Topicalization in Singlish:
Examining its Relationship with Chinese

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1   Background

Singaporean English (Singlish) is a Standard English (SE) variety with most of its vocabulary derived from SE. It also has significant lexical influence from Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin (Tan 2017). Singlish is spoken across the main ethnic groups of Singapore (Census of Population 2021), thus is often considered the nation's interethnic lingua franca (Lim & Canagarajah 2023).

1.1   Syntactic deviation from SE. One syntactic difference between Singlish and SE is Singlish's omission of arguments. When the omitted argument is the subject of a sentence, this is referred to as pro-drop (Chomsky 1993). An example of this is shown in (1).

(1)   After Ø get some sickness, Ø can't help it.   Ø = one | (Tan 2003)

Due to the grammaticality of constructions like (1), some researchers describe Singlish as a pro-drop language (Platt & Weber 1980; Sato & Kim 2012). Null arguments also exist in other environments. An example of null direct object and null indirect object in Singlish from are in (2a) and (2b), respectively.

(2)   a. John gave Mary 20 dollars, and Bill gave Ø 50 dollars.   Ø = Mary | (Branan & New 2021)
         b. I never try Ø before.   Ø = it | (Tan 2003)

Another difference is the range and prevalence of Singlish topics, in comparison to SE topics. Generally, a topic is a syntactic element that indicates the reference point of a sentence. In some languages they are identifiable with a topic-marking particle, whereas in others they are identified through a topic-comment syntactic structure (Molnár et al. 2019). The topic-comment structure exists in a variety of constructions. SE-style topicalization, or fronting, is characterized by binding between an optionally null pronominal form in the comment and the topic (Bao 2015). This is shown formally and by example in (3), where α refers to the topic and β refers to an element in the comment.

(3)   a. $[_{TP} [_{TOP} \alpha_i] [_{IP} \ldots \beta_i \ldots]]$
         b. These words, I don't believe.   (Xu & Langendoen 1985)

Singlish permits SE-style topics as well as other topic constructions that are ungrammatical in English. Bao (2015) found Singlish allows four additional topicalization structures that are not permitted in SE. The four topic structures are shown in (4) – (7). Unless otherwise cited, the following examples are from Bao (2015).

(4)   Chinese-style topic structure
        a. [$_{TP}$ [$_{TOP}$ α_i] [$_{IP}$ … β_i …]] β_i is phonologically null.
        b. [stay longer] [they have to overcharge]   (Platt & Weber 1980:78)

(5)   Multiple-topic structure
        a. [$_{TP}$ [$_{TOP}$ α_i] [$_{TOP}$ α_j] … [$_{IP}$ … β_i … β_j …]] β_i is the comment, or a non-null constituent of the comment.
        b. [about six-thirty]$_i$, [my friend and I]$_j$, [we$_j$ left e_i hah]   (ICE-SIN:s1a-001)

(6)   Multiple-comment structure
        a. [$_{TP}$ [$_{TOP}$ α_i] [$_{IP}$ … β_i …] [$_{IP}$ … β_i …] …] $\beta_{i, j}$ as defined in (3) or (4).
        b. [that fish$_i$] [I bought e_i last week], [e_i spoiled already]

(7)   Null topic
        a. [$_{TP}$ [$_{TOP}$ α_i] [$_{IP}$ … β_i …]] β_i as defined in (3) or (4).
        b. ~~about flowers~~$_k$ [I never ever draw e_k what]

For (4)-(7), the formal definitions in (a) consist of a $_{TP}$ containing at least one topic ($_{TOP}$) and at least one comment ($_{IP}$). A cosubscript of *i, j* or *k* indicates a relationship between two parts of the structure. All of the listed structures are permitted in Chinese. Bao (2015) uses this as evidence of Singlish's syntactic relationship with Chinese.

