

Background

Previous studies of utterance final particle *ā* in Mandarin:

- I. To indicate that the speaker believes something to be true while the hearer does not, which troubles the speaker (Wu, 2004)
- II. To reduce the forcefulness of the utterance (Liu et al, 2001)
- III. To assert a fact or belief (Chang, 2009)
- IV. To reveal mirativity (Badan & Cheng, 2015)

Ā is high tone particle, and this should not be confused with the low tone *ā*. In Mandarin, both of them are written as 啊.

Traditionally, **utterance final particles** are known as *zhùcí* (helping words), with expressive rather than descriptive meaning. They are part of the category of *xūcí* (empty words) that rarely acquires new members. In most dictionaries, they are claimed to be meaningless and are seen as emphasisers.

Modal particle: to indicate how the speaker thinks that the content of the sentence relates to the interlocutors' common knowledge or add mood to the meaning of the sentence

Discourse particle: to manage the flow and structure of discourse

We examine these claimed meanings in an experiment so as to see whether the uses can be explained from the results.

Methods

- 45 participants took part in this experiment
- All Mandarin speakers who had been raised in Taiwan, aged between 21 and 50 years of age
- 25 of them were male and 20 were female
- Participants were asked to judge the central meaning of *ā*
- To determine whether they were happy with certain situations that were fit for the core of the particle
- No prior context were provided for each sentence
- On the basis of hearing 12 pairs of recorded sentences
- Each pair contains one sentence with the particle and the other without
- Every sentence is followed by 5 multiple choices (**certain, concerned, dubious, happy, surprised**)
- Evenly presented in two blocks
- Sentences in each block were in a randomized order
- Value of the scale was not shown to the participants
- Minimum was 0, and maximum was 100

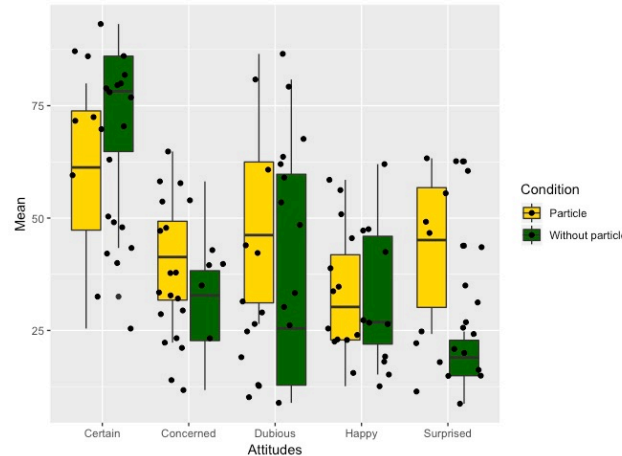


Figure 1. Mean scores of the speaker's attitudes towards *ā*

Results

- A Welch two sample t-test was conducted
- The results show inconsistencies
- Of the 5 aspects of t-tests, only **surprised** were significant, $p < .05$ ($t=3.33$, $df= 21.98$, $p\text{-value}=0.003$).
- The mean with particle is 43.69 in **surprised**, and without particle 23.20.
- Individually, 6 out of 12 pairs in **surprised** were significantly different
- Significant differences were found in some pairs of the sentences in **certain, concerned, and dubious**
- No significant differences were found in all pairs in **happy**

Discussion

The ratings of *ā* do not systematically fall into any side of the scale for **certain, concerned, dubious, happy, and surprised**.

We cannot conclude that any of the claimed meanings in the existing literature are the core for *ā*. This might due to utterance final particles do not have an explicit semantic meaning.

Further research for the use and interpretation of *ā* is required.

Further research

- 1) Kuàidiǎn bǎ mén dǎkāi ā.
'Open the door quickly ā.'
- 2) Zhāngsān: Nà shì Yàmǎxùn de diànhuà ma?
Lisi: zhè shì Yàmǎxùn de diànhuà (ā).

Zhangsan: Is that the phone number for Amazon?
Lisi: This is the phone number for Amazon (ā).

- In (1), an impatient attitude can be expressed such as 'I was wondering why you do not do so at once'.
- The hearer is considered reluctant to open the door for the speaker.
- The meaning might be infelicitous if there is no reason for one to suppose that the hearer would be uncooperative in such context
- When there is no common ground to which the hearer could refer, the use of *ā* would seem out of the blue.
- In (2), Lisi simply answers the question without projecting explicit attitudes onto the utterance when *ā* is not applied.
- When *ā* is used, it shows an implicit meaning that Zhangsan believes that Lisi should have known the phone number and it is obvious the case that the speaker's belief is different from the hearer's.
- The presupposed meaning is conveyed by the speaker that is projected to the discourse level when the particle is present.
- The shortening strategy can be argued it is due to an economical reason.
- The speaker who tries to communicate can either express exhaustively or take advantage of presupposition and leave certain aspects unsaid.

The use of utterance final particle *ā*:

- The speaker uses utterance final particles not only to state a possible world in their beliefs, but also to involve the hearer in.
- Once the particle *ā* is applied to an utterance, an interaction of both the speaker and hearer is required.
- The speaker is looking for agreement to support their beliefs, rather than merely focusing on what is implied in their possible world.
- We suggest that the speaker makes use of the particle *ā* to indicate a projected meaning and to get the hearer involved in the conversation.
- Discourse relations might function as constraints to some extent.

Common ground: a collection of mutual knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions for communication between interlocutors

Discourse relations: how two segments of discourse are logically connected to one another

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Selected References

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