FACE SUPPORT - CHINESE PARTICLES AS MITIGATORS: A STUDY OF *BA* *A/YA* AND *NE*

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1. Introduction

Requesting, as a speech act, represents a communication of beliefs, for example: (1) that S believes H can do X (2), that S believes X would incur imposition on H, and (3) that mitigation by S would be in order (Negative politeness). This paper¹ addresses the functional significance of three Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua) particles *ba*, *a/ya* and *ne* in the speech act of requesting, specifically how as pragmatic devices they help to reduce the illocutionary force of imperatives in direct requests. In other words, how they serve to modify the proposition 'That H do X'. In Searle's words, these particles would be described as illocutionary indicators:

"The illocutionary force indicator shows how the proposition is to be taken, or to put it another way, what illocutionary force the utterance is to have; that is what illocutionary act the speaker is performing in the utterance of the sentence" (Searle 1969: 30).

Ostman (1981), on the other hand, considers particles together with tense variation, modality, clichés and frozen expressions (e.g. 'please') as 'pragmatic devices'. Particles as 'pragmatic devices' have been investigated in a number of languages, for example, Japanese, German, Thai and Chinese. Studies by Ishikawa (1988, 1992), (1966), Suzuki (1990) and Squires (1994) have examined Japanese particles such as *sa* and *ne*. For instance, "the Japanese particle *sa* effects a personal view on the information conveyed in the utterance ... contrasts with the use of *ne* ... speakers use to create an empathic common ground with the hearer regardless of whether or not the information ... exclusively held by either participant ... " (Squires 1994: 1). Abraham (1991a & 1991b) and König and Requardt (1991) studied German particles (e.g. *doch*, *ja* and *auch*); Cooke (1989), Horie and Iwasaki (1996) worked on Thai particles (e.g. *na*, *nia*) and Alleston (1981) examined the Chinese particle *ne* in some detail. According to Abraham "although work on modal particles has been done ever since the seminal book by H. Weydt in 1969, and despite a considerable growth of the literature in the meantime, there are a number of striking lacunae in the research tradition" (1991: 9). Research literature on Chinese final particles which are variously termed 'sentence particles' (Chu 1984 and Chang 1994) because they are tagged to the end of a sentence, or 'modal particles' because they make the tone of the

¹ I wish to thank an anonymous referee for his/her valuable comments and suggestions. S/he is not to be held responsible for any errors which remain.

sentence "mild and moderate" as in the case of *ne* (Chang 1994: 89), has been singularly sparse, particularly from a pragmatic point of view.

"To fully understand the workings of this particle (*ne*) undoubtedly requires a tremendous amount of further research, not only in sentence grammar, but also in discourse and pragmatic analysis" (Chu 1984: 90).

Perhaps, one of the very reasons underlying the lacunae in the research of particles is because of the very elusiveness of particles which makes both description and analysis unusually difficult. "There is no agreement among researchers as to which level of description one would most fruitfully have to explore in order to come to grips with the enigmatic phenomenon as such, ... " (Abraham 1991:10). Koniq and Requardt (1991), in contrast to Doherty's (1987) consideration of modal particles as markers of epistemic evaluations, adopt the Sperber-Wilson relevance approach, analyzing modal particles as "metapragmatic instructions to process the utterance containing them in certain types of context" (1991: 63). The presence of Chinese utterance-final particles *a*, *ba* and utterance-medial particle *ne* in face-to-face requests, convinced me that they can be analysed from the perspective of politeness and mitigation. These particles, which have been shown to affect modality rather than the proposition of the sentence by a number of linguists, are not exactly illocutionary specifiers, nor are they epistemic evaluators. They can, however, be described as *mitigators* in a context where face threat is implicit. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness (negative and positive politeness) and the social parameters of PDR (relative power, social distance and relative degree of imposition) serve as a useful framework in the analysis of these particles as pragmatic devices. By way of an overview of Chinese particles described by linguists in general, and as a basis of comparison with data presented here, let's take a closer look at *a*, *ba* and *ne*

2. A brief survey of studies on Chinese particles /*Yuqi Ci*:

The Chinese expression for final particle(s) is *yuqi ci* which literally means 'mood word(s)'. These are atonal in sentence final position and considered to be important in the language. According to Teng², these particles in general linguistics are termed 'sentence particles'. It appears that by calling these particles 'sentence particles' one is focusing on the descriptive level, whereas linguists who use the term 'modal particles' seem to focus on the functional aspect. Whether we use the term 'modal particles' or 'sentence particles' to refer to these final particles appears to be a choice of terminology. This set of particles *a*, *ba* and *ne* are 'mood morphemes' which indicate modality, and one of these as shown in the findings is that of expressing the emotive aspect. They will simply be referred to as 'utterance-final particles' or just 'particles' in view of the fact that *ne* does not occur as an utterance-final particle in the data here.

