

Research Article

The Use of Chinese Discourse Marker “啊”(AH) of Men and Women in Sitcom “IPARTMENT”

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Abstract

Discourse markers typically appear in daily life conversations, and the use of discourse markers of men and women is different depending on language use. The purpose of this study was to investigate functions of the discourse marker “Ah”, which appeared in the sitcom IPartment. The data were analyzed using the perspectives of gender and language use. The findings indicated that the discourse marker “Ah” appeared in the sitcom had various functions. The indicator "Ah" emphasized the sentences at the initial position, led to correction on wrong or unexpectedly sent messages, smoothened the sentences, stressed the whole sentences, provided examples, attracted the audiences, responded to situations, and showed responses. In addition, both men and women most frequently used “Ah” as emphasizing the sentences at the initial position. There was a total of 203 occurrences of “Ah” discourse markers used by male characters and a total of 89 occurrences of “Ah” discourse markers used by female characters. The findings indicated that the male characters used “Ah” more frequently than the female characters did.

Keywords: Chinese Discourse Marker “Ah”, Men, Women

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Introduction

The language used in daily life conversations can be different or similar depending on contexts or factors. Societies define appropriate roles of men and women and the different gender roles influence male and female behaviors, including their language use (Gradol & Swann, 1989). ‘Gender’ can be a social characteristic influencing the use of language between men and women. Males and females generally have differences in their language use according to a society they are in (Prasithrathsint, 2013). This research aimed to study the use of a discourse marker in the daily conversations in a Chinese sitcom entitled ‘IPARTMENT’. This research adopted Schiffrin’s (1987) theoretical framework to analyze functions of discourse markers through conversational coherence in different structures demonstrating the relationship between speakers and listeners, semantics, and information state. The language use of sitcom characters was also analyzed, based upon the language use concepts of previous studies (Gradol & Swann, 1989; Prasithrathsint, 2013), and the gender roles concept of a researcher’s study (Sooksaeng, 2010, p.22). In this study, the use of the discourse marker “AH” (啊) between male and female characters in the sitcom was investigated to identify the discourse marker’s functions and differences or similarities of the discourse marker usage between male and female characters.

Research Objective

The objective of this study was to investigate the use of the discourse marker “AH” (啊) between male and female characters.

Research Method

1. Literature related to the functions of discourse markers and the use of language between men and women was surveyed and reviewed.

2. The scope and population of the study were defined. The study was to investigate the fifth season of the Chinese sitcom IPARTMENT with 35 episodes, aired in 2020. The sitcom comprised 327, 297 words.

3. The use of the discourse marker “AH” (啊) between the male and female characters in the sitcom was analyzed and then the findings were described.

4. The findings were summarized and discussed.

Definitions

1. Discourse markers are a form of language use and they indicate the relationship to contexts of discourse- level communication. Discourse markers also play an important role as word, phrase, or sentence connectors in certain contexts. In terms of syntax, discourse markers are independent elements and they can be omitted without change in the meaning of sentences, phrases, or discourse markers. Typically, discourse markers appear in an initial position of clauses (Schiffirin, 1987). In phonetics, there are typically pauses before and after discourse markers and the utterance of the discourse markers change at different pitch range levels, either long or short. (Brinton, 1996; Han Geling, 2008). In terms of semantics, since discourse markers are independent, they are not a part of meanings of communication (Hölker, 1991; Brinton, 1996; Liu Liyan, 2005). In pragmatics terms, discourse markers have various functions (Brinton, 1996; Han Geling, 2008). In addition, the study regarding the use and contexts of discourse markers also demonstrated that discourse markers appeared with high frequency in communication (Brinton, 1996), especially spoken or informal (Brinton, 1996).

2. Roles of men and women or gender roles are the appropriate forms of behaviors expected of men and women by society. Gender roles are changeable, based on societies, cultures, and environments, such as a personal social status, a person’s education, local cultures, and a person’s lifetime or lifespan (Sooksaeng, 2010, p.22).

