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Particles and Epistemics

Convergences and divergences between English and Mandarin*

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This chapter examines three particles that have epistemic functions in English and Mandarin: turn-initial *'oh'* in English, turn-initial *'ou'* in Mandarin, and turn-final *'a'* in Mandarin. It is argued that while *ou* and *oh* converge in registering a 'change of state' of information, orientation or awareness, turn-final *a* is used to register a contrast between oneself and an interlocutor, which often implicates, and reflexively embodies, the speaker's pre-existing knowledge, perspective, expectation or experience in relation to the matter at issue. This "contrast-invoking" usage of turn-final *'a'* can be mobilized to problematize the action of the previous speaker by marking it as counter to the speaker's expectation, thus converging with *oh*-prefacing in this particular interactional usage despite their normal functional divide. The chapter ends with a consideration of putatively universal pragmatic needs that are carried out using distinctive resources, and a distinctive division of labor among resources, in the two languages.

Keywords: Particles; epistemics; stance; English; Mandarin

"...from close looking..." at the world you can find things that we couldn't, by imagination, assert were there: One wouldn't know that they were typical, one might not know that they ever happened, and even if one supposed that they did one couldn't say it because an audience wouldn't believe it." (Sacks 1992 2: 420)

"Until I grappled with a collection of actual, naturally occurring repeats, and with the assembling of this core collection in particular, I had not the slightest idea that there <u>was</u> such a function, such an action, such a practice in talk as "confirming that something had been conveyed inexplicitly," – confirming both <u>the</u> allusion and <u>that it had been</u> an allusion. This is not the sort of action that is part of the

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articulable vernacular culture…; there is no speech act term for it; it is not readily accessible to intuition, although without a native's cultural knowledge it might not be detectable in an examination of interactional materials." (Schegloff 1996: 210)

1.   Introduction

In 1996, after attending a conference in Florida, a chance seating arrangement on a return flight to Los Angeles found us sitting together. "What are you working on?" asked one of us. "*Oh*-prefaced responses to questions that index their inappropriateness" was the reply. "So *oh*-prefacing is used to index the inappropriateness of a question?" said the other. "Yes." "But I thought that is what I just discovered for the Mandarin final particle *a*!" This struck us as quite a coincidence!

Of course, there are a number of ways in which questions can turn out to be "inappropriate." Sacks (1987) argued that polar questions normally and preferably attract responses that confirm the state of affairs depicted in the question. And, as Raymond (2003) would later show, polar questions are normally and preferably responded to with "type-conforming" responses which, in English, take the form of the interjections *yes* and *no* (see also Stivers et al. 2009). The fact that the bulk of responses to polar questions are both "confirming" and "conforming" owes a great deal to the resourcefulness of questioners, who must employ recipient design (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) to frame questions that permit respondents to respond in these ways (Sacks 1987; Raymond 2003; Fox and Thompson 2010).

However, questioners may frame questions that intrude a little too far into the recipient's epistemic domain attracting, as responses, repetitions that assert the respondent's epistemic rights over the information in question (Schegloff 1996; Raymond 2003; Heritage and Raymond 2005, 2012; Raymond and Heritage 2006). Again, they may produce questions that frame their subject matter in a way that the recipient finds unacceptable, thus stimulating a "transformative" response (Stivers and Hayashi 2010) that frames the response in terms that are distinctive from those of the questioner (see also Drew 1992; Clayman and Heritage 2002). Or a question may frame a matter as questionable which the recipient, by responding with "Of course" (Stivers 2011), treats as self-evident and unquestionable.

Our research converged on something different: responses that treated questions as inapposite because the answers were already suppositionally or presuppositionally available from previous talk (or co-text) or, more broadly, by simple cultural inference from the context. This paper examines that convergent independent discovery, probing its limits by examining the distinctive practices by which it is achieved in English and in Mandarin Chinese. In both languages, while the respondent answers the question, a linguistic particle attached to that answer conveys this inappositeness.

In English this is managed by *oh*-prefacing the response to the question (Heritage 1998), and in Mandarin by *a*-suffixing it (Wu 2004).

In this paper, we review the convergences between these two particles. However, in Mandarin part of the work accomplished by *oh*-prefacing is managed by the use of a very similar Mandarin turn- or TCU (turn constructional unit)-initial particle, *ou*. In fact, the work done by *oh*-prefacing in English is effectively parceled out between the two Mandarin particles, and this in turn sheds light on the comparative pragmatics of all three. In what follows, we begin with a consideration of Mandarin initial *ou*, tracing out the parallels and divergences with *oh*. Subsequently we turn to the target comparison that motivated this paper: the comparison between *oh*-prefaced and *a*-suffixed turns at talk.

In what follows, we begin with some basic background on each of these particles.

2.   *Oh* in Anglo-American English

Anglo-American *oh* is generally understood as registering, or at least enacting the registration of, a "change of state" (Heritage 1984, see also Schiffrin 1987). As particularized by context, the change of state may involve a change of attention or awareness, orientation, knowledge or information.[1] For example, in (1) *oh* is used to register a noticing, the noticing is then named, and used to launch the initiation of a story:

```
(1)    (Jefferson 1978:222)
       (Three people are walking together: Someone passes them
       wearing a photograph tee shirt.)

  N:     Oh that teeshirt reminded me [STORY]
```

In (2), the *oh* registers the recollection of the narrative that the speaker was engaged in prior to the departure of some guests:

```
(2)    (Goodwin G91: 250)

1  A:   Yeah I useta- This girlfr- er Jeff's: gi:rlfriend,
2       the one he's getting' married to, (0.9) s brother,=
3       =he use'to uh,
4       … ((Thirteen lines of data omitted. During this
5       …   period, the speaker's narrative is disrupted
6       …   by the leaving of some of the participants))
7  A:   What was I gonna say.=
8   ->  =Oh:: anyway.=She use'ta, (0.4) come over…
```

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1.   The use of particles to perform functions which are, broadly speaking, 'epistemic' is hardly confined to English. See Heinemann and Koivisto (2016); Heritage and Sorjonen (frth); Kim and Kuroshima (2013) for selections of papers.

