’
   b. hai yan dou ji LA  
       ‘everyone knows’
   c. lei ming ge LA  
       ‘[I know] you understand’

2.4 Explicit solicitation of confirmation that common understanding obtains

When not occurring turn-finally, LA is often immediately followed by an explicit solicitation from the interlocutor for a confirmation of the availability of common understanding, i.e. by such objects as haimai, haamaa and haawaa (objects comparable to question tags in English, e.g. isn’t it, don’t you, etc.). Consider two examples of this pattern:

(11) [DJ1:2:246]
   P: m-hai ge:: jigei .hh jigei yau duksyu han dou yigaa
       mmaa aaai hhh yigaa jeutji jouye lak
   -->T: ha# waan-haa samyun goum LA::: hai[mai aa
   P: [hai LA
       ---------------------------------------------
   P: no really, I, .hh I've always wanted (to
       travel) since I was in school, and now at last
       I'm working
   -->T: yeah, so now you'll be able to do what you've
       always wanted to do, right?
   P: yes
(12) [TC:2:613]
--\(K\): e:::.... go cleaning disk keui yau LA ha[maa
W: yau
----------
--\(K\): e:::.... the cleaning disk, he's got it, right?
W: yes

2.5 All of the constructions examined above have something to do with
the question of the recognizability of a description, and the availability of
common understanding of its sense and import. It would seem that LA finds a
place in these constructions by displaying an awareness of and orientation to
the problem of descriptive adequacy, as well as the speaker's reliance on the
recipient's ability to recognize a formulation.

3. Seeking Confirmation of the Availability of Common Understanding

Various resources are available in Cantonese to display the speaker's
assumption that common understanding of a certain thing-being-talked-about
obtains at this point in the conversation.

3.1 LA-suffixed Supplementary Formulations

One such device is a special format with which LA is closely associat-
ed. This is the \(X, jee Y LA\) format ('\(X, I\) mean \(Y\)'), which is a recurrent means
of constructing supplementary formulations.

When LA occurs within an \(I\) mean \(Y\) LA construction, and the utter-
ance as a whole occupies a position sequentially following, \(within the same turn,\)
an utterance which contains \(X\), such that \(Y\) can be heard as a variant of \(X\),
then LA regularly functions to display the speaker's awareness of the possible
difficulty or unsatisfactoriness or failure of the immediately prior description,
and, at the same time, registers an orientation to the problem of the recogniz-
ability of the thing-being-talked-about, and its interactional import. Consider
an example of this in (13).

(13) [SS:CH:1:408]
\(E\): ee: o ochi ge s saigo si o changge teng-go: z
yau-ya-chi yat-chi le: .h[hh
L: \[ha=z=
1->\(E\): =jee tai ngaujai le
E's reference to "cow-watching" has been formulated twice in this extract: once in the utterance arrowed 1, and then again in the immediately subsequent utterance, which has an *I mean X LA* format (arrow 2). There is a sense in which the latter can be seen as occasioned by the former. More precisely, the latter can be read as a supplementary formulation in relation to the immediately prior utterance. The fact that a supplementation should be offered at all raises the question of the adequacy of the initial description. The second utterance may be characterized as a supplementary formulation in the sense that it is located specifically in the aftermath of the (possible) failure or unsatisfactoriness of the initial formulation.

Consider next an instance of LA at a point in a report where the identity of a location is at issue.
This extract is taken from a longer sequence in which M reports to J what she did earlier that day: she and her family went to a restaurant for lunch. The reporting reached a point when M produces a place formulation -G street (arrow 1), following which, after a slight pause (arrow 2), M offers a second description -the place just now LA (arrow 3). As in the previous example, the second description may be regarded as an alternative formulation, in that it problematizes the prior description, and addresses the potential problem of recognition by offering a supplementary formulation which now presents the place-being-talked-about as one the identity of which the recipient is now more likely to be able to establish.

3.2 Understanding Displays

LA recurrently figures in utterances which display understanding of a prior turn, and through that offer agreement, sympathy, or support, as in examples (15) and (16).

(15) [MAK:1:040] (=2)
M: saam-bak-ng man dak-m-dak aa
   (0.4)
J: m-sai aa saam-bak-yi jaa::=
M: =o ngo lam-juu hai gamseungha [gala haa]
J: [gam lin-maai]
be-jau wo:[:
-->M: [hei-seui aa go-di gam-ge-ye LA:
   [hamaa
J: [haa::[: gam]
M: [hahaha]
   (.)
J: dou gei dai aa o go[k-dak hou dai] aa
M: [haahahahahaa]

M: could the price be as low as three hundred and fifty dollars? (is my estimate too low?)
   (0.4)
J: even less, it only cost three hundred and twenty
M: oh, I thought it was about [that
J: [and including beer
   [too
-->M: [soft drinks and the like LA, [right?
J: [yeah [so yeah yeah

M: (.)

J: it was rather reasonable
I [think it was very reasonable
M: [yeah yeah yeah yeah

(16) [DJ1:2:246] (=11)

P: m-hai ge:: jigei .hh jigei yau duksyu han dou
  yigaa mmaa aai hhh yigaa jeutji jouye lak
-->T: ha# waan-aa samyun goum LA::: hai[mai aa
P: [hai LA

-----------------------------

P: not really, I, .hh I've always wanted (to travel)
  since I was in school, and now at last I'm working

-->T: yeah, so now you'll be able to do what you've
  always wanted to do, right?
P: yes

In the next data fragment, a LA-suffixed understanding display is used
to challenge a position, but in a special kind of way.