In the Chinese sitcom IPARTMENT, the roles of male and female characters are as follows:

Table 1 Roles of male and female characters in the IPARTMENT sitcom

Gender	Character Names	Character Roles
Male	Zeng Xiaoxian	A radio talk show host who seems unsuccessful in his career. He is Hu Yifei’s husband and he is about 30-35 years.
	Lü Ziqiao	He used to be a playboy and unemployed. He is good- looking but poorly educated. He is a freelancer doing all sorts of tasks. He is Meijia’s husband and he is around 30-35 years.

Gender	Character Names	Character Roles
	Zhao Haitang	He is a university student and he is from a rich family. He admires a senior graduate student Zhuge Dali. He is around 20-25 years.
	Zhang Wei	He grew up in an orphanage. Now, he is a lawyer and he is quite stingy. He is Zhuge Dali's boyfriend. He is around 30-35 years.
Female	Hu Yifei	She is an Associate Professor and university lecturer. She is Zeng Xiaoxian's wife and she is around 30-35 years.
	Zhugue Dali	She is a master's degree student. She is smart and intelligent. She is from a wealthy family. She is Zhang Wei's girlfriend and she is around 20-25 years.
	Meijia	She is a mother of one child and she is Lü Ziqiao's wife. She is poorly educated and she is around 30-35 years.
	Ga Lijiang	She is a teenage girl who graduated from high school. She had a part-time job on a TV show of a massive food eating contest. Now, she is a secretary at Zhang Wei's law office. She is around 18-20 years.

Result/Finding

The findings of this study investigating the Chinese discourse marker “AH” (啊) used by the male and female characters in the IPARTMENT sitcom indicated that the discourse marker's functions were categorized into two functions. Firstly, “AH” (啊) functioned as a modal particle and secondly, it functioned as a discourse marker. The modal particle appeared at the end of sentences and expressing a speakers' feelings. It was not independent; therefore, it was not categorized as a

discourse marker in this study. (As shown in Example 1).

(1) 胡一菲：你能活到今天真的是很励志啊。

Hu Yifei: It's a miracle for you to make it to this day, ah.

IPARTMENT Episode 15: The Ultimate Survival Instinct Test

Example (1). Ga Lijiang was deceived into signing an unfair contract. She has to work hard to pay off the debts from signing the contract. Hu Yifei gave her opinion about this matter. “AH” (啊) was uttered at the end of the sentence, expressing the speaker's tone of voice. The particle was not an independent unit and it was not classified as a discourse marker.

Meanwhile, the functions of “AH” (啊) used by the male and female characters in the sitcom are as follows:

1. “AH”(啊) is used to emphasize the sentences in an initial position

“AH” (啊) emphasizes sentences in an initial position. The discourse marker appears after words/phrases at the beginning of sentences to give emphasis to the sentences and to claim the attention of hearers. A pause occurs after “AH” (啊) and the discourse marker marks the starting of utterances. A total of 103 “AH” (啊) discourse markers were used to emphasize the sentence-initial position by male characters and a total of 31 were used by female characters. Examples (2) and (3) show the function of “AH” (啊) as the emphasis of the sentences in an initial position.

(2) 张伟：大力啊，总之这把椅子，我不能要，你退了吧。

Zhang Wei: Dali, ah. Anyway, I can't really accept the chair. Please return it.

IPARTMENT Episode 6: The Matchmaker's Curse

Example (2). Dali, Zhang Wei's girlfriend, bought an office chair for Zhang Wei. The male character Zhang Wei used “AH” (啊) after the name of his girlfriend Dali in order to emphasize the topic of the conversation and to attract the attention of Dali, the hearer, to listen to what Zhang Wei is going to say.

- (3) 咖喱酱：大叔啊，你这么一个人，
怎么有这么多东西要搬啊。

Ga Lijiang: Uncle, *ah*. How could a guy have so many things to move?

IPARTMENT Episode 4: The Appearance of Zhao Haitang

Example (3). Lü Ziqiao is moving to a new room. Ga Lijiang comes to help him. As shown by the example, the female character Ga Lijiang used “AH” (啊) after the word “uncle” (大叔), which the female character used to call the male character Lü Ziqiao. In this sentence, the discourse marker “AH” (啊) was used to emphasize the topic and to direct the hearer’s attention to what the speaker is going to say.

