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Sentence final particles as epistemic modulators in Cantonese conversations: A discourse-pragmatic perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to extend the investigation of Cantonese sentence final particles (SFPs), and explore in particular their roles and functions in modulating the speaker's epistemic stance in conversational interactions. The stance of a speaker is emerging and continuously being negotiated and shaped in the course of the conversation; conversation participants will need to constantly modify and revise their stance and what they have already said as the conversation progresses. Because of their position as utterance final, SFPs are perfect grammatical devices to be employed to recalibrate and finalize the speaker's epistemic stance. Seeing epistemic modulation as a discourse process, this paper exemplifies how Cantonese SFPs can be deployed to reaffirm, as well as to modulate (i.e. upgrade or downgrade) the epistemic stance of the speaker in our conversational data. It is hoped that this paper could also shed light on other cross-linguistic studies on epistemic modulations and stance-taking.

1. Sentence final particles as epistemic modulators in Cantonese conversations

Knowing how to interpret a speaker's subjective stance and attitude is vital in human communication. When we interact with other people, we need to understand not only the word meaning, but also what the speaker is *trying to say* – we constantly need to recognize the speaker's intention, attitude, and state of mind. When people take part in everyday social activities, they routinely need to express their stance towards a certain situation – how the speaker evaluates the situation, how evident the speaker's conclusion of the situation is, etc. Many a time when the speaker is being queried or challenged, he or she will need to make evaluations of the current situation and this will inevitably involve the expression of the speaker's assessment of the situation as well as how and to what degree the speaker is committed to this judgment made. Consider the following conversation between two friends (both females) that was over-heard in the supermarket:

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(1) (A = female; B = female)

A: *Ni*[1] *zek*[3] *zyu*[1]*gu*[1]*lik*[1] *hou*[2]*ci*[5] *gei*[2] *hou*[2]*sik*[6].[1]
this CL chocolate seem quite delicious
'This chocolate seems to be quite delicious.'

→ B: *Ngo*[5] *m*[4] *zi*[1] *aa*[3]*!* *Ngo*[5] *gu*[2] *jing*[1]*goi*[1] *maa*[4]*maa*[2]*dei*[2] *gwaa*[3]*!*
1SG NEG know SFP 1SG guess probably average SFP
Nei[1] *zek*[3] *paai*[4]*zi*[2] *do*[1]*sou*[3] *dou*[1] *m*[4] *hou*[2]*sik*[6] *gaa*[3]*!*
this CL brand mostly also NEG delicious SFP
'I don't know! I guess, probably, it is average! Most of the chocolates from the same brand are not delicious!'

One common type of action that is frequently involved in daily interactions would be the seeking of opinions or suggestions from co-participants. When a conversation co-participant is asked about his or her opinion towards an object or event, he or she will need to present his or her stance and this stance- or perspective-display would inevitably involve assessment, which also regularly invokes the speaker's agreement or disagreement of the prior speaker. In (1), speaker B is making use of a range of strategies to express her opinion towards the chocolate. By saying *ngo*[5] *m*[4] *zi*[1] *aa*[3] 'I don't know!', the speaker first expresses her detachment from the claim because of her insufficient first-hand experience that she has not tried the chocolate before. Then, she is making a guess that the chocolate is probably not very good. This uncertainty is indicated by the epistemic phrase *ngo*[5] *gu*[2] "I guess", the adverb *jing*[1]*goi*[1] "probably", and the sentence-final particle (SFP) *gwaa*[3], marking the speaker's doubt. In fact, the use of *m*[4] *zi*[1] "don't' know", *ngo*[5] *gu*[2] "I guess", *jing*[1]*goi*[1] "probably", and *gwaa*[3] together serves a face-saving function, especially that a disagreement is involved here. Previous studies on conversation analysis have long proven a bias for conversation participants to avoid possible conflicts and to maintain social solidarity (Schegloff et al., 1977; Pomerantz, 1978; Davidson, 1984; Heritage, 1984; Jefferson, 1987; Mori, 1999; among others). The organization of talk in general should favor the maintenance of agreement among participants. Thus, it is observed that the speaker would choose to mitigate the strength of his or her claim to avoid a potential conflict, as in (1). Speaker B's suggestion that the chocolate is probably not very good is then further supported by the reason that *nei*[1] *zek*[3] *paai*[4]*zi*[2] *do*[1]*sou*[3] *dou*[1] *m*[4] *hou*[2]*sik*[6] 'most of the chocolates from the same brand are not good'. What is more, this supportive evidence is further reinforced by the affirmative SFP *gaa*[3].

Example (1) illustrates how various strategies collaborate with one another to co-construct and express the speaker's stance – all these cues at different levels of grammar mark the overall epistemic stance of the speaker. For the purpose of our paper, we are narrowing down our focus to the role of sentence final particles (SFPs), particularly on how they are used to indicate, as well as to modulate, the speaker's epistemic stance. In other words, we are interested in finding out how SFPs are used to upgrade or downgrade the speaker's epistemic claim from a discourse-pragmatic perspective.

This phenomenon of "epistemic modulation" is, I believe, 'a prime example of how the study of grammar can, and should, be linked to the study of talk-in-interaction and how solutions to grammatical problems can often be found with the help of conversation analysis' (Ochs et al., 1996). When people are involved in daily interactions which include negotiations, they will inevitably need to either upgrade or downgrade their strength of epistemic claims when they are being queried or challenged. It is exactly when they will need to make use of different strategies to position themselves in that particular situation and discourse context. By adopting a discourse-pragmatic analytical approach, we can reveal how grammatical strategies, in particular SPFs, can be used to perform epistemic modulations.

In light of the above background, the aims of this paper can be rearticulated as follows:

(i) to extend beyond previous works on Cantonese SFPs (which have mostly been on the domains of tense, modality, and aspect), and examine how native speakers of Cantonese make use of them to express, as well as to modulate, the epistemic strength of their claims when they are queried or challenged, and;
(ii) to account for the interactions between SFPs and other strategies with different degrees of epistemic strength, so as to reaffirm, or recalibrate the speaker's epistemic stance.

The paper is structured in the following way. In the next section, I will first present what sentence final particles (SFPs) are in Cantonese. I will then outline the data used in the study. After that, I will briefly explain how speaker's epistemic stance is expressed in natural conversations, particularly, I will elaborate on how SFPs can be used as epistemic modulators to reaffirm the speaker's original stance, as well as to reformulate a revised stance. I will conclude and summarize the findings in the final section.

2. Cantonese sentence final particles (SFPS)

Cantonese is well-known for its rich inventory of grammatical elements for its speakers to present their own viewpoints in different situations. The pervasive use of sentence final particles (SFPs) marks the distinctiveness and uniqueness of

[1] Cantonese tones are marked by numbers in superscript. The pitch levels of tone 1 to tone 6 are: 55, 35, 33, 11, 25, 22 respectively, with 5 being the highest pitch and 1 being the lowest. For transcription notations, please see Appendix at the end of the paper.