(17) [FEEL1:1:2:223]

P: goum nei yau-mou yeuk-go keui heui-gaai aa
  (0.7)
C: a::: yau aa gan-m-jung aa
P: mm keui heui-m-heui aa
C: a::: keui yausi heui yausi::: yausi:::::::::
  yausi yau heui yausi mou-heui aa
-->P: o:: goum dou yau paakto LA m syun amnyun aa

-----------------------------

P: so have you ever dated her?
  (0.7)
C: well sometimes
P: mm does she go with you?
C: well she sometimes, sometimes she does and
  sometimes she doesn't

-->P: I see, in that case you are going out LA it's not
  really being secretly in love.
C, the caller to a radio phone-in programme, is here seeking advice about his problem. The problem, as he formulated it earlier on in this conversation, is that he is "secretly in love" with a girl. There then follows a series of fact-finding questions in which P, one of the presenters of the programme, asks about the caller's age, occupation, the circumstances in which he came to know the girl, and so on. This extract begins with P issuing yet another question ("so have you ever dated her?"), and, upon finding out that C has in fact dated the girl, and she has "sometimes" agreed to go out with him, P presents, in the arrowed turn, a version of C's relationship of the girl as one that should have been known to be correct by C.

The character of this understanding display is such that it presents *paakto* 'going out' as a correct description of the relationship in question, and, through presenting this as common knowledge, P can be heard as challenging C's earlier formulation ("secretly in love"). Thus, in officially seeking to establish a common ground, which turns out to be incompatible with a previous one, P manages, within the contextual particulars of the conversation, to challenge the validity of the old common ground on which the original self-diagnosis was based.

4. Common Ground Establishment in Extended Tellings

The properties of LA in relation to the establishment of common understandings are such that it has interesting uses when placed in the context of extended tellings. By extended tellings I mean multiple-turn projects in conversation which would involve a temporary suspension of the turn-taking system (Sacks 1974). These would include such things as the giving of accounts and reports, story-telling, instruction-giving, direction-giving, and the like. As a common understanding display, LA is a good candidate when, in extended tellings, a need arises for the participants to pause and check that common ground is available, in order to proceed with the project. I will explore in this section the placement and functioning of LA in such sequences.

4.1 An Example: Direction-giving sequences

A feature of extended tellings is the need to set up common bases at strategic points in the project. As an example of common ground establishment in extended tellings, consider direction-giving sequences. A direction-
The way a direction-giving project gets started underscores the significance of such a common basis. Direction-giving sequences regularly get off the ground through an interesting transformation. Psathas (1986) shows that in response to a question about his/her whereabouts (or the whereabouts of an address), the would-be direction-giver would typically use the answer slot to ask a question about the original questioner's whereabouts instead. That is, the beginning of a direction-giving sequence would have the following structure:

(18) A: where are you/ where is this address? (POSITION 1)
B: where are you? (POSITION 2)
A: ((A's whereabouts)) (POSITION 3)

The point of the 'where are you?' question in Position 2 is to transform the "where are you?" sequence projected by the original question (Position 1) into a "how to get there" sequence (i.e. a direction-giving sequence). The question in position 2 projects such a sequence by eliciting a place description (to be given in Position 3), and proposes to use *that* as a point of departure for subsequent route construction. "Four ten east Lowden" (arrow 3) in the following extract is such an instance.

(19)
1---> A: I don't know just where the- uh- this address
    [is
2---> B: [well where do- which part of town do you live
3---> A: I live at four ten east Lowden.
    (2.0)
    B: well you don't live very far from me. If you go
      on the State (1.0) Hign- no if you go past the
      court house to Elmhurst...

Not only does direction-giving need a point of departure to begin, it would also need, at particular points in the course of the sequence, intermediate bases or pointers in order that the project can proceed through stages until it reaches a point of completion. Thus in the next example, notice how
(in lines 10-15), in the middle of the direction-giving, the participants find themselves working towards establishing that common understanding obtains with regard to the place term "Burbank High School" (line 10), before moving on to the next stage (line 16).

(20)

1  C: right an lets see now Walnut Avenue Burbank where is that?
2  A: awright. where- where you coming from Eaglerock?
3  C: uh huh the store
4  A: get on the Free:way,
5  C: mm hmm,
6  A: an get off at Burbank Boulevard.
7  C: mm hmm,
8  A: head toward the mountains,
9  C: mm hmm,
10 A: do you know where Burbank High School is?
11 C: uh huh,
12 A: awright,
13 C: do you mean the new (verduco) hi:lls?
14 A: ye:ah.
15 C: uh huh,
16 A: awright, Burbank High School uh the football field of Burbank high school uh ends at- the beginning of our street Walnut ...

(Psathas 1986:245-6)

4.2 LA in Extended Tellings

From the point of view of the management of extended accounts, LA may be profitably studied in terms of its contribution to the establishment of common bases.

One of the conversation organizational problems that co-participants have to deal with in any extended telling is the need to establish at particular points in the project certain common ground on the basis of which the story being told can be continued, brought to a close, and appreciated. In reportings, the reporter typically begins by setting out the background necessary for
the understanding of the import of the event to be reported. This is an environment in which LA recurrently occurs, where the immediate concern is the establishment of certain facts such as times and places, people, situations, etc. as things-known-in-common. The clearing of such ground would then be a condition for the continuation, and eventually the appreciation of the point of the report. This kind of ground-clearing work can be done in a variety of ways. For example, a certain fact may be formulated as a thing-known-in-common on the grounds that this is "what everyone knows"; a place may be formulated as known-in-common which the co-participants "just passed through", and so on. Consider such an instance of LA in a reporting sequence:

(21) [TC:1:134]

P: jee:
   (.)
P: e::::
   (.)
P: gamchi hai:::
   (0.5)
1->P: keu::i jei# aa:: seuiyiu dou keui:: godi::
     hoksaang LA:
2->L: mm
   P: ge bongsau
   L: mm
   P: soyi le:: jau:::

-----------------------------------------------
   P: I mean
      (.)
P: e:::
      (.)
P: now that
      (0.5)
1->P: she I mean um her students are needed LA
2->L: mm
   P: to help
   L: mm
   P: so then ...

