

THE EMBLEMATIC DISCOURSE MARKERS *LAH* IN COLLOQUIAL SINGAPOREAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the emblematic discourse markers *lah* in Colloquial Singaporean English (CSgE). The questions addressed are why the *lah* particle is commonly used as a discourse marker in CSgE and to what extent it contributes to the analysis and description of discourse markers in English language. This descriptive qualitative study explores empirically and theoretically the topic grounded on the secondary sources. The involvement of a related-literature review from previous researchers and experts, written in some journal articles and scientific books, has been considered. The result of the study demonstrates that the particle *lah* is indeed commonly used as a discourse marker by Singaporeans and identified as one of the most emblematic discourse markers in CSgE. The notion of diglossic situation seems to be one of the reasons why *lah* is widely used among Singaporeans. The pragmatic function of *lah* is noticeable as well since it is used to indicate emphasis, solidarity, familiarity and informality. Finally, the particle *lah* surely contributes to the analysis and description of discourse markers because it represents a naturally-occurring example of English in use. So, *lah* may enrich the English grammar, highlight its pragmatic function, and demonstrate the variability of English.

Keywords: *discourse markers, pragmatic function, Colloquial Singaporean English*

Introduction

This article presents a discussion about the emblematic discourse markers *lah* in Colloquial Singaporean English. Generally speaking, Colloquial Singaporean English is also known as Singlish, which is considered a sub-variety of English in the island-state Singapore. Because of Singapore's multilingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural societies, Colloquial Singaporean English appears to attract great attention of numerous scholars to conduct some research into the language. As Stroud & Wee (2012, p.6) describe it, "multilingual societies like Singapore are typically characterized by great social and linguistic heterogeneity."

In the context of one's everyday life, one judges others by how they speak and at the same time is judged by them. The way one converses, the words he or she chooses and the way one sounds, all convey information that significantly tells his or her listener(s) about his or her background. With reference to this, linguists and sociologists have long been interested in how people are able to make judgements about others simply from the way they converse with others. Therefore, it is definitely interesting as well as beneficial to investigate Singaporeans' use of the *lah* particle in Colloquial Singaporean English particularly. In fact, a glance at an example of English spontaneous conversation around the world is likely to find it with expressions, for instance, *well, like, so, anyway, I mean, oh, y'know, my God*, etc. in abundance. These instances are commonly described as discourse markers or discourse particles.

Indeed, despite the fact that this study is focused on a specific discourse marker in the sub-variety of a national variety of English, it of course addresses the wider context of discourse marker usage in the English language. More specifically, the main question addressed is why the *lah* particle is remarkably common in terms of its usage as a discourse marker in Colloquial Singaporean English. It is also worthwhile to observe to what extent it contributes to the analysis and description of discourse markers in general. Therefore, the next paragraphs are devoted to discussing about discourse markers in English. This is followed by Colloquial Singaporean English since this particular situation becomes the context of discussion.

As for discourse markers in English, first of all, it should be noted here that this study is not concerned about the terminological discussion among writers, that is, the two labels discourse markers versus discourse particles. Fischer (2006) attempts to distinguish between discourse markers and discourse particles. The term discourse particle suggests “a focus on small, uninflected words that are only loosely integrated into the sentence structure, if at all” (p. 4). This term is used to distinguish discourse particles from larger entities, say, phrasal idioms, which convey similar functions. On the other hand, the term discourse marker is “regarded to be a purely functional term” (p. 5). Accordingly, as Fischer suggests, this term is considered to be the most inclusive. As far as this study is concerned, even though the term discourse marker is preferred on the grounds that it has become the most frequently used term in discussions of English data (Lewis 2006), both terms are used interchangeably.

