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**Function and Meaning of Modal Particle A (啊)**

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## Function and Meaning of Modal Particle A (啊)

### 1. Introduction

Mandarin Chinese has a grammatical category that contains what is generally called *yǔqìcí* (语气词), a term that is translated into English as ‘modal particles,’ ‘mood particles,’ or ‘emotional particles.’ These particles primarily appear at the end of sentences and are often regarded as modifying a whole sentence rather than its linguistic unit; therefore, they are also known as ‘sentence-final particles’ or ‘sentence particles.’ Considering the high frequency of such particles in spoken Chinese than in written Chinese, Luke (1990) and Chu (2002) also refer to the term as ‘utterance particles’ or ‘utterance-final particles.’

Many linguists have observed that the occurrence of the modal particle is rare in formal written Chinese (see Alleton 1981:95-96; Li & Thompson 1981:290; Han Yang 1988:8; Luke 1990:10; Chappell 1991). This observation can be proven by formal Chinese writings, such as official documents, expository or scientific writings, or historical texts. Modal particles are also used with high frequency in daily conversational speech, as Chappell (1991) notes, ‘Particles are an integral part of colloquial speech, particularly in informal contexts.’ They are also familiarly present in writings that represent people’s everyday speech, in what Han Yang describes as ‘speech-written-down type’ of writing, such as ‘personal letters, plays or stories, etc.’ (1988:14).

The high frequency of use reported by Chappell (1991:40) proves the observation that modal particles play an important role in Chinese people’s use of their language. Native speakers of Chinese can use particles without any difficulty although more often than not, they are unable to verbalize the concrete meanings of the particles they use or find it almost impossible to explain what the particles mean (Kwok, 1984:111). It is arguable whether people who teach

Mandarin as a foreign language should have a solid understanding of the particles' meanings and uses to become competent users of the language themselves. Chappell's (1991) emphasis in the following quotation should apply to learners of Chinese as a foreign language:

To become a proficient speaker of a language that makes heavy use of utterance-final particles, as is the case with many East Asian languages, a knowledge of the communicative function, including emotive and attitudinal nuances of each particle is crucial.

Anyone who teaches Mandarin as a foreign language may agree that a sufficient understanding of the meanings and the uses of Chinese modal particles is hardly attainable from the descriptions or definitions in current Chinese textbooks and grammar books. For such teachers, the explanations are inadequate or problematic. Li and Thompson (1981:238) point out one of the reasons for the issues underlying such particles: 'Their semantic and pragmatic functions are elusive and linguists have had considerable difficulty in arriving at a general characterization of each of them.' Another main reason is that only a few studies have been conducted on most members of the Chinese modal particle system. Even in terms of major achievements, the meanings and the functions of the modal particles studied by different linguists vary from person to person or from book to book.

To find out what modal particles mean, this paper reviews the previous studies on the particle *a* and uses real spoken data as examples to validate the conclusions. There are three reasons for selecting the particle *a*. First, it is the most frequently used particle in everyday spoken Mandarin, which has been tested by Wang (2012:3). Wang's statistical examination of 36 dialogues indicates that out of the 549 tokens of 11 particles, 121 are occurrences of the modal particle *a*, which accounts for more than 22%. Such number and percentage are nearly double those of every other frequently used particle, namely, *ma*, *ba*, and *ne*. Second, the particle *a* has a wide syntactic distribution in

Mandarin. It occurs with all types of sentences, namely, declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamative. Last but not least, despite the perceptible salience of the particle in the daily speech of Mandarin speakers, Chinese grammarians and linguists have not reached an agreement on what exactly the particle's function is in situations where it occurs and on the question of its underlying meaning that enables it to play a role in various situations. The consequence is that teachers of Mandarin as a foreign language experience nothing short of frustration in explaining the particle to their students, or they simply choose to leave it unexplained. For their part, the students feel confused or simply dismiss it as something they can ignore and try to avoid using it.

This study aims to find the elusive meaning of the particle *a*. Specifically, it sets out to answer the following questions: 1. What kind of meaning does the modal particle *a* express? 2. Is there any relationship among the meanings when *a* expresses multiple meanings? 3. Is there any relationship between the meaning and the sentence types?

Chapter 2 presents a general description of and the literature review on the modal particle in question. The data and the adopted methodology are discussed in Chapter 3. Chapters 4 to 7 provide an analysis of the particle *a* in different sentence types and various contexts. The last chapter draws the conclusions and offers suggestions for further research.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of the current knowledge and understanding about the set of modal particles as a grammatical category, specifically the particle *a*. Section 2.1 briefly introduces modal particles from a linguistic perspective. Section 2.2 presents how the particle *a* is recognized by academia. Section 2.3 summarizes the supposed functions and meanings of the particle *a* in various sentence types. Section 2.4 supplies a critique overview.

### 2.1 Modal particles in Mandarin

Alleton (1981), Chappell (1991), and Chu (1998) employ the term ‘modal’ or ‘modality’ rather than ‘mood’ in discussing Chinese sentence particles that convey emotive and attitudinal meanings. Chappell explains, ‘Modality concerns a larger semantic field’ (1991).

Modal particles are generally placed under the *xūcí* (虚词) category of Chinese grammar, which are rendered in English as ‘empty words’ or ‘function words’ and usually include conjunctions, prepositions, particles, and interjections. In Mandarin, modal particles, such as *ma*, *ne*, *ba*, *a*, and *le*, usually appear at the end of sentences. Hu Mingyang excludes *le* from modal particles because of its aspectual functions (1981:347–350).

For Hu Yushu (1987:314), the modal particle is one of the major means to express a sentence mood (语气 *yǔqì*) (adapted from Kwok’s [1984:27] translation), which is next only to intonation. Many scholars, such as Zhang Bin (2006:582) and Zhang Yisheng (2000), agree with him.

Zhang Yisheng (2000:264–265) points out that the same declarative sentence with different modal particles can show various imperceptible tones and moods, as well as express different semantic distinctions and pragmatic

requirements. He cites the following example to emphasize the importance of the modal particle (2000:265):

(1) a. 你是 教师 吧?

*Nǐ shì jiàoshī ba?*

you be teacher BA?

'You must be a teacher.'

b. 你 是 教师 了?

*Nǐ shì jiàoshī le?*

you be teacher LE?

'You are a teacher, right?'

c. 你 是 教师 吗?

*Nǐ shì jiàoshī ma?*

you be teacher MA?

'Are you a teacher?'

d. 你 是 教师 呀?

*Nǐ shì jiàoshī ya?*

you be teacher YA?

'Unexpectedly, you are a teacher!'

In example (1), the four sentences are all yes-or-no questions asking, 'Are you a teacher?' Sentence (a) is conjecturing, sentence (b) is asking for confirmation, sentence (c) is inquiring, and sentence (d) is being taken by surprise.

According to Zhang Yisheng, the four sentences in example (1) have different sentence moods, while the fine distinction among the sentences is difficult to

express simply by intonation and interjection. Therefore, modal particles play an important role in Chinese grammar.

## 2.2 Phonetic variants of modal particle *a*

The modal particle *a* is an unstressed vowel that leads to its phonological linkage to its preceding syllables. Most forms of Chinese grammar, which includes a section about modal particles, have a description of the phonetic variants of *a* (see Y. R. Chao 1968:803; Huang Borong & Liao Xudong 1983:347; Zhu Dexi 1982:212; Yuyanban 1982:55). The descriptions can be concluded in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Variants of modal particle *a*

syllables preceding <i>a</i>	Phonetic variants	Chinese character
<i>a, ia, ua</i>	<i>+a → ya</i>	呀
<i>o, uo</i>	<i>+a → ya</i>	呀
<i>e, üe, ie</i>	<i>+a → ya</i>	呀
<i>i, ai, uai, ui, ei</i>	<i>+a → ya</i>	呀
<i>ü</i>	<i>+a → ya</i>	呀
<i>u, ou, iu, ao</i>	<i>+a → wa</i>	哇
<i>en, in, an, ian</i>	<i>+a → na</i>	呐 or 哪
<i>ne</i>	<i>+a → na</i>	呐 or 哪

<i>ang, iang, eng, ing, iong</i>	<i>+a → nga</i>	啊 or 呵
<i>zhi, chi, shi, ri, er</i>	<i>+a → ra</i>	啊 or 呵
<i>zi, ci, si</i>	<i>+a → za</i>	啊 or 呵
<i>le</i>	<i>+a → la</i>	啦

It should be noted that although phonetic variations occur in the modal particle *a*, its variants are still treated as the particle *a*. The phonetic forms *ya*, *wa*, and *na* and their corresponding Chinese characters 呀, 哇, and 呐 or 哪 are retained as in the original sentences. In the transcription of the collected data, the phonetic form depends on the speaker's pronunciation of *a*, and the corresponding Chinese character is used.

### 2.3 Modal particle *a* in the four sentence types

Chinese sentences can be divided into four types in terms of their usual functions. The four types are declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamative sentences (see Li Dejin & Cheng Meizhen 1988:352, 390–426; Gan Yulong & Qin Kexia 1993: 274–292).

As mentioned, the modal particle *a* has such a wide distribution that it can be applied to all four sentence types. This section summarizes the uses of the modal particle *a* in the four sentence types.

#### 2.3.1 Modal particle *a* in declarative sentences

Li Dejin and Cheng Meizhen define a declarative sentence as a statement that is 'used to state a thing or a view' (1968:805). Different scholars offer various



opinions. First, Y. R. Chao (1968:805) posits three functions of the particle *a* in declarative sentences.

a. It expresses 'impatience' when making a statement. For example:

(2) 我 并 没 做 错 啊!

*Wǒ bìng méi zuò cuò a!*

I ADV not do wrong!

'I didn't do wrong!'

b. It marks an utterance as a 'reminder':

(3) 本 来 你 也 知 道 啊 ， 也 不 用 再 说 啊 。

*Běnlái nǐ yě zhīdào a, yě búyòng zài shuō a.*

originally you also know A, also not-need again say A.

'As you already know, and I don't have to say it again.'

a. It marks an utterance as a 'warning':

(4) 这 个 人 的 话 是 靠 不 住 的 啊!

*Zhège rén de huà shì kào búzhù de a!*

this people GEN words be rely not-on STP A!

'This man's words are unreliable!'

Lǚ (1980:42) shares Chao's opinion that at the end of declarative sentences, the modal particle *a* expresses an explanation or reminds someone, sometimes with an impatient mood. They provide some examples about which instances the particle *a* plays a role as an explanation or a reminder.

(5) 你 说 什 么 ？ 我 听 不 清 啊。

*Nǐ shuō shénme? Wǒ tīng bù qīng a.*

you say what? I listen not clear A!

'What are you saying? I cannot hear you clearly.'

(6) 光 着 脚 走 不 了 路 哇。

*Guāng zhe jiǎo zǒu bù liǎo lù wa.*

bare ASP foot walk not ASP road WA.

'Being barefooted, I cannot walk.'

However, Lü does not include a detailed analysis of what specific function the particle *a* performs in each sentence.

Several scholars agree with Chao and Lü on this point; for example, Zhu Dexi (1982:231) mentions that the particle *a* has a reminding or a warning tone. Liu Yehua (2001:1003) concludes that the particle *a* can soften an commanding tone to a reminding tone and gives some examples. Zhang Yisheng (2000:315) also emphasizes both reminding and explaining functions but differs from Liu in finding that the particle *a* can strengthen the tone.

Li and Thompson (1981) conduct a different analysis from the above-mentioned ones. For them, the particle *a* 'performs the function of

reducing the forcefulness of the message conveyed by the sentence' (p.313). To prove their point, they use Chao's examples (already given in (2) and (4)) as their evidence.

(2) 我 并 没 做 错 啊!

*Wǒ bìng méi zuò cuò a!*

I ADV not do wrong!

'I didn't do wrong!'

According to Li and Thompson, the modal particle *a/ya* does not indicate impatience, as shown in Chao's analysis. 'The utterance itself [...] conveys the message that the speaker is impatient.' They state, '*A/ya* functions merely to reduce the force of the message' (p.316). They also cite Chao's example in which the particle *a* has a warning function, as follows:

(4) 这 个 人 的 话 是 靠 不 住 的 啊!

*Zhège rén de huà shì kào búzhù de a!*

this people GEN words be rely not-on STP A!

'This man's words are unreliable!'

They argue that '*a/ya* doesn't make [an] utterance into a warning' (p.316). They assert that the warning message is inferred from the literal meaning of the sentence. *A/ya* is used again to 'reduce the forcefulness of the message conveyed by the utterance' (p.317). From their description, it can be concluded that they view the function of the particle *a* in declarative sentences as a pragmatic 'down-toner.'

The book *Xiàndài Hànyǔ (Modern Chinese)* compiled by *Běijīng Dàxué Zhōngwénxì Hànyǔ Jiàoyán Shì* (1993) shows a different view. They conclude that the modal particle *a* denotes ‘the mood of assertion’ (申明的语气 *shēnmíng de yǔ qì*), and ‘it usually presents some strong emotions’ (p.376). They also provide examples to illustrate their opinion.

(7) 这不是水, 这是汽油啊!

*Zhè bú shì shuǐ, zhè shì qìyóu a!*

this not be water, this be petrol A!

‘This is not water, this is petrol!’

(8) 我不是故意的啊!

*Wǒ bú shì gùyì de a!*

I not be on-purpose STP A!

‘I didn’t do it on purpose!’

They believe that the particle *a* expresses the speaker’s strong emotion but do not mention what kind of emotion the particle actually conveys in speech.

Jin (2011) raises a different point. She divides declarative sentences into evaluative and illustrative types and provides the following two examples:

(9) 味儿不对呀。

*Wèir bú duì ya.*

smell not right YA.

