

## Mergers and acquisitions: on the ages and origins of Singapore English particles<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a comprehensive account of the discourse particles in colloquial Singapore English (SE), considering their etymology in the light of both structure and sociohistory. While the object of many studies, mostly focusing on their meaning and use, and generally recognised as coming from Southern Chinese languages, the establishment of the origins and evolution of SE particles has not before been attempted. The thrust of this paper is thus twofold: (i) it outlines the linguistic ecology of Singapore over the decades and proposes a framework involving three ages in which different languages are recognised as dominant, influencing the feature pool in the evolution of SE, and (ii) it identifies the most likely sources of SE particles, through (a) a systematic comparison of the forms and functions of SE particles with particles from the substrates, including, in particular, their original tone, and (b) recourse to sociohistorical facts to support the linguistic postulation. I suggest that in an early era Bazaar Malay and Hokkien contributed the particles *lah*, *ah* and *what*, and Cantonese in a later age provided *lor*, *hor*, *leh*, *meh* and *ma*, inclusive of tone. This argument highlights issues interesting for contact dynamics and new varieties of English.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A particular feature of Singapore English, which is by now well known and much documented, is the widespread use of pragmatic particles such as *lah*, *ah*, *hah*, *what*, *lor*, *hor*, *nah*, *leh*, *ma*, *meh*. The actual number of such particles – alternately referred to as discourse particles or pragmatic particles – in SE is not clear (Wee, 2004): Gupta (1992) claims 11 such particles, though some in her list are not recognised as distinct particles by some speakers; Wee (2004) provides a treatment of the “better-known” ones, numbering 8; and Ler (2006) lists 10. Here they are listed in descending order of frequency, as attested to in the ICE-SIN (Ler, 2006), though Gupta (1992; 2006) finds *a* the most common particle in speech, followed by *la*, and the reverse in written SE. Two examples of their use are seen in the following:

My parents very old fashion *ah21*? Then your parents *leh55*?  
 ‘Are you saying that my parents are old-fashioned? Then what about your parents?’

As will become evident in this paper, I hold that tone is an integral feature of the particles, and this is expressed in pitch level numbers following the particle, as seen in the example above, where, as in the Asianist tradition, 5 represents a high tone, 1 a low tone, and the sequence of two digits show starting and ending pitches. Thus *21* above indicates a low or low falling tone, while *55* is a high level tone. Such a practice of explicitly indicating tone

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is not used in other accounts of SE particles, which represent only their segmental form (with the exception perhaps of Platt, 1987, who uses accent marks). Most scholarship uses conventional orthography (with only two works using broad phonetic representation), and in this it should be noted that final <r> and <h> in the representations, for example *lor* and *leh*, are not phonetically realised.

By far the majority of scholarly treatments of the SE particles have been semantic/pragmatic in nature, in attempts to capture their meanings and functions, using a plethora of approaches, including those of speech acts, relevance theory, and Natural Semantic Metalanguage (e.g. Kwan-Terry, 1978; Platt and Weber, 1980; Platt, 1987; Platt and Ho, 1989; Gupta, 1992; Pakir, 1992; Wong, 1994; Wee, 2004; Gupta, 2006; Ler, 2006). A number have investigated the contribution of phonetic characteristics to the pragmatic meanings of some of these particles, with most work of this nature focusing almost solely on one of the most common particles, *lah* (Kwan-Terry, 1978; Bell and Ser, 1983; Loke and Low, 1988).

There is general consensus that the particles in colloquial Singapore English by and large come from Southern varieties of Chinese (Gupta, 1992, 1994; Lim, 2004; cf. “local Chinese varieties” in Kwan-Terry, 1992). However, there seems to have been comparatively little interest in and little attempt made to comprehensively establish the origins and evolution of SE particles. Certainly a handful of researchers have attributed the sources of a few particles, explicitly or implicitly, to various languages – in some cases, as suggested by Gupta (1992; 1994), to those languages that they are more familiar with – for example, *lah* has been ascribed to Hokkien (Richards and Tay, 1977), to Cantonese (Besemeres and Wierzbicka, 2003), to Chinese (Mandarin, Hokkien and/or Cantonese) (Kwan-Terry, 1978), to Colloquial Malay (Goddard, 1994), or to Chinese or Malay (Pakir, 1992); *ah* to Tamil (Baskaran, 1988); *hor* to Cantonese (Kwan-Terry, 1992); *what* to Chinese *ma* or *lo* (Kwan-Terry, 1978; Pakir, 1992); but the treatment is in most cases incidental. Richards and Tay (1977) do provide an account for SE *lah* having originated in Hokkien rather than in Mandarin or Malay, basing their argument on the parallel in functions between Hokkien *la* and SE *lah*; similarly, Kwan-Terry (1978) presents her argument for *lah* and *what* being the result of transfer from Chinese, treating Mandarin, Hokkien and Cantonese as equally possible sources.

Given the recognition of some Chinese language(s) as the source of at least some of the particles, another issue sometimes addressed is whether the particles have an independent lexical tone. While Platt (1987) queries this against the possibility of their being tone unit nuclei, but does not come to a conclusion, Gupta holds that particles function as the carrier of the intonation contour of the utterance (1992; 2006). Platt and Ho (1989: 221) propose that “for some speakers they may function as in Chinese, while, for others, they may be mainly the carriers of the pitch movement”. Lim (2004) suggests the coexistence of both systems: that SE particles do exhibit a maintenance of their tone as in their language of origin, and, as a consequence, they tend to become one of the more prominent syllables in an utterance; furthermore, because the tone they carry is fixed or is chosen from a small, closed set, and because particles, together with their tone, determine the pragmatic meaning of the utterance, their presence in an utterance does affect the possibilities of pitch movement, that is, intonation, in the rest of the utterance. Lim (2004: 48) goes on to add that it is “irrelevant whether the current speakers of SE speak these languages or are even aware of the original tones on the particles, as their use is already part of the system of CSE”. As I will demonstrate later in this paper, a large set of particles has been adopted into SE along with tone as in the original language.

The thrust of this paper is thus twofold: I aim to present an account of the particles of Singapore English which identifies (i) their most likely source(s) from the substrate language(s) and (ii) the dynamics of their evolution within SE. I do this from two complementary perspectives. (a) By making a systematic comparison of the form and functions of SE particles with particles from the substrates, focusing in particular on the pitch characteristics of the particles, I use structural and semantic/pragmatic parallels to identify the most likely source(s). (b) By examining the linguistic ecology of Singapore over the decades, I rely on sociohistorical facts to support the linguistic postulation. I thus avoid the “cafeteria principle” (Dillard, 1970; Bickerton, 1981) of shopping for commonality, but justify the linguistic similarity with historical likelihood (see Gupta, 1994: 46–7); such an insistence and practice is also made in creole studies for the use of sociohistorical data to determine which substrate languages could have possibly influenced the developing creole (e.g. Arends, 1989; Chaudenson, 2001).

## 2. SINGAPORE ENGLISH PARTICLES

This section is meant to provide a flavour of some of the more common SE particles in terms of their form and function(s), illustrated with examples from naturally occurring colloquial speech of young native speakers of Singapore English, drawn from the Grammar of Spoken Singapore English Corpus.<sup>2</sup> As the focus of this paper is to trace the origins of the particles, this account is necessarily a concentrated distillation of the literature, with the account of functions presented as in the sources; for more comprehensive descriptions of their functions, readers are directed to e.g. Gupta (1992), Wee (2004), Ler (2006), and other work cited in this paper. I name the SE particles using conventional orthography as in the majority of scholarship, but, as outlined in section 1, I also accompany this with their phonetic representation, which crucially includes their tone/pitch pattern, expressed in pitch level numbers, which is a fundamental characteristic of each particle. In the examples’ idiomatic glosses, the phrasing at times moves the utterances to a more formal register or style compared to the original SE version; this is sometimes unavoidable – there is no direct translation of the particles, after all – and in general the reader is reminded that in all cases the original utterances would be in the informal register.

The most well-known SE particle, *lah* [la], which has made its way into the *Oxford English Dictionary*, has been variously analysed as a marker of rapport or solidarity (Tongue, 1974; Richards and Tay 1977; Kwan-Terry, 1978; Bell and Ser, 1983; Platt, 1987; Pakir, 1992; Wee, 2004)<sup>3</sup> and as a marker of emphasis (Richards and Tay, 1977; Platt *et al.*, 1983; Loke and Low, 1988). Wee (2004: 119) suggests a two-part function: the particle first draws the addressee’s attention to some mood or attitude of the speaker, which depends on specific contextual factors, and in doing so also appeals to the addressee to act in such a way as to accommodate this mood and attitude. Different studies document different numbers and types of the particle *lah*, depending on their analysis of pitch level, intonation, stress and duration; for example, Bell and Ser (1983) identify a short *la* signalling solidarity and long *lah* signalling power and distance, while Loke and Low (1988) distinguish three variants contrasting in terms of pitch height, which undergo further intonational variations of rise, fall, fall-rise and rise-fall, which together express communicative functions, while further superimposition of duration and stress expresses emotive attitudes. For the present purposes, one may perhaps discern at least two different tones: low [la21] and mid rising [la24] (Platt, 1987; Kwan-Terry, 1992; cf. Lim, 2004), the former suggested as indicative

of more matter-of-factness and the latter persuasiveness (e.g. Wong, 2004), seen in (1) and (2) respectively; *lah* also occurs in (7), (10), (11) and (13).

