

Chinese *Ma*-Expletives as a Marker of Epistemic Primacy in Chongqingers' Casual Conversations

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This paper is a characterization of Chinese *ma*-expletives exploited in casual conversations as a resource to signal speaker's epistemic primacy. Chinese *ma*-expletives as a set of literally swearing expressions might otherwise indicate offensive actions and impoliteness to the recipient, but they also relate to epistemic effects in non-offensive interaction. Drawing on as data a range of naturally-occurring casual conversations recorded in Chongqing, China, this study analyzes the usage of *ma*-expletives in multiple sequential contexts. The results show a recurrent pattern: *Ma*-expletives are regularly used in turns where the speaker asserts epistemic primacy relative to the recipient. *Ma*-expletives used as such can arguably be identifiable as a marker of epistemic primacy. The findings can enlighten our understanding of the function of *ma*-expletives in non-offensive interactional contexts as well as the negotiation of epistemic order in social interaction.

Keywords: *ma*-expletive, swearing, epistemic primacy, Chinese, casual conversation

Introduction

Participants in linguistic interaction constantly negotiate their knowledge status relative to one another. A noteworthy practice is the display of epistemic primacy, which is manifested interactionally as “relative rights to know”, “relative rights to claim”, and “relative authority of knowledge” (Stivers, Mondada & Steensig, 2011, p. 9). Displaying epistemic primacy is a means of presenting oneself as a capable social actor and thus is recurrently oriented to in the flow of interaction.

Interactants' *status* (membership category, interactional role) and knowledge *source* (epistemic access) are typically made relevant to the ascription of knowledge status to them (Schegloff, 2007; Enfield, 2011). Epistemic primacy, however, is not self-evident on this sociological basis, but has to be situated in interaction and displayed by interactants moment from turn to turn. Conversation analytic studies of epistemics demonstrate that interactants may rely on a range of resources concerning sequential positioning and turn design to claim or combat claims of epistemic primacy (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Stivers, 2005, 2008; Raymond & Heritage, 2006; Heinemann, 2009; Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011; Heritage, 2013). In particular, making first-position assessments systematically implies a primary right over the knowledge, in contrast to making second-position assessments, which implies a subordinate epistemic status (Heritage, 2002). Speakers then can work to upgrade or downgrade the implications through features of turn design. The implied epistemic primacy in

first assessments can be moderated by devices like evidentials and tag questions, and strengthened by negative interrogative; and in second position, speakers can compete for primary rights by recasting a second assessment into a first with the use of negative interrogative and tag question (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Speakers can also claim primary epistemic rights in second position by indicating an independent ownership of an epistemic position through confirmation plus agreement (Heritage & Raymond, 2005), confirming allusions (Schegloff, 1996a, 1996b) and modified repeats (Stivers, 2005). In addition, some lexical devices are also employed to this end, such as the English interjection *Oh*, which is arguably a signal of speaker's primary epistemic rights when it prefaces agreements or assertions in second positions (Heritage, 2002; Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

In this paper, the author describes the exploitation of Chinese *ma*-expletives as a linguistic resource for the display of speaker's epistemic primacy in casual Chinese conversations. *Ma*-expletives might embody an affective stance of the speaker, but they are analytically identifiable as a marker of epistemic primacy situated in conversational sequences.

Swearing Language and Chinese *Ma*-Expletives

Swearing Language

Expletives have typically been studied under the rubric of swearing language, which encapsulates an array of lexico-semantic categories pertaining to socio-culturally-relative linguistic taboos (e.g., swearword, expletive, vulgarity, blasphemy, obscenity, and profanity) (Montagu, 1967; Sagarin, 1968; Jay, 1992; Wajnryb, 2005; Allan & Burridge, 2006; G. Hughes, 2006). The use of swearing language is a noteworthy linguistic phenomenon, considering its extensiveness and multiple socio-communicative functions.

A concatenation of linguistic, anthropological, and psychological studies has indicated on an empirical basis that swearing lies in the very centrality of human language and is most likely a linguistic universal, since its frequent occurrence is widely observed across languages, cultures, social domains, and social groups (Foote & Woodward, 1973; G. Hughes, 1991, 2006; Jay, 1992, 2000; Van Lancker & Cummings, 1999; Wajnryb, 2005; Landis, 2006; McEnery, 2006; Zimmerman & Stern, 2010). Previous studies have adequately explored the physiological and psychological causes of swearing (Rassin & Muris, 2005; Wajnryb, 2005; Zimmerman & Stern, 2010, p. 383), as well as the socio-cultural nature of swearing (Rieber, Wiedemann, & D'Amato, 1979; Selnow, 1985; Risch, 1987; S. E. Hughes, 1992; G. Hughes, 2006; Mercury, 1995; Jay, 2000; Allan & Burridge, 2006; McEnery, 2006; CHEN, 2008). In interactional contexts, there is a distinction made between offensive and non-offensive use of swearing with regard to reciprocity (Rassin & Muris, 2005). Swearing as an affective resource may very often communicate offensive actions targeted at the recipient in verbal attacks like cursing, derogating, and insulting, yet the non-offensive use of swearing is also documented by previous researches. For instance, swearing can communicate to the addressee a feeling of being "macho" or "cool" without implying offense (Zimmerman & Stern, 2010, p. 383). In circumstances of in-group communication, swearing can play a cohesive rather than disruptive role. It can serve as an indicator of casualness of style (Torreira, Adda-Decker, & Ernestus, 2010) and contribute to the easy-going nature of in-group interaction (Wajnryb, 2005), so it could be utilized by speakers for intimate actions such as non-serious teasing, membership indexing, and even applauding (e.g., Tetreault, 2010). In such contexts, swearing is instrumental in constructing social equality or in-group solidarity between interactants (Daly, Holmes, Newton, & Stubbe, 2004; Zimmerman & Stern, 2010).