Singlish is considered topic-prominent (Alsagoff & Ho 1998), whereas SE is subject-prominent. Topic-prominence refers to a structural emphasis on topic-comment constructions rather than subject-predicate constructions (Li & Thompson 1976). A comparison of sentences in Singlish and SE from Tan (2005) is shown in (8):

(8)   a. Certain medicines we don't stock in our dispensary.   (Singlish)
        b. We don't stock certain medicines in our dispensary.   (SE)

The truth conditions for (8a) and (8b) are identical, yet their structures are presumably not. The Singlish construction in (8a) follows a topic-comment pattern with certain medicines as the topic. By contrast, the English construction in (8b) displays a subject-predicate structure with we as the subject. Example (8a) would be grammatical in SE, but this construction is far less common than in Singlish. Whereas in Singlish, (8a) is more natural.

Topic prominence is common in East Asian languages, like Chinese. Because of this, Singlish's topic development is typically attributed to its contact with Chinese, rather than SE (Bao & Min 2005; Deterding et al. 2000). For further comparison, a Chinese sentence adapted from Tan (2005) is displayed in (9):

(9)   You xie   yao   wo men bu   shou zai wo men de yao fang li.   (Chinese)
        Certain   medicine   we $_{PL}$ don't stock in our $_{PL}$ dispensary

Like the Singlish example, the Chinese sentence in (9) follows a topic-comment pattern. This shared topic-prominence in addition to the evidence found by Bao (2015) provide more evidence for Chinese's influence on Singlish's topic development. However, Singlish topicalization is not an exact replica of Chinese topicalization. For instance, Singlish does not use topic-marking particles like the 么 (me) marker found in Chinese (Chen, Lee & Pan 2016). Beyond this relationship to Chinese, the exact nature of Singlish topics is understudied.

1.2   Topicalization in Chinese. Since there is a considerable amount of subtlety in the permissibility of Chinese topics, this section provides an overview of some permissible Chinese topic structures. Topicalization, the method by which topics are formed, can be analyzed as a type of extraction. Extraction refers to any movement to a non-argument position that creates a relationship between the moved constituent and its trace (Postal 1994). In Chinese, NPs, CPs, VPs, and adpositional phrases can be extracted to the topic position (Xu & Langendoen 1985)[1]. A few examples of this are shown in (9).

(9)   a. Gǒu wǒ jiàn-guò.   (Shi 2000)
           dog I   see-ASP
          'The dog I have seen.'/ 'Dogs I have seen.'

        b. Shuō zhèxie huà   wǒ bù zànchéng   (Xu & Langendoen 1985)
             say   these words I   not approve.of
             'Saying these words, I don't approve.'

        c. Zài zhuōzi shàng tā fàng le jǐben shū.   (Xu & Langendoen 1985)
           PREP table   on   he put ASP some book.
           'On the table, he put some books.'

In (9a) the NP *Gǒu* is extracted, in (9b) the VP *Shuō zhèxie huà* is extracted, and in (9c) PrepP *Zài zhuōzi shàng* is extracted.
The complement of the copula can also be extracted in Chinese. The copula is a linking verb between subject and subject complement. The complement provides additional information about the subject and follows the copula in underlying form. In SE, 'to be' is the copula. Example (10) showcases the topicalization of this phrase type.

(10)   Tā shì gè xiǎotōu, qiángdào tā hai bù shì   (Xu & Langendoen 1985)
           he be a thief   robber   he still not be
   'He is a thief, but a robber he isn't.'

Here, *Tā shì gè xiǎotōu* the complement of the copula is topicalized. Note that the topic is bound to an empty constituent in the comment. Xu and Langendoen (1985) found that named individuals must have a bound constituent when topicalized in Chinese.

(11)   a. *Lǐ Qìnyú wǒ zhǐ   de   jiù   shì.
          Li Qinyu I   refer $_{MOD}$ precisely be
        *`Li Qinyu, the one I refer to is'

        b. Lǐ Qìnyú wǒ zhǐ   de   jiù   shì tā.
           Li Qinyu I   refer $_{MOD}$ precisely be he
           `Li Qinyu, the one I refer to is precisely he'

They analyze (11a) as ungrammatical because the topic is an identifiable individual, but there is no expressed constituent in the comment. The same sentence becomes grammatical in (11b) when the bound constituent *tā* is no longer null. The requirement for a lexicalized constituent does not apply when the topic is a class/type. See (10) for an example.

