



# **The *sia* particle in colloquial Singapore English**

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## Abstract

The study of utterance particles in Singapore Colloquial English<sup>1</sup> (SCE), or more commonly known as Singlish, is traditionally known as one fraught with difficulties, mainly due to the problems of pinning down exact grammatical functions and interactional motivations for this unique word class. This paper studies a relatively new particle in the SCE lexicon *sia*, within the Conversation Analysis framework. Unlike the more common particles in SCE like *lah*, *leh*, *lor* etc. that have since become identifying elements of the language itself, *sia* is a more socially marked particle used by a smaller subset of SCE speakers. Through the analysis of extracts from naturally occurring data, this paper aims to 1) determine the interactional function of *sia* and 2) find the relationship between markedness of the particle and how *sia* is used in interaction.

It is found that the main functions of *sia* is relational, as it helps speakers mark and establish an in-group relationship with interlocutors they identify as ‘fellow *sia* users’ and in conversation itself, define a moment in time where interaction goes one level deeper by appealing to this relationship between speakers. By naming *sial*, a colloquial Malay swear word, as one of the most probable sources of the paper *sia* in SCE, the paper also examines how the negative connotations of *sial* might have influenced who uses *sia* and in the ways mentioned above.

The study of *sia* shows us that the SCE speaker community could be more structurally complex than just the traditional socio-educational divisions into acrolectal, mesolectal and basilectal speakers. It highlights how speakers use elements in the language to construct their own identity, create participant categories and then act upon these identities as they define relationships with the people around them. This dynamic, intuitive process, then, proves that the speakers cannot be ‘divided’ in the traditional sense and only through the analysis of talk-in-interaction can we satisfyingly reflect these relationships between the speakers in the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Also has been called colloquial Singapore English (CSE) (Wee, 2002; Lee, 2007) or Singapore English (Wong, 2005) by other researchers in the field. In this paper, I will use Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) as with Gupta (1992) to differentiate it from the variety called Singapore Standard English (SSE).

# A conversation-analytic approach to the *sia* particle in Singapore Colloquial English

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## 1 Introduction: particles in Singapore Colloquial English

### 1.1 *The defining features of Singapore Colloquial English*

Singapore Colloquial English (SCE)<sup>1</sup>, the variety of English spoken in Singapore, has a few identifying features: one of which is the use of ‘sentence-final particles’ by its speakers, such as *lah*, *lor*, *leh*, *mah*, *what*, *meh*<sup>2</sup> etc. While SCE is described as ‘English as it is spoken’ here in Singapore, the term Singapore Colloquial English itself might be a little misleading, as recent work has suggested that SCE, while having a lexicon that consists mainly of English words, its grammatical structure is more inherently Chinese, stemming from the influences from the many Chinese languages spoken in Singapore (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, to name a few) (Lim, 2007). Some examples of how particles are used in SCE are reproduced in this conversation below (particles are italicized and bolded, with approximate translations given below each utterance):

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<sup>1</sup> Also more colloquially known as Singlish; it has been called colloquial Singapore English (CSE) (Wee, 2002; Lee, 2007) or Singapore English (Wong, 2005) by other researchers in the field. In this paper, I will use Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) as with Gupta (1992) to differentiate it from the variety called Singapore Standard English (SSE).

<sup>2</sup> The spellings of these particles are varied across the different papers and books written on the topic; I have opted to go for the more conventional spellings that are used by many Singaporeans online, though of course there are variations. For a list of the more common particles present in SCE today, refer to Lim (2007) and Wee (2004).

Excerpt 1-A. This excerpt comes from a conversation between 4 friends in a car as they are discussing their dream jobs, mostly in a jocular manner. One of them, Andy, influenced by old Hong Kong police movies, tells the rest that he has always wanted to be a police officer, inviting laughing responses from the other participants in the conversation.

[C07-1]

- 1           ANDY: You **leh**? Dream job.  
                  *'What about you? What's your dream job?'*
- 2           MATT: Lawyer.
- 3           ANDY: Wah [lawyer.]
- 4           JOY:           [Wa:h. ]
- 5           ANDY: I >always want to be< the: Hong Kong CID<sup>3</sup> **one**.  
                  *'I've always wanted to be a Hong Kong CID officer.'*
- 6           JOY: huhhhuhuh
- 7           LUCAS: Wah you serious is it!  
                  *'Wow are you serious?'*
- 8           ANDY: I watch the 无间道 (wu jian dao)=  
                  *'I watched the (movie) Infernal Affairs,'*  
                  =[wah lao I want to learn.]  
                  *'and wow I really want to learn that.'*
- 9           MATT: =[Hong Kong CID                   ] **sia**  
                  *'Wow, Hong Kong CID!'*
- 10          LUCAS: You- you want to go there **ah**?  
                  *'You want to go there (to Hong Kong)?'*
- 11          ANDY: I want **lah!**  
                  *'I do!'*
- 12                   (0.6)
- 13          JOY: [No- no- no this-]
- 14          ANDY: [But Singapore- ] Singapore so lok cok **one**,  
                  [dunwan **lah.**]  
                  *'But Singapore's (police force) is so lousy, I think I'd*  
                  *rather not (be a policeman).'*
- 15          LUCAS: [That's why,] the Singapore police dun do anything **one**.  
16                   *'Exactly, that's why, the Singapore police do not do*  
                  *anything.'*

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<sup>3</sup> CID stands for Criminal Investigation Division, a sub-division of Hong Kong Police Department Crime Wing

In only 14 seconds of this data extract, there are seven instances of where particles are used, showing their overwhelmingly pervasive presence in SCE. The academic study of particles is not something unique to SCE alone, but is a part of a greater set of work by linguists researching the phenomenon of particles in other languages. Among these, particles feature especially prominently in languages like Japanese and Mandarin Chinese, and have been correspondingly studied in much depth (see Li and Thompson, 1981; Tsuchihashi, 1983; Onodera, 1995 for more in these languages). Cantonese, a language that has been described to have in its lexicon over 100 such utterance particles, both simple and compound used in combination (Luke, 1990), has also been extensively studied (see Kwok, 1984; Luke, 1989, 1990; Ko, 2000; Leung, 2005). With Cantonese being one of the Chinese languages spoken in Singapore, SCE researchers have often alluded to it as one of the sources of particles in SCE itself (among others, Wee, 2002; Lim, 2007).

As you can see from Excerpt 1-A, if the conversation had occurred without the presence of the particles, the conversation would appear stilted, unnatural or in some cases, tense and hostile. How do these particles help contribute to the overall tone and meaning of the interaction, and how do SCE speakers use them to perform each individual turn within the interaction itself? In SCE, particles take centrestage; they are what give it its distinctive flavour. The language is often identified by the use of particles, and it is not surprising that many attempts have been made to describe them, using a variety of approaches. Among them, *lah* is the most studied particle in previous literature (probably owing to its popularity as the most salient particle of SCE) (for studies on *lah*, see Richards and Tay, 1977; Kwan-Terry, 1978; Bell and Ser, 1983), while other papers on particles like *one*, *leh* and *lor*<sup>4</sup> have also contributed to our understanding of these ‘non-traditional’ elements of the language. The functions of these particles, according to these papers, are varied, but they are also undeniably pragmatic in nature, and there is no doubt that these communicative functions take precedence over any semantic references.

