

# Expressing complex speech acts in Changsha dialect:

## A study on the sentence final particle *tai*

JIN Jing

The Education University of Hong Kong

*jjin@eduhk.hk*

It has been noted in the literature that some grammatical means are inherently associated with multiple speech acts, which leads to the emergence of the research topic of “complex speech acts” (Beysade and Marandin 2006). The phenomenon of complex speech acts has received growing scholarly attention in recent years (Lam 2014; Wiltschko and Heim 2016; Heim et al. 2016; Heim and Wiltschko 2020; Tang 2020). However, research in this field is still in its early stage, and the topic remains relatively unexplored in the context of Chinese languages.

The present study contributes to the cross-linguistic investigations on the grammatical realization of complex speech acts via examining the use of the sentence final particle (SFP) *tai* in the Changsha dialect, a dialect spoken in Hunan Province of Mainland China. *Tai* is an SFP able to apply to declaratives and exclamatives but not to imperatives or interrogatives, as given below<sup>1</sup>:

- (1) a. *t'a tsoŋtē tsai lai ko tai.* (declarative: ✓)  
she yesterday just come EXP SFP  
'She just came yesterday.'
- b. *t'a tsənti tɛ 'yn tə sɿ tai!* (exclamative: ✓)  
he really stupid PM die SFP  
'He is really incurably stupid!'
- c. *ŋi mo tɛin-lai (\*tai).* (imperative: ✗)  
you do.not come-in SFP  
Intended: 'Don't come in.'
- d. *ŋi zəntə t'a po/\*tai?* (interrogative: ✗)  
you know she SFP/SFP  
Intended: 'Do you know her?'

The study will present linguistic evidence showing that *tai* is a particle that encodes complex speech acts. On the one hand, it expresses the speaker's high degree of certainty about the truth value of the associated proposition *p*; on the other hand, it seeks the addressee's confirmation, via an implicitly encoded biased question, on the

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in the abstract are as follows: EXP = experiential aspectual marker *ko* in the Changsha dialect; PM = postverbal resultative/degree marker *tə* in the Changsha dialect; SFP = sentence final particle.

truth value of  $p$ . Drawing on the idea that the highest syntactic domain of the clause bears a speech-act-related function and plays a role in encoding the discursive interaction between the speaker and the addressee (Haegeman and Hill 2013; Lam 2014; Wiltschko 2014; Tang 2015; Heim et al. 2016; Wiltschko and Heim 2016; Tang 2020; Heim and Wiltschko 2020), the present study adopts a syntax-discourse interface approach to the syntax of *tai*. The study decomposes the complex speech acts *tai* into two functional projections at the structural level, one related to the speaker's commitment to the utterance and the other responsible for the speaker's call on the addressee to confirm. It is shown that *tai* represents a new type of grammatical strategy for expressing complex speech acts, that is, to encode the speaker's commitment and the addressee's engagement via a single lexical item without a rising intonation. The proposed formal analysis not only offers a straightforward explanation for the syntax-discourse properties of *tai*, but also receives robust empirical support across languages.

**Keywords:** Complex speech acts; Sentence final particle; Speaker's commitment; Call on addressee; Syntax-discourse interface.