Discourse markers are “inserts which tend to occur at the beginning of a turn or utterance, and to combine two roles: (a) to signal a transition in the evolving progress of the conversation, and (b) to signal an interactive relationship between speaker, hearer and message” (Biber et al. 2012, p.1086). Another definition is provided by Schiffrin (1987) who states that discourse markers are sequentially dependent components which bracket units of conversation. The unit of conversation, Schiffrin suggests, may relate to a sentence, propositional act, speech production, utterance, tone unit, etc., and as a bracket, discourse markers either go before or follow the relevant unit of conversation. Further, according to Biber et al. (2012), there is sometimes an ambiguity between discourse markers and adverbs when they share the same words or phrases. For example: *now* and *well* can be used as circumstance adverbs as well as discourse markers.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, one may experience from daily conversations or writings that there is a myriad of discourse markers employed in them. They can be found in some interactive uses (e.g. *well*, *okay*, *right* and *now* as well as in the finite formulae: *I mean*, *you know*, *I'd say*, and *you see*). Now, so as to help to provide a flavour of discourse markers, here are some instances of the discourse marker *well* used in various sentences and situations. Biber et al. highlight that *well* is a versatile one and seemingly has “the general function of a ‘deliberation signal’, indicating the speaker’s need to give (brief) thought or consideration to the point at issue” (2012, p.1086).

- (1) He said, *well*, I’d like to read a little bit about it first – I said, *well*, can you read my first volume, you’ll see for yourself, you know, but he said, *well*, what about this, *well*, you know, *well*, you know, and he hems and haws and he won’t come out and say yes or no (AmE)
- (2) A: We were talking about walking last night.
B: Yeah, *well*, I used to walk a lot, but I, er, I <...> now all I do is eat. (AmE)
- (3) A: You are always hungry.
B: *Well* I’m not now. (BrE)
- (4) The boss and the secretary work late all night, *well*, not all night but late into the night (AmE)

(AmE = American English, BrE = British English; source: Biber et al. 2012, p.1087)

As for Biber et al.’s explanation, *well* is a very common turn initiator with different functions, usually serving to relate a speaker’s response to the ongoing conversation. Example (1) clearly illustrates this responsive role of *well*. At times, the response follows an agreement marker such as *yeah*, as in (2). However, as in (3), *well* often marks continuation but with a rather contrasting notion. In addition, *well* can occur in the middle of an utterance as a signal of self-correction or deliberation over the choice of expression, as in (4).

Next, referring to Wierzbicka (1991, cited in Aijmer 2002, p.1), Aijmer argues that particles are often “idiosyncratic: ‘untranslatable’ in the sense that no exact equivalents can be found in other languages.” In his quotation, he also underlines that discourse particles are ubiquitous and their frequency in ordinary conversation is remarkably high. Furthermore, their meaning is crucial to the interaction mediated by speech; consequently, if one failed to

master the meaning of particles, there would be a drastically impaired communicative competence. In other words, discourse markers are different from ordinary words or phrases because of numerous pragmatic values that they can be associated with (Aijmer, 2002).

Furthermore, the researcher has to define the context of this study, that is, Colloquial Singaporean English. In order to comprehend Colloquial Singaporean English (henceforth CSgE), it should be defined what Singaporean English is, which is also termed Singapore English by some scholars (e.g. Deterding 2007, Leimgruber 2013 and Lim 2007). The definition Singaporean English used in this article is based on Mian-Lian & Platt's, that is, "English as used by Singaporeans" (1993, p. 1). Of course, the term Singaporean English (henceforth SgE) here is used in a remarkably wider context. SgE, Mian-Lian & Platt (1993) point out, is a "particularly interesting indigenized, or nativized, speech variety because it is so widely used and fills so many functions" (1993, p.1). Thus, the term Singaporean English is preferred to Singapore English because, as suggested by Mian-Lian & Platt, the latter is sometimes used in a somehow pejorative manner to refer to a 'substandard' variety of English, particularly the kind of local English uttered by those with lower standards of education. For this reason, as underlined by Inharjanto (2024), it seems appropriate to refer to SgE similarly when referring to other varieties such as American English, British English, Australian English, etc.

Now, where is the place of CSgE? It is widely accepted that there are two main varieties of English spoken in Singapore, namely Singaporean English and Colloquial Singaporean English (Cavallaro & Chin 2009, Deterding 2007, Smakman & Wagenaar 2013). In this sense, the former category is used to refer to Standard SgE or "educated Singapore English" (Deterding 2007, p.6); consequently, it does not suggest a wider context of English in Singapore as suggested in the previous paragraph. In addition, Cavallaro & Chin discuss that despite the differentiation, in reality, the variation is obviously more continuous than discrete. With reference to CsgE, it is also popularly known as Singlish (Deterding 2007, Smakman & Wagenaar 2013).

