An analysis of Mandarin Chinese final particle $ba$ in dispreferred responses

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Abstract
In Mandarin Chinese conversation, the final particle $ba$ is considered to perform various functions. Using conversation analysis, this article examines the use of the final particle $ba$ in dispreferred responses. It is argued that the particle $ba$ is used to mitigate negative valence with delays, alternative choices, accounts, and pro-forma agreement as well as other linguistic features in disagreements and declining suggestions or invitations. Also, the results reveal a close relationship between the particle $ba$ functioning as a mitigator or displaying a speaker’s uncertainty in social actions as well as sequential positions.

KEYWORDS: CHINESE; FINAL PARTICLE; BA; DISPREFERRED RESPONSE
1. Introduction

The presence and use of final particles is one of the distinguishing features of East Asian languages. Chinese, including Mandarin and dialects, Japanese, and Korean have a repertoire of particles that are attached to sentences or utterances to express a variety of speaker stances (e.g., Chor, 2018; Hayano, 2017; Kendrick, 2018; Kim, 2018; Strauss & Xiang, 2009; Wu, 2005). In Japanese, mono, ne/na, no, sa, wa, yo, ze, and zo are commonly used final particles (Kaiser, Ichikawa, Kobayashi, & Yamamoto, 2013; Shibatani, 1990). Korean has a range of sentence enders such as -(n)-ta, -e/-a, -ne-ye, -(s)o, -e.yo/-a.yo, -(su)p-ni-ta, -(n)-ta as well as other idiosyncratic sentence enders (Pak, 2008; Sohn, 2001). Chao (1968, pp. 797–812) lists 26 particles in modern Mandarin Chinese including de, le, ma, me, ne, a, e, ba, ou, sha, kann, lai, j(de)ne, chiuh, laij, bale, shyhde, jiowshle, derle, dehuah, de.shyr.how(l), bushma. Given that these particles occur in various situations of conversation and serve a wide range of functions, they are “notoriously difficult to analyse” (Kendrick, 2018, p. 23). Kendrick (2018) notes that one of the primary sources of the difficulty is the analysis methodology and proposes the significance of conversation analysis for the analysis of final particles in various actions and environments. What conversation analysis can contribute to the understanding of final particles is its emphasis on sequential context, allowing us to carefully examine the details of ongoing interactions of what speakers do, how turns are designed and understood, how participants display their understandings of what they are doing in each turn, and how interaction proceeds through the turns (Drew, 2018).

While approached from a wide variety of perspectives, the final particle ba has not been examined thoroughly from the conversation analytic perspective (Kendrick, 2018). Using conversation analysis, Kendrick (2018) examined the use of ba through three types of social action: answers to questions, informing, and assessments. The findings provide support for the views of the particle in literature, i.e. to display a speaker’s uncertainty and to solicit agreement, and demonstrate that the two functions are mutually compatible.

However, the particle ba has not been analysed as a mitigator by using the conversation analysis method. The goal of this article is to contribute to the line of conversation analytic research through analysis of the final particle ba as a mitigator in dispreferred response. In particular, the focus is on how the particle ba and other linguistic resources mitigate the negative valence in disagreements and declining suggestions or invitations.

In what follows, research on the final particle ba and dispreferred responses will be reviewed, followed by the analysis of the particle ba with naturally occurring conversation data. A discussion of ba as a mitigator and a marker of a speaker’s uncertainty concludes this article.
2. Final particle \textit{ba} and dispreferred response

2.1 Functions of \textit{ba}

Much literature exists about the particle \textit{ba}, yet its primary function is still under debate (Tantucci, 2017). Some argue that \textit{ba} indicates a speaker’s uncertainty (Chao, 1968; Chu, 2009; Gao, 2000; Han, 1995; Lin, 1981; Lü, 1980; Xu, 2003). Chao (1968) argues that \textit{ba} usually indicates a doubtfully posed statement which means ‘you know, I suppose?’ or ‘I told you before, didn’t I?’ as shown in Example (1).

(1) \textit{ni zhidao \textit{ba}.}  
You know, I suppose.  

(Chao, 1968, p. 768)

Also, Li and Thompson (1981, pp. 307–311) argue that the semantic function of \textit{ba} is equivalent to that of the ‘Don’t you think so?’ or ‘Wouldn’t you agree’ type of questions in English. Thus, the particle \textit{ba} solicits the hearer’s agreement or approval regarding the statement to which \textit{ba} is attached. In the context of Example (2) in which two people discuss whether the referent \textit{tā} has done something, sentence (a) would be appropriate when the speaker is defending the referent. Sentence (b) would be inappropriate because the particle \textit{ba} functions to solicit agreement from the hearer which is incompatible with the anger of the speaker defending the referent.