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<sup>4</sup> For a Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach to the particle *one*, see Wong (2005). The particle *leh* has been studied by Platt (1987), Gupta (1992) and Lee (2007) etc., while an in-depth analysis of *lor* can be found in Wee (2002).

## 1.2 *The importance of context*

Several studies on SCE particles have focused on trying to answer the question of these functions by taking a *what if* approach, i.e., what changes if the particle was there or if it was not (Kwan-Terry, 1978; Bell and Ser, 1983; Chua, 1990), or if the particle was replaced by another particle (Gupta, 1992). This is an excerpt from a paper by Kwan-Terry (1978) looking at the meaning of the particle *lah* (represented as *lā* in her study).

Take, for instance, the following telephone conversation in which one asks,

“Where are you now?”

And the other one answers,

“In my office *lā*”

When this statement is compared with its corresponding statement without *lā*:

“In my office,”

It would appear that the latter is a bald statement without any particular emotive colouring *while the former with lā may be interpreted as carrying the additional emotive meaning of obviousness*: the speaker seems to imply that the answer - that he is in his office - is obvious.

(Kwan-Terry, 1978:22, emphasis added)

While it seems almost intuitive to isolate the particle and analyse how the ‘tone’ of the sentence changes with or without it (e.g. Does this sentence sound different without *lah*? In what way?), this method only looks at the *what*, what the particle is when it features in an utterance. The question we must also ask, is *why*, and the method above ignores the reason *lah* is used here, with relation to what the speaker is trying to achieve through his choice of the particle, *at this particular point* in the conversation. The example given here is clearly a part of talk-in-interaction in progress, and thus the *interaction*, instead of just the utterance with the particle, is what should be analysed.

Kwan-Terry’s final observation on *lah*, in fact, just further highlights the importance for the studying of the context in greater depth than what has been explored before.

However, it should be noted that the meaning of *lā* is ***extremely variable, depending largely on the context.***

(Kwan-Terry, 1978:23, emphasis added)

The *lah* can be seen to mean a myriad of things in an isolated sentence like ‘In my office *lā*’ - besides an ‘additional emotive meaning of obviousness’ - it can also carry additional meanings of persuasion or a general softening of tone, to name a couple more (see eg. A, B and C).

Where are you now?

In my office *lā*.

A. ‘In my office of course.’ (indicating obviousness)

B. ‘In my office, come and find me?’ (an attempt at persuasion)

C. ‘I’m still in my office, sigh.’ (an explanatory attitude, softening of tone and showing rapport and solidarity with the person asking the question)

Therefore, when examining utterance particles like this in SCE, we will hit a roadblock if we focus right from the beginning in trying to pinpoint a core semantic meaning, or in this case, isolate the particle from its environment to find out what it does. Without looking at the contextual information, we can only conclude that the particles are highly flexible and context-dependent, which will not tell us anything much at all.

Richards and Tay (1977), commented about the pragmatics surrounding the use of particles; they intimated that *lah* is part of a larger speech act, and its speech function is highly dependent on ‘***the persons involved in communicating, their relationship to each other, the purpose of the speech act in terms of whether it is a request, a reprimand, an order, a question etc.***’ (Richards and Tay, 1977:145) Thus, the use of *lah*, to them, besides its involvement with the ‘overall meaning’ of a speech act, has to factor in both situational and cultural contexts. Yet, they stop short of ascribing to the exact contexts they mentioned in their analysis, or perhaps

there was not yet a structured, methodical way established enough in 1977 for them to draw on for analysis.

## 2 Conversation Analysis as a framework

It is necessary that we have to revert to the context time and again, and let each instance of an interaction tell us what the particle does, to try and find generalizations and patterns in its use. We also cannot forget to factor in the participants of the interaction, for it is their interpretation of the particle and how they design its production and subsequent responses to it that is important.

Conversation Analysis, the systematic analysis of talk produced when people interact, allows us to do exactly that. By recording naturally occurring instances of certain phenomena in speech to be studied, the CA method provides the ability to go back and repeatedly examine the data, allowing access to detail that will not have been achievable with invented data. Talk in interaction, then, should always be understood as oriented to the participants' satisfaction, rather than based on any assumptions on part of the analyst.

A quote from Conversation Analysis pioneer Harvey Sacks reproduced in Heritage (1988) further underlines the unreliability of data not fully transcribed from real-life recordings of conversation.

‘Neither the intuitive invention of data, nor the use of stenographic notes, nor the on-the-spot coding of behaviour allows the detail of actual conversational behaviour to be recovered and the use of these methods must inevitably compromise the value of the observations made as reliable evidence.’ (Sacks, 1984 in Heritage, 1988)

For the study of an utterance particle like *sia* in a language that has a more spoken presence than written in a multilingual situation like in Singapore, the CA framework is probably the best tool we have to fully and adequately describe its use in SCE itself.

### 3 The *sia* particle

#### 3.1 The definition of *sia*

In SCE research up from the 1970s (Tongue, 1974, has been said to be the first academic study of the language) till now, there has not been a mention of the particle *sia* in any academic study on SCE.

Yet it exists in the lexicon of SCE speakers and a simple online search reveals that several online dictionary sources of SCE do list the particle *sia* (e.g. [talkingcock.com](http://talkingcock.com), *n.d.* and [singlishdictionary.com](http://singlishdictionary.com), 2004), and make reference to its possible Malay origin. [singlishdictionary.com](http://singlishdictionary.com) gives three variations of spelling (and possibly pronunciation) of the particle - *sia*, *siah* and *siak*. Internet research on *sia* also uncovered other spelling variants of the particle, *siol* and *sial*.

[singlishdictionary.com](http://singlishdictionary.com) gives a definition of the particle, calling it ‘**an exclamation used as a suffix for emphasis** - i.e. in *power sia* or *steam sia*.’ Both exclamations are unique to SCE, but many informants I have spoken to have either 1) never heard of *sia* being used in this way, or 2) interpret them as ‘old-school’ utterances that have since dropped out of fashion in natural speech. However, a search online shows that you do still find them on the Internet, as shown in this example:

Shan CMI<sup>5</sup> with Singlish lah. He too Irish/Jamaican. Ross would definitely have been a better choice. In other news, Tyler for President! He **power sia!**

(YouTube comment from user *ahnox* on [http://www.youtube.com/all\\_comments?v=Q1M9Z-EK3vg](http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=Q1M9Z-EK3vg), emphasis added)

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<sup>5</sup> CMI stands for ‘cannot make it’, a Singlish acronym to mean someone’s incompetence/inability to do something.

This is a comment from YouTube user *ahnox* on a video featuring a Caucasian boy, Tyler, who can speak fluent Singlish, something the interviewer, Shan, cannot do (or in this example, deemed as CMI ‘cannot make it’). Thus used here, ‘power *sia*’ would be an assessment of Tyler’s ability - that he is really powerful/skillful (as a Singlish speaker). What is interesting, too, is the reason why user *ahnox* decided to use *sia* (or rather, the whole expression *power sia*) to describe Tyler – who was his comment targeted to? One would assume that they would include the subsequent viewers of the YouTube video, which will probably give hints to why he said what he did. The asynchronous nature of Internet forums and comment boards actually makes the choice of what to say more conscious than in natural speech, and the fact that this comment was made to compliment a non-native SCE speaker on his fluency in the language probably all are important motivations for the use of the expression.

