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Adjusting epistemic gradients: The final particle *ba* in Mandarin Chinese conversation¹

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In Mandarin Chinese conversation, the final particle *ba* contributes to the formation of a variety of social actions. Using the methods of conversation analysis, this article examines the use of the *ba* particle in answers to questions, informings, and assessments. It is argued that the particle serves as a turn-constructional resource for the adjustment of the epistemic gradient invoked in the sequence, downgrading the speaker's epistemic position. In assessment sequences, the epistemic adjustment made by the particle also serves to solicit a response from the recipient who invariably has knowledge of the matter in question. An analysis of the *ba* particle in terms of epistemic gradients and their adjustment unifies two accounts of the particle's function put forward in the literature.

1. Introduction

A characteristic feature of conversation in Mandarin Chinese is the abundance of final particles.¹ Appearing most commonly, though not exclusively, at the ends of turn-constructional units (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), final particles are little words, from a closed class, with abstract and ineffable meanings and a myriad of uses in everyday conversation. They are also notoriously resistant to analysis. The most success has come from studies that bring the methodological principles of conversation analysis to bear on their use in naturally occurring interaction (see Wu, 2004). Such studies have examined the final particles *a* (Wu, 2004, 2006; Wu & Heritage, 2017), *ma* or *me* (Kendrick, 2010; Tsai, 2011), *ne* (Qin, 2012), and *ou* (Wu, 2004, 2005; Wu & Heritage, 2017). A final particle that has not yet been examined from this perspective is the *ba* particle. In this article I develop an analysis of *ba* that builds on conversation analytic research on social action (Levinson, 2013) and the management and distribution of knowledge in interaction (Heritage, 2013).

The previous literature on the *ba* particle can be divided along methodological lines into two groups: sources that describe and illustrate a range of common uses of the particle and those that not only illustrate its use but also argue for a general account of its meaning or function. Common to both groups is the use of constructed examples, either as illustrations of typical uses or as the basis for a general account of the particle's function. In those grammars that eschew a general account, one typically finds a list of examples along with short but intriguing glosses of the particle's functions. In reference to a list of examples of *ba* in directives, Chao (1968, pp. 807–808) glosses *ba* as an

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“advisative particle” but subsequently notes that *ba* also occurs in polar questions and “doubtful posed statements”. A similar approach is taken by Lin (1981, pp. 274–275), who describes *ba* as a modal particle that occurs in “mild interrogative sentences” but also observes that the collocation *hao ba* (‘good’ or ‘okay’ + *ba*) indicates a speaker’s “hesitation or unwillingness” in the acceptance of an offer or proposal. These descriptions offer intriguing insights into the particle’s meaning and use but stop short of a general account of the particle’s function.

In contrast, a small number of grammars and articles have examined a range of uses of the *ba* particle, including those mentioned above, and offered a general account. Among these sources, two alternative proposals can be identified. First, Li and Thompson (1981, p. 307) propose that “*ba* has the effect of soliciting the approval or agreement of the hearer with respect to the statement to which *ba* is attached” and therefore gloss the function of the particle as “agreement solicitation”. Despite a reliance on constructed examples, Li and Thompson’s proposal is fundamentally an interactional one, describing the function of the particle within a solicitation-agreement sequence. Second, as an alternative to Li and Thompson’s approach, a number of scholars have proposed that the function of the *ba* particle is to indicate a speaker’s uncertainty. The speaker uncertainty analysis can be found in standard grammars (Chu, 1998), pedagogical grammars (Cheung, 1994), and articles that examine *ba* from within specific theoretical frameworks, such as Greician pragmatics (Han, 1995) and relevance theory (Chu, 2009). Although these investigations each engage with Li and Thompson’s proposal, the accounts that they provide shift the focus of analytic attention away from an interaction between the speaker and recipient and towards “the rationale behind the speaker’s use of *ba*” (Han, 1995, p. 100). As a consequence, Li and Thompson’s insight into the relationship between the *ba* particle and interactional sequences has been largely ignored in the subsequent literature.

The analysis of the *ba* particle that I develop in this article unifies Li and Thompson’s (1981) agreement solicitation account and the currently prevailing account of *ba* as a display of speaker uncertainty. The study draws on a corpus of naturally occurring social interaction among speakers of Mandarin Chinese recorded in Taiwan (Kendrick, 2010). Using conversation analysis, I examine the use of the *ba* particle across three types of social action: answers to questions, informings, and assessments. In each case, the analysis shows that the *ba* particle serves to adjust the epistemic gradient between speaker and recipient, lowering or downgrading the speaker’s epistemic position. The study thus builds on and contributes to conversation analytic research on epistemics and action formation (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Heritage, 2012a). In what follows, after I review research on epistemics in English and demonstrate its relevance to Mandarin Chinese, I analyse the use of the *ba* particle across the three types of social action. I then discuss the two accounts of the particle’s use in the literature and how an analysis in terms of epistemic gradients unites them. The article concludes with a reflection on the methods used to investigate final particles and the wealth of opportunities for future research in this area.