(2)

(a) \textit{tā} bu hui zuò zhè – yàng – de shì  
3sg not will do this – manner – ASSOC thing  
’S/He wouldn’t do such things.’

(b) \textit{tā} bu hui zuò zhè – yàng – de shì \textit{ba}  
3sg not will do this – manner – ASSOC thing SA  
’S/He wouldn’t do such things, don’t you agree?’

(Li & Thompson, 1981, p. 309)

In other cases, the particle \textit{ba} can also serve as a mitigator in face-threatening actions such as giving advice, requests, or critical comments (Lee-Wong, 1998; Ran, 2004). For example, Lee-Wong (1998) discusses the functions of Chinese final particles \textit{ba}, \textit{a/yu}, and \textit{ne} in the speech act of request. She argues that the particle \textit{ba} reduces the illocutionary force of imperatives in direct requests. In other words, the particle \textit{ba} functions as a mitigator so that requests perceived as commands or instructions can be exhortations.
For this reason, authoritative commands or instructions do not end with a final particle such as *ba* (Lee-Wong, 1998). For example, the particle *ba* is not used in the request in Example (3) because the speaker is in a superior role-relationship (as authority figure). In such situations, it is not necessary to use the particle *ba* to reduce the illocutionary force of imperatives.

(3) Customs officer asking a passenger to have his luggage ready for checking

Qing *ba* xiangzi Dakai, women xianzai yao jiancha.

Please CV suitcase open we now want inspect

‘Please open your suitcase. We want to inspect it now.’

(Lee-Wong, 1998, p. 395)

Invented sentences notably serve as the basis for most studies on the final particle *ba*. Naturally occurring conversation data occurs only in limited research. Using the methods of conversation analysis, Kendrick (2018) examines the use of *ba* in answers to questions, informings, and assessments with naturally occurring conversation data. Kendrick argues that “*ba* serves as a turn-constructional 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” (Kendrick, 2018, p. 10).

Example (4) illustrates the use of the particle *ba* in answering a question. Kendrick (2018, p. 10) argues that “in answers to questions, the *ba* particle resists the claim embodied by the questions that the respondent knows the answer.”

(4)

1 Alan: ta- Liu Yong nali biye de

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 has impression

‘Oh, I think I remember.’

(Kendrick, 2018, pp. 10–11)

The fact regarding the education of Liu Yong, a well-known Taiwanese writer, is outside of the respondent Greg’s first person domain of knowledge. The particle
*ba* is deployed to reject accountability for the answer to the question of where Liu Yong graduated. Thus, *ba* appears as a claim for insufficient access.

The particle *ba* is also appropriate when the speaker and the recipient both presumably have access to the referent. In such cases, *ba* is used to lower a speaker’s epistemic position and serves to solicit a response from a recipient. In Example (5), three female participants evaluate the same referent, Lin Zhiling, a famous actress in Taiwan. Kendrick (2018, p. 20) argues that the particle *ba* functions as a resource to solicit agreement in the form of confirmation rather than indicating that the speaker does not have complete access to the referent.

(5)

1. **Wu:** *Lin Zhiling wo ye bu hui jue de piaoliang*  
   NAME NAME ISG also NEG can feel pretty  
   ‘I also don’t find Lin Zhiling pretty.’

2. **Li:** *Lin Zhiling bu cuo: a:*  
   NAME NAME NEG wrong PRT  
   ‘Lin Zhiling’s not bad.’

3. **Wu:** ((blinks))

4. **Li:** ((turns head towards Wang))

5. **Wu:** ((1.3) ((Li and Wu maintain gaze))

6. **Li:** ((0.3)

7. **Li:** → *+Lin Zhiling piao:liang ba:+*  
   NAME NAME pretty PRT  
   ‘Lin Zhiling’s pretty *ba*:’ (‘pretty, isn’t she?’))
   +gestures towards Wang--------+
   (0.2)

8. **Wang:** *piaoliang a*  
   Pretty PRT  
   ‘Yeah, she is.’

(Kendrick, 2018, pp. 19–20)

Kendrick (2018) argues that the analysis provides support to the views of *ba* as an indicator of uncertainty as well as a device to solicit agreement. He notes 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” (p. 21). Examples (4) and (5) in Kendrick (2018) demonstrate that turn design, social action, and sequential position are significant in understanding the use of particle *ba* in naturally occurring conversation through the conversation analytical perspective.
As noted previously, the particle *ba* can also serve as a mitigator. However, while the particle *ba* as a mitigator has been examined in face-threatening actions such as giving advice, requests, or critical comments (Lee-Wong, 1998; Ran, 2004), no previous study has investigated it in responses. This study, therefore, sets out to examine the particle *ba* as a mitigator in dispreferred responses with the methodology of conversation analysis.