To give an initial ‘sense’ of how *sia* is used in naturally-occurring SCE utterances, I will list several examples below. These examples are all from my field observations, taken down verbatim when *sia* was heard in conversation around me:

EG 3-A. On the disappearance of A’s assignment from a box where all graded assignments were returned. A and B are good friends, and B is responding in a jocular manner to A about the disappearance of her paper.

- A: He already returned me the scanned copy, but I couldnt find the hard copy *lor*.
- B: Maybe someone stole your assignment!
- A: For what *sia*?
- B: How I know, maybe someone wanted to see your *zai* (*superb*) assignment.

EG 3-B. C, D and E are three elementary school boys having lunch at a Mcdonald’s after school. E’s response when alerted to the fact that the restaurant they did provide salt in small sachets.

- C: They got salt, bro.
- D: Go and take!

E: I lazy *sia*.

EG 2-C. When commenting on the size of a mutual friend's house. F and G are both friends telling another friend, H, about their friend Freddie's house. H has never been there.

F: Have you seen Freddie's house? Wah-

G: Freddie's house damn big *sia*. You can play soccer in the whole living room!

### 3.2 *Frequency of sia in speech*

The *sia* particle, unlike its more famous counterparts like *lah*, *meh* and *lor*, is less pervasive in Singaporean speech. The more commonly-used utterance particles like *lah* appears (in a rough count, in the author's data) 1-4 times in just one minute of recorded conversation. Deterding (2007) counted forty-seven instances of *lah* in one hour of data for a native SCE speaker. Even in 'educated' Singapore English, or in situations where a more formal register of the language is being used, *lah* and *ah* appeared 28 times in four hours of conversation between undergraduates who were native SCE speakers and their expatriate tutor (a native English speaker). For *sia*, occurrences are comparatively rarer, more to the level of *1-4 times in an hour* in my data, and even then, these are recordings of people who have been known to use *sia* in their speech.

## 4 **Aims of the paper**

Therefore while it seems that *lah* is used across all demographics and is a predominant component in SCE, *sia* seems to be more socially marked, and used by a smaller group of SCE speakers. Though it is less commonly used, the fact remains that it is still used and can be heard and recorded in interaction and finding out what it does will give us a better understanding about the why and how particles are used not only in SCE, but also in other languages that have particles as part of their lexicon.

The aims of this paper, then, are to investigate the following:

- 1) through the study of occurrences of *sia* in natural conversation, to pinpoint the function(s) of this particle – how it is used by SCE speakers;
- 2) the role the markedness of *sia* plays in determining its extent of use within the SCE community

## 5 Analysis

### PART I: In-group functions of *sia*

#### 5.1 *sia* in establishing and marking an in-group relationship

Excerpt 5-A. Jason, Ann and Howard are friends from school and belong to the same hostel. This following excerpt is unique in the sense that Ann and Jason are interacting separately with Howard on a phone, and Howard's voice is never heard in the recording as he is on the other end of the line. In this segment, Ann is reaching the end of her conversation with Howard, and she passes the phone back to Jason at line 3 of the transcript.

[C01-3]

- 1        Ann: 以后 再 跟 你 讲 啦! =  
           yihou zai    gen    ni    jiang la!  
           I'll tell you in the future!
- 2        Ann: = Okay okay I passing you back to Jason now wait ah (.)  
 3            °mm°
- 4            ((hands phone over))
- 5        Jason: Eh your IA<sup>6</sup> until when **sia**?
- 6            (1.8) ((Howard's reply over the phone is not recorded))
- 7        Jason: Haah? Whole sem<sup>7</sup> ah? (1.0) F\*\*\* okay lor neh mind weekend
- 8            go out lor

<sup>6</sup> IA stands for Industrial Attachment, a 6-month internship programme with an external company that is mandatory for most undergraduate students in the university.

<sup>7</sup> 'sem' is the truncated form of 'semester'.

In line 2 of the transcript, Ann says that she was ‘passing (Howard) back to Jason’, indicating that before speaking to Ann, Howard had been on the phone with Jason. Immediately after that, Jason’s first comment to Howard comes in the form of a question ‘Eh your IA until when *sia*?’

The only apparent motivation of *sia* as evidenced from the transcript is the passing back of the phone to Jason. The fact that *sia* here is used in the very first utterance after the handover shows that it is used to achieve some sort of re-establishment of the parameters of Jason’s relationship with Howard. The dynamics of the interaction had changed when Ann was talking to Howard, and Jason, in order to ‘re-set’ the tone back to how it was before and re-establish the relationship between him and Howard, uses *sia* to achieve this effect, as if saying, ‘*It’s me again, bro.*’ It highlights that this is the continuation of how it was before Ann got on the phone and clearly points to how *sia* can be used to mark some kind of connection between speakers. Another example of this function of *sia* can be found in Excerpt 5-B:

Excerpt 5-B. The following conversation is an exchange between two former schoolmates and good friends, Darren and Ann. Darren is visiting Ann at her university, and this extract is recorded when Darren asks Ann about her promise to take him to the bus stop when he leaves at 4pm. That ongoing sequence trails off at line 12, and Darren uses a *sia* utterance as he starts a new sequence at line 15.

[C02-2]

- 1       DARREN: What time you going off?  
 2       ANN: Mm?  
 3       DARREN: What time you going off?  
 4       ANN: Erm... (2.0) Four o'clock maybe,  
 5               (1.5)  
 6       DARREN: You gotta show me where's the shuttle bus what.  
 7       ANN: Yah lah, I'll- I'll bring you there lah that's why four  
 8               o'clock lah!  
 9       DARREN: Oh your lesson four thirty ah?  
 10       ANN: Mm.

- 11 DARREN: (.) Screw you lah.
- 12 ANN: Why?
- 13 ((Darren flips open the pages of the school newspaper))
- 14 (3.0)
- 15 DARREN: Who writes all this one **sia**?
- 16 ANN: The people at err. (.) CS lah!
- 17 DARREN: (.) Comm studies,
- 18 ANN: Yah yah yah they have sort of like a journalist-ism
- 19 department what.
- 20 (3.5)
- 21 ANN: Why?
- 22 DARREN: Mm?

Similarly, as with Excerpt 5-A, Darren uses *sia* in his first comment after a pause of 3 seconds, in the form of a question ‘Who write all this one *sia*?’

In order to understand the motivation of *sia* in line 15, we have to take a closer look at the previous sequence from lines 1 – 12. The tone of the conversation seems to have moved towards something relatively tense. Darren, a person who is prone to speak spontaneously and without restraint, replies to Ann’s innocent confirmation that her lesson was at 4.30pm with ‘screw you<sup>8</sup> lah’ to mean ‘whatever’. Using such a term changes the tone of the interaction to one that is less friendly, which then prompted Ann to ask ‘why’ i.e. ‘*why, what do you mean? Why did you say that?*’ Darren does not answer to that question (most probably due to his lack of an appropriate comeback, as he did not mean anything hostile by the comment in the first place), instead flipping open the newspaper. His ignoring of the question causes the sequence to die down.

Then, as he starts the next sequence, he asks a question using *sia*, which can then be seen as his bid to *re-set the tone* of the interaction to what it was before the previous sequence, and continue the conversation like how it was before. Asking that same question without the use of

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<sup>8</sup> ‘screw you’ developed from a euphemism of ‘f\*\*\* you’, but has since taken on the meaning of ‘whatever’, or ‘go away I don’t care’.