‘The smell is not right.’

(10) 这是好消息呀。

*Zhè shì hǎo xiāoxi ya.*

this be good news YA.

‘This is a good news.’

In Jin’s opinion, the modal particle *a* in declarative sentences expresses an amazed feeling because the speaker finds some new situations that are against his or her original thoughts. The writer concludes that the particle *a* functions as the speaker’s ‘counter-expectation’ (反预期 *fǎn yùqī*) (2011:89–90).

The cited literature shows that the modal particle *a* in declarative sentences demonstrates several distinct meanings and functions. First, many forms of Chinese grammar take the particle as an indicator of the speaker’s impatience and as a marker of various speech functions, such as explaining, reminding, and warning. Others treat the particle *a* as a down-toner or an assertion marker that expresses the speaker’s strong emotion. Jin regards the particle *a* as expressing the speaker’s counter-expectation.

### 2.3.1 Modal particle *a* in imperative sentences

In Mandarin, the modal particle *a* can occur in imperative sentences. Most researchers adopt the multiple-function view that the presence of the particle *a* in an imperative sentence is intended to mark the imperative as a request, a command, an urging, a reminder, a warning, an exhortation, or a persuasion (see Y. R. Chao 1968:803–806; Lü Shuxiang 1980:42; Hu Mingyang 1981:347–350; Zhu Dexi 1982:231; Liu Yuehua 2001:1003). However, most writers only assign some function labels to the particle *a* and provide several sample sentences

without discussing them further or identifying the kind of function or meaning of the particle *a* in each sample sentence. Examples (11) and (12) are provided by Y. R. Chao (1968), who views the particle *a* in them as indicating a command.

(11) 说呀，别害怕呀！

*Shuō ya, bié hàipà ya!*

say YA, do-not afraid YA.

'Say it! Don't be afraid'

(12) 走啊！咱们都走啊！

*Zǒu a! Zánmen dōu zǒu a!*

go A, we all go A!

'Let's go! Let's all go!'

Li and Thompson (1981) maintain that the modal particle *a* performs the same function in imperative sentences as in declarative ones—'to reduce the forcefulness of the message conveyed' (p.313). They also critically comment on Chao's point that the particle *a* issues a command in imperative sentences:

*A/ya* occurs with commands. Again, it is not the function of *a/ya* to signal that the utterance is a command. Rather, the utterance itself signals that it is a command, and *a/ya* has the usual function of reducing the forcefulness of the command (p314-p315).

To pursue their point, they use another utterance—*chīfàn* 'eat'—as an example. The sentence *Chīfàn* is an order addressed to someone to eat food right now, but if the particle *a* is attached to the sentence, then it would be 'a much more friendly command' (315). For Li and Thompson, the particle *a* is still a 'down-toner,' a 'tone-softer,' or a 'politeness indicator' but does not make a discourse as stated by the various scholars mentioned above.

An observation which is made by Wang (1985) appears to contrast again with that of Li and Thompson. Wang also uses examples (13) and (14) to support

his point.

(13) 姑娘， 喝水呀。

*Gūniang, hē shuǐ ya.*

girl, drink water YA.

'Girl, drink some water.'

(14) 张 姑娘 又 催 道：“走哇，姐姐。”

*Zhāng gūniang yòu cuī dào: "Zǒu wa, jiějie."*

Zhang girl, again urge say: "go WA, sister."

'Miss Zhang said again by way of urging: "Go, sister."'

Wang argues that the modal particle *a* can 'increase the forcefulness of the speech'; consequently, the imperative sentence will be more of an urging act than a command (1985:227). According to Wang, the particle *a* in an imperative sentence serves to intensify the sentence mood, as opposed to a down-toner.

As mentioned, Jin finds that the modal particle *a* also expresses the speaker's counter-expectation. She provides examples (15) and (16) in her paper.

(15) 你 等等， 别 走 哇！

*Nǐ děngdeng, bié zǒu wa!*

you wait wait, do-not go WA.

'(You) Wait, don't leave!'

(16) 你 说 话 呀！ 说 话 呀！

*Nǐ shuō huà ya! Shuō huà ya!*

you speak words YA! Speak words YA !

'(You) Speak! Speak!'

From the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that the basic function of the modal particle *a* in imperative sentences can be divided into four types: a marker of various directive functions, a down-toner, an intensifier, and a

counter-expectation.

### 2.3.2 Modal particle *a* with exclamation

Exclamatives are widely defined as sentences which express strong emotions. In Mandarin, adverbs such as *duō* 'much', *duōme* 'much', *zhème* 'so much', *hǎo* 'so', *zhēn* 'really' and so on often occur with exclamatives. It is widely recognized that in Mandarin the modal particle *a* often emerges at the end of an exclamative sentence (see Lü Shuxiang 1982; Yuyanban 1982; Liu Yuehua 1983; Huang Borong & Liao Xudong 1983; Li Dejin & Cheng Meizhen 1988; Gan Yulong & Qin Kexia 1993). All these works provide examples of exclamative sentences with modal particle *a* attached. The basic function of particle *a* with exclamatives is concluded as 'indicating exclamation' or 'intensifying the exclamatory mood'. In addition, without particle *a*, the sentences express strong emotion are also exclamatives, that is, exclamatives are not necessarily ended by particle *a*. For example, the sentence *nǐ hǎo bàng!* 'You are so great!', expressing speaker's strong admiration without particle *a*, is a exclamative.

### 2.3.3 Modal particle *a* in exclamative sentences

Exclamative sentences are widely defined as statements that express strong emotions. In Mandarin, adverbs, such as *duō* 'much', *duōme* 'much', *zhème* 'so much', *hǎo* 'so', *zhēn* 'really', and so on, often occur in exclamative sentences. It is widely recognized that in Mandarin, the modal particle *a* often appears at the end of an exclamative sentence (see Lü Shuxiang 1982; Yuyanban 1982; Liu Yuehua 1983; Huang Borong & Liao Xudong 1983; Li Dejin & Cheng Meizhen 1988; Gan Yulong & Qin Kexia 1993). All these works provide examples of exclamative sentences with the modal particle *a*. The authors conclude that the



basic function of the particle *a* in an exclamative sentence is to indicate an exclamation or intensify the exclamatory mood. Even without the particle *a*, the sentences expressing strong emotions are also exclamative; in other words, such sentences do not necessarily end with the particle *a*. For example, the sentence *Nǐ hǎo bàng!* 'You are so great!', expressing the speaker's strong admiration without the particle *a*, is an exclamative type.

#### 2.3.4 Modal particle *a* in interrogative sentences

It is well known that interrogative sentences are characteristically used to ask questions. In Mandarin, the modal particle *a* is found to occur in five main types of interrogative sentences: specific (特殊疑问句 *tèshū yíwèn jù*), alternative (选择疑问句 *xuǎnzé yíwèn jù*), yes-no (是非疑问句 *shìfēi yíwèn jù*), A-not-A (正反疑问句 *zhèngfǎn yíwèn jù*), and rhetorical (反问句 *fǎnwèn jù*).

Specific interrogative sentences contain question words, such as *shéi* 谁 'who', *shénme* 什么 'what', *zěnmē* 怎么 'how', *nǎr* 哪儿 'where', and so on. These question words are equivalents of the 'wh-' words in English. What Their difference is that in English, such wh-words must be placed at the beginning of the sentences, whereas in Mandarin, sentences containing a question word have the same word order as their corresponding declarative sentences. The two dialogues below will illustrate the difference between them:

- (i) - What do you eat?  
- I eat bread.

- (ii) - *Nǐ chī shénme?*  
You eat what? (=What you eat?)  
- *Wǒ chī miànbāo.*  
I eat bread.

Alternative interrogative sentences usually use the disjunctive *háishì* 还是 (or) to connect two or more alternatives that listeners can choose from, for example, 你去还是我去? *Nǐ qù háishì wǒ qù?* 'Are you going, or am I going?', or 你是学生还是老师还是都不是? *Nǐ shì xuéshēng háishì lǎoshī háishì dōu búshì?* 'Are you a student or a teacher or neither?'. The literature also refers to questions of the alternative type as 'A-or-B questions.'

A-not-A interrogative sentences juxtapose the positive and the negative forms of the predicative verb or adjective of the sentence, for example, 你去不去? *Nǐ qù bú qù?* 'Are you going or not?', or 这个好不好? *Zhège hǎo bù hǎo?* 'Is this good or not?'.

Syntactically, yes-no interrogative sentences are declarative-form questions as they all take a declarative sentence form prior to the ending particle, have an interrogative tone, and ask listeners to answer with 'yes' or 'no.' An example is 你明天来吗? *Nǐ míngtiān lái ma?* 'Will you come tomorrow?'.

Rhetorical interrogative sentences are different from the others in that they convey strong opposite meanings. For example, 'Who cares?' means 'No one cares,' or 'I don't care' (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990:24). In translating from English to Chinese and vice versa, the term 'rhetorical interrogatives' is often rendered as *fǎn wèn jù* (sentences that ask questions in the opposite direction). An example is 你知道什么呀? *Nǐ zhīdao shénme ya?* 'You know nothing'.

The modal particle *a* can be attached to all five types of interrogative sentences presented above. The following paragraphs summarize some scholars' points about the particle *a* in interrogative sentences.

For specific interrogative sentences, Y. R. Chao concludes that the function of the particle *a* is to soften the tone of a question, which is echoed by other

scholars (Lü Shuxiang 1980; Li & Thompson 1981; Zhu Dexi 1982; Liu Yuehua 1983). Li and Thompson remark that ‘the questions with the particle *a/ya* are much softer and thus tend to suggest kindness on the part of the speaker’ (p.313).

In contrast to most scholars’ politeness view of the particle *a* as a down-toner, Han Yang (1988:313) treats the particle as an intensifier in different types of interrogative sentences. She gives two examples with her own translation, as follows:

(17) 张三 喜欢 看 什么 书 哇?

*Zhāngsān xǐhuan kàn shénme shū wa?*

Zhangsan like look what book WA?

‘What book does Z3 like to read (do tell me)?’

(18) 张三 去 不 去 呀?

*Zhāngsān qù bú qù ya?*

Zhangsan go not go YA?

‘Is Z3 going or not (do tell me)?’

For the function of the particle *a* in interrogative questions, such as yes-no types, most scholars treat the particle as an interrogative particle that marks a declarative-form utterance. Y. R. Chao calls it a ‘confirmation question’:

It is used for asking for confirmation of a posted statement, with the effect of ‘Did I hear you right?’ (1968:804).

Most scholars, such as Lü Shuxiang (1980:42–43), Zhu Dexi (1982:212), Liu Yuehua (1983:240), and Li Yingzhe (1990:51), present examples and agree that the particle *a*-suffixed declarative-form questions ask for confirmation. However, Liu Yuehua makes a specific observation in his works that *a*-suffixed declarative-form questions ‘indicate that the speaker feels a certain degree of doubt or even unexpectedness and therefore he/she seeks confirmation from the addressee’ (p.240).

Han Yang makes a similar remark that the particle *a* conveys ‘an added tone of surprise/disbelief’ when attached to a declarative-form question (38). She provides the following example with her own translation:

(19) 张三 去 呀?

*Zhāngsān qù ya?*

Zhangsan go YA?

‘Is Z3 going? (that’s unexpected.)’

Li and Thompson offer different opinions and the following two examples to illustrate their point:

(20) *Nǐ lái?*

you come?

‘Are you coming?’

(21) *Nǐ lái a?*

you come A?

‘Are you coming?’

Both sentences are confirmation questions, but example (21) is less forceful and more endearing or more polite than example (20). Thus, they insist that the modal particle *a* performs the function of reducing the force of the question (1981:314).

For Jin (2011), regardless of whether the particle *a* is attached to specific, yes-no, A-not A, or alternative interrogative sentences, its main function is always to express the speaker's counter-expectation. For example:

(22) 你 就是 唐 元豹 呀?

*Nǐ jiùshì Táng Yuánbào ya?*

you just be Tang Yuanbao YA?

'Tang Yuanbao is you?'

(23) 你 说 的 商店 在 哪 啊?

*Nǐ shuō de shāngdiàn zài nǎ a?*

you say STP shop be where A?

'Where is the shop you mentioned? (I can't find it.)'

According to Jin (2011:72–77), examples (22) and (23) both reflect that the fact differs from what the speaker originally thought. However, what differs between the particle *a* in interrogative and in declarative sentences is that the former requests the listener to answer the question; thus, the particle *a* lends the interrogative sentence an commanding mood.

In conclusion, as for the modal particle *a* in specific, A-not-A, and alternative interrogative sentences, most scholars treat it as a down-toner and a politeness indicator used to soften the tone. Han Yang considers it an intensifier of the tone. Regarding the modal particle *a* in yes-no interrogative sentences, most scholars

believe that it acts as an interrogative particle for confirmation. Liu Yuehua and Han Yang additionally observe that it conveys a tone of surprise, unexpectedness, or disbelief when asking for confirmation. Li and Thompson still believe that it is a down-toner and a politeness indicator to soften the tone of a confirmation question. Jin insists that the modal particle *a* expresses the speaker's counter-expectation and an commanding mood.

#### 2.4 Critical overview

The review of the literature on the modal particle *a* reveals an indisputable agreement on the particle's morphophonemic features and syntactic distribution. However, in describing the meaning and the use of the particle *a*, confusions and disparities present themselves. The particle itself is complex, as reflected by the literature review, but the lack of extensive and intensive research is also a reason for this problematic situation. Other major contributing factors appear to be (i) the use of insufficient and self-constructed data and (ii) the lack of effort in characterizing the particle's modal properties.

