

# UTTERANCE-FINAL PRAGMATIC MARKERS IN SPOKEN MANDARIN: THE CASE OF (*Nǐ*) *ZHĪDÀO MA/BA* (你)知道吗/吧

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The current study addresses the pragmatic marker (*nǐ*) *zhīdào ma/ba* (你) 知道吗/吧 (you know), aiming to identify the (a)symmetries between (*nǐ*) *zhīdào ma* and (*nǐ*) *zhīdào ba* used in utterance-final position in oral interactions. The research questions include aspects mostly unaccounted for by previous studies, including the marker's position in the turn, the S(peaker)'s gender, the H(earer)'s response or reaction to the utterance, and the relationship between S and H. Based on the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses of 173 occurrences extracted from 12 hours of spontaneous telephone conversations, significant differences set apart the two variants, possibly due to the particles' original pragmatic meanings and resulting in a tendential division of labour. Most prominently, the *ma*-variant tends to occur in turn-final position and to trigger more explicit responses, while the *ba*-variant mostly occurs in turn-medial position to maintain S's turn and H's attention.

*Keywords:* pragmatic markers, discourse markers, *ni zhīdào*, corpus-based

## 1. Introduction

In the past half of century, pragmatic markers have become one of the most prolific topics of research in linguistics, with a considerable large amount of publications concerning both generalist explicative models and single markers in an increasingly high number of languages. Seminal works contributing to the bloom of this research area include Schourup (1982) and Schiffrin (1987), with the latter's definition of discourse markers being quoted in nearly every paper addressing the topic. Crucial in Schiffrin's volume is the intuition that these markers, and by extension the wider class of pragmatic markers (Fraser 1990, 1996; Traugott 2016), do not simply perform a function of linkage between the current utterance and their previous or following context, but they can act simultaneously on different discourse planes. More specifically, these linguistic devices can perform a role at the cognitive, expressive, and even interactional and social level.

A distinctive feature of pragmatic markers that has been identified from the perspective of historical linguistics is their frequent development from lexical items whose meaning undergo a process of semantic *bleaching* and increased acquisition of pragmatic or grammatical meanings over time (Givón 1979; Traugott 2009). Alongside with the loss in se-

mantic meaning, an inverse process of increase in syntactic scope is generally also observed, as well as – crucially – a tendency to appear at the utterance peripheries (Traugott 1995), i.e., either in utterance-initial or utterance-final position – generally with a (slight) change in meaning or role, as evidenced by Bazzanella (2001). Despite the possibility for pragmatic markers to occur both at the left and the right periphery of the utterance, however, most of the scholarly work has been devoted to investigating the former type, with utterance-final markers only recently being acknowledged as having specific features worth being addressed independently (Haselow 2012; Hancil, Haselow, Post 2015; Traugott 2016).

## 2. Chinese Utterance-Final Markers

Utterance-final pragmatic markers have been even less prominent in works on Chinese, a language which already possesses a traditionally-acknowledged class of modal or sentence-final particles (SFPs) used to convey a wide range of (inter)subjective functions (Liu, Pan, Gu 2001; Simpson 2014; Lepadat 2017).

SFPs have been traditionally classified into (at least) two types: those (primarily) codifying sentence types, such as the interrogative particle *ma* 吗, and those specialized in the expression of the speaker's subjective attitude, such as *a* 啊, *ba* 吧 and *ma* 嘛 (Zhu 1982; Paul, Pan 2017). In other studies such as Tantucci and Wang (2018) – but see also Lee-Wong (1998) for a similar view – SFPs are treated as expressing intersubjectivity, i.e., as “operators of rapport maintenance”, markers “employed to overtly account for H[earer]’s potential reactions to S[peaker]’s utterance” (Tantucci, Wang 2018, 68). Despite controversies in the literature and the difficulty to grasp the exact meaning(s) of each particle, what appears undeniable is their versatility in terms of the functions fulfilled (Simpson 2014).

However, recent works (e.g., Yap, Yang, Wong 2014) have shown that in addition to these highly conventionalised elements, Chinese also makes use of periphrastic expressions to convey (inter)subjectivity, i.e., utterance-final markers comparable to those occurring in Indo-European languages (e.g., *wǒ juéde* 我觉得, I think, *hǎoxiàng* 好像, apparently, *nǐ zhīdào ma/ba* 你知道吗/吧, you know, *búguò* 不过, though). An example is given below in (1), where *nǐ zhīdào ba* is used at the utterance right periphery<sup>1</sup>.

- (1) 我当时就急了, 你知道吧。  
*Wǒ dāngshí jiù jí-le, nǐ zhīdào ba.*  
 1sg then just hurry-PFV, 2sg know SFP  
 I was in a hurry then, you know. (CallFriend/zho-m/4447)

Furthermore, it has been shown that the two types can also co-occur within the same utterance (Bourgerie 1998; Song 2018; Lepadat 2021), as illustrated in (2) below, wherein

<sup>1</sup> For reasons of space, in all the examples only relevant utterances containing the analysed markers are provided with *pinyin*, glosses and English translation, while the preceding or following context is only complemented by the English translation.

the speaker's utterance is marked both by the rhetorical particle *ma* and by the epistemic marker *wo juéde*.

- (2) 这学校能有排名吗, 我觉得。  
*Zhè xuéxiào néng yǒu páimíng ma, wǒ juéde.*  
 This school can have ranking SFP 1sg think  
 This school can hardly have a ranking, I think. (CallFriend/zho-m/5636)

In Lepadat (2021), it is argued that the second marker in the co-occurring pair can either support the first in strengthening or mitigating the illocutionary force of the utterance, or it can be used to renegotiate the illocutionary force before its reception on the part of the hearer, as observed in (2). However, in spite of some recent studies investigating how pragmatic markers combine in English and a few other European languages (Lohmann, Koops 2016; Cuenca, Crible 2019; Haselow 2019; Crible, Degand 2021), what are the specific restrictions regulating the co-occurrence of SFPs and other utterance-final markers in Chinese is yet to be addressed.

A fair amount of studies produced up to date have tackled Mandarin Chinese individual markers (e.g., Biq 2001 on *jiùshì(shuō)* 就是 (说), that is (to say); Lim 2011 on *wo juéde*; Zhou, Bao 2014 on *fǎnzhèng* 反正, anyway; Wu, Biq 2011 on *zhēnshì* 真是, really (is), and *shízài shì* 实在是, indeed (is); Wang 2018 on *ránhòu* 然后, then; Shi 2019 on *jiùshìle* 就是了, that's it/all) or more in general adverbs (Wang 2012; Yang 2014; Song 2018) being used in utterance-final position. Other works include Yap, Choi, and Cheung (2010), Yap, Yang, and Wong (2014), and Yap and Chor (2019), all of which focus on the grammaticalization process leading to the formation of (utterance-final) epistemic and stance markers. Nonetheless, many aspects concerning the use of such expressions in Mandarin are yet to be fully explored and understood.

### 3. *Zhidao* as a Pragmatic Marker

Among the pragmatic markers which have received a relatively fair amount of attention is (*ni*) *zhidao ma/ba*, whose interactional meanings can be to some extent compared with those of the English marker *you know* (Östman 1981). Drawing on Tao's (2003) seminal paper on the prosodic, grammatical and discourse functions of *zhidao* in oral interactions, different scholars analysed the functions of *zhidao*-derived markers such as *ni zhidao*, (*ni*) *zhidao ma* and (*ni*) *zhidao ba*, either by taking into account all possible variants (Liu 2006; Shan 2014, 2015; Huang 2016) or by focusing on specific ones (Hu 2015; Tang 2016).

