PROPOSING TO IGNORE DISCOURSE UPDATES IN COLLOQUIAL SINGAPOREAN ENGLISH (CSE)*

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1 Introduction

SE is well-known for its sentence-final discourse particles (Botha, 2018; Gupta, 1992; Smakman and Wagenaar, 2013; Wee, 2002, 2010). Consider the following example with the particle **ló** :

(1) Context: A and B are good friends, and 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 call **ló** a "discourse particle" because it seems hard to translate (i.e., ineffable, see Potts (2005)). Instead, its meaning contribution is best understood through how it constrains how subsequent discourse evolves. In this case:

- **ló** commits the speaker to the prejacent (1.A3)
- **ló** invites the addressee to withdraw their request (1.A2)
- **ló** precludes the addressee from acting as if the prejacent was somehow not contingent (1.A1)

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This cluster of features is of particular interest to us because they have surface connections to other empirical phenomena that have been of great interest to researchers building dynamic pragmatic models.

Contingent Commitment
Gunlogson (2008) has convincingly argued that rising declaratives involve making contingent discourse moves.

(2) It's raining outside (↑)

For instance, in (2), rising intonation marks the discourse move as contingent—in particular, it says "I'll be a source for the prejacent just in case you, the addressee, also commit to being a source, else, I won't commit to being a source for the prejacent."

- This feels similar to how in (1), the speaker dangles commitment, but does not go through with it (which is detectable by the infelicity of 1.A1).

Conversational Crisis
Farkas and Bruce (2010) explores in detail what happens when a conversation is in crises.

- They want to model the state of the context if A says p and B says $\neg p$
- Clearly each conversational participant is committed to their utterance, but we cannot take the union of these commitments to get a common ground—the conversation is thus in crises.

In this situation there are two options:

(i) A conversational participant can retract commitment to a troublesome proposition.

(ii) Both conversational participants can agree-to-disagree—i.e., retain commitment to their troublesome propositions while establishing a tacit agreement to not broach that issue again.

While we will see examples of **ló** being used in agreeing-to-disagree (ii), we already see an instance of (i), albeit in the domain of imperatives, in (1.A3), where A takes B's use of the **ló**-marked utterance as an invitation to retract.

Thus, ló's importance:

- Previous work on Singaporean English discourse particles including Botha (2018); Gupta (1992); Smakman and Wagenaar (2013); Wee (2010) and, most relevantly, Wee (2002), have not attempted to provide a formal semantic account. Here, we demonstrate that **ló** is amenable to a formal analysis, and we hope this opens up future opportunities for such further research.
- An account of **ló** has the potential to relate to previous work on conversational crises and contingent commitment.
- Moreover, because as we will see, **ló** can target expressions making all sorts of discourse moves (assertions, imperatives, etc.), a unified account of **ló** will allow us to generalize these important notions of contingency, agreeing-to-disagree, etc.

Core proposal: While this will be fleshed out formally, our core idea is that **ló** makes a meta-conversational question. That is, it lays out two conversational futures:

- In the first, the prejacent has its standard effect.
- In the second, the conversational participants agree to ignore their last moves.

The listener must then decide which path to take, just like when a listener selects a proposition (an answer) from a set of propositions (a question).

2 Dynamic Pragmatic Models

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.

Table model
Farkas and Bruce (2010) propose a model of the conversation with the following core ingredients, arranged in a table for clarity:

(3)

A	**Table**	**B**
DC_A	S	DC_B
Common Ground cg	**Projected Set** ps	

- DC_X is a set of propositions for each conversational participant representing their public commitments that are not shared by all other participants.
- cg is the common ground, storing the set of propositions that all participants have publicly agreed to, as well as "common knowledge".
- ps is the projected set, a set of common grounds, namely those privileged common grounds that the discourse is headed towards. The ps is defined in terms of the table.
- S is a stack called the Table. It represents unresolved issues in the conversation. When a participant makes a conversational move, we add a pair consisting of the syntactic object uttered along with its denotation.
  - When the table is empty the conversation is in stasis. The goal of conversational participants is to empty the table.
  - When something is added to the table, the ps is altered by adding all those future common grounds that would result if the table was resolved (i.e., made empty).

Portner in the Table Model
Farkas and Bruce (2010) do not consider imperatives, but they will be of interest to us because we can react to them with **ló** , as in (1).

- We extend the Table model with an account of imperatives in the style of Portner (2004).

- The core idea is that sentences in imperative form denote properties indexed with the individual the imperative is directed at, and who is requested to have that property.

