A Corpus Study of Sentence-Final *me*: “Cosmopolitan” Mandarin?

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Abstract

Erbaugh (1985) notes that in many East Asian languages, many speakers believe sentence-final particles are more frequently used by women than by men. She speculates that if men and women’s usage actually reflects this stereotype, it is a product of the burden placed on women’s shoulders to facilitate smooth interaction in conversation. I focus on one modal particle of Mandarin Chinese: me (often written 嘛), which is sometimes described as marking the obviousness of an utterance.

With a corpus study of conversational Mandarin, using two separate corpora, I also examine the relationship between me frequency and speakers’ region of origin, perceived accent, among other. I show that, in Mainland China, me’s use is generally favored by (young) women compared to other gender and age demographics, while three other particles—a/ya, ba, and la show no differentiation in use according to sex and age. In both Mainland China and Taiwan, speakers perceived as having southern regional accents produce more me than speakers with other accents, though Taiwanese speakers produce more me than Mainlanders overall.

I argue against describing me as merely a particle for smoothing out interaction, and rule out an account of its gender distribution based on this misleading generalization. Following more recent work in language, gender, and sociolinguistic variation, in particular Zhang (2005), and supported by additional corpus data, I suggest that me’s sociolinguistic distribution can be better understood as a resource in the creation of linguistic styles. In this account, me gains significance as a salient feature of Taiwanese or Southern Mandarin, and speakers use it in the course of a linguistic presentation that draws on the symbolic value of association between Taiwan and Southern China and its transnationally-flavored brand of urban, capitalist modernity.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The modal particle me¹ (IPA: /ma/) occurs at the end of sentences in Modern Standard Chinese (MSC, Mandarin or putonghua). It adds what is often described as a signaling of obviousness or an air of insistence to the propositional meaning of an utterance:

(1.1) ta yidian ye bu ai, yi bai qishi gongfen me!
     3p.sg one:bit also not short one hundred seventy centimeter ME
     He isn’t short at all, he’s 170 centimeters!

The addition of me in Example 1.1 marks the proposition in he’s 170 centimeters as obvious evidence of the claim that the person in question is not short, and could also be analyzed as marking the speaker’s insistence on the claim about his height.

Previously, me has mostly been analyzed from pragmatic and discourse analytic perspectives. This thesis, by contrast, is primarily a sociolinguistic study, borrowing on techniques in corpus linguistics to explore social variation in the use

¹The romanization me used here is chosen in accordance with Chao (1968), Chu (1998), and Lu (2006). It is intended to distinguish me (瞇) from the phonologically similar yes/no-question marker ma (嗎). In written Chinese, 瞇 is today the standard orthographic realization, though Chao (1968) remarks that a variety of characters have been used to represent me through time, including 喂, 麻, 嘿, 么, and 么.
of *me*. Using these data, I make an argument for looking at *me* from the point of view of linguistic style. I borrow on Zhang’s (2001, 2005) work on “cosmopolitan Mandarin” and other research on linguistic styles and identity to support my claim that the social distribution of *me* can be explained in part by the increased influence of Taiwan and Hong Kong on worldwide Chinese-speaking communities.

In the midst of China’s current rapid economic development, private firms, many owned by ethnic Chinese from outside mainland China, have set up operations on the Mainland. These new foreign-owned businesses currently exist alongside the state-owned enterprises that were the norm before the era of “opening and reform” began in the late 70’s and early 80’s. Many of the *waiqi* ‘foreign enterprise’ owners and managers come from Hong Kong and especially Taiwan, but their staff is often drawn from the Mainland’s large cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and others, forming a new class of Mainland-native white-collar business professionals. The distinctive, foreign-seeming style of many of these Mainland-native *waiqi* businesspeople has become widely noted by the public. Of particular interest are linguistic presentations that appear to mimic the Southern-accented Mandarin of their managers, even, for example, by people with native Beijing Mandarin background, a population which Zhang (2001, 2005) studied.

Zhang conducted a linguistic variation study in Beijing, comparing male and female employees of foreign-owned businesses (sometimes called *yapishi* ‘yuppies’) to employees at the traditional state-owned firms. One of the variables she studied was “full tone,” a phonological feature characteristic of Hong Kong and Taiwanese usage. In most varieties of Chinese, every syllable carries its own tone value. Beijing Mandarin, on the other hand, and also standard Mandarin, which is based on Beijing phonology, de-stresses the second syllable of some two-syllable words so that the full tone value is not produced. Thus *xian*\(^{ss}\) *sheng*\(^{ss}\) ‘mister,’ whose sylla-
bles natively carry two high-level tones, is pronounced xian\textsuperscript{55} sheng, with so-called “light tone” on the second syllable instead of the high-level tone.

In Beijing, where this light tone is a distinctive feature of both the local dialect and the national standard, full tone is a very salient marker of non-local status. Thus, when the yuppies (in particular, yuppie women) employ full tone, Zhang claims, they are signaling some kind of non-locality in their language. Through this, what Zhang calls a “cosmopolitan style” is enacted in the speech of the waiqi professionals. This cosmopolitan Mandarin combines both local and non-local linguistic resources, and in using it the foreign businesspeople construct an outward-looking, cosmopolitan identity.

I will present the argument in favor of describing \textit{me} as part of a cosmopolitan style in Mandarin. I start with the observation that high final particle usage in general is taken to be a feature not just of women’s speech (Chan 1996, 1997:43-44), but also of Taiwanese Mandarin and Cantonese when compared to northern Mandarin. \textit{Me} itself is also a salient feature in the speech of Taiwanese pop stars and characters in Taiwan-produced TV dramas. I believe the stylistic deployment of \textit{me} can bring the symbolic value of these phenomena into play for a speaker, and I speculate that this is behind the sociolinguistic distribution of the particle that I find.

My case is developed throughout the thesis, starting with Chapter 2, where I give an account of the variety of meanings that \textit{me} may take on in different contexts. In Chapter 3, based on this variety and working from the history of language and gender research, I show that there can be no simple relationship between the modal and discourse semantics of \textit{me} and its social distribution, especially with regard to gender.
In Chapters 4 and 5 I look at two Mandarin Chinese speech corpora, exploring the relationship between frequency of *me* and other particles and social characteristics of the speakers as recorded by the compilers of the corpus. One corpus, HKUST Mandarin Telephone, enlisted participants from urban areas throughout Mainland China. Talkers were paired up randomly by researchers according to demographic information and asked to conduct telephone conversations of up to ten minutes on given topics. A subset of the conversations was transcribed orthographically. In the other corpus, CALLHOME Mandarin, participants were given a chance to call their families or friends overseas (mostly in mainland China or Taiwan); orthographic transcripts are available for three- to five-minute long chunks of those recordings.

