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## Speech in interaction: Mandarin particle *le* as a marker of intersubjectivity\*

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**Abstract.** Adopting a discourse-analysis approach, we argue in line with van den Berg and Wu (2006) in showing that the particle *le* in Mandarin serves as a common ground coordination device, exhibiting a high degree of intersubjectivity, which is absent in the use of verbal *-le*. However, in view of the limit imposed by the data type of previous research, we observe the turn-taking behavior in natural, spontaneous, spoken data to further consolidate van den Berg and Wu's proposal. We argue that use of natural, spontaneous spoken data is essential in furthering our understanding of linguistic forms and their associated functions. Through this study, we hope we will be able to show and confirm the importance of data type in both the theoretical and pedagogical aspects of linguistic research.

**Keywords:** Mandarin *le*, discourse particle, interaction, natural spoken corpus, intersubjectivity

### 1. Introduction

The Chinese 了/LE<sup>1</sup> is a highly frequent particle in daily conversation and has created great difficulties for both learners and researchers of Mandarin Chinese. Given its pervasive and elusive nature, the particle has attracted considerable attention and has been extensively studied (Andreasen 1981; Van den Berg 1989; Van den Berg and Wu 2006; Chang 1986; Chao 1968; Huang 1988; Huang and Davis 1989; Li and Thompson 1981; Li et al. 1982; Rohsenow 1977, 1978; Spanos 1979; Thompson 1968; Yang 2003).

The particle has been studied by various scholars with different research foci. Chao (1968) argues that *-le*, the verbal aspect and *le*, the discourse particle, should be treated separately, given their different distributions, and lists one function for *-le* and seven functions for *le*. Thompson (1968) claims that the particle *le* codes an event boundary in general, while the function of *-le* is to understand an event as one in a series of actions. Rohsenow's (1977, 1978) syntactic analysis claims that there is only one morpheme LE in Mandarin and proposes only one atomic meaning of 'come about' to account for both *-le* and the particle *le*. Spanos' (1979) pragmatic study argues that use of *le* involves a change regarding the realization of a process, action or state of affairs related to the speaker's understanding toward a particular predication. Li and Thompson (1981) and Li et al. (1982) look at the

particle *le* from a functional perspective and argue for the importance of context in understanding the various uses of *le* as coding “current relevance” (Li and Thompson 1981, 240). Andreassen (1981) emphasizes the semantic aspect of *le* and considers *-le* to mark the Perfective aspect and *le* to be a Perfect aspect marker. Chang (1986) adopts a discourse analysis approach to *le* in expository and narrative discourse and proposes the tendency of the particle *le* to appear toward the end of a discourse block. Van den Berg’s (1989) functional analysis regards *le* as related to the notion *actualiteitswaarde* ‘actuality value’ and *-le* as a perfectivity marker. Huang (1988) and Huang and Davis (1989) identify *le* as an aspect marker, signaling the concept of boundary or interruption. They recognize that the function of *le* extends beyond the sentential level and the particle is employed at the level of speech situation. Shi’s (1990) unified account proposes that *le* is a strategy indicating relative anteriority of Mandarin Chinese, and that the particle may take different functions under different circumstances. Chang (2001) argues in line with Huang (1988) and points out that *le* is a form of focus marking and that *-le* is a focus marker of action, while the particle *le* draws attention to state. Yang (2003) argues that there is only one LE regardless of its distribution, the basic function of which is to code perfectivity, and also focuses on how the various uses of LE are related to the concept of perfectivity. The most recent and comprehensive study by Van den Berg and Wu (2006) analyzes contextualized data and proposes *le* to be understood as a device to update the common ground (Clark 1996) in everyday exchange.

The above studies attack the issue of LE from various perspectives and each has their respective contributions, but it is worth noting that many of them share the view that the understanding of this particle should be based on observation at the discourse level. This generalization, however, reflects a common methodological limitation shared by previous research. As has been mentioned, LE is a highly frequent particle used in daily interactions, but none of the above studies employ natural conversation as its data. The most methodologically recent and comprehensive, Van den Berg and Wu (2006), employ three sources of data: action-picture stories translated from English to Chinese, rewritings in Chinese of English children’s stories, and a published Chinese conversational text, *Chinese 600*. The data come in a variety of forms, but still do not contain the natural spoken genre. Given the highly interactional nature of LE recognized by the previous research, lack of natural spoken data thus constitutes a methodological gap. In view of this gap, we propose to look at this particle in a spontaneous spoken corpus and to see whether such a new approach may shed additional light on how the particle is actually used by interlocutors.