2. “AH”(啊) is used to signal correction of wrong or unexpectedly sent messages

“AH” (啊) signals correction of messages conveyed wrongly or sent unexpectedly. This discourse marker is an independent unit. A pause occurs before and after the discourse marker. The discourse marker is typically followed by interjection and negative words such as “pēi!” (呸!) which means to spit, “búshì” (不是) which means to be not, and “búduì” (不对) which means to be wrong or incorrect. These words are followed by an explanation or a correct message conveyed by a speaker. A total of 22 “AH” (啊) discourse markers were used by male characters and a total of eight were used by female characters. Examples (4) and (5) show the function of “AH” (啊) as the signal of correction of wrong or unexpectedly sent messages.

- (4) 诸葛大力：做律师还兼职闪送，
你很缺钱吗？

Zhuge Dali: As a lawyer, you also work as a part-time flash deliverer.
Are you short of money?

张伟：我可缺钱了，啊，呸，
不是，现在不是讨论钱的时候，我我我刚才看到一个女孩翻到了栏杆外面，
我一走神才碰到了你。

Zhang Wei: I’m short of money, *ah*, Now is not the time to discuss money. I., I., I just saw a girl rolling over the railing. I ran into you as I was

absent-minded.

IPARTMENT Episode 1: Next Stage in Life

Example (4). Zhang Wei met Zhuge Dali for the first time because Zhuge Dali was hit by Zhang Wei’s bike. They talked to each other. Zhang Wei told Zhuge Dali that he was a lawyer and he was in a hurry to return home because he forgot an important document to be sent to a customer. In the conversation, the male character Zhang Wei used “AH” (啊) to signal a correction of the unexpectedly conveyed message “I really need money” and this message was followed by another message “I saw a girl standing outside the swamp fence when I ran into you”, which was intended to explain to the listener.

- (5) 咖喱酱：啊，不是，不是，不是，
你看起来不年轻。

Ga Lijiang: *Ah*. No, No, No. You look not so young.

IPARTMENT Episode 10: Grassy Desk

Example (5). Ga Lijiang was trying to please an aunt, who is Zhang Wei’s customer, by complimenting her, but Ga Lijiang still used wrong words to compliment the aunt. As shown by this example, the female character Ga Lijiang used “AH” (啊) to signal correction of her previous message unexpectedly said that the aunt looked old. The discourse marker was followed by the negative words showing that Ga Lijiang did not mean to say that. However, the female character still conveyed the wrong message to the aunt that “*You look not so young.*”

3. “AH”(啊) is used to create textual coherence

“AH” (啊) creates coherence of texts. The discourse marker is independent and a pause occurs before and after the discourse marker. A speaker uses “AH” (啊) to make texts flow smoothly. A total of five “AH” (啊) discourse markers were used by male characters and a total of eight were used by female characters. Examples (6) and (7) illustrate that “AH” (啊) is used to create coherence of texts.

- (6)张伟：尊敬的各位，尊敬的各位
长辈，各位亲朋，**啊**，
今天我们齐聚一堂，共同
见证两位新人的甜蜜时刻。

Zhang Wei: Distinguished guests and
dear friends, **ah**, we
gather here today to
witness a sweet moment
of the couple who are our
best friends.

IPARTMENT Episode 36: The End

Example (6) Zhang Wei was the host of Zeng Xiaoxian and Hu Yifei's wedding. As shown by the example, Zhang Wei used "AH" (啊) to separate the sentences and make the sentences run smoothly. "AH" (啊) also helps a speaker to have time to think of what to say next and makes a conversation run smoothly.

- (7)胡一菲：哎呀，好了，你永远是我
最聪明的学生，**啊**，别蒸了，
睡会儿吧。

Hu Yifei: Well, you'll always be my smartest
student, **ah**, stop saying in it. Have
some rest.

IPARTMENT Episode 32: The Travel of True Love

Example (7). Zhuge Dali would participate in a national intelligence competition but unfortunately, she caught a cold, causing dizziness. The example shows that the female character Hu Yifei used "AH" (啊) to separate the sentences and it was used as a filler to create a smooth flow of the sentences until the end of the conversation.