2. Epistemic gradients in Mandarin Chinese

Heritage and Raymond (2012) argue that declaratively and interrogatively formatted first pair-parts embody alternative epistemic relations between first and second speakers. Whereas a declarative form establishes a K+ position (has knowledge) relative to a K– second position (lacks knowledge), an interrogative first pair-part sets up the inverse relation: the first speaker claims a K– position and proposes that the

second speaker is K+. These alternative epistemic relations can be observed in the extracts below, drawn from Mandarin Chinese conversation. In Extract (1), a son who has just arrived home from school reports on his performance in English class to his mother.

Extract 1 (TPE09)

- 1 Son: wo jintian (.) shang yingwen ke [K+]
 1SG today attend English class
 today (.) in English class I
- 2 huida yi da dui.
 answer one big pile
 answered a whole bunch of questions.
- 3 Mom: zhen de:. [K- > K+]
 real PRT
 really.
- 4 Son: (shi a)
 COP PRT
 (yeah)

The son's initiating action, a news announcement, establishes a K+ position relative to his mother, who presumably lacks a basis to know the details of the son's performance in class. The mother's response *zhen de* 'really' (line 3) registers the news and displays a change from K- to K+. Extract (2), which comes from a service encounter at a computer shop, illustrates an alternative epistemic relation between first and second speakers.

Extract 2 (TPE05)

- 1 Emp: na ni you xuyao jiang XP ma. [K-]
 then 2SG have need downgrade XP PRT
 and do you need to downgrade to XP?
- 2 (0.3)
- 3 Cus: yao. [K+]
 want
 yes.
- 4 Emp: yao, hon. [K- > K+]
 want PRT
 alright.

After the customer has agreed to purchase a new computer, the employee asks him if he would like to downgrade the operating system. The employee's first pair-part, here a polar question with the *ma* particle (see Tsai, 2011), takes up a K- position and treats the customer as K+ (line 1). After the customer provides an affirmative answer (line 3), the confirmation in third position registers the employee's shift from K- to K+ (line 4).

In the domain of questions, Heritage (2010) observes that different question designs claim different degrees of asymmetry between the knowledge states of the speaker and the recipient. A polar question in an interrogative format, with so-called subject-verb inversion ('Are you married?'), typically establishes a deep epistemic gradient between the participants and claims that the speaker lacks definite knowledge of the matter in question. But these epistemic gradients can be adjusted through turn

design. A statement with an interrogative tag ('You're married aren't you?') sets up a shallower epistemic gradient and conveys "a strong hunch as to the likelihood of a particular response" (Heritage, 2010, p. 48). A statement that operates as a polar question via epistemic asymmetry ('You're married') claims a higher degree of certainty but seeks confirmation from the recipient and therefore establishes an even shallower epistemic gradient.

The epistemic gradation that Heritage (2010) describes can be observed in the extract below, which again comes from the recording of an interaction between the mother and son considered in Extract (3). Prior to this extract the son has left the kitchen, where the recording takes place, to go to the bathroom. Here the mother talks to him through the bathroom door.

Extract 3 (TPE09)

- 1 Mom: ei, ni zaoshang bu shi daguo le ma.
PRT you morning NEG COP big.ASP PRT PRT
hey, didn't you go to the bathroom this morning?
- 2 (0.8)
- 3 Mom: han? ni zaoshang you da ma.
PRT you morning have big PRT
huh? did you go this morning?
- 4 (1.5)
- 5 Mom: jintian zao(shang) mei da.
today morning NEG big
you didn't go this morning.
- 6 (10.7)

The mother's first question at line 1 includes *bu shi* – a negative morpheme and the copula – and the final particle *ma*, a format which, like negative interrogatives in English, seeks reconfirmation of a matter after a prior action or event has cast the speaker's knowledge into doubt (see also Heritage, 2002). The mother's negative question establishes a shallow epistemic gradient between herself and the son, such that the mother claims to know the answer but, in light of prior events, requests confirmation from her son, who is in a position to know the matter more definitively. The mother's second question occurs after the son has apparently produced a response to the question that neither the mother nor the video camera can hear (line 2). After she initiates repair with *han?* 'huh?' at line 3, indicating a trouble of hearing, she then reissues the question in an alternative format that retains the *ma* particle but omits *bu shi*. The *ma* particle question establishes a deeper K- to K+ epistemic gradient and displays less certainty about the matter than the previous negative question (see Schegloff [2004] on epistemic backdowns after repair initiations). The two questions in this sequence thus illustrate two practices that speakers of Mandarin Chinese can employ to establish and adjust epistemic gradients, as described by Heritage (2010) for English. After the son fails to respond, the mother produces a format without a final particle, which claims a K+ position and is hearable as a conclusion that she has reached based on the son's withholding of a response.

