The utterance-final particle *la* in Taiwan Mandarin*

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1. Introduction

As a frequently-used utterance-final particle (hereafter: UFP) in Taiwan Mandarin, *la* has not received the same amount of attention in the literature as other Mandarin UFPs. One possible reason is that it is simply regarded as a fusion of the two UFPs *le* and *a* (signalling change of state and marking high relevance respectively; Li & Thompson 1981, Li 2006), and that it is therefore not recognized as a single UFP in its own right. Most likely, this is related to the fact that most studies on Mandarin are based on the northern variety of mainland China, in which *la* is best viewed as a fused form of the UFPs *le* and *a* (as was first proposed by Chao 1968: 796; see also Sun 1999, Qi 2002). The fusion normally exhibits the same property as its “unfused” counterpart (see (1b)).

(1) a. zhè ge bù néng chī la↓? (Chao 1968: 796)
   this cl neg can eat prt
   ‘This can’t be eaten anymore?’

b. zhè ge bù néng chī le a↓?
   this cl neg can eat prt prt
   ‘This can’t be eaten anymore?’

However, if tested on conversation speech data of Taiwan Mandarin, it becomes evident that the “fused *la* analysis” is insufficient in explaining all occurrences of UFP *la* in this variety of Mandarin.

In this article, as elsewhere (Cheng 1985, Wan & Jaeger 2003), Taiwan Mandarin refers to the Mandarin spoken in Taiwan, an island located off the southeastern coast of China with a population of 23 million. Previous studies have confirmed the claim by Kubler (1985: 157) that “the Mandarin commonly spoken in Taiwan differs considerably from that of Beijing in phonology, syntax, and lexicon”. According to Kubler (ibid.), these differences are due to
language contact with Southern Min, the major local Chinese variety spoken in Taiwan.

This paper aims at providing a more refined examination of the use of the UFP la in conversations than has been done to date. In the first part of this paper, I will argue that, in Taiwan Mandarin, two different UFP la must be distinguished (“fused la” and “simplex la”). In the second part, I propose a new analysis concerning the core function of simplex la in Taiwan Mandarin. I argue that the UFP la functions as an “upcoming-elaboration marker”. This hypothesis will then be tested on the basis of a review of previous studies and a detailed data analysis.

2. Data

Most of the data in my research come from the MTCC (Mandarin Topic-oriented Conversation Corpus) collected by the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. The MTCC consists of 29 dialogues between two speakers who are familiar with each other. Each pair of speakers was asked to discuss a topic related to a certain event having taken place in 2001. The total length of recording is 11 hours. Excluding the two dialogues which are basically spoken in Taiwan Southern Min (hereafter: TSM), 27 dialogues are used in this research. In addition to the MTCC data, some examples come from my own recordings, made in 2007 and 2008. The settings of my own recordings are essentially similar to the MTCC data.

3. Fused la and simplex la

The “fused la” can be found in both mainland Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin, as in examples (2a) and (2c). It has an “unfused” counterpart, shown in (2b) and (2d). The semantic meaning and function of each pair are the same.\(^1\) However, not all the occurrences of la in Taiwan Mandarin correspond to an “unfused” counterpart, as example (2e).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(2) a. } & \text{ tài dà la↑.} \\
& \text{too big prt} \\
& \text{‘(It's) too big.’} \\
\text{b. } & \text{ tài dà le a↑.} \\
& \text{too big prtprt} \\
& \text{‘(It's) too big.’}
\end{align*}
\]
c. tài dà la?  
   too big PRT  
   ‘(Is it) too big?’

d. tài dà le a?  
   too big PRT PRT  
   ‘(Is it) too big?’

e. tài dà le la.  
   too big PRT PRT  
   ‘(It’s) too big.’

The reason why I argue that the occurrence of la in (2e) cannot be taken as a fusion is that, if it were a case of fusion, the phrase tai da le la ‘(it’s) too big’ would have to be analyzed as *tai da le le-a ‘too big’, containing an ungrammatical sequence le le. Thus, as la in (2e) cannot be a fused form, it must be a simplex form. I will call this type of la “simplex la”. Quite intriguingly, simplex la does not exist in mainland Mandarin but only in Taiwan Mandarin. Speakers of mainland Mandarin judge examples such as (2e) as ungrammatical. As just mentioned, the fused la, on the other hand, occurs in both varieties.