##### (i) The use of insufficient and self-constructed data

Most of the works that focus on the particle cite examples that are actually taken from well-known classics, modern Chinese novels, and screenplays (see, e.g., Wang Li 1985; Lü Shuxiang 1982; Fang Yuqing 1992, etc.). The sample sentences in these works are authentic in the sense that the literary classics from which they are extracted resemble the way that people speak in daily life. Nonetheless, in many instances, conclusions are drawn by examining only a limited number of cases. This may explain different scholars' varying observations of the same particle though they all use authentic data. Needless to

say, conclusions based on limited data may appear applicable to some cases but will not fit others.

Some works use self-created examples. Specially, they present a few sentences formed with the particle *a* attached and then compare them with the sentences without the particle by appealing to the researchers' own intuitive feelings about the differences. They then arrive at conclusions about the particle's function and meaning. Native speakers' intuitions can play an important role in linguistic research but only on a sound database.

(ii) The lack of effort in characterizing the particle's modal properties

Most forms of Chinese grammar that have a paragraph or a section on the particle *a*, likely provide a list of the particle's functions. The following are a few items on such a list, taken from the major accounts about the particle in the literature. Y. R. Chao (1968:803–806) provides the following list of 10 functions for the particle *a*:

1. Impatient statement
2. Reminder
3. Warning
4. Starting a question (softening its tone)
5. Confirmation question
6. Vocative particle
7. Command
8. Exclamation
9. Pause for the listener
10. Enumeration

Lü Shuxiang (1980:42–43) proposes the following functions:

1. It indicates an explanation, a reminder, or impatience when attached to declarative sentences.

2. It indicates a request, an urging, a command, a warning, and so on when attached to imperative sentences.
3. It softens the tone of speech when attached to specific and alternative interrogative sentences.
4. It occurs in yes-no interrogative sentences.
5. It indicates the speaker's hesitation or calls the listener's attention as a pause marker.
6. It indicates an enumeration.
7. It is used after a hypothetical or a conditional clause.
8. It indicates a long process after repeated verbal phrases.

Liu Yuehua (1983) lists as many as 14 uses of the particle *a*. These include 2 for declarative sentences (reminding and explaining) 2 for imperative sentences (reminding and exhorting) 3 for interrogative sentences (indicating doubt or surprise with a yes-no question and indicating an inquiry with an alternative interrogative sentence), 1 for being attached to exclamative sentences and 6 for being in a phrase-final position.

Wang Li (1985) lists the following three functions of the particle *a*:

1. It indicates persuasion by seeking attention to the truth.
2. It indicates urging by intensifying the force of an imperative sentence.
3. It helps form questions.

Zhu Dexi (1982:212) also has a short list:

1. It indicates a reminder or a warning in declarative and imperative sentences.
2. It lends a note of informality to specific and alternative interrogative sentences.
3. It seeks confirmation in yes-no questions.

Lists such as the preceding ones reflect the functional complexity of the particle's behavior; however, the characterization of the particle that can account



for its complex behavior is not provided. The absence of such characterization makes it difficult to find the interconnections among these numerous functions.

Han Yang (1988:38) concludes that the particle *a* in declarative and specific and alternative interrogative sentences is used as 'an intensifier of the speech act force of a sentence.' However, in her work, for the particle *a* in yes-no interrogative sentences, 'intensifying' the interpretation is changed to 'that's unexpected.' Regarding the other sentence types, she does not present a detailed analysis.

Li and Thompson (1981) assert their position that the essential function of the particle *a* is to reduce the forcefulness of a speech act. However, in their discussion, they do not include the pervasive presence of the particle in exclamative sentences. If the particle serves to reduce the forcefulness of people's statements, it is difficult to explain its frequent use with exclamative utterances that enable a speaker to express one's intense emotions to the full extent. The validity of Li and Thompson's characterization of the particle *a* is undermined by the lack of inclusiveness in their discussion.

### 3. Approach to the Study

As reflected in the literature review, the modal particle *a* can be put into a variety of uses in a wide range of situations. Many scholars present different conclusions and comments on the meaning and the function of the particle *a* in different sentence types. To lay a solid foundation for further studies, real spoken materials are used to check the reliability and the authenticity of the previous studies.

In this thesis, Jin's work (2011) is the main research object for the following reasons: (i) Her work is relatively new compared with the studies of Chao (1968), Lü (1980), and Li and Thompson (1981). (ii) Her research material is collected from novels but not real daily conversations, so its authenticity needs to be assessed. (iii) Jin's conclusion about the particle *a* vastly differs from those of others that if it can be proven by real spoken materials, her findings will provide scholars and teachers who teach Chinese to foreigners with a new understanding of modal particles and another research direction. It should be mentioned that although Jin's work is the main research object, other scholars' findings are also compared to draw comprehensive and valuable conclusions as much as possible.

#### 3.1 Language data

The introduction has pointed out modal particles' high rate of usage frequency in daily conversations. Considering the language divergence among individuals and to avoid drawing conclusions from self-generated data, the spoken material in this thesis involves speakers representing both sexes and different ages, hometowns, and other personal backgrounds, as well as their conversations in different situations.

The research material is a well-known Chinese sitcom entitled 'iPartment 4' (《爱情公寓4》 *àiqíng gōngyù*). In each episode, about 40 minutes (without commercials and ending songs), 8 characters, including men and women aged 18 to 50, live in the same apartment, show the audience a real city life, and talk in humorous and relaxed language.

The major advantage in using a sitcom such as iPartment 4 is its realistic nature. The stories are based on young people's real lives, and the actors are trained to act and talk naturally in the shooting settings. Compared with recorded interviews and conversations, dramas and sitcoms such as iPartment are more realistic because participants cannot be fully at ease when they know they are being recorded (see Labov 1972 about the observer's paradox). In other words, the participants may act unnaturally or become inhibited in their speech and end up not talking as they usually do.

Diversity is the second reason for choosing the sitcom as the research material. The eight characters in the sitcom have relationships of various types and interact with others in different roles, including aunt and nephew, boyfriend and girlfriend, teacher and students, employer and employee, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and so on. The interactions also occur in various settings and contexts, whereas it is difficult for a researcher to find such a group of people and such contexts and record the conversations in a preset environment.

Moreover, according to the interview with the lead actor (Internet 2012), the actors were ad-libbing to add popular jokes and funny stories, which presented a wonderful performance effect. Their improvised performances and conversations mostly avoided fabricating data from scripted conversations and ensured the authenticity of the spoken data.

Finally, for a well-known sitcom, the episodes of iPartment 4 are easily available. This means that anyone can access the data again for further studies and analyses if necessary.

iPartment 4 is a 24-episode sitcom. The first 20 minutes of the first episode have been transcribed by myself to be analyzed as research material. Not every word spoken in the video has been transcribed. The dialogues where the particle *a* is not spoken or not closely related to the utterances have been omitted from the transcription, indicated by ellipses in brackets. This spoken material is used for checking the usage frequency, function, and meaning of the modal particle *a* in different sentence types.

### 3.2 Analytical procedures

To illustrate the relationship between the meaning of the particle *a* and the types of sentences to which it is attached, all the sentences are divided into four. Jin divides the sentence types into three: declarative (including general declarative and exclamative), interrogative, and imperative. Considering that the exclamative sentences account for over 10% of the spoken material, this paper discusses this sentence type separately.

Excerpts from the transcribed spoken material are used as examples. The character's dialogue lines are presented as Pinyin transcriptions, with English glosses vertically aligned between the corresponding words and the English translation. The Pinyin lines in the examples are all in italics. The token of the particle *a* that is the focus of the discussion about a particular dialogue is underlined in the Pinyin lines. The English translations are done by myself, using a linguistic research approach and based on the English version of the sitcom that can be found online. In presenting the dialogue examples, relevant contexts about the particle *a* have been chosen in the hope that readers could have a

sense of the manner in which the characters talk to one another. The starting time of the context can be found beside each example's serial number.

The utterances with and without the particle *a* are compared. The analysis checks whether the sentence without the particle *a* is still acceptable in the same context and whether it fits the context. As for yes-no interrogative sentences, another particle, *ma*, which is often treated as a marker of interrogative sentences, takes the place of the particle *a* to find out whether the meaning of the sentences is changed. Evaluating the meaning of sentences with and without the particle *a* can reveal its function and elusive meaning and check whether or not Jin's claims are defensible in the case of the spoken data rather than the written data that she herself has used.

#### 4. Analysis of Particle *a* in Declarative Sentences

This chapter focuses on the use of the particle *a* in declarative sentences uttered in discourse contexts. In this corpus, 45 sentences contain the modal particle *a*, including 18 declarative sentences with a particle at the end. To illustrate the meaning and the function of the particle *a* with declarative sentences, Jin first divides declarative sentences into three types: evaluative, illustrative, and response.

##### 4.1 Modal particle *a* at the end of evaluative declarative sentences

For Jin (2011:53), an evaluative declarative sentence means that the speaker assesses something's value or property based on his or her subjective thoughts. According to Jin's examples, which are chosen from novels, the particle *a* in an evaluative declarative sentence mainly expresses the speaker's surprise, that is, the function of 'counter-expectation subjectivity' (反预期主观性 *fǎn yùqī zhǔguān xìng*). Sometimes, the particle *a* also indicates that what the speaker says contradicts the expectation of both the speaker and the listener (2011:53). The following list includes examples chosen from this present paper's spoken materials and shows whether the particle *a* in each evaluative declarative sentence expresses surprise or out of expectation.

(27) 0: 27

关谷: 美嘉 和展博 在 厕所的 垃圾桶 里 发现了一根

*Guāngǔ: Měijiā hé Zhǎnbó zài cèsuǒ de lājītǒng lǐ fāxiàn le yìgēn*

Meijia and Zhanbo at toilet GEN wastebin inside discover ASP one CL

印 有 两 条 杠 的 验 孕 棒,

*yìn yǒu liǎng tiáo gāng de yàn yùn bàng.*

print exist two CL bar STP test pregnancy stick.

可是 悠悠 告 诉 我 她 并 没有 怀 孕 啊。

*Kěshì Yōuyou gàosù wǒ tā bìng méiyǒu huáiyùn a.*

but Youyou tell me she AUB not-have pregnant a.

究竟是 怎么一 回 事情 呢？

*Jiūjìng shì zěnmē yì huí shìqíng ne?*

on earth be how one CL thing PT?

‘Meijia and Zhanbo found a used pregnancy test which came out positive in the toilet’s waste bin. But Youyou told me she was not pregnant! What exactly is going on?’

(27) 可是 悠悠 告诉 我 她 并 没有 怀孕。

*Kěshì yōuyou gàosù wǒ tā bìng méiyǒu huáiyùn.*

but Youyou tell me she AUB not-have pregnant.

‘But Youyou told me she was not pregnant’

In example (27), Guangu thinks that Meijia is pregnant, while the possibility that such is not the case is opposed to his expectation. In example (27’), Guangu only conveys what Youyou said to listeners, without expressing Guangu’s own feelings. The sentence in example (27’) without the particle *a* can still be used in the same conversation, and it can be preceded and followed by the same sentence. Therefore, the particle *a* expresses the speaker’s astonishment, which fits Jin’s analysis.

(28) 6:22’

小贤： 要不然 还是 去 医院 看看 吧。

*Xiǎoxián: Yàoburán háishi qù yīyuàn kànkān ba.*

otherwise still go hospital see PT.

‘You should go to the hospital.’

一菲： 多 大 点 事 去 医院 啊， 凭 我 的 修复 能力，

*Yīfēi: Duō dà diǎn shì qù yīyuàn a, píng wǒ de xiūfù nénglì,*

how big CL thing go hospital *a*, lean-on my recover ability,

分分 钟 恢复。 昨天 晚上 已经 热 敷 过 了。

*fēn fēn zhōng huīfù. Zuótiān wǎnshàng yǐjīng rè fū guò le.*

Minute recover. Yesterday evening already hot compress have ASP.

'It is not a too big problem to go to hospital! According to my recover ability, my leg will be recovered soon. I applied hot compresses last night.'

(28') 一菲: 多 大 点 事 去 医院

*Yīfēi: Duō dà diǎn shì qù yīyuàn*

how big CL thing go hospital

'It is not a too big problem to go to hospital.'

In both examples (28) and (28'), Xiaoxian suggests that Yifei goes to hospital, while Yifei thinks that his advice is unnecessary because she feels that her injury is not that serious. Yifei shows her disdain for going to hospital, but in example (28), the particle *a* expresses her astonishment; she couldn't imagine someone suggesting to her to go to hospital. The sentence in example (28') without the particle *a* can still be used in the same conversation, and it can be preceded and followed by the same sentence. In terms of this sentence, the particle *a* lends the sentence the feeling of astonishment, not only stating an evaluation.

(29) 12:01'

关谷: 难道 是 子乔 带 回来 的 哪个 妹子?

*Guāngǔ: Nándào shì Zǐqiáo dài huílai de nǎge mèizi?*

could-it-be Ziqiao bring back STP which girl?

不过 也 没 道理 丢 在 我们 的 垃圾桶里啊。

*Búguò yě méi dàoli diū zài wǒmen de lājītǒng lǐ a.*

but also not-have reason throw be-in our wastebin inside *a*.

'Could it be any girl that came home with Ziqiao? But it doesn't make sense, how could her throw the kit in our wastebin!'

(29')

关谷: 不过 也 没 道理 丢 在 我们 的 垃圾桶里

*Guāngǔ: Búguò yě méi dàoli diū zài wǒmen de lājītǒng lǐ*

but also not-have reason throw be-in our wastebin inside

'But it doesn't make sense to throw the kit in our wastebin.'