Chao (1968) lists twenty-six forms of particles and describe their pitch variation at some length. Chang (1994) examines these particles from a grammatical viewpoint. She

² By personal communication. I am grateful to Professor Teng Shou-hsin who clarified and commented on the terms *yuqi ci* 'sentence particles' and 'modal particles'.

describes *ne* as a sentence/final particle, a question particle, and a modal particle depending on whether it is tagged on to an interrogative sentence or a declarative sentence. Huang (1994) who goes a step further, contends that the uses of *ne* and *ba* as final particles in questions convey a note of uncertainty but she falls short on explication. Huang's work is largely drawn from excerpts of written texts such as plays. Lin's (1981) grammar text, by far gives the most detailed account of the pragmatic functions of final particles. For instance, she points out that by adding *ne*, a question becomes softer in tone (1981: 276). The functions of *a/ya*, *ba* and *ne* summarized here, are excerpted from her work (1981: 271-276) which includes the other particles: *de*, *le* and *ma*. It is interesting to note that these functions broadly illustrate the pragmatic value of these particles as a politeness measure.

1. A/YA: a semi-interrogative particle that makes questions and exclamations in a polite manner; joins readily with the preceding syllable, has a series of phonetic variants. Depending on the final vowel preceding A, it can be pronounced A, YA, WA, or NA. Out of eight functions, *three are related to aspects of politeness* [italics mine]. E.g.

1. A
2. A
- A. A may be used to soften the imperative mood e.g.
Ni ting A! Ta shuo shenme na? (Listen! What is he talking about?)
- b. A may be used to provide a pause in a sentence so as to present a milder mood:
Xiao xin yidianr A! Bie shang le tade dang! (Be careful! Don't be fooled by him).
- c. In exclamations, A expresses polite questions or exclamations that do not require answers:
Zheme ban, xing bu xing A? (Is it okay to do it this way?).

2. BA: /As a modal particle, BA may be used to suggest, to command, to indicate probability, or to express uncertainty/. When giving advice BA is added at the end of the sentence to implore by using a soft tone. E.g.

Bie zoule BA. (Please don't go).

3. NE: /Similar to the modal particle BA, NE expresses uncertainty. Unlike BA, however, it cannot be used at the end of a declarative sentence. By adding NE, a question becomes softer in tone. E.g.

Ni shuode hua, shei xiangxin NE? (Does anyone believe what you say?)

Li and Thompson (1981: 238) also ascribe the function of politeness and mitigation to sentence-final particles *ba* and *ya*

<u>ba</u>	'Solicit Agreement'
<u>a/ya</u>	'Reduce Forcefulness'

Alleton's (1981) work on *ne* has been one of the more detailed considerations of the mitigating role of this particle in face-to-face interaction. In the following examples, she attributes politeness as one of its main functions. Utterances of type 1 are according to her, typically used by police for interrogations (1981: 99) whereas Utterance 1a is considered usual because of the softening effect of *ne* which takes away the confrontational and interrogative tone of the speaker.

Examples:

1. *Ni you ji-ge xiongmei?*
You there are-how many-brothers and sisters
How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- 1a. *Ni you ji - ge xiongmei ne?*
you - there are - how many - brothers and sisters - NE

(And) how many brothers and sisters do you have?

Utterance 2 provides another clear example of the pragmatic effect of *ne*. The absence of *ne* Alleton claims, would give this statement a very short tone (1981: 99). In contrast, the presence of *ne* contributes to the persuasiveness of the statement, that is, by appealing to the listener's active participation.

2. *Women de shi ni dasuan zenme ban ne?*
 We - DE - affair - you - to reckon - how to do - NE
 How do you plan to take care of our problem?

Another study which views Chinese final particles from a pragmatic perspective is that of Chu's (1984). *Ne*'s functions are explained from the perspective of presupposition and politeness. In the following dialogue he maintains that if the student does not use *ne* in the two instances he will sound very rude to the teacher (1984: 89).

- Zhang: *Bai Laoshi, weishenme Qiu Dacheng dao jintian hai bulai shangke ne?*
 Teacher Bai, why is it that Qiu Dacheng hasn't been coming to school?
 Bai: *Ai, duan shijian nei, keneng laibuliao le.*
 I'm sorry but I'm afraid that he won't be able to come for a while
 Zhang: *Weishenme ne? Bai Laoshi*
 Why? Teacher Bai.

Chu maintains that "*ne* meshes well with the Politeness Principle of Leech in its pragmatic function" (1984: 90) but goes no further. Shifu (1985: 96) on the other hand, claims that *ne* can be used in a context where no politeness is implied e.g. this question by an old lady to the manager 'Where's the beef?/*Niurou ne?* He argues that the manager cannot possibly think she is being polite. Refuting Shifu's contention, Chu (1985) cites Chang (1984) "who argues convincingly that one of the functions of *ne* is to express politeness" (1985: 75). In the plays he studied, he found that a girl from a rich family would not use *ne* when she talked overbearingly to a poor classmate. In other words, what Chu is contending is that because *ne* in this instance is not used downward in speech, it can be interpreted as a marker of social status or social distance.

In brief, Lin, Alleton and Chu demonstrate how final particles, *a*, *ba*, *ne* can be used to indicate modality, such as the expression of speaker attitude. For instance when speaker wishes to sound polite and persuasive in questioning, *a* and *ne* as utterance-final particles are used with the intention of reducing the illocutionary force of straight interrogatives. The softening effect of these final particles on the interrogative mood of questions, as a politeness measure, lends support to Ostman's statement on the use of particles in Chinese:

"In languages like Chinese, which have so many other uses for pitch variation that they need to use particles to express many phenomena that are covered by intonation in English" (1981: 43 & 84).