(4) Pull (directed at B)! $\rightsquigarrow \langle pull[I], P_B \rangle$

Each conversational participant X is given a to-do list, a set of X-indexed properties they must fulfill.

- The effect of using an imperative to make a command is to project a future to-do list for the addressee which contains the denotation of the imperative.

(5) K_1, the Initial Context

A	**Table**	**B**
To-do$_A$		**To-do**$_B$
Common Ground s_1	**Projected Set** $ps_1 = \{s_1\}$	
	Projected To-Do $ptd_1 = \{td_A, td_B\}$	

(6) K_2, A commanding *Pull!* relative to K_1

A	**Table**	**B**
	$\langle pull[I], P_B \rangle$	
To-do$_A$		**To-do**$_B$
Common Ground s_1	**Projected Set** $ps_1 = \{s_1\}$	
	Projected To-Do $ptd_2 = \{td_A, td_B \cup P_B\}$	

The effect of accepting a command, for instance with a hearty *Aye!*, is to clear the Table and increase (add to) the speaker's to-do list, simplifying the projected to-do list:

(7) K_3, B accepting *Pull!* relative to K_2

A	**Table**	**B**
To-do$_A$		**To-do**$_B$
		P_B
Common Ground s_1	**Projected Set** $ps_1 = \{s_1\}$	
	Projected To-do $ptd_3 = \{td_A, td_B\}$	

Now that we know how to make commands (at least), and react to them, we can consider the behavior of **ló**-marked reactions.

3 Analysis

We now want to make good on the following core proposal.

Core proposal (repeated):
The particle **ló** makes a meta-conversational question. That is, it lays out two conversational futures:

- In the first, the prejacent has its standard effect

- In the second, the conversational participants agree to ignore their last moves.

Having introduced discourse structures à la Farkas and Bruce (2010), we are in a position to define this sort of update. First, though, we define a new update called **Wipe**, for "wiping the table":

(8) **Wipe**$(K_i) = K_o$ where, **(idealized**[1]**)**

a. $T_o = \emptyset$

(9) **ló** $(U(S[X], a, K_i)) = \{U(S[X], a, K_i), \textbf{Wipe}(K_i)\}$ where

a. U is a variable over standard updates

[1]This version of **Wipe**, while clean, is a bit too powerful. The problem, of course, is what if there are items on the table from earlier discourse? We don't want to remove them wholesale. The solution involves realizing that the table is a stack. This means that we can treat **ló** as an anaphoric expression, such that it can anaphorically pick up some expression $S[X]$ and feed this information to a version of **Wipe** that pops every element of the stack up to and including $S[X]$, but stopping there.

b. K_o = **Wipe**(K_i)

Note the following:

- The output of a **ló** update is a *set* of output discourse structures, where standard updates take an input discourse structure to an output discourse structure.
- The first element of this set is just the output of doing the prejacent's update on the input discourse structure—that is, if **ló** is applied to an assertion **A**, then U = **A** and the first element will simply be the standard output of applying **A** to $S[X]$, a and K_i.
- The second element of this set is the discourse state produced by wiping the input K_i.

We are now in a position to explain the core data we began with, repeated for convenience:

(10) Context: A and B are good friends, and 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!

After A says (10).A, we have a discourse structure like the following with a command/request on the table:

(11) K_2, A makes a request of B relative to K_1

A	**Table**	**B**
	$\langle Airport[I], Air_B \rangle$	
To-do$_A$		**To-do**$_B$
Common Ground s_1	**Projected Set** $ps_1 = \{s_1\}$	
	Projected To-Do $ptd_2 = \{td_A, td_B \cup Air_B\}$	

When B says (10).B, we get a set of output contexts.

- The first is just the result of acceptance with *okay*.
- The second is the result of **Wipe**, which clears the table.

Because the projected to-do list is defined as a function of what is on the table, this discourse structure cannot evolve into one where B is committed to taking A to the airport.