Similar to Cavallaro & Chin's account, Mian-Lian & Platt (1993) attempt to identify what is called the Singaporean English speech continuum. They claim that, "as in all speech communities, the type of language used by the speakers varies according to education, socio-economic class, and type of employment" (Mian-Lian & Platt 1993, p.2). So, like the post-creole continua in Hawaii, Guyana, or Jamaica, the SgE continuum has a range of social varieties of English ranging from the acrolect through the mesolects to the basilect. In the context of English in Singapore, the acrolect is spoken (and written), at least in formal circumstances, by Singaporeans who have been educated on a high level and who hold high rank careers. In contrast, the lowest lect, i.e. the basilect, is spoken by Singaporeans with minimal education working in an environment where less English is utilised. In order to illustrate the present SgE speech continuum as mentioned above, Figure 1 below is provided, which is adapted from Mian-Lian & Platt (1993, p.3).

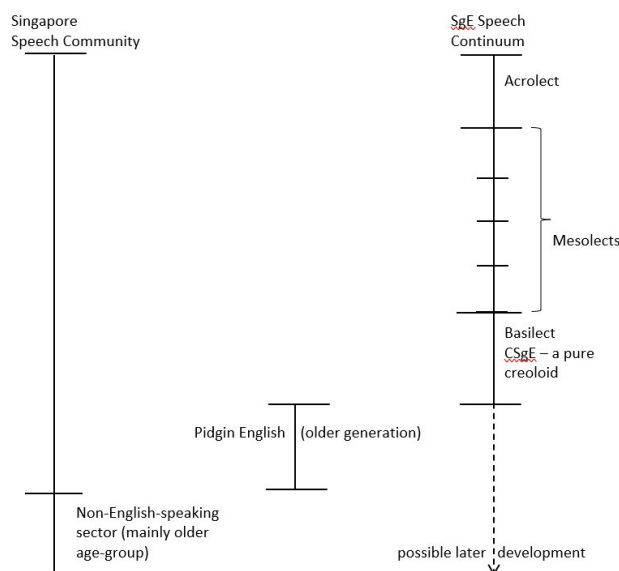


Figure 1. Singapore speech community and SgE speech continuum

Furthermore, there is seemingly a diglossic situation existing between the two main varieties, which involves “a clear switch between the two styles of speech according to the situation in which the interaction takes place” (Gupta 1992 as cited in Deterding 2007, p.6). Deterding claims strongly that many younger generations can easily switch between the two varieties depending on whom they are conversing with, what they are talking about and where they are. However, it should be noted here that, as for Deterding, it is still uncertain if the two varieties are indeed clearly separate, as in a classic diglossic situation (e.g. in Tamil or Arabic, where a distinct version of the language is used in formal contexts, say, public talk, religious service and classrooms).

Overall, at this point, it can be seen that there have been a number of scholars who describe the language variation in SgE using different approaches and classification. (Smakman & Wagenaar 2013). It is indeed true, as discussed previously, that some of the scholars have addressed SgE in a lectal continuum with an acrolect, mesolect and basilect (e.g. Platt & Weber 1980, Mian-Lian & Platt 1993). According to Lim (2004 as cited in Smakman & Wagenaar 2013), Standard SgE is the acrolectal SgE and CSgE the mesolectal SgE. It is also noticeable that Standard SgE is used in more formal contexts whereas CSgE, which is analysed in this study, is the other variety and refers to the more colloquial speech found in informal circumstances. As regard the function in what can be called a ‘leaky diglossic relationship’, as mentioned by Smakman & Wagenaar (2013), Standard SgE is considered to be the ‘high’ variety and CSgE the ‘low’ variety.

After considering the background and some aspects mentioned previously, the researcher proposes two research questions. The main question addressed is why the *lah* particle is remarkably common related to its usage as a discourse marker in Colloquial Singaporean English. Subsequently, as far as the researcher is concerned, it is also worthwhile to observe to what extent it contributes to the analysis and description of discourse markers in general. It is hoped that the questions raised can be considered thoroughly by means of the next sections

Method

This study is considered to be qualitative research because it employed exploration and descriptive explanation (Astuti, 2016). Data of this research was obtained from secondary sources, that is, some related literature review from previous researchers and experts, written in some journal articles and scientific books. Therefore, the secondary data collection involved using existing data collected by some authors, then the researcher analysed and

interpreted them to extract relevant information. This is the process of gathering and evaluating information or data from various sources to find answers to the research questions.

