Singlish Sekali: What if it's like doch?

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The discourse marker *sekali* in Colloquial Singaporean English (Singlish), a contact language with influence from English, Malay, Southern Min, Mandarin, Tamil, a.o., appears to function similarly to the English hypothetical *what if*, as in (1). I explore the different uses of *sekali*, a loanword from Malay, and propose a uniform semantics for the lexical item.

(1) A: Why don't you buy a lottery ticket? *Sekali* you win the top prize.
    ≈ What if you win the top prize?

Basic Data Rawlins (2010, 2016, 2017) identifies four distinct types of English *what if*, each corresponding to a distinct function; however, not all of them can be performed by Singlish *sekali*.

(2) Consequential: ask about consequences of some ordinary possibility
    A: Henry is coming to the party.
    B: What if Isabella is there?/ *Sekali* Isabella is (also) there.

(3) Challenging: double check hearer's commitment to some claim
    A: I'm not going to the party.
    B: What if Isabella is there?/ *Sekali* Isabella is there.

(4) Suggestive: suggest the resolution for some issue
    A: Who should we invite to give a talk?
    B: What if we invite Isabella?/ #*Sekali* we invite Isabella.

(5) Hypothetical: ask about the consequences of some outlandish possibility
    What if cats could text? #*Sekali* cats could text.

The infelicity of *sekali* in (4) and (5) demonstrates that *sekali* cannot simply be the Singlish analog for *what if*[1].

Existing Analyses Chen (2010) characterises the function of *sekali* as expressing unexpectedness so long as the unexpected event is plausible given the speech context, but this fails to account for the contrast in (6).

(6) Context: A is rolling a six-sided die; only if A rolls a one does A receive a penalty; only if A rolls a six does A receive a prize.
    B: *Sekali* you roll a one/#two/six.

Chen claims further that *sekali* "requires the time of evaluation to be after the point of utterance", and therefore precludes the possibility of expressing past tense within the *sekali*-marked proposition, contrary to (7).

(7) Context: John is late for an appointment with A and B.
    A: Where is John?
    B: *Sekali* he fell down and had to go to the hospital.
    ≈ He might have fallen down and had to go to the hospital.

In the following, I propose that Chen's (2010) observation that the contribution of *sekali* is twofold, expressing unexpectedness and plausibility, is in essence correct, and provide a formal account of *sekali* that captures this, along with the offending (6) and (7), by combining epistemic modality with an inferential component.

Proposal Based on the analysis of the German discourse particle *doch*, which is often analysed as expressing unawareness of a conflicting proposition that should be known

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[1] Note also that *sekali* constructions do not have any inherent interrogative force; the closest approximation in English would be the rhetorical use of 'what if'.

(Karagjosova 2004, Zimmermann 2011), I propose that *sekali* simply expresses unawareness of a conflicting proposition; as shown in the examples above, *sekali* is not sensitive to whether the proposition should be known or not.

Sekali further differs from *doch* in that B never commits to φ, but rather to $\Diamond\varphi$; *sekali* thus has an epistemic possibility component. Since the complement φ in *sekali* φ constructions never include overt instantiations of any modals, the epistemic possibility modal must be internal to *sekali* itself. Since *sekali* φ constructions where the speaker knows φ to be epistemically impossible can be construed as being outrightly false, this epistemic possibility must be truth-conditional.

I propose that each component of *sekali* functions at a different level, with the epistemic possibility component being situated at the level of assertion, such that *sekali* φ is equivalent to $\Diamond\varphi$. The inferential component is situated at the level of presupposition (cf. Kaufmann and Kaufmann 2012), such that the speaker, in uttering *sekali* φ, commits to the belief that it is possible that the addressee believes $\neg\varphi$.

This can be formally stated as $\Diamond^{B_s}\Box^{B_a}\neg\varphi$, with the subscripts on the modal operators denoting the relevant epistemic conversational backgrounds, in the sense of Kratzer (1981, 2012).

The contrast in (6) follows from the fact that the modality expressed by *sekali* is performative; the use of *sekali* issues a recommendation for belief-revision on the part of the addressee. Per Kaufmann (2012), performative modals are subject to contextual conditions, with the relevant condition in the case of (6) being the Ordering Source Restriction (OSR), which in essence requires that the complement φ answers a salient decision problem for the addressee. In (6), the decision problem would be whether A should get her hopes up or not - the non-consequential proposition (i.e. 'two') is therefore excluded.

The variable acceptability of past tense within the scope of *sekali* follows from another condition, namely the Epistemic Uncertainty Condition (EUC), which states that the speaker holds possible some future courses of events where φ comes about and some where $\neg\varphi$ does. In (7), while φ may be past relative to the time of utterance, it remains epistemically uncertain, such that the speaker holds both φ and its negation possible, in accordance with the EUC. The additional restrictions on past-tense within the scope of *sekali* thus falls out from the variability of epistemic certainty with respect to past, but not non-past, events.

Conclusions My analysis of Singlish *sekali* therefore captures its similarity to English *what if* in that it has an epistemic possibility component, but also its dissimilarity, in terms of its inferential component, which instead draws parallels to the German *doch*; to my knowledge, German is not one of the languages which has influenced the development of Singlish (or Malay); this parallel might therefore provide some insight into the internal composition of discourse particles, and in turn, make typological predictions about the possible kinds of discourse particles that exist cross-linguistically.

Selected References Chen, L. 2010. Sekali, How And Lucky - Expressing Unexpectedness in Colloquial Singapore English. NUS, Ma. - Kaufmann, M. 2012. Imperatives and imperfect information. Particles workshop, Göttingen. - Kaufmann, M. & S. Kaufmann. 2012. Epistemic aprticles and performativity. *SALT 22*. - Kratzer, A. 2012. Modality and Conditionals. Oxford UP. - Rawlins, K. 2017. Asking What-Ifs. What if workshop, UoT.