And in (3), *oh* acknowledges the receipt of a series of answers to questions, and accepts these answers as "new" information, thus functioning as a "sequence closing third" (Schegloff 2007):

```
(3)   (HG:II: 25)
 1  N:     .hhh Dz he 'av 'iz own apa:rt[mint?]
 2  H:                          [.hhhh] Yea:h,=
 3  N:-> =Oh:,
 4        (1.0)
 5  N:    How didju git 'iz number,
 6        (.)
 7  H:    I(h) (.) c(h)alled infermation'n San
 8        Fr'ncissc(h)[uh!
 9  N:->             [Oh::::.
10        (.)
11  N:    Very cleve:r, hh=
12  H:    =Thank you[: I-.hh-.hhhhhhhh hh=
13  N:              [W'ts 'iz last name,
14  H:    =Uh:: Freedla:nd..hh[hh
15  N:->                      [Oh [:,
16  H:                            [('r) Freedlind.=
```

It is this latter, freestanding, use of *oh* that is the most common and default use of the particle. In this case and countless others like it, the particle's "change of state" proposal is used to register the transmission of information from a more knowledgeable (K+) speaker to a less knowledgeable (K-) one. The information may be treated as dramatic and exciting as in (4):

```
(4)   (Terasaki (2004:176))
 1  Ron:    I fergot t'tell y'the two best things that
 2          happen'tuh me t'day.
 3  Bea:->  Oh super.=What were they
 4  Ron:    I gotta B plus on my math test,
 5  Bea:    On yer final?
 6  Ron:    Un huh?
 7  Bea:->  Oh that's wonderful
 8  Ron:    And I got athletic award.
 9  Rea:    REALLY?
10  Ron:    Uh huh. From Sports Club.
11  Bea:->  Oh that's terrific Ronald.
```

Or it may be banal, commonplace and thoroughly anticipated in the design of the question as in (5):

```
(5)   (Rah:12:4:ST (Heritage 1984:309))
 1 Jen:-> =Okay then I w'z askin='er en she says yer
 2     -> working tomorrow ez well.
 3 Ida:    Yes I'm s'pose to be tihmorrow yes,
 4 Jen:-> O[h::::.
 5 Ida:     [Yeh,
```

Here Ida's response simply confirms at first hand what Jenny already knows from another acquaintance. Regardless of the degree to which it is exciting or banal, the information is acknowledged with *oh*.

In other cases, by contrast, *oh* is deployed not to acknowledge the transmission of *information*, but rather to register and index to index the unexpectedness of an *action*. For example, in the following case a British art connoisseur is interviewed about his experiences at Beijing University where he taught English literature, and supervised the translation of works by the poet T. S. Eliot into Mandarin. At this point his interviewer is unwise enough to ask him if he learned to "speak Chinese":

```
(6)   (Chat Show: Russell Harty-Sir Harold Acton)
 1  Act:    …hhhh and some of thuh- (0.3) some of my students
 2          translated Eliot into Chine::se. I think thuh
 3          very first.
 4          (0.2)
 5  Har:    Did you learn to speak (.) Chine[:se.
 6  Act: ->                                 [.hh Oh yes.
 7          (0.7)
 8  Act:    .hhhh You cah::n't live in thuh country
            without speaking
 9          thuh lang[uage it's impossible.hhhhh=
10  Har:             [Not no: cour:se
```

Here Acton's *oh*-prefaced confirmation treats the question as inapposite and its answer as self-evident. He goes on to elaborate the point at lines 8 and 9, and subsequently the interviewer acknowledges that the fact of Acton's learning Chinese could, indeed should, have been simply assumed (line 10).

We can summarize these observations by suggesting that whereas freestanding *oh* is ordinarily used in second or third position in a sequence to acknowledge *information*, it can also be used in prefaced form in second (responsive) position to register the unexpectedness of an *action*. This latter usage can travel forward, as it were, to first position where, as in (1) above, it can index a sequence initiation as the product of recollection or as "touched off" by an environmental contingency. All of these usages rely on the "change of state" semantics that *oh* enacts.

3.   Initial *ou* in Mandarin Chinese[2]

As it turns out, Mandarin Chinese also has turn- or TCU-initial *ou*, which, according to Chao (1968:817), serves to register "explicit acknowledgment of receiving

---

2.   In addition to the turn-initial (and free-standing) *ou*, Mandarin Chinese has a final particle *ou* (see Wu 2004). The exploration of the convergences and divergences between the Mandarin initial *ou*, the Mandarin final particle *ou*, and the English *oh*, however, is beyond the scope of this article and needs to await another occasion.

new information" or to convey "surprise." A clear parallel between Mandarin *ou* and English *oh* in their use to register a change of awareness, orientation, knowledge or information is found in the use of Mandarin *ou* in examples such as the following, which exhibit a very similar pattern as the use of *oh* in the earlier-examined (1) and (2).

```
  (7)   (CAO 6_11_06_C5 video 51:59)
(Prior to this excerpt, L, a middle-aged well-experienced
translator, was complaining about the difficulty for her to find
translation jobs in the system that she had worked in.)
  1 M:  ei, xianzai fanyi    ta  you  hen  duo  na   yang de=
        PRT now     translate 3SG have very many that way  NOM
        'Hey, there are many translation (companies) which are
        like-'=
  2 M:  =jiu shi shuo- (0.2) birushuo- (.) ta  jiu  gu:  ni
        just be  say         for:example  3SG just hire you
        ='I mean- (0.2) for example- (.) they would hire you.'
  3 M:  jiu  an-  an  zishu      shoufei shenme de=
        just base base word:count charge what   NOM
        '(They'd) pay (you) per the number of words or what.'
  4 M:  =you na   yang de  a
        have that way  NOM PRT
        ='There are (companies) like that.'
  5 L:  .hh na:: you a= ni  kan women na   ge xitong de=
            where have PRT you see we    that C  system ASSC
        '.hh Where?=Think about our system.'=
  6 L:  =ni  hai  bu zhidao ma
        you still N  know   Q
        ='Don't you know by now?'
  7     (.)
  8 M:  bu shi nimen xitong. qita   de
        N  be  you   system  other  NOM
        'Not your system. Others.'
  9 L:  qita ye  feichang nan      nong=
        other also very     difficult do
        'Others are also very difficult to go through.'=
 10                  [(M moves gaze from L, looking at the ceiling
        and thinking)
 11 M:-> =xianzai- [ou dui.  haoxiang-     [[aoyun=
        now         PRT right seem          Olympic:Games
        ='Now- [Oh by the way- (It) seems- [[the Olympic Games'=
 12 R:                                     [[aoyun
                                             Olympic:Games
                                           [['The Olympic Games.'
 13 M:  =wo nei  tian kan:dao yi  ge guanyu aoyun         de
        I   that day  see     one C  about  Olympic:Games ASSC
        ='I saw (something) about the Olympic Games the other day.'
```

