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## On agreement-drop in Singlish: topics never agree

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This paper examines the distribution and properties of agreement-drop constructions in Singlish, which are distinguished by the absence of overt subject agreement morphology. I demonstrate that these constructions are distinct from their minimally different fully-agreeing counterparts in that they (i) bleed object topicalisation, (ii) block the extraction of adjuncts which are lower in the structure, (iii) are scopally frozen, (iv) are unable to be embedded under regret-class predicates, (v) rule out quantificational “subjects”, and (vi) impose interpretational constraints on *wh*-“subjects”. I argue that these properties rule out prior characterisations of the alternation as the output of free variation in the PF. On the basis that agreement-drop constructions in Singlish consistently parallel topicalisation structures cross-linguistically, I sketch a syntactic account that unifies the two constructions within the syntax.

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## 1 Introduction

This paper examines the distribution and properties of a class of constructions in Colloquial Singaporean English (henceforth SINGLISH) which exhibit non-standard agreement marking.

Singlish is a contact variety spoken in Singapore. Though its exact typological status remains indeterminate, having been variably characterised as either the basilectal and/or mesolectal segment (s) of the speech continuum of a pidgin (DeCamp 1971; Platt 1975; Tay 1979; Platt & Weber 1980), a creoloid (Platt 1975), an extended pidgin (Arends et al. 1994), or the low colloquial variety that stands in diglossic opposition to Standard English (Gupta 1989), there is one common assumption that bridges all of these differing views, namely that Singlish is the result of English having accumulated, over the past 2 centuries or so, a variety of lexical and grammatical features from the other languages historically represented in the region. Of these, the most prominent are the Sinitic varieties of Southern Min (Hokkien/Teochew), Wu (Cantonese), and Mandarin, alongside the indigenous Bahasa Melayu (Malay) (for a comprehensive overview of the linguistic environment in Singapore, see Bao 2015).

The characteristic feature of Singlish which this paper is primarily concerned with, and which distinguishes Singlish from the so-called “standard” Englishes (including the other English variety extant in Singapore, Standard Singaporean English) is the apparent optionality of verbal agreement with third-person singular subjects in present tense constructions. Example (1) demonstrates this optionality; unlike in standard English, the absence of the *-s* agreement morpheme does not result in ungrammaticality.

(1) Ok, let’s see how she **talk** to her boy. (adapted from Wee & Ansaldo 2004: 23)

This non-realisation of the agreement morpheme (henceforth AGREEMENT-DROP) has been observed in the literature to be semantically vacuous, with (1) being “equivalent” to the minimally different (2), at least when we consider their respective literal contributions.

(2) Ok, let’s see how she *talks* to her boy.

Indeed, Wee & Ansaldo (2004) consider the distribution of agreement-drop to be “sporadic rather than rule-governed” (p. 380), and consequently suggest that it should be treated as a case of morphophonological free variation; that is to say, agreement-drop is a PF-phenomenon.

Such a characterisation of agreement-drop naturally makes a number of strong predictions. In particular, this position severely limits the extent to which agreement-drop should be expected to interact at the levels of the syntax and the semantics: as a morphophonological quirk of the language, the (non-)instantiation of agreement morphology is, under standard assumptions about the division of labour between LF and PF, predicted to not have any syntactic or semantic reflexes.

One analysis that adopts this particular position is outlined in Sato (2014), which argues that the agreement morpheme is always syntactically represented, and the lexical choice between the overt *-s* allomorph and the zero-allomorph in examples like (1)–(2) is resolved independently in the post-syntax. From the perspective of the syntactic module, agreement-drop constructions are indistinguishable from their counterparts where verbal agreement is overtly manifested.

In this paper, I present a number of novel empirical observations which demonstrate that treating agreement-drop as happening in the post-syntax does not generate the correct empirical coverage, since agreement-drop can, and indeed, does, lead to changes in (un)grammaticality within a number of well-defined syntactic frames, at least for some subpopulation of native speakers.<sup>1</sup> The first of these observations concerns agreement-drop when applied to simplex clauses, as in (3 vs. 4).

(3) Mr. Wu knows Mary.

(4) %Mr. Wu **know** Mary.

Notably, unlike the earlier example of agreement-drop given in (1), the omission of the agreement morpheme in (4) triggers a feeling of incompleteness<sup>2</sup> (which will be accounted for section 3.3).

As we will see below, the alternation in (3)–(4), alongside the other data points to be presented in this paper, is more readily explained by an account that takes the agreement-drop alternation as one that applies in the syntax rather than at PF. That said, for the purposes of developing such an account, I will, in the presentation of the novel observations, set aside any “incompleteness” observed by temporarily treating them as being baseline, and focusing instead on any further degradation that surfaces in the presence of agreement-drop, before revisiting the issue in section 3.3.

More specifically, I demonstrate that agreement-drop constructions display a number of syntactic effects, namely, they (i) bleed the possibility of object topicalisation, (ii) block the extraction of more deeply embedded adjuncts, (iii) cannot themselves be embedded under predicates such as ‘regret’, (iv) exhibit apparent scope-freezing effects, (v) are constrained in the possible quantifiers that can serve as their “subjects”, and (vi) restrict the distribution of *wh*-subjects to partitive contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Of the seven native speakers consulted, five observed all the contrasts between the fully-agreeing and agreement-drop constructions presented in the paper; a minority (two speakers) was not sensitive to the alternations under study. I briefly discuss the implications of the existence of the minority pattern in the conclusion (putting it aside until then).

<sup>2</sup> I follow Tsai (2008) in using the ‘%’ symbol to indicate that the clause does not feel “complete”; that is to say, clauses such as (4) require some contextualisation.

That agreement-drop should result in these effects definitively demonstrates that for speakers with such contrasts, agreement-drop cannot be a PF phenomenon, but must instead be treated within the syntax.

I argue that each of these properties are exactly predicted by the existence of a topicalisation-like structure which is instantiated in agreement-drop constructions, with the overtly realised “subjects” being syntactically situated in a topic position which is higher than that of canonical subjects in standard Englishes (i.e. SpecIP). In particular, I propose that Singlish, as a contact language, has two alternative clausal spines it can deploy when realising basic clauses, with one option crucially including an obligatorily merged “Topic” projection at the leftmost edge (cf. Sato 2016); I argue that there is a two-way correlation between agreement-drop, and the use of this clausal spine in the derivation.