Further, after collecting some data from secondary sources linked to the discussed topic, the researcher then analyzed and interpreted it. The data were analyzed and interpreted by using a thematic analysis. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), this thematic analysis aiming to identify patterns or themes within qualitative data mainly involved six steps. First, the researcher was required to be familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the data. Secondly, it was necessary to generate initial codes in order to organize the data in a meaningful and systematic way. The next step was to search for themes which aimed for capturing something significant or interesting about the data. The fourth step involved reviewing themes with the aims of reviewing, modifying, and developing the preliminary themes generated in the previous step. Next, the researcher was required to define and name themes for identifying the core idea of each theme. Finally, each theme must be elaborated in the research report within the process of producing the report. However, those phases were modified and simplified to serve the purpose of this current study

Findings and Discussions

This section deals with the research findings and discussion. The researcher will present the results of the data analysis to answer the research questions and then its discussion. To begin with, the findings are related to the particle *lah* in CSgE. It could be noted that discourse markers are a stereotypical feature of CSgE (Leimgruber, 2013) and perhaps the one word that is most emblematic is the discourse particle *lah* (Deterding, 2007). Interestingly enough, the particle *lah* has even entered the online Oxford English Dictionary. Referring to its usage in Malaysian, Singaporean and Bruneian English, the Internet edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (2023) defines *lah* as “a particle used with various kinds of pitch to convey the mood and attitude of the speaker.” The dictionary also provides some examples:

- (5) a. Come and see *lah*.
- b. Don't act tough *lah*.
- c. Wrong *lah*!
- d. If people want to interpret that way, let them *lah*.

Thus, the examples in (5a-d) shows that the different speakers definitely want to express their moods and attitudes towards their listeners. Hence, the following paragraphs attempt to identify the particle *lah*, in particular its usage and functions, in the context of CSgE.

To begin with, it is useful to contextualise the particle *lah* in a bigger picture. Here is a useful way of looking at CSgE discourse markers given in Gupta (1992 as cited in Leimgruber 2013, p.85). The particle *lah* is displayed in a system among the other common discourse markers in CSgE. The discourse markers are demonstrated on a scale of assertiveness, hierarchically progressing from least assertive (tentative) to most assertive (contradictory). Gupta's scale is reproduced here in Figure 2 and *lah* is bold-typed so as to place it in the context of other discourse markers. It is noticeable from Figure 2 that *lah* is an assertive particle and together with other assertive and tentative particles form the group of directive particles.