2   Study Overview

The purpose of this study is to define contrasts between Singlish topic patterns and Chinese topic patterns, then use these contrasts to inform an analysis of Singlish's topic structure. I sought to define contrasts based on the description of Chinese topics from Xu & Langendoen (1985). I included three of the topicalization areas they describe in my investigation: (I) extraction across parts of speech, (II) bound constituent position, (III) null binding. I gathered a small Singlish sentence set for each area and tested their grammaticality. For grammaticality judgements, I consulted three native Singaporeans, all of which spoke both SE and Singlish. All three speakers were ethnically Chinese with varying levels of experience with Mandarin. A timeline of their Mandarin acquisition ages is shown in **Figure 1**.
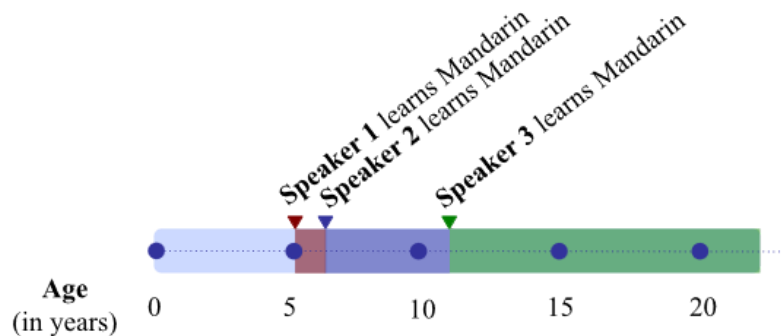
Figure 1: Visualization of Mandarin acquisition age for all consulted speakers

3   Results

All of the following examples were interpreted under a Singlish reading unless labeled otherwise. Judgments indicated a difference between NP topics and when the topic was S, S', VP, or PrepP. Recall that a construction with any of these phrase types as the topic is grammatical in Chinese.

3.1   Extraction of NPs. Sentence set (12) tested extraction of NPs from object position. In (12a), *Mr. Wu* is in the topic position. In (12b), *rocks* is in the topic position. By Xu and Langendoen's (1985) dichotomy, *Mr. Wu* would be considered an identifiable individual, whereas *rocks* would be considered a class/type.

(12)   a. ?*Mr. Wu* $_{TOP}$, Mary knows.
         b. **Rocks* $_{TOP}$, Mary throws.

Two of three speakers found (12a) to be marginal, whereas one speaker found it grammatical. All speakers found (12b) ungrammatical. For comparison, an example of NP topics in Chinese are shown in (13), reprinted from (10), and in (14).

(13)   *Gǒu* $_{TOP}$ wǒ jiàn-guò.   Chinese | (Shi 2000)
         dog   I   see-$_{ASP}$
         'The dog I have seen'/ 'Dogs I have seen'

(14)   *Xiǎo Zhāng* $_{TOP}$ wǒ zuótiān   jian-guò   Chinese | (Shi 2000)
         Xiao Zhang   I   yesterday meet-$_{ASP}$
         'Xiao Zhang, I met yesterday'

Like the Singlish example, (13) and (14) have NPs extracted from object position. In (13), *Gǒu*, a class/type NP, is in the topic position. In (14), *Xiao Zhang*, an identifiable NP, is in topic position. Both of are grammatical. Since neither Singlish example was marked grammatical, this is evidence of Singlish's deviation from Chinese topicalization.

(15)   a. Erkin is a good student.
         b. **A good student* $_{TOP}$, Erkin is.

In (15), *a good student*, the complement of the copula, cannot be extracted to topic position. As we saw in (10), Chinese permits this extraction. Since Singlish does not, this is also a deviation from Chinese.

