

## **Exploring the Role of Utterance-Final Particle *lō* in Turn Allocation in Cantonese Conversation**

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Inherent in Cantonese grammar, utterance-final particles are used in naturally occurring Cantonese conversations to aid speakers to perform speech acts, indicate the source of knowledge, as well as communicate emotions. While studied extensively in semantics, pragmatics, and syntax, research on these significant elements in Cantonese as conversation objects from a conversation analytic point of view is either scarce or under-represented. With an aim to fill this lacuna, this paper investigates the role and behavior of the utterance-final particle *lō* (囉) in turn construction and allocation using excerpts from a 42-minute telephone conversation. It is found that while an unstretched *lō* typically proposes turn completion and unfolds a CTRP, the particle is stretched strategically in naturally occurring conversations to signal and practice turn continuation. It is also argued that the turn-holding device is conceptually ingrained in native speakers' conversational knowledge.

### **1. Background**


Inherent in Cantonese grammar, utterance-final particles are pervasive in naturally occurring Cantonese conversations. These particles are a group of morphemes suffixed to most utterances to aid speakers to perform speech acts, indicate the source of knowledge, and/or communicate emotions (Matthews & Yip, 2011). Pragmatic meaning typically expressed in intonation in European languages is conveyed via particles in Cantonese (Chan, 1999; Wakefield, 2011), hence its ubiquity in conversations. Moreover, Luke (1990) reveals in an informal count that “an utterance particle is found in continuous talk [...] every 1.5 seconds” (p.11). Furthermore, researchers in modern days have discovered a tendency for Cantonese speakers to use these particles in online written communication even when typing in English, suggesting the importance of this group of untranslatable morphemes in Cantonese conversation (James, 2001; Sewell & Chan, 2016).

Studied extensively from various perspectives: from semantics (Kwok, 1984; Wakefield, 2011), to pragmatics and speech acts (Gibbons, 1980), to syntax (Fung, 2000; Matthews & Yip, 2011; Sybesma & Li, 2007), the functions of these particles remain elusive. While a conversation analytic (CA) approach was pioneered by Luke (1990) to examine these particles, much of his analysis (and what follows in CA in present days, if any) centers on the sequential contexts in which these particles appear, as well as their

relation to topic management. Research on their roles in turn management is surprisingly scarce, in spite of its importance in verbal communication. This paper, with a focus on one of the most frequently used utterance-final particles *lō*, aims to fill this research lacuna by closely scrutinizing it as a conversational object pertinent to turn construction. It hopes to complement what has been found in the existing literature in order to provide a more complete picture of how *lō* is manipulated to contribute to turn design.

It should also be noted that in this paper, the term “utterance-final particle” is used in lieu of “sentence-final particle” (as in other research) because spoken discourse, rather than written one, is investigated. By nature, speech comprises fragments to which these particles are adhered in the final syntactic position. Therefore, it is more appropriate to refer to them as “utterance-final particles” for the purpose of this paper.

## 2. Literature Review

The utterance particle investigated in the present study is , represented as *lō* (an abbreviation for a high-level tone /lo55/). It must be distinguished from the *lō* of a mid or low-level tone since the pragmatic functions they serve are entirely different and should be regarded as separate utterance particles. The versatility of the particle makes it infeasible in this paper to consider every possible syntactic position in which it may appear and the corresponding functions. Furthermore, given the purpose of this study, only its occurrence in the utterance-final position is considered.

Utterance-final particles are traditionally considered empty, which entails that “they do not have readily specifiable truth-conditional meanings” (Luke, 1990:4). However, other researchers have argued that particles encode certain meaning, especially one that colors the emotion of the speaker, reflects his stance, and expresses certainty (e.g. Leung, 2012; Wakefield, 2011; Ye, 2004), suggesting their identity as “emotional adverbs”. The particle under investigation, *lō*, must be attached to an utterance to exhibit its meaning, which is highly context-dependent, particularly when it appears in the utterance-final position. It is thus treated as semantically-free in this research.

Despite the lack of content meaning, the pragmatic functions adhered to *lō* has been rather thoroughly examined. Zhang and Ni (1999) illustrate the evidentiality connoted in the particle, implying that the speaker believes the message conveyed in the TCU as “simple, truthful, easily comprehensible and conclusive” (p.200; my translation). Fang (2003) adds that the particle can be used to “explain, agree or ascertain facts” (p.134; my translation). On the same note, Leung (2005) points out that the employment of *lō* indicates the speaker’s certainty about the message. It is complemented by Tang’s finding (2008), which delineates the sense of “naturally” and “of course” – self-evidentiality – carried by the particle. Moreover, as an attitude and emotion marker, *lō* denotes sarcasm and/or annoyance (Li, 1995), as well as certainty, frustration and dismay (Gao, 1980). Summarizing the previous findings, Matthews and Yip (2011) conclude that *lō* serves to:

(i) exhibit evidentiality

你 唔 理 佢 咪 得 囉  
 nei mh lei koei mai dak lo  
 you NEG care him PT okay PT  
*Just ignore him then it'll be OK!*

(ii) enhance affective and emotion coloring (e.g. express annoyance)

啲 車 行 得 勁 快 囉  
 dee ce haang dak ging fai lo  
 those car move ASP super fast PT  
*Those cars are moving so fast!*

(iii) invite agreement, cooperation and/or sympathy

唉 我 唔 知 點 算 好 囉  
 aai ngo mh ji dim suen ho lo  
 sigh I NEG know how deal good PT  
*Sigh. I don't know what to do.*

As for being a conversational object, the utterance-final *lō* is used as a device for completion proposal and topic closure, in a number of sequences including question-answer, reporting, settlement negotiation, and confirmation (Luke, 1990). While suggesting that *lō* marks a topic boundary, Luke (ibid) points out that the possibility of completion and ending that *lō* induces often orients to the “[passing of] responsibility on to the other participant(s) to take the conversation in some as yet underdetermined direction” (p.188). In CA terms, *lō* inherently marks the Possible Completion Point (PCP) of a TCU because syntactically it can be suffixed to a word, a phrase, a clause or a sentence, indicating a syntactic completion. By nature, each Cantonese character embodies a phonemic pitch (tone). Prosodic completion is thus automatically marked by an utterance-final particle, which also carries a pragmatic function, as discussed. In simpler terms, *lō* carries the structural function of unfolding a CTRP in Cantonese conversation, where syntactic, prosodic and pragmatic completions converge and a transition of turn to another speaker is highly expected (Ford and Thompson, 1996).