## 2. Methodology

With the above methodological concern in mind, we list below our assumptions and research issues to pursue. We basically agree with Van den Berg and Wu (2006) in regarding the particle *le* as a common ground coordination device, however, with two specific research questions proposed: First, what does spontaneous face-to-face conversation – a genre that differs from the data used in previous research – tell us about the patterning of *-le* and *le* in Mandarin? Can this patterning lead to a further understanding of how interlocutors collaborate to realign their mental model with use of *le*?

In order to generalize the authentic usage patterns of LE from natural spoken data, we randomly choose 12 excerpts of the face-to-face conversation from the Spoken Corpus of Mandarin Chinese of NTU Cognitive Pragmatics Lab (NTU CoPra), amounting to roughly 90 minutes, or 4,287 intonation units (hereafter IUs) in length. We identified 30 tokens of verbal *-le* and 109 tokens of particle *le*.<sup>2</sup> The spoken data are coded according to the transcription convention proposed by Du Bois et. al (1993), which recognizes intonation units and turns as basic units of communication. With spoken language coded as such, behaviors of interlocutors such as turn-taking, repetition, pause, laughter, back-channeling, etc. all become readily observable. As grammars code best what speakers do (Du Bois 1985, 363), we believe that an investigation of what speakers do with LE in interaction may help uncover the meaning and function of the grammatical particle.

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### 3. Patterns of contextualized use of *Le* in natural spoken corpus

Following the methodology mentioned above, we observe the behavior of *LE* in natural face-to-face conversation of Mandarin with respect to the interplay of *LE* and the turn-taking behavior of interlocutors. Specific attention is paid to how an interlocutor reacts upon hearing an IU with *LE*. We observe that both *-le* and *le* can occur in an IU followed by a change in floor, as is shown in (1) and (2):

- (1) 1 A: [它的 卡] 就是 一個 太陽 嘛.\  
 ta<sup>1</sup>de<sup>5</sup> ka<sup>3</sup> jiu<sup>4</sup>shi<sup>4</sup> yi<sup>1</sup>ge<sup>5</sup> tai<sup>4</sup>yang<sup>2</sup> ma<sup>5</sup>  
 its card JIUSHI a-CL sun PRT
- 2 .. 對不對.\  
 dui<sup>4</sup>-bu<sup>2</sup>-dui<sup>4</sup>  
 right-not-right
- 3 ... 形--  
 xíng
- 4 .. 上面 有 一個, \_  
 shang<sup>4</sup>mian<sup>4</sup> you<sup>3</sup> yi<sup>1</sup>ge<sup>5</sup>  
 on have one-CL
- 5 ... 金色的 畫了 一個 太陽.\  
 jin<sup>1</sup>se<sup>4</sup>-de<sup>5</sup> hua<sup>4</sup>le<sup>5</sup> yi<sup>1</sup>ge<sup>5</sup> tai<sup>4</sup>yang<sup>2</sup>  
 golden draw-LE one-CL sun

“There’s a sun on its card, right? A golden sun drawn on it.”

- 6 B: ... 我 不太 記得 了.\  
 wo<sup>3</sup> bu<sup>2</sup>-tai<sup>4</sup> ji<sup>4</sup>de<sup>2</sup> le<sup>5</sup>  
 I not-too remember LE

“I don’t quite remember.” (IU 95-100, Card)

- (2) 1 J: .. <@玉瑋 被-@>@@  
 yu<sup>4</sup>wei<sup>3</sup> bei<sup>4</sup>  
 Yuwei BEI
- 2 ... <@他 怎麼 了@>.\  
 ta<sup>1</sup> ze<sup>3</sup>me<sup>5</sup> le<sup>5</sup>  
 he what LE

“What has happened to Yuwei?”