The previous studies have thus justified a line of research into the non-offensive use of swearing language. A focal question in this field remains to be further explored: What do linguistic interactants achieve with swearing language in non-offensive contexts? This question is well reflected in G. Hughes' (2006) words, "[T]here is a recurring problem of interpretation and analysis concerning the degree to which any person... can know how literally to interpret forms of swearing" (p. xvii). The present study addresses this question by focusing on the epistemic import of Chinese *ma*-expletives used in casual conversations.

Chinese *Ma*-Expletives

Despite the lack of a consistent definition in the literature, expletive is distinguishable from the other categories of swearing language along syntactic and semantic dimensions. An expletive in this study is understood as a taboo expression that is syntactically peripheral and contributes nothing to the propositional meaning of clause (Jay, 1992; Mercury, 1995; Van Lancker & Cummings, 1999). As structurally optional elements, expletives typically occur in clause-initial, clause-final, or post-subject/topic slots. The internal composition of individual expletives is rule-governed and is usually inflexible. When used in non-offensive utterances, expletives are non-referential. Examine an English example: "*You'd bloody well better believe it!*" and a mandarin example: "Wǒ *tā-mā* zhēn méi kàn jiàn (I *his-ma* really didn't see)."

Chinese *ma*-expletives, in this light, are identifiable as a coherent set of expletives that contain the lexical item *ma* (mother) and literally denote maternal insult. As identified in the subsequent data, most *ma*-expletives involve sexual taboo, and amongst them two prototypical items are *ri-ni-ma* (fuck-your-ma) and *ri-ma* (fuck-ma). *Ma*-expletives are widely observable in regional varieties of Chinese as well as in Mandarin, encompassing an array of region-specific forms. Underlying the motive of this study on *ma*-expletives is that they are seen to appear far more frequently than other types of Chinese expletive in daily interactions and thus have much greater impact on interpersonal communication and language use.

The use of *ma*-expletives in conversations, as the previous literature on swearing language indicates, could be non-offensive depending upon the interplay of communicative context, action type, and turn design features. In non-offensive uses, the propositional content or referential meaning of *ma*-expletives is not utilized, thus combating implication of offense directed at the recipient. And *ma*-expletives in this usage are not designed as independent TCUs (turn constructional units). In Excerpt 1, for example, a middle-aged woman taxi driver is disclosing to a middle-aged male passenger that her adult son "exploits" her and her husband (see Example 1) (The meanings of the transcription symbols and glossing abbreviations in the following examples are listed in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively).

Example (1)

Excerpt 1 Woman driver and male passenger (00:02-00:12) ((accent features represented))

- 1 DR: Jīn-tiā'r bú sǐ lě-yǎng mín-tiā'r dǒu sǐ nǎ-yǎng,
Today not is this-way tomorrow just is that-way,
"((He demands)) this one day and ((demands)) that another day,"
- 2 → fàn-zěn *ri-ma*-ye (.) zū- nì zū bú-sǐ gòu bú-sǐ
anyway fuck-ma-PRT (.) pig- you pig not-is dog not-is
"anyway, ((he treats)) us worse than pigs or dogs"

- 3 PS: hh hh
 hh hh
 “((exhalation)) ((slight giggle))”

The driver's turn is hearable as a complaint about her son. Through the complaint about a non-present third party, the driver invites empathy from the passenger, who might ever experience the same kind of “problem” or feeling in his own family. In the second clausal TCU (line 2), which is analyzable as an assessment (Pomerantz, 1984), the driver employs a *ma*-expletive *ri-ma-ye* (fuck-ma-PRT). This expression is structurally cancellable from the clausal TCU without altering its proposition content and is clearly used non-referentially. In addition, a distinctive phonological feature of non-offensive *ma*-expletives is that they tend to be untuned reflecting the non-referential characteristic, as audible from the subsequent data. Thus, it is not targeted at the recipient, to whom the content of the referred-to matter is apparently unrelated. Unlike those chunks of swearing language involved in performing blatantly offensive actions, non-offensive *ma*-expletives relate to a different set of pragmatic effects.

