

# The Syntax of *ze1* Revisited: Focus or Degree?

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## 1 Introduction

This paper intends to provide a syntactic explanation to the exceptional co-occurrence of the sentence-final particle (SFP) *ze1* (hereafter referred to as “*ze*” without the tone marker) and *ho2* (hereafter referred to as “*ho*” without the tone marker) in Cantonese based on the structure of the clausal periphery that captures the grammatical properties of speech acts proposed by Tang (2020: 9). For the structure of this paper, the data will be presented in Section 2, followed by a more detailed syntactic analysis in Section 3 together with examples.

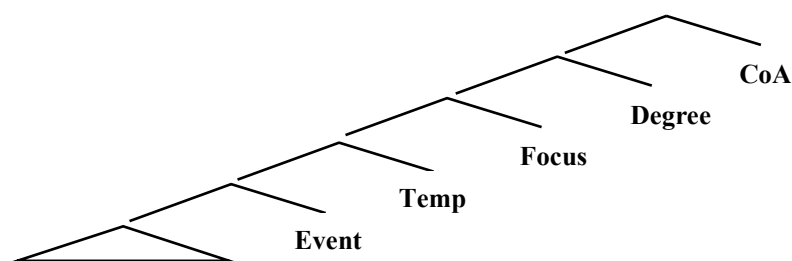


Figure 1. The Structure of the Clausal Periphery (Tang 2020: 9)

Tang (2020:10-11) suggests that sentence-final particles (SFP) of the modality type, interrogative type, imperative type and emotion type are the realization of Degree, and in that they are in complementary distribution. Based on the above structure, Tang (2020:13) further argues that *ho*, which is an interrogative type, undergoes movement from Degree to CoA, so as to derive the complex speech act that it introduces and to be the bearer of the rising intonation, as it is considered as a morpheme that spans across two syntactic domains.

The above explanation might have an exception. According to the categorization of Tang (2020: 5), *ze* belongs to the modality type, which should be a realization of Degree. Consider the following example:

- (1) 張三做一題數咗啱?  
Zoeng-saam zou jat tai sou ze ho  
Zoeng-saam do one CL math ze ho  
'Zoeng-saam only needs to solve one mathematical problem, right?'

Example (1) shows that *ze* and *ho* can co-occur, which contradicts to the saying that types of SFPs in the Degree layer are in complementary distribution. Based on the rule of the h-family (i.e., \*[focus  $\emptyset$ ] Degree) proposed by Tang (2020:14), the followings attempt to provide a syntactic explanation to this phenomenon.

## 2 Data

Tang (2015: 217) categorizes the SFP *ze* into the modality type, as it is found with several functions, namely (i) expressing a restrictive focus (Cheung 2007: 194), (ii) expressing the lower limit of items, degrees, quantities, times, scopes and circumstances conveyed in the predicate (Leung 2005: 60), and (iii) expressing the “downplaying” attitude (Li et al 1995: 512; Fang 2003: 137). Therefore, *ze* expresses a subjective evaluation or knowledge of the speaker towards the proposition, such that the attitude or mood of the speaker can be revealed. Following the structure of the clausal periphery proposed by Tang (2020: 9), *ze* as an SFP of the modality type can sit in the head of Degree.

By looking into the functions of *ze*, we may notice that *ze* can express a restrictive focus. According to Lee (2019), *ze* and *zaa3* (hereafter referred to as “*zaa*” without the tone marker) can express the meaning of “only.” This shows that this kind of restrictive SFPs expresses the restricted scope of the clause and have a closer tie with the predicate in the clause. Tang (2015: 206) categorized *zaa* as the SFP of the focus type, as the restrictive scope of it is of a particular part of the predicate. Since both *ze* and *zaa* share the semantic components of “assertion of the exclusive function,” and “the presupposition of the corresponding sentence without the particle,” they both

express the core semantics “restriction” (Li 2014, as cited in Lee 2019), we may say that they share the similar “focus” meaning.