3 沒有

S: .. 啊\  
 mei<sup>2</sup>yo  
 u<sup>3</sup>-a<sup>5</sup>  
 noth-  
 ing-  
 PRT

4 他 說 他 以 後 都 要 買 L 還 什 麼  
 . V 是 的\  
 .

ta shu ta yi<sup>3</sup>hou do ya m L hai<sup>2</sup> she<sup>2</sup>m  
 1 o<sup>1</sup> 1 4 u<sup>1</sup> o<sup>4</sup> ai<sup>3</sup> V shi<sup>4</sup> e<sup>5</sup>de<sup>5</sup>  
 h say h after all w bu L or what-  
 e e an y V DE  
 t

“Nothing. He said that he would buy LV (Louis Vuitton) or the like after that.” (IU 264-267, Baseball)

Although both *-le* and *le* can occur in an IU before a change of turn, as (1) and (2) show, we notice an interesting divergence between *-le* and *le* with regard to their frequency of presence in an IU followed by floor change. Their respective patternings are summarized in Table 1:

**Table 1: The distribution of *-le* and *le* with respect to floor change<sup>3</sup>**

	Verbal <i>-le</i>	Particle <i>le</i>
Tokens found in an IU followed by floor change	10	78
Total tokens in the corpus	30	109
Percentage	33.33%	71.56%

As is indicated in Table 1, the particle *le* is more frequently found to end a turn, with 78 such tokens found out of the total of 109 tokens in the entire corpus, while *-le* is less seen to occur in a turn-final IU, with only 10 tokens found out of a total of 30. The percentage of particle *le* to occur in an end-of-turn IU is accordingly 71.56%, over twice as much as the 33.33% of *-le*.

But what does their difference in patterning tell us about LE in interaction? Why is the particle *le* much more frequent than *-le* at Transition Relevant Places (Sacks et. al 1974)?

In response to the above question raised by the distributional patterns of LE, a hypothesis can be drawn based on the patterning and Van den Berg and Wu's (2006) proposal: Since according to Van den Berg and Wu, the particle *le* serves as a device of the speaker to update the common ground to adjust the hearer's mental model, can the new turn that follows use of *le* be viewed as a subtle signal from the hearer as a recognition of the user's intent? If so, how is the recognition represented?

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#### 4. Hearer's turns that follow *le* and what they mean

In order to validate the above hypothesis and give a detailed description of the hearer's recognition of common ground update, we focus here on the hearer's response to utterances with the particle *le* to see whether the hearer shows any sign of recognition of the common ground renewal, and specifically in what ways the hearer reacts to the change in the mental model.

A scrutiny into the turns that follow an utterance with the particle *le* reveals a striking tendency. It is noteworthy that 37 turns out of the total of 78 turns, which amounts to 47.4% of end-of-turn *le*, are followed by prototypical Reactive Tokens (hereafter RTs). We follow Clancy et. al (1996, 356) and define prototypical RTs as short utterances produced by an interlocutor that are not intended to disrupt the primary speaker's turn and do not itself claim the speakership. Three types of prototypical RTs are found to form the non-primary turns that follow turn-final *les*: Back-channels (henceforth BCs), Reactive Expressions (REs) and Repetitions.<sup>4</sup> Also note that Clancy et. al's taxonomy contains another category of less prototypical RTs, termed Resumptive Openers (ROs), which accounts for 38 tokens out of the total of 78 and is to be discussed later in this section.

##### 4.1 Back-channels as hearer's response

In our natural, spoken data, the most frequent prototypical RTs found after turn-final *les* are BCs. BCs refer to a 'continuer' (Schegloff 1982), a non-lexical voice used as a token of understanding or as a display of interest (Clancy et al 1996, 359). According to this definition, we identify 26 occurrences of *le* followed by BCs, which accounts for 33.33% of turn-final *les* in our data. Typical BCs include laughter, coded as @ in our data, *oh*, *hm*, etc. Instances (3) and (4) exemplify BCs after turn-final *les*.