### 2.2 Dispreferred responses

The aim of research in conversation analysis (CA) is “to discover and explicate the practices through which interactants produce and understand conduct in conversation” and to uncover practices through “identifying patterns in talk” (Drew, 2005, p. 75).

Turns at talk and turn-taking, turn design, social action, and sequence organisation are four basic concepts that “underpin CA’s explorations of the patterns, structures, and practices that are to be found in conversation” (Drew, 2005, p. 79). Conversation participants take turns to speak and design their turns to act. Not only do speakers select a particular action from a range of possible actions or activities to perform, they also choose various features to construct turns, including lexical, syntactic and grammatical, phonetic and prosodic features, and non-verbal features.

Preference organisation is one of the most thoroughly examined areas within conversation analysis (Clayman, 2002; Clift, 2016; Drew, 2012; Pomerantz, 1984; Pomerantz & Heritage, 2012; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell, 2011). Differing from its vernacular usage, the term ‘preference’ does not refer to “the subjective feelings of the interactants, but to public forms of conduct that are recurrent and institutionalized, and that systematically favor certain interactional outcomes over others” (Clayman, 2002, p. 232). For example, there is a preference for ‘yes’ answers over ‘no’ answers, and a preference for progressivity in interaction, that is, “an observed inclination to continue a turn to possible completion rather than abandoning it in the course of its production” (Clift, 2016, p. 141).

Regarding preference and dispreference in responsive turns, preference can be displayed in both the action performed and in its format (Clift, 2016; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell, 2011). According to Clift (2016, p. 143), an action that aligns positively with the stance displayed in the first part of an adjacency pair, such as favouring the accomplishment of the activity and advancing the sequence, is considered as preferred. A dispreferred action aligns negatively with the prior first pair part. Also, preferred responsive turns are characterised by prompt production to the first pair part while dispreferred turns are characterised with various features such as delay. Clayman (2002) notes that dispreferred responses such as disagreements and rejections tend to include the following features:
a. Delays: silences preceding the delivery of the response, prefaces of various kinds, and insertion sequences that displace the response over a series of turns.

b. Prefaces: discourse markers such as ‘uh’ or ‘well’; token agreement, appreciations, and apologies; and other forms of hesitation.

c. Accounts: explanations for the disagreement or rejection.

d. Disagreement/rejection is itself mitigated: marked as uncertain, conditional, or indirect (pp. 233–234).

The following examples illustrate the basic idea of preference sequence in which an invitation is accepted in Example (6) while rejected in Example (7) (Clift, 2016; Sidnell, 2011).

(6)

1  A  Why don’t you come and see me some[times
2  B  [I would like to
3  A  I would like you to

(Clift, 2016, p. 143)

(7)

1  A  Uh if you’d care to come over and visit a little while this
2  morning I’ll give you a cup of coffee.
3  B  hehh Well that’s awfully sweet of you, I don’t think I can make
4  it this morning...hh uhm I’m running an ad in the paper and- and
5  uh I have to stay near the phone.

(Clift, 2016, p. 143)

In Example (6), the acceptance of the invitation (line 2) aligns with the action and promotes affiliation; thus, it is a preferred action. In contrast, the declining (line 3) in Example (7) is a dispreferred action because the action impedes the forward progression of the action and negatively affects affiliation. Also, the formats of the turns in the examples are different. The acceptance (line 2) in Example (6) appears before the end of the invitation is completed and in the overlap. The acceptance itself, ‘I would like to’, is also produced straightforwardly. On the other hand, the declining (lines 3–5) in Example (7) is structurally complex. First, the turn is prefaced with audible breathing (‘hehh’), ‘well’, and a statement of appreciation ‘that’s awfully sweet of you’. By being framed with ‘I don’t think …’, the declining is mitigated. An explanation (‘I’m running an ad in the paper and-and, uh, I have to stay near the phone’), which prevents B from accepting the invitation, is also provided. Further, a certain degree of dysfluency produces this turn, which is contrastive to the turn in line 2 of Example (6).
Certainly, preference sequences are far more complicated than the examples shown above (see Cliff, 2016; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell, 2011 for details). For example, while assessments typically prefer agreement, the assessment in line 1 in Example (8) prefers disagreement. In a case like “self-deprecation” (Pomerantz, 1984) in which the assessment is negative and towards the speaker, the responsive turn prefers disagreement to agreement.