Another reason for distinguishing two different types of la has to do with the pitch with which they are pronounced. Unlike fused la, which can be uttered with a rising or falling pitch (see (2a) and (2c)), simplex la is typically uttered with a low pitch as in (2e). This has been observed by Wu (2005), who claims that the la which can have a low pitch only, results from language contact with TSM.

The final difference between the two UFPs has to do with their meaning and function. Whereas “fused la” combines the function of le and a (signalling change of state and marking high relevance respectively; Li & Thompson 1981, Li 2006), simplex la has a completely different function, as I will show in detail in the following sections.

In the data I examined, simplex la can be found in four distributional contexts: disagreeing sequences, informing sequences, imperatives and questions. Out of 542 occurrences of simplex la in the MTCC, 436 occurrences of la are followed by an explicit elaboration or explanation and there is no interruption by the interlocutor. This is more than 75% of the cases. I therefore propose that simplex la in Taiwan Mandarin serves to signal an upcoming elaboration. However, sometimes the elaboration is not uttered explicitly but is left implicit. I distinguish between la that comes with explicit elaboration and la with an implicit elaboration. I consider the former as unmarked and the latter
as marked. The disagreeing sequences, informing sequences and imperatives analyzed in this article exemplify how la marks an upcoming elaboration.²

4. Disagreeing sequences

One sequential environment in which the UFP la often occurs in the data is the disagreeing sequence. In this type of sequence, la is attached to disagreeing utterances, including utterances such as dui ‘right’ or shì ‘yes’ which at first sight appear to be agreements but which are, as I argue, used to induce disagreements.

In excerpt (3), F and M are talking about Arantxa Sánchez Vicario, one of M’s favorite tennis players.

(3) 1F tā dào zuìhòu hǎoxiàng yě: bú shì dǎ de hén=3sg arrive last seem also NEG be play de very
2F =hǎo hon.
good PRT
‘It seems that she didn’t play quite well in the last few rounds, right?’
3F [kěnéng-
maybe
‘Maybe…’
4M [kěshí yì tā de niánjì zhèyàng dǎ= but as 3sg de age this.way play
‘But, considering her age,’
5M =wǒ juéde yǐjīng suàn shì bùcōu le la↓↓
1sg think already count be not.bad PRT PRT
‘I think the way she played was not bad at all.’
6F hum hum.
hum hum
‘Hum hum.’
7M nàxiē niánqīng de qiúyuán dòngzuò dōu xu- nàme=
those young de player action all xu- so
8M =de kuài=.
defast
de fast
‘Those young players all move so fast.’

After hearing F’s negative evaluation of Sánchez Vicario’s performance, M immediately states his disagreement using a sentence ending in la in lines 4–5 by providing another perspective (i.e. judging based on age) and his own assessment which is initiated by the epistemic expression wǒ juéde ‘I think.’ This
disagreement is prefaced with an explicit disagreeing token *kěshì* ‘but’. M’s *la*-attached assessment is then followed by his account of the opposed assessment.

Except from being attached to a direct disagreement, as in excerpt (3), *la* can also be attached to agreements, ranging from a single agreement token *duì* ‘right’ to an assertion or an assessment, in “agreement-plus-disagreement” turns. According to Pomerantz (1984: 72), this type of turn can be seen as weak disagreement, or, in other words, partial agreement/partial disagreement.

This usage of *la* is exemplified in excerpt (4), in which the interlocutors N and S discuss the position of the U.S. in international politics. Prior to excerpt (4), N has told S that the United States was the most powerful country in the world and that no other country dared to oppose the U.S., except China. N then modifies his own statement and claims that China is not that powerful today, which is opposed by S who says that China may be powerful in the future.