- (3) 1 A: 她媽--  
 ta<sup>1</sup>ma<sup>1</sup>  
 her mother
- 2 ... 就是 跟 她妹 就 指著 冰箱、\  
 jiu<sup>4</sup>shi<sup>4</sup> gen<sup>1</sup> ta<sup>1</sup>mei<sup>4</sup> jiu<sup>4</sup> zhi<sup>3</sup>zhe<sup>5</sup> bing<sup>1</sup>xiang<sup>1</sup>  
 JIUSHI with her sister JIU point-ASP fridge
- 3 .. 然後 她們 已經 把 電話 折成  
 ran<sup>2</sup>hou<sup>4</sup> ta<sup>1</sup>men<sup>5</sup> yi<sup>3</sup>jing<sup>1</sup> ba<sup>3</sup> dian<sup>4</sup>hua<sup>4</sup> zhe<sup>2</sup>cheng<sup>2</sup>  
 then they already BA phone snap-ASP  
 <DIM 兩半 [丟到 冰]箱<@ 裡面 去 了  
 @>DIM>\  
 liang<sup>3</sup>ban<sup>4</sup> diu<sup>1</sup>dao<sup>4</sup> bing<sup>1</sup>xiang<sup>1</sup> li<sup>3</sup>mian<sup>4</sup> qu<sup>4</sup> le<sup>5</sup>  
 half throw fridge in go LE
- “Her mother and sister pointed at the fridge, and snapped the phone in half and threw it into the fridge.”
- 4 B: [@@]
- 5 A: ... 然後 她弟 說 她 很 傷心、\  
 ran<sup>2</sup>hou<sup>4</sup> ta<sup>1</sup>di<sup>4</sup> shuo<sup>1</sup> ta<sup>1</sup> hen<sup>5</sup> shang<sup>1</sup>xin、\  
 then her brother say she very hurt

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ran<sup>2</sup>hou<sup>4</sup> ta<sup>1</sup>di<sup>4</sup> shuo<sup>1</sup> ta<sup>1</sup> hen<sup>3</sup> shang<sup>1</sup>xin<sup>1</sup>  
 then her brother say she very sad

“Then her brother said that she was very sad.” (IU 5-9, Cell phone)

- (4) 1 C : .. ..<F 可是 我 不喜歡 第八節 F>, \_  
 ke<sup>3</sup>shi<sup>4</sup> wo<sup>3</sup> bu<sup>4</sup>xi<sup>3</sup>huan<sup>1</sup> di<sup>4</sup>ba<sup>1</sup>jie<sup>2</sup>  
 but I not-like ORD-eight-class
- 2 .. 因為 到 六點 實在 太=晚 了.\  
 yin<sup>1</sup>wei<sup>4</sup> dao<sup>4</sup> liu<sup>4</sup>dian<sup>3</sup> shi<sup>2</sup>zai<sup>4</sup> tai<sup>4</sup>-wan<sup>3</sup> le<sup>5</sup>  
 because to 6pm really too-late LE
- “But I really don’t like the eighth class, because it is till 6pm and is really too late.”
- 3 L: .. 喔 = . \_  
 oh  
 PRT (BC)
- 4 N : 很妙 ㄟ.\_  
 hen<sup>3</sup>miao<sup>4</sup> ei  
 very interesting PRT
- “It is very interesting.”
- 5 C : .. 因為 CD 會 上課.\  
 yin<sup>1</sup>wei<sup>4</sup> CD hui<sup>4</sup> shang<sup>4</sup>ke<sup>4</sup>  
 because CD will have class
- 6 .. 有人 會 用 中午 時間 [上課].\  
 you<sup>3</sup>ren<sup>2</sup> hui<sup>4</sup> yong<sup>4</sup> zhong<sup>1</sup>wu<sup>3</sup> shi<sup>4</sup>jian<sup>1</sup> shang<sup>4</sup>ke<sup>4</sup>  
 people will use noon time have class
- “Because there might be classes during C and D. People may have classes at noon.” (IU 24-29, 上課時間)

As (3) and (4) shows, BCs are used by a non-primary speaker to express involvement in conversation, but do not themselves constitute a claim of speakership. Another category of prototypical RTs to be introduced below, Reactive Expressions, are a similar interactional strategy.

#### 4.2 Reactive expressions as hearer’s response

Another frequent type of prototypical RTs identified in our natural spoken corpus is RE. REs are lexical, non-floor-taking expressions uttered by a non-primary speaker (Clancy et. al 1996, 359). We identify 9 turns of RE

after turn-final *les*, which makes 11.54% of the total. In our corpus, speakers typically use *dui* or *dui-ah* to express involvement. See (5) and (6) below for illustration.