Although *-k* is not a syllable, it can still be considered as an SFP and combined into *ze*. As we treat the functions of the coda *-k* as an SFP, based on Tang’s (2015: 217) categorization, it belongs to the emotion type, expressing a fortified modality together with an SFP that has a *l-/g-/z-* onset.

Following the analysis above, we may analyze *zek* with the following structure:

<i>ze</i>	+	<i>-k</i>	=	<i>zek</i>
modality type	+	emotion type	=	modality/ imperative/ interrogative/emotion type
Degree		Degree		Degree

Figure 2. Formation of *zek*

Tang (2015: 218) also states that the addition of the coda *-k* in *ze* has more or less the same meaning of the “downplaying” attitude, but the modality is stronger, as it can (iv) give a focus to the new information in the proposition, (v) express encouragement and suggestions, (vi) and express enquires with an urgent need of response (Li et al. 1995: 513). The speech may even become more feminine with the addition of *zek* (Cheung 2007: 195). As we can see that the difference between *zek* and *ze* mainly lies on the degree in terms of modality, while the core meanings remain similar, we may conclude that *zek* can be used as an SFP of the modality type. Since the functions of *ze* become more diverse with the *-k* coda insertion, it might be used as an SFP of the interrogative type, imperative type and emotion type as well (Tang 2015: 242). Following the structure of the clausal periphery of Tang (2020: 9), all these types of SFPs can be the realization of Degree. Thus, *zek* should sit in the head of Degree.

Fang (2003: 147) suggests that *ho* is confirmation-seeking. Matthews and Yip (2011: 399) also say that *ho* expresses the expectation of agreement from the hearer. Therefore, we may say that *ho* conveys the request of response in speech acts from the addressee. Following the terminology of Tang (2020: 1), *ho* can sit in the CoA.

Tang (2015: 243) does not analyze *ho* individually, but with the *o3* (hereafter referred to as “*o*” without the tone marker) that precedes it. Since the addition of *oho* can yield a Yes/No question, *oho* can be considered as an SFP of the interrogative type. Tang (2020: 15) further explains that *o* is a defective dummy of the focus type and has undergone vowel harmony with *ho*. As *o* is in complementary distribution with other SFPs of the focus type, subject-oriented, and evaluative, Tang (2020: 14) further proposes the structure of \*[focus  $\emptyset$ ] Degree, that is, when there is no SFP of the focus type, *o* should occur with *ho*, and *ho* as an SFP of the interrogative type spans across two syntactic domains, namely Degree and CoA, under movement (Tang 2020: 15).

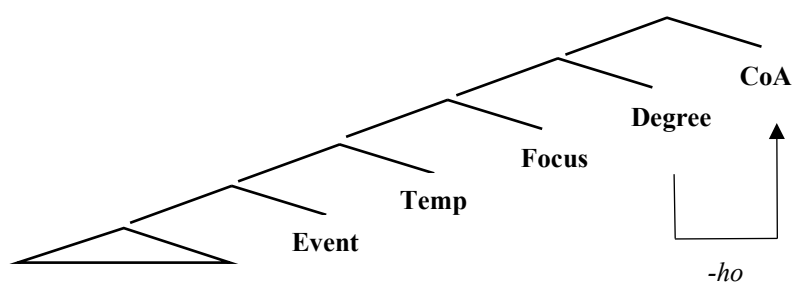


Figure 3. Movement of *-ho*

### 3 Analysis

**3.1 Tests** This section provides tests for testing that *ze* and *ho* are in the same clause, so as to eliminate the concern that the co-occurrence of *ze* and *ho* are mini-phrase or mini-sentence that is “added to the sentence after the derivation of it has been completed.” (Sybesma and Li 2007: 1772) To prove the claim, right-dislocation test will be applied, as right-dislocated subject should not separate the main clause of its predicate.

Consider the following examples (cf. example 1):

- (2) 做一題數啫嘢，張三？  
 Zou jat tai sou ze ho Zoeng-saam  
 Do one CL math ze ho Zoeng-saam  
 ‘Zoeng-saam only needs to solve one mathematical problem, right?’
- (3) \*做一題數啫，張三，嘢？  
 Zou jat tai sou ze Zoeng-saam ho  
 Do one CL math ze Zoeng-saam ho  
 ‘Zoeng-saam only needs to solve one mathematical problem, right?’
- (4) \*做一題數，張三，啫嘢？  
 Zou jat tai sou Zoeng-saam ze ho  
 Do one CL math Zoeng-saam ze ho  
 ‘Zoeng-saam only needs to solve one mathematical problem, right?’