In the HKUST corpus I find that *me* frequency has a robust relationship with speaker age and gender. Usage by younger women far exceeds that of young men and older men and women, whose rates of use are not significantly different. In the CALLHOME corpus, on the other hand, speakers on average use *me* at about half the frequency they do in the HKUST corpus. And though there is a tendency for women to use more *me* than men, the difference is much less pronounced in the CALLHOME corpus than in HKUST.

In the final chapter I will draw together the evidence for *me* as a resource in the construction of styles in Mandarin, and make some educated guesses as to how such constructions might be enacted in interaction. I return to the question of linking the gender difference in *me* production to its geographic distribution, and finally, point out some avenues of further research that this study opens up.
Chapter 2

Modality and the pragmatics of sentence-final *me*

2.1 The sentence-final particle system

Modern Standard Chinese has a relatively rich collection of sentence-final elements, usually called “sentence-final” or “modal” particles or *yuqi ci* ‘mood words’ or *zhu ci* ‘helping words.’ Rather than carrying any referential meaning of their own, these are used to signal the epistemic or affective attitude of a speaker towards the utterance (Wu 2004:25).

The most common (and well-studied) of these particles are listed in Table 2.1, along with a non-exhaustive summary of their possible ‘functions’ (i.e. added emotive, modal, or discourse-functional contributions to the utterance). The specific characterizations of each function of each particle are open to dispute; Chao (1968) enumerates no fewer than twenty-six ways of encoding modality with sentence-final particles in Mandarin, many of which would likely be disputed and recategorized by other researchers. Table 2.1 gives an idea of how highly polyvalent the
<table>
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Table 2.1: Outline of common particles of Modern Standard Chinese (Source: Chappell 1991)

Final particles of Mandarin can be with regard to meaning and function.

To give an idea of the usage of some of the more common particles, below are some examples employing ma, ba, and me:

Ma, yes/no question marker:

(2.1) ni gen wo qu ma?
2p.sg with 1p.sg go MA
‘Are you coming with me?’

Ba, suggest:

(2.2) ni gen wo qu ba!
2p.sg with 1p.sg go BA
‘Come with me!’ (softer tone than an unmarked imperative)
Ba, solicit agreement:

(2.3) \textit{ni gen wo qu ba?}\textsuperscript{4}
2p.sg with 1p.sg go BA
‘Are you coming with me? [I assume you will say yes]’

Me, insistence:

(2.4) \textit{ni gen wo qu me!}\textsuperscript{4}
2p.sg with 1p.sg go ME
‘Come with me [for God’s sake]!’

The examples above vary by illocutionary force, with both imperative and interrogative utterances represented, and also by the speaker attitudes and assumptions conveyed alongside the purely propositional semantics of the utterance. Contrast, for example, the (pragmatically and emotionally) unmarked yes/no question in Example 2.1 with the assumption of an affirmative response signalled by \textit{ba} in Example 2.3.

### 2.2 Previous accounts of \textit{me}

\textit{Me} (Example 2.4, above) is one of the less-studied of the sentence-final particles, but treatments of its semantic and pragmatic properties go back at least as far as Chao’s (1968) grammar of spoken Chinese. Broadly speaking, these accounts all agree that the meaning or function of \textit{me} has to do with expressing the obviousness of a proposition and/or insistence on the truth of that proposition by the speaker.

\textit{Me} is diachronically related to the yes/no-question marker \textit{ma}, originating from a negative rhetorical question construction \textit{bu shi ... ma}? ‘Isn’t ...?’ that is quite

\textsuperscript{4}As a rough translation of \textit{me}, ‘for God’s sake’ covers many of the uses we will see. I owe this translation to Lu (2006).
common in Mandarin (Chappell 1991:58). See Examples 2.5 (rhetorical question with *ma*) and 2.6 (declarative with *me*):

(2.5) *zhe bu shi hen piāoliáng ma?*
    this not be very pretty MA
    ‘Isn’t this pretty?’

(2.6) *zhe hen piāoliáng me!*
    this very pretty ME
    ‘This is pretty (how could anyone say otherwise?)!’

This diachronic association with rhetorical questions with assertive illocutionary force survives in *me*’s semantic properties, which have been treated by several scholars. Their opinions often differ widely, but in general there is agreement on the general picture of *me*’s semantics.

For Chao (1968), the particle primarily marks “dogmatic assertion.” Here the speaker who employs *me* is said to be implying that the proposition is something the speaker should already know—equivalent to saying *you should know or don’t you see?* in English (1968: 801). His example of this usage:

(2.7) *wo shuo shi de me! ni jiushi bu dong me!*
    1p.sg say be DE ME 2p.sg just not understand ME
    ‘I say it is! You just don’t understand!’

The other use of the particle that Chao notes is as a “Pause Particle with Hesitation,” translatable as “‘as for, in the case of . . . well’” (1968: 801). The particle in this sense is essentially a topic marker. Chao’s example:

(2.8) *jintian wo bu neng, mingtian me, daihuir zai shuo ba*
    today 1p.sg not can, tomorrow ME, awhile again say BA
    ‘I can’t today; as for tomorrow, well, let’s talk about it later.’

Chao’s work, as part of a comprehensive descriptive grammar of modern Chinese, does not offer a particularly in-depth analysis of *me* itself. Chappell (1991)
is the first work to endeavor a major semantic treatment of the particle. Chappell’s basic analysis is that the uses of *me* fall into three major categories: (1) to remind the addressee “that the entire proposition is obvious or self-evident from the preceding discussion or from their shared cultural knowledge” (1991: 47), (2) to mark disagreement, and (3) topic resumption. Usage (3) is similar to the use of *me* as a topic marker that Chao pointed out. The first two meanings, however, contrast with Chao’s original formulation.

An example of *me* as a marker of obviousness (usage 1) is given below in Example 2.9, from the HKUST Mandarin telephone survey\(^2\):

\[(2.9) \text{ruguo women qu le gudai, kending jiu bu shiying, shouxian} \]
\[	if 1p.pl go \text{PRF old.era affirm just not fit first} \]
\[
\text{jiu meiyou dianshi me!} \]
\[
\text{just not.have television ME} \]
\[
\text{‘If we went back to the past, I’m sure we wouldn’t be used to it—for one, there wouldn’t be any television [of course]!’} \]

The use of *me* here marks that the recent invention of the television is knowledge that speaker and addressee share, and that the truth of the proposition should be self-evident. *Me* is quite commonly employed in this capacity.