3. The *ba* particle in the formation of social actions

The *ba* particle contributes to the formation of a wide range of social actions. In this section, I examine the use of the particle in three types of action: answers to questions, informings, and assessments. In each case, the *ba* particle serves as a turn-constructive resource that downgrades the epistemic position of the speaker, taking a position lower than fully K+, thereby adjusting the epistemic gradient between speaker and recipient.

3.1 The *ba* particle in answers

A question-answer sequence invokes an asymmetrical epistemic relation between questioner and answerer relative to the matter under interrogation (Heritage, 2010). Particular question designs set constraints that the recipient must manage in the design of the answer, and recipients have at their disposal a range of turn-constructive resources to resist these constraints (see, e.g., Heritage, 1998; Raymond, 2003; Fox & Thompson, 2010; Heritage & Raymond, 2012). In answers to questions, the *ba* particle resists the claim embodied by the question that the respondent knows the answer. The epistemic gradient established by the question (K- to K+) is adjusted by the *ba* particle, which downgrades the respondent's epistemic position. The particle is commonly employed in answers to questions about matters outside of the respondent's first-person domain of knowledge, to which he or she presumably lacks direct access. In Extract (4), Greg and Alan, two university students and close friends, talk about Liu Yong, a well-known Taiwanese writer, whom Greg has mentioned prior to this extract.

Extract 4 (TPE11)

- 1 Alan: ta- Liu Yong nali biye le.
3SG NAME NAME where graduate PRT
he- where did Liu Yong graduate?
- 2 (0.8) ((Greg is chewing))
- 3 Greg: -> Liu Yong ou:, (0.9) shida ba.
NAME NAME PRT NTNU PRT
oh Liu Yong, (0.9) NTNU ba. (('I think NTNU'))
- 4 (1.1) ((Alan is chewing))
- 5 Alan: ou you yinxiang.
PRT have impression
oh I think I remember.

Although both Alan and Greg recognise Liu Yong as a well-known name – indeed prior to this sequence Alan has claimed to have read one of his essays – the matter of his education is outside of Greg's first-person domain of knowledge. The question asks for a specific fact about the life of a public figure that Greg presumably has no inherent basis to know. The *ba* particle thus appears to reject accountability for the answer, formulating it as noncommittal, and can be understood and analysed as a claim of insufficient access. Alan, in turn, treats Greg's answer not as the delivery of information (as just *ou* 'oh' would do), but rather as an occasion for him to recall his own (limited) knowledge of the matter.

In answers to questions, the *ba* particle disclaims complete and unproblematic access to the matter formulated in the turn, such that, relative to similar turn-designs without a final particle, the *ba*-marked turn can be understood variously as 'uncertain',

‘mitigated’, ‘deferential’, or otherwise ‘downgraded’. That in answers to questions the particle should be analysed as a claim about epistemic access can be grounded in the conduct of participants themselves, who, as in Extract (5), can be observed to orient to the relevance of access to sources or bases for *ba*-marked turns. Prior to this extract, the son has just told his mother about a website for his school that apparently features a student art exhibition.

Extract 5 (TPE09)

- 1 Mom: xuexiao (1.2) wangye shang zuo shenme.
school webpage on do what
what's (1.2) on the school website?
- 2 Son: jiushi shenme, xuesheng, xuesheng meidai.
just what student student art.exhibition
it's a, student, student art exhibition.
- 3 (0.5)
- 4 Mom: zhen de ou. aiyo.
real PRT PRT INTJ
oh really? wow.
- 5 (.)
- 6 Mom: (na) you:, you ni de mingzi chulai ma.
then have have 2SG PRR name appear PRT
(so) di:d, did your name appear?
- 7 (0.4)
- 8 Son: -> meiyou ba. [(bu shi)
NEG.have PRT NEG COP
it didn't ba. (no) (('I don't think so'))
- 9 Mom: [()]
- 10 Son: na zhi shi- (.) .hhh wo deng yixia qu
that just COP 1SG wait a.while go
it's just- (.) .hhh later I can go take
- 11 kan yi kankan, yao bu yao.
look one look.look want NEG want
a look and see, you want to?
- 12 Mom: deng yixia hao bu hao.
wait a.while good NEG good
later, okay?
- 13 Son: hao.
good
okay

The mother's question at line 6, which appears to treat the son's telling as a potential occasion for praise, assumes that the son has access to the details of the website that pertain to him personally. Designed with the *ma* particle, which invokes the relevance of a positive or negative answer (Tsai, 2011), the mother's question constrains the forms that the son's response should take (cf. Raymond, 2003). The *ma*-question mandates an answer that either confirms or denies that the son's name appears on the website. Either option, however, would also accept the tacit claim that he has sufficient access to the matter, that is, that he has a basis upon which to know whether his name

appears. With the *ba* particle, the son designs his answer so as to disclaim sufficient access and thus resist or evade the assumption embodied in the mother's question.

