

Agreement-Drop in Singlish: Subject to Topichood

Si Kai Lee

1. Introduction

Colloquial Singaporean English (henceforth SINGLISH) is a contact variety spoken in Singapore. Of indeterminate typological status, it has been variably characterised as either the basilectal and/or mesolectal segment(s) of the speech continuum of a pidgin (DeCamp 1971, Platt 1975, Tay 1979, Platt & Weber 1980), a creoloid (Platt 1975), an extended pidgin (Arends et al. 1994), or the low colloquial variety in diglossic opposition to Standard English (Gupta 1989). However, one common assumption that spans all of these accounts of Singlish is that Singlish is the result of English having accumulated, over the past 200 years, lexical and grammatical features from the other languages historically represented in the region. Of these, the most prominent are the Sinitic varieties of Southern Min (Hokkien/Teochew), Wu (Cantonese), and Mandarin, alongside the indigenous Bahasa Melayu (Malay) (Bao 2015).

One feature which distinguishes Singlish from the so-called “standard” Englishes (including the other English variety extant in Singapore, Standard Singaporean English) is the apparent optionality of verbal agreement with third-person singular subjects in the present tense; the *-s* morpheme that corresponds to 3rd-person singular subject-verb agreement in the present tense in (1) is largely optional in Singlish (cf. 2).

(1) Rachel **knows** Nick.

(2) Rachel **know** Nick. [= (1)]

This non-realisation of the agreement morpheme (henceforth AGREEMENT-DROP) has been observed to be semantically vacuous, with (2) being semantically equivalent to (1). Indeed, Wee & Ansaldo (2004) note that the distribution of agreement-drop appears to be “sporadic rather than rule-governed” (p. 380), and suggest that it should be treated as a case of morphophonological free variation.

Note, however, that this view of agreement-drop makes strong predictions with respect to its ability to interact with the syntax-semantics interface; as a morphophonological quirk of the language, (non-)instantiation of agreement-drop is never expected to have syntactic or semantic reflexes. Sato (2014) adopts this view, arguing that the agreement morpheme is always syntactically represented, independent of the choice between the overt *-s* allomorph and the zero-allomorph. That is to say, from the perspective of the syntax, agreement-drop constructions are indistinguishable from their full-agreement counterparts.

I present a number of novel empirical observations which demonstrate that this is not the case: agreement-drop can result in ungrammaticality within the right syntactic frames. In particular, I demonstrate that agreement-drop constructions (i) bleed the possibility of object topicalisation, as well as (ii) exhibiting scope-freezing effects; (iii) adjunct extraction over an embedded agreement-drop construction is also impossible, and (iv) agreement-drop constructions cannot be embedded under predicates such as *regret*.

These properties clearly show that agreement-drop cannot be a purely morphophonological phenomenon, but must instead be morphosyntactic in nature. I argue that these properties are a byproduct of a topicalisation structure being instantiated obligatorily in agreement-drop constructions, with the overtly realised “subject” in these constructions being syntactically situated in a topic position which is higher than that of canonical subjects in standard Englishes (i.e. SpecTP).

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In section 2, I present the novel empirical observations, and I provide a detailed walkthrough of the proposed analysis in Section 3. Section 4 concludes.

2. Data

2.1. Object Topicalisation

As in other “standard” Englishes, the syntactic operation of object topicalisation is available in Standard Singaporean English, i.e. direct objects can undergo dislocation to the left periphery of the clause, as in (3a). Notably, however, the sentence is heavily degraded in the agreement-drop counterpart of (3a), (3b)¹.

- (3) a. Mary_{*i*}, Mr. Wu knows *t_i*.
 b. ?* Mary, Mr. Wu **know**. [= (1)]

The minimal pair formed between (3a) and (3b) indicates that it is the presence/absence of the agreement morpheme that bleeds object topicalisation.

This pattern extends to embedded clauses, where object topicalisation is again illicit in conjunction with agreement-drop (4a vs 4b).

- (4) a. John says that Mary, Peter likes.
 b. ?* John says that Mary(.) Peter **like**.

That the loss of the agreement morpheme should bleed a syntactic operation clearly poses an empirical challenge to any PF-based account of agreement-drop; to the syntax, the syntactic presence of the silent allomorph of the agreement morpheme is indistinguishable to the overtly realised allomorph. Free variation of the two allomorphs should therefore have no impact on the applicability of any syntactic operation(s). Note that an intonational break equivalent to that which is usually required for object topicalisation structures in standard English is insufficient to rescue the sentence from ungrammaticality.