Cantonese and makes it so different from other Chinese dialects as well as other languages.[2] According to Luke's (1990) study on sentence particles from a Conversation Analysis perspective, these particles are so widely used that they actually appear in every 1.5 s in everyday Cantonese interactions. Although Cantonese native speakers can always understand and make use of these particles in everyday natural conversation, they always find it difficult to unpack the particles into simple terms and explain what they actually "mean". This is why SFPs have raised so much interest among scholars in the field.

SFPs are bound grammatical elements always attached to the end of the sentence (or what some prefer to call the utterance). Previous studies have identified a large number of them, ranging from over 25 to as many as 95 (depending on how these particles are defined). Scholars in the field have long recognized the distinctive nature of this class of linguistic objects in Cantonese and they generally believe that the use of these particles is related to what they call "yuqi" (mood). They serve to signal a wide range of grammatical and discourse-related functions, including tense and aspect, mood, epistemic modality, evidentiality, as well as speaker stances. Without these particles, speakers of Cantonese would find it difficult or even impossible to express their state of feelings at a time or their attitudes towards a particular event. Moreover, it is often noticed that the use of a particular particle is not interchangeable with any one of the other utterance particles and such a change would normally lead to a change in meaning of the whole utterance. This unique class has attracted the interest of many scholars, and previous studies have not only attempted to investigate the distinctive nature of this class of particles as a whole but also the grammatical and functional properties of individual particles.

The earlier series of research studies on SFPs tended to say these particles have little or no semantic content, and that they are mostly dispensable and cannot be defined outside the context (e.g. Ball, 1971; Kwok, 1984; Luke, 1990; Baker and Ho 2006; Matthews and Yip, 2011). A number of more recent studies, to varying degrees, have come to argue that Cantonese SFPs have semantic meaning independent of the context in which they are used (e.g. Gao, 1980; Fung, 2000; Sybesma and Li 2007; Leung, 2005; Wakefield, 2011b). For instance, the particle *ge*^{3} is often used to signal determination (Kwok, 1984; Leung, 2005) or assert facts (Matthews and Yip, 2011). Other common examples of SFPs include *lo*^{1}, *ge*^{2}, *wo*^{3}, *gwaa*^{3}, *me*^{1}, and *lai*^{4}, to name a few, indicating meanings in areas of speech acts (i.e. *me*^{1} as an interrogative particle), tense and aspect (i.e. *lai*^{4} as a perfective particle), evidentiality (i.e. *wo*^{3} as an evidential marker), and epistemic modality (i.e. *lo*^{1}, *ge*^{2}, and *gwaa*^{3}, displaying various degrees of speaker's epistemic commitment).

In daily interactions, speakers are very often required to indicate their commitment to the truth of the proposition – whether they are certain or uncertain about the factuality of the proposition. SFPs are very powerful in indicating this epistemic commitment (cf. Lyons, 1995). For example, *lo*^{1} is a marker of certainty indicating obviousness (Kwok, 1984; Leung, 2005; Matthews and Yip, 2011; Tang, 2015) while *gwaa*^{3} is a marker of uncertainty or doubt (Kwok, 1984; Leung, 2005; Cheung, 2007; Matthews and Yip, 2011; Tang, 2015). By altering just one particle, the speaker's epistemic stance is totally changed. Consider how, as seen in Table 1, the addition of different sentence final particles can affect the meaning of the utterance *Keoi*^{5} *wui*^{5} *heoi*^{3}, literally 's/he will go'.

We can see from this table how speakers of Cantonese can use SFPs to indicate subtle nuances of meaning, particularly to signal varying degrees of speaker's commitment. This study proposes that Cantonese SPFs not only can express the speakers' various epistemic commitments, but also *calibrate* the epistemic strength of the speakers to their utterances. We shall see in the course of the discussion how speaker's epistemic stance can be expressed in daily interactions, in particular how SFPs can be used to modulate the speakers' epistemic stance when speakers are being queried or challenged.

Table 1
Examples Cantonese SFPs with their meanings translated in English.[3]

Base utterance	Sentence final particle (SFP)	English translation		
	wo^{5}	'People say that	he will go.'	
	gwaa^{3}	'It is probable that	he will go.'	
	ge^{3}	'It is certain that	he will go.'	
Keoi^{5}*wui*^{5} *heoi*^{3}	*aa*^{4}		'He will go.	How surprising!'
	me^{1}		'He will go?	I doubt it.'
	ho^{2}		'He will go,	right?'
	maa^{3}		'Will he go?'	

[2] I have adopted the term "sentence final particles" from Law (1990), Law (2002), and Sybesma and Li (2007), to refer to the grammatical elements investigated in this study. In the past, scholars have proposed different terms to refer to what is called "sentence final particles" in here. These terms include "utterance particles" (Luke, 1990), "final particles" (Fung, 2000; Yiu, 2001), "sentence particles" (Yau, 1965; Kwok, 1984; Matthews and Yip, 2011), "suggestive particles" (Whitaker, 1954) or simply "particles" (Chao, 1947; Cheung, 2007; Tang, 2015). The terms here are made with reference either to the semantic value to these grammatical elements or to their position in an utterance. To learn more on sentence particles in Mandarin, readers are invited to read Chu (1998), Li and Thompson (1989), and Lu (2005).

[3] For a fuller description of the role of Cantonese SFPs, especially interrogative particles such as *me*^{1}, *ho*^{2}, and *maa*^{3}, see Chor et al. (2016).

3. The data

The data for this study consist of recordings of interviews between native Cantonese speakers, compiled for the project *Epistemic Modulation and Speaker Attitude in Cantonese: A Discourse-Pragmatic Perspective*.[4] In the interviews, the interviewees were given pictures depicting different buildings and attractions, such as mosques, European-style castles, Asian-style temples, and different towers of the world, and were asked to talk about where they thought the pictures were taken, and to support their claims with reasons.[5] Since buildings such as castles and temples are not uniquely associated with a particular place, participants thus needed to make a guess. For instance, mosques in Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh might look alike. When a picture of a mosque was shown to the participants, they would have the opportunity to talk about the picture, and to express their subjective viewpoints about the location. They would need to support their claims with reasons, and to indicate how committed they were to their claims. When they were challenged by the interviewer, they might need to either upgrade or downgrade their assertions. In this way, SPFs that speakers use to modulate their epistemic claims can then be identified.

Altogether 20 interviews (approx. 14 h of recordings) have been collected. It is believed that interview data of this kind is particularly useful in the context of this present study. A power asymmetry is often involved in such context – the interviewer has more information and thus has more control over the interview, while the interviewee has less information and thus is less powerful in the interview. When the interviewee's claims are queried or challenged, he or she will need to give explanations and to provide evidence to support the claims. By doing this, the ways in which grammatical strategies can help to modulate speaker's stance can be revealed, including the use of different SFPs.

