

“It’s very manly *ei*!”: Variation in Affective Sentence-Final Particles in Taiwanese Mandarin Television Dramas

Affective sentence-final particles (ASPs) in Mandarin Chinese discourse reflect the stances of conversation participants (Chu 2002, Wu 2004, etc.). In the case of Taiwanese Mandarin, in which ASPs are frequent and varied, research in conversation analysis has shed light on how certain particles are used (Wu 2004), but questions remain as to the distribution of ASPs, their stylistic functions, and how their use has changed over time. Many ASPs are popularly associated with the performance of cuteness among young women, but this notion has not been extensively evaluated (cf. Callier 2007).

Our study draws from a corpus of Taiwanese television dramas to examine how the use of ASPs has changed over time. The language of scripted television has been shown to reflect wider usage, and to influence language change (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005, Stuart-Smith 2006). Taiwanese dramas are particularly significant due to the popularity of Taiwanese media and its linguistic influence in other regions (Zhang 2005:437). This study also presents an opportunity to examine the impact of policy changes since the 1980’s that have relaxed rules on standard Mandarin (Sandel 2003:530).

The present analysis contrasts two popular dramas, *Professor Hoe* (鋤頭博士) (1989), and *Devil Beside You* (惡魔在身邊) (2005). 362 minutes of footage were analyzed, with 883 ASPs coded in total, including *a* (啊), *la* (啦), *na* (呐), *ya* (呀), *o* (喔/哦), *lo(u)* (嚟/囉), *ei* (耶/欸), *lei* (嘞/咧), and *me* (嘛). Sociolinguistic information was also recorded for each major character.

Significant differences were found in the distribution of ASPs between the two dramas. For both shows, *a* was the most frequent ASP, making up approx. 57% of particles in each case ($p = .8294$). However, *la* and *me* decreased significantly ($p < .0001$), while *o*, *lo(u)*, and *ei* increased ($p = .0011$, $.0428$, $.0001$). The overall rate of ASP use on the 1989 program was higher, suggesting that, in spite of language policy reforms, more recent television language is not necessarily more authentic or informal.

Patterns in speakers’ ASP use illustrate how ASPs are used to construct character identities. The use of ASPs is associated with immaturity, low education, and warmth, while their absence is associated with sophistication, professionalism, and coldness. These characteristics correlate with certain social groups within the dramas: teenagers, working-class adults, and retirees use ASPs more than middle-class working adults. Although the use of ASPs is conventionally associated with women, female characters did not use them more frequently than men in this corpus. Breaking down the results by particle reveals a significant difference in the use of *ei*, which in the 2005 program is the second-most popular ASP, and is used by teenagers more than by adults. Evidence indicates that *ei* is now in widespread use, but has not yet fully gained mainstream acceptance.

This research represents a first step into a broader project of investigating how Taiwan publicly presents its complex linguistic situation for local and non-local consumption, and what influence this has had on Mandarin in Taiwan and elsewhere.

Word Count: 499

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