(8)

1  B    And I never was a great (h) Bri(h)dge play(h) er Clai(h)re
2  A    → Well I think you’ve always been real good.

(Pomerantz, 1984, p. 85)

While some research has been carried out on the function of the final particle ba as a mitigator, no single study has examined it in responses with naturally occurring conversation data as well as from the conversational analytical perspective. By employing conversation analysis (CA), this article attempts to show how the use of ba as a mitigator works with other features to mitigate the negative valence in dispreferred responses. In particular, the present study focuses on responses to statements, suggestions, and invitations. The dispreferred responses appear as disagreements towards statements and declining suggestions or invitations in the present study.

3. Data

The data for this study were collected using the NCCU (National Chengchi University) Corpus of Spoken Chinese. The data include more than seven hours of audio-recorded face-to-face conversations (Chui & Lai, 2008). Groups of two to four native Mandarin Chinese speakers who were friends or classmates participated. The speakers in the data are coded using Roman letters to provide anonymity. The data show 291 examples of ba used in various situations. Nineteen cases of the particle ba exhibit in dispreferred responses. Seven examples of disagreement and declining were selected to demonstrate the particle ba with other features in dispreferred responses in Mandarin Chinese.

The transcription of this study follows a tri-linear model: the first line is the utterance written in Chinese Pinyin, the second line contains the word-by-word gloss, and the third line provides the approximate English translation. Though the corpus provides transcripts, the author re-transcribed the relevant segments in detail to improve the precision required for this analysis. Also, to facilitate reading, the ba particle to be scrutinised in the examples is boldfaced.
4. *Ba* in dispreferred responses

The particle *ba* occurs in diverse dispreferred responses, such as disagreement and declining. The data of the present study show that *ba* serves other resources, such as turn-initial delay, alternative choices, account, and pro-forma agreement, to mitigate the negative valence in dispreferred responses. The particle *ba* works as a mitigator with other features to soften the tone in disagreements and declining suggestions or invitations.

4.1 Delay with *ba*

Dispreferred responses usually come with a delay (Clayman, 2002; Clift, 2016; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell, 2011). When the particle *ba* appears in a dispreferred response, it often occurs with a turn-initial delay. Example (9) illustrates that a delay is associated with *ba* in a disagreement sequence.

(9)

\begin{align*}
1 & \quad M2: \quad a \text{ zhujiao } jiao \text{ sheme mingzi} \\
& \quad \text{ITJ leading-actor call what name} \\
& \quad \text{‘Oh, what’s the name of the leading character?’} \\
2 & \quad M1: \quad zhujiao \quad nimo \quad ba \quad Nemo \\
& \quad \text{leading-actor Nemo FF Nemo} \\
& \quad \text{‘The leading character is Nemo. Nemo.’} \\
3 & \quad F2: \rightarrow \quad hhhhhhhh \quad Nemo \text{ shi lingwai yi ge } \text{ ba} \\
& \quad \quad \text{Nemo COP another one CL FP} \\
& \quad \quad \text{‘Nemo is another one } \text{ba}.’ \\
4 & \quad M1: \quad nimo \text{ shi xiaochouyu dui } \text{ bu } \text{ dui} \\
& \quad \quad \text{Nemo COP clown-fish right NEG right} \\
& \quad \quad \text{‘Nemo is the clownfish, right?’} \\
5 & \quad F2: \quad dui \quad hai\text{dizongdongyuan na yi zhi jiao Nemo} \\
& \quad \quad \text{right Finding-Nemo that one CL call Nemo} \\
& \quad \quad \text{‘Yes, the one in Finding Nemo is called Nemo.’}
\end{align*}

Before the segment, M1 was talking about a film. In line 1, M2 asks about the name of the leading character in the film. M1 tells him that the name is Nemo (line 2). In line 3, F2 seems not to agree with M1. Instead of directly saying M1 is wrong, F2 mentions that Nemo is from another movie. Also, she delays her response with laughter and attaches a particle *ba* at the end of the utterance.

It is important to note that here, the particle *ba* does not show F2’s uncertainty because line 5 reveals that she knows that Nemo is from another movie *Hai Di Zong Dong Yuan* (‘Finding Nemo’). Thus, the particle *ba* does not display the
speaker’s uncertainty. Instead, here, the particle *ba* can be analysed as mitigating the negative valance of disagreement with turn-initial delay laughter.

Example (10) illustrates that a pause at turn-initial position works with particle *ba* in disagreement. In Example (10), F2 is complaining about her colleague who does not take his job seriously. The colleague is going to night school and always uses that as an excuse to come to work late and leave early.