The discussion is organised as follows: section 2 presents the novel empirical findings. Section 3 presents and discusses the syntactic account implicated by the data in section 2. Section 4 concludes.

## 2 Novel Observations

It has been claimed that agreement-drop in Singlish is a purely PF phenomenon, with the non-realisation of the agreement morpheme being treated as the result of the spell out of a zero allomorph (Wee & Ansaldo 2004; Sato 2016). This view of agreement-drop makes the strong prediction that agreement-drop should not have any syntactic or semantic correlates.

It is therefore surprising that there are in fact a number of syntactic and semantic reflexes which accompany agreement-drop, which have hitherto been undocumented. I present them in this section as evidence against a PF treatment of agreement-drop in Singlish.

### 2.1 Object Topicalisation

The first piece of evidence which I bring to bear upon this issue is the fact that agreement-drop constructions, unlike their fully-agreeing counterparts, are resistant to object topicalisation.

- (5) a. Mary<sub>i</sub>, Mr. Wu knows *t<sub>i</sub>*.  
 b. ?\*Mary<sub>i</sub>, Mr. Wu **know**. [= (3)]

Examples (5a) and (5b) form a minimal pair, diverging only in the presence/absence of the standard third-person present tense agreement morpheme *-s*. That there is a contrast in acceptability arising from this minimal difference therefore demonstrates that the absence of the agreement morpheme bleeds the syntactic operation of object topicalisation.

Note that the ungrammaticality reported here cannot be attributed to any particular prosodic requirement, e.g. a requirement that there be a prosodic gap immediately following

the topicalised object, such as is usually required in standard English, since the insertion of an equivalent intonational break, as indicated by the comma following the topicalised object in (5b), is insufficient to rescue the sentence from ungrammaticality.

Nor can the ungrammaticality be a result of some phonological constraint that rules out the realisation of a phonologically null element at the right edge of a prosodic phrase: the insertion of additional phonological material at the right edge does not eliminate the observed contrast between object topicalisation in fully-agreeing versus agreement-drop constructions (6a vs. 6b).

- (6) a. Mary<sub>p</sub>, Mr. Wu knows  $t_i$  well.  
 b. ?\*Mary<sub>p</sub>, Mr. Wu **know**  $t_i$  well. [= (6a)]

The incompatibility of object topicalisation with agreement-drop further extends to biclausal contexts as well. Where object topicalisation is usually licensed in the embedded clause (7a), it is again illicit when the agreement morpheme is unrealised on the embedded predicate (7b).

- (7) a. John says that Mary, Peter likes.  
 b. ?\*John says that Mary (,) Peter **like**.

This alternation crucially cannot be attributed to the mismatch between the presence/absence of agreement on the matrix and embedded clauses respectively, as demonstrated by the acceptability of both (8) and (9).<sup>3</sup>

- (8) John **say** that Peter **like** Mary.  
 (9) (?)John says that Peter **like** Mary.

This state of affairs is incompatible with a PF-based account of agreement-drop, since the treatment of agreement-drop as a PF phenomenon would amount to the assertion that agreement-drop applies post-syntactically, and as such, cannot have any syntactic reflexes under standard models of syntax and its interactions with the interfaces. That is to say, under such a view of agreement-drop, the syntax should not be privy to how the agreement-morpheme is ultimately pronounced (or in this case, not pronounced). Since agreement-drop constructions and their fully-agreeing counterparts have the same underlying syntax, they are not expected to diverge in their syntactic behaviour.

Contrary to this prediction, what we have seen is that the loss of the agreement morpheme bleeds the syntactic operation of object topicalisation in the above examples. The incompatibility

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<sup>3</sup> The mismatched agreement construction is admittedly somewhat marked; however, if agreement-drop has syntactic correlates as I am claiming, changing the agreement-drop status of multiple clauses to avoid this confound will create pairs of examples that are not minimally different. To preserve isomorphism in the non-target clauses, so as to isolate the effects of any individual instance of agreement-drop, I have elected to leave the agreement status across clauses in the multiclausal examples mismatched.

of agreement-drop with object topicalisation therefore poses a serious empirical challenge to the treatment of this phenomenon as a PF one, and consequently, serves as evidence motivating a syntactic account of the alternation under study.

## 2.2 \*Adjunct-extraction across agreement-drop

The next piece of evidence which I present to demonstrate that agreement-drop cannot be treated as a post-syntactic alternation appears in multiply-embedded clauses, in the form of a contrast involving adjunct extraction possibilities.

Consider first the standard English example (10). The embedded indirect object *to John* can be dislocated to the left edge of the embedded clause, yielding the perfectly grammatical (11).

(10) I think that Mary says *to her friends* that Peter fixes cars with a hammer.

(11) I think that *to her friends*, Mary says that Peter fixes cars with a hammer.

Notably, it has been observed that this operation of embedded topicalisation blocks the extraction of adjuncts from any clause that is lower in the structure (Lasnik & Saito 1992). To illustrate, example (12) is ungrammatical under the indicated reading, where the extracted adjunct *how* associates with the most deeply embedded clause.

(12) \*How<sub>i</sub> does he think that *to her friends*<sub>j</sub>, Mary says *t<sub>j</sub>* that [Peter fixed cars *t<sub>i</sub>*]?

That is not to say that the linear string corresponding to (12) is itself ungrammatical, however. If construed differently, the linear string is perfectly acceptable; in particular, the sentence is grammatical *if* the adjunct is instead interpreted as an associate of either of the two higher predicates. In other words, the linear string corresponding to (12) *can* be interpreted, and is in fact two-way ambiguous between a question about the manner of *saying* (13) and the manner of *thinking* (14), but crucially, the interpretation where it is the manner of *fixing* that is being questioned cannot be accessed; ergo, the topic ‘to her friends’ blocks *wh*-extraction from a more deeply embedded clause, but crucially does *not* block *local wh*-extraction.

(13) How<sub>i</sub> does he think [that *to her friends*<sub>j</sub>, Mary says *t<sub>j</sub>* that [Peter fixes cars] *t<sub>i</sub>*]?