4. "AH" (啊) is used to emphasize an entire message

"AH" (啊) emphasizes an entire message and appears after a speakers' message or in the final position of a turn. The discourse marker is independent. A total of nine "AH" (啊) discourse markers were used by male characters and a total of seven were used by female characters. Examples (8) and (9) show the function of "AH" (啊) as the emphasis of an entire message.

- (8) 张伟：喂，王总您放心，两千万的案子
包在我身上，**啊**。

Zhang Wei: Hello, Mr. Wang. Rest assured. I'll
handle your 20-million-yuan case,

ah.

IPARTMENT Episode 2: A Miracle of Dali

Example (8). Zhang Wei pretended to speak to a client on the phone. The male character Zhang Wei used the discourse marker "AH" (啊) at the end of the sentence to emphasize the whole message and it helped build listeners' confidence with the speaker's ability to handle the "20-million-yuan case".

- (9)美嘉：诶，我答应过小黑，帮他保守
秘密，你们千万不能说出去啊，
啊！

Meijia: Hey, I promised Xiaohei to keep it a
secret. So, please make sure you don't
spill it out, **ah**.

IPARTMENT Episode 4: The Appearance of Zhao Haitang

Example (9). Meijia knew a secret of her apartment neighbor Xiaohei. Xiaohei's mother gave birth to septuplets. The example shows that Meijia used "AH" (啊) at the end of the sentence to emphasize the entire message stressing the importance of keeping the neighbor's secret.

5. "AH" (啊) is used to give examples

"AH" (啊) is used to give examples and it appears at the end of phrases mentioned by a speaker. Typically, the discourse marker is used after two or more phrases. A speaker gives the first example and then pauses before giving another example. A total of two "AH" (啊) discourse markers were used by male and female characters as shown by examples (10) and (11).

- (10) 张伟：那些明星都在干嘛呀，赶紧官宣
啊，绯闻**啊**，救我于水火之中啊。

Zhang Wei: What are all those stars doing?
Make some announcements, **ah**,
gossips **ah**, save me from all the
madness.

IPARTMENT Episode 22: A Good Show

Example (10). Zhang Wei was disgraced by Ga Lijiang, a competitor in an Internet idol contest, with fake news and rumors. In the example, Zhang Wei used “AH” (啊) to give the two examples. Zhang Wei was in trouble and he hoped that the stars would make some announcements and gossips to help cover up Zhang Wei’s fake news and rumors.

(11) 美嘉：虽然好看不能当饭吃，但是多看看小帅哥啊，小鲜肉啊，心情就是愉悦。

Meijia: The good-looking can’t feed your stomach but looking at handsome guys, *ah*, young guys, *ah*, makes you happy.

IPARTMENT Episode 12: Average-Looking Glasses

Example (11). Meijia was wearing the invented glasses which make everyone look alike Zhang Wei and it made Meijia feel disgusted. The example shows that Meijia used “AH” (啊) to give the examples and to make the sentence flow.

6. “AH”(啊) is used to attract audiences

“AH” (啊) appears in a turn-initial position and it is independent. A speaker utters the discourse marker “AH” (啊) in a louder voice to attract the hearer’s attention. A total of seven “AH” (啊) discourse markers were used by male characters and a total of three were used by female characters. Examples (12) and (13) show the use of “AH” (啊) to attract audiences.

(12) 赵海棠：叔叔阿姨们好，我叫海棠，我奶奶过世得早，我爷爷一直一个人过，没有什么朋友，不过今天能认识叔叔阿姨们这样的朋友，我们都很开心。

Zhao Haitang: Hello. My name’s Haitang. My grandma died early and my grandpa has been living alone without many friends. We’re so happy that he can make friends with you today.

牛叔叔：你老伴走啦，一个人过，肯定不容易吧。

Uncle Niu: Your wife died. Life must be hard for you.

马阿姨：怪不得腰腿都不好，一个人辛苦啊。

Aunt Mah: No wonder you’re in bad health. It’s hard to live on your own.

赵海棠：啊，对，我爷爷刚查出了帕金森早期症状，记性不太好。

Zhao Haitang: *Ah*, yes, my grandpa has just been diagnosed with an early stage of Parkinson’s. He has a bad memory.