Liu (2006) analyses the differences between three macro-syntactic patterns to account for the direction of the link between the three above-mentioned variants and the preceding/following context. According to Liu, only *ni zhidao ma* can have a forward-looking and topic-introducing function, while all the three markers can be used to refer to the previous context, despite some pragmatic differences being involved: *ni zhidao* generally marks information the speaker assumes as already known to the addressee in order to render it easier to understand or to accept; *ni zhidao ma* generally involves information which

is either new or unexpected to the addressee, or difficult to understand and/or to accept; lastly, *ni zhidao ba* is argued to be used with information which has a moderate degree of familiarity and accessibility on the part of the addressee.

Huang (2016) discusses *ni zhidao ma/ba* as markers of information-transmitting speech acts: when used in (turn)initial position, they initiate a conversation, in (turn)final position they serve an emphatic function, while in (turn)medial position, the *ma*-variant is argued to introduce a topic shift and the *ba*-variant to have a speech-maintaining function.

Shan's (2014) corpus-based study provides a distribution overview of all the expressions containing *zhidao*, and analyses their functions at the level of discourse organisation and interpersonal relations, without pinpointing any specific distinction between the different variants: as far as discourse organisation is concerned, *zhidao* is argued to connect propositions, to maintain discourse coherence and to introduce a new topic, whereas interpersonal relations include the construction of a (shared) cognitive context and the emphasizing of the speaker's psychological state, i.e., attitudinal and emotive stance. In Shan (2015), three different pragmatic meanings are attributed to *zhidao* markers – initiating or taking over a speech turn, maintaining the turn, and emphasizing the speaker's subjective stance – each of them being paired with different positions in the turn of speech, as well as with distinct prosodic properties arguably allowing for a clear separation and distinction between the three.

Specifically focusing on *ni zhidao ma* is Hu's (2015) study, which tackles the semantic reanalysis process, i.e., the grammaticalization process (Traugott, Dasher 2002), underwent by *ni zhidao ... ma*. According to Hu, this structure was originally employed to introduce a question constituting the first move in the initiation-response-feedback interaction pattern. After different intermediate stages, the grammaticalization process reached its final step with *zhidao ma* becoming a pragmatic marker devoid of (a fully) interrogative value, and can now be used as a focus marker to foreground information either in the previous or the following context. Other intermediate functions of the marker, all of which are still available in modern Mandarin, refer to introducing a topic and increasing discourse cohesion on the one hand – in both cases referring indexically backwards – and increasing contextual relevance and highlighting information on the other hand – both of which can refer indexically either backwards or forwards.

Finally, Tang's (2016) study tackles *ni zhidao ba*, arguing that it can have either propositional value – whenever it triggers an explicit answer on the part of the interlocutor – or non-propositional value, in which case it can perform five different functions at the level of discourse organization and two macro-functions at the interpersonal level. From the perspective of discourse, Tang argues that *ni zhidao ba* can be used for topic instantiation, topic continuation and topic shift, topic closing and turn-holding. As far as the interpersonal level is concerned, *ni zhidao ba* is argued to be employed in order to either guide the listener's attention – by capturing his/her attention or by activating a certain semantic frame – or to reach a common understanding. It is unclear, however, whether the functions performed on different discourse planes are clearly and independently identifiable, or if a certain amount of overlap can be expected.

Crucially, while acknowledging that the functions of the particles *ba* and *ma* within the construct have been subject to bleaching to a certain extent, most of the authors have also argued that (slight) differences in the meanings performed by the two variants can still be perceived (Tao 2003, 298; Liu 2006, 427). What exactly these differences consist of – beyond the activation status of the information they refer to (Liu 2006) – and to what extent they can be identified in naturally-occurring language, however, remains to be clarified. In order to assess these differences, a few words must be spent on the functions that *ma* and *ba* perform as SFPs.

As far as *ma* is concerned, in addition to codifying yes/no interrogative sentences as in (3), it has been noted that it can also be employed to emphasize a point or to persuade the speaker in rhetorical questions (Liu, Pan, Gu 2001, 415-416), as shown in (4).

- (3) 你看见张老师了吗?  
*Nǐ kànjiàn Zhāng lǎoshī le ma?*  
 2sg see Zhang professor PFV SFP  
 Have you seen Professor Zhang? (Liu, Pan, Gu 2001, 415)
- (4) 你这不是欺负人吗?  
*Nǐ zhè bú shì qīfū rén ma?*  
 2sg this not be bully people SFP  
 Aren't you just bullying people? (Liu, Pan, Gu 2001, 415)

Much more complex appears to be the use of the SFP *ba*, which can codify directives, questions envisaging a positive reply and even speculative assertions (Liu, Pan, Gu 2001, 424-426). In particular, its function has been argued to consist in mitigating the illocutionary force of a speech act, either by expressing the speaker's uncertainty (Chu 1998, 136) – as shown in (5) – or by soliciting the hearer's agreement or acceptance (Li, Thompson 1981, 307), as illustrated in (6).

- (5) 倘在上学，中学已该毕业了吧。  
*Tǎng zài shàng-xué, zhōngxué yǐ gāi bìyè-le ba.*  
 If PROG go-to-school middle-school already should graduate-PFV SFP  
 If (he) had gone to school, (he) should have graduated from high school.  
 (Chu 1998, 137)
- (6) 你想一想吧。  
*Nǐ xiǎng-yī-xiǎng ba.*  
 2sg think-one-think SFP  
 Why don't you think about it a little? (Li, Thompson 1981, 308)

Furthermore, *ba* has also been analysed as having a topic-introducing function (Tantucci 2017), which represents the more recent development of the particle from a diachronic point of view and, according to Tantucci (2017, 49), “a further stage of extended-intersubjectification as Sp/w assertively establishes a new topic precisely based on 3rdP's expected

endorsement of this choice". This is illustrated in (7), where *ba* is argued to introduce a topic the speaker expects the hearer to actively co-engage with.

- (7) 嫂子吧, 嫂子没到这家来的时候就是姐姐。  
*Sǎozi ba, sǎozi méi dào zhè jiā lái de*  
 elder-brother's.wife SFP, elder-brother's.wife not arrive this home come REL  
*shíhòu jiù shì jiějie.*  
 time only be older-sister  
 Take my elder-brother's wife, before she became part of our family she simply was  
 an older sister. (Tantucci 2017, 45)

#### 4. Research Questions and Method

The current study represents an attempt to identify the (a)symmetries between (*ni*) *zhidao ma* and (*ni*) *zhidao ba* used in utterance-final position in naturally-occurring spoken Mandarin. Given the presence of a distinct particle being used in the two variants, the aim is to assess whether this entails distinct functions being carried out by (*n*)*zdm* and (*n*)*zdb* or whether a complete semantic bleaching of the two particles' meanings has occurred, resulting in the interchangeability of the two variants. More specifically, the study strives to address the issue from a new perspective, i.e., by taking into account factors which have not yet been fully clarified by previous studies, including pragmatic and socio-pragmatic variables such as the characteristics of the speaker and the speech act (s)he intends to carry out, as well as the hearer's response or reaction to the utterance and the relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

The research questions addressed by this paper are as follows:

- i. do (*ni*) *zhidao ma* and (*ni*) *zhidao ba* perform different functions when used in utterance-final position or are they freely interchangeable?
  - ii. if they are different, what are the features that uniquely characterise and set them apart?
- In order to respond to the above questions, I first analysed the (a)symmetries between the two markers in terms of the variables i) – v), which allowed me to draw reliable considerations concerning the second research question:
- i. their position in the turn;
  - ii. the (eventual) response/reaction triggered on the part of the receiver;
  - iii. rapport management (Spencer-Oatey 2008; Tantucci 2021);
  - iv. the illocutionary force of the utterance;
  - v. the speaker's gender.