As for *me* as a marker of disagreement (usage 2), Chappell cites the following example (slightly adapted, 1991: 47), wherein speaker C disagrees with speaker B’s implied assessment and ends the utterance with *me*:

\[(2.10) \text{B: xianzai shou zhe zhong chuguochao yingxiang de} \]
\[
\text{now suffer this kind go-abroad-trend influence NOM} \]
\[
\text{ren tai duo le. people too many LE} \]
\[
\text{‘There are far too many people being influenced by the trend to go abroad.’} \]
\[
\text{C: zhe ye shi hao shi me!} \]
\[
\text{this also be good matter ME} \]

\(^2\text{HKUST Mandarin Speaker 013081, a 25 year-old female.}\)
‘That’s something good, too!’

Chu (1998) criticizes Chappell’s account on the matter of the ‘disagreement’ meaning. Chu believes the effect of disagreement is likely better explained by a combination of more basic factors. With particular reference to Example 2.10, Chu points out that the adverb ye ‘also’ is mistranslated as “too” in Example 2.10; in this case it is ye that marks the disagreement that Chappell claimed was signified by me.

While Chu’s critique of Chappell’s broad meaning generalizations is entirely valid, Chappell also introduces a different way of thinking about the particle’s semantic and pragmatic characteristics, which proves to be quite productive for Chu’s account and later research as well.

Chappell proposes that me’s apparently disparate ‘meanings’ coexist at different levels of proposition modality and discourse function; in brief, there is a “modal” me and a ‘adiscourse’ me, and modal functions can be used alongside discourse functions and vice versa.

Modality, here, is the phenomenon of linguistically encoding (especially by grammatically optional or periphrastic means) of illocutionary force, the relationship between realis and irrealis and other non-propositional meanings. Chappell borrows the concept from the influential work of Palmer (1986) and Bybee (see Bybee and Fleischman 1995)

The modal meaning of me under this rubric is one of bald assertion without reasoning, which often carries negative sentiment (1991: 58). This helps account for the insistence that Chao saw at work in his me of dogmatic assertion, as well as the disagreement meaning observed by Chappell. At the level of discourse, Chappell claims me is used to construct textual coherence by pointing out obvious consequences and connections to previous discourse, as well as signaling the speaker’s
desire for their addressee to understand.

Analyzing at multiple levels the particle’s contributions to the semantic and pragmatic character of the utterance allows us to better theorize the wide range of situations in which *me* appears. These include both confrontational and insistent sentences such as Examples 2.4, 2.6, 2.7, etc. and more neutral or cooperative utterances like Example 2.9.

Chu (1998) similarly analyzes *me* from three different perspectives, at the “syntactico-semantic,” modal, and discourse-functional levels. At the syntactico-semantic level, he proposes that “the generalized meaning of *me* can be represented as ‘heavily presuppositional’—i.e. the speaker assumes the content of the utterance is known to the hearer” (1998: 131). The speaker, using *me*, thereby signals that the content of the utterance is or should be known to both speaker and interlocutor.

The modal function of *me* Chu characterizes as “insistent,” i.e. trying “to persuade the hearer to accept it as true” (1998: 148). He brings in naturalistic conversation data as well as forced-choice surveys to support this argument. Although it is unclear whether his survey data support his assessment, the conversational data point to the conclusion that speakers use *me* to assert fact and insist upon its truth. It also agrees with Chappell’s description of *me*’s modal content. On the third level of Chu’s description, discourse, *me* marks obviousness, another parallel to Chappell’s account.

Chu (1998) is, in general, an argument for a “discourse grammar,” one in which the meaning of utterances, including those containing *me*, can only be understood in a discursive context. Thus, although it is desirable for theoretical purposes for linguists to make the general characterizations Chu does, *me*’s meanings in context are actually highly variable. As Chu points out and we have have seen, *me* can point out agreement and disagreement, cooperation and “face threats” (Lu 2006),
or even just serve as a relatively uninteresting topic marker.

What is particularly important to note for this study is that this heterogeneity of function makes *me* fairly opaque to a sociolinguistic analysis that tried to argue directly from *me*’s semantic content to its social distribution. There is nothing inherent about a young woman that makes her more likely to need to mark insistence or obviousness with this particular particle. Rather, the link between the linguistic form, its semantic content, and the social distribution of its use is a complex one which will be fleshed out further in the remainder of this thesis.
Chapter 3

Gender, style, and “women’s language”

3.1 Women’s language

Erbaugh (1985:88), who discusses sentence-final particles as a feature of East Asian languages, draws on several early lines of thinking (Fishman 1978) in language and gender when she considers that “if the text counts bear this out [that women use more particles than men], it is likely a result of the interactional work that women are expected to perform in conversation.” Since my study centers around the results of just such a text count, it is important to locate it properly within studies of gender and linguistic variation.

Even before the birth of language and gender as a subfield in its own right, variation studies included certain gender-related phenomena among their results. Labov’s (1966) New York study noted that the tendency for lower middle class speakers to produce higher numbers of prestige variants in reading style than upper middle class speakers was more pronounced among women.
Some early variationist work saw the gender differences it encountered as evidence of women’s increased sensitivity to norms of appropriateness and status, or “overt prestige” (Trudgill 1972). Women, it was theorized, relied more heavily on symbolic means such as language to seek status because men had better access to (presumably non-symbolic) resources such as money and property, political power, and coercive violence.

The publication of Lakoff’s (1975) highly influential *Language and Woman’s Place* inaugurated language and gender as a bona fide field of inquiry, but it theorized gendered language production somewhat differently. In her account, not just the status attached to correct language but also the linguistic form of traditionally gendered forms are important. The structural characteristics of such “women’s language” both reflect the power-deprived state of women in society and reproduce that state, putting women into a double-bind: using it, you admit your weakness and lack of power; if you choose not to use it, you are subject to the consequences of violating gender norms.

As an instance of one of the features of women’s language, take the tag question *isn’t it?* in example 3.1:

(3.1) It’s a lovely day, isn’t it?

By opening up the assertion *it’s a lovely day* to comment and possible contestation by the addressee, use of the tag question appears to circumscribe and limit the speaker’s commitment to the utterance. Moreover, it does this by mere virtue of being, formally speaking, a question.

Thus women’s language (distinct from language used about women, which Lakoff also explored) is argued to limit the expressive power of its user, and forces her to reduce her epistemic commitment to her utterances. Later work expanded on the interaction between gender roles and language use, at the same time as Lakoff’s
work encountered significant criticism.

