

“OF COURSE GOT TONE LAH!”

A phonetic investigation of the tonal properties
of the Singlish discourse particle *lah*

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SINGAPORE: A LINGUISTIC MELTING POT

- initially a trading port for the British East India Trading Company, enter English
- English as the language of government, business, education post-independence
- Singapore English is a variety resulting from a “highly multilingual contact situation” with English as the superstrate and the many local/ regional languages as the substrates
- a nation of bilinguals: all students taught their ethnic mother tongue (EMT) as well as English in school

SINGAPORE ENGLISH, SINGLISH

- a polyglossic situation (Platt, 1977)
- Singlish the 'colloquial' variety, spoken in the home alongside mother tongues, in the marketplace, and on the street
- has prevailed against all attempts (by the Government, amongst others) to squash it

Ethnic differences

- the acquisition and use of different EMTs by different ethnic groups in Singapore has been shown to influence the Singlish spoken by each group

DISCOURSE PARTICLES

- “lexicalized, monosyllabic items fulfilling discourse functions” (Leimgruber, 2009: 81)
- appear IP-finally
- crucial to interpersonal communication, a clear diagnostic feature of Singlish as the colloquial variety

<i>lah</i>	indicates speaker's mood/ attitude and appeals to addressee to accommodate the mood/ attitude
<i>wat</i>	indicates information as obvious and contradictory
<i>ma</i>	indicates information is obvious
<i>meh</i>	indicates skepticism
<i>leh</i>	marks a tentative suggestion or request
<i>lor</i>	indicates obviousness or a sense of resignation
<i>hor</i>	asserts and elicits support for a proposition

LAH: A CARRIER OF LEXICAL TONE?

- many hypotheses exist on whether or not *lah* carries (contrastive) lexical tone but a severe lack of consensus
- the current research aimed to investigate, using **quantitative** methods, the question of lexical tone on this ubiquitous Singlish particle
- pertinent for questions about the behaviour of tone in contact situations, the definitions of ‘tonal languages’, amongst others

A BASELINE FOR INVESTIGATION

- Wong's (2004) treatment of *lah*



LAH[2 I]

(Baby Wolf has just discovered that all his porridge has been eaten, and is upset)

Mother Wolf: *Okay lah[2 I], you so poor thing, later I cook more for you*

It's okay! Since you're feeling so sorry for yourself, I'll cook you some more porridge later

- often conveys annoyance and called the 'impositional' *lah* as it performs a mental act, trying to impose an idea and cause a change in opinion, on the addressee
- the only *lah* variant that can be used with expletives



LAH[5 I]

(When Mother Wolf discovers that the intruder into their house had only eaten a small amount of her porridge and left the rest)

Mother Wolf: *Why only eat a bit ah, that person don't like meh?*

Why did they eat such a small amount, didn't they like it?

Father Wolf: *Of cos lah[5 I]! Your porridge is the brown rice on, too healthy mah*

Of course (they didn't like it)! You make your porridge with brown rice, so it's too healthy (therefore also not very tasty)

- an idea of obviousness is key to this variant, so it is often used to convey sarcasm, or in confrontational contexts



LAH[24]

(Father Wolf is grumbling about wanting his breakfast, and the narrator explains...)

In wolf years, he very old lah[24], so cannot blame him oso

In wolf years he is very old you see, so one can't blame him (for being grouchy)

- this variant has consistently been identified as being used with an attempt to persuade, but in a manner less forceful than the other two variants