- (5) 1 Z: 因為 韌權 他 有 習慣 就是 先  
 yin<sup>1</sup>wei<sup>4</sup> zhan<sup>3</sup>quan<sup>2</sup> ta<sup>1</sup> you<sup>3</sup> xi<sup>2</sup>guan<sup>4</sup> jiu<sup>4</sup>shi<sup>4</sup> xian<sup>1</sup>  
 because Zhanquan he have habit JIUSHI first  
 把 球 穩下來。  
 ba<sup>3</sup> qiu<sup>2</sup> wen<sup>3</sup>xia<sup>4</sup>lai<sup>2</sup>  
 BA ball stable-ASP  
 2 ... 可是 穩下來 之後 人家 早就 回防 了。  
 ke<sup>3</sup>shi<sup>4</sup> wen<sup>3</sup>xia<sup>4</sup>lai<sup>2</sup> zhi<sup>1</sup>hou<sup>4</sup> ren<sup>2</sup>jia<sup>1</sup> zao<sup>3</sup>jiu<sup>4</sup> hui<sup>2</sup>fang<sup>2</sup> le<sup>5</sup>  
 but stable-ASP after they early-JIU back LE

“Because Zhanquan has a habit of getting firm control of the ball first, but after that the other team would have come back.”

3 W: 對 ah.

...

dui<sup>4</sup>-ah

right

4 Z: (0) 然後,  
 ran<sup>2</sup>hou<sup>4</sup>  
 then

5 ... (1.2) 而且 其實 他 他 有一球.. 他 運球  
 er<sup>2</sup>qie<sup>3</sup> qi<sup>2</sup>shi<sup>2</sup> ta<sup>1</sup> ta<sup>1</sup> you<sup>3</sup>yi<sup>1</sup>qiu<sup>2</sup> ta<sup>1</sup> yun<sup>4</sup>qiu<sup>2</sup>  
 and actually he he once he dribble  
 快攻,  
 kuai<sup>4</sup>gong<sup>1</sup>  
 fast break

6 ... (0.8) 前面 已經 有 兩個人 去 堵 他 了。  
 qian<sup>2</sup>mian<sup>4</sup> yi<sup>3</sup>jing<sup>1</sup> you<sup>3</sup> liang<sup>3</sup>ge<sup>5</sup>ren<sup>2</sup> qu<sup>4</sup> du<sup>3</sup> ta<sup>1</sup> le<sup>5</sup>  
 front already have two-CL-man go stop he LE

“And actually once he dribbled for a fast break, but there were already two people in front of him.” (IU 33-38, Basketball Game)

- (6) 1 B: @@@@  
 2 .. 那 太 麻煩 了.\  
       na<sup>4</sup> tai<sup>4</sup> ma<sup>2</sup>fan<sup>2</sup> le<sup>5</sup>  
       that too trouble LE  
 “That is too much trouble.”  
 3 A: 對 ah\_  
       dui<sup>4</sup>-ah  
       right  
 4 .. [我 就 想說 怎麼 這麼 奇怪]  
       wo<sup>3</sup> jiu<sup>4</sup> xiang<sup>3</sup>shuo<sup>1</sup> ze<sup>3</sup>me<sup>5</sup> zhe<sup>4</sup>me<sup>5</sup> qi<sup>2</sup>guai<sup>4</sup>  
       I JIU think-COMP why this strange  
 “Yeah. I was wondering why this was so strange.”  
 5 B: [那 太 麻煩 了 啦]  
       na<sup>4</sup> tai<sup>4</sup> ma<sup>2</sup>fan<sup>2</sup> le<sup>5</sup> la<sup>5</sup>  
       that too trouble LE PRT  
 6 .. 就 按 綠色 那個 就 <E ok E>\  
       jiu<sup>4</sup> an<sup>4</sup> lü<sup>4</sup>se<sup>4</sup> na<sup>4</sup>ge<sup>4</sup> jiu<sup>4</sup> ok  
       JIU press green that-CL JIU Okay

“That was too much trouble. Just press the green one then it will be ok.” (IU 74-79, 飯前閒聊)

As (5) and (6) show, the non-primary speaker uses *dui-ah* to express involvement in conversation, but does not really claim the floor and lets the primary speaker go on with what he has to say.

