

## Translating the Chinese Modal Particle 吧 (a)

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### Abstract

The Chinese language has many modal particles, which often appear at the end of a sentence, hence also known as sentence-final particles. Such particles have specific functions and carry implied meanings in different contexts. However, modal particles are generally considered not existing in English, so their translation from Chinese into English presents a challenge for translators. This study focuses on the English translation of the Chinese modal particle 吧 (a) in sentence-final positions based on examples from three Chinese movies. The translated subtitles with the modal particle 吧 (a) are categorised into four types of sentences – namely, declarative, interrogative, exclamative and imperative. The examples are analysed within the framework of Nida's functional equivalence theory by comparing the modal particle's functions and meanings in the source and target texts. It was found that omission, explicitation and linguistic amplification are the three strategies used for rendering this modal particle, while omission is the dominant strategy. Though acceptable in many cases, omission may lead to the loss of functions or implied meanings. The findings suggest that translators should rely on an analysis of the context to decide which strategy is most appropriate to convey the function and implied meaning of 吧 (a).

**Keywords:** Modal particle, Sentence-final particle, Functional equivalence, 吧 (a)

## 1. Introduction

语气词 (*yuqici*), known as modal particles (MPs), refer to the function words that indicate speakers' attitudinal and emotive tone, and usually occur at the end of a sentence or before a pause within a sentence (Institute of Linguistics CASS 2012: 1591). When appearing in sentence-final positions, they are also referred to as sentence-final particles (SFPs). Chao (1968: 797-812) has identified twenty-six MPs in Chinese Mandarin. MPs are complex in not only their syntactical distributions but also their modality functions and implied meanings. Scholars agree that MPs are essential and effective in conveying speakers' emotions and moods in people's everyday speech, particularly in spoken dialogues (e.g. Lee-Wong 1998; Winters 2009; Y. X. Wang 2013; Luo and Wu 2017).

The use of MPs is a feature of Chinese Mandarin, whereas English is traditionally regarded as a language without MPs. This lexical gap leads to some difficulties in Chinese-English translation. Translators face issues such as whether the Chinese Mandarin MPs should be translated, and if so, how to convey the modality functions and implied meanings appropriately. For example, the Chinese question “这个啊? (*Zhege a?*)” can be simply rendered as “This one?” without translating the SFP “啊(*a*)”. However, the SFP indicates that the speaker is uncertain, and is thus asking for confirmation (Chao 1968: 804). Therefore, another possible translation of this question is “This one, you mean?”, which makes the implied meaning explicit.

Nida's functional equivalence theory is particularly relevant when studying the translation of modal particles, because their functions and implied meanings in the source text, if not conveyed appropriately, may be lost or changed. According to the review of the literature, very few studies on translating the SFP 啊 (*a*) from this theoretical perspective have been found. This paper is therefore designed to investigate the translation of 啊 (*a*) in sentence-final positions within the framework of Nida's functional equivalence theory, based on examples from three Chinese movies – namely, 梅兰芳 (*Mei Lanfang*, or *Forever Enthralled*), 山楂树之恋 (*Shanzhashu Zhi Lian*, or *Under the Hawthorn Tree*) and 非诚勿扰 (*Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, or *If You are the One*), because movies contain a lot of dialogues comprising modal particles, and no research has been conducted on the usage of modal particles in movies.

This paper will address the following questions:

1. What techniques have been used to translate the SFP 啊 (*a*)?
2. What effects have such translations achieved in terms of modality functions (i.e. tones) and implied meanings from the perspective of functional equivalence?
3. Is there a more appropriate way to translate the SFP 啊 (*a*) in order to accurately convey its modality functions and implied meanings?

The paper includes the following sections: introduction, literature review, materials and research methods, data analysis and discussion, and conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

The review of literature consists of three parts, i.e. an overview of MPs in Chinese Mandarin and English; features and modality functions of the SFP 啊 (a); and an overview of studies on translation of SFPs, functional equivalence theory and its implications.

### 2.1 An Overview of MPs in Chinese Mandarin and English

Modal particles (MPs), known as 语气词 (*yuqi ci*, literally meaning “mood word(s)”) and 语气助词 (*yuqi zhuci*, literally meaning “mood helping word(s)”) in Chinese Mandarin, refer to words that indicate speakers’ attitudinal and emotive tone, and usually occur at the end of a sentence or before a pause within a sentence (Institute of Linguistics CASS 2012: 1591). Other terms such as “sentence particles”, “modal final particles”, “utterance particles” and “utterance-final particles” have also been used by researchers (e.g. Li and Thompson 1981; Tsee 1986; Luke 1990; Chappell 1991; Lee-Wong 1998). Since the particles addressed in this paper only occur in sentence-final positions, “sentence-final particle (SFP)” is used to refer to “modal particle”.

Chinese Mandarin is replete with SFPs. Chao (1968: 797-812) lists 26 forms of particles, including 17 single particles—的(*de*), 了(*le*), 咧(*lie*), 吗(*ma*), 么(*me*), 呐/呢(*ne/ne*), 呐/哩(*na/li*), 啊(*a*), 诶(*ei*), 罢(*ba*), 吧(*ba*), 呕(*ou*), 煞(*sha*), 看(*kan*), 来(*lai*), 去(*qu*) and 来(*lai*)—and eight compound particles—的呐(*dene*), 着呐(*zhene*), 来着(*laizhe*), 似的(*shide*), 罢了(*bale*), 就是了(*jiushile*), 得了(*dele*), 的话(*dehua*), 的时候(*deshihou*), and 不是吗(*bushima*). Scholars agree that using SFPs is the most important and common way of expressing modality in Chinese Mandarin, particularly in spoken dialogues (Chao 1926). In general, researchers (e.g. Lee-Wong 1998; Lu 2005; Winters 2009; Y. X. Wang 2013; Luo and Wu 2017) agree that SFPs have the following three linguistic properties:

1. SFPs are atonal or unstressed in tone;
2. SFPs are bound morphemes, i.e. they cannot occur by themselves or serve as answers to questions alone; rather, they must be attached to a sentence or phrase;
3. SFPs have no denotations, i.e. truth-conditional meanings, and thus do not influence the truth condition of sentences.