One phenomenon as identified in this paper, is decidedly that of mitigation, as shown by *ne* in the above examples, which is in contrast to Chao's example (1968: 795) *Tzao.deal hwei.lai a!* 'Do come back early!' where the particle "*a* has a slight effect of 'do' in the translation." He says the *a* realized as a pause and/or glottal stop, "does not make the request stronger, but it gives the effect of a repeated request, that of urging H to do X. The

final particle *a* is not exactly an emphasis marker like *do* as in: '**Do** stop!' (Fraser 1996: 184). In this utterance, *do* functions more like an intensifier, urging H to comply. In Chao's example, the final particle *a* intensifies the tone of the utterance, yet it does not have the effect of a commanding tone. Rather it exhorts H to do X. If we consider the following requests, we can see the distinct difference between a speech act which exhorts and one which commands.

1. Take your coat off.
2. Do take your coat off.

The first request can be read as a straight directive whereas the second request can be interpreted as an exhortation. In utterance 2, S exhorts H to do X rather than directs H to do X. Similarly, ending the utterance with the particle *a* as in *Tzao.deal hwei.lai a!* has the effect of transforming a directive into an exhortation.

3. The study: Methodology and data

Taped oral elicitations from 82 interviewees (largely from Beijing) to a modified form of Discourse Completion Test (DCT), along the lines of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns Project (CCSARP) group (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), form the corpus of data used for this analysis of particles. For each interviewee, a total of 16 out of a maximum of 20 situations were used (See appendix). These situations represent a broad section of common requests in a variety of settings involving interactants who are marked by varying degrees of social distance and relative power. These requests ranging from the most routine (road direction) to the most personal (a loan) are described and categorised along Brown & Levinson's (1987) contextual framework of social determinants:

- (1) relative social distance [D]
- (2) relative power [P]
- (3) relative ranking/weighting of the degree of imposition [R]

Altogether four main strategy types were identified in this study, three single strategies and one multiple strategy. These strategy types relate to the categorisation of the core request or head act of an utterance. A head act, as defined in the CCSARP, is identified by means of its propositional content, that which asks something of H or which expresses the desire of S that H do something. The main strategy types are categorised as follows:

- M1 (Main strategy type 1) Impositives - on record, non-negotiable
- M2 (Main strategy type 2) Conventionally Indirect - on record, is given an option
- M3 (Main strategy type 3) Hints - off record
- M4 (Main strategy type 4) Combined strategies - on record (combination of M1 and M2)

In an on-record, non-negotiable request (M1), H is not invited or consulted about the feasibility of carrying out the request; S says what s/he wants H to do. In contrast, in an on-

record conventionally indirect request (M2), H is given an option of refusal. S may query H as to whether s/he can do X. In both M1 and M2 request strategies, S makes explicit his/her intent - that H do X or whether H can do X. The classification of main request strategy types is broadly similar to Blum-Kulka and House's (1989). Interrogatives, a common form of requests, do not only interrogate but also direct - that H tell S about X. "The interrogative frames questions and requestives, the two sub-classes of directives not covered by the imperative. Both are really kinds of requests: In a requestive S asks H to do X (i.e. perform some act); and in a question S asks H to tell S something. Thus the difference is only that a question solicits a verbal response, and a requestive solicits a nonverbal response" (Allan 1986: 207).

Interviewees consistently preferred M1 strategy - 54.4% of the speakers used direct requests employing IMPs as a sub-category (See Lee-Wong 1994a). This partly explains the need for speakers to adopt a form of strategic politeness by way of internal modification - i.e. modification within the core request (Faerch & Kasper 1989). One form of modification used by these native speakers of Chinese is the use of syntactic downgraders, that is, linguistic devices used as part of the head act intended to reduce the illocutionary force of direct requests. These linguistic devices comprise conditionals (If ..., do X) verb reduplication, (e.g. *kankan*/'look look'), appealers (use of tags) and utterance-final particles *ba*, *a*, and *ne* (which sometimes appear in medial position). The basic tenet underlying this study is that in a social context marked by a small D, a low or an equal P and a mid to high R, the face threat implicit in a direct request can be mitigated by particle *a*, *ba*, or *ne*. Requests on the left side are therefore intended to be more polite in tone than those on the right, because of the presence of syntactic downgraders represented by *ba*, *a* and *ne*.

Do X <i>ba</i>	Do X
Can you do X <i>a</i> ?	Can you do X?
If ... can you do X <i>ne</i> ?	If ... can you do X?

It is worth noting that particles constitute 7.7% of the total percentage of syntactic downgraders used by interviewees. There was a tendency for Beijing speakers to use particles relatively more often than those from Nanjing or Guangzhou. The examples cited in this paper are drawn from taped elicitations of Beijing interviewees. Occurring in utterance-final position, these particles are usually used as part of the head act or core request.

