The Cantonese utterance particle gaa3 and particle combinations: an NSM semantic analysis

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Cantonese utterance particles occur in ordinary Cantonese conversation every one or two seconds. Speech becomes unnatural when they are omitted. They are often used in combinations of more than one, with ‘basic’ and ‘compound’ particles totalling approximately one hundred. However, it is generally agreed that the particles’ meanings are extremely elusive. This study uses the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework and natural speech data from the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus to explain the meaning of the utterance particle gaa3 as used in statements. Gaa3 is the second most frequently used utterance particle in the corpus, and the eleventh most frequently used Cantonese word overall. The NSM explication proposed clearly states what the ‘core’ or invariant meaning of gaa3 is. Furthermore, the explications of gaa3 and two other particles, laa1 and wo3, can reveal why they can (or cannot) combine, and what their composite meanings are. This is a new approach to the untested idea that the meaning of particle ‘clusters’ is equal to that of the individual particles combined. The explications begin to expose a system with which the vast array and patterns of Cantonese utterance particles can be explained in a logical way.

Introduction

Cantonese utterance particles have an extremely high frequency and significance in the natural, everyday Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong. An utterance particle is found in ordinary, continuous talk every 1.5 seconds, although the regularity with which they occur varies greatly depending on the mode of language use (i.e. they are used less in very formal situations) (Luke 1990:11). A conversation without any utterance particles sounds highly unnatural. Gaa3, the focus of the present study, is not only the second most frequently used utterance particle in the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus, but also the eleventh most frequently used word overall. Despite the significance and pervasiveness of utterance particles in Cantonese, their meanings are extremely
elusive, and even native Cantonese speakers find it difficult to pinpoint or articulate what the particles mean.

This study uses the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework and corpus data to demonstrate that \textit{gaa3} has a meaning which can be clearly stated, and which can be tested by substitution in place of \textit{gaa3} in real conversations. The proposed NSM explication reveals the invariant semantic content of \textit{gaa3} as used in declaratives, and covers the particle’s wide range of uses. The explication is simple, testable, and supported with real, natural examples.

Furthermore, this study uses the proposed explication of \textit{gaa3} and of two other particles, \textit{laa1} and \textit{wo3}, to look at the way the particles combine. Particle ‘clusters’ and ‘contractions’ of more than one particle have often been claimed to have the combined meaning of the separate particles of which they are made up (Yau 1965:120; Kwok 1984:8-15; Yip & Matthews 2000:131-132; Wakefield 2011:13), although this does not seem to have ever been rigorously tested. Moreover, this would be a futile exercise if the meanings of the particles that make up the clusters and contractions were not first accurately identified. NSM provides a new approach to the idea that the meaning of particle combinations is equal to the meaning of the individual particles combined.

To begin with, an overview of Cantonese utterance particles and of prior work on \textit{gaa3} will be given. It will be shown that accurate and comprehensive semantic analysis of \textit{gaa3} is lacking. Next, the NSM method and the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus are introduced briefly. The proposed NSM explication for \textit{gaa3} is then explained and supported by real, naturally occurring examples from the corpus. Following this, the semantics of several combinations of particles, namely \textit{gaa3laa1}, \textit{gaa3wo3}, and \textit{*laa1wo3} are considered. Finally, some remaining issues and topics for further research are discussed.

\textbf{Cantonese utterance particles}

Cantonese utterance particles are bound morphemes that attach to the ends of utterances. They have also been called ‘sentence particles’ or ‘sentence-final particles’, although they can occur at the end of syntactic units that are not sentences, such as clauses, phrases, free-standing words, or paragraphs (Luke 1990:6-10; Matthews & Yip 2011:390; Wakefield 2011:12). Cantonese utterance particles are necessary for Cantonese speakers’ self-expression, indicating something about a speaker’s attitude, assumptions, intentions, or emotions.
Cantonese is a tonal language, with the rich tonal system restricting Cantonese speakers’ ability to manipulate pitch. Because of this, many speaker-oriented discourse meanings, typically expressed with intonation in a language such as English, are expressed via utterance particles in Cantonese (Chan 1999:88; Yip & Matthews 2001:156; Wakefield 2011).

The prevalence of Cantonese utterance particles in everyday, spoken Cantonese cannot be disputed. In the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus, the most frequently occurring utterance particle, aa3, is also the second most frequently occurring word overall. Approximately thirty or more ‘basic’ (typically monosyllabic) Cantonese utterance particles have been identified, but they can also be used together in combinations of more than one particle. The number of ‘basic’ and ‘compound’ particles used in spoken Cantonese is estimated to be approximately one hundred (Kwok 1984:8-11; Luke 1990:1; Yip & Matthews 2000:131; Wakefield 2011:13,19).

**Previous descriptions of gaa3**

Despite gaa3's high frequency, few investigations of gaa3 have been carried out, and those studies that consider gaa3 tend to look at a large number of particles, leading to less focus on individual particles and less accuracy in findings. Until more recently, it was not the norm to search for one ‘core’ meaning of a particle, with many believing that Cantonese utterance particles have a wide range of meanings too elusive to pin down, or perhaps no meaning at all. Furthermore, previous work on gaa3 tends to be built on constructed or invented examples, despite the fact that Cantonese utterance particles typically occur in informal, everyday language, and have meanings that seem to belong to tacit knowledge. Studies that mention gaa3 include those of Yau (1965), Matthews and Yip (2011) and Fung (2000). The oft-cited studies of Gibbons (1980), Kwok (1984) and Luke (1990) do not explore the semantics of gaa3.

Yau (1965:ii,66,112-116) describes gaa3 as being used in utterances that are ‘obviously affirming (or not demanding a verbal confirmation)’, and as having the connotation of ‘conceited’. However, gaa3 is used at the end of both statements and questions, and ‘conceited’ is not only itself a complex English concept, but also not a meaning applicable to all occurrences of gaa3. Examples 1 and 2 show typical examples of gaa3. In example 1, a speaker explains something about whale watching, and the utterance would probably not be described as ‘conceited’. In example 2, speakers A and B are discussing which
universities and which courses speaker A might apply for. Speaker A has not made any decisions yet. Speaker B questions whether a certain university has the option to study accounting, and speaker A’s response is given here as example 2. Again, this is unlikely to be ‘conceited’.