Comparing examples (29) and (29'), (29') states that there is no reason to throw the kit in their wastebin, while in example (29), Guangu shows his astonishment at the fact that someone else throws the kit in their wastebin. However, example (29') reads a little strange (as agreed by five native Mandarin speakers) because when the speaker feels that an action does not make sense, the fact is out of his expectation. Thus, the particle *a* is used to express astonishment. The sentence without the particle is only a statement that does not fit the context.

(30) 13:50'

悠悠：你不觉得先从这张快递单

*Yōuyou: Nǐ bù juéde xiān cóng zhè zhāng kuàidì dān*

you do-not think firstly from this Cl delivery bill

查起会比较容易吗？

*chá qǐ huì bǐjiao róngyi ma?*

investigate start can more easy PT?

'Don't you think it is easier to start from this parcel receipt?'

关谷：有道理啊。

*Guāngǔ: Yǒu dàoli a.*

have reason a.

'That actually makes sense!'

(30')

关谷：有道理

*Guāngǔ: Yǒu dàoli*

have reason.

'That makes sense.'

In example (30), Guangu thinks that Youyou's advice is feasible and shows his surprise and appreciation. Example (30') only states that Guangu thinks that what Youyou says is right. Therefore, it can be deduced that the feeling of surprise is brought by the particle *a*; meanwhile the particle also brings an

appreciative feeling. The sentence without the particle actually fits the context where Guangu agrees with Youyou about the latter's statement. However, the particle *a* makes the mood of the sentence more vivid and also shows the character's personality.

(31) 20:01'

[Meijia gives the money to the courier]

快递员： 待会儿 问 我 话 的 不会 是 警察 吧？

Kuài dì yuán: *Dāihuǐr wèn wǒ huà de bú huì shì jǐngchá ba?*

later ask me words STP not can be police PT?

这 钱 我 不能 要 的。

*Zhè qián wǒ bùnéng yào de.*

this money I cannot need STP.

'There's not going to be a police to question me, right? I cannot take this money.'

美嘉：他 调查 我，明显 是 图谋不轨 啊。

Měijiā: *Tā diàochá wǒ, míngxiǎn shì túmóbùguǐ a.*

he investigate me, obviously be up-to-no-good *a*.

'He investigated me, obviously he is an evil guy!'

(31')

美嘉：他 调查 我，明显 是 图谋不轨

Měijiā: *Tā diàochá wǒ, míngxiǎn shì túmóbùguǐ*

he investigate me, obviously be up-to-no-good

'He investgated me, obviously he is an evil guy.'

Lü, Chao, Zhu, Zhang, and Liu take the particle *a* as a reminding marker. Jin concludes that the 'reminding' function is that 'what the speaker says is out of the listener's expectation,' so the essence is still 'surprise.' For example, in example (31), Meijia wants to remind the courier that an evil guy is spying on her, which is what the courier has not realized, that is, beyond the courier's expectation. The sentence in example (31') is about Meijia's judgment of

someone without expressing her wish for the courier's attention. In this example, the speaker wants to remind the listener, but the characterization of the particle is the listener's 'contrary expectation.'

(32) 20:53'

小贤：送上门的按摩，她没理由拒绝了吧？

*Xiǎoxián: Sòng shàng mén de ànmó, tā méi lǐyóu jùjué le ba?*

send up door STP massage, she not-have reason reject PT PT?

'A door to door massaging service, she can't reject it without a reason.'

展博：不应该啊。我老姐应该不会让人碰

*Zhǎnbó: Bù yīnggāi a. Wǒ lǎo jiě yīnggāi bú huì rang rén pèng*

not possible a. I old sister possible not can let people touch

她脚的呀。

tā jiǎo de ya.

her foot STP ya.

'It's impossible! It is not possible for my sister to let people touch her

feet.'

(32')

展博：我老姐应该不会让人碰她脚的

*Zhǎnbó: Wǒ lǎo jiě yīnggāi bú huì rang rén pèng tā jiǎo de*

I old sister possible not can let people touch her foot STP

'My sister won't let people touch her feet.'

Example (32') states Zhanbo's conjecture about his sister's daily habit. The particle *a* in example (32) expresses Zhanbo's surprise about his sister. The fact that his sister accepts someone's touch is against his expectation. These examples correspond to Jin's 'counter-expectation' analysis.

As discussed, the modal particle *a* in evaluative declarative sentences expresses the meaning of 'counter-expectation' as stated in Jin's conclusion. Sometimes, the particle *a* can also convey an appreciative mood while expressing a 'counter-expectation,' and the particle makes the mood of the sentence vivid.

However, when the sentence itself has a ‘surprised’ implication, the particle *a* must be attached to it.

#### 4.2 Modal particle *a* at the end of illustrative declarative sentences

Seven illustrative declarative sentences emerge from 18 declarative sentences with the particle *a*, next to evaluative declarative types. According to Jin (2011:59), illustrative declarative sentences demonstrate something to listeners, explain some behavior or the truth, pronounce what the speaker will do, and so on. The aim of such sentences is to convey information that the speaker thinks is unknown to the listener; thus, the speaker wants to draw the listener’s attention on purpose. Jin concludes the meaning of the particle *a* as marking a ‘counter-expectation.’ Some examples are listed below:

(33)

子乔：一菲，你 怎么 才 来 啊？

*Zǐqiáo: Yīfēi, nǐ zěnmē cái lái a?*

Yifei, you how EMP come *a*?

‘Yifei, why are you so late?’

一菲：我 迟 到 了 吗？一 收 到 短 信 我 就 来 了 啊。

*Yīfēi: Wǒ chí dào le ma? Yì shōu dào duǎo xìn wǒ jiù lái le a.*

I late ASP PT? Once receive short message I just come ASP *a*.

‘Am I late? I came here as soon as I got your message, really!’

子乔：那 是 半 小 时 前 了 吧。

*Zǐqiáo: nà shì bàn xiǎoshí qián le ba.*

that be half hour ago ASP PT.

‘It was half an hour ago.’

(33’)

一菲：我 迟 到 了 吗？一 收 到 短 信 我 就 来 了

*Yīfēi: Wǒ chí dào le ma? Yì shōu dào duǎo xìn wǒ jiù lái le*

I late ASP PT? Once receive short message I just come ASP

‘Am I late? I came here as soon as I got your message.’

In example (33), Ziqiao asks Yifei why she is so late, but Yifei does not think so; she is astonished because in her mind, she sets out as soon as she receives the message. The speaker views the listener as judging herself in the wrong way; thus, the speaker emphasizes the propositional content and tries to correct the listener's wrong opinion. Example (33') only explains that Yifei sets off without the feeling that she wants Ziqiao to agree that she is not late, while example (33) expresses the feeling that Yifei tries to convince Ziqiao to accept her words.

(34) 9:29'

黄： 要不然， 你就说 你信了。

*Huáng: Yàobùrán, nǐ jiù shuō nǐ xìn le.*

otherwise, you just say you believe ASP.

这 药 我 就 给 你。

*Zhè yào wǒ jiù gěi nǐ.*

this medicine I just give you.

'Unless, tell me that you believe me, then I'll give you the medicine.'

小贤： 这 对 你 来 说 有 差 别 吗？

*Xiǎoxián: Zhè duì nǐ lái shuō yǒu chābié ma?*

this to you come say have difference PT?

'Does it make a difference to you?'

黄： 你 以 为 我 是 江 湖 骗 子 啊？

*Huáng: Nǐ yǐwéi wǒ shì jiāng hú piànzi a?*

you think I be river lake fraud a?

我 们 知 识 分 子 有 节 操 啊！

*Wǒmen zhīshífènzǐ yǒu jiécāo a!*

we intellectual have moral a!

'You think I am some kind of fraud? We intellectuals do have morals!'

(34')

黄： 我 们 知 识 分 子 有 节 操

*Huáng: Wǒmen zhīshífènzǐ yǒu jiécāo*

we intellectual have moral

'We intellectuals have morals.'

In example (34), Huang finds that Xiaoxian treats him as a fraud, so he becomes angry and tells Xiaoxian that he is an intellectual with high morality. Compared with example (34'), the speaker also emphasizes what he says and wants the listener to believe him. Similarly, the preceding sentence shows that the speaker is surprised that the listener treats him as a fraud, so the sentence without the particle cannot be followed by it (agreed on by five native Mandarin speakers).

(35) 19:14'

美嘉：你 是 哪 家 快 递 公 司 的 ？

*Měijiā: Nǐ shì nǎ jiā kuàidì gōngsī de?*

you be which house delivery company GEN?

叫 你 来 你 就 来 啊 ？

*Jiào nǐ lái nǐ jiù lái a?*

ask you come you just come a?

'Which delivery company are you from? How can you just come when people ask you to?'

快递员：我 记 得 是 你 签 收 的 呀 ，

*Kuàidì yuán: Wǒ jìde shì nǐ qiānshōu de ya,*

I remember be you sign-in STP *ya*,

怎么 是 一 个 男 的 打 电 话 给 我 ？

*zěnmē shì yíge nán de dǎdiànhuà gěi wǒ?*

how be one CL man call give me?

'I remember, the person signed the parcel must be you. The one who called was a guy.'

(35')

快递员：我 记 得 是 你 签 收 的

*Kuàidì yuán: Wǒ jìde shì nǐ qiānshōu de*

I remember be you sign-in STP

'I remembered you signed the parcel.'

In example (35), the courier ensures that the receiver is Meijia and requests her to admit it, and he is also surprised that the caller is a man. In example (35'), the courier neither feels surprised nor convinced. Even the intonation can change the sentence's meaning. If the accent is on "you," the speaker emphasizes the person; if the accent is on "be," the speaker emphasizes what he remembers.

(36) 21:19'

展博：她就把我踹飞了，5米

*Zhǎnbó: Tā jiù bǎ wǒ chuài fēi le, wǔ mǐ.*

she just BA me pick fly ASP, five meter.

'She kicked me right to 5 meters away.'

子乔：她属驴的啊？

*Zǐqiáo: Tā shǔ lú de a?*

she be donkey STP *a*?

'Is she a donkey?'

展博：她说这是自然反应，控制不住。

*Zhǎnbó: Tā shuō zhè shì zìrán fǎnying, kòngzhì bú zhù.*

she say this be natural reflex, control not can.

'She said it's natural reflex. She can't control.'

小贤：膝跳反应的开关也不在那儿啊。

*Xiǎoxián: Xī tiào fǎnying de kāiguān yě bú zài nàr a.*

knee jump reflex GEN switch also not be-in there *a*.

'How could the kicking reflex trigger triggered at there!'

(36')

小贤：膝跳反应的开关也不在那儿

*Xiǎoxián: Xī tiào fǎnying de kāiguān yě bú zài nàr*

knee jump reflex GEN switch also not be-in there

'The swith of the kicking reflex also not be there.'

In example (36), Xiaoxian is surprised at Yifei's reaction when someone touches her ankle. In his mind, the kicking reflex cannot be triggered by touching the ankle, so he shows his 'counter-expectation' of Zhanbo's words and Yifei's reaction. In example (36'), Xiaoxian simply makes a statement about the kicking reflex. The sentence without the particle does not fit the context when the accent is on "also," while when "there" is accentuated, the sentence without the particle still fits the context.

We can conclude from these examples that the particle *a* with illustrative declaratives can express the meaning of 'counter-expectation'. What is different from evaluative declaratives is that, in illustrative declaratives, the particle not only expresses 'counter-expectation', but also expresses that the speaker requests others to change the wrong opinion.

However, I find some other examples without the 'counter-expectation' mood but simply convey information:

(37) 12:22'

悠悠： 拜托，你现在的首要任务是把派对办好，

*Yōuyou: Baituō, nǐ xiànzài de shǒuyào rènwù shì bǎ pàiduì bàn hǎo,*

please, you now STP first mission be BA party make good,

不用你破案。

*bú yòng nǐ pò'àn.*

no need you solve-crime.

'Please, the most important thing for you now is throwing a great party.

You not request for solving crime.'

关谷： 人家想不通难受啊。

*Guāngǔ: Rénjia xiǎng bù tōng nánshòu a.*

I think not through uncomfortably *a*.

'I feel uncomfortable if I can't figure it out.'

(37')



关谷： 人家 想 不 通 难受

*Guāngǔ: Rénjia xiǎng bù tōng nánshòu*

I think not through uncomfortably

'I feel uncomfortable if I can't figure it out.'

The particle *a* in both examples (37) and (37') expresses the same meaning, that is, the reason why Guangu wants to find out the truth, and this paper's author cannot glean the 'counter-expectation' meaning from the examples (as agreed on by five other native Mandarin speakers). In example (37'), Guangu illustrates his feelings seriously, while in example (37), he softens his mood to explain his feelings to his girlfriend. From the actor's intonation, the length of "a" is a little longer to make the sentence sound softer. Working as a down-toner is the only function in the sentence.

(38) 14:00'

关谷： 曾 老师， 子乔 还有 我 最近 都 穷 的

*Guāngǔ: Zēng lǎoshī, Zǐqiáo hái yǒu wǒ zuìjìn dōu qióng de*

Zeng teacher, Ziqiao and me recently all poor STP

没 钱 网 购， 这里 貌似 只有 你 最可疑吧。

*méi qián wǎng gòu, zhèlǐ mào sì zhǐ yǒu nǐ zuì kě yí ba.*

not-have money online shopping, here seem only you most suspicions

PT.

'Dr. Zeng, Ziqiao and I are too broke to shop online recently. You are the most suspicious one around.'

悠悠： 可 我 最近 真的 没有 买 过 东西 啊。

*Yōuyou: Kě wǒ zuìjìn zhēnde méiyǒu mǎi guo dōngxi a.*

EMP I recently truly not-have buy ASP thing a.

'But I didn't buy anything recently.'

