

Cantonese handout #14

Sentence Final Particles (SFP's) mei2 jam1 尾音

Cantonese is a language that's famous (or infamous, depending on how you look at it) for its sentence final particles (mei2 jam1). In English, we usually modify the mood or meaning of a sentence by uttering it in a different tone. However, since Cantonese is a tonal language, where changing the tone of a word may actually change the word into a different word, there is much less flexibility to do so. This is where the sentence final particles come in. These particles are often used to modify the mood or sometimes even the meaning of a sentence. Its purported that Cantonese may have up to a hundred of these particles, but in reality the ones used in daily life number much less.

Before you begin...

It should also be noted that learners should not attempt to use these particles until they fully understand their usage. Using the wrong particle in a sentence may make a sentence sound extremely funny, strange, or even rude and insulting. It is okay for students of Cantonese to leave out particles most of the time when they are still learning; the main meaning of the sentence will still be conveyed. However, to become fully fluent, the particles should eventually be mastered. Students of Cantonese should try to learn only a few at a time and verify with native Cantonese speakers to ensure that they are being correctly used. You may also notice that more than one particle can be combined in some cases.

The students are most likely familiar with the two most common finals, aa3 呀 and maa3. 嗎

Maa3 嗎 appears in "Type-1" or "Simple questions", changing statements into neutral (yes or no) questions. This is used more often in Mandarin/written Chinese, but can still be heard in Cantonese.

In the Sydney Lau series of books on learning Cantonese, he suggests that maa3. 嗎 is a combination of m4 唔 + aa3 呀. It gives the feel of "or not" to the sentence. Consider the examples below:

Nei5 faan1 uk1 kei2 maa3? Are you going home (or not)?

你返屋企嗎?

Nei5 hou2 maa3? Are you well (or not)?

你好嗎?

Keoi5 gou1 maa3? Is he tall (or not)?

佢高嗎?

Aa3 呀 is used in "type 2" or "choice" questions where the positive and the negative form of the verb are used. The aa3 is used to soften the tone of interrogatives so they won't seem so abrupt, and make them sound more natural. It can also occur in declaratives, imperatives, and exclamatives. Consider the following:

Nei5 heoi3 bin1 dou6 aa3? Where are you going?

你去邊處呀?

This would be the way you might ask a friend where they were going. Dropping the aa3 would make the question a bit curt and abrupt and might be the way a police officer would interrogate a suspect.

Cin4 min6 jau5 hou2 do1 jan4 aa3. There are a lot of people out front.

前面有好多入呀

In the above sentence the speaker is making a live report of a current situation. If the aa3 is left out, the sentence would be a factual statement which sounds abrupt and unnatural.

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Faa13 di1 sik6 aa3 Eat (a little) faster.

快啲食呀

This is a suggestion, where dropping the aa3 would make it more of a command.

Ni1 di1 caa4 zan1 hai6 zeng3 aa3! This tea tastes really nice!

呢啲茶真係正呀!

The addition of the aa3 makes this exclamation sound more emotional and more expressive.

In addition to the aa3, you will also encounter aa1, aak3, aa4, and aa5 which will be discussed in future lessons.

laa1, laa3, laak3, laa4, and laa5: The laa's generally indicate a "realization of state of affairs". They can in many cases be translated as "it is now the case that....."

Laa1: Many scholars suggest that laa1 is used to suggest tentativeness, a lack of finality or a lack of forcefulness. Others suggest that it establishes common grounds and marks obviousness. In comparison with it's laa3 counterpart where the speaker has no particular assumption about the listener's knowledge, the speaker using the laa1 assumes a level of knowledge on the part of the listener. Consider the following examples.

Ngo5 jiu3 heoi3 Mei5 gwok3 laa1 (Now) I have to go to America (as you should have known)

我要去美國啦

Keoi5 sik6 jyun4 laa3 (Obviously/as you have observed) He's done eating (now)

佢食完啦

Keoi5 zau2 zo2 hou2 noi6 laa1 She has left for a long time (I thought you knew)

佢走咗好耐啦

Used to "echo" previous similar statements the addition of the laa1 gives the feel of "Is that what you just said?"