The above tests show that neither *ze* nor *ho* can be separated from the main clause. Therefore, we could say that *ho* is not a mini sentence nor mini clause which has undergone derivation. By ensuring the SFPs are in the main clause, we can enter into the discussion in 3.2.

**3.2 Possible Explanation** The following sections will explain the reason why *ze* can co-occur with *ho* in the same clause.

**3.2.1 Hypothesis: From Focus to Degree** The hypothesis we propose here is that *ze* spans across two syntactic domains, which are Focus as the original position in the D-structure, and Degree as the landing site in the S-structure.

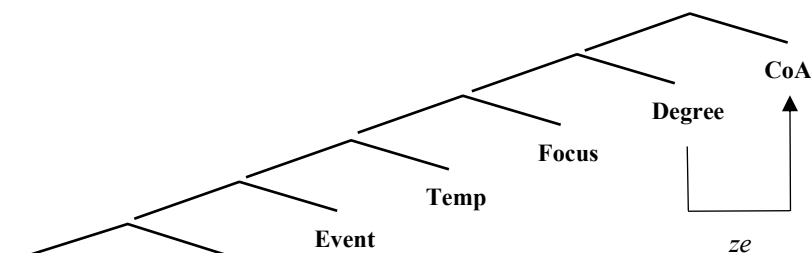


Figure 4. Movement of *ze*

**3.2.2 Evidence: From Focus to Degree** Although Focus and Degree are categorized as the Grounding layer by Wiltschko and Heim et al. (2016: 113), which is the “highest functional layer in the extended projection of the clause” expressing information about the speaker’s commitment towards the proposition (Ross 1970), it allows syntactic movement in between, as Focus gives information about the focus scoped (Tang 2015: 206), while Degree focuses on the speaker’s attitude.

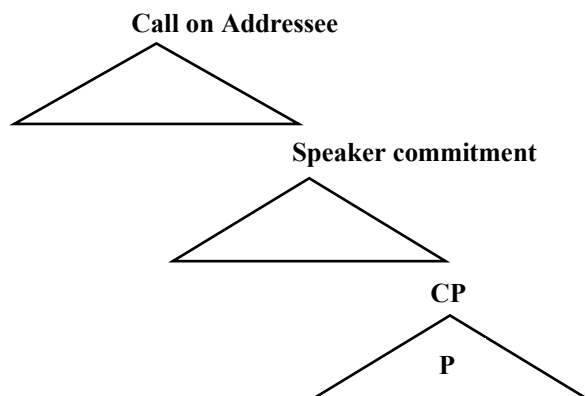


Figure 5. Movement of *ze*

The following examples may prove that *ze* undergoes syntactic movement from Focus to Degree.

- (5) \*張三做一題數啫哦嘢？

Zoeng-saam	zou	jat	tai	sou	ze	o	ho
Zoeng-saam	do	one	CL	math	ze	o	ho

‘Zoeng-saam only needs to solve one mathematical problem, right?’

- (6) \*張三做一題數啫嘢？

Zoeng-saam	zou	jat	tai	sou	zek	ho
Zoeng-saam	do	one	CL	math	zek	ho

‘Zoeng-saam only needs to solve one mathematical problem, right?’

In (5), *ze* cannot co-occur with the dummy of the focus type *o*, while the sentence in (1), which does not have *o*, allows the co-occurrence of *ze* and *ho*. In (6), *ze* has the coda *-k* added, expressing a fortified modality as a realization of Degree. This makes the sentence ungrammatical with *ho* (cf. example 1), as the position for Degree should be in complementary distribution.

These examples might be able to support our hypothesis.