4. Expressing speaker's epistemic stance

Knowing how to interpret the speaker's subjective stance and attitude is of vital importance in everyday communication. There is now a growing body of literature on stance-taking phenomenon from various perspectives, typically from the sociolinguistic and anthropological perspective (Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Fetzer and Fischer, 2006; Englebretson, 2007), as well as from the discourse-pragmatic perspectives (Mori, 1999; Wu, 2004; Yap and Lun, 2010; Iwasaki and Yap, 2015). What has been emerging from the literature and prior analysis of stance is that stance-taking is an interactive and context-shaped activity (Karkkäinen, 2003, 2006; Endo, 2013; among others). Findings from these studies have important contributions to our understanding of the kinds of strategies that speakers employ when they need to convey their thoughts and attitudes to others.

The stance of a speaker is understood as the epistemic or attitudinal comment on propositional information (Biber, 2004). In other words, it deals with how the speaker conveys his or her value judgments, personal feelings and degree of commitment to the truth value of a given proposition (Englebretson, 2007). A speaker's stance includes subjective expressions of his or her mood, attitude, assessment, and perspective, and is reflected at various levels, including lexical, phrasal, and clausal levels (Yap and Lun, 2010). Speakers can display their stance through the use of many different strategies, such as the use of different lexical/phrasal choices, syntactic structures, pragmatic markers, intonation/prosody, as well as various discourse strategies including hedging devices and even silence. For example, in English, speakers can make use of epistemic adverbials (e.g. “probably”, “certainly”), modals (e.g. “may”, “must”), epistemic phrases containing psych verbs (e.g. “I think”, “I believe”), evidential expressions with ‘say’ verbs (e.g. “It is said that”) or psych verbs (e.g. “seemingly”, “apparently”), grammaticalized parentheticals (e.g. “I'm afraid”) and other phrasal/lexical means (e.g. “I just hate that”, “I simply love it”).

Epistemic modality in general refers to the use of expressions to encode the speaker's understanding and knowledge towards a claim (Palmer, 1986; Lyons, 1995). A common way to express epistemic meanings in English is to make use of various epistemic phrases such as “I think”, “I guess”, and “I suppose”. In fact, one of the most remarkable phenomena in the history of the English language is the rise of epistemic phrases – the phrases that clarify the speaker's stance in relation to what is being said (Wierzbicka, 2006). A sentence without any epistemic qualification is an implication of factual knowledge. For example, “Judy has left” is a statement describing a piece of factual knowledge, meaning “I know Judy has left.” However, sentences like “I think Judy has left,” “I guess Judy has left,” and “I suppose Judy has left” do not imply a claim to knowledge. Rather, the meanings can be identified on a continuum between “doubt/uncertainty” and “lack of doubt/certainty”, depending on whether the speaker has sufficient evidence or information. For instance, “I think” signals the highest level of certainty among the three, indicating that the speaker is about to express an opinion that he believes to be true based on some reliable information. “I think” is also sometimes used as a face-saving strategy. “I guess” and “I suppose” display comparable epistemic strengths, with “I guess” implying a perhaps lower degree of certainty. “I suppose” signals what the speaker

[4] *Epistemic Modulation and Speaker Attitude in Cantonese: A Discourse-Pragmatic Perspective* is a project funded by the Research Grant Council of Hong Kong (FDS #UGC/FDS16/H07/14), awarded to the author of this paper. The project aims to explore the various grammatical resources and strategies which Cantonese speakers use to externalize their subjective mood and to modulate their epistemic commitments in an interactional context.

[5] The participants are all university undergraduate students aged 18–23, growing up in Hong Kong speaking native Cantonese. The two interviewers were research assistants of the project, also speaking Hong Kong Cantonese as their mother language. The interviewer and the interviewee did not know each other in person. All interviewees were given a consent form to sign before the interview so they knew that the conversations recorded will be used for research purposes. However, they were not told how the data would be used.

believes to be true (though without actually knowing whether it is true or not), while "I guess" suggests that the speaker is only making a rough estimate and giving a reserved answer to the question.

Epistemic phrases like "I think", "I guess", and "I suppose" are used abundantly in everyday English conversations to signal the speaker's epistemic stance. These phrases can also be used parenthetically and appear in different syntactic positions to signal the speaker's epistemic commitment to the propositional content. Not only has epistemic modality been studied widely in English, related topics have also been explored in other languages, including Chinese and various Asian languages. In particular, many of these studies have investigated into how grammatical markers, especially verbal particles and sentence particles, can be used to mark epistemic modality and evidentiality (see e.g. Kim, 2011; Ahn and Yap, 2015 for Korean; Morita, 2002; Matsugu, 2005; Tanaka, 2013 for Japanese; Kush, 2016 for Hindi; Wu, 2017 for Chinese).

In Cantonese, the indication of epistemic stance are also found to be achieved in various ways, including the use of epistemic modals and adverbials (e.g. *wui*^{5} *"will", jing*^{1}*goi*^{1} *"should", tung*^{1}*soeng*^{4} *"usually"*), evidential markers and phrases (e.g. *hou*^{2}*ci*^{3} "seems", *teng*^{1}*gong*^{2} "it is heard"), as well as discourse pragmatic devices, including the use of various discourse markers (e.g. *zik*^{1}*hai*^{6}, *gam*^{2}, *naa*^{4}) or even the use of pauses and long silences. SFPs signaling different epistemic strengths are also widely deployed to express the speaker's epistemic stance.

In the previous section, we have seen the bewildering senses of Cantonese SFPs and also their functions in different domains. One of the common functions that Cantonese SFPs serve in daily conversational interactions is the expression of epistemic meanings. Some of the particles have been attested to be closely related to the domain of epistemicity. For instance, particles *aa*^{1}, *lo*^{1}, and *ge*^{3} are normally used to indicate certainty while particles like *ge*^{2} and *gwaa*^{3} are used to signal uncertainty. Table 2 lists the SFPs that have been generally attested to serve the function of expressing epistemic meanings.

Contrary to the abundance of studies in Japanese on the role of final particles in the expression of the speaker's stance (e.g. Tanaka, 2000; Morita, 2005; Hayano, 2011; among others), not so much has been said about Cantonese SFPs. Despite the fact that these particles do form a very important part in Cantonese grammar, little has been said about their interactional role with other grammatical elements, as previous studies have been mostly on the description of the functions of individual particles (Yiu, 2001 on *lei*^{4}, *zyu*^{6} and *laa*^{3}; Leung, 2006 on *wo*^{3}; Tang, 2006 on the interrogative *sin*^{1}; Wakefield, 2011a on *lo*^{1} and *aa*^{1}*maa*^{3}; Lam, 2014 on *me*^{1} and *ho*^{2}; Cheung, 2015 on *me*^{1}; among others). Thus, the present study is an attempt to develop this line of inquiry by looking at how SFPs can *interact* with other grammatical strategies such as modal verbs and epistemic adverbs, as well as discourse-pragmatic devices including pauses and gap fillers, to express and to modulate the speaker's subjective stance.