As speaker transition becomes relevant, the priority in applying turn allocation techniques follows in succession (Sack, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974):

- (a) Current [speaker] selects next;
- (b) If not (a), next speaker self-selects;
- (c) If not (b), current speaker continues.

For these reasons, when an utterance-final positioned *lō* is observed, transition of speakers is expected. Yet, topic closure achieved by *lō* may not necessarily trigger turn transition (Luke, 1990) since “this discourse role can be overridden by other indicators of incompleteness of the turn such as ... unfinished meaning” (Leung & Gibbons, 2011). However, the exact mechanism in such cases remains under-explained.

With an aim to address this unanswered question and contribute to the understanding of these essential elements in Cantonese conversation, this study sets out to explore the role of *lō* as a conversational object in relation to turn allocation. Specifically, I argue that stretching of *lō* invariably closes a CTRP and leads to turn continuation, while its unstretched counterpart always unfolds a CTRP and prompts turn transition. In other words, stretched *lō* is a turn-holding device in Cantonese conversation.

### 3. Data and Method

The naturally occurring data examined in the present study comes from a 42-minute audio-recorded telephone conversation in Cantonese between two confidants, J and S. Both interlocutors were born and raised, and have spent a significant amount of time in Hong Kong, hence the representativeness of the Hong Kong Cantonese speech style. In the conversation, a range of topics are covered, which orient to the daily life events of the participants.

The entire conversation is transcribed<sup>1</sup> iteratively by the researcher to enhance the intra-rater reliability. Upon identification of the candidate turn-holding device, the situational and sequential contexts in which it appears are coded and categorized as exemplified:

(Extract 0: Recount a conversation: 08:15-20)

- 01 J: → 咪講番嗰日囉::.  
 mai gong faan gor jat lo::.  
 PT say ASP that day PT  
*So we talked about that day again.*
- 02 咪講番嗰日(.)跟住又拗咗陣.  
 mai goong faan gor jat (.) gan zyu jau aau zo zan.  
 PT say ASP that day then again argue ASP PT  
*So we talked about that day, then we argued a little.*
- 03 S: 哦: OK:. 算啦.  
 ngo: OK: syun laa.  
 EXCL forget PT  
*I see. Forget it.*

Table 1: Codes

Stretched?	Turn allocation	Communication breakdown?	Remarks
YES	Turn held; current speaker continues	NO	As expected

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for transcription key. The second row of each line comprises transcription to *Jyutping* (粵拼), a Romanization system for Cantonese developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong.

The patterns of turn allocation are then analyzed within a conversation analytic framework in relation to other conversational objects and practices in the sequence. Instances of the use of the candidate device are discussed and delineated in six selected extracts.

#### 4. Analysis

As discussed in the literature review, a typical function of the Cantonese utterance-final particle *lō* is to negotiate endings, declare evidentiality, and invite agreement and sympathy (Matthews and Yip, 2011). The following excerpt displays how a regular *lō* without stretching indicates the end of a TCU and opens up a CTRP, which renders a regular turn allocation priority (Sacks et al., 1974). Leading up to the excerpt, the participants discuss the items to pack when they go camping.

(Excerpt 1: Packing: 38:18-32)

- 01 S:      其實真正要擺落去嘅  
           kei sat zan zing jiu baai lok-heoi ge  
           actually truly need put ASP PT  
           *Actually what needs to be put in there*
- 02            其實真係得衫: 㗎啫 㗎:  
           kei sat zan hai dak saam: ga ze wo:  
           actually really only clothes PT PT PT  
           *is just clothes.*
- 03 J: → (0.1) 係喇(.) 沖涼嘢: 囉.  
           (0.1) hai le (.) cung loeng je: lo.  
           yes PT shower stuff PT  
           *Yeah. And toiletries.*
- 04 S:      沖涼嘢咁你share㗎嘛: >都係<一份: 啫:  
           cung loeng je gum nei ga ma: >dou hai<jat fen: je:  
           shower stuff PT you PT PT also be one CL PT  
           *But you share the toiletries, and it's just one set of them.*
- 05 J: → 係囉.  
           hai lo.  
           yes PT  
           *Yeah.*
- 06 S:      係呀.  
           hai aa.  
           yes PT  
           *Yeah.*

A simple turn sequence of suggestion and agreement is observed. Lines 01-02 form the first pair part (FPP) of the base adjacency pair when S suggests packing only clothes, and J's agreement turn at line 03 completes the sequence. When he further proposes to bring toiletries (*cung loeng je: lō*) at line 03, he suffixes the utterance with an

unstretched *lō* to signify evidentiality as well as invite agreement. At the same time, a CTRP is exposed. S as the next speaker self-selects to pick up the turn (Sacks et al., 1974) and supply an insert expansion at line 04 in order to clarify that only one set of toiletries is needed. At line 05, J supplies the second pair part with (“*hai lo.*” // “*Yeah*”). Serving identical pragmatic functions, the unstretch *lō* (line 05) reveals a CTRP where S, as the next speaker, fulfills the turn transition expectation and completes the sequence with a sequence closing third (“*hai aa*”). These two instances shed light on the pragmatic role of *lō* in terms of completion proposal.