(38')

悠悠： 可 我 最近 真的 没有 买 过 东西

*Yōuyou: Kě wǒ zuìjìn zhēnde méiyǒu mǎi guo dōngxi*

EMP I recently truly not-have buy ASP thing

‘But I didn’t buy anything recently.’

In example (38), Guangu suspects that Youyou bought the pregnancy test, and Youyou explains that she has bought nothing recently. Compared with example (38’), which is also a serious illustrative sentence, example (38) has a softer tone, resembling that of a girl talking with her boyfriend. In the same way, the particle softens the sentence’s mood and functions as a down-toner.

(39)

小贤： 喂，展博， 知道 哪儿 有 卖 红花油 吗？

*Xiǎoxián: wéi, Zhǎnbó, zhīdao nǎr yǒu mài hónghuāyóu ma?*

Int. Zhanbo, know where have sell safflower PT?

我 去 了 药 店 了，全 都 没 货 呀！

*Wǒ qù le yào diàn le, quán dōu méi huò ya!*

I go ASP medicine shop ASP, all not-have goods *ya*!

‘Hello, Zhanbo, do you know where can I buy a safflower oil? I went to a few pharmacies and they all ran out of stock!’

(39’)

小贤： 我 去 了 药 店 了，全 都 没 货

*Xiǎoxián: Wǒ qù le yào diàn le, quán dōu méi huò*

I go ASP medicine shop ASP, all not-have goods

‘I went to a few pharmacies and they all ran out of stock’

Examples (39) and (39’) both express Xiaoxian’s upset and anxious feelings when he finds that all pharmacies are out of stock. The particle *a* lessens the tone’s formality since the dialogue occurs between close friends.

In conclusion, Jin’s analysis of the particle *a* in illustrative declarative sentences that express a ‘counter-expectation’ meaning can be proven by spoken materials. However, other than the ‘counter-expectation’ meaning, sometimes, the particle *a* in illustrative declarative sentences simply conveys information. The speaker uses the particle *a* to soften the tone when the dialogue occurs between people in a close relationship. As mentioned by Li and Thompson, the

particle *a* functions as a down-toner to ‘reduce the forcefulness of the message conveyed by the utterance.’

#### 4.3 Modal particle *a* at the end of responses

Many responses emerge from declarative sentences with the particle *a*. According to Jin (2011:65–69), positive responses with the particle *a* attached are used in a specific ‘counter-expectation’ context, and speakers show their collaborative attitude (sometimes, their deceptive collaborative attitude). As for negative responses, the function and the meaning of the particle *a* are similar to those in illustrative declarative sentences—expressing ‘counter-expectation’ and requesting others to change their wrong ideas. Another response is that of speech behavior. Speakers convey that what they say is what they really think by using the particle *a*, such as when expressing thanks and apologies.

(40) 4:16’

悠悠：这 不会 是 你们 的 恶作剧吧？

*Yōuyou: Zhè búhuì shì nǐmen de èzuòjù ba?*

this not be your prank PT?

‘Please don’t tell me this is a prank.’

美嘉：是啊！这是 谁的 恶作剧？

*Měijiā: shì a! Zhè shì shéi de èzuòjù?*

yes a! this be whose prank?

‘Right, who did it?’

(41) 10:41’

悠悠：美嘉，你有空 吗？陪我去超市 逛逛。

*Yōuyou: Měijiā, nǐ yǒu kòng ma? Péi wǒ qù chāoshì guàngguang.*

Meijia, you have space PT? company me go supermarket stroll stroll.

‘Meijia, do you have time? Let’s go for grocery shopping together.’

美嘉： 好 啊。

*Měijiā: Hǎo a.*

Okay a.

‘Okay.’

Both examples (40) and (41) express Meijia’s collaborative attitude. For example, when Youyou invites Meijia to go shopping with her, Meijia worries whether Youyou would discover her secret. Thus, at that time, to cover up her guilty conscience, Meijia says “Okay” as soon as possible. The particle *a* emphasizes her strong willingness to do anything for Meijia. However, this paper’s author has not found an obvious specific ‘counter-expectation’ context in the examples. In daily life, the particle *a* in positive responses is commonly used in communication. For example, a friend can ask someone, ‘一起吃火锅吗? *yìqǐ chī huǒguō ma?*’ ‘Have a hotpot with me?’, and the person can answer, ‘好啊 *hǎo*’ ‘Okay’ to show one’s intention. However, during the conversation, no ‘counter-expectation’ context exists.

(42)

小贤： 送 上 门 的 按 摩 ， 她 没 理 由 拒 绝 了 吧 。

*Xiǎoxián: Sòng shàng mén de ànmó, tā méi lǐyou jùjué le ba?*

send up door STP massage, she not-have reason reject PT PT?

‘A door to door massaging service, she can’t reject it without a reason.’

展博： 不 应 该 啊 。 我 老 姐 应 该 不 会 让 人 碰

*Zhǎnbó: Bù yīnggāi a. Wǒ lǎo jiě yīnggāi bú huì rang rén pèng*

not possible a. I old sister possible not can let people touch

她 脚 的 呀 。

*tā jiǎo de ya.*

her foot STP ya.

‘It’s impossible! It is not possible for my sister to let people touch her

feet.’

(42’)

展博：不 应该。

*Zhǎnbó: Bù yīngāi.*

not possible.

'Not possible.'

In example (42), the particle *a* is attached to a negative response. Zhanbo is surprised at his sister's attitude toward someone who can touch her feet, and he insists that this is his sister's habit, so he wants Xiaoxian to believe him. The sentence without the particle cannot be used in the context because the speaker wants to express his astonishment, but this is not simply an illustration as in example (42'). The particle *a* used here agrees about Jin's analysis.

(43) 4:30'

美嘉：要 不是 我们 发现 验孕棒，

*Měijiā: Yào bú shì wǒmen fāxiàn yàn yùn bàng,*

if-not we discover test pregnancy stick,

关谷 会 这么 快 求婚 吗？

*Guāngǔ huì zhème kuài qiú hūn ma?*

Guangu can such quick request marriage PT?

对不起啊，我 不是 质疑 你们的 感情，我……

*Duìbùqǐ a, wǒ bú shì zhìyí nǐmen de gǎnqíng, wǒ……*

sorry *a*, I not be doubt your love, I...

'Without our discovery of the pregnancy test, Guangu would never

propose so fast! I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to doubt your love. I ....'

(43')

美嘉：对不起，

*Měijiā: Duìbùqǐ,*

sorry,

'Sorry'

(44) 7:56'

小贤： 来，正 好 八 十，给 我 一 瓶。

*Xiǎoxián: Lái, zhènghǎo bā shí, gěi wǒ yì píng*

come, just eighty, give me one bottle.

'Here's eight yuan. Give me one.'

黄： 兄 弟，真 识 货 呀！自 己 用？

*Huáng: xiōngdì, zhēn shí huò ya! Zìjǐ yòng?*

brother, real know goods ya! yourself use?

'My friend, you sure know what the good stuff is. For self usage?'

小贤： 给 朋 友 买 的。

*Xiǎoxián: Gěi péngyou mǎi de.*

give friend buy ASP.

'For a friend.'

黄： 是 这 样 啊

*Huáng: Shì zhèyang a.*

be this a.

'I totally understand you now.'

(44')

黄： 是 这 样

*Huáng: Shì zhèyang.*

be this.

'I see.'

Two speech behavior responses have been found in the preceding examples. By using the particle *a*, Meijia wants to express her apology and hopes that Youyou will forgive her for her improper words. Huang also uses the particle *a* after Xiaoxian tells him who will use the safflower, which indicates that what the speaker says is what the speaker is willing to say, and the particle *a* here functions as a discourse marker to achieve the communicative goal.

In conclusion, Jin (2011) summarizes the meaning and the function of the particle *a* in declarative sentences as 'counter-expectation,' regardless of whether the particle is attached to evaluative or illustrative declarative sentences or responses. Analyzing the spoken material indicates that most examples agree about Jin's conclusion; however, a few examples show some differences. Sometimes, when the speaker is talking to someone with whom he or she has a close relationship, the particle *a* is only conveying information and softening the tone without showing an unexpected mood. In positive responses, sometimes, the speaker is only showing one's willingness without an unexpected mood.

## 5. Analysis of Particle *a* in Imperative Sentences

This corpus includes four instances of the particle *a* in imperative sentences. Jin (2011:86) uses the particle *a* to strengthen the tone and express the speaker's 'counter-expectation.' The speaker supposes that the listener should do/not do something, while the listener happens not to do/do it, which makes the speaker feel surprised.

(45) 5:26'

子乔: 你们 真的 捡到了 什么 验 孕 棒?

*Zǐqiáo: Nǐmen zhēnde jiǎndao le shénme yàn yùn bang?*

you truly pick ASP what test pregnancy stick?

'Did you guys really discover that pregnancy test?'

美嘉: 没有! 都是 误会! 你们 喝 酒,

*Měijiā: Méiyǒu! Dōu shì wùhui! Nǐmen hē jiǔ,*

no! all be misunderstanding! you drink alcohol,

玩 玩 玩, 不 用 客气啊!

*wán wán wán, bú yòng kèqi a!*

play play play, not need politeness a!

'No! It was just a misunderstanding! Continue to drink and have fun! Do help your self.'

(45')

美嘉: 没有! 都是 误会! 你们 喝 酒,

*Měijiā: Méiyǒu! Dōu shì wùhui! Nǐmen hē jiǔ,*

no! all be misunderstanding! you drink alcohol,

玩 玩 玩, 不 用 客气!

*wán wán wán, bú yòng kèqi !*

play play play, not need politeness!

'No! It was just a misunderstanding! Continue to drink and have fun! Help your self.'

In example (45), due to Meijia's guilty feeling about the pregnancy test, she wants to change the conversation topic, but all the people stop eating and



drinking and try to find out the truth about the pregnancy test, against Meijia's will. The particle *a* in example (45) reflects the speaker's strong request for the listener to do something. In example (45'), Meijia invites people to enjoy the food without other moods.

(46) 7:31'

[Huang is selling goods by the road.]

黄： 瞧 一 瞧， 看 一 看 啊！ 祖 传 药 酒 包 灵 验！

Huáng: qiáo yi qiáo, kàn yi kàn *a*! Zǔ chuán yào jiǔ bāo líng yàn!

see one see, look one look *a*! ancestor pass medicine alcohol promise  
valid efficacy

'Please stop and take a look! Medicinal liquor passed on from ancestors  
is efficacious!'

(46')

黄： 瞧 一 瞧， 看 一 看！

Huáng: qiáo yi qiáo, kàn yi kàn!

see one see, look one look!

'Stop and take a look!'

In example (46), Xiaoxian is on the phone when he passes by Huang who is selling goods. As a street vendor, Huang particularly wants customers to come and have a look at his merchandise. The particle *a* here expresses the speaker's strong wishes. In example (46'), Huang simply shouts to sell his goods. The sentence without the particle can still be used in the same context and can either be preceded or followed by the same sentence because the syllable coda of the last word *kàn* is *àn*, which rhymes with the following syllable coda *àn* of the last word *yàn*. Such a rhyme scheme can also draw the listener's attention and meet the speaker's needs. However, if the syllable coda is not part of a rhyme, the sentence without the particle cannot express the speaker's strong willingness and cannot interest customers.

(47) 9:29'

黄： 要不然， 你就说 你信了。

*Huáng: Yàobùrán, nǐ jiù shuō nǐ xìn le.*

otherwise, you just say you believe ASP.

这 药 我 就 给 你。

*Zhè yào wǒ jiù gěi nǐ.*

this medicine I just give you.

‘Unless, tell me that you believe me, then I’ll give you the medicine.’

小贤： 这 对 你 来 说 有 差 别 吗？

*Xiǎoxián: Zhè duì nǐ lái shuō yǒu chābié ma?*

this to you come say have difference PT?

‘Does it make a difference to you?’

黄： 你 以 为 我 是 江 湖 骗 子 啊？

*Huáng: Nǐ yǐwéi wǒ shì jiāng hú piànzi a?*

you think I be river lake fraud a?

我 们 知 识 分 子 有 节 操 啊！

*Wǒmen zhīshífènzǐ yǒu jiécāo a!*

we intellectual have moral a!

‘You think I am some kind of fraud? We intellectuals have morals!’

小贤： 来 人 啊！ 抓 骗 子 啊！

*Xiǎoxián: Lái rén a! Zhuā piànzi a!*

come people a! catch fraud a!

‘Come someone please! Do arrest this fraud!’

(47’)

小贤： 来 人！ 抓 骗 子！

*Xiǎoxián: Lái rén! Zhuā piànzi!*

come people! catch fraud!

‘Come! Arrest this fraud!’

Both examples (47) and (47’) express Xiaoxian’s wish for someone to help him catch the fraud. However, the sitcom has not informed the audience if there are any passengers and whether the passengers are willing to help, so the

audience does not know whether the particle *a* expresses Xiaoxian's 'counter-expectation.' Nonetheless, the imperative sentence with the particle *a* does have a stronger mood.

(48) 15:50'

小贤：子乔，你帮我劝劝一菲吧。

*Xiǎoxián: Zǐqiáo, nǐ bāng wǒ quànquan Yīfēi ba.*

Ziqiao, you help me persuade persuade Yifei PT.

她脚肿成这样不去医院不行的。

*Tā jiǎo zhǒng chéng zhèyang bú qù yīyuàn bù xíng de.*

her foot swell become this not go hospital no way STP.

'Ziqiao, please talk to Yifei. With a swollen leg like that, she needs to go to the hospital.'

子乔：你第一天认识她吗？她会听我的？

*Zǐqiáo: Nǐ dì yī tiān rènshi tā ma? Tā huì tīng wǒde?*

you first day know her PT? she can listen mine?