One major criticism is that it is difficult to isolate a perfect isomorphic relationship between linguistic structure and the functions such structures serve in interaction (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). For example, in addition to being “cooperative” (as we saw in example 3.1) tag questions can be face-threatening:

(3.2) I don’t think it was right of you to make him do that, do you?

By the same token, *me* and other sentence-final particles cannot simply be relegated to “softness.” As chapter 2 showed, the range of functions to which *me* can be put is quite broad, and certainly not reducible to an over-generalized notion of “softness” or “cooperativeness.”

Even more tenuous than overgeneralizations about the function of linguistic phenomena like tag questions or particles is the attempt to link such structural elements directly to “power” or “gender.”

Cameron *et al.*’s (1988) corpus study finds that, in the corpus of the Survey of English Usage, men, not women, are by far the more frequent users of tag questions. This falsified the prediction strongly implicated by Lakoff’s work, that women would use more tag questions. Two questions then arise: first, if women’s language is not necessarily manifest in the text counts, then on what level of analysis, if any, do we claim women’s language exists? And second, what, if anything, can text counts tell us?

### 3.2 Practice-based and stylistic accounts

The second question is of more direct relevance to the current project, but its answer depends on clarifying the object of study. The difficulties encountered by initial attempts to characterize and quantify the relationship between gender and language
use have been addressed by later work which will directly inform my approach to investigating me.

Zhang (2001) summarizes the motivation for the change in direction which some language and gender researchers began to pursue in the early 90’s:

Earlier studies on gender variation are preoccupied with the questions “do/why do women use standard/prestige forms more than men” and “why are women innovative in change but conservative in stable situations”. As many have pointed out (e.g., Bing and Bergvall 1996; Eckert 1989), such questions presuppose that women and men’s linguistic behavior is essentially different and gender is a biological dichotomy.

(2001: 49–50)

The problem of taking gender as a given and natural analytic category is addressed by works such as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), which introduce and argue for looking at gender without removing it from the social practices in which gender is constituted: “This requires studying how people negotiate meanings in and among the specific communities of practice to which they belong” (1992: 472).

Starting with communities of practice as the unit of analysis, an approach to language and identity has coalesced that conceptualizes linguistic practice as one part of a system of practices that compose styles. Important works in style and variation include California Style Collective (1993), Mendoza-Denton (1997), Eckert (1999), Podesva et al. (2002), and Podesva (2007). These works theorize how speakers organize linguistic variants and other social practices to create styles, such as ‘tough’ or ‘prissy,’ in interaction. For example, Podesva (2007) argues that Heath, a gay medical school student, uses falsetto phonation in certain informal contexts in order to construct an expressive stance in interaction.

Importantly, however, Heath is not directly performing gayness, even though his falsetto speech might be ideologically associated with a gay identity. How is
that link established? Linguistic forms are “indirectly indexical” of identity categories like gender and sexuality (Ochs 1992). In interaction, linguistic moves take on some kind of situational meaning—to index a stance or perform a speech act—and then in turn it is those interactional moves that are linked to the ‘big’ ideological categories like ‘gay man.’ Thus the expressiveness that Heath constructs with falsetto is understood as gay, and falsetto itself becomes a part of that association.

3.3 *Me* and gendered styles

What styles suit the use of *me*? Farris’s (1995) research describes a *sajiao* or a ‘petulant child’ communication style (‘sajiao’ being the somewhat common word used in Chinese to describe this; this term is not common outside Chan’s work on language and gender): “the adorable petulance of a spoiled child or young woman who seeks material or immaterial benefit from an unwilling listener.” The addressee, confronted with a request in this petulant style is then put in the position of the parent, who can choose to give in to the request or refuse, for the good of the *sajiao* user. The association of the style with young women is mostly in the context of romantic relationships, where it is argued that “sajiao style indicates women’s indirect and informal power in Chinese society; at the same time, it serves as a means to create and maintain that form of power” (Chan 1997).

According to Chan, this style is associated with *me*:

Often accompanying *sajiao* is the sentence-final particle, *ma* 嘛, a particle that is used to ‘soften’ the tone of an utterance and is generally regarded as more typical of women’s speech... In the *sajiao* style, the entire sentence is uttered slowly and when *ma* is added, the syllable is nasalized and noticeably lengthened. (Chan 1997:40)
Farris’ above description of sajiao writes identity categories (child, woman) right into the style itself, but the interactional stance she describes is one of insistent pleading in the face of opposition. As was established in chapter 2, me’s meaning can involve both insistence and the obviousness of the speaker’s utterance. It is not a leap to imagine its usefulness in sajiao, where the speaker can mark both that they are making a request and that opposition to their request goes against the self-evident desirability of fulfilling the request.

This, of course, is quite different froms Chan’s reasoning as to why me might appear in sajiao, which invokes the softness of the particle. Some particles do perform the function of “softening” in certain cases, like ba, which can give utterances in the imperative mood the force of “suggestion” rather than a bare command. But I believe that underlying the urge to characterize me as a softening particle are the association of me with women and the subsequent association of femininity with softness. Inasmuch as terms like “soft” are useful at all, I don’t believe they apply to me in the sajiao style.

In some situations, sajiao involving me may indeed be a common style, and it is certainly gendered, with the association between a needy, somewhat whiny, but undeniably persuasive young woman in a relationship and the use of this nasal, childish style. However, I did not find any identifiable instances of sajiao in the corpora I examine in the coming chapters. It is not a style that suits itself well to conversation between strangers, or between adult family members. Ultimately the question of specifically how individual speakers deploy me and other resources will have to be left up to further investigation. The kind of in depth microanalysis required to do this work (see, for example, Wu 2004) is not suited to these corpora. In some cases there are only fragments of conversations, and when there is enough context to begin trying to understand how the speakers might be managing...
their interaction, the transcripts themselves are not detailed enough for a proper examination.

Recognizing the limits of the corpus-based approach I have chosen, it also allows for a different method of “reading” the social meaning of me. In the coming chapters, I will establish that in terms of gender and age, me is used most frequently by young women, and in terms of geography, Taiwanese speakers with marked southern Chinese accents use it more than those with standard phonology, and standard-sounding Taiwanese more than Mainland speakers. With these findings in hand I will suggest ways in which the cosmopolitan connotations of Taiwanese-ness, which in Mainland China may be salient on several levels, may endow linguistic forms such as me with powerful social and indexical meanings.
Chapter 4

Particles in the HKUST Mandarin Corpus

4.1 The HKUST corpus

The investigation here used the HKUST Mandarin Telephone Speech corpus, Part 1 (Fung et al. 2005). The HKUST corpus consists of 200 hours of recorded telephone conversations of no more than ten minutes between speakers of Mandarin Chinese living in Mainland China. Most of the callers did not know each other. 897 of these conversations (with 1793 separate speakers) were orthographically transcribed in Chinese characters, and it is using these transcripts that I performed the following investigations.