(1) A: What do you want to talk about?

B: Anything under the sun *la21*.

(2) Tired *la24*.

'It's because I'm tired (which is why I don't want to go out)' [explaining persuasively]

The particle *ah* [*a*] is commonly found at the end of declaratives; if it has a mid fall or low pitch [*a21*], this marks them as questions where a response is required from the interlocutor, as in (3a) and also in (12). If the particle has a rise, however [*a24*], then the question becomes rhetorical and is usually just to reiterate or check a fact with no response required from the interlocutor, as in (3b) (Lim, 2004). Rising *a24* can be used to check that the interlocutor is following the conversation, narrative or explanation (Gupta, 1992) or to signal continuation of the utterance, as seen occurring with relatively high frequency in extracts such as (4) where the three instances of *a24* used by speaker A fulfil this function; A's *a41* with a high fall can be seen to have an exclamatory function. When used with imperatives, *a24* with a rise softens the command, seen in (5).

(3a) Then you got to do those papers again *a21*?

'So do you have to do those papers again?'

(3b) Then you got to do those papers again *a24*?

'So you have to do those papers again (I know).'

(4) A: Okay when you go BBDC *a24*, you have to attend six class.

'Okay, when you go to BBDC [a driving school; also a basic test], you have to attend six classes.'

B: Still have to attend the theory class?

'Do I still have to attend the theory class?' [B has already passed the theory test]

A: Okay. This theory class *a24*, this theory class ... usually for those people who haven't take BBDC basic and final theory right?

'The theory class is usually for those who haven't done the basic test.'

B: So I no need *la41*!

'So I don't need to do it then!'

A: Okay you no need to take the basic theory. You just attend the class. So you just listen *a41*.

'Okay, so you don't need to do the basic theory (test); you just have to attend the class, and just listen!'

B: I don't want to attend the class!

A: You have to listen. You have to attend. The book *a24*, you have to chop.

'You have to attend the class, because you have to get your book stamped (for attendance).'

(5) You hold on *a24*.

'Hold on (if that's okay with you).'

The particle *what* [*wat21*] presents a piece of information as being obvious, contradicting something that has previously been asserted (Wee, 2004), and is said with a low fall or low pitch that is a step down from the pitch of the previous syllable (Lim, 2004), as seen in (6) and (7), as well as (11).

- (6) A: But this one is only for those matriculated students.  
 B: I'm matriculated *wat21*.  
 'I am matriculated, as you well know (so I should be eligible for this).'
- (7) A: Then buy a buckle type *la42*!  
 'Then why don't you buy the type of shoe with a buckle instead?'  
 B: Buckle will break because it rusts.  
 'The buckles will break (more easily) because they rust.'  
 C: Salt *wat21*!  
 'Because of the salt, of course, that will cause the buckle to rust and consequently break, as you well know. (So you shouldn't buy shoes with buckles.)'  
 A: *a24*?  
 'What do you mean? I don't understand.'  
 C: Salt *wat21*! Your sweat got salt, you see. Salt will make it corrode even faster.  
 'Because of the salt, as you well know. Your sweat contains salt, and that will cause the buckle to corrode more quickly.'

The particle *lor* [*lɔ33*] occurs with a lengthened, mid level tone, the same pitch as the preceding syllable (Lim, 2004), and indicates a sense of obviousness, which in negative contexts can convey inevitability or resignation (Wee, 2002). It is used with declaratives, as in (8), and imperatives, as in (9).

- (8) The most I have fewer kids *lɔ33*.  
 'At the very worst, I'll have fewer children.'
- (9) You buy *lɔ33*. [if you think the flat is so good.]  
 '(Why don't you) buy it then, if you think the flat is such a good buy.'

The question particle *hor* [*hɔ24*] with rising pitch, when attached to a proposition, both asserts the proposition and tries to garner support for it (Wee, 2004). Since the use of *hor* requires that the speaker assert a proposition, it is only found with questions with declarative form, seen in (11) (from Wee, 2004: 124, adapted from Gan, 2000), and never with *wh*- or polar interrogatives.

- (10) A: But it's beautiful in that. . . how. . . I mean, Finn got got a chance to realise himself, right?  
 B: He's quite innocent *la21*, *hɔ24*? Innocent.  
 'He's quite innocent, don't you agree?'
- (11) A: I bought a Prada wallet yesterday.  
 B: You are very rich *hɔ24*?  
 'You are very rich, aren't you.'  
 A: No *la21*. Got sale *wat21*.  
 'No, I'm not really. It was at a sale (as you know).'

The question particle *leh* [*le55*], which occurs with a high level pitch, usually a step up from the pitch of the previous syllable (Lim, 2004), serves to highlight a comparison (Lim, 2005) (also described as meaning 'what about?' in Platt, 1987; Gupta, 1994). In example (12), the speaker uses *le55* to question the old-fashionedness of the listener's parents in comparison to the speaker's own parents, whose old-fashionedness was just commented on by the listener.

- (12) My parents very old fashion *a21*? Then your parents *le55*?  
 'Are you saying that my parents are old-fashioned? Then what about your parents?'

Another question particle is *meh* [*mɛ55*], which has been said to question a presupposition (Gupta, 1992) or indicate that the opposite of what was thought is true (Wong, 2000); in short, it expresses scepticism (Wee, 2004), and it is always realised with high level pitch (Lim, 2005). In (13), for example, the use of *mɛ55* indicates that A is surprised at B's apparent ignorance that a mutual acquaintance actually has Pirelli tyres.

- (13) A: No *la21*! He's using Pirelli, you don't know *mɛ55*?  
 'No, he has Pirelli tyres; didn't you know that?' [incredulously]  
 B: Really? Don't bluff.
- (14) Just sign, just sign. *Wah*, you sign like that *mɛ55*?  
 'Just sign (the paper). Wow, do you really sign (your name) like that?!'

Finally, the particle *ma* [*ma21*] presents a piece of information or advice as obvious to the addressee (Kwan-Terry, 1991; Wee, 2004), and occurs with low pitch or a low fall, illustrated in (15) from Wong (1994):

- (15) A: How come you call me?  
 'Why did you call me?'  
 B: You page for me *ma21*.  
 'You paged for me, after all (as you know) (so naturally I'm returning your call).'

### 3. THE SUBSTRATE LANGUAGES IN THEIR TIME

Given the diversity of the languages involved in the highly multilingual environment in which SE has developed and is spoken, we must assume that language contact plays a significant role in its evolution (e.g. Gupta, 1994; Ansaldi, 2004). In the next section, I survey the particles found in a number of indigenous Asian languages that have been and are relevant in the contact environment of Singapore, to best determine the sources of SE particles. It would however be wise to first outline the historical facts relevant to the issue at hand; and in this section I first present a summary of this in tabular form in Table 1, with information largely based on Bloom (1986), Gupta (1994: 32–47), and Lim and Foley (2004), the first two being particularly rich in research on historical documentation from census and education material. I wish particularly to highlight some landmarks by which one may divide the timeline into a few distinguishable phases of SE development which, as I will then show, are significant in the appreciation of the SE particles.

In considering the status and positioning of the various languages and their contribution to Singapore English, in particular where the particles are concerned, based on the socio-historical developments in Singapore, I propose that we distinguish the following eras in Singapore's linguistic history:

- I. the age of the original immigrant substrates, starting from pre-colonial centuries (pre-1800) through post-independence years (mid-1970s);
- II. the age of the official languages, from the mid-1970s up until the present; and
- III. the age of the global-media languages, beginning around the late 1980s and extending through to the present.

Table 1. Some landmarks in the linguistic sociohistory of Singapore

Time period and historical circumstances	Language/education policies and practice	Language situation
Pre-1800s Malay Sultanate		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact varieties of Malay are main lingua franca</li> </ul>
1819–1965 British colony		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hokkien also serves as lingua franca</li> </ul>
Pre-1900s–1920s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English-medium schools: majority of Eurasian teachers, smaller equal numbers of European and Indian teachers; majority of Eurasian and Straits-born Chinese students; extensive use of contact Malay varieties</li> <li>• Chinese-medium schools use other Chinese languages, not Mandarin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numerous southern Chinese, Malay/Indonesian and South Asian languages spoken by respective communities</li> <li>• English spoken by communities such as Eurasians, Armenians, Ceylonese, Babas, British, Americans, Europeans</li> </ul>
Early 1900s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharp rise in Chinese students in English-medium schools</li> <li>• Dramatic increase in Chinese teachers in English-medium schools (c.1927)</li> <li>• Mandarin replaces other languages in Chinese-medium schools (c.1912)</li> </ul>	
1956–65 leading to and at independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 official languages (1956)</li> <li>• English as compulsory school language (1965)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English starts becoming main interethnic lingua franca, especially in younger generation</li> </ul>
After 1979	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak Mandarin Campaign (1979)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandarin becomes most frequently used home language for Chinese, and preferred intra-ethnic lingua franca for Chinese, especially in younger generation</li> </ul>
c.1980–2000 recent Cantonese immigration*		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cantonese used more than Mandarin in Cantonese homes</li> </ul>

\*See note 8.

