

Mirativity in Sentence-Final Particles:

A Comparative Analysis of Cantonese *laa3* and Mandarin *le*

Mirativity, a linguistic phenomenon highlighting the conveyance of unexpected or new information, emerges as a distinctive feature in various languages. This study investigates the manifestation of mirativity in the realm of Sentence-Final Particles (SFPs) within two prominent Chinese varieties: Cantonese and Mandarin. Specifically, it focuses on the comparative analysis of Cantonese *laa3* and Mandarin *le*, both of which play pivotal roles in colloquial verbal communication by adding layers of semantic meaning and emotional context to utterances. While the study of Chinese SFPs has been extensive, particularly from a syntactic standpoint, the finer semantic nuances of these particles have remained a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. A notable area of contention lies in the semantic interplay between the SFPs and their attached utterance, especially in the comparison between Cantonese *laa3* and Mandarin *le*. This paper aims to bridge this gap by examining the potential mirative aspects of these particles, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of their semantic functions.

The concept of mirativity, as conceptualized and investigated by scholars such as Delancey (36) and Matthews (7), specifically pertains to the expression of unexpectedness or novelty from the speaker's perspective. Recent studies have begun to uncover the mirative dimensions of Mandarin *le* (Fang and Hengeveld 882). However, the extent to which Cantonese *laa3* shares these mirative qualities with Mandarin *le* has not been comprehensively explored. Through this analysis, the paper aims to shed light on the nuanced semantic roles of SFPs in Chinese varieties and enhance the understanding of mirativity in linguistic discourse.

Literature Review

Sentence-Final Particles (SFPs) in the Chinese Language

Sentence-Final Particles (SFPs) are integral to colloquial conversation in Chinese, playing a crucial role in self-expression. They reveal speakers' attitudes, assumptions, intentions, or emotions towards the addressees or the situations at hand (Luke 3). The understanding of SFPs is not just a linguistic concern but a key to social interaction, indicating a speaker's semantic and communicative competence.

The scholarly discourse on Chinese SFPs is diverse and often contentious. Some linguists argue that these particles carry “no semantic content,” being purely “subjective” and “illogical” (Wierzbicka 519). This perspective, however, simplifies the complex nature of SFPs, overlooking their functional importance in language use. The ongoing debates focus on the semantic contents of SFPs, their syntactic integration, and their pragmatic implications. Table 1 shows the lists of the most commonly used SFPs in Mandarin (Fang and Hengeveld 879) and Cantonese (Matthews and Yip 393–408).

Common SFPs in Mandarin	Common SFPs in Cantonese
de (的)	aa4 (呀)
le (了)	ha2 (下)
ne (呢)	ho2 (嘢)
ba (吧)	le2 (哩)
ma (吗)	me1 (咩)
a (啊)	le1/ne1 (呢)
ma (嘛)	waa2 (話)
bei (呗)	aak3 (啊)
ba le (罢了)	ge3 (嘅)
er yi (而已)	ge2 (嘅)
ye ba (也罢)	laa3 (喇)
ye hao (也好)	gaa3 (㗎)
la (啦)	lak3, laak3 (嘞)
lei (嘞)	aa1 (㗐)
lou (喽)	laa1 (啦)
zhe ne (着呢)	aa1maa3 (㗐嘛)
	gwa3 (卦)
	lo1 (囉)

	lok5 (咯) wo3, wo5 (噶) bo3(噃) ze1, zek1 (啫) sin1(先) tim1 (添)
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Table 1 Common SFPs in Mandarin and Cantonese

Mirativity

Mirativity, as a semantic category, was initially conceptualized by the linguist Scott Delancey in 1997. The mirative denotes a grammatical marking that encodes various nuances such as sudden discovery, surprise, unpreparedness, counter-expectation, and the conveyance of new information (de Haan, “Mirativity”). Crucially, mirativity is distinguished from evidentiality, although the two can co-occur. This phenomenon is not unique to any single language family; it is found in languages as diverse as Turkish and certain Tibeto-Burman languages. The mirative function can be explicit or implicit, depending on the linguistic structure and cultural context.

Mandarin *le*

In Mandarin, the particle *le* has garnered attention for its potential mirative functions, encoding surprise or the unexpectedness of information. While some researchers view *le* primarily as a “change of state” marker or a symbol of a “currently relevant state,” others tie it to mood, tense, or evidentiality aspects (Fang and Hengevald 882). However, Fang (589) presents a compelling argument for classifying *le* as a distinct mirative marker, especially evident in contexts that involve new or surprising situations. This interpretation aligns with tests for mirativity as outlined by Peterson (11). Consider the examples:

1. 晚上的饺子有点咸了
wan-shang de jiaozi you dian xian le
 night ATTR dumpling have a_little salty MIR
 “The dumplings I had last night were a little salty!”

