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英  
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On  
Chinese  
Modal  
Particle  
A (啊)

*A Pragmatic and  
Semantic Study*

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# 1. Introduction

Mandarin Chinese has a grammatical category which comprises what are generally referred to in Chinese grammars as *yuqici* (语气词), a term which is variously translated into English as ‘modal particles’, ‘mood particles’ or ‘emotional particles’. These particles predominantly appear at the end of sentences, and they are seen as modifying the whole sentence rather than a linguistic constituent of a sentence, therefore they are also known as ‘sentence-final particles’ or ‘sentence particles’. In spite of the terms used, it is also generally acknowledged that some of the particles can occur in sentence-internal positions, e.g. after a phrase or a clause (see, for example, Y. R. Chao 1968). Recognized as a salient feature of spoken rather than written Chinese, modal particles are also referred to as ‘utterance particles’ or ‘utterance-final particles’ by Luke (1990) and Chappell (1991).

The number of Chinese modal particles as listed by different grammarians or linguists varies from person to person or from book to book. It ranges from five to more than a dozen. An exceptionally extended list of sentence-final (and phrase-final) modals was provided by Y. R. Chao (1968: 795–814). It is, however, pointed out by Chappell (1991) that the first 12 on Chao’s list parallel those found in works by others on Mandarin grammar and the extended list is the result of finer distinctions Chao made and polysemy he posited for some of the major Mandarin particles. In spite of the disparity in the number of Mandarin modal particles that get listed and discussed in linguistic or grammar works on the topic, five particles rarely miss being mentioned. They are: *ma* (吗), *a* (啊), *ne* (呢), *ba* (吧), and *le* (了).<sup>1</sup>

One of the Chinese textbooks I have used in teaching is entitled *Zhongji Hanyu: Ting He Shuo* (Intermediate Chinese: Listening and Speaking) (Beiyu Erxi, 1990). The book is compiled for learners of Chinese

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1 Li and Thompson (1981) include *ma* (吗) on their list of sentence-final particles in Chapter 7 (p. 238), but discuss it in Chapter 18 on questions (p. 547). Hu Mingyang (1981a) excludes *le* (了) from his list, perhaps due to the fact that *le* has aspectual functions as well.

as a foreign language who have learned the basic modern Chinese grammar and a vocabulary of more than 2500 words (see the Compilers' Notes: p. 1). The dialogues in the book sound colloquial and natural to my native ear. I examined the 36 dialogues in the book. Throughout the dialogues, 11 modal particles are present, and there are altogether 549 tokens of them. Of this total number, the five particles mentioned above account for more than 90 per cent (see Appendices A, B and C). It should be fair to say that they are the most frequently used modal particles in Modern Standard Chinese.

It has been observed by more than one linguist that the occurrence of modal particles is remarkably rare in formal written Chinese (see Alleton 1981: 95–96; Li & Thompson 1981: 290; Han Yang 1988: 8; Luke 1990: 10; Chappell 1991). The observation can be proved beyond doubt by an examination of formal Chinese writings such as official documents, expository or scientific writings or historical texts. It is also observed by the same linguists and others that they are highly frequent in daily conversational speech as Chappell (1991) notes: 'Particles are an integral part of colloquial speech, particularly in informal contexts.' They are also frequent in writings that represent people's everyday speech, i.e. in what Han Yang describes as 'speech-written-down type' of writing, such as 'personal letters, plays or stories, etc.' (1988: 14).

Chappell (1991) reports, on her count of the particles in a recorded 13-minute conversation, that modal particles occurred about every 6 seconds in the conversation. In my survey of the 36 dialogues mentioned above, I found that for every dialogue with an average length of 22 lines on a half A4-sized page, there are no less than 15 modal particle occurrences. The 36 dialogues, with the total of 549 tokens of the 11 modal particles, comprise altogether 1880 intonation units.<sup>2</sup> This means that particles occur on the average of one with every 3.5 intonation units (see Appendix C).

Sufficient evidence confirms the observation that modal particles constitute an important part of Chinese people's use of their language.