This extract is taken from a longer telephone conversation where P has phoned to break some bad news. But before he discloses the bad news, P embarks on a description of the circumstances leading up to it. LA occurs at a
point (arrow 1) where certain specific references have been made to persons ("she", "her students") and purposes ("needed"). Through LA-suffixing, P proposes that the reference of each of these terms should be known to the recipient, and, more importantly, the import of mentioning them in this particular way (i.e. the situation as portrayed by the collocation of these terms) should also be understood by L. Further, the teller may be heard as proposing that, should his assumption about the common understandings be warranted, he would then proceed to continue with the report. L's "mm" (arrow 2) acknowledges that the understandings being sought are indeed available, and invites the reporter to go on.

The following extract has a similar structure:

(22) [FEELL:1:306]
1->C: keui LA::
2-> jee la peiyu keui: e: fong-jo-hok LA:
3-> ngo m jungyi keui keui jau-wai heui wan LA::=  
   L: =mm mm
4->C: goum keui a yigaa nei ji LA
5-> hou-do di ye hou kapyan saimanjai LA::=  
   L: =mm mm=  
   C: =gogo waan dinjiyauheigei aa  
   goum keui heui di hou jaap aa di deifong

1->C: he LA, I mean for instance, after school LA,  
2-> I don't like him to go and play everywhere LA=  
   L: =mm mm
3->C: but then he um, these days you know LA  
4-> there's such a lot of temptations for children  
   LA=  
   L: =mm mm=
5->C: =everybody's playing video games  
   so he goes to these really scruffy places

C, a parent, is here calling to ask for advice about some trouble she is having: against her wishes, her son "goes to play everywhere after school". Earlier on in the conversation, C revealed that her problem is that her son "likes lying". When asked how she came to this conclusion, C embarks on an account of an event in which her son lied. One interesting feature of this troubles-telling sequence is that the 'facts' provided are given not merely for
the sake of the record, but are sensitive to the nature of the state-of-affairs-being-reported as a complainable. Here in this extract, five LA-suffixed utterances occur in close proximity right at the beginning of an extended account, providing a background against which the problem can be stated and appreciated: the person who is the source of the trouble (arrow 1); the time and kind of situation pertaining to her son's (mis)behaviour (arrow 2); an expectable, reasonable, seen-by-any thing to feel on the part of a parent under similar circumstances (arrow 3); the times they're a-changing (arrow 4); and the proliferation of undesirable temptations to the young (arrow 5). In thus furnishing a basis for her anxieties, and displaying her assumption that the recipient can be expected to understand her situation and see the reasonableness of her actions and feelings, C is managing an appeal for sympathy.

Thus, LA is intimately associated with the preparatory work that goes into the laying of a background against which an event can be portrayed, and its significance appreciated (e.g. whether it is to be heard as a complaint, a piece of bad news, or a joke). In such an environment -- between a background and an event -- LA strongly implicates continuation: the ground-laying work is a condition upon which a report can continue. To see this 'continuation' feature more clearly, let us take another look at an earlier extract.

(23) [MAK:1:055] (=14)
M: ngodei:: gamat dou cho dik-s yaai ngo dak yat-gaa che je:
(0.4)
M: ngodei [leung-gaa che siin gau aamaa
J: [haa
(0.4)
M: gamat chaichai heui aamaa
(0.5)
1->M: goumaa## hai::: G gaai
(.)
2->M: jee chausin go-dou LA
(0.6)
3->M: ngo sailou dou keuidei cho yagaa diksi
(.)
M: mei pick-maai ngodei yago yan heui
(.)
M: goum ngodei yau lingngoi yagaa aa cho yigaa che heui=
J: =ha#

M: today we took a taxi too cos I have only one car
(0.4)
M: we [needed two cars
J: [yes
(0.4)
M: cos all of us went together today
(0.5)
1->M: so in G street
(.)
2->M: I mean that place just now LA
(0.6)
3->M: my brother's place they took one taxi
(.)
M: then picked up one of us
(.)
M: and we took another em this car=
J: =yeah

We noted earlier that the occurrence of LA in this extract may be seen in terms of the problem of descriptive adequacy. That is, LA is employed at a point where a supplementary formulation seems called for. Within the reporting context, this implies that further progress of the report would now depend upon whether or not the participants can establish to their satisfaction that common ground is available.

Consider in this context a fragment from English conversation where a similar task is accomplished with the use of the particle you know.  

(24) (Schiffrin 1987:269-70)
Zelda: she got-she-she had applied eh: for a job at
1-> the drugstore, as a counter girl?
2-> y'know [lunch]eonette?
3-> Zelda: as a waitress and they called Sunday. So she's working

Data fragments (23) and (24) share some striking similarities. In both cases, the teller produces, in the course of an extended report, a description
(arrow 1 in both extracts) which is somehow not responded to with an acknowledgment or recognition token. This is then followed by a supplementary formulation (arrow 2), which, as detailed before, displays an orientation to the problem of descriptive adequacy, while at the same time proposes its resolution and the resumption of the main project.

Notice an interesting difference between the first and second formulations. A lack of response to the first formulation is taken as a sign of possible non-recognition -- in any case something which would warrant a supplementary formulation. A lack of response to the second formulation, however, does not seem to matter. Instead, the teller goes ahead as if clearance has been secured anyway. While it is true that in both extracts following this second formulation a third term appears (arrow 3), this latter utterance seems to have a very different status from the other two: it is latched on to the next stage of the report without any gap, and works more like a resumption marker than another supplementation.

Thus, in both extracts further progress of the report is resumed after some ground-clearing has been achieved through the use of a second formulation in the position immediately following the trouble-source. It is in this sense that part of the work that LA does in this kind of sequential environment can be characterized as 'continuation proposal'.

4.3 Thus, an investigation of the use of LA in extended tellings shows that this particle has a part to play in various procedures with which conversational participants may establish to each other's satisfaction that mutual recognition or identification of objects, persons, events, etc. are available, or that common understandings of situations and contexts obtain. In so doing, the particle contributes to ground-clearing and ground-laying work, and helps set the scene for the further detailing of an event or a story. Furthermore, the occurrence of LA in these contexts strongly implicates continuation.