(14) How<sub>i</sub> does he think [that *to her friends*<sub>j</sub>, Mary says *t<sub>j</sub>* that [Peter fixes cars]] *t<sub>i</sub>*?

This alternation can be isolated and directly attributed to the embedded topicalisation structure, when we consider the otherwise-equivalent construction (15). (15) forms a minimal pair with (12), distinguished only by the fact that it does *not* have the same embedded topicalisation structure; unlike (12), (15) *does* indeed allow for the extracted adjunct to be interpreted as an associate of the lowest predicate, i.e. (15) is three-way ambiguous.

(15) How<sub>i</sub> does he think that Mary says to her friends that [Peter fixes cars  $t_i$ ]?

The contrast in accessible interpretations that arises between (12) and (15) therefore demonstrates that the syntactic operation of topicalisation can bleed the extraction of a lower adjunct.

With this as background, we now consider the case of agreement-drop constructions: if, as I have claimed, agreement-drop corresponds to the presence of a topicalisation structure within the syntax, we predict that agreement-drop should block the extraction of a more deeply embedded adjunct in exactly the same fashion as the topicalisation structures discussed above.

We should therefore expect to find that the contrast between (15) and (12) is replicated in the minimal pair comprising (15) and its agreement-drop counterpart.<sup>4</sup> This is indeed what we find:

(16) \*How<sub>i</sub> does he think that *Mary say* to her friends that [Peter fixes cars  $t_i$ ]?

Crucially, the available interpretations for the extracted adjunct in (16) are exactly the same as those noted to be available for the embedded topicalisation example (12); i.e. while (16) cannot be interpreted as a question regarding the manner of fixing, it is still two-way ambiguous, and can be interpreted either as a question regarding the manner of thinking (17) or the manner of saying (18).

(17) How<sub>i</sub> does he think [that *Mary say* to her friends that [Peter fixes cars]]  $t_i$ ?

(18) How<sub>i</sub> does he think [that *Mary say* to her friends that [Peter fixes cars]  $t_i$ ]?

Again, if agreement-drop were truly the result of the instantiation of a zero allomorph in the PF, we would not expect the alternation between (16) and (15), which are distinguished only by the absence/presence of overt agreement respectively, to have an impact on the (un)availability of any particular interpretation(s), since the LF representations of the two constructions should, under such a view, be identical.

The existence of a semantic contrast between the two constructions therefore constitutes further evidence in favour of treating agreement-drop within the syntax, rather than post-syntactically as a PF alternation.

That there is again a parallel to be drawn between embedded agreement-drop and embedded topicalisation is also suggestive that the two phenomena should be unified, with the parallelisms deriving from a syntactic structure common to both types of constructions.

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<sup>4</sup> See fn. 3 for a discussion of the mismatch in the presence/absence of agreement cross-clausally.

### 2.3 \*Regret agreement-drop

The parallelisms continue when we consider the interaction of agreement-drop (as well as topicalisation) with ‘regret’-class verbs. In particular, I demonstrate that just as ‘regret’-class verbs have long been observed to be unable to take clausal complements that have a topicalised nominal phrase in their left periphery (Hooper & Thompson 1973), they are similarly unable to take as their complements agreement-drop constructions.

It must first be noted that this incompatibility of ‘regret’-class verbs with topicalisation in their complement clauses cannot be extended to *all* predicates that take clausal complements, given that there are other predicates which *do* allow for embedded topicalisation in their clausal complements, such as *say*, which we previously saw in (7a), repeated below.

(7a) John says that Mary, Peter likes.

- (19) a. John regrets that he knows Mary.  
 b. \*John regrets that [Mary], he knows.

Instead, the incompatibility of ‘regret’-class verbs with topicalisation structures, as in (19b), has been suggested to follow from competing semantic requirements imposed by the verbs themselves, and by the topicalisation structure being embedded. More specifically, such verbs (also known as factives) are traditionally treated as triggering a strong presupposition that their clausal complements are true (Stalnaker 1974; 1978; Heim 1982; 1983); however, topicalisation also triggers an existence inference that holds of the topicalised nominal (which manifests in the form of the specificity requirement noted previously). It is the concurrent imposition of these two independent requirements on the clausal complement as well as the topicalised nominal contained within that results in the incompatibility noted above (see, e.g. Hooper & Thompson 1973).

Abstracting away from the exact implementation of the mechanisms underlying the satisfaction of the interpretational requirements of factives and topics respectively, such that they ultimately end up in complementary distribution, we are left with the fact that there is indeed an incompatibility, and, crucial to the purposes of this paper, that this incompatibility surfaces in agreement-drop constructions as well: while agreement-drop can in principle apply to embedded clauses (20), it patterns with topicalisation in that it is not allowed when targeting the predicate of the clausal complement of a verb such as *regret* (21).

(20) John says that he **know** Mary.

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

This is unexpected under the PF approach to agreement-drop, since the agreement morpheme is, under such a view, syntactically represented even in the cases where the zero-allomorph was



ultimately selected for realisation. The semantic conflict that holds between topicalisation and ‘regret’-class verbs should therefore be orthogonal to the exact form of the agreement morpheme, since there is no *a priori* reason why agreement-drop should trigger an equivalent conflict with the requirements imposed by ‘regret’-class verbs. We should therefore expect there to be no contrast between the grammatical fully-agreeing (19a) and the ungrammatical agreement-drop (21) is predicted, contrary to fact.

Taking the earlier observations into consideration, this paradigm is, conversely, unsurprising if the “subjects” of agreement-drop constructions are, in actuality, topics, since the embedded “subject” *he* in (21) would be, from the viewpoint of the syntax, a topic; the incompatibility between ‘regret’-class verbs and agreement-drop would consequently resolve into the aforementioned interpretational incompatibility between ‘regret’-class verbs and topicalisation structures.

## 2.4 Bleeding of Inverse Scope

Yet another piece of evidence in favour of a syntactic treatment of agreement-drop relates to the effects of agreement-drop on quantificational scope readings; agreement-drop voids inverse scope readings which are otherwise possible in their fully-agreeing counterparts.

Example (22) is ambiguous between a surface-scope reading, where the existential introduced by the embedded subject *somebody* scopes over the universal introduced by the embedded object *everyone*, and an inverse scope reading, where the universal scopes over the existential. That is to say, the sentence is adjudged true either if there is a specific unique individual such that everybody is loved by that individual **or** if, for each individual being considered, at least one individual loves them.