'Do you just know her? She would definitely not listen to me.'

小贤：跟谁过不去也别跟自己过不去啊。

*Xiǎoxián: Gēn shéi guò bú qù yě bié gēn zìjǐ guò bú qù a.*

with who pass not go also not with self pass not go a.

'She could look for trouble with anyone but how could she look for trouble with herself.'

(48')

小贤：跟谁过不去也别跟自己过不去。

*Xiǎoxián: Gēn shéi guò bú qù yě bié gēn zìjǐ guò bú qù.*

with who pass not go also not with self pass not go.

'She could look for trouble with anyone but don't look for trouble with herself.'

In example (48), Xiaoxian thinks that Yifei has already sacrificed her own health to save face, which is beyond Xiaoxian's expectation. Besides the feeling of surprise, Xiaoxian expresses blame here. In example (48'), Xiaoxian judges that looking for trouble is a wrong idea without expressing that he wants Yifei to follow his advice. The sentence without the particle indicates the lack of the speaker's blaming attitude and feeling of surprise, so it does not fit the contexts.

In conclusion, the particle *a* in imperative sentences has two distinct modal meanings: valitive and surprisive. The former refers to the speaker's strong request for the listener to perform an action. The latter indicates the speaker's feeling of surprise at what the listener is doing or not doing when the speaker requests the listener to do just the opposite. Y. R. Chao observes that an imperative sentence/command attached with the particle *a* 'has a slightly insistent air' (1968:804), and the particle in an imperative sentence 'has a slight effect of "do" in the translation' (1968:795). Thus, he translates the sentence '*Zǎo diǎnr huílai a!*' to 'Do come early!' Jin only raises the surprisive meaning because her written data cannot express the valitive meaning. She claims that when the particle *a* is attached to imperative sentences and emphasizes the command mood, the speaker asks the listener to perform the requested action. An imperative sentence with the particle *a* is oppressive to the listener, which is against the politeness principle of the speech communication strategy.

## 6. Analysis of Particle *a* in Interrogative Sentences

As mentioned, according to Jin (2011:69), the particle *a* can be attached to four interrogative sentence types: specific (特殊疑问句 *tèshū yíwèn jù*), alternative (选择疑问句 *xuǎnzé yíwèn jù*), yes-no (是非疑问句 *shìfēi yíwèn jù*), and A-not-A interrogative sentences (正反疑问句 *zhèngfǎn yíwèn jù*). Jin concludes that whether or not the particle *a* is attached to any type of interrogative sentence, it still expresses the speaker's 'counter-expectation.' In 45 sentences with the particle *a*, there are 18 interrogative sentences.

### 6.1 Modal particle *a* at the end of yes-no interrogative sentences

In yes-no interrogatives, the speakers request the listeners to answer yes or no. Liu (2001:786) concludes that when the person who raises the question thinks that he or she asks about a possible fact or feels uncertain about something, he or she uses a yes-no interrogative sentence. In other words, the speaker who is certain of something uses a yes-no interrogative sentence to ask for the listener's confirmation; the speaker who feels uncertain about something uses a yes-no interrogative sentence to request the listener to answer. In this case, what are the meaning and the function of the particle *a*? Jin (2011:73) explains that the speaker anticipates something based on what he or she already knows, while during the process of communication, the speaker finds that what he or she expects is against the fact, thus feeling surprise and unbelief. This is the 'counter-expectation' meaning of the yes-no interrogative sentence with the particle *a*. Considering that the particle *ma* is a marker of a yes-no interrogative sentence, the sentences with the particle *a* and the particle *ma* are compared.

(49) 6:51'

小贤： 谢谢，一杯 牛奶。

*Xiǎoxián: xièxie, yì bēi niú nǎi.*

thanks, one cup milk

'A bottle of milk please.'

子乔: 一菲 要 的 是 酒.

*Zǐqiáo: Yīfēi yào de shì jiǔ.*

Yifei need STP be alcohol.

'I think Yifei wants alcohol.'

小贤: 她 没 文化 你 也 文盲 啊?

*Xiǎoxián: Tā méi wénhuà nǐ yě wénmáng a?*

she not-have culture you also illiterate a?

喝酒 会 更 肿 的。

*Hē jiǔ huì gèng zhǒng de.*

drink alcohol can more swell STP.

'She doesn't have common sense and you don't have either? Alcohol would make her leg worse.'

(49')

小贤: 她 没 文化 你 也 文盲吗?

*Xiǎoxián: Tā méi wénhuà nǐ yě wénmáng ma?*

she not-have culture you also illiterate MA?

'She doesn't have common sense and you are an illiteracy?'

In example (49), Xiaoxian thinks that everyone who has common sense would know that Yifei should not drink alcohol, but Ziqiao wants to order alcohol for Yifei, which is out of Xiaoxian's expectation. However, Xiaoxian does not ask for an answer because he knows that Ziqiao is literate. The yes-no interrogative sentence here is more similar to a rhetorical question. Compared with example (49'), the interrogative sentence with the particle *ma* sounds more impolite than the one with the particle *a* because it sounds like the speaker really suspects that the listener is illiterate. Thus, the particle *a* can soften the tone in yes-no interrogatives.

(50) 8:29'

小贤： 你 还 兼 职 算 命 啊？

*Xiǎoxián: Nǐ hái jiānzhí suànmìng a?*

you also part-time fortune-telling a?

‘You are unexpectedly also a fortune teller?’

黄： 难 得 有 缘 人，

*Huáng: Nán dé yǒu yuán rén,*

hardly get have fate person,

老 夫 免 费 帮 你 算 算 如 何？

*lǎo fū miǎnfèi bang nǐ suànsuan rúhé?*

I for free help you calculate how?

‘Since you are here, how about I tell your fortunes for free?’

(50’)

小贤： 你 还 兼 职 算 命 吗？

*Xiǎoxián: Nǐ hái jiānzhí suànmìng ma?*

you also part-time fortune-telling MA?

‘You also can tell fortune?’

(51) 8:41’

[Huang is touching Xiaoxian’s hand]

黄： 兄 弟， 你 的 皮 肤 很 干 啊。

*Huáng: Xiōngdì, nǐ de pí fū hěn gān a.*

brother, your skin very dry a.

用 用 这 个 雪 花 膏， 20 一 罐。

*Yòngyong zhège xuěhuā gāo, èr shí yí guān.*

use use this snow cream, twenty one bottle.

‘My friend, your skin is too dry. Try this cream, twenty yuan per one.’

小贤： 你 推 销 啊？

*Xiǎoxián: Nǐ tuīxiāo a?*

you promote a?

‘You actually market products?’

(51')

小贤： 你 推销吗？

*Xiǎoxián: Nǐ tuīxiāo ma?*

you promote MA?

'You market products?'

(52)

黄： 要不然， 你就说 你信了。

*Huáng: Yàobùrán, nǐ jiù shuō nǐ xìn le.*

otherwise, you just say you believe ASP.

这 药 我 就 给 你。

*Zhè yào wǒ jiù gěi nǐ.*

this medicine I just give you.

'Unless, tell me that you believe me, then I'll give you the medicine.'

小贤： 这 对 你 来 说 有 差 别 吗？

*Xiǎoxián: Zhè duì nǐ lái shuō yǒu chābié ma?*

this to you come say have difference PT?

'Does it make a difference to you?'

黄： 你 以 为 我 是 江 湖 骗 子 啊？

*Huáng: Nǐ yǐwéi wǒ shì jiāng hú piànzi a?*

you think I be river lake fraud a?

'You even think me as a fraud?'

(52')

黄： 你 以 为 我 是 江 湖 骗 子 吗？

*Huáng: Nǐ yǐwéi wǒ shì jiāng hú piànzi ma?*

you think I be river lake fraud MA?

'Do you think me as a fraud?'

In example (50), Xiaoxian originally thinks that Huang is a grocer when the latter tells the former that he has a great marriage. Xiaoxian is surprised that Huang can tell fortunes. Huang's job is out of his expectation. Compared with



example (50'), in example (50), besides surprise, Xiaoxian feels that the information is rather unbelievable. Similarly, in example (51), Xiaoxian is surprised that Huang is a salesman, while example (51') indicates that Xiaoxian asks the question, 'Are you a salesman?' In example (52), Huang thinks that Xiaoxian treats him as a fraud, making him feel astonished and angry. Compared with example (52'), the speaker in example (52) does not request for an answer; he highlights what he thinks is true.

(53) 10:50'

美嘉：你们 刚 订婚 就 吵架 了啊？

*Měijiā: Nǐmen gang dìnghūn jiù chǎojià le a?*

you just engage right-away quarrel ASP a?

'How could you guys quarrel right after engagement?'

悠悠：没有。昨天 我是 闹着 玩的。

*Yōuyou: Méiyou. Zuótiān wǒ shì nàozhe wán de.*

no. yesterday I be quarrel ASP play PT.

'Nope. I was fooling around him yesterday.'

(53')

美嘉：你们 刚 订婚 就 吵架 了吗？

*Měijiā: Nǐmen gang dìnghūn jiù chǎojià le ma?*

you just engage right-away quarrel ASP MA?

'You guys are already quarrelling right after engagement?'

(54) 11:19'

悠悠：我 决定 了，订婚 派对 就由 你 来负责啦。

*Yōuyou: Wǒ juéding le, dìng hūn pàidài jiù yóu nǐ lái fùzé la.*

I decide ASP, engagement party concern-on you come be-in-charge-of.

'I've decided to put you in-charge of our engagement party.'

关谷：不过……

*Guāngǔ: Búguò...*

but...

'But...'

悠悠： 又 有 意见 啊？

*Yōuyou: Yòu yǒu yìjian a?*

again have advice *a*?

'Got a problem?'

(54')

悠悠： 又 有 意见吗？

*Yōuyou: Yòu yǒu yìjian ma?*

again have advice MA?

'Got a problem?'

On the contrary, the yes-no interrogative sentences with the particle *a* in examples (53) and (54) request for answers. The speaker finds that the fact is against his or her expectation, so he or she seeks confirmation. In example (54), Youyou is surprised that Guangu is not satisfied that he will be in charge of the engagement party. In example (54'), Youyou's words do not ask for an answer and sound more like a threat: 'You'd better agree with me.' Therefore, the particle *a* also functions as a down-toner.

(55) 11:52'

悠悠： 一 开始 我 也 怀疑 过， 不过 瞬间 就 排除 了。

*Yōuyou: Yì kāishǐ wǒ yě huáiyí guò, bú guò shùnjiān jiù páichú le.*

once start I also doubt ASP, but instant at-once remove ASP.

一菲 刚 打 过 球， 还 崴 了 脚， 完全 不 像 啊。 [...]

*Yīfēi gāng dǎ guò qiú, hái wǎi le jiǎo, wánquán bú xiàng a. [...]*

Yifei just beat ASP ball, also sprain ASP foot, at-all not similar *a*.

你 还 真 怀疑 男生 啊？

*Nǐ hái zhēn huáiyí nánshēng a?*

you still real doubt man *a*?

'I thought about that too, but I knew it wasn't real. Because Yifei not only played tennis and also injured her ankle, so it can't be her. [...] Are you truly suspecting males?'

(55')

悠悠：你还真怀疑男生？

*Yōuyou: Nǐ hái zhēn huáiyí nánshēng ?*

you still real doubt man?

'Don't tell me you are suspecting males.'

In examples (55) and (55'), the sentence with the particle *a* expresses an astonished feeling. Youyou is unsure whether Guangu suspects males; if so, this fact is out of her expectation, so she uses the particle *a* to seek confirmation. In example (55'), Youyou does not ask Guangu to answer her question but only tells Guangu to give up suspecting males. Thus, the sentence without the particle does not fit the context.

(56)

美嘉：你是哪家快递公司 的？

*Měijiā: Nǐ shì nǎ jiā kuàidì gōngsī de?*

you be which house delivery company GEN?

叫你来你就来啊？

*Jiào nǐ lái nǐ jiù lái a?*

ask you come you just come *a*?

'Which delivery company are you from? How can you just come when people ask you to?'

(56') 美嘉：叫你来你就来？

*Měijiā: Jiào nǐ lái nǐ jiù lái?*

ask you come you just come ?

'How can you just come when people ask you to?'

In example (56), Meijia is surprised the courier just comes when other ask him to do and request listener's confirmation. In example (56'), the

interrogatives without particle *a*, the speaker has already had an answer and doesn't request a feedback from the listener.

(57)

展博：她就把我踹飞了，5米

*Zhǎnbó: Tā jiù bǎ wǒ chuài fēi le, wǔ mǐ.*

she just BA me pick fly ASP, five meter.

'She kicked me right to 5 meters away.'

子乔：她属驴的啊？

*Zǐqiáo: Tā shǔ lú de a?*

she be donkey STP *a*?

'Is she actually a donkey?'

展博：她说这是自然反应，控制不住。

*Zhǎnbó: Tā shuō zhè shì zìrán fǎnying, kòngzhì bú zhù.*

she say this be natural reflex, control not can.

'She said it's natural reflex. She can't control.'

(57')

子乔：她属驴的吗？

*Zǐqiáo: Tā shǔ lú de ma?*

she be donkey STP MA?

'Is she a donkey?'

In example (57), the speaker is also surprised at what Yifei has done, and because he knows that Yifei is not under the donkey (Zodiac) sign, he does not request for an answer. Because a donkey does not belong to the Chinese Zodiac system,<sup>1</sup> in example (57'), the speaker still does not ask for an answer but expresses misunderstanding. However, if the 'donkey' is replaced by another Chinese Zodiac sign, such as the 'dog,' the sentence '*Tā shǔ gǒu de ma?*' ('Is she a dog?') is a simple inquiry without an emotion.