Scholars have proposed different ways to categorise SFPs. The most recent and well-recognised one referred to in most Chinese grammar books (L. Yang 2013) is proposed by Huang and Liao (2002: 45). They suggest that since Chinese sentences can be classified as declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamative in terms of their modality, SFPs can be categorised accordingly:

1. Declarative: 啊(*a*), 吧(*ba*), 呗(*bei*), 的(*de*), 啦(*la*), 了(*le*), 嘞(*lei*), 喽(*lou*), 嘛(*ma*), 呢(*ne*), 着(*zhe*), 罢了(*bale*), 而已(*eryi*), 也罢(*yeba*), 也好(*yehao*), 着呢(*zhene*)
2. Interrogative: 啊(*a*), 吧(*ba*), 呢(*ne*), 吗/么(*ma/me*)

3. Imperative: 啊(a), 吧(ba), 了(le)

4. Exclamative: 啊(a)

It is worth noting that some SFPs may appear in different types of sentences with the same or different modality functions.

In terms of MPs in English, it has generally been believed that English does not have MPs, or that they occur with much lower frequency (Fischer and Heide 2018: 509; Aijmer 2009: 112). Some scholars (e.g. Hoye 1997: 209-212) try to include some modal adverbs, such as “clearly”, “obviously”, “apparently”, “certainly”, “surely”, “only”, and “simply”, as MPs, while other scholars (e.g. Fischer and Heide 2018) have sought to investigate the uses of utterance-final particles such as “then”, “already”, “alright/all right”, “after all”, “indeed” and “just” as MPs. Researchers have attempted to establish a schematic category for interpreting the uses of some English pragmatic markers as MPs, but no productive guidelines have been widely recognized (Fischer and Heide 2018: 532). As such, Heim (1998: 25-26) suggests that when translating modality into English, mere lexical substitution is often insufficient, and that translators need to be more creative in seeking contextual and syntactical equivalences.

## 2.2 Features and Modality Functions of the SFP 啊 (a)

The SFP 啊 (a) is found to be one of the most frequently used SFPs in Chinese (B. Li 2013: 146; Zhu 2021: 40). Pronounced as an unstressed vowel, it is also recognised as relatively complicated in phonetic variants (Chao 1968: 803; Lee-Wong 1998: 387; Y. X. Wang 2013: 8) because it can link freely with the preceding consonants or vowels. It may have different pronunciations, such as *ia* (呀), *ua* (哇), and *na* (哪), depending on the preceding syllables (Y. X. Wang 2013: 8-10; Institute of Linguistics CASS 2012: 2). For the sake of convenience in referencing, only 啊 (a) is used to refer to this SFP and its variants in this paper.

In the following, the review of the usages of 啊 (a) will be presented in relation to declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamative sentences, with the source text in Chinese (ST), the pronunciation in *Pinyin*, a word-for-word translation (WT) and a meaning (M) provided by the author. The SFP is underlined by the author in ST and *Pinyin*, and is italicised and underlined in WT. In M, the meaning indicated by the SFP is italicised.

### 2.2.1 啊 (a) in Declarative Sentences

啊(a) in declarative sentences has different functions (e.g. Chao 1968; Li and Thompson 1981: 313; Han 1988: 28; Y. X. Wang 2013: 113; L. Wang 1985: 228). For instance, it can serve as:

(a) an indicator of “impatience”, usually with the force of “you see or ought to see” (Chao 1968: 805):

Example (1)

ST: 我 并 没 做 错 呀。

*Pinyin*: Wo bing mei zuo cuo ya

WT: I really not do wrong ya

M: *You should see, I did nothing wrong.*

The sentence without 啊 (a) is grammatical, but the emotion is not as strong because it is simply stating an objective fact.

(b) a “reminder” (ibid):

Example (2)

ST: 本来你也知道啊,也不用再说啊...

Pinyin: Benlai ni ye zhidao a, ye buyong zai shuo a

WT: Originally you also know a, also no need again say a

M: *You see, as you already know, and I don't have to say it again...*

Chao provides no elaboration on this example but only explains that it usually has a rising intonation and pronounces as “a” instead of “ya” (ibid).

(c) an indicator of “warning” (ibid):

Example (3)

ST: 这个人的话是靠不住的啊!

Pinyin: Zhege ren de hua shi kaobuzhude a

WT: This person's word be unreliable a

M: This man's word is unreliable, *mind you!*

This sentence without 啊 (a) is also grammatical, but the suggestion of warning is lost.

(d) an intensifier or emphasiser (Han 1988: 28):

Example (4)

ST: 这是他的啊。

Pinyin: Zhe shi tade a

WT: This be his a

M: This is his. *I'm telling you!*

啊 (a) is understood to mean “it is a fact”.

### 2.2.2 啊 (a) in Interrogative Sentences

Interrogative sentences can be divided into five sub-categories: question-word questions, alternative questions, affirmative-negative questions, yes-no questions (also known as declarative-form questions), and rhetorical questions (Y. X. Wang 2013: 21). Rhetorical questions are non-genuine questions that are used not to seek information but to indicate a

positive or negative assertion, while all other types of question are genuine questions that require an answer (ibid., 23).

Most scholars (e.g. Li and Thompson 1968: 313; Institute of Linguistics CASS 2012: 2; Y. H. Liu *et al.* 2004: 412; Chao 1968: 804) attribute a single function to 啊 (a) in all types of interrogative sentences, i.e. a down-toner to soften the tone and suggest politeness.

Example (5)

ST: 谁 呀?

Pinyin: Shui ya?

WT: Who ya

M: Who is there? *Please tell me.*

This question will still be grammatical and interrogative without the SFP, but the tone will be more blunt and impolite.

In yes-no questions, the SFP 啊 (a) works as an interrogative particle to call for confirmation.