Based on the answer to the second research question, I was also able to formulate an answer to the first research question.

The study was carried out by extracting 25 conversations from the CallFriend corpus (Canavan, Zipperlen 1996), which consists of unscripted telephonic conversations between native Mandarin speakers living in the US of approximately 30 minutes each. The selected conversations are all dyadic and balanced in terms of speaker-hearer gender, with 10 female to female conversations, 10 male to male conversations, and 5 male to female

conversations. Overall, the retrieved occurrences were produced by 15 male and 15 female speakers. The total amount of analysed audios and transcriptions is of ca. 12 hours and 30 minutes, which resulted in the extraction of 173 occurrences of (*ni*) *zhidao ma/ba* in utterance-final position. More specifically, 91 instances of (*ni*) *zhidao ba* and 82 of (*ni*) *zhidao ma* were retrieved from the selected conversations.

The total number of extracted occurrences were subsequently annotated taking into account the following information:

- i. the specific token;
- ii. the identification number of the conversation it belongs to;
- iii. the variant to which it belongs, i.e., either (*ni*) *zhidao ma* or (*ni*) *zhidao ba*;
- iv. the gender of the speaker;
- v. the illocutionary force of the utterance, based on Lepadat (2021);
- vi. the position of the token in the speech turn;
- vii. the presence/absence of sentence-final particles (SFPs) as markers of intersubjectivity (Tantucci, Wang 2018);
- viii. the response or reaction of the hearer.

While most of the annotated variables are self-evident, those at points v), vii) and viii) require additional explanation.

As far as the illocutionary force of the utterance is concerned, the classification scheme follows the one adopted in Lepadat (2021) to tackle utterance-final expressions in spoken Mandarin. More specifically, with respect to the classical model proposed by Searle (1979), the current scheme adopts Tantucci's (2016) distinction between presentative, evaluational and assertive illocutionary force that can characterize constative – i.e., information-transmitting – speech acts. The former is generally marked by evidential devices meant to present a given information as acquired from the exterior, the second presents the information as merely hinging on the speaker's (subjective) cognitive process, whereas the latter is presented as a fact to be simply acknowledged by the addressee (Tantucci 2016, 185)<sup>2</sup>.

The different realisations of the three illocutionary forces can be observed in (8), (9) and (10) respectively.

<sup>2</sup> According to Tantucci (2016), two forms of pragmatic ascription – i.e., commitment – can be involved in constative illocutionary speech acts: the S/W (speakers/writer) ascription towards her/his own evaluation and towards the factuality of the statement. Tantucci proposes that an assertive force implies both a factual and an evaluational ascription – i.e., both factual and evaluational distancing on the part of the speaker are disallowed. On the other hand, evaluations are argued to allow factual distancing, and presentative speech acts to involve neither evaluational nor factual ascription on the part of the speaker, for (s)he simply aims to inform the addressee of a piece of knowledge that s(he) “has markedly acquired somehow”, including by means of direct evidence (Tantucci 2016, 199-204).

- (8) A1: 诶, 你们这个材料弄得好像比较- 比较那什么啊- 比较理啊, 你知道吗.  
*Èi, nǐmen zhège cáiliào nòng de hǎoxiàng bǐjiào- bǐjiào nà*  
 Eh 2pl this-cl materials treat DE apparently relatively relatively that  
*shénme a- bǐjiào lǐ a, nǐ zhīdào ma.*  
 what SFP relatively theoretical SFP 2sg know SFP  
 Apparently, the way you do the materials [course] over there is more on the theoretical side, you know?  
 B1: 我们这边啊? Here at my university?  
 A2: 嗯. Uhm. (CallFriend/zho-m/5784)
- (9) A1: Yeah, 我觉得她有时候她需要, 因为她也够孤单的, 你知道吗.  
*Yeah, wǒ juéde tā yǒu shíhòu tā xūyào, yīnwèi tā yě gòu gūdān*  
 Yeah, 1sg think 3sg.f have times 3sg.f need because 3sg.f too enough lonely  
*de, nǐ zhīdào ma.*  
 SFP, 2sg know SFP.  
 Yeah, I think sometimes she needs it too, because she's quite lonely as well, you know.  
 B1: 对呀. Yeah. (CallFriend/zho-m/5930)  
 A2: 啊像我在这儿哈, 我- 我- 我请她- 我告诉她我们这儿有那艺术节,  
 让她来看, 完了我见儿.  
 For example, on my side, I invited her- I told her that there is an art festival over here, I asked her to come, and at the end we went there (together).  
 (CallFriend/zho-m/5930)
- (10) B1: 对, 我现在才开始学怎么用computer, 你知道吧.  
*Duì, wǒ xiànzài cái kāishǐ xué zěnmeyòng computer, nǐ zhīdào ba.*  
 Yes, 1sg now only start study how use computer 2sg know SFP  
 Yes, for the time being I have just started to learn how to use a computer, you know?  
 A1: 那也没事儿, 这简单. 我跟你说明我们这, 我们能在国内读大学就是...  
 That's okay, it's simple, let me tell you, this- we were able to finish university in China, the point is. (CallFriend/zho-m/5906)

The advantage of using this finer-grained scheme is that it allows to detect subtle difference in the speaker's intentions when transmitting information to the hearer, and thus to identify differences in the functions that are performed by the marker, as will be explained in § 5.2.

Regarding SFPs, this paper adopts Tantucci and Wang's (2018) view that they serve intersubjective functions, i.e., that they codify the speaker's awareness of the hearer's potential reaction to the utterance and are thus instances of what Spencer-Oatey (2008, 3) calls *rapport management*: "the use of language to promote, maintain or threaten harmonious social relations". Based on the few studies carried out on the co-occurrence of pragmatic markers (Cuenca, Crible 2019; Haselow 2019; Crible, Degand 2021; Lepadat 2021), there is – in theory – no restriction against two intersubjective markers being used in combination, even when they have the same syntactic scope. However, Ostman's (1981) study on English *you know* highlights the incompatibility between this marker and utterances characterized by a phatic function, i.e., one which is intersubjective in nature. Whether the



restriction applies (equally) to (n)zdm and (n)zdb might help shed light on the (possibly different) shades of meanings characterizing the two variants of the marker.

Finally, the coding scheme for the hearer's response and/or reaction is corpus-driven and includes two different modalities: implicit or explicit material. The responses produced as a reaction to utterances containing *ni zhidao ma/ba* in the dataset can be described in terms of a continuum as far as their *explicitness* is concerned, hinging on a cline of engagement going from zero or minimal responses to fully-fledged answers (Tantucci, Wang, Culpeper 2022). Nonetheless, after several attempts, it was found that only the positions at the ends of the continuum are relevant as far as the two variants are concerned, i.e., whether the response is minimal and does not imply a shift of the speech turn, or whether the response is more informative and implies the hearer taking over the speech turn<sup>3</sup>. This is in line with previous studies on reciprocity – defined in Culpeper and Tantucci (2021, 150) as “a constraint on human interaction such that there is pressure to match the perceived or anticipated (im)politeness of other participants, thereby maintaining a balance of payments” –, which have shown that while backchannelling and minimal responses constitute more passive contributions to the conversation, propositional information such as comments imply a much higher engagement of the hearer as a contribution to the ongoing conversation (Bruce, Hansson, Nettelbladt 2010; Tantucci, Wang, Culpeper 2022).

In order to assess whether the use of the marker induced a more or less explicit response on the part of the hearer, the productions triggered by *ni zhidao ma/ba* were classified into two categories following the scheme in Table 1:

Table 1 - Criteria for response coding

Tag	Response type	Example
Implicit	absent	∅
	laugh	laughter
	backchannel	ó 哦, òg 嗯 (uhhuh), duì 对 (right), shì-de 是的 (indeed)
	confirmation check	shì ma? 是吗? (really?)
Explicit	clarification request	a, summer méi qián 啊, summer 没钱? (Oh, there's no money during summer?)
	comment	nà yě méi shìr 那也没事儿 (that's fine)
	answer	wǒ zhīdào a 我知道啊 (I know!)