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese Zodiac system includes the following animals: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig.

In conclusion, the particle *a* in a yes-no interrogative sentence expresses the speaker's 'counter-expectation' and softens the tone. However, in specific situations, such as when the speaker knows that what he or she says is impossible (e.g., someone is under the Zodiac sign donkey), he or she does not request for the listener's confirmation but only expresses surprise.

## 6.2 Modal particle *a* at the end of specific interrogative sentences

Specific interrogative sentences with the particle *a* can be divided into inquiry-specific and rhetoric-specific types. In an inquiry-specific interrogative sentence, the speaker feels uncertain and requests for the listener's specific answer according to the interrogative pronoun. In a rhetoric-specific interrogative, the speaker expresses a negative or a positive statement, for example:

(58) 10:41'

悠悠：美嘉，你有空吗？陪我去超市逛逛。

*Yōuyou: Měijiā, nǐ yǒu kòng ma? Péi wǒ qù chāoshì guàngguang.*

Meijia, you have space PT? company me go supermarket stroll stroll.

'Meijia, do you have time? Let's go for grocery shopping together.'

美嘉：好啊。你怎么不让关谷陪你去啊？

*Měijiā: Hǎo a. Nǐ zěnmē bú rang Guāngǔ péi nǐ qù a?*

okay *a*. you how not let Guangu company you go *a*?

'Okay. But why don't you ask Guangu to go with you?'

(59) 6:03'

子乔：一菲，你怎么才来啊？

*Zǐqiáo: Yīfēi, nǐ zěnmē cái lái a?*

Yifei, you how EMP come *a*?

'Yifei, why are you so late?'

一菲：我迟到了吗？一收到 短 信 我 就 来 了 啊。

*Yīfēi: Wǒ chídào le ma? Yì shōudào duǎo xìn wǒ jiù lái le a.*

I late ASP PT? once receive short message I just come ASP a.

‘Am I late? I came here as soon as I got your message.’

子乔：那 是 半 小 时 前 了 吧。

*Zǐqiáo: nà shì bàn xiǎoshí qián le ba.*

that be half hour ago ASP PT.

‘It was half an hour ago’.

Example (58) is an inquiry-specific interrogative sentence. The speaker asks why the listener does not invite another person. In example (59), a rhetoric-specific interrogative sentence, the speaker uses a specific interrogative but does not aim to inquire. The speaker only wonders how the listener could be late for such a long time. The speaker’s aim is to blame rather than to inquire.

In the 8 specific interrogative sentences, 6 are inquiry-specific and 2 are rhetoric-specific types. The inquiry-specific sentences are examined first. According to Jin (2011:75), the particle *a* in inquiry-specific interrogatives have two main functions: one highlights the question; the other expresses the speaker’s ‘counter-expectation.’

(60) 10:12’

子乔：我 昨天 打 电 话 不 是 告 诉 你 了 嘛，

*Zǐqiáo: Wǒ zuótiān dǎdiànhuà búshì gàosu nǐ le ma,*

I yesterday phone not tell you ASP PT,

我 们 套 间 厕 所 的 抽 屉 里 就 有 红 花 油。

*wǒmen tàojiān cèsuǒ de chōuti lǐ jiù yǒu hóng huā yóu.*

we partment toilet GEN drawer inside just haveHAV safflower

你 干 嘛 舍 近 求 远 去 买 啊？

*Nǐ gànma shě jìn qiú yuǎn qù mǎi a?*

you why abandon-near-request-far to buy *a*?

'Didn't I tell you over the phone yesterday? There's a bottle of safflower oil in the drawer of our apartment. Why did you waste your time to buy another one?'

小贤： 我 当时 进不去 嘛!

*Xiǎoxián: Wǒ dāngshí jìn bú qù ma!*

I at-that-time enter-not-go PT!

'I couldn't get into our apartment at that time!'

(60')

子乔： 你 干嘛 舍近求远 去买？

*Zǐqiáo: Nǐ gànma shě jìn qiú yuǎn qù mǎi?*

you why abandon-near-request-far to buy?

'Why did you waste your time to buy another one!'

In example (60), Ziqiao is puzzled with Xiaoxian's behavior, so he requests the latter to answer why he does that. On the other hand, Ziqiao has told Xiaoxian that there is a safflower in their drawer, so Xiaoxian's behavior of getting out to buy another one is against Ziqiao's expectation. In example (60'), the audience can still read Ziqiao's counter-expectation, but his words sound more like blaming without inquiring. The particle *a* also makes the whole sentence more fluent, perhaps due to its softening the tone brought by the last third tone word, 买 *mǎi* 'buy'.

(61) 10:41'

悠悠： 美嘉，你有空 吗？陪我去超市 逛逛。

*Yōuyou: Měijiā, nǐ yǒu kòng ma? Péi wǒ qù chāoshì guàngguang.*

Meijia, you have space PT? company me go supermarket stroll stroll.

'Meijia, do you have time? Let's go for grocery shopping together.'

美嘉： 好啊。你 怎么 不让 关谷 陪你去啊？

*Měijiā: Hǎo a. Nǐ zěnmē bú rang Guāngǔ péi nǐ qù a?*

okay *a*. you how not let Guangu company you go *a*?

'Okay. But why don't you ask Guangu to go with you?'

(61')

美嘉：你 怎么 不 让 关谷 陪 你 去？

*Měijiā: Nǐ zěnmē bú rang Guāngǔ péi nǐ qù?*

you how not let Guangu company you go?

‘Why don’t you ask Guangu to go with you?’

In example (61), first, Meijia is curious about why Guangu does not go shopping with Youyou, so she wants to receive an answer. Second, the fact that Guangu, as Youyou’s boyfriend, does not go shopping with Youyou is against Meijia’s expectation. Example (61’) expresses Meijia’s pure inquiry.

(62) 10:55’

美嘉：你们 什么 时候 办 订婚 派对啊？

*Měijiā: Nǐmen shénme shíhou bàn dìng hūn pàiduì a?*

you what time make engagement party a?

我 还 等 着 嗨皮呢。

*Wǒ hái děng zhe hāipi ne.*

I still wait ASP happy PT.

‘After all, when do you guys plan to throw an engagement party? I am looking forward to having some fun.’

悠悠：问 关谷 吧。

*Yōuyou: Wèn Guāngǔ ba.*

ask Guangu PT.

‘Ask Guangu.’

(62’)

美嘉：你们 什么 时候 办 订婚 派对？

*Měijiā: Nǐmen shénme shíhou bàn dìng hūn pàiduì?*

you what time make engagement party?

‘when do you guys plan to throw an engagement party?’

(63) 11:28’



关谷： 只是，我有件 事情 还 没 想 通……

*Guāngǔ: Zhǐshì, wǒ yǒu jiàn shìqìng hái méi xiǎng tōng.....*

but, I have CL thing still not thing through...

‘But, there is still something I couldn’t figure out.’

悠悠： 什么 事 啊？

*Yōuyou: Shénme shì a?*

what thing a?

‘What happen on earth?’

(63’)

悠悠： 什么 事？

*Yōuyou: Shénme shì?*

what thing?

‘What’s that thing?’

In example (62), the inquiry-specific interrogative sentence with the particle *a* not only highlights the question (requests for the listener’s answer) but also expresses the speaker’s surprise that they have not decided the time to hold the party. In example (62’), the interrogative sentence without the particle *a* is an inquiry without expectation. Similarly, in example (63), Meijia requests Guangu’s answer about what he wants to figure out and also expresses her surprise about Guangu’s unwillingness to be in charge of their engagement party. Example (63’) cannot tell the ‘counter-expectation’ feeling.

(64) 16:00’

子乔：你 居然不 知道 她 跟 谁 过 不 去？

*Zǐqiáo: Nǐ jūrán bù zhīdào tā gēn shéi guò bú qù?*

you unexpectedly not know she with who pass not go?

‘You really don’t know who she looking for trouble with?’

小贤： 谁 啊？

*Xiǎoxián: Shéi a?*

who a?

'How can I know who he is?'

子乔：当 我 没 说 过。

*Zǐqiáo: Dāng wǒ méi shuō guo.*

treat me not say ASP.

'Just treat me as I said nothing.'

(64')

小贤： 谁？

*Xiǎoxián: Shéi?*

who?

'Who?'

(65) 16:19'

小贤： 就 是 他！

*Xiǎoxián: Jiù shì tā!*

just be him!

'That's him!'

子乔： 谁 啊？

*Zǐqiáo: Shéi a?*

who a?

'Who's that? (Do I know him?)'

小贤： 帮 我 算 命 的 郎 中。

*Xiǎoxián: Bāng wǒ suànmìng de lángzhong.*

help me fortune-telling STP herbalist.

'The fortune teller.'

(65')

子乔： 谁？

*Zǐqiáo: Shéi?*

who?

'Who?'

In both examples (64) and (65), the interrogative sentences with the particle *a* are 谁啊? *shéi a?* ('Who?'). The listeners think that the speakers should know the person, whereas the speakers do not know. Thus, the speakers continue to ask for an answer and also express surprise because they truly do not know the person. In examples (64') and (65'), the speakers are simply inquiring without 'counter-expectation.'

Turning now to rhetoric-specific interrogative sentences, according to Jin (2011:79), the speaker predicts that what he or she asks cannot be answered because the reason is not related to any substance or quantity, so the speaker is not inquiring but expressing his or her cognition and attitude. For this reason, more emphasis is placed on the question words in rhetoric-specific interrogative sentences than in inquiry-specific types. However, in rhetoric-specific interrogative sentences with the particle *a*, what the speaker wants to express is 'counter-expectation,' for example:

(66) 9:58'

小贤: 我 回来 的 时候, 一菲 睡 了, 诺澜 也 走 了。

*Xiǎoxián: Wǒ huílai de shíhou, Yīfēi shuì le, Nuòlán yě zǒu le.*

I come-back STP time, Yifei sleep ASP, Nuolan also go ASP.

'When I back home, Yifei was asleep, and Nuolan left.'

子乔: 你 这 都 干 了 些 什么 呀?

*Zǐqiáo: Nǐ zhè dōu gàn le xiē shénme ya?*

you this all do ASP some what ya?

'You actually did what a terrible thing! '

(66')

子乔: 你 这 都 干 了 些 什么?

*Zǐqiáo: Nǐ zhè dōu gàn le xiē shénme?*

you this all do ASP some what?

'What's wrong with you?'

In example (66), Ziaoqiao is surprised at Xiaoxian's action and thinks that the latter's behavior is wrong and unreasonable, so Ziaoqiao simply complains

without asking for a response. Compared with example (66'), the complaining tone in example (66) is strengthened and highlights the speaker's astonished mood. Five other native Mandarin speakers think that example (66') is more like the speaker finding a disordered scene than asking the listener what happened, so the sentence without the particle cannot be used to fit the context.

(67)

子乔: 一菲, 你 怎么 才 来 啊?

Zǐqiáo: Yīfēi, nǐ zěnmē cái lái a?

Yifei, you how EMP come a?

'Yifei, how could you come so late!'

一菲: 我 迟到了吗? 一 收到 短 信 我 就来了啊。

Yīfēi: Wǒ chídào le ma? Yì shōudào duǎo xìn wǒ jiù lái le a.

I late ASP PT? Once receive short message I just come ASP a.

'Am I late? I came here as soon as I got your message.'

子乔: 那 是 半 小时 前 了 吧。

Zǐqiáo: nà shì bàn xiǎoshí qián le ba.

that be half hour ago ASP PT.

'It was half an hour ago'.

(67')

子乔: 一菲, 你 怎么 才 来?

Zǐqiáo: Yīfēi, nǐ zěnmē cái lái?

Yifei, you how EMP come?

'Yifei, why are you so late?'

Similarly, in example (67), Ziqiao complains about Yifei's lateness but does not actually ask for the reason. Compared with example (67'), the speaker's astonishment is emphasized in example (67).

In the two preceding examples, this paper's author views the 'counter-expectation' meaning as brought by the adverbs 都 *dōu* (all) and 才 *cái* (just now) because both interrogatives with and without the particle *a*

express the speaker's surprise. The function of the particle *a* intensifies the unexpected feeling to a blaming and complaining mood.

### 6.3 Modal particle *a* at the end of A-not-A interrogative sentences

In Jin's corpus, A-not-A interrogative sentences with the particle *a* only account for 6.7% of all interrogatives with the particle *a*. In this corpus, only one example of an A-not-A interrogative sentence with the particle *a* is found. What differs from Jin's 'counter-expectation' is that she treats the particle *a* as a discourse marker where the speaker strongly requests for the listener's response (2011:84).

(68) 6:30'

小贤：瘀血 没 散 怎么 能 热敷呢？

*Xiǎoxián: Yūxiě méi sàn zěnmē néng rè fū ne?*

blood stasis not loose how can hot compress PT?

你 有 没 有 文 化 呀？

*Nǐ yǒu méi yǒu wénhuā ya?*

you have not have culture *ya*?

'How could you do this? Do you have any common sense?'

(68')

小贤：你 有 没 有 文 化？

*Xiǎoxián: Nǐ yǒu méi yǒu wénhuā?*

you have not have culture?

'Do you have common sense?'

In both examples (68) and (68'), Xiaoxian thinks that Yifei's choice of the hot compress is wrong and thus feels astonished. Example (68') conveys blame and disdain at Yifei's ignorance. On the other hand, the interrogative sentence with the particle *a* in example (68) expresses Xiaoxian's wish for Yifei to recognize and admit that the hot compress is a wrong choice.

