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Sentence Structure of Singlish in Written Materials: The Influence of Chinese on the English Superstrate

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Resumen

En este artículo de investigación se ha estudiado la estructura de la frase en Singlish, que es la lengua criolla de base inglesa que se habla en Singapur. Nos basamos en dos de sus características más distintivas – la anticipación del tema y la omisión del sujeto – para poder conocer la interacción entre el inglés y las lenguas nativas que condicionaron la evolución del Singlish. Como medio para llevar a cabo nuestra investigación, se escribió un estudio de caso en el que se analizaron una serie de frases tomadas de textos en dicha lengua, ya que la mayoría de estudios hasta ahora se habían basado principalmente en su producción oral desatendiendo así su vertiente escrita. Nuestro objetivo último era confirmar si los resultados de nuestra investigación se correspondían con aquellos defendidos por los lingüistas que estudian el Singlish basándose en un tipo de ámbito diferente.

Palabras Clave

Singlish - Criollo - Anticipación del Tema - Omisión del Sujeto - Inglés - Textos

Abstract

In this paper we studied sentence structure in Singlish, which is the English-based creole language spoken in Singapore. We concentrated on two of its most distinctive characteristics – topic prominence and subject drop – so that we could understand the interactive process between English and the native strata that conditioned its development. As a means to conduct our research, we wrote a case study in which we analyzed a number of sentences taken from two Singlish texts, since most studies so far had predominantly concentrated on the analysis of oral materials obliterating as a result the written production of such language. The ultimate objective of our paper was to confirm whether the results of our investigation corresponded to those which linguists who study Singlish on different grounds have defended over the last few years.

Keywords

Singlish - Creole - Topic Prominence - Subject Drop - English - Written Materials

1 Historical Context and dynamics of Singlish

Under the British colonial rule, the English language was exported to a large number of territories, including Singapore, whose case is particularly interesting due to its multilingual and multiethnic environment. Singlish is the English-based Creole language (Leimgruber, 2005) spoken on the island and, just like the Australian Creole (Cheshire, 1991), or Taglish – still common in the Philippines – (Thompson, 2003), it is one of the dozens of creoles which originated as a result of the interaction between English and the native languages which were present in the ecology of the new lands.

When analyzing Singlish, it is vital to identify and thoroughly examine both the series of languages that influenced it as well as the political decisions – mainly on the field of education – which conditioned its development. We can trace back the first seeds of Singlish to the year 1819 when the British Governor Stamford Raffles opened a commercial office on the island starting thus the colonization of the territory. Some years later, in 1824, the island was incorporated as part of the British Empire under the rule of the East India Company (Sopena, 1995) and it was after that landmark when commerce started to flourish mainly due to the rubber business that attracted large number of workers to the plantations, who were mainly Chinese. Before the British established in Singapore, there were already a thousand indigenous Malays and just in thirty years of British rule the population reached 100,000, half of these being of Chinese origin. Hence, by 1860, three were the main languages spoken on the island: Hokkien – a Sinitic variety of Chinese –, Bazaar Malay – the lingua franca in the East India archipelago at the time –, and British English, although the latter to a lesser extent. (Lim, 2011).

The first English school was founded by Stamford Raffles in 1823, and in the forthcoming years a number of educational institutions that represented the different ethnicities – Malay, Chinese, and Tamil schools – started to appear. Nevertheless, during the 19th century these institutions were somewhat elitist and not that many children could go to school. This situation changed for the better progressively until 1942, when the British were defeated by the Japanese, who occupied the island and eventually repressed its inhabitants.

The Japanese, however, lost World War II and the British took hold of these possessions again. Every aspect of life in Singapore started to normalize and so did

institutions, which became much more popular – by the 1950s education was universal and imparted in English-medium schools (Lim, 2011) –. Education was the main reason why English was becoming certainly present in the ecology of the island back then and its usage was fostered even more by the Singaporean Government, which became an independent Republic in 1965. From that time onwards, the Government, being aware of the innumerable advantages that speaking English provides in an absolutely globalized world, promoted every aspect of the education of the language by passing a number of laws, like the one in 1987, which established English as the standard medium of instruction in all schools (Fraser, 1994). It also became extremely relevant in the world of business or in the administration, and it took on the role of Bazaar Malay as the predominant Lingua Franca.

This period of the history of Singapore, especially in terms of education, is crucial for our study since Singlish was born in the 1950s schools as a result of the English input which children who belonged to various different linguistic backgrounds were exposed to at the time (Gupta, 1994). It was in the school playgrounds where English interacted with the series of languages spoken in Singapore like Malay and Cantonese – which was decisive due to the large number of Southern Chinese who emigrated to Singapore –, amongst other varieties, contributing immensely to the lexical base of Singlish as it was the dominant tongue and combining its features (phonology, grammar, syntax and so on) to the ones characteristic of the substrates. Children then internalized the dynamics of this new system, creolization occurred after some time, and Singlish expanded and became central to many of the citizens of Singapore, who comprised 5.31 million by 2012; a figure which included a series of different ethnicities dominated by the Chinese 74.2% and followed respectively by Malays 13.3%, Indians 9.2% and others 3.3% (Tan, 2013). As a matter of fact, the four official languages in the country are Mandarin, Tamil, Malay, and English (Platt, 1975).

