

## INTRODUCTION

CHIARA ROMAGNOLI, CHIARA PICCININI

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI ROMA TRE, UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

chiara.romagnoli@uniroma3.it, chiara.piccinini@unicatt.it

This special section stems from the panel “Chinese Discourse Markers” presented within the 18<sup>th</sup> biennial conference of the Italian Association of Chinese Studies. Inspired by the lively discussion emerged on that occasion and by the interest aroused by the topic, the panel participants felt the need to improve their research papers and collect them in a publication presenting the proposal to the editors of *L'Analisi Linguistica e Letteraria*, who kindly accepted it.

Despite their wide usage in spoken language, discourse markers (DMs) have been among the most neglected research topics in linguistics till recent times. We not only find different definitions and classifications in the literature but there is hardly consistency and agreement even on the term to be used to label these items. If this holds true for the most commonly taught languages, it is even more valid for the case of Mandarin Chinese, whose DMs have been investigated only since the late '80s within Western academia and starting from the 21<sup>st</sup> century by mainland China scholars. Most importantly, in the pedagogical material we rarely find traces of the research results on Chinese DMs carried out during the last two decades: in the abundant number of textbooks and materials, published by both Chinese and Western editors, these lexical items still lack label and explanation, giving the readers the idea of an optional and casual usage and preventing them to grasp the important role played by DMs especially in spoken language.

The articles included in the present section aim at filling this gap by building a bridge between theoretical findings and applied research studies. As mentioned above, there is little agreement as to what terminology has to be used to classify DMs. This heterogeneity is in part reflected in the terminology employed to refer to the specific linguistic items the authors take into consideration throughout their contributions collected in this special section. The first author, Tao, addresses the terminological inconsistency on DMs, gives an overview of the main terms employed to classify them and affirms that this lack of agreement could be explained by the different definitions provided for these items in the literature, which is connected with the polysemous and multifunctional feature of DMs themselves. As far as the other authors are concerned, in three contributions (Conti, Carella; Casentini; Piccinini) the term “discourse marker” is employed, while Lepadat prefers “pragmatic marker” to address the utterance-final periphrastic expression (*nǐ*) *zhīdào ma/ba* (你) 知道吗/吧 (you know); finally, Romagnoli uses “connectives” to refer to those specific DMs taken into account in her study.

As for the contents of the single contributions, in the first one Tao gives an overview of the research carried out on DMs, describing the major trends and mentioning potential directions of future investigations. The author suggests applying Fisher (2006)'s taxonomy to investigate

Chinese DMs, which are discussed both from the perspective of L1 Chinese and from that of L2 Chinese. Interestingly enough, Tao distinguishes the north American tradition of studies, the one he belongs to and which has played a pioneering role in this area of research, from the studies carried out within China. As for the latter, a weak point mentioned by the author is data selection criteria and methods, which need to be improved in future research. As for L2 Chinese, since mastery of DMs is notoriously challenging, there is an abundance of topics to be addressed and research has accordingly been focused on different aspects, mainly belonging to two major fields, i.e. acquisition and teaching, both included in the works revised by the author. The second part of Tao's contribution is instead focused on the future agenda and is therefore of the utmost importance for those who intend to investigate this field. In this regard, Tao suggests i) to pay more attention to the grammatical features displayed by different genres; ii) to build multimodal spoken language corpora in both L1 and L2 in order to elicit the resources employed by different speakers; iii) to include prosodic and gesture-based account in the description of DMs, since they should be integral part of the analysis.

Conti and Carella's contribution is focused on the comparative analysis of two DMs, the Chinese *ránhòu* 然后 and the Italian *poi* (then), chosen for the similarity of lexical meaning and discourse functions. The features displayed by these DMs are partly shared by other DMs in both languages and have been described by the authors in the literature review section. This part is followed by the original contribution of the scholars, who extracted and analysed more than 350 occurrences from oral corpora of natural conversations in the two languages of interest. The source of the data, the comparative approach and the methodology employed, which combines corpus linguistics and statistics, make this study, as the others collected in this volume, a valuable attempt to provide a detailed account of two very frequent DMs. Interestingly enough, the data show that the most frequent function of both *poi* and *ránhòu* is their usage as DM, rather than the traditional, temporal one. In particular, *ránhòu* is mainly used as a turn managing device and to mark shift, continuity, resumption, and development of sentential topics. *Poi*, on the other hand, is often used as a device for stance management, and often cooccurs with other similar elements.