The absence of a reaction as well as non-verbal reactions such as laughter, together with backchannels and agreement markers represent a baseline form of interaction (Tantucci, Wang, Culpeper 2022). The production of such responses on the part of the hearer does

<sup>3</sup> This paper follows Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) in considering conversation “as a sequence of conversational turns, in which the contribution of each participant is seen as part of a co-ordinated and rule-governed behavioural interaction” (Crystal 2008, 498). An operational definition of turn particularly suited for the purpose of this paper is provided in Leech and Rowe (2021, 2), according to whom “conversational turn is defined as a series of utterances that are contingent upon a previous speaker's turn”.

not interrupt the current speaker's turn, but only provide support, agreement or acknowledgement signalling that the speaker can continue talking (ten Bosch, Oostdijk, de Ruiter 2004, 567-568; Bruce, Hansson, Nettelbladt 2010, 500). Example (9) illustrates the use of a backchannel to express support and attention to what is being said, nonetheless allowing the current speaker to maintain the turn. Somewhat special cases are confirmation checks, which were considered to initiate a new turn when explicitly answered to by the interlocutor (11), but not so when they had no overt effect on the ongoing conversation, as in (12).

- (11) B is telling A about the selection process she went through in order to get a new job.  
 B1: 他说我不需要 interview 了, 你知道吗?  
*Tā shuō wǒ bù xūyào interview le, nǐ zhīdào ma?*  
 3sg say 1sg not need interview SFP 2sg know SFP  
 He said there was no need for me to interview, you know?  
 A1: 噢 是吧?  
*Ō shì ba?*  
 Oh be SFP  
 Oh, really?  
 B2: 啊, 当时我还特别高兴嘛, 然后我就我就打电话。  
 Yeah, in that moment I was really happy, you know, so afterwards I just gave them a call.  
 (CallFriend/zho-m/4257)
- (12) Context: A is telling B about a time when the lab heads tried to make his life difficult.  
 A1: 哎呀, 我忘了这个事。我赶紧去把它补了, 知道吧。  
*Āiyā, wǒ wàng-le zhè-ge shì. Wǒ gǎnjǐn qù bǎ tā bǔ-le, zhīdào ba.*  
 Oops, 1sg forget-PFV this-CL thing. 1sg rush go BA 3sg fix-PFV know SFP  
 Oops, I forgot about that thing, so I immediately rushed [there] to fix it, you know?  
 B1: 是吗。 Really?  
 A2: 补了后呢, 就在我补的路, 路上, After I fixed it, when I was on my way to fix it,  
 B2: 嗯。 Mhm.  
 A3: 他们就把电话打到 Freda 那。 They just called Freda.  
 (CallFriend/zho-m/5673)

While the above types of responses – with the exception of some confirmation checks – do not initiate a new turn, all the remaining forms indicate the (tentative) initiation of a new speech turn. Clarification requests are only made up of minimal linguistic material and immediately yield the turn to the previous speaker, as was observed in (8). More informative responses by means of which the hearer gives an explicit contribution to the interaction are comments, as in (10), which nonetheless do not represent a direct answer to a question, i.e., literal uses of *ni zhīdào ba*<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, the only answer found in the corpus represents an unforeseen literal use of the marker, i.e., it is interpreted by the hearer as a fully-fledged question and is responded to with an affirmative reply, as shown in (13). It is clear, however – given the use of the utter-

<sup>4</sup> Responses containing both backchannelling and propositional information were annotated as belonging to the more informative type of contribution, i.e., to explicit responses.

ance-initial marker *wǒ gēn nǐ shuō* 我跟你说 (let me tell you) – that A didn't expect B to actually know about the information she was providing, therefore a rhetorical, discourse-marker use can still be assigned to this occurrence.

- (13) A1: 我跟你说啊。 Let me tell you,  
 B1: 嗯。 Mhm.  
 A2: 我昨天听他们说那个: credicard, 就是: 有reward, 你知道吗?  
*Wǒ zuótiān tīng tāmen shuō nà-ge credicard jiù shì:yǒu reward,*  
 1sg yesterday hear 3pl say that-cl credicard just be have reward  
*nǐ zhīdào ma?*  
 2sg know SFP  
 Yesterday I heard them say that the credit card [company] is giving out rewards,  
 you know?  
 B2: 有啊。 Yes, of course!  
 B3: 我知道啊。 Yes, I know! (CallFriend/zho-m/5195)

All the columns of the annotation row are illustrated below, with a *ni zhidao ma* occurrence as an example (corresponding to (2) above). What can be observed from Table 2 is that the marker – in its *ma*-particle variant – was produced by a female speaker at the end of an utterance expressing an evaluative speech act. The utterance is located in turn-medial position and is additionally marked for intersubjectivity by the particle *de* 的 (see § 5.1). The response produced by the interlocutor is an implicit expression, which allows the speaker to maintain the turn.

Table 2 - Sampled row of annotation from the dataset

token	conv_id	variant	gender	illocution	turn_pos	SFP	response
nzdm	5930	(n)zdm	F	evaluative	medial	de	implicit

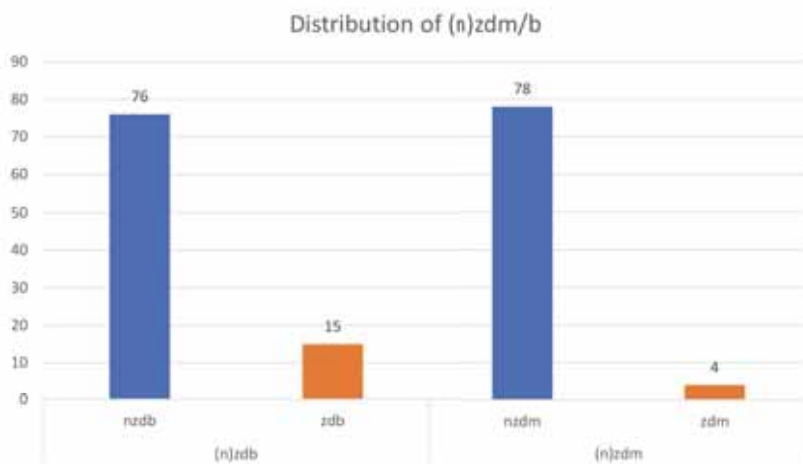
## 5. Data Analysis

After carrying out the annotation process, the data were analysed statistically using RStudio (RStudio Team 2020). The statistical methods applied include conditional inference trees (Tagliamonte, Baayen 2012) and random forests (Breiman 2001), which are particularly suited for categorical data – i.e., non-numerical nominal and ordinal variables – and appropriate when dealing with complex relationships among these or with categories presenting very few observations (Levshina 2015, 166-167, 275). In addition, conditional inference trees can be plotted to obtain useful visual representations of data.

Before focusing on the correlations between the two variants analysed in the present study and the (socio)pragmatic variables outlined in § 4, an overview of the marker's distribution in the dataset will be presented. As Graph 1 shows, the distribution of the two variants is roughly similar in my data: the *ma*-variant (henceforth *(n)zdm*) occurs 82 times and the *ba*-variant (henceforth *(n)zdb*) 91 times. However, it should be also noted

that while the variants overtly encoding the hearer through the presence of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun *ni* (henceforth *nzdm* and *nzdb*) have almost identical occurrences – 78 and 76 respectively – the variants wherein the pronoun is omitted (henceforth *zdm* and *zdb*) show a slight difference, with *zdb* occurring 15 times and *zdm* being used only 4 times throughout the dataset. Because we are dealing with small numbers, only two variants have been considered for statistical analysis, i.e., *(n)zdm* vs. *(n)zdb*. Finer-grained distinctions will be discussed only from a qualitative perspective.