#### 6.4 Modal particle *a* at the end of alternative interrogations

According to Jin (2011:84), alternative interrogations have the lowest number among all interrogative sentences with the particle *a*, which account for 2%, and the particle *a* at large expresses an inquiring meaning in alternative interrogations. In the present paper, the author's observation is that of all the sentences with the particle *a*, no particle *a* co-occurs with alternative interrogations. It can be proven that an alternative interrogation with the particle *a* is rare indeed. However, Jin's analysis of the particle *a* needs to be further observed.

In conclusion, when the particle *a* occurs with specific interrogative and A-not A interrogative sentences, the particle primarily conveys the speaker's strong inquisitive mood. Through the particle, indicating the speaker's desire to know or incomprehension, the question will inevitably sound more expressive and less preemptive than its non-particled counterparts. This may explain why some works treat the particle as a tone softener in interrogative sentences. When the particle *a* is attached to declarative-form yes-no interrogative sentences, in most cases, the particle indicates the speaker's feeling of surprise and injects the question of seeking confirmation into the declarative sentences.

## 7. Analysis of Particle *a* in Exclamative Sentences

Exclamative sentences usually end with an exclamation point (!) and express the speakers' various strong emotions, which are caused by their 'surprise.' Due to this point, the particle *a* is often treated as an exclamative marker. Jin (2011:57-58) has a different argument that it is not necessary for the particle *a* to express a strong emotion, but what expresses the speaker's emotion is the subjective adverb of degree, such as 多 *duō* 'much', 真 *zhēn* 'really', 太 *tài* 'too', and so on. At the end of the imperative sentences, what the particle *a* expresses is still 'counter-expectation.'

(69) 3:36'

展博： 真的，我 当时 在 角落 快 看 哭了。

*Zhǎnbó: zhēnde, wǒ dāngshí zài jiǎoluò kuài kàn kū le.*

truly, I at that time in the corner almost cry PT.

'That's true. I was tearing up in a corner.'

悠悠： 好啊！你在偷 看！偷 拍了 没有？

*Yōuyou: hǎo a! Nǐ zài tōu kàn! Tōu pāi le méiyǒu?*

good *a*! you ZAI peep! secretly-photo ASP not?

'How dare you! You were spying on us! Did you secretly take a video?'

(69')

悠悠： 好！你在偷 看！偷 拍了 没有？

*Yōuyou: hǎo! Nǐ zài tōu kàn! Tōu pāi le méiyǒu?*

good! you ZAI peep! secretly-photo ASP not?

'Good! You were spying on us! Did you secretly take a video?'

The sentence *Hǎo a* 'How dare you' in example (69) expresses the speaker's strong emotion but is not a representative exclamative because it lacks an adverb of degree. It differs from example (26) in that the latter expresses agreement, while the former conveys the speaker's astonishment at what the listener has done (e.g., 'How could you do this!'). In example (69'), the sentence without the particle *a* means 'good' or expresses agreement, which does not

conform to the original context. Therefore, the particle *a* here expresses the 'counter-expectation' meaning.

(70) 7:27'

黄： 瞧 一 瞧， 看 一 看 啊！ [...]

*Huáng: qiáo yi qiáo, kàn yi kàn a! [...]*

see one see, look one look a! [...]

一 瓶 保 你 用 三 年，

*Yì píng bǎo nǐ yòng sān nián,*

one bottle promise you used three years,

再 送 好 礼 真 心 赞 啊！

*zài song hǎolǐ zhēn xīn zàn a!*

again give good present real heart praise *a*!

'Stop and take a look! [...] One bottle can use for three years. It is very very very good that another free gift will also come to you!'

(70')

再 送 好 礼 真 心 赞 ！

*zài song hǎolǐ zhēn xīn zàn!*

again give good present real heart praise !

'It is very good that another free gift will also come to you.'

(71) 7:56'

小 贤： 来， 正 好 八 十， 给 我 一 瓶。

*Xiǎoxián: Lái, zhènghǎo bā shí, gěi wǒ yì píng*

come, just eighty, give me one bottle.

'Here's eight yuan. Give me one.'

黄： 兄 弟， 真 识 货 呀！ 自 己 用？

*Huáng: xiōngdì, zhēn shí huò ya! Zìjǐ yòng?*



brother, real know goods ya! Yourself use?

'My friend, you sure know what the good stuff is. For self usage?'

(71')

黄： 兄弟，真 识 货! 自己 用?

*Huáng: xiōngdi, zhēn shí huò! Zìjǐ yòng?*

brother, real know goods! Yourself use?

'My friend, you know what the good stuff is. For self usage?'

(72)

[Huang is touching Xiaoxian's hand]

黄： 兄弟， 你的皮肤 很 干 啊!

*Huáng: Xiōngdi, nǐ de pífu hěn gān a!*

brother, your skin very dry a!

用用 这个 雪花膏， 20 一 罐。

*Yòngyong zhège xuěhuā gāo, èr shí yí guān.*

use use this snow cream, twenty one bottle.

'My friend, your skin is too dry! Try this cream, twenty yuan per one.'

(72')

黄： 兄弟， 你的皮肤 很 干!

*Huáng: Xiōngdi, nǐ de pífu hěn gān!*

brother, your skin very dry!

'My friend, your skin is dry!'

In example (70), Huang shouts to attract customers. He thinks that customers do not know the quality and the price of his merchandise, so the particle *a* is used to strengthen the tone. In example (70'), Huang simply introduces his products. Compared with example (70), Huang emphasizes what customers do not know, which indicates the 'counter-expectation' meaning. In example (71), Xiaoxian pays for the medicine as soon as possible, which is against Huang's expectation. The particle *a* expresses the 'surprise' meaning. Example (71') states Huang's

evaluation of Xiaoxian without the 'surprise' meaning. Similarly, compared with example (72'), the particle *a* in example (72) expresses Huang's surprise at Xiaoxian's skin.

(73) 9:23'

小贤： 你 不是 说 免 费 的 吗？

*Xiǎoxián: Nǐ búshi shuō miǎn fèi de ma?*

you not-be say remove fee STP PT?

'Didn't you say it is free?'

黄： 相信 免费， 不信 八十。

*Huáng: Xiāngxìn miǎnfèi, bú xìn bā shí.*

believe-for free, not-believe eighty.

'Free if you believe me, eighty yuan if you don't.'

小贤： 我 去， 你 坑 爹啊！

*Xiǎoxián: Wǒ qù, nǐ kēng diē a!*

I go, you trap father *a*!

'What the heck, you are such a scammer!'

黄： 药 酒 钱， 再付 八十。

*Huáng: Yào jiǔ qián, zài fù bā shí.*

medicine alcohol money, again pay eighty.

'Pay another eighty yuan for the medicine.'

(73')

小贤： 我 去， 你 坑 爹！

*Xiǎoxián: Wǒ qù, nǐ kēng diē!*

I go, you trap father!

'What the heck, you scammer!'

In example (73), there is a popular network catchphrase *kēng diē* which literally means 'to trap your father' and as a slang, it means 'to deceive someone'. When Xiaoxian hears he has to pay another eighty yuan for the medicine he feels he is cheated. In example (73'), Xiaoxian is accusing Huang's

cheating behavior while in example (73), the exclamative with particle *a* expresses Xiaoxian's astonishment that Xiaoxian hasn't expected Huang is a fraud.

In conclusion, exclamatives with particle *a* expresses a strong emotion of speaker which represents speaker's surprise at the fact or what the listener says. Owing to this 'counter-expectation', speaker uses particle *a* to try to attract other's attention or try to change other's ideas.

## 8. Conclusion

This research has examined the first 20 minutes of first episode of the popular Chinese sitcom 'iPartment', which gave rise to a corpus script of dialogues that yielded a total of 45 modal particle *a*, the subject of this study. The aim of this study is to find the meaning of the particle *a* in its contexts of use. As already summarized in Chapter 2, the meanings and functions of modal particles studied by different linguists vary from person to person or from book to book. In this research, Jin's analysis and explanation of particle *a* with various sentence types are chosen to be checked with spoken corpus. Jin concludes the meaning and main function of particle *a* with four different sentence types, declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives and exclamatives, as 'counter-expectation' that particle *a* expresses speaker's surprise and astonishment at what has happened or what listener has said. Based on previous studies by many linguists, Jin analyzed and refined their points, for example, Chao (1968) considers one of the functions of particle *a* is to work as a 'reminder', Jin explains the reason why the ultimate meaning of 'reminder' is 'counter-expectation'. Despite Jin used written material, which is not good enough to examine a spoken expression, this is also an important reason why I want to test her conclusion. Jin concludes the complex meaning of particle *a* into a simple word: 'counter-expectation', if what she summarizes can be confirmed by spoken material, it would dramatically help Chinese learners to have a better understanding and comprehension of this commonly spoken particle in an easy way. After my observation of 45 tokens of particle *a*, Jin's conclusion is reasonable for the most part, whereas in some specific situation, particle *a* not only expressed surprisive meaning but also has an additional implication.

Declaratives are divided into three: evaluative declaratives, illustrative declaratives and responses. In terms of evaluative declaratives and illustrative declaratives, particle *a* expresses not only the meaning of 'counter-expectation' as Jin's conclusion but also sometimes an additional mood at the same time such as an appreciation mood. What's more, other than 'counter-expectation' meaning,

sometimes the particle *a* simply convey discourse information in illustrative declaratives. The speaker uses particle *a* to soften the tone when the dialogues happen to the people have a close relationship. As for responses, the particle *a* is only conveying information and soften the tone without showing unexpected mood. In positive responses, sometimes the speaker is only showing his willing

As for imperatives, particle *a* with imperatives expresses 'counter-expectation' as Jin analyzes. Speaker is surprised at listener's behavior, which against the speaker's willing, and strongly request the listener to execute what speaker says. There is another valitive meaning of the particle *a* which Jin views imperatives attached with particle *a* are oppressive and againsts the politeness principle of speech communication strategy. However, in my spoken data, many sentence has shown the valitive meaning that refers to the speaker's strong wish that requesting listener carry out action.

Interrogatives are divided into four: yes-no interrogatives, specific interrogatives, A-not-A interrogatives and alternative interrogatives. Alternative interrogations attached with particle *a* is rare to be seen that leads to we don't have enough sentences to analyze its meaning. As to yes-no interrogatives, particle *a* with yes-no interrogatives expresses speaker's 'counter-expectation' and soften the tone. However, in some specific situation, like speaker knows what he says is definitely impossible, the speaker doesn't request listener's confirmation, only expresses his surprise. As to inquiring specific interrogatives, the listener thinks the speaker should know the person while the speakers do not know that is out of the speaker's expectation. Thus, the speakers continue to ask for an answer and also express their surprise. While to rhetorical specific interrogatives, speaker, in fact, is not inquiring but expressing his cognition and attitude because speaker predicts that what he asks cannot be answered. However, in rhetorical specific interrogatives attached with particle *a*, what the speaker wants to express is 'counter-expectation'. As to A-not-A interrogatives, the 'counter-expectation' meaning is brought by adverb in interrogatives, so the function of particle *a* is to strengthen the unexpected feeling to a blame and

complaining mood. In a word, the particle *a* attached with interrogatives indicates the speaker's feeling of surprise and conveys the speaker's strong inquisitive mood.

As to exclamatives, particle *a* expresses a strong emotion of speaker which represents speaker's surprise at the fact or what the listener says. Owing to this 'counter-expectation', the speaker uses particle *a* to try to attract other's attention or try to change other's ideas.

In a word, modal particle *a* in the most part expresses 'counter-expectation' meaning and has a valitive function in various sentence types while in some specific context, particle *a* has an exclamative function to convey the intense state of a speaker's emotion of one kind or another, such as amazement, sadness, appreciation, dissatisfaction, etc. When particle *a* is applied between people have a close relationship, it works at a downtoner. However, when particle *a* is used to express speaker's strong surprise emotion, it can strengthen the tone. Therefore, what does particle *a* exactly mean should depend on context.

This study works on the meaning and function of a familiar modal particle word: *a* 啊. I have only tested and verified the outcomes of the previous study but without raising a creative viewpoint. Meanwhile, the study materials are not enough to support my conclusion as an incontrovertible conclusion. Therefore, more spoken materials would be collected if I have the opportunity and other modal particles such as *ba* 吧, *ma* 吗, *ma* 嘛, and *le* 了 are also worth to be detailedly studied.

And finally, the characterization of the particle's meaning and semantic functions achieved in this study has made it explicable why this Chinese particle is frequent and pervasive in daily use of language, especially in informal contexts. As can be seen clearly from the discussion of the particle *a* in the previous chapters, particle *a* allows ourselves to show our emotion and our tendency, and many of our daily social tasks accomplished with the help of the particle *a*. Hopefully this study can help Chinese teachers and other linguists and the people

who interest in Chinese language have a better acquaintance of the particle *a* or stimulate other's deep researches.

## Appendix A

### Abbreviations and Symbols Used in English Glosses

A	particle <i>-a</i> (啊) at the end of a sentence
ASP	aspect particle after a predicative verb or adjective, i.e. <i>-le</i> (了), <i>-zhe</i> (着), or <i>-guo</i> (过)
CL	classifiers used between a numeral and a noun, e.g. <i>ge</i> (个), <i>zhi</i> (只), etc.
EMP	emphatic adverb such as <i>cái</i> (才)
GEN	possessive marker: <i>-de</i> (的), which denotes a possessive relationship between the noun phrases linked by it.
Int.	interjection that appears as a separate element at the beginning or end of a Mandarin sentence, e.g. <i>wéi</i> (喂)
MA	particle <i>-ma</i> (吗) at the end of a sentence
PT	unspecified particle at the end of a sentence
STP	structural particles: <i>-de</i> (的), <i>-de</i> (地) and <i>-de</i> (得) which serve to show grammatical relationship between sentence elements
ZAI	adverb <i>zài</i> (在) indicating the progressive aspect of an action



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