A plethora of studies has touched upon Chinese *ma*-expletives, but they have mostly focused on their classification, semantic content or socio-cultural origin (see HU (2009) for a review of swearing research in China). Empirical studies on how speakers exploit non-offensive *ma*-expletives for interactional achievement are still lacking. The present study examines the non-offensive use of *ma*-expletives in daily casual conversations and demonstrates the relevance of *ma*-expletives to the epistemic primacy conversationalists lay claim to.

Data

This study utilizes for analysis naturally-occurring spontaneous Chinese conversations audio-taped in Chongqing, China. It is justified to focus on speech forms belonging to one particular regional variety of Chinese, since regional variation is such that a coherent interpretation of a linguistic phenomenon across varieties could be moderated by socio-cultural complications.

Chongqing is a municipality located in southwest China, and the Chongqingers speak a sub-variety of Sichuan Dialect, which possesses some distinctive features from Mandarin in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntactic structures. This dialect is predominantly spoken across most spheres of the local daily life, except on very formal institutional occasions or for exceptional purposes. The collected conversations in which *ma*-expletives are used all unfold in this dialect. They add up to more than 10 hours of talk, taking place between same-gender, cross-gender, same-generation, and cross-generation participants. The situations span the household, the workplace, occasional encounters in public places, etc.

The transcription of the original data is based on Chinese Pinyin (mandarin phonetic transcription), but necessary adaptations are also made to reflect the phonetic and lexical characteristics of the local dialect. The *ma*-expletives identified for analysis are italicized in the original.

Analysis

It is necessary to underscore two essential structural features of *ma*-expletives that emerge from the data. First, the internal components of *ma*-expletives are not the grammatical elements of the matrix TCU. The basic internal structures of *ma*-expletives are Verb-Object and Subject-Verb-Object. Hence, for example, *wo-ri-ni-ma*

(I-fuck-your-ma) is a *ma*-expletive while the sequence *wo ri-ni-ma* (I fuck-your-ma) is a combination of an external subject and a *ma*-expletive. Second, *ma*-expletives in the data are not found to occur as independent TCUs. Rather, they are part of TCUs, as evidenced by placement and prosody. Removing any of the *ma*-expletives will by no means impair the well-formedness of the TCUs. These two features reflect the non-referential and non-offensive meaning of *ma*-expletives, and this meaning should be understood with reference to the sequence position and the action of the turn.

As introduced, interactants are often found to exploit their status (membership category and interactional role) as the basis on which to claim epistemic primacy. Excerpt 2 is taken from an intermittent workplace conversation among several female clerks and an elder female manager in a travel agency and air-ticket office (all seated in face of computers). In response to Clerk 2's question preferentially addressed to Clerk 1 to elicit an assessment over two travel destinations, the manager takes the floor over and volunteers her assessment while using a *ma*-expletive (see Example 2).

Example (2)

Excerpt 2: Clerks and manager in travel agency and air-ticket office (06:06-06:17)

- 1 CLK 1: Hàì::nán (.) hh hào yuàn o
 Hai::nan (.) hh very far ITJ
 "Hainan is very far"
- 2 (3.0)
- 3 CLK 2: Hàikòu hào suà ma (.) Sānyǎ hào suà ma
 Haikou good play PRT (.) Sanya good play PRT
 "Which is more interesting, Haikou or Sanya?"
- (1.0)
- 4 MNG: → Yòu qián: rì-ma nà:dià'r dōu hào suà
 Have money: fuck-ma a:nywhere all good play
 "With money ((you'll find)) any place interesting"
- 5 CLK 1: Yè sǐ::=
 Too is::=
 "Anyway, yes"
- 6 MNG: =>S-b-s< ma
 =>Is-n-is< Q
 "Isn't it?"

This exchange clearly shows that a *ma*-expletive is utilized in a turn where the manager asserts a primary right to claim knowledge about travel destinations in multi-party interaction. Clerk 1 makes an assessment of the travel destination her work is currently dealing with (line 1), the propositional content of which however apparently amounts to a mere fact of little newsworthiness, a piece of shared knowledge with which her colleagues present have tacit agreement. Therefore, rather than make relevant *overt* agreement or disagreement from the recipients, as shown by the three seconds' lapse that follows (line 2), Clerk 1's turn is designed as a topic proffer, which makes a topic available to the recipients to take up or reject (Schegloff, 2007). Thus in line 3, Clerk 2 takes up and develops the topic by posing a relevant alternative question (encouraging a comparison between

the two major tourist cities in the destination province), so as to elicit relevant assessments. This question as part of topic development makes no explicit selection of a next-speaker in this multiparty interaction (Clerk 2's gaze is undirected to any recipient), but the immediate context tends to prefer a next-turn answer from Clerk 1.