We may state therefore that Singlish is the byproduct of the Government's linguistic policies applied to a multicultural and multilingual society. Unlike some other countries, the Government of Singapore has always been quite active in terms of linguistic policies and this attitude has conditioned the panorama that can be observed in the country these days. As a result of their intervention, many praise the fact that English leads a major role in the life of Singaporeans nowadays because of the series of advantages that its usage undoubtedly implies. However, there is also a controversial

side to the story. In 1999, the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong declared that personally he found Singlish to be nothing but "broken, ungrammatical English", discrediting thus the usage of the Creole (Agency France-Press, 1999-1). Additionally, in 2000 the Government launched a campaign named "Speak Good English Only" (Kheng, 2014) whose main aim was the encouragement of the usage of Standard English in every possible background in detriment of Singlish. Hence, during these last 14 years, Singlish has been disapproved and discredited in the workplace, in the administration, and especially in schools. The state firmly believes that "there are inevitable spillover effects from the private use of Singlish onto the public acquisition of good English and ultimately, the economic health" (Wee, 2010-83). For the linguist, this case constitutes a situation of language discrimination that is relevant for the notion of language rights.

However, and despite these policies, many Singaporeans refuse to give up on the use of the language as they consider it a symbol of identity and something essential to their integrity. Singlish is openly spoken in the streets of this city-state, it is progressively being incorporated to the world of television and radio, and most people these days are becoming concerned with the intrinsic value of the language opposing directly to the state as most encounter no difficulties to speak both Standard English and Singlish and to adapt their speech to the required contextual circumstances.

Singlish, when first exposed to English speakers who are not familiar with the language, is reported to sound familiar although incomprehensible most of the time. This phenomenon is due to the fact that even though the language is primarily based on English, different tongues like Malay, Chinese, or Tamil (Gil, 2003) have conditioned its development contributing with a number of characteristics. As presented in the previous lines, the English which was spoken in Singapore before 1965 – when the country became independent – was Standard British English, but in the years that followed it took on a life of its own, deviating from the standard conventions and becoming what today we know as Singlish. This deviation and characterization converted Singlish in an autonomous and different language with its own lexical, phonological, or grammatical features. In the next few lines, we compare British English and Singlish in terms of their syntactical features – and especially their sentence structure –, so as to analyze the development of the latter after the process of creolization and to identify which languages and which processes were relevant in its

evolution. In order to do so, we analyze sentence structure in two given Singlish texts so as to identify the differences between both.

Also, before commenting on the different terminological and particular features, we need to bear in mind that the English language in Singapore is a continuum composed by three different varieties which are the acrolectal, the mesolectal, and the basilectal (Platt, 1975). The focus on our paper is on the latter, since this is the one which linguists refer to as Singlish; the other two do not exhibit the particular characteristics which we discuss throughout the paper. With the purpose of briefly shedding some light onto the rest of varieties so as to differentiate them from the target of our study, we should highlight that the acrolect is the actual Standard Singaporean English which displays almost no traces of Singlish, whereas the mesolect combines features of both English and Singlish.

2 Theoretical Background: Sentence Structure in British English

In the next few lines, we present the series of considerations on the structure of sentences in Standard British English which we have considered to be the most relevant for the development of our case study. When providing the theoretical background for our case study, we considered working with a number of different grammar books so that we could have a deeper understanding of the concepts which we would be dealing with and thus, we first examined what Biber et al. had to say about these in their *Longman Grammar of Spoken and British English* (1999). We also considered Quirk et al.'s *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1975), and provided that both shared a quite similar approach since the concepts which are discussed in this section are quite basic, we finally decided to base our study on the theoretical notions covered in the latter as it is treated as the "classical" grammar book par excellence.

As explained in Quirk et al. (1975), sentences are linguistic units made up by one or more words which convey a certain idea, and these are subdivided into a number of syntactic types differentiated by their form, which include declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamative sentences. When delving into its formal structure, we consider it relevant to first identify the main syntactic elements which are present in English sentences. In relation to this issue, Quirk et al. argue that the English language

is defined by its marked SVO sentence structure, which stands for Subject-Verb-Object, and which along with the SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) configuration accounts for 75% of the world's languages (Crystal, 1997). They explain that the verb element (V) is the most "central" element and it is usually preceded by a subject (S) and possibly followed by one or two objects (O) depending on the kind of verb which has been selected. There are also two more elements – complements (C) and adverbials (A) – which are frequently placed at the end of these patterns. Afterwards, they enumerate a number of characteristics of each of these subcomponents: on the one hand, the subject is normally a noun phrase which is compulsory, it occurs before the verb, and it determines the number and, where relevant, the person and gender of the reflexive pronoun (1975-724). It is also the element which is most often present. The object, on the other hand, typically follows the subject and the verb and requires the objective form for pronouns that have distinctive case forms, when analyzing its syntactic function. These could also be subdivided into indirect and direct and, regarding its obligatoriness, Quirk et al. point out that such feature is connected to the type of verb selected in a given clause; for instance, intransitive verbs select no object. Lastly, verbs are usually placed between the subject and the object – in case there is one –, they are inflected, and they show tense, mood, aspect, and voice.

