Research Article

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Functions, sociocultural explanations and conversational influence of discourse markers: focus on *zenme shuo ne* in L2 Chinese

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Abstract: This study explores the ways that L2 learners develop their knowledge in understanding the pragmatic functions of a Chinese discourse marker (DM), *zenme shuo ne* ('how to say'), and examines three interrelated aspects in pragmatic knowledge of this DM. Using metapragmatic interviews, emic data are collected from sixteen L2 Chinese learners and nineteen L1 Chinese speakers. The data are analysed using both qualitative methods and computational models. The findings reveal that L2 learners identify a different range of DM functions from L1 speakers. They attribute their function identification to concerns about self-face and speaker-centred interpersonal relationships, in contrast to L1 speakers, who refer to moral norms and indirect interpersonal relationships between the hearer and a third party. The different interpretations that L1 and L2 participants develop for the DM have given rise to different expectations of conversational directions. L2 learners are consistently more optimistic about upcoming conversations than L1 speakers.

Keywords: Chinese; discourse marker; interpersonal relationship; metapragmatic interview; moral norm

1 Introduction

Arguably overlapping with pragmatic markers (Fraser 2009), discourse markers (DMs) are agreed upon by a variety of approaches as syntactically independent segments that are used in discourse but have little propositional meanings and exert

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little influence on the semantic meaning of the utterance that they bracket (Maschler and Schiffrin 2015). They serve a variety of pragmatic functions, which have attracted much interest from both L1 and L2 studies. Comparing the L1 and L2 understanding of DM functions has demonstrated interesting differences (e.g., Hellermann and Vergun 2007; House 2009, 2013; Liu 2016). However, to date, L2 pragmatics has mainly investigated DMs in English. More L2 pragmatics research is needed to explore DMs in other languages, such as Chinese (Ren 2022b). In addition, it is important to investigate why similarities and differences exist in the use of DMs in L1 and L2 interactions and what influence they have on the interactions. This study fills the research gap by investigating the sociocultural factors on which L1 and L2 speakers base their understanding of DM functions and the influence that their readings of DM functions have on conversational directions.

To achieve this goal, this study examines emic understanding of three interrelated aspects in L2 knowledge of a DM, namely, its pragmatic functions, sociocultural factors that L2 learners attribute their understanding of DM functions to, and their expectations of conversational directions. We compare the understanding of L2 Chinese learners to that of L1 Chinese speakers. By doing so, we aim to provide comprehensive insight into the different pathways that L2 learners adopt to develop their form-function knowledge while shedding light on the interactions between the cognitive, expressive, social and textual competence of L2 learners (Maschler and Schiffrin 2015: 205). DMs are frequently used in daily communication but have rarely been introduced systematically in formal instructions (Hellermann and Vergun 2007). This also makes them a particularly suitable focus for L2 pragmatics (Ren 2022b) investigating learners' active integration of their own sociocultural understanding with newly acquired linguistic codes.

Compared to studies of English DMs, L2 studies of Chinese DMs are rather limited. We choose the Chinese DM – *zenme shuo ne* ('how to say') – as the research object because its non-inquiry discourse function is embedded in its inquiry form (Cao 2014), and we are interested in whether L2 learners have sufficient pragmatic knowledge of it. In addition, this short phrase is frequently used in L2 Chinese teaching and learning, serving literally as part of wh-question, such as *shu zai yingyu li zenme shuo ne*? (How do you say book in English?). As a DM, it has an array of pragmatic functions, including leading a specification, getting attention, delaying a speech, mitigating face threats, and indicating corrections for previous information (Liu 2007). Its component, *zenme* (lit: how), also functions as a DM to replace embarrassing words or taboos in an utterance (Cheung 2015); *shuo* (lit: say) as a DM signals that speech following may counter the interlocutor's expectation (Wang et al. 2003). The sentence-final particle *ne* reflects the speaker's introspection on the acceptability of his/her speech and potentially indexes politeness depending on context (Lee-Wong 1998). Despite its wide usage, this DM has rarely, if

not never, been examined in the L2 context. This study thus also fills this research gap in DM-relevant studies.

The sections below begin by reviewing studies of DM functions while highlighting the functions that have been associated with sociocultural factors and conversational directions. We then move on to revisiting studies of L2 development of DMs. Data are introduced in Section 3, followed by findings in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the findings, and Section 6 provides pedagogical implications. Finally, we conclude with brief remarks and suggestions for future research in Section 7.

2 Background

2.1 Functions of DMs

Previous studies have tended to categorize DM functions into textual, expressive and interpersonal functions (Aijmer 2002; Aijmer and Vandenbergen 2003; Chen 2017; Traugott 2020). These functions are, however, not often clearly separatable and, at times, appear together in the same context (Maschler and Schiffrin 2015: 197).

The textual functions of DMs signal the relation between utterances, manage discourse organization, and help to build conversational coherence. They include turn initiation, floor holding, topic shifting, repairing a preceding message, adding information, and so forth (Brinton 1996; Gao and Tao 2021; Liu 2012; Sakita 2013). Depending on the context, these functions signal the direction in which the speaker intends to develop his/her speech and signal his/her hearers in which direction the conversation should be interpreted. For example, *like* indicates to the hearer that the upcoming message only loosely fits into the preceding topic (Jucker and Smith 1998).

Expressive functions are primarily studied as the speaker's stance expressed through DMs. Stance includes both the speaker's "personal attitudes, emotions, and assessments" and his/her "evaluations of the epistemic status of an entity or a proposition" (Gray and Biber 2014: 219). Stance taking may also encapsulate the speaker's understanding of moral norms, which s/he uses as a reference for their judgment or feeling (Englebretson 2007). For example, *qishi* ('actually') in Chinese is found to emphasize what the speaker believes to be true (Wang et al. 2010). Meanwhile, stances also exert influence on the hearer's expectation of conversational directions. Sakita (2013) finds that w*ell* indicates the stance of non-commitment to the hearer's views and a divergence from the response that the hearer expects. Traugott (2020) identifies that *by the way* indexes the speaker's "negative evaluation of the content of the upcoming clause" (2020: 8) and *oh, by the*

way helps the speaker to hedge an upcoming contrastive opinion by downplaying its importance (2020: 9).

Interpersonal functions are used to manage social relationships. Previous studies often find that these functions create politeness and relational rapport as pragmatic effects (Cook 1993; Landone 2012; Wang et al. 2010). These effects are also associated with stances, such as hedging, hesitating, agreeing, expressed by DMs, and the intentional delay/lapse created by DMs in the discoursal organization, showing that the three types of functions are interrelated.