5. LA in Listing Sequences

This 'continuation proposal' feature comes into sharper relief in a special environment, namely, listing sequences. This is an environment in which LA is very likely to be found, where a participant, for one purpose or another, provides the recipient with a list of items. Two examples of listings are given below.
(25) [SS:D2:178]
I: goum hokhaau leuibin yaumou di matye clubs lei yau::
   (0.7)
I: e::: yaumou join-dou di matye club
A: e::: poutungwaa LA:: [..hh
I: [mm
A: science club LA:
I: mm
A: e#
   (1.5)
A: jung yau: me
   (.)
A: astronomy LA::=
I: =mm
A: .hh e:::m
   (0.9)
A: table tennis LA:: hh hh [..hh .hh heh heh]
I: [mm hou do wo ha#]
A: heh heh heh heh
I: ha#
A: hai-goum lo

I: so are there some clubs in the school?
   (0.7)
I: have you joined some clubs?
A: e: Putonghua [..hh
I: [mm
A: science club
I: mm
A: e#
   (1.5)
A: what else
   (.)
A: astronomy=
I: =mm
A: .hh e:::m
   (0.9)
A: table tennis hh hh [.hhh .hh heh heh
I: [mm such a lot yeah
A: heh heh heh heh
I: yeah
A: and that's all

(26) [DJ2:2:430]
H: OK .hh yiu-m-yiu dimcheung aa
C: e:: dim bei ngo dedi maami LA:: ngo sailou WF
LA::
.hh Celine LA Judy LA::
(0.3)
C: Jeng-SM LA fei-G LA:: Amy-K LA:: .hh e:: aa-Kay
LA Wendy LA
(0.4)
C: e:: Nancy LA::
(0.2)
C: Ellen LA::
(0.4)
C: aa-D LA SS LA::
(0.4)
C: HT Gungng Gungyip Junghok Form fri yi: chyun-baan
LA::
(0.5)
C: Jeung-HY LA Jeung-GW LA Alan LA YN LA:
(0.5)
C: leidei leung go lo=
H: =doje:
M: hai waa sik 'goumm do yan gaa lei

H: OK .hh do you want to make your dedications?
C: um I dedicate (the song) to my dad and mum, my
  brother WF, Celine, Judy
(0.3)
C: Jeng-SM, fat-G, Amy-K, um, Kay, Wendy
(0.4)
C: um Nancy
(0.2)
C: Ellen
(0.4)
The most striking feature of these sequences is perhaps that the listings proceed in a one-item-at-a-time manner, punctuated now and again by LA. Another feature is that at those junctions marked by the particle, the recipient either provides a continuer (e.g. mhm) or remains silent, and in so doing allows the lister to continue with the listing.

6. LA in Pre-closings

One previously unidentified feature in the distribution of LA is its pervasive presence in and near pre-closing sequences (Schegloff & Sacks 1973). Its special prominence in this environment can be seen in the fact that it is just about the only utterance particle in the language that can occupy a place in such stock pre-closing phrases as hai gum sin LA ‘So much for now’ and chi di gin LA ‘See you later’. This special privilege of occurrence would seem to call for an account -- preferably one which would link it up with the particle’s other prominent uses identified above.

Consider two fragments extracted from near the end of telephone conversations.

(27) [TC:2:144]
--->W: hou LA ngo tung lei man:: saai sin LA
  K: hou aa
  W: dak gala yinggoi mou mantai ge
--->K: hou LA
  W: OK [hai-goum-sin
  K: [mm baai-baai
--------------------------------------------
--->W: OK I'll ask everything for you first
K: good
W: it's OK shouldn't be any problem
-->K: OK
W: OK [that's it then
K: [mm bye-bye

(28) [TC:2:156]
J: OK=
-->K: =goum: laibaai-sei gin LA
-->J: hou LA
K: ha=
J: =laibaai-sei gin lei
K: OK
J: baaibaai
K: baaibaai
--------------------------
J: OK
-->K: so see you on Thursday
-->J: right
K: yeah
J: see you on Thursday
K: OK
J: bye
K: bye

A close look at these examples suggests that the part that LA plays in pre-closing sequences goes something like this. First, a pre-closing favourable environment needs to be constructed in order that preparatory work can be done to effect conversational disengagement. There appear to be two major ways of achieving such an environment. One is to produce a 'contentless' signal (e.g. hou LA 'OK'), with which a turn is taken up, then passed onto the interlocutor again, without adding anything new to what has been said so far in the conversation. Another method is to re-state prior arrangements in such a way as to highlight their agreed-on, mutually-understood status, again adding nothing new, and yielding the turn.

Following on from such pre-closing favourable environments, one of the participants can initiate pre-closing. One pervasive procedure is to produce the ready-made token hai goum sin LA 'So much for now' to propose that, should the speaker have the other party's consent, closing can be a
relevant next activity.

Thus pre-closing initiators would need to be built under three requirements. One, it needs to put on record the speaker's assumption that whatever needed to be dealt with in that conversation has, to the satisfaction of both parties, been dealt with. Two, it needs to signal that the speaker has no further matters to raise. Three, upon the successful clearing of such grounds, they can move on to closing.

In this we find a basis for the pervasiveness of LA just prior to, and in, pre-closing positions. The production of pre-closing favourable environments, as well as the doing of pre-closings, are interactional tasks that require design resources with which participants can seek to establish a common analysis of the conversation's progress. Specifically, the establishment of a mutually endorsed 'no further business' analysis is a necessary preparation for coordinated entry into closing.

7. Soliciting Agreement on a Proposed Course of Action

We have seen how LA is instrumental in various procedures whereby co-participants may reach and agree on a common position. Also, recall that LA has privilege of co-occurrence with expressions that appeal for sympathy and understanding (lei ji LA 'you know', lei ming LA 'you will understand', etc.). These two properties provide an instructive point of entry into an investigation of a final set of uses of LA.

Previous accounts have described LA as a marker of requests and advice-givings. Indeed, my data contain many instances of this particle performing a range of actions which may be grouped under the following three headings:

(1) Requests and Implorations
These propose courses of action to be carried out by the hearer usually for the benefit of the speaker.