It should be noted that the periods need not coincide precisely with historical landmarks, and the dividing dates are meant to indicate an approximate point in time. Moreover, such a division into ages does not suggest that the ages change abruptly and are discrete, but rather that the situations in one period transform gradually into the next. Additionally, the

third age overlaps with the still-continuing second age. In what follows, for each of the ages I highlight the significant languages that would have been spoken and been in contact, and their position in the linguistic ecology of Singapore.

### *3.1. Age I. The age of the original immigrant substrates: pre-colony (pre-1800s) through post-independence (mid-1970s)*

This first era may perhaps best be characterised by heterogeneity and multilingualism. The ancient Indian Ocean trade routes would already have seen extensive contact between sailors and traders from south, east and southeast Asia. With the influx of immigration from southern China, Malaysia, the Indonesian archipelago, and South Asia which accompanied the establishment of Singapore as a British trading post, there developed widespread societal multilingualism in Singapore. The individual too would have in their repertoire a diverse range of languages, not confined to those associated with their ethnic group (or official ethnic group, as in the next age). For example, a Chinese would typically have in his repertoire Bazaar Malay, Hokkien, and one or more other Chinese varieties; this would not be too different from a Malay, who would have at least Bazaar Malay and Hokkien, along with the Malay vernacular. In what follows, each point highlights a particular group of languages significant for this first era, namely: contact varieties of Malay (3.1.1), southern Chinese varieties (3.1.2), linguistic varieties of the Indian subcontinent (3.1.3), and varieties of English (3.1.4).

*3.1.1. Contact varieties of Malay* Contact varieties of Malay have had intimate association with SE development throughout history. (It should be noted that Standard Malay or the Malay used by the Malay community would not actually have been a player in the dynamics of contact, as it would have been confined to High (H) domains within the Malay community (see also Gupta, 1994: 41–2).) **Bazaar Malay**, one of the local forms of restructured Malay, was the lingua franca in the region for centuries (Holm, 1988; Adelaar and Prentice, 1996), and it certainly served as the interethnic lingua franca in Singapore. The Chinese who came to Singapore in the 1820s and 1830s would either have had intimate contacts with the Malay and Thai worlds across several generations of residence in the region or be already acquainted with the British and Dutch administrations through sojourns in the other trading centres in the area, or would at least have had relatives with decades of trading experience (Wang, 1991), and would have had Bazaar Malay in their repertoire. The English-speaking Eurasians, a community with a complex heritage of Portuguese, British or Dutch, mixed with Indian, Macanese, Malaccan, Burmese, Siamese and/or Ceylonese origins, also spoke Malay (Gupta, 1994: 37). Even after the growth of the Chinese population, it was the second most understood language, after Hokkien, in early 1970s Singapore, and still the most important language for interethnic communication, with all Indians and 45 per cent of the Chinese claiming to understand it.

**Baba Malay**, another restructured Malay variety showing in particular Hokkien elements in syntax and lexis (see e.g. Ansaldo and Matthews, 1999), is the language of the Straits-born Chinese or Babas, the descendants of the 19th-century South Chinese immigrants and local Malay women. Although few in number (some 9.5 per cent of the Chinese population in 1881), their social and economic influence was disproportionately strong: they formed an important sector of the local élite (Kwok, 2000: 202, 204), and were seen to be the best-educated, wealthiest and most intelligent section of the Chinese community



(Nathan, 1922: 77). The Babas were (and are still) also noted, particularly for that time, for having English (increasingly) in their repertoire, holding a high regard for English-medium education and sending their children to English-medium schools. By the mid-19th century their ability to converse in this colonial language had strengthened their prominent socioeconomic position compared to other local communities, to the point where they were in fact sometimes referred to as “King’s Chinese” (Tan, 1988: 53). Their closer contact with British administrators and merchants, their role as intermediaries between Europeans and locals (Nathan, 1922: 77), their predominance in the commercial sectors, and, through all this, their multilingualism in English and Baba Malay – and usually one or more Chinese languages, in particular Hokkien – along with much code mixing (Pakir, 1986; 1989), would have had an important influence on SE (also see Ho and Platt, 1993: 8–9; Ansaldo, 2004; Ansaldo *et al.*, 2007). Given the predominance in the early 19th century of both Eurasians and Babas in the local English-medium schools, the former both as teachers and students, in general there would have been extensive use of Malay there (Gupta, 1994: 41); even British children in English-medium local schools, who were not few in the 19th century, are reported to have been able to speak Bazaar Malay (Gupta, 1994: 38).

*3.1.2. Southern Chinese varieties* The vast majority of the ethnic Chinese Singaporeans, who as a whole formed the largest proportion of Singapore’s total population within two decades of British colonisation (45.9 per cent by 1836), a proportion which grew steadily over the century (76.2 per cent in 1970: Kwok, 2000), are descendants of immigrants from Southern China, mainly the provinces of Chaochow (the Teochews), Fujian (the Hokkiens) and Guangdong (the Cantonese). Although the **Teochews** constituted the largest proportion of Chinese in the early 19th century (being twice as numerous as the Hokkiens in 1848: Kwok, 2000: 204), they were economically weak, being involved primarily in agriculture, and were also perceived to be more conservative and risk-averse (Li *et al.*, 1997). In contrast, the Hokkiens were a strong economic power in Singapore, especially from the late 1800s, establishing themselves first as traders and go-betweens and then as importers, exporters, manufacturers and bankers, and virtually monopolising commercial activities by the end of the 19th century. As the most powerful *bang* ‘clan’, the Hokkiens played a leading role within the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, set up in 1906, as well as within the Chinese community at large (Li *et al.*, 1997). **Hokkien** was the most frequently understood and spoken Chinese language (note that it is mutually intelligible with Teochew, both being subvarieties of Southern Min), followed by Cantonese and Mandarin, up until the 1970s (Lock, 1982: 302), and, more crucially, was the *de facto* lingua franca for intra-ethnic communication within the Chinese community (Platt and Weber, 1980). **Cantonese** is also suggested to have been important in terms of input (Gupta, 1994: 41), as the Cantonese are reported to have taken up English education with more enthusiasm than the Hokkiens (Chia, 1977: 160). **Mandarin** would have been in the picture from the 1920s in the Chinese-medium schools, once the Chinese republic was founded (Bloom, 1986: 362f.; Kwok, 2000), but would still have filled the role of High (H) variety, fulfilling more formal functions, in the diglossic (Ferguson, 1959) or polyglossic situation (Platt and Weber, 1980) said to be found in Singapore then.

*3.1.3. Linguistic varieties of the Indian subcontinent* While Indian contact, trade and migration to Southeast Asia had been occurring since ancient times,<sup>4</sup> in the colonial period

the first Indian arrivals were soldiers – sepoys – in the British Army, and a number of entrepreneurs arriving at the founding of Singapore. The origins of South Asians in Singapore are very diverse along geographical, language and caste lines, each filling a niche in the early days: for example, Ceylonese Tamils tended to work as clerks, junior civil servants and in the professions; Christian Malayalis from Kerala were English-educated and worked mainly in the civil service; Punjabi Sikhs were the backbone of the armed forces and the police force, and worked as private security guards; Tamil Muslims, Sindhis and Gujaratis were often small traders; and the Tamil Chettiar caste from Tamil Nadu were moneylenders and currency changers. The largest group of immigrants were South Indian, mainly from the Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam language communities, with the Tamils in the majority. While a minority were well-educated entrepreneurs and professionals, who would have had some status, the majority were recruited as indentured workers. Overall, given the pattern of migration and settlement, the Indian community was fragmented and dispersed unevenly along various cultural and professional lines. Furthermore, they represented in total only a small proportion of the population, from the 1900s ranging between 7 and 9 per cent. Their languages – **Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi, Bengali**, etc. – were used neither in interethnic communication nor in communication between the different Indian groups, but only in the home domains of the respective communities.

*3.1.4. Varieties of English* **English** was the language of the Europeans (British, Americans and others) as well as other communities such as the Armenians and Ceylonese (Bloom, 1986). It was also the dominant language of the Eurasians (Braga-Blake, 1992: 12–13), though theirs would be a particular **Eurasian English** (Gupta, 1994: 37, 44). An English-dominant repertoire was also increasingly the case for the Babas, who (as mentioned in 3.1.1) held a high regard for English-medium education and sent their children to English-medium schools; their variety may similarly be seen as a particular **Peranakan English** (Lim, forthcoming). English would have been acquired by the other ethnic groups as a school language, but not to a high level of proficiency, and would not be considered a dominant language for them (see e.g. Platt *et al.*, 1983, whose SE speakers had English education ranging from a few years in primary school to the four years in secondary school). Teachers from what was then Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and India, recruited during colonial times, have been well represented in the teaching profession (Ho and Platt, 1993: 6), in particular before the late 1920s, when Chinese teachers started outnumbering all other ethnic groups, though their **Indian English** input is not seen as having had a significant influence on SE development except for a few aspects of syntax and lexis (Ho and Platt, 1993: 8).