Intriguingly, the above three functions have primarily been studied in speaker-hearer dyadic relationships. Grzech (2021) is one of the few who have attempted to explain expressive functions (i.e., stances) and interpersonal functions in a larger social network. She finds that the complex epistemic stance expressed by the DM *-mari* in Upper Napo Kichwa is connected to the small community to which speakers belong. In the small community, access to shared information is crucial, which *-mari* grows to index.

A variety of theoretical approaches have agreed that DMs are metapragmatic. However, none of the above-mentioned studies have employed a metapragmatic approach to examine DM functions and their connections to social dimensions. From the perspective of interactional linguistics, Maschler (1994) has argued that all DMs are metalinguistic. From the perspective of pragmatics, Fraser (2009) also regards some DMs as metacomments, and from the discourse analysis point of view, Schiffrin (1980) connects DMs to meta-talk. Although a few studies have realized that DM functions reflect speakers' introspection or inner thoughts (Lee-Wong 1998; Sakita 2013), a metapragmatic investigation has rarely been conducted, which this study intends to carry out.

Metapragmatic investigations can also provide advantages in testing the conversational influence of DM functions. Thus far, DM functions that indicate conversational directions have been accounted for mostly by researchers' etic analysis of a conversation that had already been made (e.g., Sakita 2013; Traugott 2020). Such analysis differs from real-world interactions, during which DMs give rise to an expectation of conversational directions before the addressee hears the actual follow-up speeches. Therefore, it is important to investigate the expectations of conversational directions from the emic perspectives of hearers, for which metapragmatic investigations can be designed.

2.2 L2 studies of discourse markers

Studies of DMs in a second language have focused predominantly on L2 learners' use of DMs instead of their comprehension or perception. Flowerdew and Tauroza (1995)

is one of the few that studies the influence of DMs on L2 comprehension. They find that, without DMs, L2 English learners have difficulties comprehending university lectures. In their study, the group of their participants who took the lecture with DMs included scored significantly higher than another group who took the same lecture but with DMs removed. A possible interpretation is that the use of DM tends to attract L2 learners' attention, which may contribute to higher scores. It is, however, unclear in which way they are interpreted by L2 learners.

In terms of DM use, previous studies tend to compare the frequencies and varieties of DMs that L2 learners use to those used by L1 speakers. The findings from the comparison are, however, inconsistent. On the one hand, Hellermann and Vergun (2007) and Liu (2016) both find that EFL learners use English DMs, such as *you know*, *well*, significantly less frequently than L1 speakers. Hellermann and Vergun (2007) suspect that this finding is related to L2 learners' level of socialization into English cultures. Liu (2016) argues that the native-like use of DMs is an indicator of L2 learners' exposure to the target language, although in her study, there was one participant who intentionally resisted native patterns. Recently, Zuloaga and Marco (2021) added that L2 learners tend to less diversify the functions that they assign to DMs.

On the other hand, House (2009, 2013) argues that in intercultural communication mediated by English, L2 English speakers reformulate the functions of English DMs to serve their own communicative purposes. For example, *okay*, which L1 speakers use to mark a closure of a conversation, is used by her L2 participants as a discourse opener and a device for checking the hearer's comprehension. García García (2021) also finds that German and Russian speakers who are learning Spanish use the same functions of *y* and *si* as L1 speakers, in addition to the new functions that they create for the DMs. We should note that these studies do not take L1 speakers' interpretations of DM functions as a fixed repertoire. Instead, their findings illustrate the potential that L1 speakers and L2 learners develop their understanding of DMs into different sets of functions.

In comparison to the number of L2 studies on English DMs or DMs in a European language, studies of DMs in L2 Chinese are rather limited. Tsai and Chu (2017) surveyed both second language and foreign language learners of Chinese in terms of their use of DMs. Their findings agree with Hellermann and Vergun (2007) and Liu (2016), namely, L1 Chinese speakers use DMs more frequently than both L2 and foreign Chinese learners, while L2 Chinese learners outperformed foreign language learners in terms of the range of situations where DMs have been appropriately used.

Diao (2016) and Diao and Chen (2021) examine the sentence-final particles used by L2 Chinese learners in their interactions with L1 Chinese roommates. Diao (2016) finds that the use of sentence-final particles is saturated with gender ideologies. Through interactions with L1 speakers, L2 learners are socialized into this

gendered linguistic practice. That is, the female learners increased the use of sentence-final particles, whereas the male learners decreased. Diao and Chen (2021) further find that L1 speakers use particles more frequently than L2 speakers. They use the particles to display a variety of their stances, probe their interlocutor's stance, and prevent potential confrontation, which L2 speakers rarely do. Using data collected from a learner corpus, Ren (2022a) also investigates the sentence-final particle *ba* as a pragmatic marker employed by L2 learners of Chinese across three proficiency levels. The findings show that proficiency influences learners' assertive and topic-introducing uses of the marker more than their directive and interrogative uses.

While the above-mentioned studies have contributed invaluable insights into L2 learners' uses of DM, they have rarely provided learner-oriented explanations for their findings. Their investigations were primarily based on recorded conversational data and etic analysis of these data. This approach poses limitations in identifying (meta)pragmatic knowledge that L2 learners activate to understand DM functions. Many studies of L2 pragmatic development have revealed that the pragmatic awareness of L2 learners is in nature intercultural (Chen 2022; Chen and Zhu 2023; McConachy 2019) and that their interpretations of pragmatic meanings are based on their multilingual knowledge (Chen and Brown 2022). To provide a comprehensive account of L2 learners' development of (meta)pragmatic form-function knowledge, this study explores the following questions:

1) What are the functions of *zenme shuo ne* identified by L2 Chinese learners in comparison to L1 Chinese speakers?
2) How do L2 learners explain the functions that they identify? In their explanations, do they refer to different sociocultural factors from L1 speakers?
3) How do L2 learners' interpretations of this DM influence their expectations of upcoming conversations?

3 Methods

This study first recruited twenty participants for the L1 and L2 groups. One L1 participant was excluded due to his lengthy stay in English-speaking countries. Three L2 participants withdrew due to personal reasons, and one was excluded due to technical issues in her recording. Finally, the metapragmatic interviews of sixteen L2 Chinese learners and nineteen L1 Chinese speakers were examined in this study. During the interviews, two real-world telephone conversations, which contain *zenme shuo ne*, were employed as prompts.

3.1 Participants

The learners were recruited from Chinese degree programmes in two UK-based universities. They consisted of 11 females and 5 males. The unbalanced gender ratio reflected the actual gender distribution in the language programmes. All the learners were aged between 20 and 29 with only one exception who was aged between 30 and 39. There were eight L1 English speakers, four English/other heritage language bilinguals, and one L1 speaker each of French, Hungarian, Persian, and Portuguese. The learners all took the *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (Chinese proficiency test, abbreviated as HSK) before they participated in this study. Four of the learners passed level 3 in HSK, six passed level 4, five passed level 5, and one passed level 6.[1] The group was thus made up of learners who had at least an intermediate level of Chinese proficiency.