Example: In a small food café:

Shifu ni kan wode kuaizi diaole. Xiexi ni, ni lai yi gen ba
 Shifu³, you see my chopstick's dropped. Thank you, get me another one BA

Core request: *Ni lai yi gen ba*/Get me another one BA'

One should note here, that unlike a restaurant, a small food café is not considered formal, therefore *shifu* as a polite term of address marks not only social proximity but

³ Shifu is a polite term of address used largely by speakers who grew up during the Cultural Revolution. Today it is more likely to be used by speakers and to addressees in the lower socio-economic class.

also informality.

4. Analysis of particles as pragmatic devices

4.1. Interactional aspects of *Ba*: Context and function

BA consistently occurred in a context marked by asymmetrical role-relationships and informality. In direct requests (M1 strategy) as in (a) - (d), S explicitly asks H to do A.

Examples:

- (a) Customer to food cafe owner asking for another pair of chopsticks:

Qing ni cong xin gei wo yi gen kuaizi BA

Please you give me another chopstick BA

- (b) Department Head asking driver to pick a visitor up from station:

Kan ni qu yi xia BA.

Look, you go (and fetch him) BA

- (c) University supervisor asking student for change of appointment:

Jiu mingtian wanshan ni lai BA.

So, tomorrow evening you come BA.

- (d) Grandchild asking grandparents to take their dinner:

Nainai, Yeye chi fan BA.

Grandma, Grandpa, come have dinner BA.

The use of BA in these requests undoubtedly has a mitigating effect on the utterance meaning of each of these requests. BA allows the speaker to round off the request with a softening tone thereby reducing the illocutionary force of IMPs. Further, as BA is a stressed syllable, it has the effect of prolonging the utterance length and allowing S to sound persuasive. It is interesting to note that in example (a) the customer uses *qing* together with *ba* in requesting another chopstick. *Qing*/'please' is usually used simultaneously to mark requests and to convey politeness, and nearly always used with the imperative (Lee-Wong 1994b), but it should be noted that it may mark social distance as well. Reports from interviewees show the value the Chinese in PRC attach to linguistic politeness as a means of gaining cooperation from service attendants in places like the small food cafes and department stores. In the following context where D is small (between mother and daughter) *ba* as a pragmatic device fulfills a number of functions.

- (e) Daughter to Mother asking her to buy present:

Ni bang wo mai yixia BA.

You help me to buy BA

Mother: *Mai shenme hao?*

What shall I buy?

Daughter: *Nin kankan BA, suipian mai shenme.*

Polite you see (decide) BA, doesn't matter buy what.

It's up to you, doesn't (really) matter.

- (f) Daughter to Mother:

Wo ge tongxue mingtian yao shengri le.

I CL classmate tomorrow Future birthday ASP

My classmate's birthday is coming.

Wo xiang mai ge dongxi song gei ta.

I'd like buy CL thing present to her

I'd like to buy something for her.
Ni bang wo qu mai BA.
 You help I go buy BA
 You help me to get it BA
Xing BA?
 All right BA?

In (e) BA is intended by S to convey a degree of deference - deferring to her mother's wish - 'it's over to you: you decide what's suitable BA': *Nin kankan BA, suipian mai shenme*. In the absence of utterance-final BA, the request would sound like a straight directive 'You help me do X': *Ni bang wo mai yixia*. Notice that S not only used the syntactic downgrader BA but also the polite expression of *bang*'help' and the diminutive *yixia*'a while' (reassuring H it wouldn't take too much of her time). In (f) the use of BA appears to be used as a kind of confirmation although its pragmatic meaning is more akin to an expression of: 'Okay, right, no problem?', which surely is a form of persuasion. BA could also be considered as a kind of drawl particle (Chao 1968: 809) spoken with a lengthening of the vowel /a:/ and a rising intonation. Whereas a falling intonation would make this utterance sound very peremptory, more like directing H, the slightly rising utterance intonation makes it sound more like exhorting H to do X.

In the following context marked by a high R, BA is clearly intended to function as a mitigator. Both the requests in (g) and (h) threaten H's negative face (the desire to be unimposed upon) and S's positive face (loss of face for S should H refuse to co-operate).

(g) Passenger in train asking co-passenger if s/he would open the window

Zhe ge limian tai re le. Mafan ni bang wo ba zhe ge chuanguhu di yi di BA.
Wo di bu dong.

It's too hot inside here. [Sorry to] bother you, help me to push up this window BA. I can't move it.

(h) Speaker asking his friend if he could borrow his bike

Wan Hai, wo jintian you shi, zhi hao chu qu.
 Wan Hai I've got something on today, have to go out
Zixingche huai le. Lai bu ji chezi.
 (My) bike has broken down, can't get a bike in time.
Ni chezi jie wo yong yixia BA.
 Lend me your bike for a while BA.

The context in example (g) is marked by a big D which makes a direct request appear impolite. Hence, to reduce the illocutionary force of IMP in a M1 request strategy, there is clearly a need for S to mitigate. The use of Ba and the polite expression 'sorry to bother you'/'*mafan ni*', express S's desire to redress H's negative face: 'Sorry to impose on you, but help me to open the window BA'. In the context of (h), which is marked by a small D, the request is considerably more imposing because it involves the loan of H's property. In this context where H's negative face is threatened, BA can be used to modify the IMP here. 'Lend me your bike for a while' would sound rude and demanding to H whereas with BA the imperious tone is significantly reduced.