Example 1

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Daan6hai6 } & \text{ nei5 join } \text{ keoi5 go2di1 tour dou1} - \\
\text{but you join it/they those tour even/still } \\
\text{dou1 } & \text{ mei6bit1 jat1ding6 bauu1 jat1ding6 } \\
\text{even/still not-necessarily definitely cover/guarantee } & \text{ definitely tai2 dak1 dou2. Zik1hai6 keoi5 go2go3 } \\
\text{see can/able VPRT meaning it/they that-CL } \\
\text{giu3zou6 m4 z1i gun1 king4 tyun4 } \\
\text{called not know observe whale tour } \\
\text{ding6hai6 mat1je5 gam2joeng2 (1) gaa3. } \\
\text{or what-thing like-that PRT } \\
\text{Zau6 m4 jat1ding6 bauu1 nei5 tai2 dou2 lo1. } \\
\text{then not definitely cover/guarantee you see VPRT PRT } \\
\text{Zik1hai6 keoi5 wui5 jau5 - jau5 zek3 syun4 ceot1hoi2. } \\
\text{meaning it/they will have have CL boat out-sea } \\
\text{‘But even if you join those tours – it’s still not necessarily definitely guaranteed that you’ll definitely be able to see [whales]. I mean their what’s-it-called “whale observation tour”, or something like that (1) gaa3. It’s not definitely guaranteed that you’ll see [whales] lo1. I mean they will have – have a boat to go out to sea.’} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Example 2

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Keoi5 jau5 business go2bin6 di1 je5 duk6 (2) gaa3. } \\
\text{it/they have business that-side CL things read/study PRT } \\
\text{‘They [the university] have courses to do with business (2) gaa3.’} \\
\end{align*}
\]

A possible reason for the neglect of such a commonly used particle is that many believe it to be a contraction of two other particles: ge3 + aa3. It is widely believed that the meaning of a particle cluster or contraction equals that of the particles of which it is made up. Perhaps for this reason, scholars have felt it unnecessary to study gaa3 as a particle in itself. For example, Kwok (1984:8-9) places gaa3 in her list of ‘derived’ particles, which come about when particles are added together and phonological changes occur to prevent the ‘surface’ forms from being recognised as combinations of the basic particles. She does not

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1 This paper uses the Jyutping Cantonese romanisation system, also known as ‘The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong Cantonese Romanisation Scheme’. Abbreviations used in this paper include: CL ‘classifier’; DEL ‘delimitative aspect’; EXP ‘experiential aspect’; PROG ‘progressive aspect’; PRT ‘particle’; VPRT ‘verbal particle’.
attempt to look at gaa3. She does not explain how she divided her list of particles into ‘basic’ and ‘derived’, nor how she deduced that gaa3 is in fact ge3 + aa3.

Matthews and Yip (2011) also believe that gaa3 = ge3 + aa3. They explain that the ge3 + aa3 contraction is obligatory, and that the combination ge3aa3 does not occur (Matthews & Yip 2011:391-392). However, even if it is true that the particles ge3 and aa3 never occur together, this does not necessarily justify the treatment of gaa3 as a contraction of the two. Furthermore, Matthews and Yip’s (2011:394-397) subsequent section on particle combinations, including a table detailing the possible combinations of particles, then omits particle combinations consisting of gaa3. This is strange considering how frequently gaa3 occurs and combines with other particles. Besides gaa3laa1 and gaa3wo3, possible combinations involving gaa3 include but are not limited to gaa3laa1, gaa3me1, gaa3bo3, gaa3zaa3, gaa3zaa3wo3, and gaa3aa1maa3. These not only come immediately to a native speaker’s mind, but are also present in the corpus.

Nonetheless, Matthews and Yip (2011:391-392) do provide one of the few descriptions of gaa3. They state that ‘the assertive particle ge3 combined with aa3 results in gaa3, which has the effect of seeking confirmation of a statement’. Separately, ge3 is defined as ‘affirmative: “this is the case”’ and aa3 as a ‘softening statement or question’. This is a confusing treatment of gaa3. It makes it seem as if gaa3 is used only when seeking confirmation. This would imply that gaa3 is generally used in questions, but the definition of ge3 as ‘affirmative: “this is the case”’ implies that gaa3 is used in statements. Descriptions such as ‘assertive’ for ge3 and ‘softening’ for aa3 are disconnected and do not support the theory that the meaning of gaa3 = ge3 + aa3. If ‘softening’ and ‘assertive’ were both accepted as possible descriptions of gaa3, neither could be accurate in every context, which would mean they do not represent the ‘core’ or invariant meaning of gaa3. The supporting example given by Matthews and Yip (2011:392) is as follows2:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hai6} & \quad \text{zan1} & \quad \text{ge3} & \quad \rightarrow & \quad \text{Hai6-m4-hai6} & \quad \text{zan1} & \quad \text{gaa3}? \\
\text{is} & \quad \text{true} & \quad \text{SFP} & & \quad \text{is-not-is} & \quad \text{true} & \quad \text{SFP} \\
\text{‘It’s true.’ (statement)} & & & & \quad \text{‘Is it true?’ (question)}
\end{align*}
\]

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2 This example by Matthews and Yip (2011:392) has been converted to Jyutping but retains its original gloss and translation. Their abbreviation ‘SFP’ stands for ‘sentence-final particle’.
This is a classic case of explaining an utterance rather than explaining the particle’s meaning. This example gives the impression that gaa3 is a ‘question’ particle, but gaa3 often occurs with statements too. In fact, in the statement provided by Matthews and Yip, the particle ge3 could easily be substituted for gaa3. This would result in another declarative statement ‘hai6 zan1 gaa3’, which could also be translated as ‘it’s true’. The corresponding question provided, ‘hai6-m4-hai6 zan1 gaa3?’, ‘is it true?’ is a standard ‘A-not-A question’. As Matthews and Yip (2011:360-363) themselves explain, this is the most neutral form of yes/no question in Cantonese, and is like asking ‘is A the case or not?’ As can be seen from the gloss, this particular example uses ‘is-not-is’ before ‘true’ to ask the question ‘is it true?’ If the utterance particle gaa3 were not included at the end, the sentence would sound odd, but would nevertheless be a question, and would still have ‘the effect of seeking confirmation of a statement’. While this example shows a clear, typical example of a way that gaa3 can be used, more, natural examples of gaa3 should be used to check whether this is really the core meaning of gaa3. Finally, Matthews and Yip do not provide definitive evidence that gaa3 is derived from ge3 + aa3, since a number of other particles could be substituted into either of these utterances, such as ‘hai6 zan1 gaa3/ge2/gaa4/gaa3me1/gwaa3’.