Graph 1 - Overall distribution of *(ni) zhidao ma/ba* variants

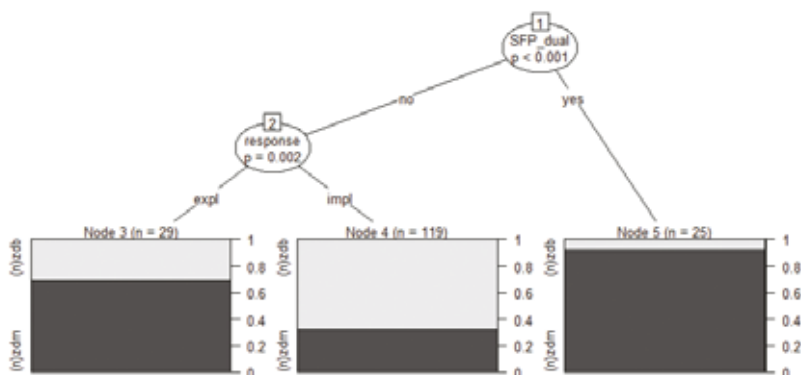


### 5.1 A holistic statistical model of *(ni) zhidao ma/ba*

The main purpose of this study is to shed light on the possible differences existing between *(n)zdm* and *(n)zdb* from the perspective of five (socio)pragmatic variables. To achieve this, I fitted a conditional inference tree (CT) to identify unbiased convergences between significant variables that have a role in the distribution of the two variants. More specifically, this statistical model has the advantage of providing graphic representations (plots) of statistically significant patterns associated with each variant and intersecting with one another in a hierarchical order. Moreover, the model allows to avoid bias problems connected with traditional regression methods (Hothorn, Hornik, Zeileis 2006), since it is the CT algorithm itself that first makes a binary split in the independent variable that is found to be more strongly associated with the dependent variable and then repeats the procedure until no other variable significantly associated with the response one is left (Levshina 2015, 291-292).

The CT in Figure 1 was obtained through the “ctree” function of the “partykit” package in RStudio by using “variant” as the dependent variable, and the five (socio)pragmatic variables detailed in § 4 as independent or explanatory variables.

Figure 1 - Significant feature patterns of (n)zdm/b



Based on the above CT model, the variable associated more strongly with the dependent variable – i.e., with the *zhidao* variant – is the presence or absence of SFPs, which the algorithm split into two subsets. This means that there is a statistically significant difference between markers co-occurring with SFPs and those which do not ( $p < .001$ ): almost all the SFPs in the data set occur with *(n)zdm* and hardly ever with *(n)zdb*. Moreover, a second split identified a significant difference between the markers not co-occurring with SFPs in terms of the response produced by the hearer ( $p < .01$ ): explicit responses correlate strongly with the *(n)zdm* variant, while implicit responses are more strongly associated with the *(n)zdb* variant. To put it in other terms, the distinctive features of each variant identified by the model are as follows: the *(n)zdb* variant hardly ever co-occurs with SFPs and triggers mostly implicit responses by the hearer; conversely, the *(n)zdm* variant can co-occur with SFPs and more explicit contributions are produced by the interlocutor as a response. The difference is illustrated in (14) and (15) respectively.

In (14), B's utterance in B1 is marked by *nzdb* in final position and is matched by A's backchanneling *uhhuh*, which has the support function of inviting B to keep narrating the fact at issue:

- (14) Context: B tells A that yesterday they rented a big car to go to LA.

B1: 我们都坐在车上, 你知道吧?

*Wōmen dōu zuò zài chē shàng, nǐ zhīdào ba?*

1pl all sit at car on 2sg know SFP

We all sat in that car, you know?

A: Uhhuh. Uhm.

B2: 他没有那种轿车, 我们就席地而坐。

He didn't have a sedan, so we all sat on the floor. (CallFriend/zho-m/4257)

In (15), B's utterance in B2 is marked by both the SFP *la* 啦 and the *nzdm* marker. The former has the function of marking both the speaker's subjective stance and her pre-emptive interest in the interlocutor's (possibly divergent) opinion, while *nzdm* further reinforces the

appeal towards A to give her opinion on the matter. As a consequence, A first produces an agreement backchannel supporting B's statement and then further comments on the matter.

- (15) Context: B is telling A about the increase in the housing value in San Diego.  
 B1: 你可不知道就是他们那个就是前几年就是 – 就是二三十年前买房子,  
 You don't know, those- a few years ago – those who bought a house 20 or 30  
 years ago,  
 B2: 买了几万块钱的房子现在都变成四十几万, 五十几万啦, 你知道吗?  
*Mǎi-le jǐ wàn kuài qián de fángzi xiànzài dōu biànchéng*  
 Bought-PFV few 10.000 CL money REL house now all become  
*sìshíjǐ wàn wǔshíjǐ wàn la, nǐ zhīdào ma?*  
 forty-something 10.000, fifty-something 10.000 SFP 2sg know SFP  
 They bought a house at some tens of thousands and now they become 400.000-  
 500.000 dollars, you know?  
 A1: Uhhuh. Uhm.  
 A2: 哎呀, 那就是挺好的哈. Well, that's good, right? (CallFriend/zho-m/4270)

A possible explanation for the scarce co-occurrence of the  $(n)zdb$  variant with SFPs is based on Östman's (1981) analysis of English *you know*. When describing the general features of the marker, it is argued that the speaker “wants the addressee to PRESUPPOSE the tenability of what he is saying. [...] Thus, we cannot use you know to qualify an instance of what Malinowski (1923) called phatic communion” (Östman 1981, 18). In other words, *you know* would be incompatible with other intersubjective markers for it treats the addressee's endorsement on what is being said as assumed. However, Östman further distinguishes two uses of *you know*, a declarative and an interrogative one: “by using declarative *you know*, the speaker does not want to be argued against. He does not anticipate a challenge from the addressee, nor does he want to be challenged”. On the other hand, the use of *you know* “accompanied by an interrogative contour (a fall-rise<sup>20</sup> or a rise) – would imply more unknown, or questioned (cf. tag questions) information, saying in effect, ‘are you attending,’ ‘do you agree,’ or ‘do you see what I mean.’” (Östman 1981, 23). From this, it can be inferred that only the declarative use but not necessarily the interrogative use – presenting a lower degree of assumption – is incompatible with previous intersubjective expressions.

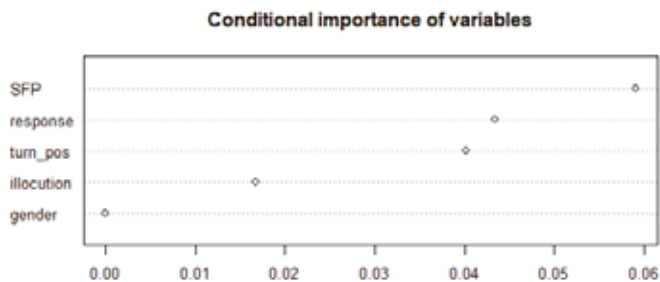
In the case of Chinese, the distinction between the two functions of *you know* appears to be carried out not (only) at the prosodic level, but also through the use of a distinct particle: *ba* for the declarative use and *ma* for the interrogative use. In fact, it is likely that the qualitative difference between *ma* and *ba* may still be perceived within the markers despite a certain degree of semantic bleaching having occurred (Tao 2003). As mentioned previously, it has been argued that *ma* is often employed merely to formulate a question (Liu 2001; Paul, Pan 2017; Romagnoli, Lepadat 2021), while *ba* expresses an invitation towards the addressee to jointly engage in a physical or epistemic action with the issuer or event to endorse their conclusion “in the form of a shared evaluation” (Tantucci 2021, 89). On this view, only  $(n)zdb$  – not  $(n)zdm$  – would imply an assumption of the hearer's agreement on what is being said, entering in conflict with the previous occurrence of a phatic – i.e., intersubjective – expression such as a SFP. The maintaining of the particles'

semantic/pragmatic core could also explain (*n*)*zdm*'s tendency to trigger more explicit and elaborate responses, while (*n*)*zdb* remains more in line with the functions of the particle *ba*, frequently soliciting confirmation of previous speculations or beliefs of the speaker (Liu, Pan, Gu 2001, 424).