Certain demographic information is reported in the corpus for each speaker: age, gender, birthplace, accent, and phone type (fixed line or mobile). Birthplace can take one of two values: Mandarin or non-Mandarin, indicating whether or not the speaker was born in an area of China that traditionally speaks a Mandarin Chinese dialect. Accent is also divided into two values—standard and accented—
reflecting a listener’s judgment of how close the speaker’s phonology comes to approximating the official standard, which is based on the Beijing dialect, a northern variety of the Mandarin dialect group.

The regressions below test the relationship between frequency of me for a speaker and that speaker’s characteristics—specifically Age, Gender, Birthplace, and Accent.

4.2 Me in the corpus

For each speaker, both caller and callee, I counted the number of occurrences of the character 嘛. Although there are other possible orthographic realizations of me (see chapter 1), they were not used in the transcripts for this corpus. I weeded out obvious cases of other uses of me/ma, including occurrence in lexical items and as a particle in particular syntactic constructions, as shown in Table 4.1. After this culling, the entire corpus contains 7667 tokens of me.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shì me? (is ME)</td>
<td>‘Is that so?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bu (shi) . . . me? (not is . . ME)</td>
<td>‘Isn’t it the case that . . .?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gan ma (do what)</td>
<td>‘What are you doing?’; ‘Why?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lama</td>
<td>‘(Tibetan) Lama’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Environments in which me was not counted. Some are syntactic constructions that include the character for me as merely a yes/no question marker, while others are lexical items that include the character for its phonetic value.

To obtain a measure of me use in relation to volume of speech produced by a speaker, I found the number of all Chinese characters in their speech for that conversation. This figure closely corresponds to a count of the number of syllables spoken by a talker. Throughout this and the next chapter, me frequencies are usually
reported as the number of occurrences of *me* per 1000 syllables uttered by the speaker. I calculated the rate of *me* use for every speaker in the corpus.

Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of speaker *me* frequency scores and shows that the majority of speakers use *me* at very low rates. Moreover, as the rate of *me* increases, the number of speakers with that frequency appears to decrease exponentially.

Figure 4.1: Histogram of speaker *me* frequency scores

I tested the hypothesis, originating from common native speaker stereotypes, that women in general use more *me* than men. Figures 4.2a and 4.2b give two graphical representations of *me* frequency split by gender. In both visualizations, only the slightest suggestion of gender difference, if any, can be discerned.

It turns out, however, that this trace difference interacts with speaker age, so
that while older speakers show little to no gender difference in *me* rates, younger speakers show a somewhat more dramatic distinction. This is represented in Figure 4.3. Men and women below 32 years of age break apart, with the median women’s usage almost doubling that of men. Note that the uppermost category, speakers over 38 years old, contains 56 speakers (36 men and 20 women), which compared to the other categories is somewhat small. The other categories, though, each have well over 200 speakers, so the difference that is apparent here is probably not due to small sample size.

Counts of “rare events,” such as the occurrence of sentence-final particles, are often modeled using Poisson regression¹. To use Poisson regression, however, the researcher must assume that the mean of the response is equal to its variance, an

¹See the discussion in Long (1997).
HKUST: *Me* by speaker age and gender

![Graph showing median frequency per 1000 syllables by age category for female and male speakers.](image)

**Figure 4.3: *Me* by speaker gender and age**

Assumption which in the present case is overly idealistic\(^2\). An alternative to Poisson regression, negative binomial regression, is then preferred.

If \(\mu_i\) is the count of *me* for speaker \(i\), and \(E_i\) is the total number of syllables\(^3\) spoken per speaker, then \(\mu_i\) is modeled by the equation:

\[
\log\left(\frac{\mu_i}{E_i}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \cdots + \beta_p x_p
\]

\(\beta_0, \ldots, \beta_p\) are estimated effects of the predictor variables \(X_0, \ldots, X_p\) (e.g. age,

---

\(^2\)This was discovered in the exploratory model fitting stage, where the deviance (a representation of the error of the model) divided by the residual degrees of freedom should equal a value close to 1. When this value is too high, the data is overdispersed, and Poisson regression will underestimate the errors of the regression terms. In an exploratory Poisson regression fit, this value was 6733.8/1766 = 3.8, which is high enough to be worrisome.

\(^3\)Calculated as the number of Chinese characters in the speakers’ turns.
speaker gender, etc.) on the log-odds of the rate of *me* use, represented by the left-hand of the equation. I used R (R Development Core Team 2006) to fit a negative binomial regression, first testing the effects of speaker accent, speaker birthplace, speaker sex, age and the two-way interactions between age and sex. Table 4.2 reports the parameter estimates made and the results of Wald tests for significance on individual coefficients.

For categorical variables—Sex, Accent, Birthplace, and Accent—the “Estimate” reported in the table is the change in the estimated frequency of *me* when that variable changes from Female to Male, from Mandarin-dominant to non-Mandarin dominant, or from “Accented” to “Standard,” respectively. Thus, since there is a negative sign on the estimate for Accent, we know that speakers judged to have standard accents are estimated to use less *me* than those who have nonstandard accents (though this effect is not significant—in analysis this difference is not considered to deviate significantly from zero).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>z value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Significant?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>−5.3738</td>
<td>0.2063</td>
<td>−</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.0177</td>
<td>0.0073</td>
<td>−2.43</td>
<td>0.0151</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>−1.0545</td>
<td>0.2672</td>
<td>−3.95</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthplace</td>
<td>−0.0179</td>
<td>0.0937</td>
<td>−0.19</td>
<td>0.8481</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent</td>
<td>−0.0282</td>
<td>0.0511</td>
<td>−0.55</td>
<td>0.5818</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:Sex</td>
<td>0.0296</td>
<td>0.0095</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>0.0019</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: HKUST Corpus: *me* regression results

*a* Shorthand for Sex = Male, Birthplace = Non-Mandarin, and Accent = Standard; estimates are change in response if these expressions are true.

We interpret these results by examining the magnitude and sign of the estimated effect, keeping in mind that only effects that are significant at an appropriate level (say, $\alpha = 0.05$) should be considered to be in evidence. The most significant

---

4 Exploratory model fitting gave hints of other interactions between predictors, but none of these were clear enough to justify the added difficulty of interpreting models with numerous interaction terms.
results, at $p < 0.01$, show that Sex and the interaction between Age and Sex has a significant influence on the frequency of *me*. Age also has a significant effect on the response by itself.