As an account for his answer, the son proposes to check the website with his mother, thus revealing an orientation to the claim that the *ba* particle embodies, namely that the son lacks sufficient access with which to answer the mother's question. Without the particle, the son's answer would be accountably unequivocal, and a subsequent proposal to check the source of the information would presumably be hearable as a contradiction or reversal. With the *ba*-marked answer, however, the son explicitly disclaims the access that the mother's question assumes, and the proposal to check can be heard as a solution to his inability to answer without equivocation.

The analysis suggests that in answers to questions the *ba* particle serves to resist the assumption of complete and unproblematic epistemic access embodied by the question. The particle serves to downgrade the speaker's epistemic position and thereby adjust the epistemic gradient established by the question (see Figure 1).

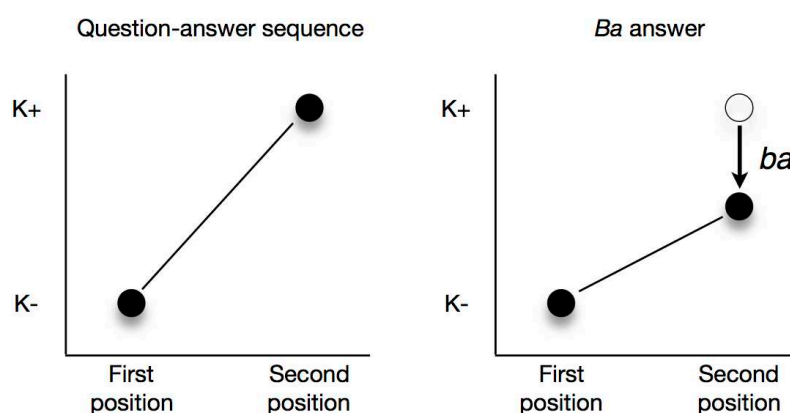


Figure 1: The epistemic adjustment made by the *ba* particle in question-answer sequences

3.2 The *ba* particle in informings

Like question-answer sequences, informing sequences also invoke an asymmetrical epistemic relation between speaker and recipient relative to the matter formulated in the turn. The relationship is, however, the inverse: with an informing a speaker proposes to deliver information, knowledge, or news to a recipient, which the speaker assumes the recipient does not already know (Heritage, 2008). The *ba* particle occurs in informings that report approximations, estimates, proposals, possibilities, and the like. Informings of this type do not require (and, in fact, disallow) a claim of complete access to the information in question.

In reports of past or habitual actions that include quantifications such as 'one time' or 'one bag', the *ba* particle, along with other features of the turn's design, formulate the quantity as an approximation or estimate. In Extract (6), Alan's report, touched off by a television news broadcast about a recent increase in the price of gasoline in Taiwan, includes the quantifications *yige yue* 'one month' and *yi ci* 'one time'.

Extract 6 (TPE11)

- 1 (13.0) ((television news report on the price of gasoline))
- 2 Alan: wo dagai (0.8) yige yue-

- 1SG probably one.CL month
I probably (0.8) in a month-
- 3 yige yue dagai hui hua- (0.6)
one.CL month probably will spend
in a month probably will spend- (0.6)
- 4 -> hui jia yi ci you ba.
will add one time gas PRT
will get gas one time ba.
- 5 (1.3)
- 6 Greg: name shao ou.
that few PRT
oh that rarely.
- 7 Alan: en, wo bu chang zai waimian qi jiche a.
PRT 1SG NEG often be.at outside ride scooter PRT
yeah, I don't ride my scooter outside often.