To further substantiate the claim that an unstretched *lō* is perceived in Cantonese to signal pre-closing, the use of an unstretched *lō* in Excerpt 2 below is analyzed, which consists of J’s recount of an argument with his materialistic ex-boyfriend.

(Excerpt 2: Designer brand: 05:35-05:44)

- 01 S: .hh 即係其實佢覺得你同佢一樣  
 .hh zik hai kei sat keoi gok dak nei tung keoi jat joeng  
 so be actually he feels you and him one type  
*That means he feels you and him are the same kind of people*
- 02 → 都咁鍾意啲啲-brands囉.  
 dou gum zoeng yi goh dee- lo.  
 also as like that CL PT  
*and you like those designer brands as much as he.*
- 03 (0.8)
- 04 S: 個心裡.hh  
 gor sum loei.hh  
 CL heart inside  
*Inside you.*
- 05 J: .hh hh 我唔知::呀.hh=  
 .hh hh ngo mh zi:: a. hh=  
 I NEG know PT  
*I don’t know.*
- ((J then went on to initiate a new topic))

As seen in the excerpt, a turn sequence is constructed when S makes an assessment about the recount and J in turn neither agrees nor disagrees with the assessment, expressing frustration in his tone. At lines 01-02, S constructs a multi-unit turn by a mid-TCU device. She finishes her first TCU in line 01 (i.e. concluding that the ex-boyfriend feels J and himself are the same), and employs a prospective indexical (i.e., “yat joeng”, *the same*) (Goodwin, 1996) that points forward to the next TCU in line 02, when she explains how J and the ex-boyfriend might be the same. Upon the completion, the unstretched *lō* serves the said pragmatic function, exposing a CTRP. A speaker transition becomes relevant, when J as the next speaker is expected to self-select and pick up the turn (Sacks et al., 1974). A gap (line 03) immediately follows the unstretched *lō*-

suffixed utterance due to J's failure to take up the turn, leading S to exercise the current-speaker-continue practice by adding an increment at line 04 (Schegloff, 1996; Walker, 2007) to repair the trouble source. At line 05, J makes an assessment about S's comment and moves on to the next topic. The excerpt illustrates that the unstretched *l̄o* is used as a device to signal pre-closing and completion proposal. Pragmatically it invites agreement, which is acknowledged by J as seen in line 05 (his hesitation about offering agreement). It also goes in line with Luke's claim that the co-participant is responsible for taking the conversation in some as yet undetermined direction, demonstrating that *l̄o* itself, when unstretched, is a turn-completion marker that entails the opening up of a CTRP for a transition of turn among speakers, as opposed to its stretched counterpart as detailed in Excerpts 3, 4 and 5.

Excerpt 3 below manifests how the stretching of *l̄o* keeps the pragmatic function intact but allows the current speaker to retain his/her turn. The conversation is about S's frustration with the late settlement of her credit card balance. She justifies the unpunctuality in an attempt to elicit sympathy from J. To do so, S constructs a very long turn using the candidate device thrice.

(Excerpt 3: Credit card: 06:13-06:52)

- 01 S: .hh 我 唔 記 得 找 <唔 數 呀::> hh  
 .hh ngo mh gei dak zaau <kaat sou a::> hh  
 I NEG remember settle card amount PT  
*I've forgotten to settle my credit card balance.*
- 02 J: 我 知 呀.(.) [ 跟 住 呢? ]  
 ngo zi a.(.) [ gan zyu ne? ]  
 I know PT follow ASP PT  
*I know. And then?*
- 03 S: → [ 好 唔: 開 s- ] 咁 咪 找 番 >囉<=  
 [ hou mh: hoi s- ] gum mai zaau faan >lo<=  
 very NEG hap- PT PT settle ASP PT  
*I'm very sad. Well, I'll settle it.*
- 04 都 遲 咗 [ 幾 日 喇 唉:: 好 唔 開 心 呀= 今 日- ]  
 dou ci zo [ gei jat laa aai:: hou mh hoi sam a= gam jat- ]  
 ASP late ASP several day PT EXCLM very NEG happy PT today  
*It's been overdue for a few days, sigh. I'm very unhappy today.*
- 05 J: [ hhh ]
- 06 .hh \$你 咪 去 打 去 今 次 啖\$  
 .hh \$nei mai heoi daa heoi gam ci ai\$  
 you PT go call to this time tell  
*then you call them this time and tell*
- 07 [ 佢(h) 比(h) 個(h) 機(h) 會(h) 你(h) 囉(h). hhhhhhhhhh ]  
 [ keoi (h) bei (h) gor (h) gei (h) wui (h) nei (h) lo (h). hhhhhhhhhh ]  
 him give CL opportunity you PT