THE DIFFICULTY OF ASSESSING LEXICAL TONE

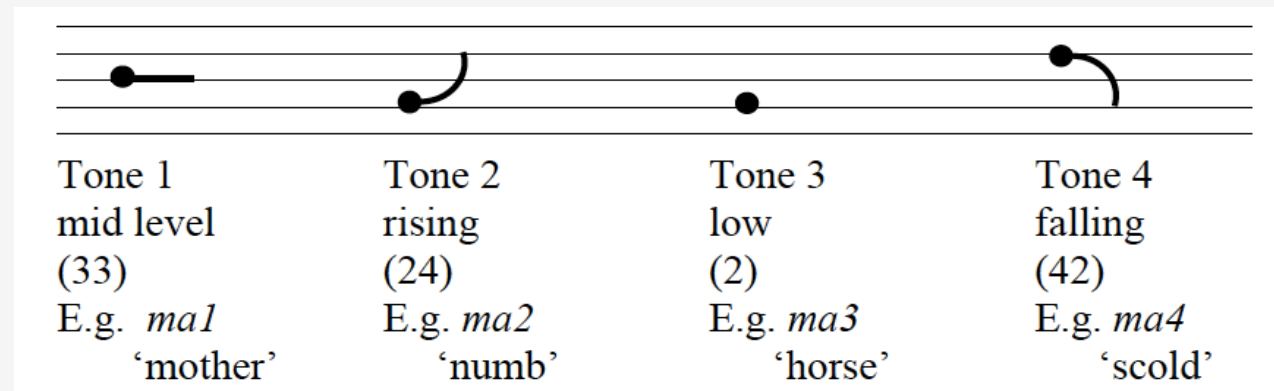
- a universal criterion: context-independent pitch contour which plays a role in semantic differentiation
- however...
 - a. sentential intonation even in tone languages interacts with pitch movement on lexemes, often distorting any lexical tone (& since particles in Singlish appear IP-finally, interference from boundary tone is unavoidable)
 - b. pragmatic information is generally harder to clearly define than semantic information

A SINGLISH-SPECIFIC CRITERION

- the argument for Malay representation
- interethnic intonational differences as a control for the effect of sentential intonation on the particle *lah*

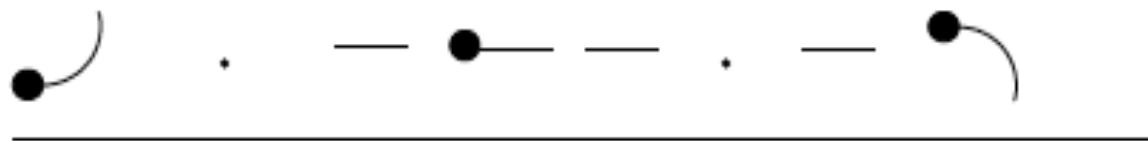
MANDARIN EMT: CHARACTERISTIC INTONATION

- the melodic structure of Chinese Singaporean Singlish is characterised by the four tonal variants present in their EMT, Singapore Mandarin (SM) (Tan, 2010)



MALAY EMT: CHARACTERISTIC INTONATION

- Malay Singaporeans tend to exhibit a unique fall-rise-fall pattern on monosyllables or the word-final syllable of bi- or trisyllabic words, in particular on declaratives, due to influence from Singapore Malay (Tan, 2010: 179)
- an IP-internal pattern of high, flat tones



When are you buy- ing a new bed?