The negative sign on the effects for Age and Sex indicates that older speakers and male speakers (without taking into account the interaction between Sex and Age) use less *me* than younger, female speakers. The interaction effect is positive, which indicates a countervailing effect—older men use slightly more *me* than younger men. Taken together, these results inform us that there is gender differentiation with regard to production of *me* and that this difference is informed by the speaker’s age. This confirms our visual assessment of the graph in Figure 4.3.

## 4.3 *Me* and other particles

Chan (1997) suggests that many particles, including *me*, are used more frequently by women than men. But an investigation of some of the other modal particles in the corpus—*a/ya*, *ba*, and *la*—shows that not all particles vary by age or gender, even though *a/ya* and *la* are both predicted to do so.

Referring to Figure 4.4, we see the average speaker frequencies for four particles, divided by Sex and Age. Interestingly, *a/ya*, which marks exhortation or a topic (see Table 2.1, Chappell 1991) and *ba* (which marks suggestion or solicits agreement; *ibid.*) do not vary significantly by either Age or Sex. By contrast, *me* and *la* (said to connote emotion and involvement), seem to show similar patterns, with younger women using them more frequently.
Figure 4.4: Four particles across the age spectrum, split by gender
In Tables 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5 are reported the results of regression fits with frequencies of *a/ya*, *ba*, and *la* as the responses, using negative binomial regression as above. Interestingly, different covariates, or none at all, are significant for each particle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>z value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Significant?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>−4.7219</td>
<td>0.1553</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.0093</td>
<td>0.0054</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>0.0873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex = Male</td>
<td>0.0914</td>
<td>0.1996</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.6469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthplace = Non-Mandarin</td>
<td>−0.0419</td>
<td>0.0698</td>
<td>−0.60</td>
<td>0.5477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent = Standard</td>
<td>−0.1399</td>
<td>0.0380</td>
<td>−3.68</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:Sex = Male</td>
<td>−0.0063</td>
<td>0.0071</td>
<td>−0.88</td>
<td>0.3786</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Residual deviance: 1979.8 on 1788 degrees of freedom

Table 4.3: Regression of frequency of *a/ya* on speaker characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>z value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Significant?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>−5.2739</td>
<td>0.1404</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.0002</td>
<td>0.0049</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>0.9743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex = Male</td>
<td>−0.1591</td>
<td>0.1802</td>
<td>−0.88</td>
<td>0.3774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth = Non-Mandarin</td>
<td>0.0630</td>
<td>0.0622</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>0.3113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent = Standard</td>
<td>−0.0190</td>
<td>0.0343</td>
<td>−0.55</td>
<td>0.5800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:Sex = Male</td>
<td>0.0054</td>
<td>0.0064</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.4018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Residual deviance: 1929.4 on 1788 degrees of freedom

Table 4.4: Regression of frequency of *ba* on speaker characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>z value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Significant?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>−7.3617</td>
<td>0.3295</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.0204</td>
<td>0.0115</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.0763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex = Male</td>
<td>0.3301</td>
<td>0.4276</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.4401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth = Non-Mandarin</td>
<td>−0.3313</td>
<td>0.1556</td>
<td>−2.13</td>
<td>0.0332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent = Standard</td>
<td>−0.1807</td>
<td>0.0815</td>
<td>−2.22</td>
<td>0.0267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:Sex = Male</td>
<td>−0.0198</td>
<td>0.0152</td>
<td>−1.30</td>
<td>0.1942</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Residual deviance: 1699.9 on 1788 degrees of freedom

Table 4.5: Regression of frequency of *la* on speaker characteristics.
The only significant predictor for *a/ya* frequency was Accent, with standardsounding speakers using less of the particle than others. None of the social factors tested have a significant effect on *ba* frequency, while for *la*, Mandarin-background speakers with nonstandard accents are predicted to have the highest frequencies. In the regression results, there is no effect for age or sex on *la*, so the variation we saw in figure 4.4 must be better explained by these other variables.

In general, my purpose in addressing these extra particles is to argue for looking at each particle on its own terms. With different histories and ideological associations, the reasons for the particular distribution of one feature will be unlikely to apply directly to other.

In the next chapter I will show that, even in an entirely different corpus, *me* follows the same pattern as it does in HKUST Mandarin Telephone.
Chapter 5

The Mandarin CALLHOME Corpus

The CALLHOME Mandarin Corpus, another collection of recorded telephone conversations in Mandarin, is quite similar to the HKUST corpus in many ways. Participants were recruited among Mandarin speakers living in the United States, and asked to call another native Mandarin speaker abroad. Most participants contacted family or close friends. Only the US-based participants, who placed the calls overseas, had the option to provide demographic information directly to the organizers of the corpus. Therefore, of 334 speakers in the corpus, only 90 reported their age, and in the main regression in Section 5.2 of this chapter, only these 90 speakers are used. Other information, such as length of education, is also present, but is even more sparse. Much like HKUST, auditors rated speakers for their accent, rate of speech, and clarity of articulation.

Also reported was a partially encrypted version of the phone number dialed by the US caller. After looking up the country calling code, I found that 304 speakers were in conversations where the receiving party was in mainland China. 14 speakers were in conversations involving speakers in Taiwan, and likewise 2 in Singapore, 2 in Hong Kong, 2 in Japan and 3 in Germany.
Accent was specified in greater detail than in the HKUST data, giving the approximate region of the speaker’s accent (usually just “northern” or “southern,” but sometimes quite specific, such as “southern (Shanghai)” or “Taiwanese.” As in HKUST, there was also a category for unaccented Mandarin, which again probably indicates a phonology close to the Beijing-based standard. These classifications should be taken with a grain of salt—the standard of classification is the auditor’s perception alone. Accent is not a proper stand-in for birthplace, for instance, since we are as interested in the speakers “without” accents, if not more so, as we are in those who have identifiable regional accents. Nonetheless, as broad characterizations of what a speaker sounds like to a (presumably) “typical” Chinese speaker, they are probably reliable.

The transcribed portion of the corpus is shorter than HKUST, consisting of 120 conversation fragments three to five minutes in length. Me was orthographically realized either as 嘿 or 嘿. Lines with these forms were extracted from the transcripts, and again tokens where a construction other than modal or topic-marking me was involved were excluded. There were 926 tokens of me collected in this way, and 328 speakers who produced enough speech to be identifiable—some speakers said one or two sentences to the caller and then gave the phone to someone else.