The L1 Chinese speakers were recruited from international students at the same two universities. They consisted of 13 females and 6 males, a gender ratio that was intentionally kept consistent with the learner group. All the L1 participants were aged between 20 and 29 except one aged from 10 to 19 and one aged from 30 to 39. Their first language was Mandarin Chinese without any bilinguals. English was their second language, and their English proficiency ranged from 5.5 to 6.5 in terms of IELTS scores. Sixteen of them had not at all or had only spent less than three months in the U.K. Another three had spent 2, 3, and 5 years, respectively. Among those who had stayed at least one month in the U.K., four claimed that the English-speaking culture had not influenced their understanding of Chinese culture, while eight considered that their experience abroad helped to deepen their understanding of Chinese culture, making them notice those parts overlooked by them when in China.

For the ease of identification, the participants are named by their group C (Chinese) and L (Learner) and their number in interviews, e.g., L_01, C_01.

3.2 Selected phone calls as interview prompts

Two phone calls were extracted from the CALLFRIEND Mandarin Chinese–Mainland corpus.[2] The phone calls were originally transcribed in Chinese. We first searched the transcripts containing *zenme shuo ne*, which resulted in 29 conversations.

1 For the test content and ability description of each level of HSK, please see https://www.chinesetest.cn.

2 The corpus was developed by the Linguistic Data Consortium. It is widely used and consists of 60 authentic telephone conversations lasting between 5 and 30 min (approximately 24 h) between native speakers of Mandarin Chinese. See more information at the corpus website: https://doi.org/10.35111/5ha0-rb62.

Second, we manually deleted conversations using *zenme shuo ne* in its literal use. Third, we selected conversations that have at least two sentences preceding the DM and two following it, given the need to examine the context of the DM use. Finally, since there was no restriction on topics that speakers discussed over each phone call, we selected two topics that were closely related to the participants' life experiences. One of the phone calls was a student talking to his/her friend about strict course teachers and an upcoming exam, while another phone call was discussing the lifestyle and love relationship of a friend that both the speaker and the hearer knew. During the interview, the participants were required to read the Chinese transcripts. An English translation was later provided to allow L2 learners to make a quick reference for unfamiliar words. Both L1 and L2 participants agreed that the call contents were very common to their life experiences.

Zenme shuo ne appeared in the middle position of the phone calls. Preceding turns before this DM had foregrounded the conversation topics, and after the DM, several more turns were exchanged between the speaker and the hearer on the same topic (see Appendix A for the full transcripts). Examples (1) and (2) present the utterance in each transcript where *zenme shuo ne* was used.

Example (1) Talking about an upcoming exam and the course teachers

B: 但是我们那老师挺严的, 我操, 那吊人真是坏, 我操, 噢, 也不是坏, 怎么说呢 …

'But our teacher is very strict. Fuck, that fucking person is truly bad, Fuck, oh, it's not bad, how to put it …'

Example (2) Discussing a friend's lifestyle and love relationship

A: 但是我觉得C有点儿好像太过， 怎么说呢 …

'But I think C (the friend) is a bit too much, how to put it …'

The speakers and hearers in the phone calls had not been given a specific name or gender to prevent influence from these extralinguistic factors. They were written as A (the speaker) and B (the hearer). The 'teacher' and the 'friend' that A and B had been talking about in their phone calls were referred to as 'the third party' in later sections.

3.3 Metapragmatic interview

Metapragmatic interviews have previously been employed extensively to probe understanding of a linguistic form and its relation to sociocultural concepts (e.g., politeness, sincerity) (e.g., Chang and Haugh 2011; Ogiermann and Suszczyńska 2011; Ren and Fukushima 2022). It serves as a suitable tool for this study to investigate the

specific DM and its sociocultural explanations as well as the participants' expectations of conversational directions.

One L1 and one L2 Chinese research assistant (RA) were recruited to be interviewers for interviewing the L1 and L2 groups, respectively. To train the RAs, they were required to take the interview with the first author, who acted as their interviewer. After experiencing the interview by themselves, they were invited to a 30 min training session, during which the first author provided them with a list of interview questions and explained how each question could be unfolded. To ensure that the RAs' performance was consistent with different interviewees, the first author sat as the moderator during each interview. The interviewers were of a similar age and had similar university experiences to the participants. This study chose to use peers as the interviewers to encourage more open and detailed responses from the participants, given that the identity of the interviewer is known to affect the responses produced in interviews (e.g., Mori 2012).

Each metapragmatic interview took 20–30 min. It began by confirming whether the participants knew about *zenme shuo ne* and requiring them to specify what they knew. These warm-up questions collected the knowledge that the participants had about this DM. The participants were then provided with the phone call transcripts in which the conversation after *zenme shuo ne* was replaced by a blank. In other words, what the participants read was the first half of the phone call, including *zenme shuo ne*. They were asked to envisage in which direction the speech would develop and explain their reasons. This was a simulation of an actual conversation, namely, the hearer had no access to what the speaker would exactly say next, but, instead, the DM and its preceding talks give rise to an expectation. The participants were also asked for the functions and reasons that *zenme shuo ne* was used in its place. These general questions were followed by specific questions based on the interviewee's answers. For example, if one answers that *zenme shuo ne* is used to indicate the speaker's emotional struggle, the interviewer would ask what the speaker struggles for. These questions collected data for the three interrelated aspects of DM understanding, namely, the participants' interpretations of DM functions, their explanations for the functions, and the conversational directions expected after the DM was used. Finally, the participants were provided with complete transcripts. They read the complete conversations and answered the same question about the functions of *zenme shuo ne*. The interviewer also double-checked whether the actual conversation had developed beyond their expectations. Answers to these questions helped to confirm the quantitative analysis results for expected conversational directions (see Section 4.4).

During the interview, this study presented the phone calls in their written transcripts instead of letting the participants listen to them. This is because DMs are often not attended to in listening tasks due to their brevity. Moreover, participants do

not have the time to monitor the DM functions when they are paying attention to the whole discourse (Flowerdew and Tauroza 1995; Schmidt 1993). Instead, the written transcripts offered the participants the status of "eavesdroppers" who had intentionally followed the conversations and comprehended their details (Goffman 1981: 132). This participation status serves well the research aims of this study.