5. The idea of epistemic modulation

From the perspective of Conversation/Discourse Analysis, the stance of a speaker is emerging and continuously being shaped in the course of the conversation. Co-participants do not normally have everything planned right at the beginning of the conversation. Rather, their stance is being continuously negotiated and unfolded in the course of this socially organized activity, so that the speaker's prescribed goal can be achieved at the end of the conversation. The sentences embedded in the conversation are best understood and analyzed from the perspective of "incremental sentence" – a term that is proposed by Luke (2004a, 2004b) and further elaborated in Luke (2012).[6] In line with Schegloff's (2000) understanding of the incremental nature of sentence construction, "increment" here is best understood as a process that occurs in real time, so that an item, or a series of items, is added to the end of a sentence (which is self-sufficient without these added items) to augment, supplement, qualify, or modify it. Form this point of view, sentences within a conversational context can be incremented or extended in real time.

Table 2
Examples Cantonese SFPs indicating certainty and uncertainty.

Certainty	
aa^{1}	Doubtless (Leung, 2005)
lo^{1}	Obvious facts and accounts which are undebatable (Kwok, 1984; Leung, 2005; Tang, 2015)
aa^{1}*maa*^{3}	Obvious reason (Kwok, 1984; Leung, 2005)
ak^{3}	A sense of finality (Matthews and Yip, 2011)
ge^{3}	Determination/Certainty (Kwok, 1984; Leung, 2005); used for assertions of facts (Matthews and Yip, 2011)
gaa^{3}	*ge*^{3}+ *aa*^{3}; Determination/Certainty (Leung, 2005)
gaak^{3}	*ge*^{3}+ *ak*^{3}; A greater sense of finality (Leung, 2005)
laak^{3}	Similar to *laa*^{3}, with a greater sense of finality (Kwok, 1984; Matthews and Yip, 2011)
Uncertainty	
ge^{2}	A sense of uncertainty (Kwok, 1984; Matthews and Yip, 2011)
gwaa^{3}	Unconfident/uncertainty (Kwok, 1984; Leung, 2005; Cheung, 2007; Matthews and Yip, 2011; Tang, 2015)

[6] As Luke (2012: 345) remarked, the term "sentence" here is understood in the more general sense of an "utterance" – the sense of utterance that unfolds in real time (e.g. Goodwin, 1979; Lerner, 1991).

Since stance is emerging and sentences are incremental by nature that the planning and delivery of them all happen in *real* time, co-participants will need to keep modifying and revising what they have already said. Most parts of the conversation might not have originally existed at the beginning of the conversation. However, the ideas might then be "added" or the stance "revised" as the conversation progresses through real time. SFPs are many a time being employed to revise/modulate the speaker's stance. In the two subsections below, we will see how Cantonese SFPs can be deployed to reaffirm, as well as to modulate (i.e. upgrade or downgrade) the epistemic stance of the speaker.

5.1. SFP as an epistemic collaborator (reaffirmation)

While Cantonese SFPs seem to express a range of functions in different contexts, most of them do have some core functions that are agreed among scholars in the field. Among other functions of SPFs, including the expression of evidential meanings, appraisals, and personal judgments, a major function of SFPs is to express the epistemic commitment of the speaker towards a given proposition. Particles like *aa*^{1}, *lo*^{1}, and *gaak*^{3} are often used to indicate the speaker's certainty, while particles such as *ge*^{2} and *gwaa*^{3} are mostly used to indicate the speaker's doubt towards the content of the given proposition.

For example, the particle *aa*^{1} has been described in the literature as a "softener" (Kwok, 1984), a particle of "certainty" (Cheung, 2007), and a particle expressing "doubtless" (Leung, 2005). All of which add to a sense of high epistemic commitment to the speaker's affiliation to his or her utterance. Consider (2) below for the function of *aa*^{1}.

(2) (IR = Female; IE = Female)

01 IR: *Ni*^{1} *go*^{3} *gin*^{3}*zuk*^{1}*mat*^{6} *dou*^{1} *ho*^{2}*ji*^{5} *hai*^{6} *kei*^{4}*taa*^{1} *gaa*^{3} *wo*^{3}*:.*
this CL building also MOD COP other SFP SFP
'This building can also be something else.'

→ 02 IE: *M*^{4} *ci*^{5} *miu*^{2} ***aa*^{1}*:.***
NEG resemble temple SFP
'It does not resemble a temple.'

03 IR: *Hou*^{2}*ci*^{5}*!* *Nei*^{5} *tai*^{2} *haa*^{5}*!* *Keoi*^{5} *jau*^{5}*(.)* *di*^{1} *hoeng*^{1}*lou*^{4}*(.)*
resemble 2SG see ASP 3SG have CL incense-burner
ding^{2} *aa*^{4}*?*
tripod SFP
'It does! You see. It has some … incense-burner?'

In (2), the interviewee is shown a picture of the Forbidden City and is asked where it is. The interviewer hints the interviewee that building like this could be associated with a number of different types of constructions. The interviewee then replied *m*^{4} *ci*^{3} *miu*^{2} ***aa*^{1}**, indicating that *for sure* it is not a temple. In here, the SFP *aa*^{1} is considered a marker of assertion, displaying the speaker's affirmation (as opposed to a bare statement without the particle). Indeed, the interviewer's relatively strong reaction in line 03 has indicated her surprise to the interviewee's assertion that the picture in fact does *not* look like a temple. It is found in our corpus that this particle *aa*^{1} occurs recurrently in assertions where there is a challenge or query from the interviewer, and the interviewee would like to make a confident suggestion.

Besides *aa*^{1}, another common marker of certainty would be *lo*^{1}. The SFP *lo*^{1} has been considered as a marker of "obviousness" (Kwok, 1984; Leung, 2005; Tang, 2015; among others). This sense of "obviousness" has further been reinterpreted as an indicator of the speaker's high commitment to the truth of the propositional content of the utterance, as people are often doubtless about something obvious. Consider an instance of *lo*^{1} below.

(3) (IR = Male; IE = Male)

→ 01 IE: *Ni*^{1} *go*^{3}*(.)* *Baa*^{1}*Lai*^{4}*Tit*^{3}*Taap*^{3} ***lo*^{1}***.*
this CL the-Eiffel-Tower SFP
'This **is** the Eiffel Tower.'

02 IR: *Jau*^{5} *mou*^{5} *nam*^{2} *gwo*^{3} *hai*^{6} *Dung*^{1}*Ging*^{1}*Tit*^{3}*Taap*^{3} *aa*^{3}*:?*
have have-not think ASP COP the-Tokyo-Tower SFP
Nei^{5}*(.)* *gam*^{3}*:-gam*^{3} *hang*^{2}*ding*^{6} *ge*^{2}*?*
2SG so so certain SFP
'Have you ever thought that it is the Tokyo Tower? Why you are so- so sure?'

In the context of excerpt (3), the interviewee is shown a picture of a tall tower, and asked about what this tower is. By giving a reply with *lo*^{1}, the interviewee indicates that *without doubt* the tower in the picture is the Eiffel Tower. The interviewee's epistemic stance of certainty is also confirmed by the interviewer's subsequent reply, asking why the interviewee is *so* sure that it *is* the Eiffel Tower but not the Tokyo Tower.

While *aa*^{1} and *lo*^{1} are common SFPs of certainty, *ge*^{2} is one that is frequently used to indicate "uncertainty" (Kwok, 1984; Law, 1990; Fung, 2000; Matthews and Yip, 2011). The particle *ge*^{2} is commonly employed in Cantonese to display the speaker's doubt about the propositional content of the utterance, as illustrated in (4) below.