(10)

1  F2:  *ge ni jiang wo tongshi*
   with you tell I colleague
   ‘I am telling you that my colleague’

2  *lian jiudian shangban zhege dou zuobudao haobuhao*
   even nine.clock work this.CL even cannot.do OK
   ‘even cannot come to work at 9’

3  F1:  *a:* ITJ
   ‘Ah?’

4  F2:  *suoyi=
   so
   ‘So’

5  F1:  =*keshi [qishi=
   But in fact
   ‘But actually’

6  F2:  *[tianwang
   King
   ‘(He’s a) King (at work).’

7  F1:  =*yinwei ta jintian hai you zai shangke dehua
   Because he today still have at take.class if
   ‘Considering that he is still going to night school,’

8  *jiudian shangban shi zhende hen tongku la*
   Nine.clock work COP really very tough FP
   ‘(going to work) at nine is very tough.’

9  F2:  → *(0.5) qishi hai hao ba*
   in fact still good FP
   ‘Actually, it is OK *ba.’

10 *qishi yexiao ye cai shang dao shidian ye*
    in fact night.school also only up till ten.clock FP
    ‘Actually, the night school ends as early as 10.’

11 *jiu dengyu women chuqu happy yi ge wanshang*
    just equal we go out one CL night
‘Just like we go out to have fun at night.’

Moreover, he does not go to night school every day either.’

Oh, probably he has something going on at night.’

‘He has. Dancing at a night club.’

‘That is) very exhausting.’

‘How can he get up at 9 in the morning then?’

‘Yes, so you know the earliest time he came’

‘just this week, just at 9:30’

Before the segment, F2 has complained about her colleague’s unsatisfactory performance at work. In lines 1–2, she provides an extreme case about the colleague, which is that he cannot even get to the office by 9 a.m. F1 seems to be surprised at that in line 3 and takes a stance by defending the colleague, saying that night school might be the reason that F2’s colleague cannot get to work on time (lines 6–8). In line 9, F2 delays her response with a noticeable pause and gives a *ba*-marked assessment *hai hao ba*. F2 further explains why night school is not the reason for her colleague’s lateness (lines 10–12). In line 13, F1 downgrades her stance by providing another reason for the colleague’s unpunctuality. F2 continues to provide new information to support her stance on her colleague’s performance. After knowing the colleague dances at a night club, F1 repositions her stance to be in line with F1 (lines 15–16).

In line 9, F2 does not immediately indicate her disagreement with F1. The turn begins with a pause as well as the particle *ba*, which further mitigates the negative valence. Also, the particle *ba* in Example (10) does not indicate speaker F2’s uncertainty because she provides further explanations for why she does not think night school should be the reason for her colleague’s lack of punctuality.
4.2 *Ba* with an alternative choice

Besides turn-initial delays, the particle *ba* also occurs with alternative choices in dispreferred responses.

In Example (11), two friends are talking about buying a flash drive.

(11)

1  F1:  

   hhhhhh na  ni  qu mai  n  ge a
   then you go buy that CL FP
   ‘Then you should buy that one.’

2  you  mei you  sheme sushi de zaoxing huozhe shi
   have NEG have what sushi LK design COP
   ‘Is there anything shaped like a sushi or (others)?’

3  F2:  

   →  na  zhong bu  hao  ba
   that kind NEG good FP
   ‘That kind is no good *ba*.’

4  F1:  

   na  zhenshi chaoji  wudi  keai de la
   that really extremely incomparably cute LK FP
   ‘That is really extremely, incomparably cute.’

5  F2:  

   →  you  mei you  Snoopy
   have NEG have Snoopy

   ‘Are there Snoopy-shaped (ones)’

6  huoshi na  zhong papaxiong de zaoxing
   or     that kind Tarepanda LK design
   ‘or something like the Tarepanda?’

7  F1:  

   you  ba
   have FP
   ‘Probably there are.’

Before the segment, F2 mentions that she wants a cute flash drive. In line 1, F1 suggests that F2 should buy a sushi-shaped flash drive. F2 does not accept the suggestion immediately in line 2 by a *ba*-marked assessment *nazhong buhao* (‘that kind is not good’). In line 4, F1 keeps convincing F2 by noting that the sushi-shaped flash drive is extremely cute. Instead of directly rejecting F1’s suggestion, F2 brings up Snoopy or the Tarepanda flash drives as alternative cute flash drive choices (lines 5–6).

In this case, the particle *ba* and an alternative choice in the sequence serve together to mitigate the negative valence brought by the negative assessment on F1’s suggestion. Also, the *ba*-marked assessment should not be considered as indicating the speaker’s uncertainty because the speaker clearly mentions other choices of cute flash drives.
The same practice is observed in Example (12) where two females are talking about living with their husbands’ families after marriage.

(12)

1  F1:  yikaishi         shi ta xian wen wo de
       at-the-beginning COP he first ask I  LK=  
   ‘It was he who asked me first.’

2  F2:  o::
       ITJ
   ‘Oh.’

3  F1:  ranhou wo jiu shuo zhu zai yiQi ou (0.3)
       then I then say live at together FP
   ‘Then I said we could live together’

4  → wo shuo bu tai hao ba
      I say NEG too good FP
   ‘I said that it would not be a good idea ba.’