*sia* would not have the same effect, and might not have allowed Darren to change the topic so effectively, as *sia* helps re-establishes the connection he has with Ann.

*An in-group marker?*

Up till this point we can see that *sia* is used to mark a kind of relationship between the parties involved in the interaction, that ‘*we belong to the same group*’. This character of *sia* as some sort of relational marker makes it useful as *an invitation, or a pull* for situations when the speaker perceives that ongoing conversation has *moved away* from that same-group intimacy and wants to return to a certain *shared state* with his interlocutors. How this ‘group’ is defined by the users of *sia* will be further discussed in the later sections of the paper, but for now, it is sufficient to see that in all these examples, the appearance of *sia* in these recordings show that the speakers all identify themselves and their interlocutors as being part of the same ‘group’. Consider the next two excerpts 5-C and 5-D:

Excerpt 5-C. The following excerpt is a conversation between 4 friends. 3 of them, Alice, Jason and Yo are discussing Jason’s relationship issues. Jason has just recently given up an opportunity to be in a relationship due to his own perceived inability to commit. Henry, the 4<sup>th</sup> person, having not heard the story before, tries to find out the identity of the girl in question.

[C01-4]

- 1 ALICE: Aiyah, but tsk such a wa:ste! She from LCD<sup>9</sup>
- 2 JASON: I dun think it’s such a waste,
- 3 ALICE: Really? Why?
- 4 JASON: Cause: (1.0) 不要 啦 (0.5) 玩不够  
buyao la wanbugou  
‘Don’t want.. (I) haven’t played enough’
- 5 ALICE: Mm:
- 6 HENRY: 玩 which one?  
wan  
‘Who are you playing?’
- 7 YO: I thought yall were playing to begin wit(h)h .hh
- 8 JASON: But [the thing that- to have ]=
- 9 ALICE: [No, 玩不够 是 自己 的 东西 吧 ]=  
Wanbugou shi zhiji de dongxi ba  
‘No, it’s more about himself (not about the other person

- 9 ALICE: [No, 玩不够 是 自己 的 东西 吧 ]=  
 Wanbugou shi zhiji de dongxi ba  
 'No, it's more about himself (not about the other person involved).'
- 10 JASON: =to let it go further would be, would entail
- 11 ALICE: COMMITMENT.
- 12 JASON: Yah.
- 13 ALICE: Mm.
- 14 HENRY: 玩 who **sia**?  
 wan  
 'Who is it (you're playing)?'
- 15 YO: All LY<sup>10</sup> guys like dat uh
- 16 ALICE: NO I dun think so only - I think a lot of [guys mus i-]

It is obvious from the excerpt that Henry is the only one who did not have prior information about the girl the other three participants were talking about. Halfway through the sequence, Henry asks in line 6, 'wan ('play') which one?' which in the context can be translated to mean '*Who are you playing?*' His question was not acknowledged by anyone, with Alice, Jason and Yo continuing their conversation from lines 7 through to 13. As the conversation winds down at line 13, Henry tries again, this time with a question *sia* construction in line 14. Henry, as evidenced by line 6, could have easily asked the question without the particle *sia*, and thus the use of *sia* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> try is triggered by whatever happens in the interaction between lines 6 and 14, in effect, that lack of acknowledgement from the rest of the participants. Jason, by using *sia* here, is indicating to Alice, Jason and Yo to include him in the conversation and to remind them subtly that he still wants to be part of this, again, by appealing to their relationship as close friends, i.e. *Hey, come on guys, tell me who!*' Jason in the end does pick up the question and finally responds to it in lines 17 and 18.

Excerpt 5-D. Xav, Matt and Val are good friends, who are sitting around a table chatting. This transcript comes in just as an ongoing sequence is ending. Xav in the same turn starts a new sequence in line 2, asking Matt about something they have been putting off - the nomination process for the club they were in charge of.

[C03-1]

1 XAV: °Screwed.° I hope you- (2.0) you have a long year ahead.  
 2 Okay den the nomination thing how?  
 3 VAL: What nomination thing?=  
 → 4 MATT: =Eyeh still waiting for you **sia**, [I dunno-]  
 5 XAV: [Waiting ] for me?  
 6 MATT: So what are we going to do with the names? Seriously,  
 7 XAV: You got all the names already ah?  
 8 MATT: There's a fe- there's a couple of Year Ones names lor.  
 9 XAV: Yah we set up we set up- okay I tell you what, I'll send  
 10 out an email, an official email, uh from Ally to say that  
 11 yknow, we're now officially looking for the what (.) and  
 12 den u:m we will shortlist their names ask them to submit  
 13 their names, their names and contact numbe- number to  
 14 Ally,  
 15 MATT: Can also,  
 16 XAV: Yah, and den we wil- uh- names and contact number and den  
 17 we will (.) call them for interview lah.

This nomination process is something that both X and M view as problematic and exasperating, and they have been avoiding talking to each other about it, putting it off for as long as they could. In line 4, Matt, when faced with the question from Xav, has to deal with that fact that his answer to Xav may sound like an accusation, i.e. *'It's not me, I'm still waiting for you!'* There is the potential risk that the conversation might turn sour, but with the use of *sia*, he can indicate to X that it is not meant to be as accusatory as that, and *'we are in this together'*. With *sia* being a handy tool to give the 'right tone' to whatever is being said to the other interlocutors in the interaction, it is used here to soften a statement that might have otherwise sounded harsh and help to indicate to Xav that the relationship between both participants still stands.

### *Interim summary*

All these examples above show that *sia* bears some kind of relational function, to set or re-set the tone or re-establish a connection the speaker wants to have with the other interlocutors in the interaction, when it is perceived by the speaker that the conversation is moving away from a closed, intimate setting due to a variety of reasons, i.e. a misunderstanding, disagreement or even a change of speakers like in Excerpt 3-A. *sia* can appear in a variety of syntactic environments, but each time it does, it acts as a *pull or a marker* to bring the interaction back to a level reflecting the in-group relationship between the interlocutors.

### 5.2 *sia* in defining an interactional moment

It will not be surprising, then, to find that *sia* can also be used as a pull in the other direction – when interaction needs to be even more intimate than what it is at that moment. This allows *sia* users to define an even deeper level of intimacy in the interaction – a moment or a part of the conversation where there is a need to achieve greater intimacy.

The next few examples will illustrate this:

Excerpt 5-E. The following conversation comes from an exchange over lunch at the university cafeteria between two friends, Ravi and Aretha. They are discussing a long-awaited email that Aretha finally received from her friend. At this point Ravi changes the topic and talks about an incident that happened between him and Aretha just hours before. He had sent her a text message where he mistook the next day to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September, when it was actually the 10<sup>th</sup> of September. Both Ravi and Aretha then express their amazement at how he could have ever got a date wrong by one week.