(4) 1N  *kěshì zhōngguó dàlǜ xiànzài yě bù shì hěn*=
but  China mainland now also neg be very
2N  =qiángdà ma.
   powerful PRT
   ‘But mainland China is not very powerful.’
3N  *duì bù duì?*
   right neg right
   ‘Right?’
4S  guò ge jǐ shí nián hòu. @@
   pass cl several ten year after (laughter)
   ‘Maybe in a few decades from now.’
5N  *duì la*.  
   right PRT
   ‘Right.’
6N  *kěshì- kěshì nǐ shuō zhōng- but- but 2sg say zhong-
   ‘but you said that China…’
7N  zhōnggòng nǐ shuō yào guò jǐ shí nián,  
   Chinese.communist.party 2sg say want pass several ten year
   ‘Communist China, you said the fact that it would take some
decades,’
8N  zhè shì wǒmen de xiǎngxiàng la.
   this be 1pl de imagination PRT
   ‘this is just our imagination.’

In line 5 in (4), N uses a *la*-attached agreement *duì la* ‘right’. However, as *duì la* is immediately followed by *kěshì* ‘but’, it becomes clear that N in fact does
not agree with the previous statement. Hence, *duì la* occurs exactly prior to a disagreement and can therefore be seen as a disagreement initiator in the turn design.

According to Levinson (1983), agreement, as a preferred response, does not require structural complexity. In other words, unlike disagreement, an agreement turn may be very simple. As he points out, the preferred seconds are unmarked (ibid: 307). They occur as structurally simple turns, whereas dispreferred seconds are marked by various kinds of structural complexity. For instance, the dispreferred seconds are typically delivered after some significant delay, accompanied with some preface marking with their dispreferred status or with some account of why the preferred second cannot be performed. Ford (2000: 297) likewise points out that “explanation is treated by interactants as normatively relevant subsequent to contrasts in a variety of functions”.

Given that an agreement turn does not require structural complexity, *la*-attached agreements seem to conflict with the proposed core function of *la*, viz. to project the upcoming elaboration. Here, I argue that the UFP *la*, which projects a following upcoming elaboration, converts an agreement into a disagreement initiator. As *la* projects an upcoming elaboration, it is not surprising that it is often found in disagreeing sequences. Formally, disagreement, as one of the dispreferred responses/seconds in conversation, requires more structural complexity than agreements. That is why I argue that this property of *la* is compatible with disagreement because the projected elaboration usually provides the account of the disagreement.

However, although *la* often occurs in disagreeing sequences, I argue that it is still a “upcoming-elaboration marker”, rather than a disagreement marker. In the following section, I will show some excerpts in which *la* projects the following elaboration in the informing sequences.

5. Informing sequences

Another sequential environment in which the UFP *la* often occurs in the data is the informing sequence. Most of the *la*-attached instances in an informing sequence occur in the answer to the interlocutor’s question, and in reporting/storytelling sequences.

Excerpt (5) exemplifies a *la*-attached answer. In this example, Y and Z, who are friends, talk about Z’s recent travel experience.
Here, Z's question in line 5 reflects his lack of knowledge about the issue in question. In lines 6–8, Y, as the reporter of this story, delivers two $la$-attached utterances when answering Z's question regarding the amount of money he spent during his trip and projects his following elaboration in line 9 (with interruptions by Z).

Similar to the example above, in storytelling/reporting sequences, the UFP $la$ also serves to project the following elaboration. Prior to excerpt (6), F has reported what she had read in an English magazine about Michelle Kwan, a female figure skater.
In line 5, F, after telling what she had read about Michelle Kwan, inserts an assessment of the issue in question (i.e., the report in the magazine is not very informative) in her own informing sequence. Having received M’s reactive token hum hum hum hum,\(^3\) she continues her turn by elaborating on the previous introduction and completes her utterance with the turn-ending marker zhè yàngzi ‘this way’.\(^4\)

Some occurrences of la are not followed by an explicit following elaboration, as in example (7). Prior to this excerpt, S told M that her friend got pregnant before getting married and this made her very surprised.

(7) 1M zěnme shuō ne?
how say PRT
‘What do you mean?’
2S yìnwèi tā bìng bú xiàngshì nà zhòng rén a.
   because 3SG at.all neg seem that CL person PRT
   ‘Because she does not seem like that kind of person.’