(22) John says that someone **loves** everyone.  $\checkmark \exists > \forall; \forall > \exists$

Interestingly, agreement-drop constructions do not display this same ambiguity. Instead, the inverse scope reading is completely ruled out in (23).

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

Again, the two examples (22) and (23) form a minimal pair, with the only point of difference being the realisation/non-realisation of the embedded agreement morpheme.

This therefore constitutes a case of semantic non-equivalence between the fully-agreeing construction and its agreement-drop counterpart; setting the exact analysis of the semantic alternation aside for a moment, the very fact that there is such an alternation at all indicates that a PF-based account of the phenomenon cannot be tenable, since a silent allomorph of the same underlying morpheme should not be able to affect the semantic component.

How is the blocking effect of agreement-drop on inverse scope obtained then?

One possibility is to appeal to differences in the structural height of the existential quantifier in fully-agreeing versus agreement-drop constructions.

Consider the standard English sentences in (24) and (25). As before, inverse scope is available in (24) such that the universal quantifier in the object outscopes the existential in the subject. However, if we question the subject of (24), as in (25), the universal quantifier cannot scope over the *wh*-element (see, e.g. May 1977). That is to say, (25) is only compatible with an answer where there is a single unique individual who loves each and every individual within the domain. (25) is crucially not amenable to an answer which comprises the concatenation of every individual's distinct lover.

(24) Someone loves everyone.  $\forall \exists > \forall; \forall \forall > \exists$

(25) Who loves everyone?  $\forall \text{wh} > \forall; * \forall > \text{wh}$

This indicates that while inverse scope can obtain over subjects in the canonical subject position (i.e. Spec,TP), it cannot obtain over elements which have undergone extraction to a higher structural position. The inability of inverse scope to obtain in the agreement-drop construction in (23) may therefore be yet another instantiation of the same effect: the existential quantifier in the “subject” is similarly too high for inverse scope to obtain, i.e. the “subject”s in (22) and (23) respectively cannot have been realised in the same syntactic position.

An alternative analysis appeals to the more general constraints imposed upon sentential topics, rather than their structural height. First, consider that indefinites cannot usually serve as topics, as demonstrated by the contrast in grammaticality between (26) and (27), where the topicalised nominals are marked by the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a* respectively (see also Hankamer 1971; Kuno 1972).

(26) The girl, Mr. Wu knows.

(27) ?A girl, Mr. Wu knows. (?specific, \*nonspecific)

Crucially, an exception is made when the indefinite is interpreted as being specific<sup>5</sup> (cf. Erteschik-Shir 1997; 2007; Cohen & Erteschik-Shir 2002; Giurgea 2015: a.o.). Accordingly, (27) improves when the topicalised element is interpreted as a specific indefinite (cf. Davison 1984), i.e. the speaker intends for the reference of the indefinite to be a particular girl whom they have in mind. The same holds of the agreement-drop construction in (23): the construction is acceptable only if *someone* is interpreted specifically.

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<sup>5</sup> Partitives can also induce a similar effect; see also Ward & Prince (1991) for further discussion regarding both indefinite and nonspecific topics.

This specificity requirement is generally taken as an example of the so-called “exceptional wide scope” phenomena, and can be formalised in a number of ways. Indeed, the exact formalism has been hotly debated in the literature, with some of the options including the (forced) interpretation of the indefinite as referential (Fodor & Sag 1982), the imposition of some sort of existential closure, such as through choice functions or Skolem functions (see, e.g. Reinhart 1997; Winter 1997; Kratzer 1998: a.o.), and the stipulation that the specificity comes by way of presupposition (Yeom 1998). One analysis that is particularly aligned to the current paper is Endriss’s (2009) analysis of exceptional wide scope phenomena as being directly correlated to topicalisation.

The exact implementation of the specificity requirement is, however, in no way central to the present discussion. The critical observation is only that the specificity requirement itself exists as a so-called exceptional wide scope phenomenon. Ergo, the absence of the inverse scope reading in (23) is a result of the topical (quantificational) indefinite *someone* being exceptionally required to take wide scope over the universally quantified object *everyone*.

In fact, the exact implementation of the absence of inverse scope, while interesting, is itself orthogonal to the more general point that I am trying to make in the current section, which is simply that agreement-drop “subjects”, much like topics, do not allow for the possibility of inverse scope, contrary to the predictions made by the PF account of agreement-drop, though the observation is certainly in line with this quote from Endriss (2009): “Quantifiers receive wide scope due to their interpretation as topics” (p. 10).

Furthermore, the specificity requirement that may be the source of the forced wide scope interpretation of quantificational topics, in fact applies more generally to indefinites in the agreement-drop “subject”-position, as I will briefly demonstrate in the next subsection.

## 2.5 Quantificational Constraints

Existential quantifiers aside, universally quantifiers are themselves also indefinite, and as such, have been argued to generally be unable to serve as topics (Reinhart 1981). We would therefore, in light of the findings thus far, predict universally quantified external arguments to be ruled out exactly in the context of agreement-drop. This prediction is indeed borne out (28a vs. 28b; 29a vs. 29b).

- (28) a. Everyone loves John.  
       b. ?\*Everyone love John.
- (29) a. Everybody loves John.  
       b. ?\*Everybody love John.

The distribution of quantifiers in Singlish therefore provides another domain in which the “subjects” of agreement-drop constructions parallels aboutness-topics.

## 2.6 Wh-subject-topics

Lasnik & Uriagereka (1988) observe that *wh*-phrases in English cannot undergo topicalisation, on the basis of examples such as the following:

- (30) Who said that John like Mary?  
 (31) Who said that Mary, John likes?  
 (32) Who said that John likes who?  
 (33) \*Who said that who, John likes?

As such, we might expect that the *wh*-subject questions to be impossible in agreement-drop constructions, since the *wh*-subject would be expected to be forced to function as a topic, given the trend that we have seen throughout the present section.

The impossibility of topicalising *wh*-phrases appears to be variable cross-linguistically, however. Grohmann (2006), on the basis of earlier work (Grohmann 2000: a.o.), argues for the existence of *wh*-topics on the basis of German multiple *wh*-questions, arguing further that these *wh*-topics are subject to a constraint he labels Discourse Restricted Quantification (34).

