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The acquisition of Mandarin sentence final particles by Italian learners

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Abstract: This article deals with the acquisition of four Mandarin sentence final particles *ma*, *a*, *ba*, *ne* by Italian native speakers. The research gives a contribution to the study of sentence final particles from an acquisition and didactic perspective, which has been scarcely investigated in the linguistic literature. The article proposes a quantitative and qualitative experimental analysis with two groups of Italian learners, one at elementary proficiency level and one at intermediate level. The research shows that *ne* and *ba* are the most challenging particles to acquire by Italian learners. We argue that this due to the fact that *ne* and *ba* are highly polyfunctional and they do not simply determine the type of clause. The functions of *ne* and *ba* tested in this paper, in fact, are better defined as discourse particles, whose meaning is highly dependent from the context. Moreover, the experiment demonstrates not only that the proficiency level is straightforward correlated to the mastery of sentence final particles, as expected, but also that the didactic tools play a crucial role. As a matter of fact, the results of this study opens up a number of pedagogical implications in relation to the teaching of Mandarin sentence final particles to Italian learners.

Keywords: Chinese L2, acquisition of sentence final particles, Italian

Article Note: This paper is the result of the close collaboration between the two authors. In particular, Badan takes responsibility for the sections from page 1 to page 9 and Romagnoli for those from page 9 to page 17. We are very grateful to dr. Conti for his help in statistical analysis.

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1 Introduction

This study examines the acquisition of four Mandarin sentence final particles, such as *ma*, *a*, *ba*, *ne*,¹ by Italian native speakers. Mandarin sentence final particles have long been discussed in theoretical linguistic studies, however they have been scarcely investigated from the L2 acquisition and didactic perspective.²

The investigation of the acquisition of sentence final particles by Italian learners of Mandarin is particularly intriguing because (i) Italian language does not have sentence final particles-type of strategy, and (ii) teaching practice tends to overlook these items since their presence or absence does not affect the grammaticality of the sentence.

We tested two groups of Italian learners with two different proficiency levels of Mandarin L2: elementary level (one year of study) and intermediate level (two years of study), respectively corresponding to *Hanyu shuiping kaoshi* 2 and 3.³ In the first two years of study, *ma* and *a* are thought as having a straightforward use as sentence type particle. *Ma* turns a sentence into a question, while *a* turns a sentence into an exclamative. The particles *ba* and *ne* are instead thought as polysemic: they are not sentence type particles, but they express different types of attitude, without affecting the grammaticality of the clause. The difficulty in acquiring these particles by Italian learners requires not only their appropriate use in context, but also a new way to conceive the formation of different clause types. Our choice to focus on *a*, *ba*, *ma* and *ne* is justified not only by the fact that they have been extensively studied by many scholars (see section below), but also due to the frequency accounts of these items. Xiao et al. (2009), specifically define the four particles as part of the core vocabulary for learners, since they are the most frequently final particles (after *le*) used in Mandarin spoken language.

On the basis of the observations above, with the current study we aim at answering to the following questions:

RQ1: What are the most challenging particles for Italian learners among those analysed in the current experiment?;

1 Throughout this paper, we express the sentence final particles using only the *pinyin*, the official Romanization system of Standard Chinese. The corresponding Chinese simplified characters are the following: 吗 for *ma*, 啊 for *a*, 吧 for *ba*, 呢 for *ne*.

2 The main studies on sentence final particles published in the last decade are mostly written in Chinese, see for instance Xu (2002), Zhao (2003), Zhou and Shen (2006), Xie (2007), Xu (2011), Song (2013), and Yang (2013), on which we based the design of the experiment in this paper. Yang investigates the acquisition of *ba*, *ma* and *ne* by American heritage and non-heritage learners of Chinese, with two different proficiency levels.

3 The *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (HSK) ‘Chinese Proficiency Test’ is the standardized test of Standard Chinese language proficiency for non-native speakers.

RQ2: Why some particles are more difficult to acquire with respect to others?;

RQ3: Is the proficiency level correlated to the mastery of sentence final particles?;

RQ4: What is the role played by the didactic tools used by the two groups of learners?