3S yǐqián gèn tā chúqù xǐ-
   before with 3SG go.out wash
   ‘Before I went out with her to…’

4S wàimiàn xǐ ge nà zhòng lùtiān wēnquán,
   outside wash CL that CL outdoor hot.spring
   ‘go to that sort of outdoor hot spring...’

5S tā gēn tā nánpéngyǒu qū xǐ,
   3SG with 3SG boyfriend go wash
   ‘she went there with her boyfriend.’

6S e fānzhèng jiù shì xiǎo hěn bǎoshǒu jiù dui=
   e anyway just be wash de very conservative just right
7S =le la→.
   PRT PRT
   ‘Eh...anyway they are taking the bath in a conservative way.’

8M chuān yǒngyī chuān yǒngkù.
   wear swimming.suit wear swimming.trunks
   ‘wearing swimming suit and swimming trunks.’

9S dui a @@.
   right PRT (laughter)
   ‘Right.’

In line 6–7, S concludes her explanation with a la-assessment. Here, the la-utterance is not followed by any following elaboration. Instead, the elaboration is implicit. To be specific, the speaker withholding the following elaboration strategically as to imply that the speaker has provided enough information and expects the hearer to understand it. In the following line, M expresses his understanding by adding details which can be seen as examples of S’s claim. This conversational cooperation is then confirmed by S in line 9.

6. Imperatives

In my data, la-attached imperatives are rarely followed by any elaboration or explanation. Excerpt (8) is a multi-party conversation. M and F are describing one of their mutual friends to a third interlocutor C, who does not know her.

(8) 1M nǐ xiān jiāng yíxià tā de dàbàn. tā de jūzhī=
   2SG first say a.while 3SG de dress.up 3SG de behavior
In this excerpt, M launches two imperative sentences (line 1–2 and 4) directed at F. In line 1–2, M makes her request to F by asking F to introduce H’s appearance and behavior. Acknowledging F’s hesitation, expressed by prolonged fillers such as e and en, M launches the second imperative sentence, which is la-attached. The force of the strength of the second imperative is stronger than the first one, which is due to la. I think that the withholding of a following elaboration after the la-attached imperative implies that the speaker believes that the reason for uttering this imperative is self-evident and need not be stated explicitly. In other words, the elaboration projected by the la-attached imperative is implicit.

In line 5 of excerpt (8), F accepts M’s request and starts to describe the appearance of the friend, which is a preferred response. If the response is dispreferred, for example, a rejection, the la-speaker is inclined to make the implicit projection explicit, as we see in excerpt (9).

Excerpt (9) is taken from a telephone conversation between Y, the director of a travel agency in Taiwan and his niece H, who lives in Europe. Prior to this excerpt, Y has told H about an apartment he plans to buy.

(9) 1Y nà nǐ yuè dǐ huí lái kàn la↓.  
that 2sg month bottom return come see  prt  
‘So you come back at the end of this month and take a look.’

2H shénme. han?  
what  prt  
‘What?’

3Y nà nǐ zìjǐ zuò fēijī huí lái.  
that 2sg self sit  plane return come see  one see  
'kind who is good at displaying her charm.'
In this excerpt, Y makes two la-attached imperatives in line 1 and 3–4. Y’s first la-imperative is questioned by H with a confirmation requester han, which expresses doubt or uncertainty concerning Y’s proposal. In line 3–4, Y rephrases his imperative and deploys the UFP la again at the end of his utterance. H’s production of the second rejection, including the term she selects (shénjīng lit. ‘nerve’, equaling English ‘are you nuts?’) and the manner of its delivery (laughter), reveal her doubts about the credibility of Y’s proposal. This triggers Y’s explicit production of the following elaboration in line 6.

Compared to cases with a following elaboration, I argue that the la-attached utterances without a following elaboration shown in (7), (8) and (9) carry a particular function in talk-in-interaction, which is a “marked use”. To be more specific, the withholding of a following elaboration is unexpected for the hearer and thus accomplishes some particular interactional aims. I agree with Myers-Scotton (1993: 78) who proposes that speakers have a sense of markedness regarding available linguistic codes for any interaction, but choose their codes based on the persona and/or relation with others which they wish to have in place. The markedness has a normative basis within the community, and speakers also know the consequences of making marked or unexpected choices. Because the unmarked choice is ‘safer’ (i.e. it conveys no surprises because it indexes an expected interpersonal relationship), speakers generally make this choice. But not always.

