

# An Attempt to Differentiate Two Epistemic SFPs in Hong Kong Cantonese

Ka Fai Law

The Ohio State University

## Abstract

Cantonese has a rich inventory of sentence-final particles (SFPs). Studies of Cantonese SFPs have been a heated topic in the last several decades. Although scholars have studied their linguistic features in various aspects, there are still gaps to be bridged. For example, linguists have claimed that the SFPs *ge3* and *laak3* denote certainty or epistemic modality. However, whether they are interchangeable in a sentence and whether they convey the same sense of certainty have not yet been discussed. This study attempts to differentiate between *ge3* and *laak3* concerning their sense of certainty through discourse analysis. The findings suggest that the context where *ge3* is used reflects the speaker's prior knowledge whereas the context where *laak3* is employed emphasizes the current state of affairs accompanied with senses of a change of state and finality.

## Keywords

Cantonese, sentence-final particles, prior knowledge, discourse analysis, epistemic modality

## 1. Introduction

Sentence-final particles (SFPs) are robust linguistic elements in modern Cantonese. They commonly occur at the final position of a sentence and are used in daily conversation. Studies of SFPs have been a heated subject in the past several decades. A number of scholars have attempted to explicate the features of SFPs in various linguistic aspects (Yau 1965, Bourgerie 1987, Matthews 1998, Wakefield 2011, to name a few). However, close studies of SFPs that denote a similar semantic meaning are rarely conducted; for example, linguists have claimed that the SFPs *ge3* and *laak3* convey certainty or epistemic modality.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the

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<sup>1</sup> There are two branches under the domain modality — epistemic modality and deontic modality (Palmer 1986). Epistemic modality generally refers to a speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition of an utterance (see also de Haan 1999) while deontic modality denotes a speaker's attitude toward necessity and probability (Fung 2000). According to Fung, neither *ge3* nor *laak3* convey deontic modality. However, *ge3* in a sentence (given by one of the reviewers) such as 頒獎禮，佢應該要嚟嘅 *Baan1zoeng2lai5, keoi1 jing1goi1 jiu3 lei4 ge3* 'He should come for the award ceremony' denotes the sense of obligation. Without the modal verb 應該 *jing1goi1*, such meaning remains. It is possible that the

context of where the SFPs are used is seldom analyzed. This study has two purposes. The first is to examine the two epistemic SFPs *ge3* and *laak3* and attempt to differentiate them through discourse analysis. The second is to emphasize the importance of analyzing contexts when dealing with SFPs. This paper will proceed as follows: Section 2 discusses the issue concerning the epistemic sense of the two SFPs; Section 3 demonstrates the findings and examples; and Section 4 provides some concluding remarks.

## 2. The issue

Kwok (1984: 42) stated that where *ge3* is used “the sentence is a factual statement expressing what the speaker regards as true.” She then proposed that *laak3* “conveys a sense of certainty” (1984: 48). Similarly, Fung (2000: 100, 174) asserted that both *ge3* and *laak3*<sup>2</sup> denote “pure epistemic modality.” She added that *ge3* “marks a high level of commitment on the part of the speaker to the proposition conveyed by the utterance, asserting the certainty of the proposition without any doubts...” For *laak3*, she was incapable of providing additional insights due to low occurrence of the SFP in her corpus. In summary, Kwok and Fung suggested that *ge3* and *laak3* share some semantic features. Because of the shared features, some questions may be raised. Are *ge3* and *laak3* interchangeable? Do they convey the same sense of certainty? These questions remain unaddressed to date. Therefore, some experiments were conducted by interchanging *ge3* and *laak3* in sentences where they occur in the data. As a result, they are not completely interchangeable. In certain sentences, they are interchangeable but convey different meanings. Examples (1) and (2) below demonstrate these observations. The two utterances<sup>3</sup> were extracted from the author’s Cantonese YouTube corpus created in 2017.<sup>4</sup>

Based on my own intuition, the sentence in (1) is quite odd when *ge3* is replaced with *laak3*. Although *ge3* and *laak3* in (2) are interchangeable, they denote different meanings. While *ge3* in (2) conveys the speaker’s certainty of a fact, *laak3* expresses certainty with

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verb 要 *yiú3* ‘need’ also plays a role to the meaning. If *yiú3* is omitted, however, *ge3* conveys certainty instead. Since our focus in this paper is epistemic modality, I will leave it for future investigation.