3.4 Data analysis

The functions of *zenme shuo ne* were categorized using NVivo. Specifically, the authors first identified the recurring explanations that L1 speakers and L2 learners used and scrutinized the data iteratively for any remaining explanations. We then grouped the same or similar explanations and formulated themes that accounted for the L1 speakers' and the L2 learners' metapragmatic descriptions. As discussed in Section 2.1, DM functions are not always clearly separatable from each other; for example, interpersonal functions could cooccur in the same use of a DM with its textual and expressive functions (Cook 1993; Landone 2012; Wang et al. 2010). While acknowledging the potential connections and overlap between different DM functions, we decided to be as faithful as possible to the emic descriptions of the participants. In other words, if the participants described that the DM was used to "give her time to think" so that she could "find other descriptions", we considered them as two functions instead of subsuming them under one function. This approach has previously been used in Chen and Brown (2022), who successfully identified L1 and L2 speakers' differences in meaning interpretations. The approach respected the participants' own understanding and, more importantly, allowed us to account for multiple functions used in the same speech, as excerpts in Section 4 will show.

The first author and a research assistant who was an M.A. student in linguistics coded the data independently on categorizing the functions based on the established coding scheme. The inter-coder reliability was 0.84, and the remaining discrepancies were discussed until a 100 % consensus was achieved. Table 1 presents the coding schemes with examples. In addition to quantitative analysis based on the coding schemes, the participants' explanations for their identification of functions were analysed qualitatively.

Expectations of conversational directions were scaled using a machine-learning model, namely, supervised sentiment analysis. This model calculates the speaker's sentiment orientations on a scale between negative-ness and positiveness. The calculation is conducted based on 'dictionaries', which contain a large number of evaluative expressions (usually lexicons and short phrases) collected from authentic communication. These expressions are annotated manually with positive or negative values. This study employed the English sentiment dictionary LSD2015, which consists

Table 1: Coding schemes.

Function	Example
L1 data	
Adding a specification or an explanation	“怎么说呢”可能会对C太过了这个事儿， 进行一个比较细致的描述， 嗯， 进行一些比较细节的描述。 ‘“*zenme shuo ne*” may give a more detailed description of the thing that C is too much, um, give some more detailed descriptions.’
Correcting	“怎么说呢”这句话用在这里， 它是想对自己的之前的话语的否定， 还有对接下来他要改变之前观点的阐述一个转接词。 ‘The phrase “*zenme shuo ne*” is used here, it is intended to negate his previous discourse, and it is also a transfer word for the next elaboration that he wants to change his previous point of view.’
Finding an appropriate expression	可能他也找不到一个合适的词来形容这个老师， 就第一在他的第一反应当中没有办法找到一个合适的词。 ‘Maybe he couldn’t find an appropriate word to describe this teacher, first of all, he couldn’t find an appropriate word in his first reaction.’
Indirectness marker	不太好直接去说。 ‘It’s not very good to say it directly.’
Marking the unspeakable	就是他想让人家懂， 懂他get他的点， 但是又不能明确的说明白， 差不多那个意思， 大家都知道就好。 ‘It’s just that he wants people to understand, to get his points, but he can’t clearly explain what it means, as long as everyone knows it.’
Marking transition	我觉得它更多的可能像是说开启他下一段要说的一个对话的内容。 ‘I think it is more likely to start a dialogue that he will say in the next paragraph.’
Stalling or gaining time to think	因为他， 他可能没有在第一时间想好他要怎么说， 所以说他就用， 他就， 对， “怎么说呢”， 就意思其实是给他自己创造一个思考的时间。 ‘Because he, he probably didn’t have a clear thought on what he was going to say in the first place, he just used, he just, yeah, “*zenme shuo ne*”, just means actually creating a time for himself to think.’
Subjective belief	我觉得“怎么说呢”， 在这个语境里面应该是表达一种他对这个事情的猜测， 就是他个人的主观上的印象。 ‘I think “*zenme shuo ne*”, in this context, should express his guess about this matter, which is his personal subjective impression.’
Struggling between different stances	他， “怎么说呢”可能表示他有一点想去说这个老师的不好的地方， 但是他又不知道该怎么去开口， 可能是有一点这种纠结和犹豫在里边。 ‘He, “*zenme shuo ne*” may mean that he wants to say something bad about this teacher, but he doesn’t know how to start it, maybe there is a little bit of this kind of struggle and hesitation inside.’
Turning point	我感觉他“怎么说”有点像是转折的意思。 ‘I feel that his “*zenme shuo*” is a bit like a turning point.’
L2 data	

Table 1: (continued)

Function	Example
Adding a specification or an explanation	Yeah, using it to give examples, I think.
Expressing uncertainty	I think the "*zenme shuo ne*" adds a bit of, like, uncertainty to it.
Finding an appropriate expression	I think because they realized that "*huai* (bad)" is not truly the word that they wanted to use, or it does not truly explain what they mean. Um, and they're trying to think of a better word to describe this teacher.
Indirectness marker	he wants to say it in, not so direct, trying … it's like, to sound more polite or less rude, he's kind of, like, we have a phrase in English, 'beating around the bush'.
Marking the unspeakable	He's trying to imply that without, actually, even saying anything. He might not even say anything on the end.
Marking transition	that gives them a little break in their thoughts thus far, so that they can, kind of, restart.
Politeness marker	To be polite, I think.
Recovering from emotions	So, it's like, like, emotional too much and then take a little bit back.
Rephrasing	He, the person, just wants to phrase it in, like, a different way.
Softening	Feel like it's a softener.
Stalling or gaining time to think	I probably in my everyday speech or very often have something comparable to "*zenme shuo ne*" while you're just stalling to see if you can think of, like, how you want to say.
Struggling between different stances	I think it's probably just the way in which you can try and indicate to the person who you're speaking to that you might, that you have, you're in two minds.

of 2,858 negative sentiment lexicons, 1,709 positive lexicons, and 2,860 and 1,721 negations of negative and positive expressions, respectively (Young and Soroka 2012). The Chinese sentiment dictionary adopted was the Chinese Emotional Vocabulary Ontology Database of Dalian University of Technology, which consists of 27,466 emotional expressions, including positive, negative, neg-positive, and neg-negative expressions. Although not yet widely used in linguistics studies, the reliability of these two dictionaries has been tested by computer scientists in a wide range of contexts, such as fiction, Twitter, and political texts (Hardeniya and Borikar 2016).