- (34) Discourse Restricted Quantification (DRQ; from Grohmann 2000: 269)  
 Questions involving two *wh*-expressions are well-formed if the value of both *wh*-expressions is determined by the context; determination of values is satisfied by providing a set of at least two possible referents in the discourse.

What this means is that “all *wh*-phrases in a German multiple *wh*-question must be D(iscourse)-linked (possibly, but not necessarily in the sense of Pesetsky (1987))” (Grohmann 2006: p. 269). This characterisation extends to Singlish: unlike English, *wh*-topics are indeed allowed, so long as they are in compliance with some version of the DRQ.

That is to say, in exactly such cases, basic subject-question can cooccur with agreement-drop (note the impossibility of interpreting 36 as a regular, non-D-linked question; cf. 35).

- (35) Who loves Mary?  
 (36) Who love Mary? (*?\*regular question; ✓partitive/specific*)

Given their divergent behaviour with respect to the availability of (i) object topicalisation, (ii) adjunct-extraction, (iii) embedding under regret-class verbs, (iv) inverse scope readings, and (v) quantificational “subjects”, as well as (vi) the interpretational constraints on *wh*-“subjects”, the distinction between Singlish agreement-drop constructions and their fully-agreeing counterparts cannot be attributed to a PF-alternation, but must instead be treated syntactically, particularly in

such a way that agreement-drop “subjects” are syntactically topics.<sup>6</sup> In the next section, I sketch out in greater detail the syntactic configuration implicated by the empirical facts that have been presented.

### 3 Analysis

I have thus far demonstrated that Singlish agreement-drop constructions implicate the existence of a topicalisation structure at the left edge, on the basis that agreement-drop constructions consistently pattern like topicalisation with respect to syntactic processes and possible semantic interpretations. In particular, the ostensible subject behaves like a topic in these constructions. I therefore begin by considering the nature of subjects more generally, and how this relates to the properties, and consequently, the status of the agreement-drop “subject”.

Following Pollock’s (1989) seminal proposal, there has been a continual body of work which argues for a subdivision of what was traditionally labelled Infl/IP, i.e. which argues for Split IP (Belletti 1990; Bobaljik & Jonas 1996; Bošković 2015; 2020; in press; Cardinaletti 2004; Cinque 1999; Collins 2005; Merchant 2013; Swart 1998; Ramchand & Svenonius 2014; Tenny 1992; among many others), on the basis of evidence from a variety of phenomena, such as intermediate V-movement, quantifier float, coordination, and multiple subject positions. A number of works within this line of research also follow Pollock (1989) in arguing for the existence of a dedicated subject agreement position within the inflectional domain (most recently Bošković 2020; in press, see also Kayne 1989; Watanabe 1993; Bošković 1997).

In line with this body of research, I assume that there is indeed a position dedicated to subject agreement, and thus, subject agreement morphology. The presence of such a position is, however, less evident in agreement-drop constructions in particular, seeing as they lack subject-agreement.

That said, the evidence discussed above indicates that the “subjects” of Singlish agreement-drop constructions do not pattern with regular subjects syntactically. The incongruity between these “subjects” and regular subjects are therefore suggestive of a difference in structural position, with the scope facts in particular indicating that these “subjects” are instantiated in a syntactic position higher than the dedicated subject position.

Two possible lines of analysis which provide a means of reconciling this apparent conflict become immediately salient. The first option is that the relevant projection (including its Spec) is *not* present in agreement-drop constructions, such that agreement-drop constructions actually do not (or indeed, cannot) have subject agreement at all.

An alternative line is that in agreement-drop contexts specifically, this dedicated subject agreement position is in some way defective, such that the subject of the agreement-drop

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<sup>6</sup> The account of the blocking effect of other topics on object topicalisation from Lasnik & Saito (1992) can be extended to the blocking effect of agreement-drop subjects on object topicalisation on this approach.

construction is extraordinarily allowed to circumvent the position, thereby deriving the absence of agreement morphology. Either way, the “subject” is not located in the usual (agreeing) subject position in agreement-drop constructions.

I suggest that the exact status of the dedicated subject agreement position/projection in the Singlish agreement-drop construction is ultimately orthogonal to the properties of the explicitly realised “subject” argument in the Singlish agreement-drop construction. That is to say, regardless of whether the dedicated subject agreement position/projection is absent or defective, agreement morphology is absent, as desired, and the overtly manifested subject is not located in the “standard” agreeing subject position.

Taking then the parallelisms between agreement-drop “subjects” and canonical topics established in section 2 into consideration, I then suggest that the “subject” in Singlish agreement-drop constructions is not actually a subject in the syntactic sense, but is rather instantiated in the specifier of a higher TopP projection.

This addresses the apparently aberrant behaviour of agreement-drop “subjects” since their unexpected properties are unexpected only if we take the syntactic subject as the frame of reference; when switching to the paradigm that characterises syntactic topics, they are in fact fairly well-behaved. Since the “subject” in these constructions is not a syntactic subject, it is not surprising that subject-agreement with the “subject-topic” does not surface.

It is clear from the contrast between agreement-drop and their fully-agreeing counterparts that English could not have been the source of this syntactic configuration, independent of its exact technical implementation. How then did this syntactic configuration come to be available to Singlish?

This state of affairs is, I suggest, unsurprising, when we consider the nature of Singlish as a contact language. While the fully-agreeing constructions (and their corresponding syntactic spine) can clearly be attributed to the English superstrate, the clausal spine for agreement-drop is inherited from another of the languages extant in Singlish’s formative contact ecology.

In particular, I point to the Sinitic languages as a viable candidate for the origin of this agreement-drop syntax, since these languages are well-attested within the contact ecology of Singlish, whilst also sharing both of the properties which we seek to address, namely (i) unambiguously lacking agreement morphology, and (ii) having been characterised as being topic-prominent in nature (see, e.g., Bao 2015).