CROSS-GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

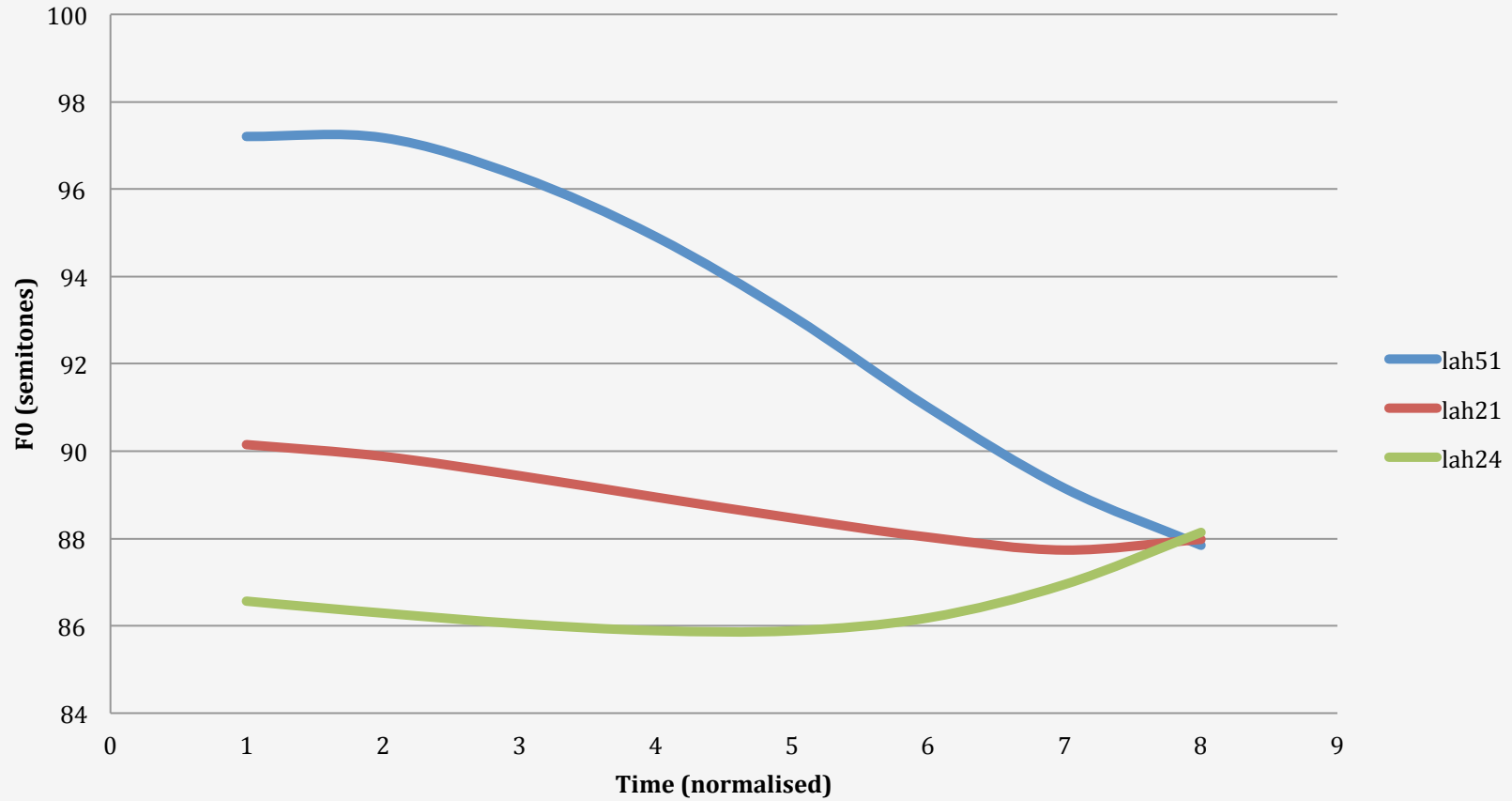
- the most common IP-final boundary tones for declaratives and exclamatives are falls, with rise-falls however found on 21% of declaratives (Lim, 2004:39)
- differences in pitch peak alignment on utterance-final lexical item: significantly early for Chinese group, late for Malay group (Lim, 2000)