[C05-4]

- 1 Ravi: It took him how long?
- 2 Aretha: To write the e[mail?]
- 3 Ravi: [Ah ] as in not to compose that email=
- 4 Aretha: =°Mm.°=
- 5 Ravi: =I mean like- (1.2) [Now is- ]

- 6 Aretha: [Since when ] he said he will write  
7 right. (1.0) End of July lor. (0.8) Now is start of  
8 September, August, one month plus.  
9 Ravi: Actually mid-S(h)ep- September [almost lah.]  
10 Aretha: [mm ] yah.  
→ 11 Ravi: Wah lao<sup>12</sup> damn stupid sia: [I sms you, no- about just now]  
12 Aretha: [Yaa:h! Oh, bout che- ]  
13 what?  
14 Ravi: 10<sup>th</sup> September?  
15 Aretha: (0.8) Orh YAH stupid you! You damn cock! Den I'm like- I  
16 look at my message then I (.) 'Eh? Eh? Erm, but tomorrow  
17 is really 10<sup>th</sup>!' I think you one week back ah- how I wish  
18 it's last week also, den I got one more [week to do my  
FYP<sup>13</sup>.]  
19 Ravi: [Ai-  
20 I- ] I seriously dunno ah, why I thought that tomorrow  
is 3<sup>rd</sup> leh!  
21 Aretha: Wh:y!  
22 Ravi: I dunno! I was like- dyouknow when you tell me you say-  
23 den I said wait ah why Aretha rushing thi- I thought we  
24 got 3<sup>rd</sup> an- that time [Bala said we got 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>]  
25 Aretha: [ya:h and den you were like ] uhhh  
26 yahh because I was like-  
27 Ravi: Den I very confidently wrote to you that eh-  
28 V: I know I have it!  
29 Ravi: [I-I ask right ]  
30 Aretha: [It's like let's] do it on the 10<sup>th</sup> kay! Den I'm like..  
31 ya:h that's that's our plan=  
32 Ravi: =[.hhehhheh.there right..]  
33 Aretha: =[that's why I say ] now right.  
34 Ravi: There there uhhh .heheh ((shows text message to Aretha))  
35 'I think tomorrow we don't, let's do it when we have  
36 something- 10<sup>th</sup> is better.'

'wah lao damn stupid sia'

The topic is changed at line 11 when Ravi moves away from the ongoing sequence using a common SCE exclamation *wah lao*, a common token of realization that causes a disjunction

effect. Ravi uses this utterance to change the topic and in this case, uses it simultaneously as a form of pre-telling of a story – the start of the new sequence. With ‘wah lao damn stupid *sia*’, he is telling Aretha, ‘Hey, I’ve got a story for you, which would show you that I’m really quite stupid.’

The self-deprecation that Ravi uses comfortably here gives us a hint to the close relationship between Ravi and Aretha. His comment is directed towards getting an expected agreement from Aretha that yes, he was really stupid doing whatever he did. Aretha, as shown in line 15, does jokingly agree with that comment with ‘Yah stupid you! You damn cock!’ The ease with which both speakers banter back and forth highlights the level of comfort of the interaction, where one interlocutor can easily use such a strategy (of deploring himself and expecting such a jocular response) to start a story – the promise of a story being the action being carried out by Ravi *at this moment in the interaction*.

As the story progresses past line 15, its stark difference from the sequence before line 11 is apparent. Both participants ‘fight’ for the floor to tell the story of their separate experiences when that text message was sent. There is increased liveliness and laughter (lines 27 and 29 etc), and the pace of the conversation picks up considerably. As both participants are enjoying the story, and the ‘discovery’ that Ravi is really absent-minded, Ravi’s use of *sia* can be seen as helping to *set the tone* for this particular re-enactment. Ravi uses *sia* like a sort of pull, or a way to invite Aretha to *participate in the same manner or style*, thus effectively defining a shared ‘space’ where interaction can be more intimate.

Excerpt 5-F. The following conversation is an excerpt between two 2<sup>nd</sup> year close friends and roommates in the university hostel. Shing is reprimanding Amin for not keeping up with schoolwork and brings up their mutual friend, Jason, who has the same problem. In this excerpt, *sia* occurs together with two utterances (lines 11 and 17).

[C04-6]

- 1 SHING: Why have you been missing lectures again!
- 2 AMIN: °tsk f\*\*\* lah, summore no time°

3 SHING: Where got no time f\*\*\* you no time!

4 AMIN: S- erm but but- lucky all mine all mine recorded lah

5 SHING: Ya:h, but have you watched them yet? That is the question,  
6 haven't [right?]

7 AMIN: [F\*\*\* ] lah!

8 SHING: F\*\*\* you! Eh must go and watch one this kind of thing,  
9 f\*\*\*ing Jamie also, everytime inside his room never do  
10 [anything]

→ 11 AMIN: [Jamie ] damn hardcore **sia**.  
12 (0.8)

13 SHING: Studying.  
14 (2.3)

15 AMIN: Just now after dinner he drink beer meh!

16 SHING: O:h yah he drinks [a lot. ]

→ 17 AMIN: [He drink-] he drink a lot **sia**! Didn't  
18 expect what know, [I dunno- I think quite *jialat*<sup>14</sup>]

19 SHING: [no no no, your room your ] room your  
20 room smells like a motel .hahaha

21 AMIN: .hehh MOTEL rig(h)ht,

22 SHING: It smells like a motel leh it smells like smells like it  
23 smells like those- those places when you rain-

24 AMIN: Smells like (.) Jamie's room lah.

25 SHING: NO! Jamie's room was better last year I dunno why.

26 AMIN: F\*\*\* you lah same lah!

27 SHING: It was better last [year ]

28 AMIN: [Remember] last year we just walk past  
29 already ah °okay that's Jamie's room° (0.5) can smell mah  
30 its uh- it's the same smell cause using the same air  
31 freshener also (1.2) same it's exactly the same smell,

In line 8, Shing brings Jason into the conversation as a comparison to Amin (i.e. always in his room, but now doing anything substantial). Amin, however, receives this information as a reminder of Jamie being preoccupied with drinking. He then makes the statement 'Jamie damn hardcore *sia*', using it as a pre-telling to start a new sequence on Jamie's alcoholic tendencies. Shing, on the other hand, interprets this comment by Amin as an information receipt, made to assess the ongoing sequence about Jason's inertia when it comes to schoolwork. It did not make any sense to him, as one would hardly describe laziness and as being 'hardcore'. He tries to

initiate his own repair after the short pause in line 10, where he says ‘studying’, i.e. ‘*Jamie is always inside his room, but not doing any studying.*’

Now it is Amin’s turn to be confused by Shing’s ‘studying’ comment and there is a longer pause before *he* initiates his own repair and further clarifies what he means by ‘hardcore’ with ‘Just now after dinner he drink beer meh!’ (‘*Just now after dinner was he really drinking beer?*’) Shing then finally understands, and replies in the affirmative with ‘O:h yah he drinks a lot.’

Why Amin used *sia* here in line 17 then becomes clear: it can be seen as another attempt by Amin, after a failed first attempt (‘*Jamie damn hardcore sia*’) to pull Shing into a new sequence. Why use *sia* though? To answer that, we need to focus on the topic that they have been talking about – namely, Jamie’s drinking. Amin was showing concern for a mutual friend, perhaps even someone he views as part of the same in-group and by using *sia*, is indicating to Shing that he was now embarking on another deeper level of intimacy in the conversation. After the confusion mentioned above, Amin gets the response he wants, i.e. ‘O:h yah he drinks a lot.’ With ‘he drink a lot *sia!*’, he repeats Shing’s statement as if saying ‘*Yah that was what I was saying all this while, don’t you agree?*’

The establishment of a shared opinion about a mutual friend’s supposedly ‘really hardcore’ drinking habits is made with the use of *sia*, and this shows how the particle is also used here as an attempt to define a more intimate segment of the interaction and appeal to the relationship between both of them. The data clearly illustrates the whole duration of Amin’s attempt from line 11 onwards to let Shing know that ‘*this is how we should be interacting on this particular topic*’.