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2 Chappell (1991) counted the frequency of sentence/modal particles in her data by comparing their occurrences with the number of intonation units that constitute each given text of her data. No definition is provided in her work as to what 'an intonation unit' is. In my examination of the 36 dialogues, I treat as an intonation unit a sequence of words which is marked off from the following words by a pause in speech and by a punctuation mark in writing.

Native speakers of Chinese appear to have complete confidence or have no difficulty using particles despite the fact that they are more often than not unable to verbalize the concrete meanings of the particles they use.<sup>3</sup> It is arguable that anyone who approaches Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language should have a good understanding of the meanings and uses of the particles if he/she is to become a competent user of the language. What is emphasized by Chappell (1991) in the quotation below should apply to learners of Chinese as a foreign language:

To become a proficient speaker of a language which makes heavy use of utterance-final particles, as is the case with many East Asian languages, a knowledge of the communicative function, including emotive and attitudinal nuances of each particle is crucial.

Anyone who teaches Mandarin as a foreign language may agree that a good understanding of the meanings and uses of Chinese modal particles is hardly attainable from the currently available descriptions and definitions in Chinese textbooks and grammar books, for they are, for most particles, inadequate or problematic. One reason for this is as Li and Thompson (1981: 238) point out: 'Their semantic and pragmatic functions are elusive and linguists have had considerable difficulty in arriving at a general characterization of each of them.' Another major reason is that little research has yet been done on most members of the Chinese modal particle system. This is clearly borne out by the scarcity of the literature in this area.

This book is based on my PhD study which set out to conduct an extensive and intensive investigation of the pragmatic and semantic functions of one Mandarin particle: the particle *a* (啊). There were three reasons for selecting this particle for the study. Firstly, other than particle *le* (了), particle *a* is the most frequently used particle in everyday spoken Chinese. My statistical examination of the 36 dialogues in the textbook I mentioned earlier indicates that out of the 549 tokens of the 11 particles that are found in the dialogues, 121 (more than 22%) are occurrences of particle *a*. This number and percentage nearly doubles

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3 Concerning the use of modal particles in Cantonese, a major Chinese dialect, Kwok (1984: 111) has made the observation: 'Although native speakers regularly make use of and understand the particles, they find it almost impossible to explain what the particles "mean".'

that of every other frequently used particle, namely *ma*, *ba* and *ne* (except for *le*, see Appendix B for statistical details). Secondly, particle *a* has the widest syntactic distribution of all the modal particles in Mandarin Chinese in that it occurs with all types of Chinese sentences, namely declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamative whereas all the other particles usually occur with one or two of these sentence types. Moreover, it is also frequently used in sentence-internal positions, primarily after the initial phrase or clause. Finally and most importantly, despite the perceptible salience of the particle in the daily speech of Mandarin speakers, there is a lack of general agreement among Chinese grammarians and linguists as to what exactly the particle is doing in situations where it is found, and few works have explored the question as to what underlying meaning or meanings it has that enable it to play a role in various situations. The consequence of this is the situation where teachers in the classrooms teaching Mandarin as a foreign language experience nothing short of frustration in explaining the particle to their students or they simply choose to leave it unexplained. As for the students, they in their turn either feel bewildered and confused or simply dismiss it as something they can do without and try to avoid using it as far as they can.

The research presented in this book is aimed at capturing the elusive pragmatic and semantic functions of the particle. Specifically, it sets out to answer the following questions: (i) In what speech contexts does the particle occur, i.e. what is its discourse distribution; (ii) What does it do in these contexts, i.e. what semantic and pragmatic functions is it put to serve; and (iii) What basic meaning or meanings does it have that underlie all the uses of the particle? To find the answer to the last question is the primary goal, that is, to achieve the characterization of the particle's semantic properties, which will help explain the complex behaviour of the particle.

Chapter 2 of this book gives a general description and literature review of the modal particle in question. Assumptions, data and methodology adopted are discussed in Chapter 3. Chapters 4 to 8 provide an analysis of particle *a* in its various contexts of use as found in the data. The last chapter recapitulates the conclusions reached, and suggestions for further research are made in the chapter too.