5  F2:  hhhhhh

6  F1:  → wo shuo keyi zhu zhu zhu [loushang louxia
       I say can live live live upstairs downstairs
      ‘I said that we could live, (like) live upstairs and downstairs.’

7  F2:  [gebi
      next-door
   ‘Next door.’

8  F1:  → gebi fujin meiyou guanxi
       next-door neighborhood NEG matter
   ‘next door (or in the same neighborhood), no problem.’

9  keshi zhu zai tongyi ceng lou bu tai hao ba
   but live on same floor building NEG too good FP
   ‘But it would not be too good to live together.’

10 F2:  en en en
       ITJ ITJ ITJ
   ‘Yes, yes, yes.’

Before the segment, F1 mentions that her boyfriend suggests they live with his parents after getting married. It seems that she is not fond of the idea. In line 4, she says that she tells her boyfriend bu tai hao ba (‘it is not very good ba’) with the use of the particle ba. Also, she further provides a choice which she prefers in lines 6 and 8, i.e., she would not mind living in the same building or next door to her boyfriend’s parents but not in the same unit. Here, we can see again that the particle ba and a choice are deployed together to mitigate the negative valence of
declining her boyfriend's suggestion. Also, it seems that F1 is not uncertain about whether she wants to live with her boyfriend's parents considering she provides other choices to respond to her boyfriend's suggestion.

Another essential linguistic feature is exhibited in Example (12). While in Example (11) the particle ba is with bu hai ('not good'), in Example (12) the particle ba is with bu tai hai ('not very good'). The scope of the negator bu is hai ('good') in Example (11), while it is tai hai ('very good') in Example (12). The degree of negativity in bu hai ('not good') is considered higher than bu tai hai given that bu hai ('not good') is the opposite of hai while bu tai hai merely means that the degree of hai is not very satisfactory. By negating the adverb tai ('very') rather than the adjective hai ('good'), F1 further softens her tone of declining. This type of adverbial phrase in dispreferred responses is also observed in English data (Tanaka, 2008).

Although Example (12) is different from Example (11) in that speaker F2’s ba-ended utterance in Example (12) is associated with a story-telling action, while in Example (11) speaker F2’s ba-ended utterance occurs in face-to-face interactions, the two examples show a common practice: that is, the particle ba and alternatives are used together in declining suggestions to mitigate the negative valence.

4.3 Ba with an account

In previous sections, we saw that ba-marked dispreferred responses can associate with delay and other choices in disagreements and declining suggestions. Explanation or justification is also commonly found in dispreferred responses (Clift, 2016; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell, 2011).

Example (13) demonstrates how the particle ba occurs within the context of an account that features declining. In this example, M2 is asking whether M1 wants to join him to see a concert.

(13)

1 M2:  ei zhuzhu you wen ni yao bu yao qu ting
   ITJ NAME have ask you want NEG want go listen
   tamen na ge
   they that CL
   'Hey, Zhuzhu asked if you wanted to listen'

2 M1:  em
   ITJ
   'em'

3 M2:  taibeiaiyue de hechangtuan de gongyan
   Taipei-love-music LK chord LK public.performance
   'to the public performance by their Taipei Philharmonic Chorus.'
4   ta shuo ta keyi qing (      )  
   he say he can invite  
'He said that he can treat (us).'

5   jiu shi yinwei wo xiang qu ting  
   Then COP because I want go listen  
'It is because I wanted to listen (to the chorus).'

6   ranhou jiu wen ta  
   then then ask he  
'(I) asked him,'  

7   ta jiu you wen ni yao bu yao qu  
   he then has ask you want NEG want go  
'then he asked if you wanted to go,'  

8   ranhou jiu shi shuo ta keyi gei women liang zhang piao  
   Then then COP says he can give we two CL ticket  
'and he could give us two tickets.'  

9   (3.2) ni mei xingqu  
   you NEG interest  
'You are not interested?'  

10  M1: → (0.7) sheme shihou a  
    what time FP  
'When is it?'  

11  M2: jiu shier yue zhong buyiding a  
    then twelve month middle probably FP  
'In the middle of December, probably,'  

12  jiu shi xian tingzhe fangzhe a  
    then COP first listening putting FP  
'just ask and get the tickets.'  

13  ruguo dao shihou[ni xiang qu dehua zai qu  
    if at time you think go if again go  
'At that time if you think you want to go, then you go'  

14  M1: [wo haoxiang mei ge zhoumo] dou you shiqing  
    I seem every CL weekend all have things  
'It seems that I have something every weekend.'  