Based on these premises, these linguists dig deeper into the division which is presented in the previous paragraph. From a syntactic point of view, these are the four sentence types that they identify (1975-863):

- Declaratives: sentences in which the subject is present and generally precedes the verb.
  Pauline gave Tom a digital watch for his birthday
- Interrogatives: sentences which are formally marked in one of two ways:
  (a) *Yes-no* interrogatives: The operator is placed in front of the subject.
      Did Pauline give Tom a digital watch for his birthday?
  (b) *Wh-* interrogatives: the interrogative *wh-* element is positioned initially:
      What did Pauline give Tom for his birthday?
- Imperatives: sentences which normally have no overt grammatical subject, and whose verb has the base form.
  Give me a digital watch for my birthday.

- Exclamatives: Sentences which have an initial phrase introduced by *what* or *how*, usually with subject-verb order.

  What a fine watch he received for his birthday!

There is one last point to be taken into account before covering the next section which is connected to the relationship between syntax and semantics. In Quirk et al. (1975-726) the authors state that, when speaking about the subject, this is "typically the theme or (topic) of the clause, and it frequently refers to information that is regarded by the speaker as given". In terms of English semantics, the term "topic" expresses given or old information and it is usually placed in initial position whereas the part of the sentence which functions as "comment" provides the recipient with new information. This, according to this grammar, habitually corresponds to the syntactic "object" category. There are a number of exceptions, which include passive sentences or certain movements, where the previous rules do not apply. With regard to terminology, although the noun *topic* is presented as *theme* in this grammar, after having certified that both stand for the same concept, we decided to address such referent as *topic* as it is the term used in all papers which discuss the issue which we study in this article.

3 Description of the Target Texts

As a relatively young creole language, used in informal situations, and certainly discredited by the Government of Singapore, Singlish occurs mostly in oral contexts. However, over the last few years, there have been various attempts to elaborate a dictionary, and these days more and more Singaporeans are expressing their thoughts on paper resorting not to the acrolect but to Singlish. Exemplifying this tendency, the webpage *TalkingCock.com* was created in 2000 by a number of journalists, cartoonists, and writers – a few award-winning ones – who wanted to make fun of themselves and their society, celebrating freedom of expression and the uniqueness of Singaporeans. Within the site there is a large variety of articles, news, comics, etc. which certainly portray not only their character and sense of humor but also their usage of the language. Despite the fact that the editor in chief labels the webpage as apolitical, some have criticized its ideals and its not so politically correct contents. From our perspective, we found quite interesting that this broad group of educated people decided to give Singlish a voice and write about almost everything in a language which, as we mentioned before,

has been tagged as "broken, ungrammatical English". We believe that this could be the beginning of a new and promising stage in the history of the language since this implies that Singlish will not only be heard but also read, and this is definitely a crucial factor that will strengthen its prestige as an independent language and foster its usage.

When discussing Singlish and reviewing the large number of academic papers which have been written on its particular features we may infer that, due to the mostly oral aspect of the language, a large number of the materials which have been used are purely oral. As a result, this has obliterated its written production but this is, as a matter of fact, somewhat justifiable since these written sources are quite new, and not that many researchers have had the chance to concentrate on them – see (Deterding, 1994), (Tan, 2003) or (Sato and Kim, 2010) –. This is the reason why our focus is on written texts. It may seem slightly inadequate that the texts we selected contain a large number of dialogues in reported speech, however, it was completely impossible to find online sources written in the basilectal level which did not incorporate dialogues to a greater or lesser extent. All those texts which claimed to be written in the basilect and did not feature any of these actually presented not the particularities of the basilect but those of the acrolect and of course, it would be somewhat irrelevant to analyze a series of materials which are basically Standard English. When it comes to writing, users tend to relax the most prominent characteristics of the basilect and this could be related to the low prestige of the variety, the Government's attempts to promote Standard British English – especially in this field –, and the lack of a written tradition. We consider that this phenomenon will change within a few years since it is only a matter of time until more people decide to write actual texts and not only single sentences in the basilect. Though containing a relevant degree of reported speech, our compositions are actual literature and the analysis of literary production has not been undergone as far as we know. We are therefore determined to compare these two aspects by means of our analysis and that is why our paper accounts both for a practical and comparative study.