Note that the ungrammaticality cannot follow from a phonological constraint on a phonologically null element at the edge of the prosodic phrase, since the inclusion of intervening material such as the adverb ‘well’ sentence-finally does not eliminate the observed contrast (5a vs. 5b).

- (5) a. Mary_{*i*}, Mr. Wu knows *t_i* well.
 b. ?* Mary_{*i*}, Mr. Wu **know** *t_i* well. [= (5a)]

Clearly, then, the ungrammaticality that arises when object topicalisation cooccurs with agreement-drop is a (morpho)syntactic issue rather than a morphophonological one.

One possibility to consider is that the subjects of agreement-drop constructions are not the regular subjects of the standard English variety, but are instead overtly realised topics, as has been argued for Sinitic languages more generally (cf. Bao 2015). If the erstwhile “subject” of an agreement-drop construction is syntactically a topic, then the impossibility of object topicalisation in such constructions would largely resolve into the widely known ban on multiple topicalisation in English (Lasnik & Saito 1992). That is to say, further object topicalisation in agreement-drop constructions would result in a double topic construction, which has been reported to be ungrammatical in English; the ungrammaticality of (3b) is therefore parallel to that of (6)².

¹ Note that this degradation can be alleviated with additional contextual information, however.

² It is true that the two constructions are not completely parallel, as can be seen from the difference in grammaticality between (5b) and (6b); due to space constraints, I will, for the moment, suggest that this is due to differences between English and the Sinitic languages (and by extension, Singlish) with respect to the possibility of multiple topicalisation. The difference in (un)grammaticality therefore stems from the possibility of establishing the overt object topic as a hanging topic, or the head of a topic chain, in the event that sufficient context is provided to license such a construal.

- (6) a. For a long time now, John has loved Mary.
 b. * For a long time now, Mary, John has loved.

I now turn my attention to another environment in which agreement-drop bleeds the availability of syntactic operations, namely adjunct extraction.

2.2. *Adjunct-extraction across agreement-drop

Consider first the standard English example (7). The embedded indirect object *to John* can undergo topicalisation, yielding the grammatical (8).

- (7) I think that Mary said *to John* that Peter fixed the car with a hammer.
 (8) I think that [to John], Mary said that Peter fixed the car with a hammer.

Embedded topicalisation has been noted to block the extraction of adjuncts from a lower clause (Lasnik & Saito 1992), cf. example (9), which is ungrammatical under the indicated reading where the extracted adjunct associates with the most deeply embedded clause; *how* must instead associate with the higher predicates, meaning that it can question either the manner of thinking or the manner of saying, but not the manner of fixing.

- (9) * How_{*i*} did you think that [to John], Mary said that [Peter fixed the car *t_i*]?

That the equivalent construction *without* topicalisation allows for the questioning of the manner of fixing (10) demonstrates that this blocking effect is indeed caused by the embedded topicalisation, to the effect that adjuncts cannot be extracted over embedded topics.

- (10) How_{*i*} did you think that Mary said *to John* that [Peter fixed the car *t_i*]?

It is therefore surprising to find that an alleged case of morphophonological free variation, agreement-drop, should result in a similar blocking effect, in that adjuncts cannot be extracted over predicates which lack the agreement morpheme (11 vs. 10).

- (11) * How_{*i*} did you think that [Mary] **say** *to John* that [Peter fixed the car *t_i*]

Crucially, the available interpretations for (11) are exactly those that are available for the embedded topicalisation example (9), i.e. (11) can be used to question either the manner of thinking or the manner of saying, but not the manner of fixing. Given that (11) is minimally different from (10) only in that there is no overt morphological person/tense marking³ on the verb, it appears that there is a parallelism between environments in which topicalisation is blocked, and where agreement-drop is blocked, a pattern which is repeated when we look at the complements of *regret*-class verbs.

³ Since the embedded verb is in the past tense, which does not show person-based allomorphy when overtly realised, there may be concerns that tense omission is distinct from agreement-drop, and that this paradigm is orthogonal to the phenomena under discussion. The following contrast demonstrates that this is not the case:

- (7') a. You said that Mary thinks that Peter fixed the car with a hammer.
 b. How did you say that Mary thinks that Peter fixed the car?
 c. * How_{*i*} did you say that Mary **think** that [Peter fixed the car *t_i*]?

The question of whether tense and agreement are indeed inextricably intertwined is very much relevant however, though it falls outside of the purview of this particular paper.