(2) Recommendations and Advice-givings (Why don't you...)
These propose courses of action to be carried out by the hearer for his/her own benefit.
Suggestions and Proposals (*Why don't we...*)

These propose courses of action to be carried out either by the speaker or the hearer, or both jointly, and constitute plans for the future.

It would seem that these action categories, though distinguishable one from another, are by no means unrelated. In all three cases the speaker would in a sense be seeking the recipient’s agreement on (or attempting to get the recipient to see) the reasonableness, appropriateness, worth, efficacy, or viability of a proposed course of action. From this point of view, LA can be regarded, in these kinds of sequences, as a device for the solicitation of agreement.

7.1 Requests and Implications

Consider the following data fragments.

(29) [FEEL:1:285]
P: goum ngo aa::: juk nei gu-hei-yung-hei LA (.)
   hou-m-hou aa?=
C: =hou LA
-->L: mmm nei teng-ha gwonggou LA (.) OK?
   -----------------------------------------------
P: well then I wish you pluck up your courage
C: OK
-->L: mmm listen to the ads, OK?

(30) [TC:1:178]
S: goum lei::::
   (0.5)
-->S: lei tai ngo faan-jo mei sin LA=
   L: =ha ngo d# ngo daa-jo-dinwaa bei lei sin lo
   -----------------------------------------------
S: so you::::
   (0.5)
-->S: see if I'm home first, OK?
   L: yeah I'll ph# I'll phone you first

The arrowed turns in (29) and (30) can be characterized as requests in the sense that they are attempts to get the hearer to adopt a proposed course of action by soliciting their agreement as to its efficacy, appropriateness, or
desirability within the specific circumstances in which that course of action is formulated and proposed.

(31) below instances an imploration. As in the previous examples, a LA-suffixed utterance is used to perform the task of getting the hearer to follow a proposed course of action. But there is now an added sense of eagerness and desperation achieved through the employment of such devices as the turn-initial *haaiyaa* 'come on!’, the special lengthening of the vowel in LA, and the subsequent reflexive characterization ("I’m giving in").

(31) [DJ1:2:270]
P: hou mun aa

-->T: haaiyaa m-hou oum mun LA:::
   heh heh heh [ngodei sung di] go bei lei teng lak
P: [heh heh heh ]
T: aiyaa paa-aa lei la# heh heh .hhhh dim-go hou-m-hou
P: .h hou aa

P: I'm so bored

-->T: come on, cheer up
   heh heh heh [we'll play you some songs
P: [heh heh heh
T: I'm giving in, heh heh .hhhh dedicate a song, OK?
P: .h OK

7.2 Advice-givings

In each of the following extracts, a piece of advice is given in the form of a proposal for a course of action that has a built-in appeal for the recipient's favourable hearing and understanding, and their appreciation of the reasoning and good-will behind the recommendation.

(32) [FEEL:1:620]
C: hai aa yugo fonghei jo yago (.) dai:: jee#
   lingngoi-yago hai deui lei daiyisi mou goum hou
g e lei jau wui lam-jyu
da  i[: jee#  la]m-faan gogo galama:
B: [`hai LO::]
B: h[ai LO:: ]
L: [mm mm mm] mm=
B: =goum nei::: .hh si ha::: aa::: jehai
   (.)
   aa:: .hh
   (0.5)
-->B: jee hh .hh leung go dou qaijuk loiwong dodi LA
tai-ding di LO=
C: =hhh hhh hhh heh heh

C: yes, if you give up one, and then I mean the
   other didn't treat you so well in the future, you
   would naturally think back on that [one   ]
B:  [exactly]
B: [right   ]
L: [mm mm mm] mm=
B: =so you .hh try and I mean (.). um .hh
   (0.5)
-->B: I mean hh .hh keep going out with them both, and
   wait and see=
C: =hhh hhh hhh heh heh

(33) [FEEL1:1:260]
-->L: nei# nei batyu se fung seun bei keui LA:::::
   (.)
   L: hou m hou aa=
   C: =hou aa

-->L: why don't you write her a letter?
   (.)
   L: all right?
   C: all right

7.3 Suggestions and Proposals

Suggestions and proposals of the Why don't we...? variety often contain
LA as a turn-component. The proposed course of action can be one that is to
be carried out by the speaker, the hearer, or both together. In suggestions,
there is typically a concern with the question whether mutual agreement can
be secured on a proposed course of action. This is especially common in arrangement-making sequences. (34) is an example of this.

(34) [TC:2:553]

W: e:::: ngo lam-juu 'tingyat heui lo
(0.3)

K: tingyat

W: ha#

(.)

K: .hhhh goumyeung (.) e::::::
(1.0)

K: lei dak-m-dak aa yugo#
(0.7)

1->K: yathai ngo heui LA

2->W: ngo tung lei lo LA
(0.3)

W: lei yau m sik lou

W: em I'm thinking of fetching it tomorrow
(0.3)

K: tomorrow

W: yeah

(.)

K: .hhhh right (.) e::::::
(1.0)

K: can you do that? if#
(0.7)

1->K: perhaps I can go LA

2->W: let me get it for you LA
(0.3)

W: you don't know the way there anyway

Here a LA-suffixed suggestion (arrow 1) is responded to in the next turn by an alternative suggestion which is itself LA-suffixed (arrow 2). These occur in the course of an arrangement-making sequence in which the participants are trying to agree on a way of getting something done (fetching something from a shop the following day). In this context, each person's proposal offers a plan for reaching that goal. The negotiation of which alternative plan to adopt is done here partly through the work of LA.
7.4 It will be clear from the above examples that LA-suffixing is a device used not only in requests and advice-givings, but more generally in any attempt to propose a course of action for the interlocutor's favourable hearing and consideration, whether the party to benefit happens to be the speaker, the hearer, or the two together as a team. LA contributes to these tasks by soliciting recipients' agreement and appealing for understanding. Thus, instead of describing LA simply as a marker of requests (e.g. Gibbons 1980), we have found a systematic basis for the work that this particle does in these sorts of sequences by relating it to its whole range of uses.