- 08 S: → [ ↑真 ↑係 想 CRY 囉:: 突然- 因為 其實 好 衰= ]  
 [ ↑zan ↑hai soeng lo:: dat jin- jan wai kei sat hou sei= ]  
 really want PT suddenly because actually very bad  
*I really want to cry. Suddenly. It's because it's actually very bad.*
- 09 =我 z- 知道 我呢 一 張 咭  
 =ngo z- zi dou ngo ni jat zoeng kaat  
 I kn- know I this one CL card  
*I know that this credit card of mine*
- 10 次 次 都 月 頭 .hh 我- 應 該 suppose 去 韓 國 前 就  
 ci ci dou jyut tau .hh ngo- jing goi heoi hon gwok cin zau  
 time time also month head I should go Korea before ASP  
*every time at the beginning of the month, I'm supposed to, before going to Korea,*
- 11 要 找 咗 佢 °呀°=因為- 我 去 完 韓 國 番 嚟  
 jiu zaau zo keoi °a°= jan wai- ngo heoi jyun hon gwok faan lai  
 need settle ASP it PT because- I go ASP Korea back ASP  
*I need to settle it because after I've come back from Korea*
- 12 其 實 我 成 個 人 .hh 都- 都 lo:st 晒 啦 =>我 根 本 就 唔-<  
 kei sat ngo saang gor jan .hh dou- dou sai la=>ngo gan bun zau mh-<  
 actually I entire CL person also also ADV PT I at all ASP NEG  
*my entire mind is lost. I can't...*
- 13 → > 根 本 就< 完: 全 無 記 得 呢 件 事 囉::=  
 >gan bun zau< jyun: cyun mou gei dak ni gin si lo::=  
 at all ASP totally NEG remember this CL event PT  
*I can't remember this at all.*
- 14 =唉. 唔 開 心 呀.  
 =aai. mh hoi sam a.  
 EXCLM NEG happy PT  
*Sigh. That's so sad.*

S's explicit news announcement about forgetting to settle her credit card at line 01 is responded by J's explicit acknowledgement "I know", which prompts S to blatantly express her feeling "Very unhappy", yet it is cut off because the utterance overlaps with J's request to elaborate on the event, "And then?" (line 02). The request is immediately followed by S's utterance "I'll settle it" (line 03). *lō* is employed to suffix the TCU in order to invite sympathy from J because the implicature is that she has to pay a penalty fee for missing the deadline. *lō* alone without stretching would indicate the end of the TCU and open up a CTRP for the transition of turn to the next speaker. However, S stretches it in order to extend her turn, which allows her to explain how long the deadline has passed and to reiterate her sadness (line 05) in order to maximize the sympathy that she can arouse from J. The implicature is understood by J, who thus responds humorously with another implicature about calling the bank and asking for an extension of deadline



without any penalty<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the use of humor with laughter as support is evidence that S's deliberate attempt to trigger sympathy was successful since it is a typical practice to soothe negative emotions (Hay, 2001).

Lines 08-14 represent an extended turn which S stretches *lō* twice (lines 08 and 13) to construct and hold, so as to perform the same pragmatic functions as what she does at lines 03-04, i.e., to express frustration and heighten sympathy, hereby through justification for her forgetfulness. S starts off the turn with an emotion trigger, claiming that she wants to cry (with an emphasis on “*really*” by a pitch rise, and “*cry*” with heavier stress), as a direct declaration of her feeling. The TCU carries the emotion of frustration as indicated by the utterance-final particle *lō*. To eliminate the conversation-terminating function of the particle, S stretches it to signal turn continuation in order for her to preserve her turn and provide more justification about her absent-mindedness in a multi-unit turn (lines 08-13), when she explains that she was too exhausted to remember to settle the credit card balance after her business trip in Korea. Note that within the turn, she uses other turn-holding devices including latching (lines 11 and 12), a compound TCU (lines 12-13 “*because...can't remember it at all*”)<sup>3</sup>, and quick start/ rush through (line 12)<sup>4</sup> (Wong and Waring, 2010). At the end of the final component of the compound TCU (line 13), she uses *lō* to, again, invite agreement and sympathy. For the same reason as the previous two instances in this excerpt, she stretches *lō*, alongside latching, to avoid giving up the turn in the CTRP so that she can reiterate conspicuously her feeling (*very unhappy*) at line 14 in order to maximize the potential sympathy from J.

The analysis of this excerpt demonstrates the how the utterance-final particle *lō* can be stretched in order for the current speaker to fill the CTRP for the construction of multiple TCUs at the speaker's discretion – in this case, to elaborate on a topic and strengthen the affective coloring. Additionally, it can be used with other turn-holding devices to fashion a multi-unit turn.

Excerpt 4 here adequately demonstrates in two instances how the stretching of *lō* is used to hold a turn even when the speaker is not necessarily ready for it. It is most evident because throughout the exchange, J persistently fights for a turn to talk while S attempts to build an extensive turn. To safeguard her turn, S stretches *lō* on two

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<sup>2</sup> As explained by the participants: because of a prior incident that the participants want to keep confidential, they now find calling the bank and asking for a deadline extension for card balance settlement humorous, and it is elicited by the word “chance”.

<sup>3</sup> The compound TCU is considered a turn-holding practice because in the given context, a CTRP opens up at 呀 (“*a*”, *PT*) (line 11). Adding the because-subordinate clause (the preliminary component of a compound TCU) makes the TCU incomplete, and the speaker can retain the turn so as to finish the TCU with a final component.

<sup>4</sup> These practices are not the focus of the paper and thus are not delineated. Note that the rush-through at 12 should be distinguished from the one at line 13 although they comprise the same words, since the latter (the repetition) should just be regarded as a self-initiated self-repair, while the former is a TCU-end turn-holding device (Schegloff, 1996).

occasions. Prior to what is illustrated in the excerpt, the co-participants complain about the incessant request from J's ex-boyfriend for a video call while neither J nor S is ready for it. They feel video-calling someone for no specific reason is absurd.