METHODOLOGY

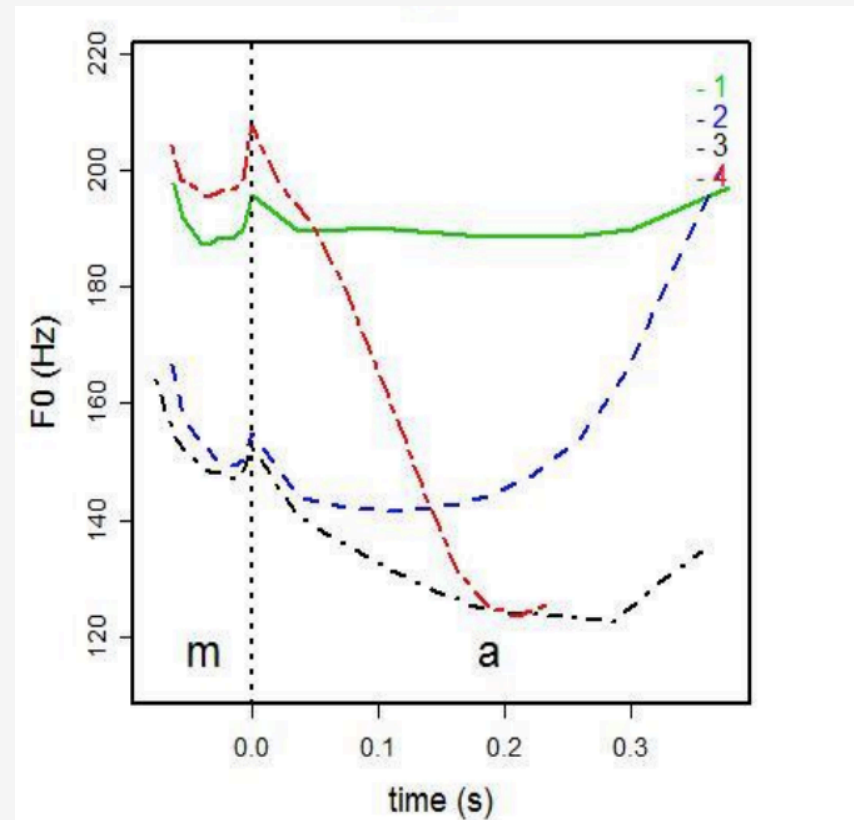
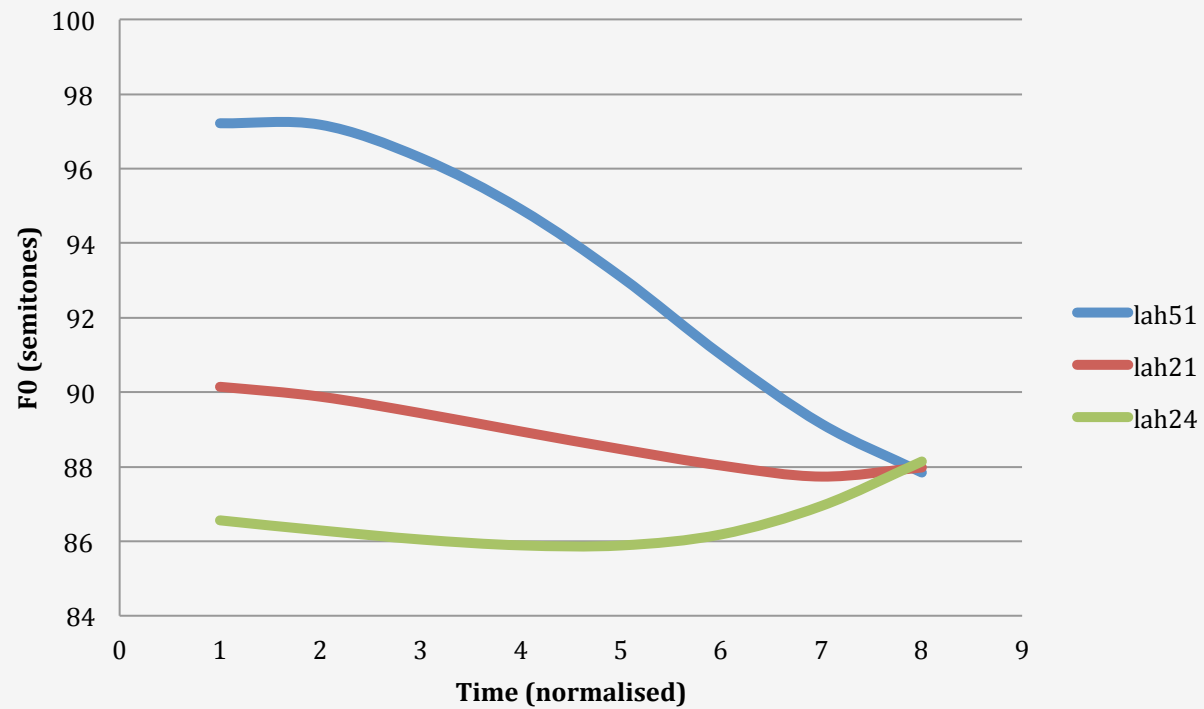
- 10 participants
 - 5 ethnic Malay and 5 ethnic Chinese
 - 4 male, 6 female
- controlled for education level, for language background
- recorded participants reading a Singlish passage adapted from a well-known fairytale
 - contained 3 tokens of each alleged *lah* variant; 30 tokens per variant collected in total, across the 10 speakers
- averaged (time-normalised) f0 contours of all tokens of each variant within each group using ProsodyPro