2 Mandarin sentence final particles *ma*, *ba*, *a*, *ne*

According to Li and Thompson (1981), Mandarin has six sentence-final particles: *le*, *ne*, *ba*, *ou*, *a/ya* and *ma*. Li & Thompson (1981:238) warn about the elusive functions of these words, stating that “linguists have had considerable difficulty in arriving at a general characterization of each of them”. Such difficulty is mainly due to the fact that the same final particle can occur in different contexts, and seems to convey a number of different meanings. Sentence final particles, in fact, have been analyzed as bound morphemes that appear at the end of the sentence and are used to indicate the clause type, illocutionary force, attitude, emotion coloring (Ding 1961; Chao 1968; Li and Thompson 1981; Law 1990; Matthews and Yip 1994; Qi 2002; Lu 2005; a. o.). Mandarin sentence final particles have been traditionally included in the class of *zhuci* ‘auxiliary words’, or defined as *yǔqí* ‘modal particles’ (Lü Shuxiang 1980), and *yuwei zhuci* ‘sentence-final functional words’ (Li & Thompson 1981; Liu et al. 2001; Qi 2002).

Several previous studies investigated the semantic and pragmatic properties of sentence final particles under different frameworks (Chao 1968; Hu 1981; Li and Thompson 1981; Zhu 1982; Wu 2004; Li 2006; Hsieh and Sybesma 2008; Del Gobbo et al. 2015).⁴ Crucially, in the literature extensive evidence has been provided to distinguish two principal types of Sentence final particles in Mandarin: particles that codify the type of sentence and particles that express the speaker’s attitude. For instance, it is generally agreed that *ma* is a yes/no question particle. That is the presence of *ma* at the end of an affirmative sentence changes the *type* of clause, turning the clause into a yes/no question:

- (1) a. Ta yijing chi-fan le.
He already eat-rice asp
He already ate.

⁴ The literature on Mandarin Sentence final particles is vast. In this paper we mention only the main and most common analyses of the particles tested in our experiment.

- b. Ta yijing chi-fan le ma?
 He already eat-rice asp prt
 Did he eat already?

On the contrary, as we will illustrate more in detail in Section 2.4, the usage or the absence of *ne* may yield subtle differences without affecting the type of sentence. Compare (2a) with (2b). While the clause in (2a) is a neutral question, the same sentence with the final particle *ne* conveys a strong inquiry (2b). The particle *ne*, in fact, does not change the type of sentence in (2a) which is still an interrogative, its function is to indicate the speaker attitude towards that question. As King (1986) proposes, *ne* can be analysed as an evaluative device: with the addition of *ne*, the question is marked as highly significant from the speaker's point of view.

- (2) a. Ya, zenme ti zhe yang de wenti?
 oh how pose this kind de question
 'Why did you ask this question?'
 b. Ya, zenme ti zhe yang de wenti ne?
 oh how pose this kind de question prt
 'Oh, Why did you ask such a question?'

(Example slightly modified from Shao 1989: 174)

It is also important to point out that difficulties in learning the Sentence final particles derives also from the fact that some meanings for Sentence final particles actually do not come from the particle itself, but arise from the interaction of the literal meaning of the sentences and specific contextual features.

2.1 The particle *ma*

Despite the wide use of *ma* as interrogative final particle as illustrated in (1), *ma* plays also different functions. For instance, Chappell (1991:48) notices that on the one hand, *ma* can also “express disagreement, possibly combined with indignation or impatience at the hearer's opposite point of view”. On the other hand, *ma* can also remind the speaker that “the entire proposition is obvious or self-evident from the preceding discussion or from their shared cultural knowledge” (Chappell 1991: 47). Additionally, Chu (1998) notices that *ma* can be used with an *insistence function* expressing an exhortative meaning as in the following example:

- (3) Zai he yi bei ma!
 Again drink one cup prt
 Have another drink!
 (slightly modified from Dow 1983:161)

In our study the subtle differences in meaning that *ma* can add to a clause have not been taken into consideration due to the low proficiency levels of the participants. Both the first and second year participants, in fact, have studied *ma* exclusively as clause type particle, which turns an affirmative clause into an interrogative one (see example (1) above).

2.2 The particle *a*

The final particle *a* (as well as its variant *ya*) displays a great variation in terms of contexts in which it may occur and the interpretation that it may evoke. In the literature, *a* is usually associated with a bundle of different meanings (see Chao 1968; Li and Thompson 1981; Zhu 1982; Dow 1983; Regina 2004).⁵ The particle *a* typically appears in exclamatives such as the example (4).