There is a second reason why we avoid using oral speech materials, and that concerns not only our eagerness to analyze the matter in hand from a different perspective but also the lack of awareness of the target language, so as not to incur in transcription mistakes. However, this fact does not mean that we will be missing out on essential aspects of Singlish. The situations which are featured in our texts are relaxed

and natural events and thus the usage of the language which is presented in both cases is genuine and reflects the most prominent features of such language.

With regard to the structure and the subject matter of these sources, we would like to mention that "Malaysian in Space" – available at the end of the paper, see "annexes" – is based on an event which involves the presence of a Malay, a Chinese, and an Indian man. There are actually certain words associated with some ethnical groups on the island when speaking Singlish but, as it can be observed in the analysis section, their speech shares the same syntactic patterns. On the other hand, the second fragment, "Auntie goes to the Travel Fair" – the experiences of an old lady who basically tells us about her visit to a travel fair –, is especially interesting due to its structure since it is a story which contains a number of literary devices and elements which constitute an actual piece of literature. This kind of composition, although one of a kind yet, will most likely be just one more of the thousands of literary pieces in Singlish that will be produced within the next few years as the prestige of this language is significantly increasing since it is has been backed up lately by influential personalities.

To conclude with this part, setting up an appropriate hypothesis for our research paper, we can speculate that the outcome of our investigation will match the results and the specific characteristics of Singlish defended by the linguists who study such language. This resemblance will be due to the specificity of our texts, as they are written in the basilect, which is the level of the continuum which linguists refer to as Singlish, and not the acrolect or the mesolect. We think that it is fair to venture then that no overt differences will be found after having carried out our analysis and, if only, minimal but probably linked to the fact that our materials are written, as studies on this subject had predominantly been based on oral sources and this kind of research is, as far as we know, unique in terms of its materials.

4 Methodology

With the purpose of delving into the sentence structure of British English in comparison to that of the substrates, we analyzed a series of Singlish sentences which are part of two satirical texts extracted from the popular Singaporean website

TalkingCock.com. This way, we read through the texts and thoroughly examining every sentence, we selected those whose sentence structure did not appear to adjust to British English patterns, that is to say, those which did not follow the SVO canonical order or, in some cases, certain examples which did not meet the requirements which movement entails. English-like sentences were then left apart and those utterances whose characteristics were particularly interesting for our study were singled out, becoming the sample of our study.

Once the sentences were selected, assuming the sample size to be adequate so as to make generalizations, we resorted to a group of examples in Chinese, Malay – both substrates of this creole language – and English, compared their syntactic features in terms of sentence structure, and also contrasted the connection between syntax and semantics in these examples. In all cases, we confronted our observations to the data presented in Quirk et al. (1975) and to the information provided by a series of linguists – like Zhiming and Hui Min (2005) or Sun (2010) – on the syntactic features of the languages which we do not master – like in the case of Chinese – so as to certify that our study is solidly based on scientific grounds. We also built on previous research so that we could consider closely the phenomena of topic prominence and subject drop, which are two of the most distinctive characteristics of Singlish grammar.

5 Analysis

In this discussion section we analyze the phenomenon of topic prominence and that of subject drop, which are two of the most distinctive characteristics of Singlish, and we compare these to the sentence structure features of Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Malay.

5.1. Topic Prominence

As specified in section number two, here we focus on the sentence structure of Singlish in order to compare it to that of British English and analyze whether the substrates have been decisive. Thus, we analyze all sentences which reproduce oral speech – reported direct speech – concentrating on that particular aspect and commenting on a number of them.

When digging deeper into its structure, we realize that mostly every sentence which has an adjunct of time shares a certain particularity, and that is that the adjunct has been placed at the front. This occurred with a frequency of 87.5 %.

(1) Nowadays toddy wery expensive

(2) Now business damn condemn

Adjuncts of time are certainly quite flexible in terms of sentence placement in British English, as they can be placed either in initial position, mid position, or end position. Users tend to make use of the latter so as to express a neutral connotation, whereas in the event of emphasizing a certain particularity they would resort to any of the two other alternatives.

(3) I'll do my homework tomorrow

Neutral, no particular emphasis

(4) Tomorrow I'll do my homework

The adverb is particularly relevant in this sentence. Thus, it is set in initial position.