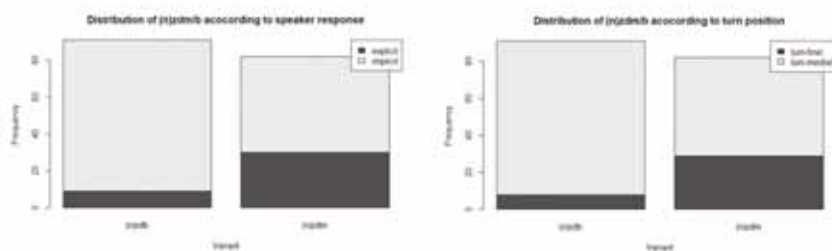
Furthermore, the different degree of compatibility of (*n*)*zdm* and (*n*)*zdb* with SFPs might be connected with a different degree of compositionality – “the extent to which the link between form and meaning is transparent” (Traugott, Trousdale 2013, 19) – of the two variants, that is to say a stronger degree of delexicalization and pragmaticalization on the part of (*n*)*zdb* and the maintaining of more of the original semantic meaning on the part of (*n*)*zdm*. More specifically, both variants can be said to be formulaic and to have undergone a certain degree of grammaticalization, since in both cases the speaker is not literally enquiring about whether the addressee has knowledge of the propositional content of the utterance. However, in most cases (*n*)*zdm* is still posing a question to the addressee, paraphrasable, as suggested by Ostman (1981) for interrogative *you know* as *are you attending?*, *do you agree?*, *do you see what I mean?*, to which (s)he expects an explicit response from the addressee; on the other hand, in most cases (*n*)*zdb* does not convey an interrogative illocutionary force anymore but rather an assertive one which could be paraphrasable with *as you know* or even *as is obvious* – implying an assumption of the addressee's endorsement of what is being said. The lower compositionality of (*n*)*zdb* thus hinges on its lower connection with the original interrogative illocutionary force of the expression, which is nonetheless still observable in (*n*)*zdm*, as shown by the different linguistic productions of the addressee in response to the two variants.

Following Tantucci's (2021, 52) claim that “the more a construct is intersubjectified, the lower its degree of compositionality”, it can be hypothesized that (*n*)*zdm* presents a lower degree of intersubjectification than (*n*)*zdb*, at least in all the prototypical cases in which it occurs in turn-final position (see below) to seek for the addressee's immediate turn-taking. On this view too, the co-occurrence between markers of intersubjectivity as SFPs and the intersubjectively stronger variant (*n*)*zdb* would result as highly redundant (but still possible). However, this is to be taken as a tendency rather than a deterministic rule, and does not exclude the existence of grey areas in which the functions of the two variants overlap, especially in the cases in which both are used in turn-medial position (see below) and do not require an explicit endorsement of the addressee.

The accuracy of the previous CT model reaches 71%, well beyond random assignment of the two variants (50%) (Levshina 2015, 297). However, to assess the importance of the above two variables more precisely among the five taken into account, I also computed a random forest model, which allows to identify the conditional importance of variables after running CTs as those in Figure 1 several times (Levshina 2015, 297-298).

Figure 2 - *Conditional importance of variables for (n)zdm/b*

The variable importance scores in Figure 2 show that while gender (0.000) and illocution bear very little importance (0.017), the most important predictors are the presence/absence of SFPs (0.059) and the hearer's response (0.043), as also predicted by the CT. Nonetheless, another important predictor that can be observed from Figure 2 has a very similar score to the response variable, i.e., turn position (0.40). In fact, the response and the turn position variables appear to be roughly equally important in explaining the behaviour of the two variants, but only one of them was shown in the CT in Figure 1. Upon closer examination, this appears to be connected with a very similar distribution of the variants  $(n)zdm/b$  in relation to the two variables. Observing the correlation between turn position and variant, on the one hand, and that between response and variant on the other hand, it is clear that the distributions are almost identical.

Figure 3 - *Distribution of (n)zdm/b according to hearer response and turn position*

In fact, it was found that although both variants occur more frequently in turn-medial position (53/82 total occurrences of  $(n)zdm$  and 83/91 of  $(n)zdb$  are in the middle of the turn), the  $(n)zdb$  variant is very rare in turn-final position (8/91 total occurrences of the variant), while this is less true for  $(n)zdm$ , which occurs at the end of a turn more than one third of the times (29/82 total occurrences of the variant). The distribution largely overlaps with that imposed upon the variants by the explicitness of the response: only 9 occurrences of  $(n)zdb$  were followed by explicit responses, while this happened with  $(n)zdm$



in as much as 30 cases. As it is not difficult to imagine, there is a tight correlation between turn position and hearer response, since turn-final instances of both variants are by definition (almost always) paired with explicit contributions of the interlocutor taking over the next speech turn (see § 4). Thus, it might be the case that the explicitness of the response is correlated with the two variants as a consequence of their preference for different positions in the turn. In fact, when used at the end of the turn, (*n*)*zdb* triggers explicit responses as those produced to reciprocate an utterance with (*n*)*zdm*, as can be noted from (16):

- (16) Context: A is telling B that his son is having troubles learning English.  
 B1: 小孩儿对语言他适应特别快, 你知道吧。  
*Xiǎoháir duì yǔyán tā shìyìng tèbié kuài, nǐ zhīdào ba.*  
 Children towards language 3sg.m adapt very quick 2sg know SFP  
 Children adapt very quickly to new languages, you know?  
 A1: sh- sh- 快是快, 对, 但还是听不懂, 但是他是愿意去学校。  
 They may be fast, right, but he still doesn't understand, but nonetheless he is willing to go to school. (CallFriend/zho-m/4198)

Also the opposite holds true, i.e., when (*n*)*zdm* is used in the middle of the turn, it is only matched with either backchannelling or no response on the part of the hearer, as observed in (9).

However, explicit comments might also be disregarded by speakers who continue talking to maintain their turn. This is what happens in (17), which represents the only case of explicit response to *ba* in turn-medial position.

- (17) B is comparing the comforts of different airlines flying to the US.  
 B1: 北京机场又在郊区, 你知道吧?  
*Běijīng jīchǎng yòu zài jiāoqū nǐ zhīdào ba?*  
 Beijing airport again be.at suburb 2sg know SFP  
 Also, Beijing Airport is in the suburbs, you know?  
 A1: 对呀, 也不方便- Right, it's not convenient-  
 B2: sh- 就特别麻烦 [...] So it's very inconvenient. (CallFriend/zho-m/4198)

A further explanation for the overlap between turn position and hearer's response in the distribution of (*n*)*zdm/b* might be again connected with the pragmatic differences between the particles *ma* and *ba*: given *ba*'s tendency to be used for confirmation requests, and *ma*'s preference for more informative contributions on the part of the interlocutor, it is envisageable that (*n*)*zdb* hardly ever occurs in turn-final position, while, on the contrary, it is more likely for (*n*)*zdm* to perform a turn-yielding function.

