Not so obvious: the sociolinguistic distribution of me in Mandarin Chinese

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Introduction

Sentence-final particles in Mandarin, most of which mark “subjective” meanings such as affect, epistemic stance, and so on, are often implicated in popular ways of characterizing women’s language. As in other Asian languages with particles, women are commonly thought to use more particles than men (Erbaugh 1985).

I used two corpora of conversational Mandarin—HKUST Mandarin Telephone and CALLHOME Mandarin—to investigate the relationship between gender and particle use, keeping an eye on other social dimensions as well. I focused on one particle in particular: me (pronounced [ma’i]), which has many functions, but usually encodes an utterance as being obvious (Chao 1968, Chappell 1991, Chu 1998). Me has been described as characteristic of certain speech styles understood as feminine, especially so-called saijiao or “petulant” speech (Chan 1997).

Particle Function(s)

| me | obviousness |
|    | Zhe mei shenme hao mai de me suan le, here has not anything good buy NOM ME, forget it LE |
| a/ya | topic, exhortation, emphasis |
| ba | suggestion |
| la* | inception, imperative, emphasis |
| ne | topic, negation expectation |

*a* is usually employed as a fusion of two particles: le, which describes a change of state, and a/ya (above)

Table 1. Common sentence-final particles and rough descriptions of some of their functions. Adapted from Chappell (1991).

Frequency of Four Particles by Gender and Age

![Graph showing frequency of four particles by gender and age](image)

**HKUST Mandarin**
- me alone showed a significant interaction effect for age and sex ($p < 0.01$); young women use more than other demographics
- other particles showed no significant relationship with the given demographic data

**CALLHOME Mandarin**
- me rates were higher among those with perceived Southern accents, for both Mainland and Taiwanese speakers ($p < 0.001$)
- me rates were higher among speakers calling Taiwan (who were thus probably also Taiwanese, $p < 0.005$)

Corpora & Methods

**HKUST Mandarin**
- 1793 speakers, paired mostly strangers
- Fisher-like topics

**CALLHOME Mandarin**
- 334 speakers, phone calls to family or friends
- richer situational information

For each speaker, I calculated the rate at which each particle occurred compared to the total number of syllables (characters) spoken by that person. I analyzed the relationship between these rates and demographic/situational data available in the corpus, using graphical methods and Poisson regression (results not reported here).

The CALLHOME data was used primarily to explore the patterns suggested in the larger HKUST dataset—especially region.

Results

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Conclusions

Most particles are not differentiated by gender, contrary to popular belief
- me, however, is used more by young women than other groups
- is this age-grading or change in progress? It could be age-grading, but me may be linked to Taiwanese and “Southern-sounding” speech.
- In other cases (Zhang 2005), variants with Taiwanese associations have been valued in emerging transnational, capitalist markets. Is this also the case for me?

References


