



# The syntacticization of illocutionary forces and the root vs. non-root distinction: Evidence from the sentence-final particle *ba* in Mandarin

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## Abstract

This paper shows that the Mandarin sentence-final particle *ba* lexically encodes specific illocutionary forces, which allow *ba*-tagged sentences to perform specific speech acts. To account for the fact about *ba*, it is argued that a speech act layer (cf. Haegeman and Hill, 2013; Hill, 2007; Ross, 1970; Speas and Tenny, 2003) projected by a functional head carrying a speaker-related feature is needed in the syntax. The paper also shows that *ba* is restricted in root environments in the sense of Emonds (1970), which indicates that functional heads encoding specific illocutionary forces cannot be embedded, and proves that the root versus non-root distinction proposed by Emonds (1970) is real despite all the counterexamples from English pointed out by Hopper and Thompson (1973) to reject the distinction. © 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper reports the distributions of the Mandarin particle *ba* and investigates its syntax. Based on empirical facts about *ba*, I argue that (certain) illocutionary forces are computed in the syntax (see Ross (1970) for an early attempt to make the same claim in English and see recent works such as Haegeman and Hill (2013), Hill (2007), Speas and Tenny (2003) for facts and arguments for syntactically computing phenomena related to speech acts). It will also be shown that *ba* is restricted in root environments as defined by Emonds (1970). This fact not only indicates that functional heads encoding specific illocutionary forces such as *ba* are unembeddable, but also provides empirical evidence for the grammatical distinction between root and non-root environments, which was proposed by Emonds (1970) and has been controversial ever since (see Hopper and Thompson (1973) for the first rejection of the distinction and Miyagawa (2013) for the most recent response to the debate).

The Mandarin particle *ba* appears in either of the following two slots in a sentence<sup>1</sup>:

- (i) At the end of a sentence where it conveys the speaker's attitude towards the contents of the utterance. This involves the speaker's epistemic standpoint as in (1a), entitlement to answers as in (1b), or hortative negotiation as in (1c);
- (ii) In a position before the end of a sentence where it functions as a phatic interjection as in (2).

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in the gloss for the Mandarin examples are: BEI, passive marker; CL, classifier; DE, prenominal modification marker; PERF, perfective aspect marker; POSS, possessive marker; PROG, progressive marker; ZHE, durative aspect marker. All sentence-final particles are simply represented by small capital letters of their spellings.

- (1) a. A: Weishenme wo haoji tian dou mei you kanjian Lisi?  
 why I several day all not have see Lisi  
 ‘Why haven’t I seen Lisi for several days?’  
 B: Ta cizhi le **ba**. (Wo #(bushi) hen qingchu.)  
 he resign PERF BA (I #(not) very sure)  
 ‘He presumably has resigned. (I’m #(not) very sure.)’  
 b. Ni shenme shihou lai **ba**?  
 you what time come BA  
 ‘Just tell me, when will you come?’  
 c. Hui jia **ba**.  
 return home BA  
 ‘How about going home?’
- (2) a. Wo **ba**, juede zhe jian shi mei name jiandan.  
 I BA feel this CL thing not that simple  
 ‘I, uh, feel that this thing is not that simple.’  
 b. Wo juede **ba**, zhe jian shi mei name jiandan.  
 I feel BA this CL thing not that simple  
 ‘I feel, uh, this thing is not that simple.’  
 c. Wo juede zhe jian shi **ba**, mei name jiandan.  
 I feel this CL thing BA not that simple  
 ‘I feel that this thing, uh, is not that simple.’  
 d. Wo juede **ba**, zhe jian shi **ba**, mei name jiandan.  
 I feel BA this CL thing BA not that simple  
 ‘I feel, uh, this thing, uh, is not that simple.’

Except for comparative purposes, in the discussion below I will ignore the interjection *ba*, which seems to be not completely constrained by syntax as shown by (2).<sup>2</sup> I will focus on the sentence-final *ba* illustrated in (1), which, as I will show, has a constant distribution where it systematically encodes specific illocutionary forces. When I need to refer to the interjection *ba* for comparisons, the modifier “phatic” will always be used before it. If no specification is made, the mention of *ba* will exclusively refer to the sentence-final *ba*.

The main aim of this paper is to explore the syntax of *ba* and its theoretical implications.<sup>3</sup> To accomplish this, section 2 first reports facts to show that *ba* conveys different kinds of speaker attitudes according to the clause type of the sentence it attaches to. These speaker attitudes conveyed by *ba*, as will be shown, are specific illocutionary forces which allow *ba*-tagged sentences to perform specific speech acts. Then section 3 provides evidence that *ba* is a lexical item computed in the syntax and makes a syntactic proposal for it. I follow Hill (2007) to posit a functional head in the syntax responsible for the speaker, and argue that *ba* ends up in that head for feature checking. Based on the facts reported in section 2 and the proposal made in section 3, the rest of the paper investigates whether illocutionary forces can be embedded, an issue that has been controversial since Ross (1970). The claim made by the paper is that a speech act head which encodes specific illocutionary forces can not be embedded. To argue for the claim, section 4 first reviews the notion of “root clause”, which dates back to Emonds (1970). Based on the definition of root proposed by Emonds (1970), section 5 then provides facts to show that *ba* is restricted in root environments, which proves the aforementioned claim, and supports the establishment of the root vs. non-root distinction in the grammar. Section 6 concludes the paper.

## 2. *Ba* as a speech act marker

An important fact about the sentence-final particle *ba* is that it always conveys some kind of speaker attitude. Depending on the clause type of the sentence it attaches to, *ba* can convey different speaker attitudes. Below I introduce

<sup>2</sup> The distribution of the interjection *ba* is not completely random. Take (2) for instance, it cannot appear in the embedded subject *zhe jian shi* ‘this thing’ or predicate *mei name jiandan* ‘not that simple’. But as far as I can tell, there does not seem to be any syntactic principle that governs its distribution. Despite the fact that the phatic *ba* and the sentence-final *ba* have complementary distributions, they do not seem to belong to the same morpheme because the former does not have the interpretations of the latter that will be introduced in section 2.

<sup>3</sup> A reviewer points out to me that Endo (2007:175–186) discusses Japanese sentence-final particles, some of which seem to have an interpretation similar to that of *ba* in terms of the speaker’s epistemic standpoint (see Endo’s (2007) description and section 2 for details). While it is definitely worthwhile to explore both the similarities and differences between the sentence-final particles in the two languages, the task goes beyond the scope of this paper and will be left for future research.

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