Quantifications such as ‘one month’ and ‘one time’ are, on the surface, highly precise. Unlike English, Mandarin Chinese does not have an indefinite article, although the collocation of the numeral *yi* ‘one’ and the general classifier *ge* can serve a similar function (Li & Thompson, 1981; Liu, 2010). Thus quantifications that include the numeral *yi* ‘one’ have the potential to be understood as precise formulations in a way that indefinite expressions in English cannot. A number of features of Alan’s turn, however, work to defeat the implication that the information in the report is precise. First, the turn begins with *wo dagai* ‘I probably’ (line 2), which qualifies the degree of likelihood or certainty of the incipient report. Second, the progressivity of the turn is disrupted repeatedly throughout its production and specifically immediately before and after the first quantification: (0.8) *yige yue-* (line 2). The disruptions of progressivity surrounding the quantification appear to diminish the speaker’s commitment to a precise and accountable formulation. Third, the turn includes the final particle *ba* (line 4), which disclaims complete access to information in the turn. Specifically, the *ba* particle serves to defeat the tacit claim that the quantifications *yige yue* ‘one month’ and *yi ci* ‘one time’ can or should be understood as precise formulations. As an outcome of these features of the turn’s design, the *ba*-marked informing reports an approximation of the speaker’s gasoline usage. That the speaker’s turn should indeed be analysed as a type of informing finds evidence in the response that it receives, which both registers the news and displays surprise.

In addition to the use of the *ba* particle in the formulation of approximations, the particle also occurs in informings that report on future or hypothetical actions. In such cases, the *ba* particle along with other features of the turn’s design formulate the informing as a ‘possibility’ or ‘proposal’ that is under consideration but to which the speaker lacks a definite and accountable commitment. In Extract (7), the *ba* particle occurs in a report on a tentative plan of the speaker, Jiang, to hold a lecture course on massage therapy at the request of a friend whose daughter has just graduated from beauty school and wishes to learn more about massage.

Extract 7 (TPE17)

- 1 Jia: souyi xi:wang wo gen ta liaoliao.
so hope 1SG with 3SG chat
so he hopes I will have a chat with her.
- 2 na keshi wo zhege ren you ji:po:, (0.7)
that but 1SG this.CL person also busybody

e.g., in Extract (1)). The *ba* particle, together with other resources, serves to disclaim complete and unproblematic epistemic access to the matter in question and thereby adjusts the epistemic gradient between speaker and recipient (see Figure 2).

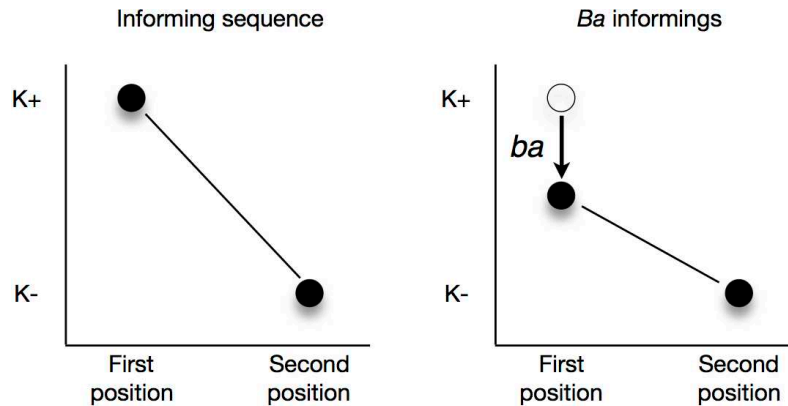


Figure 2: The epistemic adjustment made by the *ba* particle in informing sequences

3.3 The *ba* particle in assessments

An assessment is a social action in which a speaker evaluates a referent, typically by way of the formulation of a reference to a person, object, or state of affairs and the predication of a property or characteristic thereto (Pomerantz, 1984; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987). Unlike the other two types of social action examined in this article, assessments do not necessarily claim an asymmetrical distribution of knowledge between speaker and recipient. The speaker of an assessment may have greater or lesser access to the object of the assessment than the recipient (Pomerantz, 1984; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987). Building on this previous research, Heritage and Raymond (2005) provide an account of the epistemics of assessment sequences that integrates previous observations of agreement and disagreement, upgrading and downgrading, differential access between participants, and sequential position. Crucially, Heritage and Raymond argue that first assessments carry “an implied claim that the speaker has primary rights to evaluate the matter assessed” and that speakers of first assessments “may work to defeat any implication that they are claiming primary rights to evaluate the matter at hand” (p. 16).

In the formation of assessments, the *ba* particle serves to downgrade assessments in first position. In the present corpus, no *ba*-marked assessments are found in second position. Although in assessment sequences generally the epistemic relations between participants and referents vary, the relations that one observes in assessments with the *ba* particle are restricted: speakers of *ba*-marked assessments have equal or lesser access to the referents under evaluation than recipients. That is, speakers appear not to use *ba*-marked assessments to evaluate referents to which they have exclusive access (i.e., exclusive of recipients). This asymmetry in the distribution of access can be observed clearly in Extract (8), in which the participants themselves orient to the relevance of access to the referent prior to the first assessment. In this sequence, drawn from a conversation between two female friends, both of whom teach Mandarin Chinese to foreign students in Taipei, Jiang begins to tell Wu a story about an assignment that a student in her class has recently written.