Example 1 is a typical use of *le* as a mirative, as the speaker is surprised that the dumplings were salty, implying that he/she expected them to not be salty and thus emphasizing the unexpectedness.

The foregrounded usage of *le* is usually a perfective marker, comparable to perfect tense in English, as seen in example 2.

2. 我吃了
wo chi le
 1SG eat PRT
 “I have eaten.”

Interestingly, *le* can sometimes carry both perfective and mirative meanings, as in example 3. In this context, the interlocutor did not expect that Xiao Ming would like dancing, and it is also the fact that Xiao Ming has started to dance and to like it.

3. 小明也喜欢跳舞了
Xiao Ming ye xihuan tiaowu le
 Xiao Ming too like dance PRF.MIR
 “(You may not know that) Xiao Ming has come to like dancing, too.”

Cantonese *laa3*

Cantonese *laa3*, often compared to Mandarin *le* (Sybesma and Li 1752), is predominantly seen as an assertive marker, emphasizing a point of current relevance or change of state. Scholars like Tang (204–205), Sybesma and Li (1752), and Matthews and Yip (402) view *laa3* as signaling a “realization of state,” encompassing both physical and epistemic changes. Sentences featuring *laa3* are usually straightforward, neutral, and factual. *laa3* is often paraphrased as “it is now the case that,” implying a change from a previous state, whether known or unknown. For example:

4. 太嘈喇，我瞓唔到
taai3 cou4 laa3 , ngo5 fan3 m4 dou2
 too noisy SFP I sleep not PRT
 “I can’t sleep, it’s too noisy.”
5. 落雨喇
lok6 jyu5 laa3

fall rain SFP
 “It’s raining now.”

Example 4 foregrounded a context in which the speaker has a sudden realization of the noise in his/her current environment, and the inability to sleep is a consequence of the previous utterance, as well as his/her current state. Example 5 is set in a context where the speaker looked out from the window and realized the current state of raining. Both examples demonstrated typical use of the SFP *laa3*.

The central inquiry of this study revolves around the semantic intricacies of Cantonese *laa3* and Mandarin *le*. These particles have been traditionally associated with the notion of a “change of state” and “current relevant state,” yet recent scholarship has illuminated additional layers of meaning, particularly in terms of mirativity. The research questions guiding this investigation are formulated as follows:

Primary Question: Does Cantonese *laa3* exhibit the same semantic content of mirativity as Mandarin *le*?

Secondary Question: What are the functional semantic similarities and divergences between Cantonese *laa3* and Mandarin *le* in the context of mirativity?

Methodology

This study employs a methodological framework adapted from Peterson’s (11) semantic and pragmatic tests for mirativity, applied to the context of Cantonese *laa3* and Mandarin *le*. The objective is to investigate if the mirative properties identified in Mandarin *le* by Fang (589) are also applicable to Cantonese *laa3*. These properties include encoding information as newsworthy or surprising, and the ability to occur with various time references and in different illocutions like declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives, and exclamatives.

Data

The study draws data from two primary sources:

Informants: Native speakers of Mandarin and Cantonese are engaged to provide authentic and current usage examples of *laa3* and *le* in natural speech. These informants offer insights into the colloquial and contextual uses of these particles, enriching the data pool with real-life linguistic instances.

Corpora:

Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus (HKCanCor) (Luke and Wong 309): This corpus offers a wealth of data on Cantonese, encompassing various speech events and contexts. It provides a solid base for analyzing the use and distribution of *laa3* in Cantonese.

Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (LCMC) (McEnery et al. 361): Similarly, LCMC is utilized to examine the occurrences and variations of *le* in Mandarin. This corpus, with its extensive collection of Mandarin texts, serves as a vital resource for comparative analysis.

Peterson's Tests for Mirativity

The methodological core of this study involves adapting Peterson's empirical tests for mirative and surprised meaning (see Table 2). These tests are designed to discern whether a particular linguistic element carries a mirative connotation. The tests include:

Entailment	Does surprised meaning affect the truth conditions of the sentence?
Presupposition	Is surprised meaning presupposed?
Implicature	Can the surprised meaning be targeted for cancellation (i.e. a cancellable implicature)?
Challengeability	Can the surprised meaning be targeted for assent or dissent?
Embeddability	Can the surprised meaning be semantically embedded?
Displacement	Can the surprised meaning be displaced in time and space?

Table 2 Empirical tests for mirative/surprised meaning (Peterson 11)

Analysis

This section presents a detailed analysis of the results obtained from the application of Peterson's tests for mirativity on Cantonese *laa3*, focusing on the three main properties of the

mirative *le*: newsworthiness and surprise, temporal references, and the use in various illocutions.

1. Newsworthiness and Surprise

The mirative property of indicating newsworthiness or surprise is a key feature in Mandarin *le*, as seen in:

6. 我们胜利了！
wǒmen shènglì le
 1PL win PRT.MIR
 “We won!”