Despite this turn-allocation preference, the manager self-selects and forestalls Clerk 1 or any other clerk to seize a turn for assessment proffering (line 4). Rather than weigh one city against the other, she addresses the prior question by making a general claim regarding the attractiveness of tourist destinations. Her assessment as an answer is relevant to the prior action, but it is non-canonical and dispreferred, since the prior question conditions the content of the answer as one of two pre-given alternatives. By flouting this sequential constraint, the manager's turn is designed not simply as a second pair part in a question-answer sequence, but rather as a first pair part of an assessment-agreement sequence. Asserting that tourists can find fun anywhere as long as they possess money precludes the appropriateness of any mere claim of one city's comparative advantage over the other in this regard. Hence, this self-selected turn implies that Clerk 2's previous question is inapposite by rejecting its presupposition (Heinemann, 2009) and demonstrates that the manager has relative authority of knowledge about travelling and is better entitled to make a claim of such knowledge. It is in such a turn that a *ma*-expletive is employed.

The next turn (line 5) provides proof to the manager's epistemic primacy display. Clerk 1, who has been granted but has lost the privilege to make an assessment following Clerk 2's previous question, offers mere agreement with the manager, thus making no claim of a previously held position on the matter or of a primary right to assess the referred-to topic (Stivers, 2005; Heritage & Raymond, 2005), but orienting to the manager's epistemic primacy demonstrated in the prior assertion. Subsequently, the manager's authority of knowledge is self-reaffirmed and thus strengthened in line 6 by resuming a first position to claim the truth of her previous assertion using negative interrogative syntax (Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

In this interactional context, the manager's display of epistemic primacy regarding the subject matter might be based on her socially defined status (Enfield, 2011). She is the one among the participants who owns relative institutional power and has presumably more life experience as indicated by age. *Ma*-expletive here employed is indicative of her displaying such primacy.

A similar example is Excerpt 3, where a *ma*-expletive is used in a turn where an assertion is made. Here, several family members are talking about a bitter protest organized by a relative's family against a local hospital, where the relative has been struck by a serious medical accident. A lot of people related to the relative's family have been mobilized to join in the protest. BI, in her 60s and with high blood pressure, tells that she has not joined in the protest but has only cast a look at the scene later. Her family members approve of her action on some grounds, while BI justifies her own action with a different excuse (see Example 3).

Example (3)

Excerpt 3: Household talk about medical accident (00:02-00:24)

- | | | |
|---|------|---|
| 1 | BI: | Wò hòu:tóu qiě kǎn-lào yí-ha'r
I afterwards go see-PRT one-CL
"I went later and had a look ((at the scene))" |
| 2 | LAN: | ō:: nì mó něngō qiě jí ō, nì guàn tā
Good you NegImp that go anxious PRT, you care it |

- “Yeah, you need not be that anxious, your caring”
- 3 něngō dō zuǎzi, biégǒ wútóu nǎxī rén lěgō=
 that much d’what, other family those people this=
 “that much is no use, her families handle ((everything))”
- 4 WEN: =Wò hàn tā mó-qiě
 =I call her NegImp-go
 “I asked her not to join”
- 5 LAN: ō:::
 Good:::
 “Good”
- 6 BI: Nì-mēn gōgō jiānjué bú zùn wò qiě, tā só-di
 You-GEN brother firmly not allow me go, he say-NMLZ
 “your brother-in-law stopped me from attending, he told ((me not to))”
- 7 LAN: Nì qiě zuǎ↓zì::? Nì qiě qì-dédào sāzì zóyǒng eih nì?
 You go do-↓wha::t? You go rise-RES what effect uuh you?
 “What’s the point of your joining? For what effect?”
- 8 (1.0)
- 9 BI: Nì lěxī bú xiàodé tā qiě hào-dō rén,
 You these not know it go how -many people,
 “We don’t know how many people were attending,”
- 10 → rì-ma kǎn- kǎn- kǎn-
 fuck-ma look- look-look-
 “onlook-”
- 11 [mòho [-di yè sǐ rén-sān-rén-hài
 [freebie [-MOD also is people-mountain-people-sea
 “onlookers were numerous”
- 12 LAN: [ō:: [ō- ō::
 [Yeah [yeah- yeah
 “yeah”
- 13 SHAN: [nǎxī rén rěn dōu rěn-bú-dào
 [those people know yet know-NEG-RES
 “((you)) can’t distinguish those people”
- 14 BI: Nà xiàodé qiě-le hào-↓dō↑,
 Where know go-COM how-↓many↑,
 “How could I know how many people joined?”
- 15 kǎn-di rén jì-sí-gǒ
 look-MOD people several-ten-CL
 “dozens of onlookers ((were there))”

After BI announces that she has later just cast a look at the scene of the protest instead of joining in it (line 1),

the families proffer some justifications of her choice. LAN, BI's younger sister's husband, approbates her choice with interjection *ō* and justifies it on the grounds that she does not need to worry so much due to her high blood pressure and that the relative's family themselves can handle the affair (lines 2-3). WEN, BI's husband, affiliates (Stivers, 2008; Haugh, 2010) with LAN's stance towards the event by announcing that he himself has played a role in dissuading BI from attending the protest (line 4). This stance affiliation is then oriented to in LAN's turn (line 5). BI responds to both WEN's and LAN's turn, confirming to both that WEN has indeed discouraged her from attending the protest (line 6). LAN then proffers a positive assessment of BI's choice as a result of WEN's dissuasion, asserting that it is no use her going there in the form of rhetorical *wh*-interrogatives (line 7). In LAN's excuse, BI is an elderly and physically vulnerable woman, and so her joining in the keyed-up protest would not only be risky but also do little help; meanwhile, she is nothing but a peripheral relative to the victim's family and hence is not expected to play an active role in the affair. It is on this ground that LAN assesses BI's non-participation as justifiable.