The litmus test of BA as a mitigator is best exemplified in a request situation where the speaker can use BA but does not choose to do so. This usually occurs in a context marked by a high P as shown in the following examples: (i) the Customs officer, (j) the Police, (k) the manager and (l) the grandfather.

Examples:

- (i) Customs officer asking passenger to have his luggage ready for checking
Qing ba⁴ xiangzi dakai, women xianzai yao jiancha.
 please CV suitcase open we now want inspect
 Please open your suitcase, we want to inspect it now.
- (j) Policeman asking vendor to move his wares away from the footpath
Tongzhi, ba nide lanzi bian shang lai yidian.
 Comrade CV your basket side up come a little
Tongzhi, move your basket up to the side (of the pavement) a little.
- (k) Manager asking secretary to inform him of an impending distance call
Xiao Li, jie dao dianhua tongzhi wo.
 Xiao Li, when you receive the call, let me know.
- (l) Grandpa asking grandchild to answer a call
Xiao Bao, kuai qu jie xia dianhua.
 Xiao Bao, quick go and answer the phone.

In all these requests, modification by way of reducing the illocutionary force of IMPs is not deemed necessary because S is in a superior role-relationship (as authority figure). In the Chinese society where S is in a superior position (as in status or age) s/he has more options in how s/he chooses to phrase a request. As long as the speaker speaks in a friendly manner, the use of IMPs is not necessarily considered impolite, as shown in (k) and (l). However, if S intends to communicate an unequal role-relationship marked by a big D and a high P as in (i) and (j) the use of BA will be deemed inappropriate. Hence, authoritative commands or instructions do not end with a final particle.

4.2. Interactional aspects of A: Context and function

Final particle A appeared in requests where the interviewee considered the social distance between S and H to be small, and the setting to be informal (home and university). In this context, the role-relationship was not a strong determinant, it could either be symmetrical or asymmetrical.

Examples:

- (m) A request for assistance from one sibling to another:
Jiejie, zhe tiao ti zenme suan A?
 Elder sister, how do you solve this problem A?
- (n) An exhortation from host to guest:
Bu yao keqi A, qing duo chi yidianr.
 Don't stand on ceremony, please eat a little more.
- (o) An apology from University supervisor to student:
You ge tongshi lai le, Zanmen gai tian BA, Shizai duibuqi A.
 A colleague has arrived. Let's change (it) to another day BA. Really sorry A.

In example (m) the use of particle A allows S to sound less confrontational. Instead of a direct question, asking H to do X: 'How do you solve this problem?' the final-utterance A

⁴ Ba, considered a Co-Verb by grammarians, is different from utterance-final ba. In this request *Qing ni ba xiangzi dakai* 'Please open the suitcase' ba functions like a topic marker. The ba construction is generally characterized as 'Subject ba Object Verb Complement' (Tsao 1992).

lends a softer tone to the request: 'How do you solve this question A?' In utterance (n) I interpret the particle *A* as a marker intended to signal informality and casualness, that S wants H to make himself/herself at home. The use of *qing*/please' is not necessarily a formal polite request marker, particularly in a context of small D, because the 'Polite Language'/Limao Yuyan campaign has extended its use to even amongst family members. (See Lee-Wong 1994c). In modern China, parents may use *qing* and *xiexie*/thank you' to their children.

In utterance (o) it is clearly S's intent to convey his sincerity to H that he is truly sorry about changing the appointment. The use of BA mitigates his bald on record request - that H changes the appointment. Despite the fact that S is senior to H (in age and social status) there is understandably a perceived need to redress H's negative face because of the ensuing inconvenience. Moreover, it should be noted, intellectuals in China, unlike authoritarian figures are traditionally, exemplary models of politeness.

In example (p) BA appears in a context that is best described as semi-formal, the workplace. It involves a speaker asking his colleague for a date. In the B-L sense of the term of FTA, this request is highly face threatening, particularly that of face loss for S should H reject his request. The presence of *A* in this case allows S to sound polite and casual. It is necessary for the face maintenance of both parties that the request is perceived as a casual question.

(p) A male colleague asks a female colleague for a date:

Zhe ge xingqi liu ni you meiyou shijian A?

Women qu kan dianying BA.

Are you free this Saturday A?

Let's go to the movie BA

Utterance-final BA in (p) lends a suggestive note ('Let's go') to the direct request, yet spoken with a soft tone, it can be seen to be persuading H to do X (See Lin 1981: 274). The illocutionary effect of BA is somewhat similar to this request: *Lai chi BA. Fan leng le*/Come and have your dinner BA. The food's getting cold'. In (p) S's intent is more towards persuading H to do X. A Beijing speaker in Singapore sees a similarity between the pragmatic function of final particle *A* and that of Singapore speakers' use of LA as in *Qu la*/Go la'. Final *la* is a polite, informal in-group marker used by Singapore speakers in a number of communicative functions, one of which has been that of reflecting emotive attitudes on the part of the speaker such as friendliness and persuasion (Kwan-Terry 1978).