Extract 8 (TPE17)

- 1 Jia: zhe shi w- zhe shi wode xuesheng
this COP this COP 1SG.POS student
this is m- this is my student's
- 2 jintian jiao lai de:
today hand.in come PRT
today turned in
- 3 Wu: zuoye.
assignment
assignment.
- 4 (.)
- 5 Jia: zuoye. mingtian .hhh wo shangge xueqi
assignment yesterday 1SG last semester
assignment. yesterday. .hhh last semester I
- 6 dai tamen qu kan shenme
bring 3PL go look what
took them to see something.
- 7 (ni zhi bu zhidao)
2SG know NEG know
(do you know?)
- 8 >wo you mei you gen ni jiang<
1SG have NEG have with 2SG speak
>did I tell you?<
- 9 (0.7)
- 10 Wu: kan she[nme].
look what
see what?
- 11 Jia: [qu kan lingmei. ((reading))
go look psychic
going to see a psychic.
- 12 (0.7)
- 13 Wu: ah
ah
- 14 (0.3)
- 15 Wu: mmm. meiyou jiang.
INTJ NEG.have speak
mmm. you didn't tell me.
- 16 Jia: meiyou jiang.
NEG.have speak
I didn't tell you.
- 17 Wu: -> eyah. hen youyisi ba.
INTJ very interesting PRT
eyah. very interesting ba.
(('must be interesting'))
- 18 Jia: dui. hen youyisi.
correct very interesting
yeah. it's very interesting.

In preparation for the story, Jiang first checks whether it is already known to Wu (lines 7–8). After an insert sequence, in which Wu ask for more information and Jiang reads the title of the student’s assignment aloud (lines 10–13), Wu answers Jiang’s question, explicitly disclaiming access to the story (line 15). The assessment that Wu then produces is thus of a referent (presumably the title of the student’s assignment) to which she has only secondary access. That is, the speaker makes the assessment on the basis of what she has just been told, not on the basis of independent knowledge of the student’s assignment. In first position assessments, the *ba* particle also serves to solicit a response, making relevant confirmation of the assessment in the next turn. In response to Wu’s *ba*-marked assessment, Jiang first confirms the assessment with *dui* ‘correct’ and then repeats the assessment in an unmarked form (i.e., without *ba* or other modification). Through these practices, the speaker both agrees with the first assessment and asserts her primary access and rights to evaluate the referent.

The *ba* particle also occurs in assessments of referents to which speakers and recipients both presumably have access. The use of the particle in such assessments presents a puzzle: if the speaker indeed has access to the referent, why, then, should she downgrade her first position assessment? The answer, I argue, is that turn-constructural resources that lower a speaker’s epistemic position, invoking a shallow epistemic gradient, may also serve to solicit a response from a recipient (see Stivers & Rossano, 2010; Heritage, 2012b). In line with this analysis, assessments that include the *ba* particle not only evaluate the referent, but also strongly solicit agreement from their recipients. Consider, for instance, the assessment sequence in Extract (9) in which three female friends all evaluate the same referent, Lin Zhiling, a well-known television personality in Taiwan.

Extract 9 (TPE15)

- 1 Wu: Lin Zhiling wo ye bu hui juede piaoling.
 NAME NAME 1SG also NEG can feel pretty
 Lin Zhiling I also don’t find pretty.
- 2 Li: Lin Zhiling bu cuo: a:.
 NAME NAME NEG wrong PRT
 Lin Zhiling’s not bad.
- 3 (1.3) ((Li and Wu maintain gaze))
- 4 Wu: ((blinks))
- 5 (0.3)
- 6 Li: ((turns head towards Wang))
- 7 (0.5)
- 8 Li: -> +Lin Zhiling piao:lia:ng ba:.
 NAME NAME pretty PRT
 Lin Zhiling’s pretty *ba*. ((‘pretty, isn’t she?’))
 +gestures towards Wang-----+
- 9 (0.2)
- 10 Wang: piaoliang a.
 pretty PRT
 yeah she is.

In the wake of a disagreement as to the relative beauty of the television personality, Li uses an assessment with the *ba* particle to marshal support for her position. As her prior

assessment (in line 2) makes explicit, Li has sufficient access to the referent to make the assessment. In a context such as this, in which a speaker's right to assess the referent can be taken as an already settled matter (in contrast to Extract (8)), the epistemic stance of the *ba* particle takes on a different interpretation. Rather than indicate that the speaker lacks complete access to the referent – a claim that, crucially, is incompatible with the established epistemic status of the speaker – the *ba* particle serves as a resource for the solicitation of agreement in the form of confirmation from the recipient.