Here, in the midst of offering L suggestions, M interrupts her talk in progress and produces "*ou dui*" ('oh by the way'; line 11), apparently registering a recollection of some sort. The matter being recollected and briefly searched for (line 10) is then named (*aoyun* 'the Olympic Games'; line 11), followed by the initiation of a related story (line 13).

Excerpt (8) offers another similar instance. In this excerpt, the two participants are exchanging their views of the city of Chengdu, which both of them have been to.

```
(8)   (CMC 05-02, 04:40, audio 105a)

1  M:    ni lai nabianr:: (.) ni  zui  xi(huan) chengdu shenme?
         you come there       you most like     (city)   what
         '(When) you came there:: (.) what did you like most
         about Chengdu?'
2        (0.5)
3  L:->  chi  de. qihou.= ou, wo zui  xihuan qihou.  qici
         eat  NOM weather  PRT I  most like   weather next
         shi chi de.
         be  eat NOM
         'Food. Weather. = Oh, I like its weather the best, and
         then the food.'
4  M:    you  tong  gan.    zhende.
         have same  feeling really
         '(I) feel the same. Really.'
```

Here, in response to M's inquiry about what had appealed to L the most about the city (line 1), L first replies "food," followed by "weather" (line 3), whereupon, however, she immediately moves to correct the order of preference and *ou*-prefaces it. Here, the use of *ou*, like *oh*-prefacing in English, can be understood as registering a "change of state."

Like English *oh*, Mandarin *ou* can also be used responsively to acknowledge the receipt of an answer to a question and function as a "sequence closing third":

```
(9) (CMC 09 audio 150a)
(a conversation between two college roommates)
1  D:1-> ↑zher nar:  you  huang se    de chuzuche [a?
          here  where have yellow color ASSC taxi      PRT
          '↑How can there be   yellow cabs        [here?'
2  H:2->                                          [you.=
                                                   have
                                                  ['There are.'=
3  H:2-> =shang bian yi  banr shi huang  de,  yi  banr (bie …)
          top    side one half be  yellow NOM  one half other
          ='The top of the cab was half yellow, (and) half
          (another…)'
4  D:3-> ou::.
          PRT
          'Oh::.'
```

```
(10) (JX_6_3_07_1_A6 01:47)
(a conversation among three college friends. Here they are talk-
ing about L's boyfriend.)
   1  R:1->  ei, xi- gan ma   de, dang bing    de (to L)
             PRT      do  what NOM  serve soldier NOM
             'Hey, n- what does (he) do? A soldier?'
   2  M:2->  dang  bing    de
             serve soldier NOM
             'A soldier.'
   3  R:3->  ou
             PRT
             'Oh.'
```

In both excerpts, a stand-alone *ou* is used by the questioner to receipt the answer to her question.

As with English *oh*, the freestanding use of *ou* is also commonly used to register the transmission of information from a K+ speaker to a K- speaker. The following two excerpts illustrate:

```
(11) (Cao_5_24_06; video 4:01:00; audio a001)
(a conversation between two old friends who have not seen each
other for a long while)
   1  A:  women- >women danwei bu shi=
           we       we    unit   N  be
           'We- >Didn't our department'=
   2  A:  =(yuan     you  yi  ge ren)=
            original have one C  person
           ='(have a person who-)'=
   3  A:  =bu shi ye   shi mei    xingqi dou fudao fudao ta   ma
            N  be  also be  every week   all tutor tutor 3SG  Q
           ='Didn't (that person) also tutor him every week?'
   4  A:  .hhh shuo de   nei  ge::
                say  ASSC that C
           '.hhh (That person) said that uh:'
   5      (0.2)
   6  A:  shipu       nengli  hai   ting   qiang de
           read:notes ability still pretty strong ASSC
           '(his) ability to read sheet music is actually pretty
           good.'
   7  C:  a:
           PRT
           'Yeah:.'
   8  A:  jiu  shi- > jiu  mei xue=
           just be    just N   learn
           'That is- >Even if (he) hasn't learned (a song),'=
```

```
 9  A:   =(dou) na    qilai=
          all   take up
         ='(when) picking up (the sheet music),'=
10  A:   =ta  fanzheng  neng  chui
          3SG anyway    can   blow
         ='he can play (it) anyways.'
11  C:   a:
         PRT
         'Yeah:.'
12  C:-> ↑ou, ↑zhende a=
         PRT    really PRT
         '↑Oh, ↑Really?!'=
```

(12) (Cao_6_11_06; audioB180; regularB027; video 47:39:10)

(M had talked about her late mother, who had continuously attended the Chinese calligraphy classes offered by the College for Older Adults for ten years after retirement.)

```
 1  M:   [(ni dangran) bu keneng   shuo: chengwei::
          you of:course N  possible say   become
         ['(Of course you) cannot become:: say:'
 2  L:   neng gua  de   [chulai. (⁰yinggai shi.⁰)
          can  hang CSC   out         should  be
         'Can be publicly [displayed. (⁰Should be.⁰)'
 3  M:                    [shufajia    si    de.  a=
                           caligrapher seem  NOM  PRT
                          ['like a calligrapher. Right?'
 4  R:   =[ao.=
            PRT
         =['Yeah.'=
 5  M:   =[danshi ta   keyi canjia       nei ge- zhanlan=
           but    3SG  can  participate  that C   exhibition
         =['But she can take part in an exhibition.'=
 6  L:   =zhanlan.   dui.
          exhibition right
         ='An exhibition. Right.'
 7       (.)
 8  M:   [a. shenme xicheng qu
          PRT what   (name)  district
         ['Right? (At places) like the Xicheng District.'
 9  R:-> [ou, na  dangran   bu  cuo   le=
          PRT that of:course N   wrong ASP
         ['Oh, then of course (her work) was good.'=
```

Here, whether the information is treated as dramatic (↑*ou*, ↑*zhende a* '↑Oh, ↑Really?!'), as in (11), or as completely expected from the immediately prior context (*ou, na*

dangran bu cuo le 'oh, then of course (her work) was good'), as in (12), the information in each case is acknowledged with the use of *ou*.