I suggest that, instead of giving a following elaboration (“unmarked” use), withholding a following elaboration can be seen as an interactional strategy to attract the hearer’s attention and display the speaker’s belief that s/he believes that the following elaboration is self-evident and does not need to be explicitly uttered. The hearer is expected to understand what the la-speaker intends to imply. In other words, the la-attached utterances have a stronger effect, as if one would tell the hearer “this is what I want to say and you should know”.

4Y =zài huí qù la↓.
again return go PRT
‘You get on the plane, take a look, and then you go back.’

5H shénjīng. @@@
nerve    (laughter)
‘Ha, are you nuts?’

6Y wǒ gěi nǐ chū qián a.
1sg give 2sg pay money PRT
‘I will give you the money!’
Finally, the hypothesis that la is used to signal that an elaboration is upcoming can be tested in another way as well. If the core function of la is to mark an upcoming elaboration, we expect fewer instances of turn switching with la than with other UFPs or other types of sentences. The reason is that, due to la, the interlocutors expect an elaboration following a la-utterance and will therefore try not to take the floor. For making such a comparison (between la-attached sentences and all other sentences), it would be necessary to make a detailed analysis of “all other sentences” in the corpus; there may, after all, be other conversational cues discouraging turn-switching as well. As I have not yet done this analysis, explanations of differences between utterances with la and those without must be left for future research. However, it is evident from the MTCC data that the use of la discourages the conversational partner to take turn, as more than 75% of the occurrences of simplex la are followed by an elaboration and there is no interruption by the interlocutor. Taking into consideration the existence of “marked la”, we conclude from this that the MTCC data support our hypothesis that la signposts an upcoming elaboration, which conversational partners take as a cue not to take the floor.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have analyzed the use of simplex la in Taiwan Mandarin. I conclude that the use of simplex la in this language can be divided into an “unmarked use” and a “marked use”. Both types of la share a common interactional function, i.e. projecting an upcoming elaboration. In the case of the former, the utterance is followed by an explicit elaboration; in the case of the latter, the elaboration is withheld, which has a special conversational effect.

As demonstrated in this paper, most of the occurrences of la are followed by an elaboration or explanation, which is the typical and unmarked use of la. The UFP la also occurs with agreements, which usually do not require any following elaboration. I argue that the projection of an elaboration when no elaboration is required functions to scale down the force of the agreement. In some cases, the agreement can turn into a disagreement. However, it is worth noting that even though the UPF la often occurs in disagreeing sequences, it is not a disagreement marker. As was shown in Section 5, la also signposts an upcoming elaboration in contexts without disagreement.

The marked la, which mainly occurs with imperatives, serves to attract the hearer’s attention to what the speaker using la implies. The strategic
withholding of the following elaboration displays the speaker’s belief that the la-attached utterance has provided sufficient information. Thus, the following elaboration is self-evident and does not need to be explicitly uttered. The hearer is expected to understand what the la-speaker wants to imply. Therefore, this type of use carries a stronger effect, as if one would say “this is what I want to say and you should know about it”.

Transcription conventions

The transcription symbols appearing in the examples are as follows:

- truncated word
: prolongation or stretching of the sound. The more colons, the longer the stretching.
| speech overlap
↑ rising or high pitch
↓ falling or low pitch
@@ laughter
= no interval

Notes

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1. Here, the pitch height of UFP a leads to two different readings: (2a) and (2b) are assertions, whereas (2c) and (2d) are questions.

2. Due to space constraints, questions are not discussed in this article.

3. Clancy et al. (1996: 356) term hum a “Reactive Token”, which refers to “a short utterance produced by an interlocutor who is playing a listener’s role during the other interlocutor’s speakership. That is, reactive tokens normally do not disrupt the primary speaker’s speakership, and do not in themselves claim the floor.”

4. Huang (1999: 87) points out that zhè yàngzi ‘this way’ often functions to mark the end of a turn contribution.

References


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