### *3.2. Age II. The age of the official languages: mid-1970s to the present*

In this period, natural increase is the more dominant contribution to population growth, as opposed to immigration in the previous age. This is the era when some of the official languages which represent the official races in Singapore (Chinese, Malay, Indian and “Other”) – that is, those associated with “higher-order ethnicity” (Gupta, 2001: 5) – attain prominence, and start displacing the other languages which are in fact languages of separate dialect groups (“lower-order ethnicity”, Gupta, 2001: 5). Overall there is a large-scale shift from societal multilingualism in a multiplicity of languages to a small number of official languages. As before, in what follows each point highlights a particular language or group of languages significant for this second era: English (3.2.1), Mandarin (3.2.2),

southern Chinese varieties (3.2.3), Malay varieties (3.2.4), and Tamil and other linguistic varieties of the Indian subcontinent (3.2.5). While the source of data pertaining to the specific Chinese dialect groups is the newsletter of the Singapore Department of Statistics (Lee, 2001), all other statistics in this section derive from the Population Census over the years (Leow, 2001; Ng, 1995) unless otherwise specified. It should be noted that there are problems with comparability of census results with regard to sampling, self-report, variation in question type, terminology, categorisation of ethnic affiliation, acknowledgement of multilingualism, among other relevant factors. (For a critical evaluation, see Bloom, 1986: 389f. and Gupta, 1994: 24–32.)

**3.2.1. English** With its choice as one of the four official languages and its institution-alisation as the language of education in an English-knowing bilingualism system (Pakir, 1991), **English** starts displacing Hokkien and Bazaar Malay as lingua franca from the late 1970s to early 1980s, especially among the younger and more educated, with some 70 per cent of Primary 1 children in 1990 having English as a dominant language (Lim and Foley, 2004: 5–6).

**3.2.2. Mandarin** Because of its official institutionalisation as one of the nation's four official languages post-independence, and additionally through language policies such as bilingual education (for background, see e.g. Bokhorst-Heng, 1998; Lim and Foley, 2004) and, in particular, the successful annual Speak Mandarin Campaign first launched in 1979, **Mandarin** has now become the language most frequently spoken at home for the Chinese as a whole (from 10 to 30.1 to 45.1 per cent in 1980, 1990 and 2000), displacing other Chinese languages (decreasing from 81.4 to 50.3 to 30.7 per cent in the same years). Some 87 per cent of the Chinese population claimed to be able to understand Mandarin by 1988. It is certainly the language of choice for many younger Chinese Singaporeans' intra-ethnic communication in all domains (Lim and Foley, 2004: 6).

**3.2.3. Southern Chinese varieties** The Hokkiens, Teochews and Cantonese are still the three main dialect groups out of more than 20 Chinese dialect groups in Singapore, comprising 41.1, 21 and 15.4 per cent respectively in 2000, making up three-quarters of the Singapore Chinese population. In spite of the shift to Mandarin outlined in 3.2.2 above, **Hokkien** and **Cantonese** are still dominant home languages in the Chinese community – they rank as the third and fourth languages most frequently spoken at home in the Chinese community as a whole, after Mandarin and English.

**3.2.4. Malay varieties** The use of **Bazaar Malay** as a lingua franca has declined, except in the older generation and perhaps in the lower social strata; **Malay** is really only used within the Malay speech community itself, though it is still by far the most frequently spoken language at home (91.5 per cent) for the ethnic Malays.

**3.2.5. Tamil and other linguistic varieties of the Indian subcontinent** **Tamil** is spoken by a minority of the population – some 4.2 per cent are Indians of Tamil-speaking origins (though they form the greatest proportion, slightly more than half, within the Indian racial grouping, with the rest of the Indian population being Hindi, Gujarati, Malayalam and Punjabi speakers) – and plays no real role in the contact dynamics. Even with its official status, it is perceived as having little economic value, and it is now seen to be a classroom language, with very little functional use elsewhere (Saranavan, 1993; Schiffman, 2003),

being replaced largely by English (as well as Malay) in the community in inter- as well as intra-ethnic communication, even in the home domain, with a steady shift over the years (52.6 to 43.7 per cent from 1980 to 1990), particularly in the higher classes and the better-educated. The situation is similar with the **other Indian languages**, even if Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu can be studied by non-Tamil Indians students in lieu of the official mother tongue language in the education system in recent years.

### 3.3. *Age III. The age of the global-media languages: late 1980s to the present*

This is the era in which contact with languages on a global scale is increasingly significant. Also included in these considerations are languages which are significant in the more local linguistic market, namely that of Asia, as well as languages which are dominant not only in terms of their economic capital but, just as importantly, where mass media and pop culture is concerned. Once again, in what follows each point highlights a particular language or group of languages significant for this third era: varieties of English (3.3.1), Cantonese (3.3.2 (1) and (2)), and other Chinese varieties (3.3.3).

3.3.1. *Varieties of English* The usual candidate as a global or world language is English – more specifically, **EIL (English as an International Language)** varieties. While British and American English varieties are still significant for their impact in world politics and economics, as well as in the media, notably via television and the film industry from Britain and America, innumerable varieties of English are equally significant, given Singapore's various associations with countries (and therefore speakers) in Asia, the Pacific, Europe and all other parts of the world.

3.3.2. *Cantonese (1)* As noted in the previous age, with the phasing in of Mandarin and the increase in its use, there is – in the Chinese community as a whole – an overall decrease in the use as a home language of the other Chinese languages in favour of Mandarin. When each dialect group is examined separately (see Lee, 2001), however, what is significant is that the Cantonese are the only group who still speak **Cantonese** more frequently at home (36 per cent in 2000) compared with Mandarin (32 per cent), even if there is an overall decrease in usage (from 51.5 per cent Cantonese and 20.2 per cent Mandarin in 1990). This contrasts with both the Hokkiens and the Teochews, who spoke more Mandarin (46.3 and 43.4 per cent) than their own language (29 and 25.7 per cent) at home in 2000 than in 1990. What is of relevance to this paper is also that a significant proportion of the Cantonese immigrants – who in themselves form a larger proportion compared to Hokkien and Teochew recent immigrants – comprises recent arrivals to Singapore, with more than one quarter first arriving during the last 10 years. In short, the profile of the Chinese ethnic groups and language use in Singapore has in fact seen a paradigm shift in the last decade and a half, with an increase in Cantonese prominence.

3.3.2. *Cantonese (2)* In addition, **Cantonese** can be seen to be dominant in both music and film. In spite of the official and instrumental significance of Mandarin in Singapore (also see Wee, 2003a on linguistic instrumentalism in Singapore) – though, along with China, one should also note the financial and cultural hub of Hong Kong – one should also acknowledge the impact of the media and popular culture: the aggressive expansion and immense popularity of Hong Kong's entertainment industry, particularly in this period, in the form of martial arts movies, television series and Cantonese pop music, also plays a

significant role in raising the profile of Cantonese in the diaspora, including Singapore. It is in this era that Cantopop (see Wong, 2003) had its golden years, from mid-1980s to mid-1990s, with an explosion in Hong Kong of producers and artistes, the latter embraced by both the Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities. From the mid-1990s, mainland Chinese as well as overseas Chinese in Canada and the USA also entered the Cantopop industry, making it a pan-Chinese music movement. Similarly, while the Mandarin film industry dominated in the 1970s, it was the 1980s and early 1990s which are said to have been the boom years of Cantonese cinema, attaining superpower status in East Asia markets and thriving in spite of the global dominance of Hollywood. In fact, this is when Hong Kong film begins to receive interest from the West, and attains mainstream visibility in the USA in the mid-1990s through to the present (see e.g. Bordwell, 2000; Teo, 1997).

*3.3.3. Other Chinese varieties* Finally, in the most local linguistic market, again in spite of the official discourse on Mandarin vs. the other Chinese languages, a relaxation in the domains of use of **Chinese ‘dialects’** has occurred: in the lead-up to the general elections in 2001 and 2006, for example, ministers of the ruling political party, including the then Prime Minister, made election rally speeches not only in the official languages (English, Mandarin, etc.) but also in Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese, to better connect with their voters.

