Acquiring Sentence- Final Particles by Italian Learners:
Data, analysis and teaching implications

Introduction. Chinese sentence final particles (SFPs) are often quite challenging to be acquired for learners whose native language does not have such a lexical class. Although final particles are usually presented since the very beginning of Chinese language programs, learners often fail to master these lexical items, whose usage and function are often poorly described by handbooks and grammars. Moreover, despite their high frequency and their importance in spoken discourse for the development of interactional competence (Maynard 1989), the acquisition of final particles has not received much attention and very few studies have been conducted on this topic (Chen, 2009; Yang, 2013).

Goal. The aims of this study are: (i) Filling the gap in the study of the acquisition of final particles by Italian learners of Mandarin as L2; (ii) Studying the acquisition of four final particles (*a* 啊, *ba* 吧, *ma* 吗, *ne* 呢) by Italian learners of Mandarin belonging to two different levels: elementary and intermediate.

Methodology. The subjects for this research are 72 students at the Chinese Language Program at RomaTre University, whose native language is Italian: 33 of them have been studying Chinese for 1 year (elementary level), while 39 of them for 2 years (intermediate level). We have tested also ten Mandarin native speakers, which served as control group. In the questionnaire, context scenarios were carefully designed to elicit subjects' use of SFPs. One example for such a scenario is given in (i). (Glosses and translation here are only for the reader's convenience, they have not been given to the students).

(i) A: 这   本   书   你   已经   看   了；   那   本   书   __?
         This   CL   book   you   already read   ASP   that   CL   book
         "This book, I have already read (it); how about that book?"

    B: 我   还   没   看。
         I   yet   not   read
         "I haven't read it yet."

Students were instructed to fill in the blanks with one of the four SFPs (*a* 啊, *ba* 吧, *ma* 吗, *ne* 呢). The questionnaire consisted of 20 scenarios, with 5 fillers. In the 20 target scenarios, each SFP was required in 5 sentences. The two learner groups completed their questionnaires in class. The native group from a Chinese university completed their questionnaires in class and then the questionnaires were sent to the authors via email.

Research questions. This study aims at answering the following research questions:
(i) Which are the most challenging particles for Italian learners?; (ii) Which are the differences between the two proficiency levels and how the usage of particles is correlated with learners overall competence in L2 Chinese?; (iii) What is the role played by the (different) didactic material adopted by the different courses?.

Results show how particles *a* 啊 and *ne* 呢 prove to be particularly challenging for learners and also that the scores obtained in the test items differ according to the proficiency level.

By answering the research questions we will also provide some proposals to hopefully improve the teaching of this area of Chinese lexicon.

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