Example (6)

ST: 你 说的 是 真话 啊? (Lü *et al.* 1999: 46):

Pinyin: Ni shuode shi zhenhua a

WT: You words said be truth a

M: What you are saying is true, *right?*

### 2.2.3 啊 (a) in Exclamative Sentences

In terms of exclamative sentences, scholars believe that 啊 (a) can work as a sign of exclamation (e.g. Chao 1968; Tiee 1986; Lü *et al.* 1999); soften the tone of exclamation and make it less blunt and more polite (e.g. Lee-Wong 1998; Huang and Liao 2002; Y. H. Liu *et al.* 2004); or intensify the exclamatory mood (e.g. Institute of Linguistics CASS 2012; *Modern Chinese* 1993).

Example (8)

ST: 时间 多 快 呀...

Pinyin: Shijian duo kuai ya

WT: Time how fast ya

M: *Oh!* How time flies!

### 2.2.4 啊 (a) in Imperative Sentences

Many works (e.g. Chao 1968; Y. H. Liu *et al.* 2004; Lü *et al.* 1999; Institute of Linguistics

CASS 2012) take a multi-function view, regarding 啊 (a) in imperative sentences as a marker of “urging”, “reminding”, “commanding”, “requesting”, “warning”, “exhorting” or “persuading”.

Example (7)

ST: 说 呀, 别 害怕 呀! (Chao 1968: 804)

Pinyin: Shuo ya, bie haipa ya

WT: Say ya, don't fear ya

M: *Come on!* Say it! Don't be afraid!

Here, 啊 (a) creates a slightly insistent air, neither too modest nor too impatient (ibid).

In sum, the functions of 啊 (a) may vary in different types of sentences and can be categorised as in Table 1, which echoes Han (1988) and Y. X. Wang (2013).

Table 1. Modality Functions of 啊 (a) in Different Sentence Types

Sentence type	Modality function of 啊 (a)
Declarative	To intensify speaker's emotive tone implied in the statement.
	To indicate speaker's surprise or uncertainty in declarative-form questions.
Interrogative	To intensify speaker's inquisitive mood in seeking confirmation in other types of genuine questions.
	To intensify speaker's surprise at or rejection of the proposition in rhetorical (non-genuine) questions.
Exclamative	To intensify speaker's politeness and heartiness when used in social expressions such as greetings, farewells, apologies, gratitude and assertions.
	To intensify speaker's exclamative tone in other exclamative sentences.
Imperative	To intensify speaker's imperative tone in expecting something to be or not be done.

### 2.3 An Overview of Studies on Translation of SFPs, Functional Equivalence Theory and Its Implications

There have been a limited number of studies on the translation of SFPs from Chinese to English (e.g. H. Y. Shen 2008; J. Shen 2016; X. W. Wang 2015; Xu 2006; X. S. Zhang 2015; Zhao and Miao 2011; L. Li 2017; Y. M. Yang 2019; Ma 2021; Xia, 2020; W. J. Li 2021). Some scholars provide a tentative exploration of the approaches to translating SFPs. For example, Xu (2006) believes that translators can only render SFPs using the method of domestication instead of foreignisation, and puts forward two tactics of adaption: omission and the addition of grammatical elements. J. Shen (2016) suggests that translators should not



be confined to word-for-word translation; rather, they should identify the grammatical metaphor and recapture the mood effects in their translation. L. Li (2017) focuses on the translation of children's literature, briefly showing that some Chinese modal particles can be replaced by English interjections such as "wow" and "ah" to achieve the vividness of language expression. Some other scholars focus on one specific SFP in literary works, particularly 呢(ne) (e.g. Gao 2019; X. W. Wang 2015; X. S. Zhang 2015; H. Y. Shen 2008) and 吧(ba) (Zhao and Miao 2011; Xia 2020; W. J. Li 2021). These studies are mostly conducted from the perspective of domestication and foreignisation (e.g. H. Y. Shen 2008), from the perspective of the pragmatic function of the SFPs (e.g. Xia 2020; W. J. Li 2021), or under the guidance of Halliday's systematic functional linguistics, particularly the interpersonal function (e.g. Ma 2021) and the metaphor of mood (e.g. J. Shen 2016; X. W. Wang 2015; X. S. Zhang 2015). Only one study on translating 啊(a) based on functional equivalence has been found: Y. M. Yang (2021) compares two translated versions of the Chinese play script *Teahouse* and summarises five translation strategies of 啊(a), namely (1) to maintain the sentence type and modality type; (2) to use modal words, adverbs and interjections; (3) to use special English phrases or sentence patterns; (4) to change sentence types; and (5) to use intonation. Although the five translation methods seem comprehensive, some of them are overlapping, for example, using special English sentence patterns can in fact mean the sentence type is changed. In addition, no quantitative analysis is provided to show the frequency and importance of different translation strategies.

The functional equivalence theory, formerly known as "dynamic equivalence", requires that a translation should be "the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message" (Nida 1964: 166) so that "the response of the TT receptors should be essentially like that of the ST receptors (Nida and Taber 1969: 200). In order to best achieve this equivalence, the most important thing for translators is to fully understand the meanings in the source text (ST) (J. Wang *et al.* 2015).

In terms of translating SFPs, attention needs to be paid to the equivalence of "attitudinal/connotative/expressive meaning" which relates language to the speaker's mental state (Hassan 2011: 3-4), because SFPs are function words that indicate speakers' attitudinal and emotive tone. Understanding the implied meaning of the ST is essential, as an SFP may have different implications in different contexts. So from the perspective of functional equivalence, the most critical aspect is to convey the closest attitudinal meaning of the SFP to TT readers. This research is conducted based on this functional equivalence theory.

### 3. Materials and Research Methods

Three Chinese movies were selected as the corpus for this research – 梅兰芳 (*Mei Lanfang*, or *Forever Enthralled*), directed by Chen Kaige, is a biographical film about Mei Lanfang, one of the greatest Peking opera performers in China. 山楂树之恋 (*Shanzhashu Zhi Lian*, or *Under the Hawthorn Tree*), directed by Zhang Yimou, tells the story of the pure and secret love between a young couple in the 1970s; and 非诚勿扰 (*Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, or *If You are the One*), directed by Feng Xiaogang, is a romantic comedy in which a middle-aged bachelor encounters various people on blind dates before he finally finds his "Miss Right". All three directors are well-known internationally and domestically and have won awards for their work. The subtitles of the three movies were translated by Jia Peilin from Shanghai Film Studio, Zhang Mo and Tim Youngs from Shanghai Film Studio, and Chris Barden and Sherrie Liu respectively.



