The modal particle *ma* 嘛: theoretical frames, analysis and interpretive perspectives

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Abstract:

This article sets out to provide a semantic and pragmatic account of the modal particle *ma* 嘛, endeavouring to put into light new aspects in its function which, at present, remain widely unexplored in the literature. It presents an analysis of the particle *ma* by interrogating a written and a spoken corpus, showing how the semantic and the pragmatic levels are tightly interweaved in the functioning of *ma*: the results supported my hypothesis that the particle is plausibly a marker of interpersonal evidentiality (IE), a category set up by Tantucci (2013), used to signal a socially acknowledged piece of information, playing a fundamental role in the expression of politeness by safeguarding the interlocutors' face; consequently, *ma* is always used with information that has an active or accessible status in the interlocutors' mind and that is always pragmatically salient, independently of its position (at the end or inside the sentence), marking a Topic or a Focus. The particle performs pragmatic functions close to the ones of discourse markers since it increases the relevance of the marked information to the context, therefore also playing a contributing role in the coherence of discourse.

Keywords: Discourse Markers, Ma 嘛, Modality, Modal Particles

1. *Introduction*

Chinese *modal particles* or *sentence-final particles* are a word class specialized in the expression of the speaker's attitude (Wang 1985: 160; Zhu 1999: 234; Liu *et al.* 2004 [2001]: 410), that is to say in the expression of modality (Pietrandrea 2003: 1). Their use, however, is also associated to the expression of illocutivity and sentence-type distinctions (Lü 2002 [1942];

Chao 1979; Zhu 1999; Qi 2002). Modal particles are generally recognized as a world class with language-specific features, but the functions they perform are universal (Waltereit 2001: 1392). Linguists such as Chu (2006, 2009), Lee-Wong (1998, 2001) and Shei (2014) have claimed that Chinese modal particles may belong to the wider category of discourse markers, given the fact that they perform pragmatic functions which include the expression of politeness as well as discourse organization. The affinity between the two categories is due to their multifunctional nature and is widely recognized in the literature (Degand *et al.* 2013: 3).

Strictly connected with the notion of modality is that of evidentiality, which is generally defined as the category used by the speaker to indicate the evidence or "information source" for his or her proposition (Pietrandrea 2003: 23). Tantucci (2013: 211), basing his hypothesis on studies about some Balkanic and Sinitic languages who appear to prioritize an interpersonal construction of knowledge rather than the expression of the information's provenience, claims that the independence of evidentiality is not only from modality, but also from the specification of the "evidential source". Tantucci's (2013) category of interpersonal evidentiality (henceforth IE) is fundamental for the analysis conducted on the particle *ma* 嘛 in this article, as I will show that *ma* is a marker of IE, i.e. the speaker uses it in order to signal that the source of information of his utterance is grounded on an intersubjective knowledge that the speaker shares with some society member(s).

This study is aimed at answering mainly two research questions, namely what is the main function of the particle *ma* and what are the specific features that the particle shows at the semantic and pragmatic levels of linguistic analysis. A corpus-based analysis of *ma* is presented to support my hypothesis that it is a marker of IE and that it plays an important role in the expression of linguistic politeness, inasmuch it supports and safeguards the interlocutors' face. All the other meanings or functions that the particle acquires in specific contextual environments may be explained on the basis of this main function, confirming the complexity and transversality of modal particles pointed out in the literature dealing with these linguistic elements (cf. Simpson 2014: 157). Data from the corpora show that *ma* can be used not only at the end of a sentence but also in order to mark a Topic or a Focus, which brings us to my second claim in this article, that is to say that independently of its position at the end of the utterance or after a shorter phrase, acting as a discourse marker (DM), the particle *ma* advises the hearer that the information marked has an active or accessible status in the hearer's mind and a high informational salience, contributing to the coherence of the text and to the mental organization of discourse by increasing the relevance of the *ma*-marked information in the context and decreasing the effort to process it by the hearer.

2. *Modality and related issues*

Modality has been an area of great research interest over the past 40 years (Li and Thompson 1981; Coates 1983; Palmer 1986; Lyons 1997; Bybee *et al.* 1995; Van der Auwera and Plungian 1998; Liu *et al.* 2001; Portner 2009; Nuyts 2006; etc.), yet its definition and categorization still remain controversial and open to debate. Modality is intuitively connected to mood,[1] even though the two notions cannot be totally equated. The concept of mood can be defined as the category of the verbal conjugation that expresses the attitude of the subject towards the action or the state expressed by the verb (e.g. certainty, possibility, desire, etc.) (Accornero 2004: 1915), whereas modality can be broadly interpreted as the speaker's attitude toward what he or she says (Pietrandrea 2003: 1). Modality is thus a semantic category that can be expressed through different linguistic means that may vary according to the languages under consideration. These linguistic means include morphological devices such as verbal mood and modal particles, lexical devices such as modal verbs and modal adverbs, as well as syntactic elements and prosodic contours. (Palmer 2001: 19; Facchinetti *et al.* 2003: vi).

A great deal of controversies in linguistic literature about modality is concerned with the inclusion of notions such as subjectivity, evidentiality and illocutivity inside the category of modality (Pietrandrea 2003: 11-34; Li 2004: 20; Nuyts 2006: 8-17).

Subjectivity is frequently used in a rather intuitive way in the discussion of modality (Nuyts 2006: 13), but Nuyts (2006) proposes a definition of this notion in terms of "who is responsible for the modal evaluation" (*Ibidem*, 13-14) which is highly relevant to Tantucci's (2013) notion of intersubjectivity:

An evaluation is subjective if the issuer presents is as being strictly his/her own responsibility; it is intersubjective if (s)he indicates the s(he) shares it with a wider group of people, possibly including the hearer [...]. In other words, it might be a matter of whether the modal judgement is common ground between the speaker and the hearer or others.

(Nuyts 2006: 14)

Evidentiality, as already mentioned, indicates the source of information for the speaker's proposition. As Pietrandrea (2003: 26) points out, indicating

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[1] English has two terms to refer to the same phenomenon, namely mood and mode, the first one having Germanic origins and the second Latin ones. However, both terms can be seen as deriving from the Middle English form moode. As a matter of fact, other languages such as Italian only present one term which covers the meaning of both English words (Van der Auwera and Zamorano Aguilar 2016: 1-2). We prefer using the term mood, which seems to have acquired a more specific linguistic meaning.

the evidence for a proposition equates to presenting it with a commitment by the speaker that is not unconditioned; expressing the speaker's commitment is one of the key characteristics of modality and there seems to be a correspondence between the scale of reliability of the evidential source and the scale expressing the certainty of the speaker toward his or her proposition.

