Question sentence final particles in English-speaking Chinese heritage learners’ Chinese grammars

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Introduction

1. Linguistic phenomenon

Sentence-final particle (SFP) ma and ba are both yes-no sentence typing particles having [Q] and [-wh] features as shown in below:

- a. Ta shi Laoshi.
  - He COP teacher
  - He is a teacher.
- b. Ta shi Laoshi ma/ba?
  - English: 5-A inversion
  - Is he a teacher? / He is a teacher, right?
- c. *Ta shi shi la/ma/ba?
  - *Is he a teacher, but I am not 100% sure, so I am asking

However, SFP ba is different from SFP ma as it has a pragmatic [confirmation seeking] feature. SFP ma only has a genuine [information seeking] feature.

- a. Ta shi laoshi ma?
  - Is he a teacher?
  - I don’t know, so I am asking
- b. Ta shi laoshi ba?
  - He is a teacher, right?
  - I think he is a teacher, but I am not 100% sure, so I am asking

2. Feature Reassembly Hypothesis

Lardiere (2008, 2009) proposes that in L1 and L2:

- a. Features configured similarly —— no reassembly
- b. Features configured differently —— reassembly occurs

Research questions and methods

1. Research questions

- i) Is there any feature reassembling taking place in Chinese heritage learners’ acquisition process of SFP ma and ba?
- ii) Can learners successfully acquire features attached to SFP ma and ba?
- iii) Is there any developmental acquisition among learners?

2. Methods

- 1) Acceptability judgment (test [Q] and [-wh] features):
  - 4 tokens for each testing feature: 16 testing items for SFP ma (control + experimental); 16 testing items for SFP ba.
- 2) Discourse completion (test [information seeking] and [confirmation seeking] features):
  - 4 tokens for each testing feature: 4 testing items for SFP ma; 4 testing items for SFP ba.

Results (I)

1. Acceptability judgment:

Sig (p=0.011) between HL high-intermediate group and Chinese native group on [Q] feature on SFP ba (experimental items).

2. Discourse completion:

Sig (p=0.000) between native group and all HL groups; no sig (p=0.110) between HL groups

Results (II)

3. Translation:

SFP ma: 100% correct [no 5-A inversion]
SFP ba: HL high-intermediate HL Advanced
  correct correct correct incorrect
  23.53% 76.47% 57.90% 42.1%
Error: translate SFP ba sentence as SFP ma sentence.

Conclusions

1. There is a developmental acquisition process for SFP ba but not for SFP ma.
2. Heritage learners can acquire those features attached to SFP ma and SFP ba.
3. There is indeed a reassembling process identified in learners’ acquisition of SFP ba as learners at lower proficiency level map SFP ba onto yes-no questions but not tag-questions in English.

I assume this may due to learners’ different intakes from the input as well as the complexity of positive evidence. This to some extent contradicts the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere 2008, 2009) as it proposes features assembled in the same way in both L1 and L2 will not incur any reassemblable tasks and there will be no problem for learners.

References