These examples above have illustrated how *sia*, when picked up by the other participants in the conversation, can lead to the achievement of a shared intimacy between the interlocutors.

Excerpt 5-G. The following is an excerpt of an earlier part of the conversation between Darren and Ann again. Darren is recounting a story of unwittingly having observed a wardrobe

malfunction, something which was pointed out to him by Sherry, who noticed it first. He expresses disgust and disbelief at the fact that Sherry publicized this embarrassing situation immediately after it happened instead of keeping quiet about it, something he thought she should have done instead.

[C02-1]

1 DARREN: I saw Eddie the T-string leh (*expletive*)  
 2 ANN: Oh I didn't see orh.. [mm ]  
 3 DARREN: [WAH] I *b(h)ei l(h)un*<sup>15</sup> ah t(h)hat  
 4 o(h)ne hahaha Sherry saw den she ask me to see,  
 5 [bitch ]  
 6 ANN: I [know ] Sher- Sherry say she point to you=  
 7 DARREN: =[Yah]  
 8 ANN: =[she] ask you to see immediate[ly right  
 9 DARREN: [was like tinking wad  
 10 the SHIT,  
 11 ANN: mm hahahaha  
 → 12 DARREN: She got issues *sia* I swear  
 13 ANN: .Sherry?  
 14 DARREN: Yah=  
 15 ANN: =No lah, not [her la.. ]  
 16 ((DARREN plays with a plushie))  
 17 DARREN: [Eh can I pull anot? ]  
 18 ANN: I think Eddie- no no no I want to keep the tag one!  
 19 DARREN: Why?  
 20 ANN: Haah?=  
 21 DARREN: =Just cause it says domokun what.

In this case, Darren is recounting the story of how Sherry, instead of alerting Eddie of his wardrobe malfunction, decided instead to turn to Darren to tell him about it, presumably so that the two of them can laugh together about it. While Darren cannot believe that someone would do that, he was also aware that the comment he makes about Sherry ('She got issues *sia* I swear') is negative, and has to soften the utterance in a way to get an agreeable response from Ann.

His strategy in trying to seek support from Ann is to then appeal to his relationship with her by using *sia*. He uses the story as proof of Sherry's 'issues', and tries to establish a shared opinion on her with Ann. Unlike the previous extract, this is not showing concern, but is an act of criticism, and he attempts to succeed in achieving similar ground with the interlocutor in the best possible way, i.e. using *sia*. If he does succeed, then they '*were in this together*'; it would not be just him participating in the criticism, but Ann as well.

But these moments might not be picked up by members of the in-group. As seen in lines 13 and 15, Ann lacks enthusiasm in her response, first questioning Darren's target of criticism ('Sherry?') in preparation for a turn in which she disagrees with his utterance.

Darren, upon realizing his attempt to define the interaction on a 'deeper' level was failing, turned his attention to a plushie on the table. The use of *sia* is always done in the expectation of a suitable response (as deemed by the speaker, seeing that the particle marks the relationship and sets the tone for the next sequence in the interaction) and when response is minimal or 'unsuitable', Darren moved on to something else to distract him.

### *Part I Summary*

Through the examples above, we see how *sia* is used in every one of these situations to perform certain relational functions. As a particle, *sia* can be used tagged at the back of sentences and questions, clauses and even one word utterances. The syntactic environment of the particle, then, does not matter as much as its ability at the point of the interaction to perform all that it does in the extracts above.

Therefore, we can conclude from these examples that the main functions of *sia* are to allow speakers to:

- 1) establish and mark an in-group relationship - setting the 'right tone' of the particular interaction and subsequently, giving 'colour' to the interaction because of the nature of the in-group;

- 2) and define a moment in time where interaction goes one level ‘deeper’ by appealing to this relationship between the interlocutors

## **PART II: Possible sources of *sia***

That conclusion, however, does not fully answer what *sia* does in SCE. In this section we will deal with the unanswered questions that arise from determining the main function of *sia*, namely:

- 1) What is this ‘relationship’?
- 2) Who are the users of *sia* and who do they use *sia* with?

The answer to these questions could lie with the source of the particle. During the data collection process, I have had many indications that *sia* has an origin, in the Malay colloquial word *sial*. Participants interviewed after recording sessions constantly mention the Malay influence, and though we do not have definite proof, this is a possibility that cannot be ignored. The associations of *sia* with its source in the Malay language will help us answer the issues above, and give us a more complete idea about the particle. This next section will examine how by postulating *sia* as having gramaticalised from *sial*, we can make a persuasive case in supporting the data above on the interactional function of the particle.

### *5.3 The archaic sia – sial in the Malay language*

*sial*, a word in the Malay language that is often used together with the particle *ah* to form *sial ah*. *sial ah* is not used at the back of an utterance, but rather, it appears in the front, as these examples below will show.

*sial*, according to Singaporean Malay speakers, means ‘bad luck’ and functions like a curse, something like ‘damn’ in English. When asked to provide an example of how they use *sial ah*, a couple of male Malay-speaking undergraduates gave these sentences:

EG 5-A

<i>Sial</i>	<i>ah</i>	kau.	Kenapa	kau	habiskan	semua	Koko Krunch <sup>16</sup> ?
Damn	PRT	you.	Why	you	finish-SFX	all	Koko Krunch?

'Damn you. Why did you finish all the Koko Krunch (a type of breakfast cereal)?'

EG 5-B

**Sial ah,** cikgu tu bosan gila.  
Damn PRT teacher that boring INT(crazy).

'Damn, that teacher is really boring.'

EG 5-C`

Wah **sial ah** kau dapat pergi politeknik?  
Wow damn PRT you can go polytechnic?

'Oh wow you managed to enter a polytechnic?'

Note that *sial* [siaɫ] is a monosyllabic word that has the velarised alveolar lateral approximant, or more commonly known as a dark 'l', as its coda. When put together with the particle 'ah', *sial ah* might sound like *sia lah*, especially when *lah* is a prominent particle in Singlish. It is possible that this is the current phonetic realization of *sial ah* in SCE. There are examples of *sia lah* used by speakers with no Malay language backgrounds (see Appendix I for transcripts), which shows that they exist in the lexicon of SCE itself. This could be the beginnings of *sia* as a particle in SCE.

Excerpt 5-H. Consider this other excerpt of another segment of conversation between Darren and Ann, both Chinese Singaporeans. Their use of *sia* in this particular extract provides support for its Malay origin:

[C02-3]

- 1 DARREN: Eh so.. your friends are not coming here at all issit?  
2 ANN: I dunno  
→ 3 DARREN: (1.8) Why not **sial**?  
→ 4 ANN: I dunno **sial**  
5 DARREN: (0.6) Why not LAH?  
6 ANN: I dunno! I really dunno

In lines 3 and 4, both participants use the Malay pronunciation of *sia*, i.e. with the dark l [sial], and affect a ‘Malay accent’ in their utterances. This use of *sial* is imitative, which indicates that both speakers see Malay as the origin of the particle, and associate it with Malay speakers.

The interaction itself is noteworthy too. Darren uses *sia* here to define an interactional moment on ‘deeper’ level, as if coaxing Ann to explain why her friends were not coming. Ann’s immediate pickup of the particle and how she uses it in her response further strengthens the argument that *sia* is used to mark an in-group. Because of the way Darren said it (i.e. with a Malay accent), she repeats her comment in the same way. Here, not only is she marking her knowledge of the particle as being Malay, she uses it overtly to establish a connection with Darren.