(4) (IR = Male; IE = Male)

01	IR	*Ni*^{1}	*go*^{3}	*zan*^{1}*hai*^{6}	*Jat*^{6}*bun*^{2}	*lai*^{4}	*gaa*^{3}	*wo*^{3}.	*m*^{4}	*ci*^{5}
		this	CL	really	Japan	SFP	SFP	SFP	NEG	resemble
		me^{1}	*nei*^{5}	*gok*^{3}*dak*^{1}*?*						
		SFP	2SG	think						
		'This one is really Japan. You don't think it is (Japan)?'								
→ 02	IE	*Dou*^{1}	*ci*^{5}	***ge*^{2}**.						
		also	resemble	SFP						
		'It may be.'								
03	IR	*Nei*^{5}	*hai*^{6}	*dai*^{6}*jat*^{1}	*go*^{3}	*gam*^{3}	*m*^{4}	*hang*^{2}*ding*^{6}.		
		2SG	COP	first	CL	so	NEG	certain		
		'You are the first one (of the interviewees) being so uncertain.'								

In (4), the interviewee is shown a picture of a temple, and is asked where the place is. After a few guesses, the interviewer reveals that the picture is taken from Japan, and asks if the interviewee also agrees. The interviewee is a little reluctant and uses the SFP *ge*^{2} to mitigate his epistemic stance. The interviewee's lack of confidence towards the propositional content (i.e. whether he thinks the place is in fact Japan) is also reflected by the interviewer's reply that in fact the interviewee is the first person that shows such uncertainty among all the interviewees.

As such a frequently used group of linguistic elements that appears in at least every 1.5 s, SFPs as a grammatical category no doubt form an integral part in people's cognition and serve as an important strategy to express the speaker's epistemic stance. Not only that these particles occur in isolation to add subjective epistemic colour to the utterance, they also co-occur with other epistemic strategies to help speakers achieve an intended overall stance. It is found that SPFs often co-occur with other epistemic strategies of comparative strength so as to reaffirm the speaker's original stance. Consider examples (5) and (6) below.

(5) (IR = Female; IE = Female)

01	IR	*Ni*^{1}	*go*^{3}	*ne*^{1}*?*						
		this	CL	SFP						
		'What about this one?'								
→ 02	IE	*Ni*^{1}	*go*^{3}	***gang*^{3}*gaa*^{1}**	*hai*^{6}	*Zung*^{1}*Gwok*^{3}	***aa*^{1}**.			
		this	CL	even-more	COP	China	SFP			
		'This one is even more Chinese-like.'								
03	IR	*Aha,*	*aha.*	*Jau*^{5}-	*jau*^{5}	*loeng*^{5}	*zek*^{3}	*zung*^{1}*man*^{2}	*zi*^{6}	*hai*^{2}*dou*^{6}.
		FILL	FILL	have	have	two	CL	Chinese	character	here
		'Aha, aha. It has- it has two Chinese characters here.'								

In (5), the interviewee is shown a picture of a temple, the same one as shown in example (4), and is asked what kind of temple it is. The interviewee thinks that this one being shown here is *even more* Chinese-like, when compared with the previous pictures that have been shown to her. She is thus making use of the adverb *gang*^{3}*gaa*^{1} "even more" to emphasize this difference, reinforced by the SFP *aa*^{1}, which is a marker that denotes the speaker's certainty. Considering the interviewee's reply in such a confident tone, the interviewer attempts to align with the interviewee's stance by firstly agreeing with his suggestion (i.e. *aha, aha.*) and secondly providing a reason in support of the interviewee's claim that it is a Chinese temple (i.e. *it has two Chinese characters here*).

Excerpt (6) below is another case from our corpus in which the interviewee has made use of both an SFP of certainty (in this case *lo*^{1}), together with an adverb, to reinforce her commitment to the propositional content. In this example, the

interviewee is shown a picture of a palace of some kind, which actually is the Forbidden City in China.[7] The interviewee can recognize that it is the Forbidden City, but she believes that it is a fake one that has been intentionally built for the purpose of filming.

(6) (IR = Male; IE = Female)

01 IR *Gu^{3}Gung^{1} jau^{5} baat^{3} zo^{6}:- baat^{3} zo^{6} sing^{4}- baat^{3} go^{3}*
Forbidden-City have eight CL eight CL castle eight CL
hei^{2} saai^{3} ceot^{1} lai^{4} aa^{4}?
build all out come SFP
'So the Forbidden City has eight- eight castles, and all eight castles were built (for filming)?'

02 IE *Gam^{2} ngo^{5} zau^{6} m^{4} zi^{1} laak^{3}. Daan^{6}hai^{6} hai^{6} go^{2}dou^{6}*
as-such 1SG then NEG know SFP but COP there
jau^{5} go^{3} jing^{2}sing^{4} hai^{6} zyun^{1} jing^{2} gu^{2}zong^{1}kek^{6}
have CL filming-studio COP especially film costume-drama
ge$^{3.}$
SFP
'I don't know then. But there is a filming studio especially used for filming costume dramas.

03 IR *Ha^{2}? Hou^{2} zan^{1} go^{3} wo^{3}!*
INJ very real SFP SFP
'What? (The castle is) very real!'

04 IE *Hai^{6}=zan^{1}hai^{6} daap^{3} go^{3} cong^{2}ging^{2}, jin^{4}zi^{1}hou^{6} di^{1} tin^{1}faa^{1} ne^{1},*
COP=really build CL scene then CL ceiling SFP
kei^{4}sat^{6} hai^{6} din^{6}nou^{5} dak^{6}gei^{6}.
actually COP computer effect
'The building is really a hand-made scene. And then the ceiling is actually a result of the computer effects.'

05 IR *Daan^{6}hai^{6} keoi^{5} lin^{4} ceot^{1}bin^{6} dou^{1} hou^{2} ci^{5} go^{3} wo^{3}!*
but 3SG even outside also very resemble SFP SFP
'But even the outside (of the building) is also very similar (to the real Forbidden City)!'

→ 06 IE *Zik^{1} ngo^{5} m^{4} hai^{6} waa^{6} cyun^{4}bou^{6} dou^{1} m^{4} hai^{6} hai^{2}*
CONJ 1SG NEG COP say all also NEG COP at
*go^{2}dou^{6} paak^{3}, daan^{6}hai^{6} m^{4} hai^{6}- **jat^{1}ding^{6}** m^{4} hai^{6}*
there film but NEG COP definitely NEG COP
*cyun^{4}bou^{6} **lo^{1}**.*
all SFP
'That is, I am not saying all are not filmed there (at the real Forbidden City), but not- **definitely** not all (are filmed there at the real Forbidden City).'