Context: After hearing news about the war, the speaker talked to a colleague.

Sentence 6 presupposes the war has ended (perfective aspect) and implies surprise at the victory (mirative aspect). In other words, the implicated meaning is that “we” did not know whether “we” will win or not before the end of the war. Here, *le* serves as both the perfective and mirative marker. Applying the challengeability test to this case, it reveals that direct challenges to the surprise, such as saying 我并不感到惊讶 (“This doesn’t surprise me.”) without transition words like 但 (“but”), are infelicitous, underscoring the non-challengeable mirative aspect. It should be noted that the addition of a transitional word typically shifts the semantic emphasis to the contrast between the two utterances.

If the same utterance is translated into Cantonese, the informant believed that sentence 7 has the closest meaning to the sentence 6.

7. 我哋赢咗喇！
ngo5dei2 jeng4 zo2 laa3
 1PL win PRF MIR
 “We won!”

The usage of the perfective *zo2* and the SFP *laa3* here, and their equivalence to the Mandarin *le* imply a similar blend of temporal and surprise elements, suggesting *laa3* could contain mirative properties akin to *le*.

Displacement Test

The displacement test assesses whether the mirative meaning of *laa3* remains consistent despite negation. The hypothesis is that if *laa3* encodes the information as newsworthy or surprising, then it is not part of the propositional content itself, and thus, the negation of the predicate will not affect the mirative meaning of *laa3* (Fang 601).

8. 冇落雨喇
mou5 lok6 jyu5 laa3
 NEG fall rain MIR
 “It stopped raining”

Sentence 5 is the standard way of saying “it’s raining now” with *laa3* conveying both temporal meaning (present aspect) and unexpected information (mirative aspect). The negation in sentence 9 retains the mirative meaning of *laa3*, suggesting that it encodes newsworthiness or surprise, independent of the propositional content and without the temporal meaning. This supports *laa3*’s role in conveying unexpected information.

Challengeability Test

This test examines if the mirative meaning in a sentence can be targeted for assent or dissent.

Context: The speaker suddenly discovers the rain.

9. 落雨喇，我都唔知
lok6 jyu5 laa3, ngo3 dou1 m4 zi1
 fall rain SFP 1SG even not know
 “It has rained. I didn’t know.”
10. *落雨喇，我知啊
lok6 jyu5 laa3, ngo3 zi1 aa3
 fall rain SFP 1SG know SFP
 “It has rained. I already knew.”
11. 落雨，我知啊
lok6 jyu5, ngo3 zi1 aa3
 fall rain 1SG know SFP
 “It has rained. I already knew”

Sentence 9 demonstrates *laa3*’s compatibility with new contextual information (the rain) and the explicit statement of the lack of prior knowledge (“I” did not know). The ill-formed

sentence 10 underscores the contradiction between *laa3* and newly known information. In other words, it is contradictory to put *laa3* as mirative marker with the acknowledgement of “unsurprised” (“I” already knew). If the *laa3* is removed, as shown in sentence 11, the sentence is acceptable, showing that *laa3*’s mirative meaning is an intrinsic part of its use, but not an implicated meaning.

Presupposition Test

The presupposition test evaluates whether the mirative meaning of *laa3* is a presupposed element in the sentence, contributing to its overall interpretation.

Context: The speaker and the addressee are walking in the rain, and suddenly the rain stops

12. *啱啱 落 雨 喇 ， 而家 雨 停 咗 喇
ngaam1 ngaam1 lok6 jyu5 laa3 ji4gaa1 jyu5 ting4 zo2 laa3
 just_now fall rain SFP now rain stop PRF MIR
 “It rained a moment ago (we didn’t know). Now it stopped.”
13. 啱啱 落 雨 ， 而家 雨 停 咗 喇
ngaam1 ngaam1 lok6 jyu5 ji4gaa1 jyu5 ting4 zo2 laa3
 just_now fall rain now rain stop PRF MIR
 “It rained a moment ago. Now it stopped (a little unexpected).”

In sentence 12, the use of the first *laa3* is infelicitous as the rain is not new information nor a surprise to the speaker or addressee. This infelicity indicates that *laa3* presupposes the conveyance of new or unexpected information. In contrast, the sentence 13 is acceptable and uses *laa3* to mark the newness of the rain stopping, which aligns with the presupposed mirative function of *laa3*.

2. Temporal Reference

We test if *laa3* aligns with past and future contexts, beyond its widely used semantic association with the present.

Context: The speaker and the addressee are in the bus station.

14. 架巴士就嚟開喇!
gaa3 baa1si6 zau6lai4 hoi1 laa3
 CL bus almost operate SFP
 “The bus is about to leave!”