In addition to *ránhòu*, *nà* 那, which can be rendered as "then" or "so", is another frequently used DM in spoken Chinese and is the item addressed in Casentini's paper. Focused on the syntactic level of description and based on the generative linguistics theoretical framework, this corpus-based analysis is aimed at showing the co-occurrences of certain DMs with specific sentence final particles within the area deemed "to host" the pragmatic and interactional features of the sentence. As in Conti and Carella's study, data for this research have been collected from a corpus of natural conversation and statistical tests have also been conducted. Moreover, the prosodic level has also been analyzed. The initial hypothesis, i.e. the existence of specific restrictions for the co-occurrences of DMs and sentence final particle has been confirmed, and in particular the strong correlation between *na* and particles such as *a* 啊 and *ne* 呢 has been verified.

Lepadat's contribution also takes into account the co-occurrence of DMs and sentence final particles, which are extremely frequent in spoken Chinese. As the studies described above, this one too is based on a corpus of spoken data but the conversations have been selected in

order to be balanced in terms of speaker-hearer gender. In particular, the scholar explores the usage of the verbal phrase (*ni*) *zhidao* (you know) followed by either *ma* or *ba*, taking into account five pragmatic variables, i.e. position in the turn, reaction triggered, rapport management, illocutionary force and speaker's gender. Differently from the first three variables, according to this corpus of data illocution and gender do not significantly affect the distribution of the two variants, although differences among the two forms have been found and explained. Some differences between the two, as the position within the turn, are directly connected with the original functions and meanings of *ma* and *ba*, which are usually only given a syntactical description in the literature without exploring the socio-pragmatic level.

Apart from Tao's introductory contribution, the other three studies described so far share the data source since they have all been drawn from native speakers' telephone conversations. With the last two contributions we enter the realm of L2 Chinese, where DMs are not only rarely explained, but are also far less frequently used by both teachers and learners. Piccinini investigates the polysemous particle *ne* by observing the interactions between native Chinese teachers and Italian learners. To better account for the complexity of this item the author provides a detailed literature review, which is also taken into account in order to answer one of the research questions. The scholar adopts the Conversation Analysis method to handle her data which, as expected, confirm the lack of this particle in learners' oral productions. Five main functions have been distinguished in the usage of *ne* by instructors: as a mitigatory device, as a marker signaling a response to expectation, as topic marker and topic shift, as topic introduction and as signal of transition of interactional sequences. The findings mainly confirm other studies' research results but also highlight specific features related to the instructional context taken into account.

The last contribution by Romagnoli is only based on learners' written data and is focused on one particular category of DMs, the connective devices. Since the Chinese items fulfilling the linking function are mainly conjunctions and adverbs, the study provides an overview of the classifications of these items proposed by Chinese scholars, presents different taxonomies of connectives available in the literature and adopts that elaborated by Ferrari (2005). To observe the usage of connectives by L2 learners, a corpus of texts belonging to different types and collected in different times has been created and analysed using the methods of both corpus linguistics and statistics. The observation of the linguistic data has been carried out according to the connective type, the text type and the usage across time. Whereas some findings of this study, such as the extensive use of addition and causal markers, confirm previous research results, other do not, such as the lack of correlation between text type and usage of connectives and no improvement being found from the beginning till the end of the term, suggesting the need to enhance learners' mastery of Chinese connectives.

The complexity and variety of Chinese DMs make these items very challenging to describe and to acquire, as confirmed by the different accounts available in the literature. Nevertheless, and aware of the fact that still much has to be done, the studies presented in this issue demonstrate how the application of corpus linguistics methods, the usage of authentic data and their statistical quantification can provide a valuable contribution to make the picture more complete and, consequently, to offer students a more realistic view of the language they learn.