4 Findings

4.1 Functions of *zenme shuo ne*

The L2 learners and L1 speakers identified different functions for *zenme shuo ne* used in the phone calls. Figure 1 places the functions that they identified differently

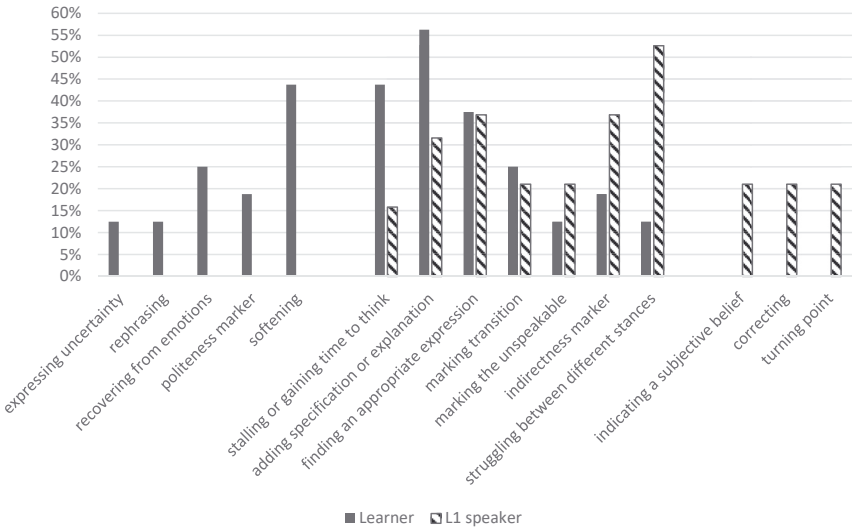

Figure 1: Frequencies of functions.

on each side of the graph with the functions that they reported in common in the middle.

Among the seven functions that have been identified in common, the L1 and L2 participants show different preferences. Fifty-six percent and 44 % of the L2 learners identified 'adding a specification or an explanation' and 'stalling or gaining time to think' the most. Both of them are textual functions. In contrast, 53 % of the L1 speakers consider the function 'struggling between different stances' to be the most frequent, which is an expressive function.

Only the learners regard *zenme shuo ne* as a softener, a politeness marker, and helping to recover from an emotional state. Two learners report 'expressing uncertainty' and 'rephrasing' as functions of *zenme shuo ne*. These two functions were also mentioned by the L1 speakers at the start of their interviews as part of their conventional knowledge about *zenme shuo ne*. However, the L1 speakers do not seem to agree that these two functions are deployed in the specific phone calls. Instead, the L1 speakers believe that *zenme shuo ne* in these specific contexts indicates a subjective belief, corrects the preceding message, and serves as a turning point for the conversation.

Overall, the L2 learners identify a larger variety of functions than the L1 speakers, which agrees with the previous findings of House (2013).

4.2 Comparison between L1 and L2 users' explanations of sociocultural factors

4.2.1 Sociocultural factors that L2 learners use to explain the functions of *zenme shuo ne*

One of the most salient differences between L1 and L2 data is the learners' identification of 'softening', 'politeness marker', and 'recovering from emotional state' as functions of *zenme shuo ne*. They believe that *zenme shuo ne* makes the speaker's speech "less harsh" (L_09), "avoiding an angry impression" (L_05), holding back "the aggy [aggravated] tone" and "being polite" (L_16). In the interviews, they explained these functions by their concerns about interpersonal relationships and the speaker's self-image.

In terms of interpersonal relationships, learners are mainly concerned with speaker-centred relationships, namely, the relationships between the speaker and the hearer and between the speaker and the third party. As shown in Excerpt (1), L_01 considers the relationship between the speaker and the third party ("when you're talking about the friend", line 01) to be the reason for *zenme shuo ne* being used as a 'politeness marker' ("they don't truly want to talk truly truly rudely about her", line 03). He also adds 'expressing uncertainty' as a secondary function to address the relational concern. His use of "so" (line 05) implies his perceptions of the causative relationship between the primary function ('expressing politeness') and the secondary function ('adding uncertainty'). This cooccurrence of two functions is supported by Lee-Wong (1998), who finds the same connection between politeness and uncertainty tone in her analysis of sentence-final particles.

Excerpt (1) L_01 (17:27)

01	L_01	I think the person says "*zenme shuo ne*" because, they, when they're talking about the friend,
02	Interviewer	U huh (nodding).
03	L_01	They don't want, um, they don't truly want to talk truly truly rudely about her.
04	Interviewer	U huh (nodding).
05	L_01	So I think the "zenme shuo ne" adds a bit of, like, uncertainty to it.

Self-image is another factor that learners refer to. As Excerpt (2) exemplifies, L_12 believes that *zenme shuo ne* "softens" the speaker's criticism so that s/he can "retract" his/her image from being "a horrible person" (lines 02–03). More intriguingly, this self-image is sensitive to others' evaluation ("you don't want the other person to think

…", line 07). In addition, *zenme shuo ne* is again assigned a secondary function, 'adding an explanation or specification' (line 05), which helps the speaker rephrase his/her thoughts to maintain a positive self-image.

Excerpt (2) L_12 (32:04)

01	Interviewer	Why do you think we need a "*zenme shuo ne*" after criticism?
02	L_12	Um, does it soften it a little bit?
03		Like I said, kind of … it makes you sound like, yeah, like you're not being such a horrible person.
04		Like, you're not just criticizing them but, like, actually this is what you think.
05		Yeah, so at first they said something truly quite mean and then they were like … they almost retracted a little bit and then, like, explained.

((After seven turns of discussing cross-cultural differences in criticism between Chinese and English, the interviewee came back to explain *zenme shuo ne*))

06	Interviewer	Yes? So, in English we sometimes do say something like, "The fucking person is truly bad."
07	L_12	Yeah, but then you don't want the other person to think, like, "Woah, you're truly, you're so mean." Then, you say, like, "Oh no, like, I mean," Do you know what I mean?

The functions 'adding a specification or an explanation' and 'stalling or gaining time to think' are found to be more frequent in L2 data than in L1 data. L2 learners interpret *zenme shuo ne* as "let me give you an example" (L_09) and "let me explain to you why I think that" (L_07), even though they know very well that this DM is literally translated into 'how to say'. Similarly, when using *zenme shuo ne* to stall or gain the speaker time to think, the learners regard it as an analogy to "um", "ah", or "like" in English (L_14, L_16). They classify it as "a filler" (L_16), "a pause" (L_02, L_07), or "a placeholder" (L_14), which "keeps the conversation flowing" (L_01).

The learners' preference for these two textual functions seems to have been influenced by their language-learning experience. At the start of the interview, the learners recalled that *zenme shuo (ne)* had previously been acquired by them as a query to an English or Chinese translation of a word or a concept, namely, 在英文/中文里怎么说呢 ('How do I say it in English/in Chinese'). This experience of asking for literal specifications seems to have transformed into the learners' understanding of

zenme shuo ne as a signal of specification in general. Additionally, the learners received instructions from their teachers that *zenme shuo ne* can be used to hold the floor and maintain fluency for their narratives. L_10 reported that their teacher had told them that they should have a few phrases, such as *zenme shuo ne*, which they could use when they were trapped in classroom activities, such as describing pictures. Given that one of the main sources of their L2 is classroom-based learning (especially during the COVID pandemic), it is thus not a surprise that the learners show the most familiarity with these two functions.