Figure 1 summarises what has been outlined thus far with regard to the significance in the different ages that the various languages have in the Singapore speech community as

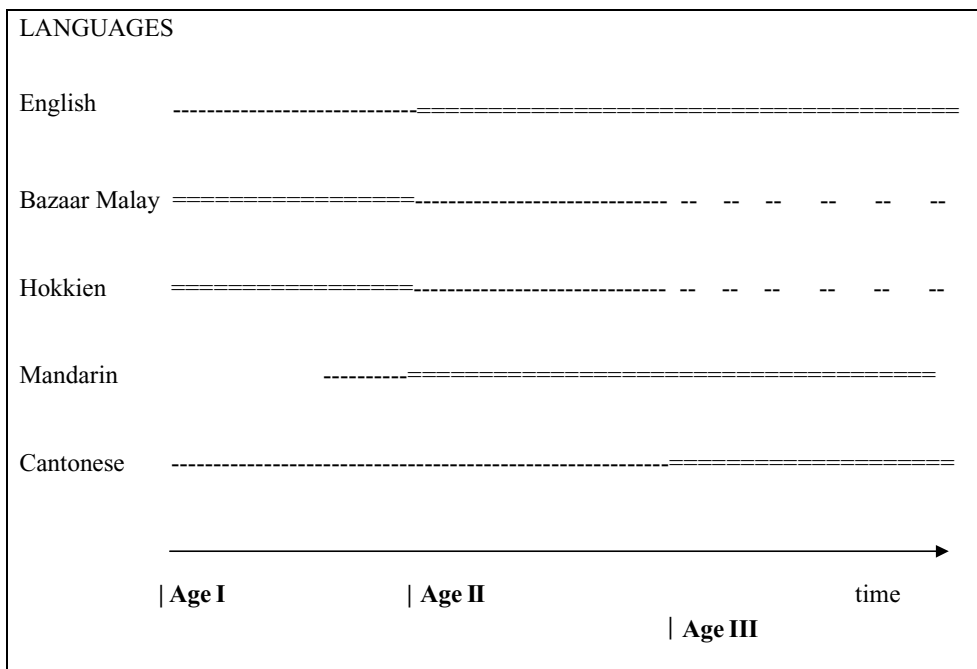


Figure 1. Relative significance of languages in the different ages of linguistic history in Singapore.  
 ---- indicates language is present; ==== language is dominant; ---- language is waning in prominence.

a whole and in the emergence of Singapore English. I have already mentioned that what is conceptualised as the third age, i.e. the age of the global languages, has begun, even if the second age, that of the official languages, still continues. This is not a contradiction in the model, but may be seen as coherent if we understand the practices in a community as being negotiable at different levels, or as different linguistic markets: a national one (in the second age) and, at least in some respects, a more global one (in the third age). This means not only that the primary language players and practices are concurrent and layered; more significantly, it implies competition, a constant tension between the languages in question, where forces may tip the balance either way.

#### 4. PARTICLES FROM THE SUBSTRATES

As the survey of sociohistorical facts suggests, in particular regarding language policies, practice and use in Singapore in the past decades, the main candidates for the role of source language for SE particles are clearly Bazaar/Baba Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin. In this section, then, I present the particles in these languages, first looking to identify linguistic parallels, in terms of form and function, followed by a consideration of historical probability.

##### 4.1. *Linguistic parallels*

For convenience, the linguistic aspects of the particles under consideration are presented in the form of Table 2, first developed in Lim (2005), which maps the form and function(s) of the relevant particles in Singapore English and the candidate languages. A number of caveats are in order with regard to the language descriptions:

(1) Given the paucity of comprehensive descriptions of the Singapore varieties of Mandarin, Hokkien and Cantonese, I use, as the basis for the description of particles from the other local languages, the classic grammars of these languages, supplemented and/or modified by accounts found in papers which mention the Singapore varieties. The sources used are as follows: Bazaar Malay: Daw Khin Khin Aye (2005); Cantonese: Kwok (1984); Matthews and Yip (1994); Hokkien: Richards and Tay (1977); Bodman (1987); Mandarin: Kwan-Terry (1978); Li and Thompson (1981). It is also beyond the scope of this paper to outline the differences between the mainland and Singapore varieties of the Chinese languages.

(2) Caution is also needed in using descriptions of Singapore varieties of the languages, since in cases of similar features in SE and the local language, the direction of influence may not be so clearly established.

The presentation in Table 2 provides a systematic comparison of (i) segmental form; (ii) suprasegmental form (i.e. tone); and (iii) function. Once again, a few notes for clarification are needed at the outset:

(1) It is generally a problem of the category of sentence particles that within it one finds particles which serve different communicative or pragmatic functions: some indicate grammatical functions, for example, question markers or aspect markers; others indicate evidentiality; and still others provide affective and emotional colouring (see e.g. the treatment given in Matthews and Yip, 1994). I have kept my representation of the

Table 2. Particles in Colloquial Singapore English, Bazaar Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese, and Mandarin

Singapore English	Bazaar Malay	Hokkien	Cantonese	Mandarin
<i>lah</i> draws attention to mood or attitude and appeals for accommodation; indicates solidarity, familiarity, informality [ <i>la24</i> ] is more persuasive [ <i>la21</i> ] is more matter-of-fact	<i>la</i> provides emphasis (like Malay <i>lah</i> emphatic marker); softens command; indicates solidarity, familiarity, informality	<i>la</i> indicates finality, completion, exclamatory or confirming meaning, emphasis, persuasiveness, dismissiveness, listing	<i>la55</i> indicates general lack of definiteness or forcefulness; softens command <i>la33</i> like <i>la55</i> but less suppliant	<i>la</i> gives emphasis
<i>ah</i> [ <i>a24</i> ] signals continuation (in narratives or explanations) and keeps interlocutors in contact; softens command; marks a question expecting agreement [ <i>a21</i> ] marks a question requiring response	<i>a</i> indicates interrogative, exclamatory, and indicative moods; signifies continuation of utterance	<i>a</i> indicates completion, finality, slightly exclamatory; indicates interrogative, exclamatory, and indicative moods	<i>a55</i> indicates tentativeness in questions and requests <i>a33</i> softens force of statements or confirmations; accompanies A-not-A and copular questions <i>a23</i> checks addressee's meaning or intention <i>a21</i> checks validity of an assumption; turns declarative into question, tends to presuppose a positive answer, common in rhetorical questions; may suggest surprise, scepticism, disapproval	<i>a</i> reduces forcefulness in A-not-A and Qn-wd questions; gives emphasis
<i>what</i> [ <i>wat1</i> ] indicates that information is obvious, contradicting something previously asserted		<i>ma</i> indicates obviousness	<i>wo21</i> *indicates noteworthy discovery <i>ma33</i> (contracted from <i>a55ma33</i> ) indicates obvious reason, excuse	<i>ma</i> provides emphasis (in listed items)

<i>lor</i> [lɔ33] indicates a sense of obviousness as well as resignation	<i>lo</i> indicates obviousness	<i>lo</i> 33 indicates obviousness, inevitability and irrevocability <i>lo</i> 55 points out what appears to be obvious	<i>lo</i> indicates obviousness
<i>hor</i> [hɔ24] marks a question asserting a proposition and trying to garner support for the proposition	<i>ho</i> marks a question with expectation of agreement	<i>ho</i> 35 expects confirmation of a statement or suggestion	
<i>leh</i> [le55] marks a question involving comparison	* <i>ne</i> ~ <i>ni</i> emphasises contrasts; indicates 'as for' <i>le</i> *marks informality and intimacy	<i>ne</i> 55 ~ <i>le</i> 55 forms question; has comparative function; indicates 'what about?'	<i>le</i> * refers to currently relevant state * <i>ne</i> * indicates response to claim, expectation or belief on the part of hearer
<i>meh</i> [mɛ55] marks a question involving scepticism	<i>me</i> acts as general question particle (in some Minnan varieties)	<i>me</i> 55 indicates a highly marked 'surprise' question, checks truth of unexpected state of affairs (common in rhetorical questions)	
<i>ma</i> [ma33] indicates obviousness	<i>ma</i> indicates obviousness	<i>ma</i> 33 (contracted from <i>a</i> 55 <i>ma</i> 33) indicates obvious reason or excuse <i>ma</i> *acts as general-purpose question particle; <i>ma</i> provides emphasis in listed items; indicates emphasis, with enhanced note of disapproval or annoyance	



descriptions quite faithful to the original material; that is, the descriptions of the functions of the particles are given as in the source, be they syntactic, semantic or pragmatic; thus there may not be total comparability across the corresponding particles from the different languages.

(2) Not every single particle in the substrates is shown in Table 2, but only those which bear resemblance in form and/or function. For the sake of comparison, particles from the substrates that show sufficient similarity in segmental form are included in the table, even if the functions in the substrates and in SE diverge; in such a case, an asterisk is placed before the function listed, as in *le* in Hokkien. Similarly, if the form diverges, an asterisk is placed before the particle.

(3) Due to space constraints, extensive examples of every particle from the different languages cannot be provided.

Finally a few other preliminary comments regarding general features of the particles are also in order here:

(1) Hokkien's sentence particles occur finally, typically with neutral tone, which is like the low tone but with very weak stress (Bodman, 1987). While the number of particles in Amoy Hokkien is not systematically enumerated (Bodman, 1987), Singapore Hokkien is said to have about 10 particles (Tay, 1968).

(2) Cantonese (Kwok, 1984; Matthews and Yip, 1994) can be said to be especially rich in particles, with some 30 basic forms (or more than 200 if all variants are counted), which vary in their pronunciation, including vowel quality, duration and intonation, to a greater extent than other Cantonese words. The vowel may be short or prolonged – the latter a characteristic of Cantonese which distinguishes it from other Chinese dialects. In Cantonese, sentence-final particles serve various communicative or pragmatic functions (which in English are often conveyed by intonation), namely: (a) indicating speech act types such as questions, assertions, requests; (b) evidentiality (indicating source of knowledge); and (c) affective and emotional colouring. These particles sometimes correspond functionally to English question tags, but in Cantonese there is no pause between main sentence and particle.