(Excerpt 4: Video call: 02:37-03:02)

01 S: → 我其實從來未試過 request 人地同我 video call 囉::  
 ngo kei sat cung loi mei si gwo jan dei tung ngo lo::  
 I actually ever yet try ASP person PL with me PT  
*I've actually never requested anyone to do a video call with me.*

02 J: hh 我 都 <係:: °呀° >.  
 hh ngo dou <h[ai:: °a° >.  
 I also be PT  
*I am the same.*

03 S: >[除非有]<特別->即係<譬如你話  
 >[tsui fei yao]<dak bit->zik hai<pei jyu nei waa  
 unless have special so be like you say  
*Unless there's something special, that is, like, say,*

04 你去左旅[行::]咁樣: [你想]show吓啲-環境=  
 nei heoi zo lei [hang::] gum joeng: [nei soeng] haa dee- waan ging=  
 you go ASP travel like kind you want ASP those surroundings  
*like you've gone traveling and you want to show a bit of the surroundings*

05 J: [hh] [hhhhh]

06 S: → =或者各樣嘢比我[睇囉::],  
 =waak ze gok joeng ye bei ngo [taai lo::],  
 or each kind thing for me see PT  
*or for me to see different kinds of things.*

07 J: [hhhhh]

08 S: → 如果唔係-真係唔知-  
 jyu gwo mh hai- zan hai mh zi-  
 if NEG be real be NEG know  
*If not, I really don't know*

09 J: >但係-我-<  
 >daan hai- ngo-<  
 but be I  
*But I*

10 S: → [個樣又咪係咁::].  
 [go joeng jau mai hai gum::].  
 CL face again ASP be this  
*The face is always the same.*

11 J: [°h h h h h° h h h h h h h] 咪(h) 係(h)::  
 [°h h h h h° h h h h h h h] mai (h) hai (h)::  
 ASP be  
*Exactly*

((J goes on to elaborate on his argument with his J))

At line 01, S constructs a TCU and claims that she has never asked anyone to engage in a video call. At the end of the line, a CTRP is created with the utterance-final particle *lō*, showing the speaker's annoyance and declaring evidentiality of the utterance. Note that S stretches *lō* here in an attempt to construct a multi-unit turn. Her intention is further evidenced by her quickened, overlapped start at line 03. However, J unexpectedly inserted a short comment at line 02 (*hh ngo dou <h[ai::<sup>o</sup>a<sup>o</sup> J]>. // "I am the same."*). S notices J's desire to fight for a turn. Therefore, when J stretches "*hai::*" in "*hai:: a*" (line 02) as an emphatic device, S exploits it as a hint for a PCP. In order to save her own multi-unit turn, S adopts a transitional overlap (Jefferson, 1983) with her quickened utterance "*unless*" at line 03 before a TRP is even exposed so as to reclaim her turn before J goes further. This sequence is the first instance in the excerpt to illustrate that the stretching of *lō* is meant to be a turn-holding device.

Upon successful reclamation of the turn at line 03, S continues until line 10 to elaborate on the topic so as to substantiate her argument that video calling someone for no reasons is unnecessary. Be aware that J's laughter at line 05 is a minimal response token, which does not interrupt nor disturb S's continuous turn at lines 03, 04 and 06. At line 03, the conditional conjunction "*tsui fei*" ("*unless*") hints that S is ready to establish a sentential (compound) TCU, whose preliminary component occurs at lines 03-06. Knowing that she needs a longer turn to encompass the final component, she adopts a stretched *lō*. Recognizing his co-participant's effort, J only supplies a response token again (the laughter) at line 07 without picking up the turn in order to give space for S to fill the final component: the "*if not*" clause (lines 08-10, with line 09 being an unsuccessful attempt by J to interrupt; explained below). What also contributes to the smoothness of this extended turn is the speakers' implicit knowledge about Cantonese subordinate clauses, where parataxis of double conjunctions are frequently used. S's utterance at lines 03-06 ("*Unless... things to see*") carries the projectability of an upcoming clause that begins with "*if not*". The turn-holding device prompts J to refrain from breaking the seamless, extended turn. An important finding here is that this sequence contradicts existing literature's claim about *lō* being a device to "negotiate ending", "propose completion" or hint "topic closure" (Luke, 1990; Matthew and Yip, 2011). S suffixes *lō* to her utterance in order to, on the contrary, hold her turn and stay on the same topic. It shows that stretching of *lō* strips a significant pragmatic function off the utterance particle.

Lines 08-10 reveal an interesting observation about how a stretched *lō* can be employed. S's utterance at line 08 is characterized by abrupt cut-offs, thus semantically obscure. It prompts an other-initiated self-repair practice when J attempts to fight for a turn to continue with the topic with a rush-through at line 09, yet in vain because of S's very rapid self-repair at line 10. J's interruption is extremely short and cut off by S, who entirely ignores it and continues with the talk on the same topic. I thus consider the

interruption insignificant and regard lines 08 and 10 a continuous turn. However, as mentioned, S's own utterance at lines 08-10 is filled with cut-offs as well. It shows that she is in fact not prepared to continue with her turn at line 06, while the fact that she still deliberately stretches *lō* in order to hold the turn means that she regards *lō-stretching* a strategic device for turn-holding. Her successful construction of an extended turn also entails J's recognition of her intention, which is reflected in the adoption of the candidate device.

The previous excerpts have illustrated with examples how the stretched utterance-final particle *lō* serves as an effective turn-holding device to build multi-unit turns so that the speaker's comments or assessments on a particular event can be extended and elaborated. The following excerpt, however, shows how the misuse of the device can cause communication breakdown. The negative example further proves that the stretching of *lō* is perceived (in implicit knowledge) as a turn-holding device in Cantonese.

Excerpt 5 captures the snippet of the co-participants' chat about J's family. Preceding what is shown below, the co-participants discuss the ungenerous spending habits of J's brother, when J expresses dismay toward his brother's manipulation over their parents.