Although, as mentioned, Kwok did not explore the meaning of gaa3, her separate entries for ge3 and aa3 have parallels with Matthews and Yip’s. According to Kwok (1984:42-43), ge3 shows that a ‘sentence is a factual statement expressing what the speaker regards as true’. It is ‘used to strengthen the force of the assertion, and is like prefacing the sentence with “It is a fact...”’. This is compatible with Matthews and Yip’s (2011:391-392) explanation of ge3. Regarding aa3, Kwok (1984:45,71) acknowledges that aa3 is found in declarative, interrogative, and imperative structures, although she also states that aa3 does not carry much semantic content, and ‘does not add a great deal’ to the meaning of the sentence. She mentions that the main function of aa3 is to make a sentence sound less abrupt, which corresponds with Matthews and Yip’s (2011:391-392) description of ‘softening’. These descriptions face the same problems as those of Matthews and Yip.

Another short description of gaa3 can be found in Fung’s work. The analysis given by Fung (2000:168-171), who also accepts that gaa3 ‘is commonly treated as’ ge3 + aa3, is largely concerned with comparing gaa3 with ge3 and with aa3. Fung admits that there are situations where gaa3 can occur naturally but where ge3 would sound odd. However, she overlooks this as an indication that gaa3 is
not made up of \textit{ge3 + aa3}. She states that sentences suffixed with \textit{gaa3} ‘remind the hearer of situations that should be known but may have been overlooked or neglected by the hearer... \textit{gaa3} assumes that the hearer has no knowledge of a situation that should have been known and is a given (as opposed to a new) situation’. In fact, Fung generalises that all utterance particles with the velar stop as the onset, including \textit{gaa3}, mark a situation that is part of the presumed knowledge of the participants in the exchange (Fung 2000:136-138). Yet many real, naturally occurring examples of \textit{gaa3}, as will be provided in this paper, show it being used to introduce new information, or to teach someone something. Furthermore, this description is not consistent with \textit{gaa3} when \textit{gaa3} is used in questions.

The present study will treat the classification of \textit{gaa3} as ‘basic’, ‘derived’, or a ‘contraction’ as irrelevant to its meaning. There does not seem to be enough evidence on either side to state whether or not \textit{gaa3} is a contraction of \textit{ge3 + aa3}. In the future, finding NSM explications of \textit{ge3} and \textit{aa3} will likely be valuable, but that is beyond the scope of the present paper. The following section explains more about the NSM method and corpus data used in this study.

\textbf{The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach and the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus}

The NSM approach used in this study allows the ‘core’ or invariant meaning of words to be identified and expressed in a reductive paraphrase made of semantic primes (see e.g. Goddard 2008, 2011; Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, 2002; Peeters 2006; Wierzbicka 1996, 1997). Use of NSM to explain meaning prevents the formulation of definitions which are circular, terminologically obscure, untranslatable or ethnocentric. Wakefield (2011) used the NSM framework in the process of equating some Cantonese utterance particles to specific English intonation patterns, though not studying any of the particles in the present study. Other NSM studies have investigated particles of languages such as Colombian Spanish (Travis 2005), French (Waters 2010), Malay (Goddard 1994, 2001, 2011), Mandarin (Chappell 1991), and Singapore English (Besemer & Wierzbicka 2003; Wong 2004, 2005). Table 1 provides the latest list of Cantonese and English NSM semantic primes.
Table 1 Exponents of NSM semantic primes in Cantonese and English

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>English</th>
<th>Substantives</th>
<th>Relational substantives</th>
<th>Determiners</th>
<th>Quantifiers</th>
<th>Evaluators</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
<th>Mental Predicates</th>
<th>Speech</th>
<th>Actions, events, movement, contact</th>
<th>Location, existence, specification, possession</th>
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3 The English exponents and the grouping of the primes are as shown in Goddard and Wierzbicka (2013 in press). Primes and exponents added or updated since being proposed in Leung (2012) are marked in the ‘Cantonese’ column with the symbol ‘*’. 
The NSM explication proposed for *gaa3* is supported by real, naturally occurring Hong Kong Cantonese taken from the Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus\(^4\) (see Luke & Wong in press). The corpus consists of approximately 180 000 word tokens from thirty hours of audio recordings from the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is made up of informal, spontaneous Cantonese speech either in ordinary settings among family, friends and colleagues, or from radio talk shows. Naturally occurring, ‘everyday’ data is more ideally suited to the study of Cantonese utterance particles than constructed or elicited data, given the particles are used primarily in informal or colloquial speech (Gibbons 1980; Luke 1990; Wakefield 2011).

**The meaning of *gaa3***

Analysis of naturally occurring examples reveal that the invariant meaning of *gaa3* in declaratives can be stated simply in NSM as follows: ‘it is good if you know this’. This explication explains the use of *gaa3* in a wide variety of

\(^4\) The Cantonese data were taken from the corpus but the English glosses and translations are my own.
situations. Some examples of *gaa3* which will be shown here include *gaa3* being used in responses to questions, giving instructions, providing new information, boasting, or teaching children. The examples show how the proposed explication covers a wider range of uses of *gaa3* than alternative explications, as well as the existing descriptions of *gaa3* mentioned above. The explication is provided below in English and Cantonese NSM with gloss in English.