(3) In (Beijing) Mandarin (Li and Thompson, 1981), sentence-final particles (*yu3qi4 ci2* 'mood words') number about 6; Singapore Mandarin is said to have about 10 (Lock, 1988); they all have neutral tone and all are not stressed. Their semantic and pragmatic functions are said to be elusive, with linguists having had considerable difficulty in arriving at a general characterisation of each of them (Li and Thompson, 1981).

(4) Bazaar Malay is reported to have *la*, *ah* and *ka* as the most commonly used particles, with *ah* being said to be used extensively (Daw Khin Khin Aye, 2005); they carry no tone, as Malay is not a tone language. (Note that Standard Malay does not have particles, save for the emphatic particle or clitic *lah*, used with imperatives to soften a command, and the question particle *kah*.)

As mentioned at the start of this section, there are three aspects along which linguistic parallels between the particles can be drawn: (i) segmental form; (ii) suprasegmental form (tone); and (iii) function. Let me first consider the possible correspondences between particles present in the various languages for the 8 SE particles investigated on the basis of two of these: segmental form and approximate function. Given the structural similarity of the Sinitic varieties, it is not surprising that a survey of Table 2 shows, at

face value at least, reasonable comparability in the particles from Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin, with Cantonese in particular fielding possible candidates for all SE particles, and Mandarin with fewer contenders. Bazaar Malay sees similar particles in just two, *lah* and *ah*.

If one considers the tone of the particles in the substrates, however, it must then be acknowledged and accepted that the Mandarin and Hokkien particles have neutral tone and weak stress, which would make explaining the emergence of prominent suprasegmental features of some of the SE particles difficult to account for, in particular the mid and high level pitch of SE's *lor*, *leh* and *meh*.

In other words, if one takes into account all three aspects of the make-up of the particles, namely segmental (phonemes) and suprasegmental (tone) form, and function, what is most striking in Table 2 is that all the SE particles, with the exception of *lah*, *what* and perhaps *ah*, can be seen to be the exact match of particles in Cantonese, including the maintenance of lexical tone (noted in Lim, 2004). I illustrate this by spelling out the analysis for SE *lor*. As has been seen, in SE, *lor* occurs only with a mid level pitch, and indicates not only obviousness but a sense of resignation as well. While the corresponding particles in Hokkien and Mandarin are very close segmentally as *lo* and *luo* respectively, where suprasegmentals are concerned, both have neutral tone and weak stress. Cantonese, however, does have particle *lo33* matching the mid level tone in SE *lor*. With respect to function, both the particles in Hokkien and Mandarin indicate obviousness, but Cantonese *lo33* also gives the sense of inevitability and irrevocability, again a perfect match with SE *lor*. The same parallels can be seen for *hor*, *leh*, *meh* and *ma*.

This wholesale importing of the particles *lor*, *hor*, *leh*, *meh* and *ma* can in fact be seen to apply in two senses: (a) particles with their full phonetic form (i.e. segmental and tonal features) and function as in Cantonese have been acquired into SE; and (b) it is a substantial subset of these Cantonese particles that have been acquired. Such a phenomenon is not unheard of, and matches observations made, for example, by Matras (2000: 577–8f.) for what he terms “categorical fusion”. By this is meant the wholesale importing, over time, of an entire class of items in the contact language – in other words, the resources of one single language system (in this case, Cantonese) is drawn on for an entire functional category (in this case, particles), with no separation of form and function for that class of items (in this case, the phonetic form, tone and meaning of the Cantonese particles are taken as a package) (see Lim and Ansaldo, in prep., for a more in-depth exploration of this process in SE).

I now return to the slightly more complex situations of *lah*, *ah* and *what*. As already noted by Richards and Tay (1977), some form of *la* particle occurs in all the Chinese languages; Bazaar Malay also has *la* which indicates emphasis, solidarity, familiarity, informality, as in SE. Linguistic parallels are less clear-cut in this case, since SE *lah* has numerous functions, and a number of pitch patterns can occur with *lah*, including a low fall. However, since the Cantonese counterparts are with mid and high level tones, and SE *lah* does not occur with either pitch pattern, Cantonese is perhaps a less likely source for *lah* than Hokkien or Malay. Kwan-Terry (1992: 67) does, however, maintain the possibility that particles may gradually lose their tonal feature over time as they become more fully assimilated into SE, and it is suggested (Anthea F. Gupta, p.c., cited in Kwan-Terry, 1992: 67) that among the first particles, e.g. *lah* and *what*, this gradual loss of tonal feature is already under way. For this reason, one may keep Cantonese in consideration. Richards and Tay (1977) discount Mandarin *la* from consideration, as it serves a grammatical function and is used in both

formal and informal situations. In short, on the basis of linguistic similarity, if one also allows for the potential bleaching of the tonal dimension of phonetic form over time, Malay and Hokkien, as well as Cantonese, are all likely sources for *lah*.

One variant of SE *ah* has a low fall; a possible corresponding form can be seen in Hokkien *a*, and some similarities in function can be seen with those of SE, for example, interrogative mood. Bazaar Malay *a* is also used for interrogative, exclamatory and indicative moods, as well as to indicate the continuation of the utterance (Daw Khin Khin Aye, 2005), and similarities with functions of *ah* in SE, illustrated earlier in examples (3)–(5), are clear. The possible contribution of Cantonese also needs to be recognised: two of its many variants of *a*, namely *a23* and *a21*, match the functions of SE's *ah* used with rise and fall. Again, as with *lah*, Malay and Hokkien, as well as Cantonese, can be considered likely sources for *ah*.

The SE particle *what* requires some consideration. It should be noted first that it does not have the same functions as that found in archaic BrE sentence-final *what*, said with high rise, and cannot have its origins there, as erroneously ascribed in Brown (1999). Searching for similarity in form in the substrates brings us possibly to Cantonese *wo21*; Gupta (1992: 42) does suggest Cantonese as the source, mentioning the near-homophone *wo*. I would emphasise that this candidate is identified on the basis of its being the closest that one can get in segmental form; but it is really a matter of degree, since SE's *what* has a central open unrounded vowel (and often an unreleased dentalised alveolar stop as coda), while the Cantonese counterpart is a mid back rounded vowel (with no coda). In terms of function, there is at best a partial overlap, as also suggested by Gupta, where *wo21* indicates some noteworthy discovery, while SE's *what* indicates obviousness and contradiction of a previous assertion.

A closer parallel in function is found if one treats *what* as a calque from Sinitic: Kwan-Terry (1978: 34) suggests that *ma* (and she uses Mandarin as illustration, but draws parallels with *ma* in both Hokkien and Cantonese), which gives emphasis as well as reflects an enhanced degree of disapproval or even annoyance on the part of the speaker, may be likened to SE *what*; Smith (1985) suggests transfer of functions from Hokkien *ma* to English *what* as a phenomenon of indirect diffusion. Most agree that there is no difference between the functions of SE *what* and SE *ma* (Platt, 1987; Gupta, 1992), and though Platt (1987) ascribes *ma* to basilectal speech and marking Chinese ethnicity, while *what* is found throughout the SE continuum, this division is disputed for contemporary SE. We may for now, on the basis of linguistic similarity, consider the possibility that *what* is either from Cantonese or else has been calqued from one of the *ma* particles from Sinitic.

#### 4.2. Sociohistorical support

As the analysis has shown until now, establishing linguistic parallels between SE particles and particles in the substrates can only take us so far. To help further clarify the problem, a look to the past is necessary in two respects, both significant and related to each other. First, the date of entry of the particles into Singapore English is significant: given the changing linguistic ecology, establishing the period just preceding the appearance of a feature would point to the languages prominent in that period as being the most likely candidates for sources. In the absence of appropriate large-scale corpora of earlier decades, this has to be established deductively, based on the appearance of the treatment of these particles in scholarship. An examination of the literature leads me to divide the SE particles into two

groups, the first comprising *lah*, *ah* and *what*, and the second encompassing the rest of the particles. Those in the first group are the first particles in Singapore English to have been documented: *lah* and *ah* as early as the early 1970s, in Killingley (1972), the first description of English in Malaya, and *what* first appearing a few years later in Kwan-Terry (1978); *lah* is also the only particle to figure in the other pioneering work of Tongue (1974) as well as Kwan-Terry (1978) and Platt and Weber (1980), with *ah* next appearing in Platt *et al.* (1983); all three particles are often mentioned in the same breath, and are also regarded as more common than the others (e.g. Gupta, 1992). In other words, these early particles already figure in SE in the 1970s. While it may be noted that Platt *et al.* (1983: 21) state that these three particles appear (only) in the “even more colloquial style” of speakers at the basilectal end of the SE speech continuum, in contemporary SE, however, they figure not only in colloquial SE of proficient native speakers, as evident in GSSEC, but also in what would be considered more formal or H domains, appearing in recent years, for example, in newspaper articles and election speeches. In contrast, the other SE particles only start making an appearance in scholarship from the late 1980s (e.g. Platt, 1987; Platt and Ho, 1989; Gupta, 1992; and other later work). Again, Platt (1987) holds that these occur more in ethnically Chinese basilectal or informal mesolectal SE and not further up the lectal or formality scale. However, in GSSEC, collected a decade later, their use is found in the colloquial SE of proficient native SE speakers of all ethnicities, evidenced in GSSEC; Gupta (1992: 38; 2006) also disputes Platt’s observation. We may surmise, then, that the later particles only become part of SE from about the mid-1980s. Following on this, we then must consider the likelihood of a language being the source of a particle within the appropriate era, that is, when it appeared in SE, by appealing to the sociohistorical background of Singapore as outlined in section 3.