<sup>2</sup> *Laak3* can also be used as a discourse marker, for example 好嘞！好嘞！我請你食飯啦！*Hou2 laak3! Hou2 laak3! Ngo5 ceng2 nei5 sik6 faan6 laa1!* ‘Alright! Alright! I will buy you a meal!’ Although it is in the final position, here, *laak3* does not express certainty or change of state. Its main function is a discourse marker which has the English equivalent “alright” or “okay.”

<sup>3</sup> The context and the transcriptions of these two utterances can be found in the Appendix section of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> The corpus consists of 3 hours of author’s transcriptions of 22 Cantonese YouTube videos totaling approximately 60,000 Chinese characters. The categories of the videos contain cooking, beauty and makeup, complaint, and product review. See Law 2020 for more details.

a signal of a changed state.<sup>5</sup> In order to confirm my observations, six native Cantonese informants were asked to examine whether *ge3* and *laak3* are interchangeable in (1) and (2). Five of them were from Hong Kong; the other was from Guangdong. Among the native speakers, only one had linguistic background. The author then produced the utterances given in Examples (1)–(4) to the informants and asked them to evaluate the use of *ge3* and *laak3* in the transcriptions. The whole process was accomplished through Facebook Messenger, an in-person meeting, or a Zoom meeting.

- (1) 係 我 特別 鍾意，  
*Hai6 ngo5 dak6bit6 zung1ji3*,  
is I especially like  
特別 喜愛 成日 都 噴 嘅 / (\*嘞)  
*dak6bit6 hei2oi3 sing4jat6 dou1 pan3 ge3/(laak3)*  
especially love always also spray SFP/(SFP)  
'(Those perfumes) are my all-time favorites, and I always use them'
- (2) 呢 個 棉花糖， 而家 係 脆 嘅 / (嘞) ， ok ?  
*Ne1 go3 min4faal1tong4, ji4gaal hai6 lam4 ge3/(laak3), ok?*  
this CL marshmallow now is soft SFP/(SFP) ok  
'This marshmallow, it is soft at this moment.'

According to my native informants, they confirmed that the use of *laak3* sounds odd in (1) while *ge3* and *laak3* are interchangeable in (2) above. They also added that *ge3* and *laak3* denote different meanings in (2). Five of the informants were able to point out that *ge3* in (2) conveys a sense of a fact whereas *laak3* expresses a sense of certainty and signals change of state. The other informant was not able to clearly explicate the differences between *ge3* and *laak3* in (2). Nonetheless, the informants' responses support the claim that the SFPs *ge3* and *laak3* signal different senses of certainty. In the next section, I illustrate my findings and demonstrate some examples.

### 3. Findings and examples

The empirical data demonstrated in this section is extracted from the author's corpus mentioned earlier. After examining the data, I observed that the contexts where *ge3*<sup>6</sup> is used

<sup>5</sup> The change of state here refers to the marshmallow from "the state of being hard (maybe it was put in a freezer earlier)" to "the state of being soft now."

<sup>6</sup> *Ge2*, on the other hand, differs from *ge3* not only in the rising intonation but also in meaning. While *ge3* conveys certainty, *ge2* expresses uncertainty or reservation. For example, 佢會食嘅 *Keoi5 wui5 sik6 ge2* 'He may eat it.' Furthermore, *ge2* can also be used in interrogative sentences such as 點解會噉嘅? *Dim2 gaai2 wui5 gam2 ge2?* 'How did it happen?'

tend to reflect the speaker's prior knowledge<sup>7</sup> and emphasizes that what the speaker conveys is a fact. The following example illustrates the point.

(3) YouTuber: 大 J (Jason)

Video title: 用急凍殺蟲劑冷凍食物！會係咩味道？

(Freezing spray to freeze foods! How does it taste then?)

Background: Jason bought a sprayer from Japan which can freeze a cockroach in seconds. He pointed out that the product is safe to be used even next to food items, according to the instructions.

- a. 噏 呢 一 支 嘢 呢  
*Gam3 ne1 jat1 zil je5 ne1*  
 so this one CL thing SFP  
 'So, this bottle...'
- b. 大家 見到 佢 上面 寫住 啦  
*Daai6gaal gin3dou3 keoi5 soeng5min6 se2zyu6 laal*  
 everyone see-PRT it upstairs write-PRT SFP  
 'You all see that it's written here.'
- c. 喺 啲 食品 附近 用 呢，都 好 安全 嘅 / (嘞)  
*Hai5 di1 sik6ban2 fu6gan6 jung6 ne1 dou1 hou2 ngon1cyun4 ge3/(laak3)*  
 at some food nearby use SFP also very safe SFP/(SFP)  
 'Using this (product) close to food is very safe.'
- d. 噏 我 上網 查過 話 呢 一 支 嘢 呢  
*Gam3 ngo5 soeng5mong5 caa4gwo3 waa6 ne1 jat1 zil je5 ne1*  
 so I internet search-PRT say this one CL thing SFP  
 'I've searched on the internet and said that...'
- e. 其實 係 對 人體 係 完全 冇害 嘅 / (\*嘞)  
*Kei4sat6 hai6 deoi3 jan4tai2 hai6 jyun4cyun4 mou5hoi6 ge3/(\*laak3)*  
 in fact is to body is completely harmless SFP/(SFP)  
 '(This product) is in fact harmless to our body.'