In each of the cases we have seen in this section, then, the use of Mandarin *ou* parallels the English *oh* in the previous section in registering a change of state – whether the change of state involves a recollection and announcement of a piece of news (e.g., (7)), a correction of a piece of information previously provided (e.g., (8)), or the transmission of knowledge or information of various sorts (e.g., (9)–(12)).

However, if these cases mark similarities in the uses of *ou* and *oh*, there is nonetheless one glaring discrepancy in the uses of the two. This concerns the incompatibility of the use of Mandarin *ou* to index the unexpectedness of an action, as English *oh*-prefacing would do. In fact, as will be seen below, such use of *oh*-prefacing in English, illustrated in the previously-examined (6), would be more adequately achieved through the use of the Mandarin final particle, *a*, to which we now turn.

4. Final *a* in Mandarin Chinese

Mandarin final particle *a* (or its phonetic variant *ia*) is one of a class of items labeled as *zhu ci* 'helping words,' *yuqi ci* 'mood words' (e.g., Lü and Zhu 1953), "sentence-final particles" (Li and Thompson 1981), "utterance particles" (Luke 1990), and "interactional particles" (Maynard 1993), among others. A major difference between final particles such as *a* and the class of particles (sometimes termed "interjections") such as Mandarin *ou* that we have seen in the previous section is that whereas the latter can stand alone, the former are always bound (Chao 1968: 795), having to be suffixed to a word, a phrase or a turn-constructional unit, for example.

Despite having no direct analogue in English, final particles are highly frequent in Chinese conversation and, as the previous terms suggest, they lack denotative or referential meaning, and are context-particularized and discourse dependent (Wu 2004: 25). This context sensitivity clearly emerges, as Wu (2004: 28–34) documents, in the context of repetition where final *a* can be added or dropped, illustrating in the latter case the kind of "dispensability" that Schegloff (2004) has documented for a variety of English turn-initial and turn-final items.

However, to say that final particles lack referential meaning is not to say that they lack consistent baseline indexical functions. Wu's (2004) study, for example, argues that final *a*, at its core, exhibits a "contrast-invoking" property; it is used to mark a discrepancy in knowledge, expectation or perspective regarding some state of affairs between the *a* speaker and the prior speaker. The discrepancy invoked through this practice is often assessment-laden, which in turn implicates, and reflexively embodies, the speaker's pre-existing knowledge, perspective, expectation or experience in relation to the matter at issue (Wu 2004: 128).

The characteristic "contrast marking" role of final *a* emerges when it is used in confirmation requests which serve as repair initiations. In these cases, speakers seek confirmation of a displayed hearing or understanding of what was said or meant in a prior turn by another, as in the following:

```
(13)   (CMC 05–03, 01:45, audio 130a)
 1  M:   bu, yuanlai    women jia   zhu   nar?  <zhu dongcheng
         no  originally we    home  live  where  live(place)

         na    kuair.
         that  area

         'No, where did we live before? ⟨(We) lived in the
         Dongcheng area.'=
 2  M:   =[dongcheng liuyin   jie    na   kuair.
          (place)    (place)  street that area
         ='Near Liuyin Street in Dongcheng.'
 3  L:   =[((clears throat))
 4        (0.5)
 5  L:-> [[guyun   jie    a?=
           (place)  street PRT
          [['Guyun Street A?'=
 6  M:   [[shi b-
           be
          [['(It) is-'
 7  M:   =aiyahh,       liuyin  jie.
          (exclamation) (place) street
         ='aarrgh! Liuyin Street.'
 8        (.)
 9  L:   ao:.
          PRT
          'Oh:'
```

In line 5, L proceeds to check her hearing of the name of the place that M has just mentioned (line 2), perhaps because its understanding was somewhat obscured by L's coincidental throat clearing (line 3). Here, L's display of a lack of full certainty about the information being proposed is indicated by an *a*-suffix.

However, confirmation requests marked with final *a* do not always involve straightforward repair initiations. They may serve to additionally index a discrepancy in expectation – such as, for example, that a prior informing is unexpected or newsworthy. This is illustrated in (14):

```
(14)   (CS Party A094A)
(T is reporting on his itinerary for an upcoming trip when X
joins in with a piece of information about their mutual supervi-
sor at line 1.)
```

```
1 X:    na    ge libai laoban bu  zai a.
        that C  week  boss   N   at  PRT
        'The boss won't be here that week.'
2       (.)
3 T:->  na    ge libai laoban bu  zai a
        that  c  week  boss   N   at  PRT
        'The boss won't be here that week A?'
4 X:    dui   a.=
        right PRT
        '(That's) right.'=
5 H:    =a  shenme shihou huilai.
         PRT what   time   return
        ='And when (will you) come back?'
```

Here T's final *a* repeat (line 3) serves as a display of "ritualized disbelief" (Heritage 1984; Wu 2004) that registers X's statement as "news".