8. LA and the Accomplishment of Common Understandings

8.1 Functional Diversity and Family Resemblance

The above survey has identified a number of turn shapes and sequential environments where LA has privilege of occurrence. When the various threads are drawn together, a picture begins to emerge:

(1) LA is closely associated with various constructions which are used to display an orientation to the problem of descriptive adequacy, and to document the speaker’s reliance on the interlocutor’s ability to work out the sense and import of a description. One might call this the ‘you-know-what-I-mean’ feature. But equally, a recipient may use LA as a design feature for the display of understanding. Let us call this the ‘I-know-what-you-mean’ feature. These two characterizations are clearly related to each other as two sides of the same coin, two aspects of a feature which can be referred to as ‘common understanding’. To the extent that LA occurs in places in conversation where some work needs to be done to address the question of the availability of common understanding, this would circumscribe a set of important uses of the particle.

(2) Another recurrent use of the particle is as a device for seeking consent and agreement. Again, it can equally be used by the recipient of suggestions, recommendations, and advice to give consent and agreement when solicited. The feature here may be termed simply ‘agreement’. There are, apart from its general use in agreements, at least two specific uses within this broad category. The particle can be used to solicit agreement on a proposed course of action in requests,
suggestions, recommendations, and advice-givings. It is also a recurrent turn-component in pre-closings where it participates in operations the aim of which is to arrive at a mutually endorsed ‘no further business’ analysis.

(3) Yet another feature can be identified in the use of LA in the management of extended tellings. As we have see, LA figures prominently in these sequential contexts as a device for establishing backgrounds on the basis of which events and happenings can be detailed. It is also instrumental in ground laying and ground clearing work, where continuation of a project may be conditional upon the establishment of a common basis.

(4) Related to this is the ‘continuation proposal’ feature, which is discernible in extended tellings, but especially prominent in listings.

From this sketch a number of features can be identified in the particle’s range of uses: features which are distinct and yet somehow related to each other. It should be clear, given this array of features and their interrelationship, that it is no easy task to provide a decontextualized, dictionary-type definition of the particle’s ‘meaning’, or a simple gloss which would satisfy all conceivable purposes. The account developed here would I hope have highlighted a unity between the particle’s functional diversity on the one hand, and the family resemblance (Wittgenstein 1953) among the range of uses on the other.

As one member within a set of utterance particles, and, indeed, within a whole inventory of prosodic, grammatical and lexical devices, this particle may be seen as a distinct entity only to the extent that no other device in the language has the same range of uses —uses that relate to one another in the particular way that they do. Each on its own, none of the various uses of LA identified in this paper is uniquely tied to this particle. For example, le55 can be used to check recognition in reportings and similar sequences; lo55 can be used to appeal to reason; and aa55 can be used apparently interchangeably with LA in some contexts (such as the solicitation of agreements). However, no other prosodic, grammatical, or lexical resource in Cantonese has an equivalent range of uses. In this we find a systematic basis for the varied yet somewhat similar ways in which LA is used in different sequential environments.
Thus there is no mechanism which will guarantee that one thing or another is bound to happen when LA appears: it is not a marker of some pre-existing functional categories. As Brown & Levinson (1978) point out, meanings-in-context are derived using linguistic resources as guides to highly complex inferential processes.

"...interactants do not generally treat socially significant linguistic features as simple signals of social facts --but rather take into account the interactional and social context in their evaluation of these features in highly complex ways." (1978: 292)

In general, the meaning-in-context and interactional import of particular instances of LA-suffixed utterances cannot be computed from decontextualized glosses of their component parts. Instead, they must be derived from complex contextualization procedures whereby the general properties of the particle are integrated within the particulars of the context (the sequential environment being a crucial consideration) in which it occurs.

8.2 The Accomplishment of Common Understandings

I have throughout this paper used the notion of common understanding in developing an account of LA. Various notions similar to common understanding have been discussed in the literature, including 'shared knowledge', 'mutual knowledge', and 'presupposition pool'. The predominant view is one that is based on the notion of knowledge as commodity: most discussions on this topic have tended to regard knowledge as property, to be owned and possessed by individuals --you either have an item of knowledge or you don’t. And communication succeeds or fails depending crucially on whether the interlocutors share certain items of knowledge.

Implicit in this concept of mutual knowledge is what one might call a substantivist assumption, i.e. the assumption that 'successful communication' consists in 'recovering intended meanings'. The problem is often formulated in the following way. How is it possible for participants to understand each other's utterances? What must a hearer rely on to ensure that the interpretation of a particular utterance is the one intended by the speaker? And the form of the solution is taken to be a mechanism whereby this match between two (or more) minds can be ensured. In reaction to this prevalent view, Garfinkel proposes that
"Shared agreement’ refers to various social methods for accomplishing the members’ recognition that something was said-according-to-a-rule and not the demonstrable matching of substantive matters. The appropriate image of a common understanding is therefore an operation rather than a common intersection of overlapping sets.” (Garfinkel 1984:30)

Common understandings are for Garfinkel an interactional achievement, the product of operations carried out by conversational participants using a variety of verbal (as well as non-verbal) means. From this point of view, LA would be one such device in Cantonese that makes explicit the speaker’s assumption of the availability of common understanding. The range of work that LA can perform shows quite clearly that it is sensitive to such problems as descriptive adequacy and whether or not an analysis of a situation is mutually endorsed. As a resource for handling these problems, LA provides participants with a means with which they can document to each other, at particular points in an unfolding interactional scene, their assumption that what is being talked about is something known in common.

