

Proposing to ignore discourse updates in Singaporean English (SE)

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Overview. In Dynamic Pragmatic frameworks (see Portner (2018) for overview), sentence meaning in discourse is a function of its standard static meaning and the effect its utterance has on the discourse context. For instance, a declarative might denote a proposition p whose utterance would be a proposal to update the common ground by adding p — $\{p\} \cup \mathbf{cg}$ (e.g., Stalnaker 1978). An imperative might denote a property restricted to the addressee A whose utterance would update A 's to-do list— $\{P_A\} \cup \mathbf{to-do}_A$ (Portner 2004). In this way, assertion, imperative force, etc. is modeled as speakers using static sentence meaning to alter aspects of an articulated, formal discourse context.

In this talk we explore resources natural languages have to revise contexts. Particularly, we discuss the SE discourse particle *ló*, which can be used to “agree to disagree” (Farkas & Bruce 2010), among a variety of other discourse effects. We propose a unified account of these effects, showing that “agreeing to disagree” is a special case of a more general phenomenon in which interlocutors attempt to move to a previous discourse state by ignoring the public effects of proposed updates. The data that follow is based on the intuitions of one of the authors, who is a native speaker of SE, and the discourse effects observed have also been confirmed by a few other native speakers of SE.

Core Data. SE is well-known for its sentence-final discourse particles (Gupta 1992). We focus on sentence-final *ló*, a particle borrowed from Cantonese (Smakman and Wagenaar 2013). The broad, novel generalization we make is that *ló*-marked utterances project two future discourse states: (i) one where the public effects of the previous utterance(s) are ignored and, (ii) one where the default effect of the utterance (sans *ló*) takes place. This is most clearly seen in examples where requests are made, like (1). B's reply projects a future state with a public agreement to take A to the airport, but the infelicity of (A1) shows that A cannot act like this is the only effect of B's utterance. Instead, B's utterance presents A with a choice whose contours make clear the contribution of *ló* as described above. That is, (A2) shows that A can retract—i.e., (i) the public effects of the original request are ignored—or A can, as in (A3), react to B's utterance as if it weren't *ló*-marked—route (ii) above—but only by acknowledging that B raised the option to retract the request.

(1) Context: A and B are good friends, and A asks for a ride to the airport out of the blue.

A: Can you send (=take) me to the airport?

B: **Okay ló.** (=I'll do it (but I don't really want to).)

A1: #I knew you'd say yes!

A2: Never mind, I can ask someone else.

A3: Thank you so much for helping me out!

We can now see how this general pattern allows *ló* to be used to “agree to disagree”. Intuitively, two interlocutors agree to disagree when one commits to p , the other commits to $\neg p$, but neither p nor $\neg p$ are added to the common ground. Example (2) shows that *ló* can be used to achieve this effect. B, following above, presents two options: (i) ignore the public effect of A's utterance or (ii) accept the effect of B's utterance sans *ló*. If A takes the second route (A1), then they must retract. The first route is the critical one, though. In this route, A accepts B's request to ignore the public effect of their previous utterance (which A can do as (A2) by making a *ló* utterance as well). But

consider what this means for an assertion, which by default will update the common ground with the asserted proposition. If it is ignored, then the situation we have is A has committed to John liking the curry, B has committed to John not liking curry, but neither is in the common ground because A’s utterance has no public effect (and B made no assertion). This is agreeing to disagree.

(2) Context: A and B are having a discussion about John’s least favorite food. A is John’s acquaintance while B is John’s best friend.

A: Yesterday, John said he like my curry chicken.

B: **No way ló.**

A1: Ok, he didn’t finish it, so maybe he didn’t like it.

A2: Ok ló.

Analysis. We analyze *ló* to capture the uniformity of (1)-(2) in the Table-model framework of Farkas & Bruce (2010), though slightly enriched. We propose that just as a question results from placing a set of propositions on the table (inviting the listener to resolve the table by selecting one), particles like *ló* can bifurcate the context itself. That is, we generate two full discourse contexts, each with a table, etc., one which has been updated with the *ló*-marked utterance, and one where public effects of all tabled moves are erased. For instance, the effect of B’s utterance in (2) is (3) (slightly simplified). In DC_1 speakers are committed to contradictory propositions, which are both on the table. The projected set is empty, i.e., in crises, and the common ground is unchanged because nothing has cleared the table. A can now choose to retract to fix the context. But, in virtue of *ló*, B provides A with the choice of DC_2 where all public effects of tabled moves are erased. That means the table is empty and the projected set reverts to what it was before the move triggered B’s *ló*-move. But this is just Farkas & Bruce’s (2010) agreeing to disagree—speakers are committed to contradictory propositions but the common ground is not in danger.

(3) $\{DC_1, DC_2\}$

a. $DC_1 = \langle A = \{l\}, B = \{-l\}, T = \langle -l, l \rangle, cg = s_2 = s_0, ps = \emptyset \rangle$

b. $DC_2 = \langle A = \{l\}, B = \{-l\}, T = \langle \rangle, cg = s_2 = s_0, ps = ps_2 \rangle$

We can analyze (1) similarly. If we assume, following Portner (2004), that requests are address-specific predicates added to to the public record (i.e., a to-do list, which we can think of as a kind of common ground with its own projected set). In this case, B presents A with a choice of contexts, DC_1 in which B accepts the request (adds it to the projected to-do list, and sets the old common to-do list to this projected ptd_2), and DC_2 where the table is cleared and the to-do list is reverted to its previous, pre-request state— ptd_1 . (Note, commitments are empty due to the nature of requests.)

(4) $\{DC_1, DC_2\}$

a. $DC_1 = \langle A = \{\}, B = \{\}, T = \langle ok, a_B \rangle, td = ptd_2, ptd_2 = ptd_1 \cup \{a_B\} \rangle$

b. $DC_2 = \langle A = \{\}, B = \{\}, T = \langle \rangle, td = ptd_1, ptd_2 = ptd_1 \rangle$

This predicts why A has the choice in (1) of retracting their request or thanking B for keeping the fulfillment a live option. Crucially, though, it also predicts why A can’t act like B simply accepted the request. Though B projected that future discourse state, they did so in the form of a metaconversational question, and so it can’t be targeted by a simple confirmation.

Main Conclusions. Based on novel observations in SE, we provide a novel mechanism for “agreeing-to-disagree” via bifurcating the discourse context, presenting one option where a previous move has its public effects ignored. We further show how this account allows for a generaliza-

tion of agreeing to disagree to other types of moves, like requests. In the talk we extend this further to account for *ló*-responses to bona fide questions, as well as certain scenarios where a *ló*-response to an assertion is taken not as agreeing to disagree, but as a conversation-ending dismissal.