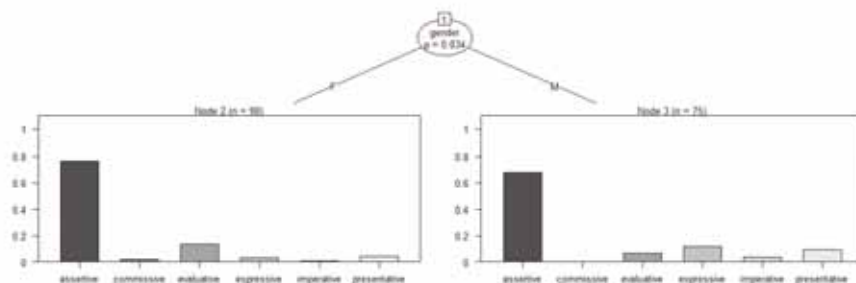
Whatever the direction of implication between response explicitness and turn position might be, it is important to acknowledge the position in the speech turn as a further significant explicative variable in the distribution of the (*n*)*zdm* and (*n*)*zdb* variants.

## 5.2 Illocution and Gender: Qualitative Remarks

If the holistic analysis of the five variables did not produce a significant outcome for the illocution and gender variables, at least two aspects are worthy of discussion from a more fine-grained perspective: the correlation between gender and illocution, and that between gender and presence/absence of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun in the marker's form.

As far as illocution is concerned, no statistical difference was found between the *(n)zdm* and *(n)zdb* variants. Nonetheless, a significant difference was identified correlating the speaker's gender to the utterance's illocutionary force. Independently from the variant used, the CT in Figure 4 shows that female and male speakers attach *(n)zdm/b* at the end of (slightly) different speech acts, bearing an indirect influence on the functions performed by the marker.

Figure 4 - Distribution of illocutionary force according to the speaker's gender



While the most frequent illocutionary force is assertive for both genders, the element of difference resides in female speakers using more frequently evaluative speech acts and male speakers more expressive acts ( $p < .05$ ). The difference can be observed in (18) and (19). In (18), the female speaker uses *nzdm* at the end of an evaluative speech act presenting the information therein given as the mere product of her psychological process. Not only the epistemic expression *wǒ jiù juéde* 我就觉得 (I really think) signals that the semantic and evidential source of the proposition coincide with the speaker itself, but it also pre-emptively acknowledges that the speaker is aware her interlocutor's opinion might be different from her own (Lim 2011; Wu, Tao 2018). The function of *nzdm* is thus clearly connected with an attempt on the part of the speaker to seek an alignment of views or a corroboration of her opinion on the part of the addressee.

- (18) Context: A is trying to convince B that not all American people are selfish.

A1: 我就觉得这些人都是很真诚的, 你知道吗。

*Wǒ jiù juéde zhè-xiē rén hěn zhēnchéngde, nǐ zhīdào ma.*

1sg just think this-pl person very sincere SFP, 2sg know SFP

I think these people are all rather sincere, you know,

A2: 她们不是不是不是说-什么她自己女儿的情况啊, 什么困难啊, 怎么离婚了, 又什么的, 她都跟我讲。

It's not to say- for example her daughter's situation, all the difficulties, her divorce, etc., she told me everything. (CallFriend/zho-m/5930)

On the contrary, the example in (19) illustrates an expressive speech act containing an element of strong subjectivity, i.e., a swear word. Since swear words' use has been argued to create inclusion and commonality of views among peers (Jay, Janschewitz 2008), it is not farfetched to believe that *nzdm* serves to reinforce this phatic signal towards the addressee. In other words, the function of the marker here is to seek an alignment of views in a rather different fashion from (18): in (18), the addressee is called upon as an entity holding an independent (and possibly different) view from the producer, while in (19) the marker is arguably used to reinforce an inclusive, identity-sharing stance. The observation is in line with previous studies on gendered expressions (Lakoff 1975, 2004; Chan 1997; Lepadat 2021) and formulaic expressions being used to assert group and/or separate identity (Wray, Perkins 2000).

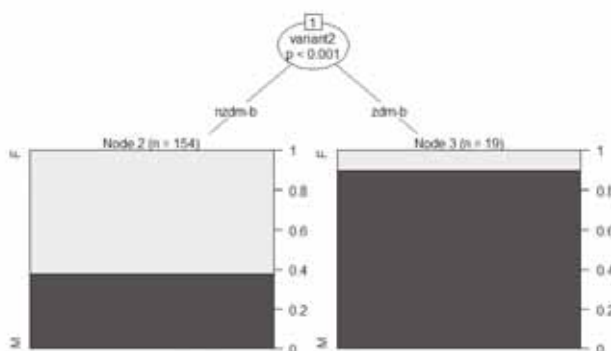
(19) Context: B tells A about the social situation in Chicago.

B1: 就这帮黑人多, 他妈小孩儿拿枪打, 就他妈小孩儿不懂事儿, 你知道吗,  
*Jiù zhè bāng hēirén duō, tā mā xiǎoháir ná qiāng dǎ, jiù*  
 Just this group black.people many 3sg mum child take gun shoot just  
*tā mā xiǎoháir bù dǒngshìr, nǐ zhīdào ma,*  
 3sg mum child not understand 2sg know SFP  
 There are so many black people, the fucking kids shoot with guns, the fucking kids are just so thoughtless, you know,  
 B2: 哎哟, 这儿他妈就这样儿, 你知道。  
 Damn, that's the fucking situation here, you know.

(CallFriend/zho-m/4198)

Lastly, speaker gender was found to be a significant variable involved in the selection of the overt vs. covert 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun variants of the marker, i.e., *zdm/b* vs. *nzdm/b*. As the CT in Figure 5 shows, the majority of omitted pronouns were produced by male speakers (17/19), while only two instances of *zdm/b* were found in connection to female speakers.

Figure 5 - Distribution of (n)zdm/b vs zdm/b according to speaker gender



One example of *zdb* produced by a male speaker is given below in (20).

- (20) Context: A is telling B about the unpleasant experience he has had with a phone company and that he does not want to use the pager machine they provided anymore.

A: 我不想用, 知道吧。

*Wǒ bù xiǎng yòng, zhīdào ba.*

Isg not want use know SFP

I don't want to use it, you know.

(CallFriend/zho-m/5673)

The two instances produced by female speakers belong to two distinct utterers, while the remaining occurrences of the pronoun-less variants were produced by five different male speakers. This would appear to indicate a more confident use on the part of male speakers of the variants that are one step further along in the grammaticalization process. In fact, as discussed by Yap, Yang, and Wong (2014), subject omission is common in different Chinese varieties, and subject + verb structures occurring at the sentence peripheries can easily develop into subject-less markers. Similar findings were reported in Hildebrand-Edgar's (2016) study on the phonetical reduction of English *I don't know*, where it was found that the most reduced form corresponding to *I d'no* and being characterized by pragmatic meanings only – vs. semantic or literal uses associated with less reduced variants – correlates with younger and in particular male speakers. On the one hand, the study establishes a correlation between younger generations of male speakers and the use of the most reduced variants available, which is also in line with other studies on reduced pronunciation variants being cross-linguistically more frequent in men than women speech (Keune et al. 2005; Ernestus, Warner 2011); on the other hand, it also interestingly points to the increase in phonetic reduction being linked to an increase in the pragmatic functions and a decrease in the literal meanings being associated with the chunk. As mentioned in § 5, the overall low rate of occurrence of *zdm/b* does not allow us to make any reliable generalisations, but only observations concerning the specific dataset employed for this study. However, it can be hypothesized that a process similar to that characterizing English *I don't know* might also be at stake in the case of *(n)zdm/b*, a marker that is still in the process of reaching its final step of grammaticalization (Tao 2003; Shan 2014), and that the phonetic reduction of the chunk might imply increased pragmaticization and potentially increased intersubjectification. Further larger-scale analyses are nonetheless necessary to verify the above hypothesis.