First, *ze* in (1) expresses a restrictive focus of “do one CL math.” This shows that it should be qualified to sit in Focus. Therefore, it is ungrammatical for *ze* and *o* to co-occur, as (5) has shown, as they should be in complementary distribution.

Second, *ze* in (6) becomes an SFP of the modality type due to the insertion of the emotion type *-k*, as its modality is fortified. Therefore, *zek* and *ho* cannot co-occur because they both compete for the position in Degree.

- (7) ?都係一百蚊咋啫。

Dou	hai	jat-bak	man	zaa	ze
All	be	one-hundred	dollar	zaa	ze

‘It’s only one hundred dollars.’

(Lee 2019: 133)

However, there might be an example that is worth discussion. According to Lee (2019: 133), *zaa* and *ze* can co-occur. Example (7) might be a counterexample to the Focus-Degree movement, as *zaa* and *ze* cannot sit in Focus simultaneously due to the complementary distribution of SFPs of the focus type. However, this sentence is judged unnatural and marginal by some of my native Cantonese informants and myself. In order to improve the sentence, either *ze* or *zaa* should be deleted, as they both mean the “only” meaning in this sentence. The co-occurrence of them appears to be redundant.

The above, however, is not adequate to explain why *ze* and *ho* can co-occur in (1). It is because even under the Focus-Degree movement, *ze* and *ho* still need to compete for the Degree position. One possible explanation may be that the Focus-Degree movement of *ze* is blocked by *ho* in (1).

Consider the following examples (cf. example 1):

- (8) 張三做一題數啫。

Zoeng-saam	zou	jat	tai	sou	ze
Zoeng-saam	do	one	CL	math	ze

‘Zoeng-saam only needs to solve one mathematical problem.’

- (9) 張三做一題數啫，唔算好多。

Zoeng-saam	zou	jat	tai	sou	ze	m	syun	hou	do
Zoeng-saam	do	one	CL	math	ze	NEG	count	very	many

‘Zoeng-saam only needs to solve one mathematical problem. That’s not many.’

- (10) \*張三做一題數啫嘢，唔算好多。

Zoeng-saam	zou	jat	tai	sou	ze	ho	m	syun	hou	do
Zoeng-saam	do	one	CL	math	ze	ho	NEG	count	very	many

‘Zoeng-saam only needs to solve one mathematical problem, right? That’s not many.’

Example (8) shows that *ze* undergoes Focus-Degree movement. First, *ze* expresses a restrictive focus of “do one CL math,” and further expresses the “downplaying” attitude, inferring the speaker’s evaluation of “solving one

mathematical problem is not that much.” We can observe that *ze* spans across Focus and Degree, by expressing a restrictive focus and the speaker’s modality. The inference of speaker’s evaluation, however, disappears in (1), where *ho* encodes Degree. The claim is supported by example (10), that, the sentence is considered ungrammatical when the speaker’s evaluative inference is uttered. This ungrammaticality does not occur in (9), as the position of CoA is not occupied by *ho*. Thus, we may further argue that *ze* indeed spans across two syntactic domains when Degree is empty (8), but when the position of Degree is occupied (1), the Focus-Degree movement will be blocked, and the modality meaning of *ze* will be deleted. In this circumstance, only the restrictive focus meaning can be retained, and it will be treated as an SFP of the focus type.

#### 4 Conclusion

In conclusion, there are two preliminary findings that are worth for further syntactic and semantic study. First, under the \*[focus  $\emptyset$ ] Degree rule proposed by Tang (2020: 14) and with reference to its core semantics, *ze* can be considered an SFP that spans across Focus and Degree, providing a restrictive focus, while contributing the speaker’s attitude in the proposition of the CP. Second, *ze* undergoes Focus-Degree movement when the head of the Degree layer is empty, but the movement will be blocked when the Degree position is occupied, and the inference of speaker’s attitude of *ze* will disappear due to the failure of Focus-Degree movement. As suprasegmental properties such as tones and intonation will contribute to the meanings just as an SFP does, and given the fact that they are regarded as the segmentless SFPs (Zhang and Tang 2016: 116), research on the phonological features of *ze* might also be helpful in complementing the explanations provided in the previous sections.

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