4.2.2 Sociocultural factors that L1 speakers use to explain the functions of *zenme shuo ne*

In contrast to the L2 group, the L1 speakers recognize *zenme shuo ne* as an indicator of a 'subjective belief', 'correcting' preceding messages, and a 'turning point', as well as identifying the function 'struggling between different stances' the most. They also refer to interpersonal relationships to explain their function identifications. However, unlike the L2 learners, the L1 speakers pay more attention to indirect relationships between the hearer and the third party. For example, in Excerpt (3), C_08 sees *zenme shuo ne* as a turning point, which changes the speech from negative to neutral. This function is explained by the fear that the hearer might pass the speaker's negative evaluation to the 'teacher' and consequently "cause some damage to [the speaker's] personal interests" (line 05). Judging from the use of *zenme shuo ne*, C_08 has also evaluated the relationship between the speaker and the hearer in terms of trustworthiness (lines 03–04). Such an evaluation was not observed in the learner data.

Excerpt (3) C_08 (09:27)

01	Interviewer	你觉得这个人为什么要从坏转成中性？ 'Why do you think this person changes [his/her speech] from negative to neural?'
02	C_08	因为他可能意识到"坏"它不是一个有， 第一， 可能觉得"坏"它并不是一个合适的词来形容这个人。 'Because s/he probably realized that "bad" itself is not, first, possibly [the speaker] feels that "bad" itself is not an appropriate word to describe this person.'

03 第二他可能觉得A他并不是非常值得信任。如果我跟你在对话的时候， 我说某某个人比较坏， 我可能是建立在我跟你互相比较信任，我对你比较信任的基础上。
'Second, s/he probably feels that A is not very trustworthy. If I am having a conversation with you, I said someone is rather bad, I probably [said so] based on the trust between you and me, based on I trust you.'

04 但是如果是我说了"坏"， 然后后来"怎么说呢"， 后来又想要去说一些其他的词的话， 可能是我对你不太信任
'But if I said "bad", then followed by a "*zenme shuo ne*", then want to add some other words, that is probably [because] I don't quite trust you.'

05 我可能担心你会跑去跟老师讲， 或者就是对我做造成什么利益上的损害。我感觉是有这两种情况
'I am probably worried about you passing my words to the teacher, or causing some damage to my interests. I feel there are these two possibilities.'

The L1 speakers also attribute their function interpretations to their understanding of moral norms. They ask right or wrong questions about the speaker's behaviour. For example, C_19 argues that criticizing a teacher would make the speaker "feel guilty" because, as a student, "s/he should at least repay" for the work that the teacher has done for teaching him/her. Furthermore, C_05 assumes that the responsibility lies with the speaker who did not "study hard" and "revise well" (line 03, Excerpt 4). He thinks that the speaker should have already realized his/her own fault and thus could not bear his/her own behaviour of accusing the teacher (lines 04–05). Therefore, C_05 believes that the speaker was experiencing an "internal struggle" between moral remorse and emotional annoyance (line 02).

Excerpt (4) C_05 (09:23)

01 Interviewer 你觉得这个人在对话里这里为什么用了"怎么说呢"这个词？
'Why do you think this person used a "*zenme shuo ne*" here in this conversation?'

02	C_05	会不会是因为他内心比较矛盾? 'Wouldn't it be because s/he is struggling inside him/herself?'
03		一边他又是觉得，嗯，他站在学生这一方，他可能说之前没有好好读书，没有好好复习。 'On the one hand, s/he also feels, um, standing on the viewpoint of a student, s/he probably hasn't studied hard before, hasn't revised well.'
04		然后碰到期末考试了，然后又在这边说老师对他们特别严格，要抓他们作弊之类的。但是觉得他的那种，就是三观，应该是觉得已经清楚认识到明明就是自己错了。 'Then, here is the term-end exam, then [s/he] was talking about the teacher has been very strict to them here, catching them cheating. But [I] feel that his/her that, reflections, s/he must have realized that it is his/her own fault.'
05		然后，但是也不忍心说直接去骂这个老师，这个意思，所以他才会用"怎么说"这样子。 'Then, but can't bear accusing the teacher directly, like this, so s/he used "*zenme shuo ne*" like this.'

Moreover, what the third party conducted was not a publicly recognized wrongdoing, such as "fire-raising" (C_16). This makes the speaker's judgment of the third party "merely [be] some of [their own] thoughts" with which others might disagree (C_16). In Excerpt (5), C_09 suspects that the speaker and the hearer have not reached an agreement on the speaker's subjective judgment (line 03, Excerpt 5) and have realized that the speaker's speech lacks the source of evidentiality (line 07). *Zenme shuo ne* is thus used to indicate that what is exchanged in the conversation is a subjective belief, which the speaker struggles to continue (lines 03–04).

Excerpt (5) C_09 (14:19)

01	Interviewer	那你觉得这个人在这他为什么用了"怎么说呢"这句话呢？ 'Why do you think this person used this sentence "*zenme shuo ne*" here?'
02	C_09	呃，可能他觉得有点婊对不对？ 'Um, probably s/he feels a bit bitchy, right?'

03		他觉得就是， 我觉得他跟那个， A跟B并不是， 他们并没有觉得达成一致观点， 但是A他觉得需要收敛点去说那个朋友。 'S/he feels like, I feel that s/he and that, A and B are not, they have not reached an agreement, but A feels that s/he needs to retract a bit when talking about that friend.'
04		但是他得， 呃， 想想着怎么去， 就是大概的提一下怎么觉得他不好， 但是没有又不想说， 有点难以启齿。 'But s/he has, um, to think how, like, briefly mention how s/he feels not good about [that friend], but don't truly want to say it out, a bit hard to say.'
05	Interviewer	有点难以启齿? 'A bit hard to say.'
06		对。 'Yeah.'
07		有可能是因为他找不到， 他只是， 他自己觉得， 但是他找不到证据说这人太过了。 'Most likely, because s/he can't find, s/he is just, s/he feels, but s/he can't find evidence to say that person is too much.'

In summary, L2 learners and L1 speakers not only have developed a different list of DM functions but also attribute their function identification to different sociocultural factors. The learners explain their functions by the concerns of self-image and speaker-centred interpersonal relationships, whereas the L1 speakers show sensitivity to moral norms and indirect interpersonal relationships between the hearer and the third party.