#### *The negative connotations associated with sial*

Besides its use as a curse (‘damn’), the word carries the implication of bad luck, and has an association with negativity and vulgarity. Also, the use of *sial* in Malay, due to its profaneness, is frowned upon in any kind of formal situations, including school, with elders, or someone highly respected. It is not present in written Malay and thus cannot be found in any grammar that document the language. Singaporean Malay speakers interviewed talk about how they tend to classify people who use *sial* in their speech as male speakers of lower socio-economic class and often uneducated. One male student in the university claimed that ‘*since I do not use vulgarities, I do not use sial*’. However, when pressed, he admitted that he does use *sial* among close friends, or rather, among people whom he knows will not take offense, *nor view him in a different light* for using it.

#### *5.3.1 The ‘relationship of solidarity’ between the users of sia*

If we accept that *sia* in SCE carries the same kind of negative connotations as *sial* does in the Malay language, we can give an explanation to why *sia* as a particle can be easily used by the speaker to mark a certain relationship with his interlocutors. The use of *sia* to someone who does not know you will result in you being seen as someone uncouth and uneducated, and thus, *sia* is

used only within the ‘in-group’, and has subsequently taken on that function of marking the people who belong to it.

This ‘in-group’, for the most part, will consist of people closest to the speaker that he can identify with, his ‘bros’, a unique relationship of friends close enough to be thought of like family. From the data, we see that *sia* occurs together with speech that is peppered with swearing and colloquial terms - this relaxed level of speech and relatively intimate topics that are talked about signal the ‘closeness’ of the participants. Their identities become salient in the words they choose to use, with *sia* also being one of these words. Out of these environments, the use of *sia* would probably decrease, or even disappear altogether.

However, this ‘in-group’ is not just limited to just close friends and ‘bros’. When interviewed, Amin, a particularly perceptive student and one of the participants in the recordings, made this comment about using *sia* with other interlocutors:

*‘It does not depend on how close friends you are... it’s determined more by how atas<sup>17</sup> (‘high-brow’) the other person is. [...] Also (you) can say that it depends on how the person himself (the speaker) chooses to view the other.’*

To Amin, if the speaker deems his interlocutor as ‘too high-brow’ to see *sia* as more than just an uncouth form of speech, then he will never use it with him. This is, then, an ‘in-group’ determined solely by the speaker, through the usage of *sia*, to indicate to his interlocutors that he wants ‘to relate to them more closely’<sup>18</sup>. In an enlightening treatise, Sacks (1979) explores the phenomenon of self-categorisation by groups that reject the label accorded to them by the larger society, and how they administer this categorization internally and independently through their language, their interaction with other members in the same category and how they behave. He explains this with the category ‘hotrodders’, and how teenagers, in an attempt to dissociate themselves from being seen as merely ‘teenagers’, something that outsiders (i.e. adults) administer to them, create a sort of ‘revolution’, that can be observed through their conversations with each other.

The users of *sia*, unlike the ‘hotrodders’, might not be setting up or administering a category that dissociates them from the society at large, but through using the particle, they have found a way to establish and define this relationship of solidarity with their interlocutors. Amin’s observation, that ‘*it depends on how the person himself (the speaker) chooses to view the other*’ is illuminating – it shows how speakers when using *sia* are therefore at the same time, establishing their own personal, idiosyncratic categories and marking their own relationships. There is more dynamicity in the usage itself. This interpretation of *sia* may find some support in the following anecdote:

There was once when I had a lunch gathering with two friends from a previous school whom I have not seen in a while. Both of them brought another friend I did not know along, so as you can imagine, it seemed like the gathering was headed for polite conversation and more questions on *how have you been* and the like. It was at this point where I started using *sia* in my conversation rather consciously, on my part, to break the ice and define the situation as one where we should have a more intimate conversation. Halfway through the lunch, one of my old schoolmates started to recount a story about how the scholarship holders in his class were forging ahead with homework even though it was only Week 1 of school. This was not recorded, but I wrote it down immediately after, and I will reproduce it here to the best of my memory:

KH: First day of school (they) ask me, ‘Eh you look at exam paper already not?’ Huhh what exam paper *s- sia*? I dun even know where to find!

The significance of this utterance was not just that he used *sia* after I started using it in conversation, but rather, there was a slight, but obvious hesitation before he used it. Not only does that mark how self-conscious KH was about the using of the particle, but also his uncertainty about whether this situation, this lunch gathering among people who were not as close to him, was the correct time and place to use *sia*.

The point where KH hesitated shows us rather tellingly how the usage of *sia*, for these speakers, is always constantly changing depending on the people you are with. For KH, we were

not people he would probably see as ‘in-group’ enough, at the same time, my use of *sia* had been picked up by him and he was reacting to my attempt to draw him into *my* in-group.

### 5.3.2 *The users of sia*

Who, then, are these people who use *sia*? Is there a way to classify them? As mentioned, in the data extracts themselves, *sia* is not as pervasive as other particles, but even in the process of data collection, there have been many failed attempts in eliciting the particle from groups of SCE speakers who do not even use *sia* in the first place. Unlike the other particles in SCE, *sia* only appears in the lexicon of a subset of SCE speakers, and in this next section, we will explore the idea of how traditional macro social categories might not apply to this subset.

Singapore has always been traditionally described to have a ‘unique’ speech situation, a continuum that extends across different lectal varieties. This has been commented on by various researchers (see Platt, 1977; Brown, 1988) as well in the early years of academic work on SCE. Platt (1977) classified SCE speakers according to their education level and occupation, which then corresponds to their position in the SCE speech continuum, ranging from the acrolect, the upper and lower mesolect, and the basilect, i.e. the higher your socio-educational status, the higher your lectal variety. What is unique, however, is how speakers are able to switch between lects depending on their socio-educational level, that is, a speaker who can speak the acrolect of SCE would have better ability to handle the lower lects as well<sup>19</sup>.

Bell and Ser (1983), in taking into consideration what they see as this continuum situation in Singapore between colloquial and standard English, proposed that while a particle like *lah* might serve as a *marker* for some (a signal of informality) in speech, it serves as an *indicator* for others (for whom a conscious choice cannot be made to eliminate the particle). Chua (1990) places *what* as a particle that is used by SCE speakers across all lectal classifications based on the socio-educational levels as divided by Platt (1977).

However, we hit a snag when we try to group *sia* users into traditional sociological parameters. From my data, it seems that *sia* is used overwhelmingly by male speakers. Post-recording interviews with participants have constantly generated comments that *sia* is a Malay

particle, and Malay speakers are the ones who use *sia*. Others of an older generation talk about the particle as a ‘young people’ particle, and how they have stopped using it since they passed a certain age. Yet there are instances where females have been known to use *sia* (albeit in lesser numbers), where Singaporeans of other language backgrounds use *sia*, and unrecorded evidence of people above university age or below (elementary school age) who use *sia* too. Then, there are those who are young, male, and Malay who do not use the particle at all. Of course, if we were to say, take a majority poll, there will be no doubt that the young male Malay SCE speakers might turn out to be the most frequent users of the particle. This conclusion, however, misses the point on why *sia* is used by everyone else who does not fall into these categories. Neither will concluding that *sia* is used across the board by people who speak different lectal variations of SCE advance us any further in trying to understand why *sia* is as marked as it is. *sia* is a particle that does not give us more information about the ‘real’ division of speakers within the community, as it is used to ‘colour’ speech and establish relationships within the community itself, rather than act as an identifying element that decides what lect of SCE someone speaks. The only division we can make with certainty, thus, is one of *sia* users and non-*sia* users.