3.2   Extraction of Other Phrase Structures. Instances when extraction patterns in Singlish matched those in Chinese are shown in (16). The topic of each example is italicized and marked.

(16)   a. *Studying outside* $_{TOP}$, I highly recommend.
         b. *On the sofa* $_{TOP}$, there was plastic.
         c. *He can run a race* $_{TOP}$, I do believe.
         d. *He can run a race* $_{TOP}$, I don't believe.

This highlights the variable nature of Singlish topics. In (16a), the verb phrase *studying outside* was extracted. In (16b), the prepositional phrase *on the sofa* was extracted. In (16c), the complementizer phrase *He can run a race* was extracted. All of these constructions were found to be grammatical. Additionally, the grammaticality of (16c) was not impacted by negation, as seen in (16d). These judgments are consistent with Chinese topic patterns discussed **1.2**.

3.3 Null binding. There is no evidence that Singlish topics follows Chinese topics' constraints regarding the lexicalization of bound constituents. The sentences tested were inspired by glosses in Xu & Langendoen (1985). In (17), a hypothetical grammaticality judgment is shown. Example (17) represents the expected judgement for Singlish if it followed the need for expressed bound element for named topics present in Chinese.

(17)   a. Li Qinyu, the one I refer to as him.
        b. *Li Qinyu, the one I refer to as.
        c. Fruit, the things I refer to as.

Both (17a) and (17c) would be grammatical and (17b) would be ungrammatical. Judgments collected from each of the three speakers are shown in (18)–(20).

(18)   a. Li Qinyu, the one I refer to as him.
        b. *Li Qinyu, the one I refer to as.
        c. * Fruit, the things I refer to as.

(19)   a. Li Qinyu, the one I refer to as him.
        b. ?Li Qinyu, the one I refer to as.
        c. *Fruit, the things I refer to as.

(20)   a. *Li Qinyu, the one I refer to as him.
        b. *Li Qinyu, the one I refer to as.
        c. *Fruit, the things I refer to as.

Overall, none of the examples shown matched the expected Chinese judgement. The speakers found (c) of each example to be ungrammatical, which does not match the constraint in Chinese.

4   Analysis

There was a contrast between Singlish and Chinese regarding the extraction of NPs. Notably, Singlish speakers did not accept NP topics when they referred to unnamed classes or types. It appeared that the earlier a speaker began studying Mandarin, the more permissive their grammar was of NP objects as topics. This suggests that Mandarin acquisition impacts topic grammaticality in Singlish, but with the small speaker sample, this is speculative.

Regardless, the ungrammaticality is distinct from Chinese where NP topics are widely permissible. The one restriction on Chinese topics discussed earlier involved null binding. This restriction included a requirement for definite NP topics to have a lexicalized bound element, as well as an allowance for class/type NPs to have a null bound element. Although Singlish speakers were divided on sentence judgements, there was no evidence that Singlish also had this restriction. Moreover, one speaker found the constructions ungrammatical regardless of if the bound constituent was expressed. Overall, the ungrammaticality of NP topics and the lack of constraints for null binding suggests a more distinct grammar from Chinese than originally proposed. In contrast to this point, in Singlish, most phrase types can be extracted to the topic position. This is a trait shared with Chinese topic patterns.

Lee (2022) discusses the possibility of two structural systems in Singlish. He introduces this theory as an explanation for the variable nature of agreement drop. Wee & Ansaldo (2004) call Singlish agreement drop "sporadic rather than rule-governed," and Lee opposes this point by defining the two systems. One is related to English, with fully-agreeing constructions and the other is related to another contact language and has agreement drop and a topic projection. The theory of two clausal spines could be related to the deviation between speakers in some examples. Regardless of the exact structure, previous claims of topic prominence in Singlish are supported by the breadth of grammatical topicalized examples provided throughout this paper.

Despite the overlap between Chinese and Singlish topicalization strategies, I have shown in this study that the systems are distinct, and the Singlish system cannot be reduced to the Chinese system.

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