In a request for direction (q), the use of particle *A* expresses S's intent to convey friendliness. One can say particle *A* here has a social function - i.e. contract the social distance between S and H, which is a customary verbal strategy in China. For instance, in Beijing when accosting elderly strangers it is polite for the young to use kinship terms to older addressees. Kinship terms showing respect for the older generation such as *Daye* (for males) and *Dama* (for females) are commonly used in Beijing⁵. However, in (q) where the addressee is a young lady and a kinship term of address is inappropriate, the alternative is to use a final particle. Final particle *A* in this context can be interpreted as expressing informality and politeness, somewhat similar to that of a polite term of address. At the same

⁵ As a participant observer in Beijing, I noticed that speakers when asking older addressees for road directions, often resorted to the use of final particles like *A* and kinship terms.

time *A* has the pragmatic effect of softening the confrontational tone of a plain interrogative. As a politeness measure, *A* complements the polite expression *qingwen*/‘please may I ask’, which is not unlike that of a polite attention-getter ‘excuse me’ in English.

(q) S asks stranger for direction to station:

Xiaojie, qingwen na huoche zhan zai nali A
Miss, where is this station *A*?

4.3. Interactional aspects of *Ne*: Context and function

In this section we examine the pragmatic effect of *NE*, which unlike *ba* cannot be used at the end of a declarative sentence. Its pragmatic meaning may appear fuzzy. Employed as a syntactic downgrader in a context of high *R*, it reflects *S*’s attitude towards the request - that of uncertainty, which is reflected in the slow, hesitant speech marked by pauses (..). *NE* can also be considered an ‘evincive’ (Schourup 1982) as when *NE* evinces introspection on the part of the speaker.

In my survey, out of the 16 scenarios on requests, the one which asks for a loan proved to be the most face threatening. Interviewees generally took some time to ponder even though some of them confessed that they had the experience of either been asked for financial assistance or had asked for help themselves. Considerable time was used for extensive verbal planning, covertly and overtly.

(r) A friend approaches another close friend to ask for a loan

Wo haizi yao dao Aozhou qu qiu xue, dan hai que shao yidian qian.

my child wants to go to Australia for studies, but still short of a little money.

Bu zhi dao ni shoutou you mei you? Ruguo you de hua, . NE..ni

don’t know you have or not with you? If you have, *NE*..you

shi bu shi jie gei wo yong? Wo NE.. Zai shenme shi hou keyi huan gei ni.

Is it (not) possible let me use? Wo NE.. Zai shenme shi hou keyi huan gei ni.

Is it (not) possible let me use? I *NE* will at a certain time return the money to you.

‘My child wants to further his studies in Australia, but we’re still short of a little cash. I was wondering if you happen to have some. If you have, *NE*.. would it be possible for you to lend it to me? I *NE* .. will return it sometime (specific date)’.

In the above request *NE* was often accompanied by a slowing down of speech, a drop in voice volume and pauses. These pauses which either precede or follow *NE*, suggest that *S* is hedging, which is a form of redress - Brown & Levinson’s equivalent of ‘Do not assume that *H* will cooperate’, or it can be considered to be a form of indirect politeness as described by R. Lakoff (1979). We find that *NE* occurs just before the core request followed by a pause: ‘If you have, *NE* .. would it be possible for you to lend it to me?’

This form of hedging signaled by the use of *NE* appears to be a planned rather than an unplanned verbal strategy. If we examine the occurrence of *NE* in this request, it can be seen that its position in the utterance is strategic rather than coincidental. For instance, it appears (1) at the point where *S* lays the groundwork for the core request - introducing the fact that the son is going overseas and (2) immediately before the core request for the loan. The use of the particle *NE* can arguably be interpreted as a deliberate emotive marker of

S's state of uncertainty to proceed with the bald-on-record request 'Lend me some money'. This form of 'avoid-confrontation' strategy is repeated by another interviewee whose core request was framed as a conventionally indirect request "Can you help me make up for the shortfall, about 500 Yuan?"

- (s) A: *Ni kan, haizi NE .. yao chu guo liu xue qu shengzhao.*
you see child NE wants to go overseas to further his/her study
- B: *Zhe shi hao shi.*
this is good.
- A: *Jingji shang NE .. hai que yidianr.*
finance NE still short of a little.
Cong jingji shang hai kui yidianr.
from finance aspect still short of a little.
Ni shenme.. Neng bang bang mang gei wo pu shang, dagai
you what ... able help to make up for it, about
wu bai yuan. Yihou, NE wo shenme shihou neng gei.
five hundred yuan later NE I -date-can return.
- A: You see, my child NE .. wants to go overseas to further her study
- B: This is good news
- A: Financially, NE .. we're still short of a little, from the financial aspect, we're short of a little.
can you, .. can you help to make up for the shortfall, about 500 yuan. Later, NE I'll return you ...