*gaa3*:

> it is good if you know this

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{jyu4gwo2} & \quad \text{lei5} & \quad \text{zi1dou3} & \quad \text{zau6} & \quad \text{hou2} \\
\text{if} & \quad \text{you} & \quad \text{know} & \quad \text{then} & \quad \text{good}
\end{align*}
\]

‘It is good if you know this’ may appear to be a vague definition, but if one remembers that this is the second most frequently used particle and the eleventh most frequently spoken word in Cantonese overall, it makes sense that it has a broad and simple meaning, which is applicable to a wide range of utterances. This allows it to be used as often as it is. Furthermore, the simplicity and wide applicability of *gaa3* may be a factor for the large number of particles that *gaa3* can combine with to create numerous particle combinations. In the following, examples of *gaa3* will be used to help explain this analysis, and also to justify the exclusion of alternative explications such as ‘I want you to know this’ and ‘I want you to think about this’.

In the excerpt below, the explication ‘it is good if you know this’ can be substituted in place of each instance of *gaa3*, and explains what the speaker is saying. These three examples are labelled 3 – 5, with each instance of *gaa3* numbered separately within parentheses. This excerpt is taken from a conversation about going whale-watching in Australia. They contradict Fung’s (2000:168-171) description that *gaa3* reminds the hearer of something that should have been known, or is not a new situation. The utterances with *gaa3* attached are used here to introduce a new topic and provide useful or interesting information.

*Examples 3 – 5*

A:

> Hai6 lo1. Hou2ci5 gei2 leng3 wo3

is PRT (very)like quite pretty/beautiful PRT

> di1 fung1ging2, hai6 m4hai6 aa3?

CL scenery is not-is PRT

‘Yes lo1. Seems quite beautiful wo3, the scenery, right aa3?’
B:  
*M6*, *hai*6 *aa*3.  
*mm* is PRT  
‘Mm, yes *aa*3.’  

A:  
*Hai*6 *lo*1.  
is PRT  
‘Yes *lo*1.’  

B:  
*Jau*5 *hoi2tyun*4 *ding6hai*6 *jau*5 *king4jyu*4 *tai*2 *(3) *gaa*3.  
there-are dolphin or there-are whale see PRT  
*Jau*5 *di1* *gun1tyun*4, *ho2ji5* *ceot1hoi*2.  
there-are some viewing-tour can go-out-to-sea  
‘You can see dolphins or whales *(3) gaa*3. There are some viewing tours, you can go out to sea.’  

A:  
*Nei*5 *dou1* *m4* *jau4seoi*2.  
you also/even not swim  
‘You don’t even swim.’  

B:  
*Daam6hai*6 *jiu*3 - *m4hai*6 *aa*3,  
but need not-is PRT  
*go2di1* *jiu3* *gaap3* *aam1* *si4gaan3* *(4) gaa*3.  
those need combine correct time PRT  
*Jiu3* *tai2* *keoi5* *go3*  
need look/see he/she/it/them CL  
*go2* *go2* *dyun6* *si4gaan3* *aam1* *ne1*  
that that period time correct PRT  
*zau6* *jau5* *jat1* *kwan4* *(5) gaa*3.  
then there-are one pod PRT  
‘But you need – no *aa*3, [to participate in] those you need to plan for the correct time *(4) gaa*3. [You] need to see whether that period of time is correct *ne1*, then there will be a pod *(5) gaa*3.’  

Next, a different usage of *gaa*3 can be considered. Examples 6 – 8 below show two people, A and B, talking about A’s exam results. Speaker B is obviously impressed by A’s results in English, and A seems proud of his results too. Like example 2, examples 6 – 8 show *gaa*3 being used in responses to questions. Unlike example 2, however, examples 6 – 8 may indeed seem ‘conceited’, as Yau
(1965) described. In examples 6 and 7, speaker A is not just answering speaker B’s questions, but also giving additional information that makes himself sound even better. In example 8, he uses the particle gaa3 to help highlight what he is saying, which might have sounded less conceited or proud had he omitted gaa3, ‘it is good if you know this’. Note that ‘it is good if you know this’ does not itself imply conceitedness, but is compatible with situations where a speaker is being conceited. As we have seen, ‘conceited’ is not an invariant meaning of gaa3, and these utterances would likely sound somewhat conceited even without gaa3 attached at the end. Speaker A’s tone of voice also indicates that he is boasting or proud and he places emphasis on his grades ‘B3’ and ‘A’. Notice also that these examples do not have an ‘effect of seeking confirmation’, as one would expect from Matthews and Yip’s (2011:391-392) description.

Examples 6 – 8

B:
Wai3 jing1man2 dou1 haau2 B aa4?
hey English also/even examine B PRT
‘[You] even got a B in English aa4?’

A:
B saam1 (6) gaa3 ngo5 di1 jing1man2.
B three PRT I CL English
Loeng5 go3 - ngo5 jau5 loeng5 zoeng1 paper A (7) gaa3.
two CL I have two CL paper A PRT
‘I got a B3 [the better subdivision of B] (6) gaa3, in English. Two – I got As in two papers (7) gaa3.’

B:
Gam3 sai1lei6? Bin1 zoeng1 aa3?
so/that impressive which CL PRT
‘So impressive / that good? Which [papers] aa3?’

A:
Ngo5 zok3man2 tung4maai4 oral dou1 hai6 A (8) gaa3.
I writing and oral also/all is A PRT
‘I got As in both writing and oral (8) gaa3.’

At an earlier stage of this study, an alternative explication was ‘I want you to know this’. This would have been valid with examples like 3 – 5, which introduce a new topic or provide interesting or helpful information. It would also have been valid with examples 6 – 8, where a speaker is boasting or wanting others to know something about them. However, ‘I want you to know this’ was rejected
because sometimes the speaker does not ‘actively’ or personally WANT something. Consider examples 11 and 13, which are also responses to questions. It is good if the addressee (speaker A in both these cases) knows that it can be forty-something degrees and that speaker B’s husband says the flies are very big, because speaker A is asking about these things. It is good if the addressee knows these things because the addressee has indicated that they want to know. The rejected component ‘I want you to know this’ would incorrectly imply that the speaker is always the main person who wants the information to be passed on. The current explication ‘it is good if you know this’ is appropriately neutral. It can also be compared with ‘it is good for me if you know this’ and ‘it is good for you if you know this’. The proposed explication is valid for examples like 11 and 13, while still being valid for examples like 6 – 8.

Examples 9 – 13

A:

\textit{Ou3zau1 hou2 jit6? Gei2si4 aa3?}  
Australia very hot what-time PRT  
‘Australia’s very hot? When aa3?’