- (4) Ta zheme/name gao a!
 ta so so tall prt
 'How very tall he is!'

The sentence (4) consists of the adverbial element *zheme/name* 'so' and the final particle *a*. If the final particle is absent, the sentence in (4) is not only interpreted as a descriptive statement, but also it sounds not complete and it requires a sort of continuation. However, notice that in some cases the addition of *a* to a simple declarative clause is enough to make the clause an exclamation (compare (5a) with (5b)):

- (5) a. Ta shi hen congming.
 She is very intelligent
 She is very intelligent. / ! (surprise)
 b. Ta shi hen congming a!
 She is very intelligent prt
 She is very intelligent! (surprise)

⁵ The following list of functions of the final particle *a* and the examples are from Chao (1968: 804–807).

The final particle *a* (as well as its variant *ya*) displays even a greater variation with respect to *ma* in terms of contexts in which it may occur and interpretations that it may evoke (Chao 1968; Li and Thompson 1981; Zhu 1982; Dow 1983; Regina 2004).

For instance, the particle *a* is also used in a *starting question* as in example (6): the addition of *a* softens the question with the effect of *excuse me* and the like. Note, importantly, that it is not *a* that turns a statement into a question: the sentence still remains a question even without the particle:

- (6) Sheir (a)?
 Who prt
 ‘Who is it?’

The presence of *a* can turn a question into a *confirmation question*. That is a question that requires a confirmation of having correctly heard what has been said, as in the following:

- (7) Ni bu chu a?
 you not go-out prt
 ‘You are not going, right?’

The particle *a* can function like a vocative particle. In (8a), for instance, *a* adds a slightly more airy and less blunt effect than a direct address without any particle. Moreover, *a* is used in mild command as in (8b):

- (8) a. Lao Jiang a!
 Lao Jiang prt
 ‘Oh, Lao Jiang!’
 b. Kuai shanglai a!
 quick up-come prt
 ‘Come here quickly (please)!’

The particle *a* can indicate also impatience, as in (9) or, it can function as a reminder, as shown by (10):

- (9) Wo mei zuo cuo a!
 I not do wrong prt
 ‘I didn’t do it wrong!’

- (10) Benlai ni ye zhidao a,
 originally you also know prt
 ye yong-bu-zhe zai shuo a...
 also not need again say prt
 ‘As you already know, and I don’t have to say it again’;

The final particle *a* is used also to express warning. As Chu (1998, 2002) notices, in case of warning, the presence of *a* seems to make the warning more personal and more concerned than otherwise:

- (11) Ni dui ta yao xiaoxinyidiar a.
 you toward he must careful a-bit prt
 ‘You get to be careful about him (and I am really concerned)’;

The final particle *a* can also indicate a confirmation to what has been previously said by another speaker (see the short dialogue in (12)), or it can simply indicate a pause for the hearer, as in (13).

- (12) A: Dui, wo xiang jiao hanyu.
 Correct I want teach Chinese
 Correct, I would like to teach Chinese.
 B: Hen hao a.
 very well prt
 Very well.
 A: Shi a.
 To.be prt
 Ok

(From *Buongiorno Cina* p.21)

- (13) Wo shuo a, ni ting a...
 I speak prt you listen prt
 ‘I speak, you listen...’

The list of different functions of *a* reported above is not exhaustive, but it gives a clear idea of the complexity and variety of interpretations that the presence of *a* provides within a clause.

In our experiment, we tested the two usages that should have been acquired by both first and second year students: *a* used in exclamatives as in (4)-(5) and in clauses expressing confirmation to a previous utterance as in (11).

2.3 The particle *ba*

Ba is commonly interpreted as making a clause an exhortation, as in (14):

- (14) Jin lai ba!
 enter come prt
 Come in!

It has been claimed to indicate suggestions, express speculations, make mild questions, speaker's uncertainty (as in (15)) (e.g., Chao 1968; Zhu 1982; Dow 1983; Chu 1983, Chu 1998).

- (15) Zhangsan zai xuexiao ba?
 Zhangsan zai school prt
 Zhangsan is at school, right?