2.3. **Regret agreement-drop*

It has been noted in the literature that there are a number of predicates which take clausal complements, but do not allow for topicalisation in their complements, such as *regret* (Hooper & Thompson 1973). This distinguishes such predicates from predicates which do allow for embedded topicalisation such as *say*, as in (4a), repeated below. Therefore, the ungrammaticality of (12b) is due to the inherent incompatibility of such predicates with topicalisation structures.

- (4a) John says that Mary, Peter likes.
- (12) a. John regrets that he knows Mary.
b. *John regrets that [Mary], he knows.

Perhaps unsurprisingly by this point, agreement-drop, which can otherwise apply to embedded clauses (13) patterns with topicalisation in that it is not possible in the scope of verbs such as *regret* (14).

- (13) John says that he **know** Mary.
- (14) *John regrets that [he] **know** Mary.

Again, this is unexpected if the presence or absence of morphological agreement is simply morphophonological, since the agreement morpheme should be syntactically active regardless of whether the zero-allomorph were to be realised; the selection properties of the predicate *regret* should therefore be just as satisfied with the zero-allomorph as it is with the regular *-s* allomorph (cf. the grammaticality of 12a).

Conversely this paradigm is fully predicted if the “subjects” of agreement-drop constructions are, as I am arguing, topics, since the embedded “subject” *he* in (14) would have to be realised in a syntactically higher position, meaning that additional functional material and projections must be merged at its left edge, resulting in the size of the entire complement clause being ultimately larger than that of the fully agreeing (13), such that it no longer satisfies the selectional criteria for *regret*.

2.4. *Scope Freezing*

The final novel observation which I bring to bear on the proposed structural distinction between fully agreeing and agreement-drop constructions is the fact that scopal alternations covary with whether agreement is overtly realised.

The standard English (15) is ambiguous between a surface scope reading, where the existential introduced by the embedded subject *somebody* scopes over the universal introduced by the embedded object *everyone*, and an inverse scope reading, where the universal scopes over the existential. That is to say that the sentence is adjudged true either if there is a specific unique individual such that everybody is loved by that individual **or** if, for each individual being considered, at least one individual loves them.

Conversely, agreement-drop do not display this same ambiguity. Instead, the surface scope reading is the only available interpretation for (16).

- (15) John says that someone **loves** everyone. ✓ $\exists > \forall$; ✓ $\forall > \exists$
- (16) John says that someone **love** everyone. ✓ $\exists > \forall$; * $\forall > \exists$

Again, the two examples (15) and (16) form a minimal pair, with the only point of difference being the realisation/non-realisation of the embedded agreement morpheme. This therefore constitutes a case of semantic non-equivalence between the full agreement construction and its agreement-drop counterpart; a PF-based account of the phenomenon is thus ruled out, since a silent allomorph of the same morpheme should not result in a change in the semantics of the construction.

How is that agreement-drop blocks inverse scope from obtaining then?

Consider the standard English sentences in (17) and (18). As before, inverse scope is available in (17) such that the universal quantifier in the object outscopes the existential in the subject. However, if we question the subject of (17), as in (18), the universal quantifier cannot scope over the *wh*-element. That is to say, (18) is only compatible with an answer where there is a single unique individual who loves each and every individual within the domain. (18) is crucially not amenable to an answer which comprises the concatenation of every individual's distinct lover.

(17) Someone loves everyone. $\checkmark \exists > \forall; \checkmark \forall > \exists$

(18) Who loves everyone? $\checkmark wh > \forall; * \forall > wh$

This indicates that inverse scope cannot obtain over elements which have undergone *wh*-extraction to a higher position, which in this case would be Spec,CP. I therefore take the inability of inverse scope to obtain in the agreement-drop construction in (16) to indicate that the existential quantifier in the “subject” is similarly too high for inverse scope to obtain, i.e. the “subject”s in (15) and (16) respectively cannot have been realised in the same syntactic position.

This paradigm holds in the matrix agreement-drop construction, such that (19), to the extent that it is interpretable can only have the surface scope interpretation, in contrast to the minimally different (17).

(19) Someone **love** everyone. $\checkmark \exists > \forall; * \forall > \exists$

2.5. Interim summary

Despite prior claims to the contrary, agreement-drop has syntactic and semantic reflexes. In particular, I have demonstrated that agreement-drop bleeds syntactic operations such as object topicalisation, and the extraction of adjuncts from more deeply embedded clauses, and can also have semantic consequences, namely blocking the obtainment of inverse scope. A PF-based account of agreement-drop is thus evidently untenable.