The classical evidential model (Givon 1982; Willett 1988; Aikhenvald 2004) opposes direct (witnessed by the speaker) and indirect (not directly witnessed by the speaker) evidentiality, eventually subdividing them into more specific types of evidence (Pietrandrea 2003: 23; Tantucci 2013: 211). However, Tantucci (2013) proposes a notion of evidentiality as the domain encoding 'acquired knowledge' rather than the 'source of information' (Tantucci 2013: 213), based on previous studies (Friedman 1981, 1986, 1994, 2003; Arson 1991, etc.) which point out how some Balkanian languages do not literally specify the source of evidence, but have marked indirect evidential forms, generally opposed to unmarked forms, which can express different notions such as reportedness, inference, sarcasm and surprise, in addition to having a potential direct reading (Tantucci 2013: 214-215). The author tries to demonstrate that many languages, including Mandarin Chinese and other Sinitic languages, have evidential systems that are centred on an interpersonal construing of the knowledge and takes the notion of intersubjectivity, elaborated from Nuyts (2006), as the defining concept of evidentiality. Specifically, the author argues for an extended notion of intersubjectivity which links not only the speaker/writer (henceforth SP/W) and the addressee/reader (henceforth AD/R), but also an impersonal third part sharing the information conveyed by the SP/W which does not necessarily take part to the speech event (Tantucci 2013: 217). The category of IE is thus defined as "the evidential dimension marking the SP/W's statement as form of intersubjective knowledge shared with a singular or plural, member(s) of society". In other words, "the intersubjective knowledge shared by the SP/W and 3rdP can be itself the evidential basis for an assertion, regardless of what or who is the source of information" (*Ibidem*, 218).

In this work, I will argue that the particle *ma* is a marker of IE, expressing that what is being said is shared not only by the SP/W and AD/R taking part in the speech event, but also by other assumed member(s) of society.

Illocutivity is the type of action performed by the transmitter of an utterance, that is to say the type of speech act that he or she intends to perform (Lombardi Vallauri 2009: 16) and it partially, but not completely, overlaps with the notion of sentence-type. One reason for the confusion between modality and illocutivity may be, as pointed out by Pietrandrea (2003: 21), that the former express the speaker's attitude towards his/her proposition, while the latter expresses an attitude towards the addressee. The strict connection between the two categories is even more evident in the Chinese language, where some of the modal particles are thought to be markers of specific types

of sentence: for instance, the particle *ma* 吗 is generally described as a question particle (Liu *et al.* 2001: 415). However, Li (2006: 35-36) claims that the function of this particle is not that of a yes/no question marker but that of a degree marker indicating that the reply to the question is maximally unpredictable. In Chinese there is, indeed, a possibility to form question by the only means of intonation, as noted by Lü [(1980) 1999]:

是非问句可以单纯用语调表示, 也可以在句尾用'吗, 啊' 等。
'Yes/no questions can be simply expressed by intonation, or can be formed by adding *ma*, *a*, etc. at the end of the sentence.'

(Lü 1999 [1980]: 12)

Modality is not usually discussed together with information structure, even though some linguists such as Li (2006: 9), Badan (accepted) and Romagnoli (2012: 258), have pointed out the use of some modal particles of Chinese as Topic or Focus markers, especially for particles such as *ne* 呢, *ba* 吧 and *a* 啊. In Section 4.2, I discuss the Topic/Focus marker function of the particle *ma*, given its relevant occurrence in this role throughout the corpora analised.

2.1 *The expression of modality in Chinese*

The confusion between *mood* and *modality* is frequently found in the literature on modality in Chinese, in the variant of *sentence mood* vs *modality*, given the nature of the verb in Chinese, which lacks inflection. *Qíngtài* 情态 is the term covering the meaning of *modality*,[2] while *yǔqì* 语气 roughly covers the meanings of the two terms *mood* and *mode* in English.[3] In the literature, the term mostly used to refer to *modality* is *yǔqì*, which clearly reflects the intermingling of the two concepts, but generally speaking there is an abundance of terms and labels referring both to the category of modality and the modals which express it. The reason for this terminological variety is an oscillatory classification of the modal words: some grammarians and linguists consider modals as belonging to auxiliary verbs, some assign them to the class of adverbs, while some others conceive of the expression of modality as conveyed by specific structural and/or sentence-final particles.

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[2] The definition of the term provided by the *Hànyǔ dà cídiǎn* is:
情态: 1) 犹情状 [uncertain state of affairs]; 2) 神态 [manner]; 3) 人情与态度 [emotions and attitude]; 4) 娇媚的神态 [charming manners] (Luo 1993: 576).

[3] The definition of the term provided by the *Xiàndài hànyǔ cídiǎn* is the following:
语气: 1) 说话的口气 [tone or manner of speaking]; 2) 表示陈述，疑问，祈使，感叹等各别的语法范畴 [expression of different grammatical categories such as statements, questions, imperatives, exclamations, etc.] (Xiàndài hànyǔ cídiǎn 2005: 1665).

The first modern grammar of Chinese, *Măshì wéntōng* 马氏文通, uses the term *qíngtài* to refer to the class of empty words, to which modal particles belong (*zhùzì* 助字), whereas some of the modal verbs are listed under the label of auxialiary verbs (*zhùdòngzì* 助动字): *kě* 可, *zú* 足, *néng* 能 and *dé* 得 [Ma 1998 (1898): 19, 23, 177]. Another milestone in Chinese linguistics comes from the contributions made by Li (1924), who lists modal particles and interjections under *qíngtài*, whereas modal verbs and modal adverbs are included under auxiliary verbs. However, Li's (1924) definition of modality seems to be anticipating some of the modern key concepts in literature (Sparvoli 2012: 147-148):

语言是要表情和生动的，不是机械的堆砌；表示说话人的意趣，情感或态度的词，就叫做情态词(即助词、叹词；就汉字说，大都　是借字表音的)。

'Language must be expressive and vivid, it is not just mechanical rhetoric; words that express the speaker's desire, emotion or attitude are called modal words (i.e. auxiliary [modal] particles and interjections; as for the characters used, most of them are borrowed for their phonetic value'.

(Li 1998 [1924]: 19, cited in Sparvoli 2012: 147)

One of the few linguists that has acknowledged and put into use the categories employed by Western linguistics in his work is Chu (1998). He considers modality to be expressed not only by modal verbs and modal adverbs, but also by modal particles:

Modality has often been said to be expressed by verbal morphology or modal verb under the grammatical category "mood" in English and in many other Western languages. In fact, however, modality can also be expressed by other means. One of them is by particles [...]. Still another is by adverbs.

(Chu 1998: 89)

In addition to epistemic and deontic modality, expressed by modal verbs and modal adverbs, Chu (1998) identifies a third modal category, attitudinal modality, which is connected to the use of modal particles. He identifies the functions of six different particles, distinguishing between 'semantico-syntactic' function, 'modality' function, and 'discourse' function, as we can notice from the table below:

Table 1. Chinese modal particles and their functions. Taken from Chu (1998: 185)

	Semantico-Syntactic	Modality	Discourse
ma	interrogation		
ba		speaker's uncertainty	
a/ya		personal involvement	
ne			inter-clausal link
le	change of state		end of discourse
me	presupposition	insistence	obviousness

2.2 *Chinese modal particles*

The importance of modal particles in Chinese can be traced back to the Classical forms of the language, as the following example from Dai (2006) clearly illustrates: during the period of the Three Kingdoms of Chinese history, the use of the particle *ěr* 耳 at the end of an expression stating that the actions of Cao Cao, King of Wei, were good, costed a high official of his Kingdom a death penalty. However, modal particles also represent a vital part of Modern Chinese, especially in everyday conversations.