07 IR *Ha^{2}? Zan^{1}hai^{6} gaa^{4}?*
INJ really SFP
'What? Really?'

In this example, the interviewer challenges the interviewee in line 01 by inquiring the possibility of having all the eight blocks of castles built simply for filming purposes. The interviewee has chosen not to respond to the interviewer's query by saying *ngo^{5} zau^{6} m^{4} zi^{1}* 'I actually don't know', shown in line 02. Rather, the interviewee has directed the interviewer to focus on her subsequent comment that there *is* a filming studio which is especially designed to film (Chinese) costume dramas. The interviewer further challenges the interviewee in line 03, by first giving a mirative interjection *ha^{2}* "what?" which is subsequent to a follow-up comment that the Forbidden City looks *really* real, implying that it could not be fake literally. Again, in line 04, the interviewee attempts to refute the interviewer's idea, by giving a definite *yes!*, followed by a very confident comment prefaced by the adverb *zan^{1}hai^{6}* "really", together with supporting information about how this surely fake building

[7] *Gugong* is the Chinese name for the Forbidden City.

can be built – the ceiling is actually the result of computer graphics. Here, the interviewee is, step by step, trying to build a climax so as to persuade the interviewer to believe in her. In line 05 however, the interviewer once again challenges the interviewee by reinforcing his observation that not only that the Forbidden City looks *really* real, but also that the outside of the building *also* looks *really* real, suggesting the low possibility that it is a fake one. As all the way through the interviewee has expressed her confidence about the belief that the city is fake, a special pathway has been paved to her final overall assessment in line 06 that even though some filming might have been done at the real Forbidden city (if it happens that it is a real Forbidden City), *jat*^{1}*ding*^{6} "definitely" not all of the filming was done there. This conclusive remark of certainty is reinforced and reaffirmed by the SFP *lo*^{1} at the finale. The interviewer's surprise to the interviewee's persistence and confidence is reflected in his reply in line 07, with a mirative interjection *ha*^{2} "what?" followed by a confirmation-seeking question "really"?

In examples (5) and (6), we have looked at how particles expressing certainty can co-occur with strategies of comparable epistemic strength so as to reaffirm the speaker's stance of determination and assertion. In fact, particles of uncertainty can also co-occur with strategies of comparable epistemic strength to mitigate the speaker's original stance as lack of confidence. Consider another excerpt below taken from our corpus. The interviewee in (7) is shown a picture of a lake, with an Asian-like temple next to the lake. She is asked by the interviewer whether the picture shows a Korean temple.

(7) (IR = Male; IE = Female)

01	IR	*((Pointing to the other picture)) e*^{6}*: (2.0) Hon*^{4}*Gwok*^{3}*. Hai*^{6} *m*^{4} *hai*^{6} *ak*^{1}*?*	
			FILL Korea COP NEG COP SFP
		'Uh, Korea. Isn't it?'	
02	IE	*Hon*^{4}*:Gwok*^{3} *aa*^{4}*? (10.0) <Hon*^{4}*Gwok*^{3}*>, tai*^{2} *haa*^{5} *ngo*^{5} *doei*^{3}	
		Korea SFP Korea see ASP 1SG to	
		Hon^{4}*Gwok*^{3} *ge*^{3} *jan*^{3}*zoeng*^{6} *hai*^{6} *dim*^{2} *ge*^{3} *sin*^{1}*.*	
		Korea GEN impression COP how SFP SFP	
		'Korea? Korea… let me see what impressions of Korea I have first.'	
→	03	*((laugh)) (8.0) M*^{6}*: ((Kiss teeth))* *dou*^{1} *ho*^{2}*ji*^{5} *ge*^{2}*:.*	
		FILL also MOD SFP	
		'Hmm... It can possibly be.'	
04	IR	*Ai*^{6}*,* *gam*^{2}*:- (5.0)* *hai*^{6}*-* *hai*^{6} *ding*^{6} *m*^{4} *hai*^{6} *ak*^{3}*?*	
		INJ as-such COP COP or NEG COP SFP	
		'Well, so, it is- is it Korea?'	

In this excerpt, the interviewer first asks the interviewee whether the picture represents a place in Korea. It seems that the interviewee is very unsure and reluctant to believe that the place is Korea. This uncertainty is reflected by her echo question with an elongated vowel in the word *Hon*^{4}, together with an extremely long pause of ten seconds (which is very marked in a conversation), followed by a repetition of *Hon*^{4}*Gwok*^{3} uttered in a slower pace. All these indicators together signal the uncertain epistemic stance of the interviewee. After a good laugh to cover up the embarrassing atmosphere together with an eight-second long pause (again very marked in a conversation), the interviewee finally answers the interviewer's question in line 03, which is a literal *ho*^{2}*ji*^{5} "can". However, the interviewee is actually very reluctant to give a straight *can*; she uses *dou*^{1} "also" and the epistemic downgrader *ge*^{2} to indicate her uncertainty towards the proposition: (perhaps) you can (also think like this). This doubtful hesitant stance of the interviewee is also reflected in the interviewer's response in line 04. The interviewer is a little miffed that the interviewee has taken such a long time to produce a much delayed response, which still is an uncertain response. He asks the interviewee again whether it is Korea, together with signs of annoyance including a very long pause of five seconds, and an interjection *ai*^{6}, indicating the speaker's impatience.

Examples (5)–(7) above have indicated the important interactional work that SFPs may perform with other strategies to reaffirm the speaker's epistemic stance, might it be certainty, or uncertainty. For instance, an SFP with a high degree of epistemicity might co-occur with adverbials like *gang*^{3}*gaa*^{1} "even more" or *jat*^{1}*ding*^{6} "definitely" to reaffirm the speaker's stance of determination and assertion, while an SFP with a low degree of epistemicity might co-occur with discourse strategies such a long pause or a lengthened vowel to signal the speaker's uncertainty.

While different strategies with similar epistemic strengths are compatible with one another and can work together to reaffirm the speaker's epistemic stance, strategies of incomparable epistemic strengths might also co-occur with one another and these situations are not uncommon. In the section below, we shall see how an SFP might be used to calibrate the speaker's final epistemic stance while co-occurring with strategies having a different epistemic value in the same utterance.

5.2. SFP as an epistemic modulator (re-calibration)

It is perhaps expected that linguistic strategies indicating comparable epistemic strength should always co-occur with one another. It might be expected that SFPs of epistemic certainty (i.e. *lo*^{1}, *aa*^{1}, *laa*^{1}, etc.) would appear with elements that express certainty while SFPs of epistemic uncertainty (i.e. *ge*^{2}, gw*aa*^{3}, etc.) would accompany linguistic items that show doubt. For

example, if one is shown a picture and he or she is sure that it is the Great Wall, we would expect to hear something like ***Jat[1]ding[6]*** *hai[6] Coeng[4]Sing[4]* ***lo[1]*** '**Certainly** (it) is the Great Wall ***lo[1]***'. On the contrary, if the person is in fact unsure whether the picture shows the Great Wall, we would except to hear something similar to ***Jing[1]goi[1]*** *hai[6] Coeng[4]Sing[4]* ***gwaa[3]*** '**Perhaps** (it) is the Great Wall ***gwaa[3]***'. However, it is found in the data that an SFP indicting epistemic certainty can actually co-occur with other syntactic strategies with low epistemic strength. Consider the following excerpt taken from our data.

