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. However, not all the occurrences of la in Taiwan Mandarin correspond to an “unfused” counterpart, as example (2e).

(2) a. tài dà la↑.
   too big prt
   ‘(It’s) too big.’

b. tài dà le a↑.
   too big prt prt
   ‘(It’s) too big.’
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c. tài dà \textit{la}\downarrow?
too big \textit{prt}
'(Is it) too big?'
d. tài dà \textit{le a}\downarrow?
too big \textit{prt \textit{prt}}
'(Is it) too big?'
e. tài dà \textit{le \textit{la}\downarrow}.
too big \textit{prt \textit{prt}}
'(It’s) too big.'

The reason why I argue that the occurrence of \textit{la} in (2e) cannot be taken as a fusion is that, if it were a case of fusion, the phrase \textit{tai da le la} ‘(it’s) too big’ would have to be analyzed as *\textit{tai da le le-a} ‘too big’, containing an ungrammatical sequence \textit{le le}. Thus, as \textit{la} in (2e) cannot be a fused form, it must be a simplex form. I will call this type of \textit{la} “simplex \textit{la}”. Quite intriguingly, simplex \textit{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 \textit{la}, on the other hand, occurs in both varieties.

Another reason for distinguishing two different types of \textit{la} has to do with the pitch with which they are pronounced. Unlike fused \textit{la}, which can be uttered with a rising or falling pitch (see (2a) and (2c)), simplex \textit{la} is typically uttered with a low pitch as in (2e). This has been observed by Wu (2005), who claims that the \textit{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 \textit{la}” combines the function of \textit{le} and \textit{a} (signalling change of state and marking high relevance respectively; Li & Thompson 1981, Li 2006), simplex \textit{la} has a completely different function, as I will show in detail in the following sections.

In the data I examined, simplex \textit{la} can be found in four distributional contexts: disagreeing sequences, informing sequences, imperatives and questions. Out of 542 occurrences of simplex \textit{la} in the MTCC, 436 occurrences of \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{la} that comes with explicit elaboration and \textit{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 =hào hon.
good prt
‘It seems that she didn’t play quite well in the last few rounds, right?’
3F [kěnéng-
maybe
‘Maybe…’
4M [kěshì yì tā de niánjì zhèyàng dǎ=
but as 3sg de age this.way play
‘But, considering her age,’
5M =wǒ juédé yǐjīng suàn shì búcùo 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::
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 dàlù 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 zhōnggōng nǐ shuō yào guò jǐ shí nián,
   Chinese.comunist.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.
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(5) 1Y suójí yángé lái jiāng wǒ shùjià de=
    so strict come say 1sg summer.vacation de
2Y =shíhòu qù Rìběn.
    time go Japan
    ‘So, strictly speaking, I went to Japan during the summer vacation,’
3Z hum.
    hum
    ‘Hum.’
4Y @@. qián yízhènzi qù Nánhéng.
    (laughter) before a.while go (place name)
    ‘and went to Nanheng a while ago.’
5Z duōshǎo qián huà le duōshǎo qián?
    how.many money spend ASP how.many money
    ‘How much? How much did you spend?’
6Y Nánhéng méi huà shénme qián la↓.
    (place name) neg spend what money PRT
    ‘For the trip to Nanheng I didn’t spend much.’
7Y kěshí qù Rìběn de shíhòu wǒ huà le wǔ=
    but go Japan de time 1sg spend ASP five
8Y =wàn duō la↓.
    ten.thousand more PRT
    ‘But I spent more than fifty thousand in Japan.’
9Y dui. nà-
    right that
    ‘Right, and…’
10Z ei zhè ou nǐ shì liǎng ge lǐbài hon.
    prt this PRT 2SG be two CL week PRT
    ‘Eh this…oh, you went for two weeks, right?’

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.
(6) 1F ránhòu yòu- yòu bā tā de nèi ge
then also also BA 3sg de that CL
‘And then, also, that…’
2F bā liūbīng dāngzuò shì tā xìngqù de dōngxì.
BA skating as be 3sg interest de thing
‘skating, she takes it as her hobby’
3M hum hum.
hum hum
‘Hum hum.’
4F ránhòu kōngzhōngyìngyǔ jièshào shì-
then (magazine’s name) introduce be
‘And then, Studio Classroom says…’
5F jiù shì- dàgài jièshào de hěn jiāndān la↓.
just be generally introduce de very simple PRT
‘anyway, they keep it quite simple.’
6M hum hum hum [hum.
hum hum hum
‘Hum hum hum hum.’
7F [duì ránhòu jiù shuō tā-
right then just say 3sg
‘Right, and then, it says, she…’
8F e, mán huì niàn shū de,
e quite can study book de
‘she’s also a good student.’
9F ránhòu: liūbīng yě liū de mán hǎo de zhè yàngzi.
then skating also skate de quite good de this way
‘And she’s also quite a good 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*, she continues her turn by elaborating on the previous introduction and completes her utterance with the turn-ending marker *zhè yàngzi* ‘this way’.

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 yinwei tā bing bu xiangshi na zhong ren a.
because 3S at.all neg seem that cl person prt
‘Because she does not seem like that kind of person.’
3S yiqian gen tā chuqu xi-
before with 3sg go.out wash
‘Before I went out with her to…’
4S waimian xi ge na zhong lutian wenquan,
outside wash cl that cl outdoor hot.spring
‘go to that sort of outdoor hot spring…’
5S tā gen tā nanpengyou qu xi,
3sg with 3sg boyfriend go wash
‘she went there with her boyfriend.’
6S e sanzheng jiu shi xi de hen baoshou jiu 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 chuan yongyi chuan yongku.
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 withholds 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 ni xianjiang yixia tā de daban. tā de juzhi=
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 dī 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 zījī zuò fēijī huí lái. kàn yí kàn=
that 2sg self sit plane return come see one see
4Y =zài huí qù  la↓.
    again return go PRT
    ‘You get on the plane, take a look, and then you go back.’
5H shénjìng. @@@
    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!’

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 (shénjìng 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”.

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 yàngzǐ ‘this way’ often functions to mark the end of a turn contribution.

References


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