Li and Thompson (1981:307) propose that the general meaning of *ba* is “the effect of soliciting the approval or agreement of the hearer with respect to the statement to which *ba* is attached.

In our experiment, we tested the usage of *ba* to express exhortation as in (14) and to indicate uncertainty as in (15).

2.4 The particle *ne*

The final particle *ne* can occur in declarative and interrogative sentences. As for declarative sentences, Chao (1968:802–803) shows that *ne* can be used to indicate the continuative aspect as in (16); or to express “interest in additional information”, like in (17).

- (16) Shuo zhe hua ne.
 speak asp word prt
 (They) are talking,---line busy

- (17) Tamen hai mai gu qin ne
 they also sell ancient zither prt
 ‘They are even selling the ancient zither (among other exotic things).’

Among the several interpretations (for instance attention attractor for Hu (1981), reminding for Shao (1989), inter-clausal/sentential linker for Chu (1984,

1985a, 1985b, 1998), evaluative device for King (1986), indicator of hearer engagement for Wu (2005a), the common aspect generally recognized by the majority of scholars is the *interactive* function of *ne*: the use of *ne* helps to draw the hearer's attention to the information that is being claimed. In the current experiment, the interactive function of *ne* is always expressed by means of elliptical questions referred to the previous discourse context.

As mentioned above, Italian language does not have sentence final particles, but uses completely different syntactic devices, specific intonation or different lexical items, such as adverbs or verbs.

3 The four particles *ma*, *ba*, *a*, *ne* in the didactic material

The two books used by the participants at the experiment are both specifically designed for Italian learners of Mandarin. However, they exhibit different features in several aspects, particularly in the vocabulary selection and in the grammar content progression. The first year students use *Buongiorno Cina* 'Goodmorning China' (Li 2005)⁶ as textbook, while the second year students use *Il cinese per gli italiani* 'Chinese for Italians' (Masini et al. 2010).⁷ The book used by first year learners adopts a communicative approach, i. e. its content is arranged by communicative functions. The communicative approach is reflected in the vocabulary selection and in the dialogues, and aims at facilitating also the acquisition of sentence final particles. Second year learners used a textbook strongly grammar-oriented, which does not pay much attention to spoken language. None of the participant had any full immersion experience in China or within a Mandarin speaking environment either. Therefore the introduction of sentence final particles by the textbooks seems crucial to understand the acquisition path. For the participants, the knowledge of Mandarin mainly relies on didactic material, on lectures provided by Italian teachers, and on the practice with native speaker instructors, who use various media didactic devices.

⁶ In *Buongiorno Cina*, each lesson includes two dialogues. Every text is followed by the list of new words with *pinyin* and translation, grammatical notes, and exercises. The grammatical notes illustrate the new grammatical forms and structures in the dialogues.

⁷ *Il cinese per gli italiani* is quite grammar-oriented. Each lesson contains two texts, a dialogue and exercises. The vocabulary list contains *pinyin*, characters, part of speech, translation, and examples. A short list of supplementary words is also provided with grammar explanations.

3.1 The particle *ma* in the didactic material

The textbook *Buongiorno Cina* used to define *ma* as *yucici* ‘modal particle’ and illustrate it uniquely as a particle that turns an affirmative sentence into an interrogative one. Differently, in *Il cinese per gli italiani* used by the second year students, the description of *ma* includes notions about the particle’s position, function and the impossibility to co-occur with interrogative lexical items.

On the basis of both textbooks, *ma* has a unique function and meaning: it is an interrogative sentence type particle.

3.2 The particle *ne* in the didactic material

Buongiorno Cina exemplifies the use of *ne* in the fixed formula *ni ne?* ‘And you?’ that will be repeated a number of times throughout the textbook, so that it will result very clearly in our test that the students learn it as it is. However, the authors clarify that *ne* can be used at the end of a clause to express a truncated interrogative sentence: *ne* indicates that the interrogative is actually omitted, but it refers to what has been said in the preceding context.

In *Il cinese per italiani*, the particle *ne* is described as a particle having an interrogative value as *ma* but weaker than *ma*. It is also specified that *ne* can occur in sentences containing interrogative pronouns. Later the authors report the use of *ne* in the expression of the progressive aspect, so distinguishing the different functions of the particle. In this way *Il cinese per italiani* adopts a more gradual approach with respect to *Buongiorno Cina*.