Examples were not extracted from the target texts

While topicalization of adjuncts is not rare, it certainly does not occur with such frequency. Therefore, we may suggest that such distribution is quite unusual when compared to British English standards. As a matter of fact, these sentences which incorporate adjuncts of time and which have a remarkable different structure are not the only ones to incur in this "fronting" phenomenon. Let us present a series of examples taken from the texts:

(5) This place where one, ha? I ne'er go before

(6) One million you keep

(7) here also got plenty terrorists

If we were to adapt example (5) to Standard English, the result would be: *Where is this place? I have never been here before.* Our focus is on the first utterance; the question. *This place* is no longer an adjunct of time, as presented in the examples in the

previous section, but an attribute of a copulative sentence which has also been placed in initial position. In statements, sentence order in attribute clauses is as follows: Subject – Copulative Verb – Attributive. However, this question contains a wh- particle and from a prescriptive point of view, if the sentence was analyzed based on English syntax, a movement should have to occur as there is a component carrying a [+wh] feature. This wh- movement, compulsory in English, would move the wh-phrase to the specifier CP (complementizer phrase). "Such action is motivated by the need to get the wh- phrase near the [+wh] feature in C (complementizer), and it is restricted by locality conditions" (Fernández, 2011-3). Nevertheless, we can appreciate none of these requirements in the example. In this case, an element – the attributive in an interrogative sentence – which, when it comes to usage is definitely not topicalized, has been placed in initial position; it is thus quite a unique phenomenon.

In (6), *one million* constitutes a direct object in terms of syntactic analysis. In the precedent lines we have commented on the fact that topicalization of adjuncts is not rare, however, the same token does not apply to arguments, being this construction quite unusual as well – but not ungrammatical if, again, we were analyzing these Singlish sentences based on English syntax –.

Lastly, in (7), *here* is not an adjunct of time but an adjunct of place. However, when it comes to sentence position the same rules apply, being this example one more of a series of rather unusual patterns if compared to the standard usage of the English language. On the whole, this disposition is quite interesting and to be taken into account since the tendency clearly deviates from standard usage involving both grammatical and ungrammatical constructions.

If we had to generalize and justify this phenomenon, we could infer that topicalization and rupture of the canonical word order occur due to the need to focus on a certain element, which is placed in initial position. However, this is quite an incomplete reasoning and it appears to us that the key to unveil and justify such tendency could be probably linked to the substrates and their influence.

As a result, we analyze how Chinese organizes information and components in the sentence level. Same as English, Chinese is classified as an SVO language (Sun, 2006). However, there is a significant difference in relation to syntax and this is related to the way the components are classified in terms of the topic prominence or subject

prominence structure of the sentence. The syntax of languages like Korean or Chinese is configured so that the topic-comment structure of the sentence is marked (Li and Thompson, 1976), as being presented with such information is considered crucial. Chinese favors those utterances which commence with the topic (given or old information; generally speaking what is being discussed) followed by the comment (what is being specified). As a result, in those cases where the topic does not correspond with the subject, exceptions to the SVO order are made on a regular basis so that the subject functions as the topic in a given clause. Topicalization occurs in most cases regardless of the grammatical category of the element which is being fronted.

In English, the subject is regularly identified with the topic (Quirk et al. 1975-726), although there are exceptions – like the passive voice, or the expletives –. There are also a number of sentences in Chinese which belong to this group where the subject functions as topic.

(8) He did not go.

(9) Ta meiyou qu
He did not go

These examples do not appear on the target texts.

But it does not always occur like that; there is a second possibility. There are two other types of topic structure in Chinese, depending on whether the topic originates in the comment or not. These are exemplified here:

(10) Shuiguo, wo xihuan
Fruit   I   like
"Fruits,   I   like"

Description of the movement: Since *fruits* is moved to initial position, there is a place-holder *e* which occupies its former position.

Fruits I like *e*

(11) Shuiguo, wo xihuan li

Fruit   I   like   pear

"As for fruits, I like pear"

Examples extracted from Zhiming and Hui Min (2005-274).

Again, we analyze (10) from the English perspective. In this case, fruit, though object of the main verb, as topic of this sentence occurs in initial position. Every movement leaves a trace and in absence of that element we would consequently use a placeholder, which is exemplified as *e* and would occupy that position. In (11) however, there is no need for a placeholder as there is already an object for the verb, which is "pear". Movement occurs in (10) but not in (11). All of the sentences that are displayed in the next few lines belong to the first subgroup, which is the most common, as the second involves a different semantic relationship between the topic and the comment, like for instance, possession.

As a result, we can observe that Chinese and English operate differently. Whereas on the one hand English is a subject prominent language whose relation in terms of the topic and the comment information is slightly relevant and subject to syntax, Chinese prioritizes the topic-comment information and the communicative aspect of the language. Even though its sentence structure is also SVO, its syntactic relations serve the topic prominence structure, changing that SVO order and resorting to topicalization when necessary. This represents the operation of two different systems.

It would be interesting to analyze the process to which the sentences extracted from our target texts have been exposed in terms of such issue. Concentrating on those which incorporated an adjunct of time like (1), we can certainly state again that topicalization has occurred. This has taken place due to the need to topicalize the element which functions as topic of the given sentence – which in this case is the adjunct of time –, since Chinese requires that topics occupy the initial position, followed by the comment. This is the structure (Zhiming and Hui Min, 2005-274), and such is the movement:

TOPIC [S….e….]

Topic, *S* stands for the sentence which is the comment for such topic.

e is the placeholder for the element which acts as the topic, which has been topicalized.