A note: while the Southern Min varieties of Hokkien and Teochew were indubitably the most prominent of the Sinitic languages over the course of Singlish’s developmental history, I will primarily be comparing Singlish to Mandarin instead. The rationale for this departure is threefold: first and foremost, Mandarin patterns with both Hokkien and Teochew in most, if not all, of the aspects relevant to the discussion at hand. Second, owing to longstanding governmental language

policies, Mandarin has, especially in more recent times, been increasingly represented in the linguistic ecology of Singapore at the direct expense of the other Sinitic languages. Accordingly, the contact ecology of Singlish is now more skewed towards Mandarin and away from the other Sinitic languages than ever before. Finally, Mandarin is the most-studied of the Sinitic languages, and insights drawn from this body of research, which may not have been replicated in Hokkien and/or Teochew, are pertinent to developing a comprehensive understanding of the Singlish facts under consideration.

### 3.1 On the topic of Topics in Singlish

The suggestion that Singlish has Topic projections akin to those found in the Sinitic languages is not in itself entirely novel, with Sinitic-style topic constructions having long been observed to exist in Singlish. In particular, Bao (2015) and Sato (2016) have both made proposals within the generative framework to this effect. However, it is important to note that the analysis being proffered in this paper is distinct in that it establishes a clear bidirectional entailment between agreement-drop and the obligatory projection of Top. This, notably, entails in turn that fully-agreeing Singlish clauses are distinct from agreement-drop constructions in that they do *not* obligatorily include a Top projection, *pace* Sato (2016).

Bao (2015) also does not make an equivalence between agreement-drop subjects and topics, simply demonstrating that Singlish has what he terms “Chinese-style topics”, which are characterised as being distinct from English-style topics in that they do not correspond to any pronominal variable in the main clause, as reflected by the accompanying glosses in (37).

- (37) a. [<sub>NP</sub> nèi-cháng huǒ] [<sub>IP</sub> xìngkuī xiāofáng-duì lái de kuài]  
           that-CL fire fortunate fire-brigade come PRT quick  
           ‘That fire, fortunately the fire-brigade came quickly.’ (Bao 2015: 12a)
- b. [<sub>NP</sub> nài xiē shùmù] [<sub>IP</sub> shùshēn dà]  
           that some tree tree-trunk big  
           ‘Those trees, the trunks are big.’ (ibid.; 12b)
- (38) a. [my family] [everybody is educated in English]  
           ‘In my family, everybody is educated in English.’ (Platt et al. 1983: 47)
- b. [a pick-up taxi] [you have to share the trip with others]  
           ‘With a pick-up taxi, you have to share the trip with others.’ (ibid.; 48)
- c. [stay longer] [they have to overcharge]  
           ‘If you stay longer, they have to overcharge.’ (ibid.; 78)
- d. [take paper] [I also want to tell mummy]  
           ‘When I am taking a paper, I want to tell my mother.’ (ibid.; 136)

On the basis of the parallels between the Singlish (38) and the Mandarin (37), Bao (2015) concludes that “(t)he topic structure of Singapore English is clearly derived from Chinese” (p. 100).<sup>7</sup>

Sato (2016) makes a similar observation, albeit beginning from the observation that there is a subject-object asymmetry that takes the form of a definiteness “preference” that applies to subjects but not to objects. This “preference” is effectively a strong bias towards the definite interpretation of the reference of preverbal subjects, as demonstrated in (39), which is not found when considering the reference of objects. This, he suggests, can be accounted for if subjects in Singlish move to the specifier of a higher topic projection, thereby creating an operator-variable chain. It is this operator-variable chain that results in the definiteness “preference”, and the subject-object asymmetry follows from the fact that objects do not undergo any comparable movements within the derivation.

- (39) a. People come already. Come greet them! (definite/\*indefinite)  
 ‘The people (that we were discussing/know were coming) came. \*Some people came.’  
 b. I buy book already. (definite/indefinite)  
 ‘I have already bought {a book/the book/books/the books}.’  
 c. Book (I) buy already. (definite/\*indefinite)  
 ‘I have already bought {\*a book/the book/\*books/the books}.’

As was previously noted, Sato (2016) also treats the realisation of agreement as being orthogonal to the underlying syntactic structure, i.e. he considers agreement-drop constructions to be

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<sup>7</sup> Such a claim may at first appear to run counter to the previously reported incompatibility of agreement-drop with object topicalisation in section 2.1, since the Sinitic varieties and, by extension, Singlish, should, and indeed, do allow for the realisation of multiple topics, as in (1) and (2).

(1) [zuótiān]<sub>1</sub> [Lǐ xiānshēng]<sub>2</sub> [wǒ e<sub>1</sub> kànjiàn le e<sub>2</sub>]  
 yesterday Li Mr. I see ASP  
 ‘Yesterday, Mr Li, I saw.’ (Mandarin; Bao 2015: 13a, from Xu & Langendoen 1985)

(2) [Another time]<sub>it</sub>, [same MRT]<sub>it</sub>, [this man]<sub>it</sub>, he<sub>it</sub> sat opposite me e<sub>it</sub> e<sub>it</sub>.  
 (SgE; *ibid.* 36c, from the ICE-SIN corpus)

Crucially, however, the interpretation of each of the multiple topics is distinct, with only one of them being able to serve as the *aboutness* topic of the sentence (see, e.g. Heim 1982); the others are obligatorily interpreted contrastively (for a discussion of the typology of topics, see Bianchi & Frascarelli 2010). The application of the label “multiple-topic constructions” to these constructions is therefore somewhat misleading: while it is true that there are multiple topics in the loose sense, there is only a single *aboutness* topic. Accordingly, the topicalisation of the object *Mary* in (6b) improves if it is interpreted contrastively, either through the use of contextual cues, or through the use of lexical markers, such as *then*, as in (3).

(3) Mary<sub>it</sub> *then* Mr. Wu **know** t<sub>it</sub>. [‘It is Mary (and not someone else) that Mr. Wu knows.’]



syntactically identical to their fully-agreeing counterparts. In his view, the basic minimal pair (3 and 4, repeated below) are syntactically equivalent; in other words, Sato (2016) adopts the view that agreement-drop is a post-syntactic alternation, i.e. PF in nature.

(3) Mr. Wu knows Mary.