Or, such displayed discrepancy in expectation may indicate true disbelief, often-times disagreement of sorts, on the part of the *a* producer. This is evidenced by numerous examples in our data in which final *a* repeats are harbingers of disaffiliation or disagreement. Consider, for example, the following instance in which D's *a*-suffixed repeat (line 4) is followed by an expression of disbelief (line 6):

```
(15)  (T-dancer 077)
  1 X:    ta gaozhong     xue.
          3SG high:school learn
          'She learned (to dance) in high school.'
  2 X:    wo y- xu-  wo san  sui jiu xue   wu    le a
          I         I   three age then learn dance ASP PRT
          'I o- le- I learned to dance at three.'
  3       ((background noise))
  4 D:->  ni san  sui jiu xue   wu    a
          you three age then learn dance PRT
          'You learned to dance at three A?'
  5 X:    um.
          PRT
          'Yeah.'
  6 D:    ou:: wo zeme kan bu chulai::.
          PRT  I  how  see N  out
          'Oh:: how come I couldn't tell::?'
```

And in (16), X's *a*-suffixed repeat (line 3) is followed, post D's confirmation (line 4), by a flat disagreement at lines 5 and 6, apparently offered as a correction:

```
(16)  (T-Dancer 211)
  1 D:    jieguo   renjia gen  wo shuo ta  shi waishengren=
          result   others with I  say  3SG be  mainlander
          'And then (when) other people told me that she is a
          mainlander,'=
```

```
2  D:   =wo- (.)  wo (ziji) dou xia    yi  tiao a=
        I         I  self   all shock one c    PRT
        ='I- (.) I (myself) was shocked.' =
3  X:-> =ta  shi waishengren  a
        3SG  be  mainlander    PRT
        ='She is a mainlander A?'
4  D:   dui   a
        right PRT
        '(That's) right.'
5  X:   ta  yi  ban  yi  ban  la.
        3SG one half one half PRT
        'She's half and half.'
6  X:   yi  ban   kejia yi  ban::
        one half  Hakka one half
        'Half Hakka and half:: (mainlander).'
```

In these cases the final *a* contrastive marker – indexing a departure from expectations – is ancillary to a subsequent and more full-fledged assertion of an alternative position, and is indicative in these cases of a strongly held position (see also Wu 2006, 2009).

A member of the family of "response cries" (Goffman 1978), *oh* differs from final *a* in three significant respects. First, *oh* can appear in "free-standing" form as a turn at talk in its own right, whereas final *a* cannot. Second, when *oh* appears in conjunction with other elements of a turn-constructional unit, it always appears in turn-initial position (or virtual turn-initial position [Heritage 1998]), whereas final *a* always appears in turn- or TCU-final position. Third, final *a* registers contrastively that some statement or experience represents a departure from the *a* producer's expectations, but does not in itself commit to the truth or veridicality of the thing to which it responds. If it did, cases like (15) and (16) above would be unusual, but they are not (Wu 2004; 2006). *Oh,* by contrast, by its registration of a change of state, centrally enacts acceptance of the truth of what is said or experienced and is primarily associated with such acceptance and additional turn components, such as assessments, that enact such acceptance (Heritage 1984; Schegloff 2007).

In the remainder of this paper we pursue overlapping lines of convergence and divergence in the deployment of these two particles.

5.   The convergences

5.1   Responding to a question while indexing the question's inappositeness or redundancy

We begin with the convergence that struck us so forcibly on that plane ride home from Florida. This is most simply seen in responses to questions seeking (re-)confirmation

of something that has already been stated. A review of (14) exhibits this phenom-
enon for Mandarin. As may be recalled, here X announces that the boss will be
absent for a week. T's repeat at line 3 treats X's announcement as news and invites its
reconfirmation:

```
(14)   (CS Party A094A)
(T is reporting on his itinerary for an upcoming trip when X
joins in with a piece of information about their mutual
supervisor at line 1.)
  1 X:   na    ge  libai laoban bu  zai  a.
          that c   week  boss   N   at   PRT
          'The boss won't be here that week.'
  2        (.)
  3 T:   na    ge  libai laoban bu   zai  a
          that c   week  boss   N    at   PRT
          'The boss won't be here that week?'
  4 X:-> dui   a.=
          right PRT
          '(That's) right A.'=
  5 H:   =a  shenme  shihou huilai.
          PRT what    time   return
          ='And when (will you) come back?'
```

Here X responds in a minimal fashion (*dui* 'right' line 4), suffixing this turn with
final *a*. Here the final *a* conveys that T's response to X's previous announcement
requiring the repetition of the information was unexpected, redundant and inap-
posite (see also (16) for a similar response at line 4). Here the registration of
something as news (line 1) that requires repetition from a putatively authoritative
speaker attracts a tiny sanction for questioning something that should be treated as
beyond question.

Exact parallels are to be found in the Anglo-American data where *oh*-prefaced
responses to questions are used to index similar failings (Heritage 1998). The follow-
ing is a case in point. Jan will be preparing a meal in Ivy's kitchen and the conversation
turns to the chicken:

```
(17)   (Heritage:01:18:2)
  1 Jan:    .t Okay now that's roas:' chick'n isn'it. Th[at ]=
  2 Ivy:                                                [It-]=
  3 Jan:    =[roasting chick'n<]
  4 Ivy:1-> =[i t h a s bee:n ] cooked.
  5           (.)
  6 Ivy:1-> It's been co[oked.
  7 Jan:2->             [Iz BEEN cooked.=
  8 Ivy:3-> =Oh yes.
  9 Jan:    Oh well thaz good…
```

In this case Ivy asserts that the chicken has been cooked (arrow 1), the assertion is queried by Jan (arrow 2), and Ivy minimally reconfirms it with and *oh*-prefaced interjection (arrow 3). As in (14) above, Ivy imposes a tiny sanction on Jan for questioning something that need not, or should not, be questioned.

These parallels extend into sequences where the questioning addresses more presuppositional aspects of prior talk, or where background information could or should be presumed. In the following case, a conversation about expensive hamburgers in North-Eastern China turns to the topic of barbecue in line 2, when A observes that she may ask her hostess about eating barbecue. Access to barbecue in Northeast China is, of course, presupposed in this remark, but B seeks to problematize its availability at line 4. This inquiry is confirmed at line 5 with B's subsequent question about whether Northeastern barbecue is made of dog meat:

```
(18)   (CMC_01_01)
(A is talking about an upcoming visit to a mutual friend's family
in the Northeast, where she apparently had visited before. The
conversation has turned to expensive hamburgers there.)
```

  1 A: *ruguo wo xinyun dehua> neng chi dao,*=
           if   I   lucky if   can eat eat
           'If I am lucky enough >(I'll) be able to eat (the buns),'=

  2 A: =*.hhh ranhou wo rang ta:: dai wo qu*
                 then   I let 3SG take I   go

           chi::: kaorou.=
           eat   barbecue
           ='Then I'll ask her:: to take me to eat::: barbecue.'=

  3 A: =*wo bu zhidao ta- tongyi bu tongyi.*
           I N   know   3SG agree   N   agree
           ='I don't know whether or not she'd- agree.'