(8) (IR = Male; IE = Male)

01	IR	*Nei[1]dou[6]*	*hai[6]*	*bin[1]dou[6]?*			
		here	COP	where			
		'Where is this place?'					
→ 02	IE	*Ngo[5]*	***gu[2]gai[3]*** **(2.0)** *dou[1]*	***jing[1]goi[1]***	*hai[6]* **:**	*Coeng[4]Sing[4]*	***lo[1]***.
		1SG	guess	also	probably	COP	the-Great-Wall	SFP
		'As I guess, probably, it is the Great Wall.'					

Except (8) here provides another instantiation of the important and complex role that Cantonese SFPs play in different stance-displays – to recalibrate and finalize the speaker's epistemic stance. In (8), an SFP of epistemic certainty (i.e. *lo[1]* in this case) has co-occurred with linguistic items of epistemic uncertainty, namely the verb *gu[2]gai[3]* "guess" and the adverb *jing[1]goi[1]* "probably". We suspect that the SFP might take the role to override the degree of epistemicity as previously signaled by prior linguistic strategies, and be able to recalibrate the concluding stance of the speaker. Although at the first place the interviewee in (8) has made use of the verb *gu[2]gai[3]* "guess" to signal that he is unsure about where the place is. He seems to show reluctance to his original stance, indicated by the relatively long pause that follows. After some thought, the speaker expresses a slightly higher degree of commitment to what he is going to say by using the adverb *jing[1]goi[1]* "probably". Before the answer *Coeng[4]Sing[4]* "the Great Wall" is announced, we notice a lengthened copular *hai[6]* BE. In fact, this elongated vowel not only has provided the speaker with a little more time before he expresses his evaluation of the picture, but has actually prepared him to suggest a revised stance of certainty, which is further reinforced by the definiteness marker *lo[1]*. In other words, the SPF *lo[1]* has finally marked an upgraded epistemic stance of the speaker.

SFPs in Cantonese can perform this function of epistemic modulation not only because of its sentence-final syntactic position, but also because of the nature of conversation as well as stance-taking. In the real conversational context, utterances are delivered in real time and stance is continuously being shaped and negotiated in the course of this speech event. From this perspective, conversations are interactive and dynamic, and are "incremental" (Luke, 2012). Simply, we cannot prove that 'in every case, the canonical sentence is essentially present in its entirety in the speaker's mind right from the start' (ibid.: 64). Utterance meaning is incremental and utterances are always under construction on their own rights. Thus, many a time, the speaker's terminal stance might not be identical to the speaker's stated initial stance. It is because of this, a recalibration of the speaker's epistemic stance is inevitable as stance taking itself is also an *incremental process*. In the course of utterance construction, speaker continuously assesses and evaluates the situation and makes constant revisions with regard to his or her viewpoint. This revision or modulation of stance would involve the help of different linguistic strategies, including lexical and grammatical items, as well as various discourse-pragmatic strategies. SFPs as grammatical elements occupying a sentence-final position play a very important role in finalizing the speaker's epistemic stance. Examples (9)–(11) further illustrate how an SFP can be used to revise the speaker's stance and calibrate the epistemic strength of the utterance.

(9) (IR = Female; IE = Female)

→ 01	IE	***E[6]:*** **(2.0)**	*ap[1]!* **(1.0)**	*Dung[1]Ging[1]*	***laa[1]***.	
		FILL	INJ	Tokyo	SFP	
		'Er... Oh! Tokyo.'				
02	IR	*Hai[6]:? Dat[6]jin[4]zi[1]gaan[1] gam[3] hang[2]ding[6].((laugh))*				
		yes	suddenly	so	sure	
		'Really? (You are) so sure suddenly.'				

In excerpt (9), the interviewee is presented with a picture that shows a very high tower. The interviewee is struggling whether it should be the Tokyo Tower or the Eiffel Tower. At first the interviewee is a little reluctant and confused, indicated by the elongated gap filler *e[6]* and the two-second pause. During this time gap, the interviewee seems to have made up her mind about her final decision, signaled by the interjection *ap[1]*. After another pause, her final answer is made, which is a clear *Dung[1]Ging[1]* "Tokyo". It is a case of epistemic upgrading. In fact, the interviewee's confidence in this answer is actually not only reflected by the use of the certainty SFP *laa[1]*, but is also confirmed by the interviewer's response in line 02. The

elongated rhetorical *hai*^{6} "yes" first suggests the speaker's doubt, which is followed by the comment that the interviewee seems to be so sure suddenly, and the ironic laugh at the end. Example (10) below exemplifies another case of epistemic upgrading.

(10) (IR = Male; IE = Male)

01 IR *Li*^{1}*dou*^{6} *bin*^{1}*dou*^{6} *lai*^{4} *gaa*^{3}*?*
here where SFP SFP
'Where is it?'

→ 02 IE *Li*^{1} *go*^{3}***:?*** **(2.0)** **<*Jing*^{1}*goi*^{1} *zau*^{6} *hai*^{6}>** **(5.0)** *Zi*^{2}*Gam*^{3}*Sing*^{4} **aa**^{1}.
this CL probably then COP the-Forbidden-City SFP
'This one? It probably- it should be the Forbidden City.'

03 IR *M*^{4} *hai*^{6} *Wong*^{4}*Daai*^{6}*Sin*^{1}*Miu*^{2} *me*^{1}*?*
NEG COP Wong-Tai-Sin-Temple SFP
'Isn't it the Wong Tai Sin Temple?'[8]

In (10), the interviewee is shown a picture with a Chinese-like temple and is asked where it is. The interviewee has displayed a sense of uncertainty at the beginning, indicated by the confirmation-seeking question *Li*^{1} *go*^{3} 'This one?' (with an elongated vowel), followed by a two-second pause. After this pause, the interviewee has made an attempt to suggest an answer, prefaced by *jing*^{1}*goi*^{1} *zau*^{6} *hai*^{6} "probably (it) should be", produced with a slow speed, and a significantly long five-second pause. After some thought (as indicated by the reduction of utterance speed and a very remarkable silence), the speaker might think that he is actually quite sure that the attraction here is *in fact* the Forbidden City. This revised conclusive stance is indicated by the use of the SFP *aa*^{1}, which means certainty. In here, a case of epistemic upgrading is being observed – the vowel elongation, the reduced utterance speed, and most significantly, the two long pauses, have all prepared for the building of a revised stance. Again, this epistemic certainty as expressed by the interviewee in line 02 is also confirmed by considering the interviewer's response in line 03, which is a question with surprise.

Having had a look at cases of epistemic upgrading, we shall look at a case of epistemic downgrading, as illustrated in example (11).

(11) (IR = Male; IE = Female)

01 IR *Li*^{1}*dou*^{6} *zan*^{1}*hai*^{6} *m*^{4} *hai*^{6} *Zung*^{1}*Gwok*^{3} *lai*^{4} *gaa*^{3}.
here really NEG COP China SFP SFP
'This is really not China.'

02 IE *Ha*^{2}*?* *Zan*^{1}*hai*^{6} *m*^{4} *hai*^{6} *Zung*^{1}*Gwok*^{3} *gaa*^{4}*?*
INJ really NEG COP China SFP
'What? It's really not China?'