(1) Nowadays toddy wery expensive

Whether a certain object should act as the topic of a given sentence or not is the speaker's decision and the focus or approach he wants to take. In a Singlish context, had *toddy* – which we can assume to mean everything – been the most relevant part of the utterance due to its special meaning for the rest of the conversation, *nowadays* would not have appeared in initial position but *toddy*, followed by the comment. However, this is not the case and a topicalization movement has occurred leaving a trace which is *e*, the place-holder. Resorting to previous lines, topicalization can occur in English and it often takes place with adjuncts of time, but not with the frequency that has been presented. We may conclude then that this tendency to front every adjunct of time which functions as topic in Singlish sentences should be related to the influence of the main substrate which is, in this case, Chinese. Extrapolating, we also observe how this does not only apply to adjuncts of time but to any element, regardless of its morphological form, which functions as topic in the sentence.

With regard to the second set of examples, number (6) represents how the substrate has also been decisive in its structure as topicalization in English is not frequent when it comes to arguments and, as we can observe in such case, *one million* which functions as the topic and direct object in the sentence, has been placed in initial position. Movement has occurred and the focused element – the topic – has been placed in initial position. In the previous lines, when commenting on the earlier set of examples, we highlighted how infrequent was to find such a number of sentences with an unmarked form – even if the phenomenon does occur in English with regularity, but not to such extent –. We observe that grammatically correct sentences but quite infrequent or even rare when it comes to usage are produced on a regular basis. To conclude, example (5) shows that that topicalization and the fact that the English lexicon adapts to that Chinese structure result in ungrammatical utterances which would not be correct from a prescriptive point of view if we were dealing with British English grammar, though they are perfectly correct in Singlish.

Thus, we have seen how the interaction between these two languages has been relevant in the development of Singlish as the topic prominence feature of Chinese syntax has been incorporated to Singlish, and this is quite different from the characteristic standards of the syntax of British English. Because of the need to place the topic in initial position, Singlish resorts to movement in the cases where the subject does not function as the topic of the given utterance. That is the reason why any English speaker, unfamiliarized both with this language and Chinese syntax, would find the distribution of words at sentence level quite unusual if compared to the superstrate. As a consequence, we can certainly agree with the series of researchers, like in the case of Leimbgruber (2008), who have acclaimed and proved such relation showing that a substratum transfer has occurred due to the coexistence of these tongues.

Although some linguists such as Bao (2005) or Deterding et al (2003) claim that Chinese is the main substratum for Singlish, at least in this particular aspect, some others – like the very David Deterding himself (2007), the leading figure in the study of Singlish – have pointed out in later studies that the syntax of Malay may have also played a relevant role in the process of creolization when configuring Singlish like a topic prominent language rather than subject prominent. In order to prove so, he provides an example of the function of Malay which depicts that particularity (2007-60):

(12) Ingat-ingat, waktu masih kecil, sering pergi memancing.
Remember when still small often go fishing
I remember, when I was still small, I often went fishing.

5.2. Subject-Drop

Apart from the issue of topic prominence discussed in the previous lines, there is a second particularity that we have encountered when analyzing the sentence structure of Singlish which might well be related to it. A large number of sentences – thirteen, to be precise – present no particle which functions, from a syntactic point of view, as subject for a given clause. This is somewhat surprising due to the fact that Singlish absorbed most of its dynamics from the superstrate, and clearly English has a marked SVO structure where the subject category is a relevant part of its syntax and it cannot be dropped. While other languages also display the SVO patterning, some like in the case

of Spanish may present null subject syntax in certain occasions only because there is a particular mechanism, which is the combination of subject-verb agreement and derivational morphology in this instance, which allows for this peculiarity. Therefore, we wonder whether this phenomenon is related to the topic prominence issue, since the syntactic category of the subject and the relation between topic and comment are strictly connected, or perhaps it may be connected to certain syntactic mechanisms which were inherent to this language. A third option is that this particularity could have been transferred from any of the substrates. With the purpose of finding the answer to our hypotheses, we analyze these sentences below:

> (13) He say, now got recession, some more some travel agents all kam tiam, so must get rid of tickets.

> (14) Because, hor, the whole bloody tour also got no turkey to eat. How can like that?

> (15) "Auntie! I got the perfect tour for you! Very cheap!"

> (16) I look like a spas, meh? Try to sell me tour for spas people!" Nowadays, people got no respect.