Where *lah* is concerned, recognised as being part of SE from at least the early 1970s, the sociohistorical facts would appear to support either or both Hokkien and Bazaar Malay as its source, since they were both the main and long-standing lingua franca in the decades prior. The existence of numerous functions of SE *lah* make for similarities to be seen in the corresponding particle in both substrates, since Bazaar Malay and Hokkien both have *la*. This may on one hand be interpreted as a case of typological convergence, when prolonged and intensive contact between different languages with similar features, in this case Bazaar Malay and Hokkien, result in hybrid linguistic features in the contact language, here SE. On the other hand, on the basis of earlier history of the region, where it was the southern Chinese immigrants who were the majority and who were also those speaking Bazaar Malay, and where numerous bilateral lexical borrowings are attested, the view is that Bazaar Malay *la* has its origins in Hokkien itself (Richards and Tay, 1977: 154, also acknowledging Asmah Haji Omar for the suggestion; Daw Khin Khin Aye, 2005). In this view, then, the source of *lah* could be seen to be of Hokkien origin, regardless of whether it actually enters SE via Hokkien or Bazaar Malay; and it would then simultaneously be reinforced by its usage in the other language, in the recognised phenomenon of substrate reinforcement (see e.g. Siegel, 2000). At the same time, one should be reminded of one more possibility to be entertained: that Bazaar Malay varieties may in fact pre-date the presence of Hokkien in southeast Asia. In cases such as this, where there has been such long and intimate contact between the substrates and likely convergence of traits, as pointed out by Ansaldo and Matthews (2004), it is not always possible to tease out the exact origin; we are after all ultimately getting into the reconstruction of contact situations, which is a notoriously difficult task (see Renfrew *et al.*, 2000).

Cantonese, while the language of the third largest dialect group, would still not be as widespread in the sense of being used for intergroup communication, as Hokkien and Bazaar Malay were. As for Mandarin, in those decades it was still a High variety in Singapore, used in education and official functions, but it would certainly not have had wide currency in other domains; and the absence of functional and social overlap between that and the more colloquial, and therefore L, Singapore English would not have supported the acquisition of the feature from Mandarin, in contrast with Hokkien or Bazaar Malay (Richards and Tay, 1977: 149 on Hokkien).

One can also make the argument for Hokkien and/or Bazaar Malay as the source for SE *ah* on the basis of its appearance during the age of original immigrant languages, as with *lah*. However, one must also attempt to account for the two variants of the Cantonese *a* particle which seem to mirror both form and function of SE's *ah*. I suggest the following. The original source of SE *ah* is Hokkien and/or Bazaar Malay, as already argued for *lah* – once again, one must perhaps accept that it is unfeasible to attempt to identify a single source when typological convergence has taken place between the two potential sources, Hokkien and Bazaar Malay. Because of similarity in segmental form, Cantonese (the next most common Chinese variety) would have reinforced *ah* in SE; but because Cantonese possesses a number of variants of *a* with diverse meanings, in the wake of Hokkien/Bazaar Malay, two of these variants could then have entered SE later: *a21* because it would have served to reinforce the original acquisition from Hokkien/Bazaar Malay, which would have neutral tone and be unstressed and therefore of low pitch, and *a24* because it may be seen to be suprasegmentally “opposite” (i.e. a rise to contrast with the fall) so as to provide maximal prosodic differentiation. If however one argued for Cantonese as the original source for SE *ah*, one would have to explain why the other *a* variants with high and mid level tones were not also acquired.

SE's *what* also presents us with a complex case: its segmental form bears a resemblance to Cantonese *wo21*, but is functionally much better matched with Sinitic particle *ma*. Given that it emerges in the same early age as *lah* and *ah*, again the most likely source for it would be Hokkien. I would argue, then, that the scale should tip in favour of *what* as a calque from Hokkien *ma*, on the basis of both function and, especially, sociohistorical facts, as opposed to (some) segmental and semantic similarity with Cantonese. Clearly the cases of *ah* and *what* are rather more complex, whose resolution requires closer examination and argumentation which will not be pursued here.

The later set of SE particles, which on the basis of linguistic similarity have been ascribed to Cantonese, emerged in the mid-1980s, and their appearance can be seen to coincide with the burgeoning of Cantonese (pop) culture in the same period. Such an increase in the presence and prestige of Cantonese in this more recent history would then explain its contribution of a large number of particles to SE due to greater and more successful pressure for items to be transferred. This in fact resonates with Matras's (2000) model: there is clear direction in categorial fusion, where the orientation target, i.e. the one from which items are acquired, is the pragmatically dominant variety, where dominance can be interpreted in a number of ways – e.g. a language that is culturally prestigious or economically powerful, or one that is dominant for a particular domain of linguistic interaction (Matras, 2000: 577).<sup>5</sup> In both these respects, one can recognise the identification of Cantonese as a target. First, it is a language which was culturally dominant in that period. Next, it is one in which the range and variety of tonal categories – with level and contour tones used in three registers – is one of its rich and significant features, and whose particles offer a spectrum

of form and nuanced meaning – in other words, dominant in terms of pragmatic resources. It is not difficult, then, to understand the importing of the subset of Cantonese particles wholesale with their tone as in Cantonese, and SE speakers' ready acceptance and use of them.

## 5. MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS THROUGH THE AGES

At this point, I summarise the analysis made by sketching a plausible account of the origins of the particles in SE.

First, there is the long-standing partnership, involving intensive and prolonged contact, of Bazaar Malay and Hokkien, which had started in the region long before, from at least the early 14th century (if not earlier) in the trading networks with Riau and other islands, where there was already a heterogeneous population of Malays, Bugis, southern Chinese, Indians, Peranakans and Eurasians. This association, as the two primary lingua francas, continues in Singapore during the 1800s and through the early 1900s. At some point in this history, either the particles *la* and *a* leach from one language into the other, or there is a merger in terms of the systems where these particles are concerned. This is not easily distinguished, due to the fact that, as mentioned earlier, ultimately we are dealing the reconstruction of contact situations which is a notoriously difficult task (see Renfrew *et al.*, 2000).

In the early development of SE in the first two-thirds of the 20th century, i.e. during the age of the original immigrant languages, the early particles *lah* and *ah* are acquired from the substrates Hokkien and Bazaar Malay; I reiterate that it is probably a moot point to try to determine if they come from Hokkien *or* Bazaar Malay. The reality is most likely – based on an evaluation of the facts outlined in section 3 – that input of the particles from Malay into English was transmitted by the Eurasian and Baba communities, who had Malay and English dominantly in their repertoire, and that this was simultaneously reinforced by the same particles in Hokkien and Bazaar Malay via interethnic communication in the entire Singapore speech community, which was itself a developing English-acquiring community.

The role played by the age of the official languages, I suggest, is dual. On the one hand, this age sees the damping of the original, once-prominent substrates: where Bazaar Malay and Hokkien are replaced as languages of inter- and intraethnic interaction. The early particles are however not lost, having already been acquired into SE, and in fact are robust features of SE, as is shown in their frequency of use across social and age groups. In the emergence of new grammars, early features can be and tend to be highly resistant over time, and such salience and persistence, in a new variety, of features attributed to the early populations can be accounted for by the founder principle (Mufwene, 1996; 2001). In conjunction with the phasing out of the original substrates, (Singapore) English becomes a language with increasing numbers of native speakers and speakers for whom it is a dominant language; in Schneider's (2003) dynamic model of the emergence of new varieties of English, this may be seen as the phase of nativisation. The features arising from the contact dynamics so far are thus provided a perfect environment for crystallisation and consolidation, not just of the three particles which have been acquired, but also of the SE system which permits the use of such particles. Again, we see how the founder principle may account for this aspect of the structure of SE: the earliest population(s) in a new territory exert a large influence on the development of the new variety, and thus the structural features of the emergent contact language are to a large extent determined by

features of the founder population(s), in this case, those of Hokkien (and the other Sinitic varieties) and Bazaar Malay.

Then, in the last decades of the 20th century, in the age of the global-media languages, enter the later SE particles which comprise a larger, wholesale acquisition of a subset of particles from Cantonese. Such an acquisition is perhaps not surprising on a number of levels: (i) the entry of (more) particles is facilitated by the fact that SE grammar already has a place for particles, as already mentioned, by the founder principle;<sup>6</sup> (ii) Cantonese is, in this third age, prominent through its dominance in media and pop culture; and (iii) Cantonese is dominant as a language of particles *par excellence*, by virtue of their sheer number, as well as their prosodic and semantic/pragmatic vividness. As already demonstrated, in this more recent set of particles, it can quite convincingly be seen that not only do their semantic/pragmatic values match their Cantonese counterparts exactly, but lexical tone as in the source language is also maintained.