03 IR *M*^{4} *hai*^{6} *aa*^{3}.
NEG COP SFP
'It is not.'

→ 04 IE *Gam*^{2} ***daan*^{6}*hai*^{6} *hang*^{2}*ding*^{6}*** ***dou*^{1}*** ***hai*^{6}*(.)*** *di*^{1} *Zung*^{1}*Gwok*^{3}
as-such but surely also COP CL China
man^{4}*faa*^{3} *ge*^{3} *je*^{5} *zyun*^{4} *zo*^{2} *heoi*^{3} *li*^{1} *go*^{3} *dei*^{6}*fong*^{1}
culture GEN thing pass ASP go this CL place
go^{2}*dou*^{6} ***ge*^{2}***
there SFP
'But I'm sure there are some elements of the Chinese culture being passed to this place.'

05 IR *O*^{5}*:*.
Right
'Right.'

[8] The Wong Tai Sin Temple is a very famous temple and tourist attraction in Hong Kong; it is very well-known for its fortune-telling.

In example (11), the interviewee is shown a picture with a lake together with an Asian-like temple next to the lake.[9] Prior to the excerpt shown in here, the interviewee suggested that this place is China. However, the interviewer has made a correction in line 01 that this is *not* China. The interviewee is surprised that the picture is not taken in China, and this unexpectedness is revealed in line 02 by her use of the mirative interjection *ha*^{2} "what?", followed by a very doubtful confirmation question, with the adverb *zan*^{1}*hai*^{6} "really?" used in support of this stance of uncertainty, reinforced by the SFP *gaa*^{4} which itself is an interrogative particle. Following this action of confirmation-seeking, the interviewer in line 03 has reconfirmed that the place shown is *not* China. After hearing this confirmation, it appears that the interviewee still would like to make a refutation of some kind. The interviewee would like to argue that even though it is *not* China, it must be a place which a lot of Chinese cultural elements have been passed to. The interviewee is very confident that even though this place is *not* China, somehow this place must be related to China. Thus, in line 04, after making use of the conjunction *daan*^{1}*hai*^{6} "but" to prepare for a contrary comment, the interviewee employs the adverb *hang*^{2}*ding*^{6} "definitely" together with the copular *hai*^{6} to indicate her level of confidence. However, after a short pause and her comment that the picture at least shows a place with a lot of Chinese cultural features, the interviewee probably realizes that she is too strong with her stance and she might need to downgrade her degree of certainty, as the interviewer has already indicated that the place is *not* China. It might not be appropriate for the interviewee to insist on her stance strongly. This epistemic downgrading is done by the use of the SFP *ge*^{2}, a marker that is always used to indicate uncertainty. This epistemic downgrading is also reflected by the interview's response in line 05, which is an interjection of surprise. The interviewer is surprised about the interviewee's change of stance – from certain to reluctant.

In examples (8)–(11), we have seen how speakers can make use of SFPs to modulate and recalibrate the epistemic stance in this sentence final position. It is observed that in these instances the SFPs are often accompanied by the use of silence and pauses, as well as other discourse-pragmatic strategies including interjections and gap fillers. A lengthened vowel also plays a role on many occasions. These strategies together can help pave the way for the speaker to state his or her final stance. Epistemic modulation is a dynamic process and stance is something that is being continuously constructed and shaped in the course of the conversation. While the speaker might already have some idea as to the position he or she wants to take when responding to the co-participant's queries, this stand might change as the speaker manages to have more time to think about the issues concerned in the on-going process of the conversational interaction. Thus, many a time, the terminal stance displayed might not equal the initial stance at the first place, and epistemic modulation has become inevitable. While silences, pauses, and gap fillers are excellent strategies to be used to buy time for a revised stance to be made, SFPs, because of their sentence final position, are also perfect grammatical devices to recalibrate and finalize the speaker's epistemic stance.

6. Concluding remarks

Stance-taking is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. In this paper, we have looked into how the speaker's stance can be reaffirmed as well as recalibrated in the on-going discourse. In particular, we have looked at the role of SFPs in the expression of speaker's epistemic stance. Most previous studies on Cantonese SFPs have tended to focus on the functions of individual particles and their categorizations. The current study has contributed another piece in this puzzle by highlighting the SFPs' role when collaborating with other grammatical as well as discourse-pragmatic strategies. In so doing, the overall picture regarding the expression and recalibration of the speaker's subjective stance can become clear.

Discourse and Grammar are not two distinct areas of study but closely related to each other. The incremental nature in stance construction has offered us yet another example of how conversation analysis and grammatical analysis can mutually illuminate each other. It is because stance is incremental and emerging, conversation participants need various strategies to state their stance, as well as to revise and restate their stance in the course of the conversation, reflecting the dynamic process of epistemic stance modulation. In this study, we have extended beyond previous works on Cantonese SFPs and looked into their role in epistemic modulation. Cantonese SFPs not only can work on their own to express the speaker's stance, but also work with other lexical, grammatical, as well as discourse-pragmatic strategies to reaffirm or recalibrate the speaker's epistemic commitment towards the proposition. It is found that discourse-pragmatic strategies such as the use of pauses and gap fillers are always accompanying the SFPs when they are employed to modulate the speaker's stance. Other than reflecting the speaker's doubt and hesitation, these pauses and gap fillers allow the speaker to buy time and rethink and reassess the situation before the concluding stance is reached.

SFPs are vital for effective communication in Cantonese. Through the analysis of how epistemic modulation is done in Cantonese, the paper hopes to shed light on other cross-linguistic studies on epistemicity and stance-taking in general, and also to arouse the interest of researchers working in cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics, particularly those working in cross-cultural communications and cross-cultural pragmatics. It is hoped that the findings can add to the growing body of literature on epistemic modality and stance-taking strategies, and aid our understanding of the subtleties of multicultural and multilingual communication. It is also hoped that findings in this study can provide insights for further studies on how speakers might make use of different strategies to position themselves in a range of discourses, including political debates, workplace conversations, or daily interactions which include negotiations, when they need to upgrade or downgrade their strength of epistemic claims when being challenged.

[9] The same picture was shown to the interviewee of example (7).

APPENDIX

(Selected transcription symbols used in the present paper).

1SG	First singular pronoun
2SG	Second singular pronoun
3SG	Third singular pronoun
ASP	Aspect marker
CL	Classifier
CONJ	Conjunction
COP	Copula
EMPH	Emphatic marker
FILL	Filler
GEN	Genitive marker
INJ	Interjection
MOD	Modal
NEG	Negative marker
SFP	Sentence final particle
(.)	Pause
(1.0)	Pause duration in seconds and tenth of seconds
→	To call attention of readers
x:	Elongation
xxx?	Rising intonation
xxx.	Falling intonation
xxx,	Level intonation
xxx!	Animated intonation (e.g. showing interest)
-	Abrupt cutoff
=	Latch on
((xxx))	Non-verbal actions by the speaker
<xxx>	Slower tempo

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.03.008.

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