4.3 Influence of *zenme shuo ne* on expectations of conversation direction

L1 and L2 participants were also asked to describe their expectations of conversational directions with incomplete phone call transcripts. Then, after being provided the complete transcripts, they were provided the opportunity to compare their expectations to the actual follow-up speeches. Using a supervised model of sentiment analysis, the participants' descriptions of their expectations were

Table 2: Sentiment scores[a].

Conversation	Learner	L1 speaker
Cov1	0.25	−0.13
Cov2	0.63	0.31

[a]The scores range between 1 and −1. 1 indicates that no negative tokens were used at all, and −1 indicates that no positive tokens were used at all.

measured on a scale of positiveness and negativeness. The results show that the learners have consistently been more positive about the conversational direction than the L1 speakers (Table 2).

With regard to the first phone call, the L1 speakers expected that the upcoming speeches after *zenme shuo ne* would still be negative (−0.13). In contrast, the L2 learners expect the upcoming conversation to be positive (0.25). They believe that the speaker would explain his/her preceding speech in a "polite" and "nice" manner, as *zenme shuo ne* indicates (L_11, L_16). L_06 even considers that the speaker should apologize first for his/her inappropriate language use in the preceding turns (Excerpt 6).

Excerpt (6) L_06 (06:46)

01	Interviewer	Yeah. So what do you think would they say after?
02	L_06	Like, some "Excuse me" or something.
03	Interviewer	You'd think they=
04	L_06	= Or, "Sorry" or something. Then, how should, should I say proper?
05		Maybe apology?
06	Interviewer	An apology? O.K. So, um, if you were the speaker, what would you put in the blank? Would you put an apology after?
07	L_06	Put how should I say this thing? Is that the, But is, the language is not appropriate, so …

After being provided with the complete transcript, the learners were surprised by the follow-up speeches in the first phone call. The follow-up speeches have not been packaged by 'politeness' but contain "slightly more cussing" (Excerpt 7, line 02) as the negative expectation that L1 speakers have. L_16 thus suspects that "[he] was wrong" in interpreting the DM functions and tries to reinterpret *zenme shuo ne* as "just … a filler expression" (line 04).

Excerpt (7) L_16 (37:49)

01	L_16	Um, so I was initially, I was thinking it's because they needed to calm down and maybe avoid cussing any further.
02		Um, I was wrong because there's slightly more cussing.
03		I think, if this case, I actually think they're definitely not trying to be nice.
04		I think they're, I think it was just an expression, like, a filler expression, generally that's why in this case, yeah.

With regard to the second phone call, both the L1 speakers and the learners believe that the continuing speeches after *zenme shuo ne* would be positive. However, the learners are, again, more optimistic (0.63) than the L1 speakers (0.31).

The L1 speakers understand that the speaker's criticism ("C is a bit too much") could serve as part of caring expressions for friends (e.g., "怕她吃亏", worried about her being taken advantage [by the foreign man], C_08). In contrast, the learners do not take the "complaint" as a strategy to express their caring about friends (Excerpt 8, line 01). In Excerpt (8), L_11 is confused because this "complaint" is followed by a caring expression. The unfolding of the actual phone call goes beyond her expectation ("which I wasn't expecting", line 01). To explain the discrepancy between her expectation and the actual follow-up conversation, she tries to reinterpret *zenme shuo ne* as a turning point that turns a complaint into an expression of caring (line 05).

Excerpt (8) L_11 (26:04)

01	L_11	Yeah, and at, like, first, it appears to be A is complaining about her, but then in the end it appears to be he cares about her, which I was not expecting.
02	Interviewer	Yeah, O.K. So … so why do you think A needs a "怎么说呢" in the conversation? After reading the whole conversation?
03	L_11	Um.
04	Interviewer	So, what do you think A used "怎么说呢" for?
05	L_11	It's kind of like he's changed his direction of how he feels about that friend.
06	Interviewer	O.K.
07	L_11	Yeah, to, like, move from the complaining about her to caring about her.

As both the quantitative and qualitative results show, L2 learners' expectations of conversational direction are affected by the functions that they identify. From their

understanding, *zenme shuo ne* functions as a 'politeness marker' and 'softener', signaling that the follow-up speeches would be packaged politely and nicely. This helps the speaker to avoid damaging his/her self-image and interpersonal relationships. In contrast, the L1 speakers struggle between their feelings of annoyance and moral norms as well as their disapproval of the other's behaviour and the fear of indirect social relationships between the hearer and the third party. They identify *zenme shuo ne* as an indicator of such struggles. Consequently, their expectation of conversational direction tends to be less positive than that of L2 learners.

5 Discussion

In this study, we reveal that L2 learners develop a distinctive understanding of DM functions. They have reported seven functions that the L1 speakers also identified while recognizing another five functions that the L1 speakers do not. In total, they have perceived a larger variety of functions than L1 speakers. Previous studies have found that L2 learners use a smaller range of DM functions and use them less frequently than L1 speakers (Hellermann and Vergun 2007; Liu 2016; Zuloaga and Marco 2021). One may argue that the disagreement between the current finding and previous findings stems from the different aspects that are investigated. That is, previous studies examine the use of DMs, while this study focuses on perception. The difference thus indicates that learners' pragmatic perception and production may not correspond to each other (Ren 2015). Meanwhile, we should also note that House (2009, 2013) and García García (2021) have studied the use of DMs and arrived at similar conclusions to the current study. This indicates the possibility that L2 learners can agentively formulate and create their own functions in both perceptions and use of DMs. Therefore, different interpretations of DM functions by L2 learners could also be a result of the diverse sociocultural factors they consider.

L2 learners pay attention to self-image and speaker-centered relationships when explaining their functional identification with the DM. Their concern of self-image appears to be similar to Goffman's (1955) concept of face, which is defined as positive social values that a speaker effectively claims for him/herself (1955: 213). It is both internally associated with positive personal attributes of the speaker and externally evaluated or (dis)approved by others. Similarly, in this study, self-image is associated with the speaker's character of "not being a horrible person" and is subjective to others' evaluation (see Except 2).

In addition, L2 learners also refer to speaker-centred relationships, namely, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer or between the speaker and the third party. They have rarely been concerned with the potential or indirect relationship between the hearer and the third party, which is, however, the focus of

the relational concerns of L1 speakers. The L1 speakers are worried about the possibility that the hearer might pass their words to the third party. They also fear that this pass-on of message would evoke potential damage to their personal interests. This finding is supported by a recent study, Chen and Wang (2021: 322), in which the indirect relationships between the hearer and the third party are named "invisible social relationships". Invisible social relationships refer to the potential social connections that the hearer has or the speaker thinks the hearer might have. They are 'invisible' compared to the 'visible' speaker-hearer dyadic relationships. Chen and Wang (2021) find that invisible social relationships exert a considerable level of influence on L1 Chinese speakers' choice of (in)direct speech strategies. This influence orients from the specific mechanism by which social networks in Chinese society operate; that is, interpersonal relationships can be used as a type of social capital for gaining reputational, substantial, and relational benefits, while ignoring or mishandling them can result in unforeseen losses.