With all that we have concluded about the interactional function of *sia*, and the relationship factor guiding its use, we can then try to identify this subset of *sia* users. The SCE speakers who identify with this *sia* identity – are those who subscribe to the fact that *sia* has these negative connotations, but still ‘defiantly’ use *sia* as a handy way to define and establish these close relationships.

The failed attempts to elicit the particle during the data collection process just mean I was recording the wrong people in the wrong situations. Only when I started looking for people who used *sia*, and put them with the right group of people did I successfully elicit *sia* in the end. The speakers in these recordings use *sia* consciously in that they constantly screen the people they use it with and those they do not. Yet at the same time, it appears naturally in conversation, and *a part of his/her identity* – this is how he wants to be seen and how he likes to be in relation to the community around him.

## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 *A dynamic identity*

In the case of particles like *lah* and *leh*, just using them automatically defines a speaker's identity as an SCE speaker; their pervasiveness in the language makes them identifiable as inherently Singlish. For the majority of SCE speakers in Singapore, the switch between Singlish and the standard vernacular happens all the time, and they make constant decisions each time they do so, continuously assessing and monitoring their interlocutors and the contexts, and correspondingly adjusting their language choices. This ability to switch to Singlish becomes a way to indicate a different interactional environment and correlates very strongly with the identity as Singaporean and our orientation to the other interlocutors as Singaporean as well. The use of particles supports this as one of the signs indicating the switch to SCE, which subsequently allows them to perform multiple functions, as explained by this quote from Platt (1987:399-400):

‘I think one can state without doubt that discourse particles in SE are multifunctional, signaling the **speaker's membership of a speech community or a subgroup thereof** and assisting in signaling the informality/formality of the context.’

Using *sia*, as with any other particle in SCE, shows the speaker's construction of his/her own identity, of indicating his/her membership to a certain group. *sia* with all the ‘baggage’ it has from *sial*, is used however to define an even more specific identity for the users within this community of SCE speakers itself – it belongs to a ‘subgroup’, not one constructed by the society, but done idiosyncratically by the speakers themselves to identify with ‘fellow *sia* users’. Correspondingly, this identity is then seen to be dynamic – as talk progresses, that identity is manifested only when *sia* is used by the speaker himself, and co-constructed when picked up by the interlocutor. Greer (2005), in his study of bilingual multi-ethnic Japanese teenagers, shows how their attitudes towards being labeled *haafu* (‘half’, mixed blood) varies between individuals and contexts – they use the label unquestioningly among themselves, but at the same time

understand that it has negative connotations for themselves. While ‘*sia* user’ is not an identity ascribed to this subgroup by the society at large, they use *sia* as a device to signal membership and establish relationships with ‘fellow *sia* users’.

## 6.2 *The traditional division of the SCE community in Singapore*

The usage and spread of *sia* in the SCE community in Singapore has shown us that there are elements in language that allow speakers to dynamically construct and negotiate different identities with different persons within the community. This process works across all traditional divisions of social and educational class, and should be also considered as one of the factors that also motivate the styles of interaction between speakers. This, then, is closely related to the *why that now* of Conversation Analysis – as speakers are constantly screening their interlocutors and actively using language to mark and carry out interactional activities.

Also, the traditional division of SCE speakers based on social and educational criteria into different competencies of the language is dynamic in itself as well. As Singapore progresses, the socio-economic status of people and their exposure to SCE and Singapore Standard English (SSE) change correspondingly. In recent years, Singapore Education Minister Ng Eng Hen has reported the general shift towards English as the home language for young Singaporeans – 6 in 10 Chinese and Indian students and 3.5 in 10 Malay students speak predominantly with family members (The Straits Times, 2009).

This shift towards SSE for the community as a whole might render for some acrolectal speakers the fluid boundaries Platt (1977) talked about immutable, having relatively less contact with SCE to begin with. For others, SCE becomes more of a tool to mark a ‘*this is how we should be talking*’ moment, the level of informality, or membership category with their interlocutors.

*sia* is perfectly positioned to illustrate this change within the community itself. And in order to explain how these macro categories have and can change over time, we have to go back to the data. This unique relationship between social structure and how we speak and converse with each other might be casually and even intuitively observable to the researcher, but like

Schegloff (1991) says, our understanding of it must be substantiated by our data, by what we can empirically justify through analyzing the conversations themselves.

Bell and Ser's (1983) conclusion that *lah* is used as an indicator for people who cannot make a choice to eliminate the particle and Chua's (1990) classification of *what* into these traditional divisions of lectal ability have their basis in their observations of the social structure in Singapore. However, the main point here, is not whether these divisions made about people who use these particles are 'true' or not, but how these categories are *made relevant* at particular moments of interaction. Thus, without the resourcefulness of CA to demonstrate that these are indeed, *participant categories* and that the participants themselves are indeed orienting to these identities they have constructed, we cannot say for sure that whatever conclusions we make on social structure is substantiated by what is actually happening on the ground (Schegloff, 1991).

Through the study of one single particle in SCE, we have managed to uncover more about the intricacies of interaction, yet also further establish that talk is systematic, and that speakers use this system to perform similar functions in the individual contexts of their interactions. In Singapore, the role utterances particles play, then, are not just adding to the 'flavour' of Singlish, but give us an enlightening insight into how words from different sources are used creatively and intuitively by speakers of SCE to define relationships with the people around them. This is Singapore culture in the making, and through the talk in interaction, we can identify and describe the ideologies and identities reflected in the elements of the language.

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## 8 Appendices

### I Use of *sia lah* in SCE conversation

Excerpt 8-A. Matt and Val are standing in front of the boot of Matt's car, both laughing about how it looks a mess. Matt starts clearing some things from the car while Val waits by the side.

[C06-1]

1 MATT: °Sorry ah I really need to do a bit of er-°  
 2 VAL: You reply Tammy already onot, or er she will call lah hor?  
 3 MATT: I- I- I- I message- I I told her already.  
 4 VAL: Okay.  
 5 (2.0)  
 → 6 MATT: Wah **sia lah** my place really like f\*\*\* liddat. Eh your- your-  
 7 your umbrella is: here or-  
 8 VAL: Its- no no it's inside there. [Yah.]  
 9 MATT: [Orh ] okay cheh. I thought you  
 10 you-  
 11 VAL: No problemo!

Excerpt 8-B. Ravi and Aretha, over lunch, are talking about the different flavours of panna cotta dessert, when Ravi receives a text on his phone. He uses *sia lah* in Line 12 when commenting on the text message he received. The content of the text had to do with the changing of venue for his cheerleading team practice later that evening.

[C05-3]

1 ARETHA: You know got other kind of flavour one right?  
 2 RAVI: [>I know.<]  
 3 ARETHA: [I- I- ], the best kind I've ever had right, is the- is  
 4 Earl Grey panna cotta,  
 5 [(Raj's phone beeps)]=  
 6 ARETHA: [it's like- ]=  
 7 RAVI: =[Really meh?]  
 8 ARETHA: =[Earl Grey- ] Earl Grey flavour and den its panna cotta but

