Topic-marking particles and referent activation in Mandarin Chinese:
A preliminary study on *a* 啊 and *ma* 嘛

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Topic markers are argued to be optional and interchangeable morphemes, with no semantic meaning, that mark expressions referring to Topics (cf. Li & Thompson 1981, Gundell 1988, Chen 2009). As for Chinese, different Topic markers have been identified (i.e. *a/ya* 啊/呀, *ba* 吧 ,ma 嘛 , me 么 and ne 呢), among which *ne* seems to be one of the most extensively investigated, often in works focusing on modal particles (among others, Chu 2006, Li 2006, Huang 2007, Chen 2009, Qiang 2010, 2011, Deng 2015).

As for *a* and *ma*, the two Topic markers object of the present analysis, relevant works often focus on their relation with the illocutionary force of their connected Comment (Qiang 2010, 2011, Deng 2015).

According to the evidence provided in Deng (2015), the Topic Marker *ma* is used to mark an anaphorical referent strictly linked to the previous context, whereof the speaker expresses a certain degree of "nonappreciation". Furthermore, according to Qiang (2010), a Topic marked by *ma* can be perceived as a constituent from which "obvious" information has been omitted, as it is shown in (1b) derived from (1a):

(1a) 因为　　你　是　　男人　　嘛，　就是　　得　　靠　　自己。
 　　 yinwei　ni　shi　nanren　ma　jiu-shi　dei　kao　ziji
 　　 because you　are　man　　ma　just　　must lean　self
(1b) ~~因为你是~~男人 嘛，就是得靠自己。
 　　 '~~Since you are~~ men, can only lean on them/yourself.'　　　(Adapted from Qiang 2010: 63)

On the other hand, *a* does not seem to be connected to any specific semantic or pragmatic function and it is used to merely separate the Topic from its Comment (cf. Qiang 2011, Deng 2015).

Another branch of studies addressing Topics has focused on the activation status of their referents. Ever since Chafe (1987: 25), it is known that referents can find themselves in different "positions" with respect to the speaker's consciousness or short-term memory: either central, peripheral or absent. Furthermore, as Lambrecht (1994: 165) already pointed out, the activation status of a referent is crucial for its acceptability as a Topic, and the more accessible the referent, the higher its degree of acceptability. Referent activation has also proven to be highly relevant in a number of information-structural sensitive constructions such as *ba*-marked objects (Iemmolo & Arcodia, 2014), *bei*-marked agents (Loar, 2011) and presentational constructions (Van Valin & LaPolla, 1998). However, it is surprising that referent activation has not yet been called upon in relation to topic markers. Indeed, if different constructions may impose different restrictions on the activation states of the Topic referents involved (Ward & Birner, 2019), it is not farfetched to hypothesize that different Topic markers are also used to mark referents with different activation states.

The current study sets up to fulfil this gap by looking into the activation states of referents marked by two specific particles, i.e. *a* 啊 and *ma* 嘛. The data for the study has been taken form the Chinese Web 2011 Corpus, available on Sketch Engine (https://www.sketchengine.eu/). A set of 200 occurrence of Topics marked by each particle was then extracted, for a total of 400 occurrences. The Topic referents were then classified according to five different activation states (active, semantically-accessible, situationally-accessible, unused and inactive). Preliminary results show that the two particles appear to be specialized in the co-occurrence with different referent activation states: i) while *a* shows a tendency to mark referents that become accessible in the speaker's mind thanks to the activation of a semantic frame, ii) *ma* shows a preference for active referents which have already been introduced into the discourse. Furthermore, iii) *a* seems to mark mainly topics of exclamative clauses and referents that can be defined either as a part of the whole or as the whole of a list of parts mentioned in the previous co-text. These functions appear similar (at least in part) to those wherein *a* is used as a sentence final particle, such us 'reminding' and 'selection' (cf. Chao 1968, Chu 1998). On the other hand, iv) *ma* frequently occurs with referents that are already known and readily available to both interlocutors' consciousnesses. This finding is also consistent with the function of *ma* in sentence-final position, where it is argued to mark highly obvious (Chappell & Peyraube, 2016) and even intersubjectively shared information (Author 1, 2017).

Keywords

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