In the research process, all instances of 啊 (a) in sentence-final positions in the three movies were sought out, together with their translations. The examples were categorised into different “functional groups” according to the modality functions of 啊 (a) in the four types of sentences (see Table 1). The number of instances of 啊 (a) in each “functional group” and the number of instances of each translation strategy for 啊 (a) were calculated and presented in percentages where appropriate. Finally, the translation of 啊 (a) in each “functional group” was analysed from the perspective of functional equivalence to illustrate the effects achieved and the functions and implied meanings conveyed, and to investigate possibilities of more appropriate translations.

#### 4. Data Analysis and Discussion

A total of 295 sentences using the SFP 啊 (a) were found, among which four sentences with 啊 (a) in Chinese were omitted in translation, and were therefore not included in the data.

The examples were divided into four groups and seven sub-categories according to 啊 (a)'s functions in the four types of sentences (see Table 1). Among the 291 instances, there are 77 declarative sentences, accounting for 26.46%; 130 interrogative sentences, or 44.67%; 46 exclamative sentences, or 15.81%; and 38 imperative sentences, or 13.06%.

Three strategies are most commonly used to convey the modality functions of the SFP – namely, omission, linguistic amplification and explicitation. Omission means “to suppress a ST information item in the TT” by omitting some of the redundancy and repetition that are characteristic of the ST (Molina and Hurtado Albir 2002: 510). As Chinese Mandarin SFPs do not have direct counterparts in English, sometimes translators omit them and allow the context to imply the speakers' emotions and attitudes (ibid.). Linguistic amplification refers to adding linguistic elements (ibid.), such as verbs, adverbs, adjectives, question tags, clausal phrases, interjections, and even punctuation, in the TT. Explicitation means to introduce information that is implicit in the ST into the TT (ibid.: 500). In terms of MP translation, sometimes a change of sentence subject, a shift between the positive and negative sentence, or a change in sentence type is used to achieve its intended function.

Overall, 212 examples are translated with omission, representing 72.85%; 55 with explicitation, 18.90%; and 24 with linguistic amplification, 8.25%. The detailed numbers (No.) and percentages of the translation strategies in each sub-category are listed in Table 2:

Table 2. Number and Percentage of 啊 (a) in Different Sentence Types and the Translation Strategies

Sentence type	Subcategory	No.	Percentage	Translation strategies					
				Omission		Linguistic amplification		Explicitation	
				No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
Declarative	Declarative	77	26.46%	54	70.13%	10	12.99%	13	16.88%
Interrogative	Declarative-form questions	18	6.18%	9	50.00%	3	16.67%	6	33.33%

	Other genuine questions	77	26.46%	75	97.40%	1	1.30%	1	1.30%
	rhetorical questions	35	12.03%	8	22.86%	0	0%	27	77.14%
	Total	130	44.67%	92	70.77%	4	3.08%	34	26.15%
	Social expressions	7	2.41%	7	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Exclamative	Other exclamative sentences	39	13.40%	28	71.80%	5	12.82%	6	15.38%
	Total	44	15.02%	35	76.09%	5	10.87%	6	13.04%
Imperative	Imperative	38	13.06%	31	81.58%	4	10.53%	3	7.89%
Total		291	100%	212	72.85%	23	7.90%	56	19.25%

While discussing the examples, the author also provides TT – i.e. the target text translation found in the movies, with underlining added to indicate what has been added when linguistic amplification is used, and the name of the movie. The examples will be followed by an analysis and a summary at the end of each section.

It is worth noting that there are often a few different translations for one sentence, all of which may be equally acceptable. This research does not seek to explore all possible translations, but to discuss more appropriate ways of translating sentences containing 啊 (a).

#### 4.1 Translation of 啊 (a) in Declarative Sentences as a Tone-intensifier

In declarative sentences, the SFP 啊 (a) intensifies the speaker's implied emotive tone in the statement (see Table 1). Of the 77 examples, 54 are translated using omission, accounting for 70.13%; 10, or 12.99%, with linguistic amplification; and 13, or 16.88%, with explicitation.

##### (a) Omission

Omission is the most frequently used strategy. When the SFP is omitted, the TT is still understandable; however, the speaker's emotive tone might be weakened in some cases, e.g.

##### Example (9)

ST: 我 是 真心的 啊

Pinyin: wo shi zhenxinde a

WT: I be sincere a

M: I am *truly* sincere, *trust me*.

TT: I am willing.

*(Forever Enthralled)*

The speaker uses 啊 (a) to stress that he is sincere and wants the listener to believe this. However, the TT simply conveys the meaning of the ST without delivering the underlying tone and emotion. As such, the TT audience will understand what the speaker has said, but not feel the tone. A more appropriate translation could be achieved through linguistic amplification by adding adverbs or phrases such as “of course” and “certainly”. It could also be achieved through the capitalisation of “am”: “I AM willing”, in order to express emphasis.

This indicates that, in declarative sentences, when omission is used in translating the SFP, the basic meaning can be conveyed but the underlying tone of 啊 (a) is lost. Omission is therefore not always the most effective strategy to achieve functional equivalence. An in-depth analysis based on the context is necessary in order to ascertain the best strategy.

### (b) Linguistic Amplification

When linguistic amplification is used, what is added in the TT can be a prepositional phrase, clausal phrase, conjunction, or other emphatic adverbs, e.g.

Example (10)

ST: 汤 搁 那儿 了 啊

Pinyin: tang ge nar le a

WT: Soup put there done a

M: I have put soup there; *help yourself*.

TT: There's soup for you.

*(Forever Enthralled)*

On the surface, this sentence is a statement of the fact that the soup is on the table. However, pragmatically, the speaker uses 啊 (a) to remind the listener that he can have the soup if he wants. In the TT, the translator adds the prepositional phrase “for you”, which effectively conveys the implied meaning, whereby functional equivalence is achieved. It is therefore more appropriate to add something, such as “for you” or “help yourself”.