LAN's turn projects agreement from BI. However, this projected action is not forthcoming, as BI disaligns her next turn (lines 9-11) from the preference organization, following a one-second pause (line 8). BI also regards her non-participation as a reasonable action, yet not because of WEN's dissuasion or the reason as has been asserted by LAN. Instead, as she claims, crowds of onlookers also gathered there and mixed with the possible protesters, which made her unable to recognize who the victim's family actually mobilized to join in the protest, and thus she would be immersed in the crowds and get unnoticeable even if participating. In this way, her role in the protest would be downplayed and her absence from it is excusable. BI takes this excuse as "official" and legitimate, not only because she has the primary right to talk about a matter related to herself, but also because she has direct and independent empirical access to the talked-about matter. By structurally disaligning her turn from LAN's prior turn and proffering an independent excuse of her own behavior based on her interactional role displays BI's epistemic authority and primary epistemic right.

BI's turn extends to lines 14-15, where she reasserts what she thinks is the most relevant excuse. In the intervening, partially overlapping responses, LAN agrees with BI's assertion (line 12) and SHAN, LAN's daughter and BI's niece, also affiliates her stance towards the affair with BI (line 13). Recipients' aligning and affiliative responses to assertions support the assertion-maker's claim of epistemic primacy. The *ma*-expletive *ri-ma* (fuck-ma) exploited in the second TCU of BI's assertion-making turn (line 10), like that in Excerpt 2, is recognizable as a signal of displaying this primacy.

Ma-expletives also appear in some other conversations where it is not so much *status* as *source* (i.e., actual access to knowledge) that underlies speaker's assertion of epistemic primacy. In Excerpt 4, three middle school boys banter with each other on a bus. Boy A hums the song he is listening to with earplugs, and then Boy B and Boy C dispute over the title of the song. Boy B uses a post-topic *ma*-expletive in a turn where he disagrees with Boy A and asserts authority of knowledge (see Example 4).

Example (4)

Excerpt 4: School boys on a bus (02:55-03:14)

- 1 B: Cǎo: hái tīn Hài-kuó-tiān-kōng
Fu:ck still listen Hai-kuo-tian-kong
“((He)) even still listens to Hai-kuo-tian-kong”

- 2 C: Lě sǐ Hài-kuó-tiān-kōng a?
This is Hai-kuo-tian-kong Q?
“Is this ((song)) Hai-kuo-tian-kong?”
- 3 B: Dǒu sǐ, nǎ-go Be-sǎzi [sǎzi ()
Right, that-CL Be-what [what ()
“Sure, ((produced by)) that ((band)) Be-something”
- 4 C: [Zēn-dī-ǎi-nì (.) (hǎ’r)
[Zhen-de-ai-ni (.) (fool)
“((It’s the song)) Zhen-de-ai-ni, ((you)) fool”
- 5 B: → Yá:’r, lě *ri-ma* juéduǐ sǐ Hài-kuó-tiān-kōng, juéduǐ sǐ
Di:ck, this fuck-ma absolutely is Hai-kuo-tian-kong, absolutely is
“Nonsense. It’s absolutely Hai-kuo-tian-kong, absolutely!”
- 6 C: (1.2) ((unintelligible speech))
- 7 Huáng Jiājū-di
Huang Jiaju-GEN
“((sung by)) Huang Jiaju”
- 8 B: Lái ma, wò gěi nì tīn ma
Come PRT, I give you listen PRT
“Here you are, listen to this”
- 9 wò-ri wò bà wò-di Hài-kuó-tiān-kōng ná gěi nì,
I-fuck I PF I-GEN Hai-kuo-tian-kong bring give you,
“I show you Hai-kuo-tian-kong ((in my music player)),”
- 10 juéduǐ yí-mó-yí-yǎng
absolutely one-mold-one-look
“totally the same ((song))”

While B’s mock directed at A (line 1) receives no uptake from A (due possibly to A’s failure to hear the utterance), it is responded to by C (line 2). C’s response is not a structurally projected action of (dis)alignment or (dis)affiliation with B’s mocking, but a query over B’s knowledge, so it becomes epistemologically relevant (Stivers & Rossano, 2010). C finds the title B has claimed for the song (*Hài-kuó-tiān-kōng*) contradicts his existing knowledge of the song, thus problematizing B’s epistemic state. B performs self-defense against the query, affirming that the title is correct and proffering the band name (line 3). However, B’s insistence casts C into implementing a refutation by asserting what he thinks is the real title (line 4). Hence, a contention as regards epistemic authority over the song is ongoing between the interlocutors.