B:

\textit{Jyu4gwo2 nei5 hai6 haa6tin1 heoi3 go2go3 si4hau6, zik1hai6}  
if you is summer go that-CL time meaning  
\textit{nei5 dou1, hoeng1gong2 dung1tin1 sin1 heoi3 go2zan6si4.}  
you also/even Hong-Kong winter before go that-time  
‘If you go in summertime, it means you are going when it’s winter in Hong Kong.’

A:

\textit{Zik1hai6 nei5 ji3si1 hai6 sap6ji6jyut6 go2zan6si4?}  
meaning you meaning is December that-time  
‘You mean in December?’

B:

\textit{Hai6 aa3, hoeng1gong2 sap6ji6jyut6 go2si4 heoi3,}  
is/yes PRT Hong-Kong December that-time go  
\textit{go2dou6 hou2 jit6 (9) gaa3 wo3.}  
that-place very hot PRT PRT  
‘Yes aa3, if you go at the time of December in Hong Kong, it’s very hot there (9) gaa3 wo3.’

\footnote{Examples 9, 10 and 12 will be discussed in the section below on gaa3wo3.}
A: 
Hai6 me1? 
is/yes PRT  
'Yes me1?' / 'Really me1?'

B: 
Dou1 saai3 dou3 hou2 sai1lei6 (10) gaa3 wo3.  
also/even/still sunny until/to very amazing PRT PRT  
Ngo5 lou5gung1 ci3ci3 faan1lei4 dou1 haak1 saai3 gam2. 
I husband time-time come-back also black all like-that  
'It's incredibly sunny (10) gaa3 wo3. Every time my husband comes back he's all black [tanned].'

A: 
Gam3 gan2jiu3 aa4 sap6ji6jyut6.  
so serious PRT December  
'So serious aa4 in December?'

B: 
Hai6 aa3, sei3sap6gei2 dou6 (11) gaa3 dou1.  
is/yes PRT forty-something degree PRT even  
'Yes aa3, forty-something degrees (11) gaa3.'

A: 
Go2 zan6 si4 teng1 jan4 gong2 ne1,  
that CL time listen people talk/say PRT  
waa6 ou3zau1 go2 dou6 ne1,  
talk/say Australia that place PRT  
hou2 gwai2 dou1 wu1jing1 (12) gaa3 wo3. 
very devil/ghost (vulgar) much/many flies PRT PRT  
Hai6 m4 hai6 aa3.  
is not is PRT  
'Some time ago I heard people say ne1, say that in Australia ne1, very "devil" many flies (12) gaa3 wo3. Right aa3?'

B: 
is/yes PRT he say very big CL PRT  
'Yes aa3. He [my husband] says they're very big (13) gaa3.'

Another alternative explication previously considered for gaa3 is 'I think like this: “you didn't think about this before”’. This explication reflects the fact that gaa3 is often used when giving someone new or unexpected information, as in examples 3 – 12. One example which this explication would not fit is example 13.
Given that it is a response to a question, it is unlikely that speaker B thought speaker A had not thought about it before. An NSM component that would seem to address the problem with example 13 is ‘I know that you want to know something like this’. However, this kind of component is clearly not a good solution. It would be too specific and would not cover the wide range of uses of gaa3. This explication may seem acceptable for instances of gaa3 like in examples 2, 8, and 13, but it does not explain examples like 3 – 5. Not all declarative uses of gaa3 are responses to questions. Notice also that in situations like example 13, where a speaker is responding to a question about flies, there is no need for ‘softening’ or to sound ‘less abrupt’, as Matthews and Yip (2011:391-392) and Kwok (1984:45,71) point out that aa3 does.

Although the proposed explication includes the prime GOOD, the explication does not require that the thing to know is inherently good. Examples 14 and 15 below both involve the speaker answering a question by saying that they do not know something. The assumption is that the person asking the question would evaluate it as good to know the answer. The explication does not require that the answer provided is about something good. Examples 14 and 15 further support the rejection of ‘I want you to know this’, discussed above. These are also examples of gaa3 that challenge descriptions like ‘conceited’ (Yau 1965:115), ‘reminding’ (Fung 2000:170), or ‘seeking confirmation’ (Matthews & Yip 2011:391-392).

Example 14

A:

Heoi3 gwo3 gei2 ci3 zek1,
go EXP how-many time PRT
nei5 lou5gung1 Orlando go2dou6?
you husband Orlando that-place
‘How many times has your husband been to Orlando zek1?’

B:

Ngo5 m4 zi1 (14) gaa3,
I not know PRT
gam2 peng4 mai6 heoi3 lo1.
so/like-that cheap so-then go PRT
‘I don’t know (14) gaa3, [he] just goes if it’s cheap lo1.’
Example 15

A:

\begin{verbatim}
Gei2si4 dou2 jau5dak1 tai2 zek1
what-time approximately can/able-to-have see PRT

gam2 ni1di1, zi1 m4 zi1 daai6koi3?
so/this these know not know approximately/roughly
‘Approximately when can we see these [whales] zek1, do you know approximately?’
\end{verbatim}

B:

\begin{verbatim}
Ngo5 m4 zi1 (15) gaa3.
I not know PRT.
‘I don’t know (15) gaa3.’
\end{verbatim}

At an earlier stage of this study, it was also considered that the explication for 
gaa3 could be about thinking, and that it would use the NSM prime THINK rather 
than KNOW. Some potential ‘THINK’ explications that were considered and 
ultimately rejected include ‘I want you to think about this’ and ‘it is good if you 
think about this’. These seem simple enough for the varied uses of gaa3, and 
would be compatible with many examples. Even so, examples 14 and 15 above 
clearly invalidate these possibilities. It is unlikely that a speaker would want to 
express ideas like ‘I want you to think about the fact that I don’t know’ or ‘it is 
good if you think about me not knowing’. THINKING about something implies 
that someone dwells on something for a relatively longer period of time than 
would be plausible in such situations. Since examples 14 and 15 are acceptable, 
it was concluded that formulations with ‘THINK’ could not provide an invariant 
meaning of gaa3.

