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DISCOURSE PARTICLES AND PRAGMATIC MEANING IN MALAY-ENGLISH BILINGUAL SPEECH

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Abstract: Discourse particles are linguistic elements that contribute to the pragmatic interpretation of utterances rather than their propositional meaning. In bilingual communities, discourse particles frequently emerge as important communicative tools that facilitate interaction, express speaker attitudes, and negotiate social relationships. This study investigates the use of discourse particles in Malay-English bilingual speech and examines the pragmatic meanings they convey in everyday communication. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, commonly occurring discourse particles such as *lah*, *kan*, *ah*, *eh*, and *mah* are analyzed within bilingual conversational contexts.

Keywords: Discourse particles, Pragmatic meaning, Malay-English bilingual speech, Bilingualism, Code-switching, Pragmatics, Discourse analysis, Malaysian English, Language contact, Sociolinguistics.

Introduction. Language serves not only as a means of transmitting information but also as a medium through which speakers express attitudes, emotions, intentions, and social relationships. In multilingual societies, bilingual speakers often utilize linguistic resources from more than one language to achieve effective communication. One notable feature of bilingual interaction is the use of discourse particles, which are words or expressions that contribute to the pragmatic interpretation of an utterance rather than its literal meaning. Although discourse particles are often short and seemingly insignificant, they perform essential communicative functions by helping speakers manage conversations, convey emotions, and negotiate interpersonal relationships.

Malaysia provides an ideal environment for studying discourse particles because of its multilingual population and frequent use of both Malay and English in everyday communication. Malay-English bilingual speakers commonly engage in code-switching and language mixing, creating a distinctive conversational style that incorporates discourse particles from different linguistic sources. Particles such as *lah*, *kan*, *ah*, *eh*, and *mah* are regularly used in both formal and informal contexts. These particles contribute nuanced meanings that often cannot be translated directly into English. Their interpretation depends heavily on context, speaker intention, and social relationships.

Methods. This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design based on pragmatic analysis. The data consist of examples of Malay-English bilingual speech collected from everyday conversations, social media interactions, online discussions, and previous linguistic studies on Malaysian English and Malay discourse. The selected data focus on commonly used discourse particles, including *lah*, *kan*, *ah*, *eh*, and *mah*.

The analysis is conducted using a pragmatic framework that examines the communicative functions of discourse particles within specific conversational contexts. Each particle is analyzed according to its contribution to speaker intention, listener interpretation, interpersonal relationships, and conversational management. The study also considers sociocultural factors that influence the use of discourse particles in bilingual communication. Through this approach, the research identifies recurring patterns and pragmatic functions associated with each discourse particle.

Results and Discussion. The analysis reveals that discourse particles play a central role in Malay-English bilingual speech by contributing a wide range of pragmatic meanings that extend beyond the literal content of an utterance. The findings indicate that these particles function as important communicative devices that help speakers express attitudes, negotiate social relationships, manage conversations, and construct bilingual identities. Although discourse particles are often brief linguistic forms, their pragmatic impact is substantial and highly context-dependent.

One of the most frequently occurring discourse particles is *lah*, which serves multiple pragmatic functions. The particle *lah* is commonly used to emphasize a statement, soften a command, express reassurance, or create a sense of familiarity between speakers. For example, in the sentence "Don't worry lah, everything will be okay," the particle does not alter the factual meaning of the statement but adds a reassuring and friendly tone. Similarly, in expressions such as "Come here lah," the particle softens the imperative force of the command, making it sound less direct and more conversational. The widespread use of *lah* reflects its role as a marker of solidarity and informality in Malaysian communication. Its presence often signals closeness between speakers and contributes to the maintenance of harmonious social relationships.

Another important discourse particle identified in the data is *kan*. This particle frequently functions as a marker of shared knowledge, confirmation, or agreement. In bilingual conversations, speakers often use *kan* to remind listeners of information that is presumed to be known by both parties. For example, the statement "I told you already, kan?" implicitly seeks confirmation while simultaneously reinforcing shared understanding. The use of *kan* demonstrates how discourse particles facilitate interaction by encouraging listener involvement and cooperation. Rather than merely transmitting information, speakers employ *kan* to create a collaborative conversational environment where meaning is jointly negotiated.