(Excerpt 5: Parents: 21:56-22:26)

01 S: .hh [ hhhhhh ]

02 J: [ 阿 媽 ] 去 澳 洲 > 嗰 陣 時 < 又 係 淨 番 > 嗰 啲 <  
[ a maa ] heoi ou zau > go zan si < jau hai zing faan > go dee <  
PRX mom go Australia that moment again be remain back that CL

*When mom was in Australia, I'm sure she left behind for him*

03 澳 紙 又 留 番- 留- 留 低 晒 比 佢.  
ou zi jau lau faan- lau- lau dai sai bei keoi.  
Oz dollar again leave back leave leave below all for him  
*the remaining Oz dollars.*

04 S: → .hh 我 唸 > 佢 咁 覺 得 < 有 歉 [ 意 ] 囉 ::  
.hh ngo laam > keoi dei gok dak < jau hip [ yi ] lo ::  
I think he PL feel have sorrow PT  
*I think they feel sorry.*

05 J: [ 佢- ]  
[keoi-]  
he  
*He*

06 (1.0)

07 J: 佢 咁 一 定 係 唱 多 咗- 我 阿 媽 佢-  
keoi dei jat ding hai coeng do zo- ngo a maa keoi-  
he PL surely be change more ASP I PRX mom her  
*They must have changed extra.*

08 我 都 知 我 阿 媽 㗎 喇- > 一 定 係 唱 <

- ngo dou zi ngo a maa ga laa- >jat ding hai coeng-<  
 I also know I PRX mom PT PT surely be change  
*I know my mom. She must have changed*
- 09 >一定係< 唱 (.) 勁: over 佢 要用 嘅 錢  
 >jat ding hai< coeng (.) ging: over keoi jiu jung ge cin  
 for sure be change much she need use POSS money  
*changed a lot more money than she needed*
- 10 然= 然= 然之後 就係 預備 好 留 比- 然之後 就  
 jin= jin= jin zi hau zau hai jyu bei hou lau bei- jin zi hau zau  
 th- -th- then ASP be prepare ASP leave for then ASP  
*so that she can...*
- 11 預備 好 比 錢 佢 嚟 [喇. ]  
 jyu bei hou bei cin keoi ga [laa. ]  
 prepare ASP give money him PT PT  
*She's prepared to leave the money behind for him.*
- 12 S: [肯 ]定 啦::  
 [hang] ding la::  
 sure  
*For sure.*

((The topic is abandoned and the co-participants continue with other topics))

Lines 02 to 12 demonstrate how a misused stretched *lō* affects the turn shape when the two speakers handle preference (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987). The first pair part (FPP) is constructed by J at lines 02-03 where he complains that his mother left behind all the unused cash for his brother when the parents visited Australia. S notices the negative emotion, so instead of a mere news receipt to close the sequence, S offers a preferred action in a dispreferred format<sup>5</sup>: an account (“[the parents] feel sorry”) with mitigating words “*ngo laam*” (“I think”). It is a preferred action because in Cantonese culture (or even broader Chinese culture), it is very impolite and face-threatening to comment on another person’s family issues even amongst close friends, or if no sympathy is offered when such issues are brought up. Therefore, normally the turn is characterized by mitigation, sigh, accounts, and more utterance-final particles within, leading to a longer turn. Both speakers come from the same culture and are aware of this practice. J thus logically perceives S’s stretched *lō* at line 04 as her intention to build a longer turn, which explains why J’s transitional overlap at line 05 is cut off on hearing the device. Whereas the syntax and pragmatics of S’s evaluative remark at line 04 “*I think they feel sorry*” project turn completion, the stretched *lō* suggests turn continuation. However, it is not accompanied by S’s continuation that is expected by J, leading to a 1.0-second gap of communication breakdown at line 06. At lines 07-11, J initiates and repairs the turn by elaborating how he speculates his mom changed more than enough

<sup>5</sup> “Dispreferred format” used here speaks from an English conversation analyst’s point of view. Note that *Preference* is context-dependent and may vary across cultures.

Australian dollars so that she could leave the extra cash behind for the brother. It can be observed that this turn is filled with cut-offs, quickened speech and latching in a rather random manner when compared to J's other utterances in the rest of the 42-minute conversation. I thus speculate that J is caught off-guard and did not expect himself to take up the turn so soon because of S's use of the turn-holding device at line 04. The sequence is closed with S's turn at line 12 "*hang ding la:.*" ("*For sure.*"), where S shows agreement with J's claim in the previous turn. As observed in the sequence, it is likely that S plans to do pre-closing with *lō* while she by accident stretches it, causing confusion in turn allocation.

This excerpt adequately displays, through a negative example, that the stretching of *lō* is procedurally perceived as a turn-holding device in Cantonese conversation, and the misuse of it for any reason can cause a communication breakdown.

Upon review of the instances where *lō* is used, cases are found where an unstretched *lō* is followed by a turn-continuation of the current speaker and the conversation remains smooth. Essentially they serve as evidence that refutes the argument of the research. However, it is discovered in these instances that *lō* is consistently accompanied by other turn-holding devices.

Excerpt 6 below illustrates two circumstances where, idiosyncratically yet consistently, a smooth turn-continuation occurs following an unstretched *lō*. Anterior to what is captured below, S informs J that she is about to switch phones in order to record their conversation.