Furthermore, the proposed explication ‘it is good if you know this’ is better 
than ‘it can be good if you know this’, because the latter makes the speaker seem 
unsure. For example, when gaa3 is used in responses to questions, where 
someone has indicated explicitly that they want to know something, it makes 
sense to state that it is good for the person asking the question to know the 
answer (regardless of what the answer is). Another revealing situation in which 
gaa3 is often used is when teaching children. The constructed examples labelled 
16 – 18 help to demonstrate this. These examples show some typical statements 
often directed at children, and support the rejection of ‘it can be good if you 
know this’ in favour of ‘it is good if you know this’.
Example 16

M4  ho2ji5  gam2joeng2  (16) gaa3.
not  can  like-this  PRT
'(You) can't be like this (16) gaa3' / ' (You) can't do that (16) gaa3.'

Example 17

Gam2joeng2  zou6  hai6  m4  ngaam1  (17) gaa3.
like-this  do  is  not  correct/right  PRT
'Doing this / behaving like this is wrong (17) gaa3.'

Example 18

Go2dou6  hou2  ngai4him2  (18) gaa3.
that-place  very  dangerous  PRT
'That place is very dangerous (18) gaa3.'

Substitution of other utterance particles such as laa1 or lo1 would make examples 16 – 18 sound very strange, if not unacceptable. The particle laa1 has the meaning ‘you now know what I think about this, because of this, I can not-say more’ (see below), which is unreasonable to expect of children. The particle lo1 would imply that the child(ren) should already know these things; it conveys an ‘offhanded’ feeling, as if the speaker does not really care about the child or the child’s safety, and as if the speaker is impatient or frustrated.

In fact, the proposed explication ‘it is good if you know this’ may help explain why utterances with gaa3 can sometimes seem to be ‘softened’ (Matthews & Yip 2011:391) and ‘sound less curt and abrupt’ (Kwok 1984:71). Utterances without the particle gaa3 might sound as if the speaker does not want to be saying these things to the addressee. It can sound like the speaker is frustrated or annoyed, or even impatient. However, gaa3 is not necessarily ‘soft’ in all cases, and ‘softening’ or ‘less curt’ are not part of gaa3’s invariant meaning. The explication reflects and allows for this too.

The examples above have supported the proposal of ‘it is good if you know this’ as the invariant meaning of gaa3 when it is used in declaratives. The next section looks at the particle clusters gaa3laa1 and gaa3wo3.

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6 This describes the feeling when lo1 is used in these specific examples, and is not proposed as the invariant meaning of lo1.
Particle clusters

As mentioned above, particle ‘clusters’ and ‘contractions’ of more than one particle have often been claimed to have the combined meaning of the separate particles of which they are made up (Yau 1965:120; Kwok 1984:8-15; Yip & Matthews 2000:131-132; Wakefield 2011:13). However, this claim does not seem to have been systematically tested. The proposed explications of utterance particles laa1 (see Leung 2012) and wo3 are given below. Explications and examples of gaa3laa1 and gaa3wo3, which frequently occur in conversation, are then considered. *Laa1wo3 does not occur in Cantonese. Note that each of the individual explications for gaa3, laa1 and wo3 were arrived at separately and without considering any potential combinations. The preliminary analysis given here shows that on the one hand, particles that occur together in clusters have compatible NSM explications that seem able to be combined. On the other hand, where explications are incompatible, those particles will not occur together in conversation. This can also be considered an additional test of the individual explications, as incorrect explications may have resulted in problematic combinations. Many more utterance particles should be examined to confirm whether this kind of (in)compatibility is true of all particle combinations.

Gaa3laa1

The proposed NSM explication for the utterance particle laa1 is given below in English and Cantonese. It is a revised version of that proposed in Leung (2012). Some typical uses of laa1 include to indicate (perceived) mutual understanding or to close a topic or conversation.

laa1:

\begin{verbatim}
you now know what I think about this
because of this, I can not-say more
lei5 ji4gaa1 zi1dou3 ngo5 dim2 lam2
you now know I how think
li1 jat1 joeng6 je5
this one CL thing
jan1wai6 gam2, ngo5 ho2ji5 m4 zoi3 gong2
because like-this/this-way I can not more say
\end{verbatim}

If the particle cluster gaa3laa1 has the same meaning as gaa3 + laa1, then the NSM explication for gaa3laa1 could be expected to consist of the explications for gaa3 and laa1 combined. This happens to be possible because the proposed explication of gaa3 is compatible with that of laa1. The explications help to
explain the existence and meaning of *gaa3laa1*. By placing the two NSM explications one after the other, the resulting explication is as follows.\(^7\)

\[
gaa3laa1: \text{it is good if you know this} \\
you now know what I think about this \\
because of this, I can not-say more \\
jyu4gwo2 lei5 zi1dou3 zau6 hou2 \\
lei5 ji4gaa1 zi1dou3 ngo5 dim2 lam2 li1 jat1 joeng6 je5 \\
jan1wai6 gam2, ngo5 ho2ji5 m4 zoi3 gong2
\]

As it turns out, this proposed explication of *gaa3laa1* can indeed be substituted where *gaa3laa1* occurs, and can explain what *gaa3laa1* means in each case. Example 19 below is about going on holiday to the USA. In this example, it is good if speaker A knows that he/she should relax while on holiday, possibly because it supports speaker B’s argument, or because B is reminding her friend to relax. Speaker B then does not need to say more because A should reasonably understand what is being said. Relaxing on holiday is to be expected. Speaker A does understand and moves on to the next topic. A similar analysis can be made of example 20, which is from a much later part of the same conversation.