(4) \*Mr. Wu know Mary. [= (3)]

Note also that Sato (2016) crucially requires the subject to have *moved* to the higher topic position, since the operator-variable chain is critical for establishing the relevant subject-object asymmetry the analysis was designed to capture. Sato's (2016) analysis therefore necessarily involves the operation of short subject topicalisation, which has been demonstrated by Lasnik & Saito (1992) to be unavailable in English, as illustrated by the contrast between (40) and (41). When an embedded object undergoes topicalisation, it can take an antecedent from a higher clause. It stands to reason then, that if the subject could undergo local topicalisation, it would also be able to take an antecedent from a higher clause. This is, however, not possible, leading Lasnik & Saito (1992) to conclude that subject topicalisation is disallowed in English.

(40) \*John<sub>i</sub> thinks that *himself*<sub>p</sub> t<sub>i</sub> likes Mary. (Lasnik & Saito 1992: 23b)

(41) John<sub>i</sub> thinks that *himself*<sub>p</sub> Mary likes t<sub>i</sub>. (ibid.: 21b)

This conclusion is further supported by the contrast in (42) vs. (43), where *wh*-extraction from the embedded topicalised subject results in a higher degree of degradation than *wh*-extraction from an otherwise-equivalent object topicalisation structure.

(42) ??Which athletes do you think that pictures of, Mary bought? (ibid.: 24b)

(43) ?\*Which athletes do you think that pictures of, are on sale? (ibid.: 25b)

This kind of movement has been argued to be banned in many languages, such as Kinande (see, e.g. Schneider-Zioga 2000; 2007; Bošković 2016: a.o.), Kaqchikel (Erlewine 2014; 2016), as well as Florentino and Trentino (Brandi & Cordin 1989; Rizzi 1990), and is in fact suggested to be universally banned (see, e.g. Bošković 2016; Erlewine 2020).

The implementation of Sato's (2016) analysis would, however, necessarily involve the stipulation that there is no such ban on short subject topicalisation in Singlish. Conversely, I suggest that an alternative derivation of agreement-drop "subjects" in Singlish that does not violate Lasnik & Saito's (1992) ban on short subject topicalisation is available: consider the possibility that "subject-topics" in Singlish are not derived through movement, but are instead base-generated in the left-peripheral position in which they surface. Since they do not undergo movement to their derived position, the generation of the "subject-topic" would also not be in

violation of the kind of (anti)locality conditions which have been suggested to be the source of the ban on short subject topicalisation, as argued for by Bošković (2016) and Erlewine (2020).

The canonical subject position (if it is there in the first place; see the discussion in the previous subsection), I suggest, is filled not by a trace of the moved argument (since there has been no movement), but a null pronoun instead, i.e. *pro*, which is semantically bound by the base-generated topic.

Even in English, topics can correspond to pronominals situated within the main clause, as seen in hanging topic constructions (see, e.g. Bianchi & Frascarelli 2010); much like the proposed structure for agreement-drop constructions, these hanging topic constructions come with a resumptive pronoun and are taken not to be derived by movement, and exhibit a parallel condition on definiteness/specificity on topics corresponding to both the clausal object (44a vs. 44b), as well as the clausal subject (45a vs. 45b).

- (44) a. The girl, Mr. Wu knows her.  
       b. A girl, Mr. Wu knows her. (✓specific, \*nonspecific)
- (45) a. The girl, she knows Mr. Wu.  
       b. A girl, she knows Mr. Wu. (✓specific, \*nonspecific)

Singlish has also been independently noted to have *pro* by Sato & Kim (2012), who use a generalisation put forth in Saito (2007), namely that languages which have radical *pro* drop also do not have overt morphological agreement, as a springboard to argue that Singlish has radical *pro* drop in exactly those contexts where agreement morphology is missing, ergo agreement-drop constructions (cf. 46B1 vs. 46B2, 46B3 vs. 46B4, 47B1 vs. 47B2).<sup>8</sup>

- (46) A: John plays soccer well HOR?  
       B1: Yah, he plays well SIA.  
       B2: \* Yah, Ø plays well SIA.  
       B3: Yah, he does SIA.  
       B4: \* Yah, Ø does SIA. (adapted from Sato & Kim 2012: 19)
- (47) A: John want to go zoo or not?  
       B1: Don't want LAH.  
       B2: \* Ø doesn't want LAH. (adapted from *ibid.*: 20)

That Singlish has null pronominals was also noted in Bao (2015), who observes that the existence of empty categories in Singlish has been posited as far back as Tay (1979), and has largely been attributed to Sinitic influence on the variety.

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<sup>8</sup> The constructions include the use of sentence final particles, which are indicated using small caps.

In particular, Bao (2015) demonstrates that there is indeed parallelism between the distribution of empty categories in Singlish and that in Mandarin; null subjects are available in Singlish, with a distribution parallel to what is found in Mandarin.

(48) [pro xīyān] yǒu hài  
 [pro smoke] have harm  
 ‘Smoking/To smoke is harmful.’ (Bao 2015: 18a)

(49) a. [pro walk in Pulau Ubin] also can  
 ‘It is also ok to walk in Pulau Ubin.’ (ibid.; 19a)

b. [pro leave one stroke only], [e wrong already]  
 ‘Leave out one stroke, and (the character) is wrong.’ (Platt et al. 1983: 25)

### 3.2 Interim Summary

I have presented a structural analysis of agreement-drop constructions that is motivated by the empirical facts established in 2, where agreement-drop constructions come with a topicalisation projection that is obligatorily merged higher in the structure, with the “subject” located in this projection rather than in the “usual” subject projection.

Such an analysis is necessitated by the empirical facts, which point to radical differences in syntactic behaviour and interpretational possibilities between agreement-drop clauses and fully-agreeing clauses in Singlish. This, by extension, points to radical differences between agreement-drop clauses and English more generally.

Accordingly, it stands to reason that English cannot have been the source of the clausal configuration that Singlish deploys in exactly these contexts. Instead, the closest analogue to, and thus the best candidate as the source for, agreement-drop constructions can be found in the Sinitic languages, seeing as the basic Sinitic clause shares with the Singlish agreement-drop clause all of the relevant properties, i.e. the absence of overt agreement morphology, the topicalisation structure, and the availability of empty categories.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3 On particles and the baseline incompleteness

One other characteristic that sets Singlish apart from English is its large inventory of sentence-final particles, and the distribution of these particles may provide further evidence in support of a structural difference between agreement-drop and fully-agreeing constructions, in the form

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<sup>9</sup> An anonymous reviewer raises the possibility that this alternation is the result of Singlish speakers code-switching between standard English, with its attendant clausal configuration as well as overt agreement morphology, and syntactically distinct, more basolectal variety, which has a topic structure as found in the substrate Sinitic languages. This is a very interesting question, but for reasons of scope, I leave the determination of this possibility to future research.

of an apparent complementarity between overt agreement morphology and a number of these sentence-final particles.