(12) The effect of (10).B relative to K_2

a. K_3, B accepting relative to K_2

A	**Table**	**B**
To-do$_A$		**To-do**$_B$
		Air_B
Common Ground s_1	**Projected Set** $ps_1 = \{s_1\}$	
	Projected To-do $ptd_3 = \{td_A, td_B\}$	

b. K_3, B **wiping** relative to K_2

A	**Table**	**B**
To-do$_A$		**To-do**$_B$
Common Ground s_1	**Projected Set** $ps_1 = \{s_1\}$	
	Projected To-do $ptd_3 = \{td_A, td_B\}$	

What we have now is a kind of question, a set of options, but it is a meta-conversational one.[2]

- A must choose which discourse structure will form the base for future conversation.
- In (10).A2, A retracts, choosing the second K_3 (12b).
- In (10).A3, A chooses the first K_3 (12a) and acknowledges that the first K_3 is a live option, that is, B may not want to do it.
- What A cannot do is ignore that a meta-conversational question has arisen. (10).A1 is infelicitous because it acts like only the first K_3

[2]Note, we do not add the request to the list of A's commitments, but it is not the kind of thing that could go in the common ground, which contains propositions. We could add some kind of list tracking commands/requests made, but do not do so here for simplicity.

exists—crucially, B did say yes, but also proposed a K where they do not have to go to the airport.

- This last point is crucial. It helps us understand a puzzle we began with, which is how provisional discourse moves—i.e., **Contingent Commitment**—can arise. **Our answer:** they can arise through expressions that take input discourse structures to sets of output discourse structures.

4 Extending the analysis

We proposed an analysis of **ló** in which it makes a meta-conversational question, such that two discourse structures are simultaneously projected. We now show that it can be immediately extended to novel cases, like reacting to assertions, and doing so leads to insights about dynamic pragmatic models.

(13) Context: A and B are having a discussion about John's food preferences. A is John's acquaintance (and so does not know that John does not like curry chicken) while B is John's best friend.

A: Yesterday, John say he like my curry chicken.
B: No way **ló**.
A1: Ok, he didn't finish it, so I guess he didn't like it.
A2: Ok **ló**.

After A asserts c we have:

(14) K_2, the result of (13).A relative to K_1

A	**Table**	**B**
c	$\langle \ldots \textit{like my curry chicken}[D]; \{c\}\rangle$	
C. Ground $s_2 = s_1$	**Projected Set** $ps_2 = \{s_1 \cup \{c\}\}$	

When B says (13).B, we get two output contexts—(i) one in which B makes a contrary assertion, and (ii) one in which there has been a **wipe**.

(15) a. K_3, the result of (13).B relative to K_2

A	**Table**	**B**
c	$\langle \textit{No way}[D]; \{\neg c\}\rangle$ $\langle \ldots \textit{like my curry chicken}[D]; \{c\}\rangle$	$\neg c$
C. Ground $s_2 = s_1$	**Projected Set** $ps_2 = \{s_1 \cup \{c\}, s_1 \cup \{\neg c\}\}$	

b. K_3, the result of (13).B relative to K_2

A	**Table**	**B**
c		
C. Ground $s_2 = s_1$	**Projected Set** $ps_2 = \{s_1\}$	

A now has a choice between contexts on which to continue the conversation.

- In (13).$A1$, A retracts. That he, he chooses the wiped discourse structure and then asserts a new proposition — $\neg c$. This will replace his earlier commitment.
- In the second case, namely (13).A2, A makes his own **ló**-marked assertion in response to B's contrary assertion. This example is extremely interesting, because it shows how **ló**-marked expressions interact with complex contexts.
  - We propose that A here expresses disagreement with B, that is, he acknowledges that B spoke with Ok (which we take as expressing no proposition), while asking B if he wants to **wipe**.
  - That is, he targets the first K_3 (15a), and then produces a new set of contexts from that input K

(16) a. K_4, the result of (13).A2 relative to first K_3

A	**Table**	**B**
c	$\langle ok[D]; \emptyset\rangle$ $\langle \textit{No way}[D]; \{\neg c\}\rangle$ $\langle \ldots \textit{like my curry chicken}[D]; \{c\}\rangle$	$\neg c$
C. Ground $s_2 = s_1$	**Projected Set** $ps_2 = \{s_1 \cup \{c\}, s_1 \cup \{\neg c\}\}$	

b. K_4, the result of (13).A2 relative to first K_3

A	**Table**	**B**
c		$\neg c$
C. Ground $s_2 = s_1$	**Projected Set** $ps_2 = \{s_1\}$	

A and B could continue to fight by selecting the first K_4 (16a), but what is interesting to us is what happens if they leave things here.

- The result is the second K_4 (16b) where the table is clear, but we have A and B committed to contradictory propositions.
- But! The table is clear and the conversation is hence not in crisis.
- This is precisely what Farkas and Bruce (2010) call agreeing-to-disagree!!

Thus, we have shown how a generalized account of **ló** can lead to agreeing-to-disagree in a method not considered previously in the literature, and that it arises in particular situations based on the meaning of **ló** — i.e., not a primitive discourse move.

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