\textbf{Example 19}

\textbf{A:}  
\texttt{Ci1sin3. Daap3 fei1gei1 heoi3 gwo3 go2bin1 fan3gaau3 aa4?}
\texttt{crazy ride airplane go over that-side sleep PRT}
\texttt{‘Crazy. Fly all the way over there to sleep aa4?’}

\textbf{B:}  
\texttt{Gam2 fong3gaa3 hai6 relax. Hai6 gam2  \textbf{(19) gaa3 laa1}.}
\texttt{then holiday is relax is like-that PRT PRT}
\texttt{‘Holidays are for relaxing. It’s like that \textbf{(19) gaa3 laa1}.’}

\textbf{Example 20}

\textbf{B:}  
\texttt{Gam2 fong3gaa3 zeoi3hou2 heoi3 sik6 aa3, waan2 aa3,}
\texttt{so/then holiday best go eat PRT play PRT}

\(^7\)In this preliminary study, the explications that make up the meaning of a particle cluster are placed one after the other, although more particle combinations and more particle explications in the future may reveal different ways to ‘combine’ or present the explications.
maai5 je5 aa3, zau6 zeoi3hou2 (20) gaa3 laa1.
buy thing PRT then best PRT PRT

‘Well the best thing to do on holiday is to eat aa3, play aa3, shop aa3, that’s the best (20) gaa3 laa1.’

A:
Hai6 lo1...
yes PRT
‘Yes lo1.’

The third example of gaa3laa1, labelled example 21, is from a conversation about postage stamp collecting, and the particle cluster here refers to something slightly different. Speaker A has been talking about the quick and large increase in the value of old $1.80 stamps (old stamps with the Queen’s image are no longer available in Hong Kong). Speaker A is recalling his/her past actions of using them up quickly, without realising their worth. The thing which from speaker B’s perspective is ‘good to know’ is that $1.80 stamps are no longer so popular and no longer increasing in price. Speaker A believes that B knows what he/she thinks about this now – that there is no point lamenting a missed opportunity – and can not-say more about it. The gaa3laa1 here is meant in a comforting way.

Example 21

A:
So2ji5 ngo5 ji4gaa1 nam2 hei2 di1
that’s-why I now think of CL
go3baat3 jau4piu3, ngo5 maang5gam3 gei3,
one-dollar-eighty stamp I ferociously/persistently send
maang5gam3 gei3 saai3 keoi5 go2zan6si4 di1 –
ferociously/persistently send all it at-that-time CL

‘That’s why when I think of those $1.80 stamps now, I ferociously/persistently sent, ferociously/persistently sent [kept sending in large amounts] all those at that time –’

B:
Sam1tung3 laa3. Daan6hai6 ji4gaa1
heart-pain PRT but now
jau6 mou5 ni1 jat1 joeng6 (21) gaa3 laa1,
instead/again not-have this CL thing PRT PRT
hai6 m4hai6 aa3?
is not-is PRT

‘Heartache laa3. But there aren’t these things now (21) gaa3 laa1, right aa3?’
The cluster \textit{gaa3laa1} is again used slightly differently in example 22 below. This time, it is more ‘blunt’, not intended to be a friendly piece of advice or a reminder like in examples 19 – 20, nor comforting like in example 21. Here, two people are having a good-natured but enthusiastic debate about football clubs and players. When speaker B says that he is going to support Germany in the World Cup, speaker A indicates that the German team is boring to watch. Speaker B agrees that they are indeed boring, but produces the following example of \textit{gaa3laa1}. He is indicating that his friend’s arguments are irrelevant and that she should know that winning is the most important thing. This is presented as an easily understood fact that does not require more explanation. He poses a rhetorical question to make his point, which he believes to be very obvious.

\textit{Example 22}

\textbf{B:} \begin{verbatim}
Jeng4 aa6 dak1 (22) gaa3 laa1
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
win then/so can PRT PRT
zeoi3 gan2jiu3. Nei5 pung2 deoi6 bo1 ci3 ci3 syu1
most important you support CL ball CL CL lose
hou2ci5 jing1gaak3laan4 gam2 dim2 gaau2 aa3?
like England then/so how make PRT
\end{verbatim}

‘It’s okay as long as they win \textbf{(22) gaa3 laa1}, that’s the most important. If you support a team that loses every time like England, then what \textit{aa3}?’

\textit{Gaa3wo3}

Using the same reasoning as with \textit{gaa3laa1}, this section looks at another common particle combination, \textit{gaa3wo3}. The following is my provisional NSM explication for the particle \textit{wo3}, given in English and Cantonese. \textit{Wo3} is used in many contexts, including starting a new topic, providing conflicting information, or indicating that something is noteworthy. The full analysis of \textit{wo3} cannot be included here.

\textit{wo3:}

\begin{verbatim}
you are not thinking about this now
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
lei5 ji4gaa1 m4 hai6 lam2 gan2
you now not is think PROG
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
li1 jat1 joeng6 je5
this one CL thing
\end{verbatim}
The explication for the particle cluster ga3wo3 should then be as follows.

\begin{align*}
\text{gaa3wo3:} \\
& \text{it is good if you know this} \\
& \text{you are not thinking about this now} \\
& \text{it is good if you think about it} \\
& \text{jyu4gwo2 lei5 zi1dou3 zau6 hou2} \\
& \text{lei5 ji4gaa1 m4 hai6 lam2 gan2 li1 jat1 joeng6 je5} \\
& \text{jyu4gwo2 lei5 lam2 haa5 zau6 hou2}
\end{align*}

To see examples of this particle combination, we can first revisit the three examples of ga3wo3 labelled 9, 10 and 12, where two people are talking about going on holiday to Australia. At the beginning of the extract, speaker A clearly does not know when it becomes hot in Australia. Speaker B states that Australia gets very hot in December. This utterance is suffixed with ga3wo3. In this example, the speaker may be expressing ‘it is good if you know this’ for several reasons. Speaker B is giving A some useful general knowledge, particularly because both speakers have mentioned in this conversation that they want to visit Australia, and also because speaker A has explicitly asked about it. Speaker B also expresses ‘you are not thinking about this now’ because it is clear that A does not know Australia gets very hot in summer, and ‘it is good if you think about it’, because it is a useful fact or even a warning to consider before going.

Speaker B then goes on to state that it is very sunny in Australia, providing the second example of ga3wo3. As above, it is good for speaker A to know this because it is useful general knowledge and because B knows that A wants to go to Australia. Speaker B indicates that A is not thinking about this, firstly because B is introducing a new fact, and secondly because A has stated that she does not know this about Australia. Again, she expresses ‘it is good if you think about it’ because it is a useful fact to consider.