The particle *ah* also appears frequently in bilingual speech and performs several pragmatic functions. Depending on context, *ah* may indicate hesitation, emphasis, clarification, or casualness. In expressions such as "Wait ah, I'm coming," the particle signals a temporary pause while maintaining conversational engagement. In other contexts, *ah* may soften statements or make interactions appear more relaxed and informal. Its flexibility allows speakers to adapt their speech according to communicative needs, demonstrating the multifunctional nature of discourse particles in bilingual communication.

The findings further reveal the importance of the particle *eh* as a marker of surprise, attention, or emotional reaction. Speakers often use *eh* when responding to unexpected information or when attempting to draw attention to a particular topic. For instance, a speaker might say, "Eh, I didn't know you were here!" to express surprise. In this context, the particle contributes an emotional dimension that cannot be fully conveyed through the lexical content alone. Such usage illustrates how discourse particles help speakers communicate attitudes and feelings efficiently within everyday interactions.

Another commonly observed particle is *mah*, which is often used to indicate obviousness, justification, or explanation. For example, in the statement "Of course I know mah," the particle emphasizes that the information should be considered self-evident. The use of *mah* strengthens the speaker's position and signals confidence in the validity of the statement. This pragmatic function

contributes to conversational effectiveness by clarifying the speaker's stance and reducing potential ambiguity.

Beyond their individual functions, discourse particles collectively contribute to the management of interpersonal relationships. The analysis demonstrates that bilingual speakers frequently use these particles to maintain politeness, reduce social distance, and establish rapport with others. Many discourse particles soften potentially face-threatening acts, such as requests, disagreements, or criticisms, thereby promoting harmonious interaction. This tendency reflects broader cultural values within Malaysian society, where politeness and social harmony are highly valued. Through the strategic use of discourse particles, speakers can communicate their intentions while minimizing interpersonal conflict.

The findings also indicate that discourse particles serve as markers of bilingual and cultural identity. Their use distinguishes Malaysian bilingual speech from other varieties of English and reflects the influence of local linguistic traditions. Even when conversations are predominantly conducted in English, the insertion of particles such as *lah* and *kan* signals cultural affiliation and shared community membership. These particles therefore function not only as pragmatic tools but also as symbolic resources through which speakers express identity and belonging.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that discourse particles contribute significantly to conversational coherence and interactional management. They help speakers organize discourse, regulate turn-taking, signal topic transitions, and maintain listener engagement. In many cases, the absence of discourse particles may make bilingual speech sound less natural or less socially appropriate within the local communicative context. Their frequent occurrence highlights the importance of pragmatics in understanding real-life language use, particularly in multilingual environments where meaning is often negotiated across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Overall, the results show that discourse particles are essential components of Malay-English bilingual communication. They enrich conversational meaning, facilitate social interaction, and reflect cultural values that shape language use. Their functions extend far beyond grammar, illustrating the complex relationship between linguistic forms, pragmatic interpretation, and social context.

Conclusion. This study investigated the use of discourse particles in Malay-English bilingual speech and examined their contribution to pragmatic meaning. The findings reveal that discourse particles such as *lah*, *kan*, *ah*, *eh*, and *mah* perform a variety of communicative functions, including expressing emphasis, seeking agreement, signaling emotions, managing conversations, and strengthening interpersonal relationships. Although these particles do not contribute directly to propositional meaning, they play a crucial role in shaping how utterances are interpreted within specific social and cultural contexts.

The analysis further demonstrates that discourse particles reflect important cultural values such as politeness, solidarity, cooperation, and social harmony. Their widespread use among bilingual speakers illustrates how language contact can generate unique pragmatic features that enrich communication. In addition, discourse particles serve as markers of bilingual identity, allowing speakers to express cultural affiliation while navigating multilingual interactions.

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