In (3c), the speaker was confident with respect to the potential safety issue when using the spray in close proximity to food items. His confident assertion derived from his knowledge obtained earlier. This can be seen in (3b) where he pointed at the official statement that was printed on the sprayer and showed it to the audience. The phrase *gin3dou3 keoi5 soeng5min6*

<sup>7</sup> Here, prior knowledge refers to the same concept of the term "source of knowledge" in the field of evidentiality (see also Aikenvald 2004 and Hanks 2014). The rationale I restrained myself using the term is that not all the contexts in the data explicitly indicate how the speaker acquired the knowledge.

*se2zyu6* ‘see that it’s written on it’ implies that the speaker had acquired the knowledge through sensory experience before showing it to the audience. Similarly, in (3e), the speaker was certain that the product is harmless to human body. His rationale for being confident comes from his previous utterance in (3d). The phrase *soeng5mong5 caa4gwo3* ‘had done an internet search’ in (3d) explicitly illustrates where he obtained the information. *Ge3* often co-occurs with the copula 係 *hai6* with an emphatic meaning. This can also be seen in (3e) above.<sup>8</sup> This *hai6...ge3* combination further emphasizes the speaker’s affirmative attitude toward his prior knowledge.

The SFP *laak3* was also added to (3c) and (3e) to evaluate whether *ge3* can be substituted. It seems that *laak3* can be used in (3c) but not in (3e). The *laak3* in (3c) denotes a change of state referring to the safety issue of the freezing spray from “it was not safe to use close to food” to “it is now safe to use close to food.” Despite that, with the context in (3), the *laak3* in (3c) does not sound natural to the author. After consulting with the native informants, three of them reported that *ge3* in (3c) and (3e) conveys certainty whereas *laak3* has a sense of change of state regarding the safety issue of the freezing spray. Their perspectives align with the author’s observations discussed above. The other three informants expressed that the use of *laak3* in (3c) and (3e) is not acceptable.

We will now turn our focus on the findings of *laak3*. The contexts where *laak3* occurs tend to focus on the state of affairs at that particular moment. In addition, the data also confirms that *laak3* denotes the speaker’s realization of state (a change of state) as well as finality. We can see this in the example below.

(4) YouTuber: 越煮越好 (The more you cook the better skills you get)

Video title: 炒雞粒 檸檬汁 \$25 蚊你都做得到 (Lemon chicken)

Background: The host was teaching the audience the Chinese dish “lemon chicken.” At the moment, he was cutting the chicken thighs into small chunks and was about to marinate them.

- a. 噉呢， 就 啲 雞扒 呢， 我 切咗  
*Gam2ne1, zau6 di1 gai1paa4 ne1, ngo5 cit3zo2*  
so then the chicken thigh SFP I cut-PFV  
一粒粒 嘍 / (\*嘅)  
*jat1lap1lap1 laak3/( \*ge3)*  
small chunk SFP/(SFP)

‘So, I have already cut those chicken thighs into small chunks.’

<sup>8</sup> Note that the second *hai6* in (3e) is an extra word which is commonly found in a faster, continuous speech. It is possible that the speaker himself was unaware of when producing this extra *hai6*.

- b. 比較 滑 啲 嘅 / (嘞)  
*Bei2gaau3 waat6 di1 ge3/(laak3)*  
 compare smooth a little SFP/(SFP)  
 ‘(The texture of chicken thighs) is more tender.’
- c. 噉 我哋 而家 要 醃 嘞 / (嘅)  
*Gam2 ngo5dei6 ji4 gaa1 jiu3 jip3 laak3/(ge3)*  
 then we now need marinate SFP/(SFP)  
 ‘Then, we now need to marinate it.’
- d. 噉 當然 啦<sup>9</sup>  
*Gam2 dong1jin4 laa1*  
 then of course SFP  
 ‘Of course.’
- e. 我哋 因為 炒 嘅, 要 落 啲 生粉  
*Ngo5dei6 jan1wai6 caau2 ge3, jiu3 lok6 di1 saang1fan2*  
 we because stir SFP need put some corn starch  
 㗎 喇<sup>10</sup>  
*gaa3 laa3*  
 SFP SFP  
 ‘Because we will stir fry it, so we need to put some corn starch in it.’

