

Abstract

In a corpus study of conversational Mandarin Chinese (Wheatley 1996; Fung *et al.* 2005), I find that most sentence-final particles (*a/ya*, *ba*, and *la*) are *not* differentiated by gender, though as Erbaugh (1985) and Chan (1997) note, women are generally believed to use more final particles. One particle, however—*me*—does vary by gender and age, showing higher rates of use by young women. Working from some previous studies of language and gender in Chinese, especially Chan (1997), I argue that explanations of this difference must go beyond common stereotypes about women's language use.

Me marks an utterance as obvious or presupposed, or adds an air of insistence (Chao 1968; Chappell 1991; Chu 1998). In the realm of language and gender, Chan's (1997) brief discussion describes *me* as "softening" utterance force. The feminine softness of Chan's account and the marking of obvious and insistence described by other scholars appear to be at odds.

Chan (1997) discusses *me* in the context of a communicative style called *sajiao* 'petulance,' which involves vowel lengthening and nasality as well as *me* use. *Sajiao* as a way of speaking is prototypically used by children making demands of unwilling parents, or young women making requests of lovers or fathers. As such it is hard to imagine *me* in this style would be used to soften an utterance; rather it is better suited for the marking of demands and instantiating the insistence that the style calls for.

My corpus study reveals that, in Mainland China, *me*'s use is generally favored by young women compared to other gender and age demographics. 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 that the difference in *me* frequency between female and male speakers in these corpora cannot be explained by claiming the speakers are doing *sajiao*. Rather, despite dominant grammatical accounts of *me* as insistent, it seems *me*'s property of marking presupposition is used for the opposite purpose—introducing new information without being too forceful—one might even say 'softening' the utterance. Based on the demographic distribution of the particle, I suggest that *me* may be part of a style linked to Southern China or Taiwan more specifically, perhaps part of the cosmopolitan or "transnational Mandarin" described by Zhang (2001).

Thus I aim to show the versatility of linguistic resources such as *me* in creating gendered linguistic styles. *Me* is marked as gendered both in the whiny *sajiao* style as well as in cooperative 'adult' discourse, but this gender marking occurs for entirely different reasons. Explanations of its gender distribution must therefore reach beyond common stereotypes and would profit from reference to recent work in stylistic variation (Zhang 2005; Podesva 2007).

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