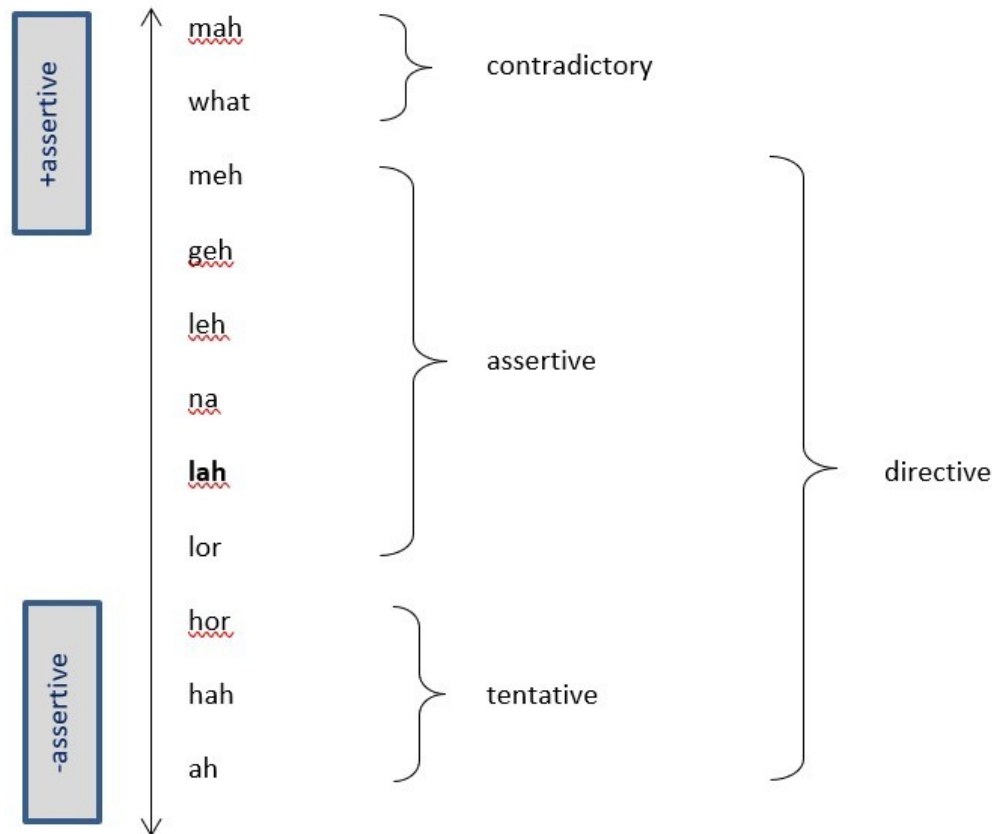


Figure 2. Gupta's scale of assertiveness (1992 cited in Leimgruber 2013, p.85)

According to Gupta (1992 as cited in Leimgruber 2013), the assertive particles, including *lah*, express speakers' positive commitment to what they are saying, as opposed to the tentative ones which offer a less positive commitment. Leimgruber (2013) argues that *lah* is the most stereotypical particle, with a high level of awareness on the part of speakers. *Lah* is particularly common in everyday conversations, used primarily sentence-finally. Categorised as assertive by Gupta, it indicates the speaker's mood or attitude and appeals to the addressee to accommodate to that mood (Leimgruber 2013). Furthermore, Leimgruber observes, it is pronounced [la] and usually spelt <lah>, although some older scholarly works use <la>.

In addition, because the particles in CSgE "typically appear in clause-final position, are monosyllabic, are used for discourse pragmatic functions" (Wee 2010, p.45), as illustrated in (5) and (6), the particle *lah* shares similar characteristics. Wee (2003) also argues that the particles are "syntactically optional in that their omission does not affect the grammaticality of the sentence", as demonstrated in the instances (6) below.

- (6) a. He also like oranges (wat)
 b. Buy the book (lor)
 c. The soup is hot (meh)?
 d. Don't go there (lah)

(source: adapted from Wee 2003, p.5)

It can be identified that those sentences work perfectly without the particles in brackets. Thus, for example, (6d) conveys a sufficient and clear message, that is, the speaker wants to accommodate his or her mood as shown in his or her imperative sentence: Don't go there.

Referring his work to other scholars, Deterding (2007) suggests that the *lah*'s function varies considerably, for instance, to soften the force of utterance and also to create a feeling of solidarity. However, a stressed version of *lah* may at times have completely the opposite

meaning, generating a social distance and signalling power. Moreover, despite the very icon of CSgE, *lah* is so pervasive that it also occasionally occurs in educated SgE (Deterding 2007).

One of the *lah*'s functions is to build solidarity between the speaker and the addressee. Examples (7) and (8) below illustrate that function and it should be noted here that the tone of the conversation is always quite relaxed.

(7) A lot of things to do *lah*, so didn't really enjoy the three weeks there

(8) Till now the baby is still not so bad *lah*, because basically....he will cry when he he he he need food....or attention

(source: Deterding 2007, p.66)

What is more, one may observe that OK *lah* is quite a frequent collocation, as demonstrated in extracts (9) to (12). Deterding (2013) identifies that in these four extracts, the OK *lah* "always occurs after a pause, and the *lah* seems to add a certain degree of reservation" (p.67). He argues that maybe it indicates that the speaker is not too sure that the matter being described is indeed OK. Furthermore, another expression hedging the degree of certainty, i.e. I guess, apparently occurs so that he suggests that it perhaps is similar to an OK with reservation.