5.1 First impressions of the second dataset

It is rare to do sociolinguistics with such a wealth of data. CALLHOME gives us access to another corpus of conversational Mandarin, where speakers were recruited differently, the stringencies of topic were lifted, and the interlocutors were familiar with each other.

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show the split in me usage by sex and the age-sex interac-
CALLHOME: *me* by speaker gender

The boxplot for CALLHOME, as we saw for HKUST, shows a very slight difference in mean *me* usage between the sexes. Surprisingly, this diagram has men as the more frequent users of the particle. Recall, however, that the age-sex interaction was important in the CALLHOME data. Restricting the subset of the data examined to that for which full age information is available, an interaction plot showing the relationship between age, sex, and *me* frequency shows women at most age levels using more, with a general increase in frequency for younger female speakers. This is a slightly younger corpus than HKUST, hence the absence of the
CALLHOME: *Me* by speaker age and gender

![Graph showing median frequency per 1000 syllables by age category and gender](image)

- **Female**
- **Male**

17–24 25–28 27–35 35+

**Age category**

**Median frequency per 1000 syllables**

Figure 5.2: CALLHOME corpus, sex-age interaction

older age categories. Despite the appearance of the first boxplot, the age-related and gender-related differences in *me* frequency that emerge from the figure 5.2 are quite similar to those we saw in the previous chapter.

The most notable difference between these initial representations and what we saw for the HKUST Mandarin corpus is the *overall* lower usage of *me* in the current corpus. Whereas the median frequency in this corpus is 0.58 *me* per 1000 syllables, the median frequency in HKUST Mandarin is 1.71 per 1000. This difference is probably attributable to CALLHOME speakers being free to choose their own topic.
of conversation, whereas being constrained to, say, Chinese geography or whether you like to watch movies out or stay in, might have given HKUST speakers a lot of chances to mark utterances as obvious. Barring this, I would hypothesize that me probably played a role in establishing common ground between the speakers in HKUST, who were strangers to each other, and would be less useful to the speakers in CALLHOME.

5.2 Déjà vu: checking the previous model

In order to take advantage of the second corpus to verify the model proposed in the first, I decided to run a model fitting the same predictors as I used in the last chapter. This borrows (liberally) from the concept of cross-validation found in computational linguistics and model building, but does not implement it with faithfulness. Nevertheless, I hope that the idea of verifying models built on one set of data by testing them on entirely another set of data, will become more popular in sociolinguistics. Currently, and mostly for want of enough data to make cross-validation techniques worthwhile, this is not a common practice in the subfield.

For this model, I used the subset of the transcript corpus with full age information for each speaker. The regression analysis confirms the similarity we noted between the graphical representations we saw in figures 5.1 and 5.2 above and what we observed in the HKUST corpus. Table 5.1 reports a negative-binominal regression using the same predictors as we did for the HKUST Mandarin-based model (less birthplace, which is not available in this corpus). Again, speaker sex and the age-sex interaction are significant. The differences in the accent predictor, which I recoded to a three-way distinction between “standard,” northern, and southern accents, did not result in a significant effect on me frequency in general.
There is still a relationship between the Age-Sex complex and *me* frequency. In general, men use far less *me* than women, but this tendency attenuates with age. For women, there is a relationship between being younger and having high rates of *me*. All in all, the model fitted for these speakers is close to the one fitted to the HKUST speakers, with the same explanatory variables being significant, and identical signs on their coefficients.

### 5.3 The Taiwan question

The inclusion of geographic information on caller location, in addition to accent, allows us to ask a potentially useful question. Is *me* usage in Taiwan patterned in a fundamentally different way than on the Mainland? In particular, what is the relationship between “Southern Mandarin,” a construct that would span both mainland and Taiwan, and Taiwanese Mandarin?

Mandarin was forcefully established as the official language of Taiwan when Chiang Kai-Shek and his followers in the Kuomintang fled there in the mid 20th century. Though the Taiwanese Mandarin has mostly the same standard form as Mandarin on the mainland, the Taiwanese (whether “native” or the offspring of re-

---

Table 5.1: CALLHOME Corpus, regression of *me* frequency on speaker characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>z value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Significant?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>−5.8917</td>
<td>0.5703</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.0429</td>
<td>0.0204</td>
<td>−2.10</td>
<td>0.0357</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex = Male</td>
<td>−1.9969</td>
<td>0.8364</td>
<td>−2.39</td>
<td>0.0170</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent = Northern</td>
<td>0.2320</td>
<td>0.2110</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>0.2714</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent = Southern</td>
<td>0.3602</td>
<td>0.2725</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.1862</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age : Sex = Male</td>
<td>0.0640</td>
<td>0.0293</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>0.0286</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
cent immigrants) are nearly all of Southern extraction. With the years-long closing-off and then subsequent opening up of political, commercial, and cultural contact between China and Taiwan, it is an open question to what extent speakers of Mandarin on either side of the Straits can be considered members of the same speech communities.

By no means will this discussion resolve the issue, but I will engage the question of the geographical divide and show that, in this case, Mainland and Taiwanese Mandarins exhibit similar norms regarding *me* use and “accent.”

First, let us examine figure 5.3, which shows box-and-whiskers plots of speaker *me* frequencies by the destination country of the telephone call. Note that Taiwan,

Figure 5.3: CALLHOME: *me* frequency by geography. A small number of calls were directed to countries outside the Chinese-speaking world; boxplots for these calls represent the usages of only a few speakers with diverse characteristics. I include them for completeness’ sake.
although it varies rather widely, has a much higher mean *me* frequency than the Mainland. Because the vast majority of speakers were in calls connecting to the Mainland, it is natural that there should be the extra spread of frequencies above its “box.” Note, however, what little effect these high frequency points have had on the median, which remains stubbornly low around 1.0 *me* per 1000 syllables.

This gives evidence to the claim that high *me* frequency is indeed an identifiably Taiwanese feature. Even though *me* itself is common on the Mainland, it would be worth investigating whether Mainland speakers perceive *me* as geographically marked—either as a Taiwanese feature or as sounding generally southern Chinese.

It is clear that Taiwan uses *me* more than the Mainland. Does it have a different sociolinguistic distribution in the two places? This question differs in that it asks about how different social factors interact with *me* use in both places. How does the Mainland-Taiwan split interact with accent? As it turns out, both regions appear to have similar patterns—southern-accented speakers use more *me*. Despite the difference in mean *me* usage, the effects of accent in both Mainland China and Taiwan are the same, thus providing evidence that both the Mainland and Taiwan share social norms about the use of *me*. See figure 5.4 and the regression results in table 5.2.