15  M2: en:: en::  
    ITJ ITJ  
'En, en'  

16  M1: jiu muqian shier yue(1.0) zhong nage keneng hui qu bisai  
    then now twelve month middle that possible will go game  
'now in the middle of December, I will probably go to compete in a game.'
‘After that, I will have one weekend’

‘For our Halun group party.’

‘And then a week for the new year’

‘When I’ll probably go hiking’

‘Just that, well…’

‘So, you will not spend the new year in Taipei?’

‘We will see ba’.

‘Because Alu has said’

‘He probably wants to stay a little longer’

M2 mentions that he can get two concert tickets for them. However, M1 does not provide any response, which is indicated by a pause in line 9. M2 takes this pause as meaning that M1 is not interested in the concert and tries to confirm his
thought. M1 does not directly respond to M2’s questions in line 10 as to whether he is interested in the concert. Instead, he asks about the date of the concert. It is also noteworthy that his turn starts with a 0.7-second pause before he asks about the concert’s date. Also, after asking about the date of the concert, he provides an account between line 14 and line 21 that his schedule is full, indicating that he probably would not be able to join M2 at the concert. Finally, in line 23, M1 finalises his response to the invitation with *kan qingkuang ba* (‘we will see ba’). Right after that, he further provides another account which starts with *yinwei* (‘because’); that is, he might have to spend time with his friends so that he probably would not be able to attend the concert. During the span of M1’s turns, we can observe distortions of progressivity, including pauses, lengthening, and cut-offs as well as epistemic adverbials such as *keneng* (‘possibly’), which are features to display the speaker’s hesitancy (Kendrick, 2018). It demonstrates that these features work with the particle *ba* to mitigate the negative valance of declining an invitation.

### 4.4 *Ba* with pro-forma agreement

In a dispreferred response sequence, a partial agreement token might preface a disagreement (Clift, 2016; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell, 2011). The following Examples (14) and (15) show the particle *ba*’s association with a partial agreement token in a disagreement sequence.

In Example (14), two male friends talk about a female friend who is not interested in her psychology major.

(14)

1 M2: *na ta dangchu weisheme hui xiangyao nian*
   Then she beginning why will want to study
   *xinlixi*
   psychology.Dept
   ‘Then why did she want to study in the psychology department in the first place?’

2 M1: *wo bu zhidao ye*
   I NEG know FP
   ‘I don’t know.’

3 M2: *ruguo ta dui renxing haishi you xingqu dehua*
   if she to humanity still have interest if
   ‘If she is still interested in humanity,’

4 *ta keyi ziji chuangzao yi ge shuyu ta ziji de lilun*
   she can self create. one CL belong she self LK theory
   ‘she can create her own theory.’
5 M1: → (1.5) en (0.8) keyi chuangzao
   ITJ can create
   'Well, she can create one.'

6 → zhishi youshihou bu shi hen jiandan ba
   but sometimes NEG COP very easy FP
   'But sometimes it is not that easy ba.'

7 M2: (2.8) women xueqi mo jiu you yi ge baogao
   we semester end then have one CL report
   'At the end of the semester, we are asked to write a report'

8 yao xie na ge wo de zhiliao lilun
   need write that CL I LK therapy theory
   'about our own therapy theories.'

9 M1: (0.5) en
   ITJ
   'En.'

10 M2: jiu shi ni yao you yi tao ziji renwei
    that COP you must have one CL self think
    'That means you need to have your own (theory) that you think'

11 (2.6) keyi qu zhiliao
    can go treat
    'that (you) can use for treatment.'

12 M1: → (2.0) keneng. ba (1.0) dan bu tai keneng
    possible FP but NEG too possible
    'It is possible ba. But it is not very possible.'

13 jiushi shou ni bu xihuan zhe ge zhuarenmen zheyang
    then say you NEG like this CL profession like-this
    'If you do not like a profession'

14 ni ziji jiu chuang yi ge zhuarenmen zheyangzi
    You self then create one CL profession like-this
    'then do something else.'

In lines 3 and 4, M2 states that the female friend should create her own theory if she is still interested in humanity. In line 5, there is a noticeable pause at the initial position of M1’s response prefacing M1’s agreement with M2 with keyi chuangzao (‘can create’). However, he continues his turn, saying he does not think it is easy to create a new theory to which the particle ba is attached. Also, zhishi (‘but’) and youshi (‘sometimes’) are used to soften the tone of the negative valence of disagreement (line 6). Probably because M2 does not receive sufficiently enthusiastic support from M1, he continues his statement from line 7 to line 11. In line 12, another noticeable pause is observed before the ba-marked
partial agreement token, i.e., *ke neng ba* (‘it is possible’), produced by M1. Then, M1 continues his turn with *dan* (‘but’) to show his disagreement.