L2 learners do not seem to have acknowledged the existence and importance of invisible interpersonal relationships in Chinese culture. They also do not recognize the social values attached to the triangled relationships between the speaker, the hearer, and the third party. They have not reported any concerns about the hearer's trustworthiness, which the L1 speakers did. They also have difficulties relating the speaker's dissatisfaction to the intimacy between friends; for example, a "complaint" can serve as an expression of caring for friends (see Excerpt 8). Previously, a number of L1 Chinese studies have revealed the connections between less refrained speech and intimate relationships (Chang and Haugh 2011; Chen and Wang 2021; Lee-Wong 1994). These studies find that intimate relationships often entail speaking directly in Chinese. Directness serves as a strategy for L1 Chinese speakers to express their sincerity (Ren and Fukushima 2022). Therefore, the speaker's negative evaluation could be taken as an outright way of speaking his/her sincere worries for a friend, which surprised the L2 learners.

L2 learners do not share the same understanding of moral norms as L1 speakers. The L1 speakers consider that students should not criticize their teacher and should repay the efforts that their teacher teaches them. This finding corresponds to the close teacher-student relationship in China and the teacher-respect norms bound to the relationship. In particular, the efforts that teachers make to teach students are not merely regarded as their jobs in Chinese but, more importantly, as a kind of emotional debt (师恩) that students owe to their teacher. In pragmatics, morality has been studied as the moral order that underlies a speaker's evaluation of (im)politeness (Blitvich and Kádár 2021; Spencer-Oatey and Kadar 2015). This study adds further evidence that moral order varies across cultures, and more importantly, it may be difficult for L2 learners to access in their learning of

the target language, indicating the necessity of providing relevant pragmatic instruction to L2 learners (Ren et al. 2022).

6 Pedagogical implication

The findings give rise to several important pedagogical implications. First, they underscore the importance of treating L2 learners' development of DM functions as a different process from that of L1 speakers. In this study, the L2 learners created their own set of functions for *zenme shuo ne* by referring to sociocultural factors, self-face and speaker-centred interpersonal relationships. The different sociocultural factors that they refer to demonstrate that when constructing a form-function relationship, L2 learners not only activate their knowledge of the target language but also rely on their existing linguistic and ideological systems. As pointed out by Chen and Zhu (2023) and McConachy (2019), the pragmatic awareness of L2 learners is in nature intercultural and multicultural. This study thus suggests that the L2 learning environment should accommodate the interactions between different languages and ideological systems that L2 learners have. They should be treated as active agents in negotiating their own form-function relationships, considering that their goal of L2 development is not to become native-like but to deliver their own intended meanings (Chen 2022; Chen and Brown 2022; Ishihara and Tarone 2009; Li et al. 2021; Ren 2013).

Second, we recommend incorporating a variety of DM functions into L2 instructions (Ren et al. 2022). The current findings have illustrated that L2 learners' identification and preferences for DM functions are influenced by their learning experience. They show the most familiarity with the two functions, 'adding a specification or an explanation' and 'stalling or gaining time to think', which have been instructed or used in their language classrooms. It is thus anticipated that providing L2 learners with a richer repertoire of DM functions would help them to further improve their cognitive, expressive, and social competence in organizing discourses via DMs.

Third, we suggest providing L2 learners with further access to culture-specific concepts. In this study, the L2 learners did not show any awareness of the moral norms and the specific types of social relationships that L1 Chinese speakers are concerned about. Due to L2 learners' distinctive development of pragmatic form-function knowledge, it may not be feasible or even desirable to expect language learners to follow these sociopragmatic norms (Ren 2013). Nevertheless, language instruction can still seek to help learners notice the deep-lying and culturally imbued concepts that underly language usage so that learners can make more informed pragmalinguistic choices (Chen and Brown 2022). In addition, language

educators are encouraged to provide explanations to account for both L1 speakers' 'insider' perspectives and L2 learners' agentive language choices. By doing so, L2 learners may gain better access to the pragmatic meanings that their L1 interactants intend to deliver. Previously, Diao and Chen (2021), who specifically surveyed the intercultural communication between L1 and L2 speakers, found that L2 Chinese learners rarely realize the stances expressed by L1 Chinese speakers using sentence-final particles. Similarly, our L2 participants are surprised by the unfolding of L1 Chinese conversations. With awareness of culture-specific concepts and their increasing ability to comprehend L2 conversations, learners can reach a more convergent expectation of conversational direction with their L1 interactants, which helps to smooth their communication.

7 Conclusions

This study has revealed the different developments that L2 learners have in terms of DM functions. By linking the DM functions to L2 learners' existing knowledge of sociocultural factors and their expectations of conversational directions, we provide a useful way to examine L2 learners' pragmatic competence and factors influencing their L2 pragmatic acquisition. The findings showed that L2 learners pay more attention to face and speaker-centred social relationships than L1 speakers, who are sensitive to culture-specific moral norms and indirect social relationships. The different function interpretations have influenced their expectations of conversational directions, with the L2 learners being more optimistic.

Previous L2 pragmatic studies of DMs have revealed interesting learner differences from L1 speakers. However, these differences have tended to be left unexplained as to where they come from and how they affect L1 and L2 interactions. Therefore, the present study contributes to the field by exploring these questions with concrete findings on sociocultural factors on which understanding of DM functions is based and the measurement of conversational directions. It offers unique comprehensive insight into L2 form-function knowledge, from L2 learners' ideological instalments to their reading of conversational flow. Meanwhile, the study also has some limitations and suggestions for future research. This study has demonstrated that metapragmatic investigation is effective in providing comprehensive accounts for DM functions. In particular, this approach collects learner-oriented perspectives and allows researchers to compare emic understandings of DMs between different participant groups. Future research may consider applying this approach to investigate learners' explanations for their own use of DMs, which this study has not addressed. In addition, this study only had information about the participants' HSK exam. In future examinations of DM use, we also recommend

incorporating oral proficiency tests prior to the investigation. The oral proficiency of L2 learners may affect their use of DMs more than their knowledge of them. Finally, we encourage studies to examine L2 Chinese learners across a wider range of proficiency levels and to include more variables focusing on learners' individual differences (e.g., age, gender, personality) to promote a comprehensive understanding of learners' perception of DMs.

Transcription conventions

=	Contiguous utterances after an interruption
…	Incomplete part
(word)	Bodily movement
((word))	Transcriber's remark

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