The most frequently studied and commonly accepted modal particles are *de* 的, *le* 了, *ma* 吗, *ba* 吧, *ne* 呢 and *a* 啊, even though some of them also perform functions that lie outside the area of modality, if we consider for instance the particle *de*'s function of marking nominal determination, or the particle *le*'s aspectual value. Most of them can also be used intra-sententially in order to mark the Topic or the Focus of the sentence, even though they are known as "sentence-final" or "utterance-final" particles in English and generally speaking in the Anglophone literature.

Given the heterogeneous nature of this word class and its constituents' "elusiveness" (Li and Thompson 1981: 238), any attempt of giving a unitary and omnicomprehensive account of the meaning and functioning of the particles has shown evident limits. The following definition may help us understand the complexity that this particular word class poses for analysis, but also what are the features that different modal particles share and what differentiate them from other elements of language:

As implied by the term "sentence-final particle", SFPs are phonologically small elements, most frequently monosyllabic, which typically and in most instances must occur in sentence-final position. They are used to communicate a range of discourse sensitive meaning relating to speaker attitude and "emotional coloring" (Matthews and Yip 1994), force of assertion, evidentiality and clause-type, along with various other semantic and pragmatic factors that are sometimes difficult to pin down.

(Simpson 2014: 157)

Research on Modern Chinese modal particles in the field of semantics was carried out during the 20th century by grammarians and linguists such as Lü [1942 (2002)], Wang (1985), Zhu (1999), Chao (1979), Li and Thompson (1981), etc., who dealt with the particles and tried to compare or differentiate them from particles of Western languages, as Qi (2002: 8) states. The syntactic properties of modal particles have mainly been studied from the perspective of generative grammar. Starting from Rizzi (1997), question particles such as the ones that can be found in Mandarin Chinese are commonly considered to be heads of complement phrases (CP)

that can project other functional phrases (FP) (Simpson 2014: 163). Quite a few linguists resorted to syntax to explain the restrictions that seem to exist not only in the particles' co-occurrence, but also in the particles' occurrence at the end of an embedded clause (for instance, Li 2006; Yang 2013; Pan 2016).

Yet another perspective of research on modal particles comes from pragmatics. There have been claims (Waltereit 2001; Traugott 2007; Degand *et al.* 2013) that modal particles, especially those to be found in the German language, have a strong similarity or overlap with the wider category of discourse markers. These discourse markers are not confined to a single world class but also include the class of pragmatic or discourse particles. Their functions include the speech sequential structure, the turn-taking system, discourse organization, thematic structure, etc. What the two categories most certainly have in common is the attitudinal, affective and opinionating dimension of the particles (Degand *et al.* 2013: 1-18).

An interesting analysis is proposed by Chu (2009) who investigates the functions of the particles *ba*, *a* and *ne* at the pragmatic level of discourse. Following Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Relevance Theory, Chu shows how the three particles serve the purpose of increasing the relevance of the utterance they mark in the context.

Another pragmatic function of the particles pinpointed by different authors is that of mitigating the tone or illocutionary force of an utterance, as we can observe in Lee-Wong (1998)'s words:

These particles, which have been shown to affect modality rather than the proposition of the sentence by a number of linguists, are not exactly illocutionary specifiers, nor are they epistemic evaluators. They can, however, be described as mitigators in a context where face threat is implicit.

(Lee-Wong 1998: 388)

Lee-Wong (1998) shows how the particles *ba*, *a* and *ne* play a crucial role in social interaction, safeguarding the interlocutors faces by reducing the forcefulness of the directive speech acts to which the particles are associated. Chu (2009) and Lee-Wong (1998) are fundamental works for the study carried out in this article.

2.3 *The modal particle ma*

Modal particle *ma* has often been disregarded by studies on Chinese modal particles due to its lower frequency with respect to particles such as *a*, *ba* or *ne*, as we can see from the following table displaying the four particles' frequency in the Chinese Internet Corpus of the University of Leeds:

Table 2. Frequency of the modal particles in the Chinese Internet Corpus of the University of Leeds

Particle	Position in the Corpus	Frequency in the Corpus
ba 吧	101	861.17
a 啊	109	813.23
ne 呢	117	761.25
ma 吗	862	113.63

According to Qi and Zhu (2005), the lower frequency of *ma* with respect to the other particles may be due to the fact that it expresses a low degree of politeness. In Qi and Zhu's corpus, the only co-occurrence of the particle with a courtesy pronoun is a command uttered by a circus director and intended for one of his/her subordinates (*Ibidem*, 2). However, the results of my analysis show that, on the contrary, the lower the degree of politeness expressed by the utterance itself, the higher the degree of politeness expressed by the particle.

Despite the small amount of literature on the subject, the studies on the modal particle *ma* have highlighted some of its main characteristics. Wang (2009) adopts what can be called a minimalist approach to the study of the particles and pinpoints a basic meaning for the particle *ma*, that of expressing the obviousness of a fact or state of affairs. All the remaining meanings are derived from it: expressing expectation or persuasion, dissatisfaction or impatience, a willful attitude, approval, happiness or relaxation, carefree and cordial tone, a belittling tone, a resigned or hopeless tone; attenuation of the tone by signaling a pause, disapproval or disdain (*Ibidem*, 7-8).

Shei (2014) suggests that particle *ma* has the main function of marking certain information as shared by the speaker and the hearer in the domain of current discourse, i.e. the particle is used with information which is part of common knowledge or which has been recently introduced in the universe of discourse. Other functions of the article such as arguing, clarifying, paraphrasing, are extensions of its main function (*Ibidem*, 267-281).

Chappell and Peyraube (2016: 323) claim that *ma* is an obviousness particle "used for situations which are viewed as highly evident in nature and which follow logically from the given facts".[4] In Chappell (1991: 16) two additional functions of the particle are identified, namely expressing disagreement

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[4] Note that Chappell and Peyraube (2016) and Chappell (1991) use the transcription *me* in order to refer to the particle 么 (麼), which has spellings as various as *ma*, *me* and *mo* (Chapell 1991: 9; Chappell and Peyraube 2016: 323). Even though the *Xiàndài hànyǔ cídiǎn* (2005: 905, 925) clearly defines the two particles *ma* 嘛 and *me* 么 as different words, there are reasons to believe that the authors are considering both particles in their analysis, given that Chappell's (1991) work is cited by Chu (1998: 145), who specifies that he is referring to the particle written as 嘛 or sometimes also 嚜.