The analysis of the *ba* particle in assessment sequences demonstrates that it occurs only in first position assessments for referents to which the recipient has primary or equal epistemic access. In such cases, the recipient's epistemic position is established as K+. The inclusion of the *ba* particle in the design of the assessment lowers the speaker's epistemic position and thereby either defers to the greater rights of the recipient or serves to solicit a response. In Figure 3 the diagram on the left illustrates the epistemic gradient of a first-position assessment without the *ba* particle, which embodies a tacit claim of epistemic primacy (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). The diagram on the right depicts the epistemic position taken up through the *ba* particle.

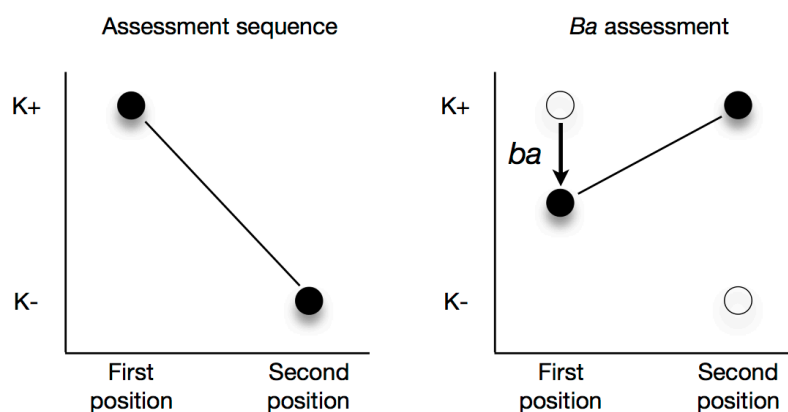


Figure 3: The epistemic adjustment made by the *ba* particle in first position assessments to K+ recipients

4. Discussion

The present study has examined the use of the *ba* particle in three distinct social actions: answers to questions, informings, and assessments. It was argued that the particle serves as a turn-constructional resource for the adjustment of the epistemic gradient invoked in the sequence, downgrading the speaker's epistemic position. In assessment sequences, the epistemic adjustment made by the particle also serves to solicit a response from the recipient who invariably has knowledge of the matter in question. In this section, I first consider the relationship between uncertainty and the solicitation of agreement, the two major accounts of the *ba* particle in the literature, and then reflect on the methods used to investigate final particles and opportunities for future research in this area.

4.1 The relationship between uncertainty and agreement solicitation

As noted in the introduction, the analyses of the *ba* particle in the literature can be divided roughly into two camps: those who argue that *ba* indicates a speaker's uncertainty (e.g., Han, 1995; Chu, 1998) and those who propose that it serves to solicit

agreement (Li & Thompson, 1981). The analysis presented here provides support for both views and ultimately reveals them to be mutually compatible.

In answers to questions, the *ba* particle resists the presumption of a K+ epistemic status invoked by the question and formulates the answer as equivocal or uncertain. In informings, the particle co-occurs with other turn-constructional resources that together formulate the statement as an approximation or a tentative proposal. Such uses are compatible with an analysis of the *ba* particle as a display of uncertainty. In assessments, however, the particle does not render a speaker's assessment as uncertain. The assessment of the student's assignment as *hen youyisi ba* 'very interesting *ba*' in Extract (8) does not convey doubt or equivocation, and the assessment of the television celebrity as *piaoliang ba* 'pretty *ba*' in Extract (9) indeed conveys the opposite stance. In assessments, the *ba* particle solicits agreement from a recipient who has independent knowledge of the assessable and therefore rights to produce an assessment of it, but it does not necessarily display uncertainty on the part of the speaker. An initial conclusion, then, is that whether the *ba* particle serves to display uncertainty or solicit agreement depends on the social action and sequential position in which the particle occurs.

There is, however, a systematic basis for the relationship between uncertainty and agreement solicitation which the *ba* particle reveals. Turn designs that diminish the speaker's epistemic position (e.g., with modal verbs, epistemic adverbials, the *ba* particle) may be understood as displays of uncertainty and may thus occasion agreement or disagreement (as confirmation or disconfirmation) from recipients who have or claim greater epistemic rights over the matter in question (cf. Stivers & Rossano, 2010; Heritage, 2012b). Consider, for example, the practices that Jiang employs in the design of a reported telling in Extract (10). The report recounts a recent conversation in which a friend proposed that Jiang, who studies massage, may be able to help her daughter who has recently graduated from beauty school (i.e., the *lingyu* 'field' referred to in line 6).

