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Utterance-final particles in Taiwan Mandarin: contact, context, and core functions

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Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1 Revisiting the research questions

This concluding chapter first recapitulates the four research questions formulated in chapter 1 and briefly presents my answers to these questions:

- (i) In what kind of context(s) do the Taiwan Mandarin UFPs under discussion occur in spontaneous conversation?
- (ii) What are the core functions of these Taiwan Mandarin UFPs?
- (iii) How can we explain the “deviated” use of these UFPs in Taiwan Mandarin?
- (iv) How can we explain the “emergence” of these UFPs in Taiwan Mandarin?

The answers to my first and second research questions are based on the analysis in chapters 3 to 6. In chapters 3, 4 and 5, my hypotheses about the core functions of the three Taiwan UFPs in question have been deduced from previous studies. Each hypothesis has subsequently been tested on examples selected from corpora of spoken Taiwan Mandarin. I propose that the core function of Taiwan Mandarin *a* is to mark knowledge activation; (simplex) *la* marks an explicit or implicit adjustment; and *ê* invites a collaborative move by foregrounding the utterances to which it is attached. Chapter 6 distinguishes the proposed core functions by contrasting their use in otherwise identical conversational strings.

The differences between Taiwan Mandarin and mainland Mandarin lead to the question as to how these differences have emerged in Taiwan Mandarin. As discussed in chapter 2, Mandarin, the official language in Taiwan today, was introduced to Taiwan in the 1950s. The promotion of Mandarin in education, its wide use in the media, and the use of Mandarin as a lingua franca among different population groups contributed to language contact. With regard to my third research question it can thus generally be said that language contact is the reason for the “emergence” of new linguistic features, including the “deviated” use of UFPs in today’s Taiwan Mandarin.

My fourth research question is addressed in chapter 7, in which I discuss the emergence of the three Taiwan Mandarin UFPs from the perspective of language contact in more detail. I suggest that (1) simplex *la* is an “imposed” UFP from Southern Mǐn (cf. Van Coetsem 1988), (2) *a* is the result of “relexification” (Lefebvre 1998, 2001, Lien 2010) due to the influence of Southern Mǐn, and (3) *ê*

has been “imported” to Taiwan by Jiāng-Huái Mandarin speakers who moved to Taiwan in the 1940s and 1950s.

Except for the influence of Southern Mǐn on Taiwan Mandarin UFPs, I have also discussed the reverse direction: the influence of Mandarin on the use of the Southern Mǐn UFP *a*. It is argued that the functional scope of Southern Mǐn *a* has been modified due to contact with Mandarin. Lastly, taking the example of *nê* in Taiwan Mandarin, I suggest that the choice of UFP reveals the speaker’s communicative intention such as expressing intimacy or group solidarity/ethnic identity in a conversation.

8.2 Significance of this study

A central claim underlying my analysis is that Mandarin is a heterogeneous linguistic entity. To quote Lien (2011): “Mandarin in the ever-growing global sense should not be monolithic. Rather it should be able to encompass regional sinophoric variants and manifest its rich and mosaic character.” Supporting Lien’s claim, I maintain that the features of a living spoken language cannot be captured in general terms, but require regional contextualization. Otherwise it is not possible to provide a precise description and analysis of the use of UFPs in different regional Mandarin varieties. As mentioned in chapter 1, most of the previous studies on Mandarin UFPs focus on “shared UFPs” (such as *a*, *ba* and *ne*), which occur in both mainland Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin. Without clearly distinguishing the regional origin of the data, most of these studies posit “common” functions of UFPs and claim that the result pertain to all Mandarin varieties. However, as I have demonstrated in this study, the functions of “shared UFPs” may differ across different Mandarin varieties (see the discussion of *a* in chapter 3). UFP *la*, which is widely regarded as a fusion of aspect marker *le* and UFP *a*, also displays different functions in mainland China and in Taiwan (see chapter 4).

Secondly, using a large amount of spontaneous spoken data, this study analyzes the core functions of UFPs on the basis of conversational participants’ interaction and various types of context in which the UFPs occur. As mentioned in chapter 2, UFPs are highly relevant for the interaction between conversational participants and can rightly be considered a particularly characteristic feature of spoken language use.

For my analysis I first take a close look at where exactly a certain UFP occurs in a conversational string and what kind of effect the deployment of this UFP has on the interlocutor(s). In other words, claims about core functions are primarily based on correlations of UFP deployment with recurrent patterns of interlocutor reactions

in different conversational contexts. Second, instances of ambiguity have been discussed with Mandarin native-speakers of different regional backgrounds. Native speaker intuition, therefore, plays a supplementary role for my analysis. It is, however, not solely the author's intuition, but rather intuitive judgments of different native speakers that helped me to assess the distribution of UFPs in regional terms.