3.3 The particle *ba* in the didactic material

In *Buongiorno Cina*, the authors point out that *ba* does not have a unique meaning, but the explanation is quite vague. As our investigation will reveal, the vagueness regarding the different uses of *ba* and the presence/absence of exclamative marker will play a role in the process of acquisition by Italian students.

In *Il cinese per italiani*, *ba* is briefly explained in the definition provided within the vocabulary list (p. 60): “[*ba* is] used to introduce a question whose answer is expected to be affirmative or to express a conjecture”. In grammatical notes and in different dialogues in the textbook, *ba* appears in different contexts, with a polysemic value. *Ba*, in fact, assumes a number of different functions: exhortative, common agreement, uncertainty/supposition, light

questions, light statements. However, the polysemic aspect of *ba* and all its functions are not always overtly explain in the grammatical notes.

3.4 The particle *a* in the didactic material

Buongiorno Cina defines in a grammatical note that *a* is a modal particle that appears at the end of declarative sentences, assuming different functions. However these functions are not specified. There is no overt mention of the use of *a* in exclamatives. Probably the use of *a* for exclamatives have been used only by the lecturers in their spoken language lessons.

In *Il cinese per italiani* particle *a* is not included in the vocabulary list, nor is overtly introduced.

4 The experiment

4.1 Methodology

The participants are 72 Italian learners of Mandarin: 33 are at elementary proficiency level and 39 at intermediate proficiency level. We have also submitted the same test to 6 Mandarin native speakers, which served as control group. The questionnaire consists of 22 short dialogues with 31 blanks to fill with one of the four target particles. The first and last scenarios were fillers. The participants completed the questionnaire in class, while Mandarin native speakers participated via email. We collected also bio data information, motivations, and language background of all the participants. The sample of participants was rather homogeneous: the average age of the participants is 20, they are all Italian native speakers, and their exposure to Mandarin L2 are basically the same for the two groups.

In the target scenarios of the questionnaire:⁸

items 3, 9, 14, 17, 26 required *ma*

items 5, 7, 16, 19, 22, 28 required *a*

items 10, 15, 24, 30 required *ne*

items 6, 12, 18 required *ba*

items 2, 21, 25, 29 both *ba* and *ma*

items 4, 20, 23 both *ba* and *a*

8 See the sample of the questionnaire in the Appendix.

items 8, 11, 13 both *ne* and *a*
 item 27 both *ne* and *ma*

4.2 Results

Results reported in Table 1 show that the most challenging particles to acquire are *ne* and *ba*. Considering the means obtained for the different sentence final particles, we notice how second year learners perform always better than first year learners, except for the particle *ma*.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the results reported in the four sentence final particles.

Items	Total		First year		Second year	
	mean	Median	mean	Median	mean	Median
Ma (max: 5 points)	4,38	4	4,42	5	4,33	4
A (max: 6 points)	4,15	4	4,06	4	4,23	4
Ne (max: 4 points)	2,97	3	2,58	3	3,31	3
Ba (max: 3 points)	1,85	2	1,70	2	1,97	2

As for the different proficiency level, the results we obtained (reported in Table 2) reveal that second year learners' performance was better than first year.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the two proficiency levels.

	Mean (of correct answers, max: 29)	Median	Standard deviation	Variance
Tot	21,99	22	3	9,3
First year	20,97	21	3,17	10,3
Second year	22,85	22	2,60	6,77

Since data were not normally distributed, we run Mann-Whitney U test and we found a significant difference between first (Mdn=21) and second year (Mdn=22) learners in test total score ($U=425.50$, $Z=-2.49$, $p=0.013$ 2-tailed), as reported in Table 3.

If we consider the means of exact results regarding the use of the four different particles, significant difference was reported only for *ne* (Mdn 1^o year = 3, Mdn 2^o year = 3, $U=327$, $Z=-3.94$, $p=0$ 2-tailed).

Table 3: Differences between the two groups.