(possibly combined with indignation or impatience at the hearer's opposite point of view) and marking a Topic (resuming an earlier topic or shared object at the end of a phrase or "sentence-internal" position).

3. *Research method and data analysis*

What clearly comes to light from analyzing the existing literature on Chinese modal particles, and in particular on modal article *ma*, is a deeply deficient and incomplete framework, which strongly requires a systemic and pragmatically informed analytical and descriptive study. My research draws on insights of authors such as Shei (2014), Chu (2009) and Lee-Wong (1998) insofar as it considers the particle *ma* to be a discourse marker, but also on Tantucci's (2013) claim about the existence of a category of IE, giving both a semantic and a pragmatic account of the particle's functioning in language.

In the following sections, I first introduce the research and methodology for data analysis, then I discuss the particle's semantic and pragmatic features.

3.1 *Methodology and tools*

The research was carried out on data extracted from two corpora, the Academia Sinica Balance Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (CKIP 1996) and the PolyU Spoken Corpus of Chinese (PolyU 2015). The first one is a rather wide corpus containing five million words consisting in written texts belonging to different text types and genres and has been mainly used for syntactic and collocational analysis of the particle in as far its dimensions allow to retrieve quantitatively representative and reliable results.[5] For the analysis concerning semantics, information structure, discourse organization and conversational interactions, I relied mainly on the spoken corpus, which consists of registrations and relative transcriptions of oral elicitations, for a total of 85.000 words, providing a rather wide context for the utterances under analysis.

Data from the Sinica Corpus have been inquired directly by means of the online platform of Academia Sinica's webpage, whereas the transcriptions from the PolyU Corpus were inquired using the terminological extraction software AntConc (Anthony 2012).

The research starting point was the analysis of the lexico-grammatical behavior of the particle in all the concordance lines retrieved from the Sinica Corpus, followed by the tracing of a collocational profile of the particle, which allowed me to verify my hypothesis regarding the semantic value of the particle. An analysis

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[5] 'Collocation' is a term used in Corpus Linguistics to refer to the occurrence of one word next to other lexical items in a text, whereas "colligation" refers to the lexico-grammatical patterns of the Node (Sinclair 2003: 117).

of the information structure of the utterances and phrases marked by *ma* was also carried out on the basis of the available oral and written texts, as well as a study of the particle's function at the level of discourse, politeness and cognitive strategies.

3.2 *Data analysis*

In order to trace the colligational profile of the particle, I extracted all the 943 concordance lines from the Academia Sinica Corpus. The following table shows its distribution inside the corpus relatively to its occurrence in different clause types:

Table 3. Distribution of ma 嘛 in the Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus of Mandarin Chinese

Collocate in N+1[6]	Type of clause or phrase	Quantity	Percentage
"!"= 46.7%	Exclamative	440	46.7%
"。" (or equivalent) = 11%	Declarative	104	11%
"?"= 2.7%	Interrogative	25	2.7%
"," = 8.2%	Exclamative	6	0.6%
	Declarative	22	2.3%
	Interrogative	12	1.3%
	Topic/Focus marker	12	1.3%
Lexical item = 34.1%	Exclamative	25	2.6%
	Declarative	192	20.4%
	Interrogative	31	3.3%
	Topic/Focus marker	74	7.8%
Total instances		943	100%

In the instances where the Node is immediately followed by a full stop, exclamation mark or interrogative mark, the identification of the clause type was immediate, whereas in the instances with lexical item or comma in N+1 co-text, assumptions on the clause type were made by looking at punctuation marks in the following context or, when punctuation was unavailable in the given context, by identifying the speech act of the utterance (mainly on the basis of subjective impression and interpretation of the following and preceding context).

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[6] N is the label for *Node*, i.e. the word under investigation, in this case represented by 嘛 ma. The collocation in position N+1 is therefore the element that immediately follows the particle.

The table shows that on a total of 943 instances, in nearly half of them (49.9%) the particle occurs in exclamative clauses and in 33.7% in declaratives, whereas only 7.3% of the clauses containing *ma* are interrogatives. In 9.1% of the instances, the particle is a Topic or Focus marker. This use of the particle may be consistent with the one identified by Chappell (1991), even if the author does not go into detail with its analysis but only focuses on the other two uses that she identifies for *ma*. The working definitions of Topic and Focus adopted in this study are based on Lombardi Vallauri (2009) and Lambrecht (1994): the Focus is "that part of the utterance which realizes the informational purpose of the utterance itself and conveys illocutionary force" (Lombardi Vallauri 2009: 88). The Topic is a referent about which the proposition is construed and it is expressed in the language by topic expressions. Constituents may be said to be topic expressions if the proposition expressed by the clause with which it is associated is pragmatically construed as being about the referent of these constituents (Lambrecht 1994: 131).

The definition of *ma* contained in the *Xiàndài hànyǔ cídiǎn* 现代汉语词典 warns the user of the inappropriateness of these particles to form questions (*Xiàndài hànyǔ cídiǎn* 2005: 910); however, we may notice that there is a hardly negligible amount of occurrences of *ma* at the end of an interrogative clause (25 cases). In fact, it is a rather frequent phenomenon in Chinese, as we can notice from inquiring other corpora: the Chinese Internet Corpus of the University of Leeds reports 49 instances of *ma* in this position, accounting for 5% of the concordance. Analyzing the 25 instances of *ma* preceding the question mark in the Academia Sinica Corpus, what we can see is that only in very few cases can we suppose that the speaker confused the particle *ma* with the homophone particle *ma* 吗, that is to say in those cases in which we find typical collocates of *ma* 吗 in the left co-text, as *nándào* 难道 and *qǐ bùshì* 岂不是 / *qǐ bùrú* 岂不如.

Table 4. Some collocates of ma 吗 in the Academia Sinica Corpus in N-5 co-text

Reciprocal frequency	Relative frequency	Collocation
5.626	72	難道
5.640	8	豈不是

In the remaining concordance lines, though, the left co-text of the particle contains collocational elements which do not typically collocate with *ma* 吗 but which on the contrary are absent in its presence, such as alternative interrogative constructions like the verb repetition preceded by the negation or several interrogative pronouns. Generally, in the Chinese language, except in the cases of multiple questions, the use of one interrogative device excludes the other. As a matter of fact, the sentences under consideration are all cases in which only one element is being questioned and the presence of

the particle *ma* 嘛 does not serve the purpose of forming a question, as we can see from the following examples extracted from the corpus:[7]

1) 對不對 嘛?
   Duì bù duì   ma?
   Right not right   IE
   'Is it right or not?'
2) 你在說什麼 嘛?
   Nǐ zài shuō shénme ma?
   1SG be say   what   IE
   'What are you saying?'
3) 趙高, 你到底要不要來接 嘛?
   Zhàogāo, nǐ dàodǐ   yào bù yào lái jiē   ma?
   Zhaogao 2SG in.the.end want not want come pick.up IE
   'Zhaogao, will you come to pick up the phone or not?'