For example, although the particle *sia* is compatible with overt agreement morphology (cf. 46), the question forming particle *meh* is perfectly fine when appended to an agreement-drop construction (50), but results in degradation when attached to the same construction's fully-agreeing counterpart (51).

(50) He **like** watermelon MEH? ['He likes watermelon?' (surprise/negative bias)]

(51) ?\*He likes watermelon MEH? [Int: = (50)]

Though the analysis of the syntactic structure of sentence-final particles in Singlish (for a nanosyntactic analysis of parallel particles in Cantonese, see Sybesma & Li 2007) is well beyond the scope of the present paper, I suggest the complementary distribution of agreement and the sentence-final question particle *meh* is due to the functional material where the particle is merged being available only within the clausal configuration which precludes agreement morphology. Independently, this also serves as further evidence against the PF analysis of agreement-drop.

Of note too is the fact the insertion of the particle also alleviates the incompleteness effects that are baseline in simplex agreement-drop constructions, though it must be noted that this is not an innocent rescue operation, since the particle will invariably introduce its discourse/semantic properties into the interpretation of the construction.

This alleviation can also be observed in the presence of other sentence-final particles, such as *one*.

(52) %John like Mary. [Int: 'John likes Mary.']

(53) John like Mary ONE. ['It is the case that John likes Mary.']

The alleviating effect of particles reported here appear to suggest that the structural differences that set agreement-drop constructions apart from their fully-agreeing counterparts may be even more extensive than I have suggested, with additional structure potentially being required to achieve full acceptability for basic agreement-drop clauses. However, I should note that the incompleteness effect is likely to be pragmatic in nature. The intuition that belies the incompleteness is that upon hearing an agreement-drop construction out of the blue, there is an accompanying sense of uncertainty as to why the sentence is being put on the table in the first place.

If this is indeed the source of incompleteness, that the addition of the particles *meh* and *one* in particular should alleviate it is unsurprising, since they are known to have discourse effects (Lim 2007; Wee 2004), which can address the uncertainty felt.

Note that this characterisation of the incompleteness also suggests that it should dissipate in the presence of additional contextual cues, and this is indeed the case: note the full acceptability of the agreement-drop construction in the enriched context provided in (54).

- (54) Context: A and B are planning a heist on Mr. Wu, and the possibility of sending Mary undercover to serve as a distraction is salient in the resolution of the current question under discussion.  
 B: (But) Mr Wu. know Mary.

The incompleteness effect is therefore not a structural issue *per se*, though the addition of more structure in the C domain in the form of overt particle use is one way of providing the necessary pragmatic cues to fully alleviate the incompleteness effects seen when an agreement-drop construction is presented in a vacuum.

## 4 Conclusion

I have presented a number of novel observations which demonstrate that despite prior claims to the contrary, agreement-drop has both syntactic and semantic reflexes for at least a subpopulation of speakers.<sup>10</sup>

In particular, I have demonstrated that agreement-drop bleeds syntactic operations such as object topicalisation and the extraction of adjuncts from more deeply embedded clauses, and can also have semantic consequences, namely blocking the obtainment of inverse scope.

The incompatibility of agreement-drop with ‘regret’-class predicates can also be situated in a conflict in the semantic requirements imposed by the predicate itself and by the syntax of topicalisation: in particular, those semantic requirements pertaining to the presuppositional content of the complement clause. “Subjects” of agreement-drop constructions also pattern with topics in that they are interpreted as being specific, with reflexes seen in the exceptional wide-scope interpretation of existential quantifier “subjects”, the impossibility of universal quantifier “subjects”, as well as the obligatorily D-linked interpretation of *wh*-“subjects”.

All of these facts indicate that a PF-based account of agreement-drop, as has been suggested in the literature, is evidently untenable, and instead motivate a structural account wherein the

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<sup>10</sup> As noted earlier, a minority of my informants (namely two) did not report any contrasts in any of the constructions under study here. If the issue was not not understanding the task, this may point toward a possible bifurcation of the speaker population, such that one group treats the agreement-drop alternation as a true PF phenomenon, in line with prior literature. This split within the speech community is perhaps unsurprising, given the unofficial status and lack of institutional support for Singlish as a variety. In the absence of any established standard, individual speakers are likely to develop their own Singlish grammars wholly on the basis of the input they encounter in their critical period, input that can vary wildly in terms of amount and quality. This does raise several interesting questions regarding the spread of variability that can be observed in Singlish speakers, though these issues are likely best explored in future research using experimental methods.

structural position of the “subject” of agreement-drop constructions is distinct from that of the subject in fully agreeing constructions.

That is to say, these observations motivate an analysis of the agreement-drop construction which involves the merger of a topic projection wherein the overt “subject” is realised, such that agreement-drop “subjects” are, syntactically speaking, topics rather than subjects. This thereby captures the parallels to topicalisation noted in the paper.

That the properties of Singlish agreement-drop constructions directly align with known properties of the Sinitic languages suggest further that these languages are in turn the source of this eminently non-English syntax. The apparent codistribution between the theoretically distinct properties of (i) the absence of agreement morphology, (ii) topicalisation-like effects, and (iii) the presence of empty categories (i.e. *pro*) in Singlish can therefore be seen to be a consequence of a bundling of these properties in the syntax of Sinitic.

One key implication of this is that agreement-drop constructions in Singlish could potentially provide an alternative window into the inner workings of the syntax of the Sinitic languages themselves. The differences inherent to the linguistic varieties under consideration could prove to be of particular interest, since they may allow for the application of a wider range of diagnostics. This may in turn shed some light on some of the more contentious issues in the domain of Sinitic syntax, such as the question of whether tense is syntactically realised or not, (see e.g., Lin 2005; 2010; Smith & Erbaugh 2005; Sybesma 2007; Sun 2014; Huang 2015; Li 2016) an issue which I pursue in work in progress.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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