Sentence 14 illustrates *laa3* in a future reference, indicating new, surprising information about the bus’s imminent departure. The word *zau6lai4* “almost/soon” explicitly indicates that this is a future temporal reference. In this case, the addressee may not know or realize that the train will leave very soon, so the speaker emphasizes this new information in order to urge the addressee to get on quickly.

Context: The speaker is describing a work meeting yesterday to the addressee.

15. 我又畀老細鬧喇!
ngo5 jau6 bei2 lou5sai3 naau6 laa3
 1SG again PASS boss scold SFP
 “I was scolded by the boss again!”

16. *我畀老細鬧喇!
ngo5 bei2 lou5sai3 naau6 laa3
 1SG PASS boss scold SFP
 “I was scolded by the boss!”

17. 我畀老細鬧㗎!
ngo5 bei2 lou5sai3 naau6 wo3
 1SG PASS boss scold SFP
 “I was scolded by the boss!”

The surprise in sentence 15 is triggered by *jau6* “again,” suggesting *laa3* conveys more of a temporal sense (perfective aspect). Sentence 16’s infelicity without “again” indicates that *laa3* may not align well with past contexts for mirativity. The SFP *wo3* is used in sentence 17: While it also carries the meaning of noteworthiness (Matthews and Yip 340), it works in past tense.

3. Illocutions

Last but not least, *laa3*’s role is examined in imperative and interrogative contexts.

Context: A teacher is talking to the class.

18. 唔好傾偈喇!

m4hou2 king1gai2 laa3
 NEG chit-chat SFP
 Stop chit-chatting!

19. 唔好 傾偈 !
m4hou2 king1gai2
 NEG chit-chat
 Stop chit-chatting!

The utterance is meant to request the addressee (the class) to stop doing something, so it is an imperative. The presence of *laa3* in the imperative sentence 18 adds a mirative layer, indicating the importance of the action in an unexpected context. Sentence 19 without *laa3* is still a command issued by the speaker. Hence, it is not appropriate to attribute their illocutionary forces to the occurrence of *laa3*. In this case, *laa3* reminds the addressee of the importance of keeping silent, assuming that the addressee may not know how to behave properly in that situation.

Context: The son got back from school with his grade report. His mum saw it.

(rhetorical question)

20. 你又唔合格喇?
nei5 jau6 m4 hap6gaak3 laa3
 2SG again NEG pass SFP
 Did you fail again?!
21. 你又唔合格喎?
nei5 jau6 m4 hap6gaak3 laa4
 2SG again NEG pass SFP
 Did you fail again?!

Sentence 20 is not intended to be a true question to solicit an answer but sounds like a furious rebuke. Sentence 21, which is more natural, uses *laa4* to form an interrogative to question or check whether a certain state did indeed realize (Sybesma and Li 1770). It is used to seek factual confirmation, not to elicit new information. Thus, the use of *laa3* in a rhetorical question supports its mirative function, contrasting with *laa4*'s factual confirmation role.

The analysis reveals that while Cantonese *laa3* and Mandarin *le* share some mirative properties, particularly in marking newsworthiness or surprise, there are notable differences

in their usage across temporal contexts and illocutionary functions. While *laa3* demonstrates a strong mirative aspect in present and future contexts, its role in past contexts appears more aligned with perfective rather than mirative meanings. Additionally, the use of *laa3* in different illocutions suggests that while it can convey mirativity, this is not uniformly the case across all sentence types. These findings indicate a complex semantic interplay within the mirative functions of Cantonese *laa3* and Mandarin *le*, underscoring the nuanced roles these particles play in their respective linguistic systems.

Conclusion

This study embarked on an exploratory journey to unravel the mirative aspects of Cantonese *laa3* in comparison with Mandarin *le*. The findings draw a complex and nuanced picture of the semantic and pragmatic roles these SFPs play in their respective linguistic contexts.

When juxtaposed with Mandarin *le*, Cantonese *laa3* reveals both similarities and divergences. While both particles share the common function of marking new or surprising information, *laa3* does not encompass all the mirative properties attributed to *le*, indicating a more restricted semantic scope.

The findings of this study contribute to the broader understanding of mirativity in Chinese varieties. They highlight the importance of contextual and syntactic factors in determining the semantic roles of SFPs. The nuanced differences between Cantonese *laa3* and Mandarin *le* also underscore the diversity within the Chinese language family, challenging any oversimplified assumptions about the uniformity of grammatical particles across varieties.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, further research is warranted to deepen the understanding of mirativity in Cantonese *laa3* and its comparison with Mandarin *le*. Extensive corpus analysis, experimental studies with a larger pool of native speakers, and cross-dialectal comparisons could provide more comprehensive insights. Additionally,

exploring the interaction of *laa3* with other grammatical elements in Cantonese and its variation across different socio-linguistic contexts may yield a richer understanding of its semantic and pragmatic dimensions.

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