(S.C.)

In all these cases, it seems legitimate to assume that the particle performs the same function as in those cases in which it occurs at the end of an exclamative or declarative clause.

Out of a total of 322 instances of the particle occurring immediately before a comma, there are 74 cases in which the particle has a Topic or Focus marking function. In the remaining cases, the particle is at the end of a clause.

In 12 of the 52 instances in which the particle is followed by a lexical item in position N+1, *ma* is again a Topic or Focus marker. In only two cases is *ma* followed by another particle, *o* 喔 and *a* 啊 respectively; on the contrary, it is often preceded by the particles *le* 了 and *de* 的.

Table 5. Collocates of ma 嘛 in N-1 co-text

Reciprocal frequency	Relative frequency	Collocation
2.979	51	了
3.032	39	的
2.167	1	而已

In the remaining 40 cases, the particle is followed in position N+1 by typical collocates, which also frequently occur in position N+2, after a comma and followed by a question mark: *duì bù duì* 对不对, *duì ba* 对吧, *shì ba* 是吧, *shì bùshì* 是不是 (elements used to ask confirmation about something particularly obvious or evident).

To sum up, the cases in which the particle is used at the end of the clause represent roughly 90% of the total instances, while the remaining 10% are represented by cases in which the particle only marks Topic or Focus phrases. Therefore, we may affirm that the particle can be both a sentential and a Topic/Focus marker. Examples of both uses will be analyzed in the following sections.

The collocational profile of *ma* also reveals some prominent elements both in the left and right co-text: the typical collocates of the left co-text are connected to the discourse function of *ma* (devices used for specification, explanation, explicitation of cause-effect relation, etc.), those of its right co-text relate to its interpersonal evidential and mitigation function (elements used to seek for confirmation by the hearer in order to mitigate the tone of the utterance):

Table 6. Collocates of ma 嘛 in N-5 co-text

Reciprocal frequency	Relative frequency	Collocation
3.197	116	就
3.288	33	因為
4.064	9	就是

Table 7. Collocates of ma嘛 in N+3 co-text

Reciprocal frequency	Relative frequency	Collocation
4.849	63	對
1.101	41	是

In example (4) *ma* is used in order to signal the pertinence of B's answer to A's question by establishing a cause-effect semantic relation; example (5) is an instance of *ma*'s IE marker value, by means of which the speaker mitigates a potentially face-threatening act (contradiction) by presenting the utterance as information belonging to common knowledge.

4)   A: 怎么就一下就觉得是香港的全景?
     Zěnme   jiù   yīxià   jiù   juédé shì Xiānggǎng   de quánjǐng?
     How   EMP all.at.once EMP think be   Hong.Kong   P   view
     'How come you immediately thought it was a view of Hong Kong?'
     B: 嗯，你这个香港这种，因为香港的宣传比较多嘛。
     Ǹg,   nǐ   zhè   ge   Xiānggǎng   zhè zhǒng, yīnwèi   Xiānggǎng
     Interj 2SG this CL   Hong.Kong this type   because Hong.Kong
     de   xuānchuán   bǐjiào   duō   ma.
     P   advertisement   rather   many   IE
     'Mmm, in Hong Kong this kind, because Hong Kong advertisements are quite frequent.'
5)   A: 我看前两幅我觉得挺像中国的。
     Wǒ   kàn   qián   liǎng fú   wǒ   juédé   tǐng xiàng Zhōngguó   de.
     1SG look before two   CL 1SG think   quite seem   China   P
     'Looking at the first two pictures I thought it looked very much like China.'

B: 但是还有乐队是吧，什么什么的
Dànshì   hái   yǒu   yuèduì   shì   ba, shénme   shénme de.
But   still be   music.band   be   P   what   what   P
'But there is also a music band, etc., etc., right?'
A: 中国不是死了也有人那样嘛。
Zhōngguó   bùshì   sǐle   yě   yǒu   rén   nà   yàng   ma.
China   not.be die-P also have people that way   IE
'But isn't it true that also in China when someone dies there are people like that?'
(P.C.)

4. *The semantics and pragmatics of the modal particle* 嘛 *ma*

4.1 *Semantics: interpersonal evidentiality*

Following Tantucci's (2013) claim that IE exists as a grammatical category independent from modal-epistemic, I claim that *ma* is also a marker of IE and is used to convey that the marked piece of information is not only shared by the speaker and the hearer who take part in the speech event, but also extends to a third hypothetical and unspecified person or group. The following figure illustrates a hypothetical communicative event – standing for every potential utterance containing information marked by the IE particle *ma* – which involves the transmission of certain information from the speaker to the hearer; this information is acknowledged by a group which includes at least the speaker, the hearer and a third unspecified party.

Figure 1. Communicative event involving the transmission of *ma*-marked information
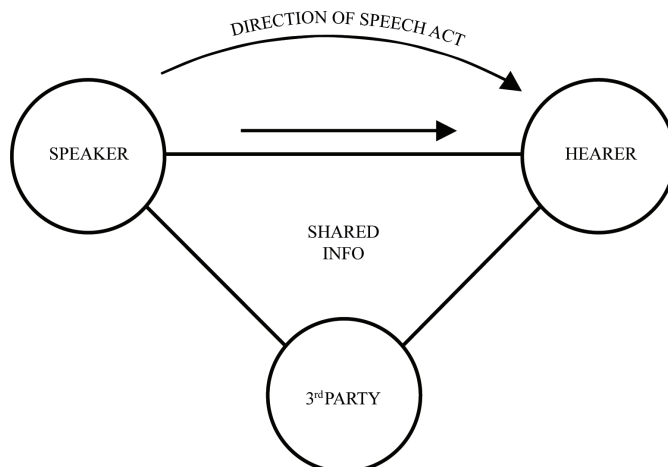
Elaborated on the basis of Tantucci (2013: 219)

The particle, therefore, does not encode the specific source of evidence of an utterance, but grounds its illocutionary force in what a group of people, of a certain number, acknowledge. This allows the speaker not to commit himself or herself to the factuality of the utterance, but to present it as solidly reliable thanks to the intersubjective dimension. The following is an example of propositional content presented as a socially acknowledge piece of information. Its origin cannot be identified with the speaker yet its reliability is nevertheless hardly questioned, as we can notice from the hearer's reply: despite being reluctant about the appropriateness of certain experiences, Jia does not doubt the validity of Yi's statement.

6)   乙: 出國就是什麼都要體驗嘛!
     Chūguó   jiùshì   shénme dōu   yào   tǐyàn   ma!
     go.abroad   EMP   what   all   must   experience IE
     'When going abroad one must experience everything!'

     甲: 但是, 為什麼要挑這個時候體驗?
     Dànshì, wèishéme yào tiāo   zhè ge shíhòu tǐyàn?
     But   why   must choose this CL moment experience
     'But why choose this moment to do it?'

                                                                    (S.C.)