In the next turn (line 5), B asserts epistemic authority as he recounts C’s claim. The first TCU is a strong disagreement expletive *yá’r* (dick, i.e., nonsense), which registers straightforward disagreement with C; then, the second TCU reaffirms B’s own claim in a heightened tone as marked by the strengthening adverb *juéduǐ* (i.e., absolutely) (Greenbaum, 1970; Bolinger, 1972; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985; Hoyer, 1997); and the third TCU further underscores the truthfulness of the claim in the form of an elliptical self-repeat (Tannen, 1987, 2007; Norrick, 1987; Hsieh, 2009). This turn is evidently designed as a counter to C and as a self-assertion,

thus registering B's epistemic authority over the referred-to song. The *ma*-expletive *ri-ma* within the second TCU explicitly signals to the recipient that epistemic authoritativeness remains with the speaker.

The subsequent turns provide evidence for B's epistemic authority claiming. In lines 6-7, following a slight pause and some muttering (which amounts to unintelligible speech), C might be hearable as doing self-defense by identifying the name of the vocalist, who actually sings both the songs mentioned in the talk. Identifying the vocalist's name proffers no new knowledge to B since he has in line 3 correctly identified the band (though having verbalized only part of its name), so it constitutes no alteration to B's knowledge state. Then in the next turn (lines 8-10), B performs a convincing action. He offers to show C what he asserts is the same song as the one heard from A's hum by using his own music player, which he believes will visually display the title of the song as *Hài-kuó-tiān-kōng*. In line 9, where the offer is reworded and elaborated, the prefacing expletive *wo-ri* (I fuck) marks the offer as a compelled action for the purpose of convincing the recipient. It announces to the recipient that the speaker is willing to make self-sacrifice or concession in terms of the offer when expecting desired actions from the recipient. Here, B apparently expects C to change his knowledge state. And in line 10, B redoes the knowledge assertion, in the service of contending that his authority is empirically supported. Therefore, judging from the sequences, the *ma*-expletive (line 5) is clearly used in a turn where the speaker's authority of knowledge is blatantly asserted.

Likewise, conversationalists also utilize *ma*-expletives in a first assessment, which implies primary epistemic rights unless the implication is combated by the use of mitigation devices (Heritage, 2002; Heritage & Raymond, 2005). An example is Excerpt 5, which is taken from a casual chat between a photographer (P) and an acquaintance (A) (both middle-aged women) at a photo studio. After A announces that she is going to attend an upcoming classmates' gathering, P shows surprise and asserts that old classmates from junior high school hardly keep in touch with each other decades after graduation. P demonstrates epistemic primacy over this matter on the basis of independent epistemic access (see Example 5).

Example (5)

Excerpt 5: Photographer and acquaintance (02:03-02:32)

- 1 P: Nì ↓nǎ:zěn-dì tóngxió hái yòu liánxǐ maih?!
You ↓the:n-MOD classmate still have touch Q?!
"You even still keep in touch with classmates from those years?!"
- 2 A: Lànggǒ mēi-dé liánxǐ ma?
How-come not-have touch Q?
"How come we should not be in touch?"
- 3 P: Mā yo [wòmēn sì-
Ma PRT [we are-
"Gosh, we are-"
- 4 A: [>Sǐ hái liánxǐ< (.) liánxǐ liánxǐ yòusíhǒu'r dà gǒ
[>Is still touch< (.) touch touch sometimes make CL
"Indeed in touch, yet just by making occasional"
- 5 diǎnhuà eryl, (0.4) mēi jǔhuǐ-gǒ, yīn-yīnwéi=
phone-call FP, (0.4) not gather-COM, cau-cause=

- “phone calls. ((We’ve)) never gathered, because”
- 6 P: → =*Ri-ma* nǎzěn -di cūzōng tóngxió
 =Fuck-ma then-MOD junior-high-school classmates
 “those years’ junior high school classmates”
- 7 mēi-qiú-dé sǎ lě-gō yǎng
 not-cock-have what this-CL like
 “keep almost no ((contact)) of this kind”
- 8 A: Nǚ tóngxió tài sǎo lao, mēi-qiú-dé sǎzi nǚ
 Female classmate too few FP, not-cock-have what female
 “Female classmates are too few, there aren’t many females”
- 9 tóngxió, jīn sī xī nán tóngxió, nàgǒ qiě suà ma?
 classmate, all is some male classmate, who go play Q?
 “((almost)) all are male classmates, so who would go gathering?”
- 10 P: Dǒu sī yeh, nà hái yòu liánxī a?
 Just is PRT, where still have touch Q?
 “Sure, how should they be in touch?”
- 11 nǎzěn-di rén jiéhūn-di jiéhūn dōu sī gó-zǎi-yí-fāng
 then-MOD people marry-NML marry all is each-at-one-place
 “those years’ classmates are married, all live away from one another”