In this context of high R, one is persuaded to interpret the use of particle NE preceding the core request, as that of a deliberate act, which Schourup (1982: 8) quoting Sacks et al. describes as 'recipient design':

"a multitude of respects in which the talk by a party in a conversation is constructed or designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the co-participants" (1974: 727)

On the other hand, one could argue that NE mediates between introspective difficulty and external face wants, that before the core request, S experienced difficulty in verbal planning, and that NE reflects S's covert thinking: 'How can I phrase this request tactfully? In this context NE is akin to 'well' in English, which Schourup terms an 'evincive'. "The basic evincive use of well is to indicate that the present speaker is now examining the contents of the private world" (Schourup 1981: 66). If we substitute NE for well, (or even 'you know') we can have the utterance rephrased as follows:

You see, **well**, .. my child wants to further her studies overseas. Financially, .. **well**, (you know) we're just a little short.

Similar to well which Schourup says has a "temporizing and delaying" function, the interpretation of NE as an evincive can be argued from the viewpoint of S's reluctance to proceed. This reluctance can be involuntary - because of embarrassment, or deliberate - because S wishes to convey a degree of uncertainty (i.e. how to proceed with the request). Hence, NE as an emotive marker here not only expresses S's attitude of uncertainty but also signals topic shift: "my childfinancially...".

In describing and explaining the pragmatic function of NE in a bald on record request with high FTA, one would therefore have to take into account these dual functions:

That of covert thinking and overt hedging. NE, as a pragmatic particle, reflects S's covert thinking and communicates S's concern for his/her positive face and that of H's negative face. The emotive value of a pragmatic particle according to Ostman (1980) is implicit as it reflects the relative uncertainty about the acceptability of the propositional content of an utterance. It is this intention to convey uncertainty which weakens the illocutionary force of a bald on record request in a context of high R. Perhaps, this is what Chu (1984: 90) meant when he says that "*ne* meshes well with the Politeness Principle of Leech in its pragmatic function".

5. Particles, pragmatic devices and politeness

Particles *a*, *ba* and *ne* as seen in the above examples are shown to have an impact on the pragmatic meaning of direct requests. Like German modal particles (*doch*, *ja* and *auch*) their functions are illocutionary and interpersonal rather than propositional (Mollering & Nunan 1995). The biggest effect of the presence of any of these particles is that of reducing the illocutionary force of direct requests which employ IMPs.

Both A and BA have been useful in the softening of the imperative mood of direct requests as shown in the above examples. For instance, in a direct question 'What/Where is this A?' this utterance-final particle A takes away the threat of confronting H with a request which could sound very demanding. Its presence helps to effect a friendlier, more casual and less demanding tone. In a sense, the function of final particle A in an interrogative is analogous to Alleton's (1981: 99) descriptive function of *ne*, which when used in polite casual speech makes the question sound less like an interrogation. The *ba* particle, when used in IMPs, reduces the illocutionary effect of direct requests. Consequently, such requests which may otherwise be perceived as commands or instructions can now be regarded as exhortations. The use of *ne* on the other hand, mitigates the imposition of a bald on record request by allowing S to express an attitude of uncertainty, which is an indirect politeness strategy.

As pragmatic devices, particles *a* and *ba* play a subtle but vital role in most routine requests, and the exploitation of these particles requires considerable communicative competence. Chappell (1991: 43) considers particles to be an integral part of colloquial speech in natural conversation in Cantonese, and that "to become a proficient speaker of a language which makes heavy use of utterance-final particles,... a knowledge of the communicative function, including emotive and attitudinal nuances of each particle is crucial" (1991: 41). Chinese native speakers in this study, for instance, had to decide which is appropriate: (1) using *ba* or *qing*, or (2) using both in direct requests (M1 strategy). In China, more so than in any other country, the choice of a linguistic form of politeness is decidedly influenced by social parameters. For instance, one interviewee considered social class - status and ranking, to be an influencing factor on how he would formulate his request. For instance, on the train (See appendix), if H were a city dweller, he would more likely say to him:

A: *Duibuqi, qing ni ba chuanghu dakai yixia*
 Sorry, please open the window for a little while.

If the addressee appeared to be from the rural area, he would simply say:

- B: *Shifu, chuanghu ba ta dakai yixia* BA.
Shifu, open the window for a little while BA.

The difference between the two request realizations obviously, lies in the degree of formality expressed. In request (A), S uses polite expressions *duibuqi*/sorry (which because of its initial position, can be usefully exploited like an attention-getter) and *qing*/please, a relatively formal marker of politeness and social distance here. In request (B) S uses a polite term of address *Shifu* and final particle BA, which mark the situation as informal and the request as friendly and casual. Similarly in a classroom, it would not be appropriate for students to enlist their teacher's assistance with this request: '*Zhe ti zenme zuo A?*' How do you do this question A?' This request would sound too familiar and disrespectful. An appropriate request would be phrased without the use of final particle, such as: '*Laoshi, qingwen zhe ti zenme zuo?*' Teacher, please may I ask how do I solve this problem?' The use of particles in any form of interaction, is as Young (1994: 139) points out, subjected to the "communicative constraints imposed by status and power distinctions on Chinese strategies of persuasion" (Young 1994: 139).

There is, as illustrated by the data in this study, a close interaction between social parameters and appropriacy of particles in requests. Chinese native speakers themselves tend to view the use of utterance-final *a* and *ba* as appropriate when D is small. Take for instance this taped extract from a conversation amongst three Chinese flatmates; Speaker M (from Beijing) has just stepped into the flat, announcing she's hungry, and wants some dinner.

