

Agreement-drop in Singlish: Subject to Topichood

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- Singlish is an English-lexified contact variety that is spoken in Singapore
- A quirk of Singlish is that 3rd person agreement morphology in the present tense is optional (1 vs 2)

(1) Rachel **knows** Nick.

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

- No semantic difference associated with the loss of agreement morphology (henceforth agreement-drop)
 - Wee and Ansaldo (2004) characterise this alternation as morphophonological free variation

- However, agreement-drop has a number of **syntactic reflexes** which clearly demonstrate that it is a morphosyntactic phenomenon rather than a morphophonological one; namely, it
 1. blocks object topicalisation
 2. blocks adjunct extraction
 3. blocks inverse scope readings, and
 4. is disallowed under predicates which disallow topicalisation

Analysis: agreement-drop is symptomatic of a difference in the structure of the left periphery, namely the presence of some topicalisation structure

- Agreement-drop has syntactic reflexes which are on par with those associated with topicalisation
- Therefore: **agreement-drop** implicates the existence of a **topicalisation structure at the left edge** (cf. Sato 2016)
 - This position is filled by the overt “subject”, thus the parallels

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

Answer: No - Singlish **subject-topics** are not derived through movement, pace Sato (2016), but are instead **base-generated** in the topic position, where they **control a pro** which sits in the **canonical subject position**.

Blocking of object topicalisation

- Objects of a simple transitive constructions can undergo object topicalisation in standard English (3)
- The parallel agreement-drop constructions resist object topicalisation (4)
- (3) **Nick**, Rachel **knows** well. (4) ??**Nick**, Rachel **know** well. [Int.: =(3)]
- This contrast extends to embedded clauses (5 vs 6)
- (5) **John says** that **Mary**, Peter **likes** a lot.
- (6) ??**John says** that **Mary**(,) Peter **like** a lot. [Intended: =(5)]

Blocking of adjunct extraction

- In standard English, object topicalisation in the embedded clause blocks the extraction of a more deeply embedded adjunct (8)
- (7) **I learned** that **to John**, Peter **said** that **Mary fixed** the car.
- (8) ***How_i** did you learn that [**to John**], Peter **said** that [**Mary fixed** the car **t_i**]?
- This interpretation is available when there is no embedded object-topicalisation (9)
- A similar blocking effect arises with embedded agreement-drop (10)!
- (9) **How_i** did you learn that Peter **said** to John that [**Mary fixed** the car **t_i**]?
- (10) ***How_i** did you learn that [**Peter**] **say** that [**Mary fixed** the car **t_i**]?

Blocking of inverse scope

- (11) is ambiguous between the surface scope reading and the inverse scope reading
- (11) Someone **loves** everyone. $\checkmark E > A; \checkmark A > E$
- This ambiguity disappears in its minimally different agreement-drop counterpart; (12) only has the surface scope reading
- (12) Someone **love** everyone. $\checkmark E > A; *A > E$
- Parallels the scopal alternations available in subject questions (May 1985[2.16])
- (13) Who bought everything for Max? $\checkmark wh > \forall; * \forall > wh$

*regret agreement-drop

- Regret-class of verbal predicates in English has been argued to be unable to take topicalisation structures as complements (Hooper and Thompson 1973) (13 vs 14)
- (13) John {**says**/**?regrets**} that he **knows** Mary.
- (14) John {**says**/***regrets**} that [**Mary**], he **knows**.
- This is similarly ruled out in agreement-drop contexts:
- (15) John {**says**/***regrets**} that [**he**] **know** Mary.

Q: Does Singlish have subject *pros*? **A:** Sato and Kim (2012) independently argue that Singlish has RPD only in agreement-drop contexts, based on Saito’s (2007) generalisation (RPD → no agreement morphology)

I extend this argument to suggest that **Singlish agreement-drop necessarily involves RPD:** underlying syntax of a basic agreement drop construction (16) = (17)

(16) Rachel **know** Nick. (17) [_{TOPP} Rachel [_{TP} *pro*_i [_{VP} *t*_j [_{VP} **know** Nick]]]]