Mean rank 1st year	Mean rank 2nd year	Mann-Whitney U	Z	p
29,89	42,09	425,50	-2,49	,013

Moreover, as reported in Table 4, the statistical comparison between performances on the single items shows that significant difference exists for the following items: 8 (requiring both *ne* and *a*); 11 (requiring both *ne* and *a*); 16 (requiring *a*); 18 (requiring *ba*); 19 (requiring *a*); 22 (requiring *a*); 24 (requiring *ne*) and 27 (requiring both *ne* and *ma*). Only in one case first year students’ performance turned to be significantly better than second year: it was item 19, requiring *a*.

Table 4: Items reporting significant differences.

# item	First year		Second year		Two levels	
	mean (median)	SD	mean (median)	SD	U	p
8	0,5 (1)	0.5	0.8 (1)	0.3	450,00	,005
11	0.6 (1)	0.5	0.9 (1)	0.2	439,5	,001
16	0.7(1)	0.4	0.9 (1)	0.2	517,50	,027
18	0.4 (1)	0.5	0.8 (1)	0.4	402,00	,001
19	0.8 (1)	0.4	0.5 (0)	0.5	430,50	,004
22	0.6 (1)	0.5	0.8 (1)	0.3	489,00	,022
24	0.0 (0)	0.3	0.5 (1)	0.5	372,00	,000
27	0.1 (0)	0.4	0.3 (0)	0.5	510,00	,048

5 Discussion

To answer RQ1 (what are the most challenging particles for Italian learners among those analysed in this experiment?), the data obtained show that the most challenging particles are *ne* and *ba*. As for the relationship between proficiency level and mastery of sentence final particles (RQ2), the data confirm that second year learners perform better than first ones. Less predictable seems to be the answer to RQ 3, which aims at providing a reason why some sentence final particles are more challenging than others. Interestingly, both groups of participants reported the lowest mean for *ba*. The scenarios provided to test the particle *ba* do not present ambiguity in meaning: scenarios 6 and 18 are aimed at giving advice (the same, using slightly different forms, i.e. ‘take a rest’), the

utterance in 12 expresses an invitation to do something ('have a look at'). These uses are rather typical for the employ of *ba* particle, however our study demonstrates that they are still unclear to learners at both elementary and intermediate proficiency level. For instance, scenario 6 includes a reduplicated verbal form and an exclamation mark, which has triggered the exhortative interpretation by some first year learners (8) and most of the second year (22). A similar case is represented by scenario 12, whereas 18, which has the same verb as in 6 (*xiuxi* 'take a rest') without the exclamative mark could have induced the use of *a* instead of *ba* because the sentence also contains the adverb *haishi* 'still'.

Scores are not so low for *ne*. However, it is only for *ne* that significant difference of performance of the four different particles between the two groups is reported. *Ne* has been used much better by second year than by first year learners. In the four scenarios requiring exclusively this particle, all the utterances present elliptical questions. Interestingly, notice that when *ne* is preceded by *ni* 'you' (scenario 15) no mistakes have been reported since the two words are processed as a single chunk. In cases where we provided a different word and context, the results are not so clear-cut and the participants also choose *ma* (scenario 10). The results are worse when the questions are not linked to a previous context (scenarios 24 and 30), where the tendency is to use *ma* to make the sentence an interrogative.

To give an explanation to the fact that *ne* and *ba* are the most challenging particles to acquire with respect to *a* and *ma*, we should consider also the differences between particles and their classification in the linguistic studies. Mandarin sentence final particles are generally classified as a unique group, however recent works propose a more refined taxonomy, analyzing the single particles more in detail. In line with these studies, we argue that the acquisition of *ma* and *a* is faster and easier with respect to *ne* and *ba* because they are different *types* of particles. Notice, in fact, that in the contexts used in our test, *ma* and *a* determine the type of sentence, while *ne* and *ba* are used more with a discourse function. In other words, we can classify *ma* and *a* as *clause-type particles*, whereas *ne* and *ba* are *discourse particles*. In the scenarios proposed to the learners, in fact, *ma* and *a* always determines the type of sentence, respectively interrogative and exclamative, while the presence of *ne* and *ba* indicate the speaker's point of view, without affecting the type (and the grammaticality) of the clause. Crucially, while clause-type particles are well described, generally discourse particles are left aside in the didactic material. This could be due to the difficulties to assign them a univocal definition. Discourse particles, in fact, are better classified in relation to their function in context, rather than morpho-syntactically, and they share the following features: (i) They do not add anything to the propositional content of the sentence; (ii) They are multifunctional, i. e.

they can have one or more pragmatic functions; (iii) Their lexical meaning is often difficult to render in a translation or paraphrase; (iv) They tend to occur more in spoken than in written language, because spoken language allows more fragmentation and flexibility in the organization of discourse. However, discourse particles are not an oral phenomenon *per se*.