This implies that linguistic amplification is helpful in conveying the emotive tone in the declarative sentence, hence an appropriate strategy.

### (c) Explicitation

Explicitation involves the change of subject or sentence type.

Example (11)

ST: 其实 是 这么 回事 啊

Pinyin: qishi shi zheme huishi a

WT: Actually be this kind of case a

M: Actually, *I think* this is the case.

TT: How's this for a solution?

(*Forever Enthralled*)

In this scene, the speaker, who is inferior to the listeners, is trying to settle an argument between the listeners; 啊 (a) is therefore used to emphasize that the speaker is making a humble suggestion and seeking the listeners' attention. The translator changed a declarative sentence into an interrogative sentence. If the ST is translated by omitting 啊 (a), the TT could be "Actually, this is the case" or "Actually, this is how it goes", both of which are merely statements of fact, which still somehow convey the meaning, but fail to indicate the speaker-listener relationship. The TT, as an interrogative sentence, explicitly conveys the implicit pragmatic meaning of the ST, i.e. making a humble suggestion. The TT audience is therefore able to feel the speaker's real intention more directly. As such, explicitation can help to reveal the implied meaning expressed by the SFP, and is appropriate for translating 啊 (a) in this declarative sentence.

To sum up, in declarative sentences, the SFP 啊 (a) intensifies the speaker's tone. Omission is found to be the most frequently used strategy. As 啊 (a) causes little change to the meaning, omission can be used to create understandable translations in most cases, but it may not effectively convey the intensified tone and emotion of the translated declarative sentence. In contrast, explicitation and linguistic amplification are more likely to reveal the underlying emotions and attitudes conveyed by the SFP.

#### 4.2 Translation of 啊 (a) in Interrogative Sentences

啊 (a) has different functions in different types of interrogative sentences. It may serve as an indicator of surprise or uncertainty in declarative-form questions, an intensifier of an inquisitive mood in other genuine questions, and an intensifier of surprise or rejection in rhetorical questions.

##### 4.2.1 Translation of 啊 (a) as an Indicator of Surprise or Uncertainty in Declarative-form Questions

Of the 18 examples, 9 are translated using omission, representing 50.00%; 3, or 16.67%, with linguistic amplification; and 6, or 33.33%, with explicitation.

###### (a) Omission

Omission is a commonly used strategy, e.g.

Example (12)

ST: 这 就是 你的 秘密 啊

Pinyin: zhe jiushi nide mimi a

WT: This just be your secret a

M: This is your secret? *That's all?*

TT: That's your secret?

*(If You are the One)*

Example (15) appears in a casual conversation where the speaker uses 啊 (a) to express her surprise about what the listener has said. The translators use a declarative question to render the ST, which has effectively conveyed the sense of informality and uncertainty. It is worth noting that all 9 examples using omission in translations are translated into declarative-form questions. This translation technique effectively achieves functional equivalence between the TT and the ST because declarative-form questions in English, similar to their Chinese counterparts, are usually used in informal conversations to express the uncertainty and surprise of the speaker (Gunlogson 2002). As such, omission is an appropriate strategy. Nevertheless, it is also possible to translate the sentence using linguistic amplification, e.g. “This is your secret? That's all?”; or using explicitation, “Are you kidding me?”. In both cases, the speaker's tone of surprise can also be conveyed.

#### (b) Linguistic amplification

Linguistic amplification is the least commonly used translation strategy.

Example (13)

ST: 辞职 的 事 您 都 敢 干 啊

Pinyin: cizhi de shi nin dou gan gan a

WT: Resignation alike thing you even dare do a

M: You even dared do something like quitting your job? *I can't believe it.*

TT: Did you really throw away your career?

*(Forever Enthralled)*

The speaker aims to demonstrate that he is shocked at what the listener has done. The use of 啊 (a) highlights his astonishment. In the TT, the adverb “really” is added to the sentence to convey the speaker's feelings of doubt and surprise. If omission is used, possible translations could be “You even dared quit your job?” or “Did you even quit your job?”. Although these translations can also reveal the shock and disbelief of the speaker, given that the listener is the speaker's uncle, such expressions do not sound polite enough.

#### (c) Explicitation

Explicitation is another possible strategy. The following sentence demonstrates the change of subject:

Example (14)

ST: 去 这么 长 时间 啊

Pinyin: qu zheme chang shijian a

WT: Go this much long time a

M: *I cannot believe you went for such a long time. Why?*

TT: What took you so long?

*(Under the Hawthorn Tree)*

The speaker says this in a rising tone, which makes the sentence a declarative-form question. The SFP 啊 (a) serves to indicate that she did not expect the listener to be away for such a long time and she is uncertain about the reasons for this. So, in addition to expressing surprise, the sentence also hints that she is asking for an explanation. By changing the subject and making the implied meaning explicit, the TT has helped to reveal the underlying meaning and emotive tone of the ST. Explicitation is therefore appropriate for translating 啊 (a) in this sentence.

#### 4.2.2 Translation of 啊 (a) as an Intensifier of Inquisitive Mood in Other Genuine Questions

Of the 77 examples, 75 are translated using omission, accounting for 97.40% of the total; 1 with linguistic amplification and 1 with explicitation, each accounting for 1.30%.

##### (a) Omission

Omission is the predominant strategy used to translate 啊 (a) in other forms of genuine questions.

Example (15)

ST: 他们 说 什么 啊

Pinyin: tamen shuo shenme a

WT: They say what a

M: What did they say?

TT: What did they say?

*(If You are the One)*

The speaker is asking about the meaning of something that has been said. This is a genuine question, and the use of 啊 (a) highlights the querying tone. A wh-question would be effective enough to convey the meaning and tone of the ST. As 啊 (a) in genuine questions works as a tone-intensifier and the tone of interrogation is embedded in genuine questions, omission is an appropriate strategy in this case.

##### (b) Linguistic amplification

Only one example of linguistic amplification is found in this group.