We can easily show that the particle's function to indicate that the semantic source of what is being said does not coincide with the speaker himself but with an external source which may be identified with common knowledge, accounts for it being associated with the obvious and evident character of the utterances it marks. Data from the corpora showed that in fact the utterances in which *ma* is used very often contain idiomatic expressions, common sayings and *chéngyǔ* 成语, knowledge that members of a society usually share and, therefore, can be taken for granted. The following are two examples of *ma*-marked *chéngyǔ* extracted from the two corpora:

7)   林: 哎喲, 秀梅呀, 我這是為了做生意, 逢場作戲 嘛 !
     Āiyō, Xiù Méi ya, wǒ zhè   shì wèile zuò   shēngyì, féngchǎngzuòx ma!
     interj Xiu Mei P 1SG here be for make business chengyu   IE
     'Hey, Xiu Mei, I only do this for business, playing a game!'

                                                                    (S.C.)

8)   A: 他们的城堡一般都是依在山坡高的地方而建。
     Tāmen de chéngbǎo yībān   dōu shì yī zài shānpō gāo de
     3PL   P   castle   normally all be near at slope high P
     dìfāng ér jiàn.
     place to build
     'Their castles are usually built on high slopes.'

B: 嗯。
Ǹg.
Interj
'Yeah.'
A: 易守难攻嘛。
Yì shǒu nán gōng ma.
Chengyu   IE
'Easy to defend and hard to attack, of course.'

(P.C.)

The evidential nature of the particle can be exploited in certain situations for specific pragmatic purposes such as persuading, contradicting, or expressing disapproval/dissatisfaction. In fact, all the meaning associated with *ma* that can be found in the literature may be demonstrated to derive from its interpersonal evidential nature. In the following example the speaker's statement contradicts the previous one (but this is codified at the lexical level by means of *dànshì* 但是 and at the pragmatic level by the illocutive force of the speech act) by stating that there are certain reasons if he never guesses right. This potentially face threatening speech act is mitigated by the use of *duì bù duì* 對不對 and the presence of *ma*, which implies that the stated information is shared by the speaker and other society members, and therefore something self-evident and unquestionable.

9)   A: 陳為民反正每次都是猜錯的。
     Chén Wèimín fǎnzhèng měi cì   dōu shì cāi cuò de.
     Chen Weimin however every time all be guess wrong P
     'In any case Chen Weimin always guesses wrong.'
     B: 但是還是有我錯的理由嘛，對不對？
     Dànshì háishì yǒu wǒ   cuò de lǐyóu ma, duì   bù   duì?
     But   still have 1SG wrong P reason IE right not   right
     'Yeah but I do have my own reasons to be wrong, right?'
     A: 對–你有錯的理由。
     Duì–nǐ   yǒu cuò   de   lǐyóu.
     Right 2SG have wrong P   reason
     'Yes, you have reasons to be wrong.'

(S.C.)

In example (10) the purpose of the utterance is to persuade the hearer that there are good reasons why he/she shouldn't invite someone to take part in a reunion. By using *ma*, the speaker implies that what he/she is saying is something obvious and high-evident in nature, strengthening the credibility of the reasons he/she gives to defend his/her choice and making them more acceptable for the hearer (since they are uttered on the basis of a socially shared knowledge) than if they were presented as the individual opinion of the speaker.

10) A: 什麼? 不要請了? 那怎麼行呢?

    Shénme? Bù   yào   qǐng   le?   Nà   zěnme xíng   ne?

    What   not   must   invite   P   then   how   be.okay   P

    'What? Don't invite him/her anymore? How is this okay?'

    B: 大家都在忙, 不容易湊齊, 再說嘛, 反正也都見過面了嘛! [8]

    Dàjiā   dōu   zài   máng, bù   róngyì còuqí, zàishuō ma,   fǎnzhèng yě

    All   al   be   busy   not   easy   gather besides TOP however   also

    dōu   jiànguò miànle ma!

    all   meet-P   face   IE

    'We are all busy, it's not easy to gather. In addition, we all meet before anyway!'

<div align="right">(S.C.)</div>

4.2 *Pragmatics: information structure*

In the field of pragmatics, we must differentiate the micro-level of information structure of utterances from the macro-level of text and discourse. Still another level is a conversation in which politeness strategies are achieved. The particle seems to play a role at each one of these levels.

Insofar as its information structure is concerned, as it is logical to expect from an IE marker, the information that the particle marks is already given in the universe of discourse.[9] Throughout the PolyU Corpus, the particle consistently occurs with information which is active or semi-active in the interlocutors' minds, both at the end of a clause or after a topical or focal phrase.[10]

In (11) the referent marked by *ma* has become accessible thanks to the semantic frame evoked by *Ōuzhōu* 欧洲 (Europe), in (12) the referent is accessible because of the situational context (the speaker is looking at a picture showing water), whereas in (13) the information marked has just been introduced in the previous sentence and it is therefore active.

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[8] The particle under investigation in this example is the second *ma*, while the first particle *ma* is an instance of Topic marker.

[9] Given information has a specific state of activation in the interlocutors' short-term memories (Lombardi Vallauri 2014: 219-220), that is to say *already active* (recently introduced in the context) or *semi-active/accessible* (by means of deactivation from a precedent active state, inference inside a cognitive frame or presence in the text-external world) (Lambrecht 1994: 90, 100).

[10] Even if Focus is usually made of information which is not previously activated by the context, there are cases in which it does not convey new information, but rather it states the given one for specific purposes (Lombardi Vallauri 2014: 220). In addition, semi-active or accessible concepts are more likely to be part of the Focus than already activated information.

11) A: 只有欧洲人才会用石材的。
Zhǐyǒu Ōuzhōu rén   cái   huì   yòng   shícái   de.
Only   Europe   people EMP   can   use   stone   P
'Only the Europeans would use stone.'
B: 嗯。
Ǹg.
Interj
'Mhm.'
A: 罗马人嘛。
Luómǎ   rén   ma
Roman   people FOC
'The Romans.'

12) A: 哎，朦胧，我我我觉得应该也还是北京一带的这样的这种景致，
它是临水而建的嘛，对吧？

Āi,	ménglóng,	wǒ wǒ wǒ	juéde	yīnggāi	yě	hái	shì	Běijīng
Interj	hazy	1SG 1SG 1SG	think	must	also	still	be	Beijing
yīdài	de	zhè		yàng	de	zhè	zhǒng	jǐngzhì,	tā
area	P	this		way	P	this	type	view	3SG
shì	lín	shuǐ		ér	jiàn	de	ma,	duì	ba?
be	near	water		to	build	P	IE	right	P

'Mhm, it's hazy, I I I believe this sort, this kind of view should be as well in the area of Beijing, it is built next to the water, right?'
B: 嗯。
Ǹg.
Interj.
'Mhm.'
A: 这里边水里边的倒影..我觉得。

| Zhè | lǐmiàn | shuǐ | lǐmiàn | de | dàoyǐng. | Wǒ | juédé. |
| This | inside | water | water | P | reflection | 1SG | think |

'This here is a reflection in the water... I think.'