Speaker A provides the next case of ga3wo3 in example 12, asking about the flies in Australia. As the explication shows, speaker A is indicating that it is good if speaker B knows this, that speaker B was not thinking about this, and that it is good if B thinks about it now. It is good if B knows about the flies in Australia because A clearly wants B to tell her about them, and A acknowledges and draws
attention to the fact that B is not thinking about the flies because it is another slight change in topic. It is good if B thinks about it, because A is asking a question and clearly wants to know.

Example 23 below shows another instance of gaa3wo3. Speaker A’s question implies that she thinks cheap flights are available, and B’s answer rejects A’s apparent assumptions. Speaker B expresses ‘it is good if you know this’ because the information attached is general knowledge and because her statement is the answer to A’s question. Speaker B also highlights that A is not thinking about the fact that the cost of flights varies according to season, and that it is good if she thinks about it. The proposed NSM explications are still valid and can explain the gaa3wo3 cluster.

Examples 23

A:
Wai3 ci4 di1 heoi3 m4 heoi3 leoi5hang4 aa3?
Hey late bit go not go holiday PRT
Nei5 lou5gung1 jau5mou5 peng4 gei1piu3 aa3?
you husband have-not-have cheap flight-ticket PRT
‘Hey, [are you] going on holiday later aa3? Does your husband have cheap flight tickets aa3?’

B:
Peng4 gei1piu3 jiu3 daam6gwai3
cheap flight-ticket have-to off-season/low-season
sin1 jau5dak1 peng4 (23) gaa3 wo3.
first have/can cheap PRT PRT
Ji4gaa1 wong6 –
now peak/busy
‘Cheap flight tickets have to be in the off-season to be cheap (23) gaa3 wo3. It’s now peak/busy –’

The next two examples show gaa3wo3 being used in a conversation with a different tone or mood. The following excerpt is from the same conversation as example 22, where two people are having a good-natured, enthusiastic debate about football. Here, they are arguing about what number shirt Beckham wears. In each turn, the speaker uses gaa3wo3 to indicate firstly that it is good if the other person knows Beckham wears a certain number shirt, i.e., number seven or number ten. At the same time, both register a disagreement and that the other thinks Beckham wears a different number. Both try to back up their arguments
to persuade the other, and they want the other to think about the fact that Beckham ‘was always number seven’ or ‘was number ten last year’.

*Examples 24 – 25*

**B:**

Keoi5 bat1nau1 dou1 cat1 hou6 (24) gaa3 wo3.

He [Beckham] always also/still seven number PRT PRT

‘He [Beckham] was always number seven (24) gaa3 wo3.’

**A:**

Bik1haam4 sap6 hou6 (25) gaa3 wo3 gau6nin2.

Beckham ten number PRT PRT last-year

‘Beckham was number ten last year (25) gaa3 wo3.’

*Laa1wo3*

As the meanings of the particle clusters gaa3laa1 and gaa3wo3 appear to consist of the meanings of the individual particles combined, it should follow that the meaning of the cluster *laa1wo3* would be made up of the meanings of laa1 + wo3, provided above. In fact, laa1 and wo3 do not combine, and *laa1wo3* is unacceptable in Cantonese. Importantly, the NSM explications for laa1 and wo3 reflect this incompatibility. Laa1 indicates ‘you now know what I think about this’, while wo3 indicates ‘you are not thinking about this now’. The reason the two particles never combine to form a cluster is displayed clearly through the NSM explications. The two have contradictory meanings. A speaker should never want to express that they have some shared knowledge with the addressee that is expected to be mutually understood, while simultaneously expressing that the addressee is not thinking like the speaker. Note that *wo3laa1* is also unacceptable, although in addition to semantic incompatibility, the ordering of the particles is also problematic (Matthews & Yip 2011:395). If considering only the order of the particles, *laa1wo3* should technically pose no problems.

**Concluding remarks and topics for further research**

This paper has proposed an NSM explication for the Cantonese utterance particle gaa3, which states its invariant semantic content when used in statements. The proposed explication ‘it is good if you know this’ has proved to be valid and applicable in a wide variety of situations, as demonstrated through examining naturally occurring examples of gaa3 taken from real, spontaneous Cantonese conversations. These examples also demonstrated that previous descriptions of gaa3 did not adequately explain its meaning in all contexts, and
justified the rejection of alternative explanations which were considered at
earlier stages of this study. The proposed explanation ‘it is good if you know this’
is most likely to be the invariant meaning, and explains the use of gaa3 much
more consistently than previous descriptions. The use of NSM gives a definition
that is simple, clear, substitutable and translatable.

Moreover, a preliminary investigation into the semantics of Cantonese
utterance particle combinations looked at some clusters consisting of gaa3,
namely gaa3laa1 and gaa3wo3. It appears that the NSM explications of
individual particles, which were all arrived at separately, can be combined
together to give the meanings of the particle clusters. To my knowledge, the
present study is the first that attempts to verify the claim that particle
combinations have the combined meaning of the separate particles of which they
are comprised. In the cases of gaa3laa1, gaa3wo3, and even the non-occurring
*laa1wo3, this claim appears to be upheld.

Several issues remain that may prove valuable topics for future research.
Firstly, the NSM explication of gaa3 provided here does not adequately explain
the use of gaa3 in questions8. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, it may be valuable
to explicate the particles ge3 and aa3 to determine whether gaa3 = ge3 + aa39.
However, a speculation can be made that particle contractions such as ge3 + aa3
will behave differently from particle clusters such as gaa3laa1 and gaa3wo3. It
seems logical to expect that highly frequently used particles will have meanings
that are relatively simple or broad, to reflect the fact that they can be used in
more situations. In contrast, less frequently used particles can be expected to
have meanings that are relatively narrow or complex. This would mean a
problem exists where many frequently used particles (which are supposedly
contractions) would be expected to be made up of particles whose meanings are
more specific or exclusive than themselves. In any case, aside from gaa3, ge3
and aa3, future research could also investigate the semantics of more Cantonese
utterance particles, and then potentially test more particle combinations.

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8I would especially like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper for drawing my
attention to remaining issues concerning gaa3 as used in questions. This reviewer also pointed
out several interesting and thought-provoking facts about the potential ge3 + aa3 contraction and
how this may be linked to understanding gaa3’s use in questions.

9A tentative and provisional proposal for an NSM component of aa3 is ‘I want to say this to you’.
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