Example (16)

ST:	醉酒	是	什么	戏	呀,	啊?
Pinyin:	zuijiu	shi	shenme	xi	ya,	a?
WT:	The Drunken (Beauty)	be	what	opera	a,	a (interjection)?
M:	What is the <i>Drunken Beauty</i> about, <i>you tell me?!</i>					
TT:	<u>Do you know</u> what this scene depicts?					
	<i>(Forever Enthralled)</i>					

The speaker utters this sentence in anger, so he uses the SFP and the interjection to intensify his tone. By adding “do you know” in the TT, the translator allows the audience to see that the speaker is not simply asking about the opera; rather, and more importantly, he is questioning whether the listener understands the opera at all. The strong attitudinal tones of the original sentence are reflected in the added phrase, making the TT functionally equivalent to the ST. Nevertheless, the emotive tone of anger may be more closely reflected with the addition of phrases such as “on earth”—“Do you know what on earth this scene depicts?” Linguistic amplification is appropriate, though other strategies may also be possible subject to the context.

### (c) Explicitation

Explicitation is not a common translation strategy for this group of 啊 (a) either. Only one instance is found.

#### Example (17)

ST:	你	干嘛	不	要	啊
Pinyin:	ni	ganma	bu	yao	a
WT:	You	what reason	not	take	a
M:	Why don't you take it? <i>Just take it.</i>				
TT:	Take it.				

#### *(Under the Hawthorn Tree)*

The speaker keeps trying to make the listener accept some money, while the listener keeps declining. The speaker does not understand why the listener will not accept the money. The translators therefore use an imperative sentence to reveal the pragmatic meaning of the question. Another possibility would be to translate this sentence using omission by changing it to “Why don't you take it?” or “Why not accept it?” These translations are also equivalent to the ST. Therefore, explicitation is appropriate when a genuine question has an implicit pragmatic meaning.

### 4.2.3 Translation of 啊 (a) as an Intensifier of Surprise or Rejection in Rhetorical Questions

Of the 35 examples, 8 are translated with omission, accounting for 22.86%; 0, or 0%, with



linguistic amplification; and 27, or 77.14%, with explicitation.

(a) Omission

If omission is used to translate 啊 (*a*), the audience will need to rely on the context to appreciate the tone, e.g.

Example (18)

ST: A: 真 够 巧的

Pinyin: zhen gou qiaode

WT: Really enough coincident

M: How coincidental

TT: Gee, what a coincidence

ST: B: 巧 什么 呀 (我 约的 你)

Pinyin: qiao shenme ya (wo yuede ni)

WT: Coincident what a (I dated you)

M: *You're wrong*—it's not a coincidence. (I made a date with you.)

TT: What coincidence? (I made a date with you)

(*If You are the One*)

B uses 啊 (*a*) to express his disagreement with A's previous utterance. This sentence is not a genuine question, but a negation implying "you are wrong". The TT does not achieve functional equivalence, as it sounds like a genuine question, though in the context, the TT audience would be able to understand the speaker's implied negation. If explicitation and linguistic amplification are used, e.g. "It's not a coincidence at all", the implicit meaning becomes explicit, but it may not sound as polite as the ST.

The other 7 examples also indicate speakers' negative attitudes towards what was said or done by listeners and they are all translated as interrogative sentences. It can therefore be summarised that translating 啊 (*a*) in rhetorical questions using omission retains the implicit meaning of negation and makes the sentence more polite. However, the implicit meaning of negation is not conveyed clearly and the audience will need to rely on the context to appreciate it. By comparison, although explicitation and linguistic amplification can display the tone and implied meanings of the SFP, the translations might sound less polite than the ST.

(b) Explicitation

Explicitation is the major translation strategy used to deal with this group of 啊 (*a*). By changing the non-genuine interrogative sentence into other types of sentences including positive/negative declarative sentences, exclamative sentences and imperative sentences,

translators can make the underlying tone and meaning expressed by the SFP explicit and thus easier to understand.

Example (19)

ST: A: 我 是 梅兰芳

Pinyin: wo shi Mei Lanfang

WT: I be Mei Lanfang

M: I am Mei Lanfang.

TT: I'm Mei Lanfang.

ST: B: 谁 不 知道 您 是 梅兰芳 啊

Pinyin: shui bu zhidao nin shi Mei Lanfang a

WT: Who not know you be Mei Lanfang a

M: Who doesn't know you're Mei Lanfang? *So what?*

TT: Everyone knows that.

*(Forever Enthralled)*

In this scene, A (Mei Lanfang) tries to call out his identity in order to stop B from shooting at him. What B says seems to be a question-word interrogative sentence, but the SFP 啊 (a) indicates that it is not a genuine question. Rather, it has two levels of meaning: 1. B knows A's identity just as everyone else does; 2. It conveys a sarcastic tone which implies that B does not care who A is. In other words, the ST can be interpreted as "I know who you are like everyone does, but so what?" The TT changes the negative question to a positive declarative sentence, revealing the first level of meaning by using a declarative sentence. However, the second level of meaning remains implicit, which requires the TT audience to work it out based on the context. A more appropriate solution would be to omit the SFP and translate the ST with linguistic amplification as "Who doesn't know? But so what?" In this way, the speaker's sarcastic tone and implicit meaning can be fully conveyed.

In summary, 啊 (a) has different functions and implied meanings in different types of interrogative sentences, so different translation strategies may be used.

Specifically, using omission while maintaining the original form to translate 啊 (a) in declarative-form questions can be especially helpful in achieving functional equivalence between the TT and the ST, because declarative-form questions have similar functions—conveying surprise and uncertainty in informal conversation—in Chinese and English. Omission is also appropriate for translating 啊 (a) in other genuine questions, because the SFP intensifies the inquisitive tone without causing other changes. As an inquisitive tone is embedded in the genuine questions, the audience can appreciate the speaker's emotive tone even though the tone of the TT might not be as forceful as that of the ST. Explicitation and linguistic amplification can also be used to replace omission and

generate appropriate translations, but the use of these strategies is subject to context.