13) 看什么样的人了。嗯，有的人嘛，爱信不信，有的人，可能会需要有解释的要。

Kàn	shénme	yàng	de	rén	le.	Ǹg,	yǒu	de	rén	ma,	ài	xìn
Look	what	type	P	people	P	interj	have	P	people	TOP	love	believe
bù	xìn,	yǒu	de	rén,	kěnéng	huì	xūyào	yǒu	jiěshì	de	bìyào.
not	believe	have	P	people	maybe	will	need	have	explain	P	need

'It depends on the type of person. Yes, some people, believe it or not, I wouldn't need an explanation from some people.'

(P.C.)

In addition to being active or semi-active, information marked by *ma* is also pragmatically salient: it may be either a topical referent which the utterance is construed about, as in the previous example (13), or a focal element which realizes the informational purpose of the utterance, as in the following example (14).

14) TIS 提供一百多種的語言翻譯服務，只要懂得善用，連講臺語嘛也通。

TIS	tígōng yībǎi	duō	zhǒng de	yǔyán	fānyì	fúwù,	zhǐyào
TIS	provide one.hundred more	type	P	language	translation	service	only

dǒngdé	shàn	yòng,	lián	jiǎng	táiyǔ	ma	yě	tōng.
understand	master	use	even	speak	Taiwanese	FOC	also	know

'TIS provides a translation service for more than 100 languages, as long as you know how to use it, you can master even Taiwanese language.'

(S.C.)

Here, the referent "Taiwanese language" has a semi-active status in the interlocutors' minds because it has been evoked inside the cognitive frame "more than 100 languages" and also because of the social background shared by speaker and hearer that probably are Taiwanese.

When Topic phrases are involved, *ma* is very often used to mark a Topic shift (15) or a Topic which is in contrast with an element of the previous or of the following context (16). Topic expression may be represented either by noun phrases or by adverbs or entire clauses, and in most cases are syntactically dislocated and followed by a pause. However, a few cases in which no pause separates the *ma*-marked phrase and the following linguistic material were also found in the corpora, as we can see in example (17):

15) 這次月考，我得了第十一名。至於班上幹部嘛，我沒有興趣…

Zhè	cì	yuè	kǎo,	wǒ	dé	le	dì		shíyī
This	time	month	exam	1SG	get	P	cardinal.number		eleven

míng.	Zhì	yú	bān	shàng	gànbù		ma,
name	prep	prep	class	prep	class.leader		TOP

wǒ	méi	yǒu	xìngqù…
1SG	NEG	have	interest

'At this monthly exam, I got eleventh place. As for being class leader, I am not interested…'

16) 好處是，跟自己過得去，心裡頭沒有包袱沒有負擔沒有委屈；壞處嘛–就是容易被矇蔽被陷害。

Hǎochù	shì,	gēn	zìjǐ	guòdéqù,	xīnlǐ	tóu	méi	yǒu
Advantage	be	with	1SGrefl	feel.at.ease	heart	head	NEG	have

bāofú	méi	yǒu	fùdān	méi	yǒu	wěiqu;	huàichù
burden	NEG	have	burden	NEG	have	grievance	disadvantage

ma–	jiùshì	róngyì	bèi	méngbì	bèi	xiànhài.
IE	EMP	easy	pass.P	deceived	pass.part	framed

'The good thing is you can fell at ease with yourself, there is no encumbrance, no burden, no sorrow; the bad thing – is that it's easy to get deceived or framed.'

17) 對了，這太太嘛一定要掌握先生的荷包，先生才不會亂來.

Duì	le,	zhè	tàitài	ma	yīdìng	yào	zhǎngwò	xiānshēng
Right	P	this	lady	TOPIC	certainly	must	grasp	husband

de	hébāo,	xiānshēng	cái	bù	huì	luàn	lái.
P	wallet	husband	EMP	not	will	disorder	come

'Right, this lady, she absolutely has to get hold of her husband's wallet, so that the husband doesn't mess around.'

(S.C.)

However, given the small amount of occurrences of the particle performing this role throughout the PolyU Corpus, considerations on the use of the particle as Topic and Focus marker have mainly been made on the basis of data belonging to the Sinica Corpus. Further research is certainly needed in order to make reliable generalizations about the use of the particle in this position, preferably working on data that associate intonation with the particle and the wider context, so that the status of information can be more easily identified.

4.3 *Pragmatics: discourse and cognition*

The information marked by *ma* is fundamental for the ongoing discourse: when the particle is used inside the sentence, it marks pragmatically salient topical or focal elements, as showed in the previous section, when it is used at the end of a sentence it marks information which is highly relevant in the context in which it occurs. The particle is in fact a device used to increase the contextual relevance of the information it marks and consequently to give coherence to the text. This is consistent with claims made by Chu (2009) and Lee-Wong (2001) about the fact that particles perform, in addition to a main modal meaning, a function at the level of discourse: that is to say they increase the relevance of the utterance in the context and make the text coherent. According to Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Relevance Theory, the degree of pertinence of an utterance in the context is higher if its contextual effect is high or if the effort to process it in this context is small. Effectual context is achieved when new information combines with old information – it is a graded notion and it can be of three types: contextual implication that adds new information to a previous hypothesis, contradiction, i.e. elimination of a false hypothesis, and strengthening of a previous hypothesis (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 107-125).

Results from the corpora highlighted that it is the presence of the particle *ma* that, similarly to the other particles, increases the relevance in the context of the utterance or phrase it marks by decreasing the effort made by the hearer to process it in that given context. Let us now see how the contextual effect is achieved:

18) A: 戴眼镜就都是文人么?
    Dài   yǎnjìng   jiù   dōu   shì   wénrén me?
    Wear   glasses   EMP   all   be   scholar   P
    'Are all the people wearing glasses scholars?'
    B: 因为这种看起来比较安静的图嘛。
    Yīnwèi zhè zhǒng kàn qǐlái   bǐjiào ānjìng de tú   ma.
    Because this type   look C.result rather quiet P picture DM
    'Because this seems a very quiet picture.'

                                                                        (P.C.)

In this example, B's reply would seem to have very little to do with A's question, but for the presence of the particle *ma* which signals to the hearer that the information is relevant and accessible and, therefore, she has to make the necessary implications in order to achieve the informational purpose of the utterance: when the interviewee is asked to describe a person in a picture, her reply is that he/she is a scholar, based on the fact that the person is wearing glasses. The interviewer, therefore, rhetorically asks if all the scholars wear glasses, and the answer given by the interviewee seems completely disconnected from the question, but the interviewer is rather satisfied with her reply and moves forward to the next question, which implies that the interviewer considered the answer to be pertinent to the question. It is *ma* that signals to the hearer that the utterance is relevant and that she has to connect it to the previous context, decreasing her effort to process the information. The notion of coherence is fundamental for communication since the hearer interprets a message on the assumption that it is coherent with the ongoing discourse. This assumption will guide the hearer's choice of the inference to activate among all the possible ones.