We seem to be dealing here with a phenomenon that lies in between two kinds of ways in which understandings are achieved in conversation. On the one hand, participants obviously must rely on assumptions about what their conversational partners must know and understand. They may proceed by simply assuming that the interlocutor knows what they are talking about. In this sense, what is said and what is meant is treated as unproblematical. This kind of assumption is clearly needed, or else one would not be able to say anything at all to anyone. For instance, while resources are available to check whether one’s recipient has successfully identified the object, person, place, etc. that one is talking about, conversation participants do not do this at every possible turn. One kind of evidence in support of this comes from repair sequences: that repair sequences should occur at all points to the fact that something which was assumed to be a thing-known-in-common turns out to be problematical. (For an account of repair in conversation, see Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977)

On the other hand, there are cases where the recognizability, identifiability, or understandability of an object, an event, a situation, etc. is raised explicitly as a problem. For instance, a description may be presented in such a
way that its adequacy is 'problematic'. In my Cantonese data, the utterance particle "ge35" is regularly used to perform this kind of task (and generates identification sequences). These, then, are cases where speakers make little or no assumption that their co-participants know what they are talking about.

I suggest that, in addition to these two kinds of ways in which understandings can be accomplished, there is an in-between method with which speakers can display their assumption that the interlocutor ought to know what they are talking about, although that is not necessarily a certainty. In these cases, speakers can, through the employment of available resources, design their descriptions in such a way as to display the assumption (as opposed to simply assuming) that the object, event, situation, etc. being portrayed is a thing-known-in-common. The very fact that this assumption is displayed would of course give rise to the possibility of a response, which may support that assumption, or 'problematize' it. LA is from this point of view a resource in Cantonese with which this third kind of procedure is made available to conversational participants.

Close analysis of LA in conversational sequences has furnished a basis for the range of uses of LA to be systematically explicated. But this account would not have been possible were one to lose sight of the interactional dimension of the particle's functioning, or to approach the problem entirely conceptually without the guidance of detailed and contextualized examination of particular instances of the particle in naturally occurring talk. It may well be that many of these tiny objects will turn out to have functional motivations that are conversation organizational in nature.
Notes

1. There is now a fairly large literature on discourse particles. A sample of studies in different languages include: Uyeno 1971 (Japanese); Schubiger 1972 (German); Lakoff 1972 (English); D. James 1973 (English); Karttunen 1975a, 1975b (Finnish); Van Valin 1975 (German); Brown & Levinson 1978 (contains scattered remarks on particles in Tamil, Tzeltal, and other languages); Goldberg 1982 (English); Schiffrin 1985, 1987 (English); A. James 1983 (English); Tsuchihashi 1983 (Japanese); Heritage 1984 (English oh); Kwok 1984 (Cantonese); Condon 1986 (English OK).

2. Grammars of Chinese which explicitly recognize particles as a word class include such widely influential works as Li (1955), Lü & Zhu (1953), Wang (1955), Chao (1968), and Li & Thompson (1981).

3. The particle LA, which is the subject of this paper, and many other particles which have been referred to as mood words or sentence-final particles, do not always indicate mood (be it grammatical or otherwise). For instance, as we will see in the course of this paper, it is by no means clear whether LA is a marker of declarative, interrogative, or imperative sentences; or an expression of any readily specifiable attitudinal or emotive category for that matter. Nor do they necessarily occur at the end of sentences. Many can occur after a variety of constituents, e.g. words, phrases, and clauses. For these and other reasons, I prefer to give to this class of objects the designation utterance particles.

4. By LA, I refer to the utterance particle which has the segmental shape /la:/, and the suprasegmental accompaniment of the high-level tone; hence its representation in other accounts variously as la1, la55 and ʔla (i.e. /la/ in tone 1). There are other particles in Cantonese with the same segmental make-up but different tones, eg. /la:/ in low level/falling tone, and /la:/ in mid level/falling tone, but they will not be studied here. I have represented LA consistently in the capitalized form, both in the transcripts and in the text, and since, of the three /la:/s, this is the only one that I will be concerned with, the proposed convention should not cause any confusion. The actual phonetic make-up of instances of LA may vary, particularly as a result of a variety of intonational modifications. But I will ignore these complications unless they seem relevant to an argument, and proceed to analyse all those utterances in my conversational data which can be clearly and unambiguously identified as
containing instances of LA. Further, although I will be analysing mainly instances of LA in which it occurs singly as a simple particle, if we assume that the properties of compound particles are partially determined by that component particle which occurs last in the compound, my treatment should in principle be extendable to compound particles where LA constitutes the last component.

5. The examples used throughout this paper are taken from audio recordings of naturally occurring conversation made in 1985 and 1986 in Hong Kong. The corpus consists of about 20 hours of recordings of conversations between speakers of Cantonese in a variety of situations - telephone conversations, face-to-face chats among family members and friends, radio programmes, casual, unstructured interviews, etc. Social characteristics of speakers such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, education level, occupation, and situational factors like formality, are not systematically controlled, but I have not noticed any special patterns of differentiation in the course of analysing the data.

6. Another way of looking at this problem is from the point of view of topic-comment structures. Often, the reference of a term (topic) will need to be established before, and in order that, something can be said about it (comment). Li & Thompson (1976) suggest that different languages may be more or less topic-prominent. "The universal notion of topic may be manifested in different ways across languages" (p. 484) Topic prominent languages are those in which topic is built into the syntactic structure of the sentence. Subject prominent languages on the other hand may employ other than syntactic means to achieve the same thing (i.e. topic establishment), e.g. to use a separate proposition.

In this respect, interesting observations have been made concerning sign languages. Studies of sign languages using recordings of spontaneous signing have found that the basic sign order has a topic-comment structure (Friedman 1976; Deuchar 1987; Kyle & Woll 1985). For instance, it has been argued that "topic prominence is the characteristic feature of BSL [British Sign Language] as well as ASL [American Sign Language]." (Kyle & Woll 1985:156), e.g.:
Eyebrows: .................. raised ..... 
Hands: k.i.i.b.y BEFORE GOOD (pause) NOW GOOD

'Kilby, who was good before, is he good now?'

TOPIC COMMENT

Thus, there would seem to be a tendency in linguistic communication (whether verbal or gestural-visual) for topic to come first, and this means that the reference of a term in topic position would often need to be established before something can be said about it.