(9) Japan is.....mmm....OK *lah* the countryside isis nice, yup

(10) the people....OK *lah* I guess I didn't really erm....er because.... it was really a big group

(11) I do enjoy talking to them at times *lah*, yah, er yup but...OK *lah* I guess

(12) I guess arts....OK *lah*, one thing I can enjoy, I mean maybe I will like arts is that it's not exam

(source: Deterding 2007, p.68)

Besides, Deterding also observe the pitch movement of *lahs* and he points out that the falls seem to engage more assertiveness, e.g. extracts (13) and (14); the low-levels may indicate a resigned acceptance, e.g. extracts (15) and (16); and the mid-levels seem to convey more of a note of cheerful resignation, e.g. extracts (17) and (18). However, he admits that it is difficult to be certain, particularly when the data is very limited, and suggest that it will be interesting to analyse some examples of *lah* being used in pleading, cajoling, teasing, complaining and other such situations.

(13) then I will just erm...take the opportunity to to read them *lah* ...yeah...erm

(14) my feet stopped kicking, so basically, I I... so basically, I sink *lah* ... so ((laughs)) I struggle

(15) shopping-wise, nothing much to buy there *lah* ... basically ... yup...then... mmm the other trip I liked ... was to Nepal

(16) you feel comfortable there ... yah ...mmm, maybe I'm old also *lah* ... ((laughs)) that's why

(17) next time when you get married, you'll know how to cook ((laughs)) ... so, um yeah *lah*, so only tried one or two dishes

(18) was thinking, OK, just try *lah* ... yah, then quite a few of my friends are in here also

(source: Deterding 2007, p.68)

Turning to the origin of this *lah* particle, despite its uncertainty and some disagreement among them, some scholars have attempted to figure it out. Brown (1999, cited in Deterding 2013) claims that the Singapore *lah* particle may come from various Chinese languages. Tong and James (1994, cited in Deterding 2013) suggest its possible source is Cantonese, where the *la* particle helps to convey a mood of cordial invitation or cheerful acceptance. However, some are convinced that the *lah* particle, because its regular use in colloquial Malay, may be from Malay. Liaw (1999, cited in Deterding 2007, p.71) argues that

one of the *lah*'s functions in Malay is to “soften the tone of requests, commands, invitations, prohibitions, etc” which is seemingly close to the aforementioned functions in CSgE.

In fact, there is also some disagreement about the origins of *lah* in Malay as some suggest, like Richards and Tay (1977, cited in Deterding 2007), it originates from Hokkien. Because of all these disputes over the origin of the particle *lah*, no one can conclude where it originates from. Deterding (2007) emphasises that, in this respect, *lah* might be similar to so many other features of SgE as “it is probable that a word or grammatical feature that is matched in more than one indigenous language (such as Hokkien, Cantonese and Malay) is most likely to be absorbed into Singapore English” (p.71). The aspect of cross-linguistic influence in relation to the spread of language, as argued by Baugh & Cable (2013), seems to play some roles in SgE's situation.

After considering the particle *lah* in CSgE in relation to its usage, functions and debatable origins, the researcher attempts to discuss the principal question. This study figures out the reason why the *lah* particle is remarkably common in terms of its usage as a discourse marker in CSgE. The researcher also presents to what extent it contributes to the analysis and description of discourse markers in English language. The answers of these questions certainly form significant part of this study.

Regarding the research question, it should be noted here that the particle *lah* is indeed commonly used as a discourse marker by Singaporeans whether they speak CSgE or SgE. Not only is the particle used among the basilect and mesolect, but it is also used by the acrolect in relation to the SgE lectal continuum. The pervasiveness of *lah*'s usage is undeniable because, as shown by Deterding (2007), it at times occurs in educated SgE. It is evident, nevertheless, that its usage in CSgE is considerably high on a regular basis. Moreover, the particle *lah* is among the other discourse markers, which are the stereotypical feature of CSgE. The particle *lah*, in particular, has been identified as one of the most emblematic discourse markers in CSgE, such that many researchers have been attempting to investigate it.