By comparison, 啊 (a) in rhetorical questions intensifies the attitude of surprise or rejection, leading to a change in the meaning of the sentence. Translating 啊 (a) in rhetorical questions using explicitation usually allows the audience to understand the deeper meaning of the sentence more directly.

In general, when translating 啊 (a) in interrogative sentences, functional equivalence is achieved more effectively by omitting the SFP in declarative-form questions and other genuine questions; while in rhetorical questions, explicitation tends to be more effective.

#### 4.3 Translation of 啊 (a) in Exclamative Sentences

啊 (a) has different functions in different types of exclamative sentences. It may serve as an intensifier of exclamative tone in real exclamations, or be used as an intensifier of politeness in social expressions such as greetings, farewells, apologies and expressions of gratitude (see Table 1).

##### 4.3.1 Translation of 啊 (a) as an Intensifier of Politeness in Social Expressions

All 7 examples are translated using omission; no example of linguistic amplification or explicitation was found in the corpus. The reason might be that although 啊 (a) is an intensifier of cordiality and heartiness, these emotions have already been incorporated into the social expressions conveying gratitude, apology, greeting, and so on, both in Chinese and in English. Taking the expression of gratitude—谢谢 (xiexie, literally meaning “thanks”)—for example, it shows up three times in *If You are the One*: once as 谢谢你们啊 (xiexie nimen a, literally meaning “thank you”) and twice as 谢谢啊 (xiexie a, literally meaning “thanks”). Either with or without an object, the expression functions to convey the emotion of gratitude. In English, “thank you” and “thanks” have been regarded as “polite expressions” (Stevenson 2010) used to show gratitude or refuse an offer; hence, the audience need no other prompts to comprehend the tone of politeness in these expressions. As such, functional equivalence can still be achieved by omitting the SFP.

##### 4.3.2 Translation of 啊 (a) as a Tone-Intensifier in Other Exclamative Sentences

Of the 39 examples, 28 are translated using omission, accounting for 71.80% of the total; 5, or 12.82%, using linguistic amplification; and 6, or 15.38%, using explicitation.

###### (a) Omission

Omission is the most frequently used strategy.

###### Example (20)

ST: 多 好的 机会 啊

Pinyin: duo haode jihui a

WT: How good opportunity a

M: *There's no doubt that it's a good opportunity!*

TT: What a perfect opportunity

*(If You are the One)*

The speaker uses 啊 (a) to strengthen the exclamatory tone, but the translators discard the SFP and translate the sentence as an exclamation. In this case, omission does not weaken the exclamatory tone because both English and Chinese exclamatory sentences function to intensify the tones and emotions in the sentence (Crystal 2009: 177; Y. X. Wang 2013: 29-30) and 啊 (a) only serves to emphasise the exclamatory tone without creating other changes. As such, the TT audience can still appreciate the exclamatory tone. The adjective “perfect” also conveys the speaker’s strong positive attitude. This means that omission is an appropriate strategy that helps to achieve functional equivalence between the TT and the ST in this case.

#### (b) Linguistic amplification

If translators aim to further highlight the understated tone of exclamation, they may employ linguistic amplification and add other modifiers, such as adverbs. This strategy is usually combined with explicitation, e.g.

Example (21)

ST: 是 啊

Pinyin: shi a

WT: Yes a

M: Yes, *sure*.

TT: Of course.

*(Forever Enthralled)*

The speaker uses 啊 (a) to intensify his tone of affirmation. The translator uses “of course” to display the definite tone of the speaker, so that the TT becomes functionally equivalent to the ST. It would also be appropriate to use omission and simply translate the sentence as “Yes”, which still conveys the meaning of the sentence, but weakens the emotive tone of affirmation.

This indicates that although omission is appropriate for translating 啊 (a) in exclamatory sentences, it is also possible to use linguistic amplification in some cases.

#### (c) Explicitation

Using explicitation can reveal speakers’ implicit pragmatic meaning in most cases, but sometimes it may weaken the tone, e.g.

Example (22)

ST: 现在 走 多 不好 啊

Pinyin: xianzai zou duo buhao a

WT: Now leave how not good a

M: How bad it is to leave now! *We can't do that.*

TT: We can't leave now

*(If You are the One)*

With the adverb 多 (*duo*, literally meaning “how”) modifying the adjective 不好 (*buhao*, literally meaning “not good”), the ST without 啊 (*a*) is still an exclamative sentence. By using the SFP, the speaker emphasises that he definitely does not think it is a good idea to leave right now. Consequently, the pragmatic meaning can be interpreted as “we should not leave now”. Although the tone of exclamation has become milder, the TT clearly reveals the deeper meaning conveyed by the SFP by using an imperative sentence. This could also be translated as “How impolite it is to leave now!”. As the translation is an exclamative sentence, it can show the speaker’s stronger tone of negation. Explicitation is therefore more appropriate here.

All in all, omission is the most common strategy for translating 啊 (*a*) in exclamative sentences, particularly for social expressions used for greeting, farewell, gratitude, apology, etc. It is also the most appropriate strategy for achieving functional equivalence.

Both omission and linguistic amplification can be used to translate 啊 (*a*), but the decision on which is more appropriate depends on the specific context. For 啊 (*a*) in other exclamative sentences, omission is particularly appropriate when the TT is in the form of an exclamation. Translators may also use linguistic amplification by adding appropriate emphatic modifiers to intensify the exclamative tone. Explicitation can also be an appropriate strategy, particularly when there is some implicit pragmatic meaning; however, it is not always appropriate to change sentence type as this can weaken the exclamative tone. Translators need to rely on the context to decide which strategy is appropriate.

#### 4.4 Translation of 啊 (*a*) in Imperative Sentences as a Tone-intensifier

Of the 38 examples, 31 are translated using omission, accounting for 81.58% of the total; 4, or 10.53%, using linguistic amplification; and 3, or 7.89%, using explicitation.

##### (a) Omission

Omission is the most frequently used strategy for translating 啊 (*a*) in imperative sentences.

##### Example (23)

ST: 你们 不要 在 外面 胡说 啊

Pinyin: nimen buyao zai waimian hushuo a

WT: You do not at outside carelessly talk a

M: Don't you talk about it before others! *Obey my command!*

TT: Don't tell anyone else.