P’s questioning in line 1 solicits A’s confirmation of the supposedly regular mutual contact maintained among the long-ago classmates that the gathering presupposes (the questioning and the confirmation solicitation are signaled by the final particle *maih* [like mandarin *a* and *ya*]). Following this turn, there is a pre-second expansion sequence (lines 2-3). A retorts the questioning (line 2), using negative WH-interrogative and untuned final particle *ma*, which in combination imply the opposite (QIANG, 2010), i.e., she and her old classmates have been in touch. The negative WH-interrogative prefaces an upcoming telling or a more extended answer to the previous question in the base second (implemented in lines 4-5). The implication of A’s retorting question is amazing to P, as is shown by her interjection and her readiness to describe her own experience as counter-evidence (line 3). This amazement indicates a discrepancy between her assumption about the state of affairs concerning such contact among former classmates and the particular case with A. A’s base-second turn (lines 4-5) does confirmation of their contact, and pursues further telling of details.

In the following turn (lines 6-7), however, P interrupts and latches on to A’s telling by proffering a first assessment of the general state of the contact among former classmates of junior high school. She asserts that *almost no* such contact is maintained in general (the indefinite determiner *sǎ* [*shá* or *shénme* in mandarin, i.e., *what*] in object noun phrase together with the preceding negative verb phrase *mēi-qiú-dé* [not-cock-have] means “have almost no”). Doing an unmitigated first assessment, P’s turn is hearable as asserting a primary right to claim general knowledge of this kind (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). In this turn, a TCU-initial *ma*-expletive *ri-ma* (fuck-ma) is utilized.

The proffering of initial assessments makes relevant a next-turn agreement or disagreement on A’s part (Pomerantz, 1984). As lines 8-9 show, however, agreement or disagreement is not forthcoming. Instead, A tells

the reason why she and her former classmates have not gathered, as a continuation of her telling about their contact initiated in lines 4-5. It pursues the telling, which has been interrupted by P's assessment-proffering in the prior turn. This lack of uptake of P's assessment is consequential for P's next turn (lines 10-11). Here, as is indicated by the acknowledgement token *dǒu sǐ yeh* (just is PRT, i.e., sure), P exploits A's account of their not having gathered as evidence to support her afore-proffered assessment, which is now recast in the form of rhetorical wh-question *nà hái yǒu liánxǐ a?* (where still have touch Q?), and then further supports the assessment with an account (line 11). By utilizing the account, P demonstrates that her assessment is grounded in her first-hand knowledge gained through her independent and direct access to life experience. This self-justifying of an assessment following the lack of (dis)agreement from the recipient in the prior turn alludes to P's claim of a primary epistemic right as well as epistemic authority when making the assessment in her previous turn (lines 6-7). The TCU-initial *ma*-expletive *ri-ma* (fuck-*ma*), as it occurs non-propositionally, is identifiable as a signal of her claiming epistemic primacy.

Likewise in Excerpt 6, two male taxi drivers are conversing about what has happened to another taxi driver's car. Driver 2 demonstrates a better knowledge of the matter and pursues a telling of it. Here, *ma*-expletives are also used (see Example 6).

Example (6)

Excerpt 6 Two taxi drivers (00:02-00:22)

- 1 D1: Tā qián-hǒu ān jiāo,
He front-rear fix rubber,
“Rubber bumper guards are installed to the front and rear,”
- 2 biégǒ (hh) bàoxiàngǎng huǎn-dì yí-gēn
other (hh) bumper change-MOD one-CL
“the bumper ((of his car)) has been replaced with a new one”
- 3 D2: → Tā nǎ-gǒ *ri-ni-ma* záo-le liàng-hǎ doma,
He that-CL fuck-your-ma suffer-COM two-CL DECL,
“His car suffered two ((collisions)),”
- 4 tā lǎngō bú záo ma? Qiántóu cē-zi tán gǒqie,
He why not suffer Q? Ahead car-DIM bounce over,
“How come the car didn't get dented? The car ahead bumped it”
- 5 biān-sǎng nǎ-gǒ cē-zi zǎi gěi tā nōng yí-hǎ qiě
side-LocNmz that-CL car-DIM again give it make one-CL go
“and then a car from aside bumped it too”
- 6 tā bú sǐ záo-le liǎng-hǎ?
It not is suffer-COM two-CL?
“didn't it suffer two collisions?”
- 7 → Tā nǎ-gǒ *ri-ma* záo-le liǎng-hǎ
It that-CL fuck-ma suffer-COM two-CL
“It suffered two collisions”
- 8 D1: ō:-ō: tā tā bàoxiàngǎng huǎn bàoxiàn gōngsī só

- O-oh he he bumper change insurance company say
 “Right, the bumper of his car got changed, the insurance company said”
 9 tā bàoxiàngǎng yǎo huǎn gěi tā huǎn-le yí-gēn
 he bumper need change give he change-COM one-CL
 “the bumper need be replaced and then replaced it for him”

Here, knowledge asymmetry between the two drivers with regard to what has occurred to another driver's car is exhibited. Driver 1 announces first (lines 1-2) that maintenance has been made to the car, including the installation of rubber bumper guards and the replacement of the bumper. The announcing of events is arguably a telling action, which makes relevant aligning actions to facilitate the activity and the provision of a stance to the referent (Sacks, 1974; Jefferson, 1978; Stivers, 2008).