RESULTS

Chinese variants

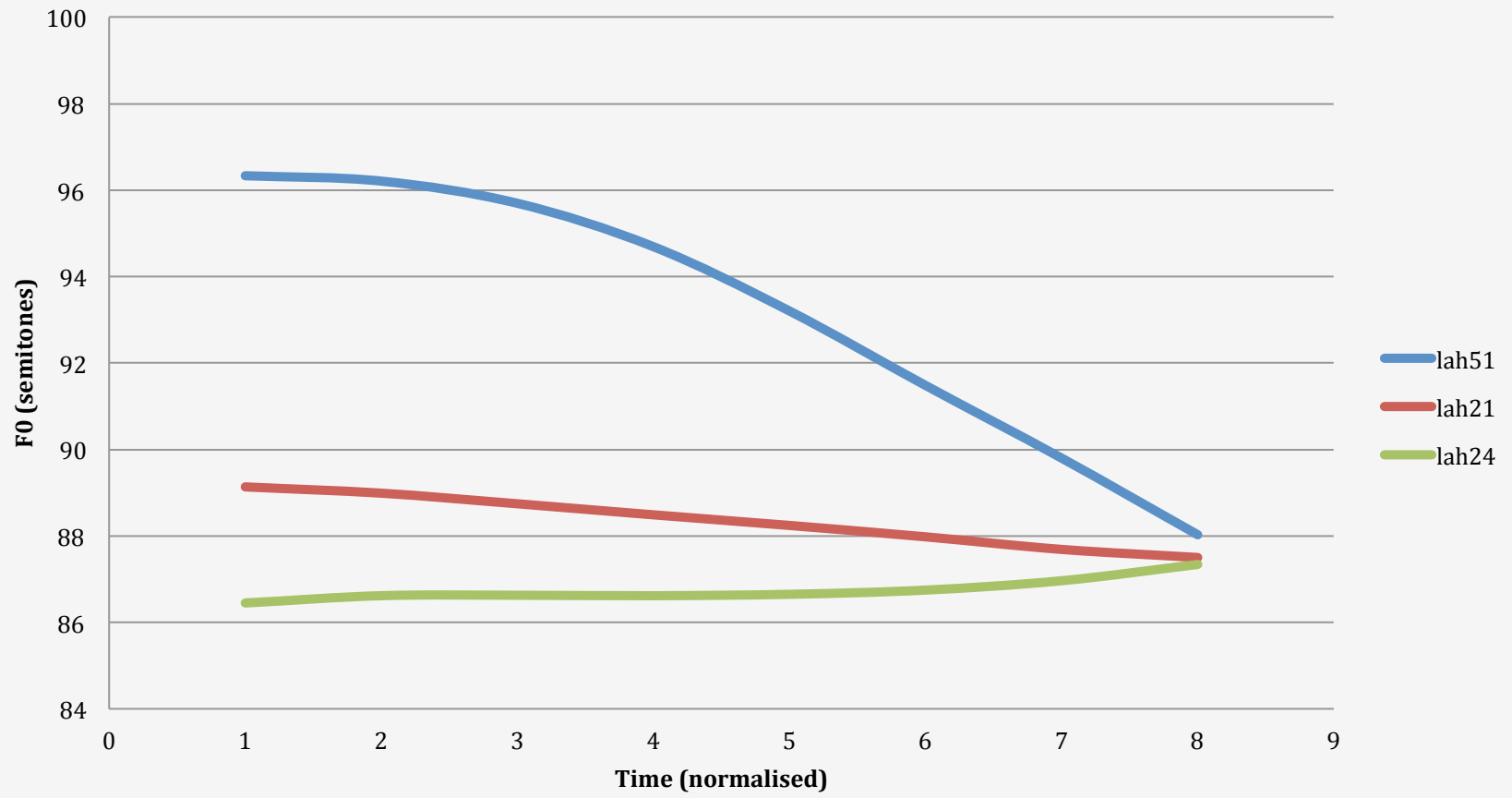