Consider another example:

(15)

1. M1: *ranhou ranhou bu shi zhongdian shi zhongdian*
   
   ‘And...and...that is not the important point. The important point’

2. *shi na ni jiu shi qu dang lianjia laogong eryi a*
   
   ‘is that you just go there to be cheap labour.’

3. M2: *yinggai shi shuo ni keyi zai na*
   
   ‘It should be said’

4. *yi bian zuo ji ge dagong*
   
   ‘(like) that you can do several part-time jobs’

5. *ranhou ni you keyi wan a*
   
   ‘while having fun.’

6. M1: *→ (2.2) keneng ba*
   
   ‘It is possible ba.’

7. *wo juede yinwei na shihou dianshi xinwen*
   
   ‘I think the TV news that time’

8. *jiu zai jiang a xue yingwen xue yingwen zheyangzi*
   
   ‘was talking about things like learning English, learning English’

9. *keyi mianfei xue yingwen zenmeyang*
   
   ‘learning English for free.’

10. *ranhou wo jiu juede na genben jiu shi goupi*
    
    ‘I thought that it was utter nonsense’

11. *genben jiu shi qu nali dang lianjia laogong*
    
    ‘actually, go there to be cheap labour.’

In Example (15), two male friends are talking about a programme by which one can have a part-time job during the summer in other countries. M1 thinks
the programme is not as good as advertised on TV because he thinks that people who participate in the programme might end up being cheap labour (lines 1–2). M2 disagrees with M1 because he believes that people in that programme can have fun while working (lines 3–4). However, M1 does not change his position as we can see from line 6 to line 11. Rather than directly showing disagreement with M2, M1 designs his turn differently (line 6). His turn starts with a *ba*-ended token *keneng ba* (‘it is possible’), which indicates a partial agreement, and then he continues to keep his stance.

In English, pro-forma agreement is a significant feature in dispreferred responses (Sidnell, 2011). One familiar form is a turn beginning with ‘yes, but …’ In Example (14), we observed a similar practice. The speaker uses *keneng* (‘possible’) *ba* to indicate partial agreement. Immediately after that, *dan* (‘but’) prefaces a disagreement. Further, we also observed features in disagreement, such as disruptions of progressivity and turn-initial delays with the final particle *ba* in Examples (14) and (15).

5. Conclusion

Previous studies reveal that the final particle *ba* can convey a speaker’s uncertainty, solicit agreement, or function as a mitigator. By examining the use of the particle *ba* through three types of social actions – answers to questions, informings, and assessments – Kendrick’s (2018) findings suggest that the functions of *ba* to display a speaker’s uncertainty and to solicit agreement are mutually compatible. Kendrick (2018) illustrated a strong relationship between the use of final particle *ba* and social actions and sequential environments.

Focusing on the use of the particle *ba* as a mitigator in dispreferred responses – disagreements and declining suggestions and invitations – the present study found that the particle *ba* primarily occurs with delays, alternative choices, accounts, and partial agreements to mitigate the negative valence. Also, the present study showed that the functions of the final particle *ba* as a marker of uncertainty and a mitigator can be mutually compatible. The particle *ba* does not necessarily indicate the speaker’s uncertainty in dispreferred responses such as disagreements and declining suggestions or invitations. As Kendrick (2018, p. 23) proposes, the *ba* particle can ostensibly lower the speaker’s epistemic position and serves to solicit agreement or confirmation from a K+ recipient. The present study reveals that the final particle *ba* can also be deployed to ostensibly downgrade the speaker’s epistemic position to mitigate negative valance.

The present study also illustrates the significance of examining the use of final particles in natural conversation and sheds light on classroom instruction regarding final particles. Turn-final or sentence-final particles are a critical linguistic feature of East Asian languages. For learners of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean,
turn-final or sentence-final particles are tough to master. Although most textbooks introduce sentence-final particles at the elementary level, often simple explanations are provided without careful examination of the context of the particles’ usage. Given that few opportunities are available for learners to facilitate the understanding of turn-final or sentence-final particle usage in real life, students might misuse the particles or avoid using them. Instructors should integrate the findings of the use of final particles based on the analysis of naturally occurring conversation data into classroom instruction to facilitate language acquisition and enhance learner’s pragmatic competence.

About the author

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Transcription conventions

Transcript symbols

[ The point where overlapping talk begins
] The point where overlapping talk ends
:: Noticeably lengthened sound
(0.0) Length of silence
↑ Rising intonation
( ) Unintelligible stretch
he Laughter

Abbreviations

COP Copula
CL Counter word
FP Final particle
ITJ Interjection
LK Nominal linking particle
NEG Negative morpheme
PROG Progressive
References