However, rather than aligning with the preference organization, Driver 2 steers into a course of telling the events himself (lines 3-7). He narrates in detail the collision accident that has led to the referred-to maintenance measures. In his turn, *ma*-expletives are twice used in TCUs that state the car has suffered two collisions (lines 3/7). Stating and restating this event convey to the recipient that it is of newsworthiness. The particle at the end of his first TCU *doma* marks the utterance as declarative and as disclosing inferable truth to the recipient, thus assisting an action of changing the epistemic state of the recipient. Under this circumstance, Driver 2 describes how the two collisions happened. Therefore, not only does Driver 2 show the events previously announced by Driver 1 are already within his knowledge, but also he demonstrates an independent access to the affair and a finer-grained knowledge of it. The use of *ma*-expletives here relates to the indication of this epistemic authority. Driver 1's subsequent turn (lines 8-9) orients to Driver 2's knowledge authority, as is evidenced by the change-of-state token *ō:-ō:* (o-oh) (Heritage, 1984).

The above analyses of conversational turns which are hearable as an assertion of the conversationalist's epistemic primacy show that the use of *ma*-expletives in these turns is a recurrent turn design feature. As such, the *ma*-expletives are related to the display of epistemic primacy.

Discussions and Conclusions

The use of *ma*-expletives in non-offensive interactions is an interesting phenomenon. *Ma*-expletives are sex-related swearing language, which is identified as a cultural universal (Flynn, 1976). But certainly, there is a distinction between the offensive and non-offensive use of *ma*-expletives in daily conversations. An examination of their non-offensive use could yield noteworthy results. The previous analyses have shown the epistemic relevance of *ma*-expletives used in sequences of casual talk, and have suggested that the occurrence of *ma*-expletives in such contexts is involved in the claim of epistemic primacy.

The structural feature of the *ma*-expletives in the data is in line with the design of their non-offensive use. These *ma*-expletives do not occur alone as TCUs and they add no literal sense to the propositional content of TCUs. This feature combats any implication of verbal offense directed at the recipient. Analyses of the above naturally occurring casual conversations show, *ma*-expletives in these interactional contexts are not employed for performing offense addressed at the addressee, but are utilized primarily as a signal to display the speaker's epistemic primacy.

As conversations unfold, conversationalists constantly orient to their own epistemic position relative to that

of their interlocutor in sequences of talk. Epistemic primacy is part of the territory defended by conversationalists. As discussed in Goffman (1971), and Heritage and Raymond (2005), people patrol and defend their territories in social interaction. To defend their authority of knowledge and their primary right to claim knowledge, conversationalists regularly exploit sequence positioning, action formation and turn design resources. *Ma*-expletives examined in this study are arguably in the service of implementing actions that show the speaker has primary right to claim knowledge and has authority in knowledge.

Previous studies have not paid adequate attention to the epistemic import swearing language might have in social interaction. Analysis of conversations along an epistemic line can shed light on what speakers are actually doing with swearing language. Particularly in casual conversations, arguably the most basic form of social interaction, swearing language can be rendered non-offensive and non-disruptive to communication, since it may be exploited primarily for epistemic effects.

Chinese *ma*-expletives as a set of swearing language forms have exhibited patterned use in the data, as they are associated with demonstrating epistemic primacy in interaction. Nevertheless, the pattern might be region-biased, considering the limitation in data collection. Further studies of this kind necessitate analyses of data collected from other regions and dialectal varieties. Meanwhile, social differences in the use of *ma*-expletives in relation to epistemic primacy need also be taken into account in future investigations.

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Appendix A: Transcription Symbols

[]	overlapping speech
(0.5)	pause length
(.)	micropause
,	clausal-TCU boundary
-	word cut-off or hesitation
?	question or rising intonation
+	interruption
=	latched utterances
Capitalization	contrastive stress or emphasis
<word>	markedly prolonged talk
>word<	markedly rushed talk
()	uncertainty about the transcription
(giggles)	paralinguistic features
(word)	best guess of the transcription
((word))	transcriber's note

Appendix B: Glossing Abbreviations

CL	Classifier
COM	Completive
DECL	Declarative
DIM	Diminutive
EP	Emphatic particle
FP	Final particle
GEN	Genitive
ITJ	Interjection
LocNmz	Locative nominalization
MOD	Modifying particle/marker
NEG	Negation, negative
NegImp	Negative imperative
NMLZ	Nominalizer/nominalization
NOM	Nominative
PF	Patient focus
PROG	Progressive
PRT	Particle
Q	Question particle/marker
RES	Resultative