  4 B: *dongbei   you   kaorou   a.*
           northeast have barbecue PRT
           'There is barbecue in the Northeast?'

  5 A:**->** *dui   a.*
           right PRT
           '(That's) <u>right</u> A.'

  6 B: *shi   bu shi gou rou   a.*
           be   N be   dog meat PRT
           'Is it dog meat?'

  7   (1.0)

  8 A: °*bu shi,*°
           N be
           °'No,'°

In this case too, where a recipient questions something that is presupposed in the prior talk, an *a*-final suffix underscores the unexpectedness and inappositeness of that questioning.

This is paralleled in the Anglo-American English data by *oh*-prefaced responses to questions that address elements of prior talk that are presupposed or that could, or should. be culturally presumed. For example, in the previously-examined (6), Sir Harold Acton was interviewed by British broadcaster Russell Harty about the former's experience of teaching in China:

```
 (6)   (Chat Show: Russell Harty-Sir Harold Acton)
  1  Act:    …hhhh and some of thuh- (0.3) some of my students
  2          translated Eliot into Chine::se. I think thuh very
  3          first.
  4          (0.2)
  5  Har:    Did you learn to speak (.) Chine[:se.
  6  Act:->                                  [.hh Oh yes.
  7          (0.7)
  8  Act:    .hhhh You cah::n't live in thuh country without
             speaking
  9          thuh lang[uage it's impossible.hhhhh=
 10  Har:             [Not no: cour:se
```

Here, as discussed, given that Acton taught English literature at Beijing University and his students were the first to translate T. S. Eliot's work into Mandarin, the interviewer's question at line 5 is clearly vulnerable to the charge that it is questioning something that is "beyond question." Acton's *oh yes* manages to convey just that, treating it as obvious that he would have learned the language. Subsequent to a brief elaboration by Acton, the interviewer acknowledges that the fact of Acton's learning Chinese could, indeed should, have been quite self-evident (line 10).

As we have seen in this section, it is relatively straightforward to see that the use of *oh*-prefacing in English and the Mandarin *a*-suffixing, despite conveying different baseline indexical meanings elsewhere, could converge in responses to questions that are being treated as inapposite or redundant, for each can convey that the question was somehow "unexpected."

5.2   Oh-prefaced and *a*-finalized responses as escalated disagreement

A similar convergence in the use of the two particles is to be found in contexts of extended or aggravated disagreement. In such a context, *a*-final suffixes can underscore a difference in perspective by registering how "unexpected" or against expectations a preceding assertion is. In the following case, W is solidly occupied with complaining about a Korean graduate student who she is teaching Chinese. First she states that the student often cancels classes (line 7), and then that the student is not paying much for the classes (line 9). This latter assertion attracts an explicit disagreement from her interlocutor (line 12).

(19) (CMC001)

```
  1  C:   wang,  ni- ni- ni  xianzai
           (name) you you you  now
           'Wang, you- you- now you're'

  2  C:   hai   zai zuo hanguo ren    [na  (ge) gongzuo?
           still ASP do  Korean person  that C   job
           'still working for         [that Korean person?'

  3  W:                               [↑zai: a.=
                                        ASP  PRT
                                       ['↑(I) am:.='

  4  W:   =na   hanguo ren    ke      na  shenme le.
            that Korean person really that what   ASP
           ='That Korean is really-'

  5       (.)

  6  C:   ta:      [yi ge xiao-
           3SG       one C  hour
           'She:    [one hour-'

  7  W:            [↑jingchang-(.) ta- na ge:: (.)bu shang ke.
                    often          3SG that C    N attend class
                   ['↑She- often- (.) uh:: cancels classes.'

  8  C:   ta yi xiaoshi:: fu  ni  duoshao, xianzai.
           3SG one hour    pay you how:much now
           'How much does she pay you- for an hour:, now?'

  9  W:   pianyi de le. sanshi.
           cheap  NOM ASP thirty
           'Cheap. Thirty dollars.'

 10  C:   yi  ge xiaoshi sanshi?
           one C  hour    thirty
           'Thirty dollars for an hour?'

 11  W:   (uh  [huh.)
           PRT   PRT
           '(uh [huh.)'

 12  C:        [Bu  pianyi.
                 N   cheap
                ['Not cheap.'

 13  W:-> SHENme BU pianyi a.
           what   N  cheap PRT
           'WHAT do you mean by NOT cheap A?!'

 14  W:   ta yanjiusheng.
           3SG graduate:student
           'She's a graduate student.'

 15       (.)

 16  W:   wo jiao ta gudai        hanyu.
           I  teach 3SG ancient:time Chinese
           'I teach her Classical Chinese.'
```

```
17          (1.0)
18  C:      u-oh. =ta shi yanjiusheng.
            PRT   3SG  be   graduate:student
            'e- Oh.=She is a graduate student.'
```

When this second complaint is rejected, Wang reasserts it with an *a*-final suffix that treats her respondent's counter-claim as unexpected. Together with other features (e.g., the loudness with which the turn is produced, indicated by upper case, and the use of the "what do you mean" structure [cf. Schegloff 1997]), the *a*-final suffix apparently is part of the design of a turn that is exclusively occupied with rebuttal.