Sentence number (13) presents two examples of the issue we were covering; the lack of an overt subject. If we were to adapt this sentence to Standard English, the result would be *He says: now there is this recession and some more travel agents have shut down, so I must get rid of tickets.* The first grammatical mistake that we detect is the lack of an overt subject in *now got recession* when examining the sentence from a Standard English prescriptive approach – we have to bear in mind once again that Singlish has its own syntactic rules and this sentence would not be ungrammatical if based on its rules –. In our translation, we have resorted to an expletive – *there is* – though we could have also chosen the plural, first person personal pronoun *we,* in order to express that the situation attained everyone. However, that is a different matter, a matter of translation methodology. Our focus on this paper is on syntax and it is crucial to highlight that in a situation where English requires an obligatory subject regardless of its form, Singlish simply does not. We can spot a second peculiarity in *so must get rid of tickets* as this second clause also requires an overt subject – *I –,* which is null. Apparently, this phenomenon affects both lexical and phrasal verbs as well as simple

and coordinated sentences. By analyzing (14), we can assume that it applies to interrogative sentences too, since in English this sentence would require the presence of an overt subject, which in this case could be *anyone or you*, and which in the example happens to be null. Likewise, there is another *"got"* construction which behaves in such a way. Example (15) shows that not only the subject is null but also the verb; only an adjective phrase is needed in this case to provide a certain connotation which modifies the given information in the previous clause. In example (16), ''Auntie'' is scolding a group of travel agents when trying to sell her a spa tour which she did not want. When complaining and confronting them for what they had done, and pronouncing *try to sell me tour for spas people,* she just utters the verb in initial position followed by the indirect object and the direct object. In this case, there is also no particle which functions as subject for the sentence.

Expanding on the idea that the category of the subject in syntactic analysis and the topic prominence issue could be related, we decide to approach this phenomenon from a semantic point of view so as to be able to establish a possible correlation. We wonder how effective communication can be possible amongst speakers when dropping the subject for a given clause. In order to find out, we compare three possible communicative situations in Standard English, Singlish – as these two are the core of our study –, and Spanish due to its rich inflectional verb morphology:

(17) Liked Portree very much, had some fantastic lobster there.

(18) Los lunes voy a clase así que los domingos procuro no salir.

On Monday (I) usually go to class so on Sunday (I) try not to go out.

(19) But I like not sure like that.

But I was like, I am not sure I like that.

Examples 17 and 18 have not been extracted from our texts.

Analyzing number (17) from a prescriptive point of view, any linguist would tag such sentence as ungrammatical. Also, any given speaker of the language would not be able to completely account for its actual meaning since there is no possible way to determine who is being talked about. English has a poor inflected verbal morphology and when resorting to non-copula verbs, the subject is compulsory since it is the marker

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of number and person. If only we would be commenting on something performed by a third person singular speaker, then we would be able to identify the speaker as such because of the residual inflectional –*s* which has survived throughout the years and which was a particular feature of Old English (Pinker, 1991). However, this is not the case for the rest of the verbal forms as they display no markers whatsoever. Hence, this is the reason beneath the obligatoriness of the subject in the syntax of Standard English, it accounts for a semantic purpose, and therefore it cannot be dropped. Spanish, on the other hand, although a SVO language as well, presents usual null subject morphology due to its rich inflectional verb morphology. Contrary to English, any given Spanish verb form displays markers for number and person as exemplified in (20).

(20)	Yo cant*é*	I sang
	Tú cant*aste*	You sang
	Él cant*ó*	He sang
	Nosotros cant*amos*	We sang
	Vosotros cant*ásteis*	You sang
	Ellos cant*aron*	They sang

As communication is perfectly effective in (19), speakers, probably because of the economy principle of the language (Chomsky, 1981) drop the subject– this idea is taken from (Sato and Chonghyuck, 2012); we specifically expand on this issue within a few paragraphs –. Also, analyzing syntactically the first sentence in (19), we can observe that a *pro* consequently substitutes that category, which can be identified as null.

> (19) But I like not sure [pro] like that
>
> > Since the topic *I* has been identified by the recipient, there is no need for a second subject due to the chain of meaning created by predication.

Singlish, however, does not present such rich inflectional verb morphology. In fact, based on the analysis of these examples, we can state that verbs seem to function just the way they do in English. We may wonder then which is the mechanism that allows subject drop in Singlish despite the fact that its verb morphology is English-like.

We propose that this phenomenon should be connected with the topic prominence issue discussed in section 5.1. Returning to effective communication methods, if only Singlish users are able to identify what is being talked about, that is because of its sentence structure, which highlights the topic of the conversation or, in other words, the focus of the communicative process and the entity which is center to the whole interaction between the speakers. Once it is fixed and identified by a given recipient, there is no need for an overt subject and speakers can make use of a null category instead as the topic is connected to a given piece of information through the semantic mechanism of predication (Sato and Kim, 2010). It is this predication what allows speakers to identify the relation between those two concepts jumping over a "syntactic gap" where we would find a *pro* category if we were to analyze any of these sentences syntactically, and which would be derived from such subject drop. According to these linguists, it also satisfies all the structural and selectional requirements of its syntax. This way, we can observe by means of the context how the topic is established and how a number of components within a sentence and a number of sentences are connected to it. The meaning of these utterances is perfectly understandable due to the relation of predication between topic and comment, even if there is no subject category as such.

(21) [TOP α [TP … β …]], where α is a major category and β, possibly empty, is related to α.