(Excerpt 6: Phone: 00:01-00:43)

- 01 J: 嘩= >你呢個電話<好::差呀=  
waa= >nei ni gor din waa<hou:: caa aa=  
wow you this phone very bad PT  
*Wow this phone of yours is really bad.*
- 02 >可唔可以<細聲小小:呀.  
>ho mh ho ji< sai saang siu siu: aa.  
can NEG can small volume little PT  
*Can you turn the volume down a bit.*
- 03 S: → 我驚你聽唔到所以我咪大聲啲囉↑  
ngo gang nei tang mh dou sor ji ngo mai daai sang dee lō↑  
I afraid you hear NEG PT so I PT loud COMP PT  
*I'm afraid you can't hear me so I speak louder.*
- 04 <>我已經<錄緊喇.  
<>ngo ji ging< luk gan le.  
I already record ASP PT  
*I'm already recording us.*
- 05 J: =唔駛:呀=我唔係撞聾↑:呀.  
=mh sai: aa= ngo mh hai zong lung↑: aa.  
NEG need PT I NEG be deaf PT

*No need. I'm not deaf.*

((5 turns later))

11 J: 嘩 好- 呢 個 電 話 真 係 好 鬼 差: 呀.

waa hou- ni gor din waa zan hai hou gwai caa: aa.

wow very this CL phone really very EMP bad PT

*Wo. This phone is really bad.*

12 S: 同 埋 呢: >呢 個< 電 話 如 果 較 咗 speaker 呢:

tung maai ne: >ni gor< din waa jyu gwo gaau zo ne:

also PT this CL phone if set ASP PT

*Also, if I set to use the speaker on this phone,*

13 你 whatsapp 嗰 張 相 呢 會 勁:: 大 喺 我 個

nei gor zoeng soeng ne wui ging:: daai hai ngo gor

you that CL photo PT will super big LOC me CL

*your Whatsapp photo becomes super big on my*

14 → screen °囉 °=我 嗰 個 係 note three \$°囉 °\$=[ 好:: >大< ].

°lō°=ngo gor gor hai \$°lō°\$= [hou:: >daai<].

PT I that CL be PT very big

*screen. Mine is a Note 3. It's very big.*

15 J: [hhhhhhhhhh] [hhhhhhhhhh]

16 S: [ 完 全 唔 想 見 到 你 個 樣 囉:: ].

[jyun cyun mh soeng gin dou nei gor joeng lō:: ].

totally NEG want see ASP you CL face PT

((S continues with her turn and the topic shifts her comments on J's photo))

Triggered by the switch of phones, J launches a direct complaint in the TCU at line 01 about the substandard quality of S's new handset. It also serves as a preface to his request for S to speak more softly at line 02. S notices the negative event, thus immediately produces a "not at fault" complaint treatment (Dersley and Wootton, 2000) with an account at line 03, where she explains why she uses a louder voice. It is also at this line where she adopts an unstretched *lō* in the discontinuous construction "*mai...lō*" (line 03) to express an emphatic tone (Tang, 2008), in order to magnify the pragmatic function of self-evidentiality and settlement negotiation carried by the particle. Instead of terminating her turn after *lō*, S immediately fills the CTRP and creates a new TCU with a news announcement (*I am already recording us*) in the retained turn at line 04. It serves as a remedy to further mitigate the complaint in order to reach conciliation. Note that *lō* (line 03) has an audibly higher pitch than normal, and the new TCU is accompanied by a rushed start with quickened speech at the beginning (<>*ngo ji ging*<). These salient phonetic details suggest that a turn-extension practice similar to "abrupt-join" described

by Local and Walker (2004, p.1388) is employed<sup>6</sup>, which overrides the CTRP opened up by *lō*. It explains the continuation of the turn despite the absence of stretching on *lō* at line 03. J then ridicules the defense at line 05, leading to conciliation.

After a short conversation comprised of five turns (skipped in the transcript), J does complaining directly again about the quality of the phone at line 11. In response, S offers “an alternative characterization of the defense” (Dersley and Wootton, 2000) and shifts the topic to the enlarged photo of J’s on her phone. She constructs a compound TCU at lines 12-14 (*If I set to use... your Whatsapp photo...screen*). At line 14, two instances of turn-continuation following an unstretched *lō* are observed. The first *lō* is suffixed to the final component of the compound TCU (henceforth denoted as 14a); the second is adhered to the subsequent turn, an implicature (*ngo gor gor hai note three \$lo°\$=// “Mine is a Note 3”*) (hereafter denoted as 14b), immediately followed by its explanation (“*It’s very big*”). In order to invite a conciliatory response from J (the complainer) in the third position of the complaint sequence (Wong and Waring, 2010), S uses an account and remedy in her alternative characterization of the defense as mitigation. Therefore, she creates an extended turn. The utterance-final particle *lō* affords the pragmatic meaning of evidentiality and annoyance as displayed in the intonation, while in both instances they are succeeded by latching, which is a typical turn-extension practice (ibid). It explains the occurrence of turn continuation even when *lō* is not stretched and answers the question about how exactly the mechanism in overriding *lo*’s discourse role works (Leung and Gibbons, 2011; Luke, 1990).

The instances in Excerpt 6 adequately capture a typical marked condition – accompaniment of other turn-holding practices – where turn continuation occurs even after an unstretched *lō*. Furthermore, what attracts the researcher’s attention in particular is that the particle *lō* (14a and 14b) is characterized by a lower volume, which is possibly due to regressive assimilation to aid latching for the turn-extension. It may hint that the softening of *lō* has a structural conversational property as a turn-holding device by itself and/or when used with latching. However, there is insufficient data to verify the speculation.

## 5. Discussion

For easy conceptualization of what is discussed, a summary of finding is provided in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Summary of excerpt analyses

Excerpt	Is <i>lo</i> stretched?	Turn allocation as illustrated in the data	Communication Breakdown?	Remarks
1	NO	Turn transitioned: next	NO	Assumption

<sup>6</sup> There are features of “abrupt-join” that do not apply to Cantonese due to its phonological differences to English. This instance at lines 03-04 exhibits the features applicable to Cantonese, thus my treatment for its as a turn-extension practice “similar to ‘abrupt-join’”.



		speaker self-selects		confirmed
2	NO	Turn transition interrupted by gap	YES	Repair needed
3	YES	Turn held by current speaker	NO	Assumption confirmed
4	YES	Turn held by current speaker	NO	Assumption confirmed; turn held even when current speaker is has not organized thoughts well
5	YES	Turn transition interrupted by gap	YES	Repair needed
6	NO	Turn held by current speaker	NO	Turn continuation aided by other turn-holding practices (e.g. latching)

In response to the research questions, the analyses of the six excerpts essentially confirm the assumptions that:

- (a) an unstretched *lō* prompts turn transition,
- (b) a stretched *lō* functions as a turn-holding device

I argue that these concepts are ingrained in native speakers' implicit knowledge because, as shown in the behaviors of the native Cantonese-speaking participants, a violation of them invariably leads to communication breakdown. That native speakers systematically treat the violation as a trouble source is strong evidence that they are part of the implicit knowledge.