   Oh-prefacing can also be deployed to a similar effect (Heritage 2002). In the following case a grandmother, concerned about the possibility that her granddaughter Sissie is anorexic, has been questioning her about her eating:

```
(20)   (SDCL:G/S:25-40)
  1 Gra:   I don'(t) know (.) I think you're just (0.2)
           ⁰(well you're)⁰
  2        just wearin yourself out with all your activity >I
           think if
  3        you slo:w down a li(tt)le bit and rest a little bit
           more<
  4        (0.4)
  5 Sis:   GRA:[M M A] YOU'RE SO WEIRD!
  6 Gra:       [Maybe]
  7 Sis:   >I don't even know why you say that I- <.hh I am
           f:i::ve
  8        thr:ee:: and I still weigh a hundred an' ten- fif teen
  9        po:unds?
 10        (0.6)
 11 Gra:-> O:h you don't weigh a ⁰hundred an'⁰ fifteen pounds.hh all
 12        your clothes are fallin off of ya everybody tells you ya
 13        look thi::n?
```

Here the *oh*-preface implements a "change of state" proposal as part of a turn designed to indicate the extraordinary and "out of left field" nature of Sissie's claim about her weight and is thus accomplice to the intensification of the disagreement between the two.

   If the use of the two particles is observed in contexts of extended or aggravated disagreement, as (19) and (20) have shown, it hardly surprises us when both particles again converge in their use to convey a stance of epistemic independence (Heritage 2002; Heritage and Raymond 2005; Raymond and Heritage 2006), as will be explicated in the next section.

5.3   Oh-prefaced and *a*-finalized responses as independently arrived at

A third area of convergence among the uses for the two particles can be identified in their deployment to register a claim of epistemic independence for an assertion from the turn (or turns) that just preceded it (Heritage 2002; Heritage and Raymond 2005; Raymond and Heritage 2006). This deployment is transparent in cases where a recipient is seeking to take the "same side" as her interlocutor in the context of reported arguments (cf. Schegloff 1984). For example, in the following sequence two friends side with the main protagonist (A) in her conflict with another girl. As A describes it, her relationship with her friend has deteriorated as a consequence of her intervention over a boyfriend (line 1):

```
 (21)   (CMC001)
(A is talking about how she tried to persuade a mutual girl
friend to leave her boyfriend.)
  1  B:   [ta xianzai dui    wo hao  fuyan       ou::.
           3SG now     towards I  very perfunctory PRT
          ['She is so cold towards me now!'
  2  B:   ranhou ta lao   shuo wo jidu   renjia hhh.(.).hhh
           then   3SG always say  I  jealous others (laugh)(laugh)
          'And she always says I am jealous of others. hhh (.).hhh'
  3       (0.3)
  4  A:-> (ni) jidu    ta ganma ia.
           you  jealous 3SG why   PRT
          'Why do you need to be jealous of her A?'
  5  C:-> jiu  shi  a,
           just be   PRT
          'Exactly A.'
  6  C:   zhao yi  ge hen  [pode  nanpengyou, *zhide jidu   (ma)
           find one C  very  lousy  boyfriend   worth jealous PRT
          'Is getting a [lousy boyfriend worth being jealous about?'
  7  A:                    [zhide  ma?
                            worthy PRT
                           ['Is it worth it?'
  8  B:   jiu shi ma.TA ZIJI RENWEI HEN HAO.*((*to*people laugh))
           just be PRT 3SG self think  very good
          'Exactly. SHE HERSELF THINKS (HE'S) TERRIFIC.'
```

In response to this, the reaction of both interlocutors is to assert that the friend's reaction is inappropriate and unwarranted. Both deploy *a*-final suffixes, indexing their reaction to A's report of the friend's accusation as "unexpected," and showing that their

reaction to it is independent of simple considerations of affiliation or loyalty, but rather as grounded in objective aspects of the social world and its workings.

Oh-prefacing offers parallel affordances. In (22), Emma is describing her daughter's report of an accusation made against her by her estranged husband: She's demanding that he commute long-distance to accommodate her unwillingness to live in metropolitan Los Angeles. Her report culminates with the statement that his claim is a "G<u>o</u>:d d<u>a</u>:mn LI<u>E</u>:":

```
(22)   (NB IV.10.R:4)
  1  Emm:    … sh<u>e</u> s'z well:< (0.3) <u>DA</u>:D se:z <u>yo</u>u won't LIVE
  2          IN THE A‾PA:RTMENT <u>i</u>n thetcher <u>un</u>HA::PPY UP THERE'n
  3          you want h<u>i</u>m tuh c'mm<u>u</u>te BA:CK 'n f<u>o</u>rth evry day
  4          wh<u>i</u>ch is a G<u>o</u>:d d<u>a</u>:mn LI<u>E</u>:,
  5             (.)
  6  Emm:    .hh[hhh<
  7  Lot:->     [O<u>h</u>‾::::::: y:<u>e</u>ah [c u z] <u>yo</u>u'd <u>n</u>ever sa<u>i</u>:d tha*:[t.
  8  Emm:                     [e-<u>H</u> e]                          [<u>A</u>:nd
  9          uh,…
```

Faced with the obligation to align with the speaker, her sister (Lottie) *oh*-prefaces a statement that flatly denies the husband's claim. The *oh*-preface responds to the claim as unexpected or "out of left field" while, simultaneously, indexing the evocation of an independent recollection that Emma has never said such a thing (Heritage 2002; Raymond and Heritage 2006). In this way, Lottie can claim independent access to "the facts" and show that her support is not simply a reflex supportive action that is devoid of substance.

To summarize: We discussed in this section three overlapping lines of convergence in the use of English *oh*-prefacing and Mandarin *a*-suffixing: (i) in responses to questions that are being treated as inapposite or redundant; (ii) underscoring a difference in perspective in contexts of extended or aggravated disagreement; and (iii) registering a claim of epistemic independence for an assertion from the turn (or turns) that just preceded it. In the next section, we will turn to a summary discussion of the three particles in question and offer a possible account of how *oh*-prefacing and *a*-suffixing – two otherwise seemingly distinct practices in languages belonging to two different families – converge in their use in the contexts outlined and discussed above.