Differently from *ba* and *ne*, the particle *ma* is acquired with a clear and non-ambiguous function, i. e. as a particle that has the role to determine the type of sentence. This is also clear by the fact that there are some restrictions in its use, for example it cannot co-occur with another interrogative element such as *shenme* ‘what’ or *shei* ‘who’ within the same clause. This incompatibility is due to the fact that one interrogative element excludes the other one.

As for *a*, as we have illustrated above, it may express many different meanings, so it could be classified as a discourse particles as well. However, in the test we have submitted to the students, the particle *a* is meant to be used only in exclamative contexts. The choice of this context is motivated by the fact that the exclamative use of *a*, in fact, is the only interpretation that students learn and find in textbooks. Moreover notice that the high average of correct answers in the employ of *a* in exclamatives could also be due to the presence of the exclamation mark, which facilitates the understanding and guessing. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire show that a number of students wrongly chose the particle *ba* instead of *a*. This type of mistake is particularly significant: It indicates the importance of the contextualization within an appropriate context that the didactic materials should use to illustrate the discourse particles.

In a couple of cases (scenario 2 part B and 13 in the Appendix), the first year students performed better than the second year students. We argue that this is due to the type of contexts where *a* has been presented by the didactic material. As a matter of fact, in the book used by the first year students, *a* is illustrating as having not only the exclamative function, but also used in confirmations as reaction to a previous proposal or affirmation. This use of *a* is not mentioned in the book employed by the second year students.

The situation is quite different when we look at *ne* and *ba*, whose interpretation is not so straightforward to explain and teach. *Ne* and *ba*, in fact, may appear in a number of contexts, independently of the sentence type, and express the speaker’s attitude in a particular context. We consider the poly-functionality of *ba* and *ne* and the difficulties of having exhaustive illustrations of appropriate contexts in the textbook as the main problem for the acquisition of *ne* and *ba*.

On the basis of the considerations above, we argue that students learn to employ sentence-type particles easily, thanks to the simple idea that using a

specific particle they obtain a specific type of sentence. However, when the learners have to acquire the different possible pragmatic functions of a discourse particle, this becomes far more difficult, because there is no a one-to-one relation between the use of a particle and the interpretation of the sentence. For the correct use of discourse particles, in fact, the context is crucial. Therefore the process of learning multifunctional particles is still too difficult for the low proficiency of the language of both first and second year students of Mandarin, especially for Italian learners, whose mother tongue does not display such sentence final lexical items to distinguish different pragmatic interpretations.

The challenge of learning *ne* and *ba* can be explained also considering the input that the learners received by the didactic tools (RQ4). Notwithstanding the importance of L2 didactic material for learners living in a L1 context, our results do not show a regular link between sentence final particles mastery and input proposed. As a matter of fact, notice that, on the one hand, there is a contrast between the low number of occurrences of *a* in *Il cinese per gli italiani* and the positive results in the employ of *a* obtained by second year learners. Crucially, the second year students who used *Il cinese per gli italiani* performed better than the first year learners, whose textbook *Buongiorno Cina* abounds with occurrences of *a*.

As for *ba*, although the vast majority of examples with *ba* in *Il cinese per gli italiani* express an exhortative meaning, several scenarios with a similar type of contexts have been rather challenging for learners.

As for the results reported in the employ of *ne*, we argue that the gradual introduction of the different functions of this particle as proposed by *Il cinese per gli italiani* could have been much more effective for the learners. The gradual explanation of the different functions of *ne* could help the students to face the polysemy and complexity of *ne* from the very beginning, as *Buongiorno Cina* implicitly proposes.