BCs and REs are the most typical RTs following end-of-turn *les* identified in our corpus, which are non-floor-taking strategies and do not constitute primary turns. Below we will introduce Resumptive Openers, which are still categorized as a type of RT by Clancy et. al (1996), but are less prototypical in the sense that they are actually a part of a primary turn.

#### 4.3 Resumptive openers as hearer’s response

ROs are another major type of response following turn-final *les* other than the prototypical RTs mentioned above. According to Clancy et. al (1996, 362-4), a turn-initial element would be considered a prototypical RT if not followed by a full turn. The difference between ROs and the other prototypical RTs is that ROs are used to acknowledge the prior speakership and then to start a new turn.<sup>5</sup> In our corpus, we identify 38 occurrences of ROs following turn-final *les*, which amounts to 48.72% of the total, with *dui/dui-ah* and laughter as the most frequent ones. Instances (7) and (8) illustrate such use of ROs.

- (7) 1 E: [你]們 也是 用 中文 就 對 了\  
       ni<sup>3</sup>men<sup>5</sup> ye<sup>4</sup>shi<sup>4</sup> yong<sup>4</sup> zhong<sup>1</sup>wen<sup>2</sup> jiu<sup>4</sup> dui<sup>4</sup> le<sup>5</sup>

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you also use Chinese JIU right LE

“You also use Chinese, right?”

2 J: (0) 對\  
dui<sup>4</sup>  
right

3 .. 語意學 他們 是 用 中文\  
yu<sup>3</sup>yi<sup>4</sup>xue<sup>2</sup> ta<sup>1</sup>men<sup>5</sup> shi<sup>4</sup> yong<sup>4</sup> zhong<sup>1</sup>wen<sup>2</sup>  
semantics they SHI use Chinese

“Yeah. They teach Semantics in Chinese.”

4 E: mhm

5 J: (0) 然後 他們--  
ran<sup>2</sup>hou<sup>4</sup> ta<sup>1</sup>men<sup>5</sup>  
then they

6 ... 我 現在 還有 旁聽\  
wo<sup>3</sup> xian<sup>4</sup>zai<sup>4</sup> hai<sup>2</sup>you<sup>3</sup> pang<sup>2</sup>ting<sup>1</sup>  
I now still audit

7 .. 語意學.. 和\  
yu<sup>3</sup>yi<sup>4</sup>xue<sup>2</sup> han<sup>4</sup>  
semantics and

8 .. 社會語言學\  
she<sup>4</sup>hui<sup>4</sup>yu<sup>3</sup>yan<sup>2</sup>xue<sup>2</sup>  
sociolinguistics

“And they... I’m now still auditing Semantics and Sociolinguistics.” (IU 36-43, Taida)

(8) 1 S:.. 人家 現在 都... 比較 愛 他們,\  
ren<sup>2</sup>:jia<sup>1</sup> xian<sup>4</sup>zai<sup>4</sup> dou<sup>1</sup> bi<sup>3</sup>:jiao<sup>4</sup> ai<sup>4</sup> ta<sup>1</sup>men<sup>5</sup>  
other now all more love them

2 .. 不愛 [我們 台灣 了]\  
bu<sup>4</sup>:ai<sup>4</sup> wo<sup>3</sup>men<sup>5</sup> tai<sup>2</sup>wan<sup>1</sup> le<sup>5</sup>  
not-love we Taiwan LE

“Others now love them more and do not love us Taiwan.”

3 J: [@@@@@]

4 .. e./

5 ..	可是	你	知道	GRE	就是	因為
	ke <sup>3</sup> shi <sup>4</sup>	ni <sup>3</sup>	zhi <sup>1</sup> dao <sup>4</sup>	GRE	jiu <sup>4</sup> shi <sup>4</sup>	yin <sup>1</sup> wei <sup>1</sup>
	but	you	know	GRE	JIUSHI	because
	大陸人	搞	的	嗎,\		
	da <sup>4</sup> lu <sup>4</sup> ren <sup>2</sup>	gao <sup>3</sup>	de <sup>5</sup>	ma <sup>5</sup>		
	Chinese people	do	DE	PRT		

“Hey, but do you know what the Chinese people do to the GRE (Graduate Record Examinations)?”  
(IU 111-115, Mainland)

As (7) and (8) show, *dui* and laughter are used to acknowledge the prior turn and as a floor-taking strategy to initiate new speakership. These elements do formally overlap with BCs or REs in the sense that if not followed by a full speakership, these elements would be considered to be a BC or an RE.