There are two uses of *laak3* in (4). In (4a), the speaker was certain that the chicken thighs had been cut into small chunks earlier. *Laak3* also denotes a changed state here, from “the state of the meat being as a whole” to “the state of the meat being as chunks.” Moreover, it signals finality emphasizing the event “cutting the chicken thigh” had been completed.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in (4c), the speaker was certain that the event “marinating the meat” was about to happen. In addition, *laak3* signifies a change of state from “the state of the speaker not being ready to marinate the meat” to “the state of the speaker being ready to marinate the meat.” Unlike (3), the context in (4) emphasizes on a state of affairs rather than the speaker’s prior knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> Contrary to *laak3*, *laa1* expresses obviousness, an invitation or request (Luke 1990 and Matthews & Yip 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The SFPs *gaa3* and *laa3* often co-occur together. This co-occurrence is sometimes called clustered particles. According to Matthews & Yip (2011), the semantic meaning of *gaa3 laa3* is a combination of the meaning of *gaa3* (assertion) and *laa3* (relevance). Research on clustered particles is relatively rare. Analyzing particle clusters is beyond the scope of this paper, therefore, any analysis will be left for later discussion. On the other hand, it has been proposed in the previous literature that *laak3* is fused with *laa3* and the checked final *-k* (Fung 2000 and Matthews & Yip 2011).

<sup>11</sup> The sense of finality of *laak3* in (4a) is possible carried from the aspect marker *-jo2* (㗎). Without *-jo2*, *ngo5 cit3 jat1 lap1 lap1 laak3* 我切一粒粒嘞, *laak3* strongly signals an upcoming event, that is “cutting the chicken thighs into small chunks” in the current context. This implies that a grammatical marker, for example the aspect marker *-jo2* in this case, can potentially alter the meaning of an SFP.

If we replace *laak3* with *ge3* in (4a) and (4c), *ge3* in (4a) sounds awkward whereas in (4c) sounds natural. With *ge3* in (4c), it signals what the speaker is stating is an inevitable fact. The perspective of informants varies in this regard. Three of them indicated that while *laak3* conveys change of state, *ge3* emphasizes a fact in (4a) and (4c). One native speaker reported that *laak3* signifies finality in (4a). Two other informants expressed the inappropriateness of the use of *ge3* in (4a) and (4c).

It is worth to elaborate a little more about the *ge3* in (4b) here. It is no doubt that *ge3* conveys epistemic meaning which emphasizes what the speaker regards as true. He is certain that chicken thighs are softer and more tender than other parts of chicken such as chicken breast. Note that there is no clue in the context for determining where and how the speaker acquired the knowledge (or experience). If we substitute *ge3* with *laak3* in (4b), the meaning of the utterance shifts the focus on the speaker’s certainty toward a changed state of the texture of the chicken meat, from “the state of the texture of the meat being tough” to “the state of the texture being soft and tender.”

I have thus far demonstrated and discussed the differences between *ge3* and *laak3* at the context level. The following table summarizes the dissimilarities of the SFPs.

Table 1 Differences between *ge3* and *laak3* concerning a speaker’s certain attitude

		Ge3	Laak3
Semantic feature	Epistemic Modality (certainty)	O	O
Context characteristics	Focus on a speaker’s knowledge	O	
	Have a factual sense	O	
	Focus on a state of affairs		O
	Signify finality		O
	Denote a changed state		O

#### 4. Concluding remarks

This short, preliminary study set out to investigate two epistemic SFPs *ge3* and *laak3* in Cantonese and to disentangle their sense of certainty. The findings reported here suggest that the context where *ge3* is used emphasizes the speaker’s prior knowledge and denotes a factual sense, whereas the context where *laak3* occurs focuses on a state of affairs and change of state. In addition to the author’s own intuition, additional perspectives were sought from native Cantonese speakers. In most cases, their feedback aligns with the author’s own intuitions presented in this paper. This study also emphasizes the importance of context analysis. As discussed in the previous sections, the context provides additional information of a speaker’s knowledge or experience. This process deepens our understanding of the nature of

SFPs in modern Cantonese. Nonetheless, the study is still in its infancy. There are a number of aspects this paper does not deal with for example, other SFPs in distinct family groups,<sup>12</sup> the situation of SFP clusters, and the interaction between syntax and semantics. A call for further investigation is therefore necessary.