      In the following example, not only is the function of *ma* that of increasing the relevance of the utterance in the context, but also that of marking a cause-effect semantic relation between the first and the second utterance of the interviewee.

19) A: 那会不会觉得颐和园会不会更开阔一点。
    Nà   huì   bù   huì juédé Yíhéyuán   huì bù huì gèng
    Then will not   will think Summer.Palace   will not will more
    kāikuò   yīdiǎn
    wide   a.bit
    'Don't you think that the Summer Palace would be a little wider?'
    B: 因为你就照了这么一栋楼嘛。
    Yīnwèi nǐ jiù zhào   le zhème   yī dòng lóu   ma.
    Because 2SG EMP take.picture P this.much one CL building DM
    'Because you only focused this building!'
    B: 嗯。
    Ǹg.
    Interj.
    'Mhm.'

B: 它这个，这个湖面有多大你这儿也没照出来呀。
Tā   zhè ge, zhè ge hú   miàn yǒu duō   dà nǐ
3SG.N this CL   this CL lake face have how.much big 2SG
zhè'er   yě   méi   zhào   chūlái ya.
here   also NEG   take.picture C.dir   P
'This here, the lake surface you cannot see how wide it is from this snapshot.'
                                                              (P.C.)

In a number of cases, the particle *ma* co-occurs with various types of connectives in order to signal the logical links between utterances. Such a connective is *yīnwèi* 因为 (...*suǒyǐ* 所以), one of the most prominent collocates of the particle.

The previous examples clearly illustrate how *ma* contributes to the coherence of the text, not only acting as a discourse connector or more generally as a discourse marker when creating logical links between utterances, but also contributing to the mental organization of discourse. In fact, the particle seems also to play a role in the alternation of turn-taking in conversations, inasmuch it is often used to mark the second communicative move in the question-reply sequence.

4.4 *Pragmatics: politeness and face-saving strategies*

Strictly connected to the particle's evidential value is its mitigating effect which becomes vital in certain face-threatening acts. The lower the degree of politeness expressed by the propositional content of an utterance, the higher the gap that the particle must fill in order to save the interlocutors' face. The example given below clearly shows how *ma* reduces the forcefulness of the illocutive act conveyed in the utterance by lowering the I-say-so component; at the same time, by marking the information as socially acknowledged by the speaker, the hearer and a hypothetical third party, the particle presents it as more solid than the individual and subjective opinion of the verbalizer:

20) 請您先別急嘛，看完再下定論，好嗎？
Qǐng nín   xiān bié   jí   ma, kàn wán zài   xià dìnglùn,
Please 2SG.pol first imp.neg angry ie   look finish again settle decision
hǎo   ma?
okay   P
'Please do not get angry, wait until you finish reading before deciding, okay?'
                                                              (S.C.)

Here the fact that the interlocutors are tied by an asymmetric relation reveals that the illocutive act may be potentially face-threatening given that the student makes a direct request to his professor, who is in a superior so-

cial position than he is. However, various elements in the utterance are used to express politeness in order to soften the illocutive force: the verb *qǐng* 请 (please, invite), the courtesy pronoun *nín* 您 and the expression *hǎo ma* 好吗 (is that okay?). Significantly, the particle *ma* is also used at the end of the first clause in order to mitigate the tone of the request by marking it as something socially acknowledged and rendering it a reasonable request whose evidential basis is represented not only by the speaker, but also by a potential group of people with whom he/she shares the responsibility of what is being said.

Similarly, the example below expresses strong disapproval towards the hearer and thus represent an illocutive act that potentially threatens the interlocutors' face. The use of the particle, however, signals that the evidential basis for the utterance is a knowledge withheld not only by the speaker himself/herself, whose face is saved, but also by a third unspecified party; the hearer's face is also safeguarded since she can more easily accept criticism coming from a socially acknowledged source rather than from an individual one, which would represent an even higher threat to her face.

21) 文鈴，你發瘋啦？//這麼大的一個黑點在臉上，真的不好看嘛！
  Wén Líng, nǐ   fāfēng   la? Zhème   dà de yī gè hēi
  Wen Ling   2SG become.crazy P So.much   big P one CL black
  diǎn zài liǎn shàng, zhēnde   bù   hǎokàn   ma!
  point on face on   really   not   Beautiful IE
  'Wen Ling, are you out of your mind? Such a big black spot on the face
  is really ugly!'

<div align="right">(S.C.)</div>

The mitigating role of the particle copes well with Lee-Wong (1998)'s claim about modal particles such as *ba*, *a*, and *ne*, enabling the speaker to conform to the Gricean Maxim of manner: the use of the particle allows the speaker to maximize linguistic economy by using a direct speech act in order to easily and quickly achieve his/her communicative purpose without threatening his/her and the speaker's face. The particle *ma* consistently occurs in potentially face-threatening utterances and its mitigating role becomes vital in those with a particularly low degree of politeness, as noted also by Guo (2012):

"嘛"用于祈使句不是直接要求对方行事，而是照顾到了听话人的面子、用显而易见的道理去 促使对方行 事
'Imperative sentences in which 'ma' is used do not directly request the interlocutor to act, but they safeguard the hearer's face by using an obvious reason to push him/her to complete an action'

<div align="right">(Guo 2012: 80-81)</div>

5. *Conclusive remarks*

The data and analysis on particle *ma* showed that the functions of particle *ma* at the different linguistic levels are densely interwoven and that the main function is represented by its interpersonal evidential value. Syntactically the particle can appear at the end of the sentence or after a constituent inside the clause (marking a Topic or Focus); its use is mainly associated with the assertive and exclamative illocutionary force and less with the interrogative one. As for its function, the particle is a marker of IE since it is used to express socially acknowledged information and all the meanings attributed to *ma* in the literature can be explained on the basis of this function, which is highly significant for the expression of politeness: it saves the interlocutors' face by anchoring the information to a solid and reliable evidential source so that the speaker's positive face is not exposed and the hearer's negative face is preserved.

The information marked by *ma* is at least accessible in the interlocutors' mind, as it is logical to expect when dealing with supposedly shared information. It is, however, also pragmatically salient either because it is a Topic upon which the utterance is construed, or the Focus of the utterance itself, or because its contextual effect is particularly high. Another pragmatic function of the particle is that of increasing the relevance of the information in the context and decreasing the effort to process it by the speaker. By ng so it gives coherence to the text and contributes to the mental organization of discourse.

To summarize, this analysis of the particle *ma* sheds light on important aspects in its functioning that may be useful not only to applied linguistics but also as a starting point for further research on the particle. My consideration about the role it plays in the marking of information structure could be further investigated and strengthened by a phonetic/phonological analysis of the intonation associated with *ma* and the clauses or phrases it marks. In addition, it would be interesting to find out more about the particle's co-occurrence with other particles and about its distribution with particles occurring in similar contexts.

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