#### 4.4 What the RTs tell us about the function of *le* in interaction

After a presentation of our main findings, we can now summarize the results in Table 2.

**Table 2: Turn Types Following Turn-final *Le***

	Type	Token	Percentage
Non-Primary Turns	Back-Channels	26	33.33%
	Reactive Expressions	9	11.54%
	Repetitions	2	2.56%
Subtotal		37	47.44%
Primary Turns	Resumptive Openers before a full turn	38	48.72%
	Full turns only	3	3.85%
Subtotal		41	52.56%
Total		78	100%

Given the above summary, we now move on to discuss the meaning of these findings with respect to how they help bring to light the function of *le* in face-to-face conversation. What can our data reveal about what *le* does in natural spoken discourse?

We shall first point out that the patterns of *le* presented here go beyond Van den Berg and Wu's (2006) claim of *le* as the speaker's strategy to update common ground. We basically agree with their idea, but we will argue that *le* actually does more than what they propose in interaction. Specifically, the patterns presented above indicate that *le* should furthermore be understood as a marker of intersubjectivity (Traugott and Dasher 2003; Verhagen 2007), an indicator of speaker's attention to the hearer as a discourse participant.

Our claim of *le* as an intersubjectivity marker is supported by the following three facts: the high percentage of *le* followed by a new turn, the hearer's frequent use of prototypical RTs, and the hearer's frequent use of ROs. The first fact that supports our proposal is that 71.56% of *le* occurs at the end of an interlocutor's speakership, as shown in Table 1. This high percentage cannot be a coincidence, but should be viewed as the speaker's use of *le* as an invitation for the hearer's participation in conversation. In other words, the speaker uses *le* as an interpersonal strategy to involve the hearer into the conversation, and over 70% of hearers accept the invitation by at least taking

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Louis Wei-lun Lu and Lily I-wen Su (2009), Speech in Interaction: Mandarin Particle *Le* as a Marker of Intersubjectivity. *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht* 14:1, 155-168. Abrufbar unter [http://zif.spz.tu-darmstadt.de/jg-14-1/beitrag/Lu\\_Su.pdf](http://zif.spz.tu-darmstadt.de/jg-14-1/beitrag/Lu_Su.pdf).

a reactive turn. The second supporting fact is that even when the hearer does not really have anything to say, he still acknowledges the primary speaker's intention and gives a sign of participation, with 35 reactive turns of BCs or REs found in total. Thirdly, if the hearer accepts the current primary speaker's cue and wishes to contribute a content-full turn to the conversation, he tends to first give an RO at the beginning of his speakership as an acknowledgement of the prior speaker's invitation to participate as signaled by the use of *le*. Thirty-eight such full turns after *le* start with an RO. It is also obvious from Table 2 that after an end-of-turn *le*, a full turn without any acknowledgement of the prior speakership is rare.

Based on proposals made in previous research and the arguments presented above, we are now able to come to a generalization about the contribution of the particle in face-to-face conversation. In addition to the function of updating the shared background knowledge (Van den Berg and Wu 2006), *le* should be seen as a marker of intersubjectivity that appears at Transition Relevance Places, a point in the conversation where change of speakership is possible. The point of the speaker to employ *le* at such places is to show recognition of presence of the other interlocutor and meanwhile to cue him of possible points to come in. Hearing *le* at Transition Relevance Places, the hearer may choose either to remain silent and let the current speaker continue with what he has to say, or to give a turn, which most interlocutors in our corpus choose to do. The turns undertaken may be non-primary, realized in the form of BCs or REs, or may be primary, with a full turn preceded by an RO in most cases. These subsequent turns following *le* form evidence of the particle as an interpersonal strategy because in our data few interlocutors simply commence their turns after hearing *le* without acknowledging the prior speakership.

Having proved that the particle *le* serves as a marker of intersubjectivity, as we return to the patterns exhibited by both *le* and *-le*, we can now make sense of the difference in their patterns with regard to turn-taking. In comparison to the intersubjectivity exhibited by the particle *le*, verbal *-le* does not show such a degree of intersubjectivity in that interlocutors show a much lower tendency of contributing a turn after hearing a verbal *-le*.