- M: Eh, *wp upi doamr er ;e. Shei bang wo qu zuo fan? Ni bang wo qu zuo ba.*
 'Eh, I'm a little hungry. Sho's helping me to prepare dinner? You help me to get dinner BA.'
 L: Eh, housewife (laughingly pointing to the other flatmate)

M is requesting her other two flatmates to take on the task of preparing dinner (M1 strategy: *Ni bang wo qu zuo ba*) after the indirect request ('Who's helping me to prepare dinner?') met with no response. In this informal setting where D is small, the direct request of getting H to prepare dinner, is downtoned by final particle BA, which marks the context as informal and the social distance as minimal. Clearly, BA functions as a marker of in-group solidarity, which is not unlike that of *eh*, a pragmatic particle in New Zealand English described by Meyerhoff as a solidarity marker as well. (Meyerhoff 1994).

In addition to the social parameter which influences speakers' use or non-use of final particles, there is another dimension which interacts with Speaker's intention to be direct and efficient i.e. the Gricean Maxim of Manner: 'Be perspicuous', 'Be brief' (Grice 1975: 45). In line with the 'Principle of Least Effort' (Lee-Wong 1994a), competent Chinese native speakers frequently exploit particles, in appropriate contexts to express their wants clearly and politely. These final particles help Chinese speakers, in Östman's words, to find "the appropriate balance between expressing their own needs, and taking those of the addressee into account." For them, "the Face-Saving aspect of verbal (and non-verbal) behaviour is characterized by an egocentric, direct, and efficient expression of wants and needs (e.g. direct requests). The Politeness aspect, however, suppresses such potential egocentricity from occurring overtly in our behaviour" (1981: 5). In the above request by M, "the appropriate balance" between direct expression of wants and the need to convey

negative politeness is achieved by an expression of mitigation. Thus instead of saying:

'You help me to get dinner'

S mitigates this directive with

'You help me to get dinner BA.'

BA, not unlike Singapore's LA tagged on to the end of an utterance, increases the utterance length and makes the request sound like a persuasion. This example of M's request illustrates how an IMP can be used to minimize utterance effort and imposition and at the same time maximize negative politeness, a communicative strategy which observes both the Principle of Least Effort and the Politeness Principle.

5. Concluding remarks

The data and analysis of particles *a/ya*, *ba* and *ne* focus on the way Chinese speakers employ these particles as politeness strategies in direct requests. These particles though not translatable into English nevertheless have been shown to play an indispensable role in the communicative function of politeness. Their pragmatic effects on utterance meaning are clearly instrumental in reducing the illocutionary force of direct requests and increasing the politeness aspect. However, the use of these particles is governed by contextual constraints. Particles *a*, *ba* and *ne* as shown in this study are used in contexts marked by a small to mid D, equal or low P, and a mid to high R. In other words, they are not used upward, neither are they used in formal contexts where D is large. In informal situations, particles *a*, *ba* and *ne* can be used as syntactic downtoners in direct requests which would otherwise sound interrogative, confrontational and imperious. Mitigation may take the form of reducing social distance between interactants, which is a Chinese cultural norm in conveying linguistic politeness in face-to-face encounters.

Viewed as pragmatic devices for face redress and politeness, these final particles can be gainfully studied within the broader framework of specific speech acts. Undoubtedly, the appropriacy of such particles relative to context is significant to pragmatic theory. What is discussed here is one of the many functions of Chinese particles. In discourse analysis, the pragmatics of *ne* invites closer examination; as a modal it is said to express puzzlement (Chu 1984). Indeed the study of particles (despite their elusiveness) in a participant framework is a valid and fertile field for further research. If finding interactive rules in natural speech constitutes a legitimate field of inquiry in pragmatics, then the study of particles is an area that merits further exploration.

Appendix

1 Restaurant/ Small food café	Customer in a restaurant has dropped a chopstick and asks for a replacement.
2 Department Store:	Customer asks sales assistant for help
3 Post Office	Customer asks postal clerk at counter about the cost of a registered parcel.
4 Market	Customer asks fruit vendor to select some fresh mandarins

5 Dinner	At dinner table, hostess asks guests not to stand on ceremony.
6 Dating	One colleague asks another for a date.
7 Direction	Speaker asks stranger for road direction.
8 Train	One co-passenger asks another if s/he would have open the window a little
9. International Call	Manager tells secretary he's expecting an international call.
10 Bike	A asks B (his/her close friend) to lend him his bike.
11 Footpath	Police asks street vendor to clear off the footpath.
12 Present	Daughter asks mother to help her get a present
13 Money	A asks B (his/her close friend) for a loan
14 Customs	Customs officer asks passengers to open suitcase for inspection
15 Changing Appointment	University supervisor wants to change date/time of appointment
16 Department	Departmental head wants chauffeur to pick a friend up from station
17 Home	Grandpa wants grandchild to answer the phone.
18 Homework	One sibling asks another for some help with homework.
19 Dinner time	Grandchild asks grandparent(s) to have their meal.

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