## 6. Discussion

Based on the results of the analyses in § 5, the two variants addressed by this paper, *(n)zdm* and *(n)zdb* can be argued to show different tendencies with respect to some of the variables taken into account. In response to the second research question, a number of features emerged that appear to uniquely characterise the two markers when used at the end of an utterance in naturally-occurring telephone conversations. First, a statistically significant difference was found in the distribution of the two variants within the speech turn, with *(ni)zhidao ba* showing a stronger tendency to occur in turn-medial position – where it serves an attention-maintaining function (Shan 2015; Huang 2016) – and *(ni)zhidao ma*

occurring more frequently in turn-final position – where it emphasizes the speaker's attitudinal stance and/or invites the hearer to take over the talk and give his/her opinion on the matter (Shan 2015; Huang 2016).

Second, the two variants also showed a significant difference in the type of verbal response produced by the interlocutor: the *ba*-variant is more frequently followed by the hearer's simple backchannels, laughter, or even silence, i.e., implicit contributions which allow the current speaker to maintain their turn (ten Bosch, Oostdijk, de Ruiter 2004), whereas the *ma*-variant tends to elicit more explicit types of verbal responses such as clarification requests and comments, by means of which the hearer takes over the speech turn (Bruce, Hansson, Nettelbladt 2010). The type of response might be, on the one hand, mediated by the position of the marker in the turn rather than connected to the variants' individual role, since turn-medial markers are generally paired with backchannels, while turn-final markers invite the hearer to take over the talk. On the other hand, this distribution might be connected with the variants retaining at least part of the original semantic/pragmatic meanings of the particles, with *ba* soliciting the hearer's agreement and *ma* inviting more informative contributions on the part of the addressee (Liu, Pan, Gu 2001). In other terms, it appears that (*n*)*zdm* – despite being formulaic in nature – preserves a more compositional meaning with respect to (*n*)*zdb*, especially when used in turn-final position; thus, it might be endorsed with an independent illocutionary force that seeks for the addressee's immediate response. (*N*)*zdb*, on the other hand, is arguably one step further along the grammaticalization process and therefore presents a stronger level of non-compositionality, being used frequently in turn-medial position only to perform the phatic function of maintaining a connection with the interlocutor.

A third difference is that the two variants behave differently with respect to (inter)subjectivity, since an important tendency was found for (*n*)*zdb* to hardly ever occur with SFPs, while the observation does not apply to (*n*)*zdm*. If (*n*)*zdm* and (*n*)*zdb* can be correctly mapped onto *you know*'s interrogative and declarative uses respectively (Östman 1981), the former seeks for the explicit corroboration of the hearer's alignment, while the latter invites the addressee to (implicitly) agree with what the speaker considers as tenable, conforming to the particles' *ba* and *ma* original meanings. In other words, a stronger non-compositional and intersubjective meaning appears to characterize prototypical cases of (*n*)*zdb*, explaining why it occurs less frequently than (*n*)*zdm* with other markers of intersubjectivity, for such co-occurrences would result as highly redundant or even incompatible (Östman 1981).

A fourth dimension analysed is the illocutionary force of the utterances at the end of which the marker occurs. Although no difference was found from this perspective between the two variants – for both are used mostly with assertive speech acts – evaluative speech acts were more frequent in correlation to female speakers, while expressive acts were produced more often by male speakers. Evaluative speech acts contain subjective epistemic expressions, which are believed to be associated with a function of asserting individual identity, while expressive speech acts contain swear words, i.e., strongly subjective expressions which are nonetheless believed to hinge on a more inclusive construction of group

identity (Wray, Perkins 2010; Lepadat 2021). While both cases imply the  $(n)zdm/b$  marker intersecting with a certain subjective stance, the solicitation of the hearer's alignment of views is carried out differently: when co-occurring with epistemic expressions, the marker calls upon the hearer to acknowledge the (possibly divergent) view of the speaker, whereas in the case of swear words, the marker is called upon to acknowledge (presumably) shared values (Lepadat 2021).

Lastly, the possible existence of a gendered asymmetry between the variants was excluded based on the data analysed for the study. Nonetheless, male speakers were found to make a more extensive use of the pronoun-less variants, while female speakers used almost exclusively the pronoun-explicit ones. Although the finding is only tentative – given the insufficient amount of the elliptical variants in the data set – further large-scale studies might be able to evidence a more confident use on the part of male speakers of the variants with a higher degree of grammaticalization, possibly hinging on a more intersubjective scope of the marker (Yap, Yang, Wong 2014, 201).

From the above results, it can be seen that in spite of the semantic bleaching characterizing the semantic reanalysis of  $(ni) zhidao ma/ba$  (Tao 2003), some significant differences may be found between the two variants – probably due to the influence of the particles' original pragmatic meanings – and resulting in a tendential division of labour inside the speech turn. Here the notion of persistence of meaning appears relevant, according to which “when a form undergoes grammaticalization [...] some traces of its original lexical meanings tend to adhere to it, and details of its lexical history may be reflected in constraints on its grammatical distribution” (Hopper 1991, 22). Although Hopper explicitly refers to lexical meanings being retained during a process of grammaticalisation, it is not difficult to imagine that also grammatical or pragmatic meanings – as in the case of SFPs – might be subject to the same phenomenon when part of wider grammaticalized chunks.

Based on all the above considerations, the answer to the first research question can be formulated in terms of a non-perfect overlapping between the two markers, which suggest that the two cannot be used interchangeably, at least not in all contexts. On the contrary, a distribution of tasks appears to be at play between  $(n)zdb$  and  $(n)zdm$ , which could be roughly matched onto the declarative and interrogative uses identified by Östman (1981) for English *you know*.

## 7. Conclusions

To conclude, the analysis of  $(n)zdm/b$  carried out in this paper evidenced that a number of features seem to set apart the two variants. It has been shown – on the one hand – that  $(n)zdb$  has a tendency to occur mainly in the middle of a speech turn to maintain the hearer's attention; as a consequence, the hearer sometimes produces short backchannelling contributions to support and acknowledge the speaker's “right” to continue talking; a stronger intersubjective value is attributed to this variant, hence its scarce co-occurrence with other (inter)subjective stance markers such as SFPs. On the other hand, data have shown that

(n)zdm has a stronger inclination to appear in turn-final position to solicit the hearer's contribution on a certain matter and to signal turn yielding; this coincides with the hearer taking over the turn as the next speaker and the production of informative propositional contributions such as clarification requests or comments; the variant is also more likely to intersect with other marker of (inter)subjectivity such as SFPs, given its relatively lower degree of intersubjectivity when used in turn-final position. Gender and illocution have not proved to be significant in explaining the distribution of the two variants, despite having shown that slight differences might exist in the functions performed by (n)zdm/b in female and male speakers' talk, depending on the illocutionary force of the utterance the marker occurs with. Lastly, more compact, i.e., more grammaticalized, forms of the marker have been used almost exclusively by the male speakers of the dataset, but the amount of total occurrences is too low to draw reliable conclusions. All in all, it can be concluded that the two variants show some significant differences in the way they are used, which might be indicative of part of the original meaning of the particles *ba* and *ma* still being retained, as well as the two formulaic chunks presenting different degrees of compositionality and grammaticalization. Future studies and further reanalysis of the marker might bring about different outcomes, as could do studies involving face-to-face rather than telephonic conversations. At the current stage of grammaticalization, however, (n)zdm and (n)zdb are not freely interchangeable but are preferably used in different positions within the turn to perform (slightly) distinct functions.

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