Under these circumstances, the notion of diglossic situation seems to suggest one of the reasons why the particle *lah* is widely used among Singaporeans irrespective of the status. This notion underlines the assumption that most Singaporeans are likely to make a clear switch between the two styles of speech, i.e. CSgE and SgE, according to the situation which interaction takes place. This is similar to Deterding's (2007) argument in which he criticises if the two varieties are really separate. Likewise, as suggested by Cavallaro & Chin (2009), although Standard SgE is desired and officially prescribed as a norm for Singapore's community, the great majority of Singaporeans regard CSgE as the language which is closer to home. In other words, it is the language of chat, banter, informal gatherings, and obviously the language of daily interaction.

Another reason why the discourse marker *lah* is regularly used is linked to its pragmatic function as the indication of the speaker's mood or attitude and at the same time the appeal to the addressee to act in such a way as to accommodate that mood and attitude. It is described by Gupta as an assertive and directive particle, meaning there is a notion of positive commitment. The particle is possible to express opinion or desire in a relatively strong manner and with confidence so that people take notice. As a consequence, the particle is used to indicate emphasis, solidarity, familiarity, informality, as in CSgE. This has also been demonstrated in the analysis of the *lah* origins, despite a number of various arguments. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that its origins are closely related to ethnic groups, namely Chinese and Malay, which form the majority of Singapore population.

Overall, the overview of the particle *lah* appears to have contributed to the analysis and description of discourse markers in general. The *lah* particle in CSgE, which is among the myriad of discourse markers in English worldwide, represents a naturally-occurring example of English in use. Therefore, the observation on this specific type of usage can definitely enrich the English grammar itself. It should be highlighted that the pragmatic functions of discourse markers, both in CSgE and in English generally, seems to be significant. Further,

similar to Karchu & Nelson's (2006) consideration, like discourse markers in English (e.g. *oh, well, God* etc), they do not add to the proportional context of speech, but do add communicative meaning to them. They "modify the meaning of utterances by signalling the attitude of the speaker, thereby, adding affective meaning" (Karchu & Nelson's 2006, p.250). Thus, discourse markers in English indeed play important pragmatic roles, and CSgE's discourse markers are no exception.

Finally, the study of the *lah* particle has also demonstrated the variability of English in different social settings, thanks to corpus-based approaches. In this respect, as suggested by the online Oxford English Dictionary, the usage of *lah* is emblematic in CSgE, but also in the neighbouring Malaysian and Bruneian English, because they share similar social settings and perhaps linguistic history. Accordingly, further research on Singapore's linguistic history or ethnicity might benefit the further analysis and description of discourse pragmatic particles. Next, the phenomena of discourse markers' usage in SgE, or among the educated SgE, also merits further investigation as from the outset it was evident that discourse markers occur in all varieties of English around the world.

Conclusion

This study has been concerned with the usage of the discourse marker *lah* in CSgE, which is considered the sub-variety of a national variety of English. The discourse marker *lah* has been analyzed by a great number of scholars and this article has attempted to presents different arguments as regards the discourse marker. Of course, the *lah* particle has been placed in the wider context of discourse markers' usage in the English language. After that, CSgE has been dealt with, highlighting the existence of SgE speech continuum in Singapore speech community. Finally, the researcher has presented more specifically the particle *lah* in CSgE in relation to its usage, functions and debatable origins.

Referring to the research questions, it is evident that the particle *lah* is indeed commonly used as a discourse marker by Singaporeans and has been identified as one of the most emblematic discourse markers in CSgE. Apparently, the notion of diglossic situation seemingly suggests one of the reasons why *lah* is widely used among Singaporeans irrespective of their statuses. A great majority of Singaporeans seem to perceive CSgE as the language that is closer to home and, consequently, used for chatting, bantering, informal gatherings, or daily interaction. Further, *lah* is regularly used because of its pragmatic function, namely, to indicate the speaker's mood or attitude and to appeal to the addressee's accommodation towards its mood or attitude. The particle is then used to indicate emphasis, solidarity, familiarity and informality. Next, related to the contribution of *lah* to the analysis and description of discourse markers in English, this represents a naturally-occurring example of English in use. Certainly, this may enrich the English grammar and highlights its pragmatic function (i.e adding communicative meaning). Finally, this study demonstrates the variability of English in different social settings and invite other researchers to investigate numerous discourse markers occurring in all varieties of English worldwide.

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