## 5. Conclusions

We now reiterate the main contribution of the present study. With the use of natural, spoken data, we observe the relation between LE and turn-taking behavior between discourse participants. We first show that the particle *le* and verbal *-le* exhibit very different patterns of distribution regarding turn-taking, with turn-final *les* much more often followed by a new turn. We further investigate the types of turns contributed by the subsequent interlocutor and generalize that after hearing *le*, most participants first acknowledge the update of common ground in the prior turn whether the turns they contribute are primary or not. Their recognition of the prior speakership can thus be viewed as acceptance of the prior speaker's use of *le* as invitation for the other interlocutor to participate in the conversation. It is in this sense that we argue *le* to be considered a marker of intersubjectivity. With the above argument, we return to our previous finding and propose that the high degree of intersubjectivity shown by the particle *le* is absent in use of verbal *-le*, given the fact that the percentage of *le* followed by transition in speakership is more than twice as much as that of *-le*.

In addition to the above findings, our study has two interesting implications. Pedagogically, it is important to note that the use of *le* actually goes beyond the sentential level and is used as a marker of intersubjectivity. Therefore students should be encouraged to practice how to use the particle in face-to-face exchange, not only to understand when to attach the particle in a sentence but, more importantly, to familiarize themselves with how to properly react to this interpersonal strategy in authentic communication. Methodologically, although previous research approaches LE from different perspectives, the data types used by them constitute a methodological constraint on the patterns that they can generalize. The use of spontaneous spoken data allows us to attack the issue from an interactional perspective, taking into account the relation between LE and turn-taking behavior in face-to-face conversation.

Finally we would like to come back again to Du Bois' stock citation that grammars code best what speakers do, and would like to argue that a look into natural spoken data for what speakers do reveals an authentic facet of

grammar of language in use, which might be absent in invented or non-spontaneous data. We believe that the same can be said about language teaching. If a student is never exposed to spontaneous interaction, the grammatical patterns he or she acquires would always be grammars of the non-spontaneous genre. A thorough and real understanding of how particles work in interaction will have to be gained via drills in natural face-to-face conversation.

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### Appendix: List of Abbreviations in Instances

Abbreviation	Meaning
ASP	Aspect
BA	Disposal marker
BEI	Passive marker
CL	Classifier
COMP	Complementizer
ORD	Ordinal
PRT	Particle

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The convention of small capitals conveys the concept of a lemma. Accordingly the symbol LE refers to both the particle *le* and verbal *-le* in general.

<sup>2</sup> Sinclair (2004) proposes that in English, for not particularly polysemous words, it requires over 20 tokens, and 50 tokens for average words to sketch their patterns of behavior. Given the highly frequent occurrences of LE in natural conversation, our corpus contains 142 tokens of LE, which is enough for a sketch of its usage.

<sup>3</sup> In our corpus, there is only one IU that contains both *-le* and *le*, and this token is put in the category of Particle *le* in Table 1.

<sup>4</sup> Clancy et. al.'s (1996) taxonomy includes four types of prototypical RTs, among which the category of Collaborative Finishes is not found in our data. In addition, the two tokens of Repetition seem to us borderline cases of Repetition, given Clancy et. al.'s (1996, 361) criterion, which defines Repetition as an interlocutor's reaction of repeating a portion of speech by the primary speaker. The two tokens found in our corpus do exhibit typical repetition of a portion of the prior turn, but from the context it can hardly be defined which speaker is the "primary" one. In view of this blurry area and the limited frequency of Repetition, we choose not to present this category in detail.

<sup>5</sup> Clancy et al.'s (1996, 362) formal definition refers to ROs as a "non-lexical" vocalic item at the beginning of a turn, but their later (1996, 364) functional criterion describes ROs as signaling acknowledgement of the prior turn and commencement of a new turn. There exists a taxonomical gap in their study. "Lexical" items that commence a turn, namely those that would be labeled REs if not followed by a full turn, are not mentioned in their taxonomy. Seeing the gap, we choose to follow their functional criterion and more loosely define ROs to include lexical items as well.