6.   Concluding discussion

We have now come far enough to see quite considerable convergences and divergences in the deployment and interactional functions of our particles. A recap of the major convergences and divergences of the three particles is offered in Figure 1 below:
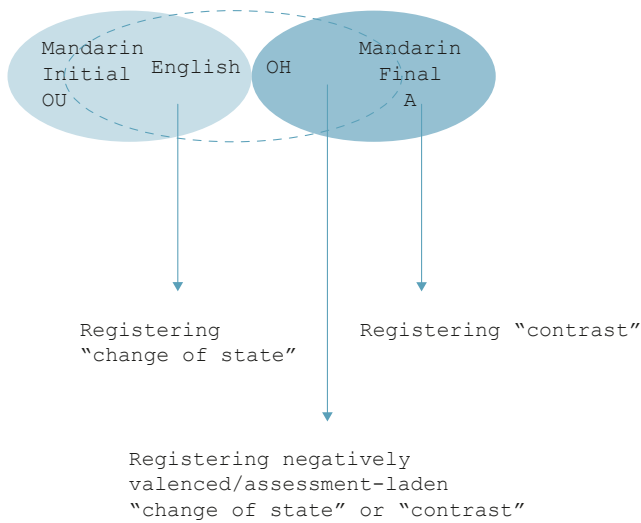
Figure 1. Functional convergences and divergences among the three particles

As indicated in Figure 1, final *a* does not have a semantics that directly parallels the "change of state" proposal that *oh* generically carries. This interactional function is performed in Mandarin mainly by the use of initial *ou*, which exhibits a remarkable convergence with *oh* in this usage. Final *a*, instead, essentially registers an epistemic contrast between the speaker and his or her interlocutor. The marking of such contrast may be interactionally quite benign, indicating nothing but the lack of a full grasp of a matter that the other party already has a full knowledge of. However, the use of *a*-suffixing can be, and indeed frequently is, assessment-laden, conveying that the speaker has a relatively settled stance which is contrastive with what the previous speaker has said or done, and by reference to which what the previous speaker has said or done can be seen as "deviant" and "counter-to-expectation." (Wu 2004; 2006; 2009). *Oh*-prefacing and *a*-suffixing converge precisely in this latter context, where their use arguably serves to problematize the appositeness of the action by another in a prior turn.

In our data, the home environments of *oh* are fundamentally concerned with acceptance: In these environments, *oh* indexes that one's mind has changed. *A*-final suffixes, by contrast, mainly register unexpectedness and, in terms of their stance towards whatever was said or done in the prior turn, are specifically agnostic towards, or tilted against, its acceptance. Thus in contrast to *oh*, which in its baseline usage depicts a change of state, *a* tends to be deployed in environments where the speaker's mind has not, or at least has not yet, changed. As a consequence, whereas *oh* is primarily deployed in contexts of consensus, *a*-final suffixes are frequently to be found in contexts of dissensus, incipient or actual disagreement, and countervailing perspectives. The functional convergence between these two particles occurs when their uses

are understood to take a stance on the appositeness of the *action* (normally a question) to which they respond, rather than on the prior turn's *propositional content.*

An inevitable question to ask here is: What is it in these two particles that enable this almost exact functional convergence when elsewhere they seem to be performing distinctive different jobs? We argue that the two particles achieve this converged interactional function from opposite sides of an "epistemic divide." Recall that at its core, *oh* is designed to express some interior movement of attention or consciousness, and *a* to index an epistemic contrast between the *a* producer and his or her interlocutor. Like many other linguistic resources, however, such baseline usages can be exploited in interactional contexts. In this case, we propose, *a*-final suffixing can be exploited to register a "marked," "heightened" contrast between the speaker and his or her interlocutor, indexing that the interlocutor's just-prior talk involves a departure from expectations or from what normally is, or should be, the case. On the other hand, while *oh* generally indexes a change of state of orientation, awareness or knowledge, it is also exploitable to register a "marked," "heightened" changed state. Here, by registering that the speaker's attention has been markedly drawn to the previous action, *oh*-prefacing can index that the action being responded to is unexpected or out of left field from the perspective of its producer. In either case, whether it is through marking a heightened contrast between oneself and the other party or through conveying a heightened changed state in oneself, what is being accomplished interactionally is the problematization of the action being responded to by marking it as counter to the speaker's expectation. *Oh*-prefacing and *a*-suffixing converge in this particular interactional usage despite their normal functional divide.

The results of this comparative study may speak to the universality of many of the pragmatic choices that speakers of any language have to make. Just as almost all languages use grammatical resources to distinguish between asserting and requesting information (Dryer 2016; but see Stivers 2010; Heritage 2012), thus testifying to the universal significance and value of this distinction, so too speakers may encounter occasions where they want to indicate – even, perhaps especially, in the very course of response – that the information they are conveying was solicited unnecessarily. In thus conveying, from the speaker's point of view, that the response is a redundant one, speakers are likely to be addressing a universal human experience. At least, this is a stance linguistically coded in both English and Mandarin, as our study has shown – though, as we have also seen, the marking of such a stance takes a different form in each language which, when viewed separately, would hardly strike one as functional equivalents at first glance.

Finally, the fact that the work done by *oh*-prefacing in English is parceled out between the two Mandarin particles – one which sounds and functions almost exactly the same as *oh* but lacks in its capacity to carry out a particularized interactional

function that can only be performed by final *a* in Mandarin – provides insight into cross-linguistic comparative CA studies. Specifically, the results reported here seem to support Schegloff's (2006; 2009) call for the need for researchers conducting comparative studies to treat each language or culture *gestalt* in its own terms, rather than to simply juxtapose the analysis of seemingly identical-looking forms or practices in different languages or to hold the conduct of one culture answerable to the conduct of another (see also Wu 2016). As Schegloff has remarked:

> …it seems to me especially important *not* to allow the terms of one culture, language or set of preoccupations to set the terms for framing another…we look to achieve CA findings about apparently omnipresent organizational issues and contingencies of interaction, and the practices of conduct and organization of such practices…which can be formulated in more abstract ways that transcend different particularized embodiments in different languages and cultures but which accommodate their specifications…   (Schegloff 2009: 373)

Clearly, the work presented here is just the tip of the iceberg and a small step in this direction. We look forward to more comparative CA findings that can shed light on the embodiment of the universality of human experiences in different languages and cultures.

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Abbreviations

ASSC	associative (*-de*)	NOM	nominalizer (*de*)
ASP	aspectual marker	PRT	particle
CSC	complex stative construction	Q	question marker
C	classifier	3SG	third person singular pronoun
N	negator		