Chinese variants

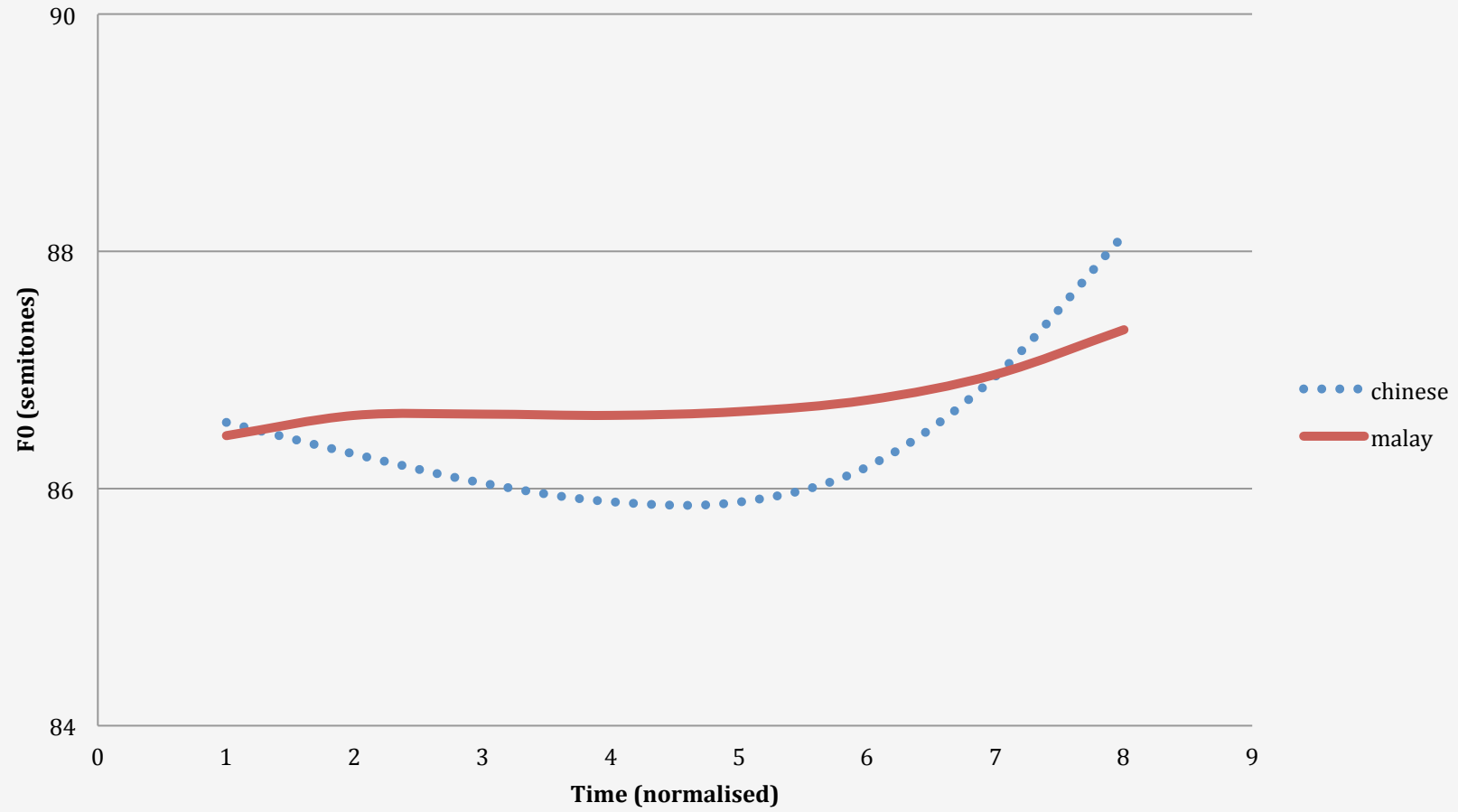


from (Lee, 2010: 353)