One significance of this thesis arguably lies in its careful distinction of regional differences in UFP use. Another significance is the combination of UFP core function analysis with language contact. In chapter 2, I mentioned that most previous studies in the intersection of Taiwan Mandarin and language contact focus on the transfer of syntactic structures, lexical items and phonological features (cf. Kubler 1981, 1985; Tseng 2003 for syntactic structures, Hsieh and Yeh 2009 for loanwords; Hsu 2005 on tone, vowel and nasal; Kuo 2005 on retroflex initials, etc.). With the exception of P. Wu (2005), the "transfer" of UFPs, or other discourse markers, has received much less attention.

By discussing three Taiwan Mandarin UFPs that are distributed unevenly across various Sinitic varieties (see table 2.1), this study provides a multidirectional perspective on language contact. Moreover, claims about possible directions of influence not only rely on language data, but also include relevant aspects of the social history of the speakers of different Sinitic varieties and social mechanisms of language contact.

8.3 Limitations of this study

This study compares the UFPs of different Sinitic varieties from synchronic and diachronic perspectives. As regards the former, as pointed out in chapter 2, my comparison of Taiwan Mandarin UFPs with UFPs in mainland Mandarin faces some limitations. Mainland Mandarin, as I have explained, in very general terms refers to usages commonly accepted by informants from various places except for the Mǐn dialect region. Ideally, however, the comparison should have been complemented by Mandarin data from spoken language corpora of different regions. Since such corpora do not exist or are not accessible, this expansion remains a desideratum for future research.

In chapter 7, it is claimed that the UFP *ê* originates from Jiāng-Huái Mandarin. Although the occurrences of *ê* in Taiwan Mandarin are judged acceptable by the Jiāng-Huái Mandarin speakers, I am aware that the use of *ê* in Jiāng-Huái Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin are not fully identical. It appears that the *ê* in Jiāng-Huái Mandarin can occur with commands (i.e. imperatives), whereas Taiwan Mandarin *ê*

cannot. Due to time limitations and a lack of an accessible database, it is hard to explain the “loss” of this function during the process of transfer.

Whereas a lack of comparable data must be acknowledged for the synchronic comparison, the diachronic comparison faces even greater limitations. In chapter 7, I propose that *é* has been brought to Taiwan by the first-generation mainland immigrants. The earliest spoken data I have been able to find in support of my assumption is a radio play recorded in the 1960s; even earlier data (e.g. recording in 1950s) could not be found. The same is true for Taiwan Southern Mǐn spoken prior to contact with Mandarin. Therefore, written sources like early dictionaries were consulted. To be sure, whereas meaningful insights can be gained from these sources, the results of my diachronic comparisons would have been more significant if a richer historical database had been available.

8.4 Implications for future research

To conclude, I briefly discuss some implications of my findings for future research. First, conversational interaction is, to use Luke’s words, the “natural habitat” (Luke 1990: 15) of the UFPs. The approach taken in many other studies on UFP is likewise based on conversational interaction analysis, e.g. Luke (1990) for Cantonese, I. Li (1999) for Southern Mǐn, Tanaka (2000), and Morita (2005, 2012a, 2012b) for Japanese, etc.).

As regards Mandarin, to the best of my knowledge, R. Wu (2004) is the first comprehensive study using conversation analysis to explore the two Mandarin UFPs *ou* and *a*. This dissertation has revised the proposed core function of *a* and also examined the core functions of the Taiwan Mandarin UFPs *la* and *é*. This analysis is by no means exhaustive. As shown in table 2.1, there are still a number of other UFPs used in Taiwan Mandarin, which have not yet been examined from the perspective of conversational interaction. It is therefore hoped that future research will draw more attention to UFPs in their natural habitat.

Secondly, the findings of this study can be applied to research in the related fields of typological comparison and language contact. As mentioned in chapter 2, UFPs are among the categories which are easily transferred from one language to another (cf. Appel and Muysken 1987, Curnow 2001 and Matras 2000). It has been shown that the UFPs of one Sinitic variety have not only been transferred to other Sinitic varieties (for example, Southern Mǐn UFPs to Taiwan Mandarin or Mandarin UFPs to Southern Mǐn), but that transfer can also take place between Sinitic and non-Sinitic varieties (for example, Cantonese and Hokkien UFPs in Singapore English, cf. Ler Soon Lay 2005).

A systematic comparative analysis of UFPs in various contact situations deserves more attention in future research. For instance, a comparison between UFPs in Taiwan Mandarin and other Mandarin varieties involving contact with Southern Mǐn, notably Xiàmén Mandarin and Singapore Mandarin (cf. Chua 2003), would shed more light on the development of different Mandarin varieties.

Thirdly, as a teacher of Mandarin as a foreign language, I hope that the findings of this study will be applied in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. In language textbooks and classrooms, the use of UFPs is rarely systematically introduced. The analysis of core functions will enable language teachers to illustrate the use of UFPs in the contexts of actual conversations. If a learner wants to achieve solid communicative competences, s/he has to be aware of functions and regional differences in the use of Mandarin UFPs.

