It's Not So Bad: An English Tone for Downplaying
John C. Wakefield
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Introduction

This paper studied the English equivalent of the Cantonese sentence-final particle ze1.

Cantonese sentence-final particles (SFPs):
- Cantonese has more than 30 SFPs.
- SFPs express discourse related meanings.
- Their functions and meanings are comparable to those expressed by English intonation.
- They probably evolved because the complex lexical tone system of Cantonese restricts the use of intonation.
- The literature has repeatedly compared the system of SFPs to the system of English intonation, and some one-to-one comparisons have been made:
  - The SFP me1 is expressed in English by ‘rais[ing] your voice almost to a squeak’ (Baker and Ho, 2006, p. 40).
  - The SFP me1 can be expressed in English intonationally as ‘an echo question’ (Chan, 2001, p. 59).
  - Wakefield (2010) concluded that four SFPs (lo1, aa1maa3, me1, and aa4) are expressing in English as specific forms of intonation.

Methodology

A definition for ze1 was developed:

(1) ze1 =
  a. it is not more than this
  b. you think this much/many is bad
  c. I want you to know this much/many is bad

Cantonese audio dialogues with ze1-suffixed sentences were created:

(2) A: If you put that much coke here, how will there be enough space to put other stuff?

B: Hai6 dak1 saam1gum3 ze1
   “There’re only three cans.”

(3) A: Wow! You can watch the same movie so many times!

B: Ngo5 tai2-gwo3 loeng5ci3 ze1.
   “I’ve only seen it twice.”

(4) A: Wow! You’ve drunk so much!

B: Ngo5 jam2-za2 hou2 siu2 ze1
   “I only drank a little!”

The three translations from the male participant are shown here in figures 1-3. The diameter of the circle shown in each figure represents the duration of the syllable(s) with which the “downplaying” tone is associated.

Results

The other female did not use this contour in her translations. Why? Does she express “downplay” differently? Did she fail to translate ze1? Did she translate a different meaning of a polysemous ze1?

Discussion and Conclusions

See the full paper for more detailed discussion and references, and please contact me about question, comments or suggestions related to this study.

clinton.wakefield@gmail.com