In particular, the scope facts indicate that the position of the “subject” of agreement-drop constructions cannot be the same as that of the subject in fully agreeing constructions, while the incompatibility of agreement-drop with *regret*-class verbs and adjunct extraction from a more deeply embedded clause suggest that the “subject” is itself a topic.

Consequently, I propose an analysis of the agreement-drop construction which involves an obligatory topic projection wherein the overt “subject” is realised, thereby capturing both the structural differences and topical parallels observed. I will further flesh out this analysis in the next section.

3. Analysis

On the basis that agreement-drop has syntactic reflexes which are largely parallel to those associated with topicalisation, I conclude that agreement-drop constructions necessarily implicate the existence of a topicalisation structure at the left edge (cf. Sato 2016), which is filled by the overt “subject”, thus yielding the parallelism between agreement-drop and topicalisation.

This raises an interesting question: since, as is well-known, short (i.e. local) subject topicalisation is blocked in standard English (Lasnik & Saito 1992, Bošković 2016, Erlewine 2016), does this mean that the ban on movement from SpecTP to the clause-mate topic position is inactive in Singlish?

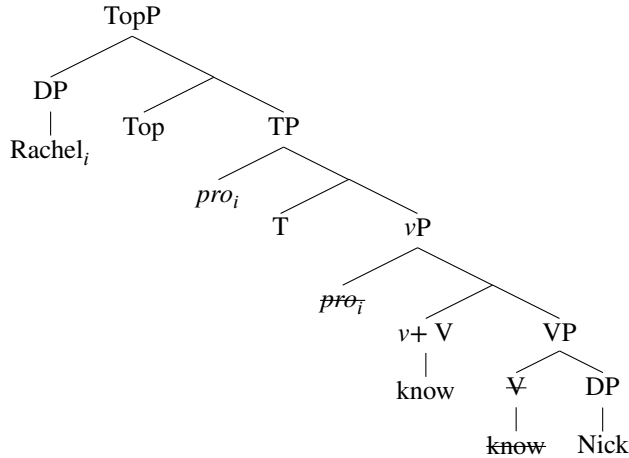
Xu & Langendoen (1985) argue that topics in Chinese are base-generated in the higher topic position, from which they are related to an empty category (i.e. *pro*) which is situated in the canonical argument position through co-indexation. Bao (2015) extends this analysis to topics in Singlish more generally, and I adopt this position for subject-topics as well. Under this view, subject-topics are not derived through movement, but are base-generated in the higher position (*pace* Sato 2016), and thus do not constitute counter-evidence for the anti-locality of topicalisation.

The underlying syntax of an agreement-drop sentence like (2), repeated below, can therefore be schematised as in (20), with the corresponding tree structure being provided in (21).

(2) Rachel **know** Nick. [= (1)]

(20) [_{TopP} Rachel_i [_{TP} *pro*_i T [_{vP} *pro*_i [_v v [_{VP} know Nick]]]]]]

(21)



This analysis does require as one of its ingredients that *pro* be available in the language, as it serves as the canonical subject in agreement-drop constructions, in the sense that it occupies the structural position canonically associated with subjects proper. Bao (2015) observes that the existence of empty categories in Singlish has long been noted in the literature, going back to Tay (1979), and has largely been attributed to Chinese influence on the variety. Bao (2015) demonstrates that there is indeed parallelism between the distribution of empty categories in Singlish and that in Chinese⁴. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Singlish is a language that has *pro*.

The analysis proffered is also reminiscent of a generalisation put forth in Saito (2007), namely that languages which have radical *pro* drop also do not have overt morphological agreement. Indeed, Sato & Kim (2012) have used this generalisation as a springboard to independently argue that Singlish has radical *pro* drop in exactly those contexts where agreement morphology is missing, ergo agreement-drop constructions.

The analysis proposed therefore extends this line of argumentation, in that rather than simply being a prerequisite for radical *pro* drop, agreement-drop constructions actually *require* radical *pro* drop (at least in the basic cases), since what the ostensible subject is instead a subject-topic and thus does not serve as the canonical subject when considering the structural configuration; instead, *pro* is merged into the structure to serve as the canonical, structural subject. In this way, there is a bidirectional implication between radical *pro* drop and the lack of agreement morphology in this particular language.

