

Why Chinese SFPs are neither optional nor disjunctors[☆]

Victor Junnan Pan^a, Waltraud Paul^{b,*}



^a Laboratoire de Linguistique Formelle (LLF)-UMR 7110, CNRS & Université Paris Diderot-Paris 7, France

^b Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Centre de recherches linguistiques sur l'Asie orientale, CNRS-EHESS-INALCO, Paris, France

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Abstract

In a recent paper, [Biberauer et al. \(2014b\)](#) claim that the Chinese sentence-final particles (SFPs) *ne* and *ma* only “double” the information encoded elsewhere in the sentence and are to be analyzed as “acategorical” conjunctions. This contrasts with the current analysis of, e.g. *ma* as an interrogative force head. The present article provides evidence in favour of the SFPs *ma* and *ne* as C-elements and challenges some of the preconceived ideas commonly encountered in the literature. Within the head-final split CP proposed for Chinese ‘Low C < Force < Attitude’, *ma* instantiates a Force head, whereas *ne* realizes the discourse-related AttitudeP, not a *wh*-question typing particle (pace [Lisa L.-S. Cheng’s, 1991](#)). Furthermore, evidence is provided to show that the surface sentence-final position of SFPs in Chinese must be taken at face value.

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1. Introduction

In a recent paper, [Biberauer, Holmberg, and Roberts \(BHR\) \(2014:200–201\)](#) state: “In a survey of about 80 VO languages with final question particles, [Bailey \(2010, 2012\)](#) observed that these particles are very often optional (this is true of Mandarin *ne* and *ma*, for example). Presumably this is possible because the question force is signaled by some other means, such as intonation.” [emphasis added]. Everybody working on Chinese will be surprised by this statement, because it presents *ma* as devoid of any inherent interrogative force. The reason why this view is so readily advocated by [BHR \(2014\)](#) is the fact that an analysis of Chinese sentence-final particles (SFPs) as Cs in a head-final CP above a head-initial TP challenges their presumably universal *Final-over-final constraint* (FOFC), which – put simply – excludes a head-final projection from selecting a head-initial XP as complement.¹

The aim of the present article is to put the record straight with respect to the sentence-final particles (SFPs) *ma* and *ne* by providing a careful analysis and by challenging some of the preconceived ideas commonly encountered in the literature. The article is organized as follows. Section 2.1 gives a brief overview of the three-layered head-final split CP in Chinese. Section 2.2 invalidates the assumption that *ma* itself does not contribute interrogative force. Section 2.3 provides

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* Corresponding author at: CRLAO, EHESS, 105, Bd Raspail, 75006 Paris, France. Tel.: +33 153105366.

E-mail addresses: victor.pan@univ-paris-diderot.fr (V.J. Pan), waltraud.paul@ehess.fr (W. Paul).

¹ For a critical appraisal of the FOFC, cf. among others [Djamouri et al. \(2013\)](#); [Haider \(2013\)](#); [Paul \(2009, 2014, 2015, chapter 8 and references therein\)](#).

arguments showing that *ne* instantiates the head of the speaker/hearer-related projection AttitudeP above ForceP; accordingly, it is not a *wh*-question typing particle (pace Cheng's (1991) clausal typing hypothesis). Section 3 argues that Bailey's (2012/2013) account cannot be applied to Chinese.² In her analysis, question particles are negative disjunctions in a head-initial XP whose complement has been elided, thus resulting in their surface sentence-final position. Section 4 demonstrates that there is no independent empirical evidence for a derivation à la Kayne (1994), where the sentence-final position of SFPs is obtained by raising of the TP complement to the left of the head-initial C. This leads to the conclusion in section 5 that the surface sentence-final position of SFPs in Chinese must be taken at face value.

2. The Chinese SFPs *ma* and *ne* as heads in a split-CP

2.1. The split CP in Chinese

This section gives a very short and selective overview of the split CP in Chinese, concentrating on those points that are directly relevant to the issue at hand. (For an in-depth discussion, cf. Paul, 2015, ch. 7, and references therein.)

Extending Thomas Hun-tak Lee's (1986) analysis of the *yes/no* question SFP *ma* as C to all SFPs, Paul (2009, 2014) establishes a three-layered CP for Chinese: 'Low C < Force < Attitude'. This split CP replicates the traditional division of SFPs into three distributional classes, based on their rigid relative ordering (cf. Zhu Dexi 1982:207–213). It differs from Rizzi's (1997, 2004) split CP 'Finite < Force' in that there is an additional layer above ForceP, i.e. the speaker/hearer-related projection Attitude Phrase (also cf. Haegeman and Hill, 2013; Haegeman, 2014 for a similar DiscourseP above ForceP in Romanian and West Flemish). Given the still controversial status of finiteness in Chinese, the more neutral label "low C" is used instead of Rizzi's "FiniteP".

Examples (1–3) illustrate the low C *le* and *láizhe*. While *láizhe* indicates recent past, the only common denominator covering the multitude of different cases where *le* appears is that it "closes off" the sentence and relates the event to the speech time. (cf. Li and Thompson, 1981:238–300 for sixty pages of examples with *le*):

- (1) Zuótiān xià yǔ le / láizhe/ { * le láizhe / *láizhe le }³
 yesterday fall rain LowC / LowC LowC LowC / LowC LowC
 'It rained yesterday.'
- (2) Tā gāngcái hái zài bàngōngshì láizhe /*le
 3SG just.now still at office LowC / LowC
 'He was in his office just now.'
- (3) Tā bì yè *(le).
 3SG finish study LowC
 'She has graduated.'

Being both low Cs, *láizhe* and *le* are mutually exclusive (cf. (1)). *Le* is unacceptable in (2) because the adverb *gāngcái* 'just now' explicitly locates the event in the past, whereas *le* relates the same event to speech time. (3) Finally illustrates a case where *le* is obligatory in order to "close off" the sentence.

Concerning the SFPs realizing ForceP, besides *ma* indicating a *yes/no* question (cf. (4)), there is also the so-called "advisative" *ba* in (5) encoding a softened imperative (cf. Chao, 1968:807):

- (4) Tā bì yè le ma / *ma le?
 3SG finish study LowC FORCE/ FORCE LowC
 'Has she graduated?'
- (5) Kuài diǎnr zǒu ba
 fast a.bit walk FORCE
 'Walk a bit faster (please).'

² While BHR (2014) refer to Bailey's doctoral dissertation as Bailey (2012) (2012 being the examination date), elsewhere her dissertation is cited as Bailey (2013) (2013 being the year of submission). In the following, we settle for Bailey (2012/2013) in order to indicate that we refer to the same work as BHR (2014).

³ The following abbreviations are used in glossing examples: CL classifier; EXP experiential aspect; NEG negation; PERF perfective aspect; PL plural (e.g. 3PL = 3rd person plural); SG singular; SUB subordinator.

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