Extract 10 (TPE17)

- 1 Jia: na:me: (.) hou lai zui jin ta jiu shuo
so afterwards recently 3SG PRT say
so: (.) then recently she said
- 2 ta xiang zhao tade nuer:,
3SG think look.for 3SG.POSS daughter
she wanted to find her daughter:,
- 3 ta xiang jiao tade nuer lai zhao wo.
3SG think tell 3SG.POSS daughter come look.for 1SG
she wanted to tell her daughter to find me.
- 4 (0.7)
- 5 Jia: uhh: (0.5) yinwei ta jue de zhe yi-
HES because 3SG feel this one
uhh: (0.5) because she thinks this-
- 6 zhe yige lingyu keneng ye hui gen
this one.CL field might also can with
this field could possibly be related to
- 7 yixie jingluo [anmo you guanxi.]
some meridian massage have relationship
energy channel massage.

- 8 Wu: [m m m : : :] hui.
INTJ can
mmm::: it does.
- 9 (0.4)
- 10 Wu: mei cuo.
NEG wrong
that's right.

The design of the report treats the connection between beauty school (*zheyi ge lingui* 'this field' in line 6) and the specific type of massage that Jiang studies as tenuous. The epistemic adverbial *keneng* 'possibly' and the modal verb *hui* 'can' or 'be possible' both serve to construe the connection as possible but not absolute. In this sequence, the tenuous formulation of the report serves to elicit confirmation from the recipient. In lines 8–10, Wu repeats the modal verb *hui* and produces *meicuo* 'that's right' (lit. 'not wrong'), both of which constitute common practices for confirmation in Mandarin Chinese.

The observation that turn designs that diminish or downgrade a speaker's epistemic position serve to solicit agreement or confirmation from a K+ recipient accounts for the use of the *ba* particle in assessments. The *ba* particle ostensibly lowers the speaker's epistemic position, invoking an epistemic gradient in which the recipient has a higher position and the right to confirm the information in question. This also accounts for the fact that the *ba* particle does not solicit agreement in response to answers to questions and informings, actions that trade on a recipient's subordinate epistemic position. The general relationship between forms that display uncertainty and forms that solicit agreement arguably provides a unified account for what are seemingly unrelated uses of the *ba* particle.

4.2 A reflection on the analysis of final particles

Final particles in Mandarin Chinese are notoriously difficult to analyse. Although a major source of this difficulty is the ineffability of their meanings, an even greater obstacle, I would like to suggest, is a methodological one. Perhaps the most obvious and intuitive method that one could employ to investigate the meaning and use of final particles in conversation is to build a collection of all instances of a specific particle that occur in a given corpus, examine each case one by one, and then produce a set of generalisations about the particle. This most obvious and intuitive method is problematic, however. As conversation analytic research on final particles has shown, the present study included, they serve as resources for the formation of diverse social actions across a range of sequential environments. An exhaustive collection of a particle will inevitably cut across these different actions and environments indiscriminately. The apparent coherence of such a collection is spurious.

An alternative method, one employed by the present study and others (see, e.g., Wu, 2006), is to build collections of specific social actions, beginning with the most common and well-understood ones, and to investigate the contributions final particles make to their formation. Such a collection allows the analyst to make meaningful comparisons between, for example, the performance of an action with and without a final particle or with one particle versus another. Indeed, the analyses presented in this article, while focused on a single particle, could be expanded to consider others. Given that speakers use the *ba* particle in answers to questions (Section 3.1), one might ask which other particles occur in this environment and analyse the distinct contribution that each one makes to the social action (see, e.g., Wu, 2005, on *ou* in second position). Such an investigation would begin not from a collection of final particles, but rather a

collection of a recognisable and recurrent sequence of action. The use of final particles in assessment sequences (Section 3.3) presents a similar opportunity (compare, e.g., the four assessments in Extract (9)). Here the open questions include which particles are observed to occur in assessments and which, if any, are not? What is the distribution of particles across first and second position (see Heritage & Raymond, 2005)? And what distinct contribution does each particle make in the formation of the assessment?

This method for the study of final particles is an incremental one. Rather than aim to produce a general account of a particle's meaning that holds across all instances in a corpus, the goal is, in the first instance, to explicate the particle's use in a single, well-defined interactional environment. As one investigates additional environments and additional uses, across a number of studies, a more general picture of the particle will emerge.

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Note

1. In a sample of the video recordings used in the present study (three recordings, 189 minutes in total), 1191 final particles occur, for an average of over 6 particles per minute or 1 about every 10 seconds. The most frequent final particle by a wide margin is *a* ($n = 634$), followed by *ou* ($n = 231$), *ma* ($n = 190$), *ma/me* ($n = 78$), and *ba* ($n = 58$).

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