Such a maintenance of tone may at first glance be seen to be a striking feature (noted e.g. in Lim, 2004), given that, as a variety of English, one would not in the first instance classify SE as anything else but a non-tone language. However, further reflection suggests that it is perhaps not an unexpected phenomenon, given that we are dealing with a (post-colonial) English variety whose evolution has been in an ecology comprising a majority of tone languages; and suprasegmental features, including tone, are certainly susceptible to being acquired in contact situations (Curnow, 2001). Similar observations have been made for other contact varieties whose substrates involve tone languages, for example, tones with grammatically contrastive function in Nigerian English (Gut, 2005), a subset of words marked for true tone in Portuguese- and English-lexifier Saramaccan (Good, 2004), use of both contrastive pitch accent and stress in Portuguese-lexifier Papiamentu (Rivera-Castillo and Pickering, 2004). In fact, various prosodic patterns of SE, such as the common occurrence of sustained level tones used in a stepwise pattern, have already been documented and ascribed to influence from the Chinese varieties (Lim, 2004).<sup>7</sup> To establish more conclusively the status of tone and intonation requires further (phonetic) evidence and argumentation, which unfortunately falls outside the scope of this paper (but see Lim, in prep.).

To sum up the discussion in this paper, I reiterate that it has been vital, for a fuller, enlightened appreciation of the particles in SE, to have combined (a) a comprehensive comparison of both segmental *and* suprasegmental form and function of particles in SE and the substrates with (b) a careful consideration of sociohistorical information. In particular, this paper has made the following contributions to the scholarship on SE particles:

(1) The proposal of three ages of Singapore's linguistic history is a framework which helps to define the changing dominance of languages in Singapore's linguistic ecology. A recognition of dominance can subsequently account for the likelihood of features from the different languages being selected from the feature pool (FP, see Mufwene, 2001) in the dynamics of competition and selection that takes place in the creation of a new linguistic variety in a multilingual setting. The FP is intended here as the sum of linguistic features from the different codes available to speakers in a multilingual situation. In such a situation, it is suggested that speakers can choose to adopt linguistic features from different codes, depending on the ecology of the situation (i.e. external factors such as prestige, dominance or demography; see also Aboh and Ansaldo, 2007).

(2) This framework provides a historical basis for linguistic similarity, which together shed light on and establish the sources of SE particles. Such a framework is of course also relevant in the investigation of other linguistic aspects of SE or other local languages.

(3) The early particles, *lah* and *ah* (and *what* as a calque), were acquired from Hokkien and/or Bazaar Malay (the difficulty in teasing out the actual source has to be acknowledged, as a result of typological convergence), the dominant lingua franca in the early decades of SE evolution; and their continued presence in SE can be accounted for by the Founder principle.

(4) The later particles, *lor*, *hor*, *leh*, *meh*, *ma*, were acquired into SE via the mechanism of categorial fusion, the wholesale import of a subset of a system, from Cantonese, a language dominant in the most recent decades for its cultural prestige, as well as for its wealth of particles.

(5) With the later set of particles, tone as in the source language, Cantonese, is maintained in SE, a phenomenon which contributes to a striking and characteristic prosody – one that is more akin to a tone language – which one finds in a variety of English whose contact dynamics involve tonal languages.

## 6. EPILOGUE

While I have throughout this paper been looking to the past for clues for piecing together an understanding of the motivations influencing the dynamics of acquisition of particles, it may perhaps be interesting to propose a possible fourth age which takes the framework from the present into the future, adding another layer to the continuing second and third ages.

### 6.1. Age IV. The age of the regional languages: end of the 1990s into the future<sup>8</sup>

(1) Arising from the experiences of Singaporean aid teams who found it difficult to communicate with the populations in neighbouring countries – in this case, Indonesia – who were affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami and other earthquakes in the Indonesian archipelago from 2004 through 2006, Singapore's government stated that measures in the education policies would be implemented to bridge the "Bahasa gap": Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew expressed a desire for 10–15 per cent of non-Malays to learn **Malay/Indonesian** as a third language, with the Malay language curriculum to be made more convenient and accessible.

(2) A resurgence in the prominence of **Mandarin** is noted, due primarily to the continuing growth of China's economy and Singapore's establishment of stronger trade and economic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1990s. Mandarin is seen to be most instrumental of all the mother tongues offered in education, with other ethnic groups wanting to study it as a second language rather than their own mother tongue (see e.g. Wee, 2003a). Not to be overlooked either is the recent immigration of peoples from all parts of the PRC, in no small part due to Singapore's policy of attracting foreign talent via migration schemes and scholarship programmes: the number of "new" migrants from PRC is estimated to be close to 100,000 (Chan, 2006: 9).

It remains to be seen how this potential fourth age will impact on any further acquisition of particles in SE. Looking to sociohistory, one may predict that Mandarin and Malay/Indonesian particles may start to make their presence felt in SE. From a more



structural viewpoint, however, two factors are not in their favour. First, accepting the acquisition of the later particles as a case of categorial fusion, the likelihood is that more particles will be acquired into SE from Cantonese, to continue the importing of the same set. Further, given that Cantonese (compared to other languages in Singapore's linguistic ecology, Chinese or otherwise) is rich both in number of particles and in vividness of tone and nuanced meaning, such prominence is likely to make the acquisition of Cantonese particles more probable, in comparison to Mandarin, for example, whose particles are fewer and less vivid prosodically, with neutral tone and weak stress.

All said, there is no predicting what speakers in such a linguistic ecology, which is complex, multilingual, and ever-changing, will do next. What we have seen is that complementing structural comparison with sociohistorical examination can illuminate the contact dynamics in such an ecology,<sup>9</sup> and that the results of the mergers and acquisitions that take place in such high-contact environments (Ansaldo, forthcoming) can produce highly interesting and instructive examples of varieties of English.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Umberto Ansaldo, Bao Zhiming, Stephen Matthews, and Lionel Wee for their insightful comments and helpful suggestions on earlier and current versions of this paper – in particular Umberto Ansaldo and Stephen Matthews for discussions and advice on particles in Cantonese and Hokkien, forms and functions, and the Founder Principle and Feature Pool – and the two anonymous reviewers for their very positive responses and constructive recommendations. All their feedback has undoubtedly contributed to improving my clarity of thought and expression in a number of descriptions and issues.
2. The Grammar of Spoken Singapore English Corpus (GSSEC), a corpus of the spontaneous speech of young Singaporean native SE speakers, comprising approximately 8 hours, was collected for the project 'Towards a Reference Grammar of Singapore English' (Lim, 2001) which was funded by a National University of Singapore Academic Research Grant R-103-000-003-112 (L. Lim and J.A. Foley, Principal Investigators); see Lim and Foley (2004) for more details. The GSSEC was also donated to ICE-SIN.
3. It should be noted that informality, solidarity, and familiarity can really be seen to be signalled by all particles, since they are part of an informal code, and not only by *lah*. I thank my second reviewer for this reminder.
4. The influence of the Sri Vijaya empire in the 11th and 12th centuries in the region should not be overlooked; Wignesan (1995), for example, highlights the contribution of Dravidians to the transporting of cultural, religious and literary influence to the Malay world; but this bears less directly on the influence of South Asian languages in Singapore's contact dynamics from the 19th century.
5. My analysis along the lines of categorial fusion presented here differs from that of Gupta (2006), who, using an earlier version of Matras (1998) which defines the "pragmatically dominant" language as one towards which speakers' "efforts at norm-conforming linguistic behaviour are currently directed" (1998: 326), holds that SE particles come from varieties least liable to "norm-conforming linguistic behaviour". Wee (2003b) documents what he considers a new particle in SE, *know*, from *you know*, whose "birth", presumably in the third age, would be consistent with my proposal in this paper, in that it can be seen to have emerged in a time of increasing exposure to and familiarity with American and/or British English, both varieties with economic and cultural prestige.
6. Wee (2003b), in accounting for the birth of the SE particle *know*, also speaks of analogical change (e.g. Hopper and Traugott, 1993), which proceeds because the grammar of a language contains a number of pre-existing constructions or exemplars, and the properties of these exemplars are then extended to newer forms.
7. One should of course recognise a range of SE, from prosodically more "tonal" to not "tonal", that is, closer to the stress-language varieties of English; in the latter, the acquisition of the Cantonese particles as a set would in fact be intriguing, as they would be seen to have out-competed the counterpart particles in Hokkien and Mandarin, which, by having neutral tone, might have been expected to be more complementary for a non-tonal variety such as English (Umberto Ansaldo, p.c., May 2006).
8. Other immigrant communities are also significant in Singapore's linguistic ecology, including the large groups of Philippina domestic workers, professionals and lower-skilled workers from all parts of South Asia, etc. However elaboration on these is beyond the scope of this paper.
9. In addition to Arends's (1989) pioneering work on Sranan and its substrates, as another example in this vein, through detailed sociohistorical research, Roberts (2004) was able to identify the important substrates among the immigrant population when Hawai'i Creole was emerging, namely Cantonese and Portuguese, and not Japanese or Filipino languages.

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