## Appendix

The context of Examples (1) and (2).

(1) YouTuber: RickyKAZAF

Video title: 搽香水都有技巧!! 人生五大香水推薦

(How to use perfumes! My top five recommendations)

Background: The YouTuber was teaching the audience the proper ways to apply perfume and recommending his top five all-time favorite perfumes.

a. 咁 今日 呢, 就 好想 分享吓 呢  
*Gam3 gam1jat6 ne1, zau6 hou2soeng2 fan1hoeng2-haa6 ne1*  
 then today SFP then really want share-a-bit SFP

‘So, I wanted to share (with you) today...’

b. 究竟 香水 係 可以 點樣 搽 啦  
*Gau3ging2 hoeng1seoi2 hai6 ho2ji5 dim2joeng2 caa4 laa1*  
 after all perfume is can how apply SFP

‘How should (we) apply perfume...’

c. 第二 呢, 就 係 我 自己 有 邊 五 支  
*Dai6ji6 ne1, zau6 hai6 ngo5 zi6gei2 jau5 bin1 ng5 zil*  
 second SFP then is I self have which five CL  
 香水 呢,  
*hoeng1seoi2 ne1,*  
 perfume SFP

‘Second, (I wanted to share) which five perfumes...’

d. 係 我 特別 鍾意,  
*Hai6 ngo5 dak6bit6 zung1ji3,*  
 is I especially like  
 特別 喜愛 成日 都 噴 嘅/\*嘞  
*Dak6bit6 hei2oi3 sing4jat6 dou1 pan3 ge3/\*laak3*  
 especially love always also spray SFP

‘(Those perfumes) are my all-time favorites, and I always use them’

(2) YouTuber: Jason (大J)

Video title: 用急凍殺蟲劑冷凍食物! 會係咩味道?

(Freezing spray to freeze foods! How does it taste then?)

<sup>12</sup> They are L-, Z-, and G- family in Fung’s (2000) terms.

Background: Jason bought a sprayer from Japan which can freeze a cockroach in seconds. He pointed out that the product is safe to be used even next to food items, according to the instructions.

- a. 咁 我哋 就 唧 落去 呢 一 個  
*Gam3 ngo5dei6 zau6 zit1 lok6heoi3 nel jat1 go3*  
then we then spray continue this one CL  
棉花糖 度 ok ?  
*min4faal1ong2 dou4 ok?*  
marshmallow place ok  
'So, we are going to spray on this marshmallow, okay?'
- b. 大家 睇 倒 啦  
*Daai6 gaa1 tai2 dou2 laa1*  
everyone see PRT SFP  
'Everyone see this right?'
- c. 呢 個 棉花糖, 而家 係 臉 嘅 / 嘞, ok ?  
*Ne1 go3 min4faal1ong4, ji4gaa1 hai6 lam4 ge3/laak3 ok?*  
this CL marshmallow now is soft SFP/SFP ok  
'This marshmallow, it is soft at this moment.'
- d. 係 嘞, 我哋 用 呢 一 支 嘢 呢  
*Hai6 laak3, ngo5dei2 jung6 nel jat1 zil je5 nel*  
yes SFP we use this one CL thing SFP  
就 唧 落去 嘞。  
*zau6 zit1 lok6heoi3 laak3.*  
then spray continue SFP  
'Yes, we are going to use this thing to spray on it (the marshmallow).'
- e. 321 Ok, 零下 75 度 超級 凍。  
*321 Ok, ling4haa6 75 dou6 ciu1kap1 dung3.*  
321 ok minus 75 degree super cold  
'3,2,1. Ok, minus 75 degrees! Super cold!'

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## 試圖區分香港粵語的兩個認知情態句末語助詞

羅嘉輝

俄亥俄州立大學

### 提要

粵語語助詞的研究一直是熱門的題目。儘管學者們對語助詞的特徵在語言學上進行了多方面的研究，至今仍有未被論述的方面。語言學家提出語助詞“嘅”和“嘞”表示肯定。它們在句子中是否可以互換及在語意上是否傳達相同的確定性等亦尚未討論。本研究試圖通過語境分析來區分“嘅”和“嘞”的肯定性。研究指出，使用“嘅”的語境反映了說話者的肯定是有先前知識的支持，而使用“嘞”的語境強調了對事態的肯定，表示狀態變化和事態結束。

### 關鍵詞

粵語，句末語助詞，先前知識，語篇分析，認知情態

Mailing address: Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

Email: law.246@osu.edu

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