IPARTMENT Episode 26: The Family of Lawyers

Example (12). Zhao Haitang disguised himself as Zhang Wei’s nephew. Meanwhile, Zhang Wei disguised himself as an old man to investigate a case. The male character Zhao Haitang used “AH” (啊) to attract the attention of Uncle Niu and Aunt Mah who felt sympathetic to the bad health of Zhang Wei.

(13) 美嘉：啊，为什么我跟子乔的姻缘指数只有20%，不行，我也要充值。

Meijia: *Ah*, why is my marriage index with Ziqiao only 20%? No, I want to recharge it, too.

IPARTMENT Episode 6: The Matchmaker’s Curse

Example (13). Meijia was using a mobile application to check her marriage compatibility with Lü Ziqiao. The example shows that Meijia used “AH” (啊) to draw her friend’s attention to listen to her result of marriage compatibility which did not seem good.

7. “AH”(啊) is used to respond to situations

“AH” (啊) is used to show speakers’ responses to situations such as doubtful and shocking. The discourse marker appears in a turn-initial position and it is independent. A speaker utters “AH” (啊) naturally. It is not uttered in a louder voice to attract audiences. A total of 45

“AH” (啊) discourse markers were used by male characters and a total of 17 were used by female characters. Examples (14) and (15) show the use of “AH” (啊) in different situations.

(14) 诸葛大力：不，当然是你和子乔。

Zhuge Dali: No, it's you and Ziqiao.

吕子乔：啊？

Lü Ziqiao: Ah?

IPARTMENT Episode 11: Cheer for You

Example (14). Zhuge Dali, Zhang Wei, and Lü Ziqiao were talking about a three-legged race for couples. As shown by the example, the male character Lü Ziqiao was shocked that he and Zhang Wei had to join the race as Zhuge Dali said.

(15) 诸葛大力：应该是坏了，报修吧。

Zhuge Dali: It should be broken. Just call for repair.

美嘉：啊？小花，打电话给售后，小花。

Meijia: Ah? Xiao Hua, call the after-sales service, Xiao Hua.

IPARTMENT Episode 30: I Have a Date with AI

Example (15) The AI robot named Xiao Hua was broken because Meijia's child spat on it. In the example, the female character Meijia used “AH” (啊) to express she was shocked that her AI robot was probably broken as Zhuge Dali said.

8. “AH” (啊) is used to show responses to another speaker

“AH” (啊) is used to respond to another speaker. The discourse marker can occur alone. It is independent and can occur after a word. A total of ten “AH” (啊) discourse markers were used by male characters and a total of 13 were used by female characters. Examples (16) and (17) show the use of “AH” (啊) to show responses to another speaker.

(16) 美嘉：诶，爱情公寓的房子，不是只租

不卖的吗？

Meijia: Eh, I thought the rooms in IPARTMENT are just for rent, not for sale?

吕子乔：啊。

Lü Ziqiao: Ah.

IPARTMENT Episode 2: A Miracle of Dali

Example (16). Hu Yifei together with Meijia, Lü Ziqiao, and Zhang Wei had a look at the new room which Hu Yifei just bought at IPARTMENT. The example shows that the male character Lü Ziqiao used “AH” (啊) to respond to what Meijia said.

(17) 快递员：（敲门）胡一菲在吗？

Delivery Man: (Door knocking) Is Hu Yifei here?

胡一菲：啊，在。

Hu Yifei: Ah, yes.

IPARTMENT Episode 2: A Miracle of Dali

Example (17). A delivery man arrived at Hu Yifei's room and sent her a package. As shown by the example, the female character Hu Yifei used “AH” (啊) to respond to a delivery man.

After exploring the use of the discourse marker “AH” (啊) among the male and female characters in the Chinese sitcom IPARTMENT, the results illustrated that “AH” (啊) performed various functions: emphasizing the sentences in an initial position, signaling correction of wrong or unexpectedly sent messages, creating textual coherence, emphasizing an entire message, giving examples, attracting audiences, responding to situations, and showing responses to another speaker. With regard to the number of “AH” (啊) usage in the sitcom, male characters were found to use more discourse markers than female characters.

