# 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? ( **[Q]** ) English: S-A Inversion
   He COP teacher MA/BA
   Is he a teacher? /He is a teacher, right?
c. *Ta  shi  shui ma/ba? ( **[-wh]** )
    He COP who ma/BA

**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

## Participants

| Group | N | Average age | Average months of studying Chinese | Average months in China /Taiwan | Mean scores in the cloze test (total=40) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HL high-intermediate | 17 | 28 | 188.7 | 13.5 | 25 |
| HL Advanced | 19 | 22 | 186.7 | 23.2 | 33 |
| Chinese native speakers | 18 | 23 | / | / | 39 |

All Heritage learners (HL) were born in English-speaking countries and had exposure to Chinese from their family since they were born.

## 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*.
3) **Translation (identify feature matching):** 2 translations: SFP *ma* and SFP *ba* sentences.

## Results (I)

**1. Acceptability judgment:**
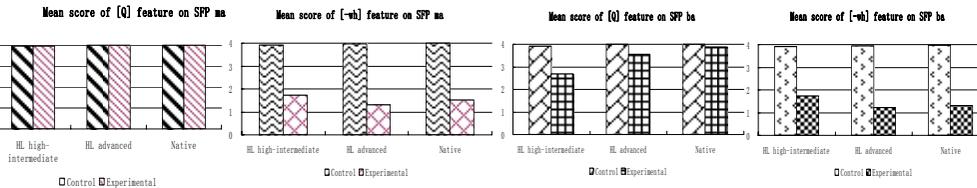


Sig (p=0.011) between HL high-intermediate group and Chinese native group on [Q] feature on SFP *ba* (experimental items).

**2. Discourse completion:**
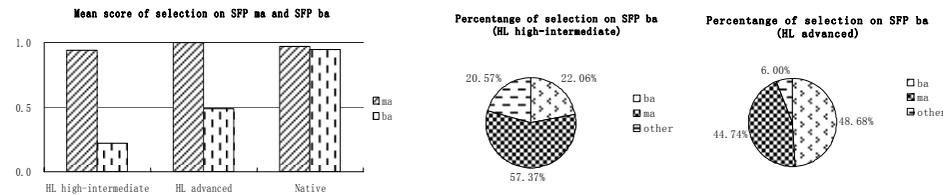


SFP *ba*: Sig (p=0.000) between native group and all HL groups; no sig (p=0.110) between HL groups

## Results (II)

**3. Translation:**

**SFP *ma*: 100% correct (no S-A Inversion)**

**SFP *ba*:**

| HL **high-intermediate** | | HL **Advanced** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| correct | incorrect | 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 reassemble tasks and there will be no problem for learners.

## References

Lardiere, D. (2008). Feature assembly in second language acquisition. In J. Liceras, H. Zobl & H. Goodluck (Eds.), *The role of formal features in second language acquisition* (pp. 106–140). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lardiere, D. (2009). Some thoughts on the contrastive analysis of features in second language acquisition. *Second Language Research*, 25(2), 173–227.