No agreement: Singlish subjects are Topics

Colloquial Singaporean English (Singlish) is a contact variety of English primarily influenced by Malay and Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, Southern Min, etc.). One morphosyntactic property of Singlish that sets it apart from more standard Englishes is the optionality of agreement morphology (Wee & Ansaldo 2004), as shown in (1).

(1) Context: A and B are discussing Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*.
And how the benefactor **appear** in the first and last part... (ibid. 65)

Wee & Ansaldo (2004) suggest that the (non-)realisation of subject-verb agreement in Singlish is a matter of morpho-phonological free variation, given that it does not appear to be phonologically conditioned. I present novel data demonstrating that when the agreement morpheme is not overtly realised (hence agreement-drop) a number of syntactico-semantic reflexes are observed; agreement-drop thus cannot simply be a result of the suppression of the agreement morpheme at the PF-interface. Instead, I argue that agreement-drop is indicative of a difference in structure prior to spell-out.

In particular, I demonstrate that agreement-drop precludes the possibility of object topicalisation, bleeds inverse scope readings, cannot be embedded under *regret*-class verbs, and do not allow for adjuncts to be extracted over them.

I argue that these same properties have been attributed to the presence of a syntactic topic at the left periphery. I adopt Sato's (2016) account of Singlish as a topic-prominent language which obligatorily realises a topic projection, schematised as (2).

(2) $[_{\text{TopP}}\ \text{DP}_{\text{subj}-i}\ [_{\text{TP}}\ \cancel{\text{DP}}_{\overline{\text{subj}-i}}\ [_{\text{T}'}\ \text{T}\ [_{v\text{P}}\ \cancel{\text{DP}}_{\overline{\text{subj}-i}}\ [_{v'}\ v\ [_{\text{VP}}\ \text{V} \ldots\ ]]]]]]$

However, *pace* Sato, I propose that there is (minimally) a robust one-way entailment from the lack of standard agreement-morphology to the topic-prominent syntax which has been proposed.

Observations Objects in standard English can undergo object topicalisation, as in (3a) vs. (3b). Morphological agreement in (3a) is optional; however, in the absence of any further context, the sentence is heavily degraded when agreement-drop applies (3c).

(3) a. Mr. Wu **know(s)** Mary.
b. Mary$_i$, Mr. Wu knows t_i.
c. ?? Mary, Mr. Wu **know**. [Int: =(3b)]

That the loss of the agreement morpheme bleeds a syntactic operation such as topicalisation clearly indicates that the phenomena under consideration cannot be a result of post-syntactic PF-deletion. This is further exemplified by the contrast between the minimal pair (4) and (5): agreement-drop bleeds the interpretation where the extracted wh-adjunct is associated with the most deeply embedded clause. Agreement-drop thus demonstrably has semantic reflexes, and consequently cannot possibly be a simple PF-phenomenon.

(4) How$_i$ did you think that Mary said *to John* that [Peter fixed the car t_i]?

(5) * How$_i$ did you think that [Mary] **say** *to John* that [Peter fixed the car t_i]

In fact, the unavailability of the interpretation wherein the extracted wh-adjunct is associated with the most deeply embedded clause has similarly been observed as a reflex of a syntactic operation, namely embedded topicalisation, as in (6): the embedded topicalisation of the PP *to John* behaves on a par with agreement-drop (cf. 5).

(6) * How$_i$ did you think that [to John], Mary said that [Peter fixed the car t_i]?

This parallelism between agreement-drop and topicalisation can also be found in the behaviour of agreement-drop under *regret*-class predicates: such predicates, argued to be unable to take topicalisation structures as their complements (Hooper & Thompson 1973), similarly do not allow for agreement-drop in their complements (7 vs. 8).

(7) * John regrets that [Mary], he knows.

(8) * John regrets that [he] **know** Mary.

Finally, agreement-drop bleeds the obtainment of inverse scope readings; the universal object cannot outscope the existential subject in the presence of agreement-drop (9 vs. 10).

(9) John says that someone **loves** everyone. $^{\checkmark}\exists > \forall$; $^{\checkmark}\forall > \exists$

(10) John says that someone **love** everyone. $^{\checkmark}\exists > \forall$; $^{*}\forall > \exists$

The scope rigidity enforced by agreement-drop is reminiscent of that invoked by $\bar{A}$-extraction of subjects to the left periphery (11 vs. 12). The scopal alternation between (9) and (10) therefore suggests that the embedded subject *someone* is instantiated in different structural positions in (9) and (10) respectively.

(11) Someone loves everyone. $^{\checkmark}\exists > \forall$; $^{\checkmark}\forall > \exists$

(12) Who loves everyone? $^{\checkmark}$wh $> \forall$; $^{*}\forall >$ wh

Analysis These observations all follow if we adopt Sato's (2016) account of Singlish as a topic-prominent language. As a topic-prominent language, Singlish necessarily projects a topic-projection at the left periphery; in the absence of further context/pragmatic considerations, the subject is promoted to this topic-position at the left edge, such that the underlying structure of (3a) is as follows:

(13) $[_{\text{TopP}}$ Mr. Wu$_i$ $[_{\text{TP}}$ ~~Mr. Wu$_i$~~ $[_{\text{T}'}$ T $[_{v\text{P}}$ ~~Mr. Wu$_i$~~ $[_{v'}$ v $[_{\text{VP}}$ **know** Mary]]]]]]

The degradation of object-topicalisation in agreement-drop contexts as noted in (3c) therefore resolves into a case of multiple topicalisation, which has been observed to be unavailable in English (Lasnik & Saito 1992); since *Mr. Wu* already occupies Spec,TopP, *Mary* cannot undergo movement targeting the same landing site. The fact that further context alleviates this degradation can then be taken as evidence that while the subject is promoted to the topic position by default, this can be superceded by other semantico-pragmatic considerations/features.

The parallels that hold between the behaviour of agreement-drop and that of topicalisation with respect to adjunct extraction and *regret*-class predicates respectively, support this characterisation of agreement-drop constructions as necessarily involving topicalisation. The agreement-drop-as-topicalisation analysis also neatly captures the scope rigidity of agreement-drop constructions, since the quantificational subject undergoes raising to a higher $\bar{A}$-position that obligatorily takes wide scope. Indeed, the scope transparency of agreement-drop constructions demonstrates that this left peripheral position must be overtly filled; the quantificational object cannot undergo covert movement over the subject to said position.

Finally, there also appear to be certain syntactic frames in which full-agreement results in degradation, e.g. biased polar questions formed with the sentence-final particle *hor*; much as agreement-drop corresponds to topicalisation, full-agreement may therefore correspond to a non-topicalisation structure of the variety considered default for standard English.

(14) John like($^{?*}$-s) Mary hor?

Conclusion In summary, I demonstrate that the apparent free variation in the (non-)realisation of the 3SG present tense verbal agreement in Singlish has clear syntactico-semantic reflexes. These reflexes align with those observed for topicalisation structures; therefore, I take this to indicate that the absence of agreement-morphology diagnoses an underlying topicalisation structure of the kind proposed by Sato (2016). Further evidence suggests that the correlation between agreement and the underlying syntax may be bidirectional.

Selected References Hooper, J. B. and Thompson, S. A. (1973). On the applicability of root transformations. *LI*. - Lasnik, H. and Saito, M. (1992). *Move Alpha*. - Sato, Y. (2016). Remarks on the parameters of argument ellipsis. *Syntax*. - Wee, L. & U. Ansaldo. 2004. Nouns and noun phrases. In Lim (ed.).