6 Conclusions and pedagogical implications

This article deals with the acquisition of four Mandarin sentence final particles *ma*, *a*, *ba*, *ne* by Italian native speakers. The research gives a contribution to the study of sentence final particles from an acquisition and didactic perspective, which has been scarcely investigated in the linguistic literature. The article proposes a quantitative and qualitative experimental analysis with two groups of Italian learners, one at elementary proficiency level and one at intermediate level. The experiment shows that *ne* and *ba* are the most challenging particles to

acquire by Italian learners. We argue that this due to the fact that *ne* and *ba* are highly polyfunctional and they do not simply determine the type of clause. The functions of *ne* and *ba* tested in this paper, in fact, are better defined as discourse particles, whose meaning is highly dependent from the context. Moreover, the experiment demonstrates not only that the proficiency level is straightforward correlated to the mastery of sentence final particles, as expected, but also that the didactic tools play a crucial role. As a matter of fact, the results of this study opens up a number of pedagogical implications in relation to the teaching of sentence final particles.

As for the didactic material, the examples provided in language textbooks are mostly at the sentential level, whereas the comprehension of the different functions of the sentence final particles would be facilitated by a wider linguistic context. We noticed that sometimes learners understood the meaning of the discourse, but used the wrong particles and *viceversa*. Both scenarios lead to the hypothesis that students learn the use of the particles, keeping it separate from the discourse meaning. The case of the material adopted by the first group (elementary proficiency level) of participants shows also that presenting different sentence final particles in the same didactic unit or in close sequence is of no help to learners, whose mother tongue does not exhibit such a lexical item. Confirming Zhou and Shen (2006) and in line with Yang (2013:76), we hold that the different uses or the same uses of the same particle “may be acquired in different orders in that some contexts may be more typical (in the sense that it is more similar to the text that learners have encountered) than other contexts.” We suggest that providing input of spoken language in the form of audiovisual material that reproduces the natural flow of speech among native speakers would improve considerably the acquisition of sentence final particles. In this way, in fact, the didactic stimuli would offer the aid of valuable extra-linguistic clues to help learners to distinguish the different functions of the same SFP, by paying attention to the prosody and disambiguate cases (such that of item 6 discussed in the previous section). The frequent exposure to such material could enhance input processing as plenty of studies already demonstrated (i. e. White 1998; Ellis 2002).

As for the training method, we argue that that explicit instruction can help learners to raise awareness about the distinction between final particles that indicate the type of sentence (like the interrogative ones) and particles that have exclusively pragmatic functions. Whereas traditional grammar-translation method tends to highlight exclusively the syntactic position of sentence final particles, we have noticed how different factors play a role in the interpretation of these items and how learners would hopefully benefit from the knowledge of the whole picture.

Appendix

1. A: 你是小李的哥哥____?
B: 对, 我是。
2. A: 这是你的书____?
B: 是。
A: 我用一下, 好____?
B: 好_____。
3. A: 现在几点?
B: 你自己有表____!
4. A: 今天我不工作, 我不舒服。
B: 休息休息____!
5. A: 妈, 明天我骑自行车去学校。
B: 骑自行车要小心____!
6. A: 这本书你已经看了; 那本书____?
B: 我还没看。
7. A: 你会说中文____?
B: 会。
A: 日文____?
B: 不会。
8. A: 那个孩子那么高____! 那个女人这么漂亮! 看一看____!
B: 不要烦我。我有事_____。
9. A: 你喜欢熊猫____?
B: 喜欢。你____?
A: 不太喜欢。
10. A: 这朵花儿真香____!
B: 又香又好看, 我也喜欢。
11. A: 昨天你去看电影了____?
B: 我去了。
12. A: 我太累了。
B: 你还是休息一下_吧_____。
13. A: 你这次考试考得不好。
B: 我不是不想学习, 是没有时间_____。
14. A: 去吃中国菜怎么样?
B: 好_____。
15. A: 你是王老师____。
B: 我就是, 你怎么知道?
16. A: 这条裤子多么酷____!
B: 那你买_____。

17. A: 我的书包____ ?
B: 不知道, 你去卧室看。
18. A: 你来过这里____ ?
B: 你怎么知道 ?
19. A: 下雨了____ ?
B: 我不知道。
20. A: 你的书____ ?
B: 这本书就是我的____。
21. A: 你爸爸在办公室____ ?
B: 我不知道。
A: 你妈妈____ ?
22. A: 他们在____ ?
B: 不在。

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