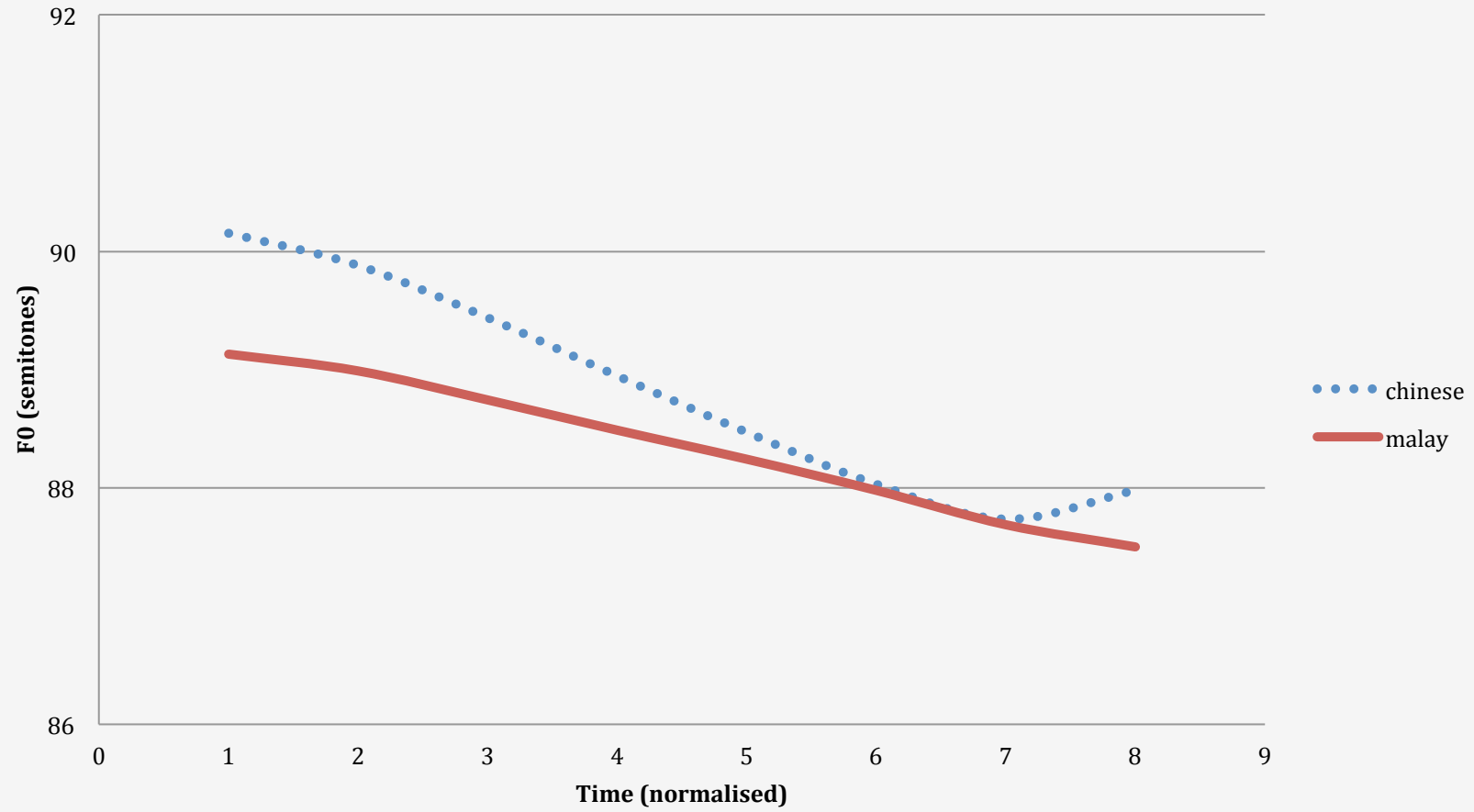
Malay variants



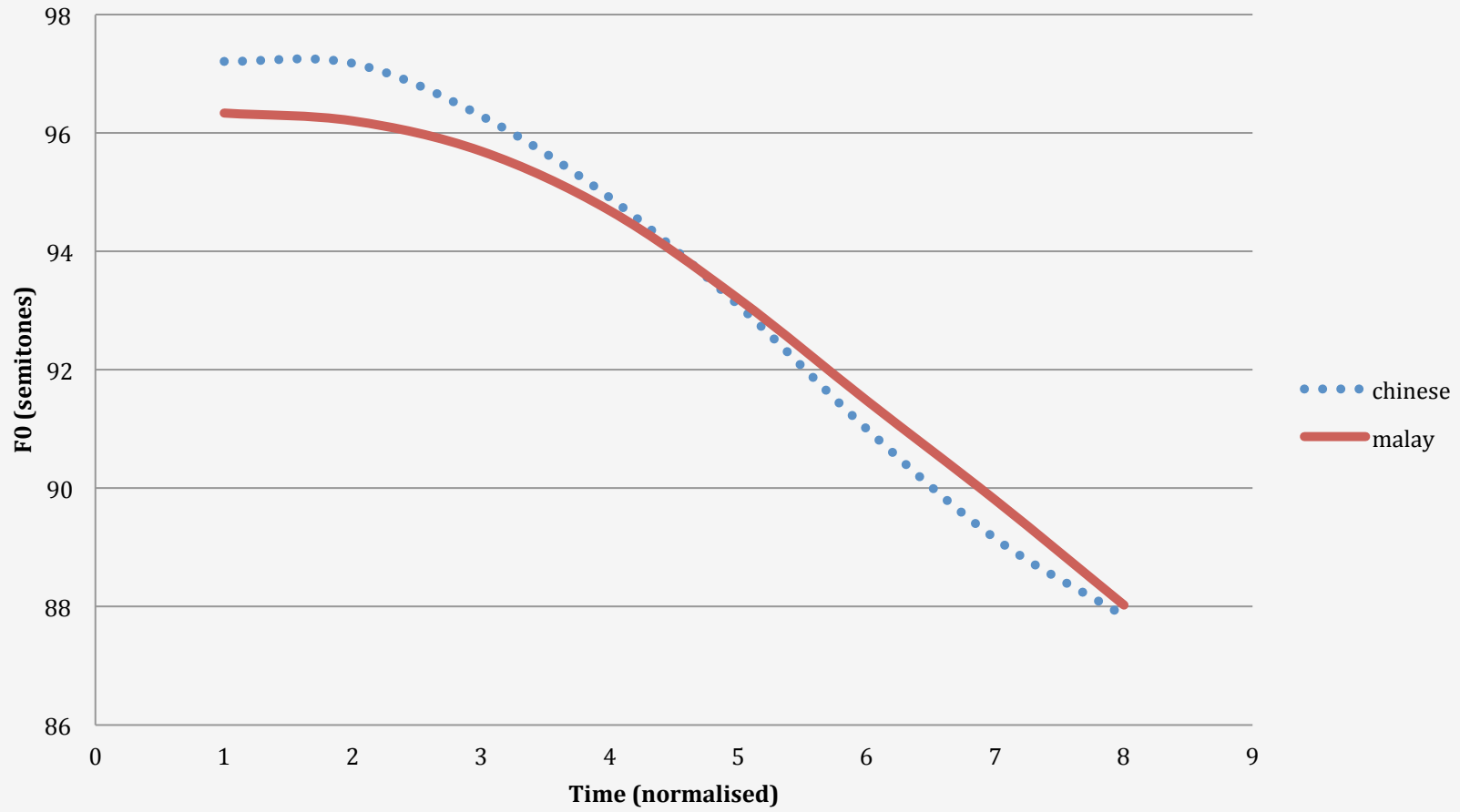
lah24



lah21



lah51



CONCLUSIONS

- three distinct pitch contours co-occurring with the particle *lah*
- a lack of any clear indication that it is intonation influencing these contours: the possibility of lexical tone remains valid
- gradual erosion of lexical tone a possibility as contours do not correspond exactly to Wong's (2004) postulates

CONCLUSIONS

- the fact that Malay Singaporeans also show three variants, although somewhat less securely than the Chinese, indicates that:
 - a. tone on *lah* is not a result of cross-language transfer in tone language bilinguals, but inherent to the particle
 - b. a pan-Singaporean feature
 - c. however an effect of tone language shown on an individual level, with the greater scale and excursion of contours exhibited by the Chinese group