Discussion

There is the difference in the language use between men and women. Gender roles can also be a social characteristic influencing the use of language of men and women. Moreover, the use of language between males and females can also be different according to the society, culture, and environment they are in. The IPARTMENT sitcom is the story happening in Shanghai, a metropolitan city with prosperity and cultural diversity. Shanghai, in fact, is one of most important cities in China as it is a free-trade port city and attracts foreigners, which have had great influences on the city. The characters in the sitcom are new-generation people of different ages and they grew up in a gender-equal society. The roles of the

sitcom's female characters are defined to represent the Chinese women's current roles including achieving higher education, having the same rights as men, living on their own, and having freedom of thought (Amnathanakul, 2019, p. 74). The language used by the Chinese female characters in the sitcom is a reflection of the current Chinese female roles expected by a society. The findings demonstrated that the discourse marker “AH” (啊) used by the male and female characters in this sitcom performed the same functions. However, the number of “AH” (啊) discourse markers used by the male and female characters were apparently different. The male characters in the sitcom were found to use more discourse markers than the female characters. The findings are consistent with the research of Gradol & Swann (1989), who studied the language use of males and females, and the study of Prasithrathsint (2013), who indicated the differences of language use of male and female speakers.

Based on function analysis, the male characters used “AH” (啊) more frequently than females for the following functions: emphasizing the sentences in an initial position, signaling correction of wrong or unexpectedly sent messages, emphasizing an entire message, attracting audiences, and responding to situations. Meanwhile, the female characters used “AH” (啊) more frequently than the male characters in the following functions: emphasizing the sentences in an initial position, creating textual coherence and showing responses to another speaker. The number of “AH” (啊) markers used between the male and female characters to give examples was the same. In terms of the function of a marker in showing responses to situations, the male characters used discourse markers more than the female characters and this finding was not inconsistent with the finding of Zhao Rongjun (2003, p. 140), showing that females used numerous interjections compared to men. However, the findings of this study demonstrated that the male characters used more “AH” (啊) discourse markers, which performed the similar function as interjections to respond to situations than the female characters. As a result, the discourse marker “AH” (啊) was used by the male and female characters in similar or different ways. The similarities and differences of the discourse marker usage are the reflection of the language used by the present-day Chinese society.

Suggestion

The analysis of the discourse marker “AH” (啊) used by the male and female characters in the IPARTMENT sitcom was based on the perspective of the language use between men and women. The findings from this study can be guidance for those who have an interest in the language use of males and females or discourse markers. The findings from this study, moreover, may also be helpful for those who teach or learn Chinese. The suggestions for future research are to study discourse markers which have the same function as “AH” (啊) in other languages and compare the discourse marker use between males and females.

Conclusion

Discourse markers are a form of language use and they are mostly used in informal conversations. This research studied the discourse marker “AH” (啊) which was used by various characters in the IPARTMENT sitcom in which dialogues or conversations are generally used in daily life and informal settings. The discourse marker appearing in the IPARTMENT sitcom was found to perform several functions in accordance with the sitcom context and they are classified into different functions: emphasizing the sentences in an initial position, signaling correction of wrong or unexpectedly sent messages, creating textual coherence, emphasizing an entire message, giving examples, attracting audiences, responding to situations, and showing responses to another speaker. In terms of the number of the “AH” (啊) discourse markers used by male and female characters in the sitcom, the male characters used significantly more discourse markers in various functions than the female characters. “AH” (啊), which emphasized the sentences in an initial position, was used the most frequently by both male and female characters in the sitcom. The key factor influencing the use of “AH” (啊) similarly or differently by male and female characters in the sitcom is the changing gender role in Chinese society. This research studying the discourse marker, therefore, can reflect the language usage of males and females and gender roles of men and women in today's Chinese society.

Table 2 The number of “AH” (啊) used by male and female characters in different functions

Gender/ Function	Emphasizing sentence-initial position	Signaling message correction	Creating textual coherence	Emphasizing entire messages	Giving examples	Attracting audiences	Showing responses to situations	Responding to another speaker	Total
Male	103	22	5	9	2	7	45	10	203
Female	31	8	8	7	2	3	17	13	89
Total	134	30	13	16	4	10	62	23	292

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