Keoi5 zau2 zo2 hou2 noi6 laa1 She has left for a long time (Is that what you just said?)

佢走咗好耐啦

In both above examples, a level of listener oriented information is assumed. When used with imperatives it implies "please" as seen in the following examples.

Faa13 di1 sik6 laa1 Eat a little faster (please).

快啲食啦

Gwo3 lei4 laa1 Come over here (please)

過嚟啦

Laa3. like laa1 also marks a "realization of state" or "change of status" but with laa3 the speaker assumes no prior knowledge on the part of the listener, but rather that the speaker is introducing new information to the listener. Consider the following:

Ngo5 jiu3 heoi3 Mei5 gwok3 laa3 (It is now the case) I have to go to America.

我要去美國嘞

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Aai1 aa! gam1 jat6 jaa6 aa5 ng5 hou6 laa3 Oh my! today is (already) the 25th!

哎呀 今日 廿 呀 五 號 嘞

Lok6 jyu5 laa3 It's raining, (now)

落 雨 嘞

Ngo5 sik6 jyun4 laa3 I've(now) finished eating

我 食 完 嘞

Ni1 go3 zau6 gui3 zou6 zok3 on3 dung6 gei1 laa3 This is what is called "motive for
 呢個 就 叫做 作 案 動 機 嘞 committing a crime".

Some scholars believe that laa3 can also function to turn statements into directives. Others, however, feel that the laa3 still marks a realization of state and that the directive force comes from the sentence structure or other components. Consider the following:

Ngo5 dei6 hou2 zau2 laa3 We'd better go/ It's(now) time for us to go.

我 哋 好 走 嘞

is understood as an announcement rather than a suggestion..."let's go."

M4 hou2 gong2 gam3 do1 laa3 Don't talk so much. (any longer)

唔 好 講 咁 多 嘞

The laa3 in the above case indicates a change of state, from a situation where people are talking a lot, to a new situation where no one talks so much. The directive force is expressed separately, presumably by morphosyntactic means.

Laak3 is essentially the same as it's unchecked counterpart (laa3) but it is less neutral in the sense that it expresses more emotional involvement of the speaker. Sentences ending with laak3 usually imply that the new situation has some consequences on the speaker.

Consider the following:

Lok6 jyu5 laak3 It's raining, (So what are we going to do now?)

落 雨 嘞

Ngo5 sik6 jyun4 laak3 I've (now) finished eating (so I'm off to work)

我 食 完 嘞

Laa4 Sentences ending with laa4 are interrogatives checking whether a certain even did take place, or whether a new state did come about. The laa4 is used as opposed to maa3 because of the change of status. Consider the following:

Lok6 jyu5 laa4 So it's raining now?

落 雨 嘞

Nei5 sik6 jyun4 laa4 So, you're done eating?

你 食 完 嘞

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Laa5 is not mentioned in every publication, nor is it recognized by all scholars. Those that do, consider it to be very similar in use to the laa4. Both are used for seeking confirmation. With the laa5 however, the speaker shows more certainty as to what the answer would be. Laa5 can also be pronounced as le5 aa5

Lok6 jyu5 laa5 It's raining now (isn't it)? (assuming a positive response)

落雨嘞

Nei5 sik6 jyun4 laa4 You're done eating(aren't you)? (assuming a positive response)

你食完嘞

Summary

Laa1 implies...1. Please 2. Obviousness or prior knowledge by the listener 3. Is that what you just said?

Laa3 implies...1. Now or 2. Is used when "new" information is presented to the listener.

Laak3 is the same as laa3 but with more emotional involvement.

Laa4 is used in questions instead of maa3 to confirm "Is it now the case that....?"

Laa5 is the same as laa4 but with prior assumption of the answer.

Sources: http://www.cantonese.sheik.co.uk/essays/cantonese_particles.htm
<http://www.lotpublications.nl/publish/articles/001865/bookpart.pdf>