7. There are interesting parallels between the Cantonese particle LA and various particles in English, notably *you know*, *OK*, and *all right*. The most salient points of similarity are summarized below.

(1) *you know*

A number of features of *you know* that have been discussed in recent studies look rather similar to some of the uses of LA identified in this paper. For instance, Schiffrin's (1987) account includes the following features: (Note: these apply only to the suffixing, but not the prefixing, *you know*. The former is rather similar to LA in many respects, but not the latter.)

a. Seeking agreement. For instance, *you know* is often found at certain junctures in an argument, or the evaluation part of stories, to draw the audience's attention to material that is important for the understanding or appreciation of the point of the story. It also marks background information needed for the understanding of an account.

b. It helps "create an exchange structure" (p.285) in which a joint focus is established between speaker and hearer, thereby facilitating further talk based on that joint focus: *you know formats open a joint focus on speaker-provided information"* (p.291), i.e.

A1: says something which leads B to focus on X
B1: focuses on X
A2: uses X in a way dependent upon A1 and B1
(A1 being the turn containing *you know*) (p.285)
An extract that would illustrate this structure is:

Irene: Because like uh: ... eighth grade, they were the only class that he had taken over t'he synagogue, which remained there: y'know?=
Sally: =yeh, I remember.
Irene: It labelled them. (p.273)

This is a use that clearly bears a lot of resemblance to the use of LA in extended tellings.

c. It appeals to common knowledge: "you know appeals to shared knowledge as a way of converting an opponent to one's own side in a dispute." (p.279)

In addition, there is now a pioneering study reported in Local, Wells and Sebba (1985) in which the particle you know (with a set of attending phonetic features) in the speech of Londoners of Jamaican descent was found to have interesting turn-taking properties.

(2) OK

Taking up Goffman's (1974) suggestion that expressions like OK and "now then" may be regarded as "bracket markers", Condon (1986) examines the distribution of OK with reference to the organization of verbal and non-verbal actions, and notes that it often occurs at junctures where more than one of these levels converge. One specific location in which it is often found is at junctures between a main task and an off-task activity: OK often signals at such a juncture a return from off-task activities (such as joking) to some main task, but not the other way round. In so doing, it re-invokes interpretive schemes that may have been temporarily held in abeyance in the course of a side-sequence. In this sense, it may be said to have an "orientation" and "keying" function.

But apart from its orientation and keying functions, OK has some uses that are very similar to LA:

a. It has special privilege of occurrence in pre-closing sequences. According to Schegloff and Sacks (1973), "passes" in this environment are often done using OK.
b. It is a regular device in the building of suggestions, recommenda-
tions, and advice in conversation.

c. It is used in positions where the immediate concern is to establish a common basis in order for an ongoing main project to move on (e.g. in direction-giving).

As will become clear in the course of this paper, the distribution of LA across a range of sequential types is to some extent similar to that of OK, although there is one major difference between the two, and that is that whereas OK can be used as an independent item on its own, LA must be suffixed to some other items (even very minimal ones such as hou "good").

(3) All right

Apart from some of the functions so far mentioned, all right has an interesting use in a particular position to plead for an extended slot in which to advance an account or an argument. Some examples from George Higgins’ novels will illustrate this use of all right:

"And, Jerry," Teddy said, "all right? It’s not like I am telling you how you should be a father. Because I have seen enough of you and how you go about that so I don’t think you need some advice from me, okay? ..." (Higgins 1986:181)

"Calvin," I said, "look, all right? I am your trial lawyer. Your criminal trial lawyer. All I want to do is to try your case for the best result possible...." (Higgins 1986:194)

The format in question looks something like this: "Appellation + all right + more talk". While LA cannot be used on its own like all right in this format, the equivalent in Cantonese would be an utterance that is suffixed with LA, viz. "lei teng ngo gong sin LA" ("Listen to me first LA")

More parallels could be drawn between LA and other linguistic means in English (e.g. prosodic devices). However, it must be stressed that LA is not an exact equivalent of any of these resources. For instance, its use in listing and similar sequences where it functions primarily as a continuation proposal is quite unlike any of the English particles mentioned here.

8. Chao has noticed this in connection with the Mandarin particle le, and he calls it "enumeration" (1968:800). Kwok (1984:55), following Chao, ob-
serves that the Cantonese particle LA has a similar use.

Appendix

Transcription and Glossing Conventions

I list in this appendix the most prominent conventions used for the transcription of the data extracts throughout the paper. Most of these are now more or less standard practice in conversation analysis. For a fuller description of these conventions, see Atkinson & Heritage (1984: ix-xvi, "Transcript Notation")

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOTATION</th>
<th>MEANING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>a pause; n is the length of the pause in seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>a slight pause of 0.1 second or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(****)</td>
<td>a stretch of unidentifiable sounds; in so far as this can be determined, each * represents one syllable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((   ))</td>
<td>a non-linguistic action/event such as someone coughing, clearing his throat or the telephone ringing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[xxxx]</td>
<td>overlapping of 2 or more utterances (e.g. &quot;xxxx&quot;, &quot;yyyy&quot;) produced by different speakers; &quot;[&quot; marks the onset of such an overlap; &quot;]&quot; marks its end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ yyyy ]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xxxx=</td>
<td>&quot;latching&quot;; &quot;=&quot;s are used in pairs, one at the end of an utterance (eg. &quot;xxxx&quot;) and the other at the beginning of the following utterance (eg. &quot;yyyy&quot;) to show that there is no discernible time gap between them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=yyyy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the lengthening of a vocalic segment; the more ":"s the longer the vocalic segment; each ":" is of about 0.1 duration.

the lengthening of a consonantal segment, where C is a consonant; each C is of about 0.1 second's duration.

in-breaths; the more "h"s the longer the in-breath; each "h" is of about 0.1 second's duration.

out-breaths; the more "h"s the longer the out-breath; each "h" is of about 0.1 second's duration.

speech (e.g. utterance "xxxx") accompanied by laughter.

a brief glottal stop

a glottal stop held over n seconds.
References