This leaves us with the remaining problem of the apparent optionality of agreement-drop. To address this issue, I break from existing literature in proposing that the apparent optionality is an illusion which arises from the contact nature of Singlish. I propose that Singlish clauses **always** have agreement-drop, and thus always come with a topicalisation structure in the left edge. However, the linguistic ecology of Singapore is such that any individual speaker of Singlish is likely to have sufficient competence in Standard Singaporean English as well, and would thus be able to code-switch⁵ between the two varieties at will. The “optionality” of agreement-drop therefore corresponds to code-switching between the two varieties, which have different clausal spines: the standard English spine culminates in SpecTP⁶, as in

⁴ Bao (2015) primarily made comparisons with Mandarin data, though he notes that the major Southern Min Sinitic varieties extant in Singapore, Hokkien and Teochew, to also be parallel to both Singlish and Mandarin in this respect.

⁵ The exact domain(s) where code-switching is a licit option remains to be determined.

⁶ Setting aside the question of whether tense and agreement should be disjunct.

(22), while the Singlish spine has an obligatorily merged “Topic” position at the leftmost edge (Sato 2016: cf.), as in (23).

(22) [TP DP_{subj-i} [T' T [L_{VP} t_i [L_{V'} v [V_{VP} V-s ...]]]]]

(23) [TopP DP_{subj-i} [TP *pro*_i [T' T [L_{VP} ~~*pro*~~_i [L_{V'} v [V_{VP} V ...]]]]]]

An open question, however, is why should it be that the lack of agreement morphology correlates with the merger of *pro* or the Top projection in the first place?

Consider that the (non-)insertion of the agreement morpheme *-s* in the present tense is modulated by the lexical insertion rules of the variety in question. If, as I have suggested, Singlish is wholly distinct from standard (Singaporean) English from a structural standpoint, then the relevant lexical insertion rules can accordingly be distinct in either variety, such that Singlish and English diverge both on the availability of *pro*, as well as the form of the agreement-morpheme.

The correlation between agreement-drop and the obligatory merger of the higher topic projection would therefore be a result of the clausal spine for Singlish requiring the merger of that higher position. In other words, the three-way correspondence between agreement-drop, *pro*, and the obligatory projection of TopP is not the result of a direct causal relationship between any two of the properties, but rather follow from the parametric specification for Singlish, which requires all Singlish constructions to have all three of the noted properties.

4. Conclusion

I have demonstrated that the absence of the agreement-morpheme *-s* in Singlish, which has hitherto been treated as being a product of free allomorphy, has syntactico-semantic reflexes, bleeding syntactic processes such as object topicalisation, adjunct extraction, and complementation under *regret*-class verbs, and changing the possible semantic interpretations, as evidenced by the scope freezing effects of agreement-drop.

I argue that these properties are all consistent with an analysis of agreement-drop constructions as inherently being topicalisation structures, along the lines of Sato (2016) and Bao (2015). I argue that what has thus far been characterised as optionality in terms of agreement-drop is instead a conspiracy that follows from ready code-switching between Singlish, which never has agreement, and Standard Singaporean English, which always has agreement, though this issue has only been obfuscated by the limited distribution of agreement morphology even in the variety in which it is obligatory.

Under this view of the “optionality” of agreement-drop, I argue that the correspondence between agreement-drop and topicalisation is in fact mediated by a third-factor, namely, the parametric specification of the Singlish morphosyntax more generally. This analysis makes strong predictions about the co-occurrence of features which are eminently not available in Standard Singaporean English and features which are exclusive to Standard Singaporean English, such as agreement.

Indeed, a cursory consideration of examples like (24–26), which contain the explicitly Singlish sentence-final particle *meh*, suggests that this analysis is on the correct track.

(24) He **like** watermelon meh? [‘He likes watermelon?’ (surprise/negative bias)]

(25) ?* He **likes** watermelon meh? [Int:=(24)]

(26) * He **liked** watermelon meh?

However, there are a number of confounding factors which complicate the picture: the first, and perhaps more problematic, issue is the fact that there appears to be some degree of interspeaker variation with respect to the degree of ungrammaticality of examples like (25) and (26).

Second, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is an interaction between tense and agreement, to the effect that there is an unexpected difference in grammaticality between (25) and (26). The status of the past tense

morpheme *-ed* in Singlish thus deserves deeper scrutiny; since these are issues which are undoubtedly beyond the scope of the present paper, I conclude simply by saying that I leave further investigation of these matters to future research.

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Proceedings of the 39th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics

edited by Robert Autry,
Gabriela de la Cruz Sanchez,
Luis A. Irizarry Figueroa,
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Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2024

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ISBN 978-1-57473-481-2 hardback

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Lee, Si Kai. 2024. Agreement-Drop in Singlish: Subject to Topichood. In *Proceedings of the 39th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, ed. Robert Autry et al., 592-599. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #3677.