*(Under the Hawthorn Tree)*

The speaker, who is the mother of the listeners, is asking, or warning her children not to talk about a secret with other people. Without 啊 (a), the Chinese sentence could still stand alone as an imperative sentence, but the use of 啊 (a) strengthens the imperative tone of the speaker, expressing her strong wish for the listeners' compliance. Even though the SFP is omitted, the TT, as an imperative sentence, effectively reveals the intention of the speaker because the function of both English and Chinese imperative sentences is to express commands or instructions (Crystal 2009: 237). Although omission is acceptable, it may be better to use linguistic amplification, e.g. “Remember, don't tell anyone else” or “Don't you tell anyone else”, where the imperative tone would be intensified, enabling the audience to appreciate the strong intonation more easily. Using the exclamation mark (!) would also be an appropriate strategy for displaying the speaker's strong imperative tone.

(b) Linguistic Amplification

Translators may also choose to add other words or phrases to convey the tone emphasised by 啊 (a).

Example (24)

ST: 我 说 一 件 事 儿 你 不 要 生 气 啊

Pinyin: wo shuo yijian shier ni buyao shengqi a

WT: I say a thing you do not angry a

M: I'll tell you something; don't get mad *please*.

TT: Please don't get angry, but...

*(If You are the One)*

In contrast to the speaker in example (26) who can be regarded as superior to the listeners, the speaker in example (27) is asking for the listener's forgiveness and is thus putting himself in an inferior position. Therefore, the function of this imperative sentence is more to make a request than to give a command. The SFP 啊 (a) in the ST is still used to emphasise the imperative mood and the earnestness of the speaker's wish, but because of the different speaker-listener relationship, it makes the sentence sound more polite rather than blunt and forceful. As such, the translators add “please” to indicate the politeness and strong desire of the speaker, which enables the TT audience to comprehend the tone of the speaker, hence achieving functional equivalence.

(c) Explicitation

Explicitation is not a common strategy and is found in three examples only.

Example (25)

ST: 哎? 晓华 你 先 回 去 啊

Pinyin: Ai Wanhua ni xian huiqu a

WT: Oh? Wanhua you first go back a

M: Oh? Wanhua, *sorry* but you *may* go home first.

TT: Wanhua? I'll see you later.

(Forever Enthralled)

In this scene, when the speaker is about to visit the listener's (Wanhua's) home, another person suddenly appears and takes him aside, so the speaker has to talk with this person first. By using 啊 (a), the speaker, who is older than Wanhua, is asking him to go home and conveying a sense of apology for the sudden interruption. What makes the tone more subtle is that the speaker has only been acquainted with the listener for a short period of time. The sentence is therefore neither just a forceful demand nor a humble request, but rather a mild mixture of the two. Faced with such a complicated sentence, the translator renders it as a declarative sentence where the subject is changed from the second-person pronoun to the first-person pronoun. Consequently, the explicit imperative tone in the ST becomes implicit in the TT. The implicit imperative tone makes the TT sound milder and more polite than a literal translation such as "Go back first, Wanhua". In addition, the TT makes sense in the given context and enables the audience to understand the intention of the speaker. As such, explicitation is an appropriate choice.

To sum up, omission is the most frequently used strategy for translating 啊 (a) in imperative sentences. It is appropriate and effective for achieving functional equivalence between the TT and the ST because 啊 (a) in imperative sentences intensifies the tone without making other changes, and at the same time, imperative sentences have similar characteristics and functions in Chinese and English. If translators want to further intensify the tone of the SFP, using linguistic amplification is an appropriate choice.

## 5. Conclusion

The Chinese SFP 啊 (a) has different functions and implied meanings in different contexts but does not have a counterpart in English. Omission, explicitation and linguistic amplification are the three strategies used to translate the SFP 啊 (a). Of these, omission is the most frequently used strategy, followed by explicitation and linguistic amplification. However, omission is not the only or the most appropriate option in all cases. Linguistic amplification and explicitation can also be used to create equally appropriate translations in some situations. In declarative sentences without emphatic words and in rhetorical questions, omission will lead to the weakening or loss of tone or the loss of implicit meaning, even though it can convey the surface meaning.

The effects of the three strategies vary in different contexts. Specifically, translating 啊 (a) using omission can effectively display the tones and meanings of the SFP when it is attached to declarative sentences with emphatic words, declarative-form questions and other genuine questions, imperative sentences, social expressions and other exclamative sentences. However, when the SFP appears in declarative sentences without emphatic words and in



rhetorical questions, omission may fail to convey the intensified tone and implicit meaning of the SFP, and the tone or meaning lost varies in different contexts. In these cases, linguistic amplification and explicitation can display the tone and meaning of the SFP more accurately. It is worth noting that even in situations where omission works effectively, linguistic amplification and explicitation can also achieve functional equivalence to an equal extent if used appropriately, except in social expressions.

With regard to whether there is a more appropriate way to translate the SFP, it has been found that although omission is the most frequently used strategy, when the SFP is attached to declarative sentences without emphatic words, and in rhetorical questions, linguistic amplification and/or explicitation rather than omission should be used because omission will cause the loss of tone and meaning. However, translators should rely on an appropriate analysis of the context to decide which strategy works best.

This research has shed some light on the translation of Chinese Mandarin SFPs into English and provided some implications for translators in the field of subtitle translation. As the Chinese Mandarin SFP 啊 (a) does not have any direct English counterpart and is relatively inconspicuous compared to other parts of a sentence, translators may ignore or not pay sufficient attention to it. It is important to know that this SFP is meaningful and may add different connotations to a sentence. Omitting the SFP is not the only choice, and can lead to the loss of tone or meaning, particularly in rhetorical questions and declarative sentences that do not include emphatic expressions. As illustrated in this paper, there are other ways to display the underlying tone and meaning of the SFP in such cases, such as linguistic amplification and explicitation.

Finally, this paper has a constraint in that, due to space constraints, it was not able to analyse all of the examples in the corpus in which modality functions or implied meanings are lost or changed when one strategy or another is used.

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