Excerpt 1 draws the baseline for this paper, illustrating that an unstretched *lō* unfolds a CTRP and promotes turn transition. The seamless transition should be compared with the communication breakdown in Excerpt 2, where an unstretched *lō* is employed while the next speaker fails to self-select and pick up the turn. Instances in Excerpts 3 and 4 manifest how speakers strategically take advantage of a stretched *lō* in order to hold a turn to convey contextual and pragmatic meaning. They are in stark contrast with those in Excerpt 5, where repair practices are required thanks to a communication breakdown created by the current speaker who does not continue with the turn upon the use of a stretched *lō*. While Excerpt 6 features instances where the CTRP is not available for turn transition despite the utilization of an unstretched *lō*, it is justified by the fact that other turn-holding practices are employed, including latching and abrupt-join. Instead of serving as a challenge to this paper's argument, Excerpt 6, together with the rest, in fact illuminates an unexplored aspect of research for the subject matter and helps to fill the gap left open by Leung and Gibbons (2011) and Luke (1990) in terms of

the mechanism of turn allocation involving utterance-particle. Moreover, the data analyzed in this paper comes from a telephone conversation. With the absence of paralinguistic cues such as gaze and gestures, participants can only rely on the spoken discourse and conversation objects in terms of turn allocation. It gives more weight to the role of these verbal practices and devices when it comes to turn construction, enhancing the validity of the paper's arguments. Importantly, in spite of their conversational role in turn allocation, their pragmatic functions remain intact and specific to the situational contexts in which they appear.

An interesting finding in the investigation is that, when used with latching, *lō* is pronounced softly. While an initial speculation is that regressive assimilation occurs phonetically to aid utterance production, it is worthwhile to study this pattern in greater detail in terms of its behavior or even systematicity in its co-occurrence with latching as a turn-holding device.

As established in existing literature, the versatility of the utterance-final particle *lō* gives rise to its omnipresence in Cantonese conversation, especially for coloring affection and emotion conveyed by the speakers. Its frequency of use is naturally higher in casual conversations or among close friends (Chan, 1998), such as the participants in the study. It would be of value if more contrastive studies were done with more formal settings, such as the one by Leung and Gibbons (2011) on courtrooms in Hong Kong.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown in my analysis that albeit the use of *lō* possibly opens up a CTRP, stretching it systematically marks a speaker's intention to continue with the his/her current turn while keeping the pragmatic functions of affective coloring and inviting sympathy (or agreement or cooperation) intact. Its concurrent use with other turn-holding devices such as latching and big breath entails that these elements share similar functions in this regard. They serve as strategic alternatives for one another to avoid an utterance sounding unnatural, although the use of a stretched *lō* is restricted by its other pragmatic functions (such as affective coloring) and suffix positioning. Moreover, the deliberate use of a stretched *lō* allows a speaker to retain his/her turn even when s/he is not prepared for it. It is conceptually ingrained in native speakers' minds as a turn-holding device, which contributes to the seamless turn allocation in naturally occurring conversation. Note that simultaneously the particle's discourse role in turn allocation can be overridden by other devices and practices.

It should be evident by now that utterance-final particles carry essential pragmatic functions. An important finding is that, as I have demonstrated, these functions (in the case of *lō*: completion proposal and ending negotiation) can possibly be altered or even eliminated (in the current case, by stretching). This leads to other questions: does the same apply to another utterance-final particle *lā*, which shares very similar properties with *lō*? What other practices can alter the pragmatic functions of these particles, and in

what way(s)? How do these particles contribute to turn organization, sequence management and other conversational practices?

A major limitation in this study is the narrow range of participants. As discussed, factors such as the role, relationship, and setting may have an effect on the use of these Cantonese particles. One may argue that the excerpts only demonstrate how the particular two speakers use the language, and the style is specific to them. Valid though the speculation about its generalizability, this research is exploratory in nature and aims to provide an under-utilized perspective in the field of Cantonese linguistics to analyze conversational data. While the properties, grammar and pragmatic functions of them are extensively researched and studied, their role in conversation as a structural unit is seldom investigated. The current study opens up a wider avenue of research possibilities about the behavior of these particles, which, though trivial-looking, are by contrast instrumental in bonding utterances and keeping Cantonese conversation in one natural piece.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Key 1 (see Schegloff, 2007 for detailed explanations)	=	(equal sign) latch or contiguous utterance.
.	(0.4)	(number in parentheses) length of a silence in 10ths of a second.
?	(.)	(period in parentheses) micro-pause, 0.2 second or less.
,	((gazing))	non-speech activity or transcriptionist comment.
-	\$word\$	smiley voice.
::		
<u>word</u>		
WORD		
°word°		
↑word		
↓word		
>word<		
<word>		
<		
hh		
.hh		
(hh)		
[ ]		
[ ]		

		Transcription Key 2
	ASP	aspect marker
	COMP	comparative marker
	CL	classifier
	EMP	emphatic marker
	EXCLM	exclamation
	LOC	location marker
	NEG	negative marker
	PT	particle
	PL	plural marker
	POSS	possessive case marker
	PRX	prefix