In both the Mainland and Taiwan (though perhaps more so in the latter), speakers judged as speaking with “southern” accents used more *me* than other speakers. Hence we see some evidence of a similar cline in both places. This, combined with the evidence we see in this corpus and the other for age- and gender-based

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>z value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Significant?</th>
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<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>−7.0443</td>
<td>0.0976</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex = Male</td>
<td>−0.0629</td>
<td>0.1289</td>
<td>−0.49</td>
<td>0.6257</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accent = Southern</td>
<td>0.5264</td>
<td>0.1425</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location = Taiwan</td>
<td>0.6230</td>
<td>0.2556</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0.0148</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2: CALLHOME: The effects of geography and accent on *me* frequency
Figure 5.4: CALLHOME: me frequency by geography and accent
differentiation in *me*-production, will help us piece together what may be going on with *me*, and make some educated guesses about its social significance.

Looking at the results of the two corpus analyses overall, we have seen that *me* is favored by women, young women in particular. Speakers of Mandarin with Southern accents, and Taiwanese speakers, also have higher frequencies of *me*. Conversations with strangers on fixed topics elicited more *me* than conversations with family and friends.

Other particles appear to show very different patterns of use: *ba* did not vary according to the speaker characteristics recorded, whereas *a/ya* may be more commonly used by Mandarin-background speakers who have an ‘accented’ variety.
Chapter 6

Conclusion: My style is *me* style

Although we’ve seen some robust trends in social variation with regard to *me*, the methodology of this study prevents me from drawing many definitive conclusions about relationships between the different trends of variation I’ve seen. Nevertheless, in order to sort out how the results of this work may be relevant to ongoing work in Chinese sociolinguistics and language and gender, in the space below I conduct a sustained speculative inquiry starting from these questions: Do young women using *me* sound southern and/or Taiwanese? Or do Taiwanese using *me* sound like young women? Both? Neither? The possible answers to all of these questions may be seen as the starts of testable hypotheses, which can be fleshed out in further studies.

First, we can, I hope, count ‘neither’ above as an unlikely choice. I have given evidence suggesting that the relationship between *me* and accent on the Mainland and Taiwan is similar. It would be reasonable to guess that the other social factors that were significant in variation would be linked as well. For further study, either ethnographically or textually grounded, this will be key to understanding why we see these patterns of variation.
In the absence of such studies—at least ones concerning me directly—I fall back on the work of Qing Zhang (2001, 2005), which I describe in Chapter 3. Recall that for Zhang’s speakers, “full tone” is a non-local resource that allows them to construct a “cosmopolitan” style and identity, one that reaches beyond the local confines of Beijing. Though it is tempting to claim that me is likewise a resource for the construction of non-locality in identity, it would be difficult to sustain such a claim for these data.

Plainly, for some speakers in these corpora, at least some of the Taiwanese ones and likely many of the Southern-accented Mainlanders, me is primarily a local resource on some level—either “truly” local or belonging to a regional identity such as “Southern” that may be increasingly salient (Joseph 2004). Moreover, these corpora sample speakers from across Mainland China and the world. Keep in mind Zhang’s reminder that “all cosmopolitans are nonetheless contextually situated in space and time... the space they are carving out is in and of” their locality (2001:158). We can therefore see that it would be difficult for one variable to be consistently “non-local” in so many different localities at once. At the very least it is important to note that even when a variable appears to have a consistent meaning of its own on a national or trans-local scale, its meanings are necessarily realized and negotiated in local sites of interaction, allowing the possibility of different outcomes based on the local situation.

Despite this, Zhang’s approach, which investigates the symbolic value of a variable in a style in part by examining the cultural history of the style and its (prototypical) users, can help us think about the gendering of me.

Zhang (2001) explains the gender differences encountered in linguistic practice in Beijing foreign enterprise by pointing to women’s common role as language technicians (often foreign language experts), or in “decorative” roles, both po-
sitions that exacted more controlled linguistic performances than those asked of men. In the foreign-owned business sector, then, this resulted in women making greater use of a variety valued in a transnational Chinese linguistic market, one that de-emphasized local features and favored non-local variants, like full tone.

Looking at me from our vantage point, it makes some sense to think of it as basically a Southern Chinese or Taiwanese feature. Although me did not originate in Taiwan, given the present situation as it presents itself in the corpora, I would guess that the high frequency at which some Taiwanese speakers use the particle is noticeable, particularly from the standpoint of the Mainland speaker. How does such a variable accrue the kind of meaning that makes it socially significant to talkers and hearers?

Taiwanese tourists on the street, management in foreign-owned enterprise, and pop stars and television actors in the entertainment media: these are a few of the ‘model’ speakers of Taiwanese Mandarin that Mainland speakers might hear on a regular basis. Perhaps some Mainlanders, hearing Taiwanese me with its noticeably increased frequency, indexically associate increased me use with a set of ideas about what it means to be Taiwanese, gleaned at least partially from their experience of these speakers’ identity performances. Among these ideas might be included Taiwan’s long sustained contact with the West, its rapid and relatively stable economic development, and the ubiquity of its influence in Chinese-language entertainment, rivaled only by Hong Kong in this capacity.

This account is only one possible one. But it may explain why women on the Mainland would increase their use of this particle which I am linking to this construct of an urban, modern Taiwan. How? There are two possibilities I will explore. It could be the case that me is “already” gender-marked in Taiwanese usage, so that accessing it as a male speaker would require some kind of ‘extra’
motivation, which we have no reason to posit here. Though the Taiwanese speaker data from CALLHOME is unclear on this point, it may well be the case that *me* is gender-marked in Taiwan as well as the Mainland. If so, then an explanation of that markedness will have to await more in-depth studies than this one.

If, however, *me* is not perceived as gender-marked by hearers, then we may guess that its increased use by young women indicates that its Taiwanese-ness is in itself more accessible to them than it is to other speakers. As I wind up this string of hypothetical propositions, I suggest that the answer to this may lie in how the construct of Taiwan is gendered in relation to Mainland China, or indeed Southern China in relation to Northern China. If, in some conceptual system, Taiwan itself is marked as feminine (in opposition to a masculine China, say), then identity resources of Taiwanese origin may be more accessible for women, or useful in constructing feminity.

My treatment of these conjectures in this space can only be as flippant as this—in the future, however, I hope that avenues of research that engage questions of identity, linguistic variation and style, and language ideologies can provide fruitful ways to test and modify these speculations and enrich our understanding of *me* and similar phenomena.
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