

No agreement: Singlish subjects are Topics

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GLOW 2021 Flash Talk

Basic facts about Singlish

- One characteristic quirk of Singlish is that (3SG) subject-verb agreement is optional:
 - (1) John loves Mary

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 - (1) John loves Mary
 - (2) John love Mary =(1)

Basic facts cont.

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- Non-realisation of the agreement morpheme (agreement-drop) does **not appear to change the semantic interpretation**
- Conclusion: PF-phenomenon?
- Indeed, Wee and Ansaldo (2004) suggest that this is morphophonological free variation
- However, not all is as it seems...

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No object topicalisation

- | | |
|--|------------------------|
| (3) Mr. Wu knows <u> </u> Mary well. | Full agr. |
| (4) Mary, Mr. Wu knows <u> </u> well. | Full agr.; Top. |
| (5) Mr. Wu know Mary well. [= (3)] | Agr-drop |
| (6) ??Mary, Mr. Wu know well. [Int.:=(4)] | Agr-drop; Top. |

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Agr-drop is equivalent to full-agreement

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Object topicalisation is fine when there is full-agreement (3 vs. 4)

No object topicalisation

- (3) Mr. Wu **knows** Mary well. Full agr.
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But! object topicalisation results in degradation in the agr-drop construction! ('??')

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- (3) Mr. Wu **knows** Mary well. Full agr.
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This contrast in grammaticality must be in some way related to the lost agreement!

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Ergo, agreement-drop affects syntax (object topicalisation);
agreement-drop cannot be a PF-phenomenon

Scopal Possibilities

(7) Someone loves everyone.

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✓ $\exists > \forall$

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$\checkmark \exists > \forall ; \checkmark \forall > \exists$

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- (7) Someone **loves** everyone.
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- (7) Someone **loves** everyone.
- (8) Someone **love** everyone.

✓ $\exists > \forall$; ✓ $\forall > \exists$

✓ $\exists > \forall$; * $\forall > \exists$

Compare this with the following:

Scopal Possibilities

- (7) Someone **loves** everyone.
- (8) Someone **love** everyone.

 $\checkmark \exists > \forall; \checkmark \forall > \exists$ $\checkmark \exists > \forall; * \forall > \exists$

Compare this with the following:

- (9) Someone **loves** everyone.

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(7) Someone **loves** everyone.

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Compare this with the following:

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(7) Someone **loves** everyone.

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Compare this with the following:

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Compare this with the following:

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✓ $\exists > \forall$; ✓ $\forall > \exists$

(10) Who **loves** everyone?

Scopal Possibilities

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- Claim: agreement-drop constructions are underlyingly (subject-)topicalisation structures (cf. Sato 2016)

Some conclusions

- Agreement-drop has syntactic reflexes
- It cannot be PF
- Can be explained if agreement-drop constructions are syntactically different at the left periphery (which is where agreement is situated anyway)
- Claim: agreement-drop constructions are underlyingly (subject-)topicalisation structures (cf. Sato 2016)
- Come to the breakout room for more data/further discussion!

Thank you!

- Sato, Y. (2016). Remarks on the parameters of argument ellipsis: A new perspective from colloquial singapore english. *Syntax*, 19(4):392–411.
- Wee, L. and Ansaldo, U. (2004). Nouns and noun phrases. In Lim, L., editor, *Singapore English: A grammatical description*, Varieties of English around the world G33, pages 57–74. John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.