Sentence pattern proposition by Xu and Landgedoen, (1985-20).

Our analysis seems to match the outcome resulted from the investigation of these linguists, who are two of the leading figures in the grammatical aspects of Singlish. It is also backed up by the fact that Chinese, as explained by Huang (1984) is a radical pro drop language as we can see in this example. In our paper, we only cover the subject drop phenomenon, but nowadays linguists studying Singlish claim that such language is a radical pro drop language, which means that not only the subject but also any pronominal argument – subjects, objects, or possessors, for instance – can be "liberally dropped" (Sato and Kim, 2010-4).

(22) Ta kanjian Ø le.

   He saw [PRO]

In this example taken from Huang (1984), which is included in Sato and Kim (2010-4), we can observe how objects can also be dropped – and not only subjects-. This phenomenon is defined as radical pro generalization.

It is interesting to analyze how both linguists concentrate on this issue and expand on the matter in hand by postulating a theory which accounts not only for Singlish but also for the rest of the topic prominent languages, which are mainly located on the Asian continent (Japanese, Korean or Thai are some examples)(Gelderen, 2011-3). They demonstrate how subject-verb agreement is sporadic rather than optional by displaying a number of examples like (23).

(23) A: John wants to go zoo or not?

   B: Don't want lah.

Previously, we stated that subject verb agreement in Singlish was English-like. If only we could not perceive the detail pointed out by these linguists, it was due to the fact that Singlish, as a creole, balances quite frequently amongst the different varieties of the continuum, and a number of these sentences could be perfectly acceptable in the acrolectal level. Actually, code switching is quite usual in Singapore and difficult to detect (Thang Vu et al., 2013). In connection to this issue, Sato and Chonghyuck point out that despite the irregularity of subject-verb agreement, there is one fact which is certain and that implies that once subject verb agreement is manifested, radical pro drop becomes unavailable, as in (23) where this agreement-marker blocks the subject omission. This explains why sentences which display this kind of agreement always present overt subjects – this was obviously checked by focusing on those sentences which had the inflectional third person singular (–s) as there is no other marker for the rest of grammatical persons –. By exemplifying this tendency, they prove that syntactic agreement and topic prominence are mutually exclusive, generalizing thus the tendency and shedding a whole new light onto the issue, applying this theory not only to Singlish but to any topic prominent languages. Also, our ideas are backed up by Chomsky's

quote (1981-65) concerning the economy principle in conversational discourse that "all else being equal, a *pro* must be chosen over an overt pronoun".

As a result of our investigation and the information provided by Sato and Chonghyuck (2010), we have been able to determine that the Chinese language was again a key factor in the configuration of Singlish with regard to the subject-drop phenomenon and that this issue was connected to the idea of topic prominence, also motivated by such substratum. In these lines, we have proved how the idea of semantics played a crucial role as predication establishes the required links for effective communication, regardless of the fact that there is usually a null category in Singlish sentences which usually accounts for an overt subject in British English. As explained on the previous lines, this shows why a language, which does not have any other mechanisms such as the rich verb morphology present in Spanish, displays null verb morphology. Singlish, thus, uses those connections and predication so that recipients are able to identify a certain element as the focus or center of the communicative process, and as a result a semantic chain is constructed afterwards without the need of actual syntactic subjects as comments are linked to that topic by means of those mechanisms. This represents how subject drop, like in the case of the topic prominence issue, shows that Singlish deviates from the dynamics of Standard English and resorts to the syntax of Chinese to set the bases for a new and autonomous language which combines features of both tongues.

6 Conclusions

By means of our analysis, we have demonstrated how determining the substrates – especially in the case of Chinese – have been to the making of a relatively new English based creole language. Singlish is characterized by its remarkable topic prominent structure, which deviates from the subject prominent syntax of Standard English, implying that the element identified as the topic regardless of its syntactic function will be placed in initial position, followed by the comment, and movement will occur in the necessary cases so as to adjust to that particularity. Derived from its structure, Singlish displays null subject morphology since predication allows for the necessary correlations which make communication effective without the need of an overt subject.

All these characteristics show the noticeable plasticity of the English language when combining with the native languages of a given ecology resulting in new, autonomous languages all over the world. This was especially important during the British Colonial period – especially in the 18th century – which witnessed the importation of English to the new territories. Such coexistence eventually gave birth to languages such as the Australian Creole or Taglish– spoken in the Philippines – just to name a few of the dozens.

To conclude, and with regard to the typology of our texts, by first analyzing these fragments and then postulating likely theories for the phenomena, we have been able to certify that the features of the basilect present in our texts coincide with those identified by linguists in their studies based in oral materials. We believe then that our hypothesis has proved to be correct. As a result, we have confirmed the fact that the topic prominence of Singlish structures is a contrasted particularity, and we have learnt that subject drop is the direct byproduct of the characteristic sentence structure that we identified in the previous lines. This study could be especially relevant in terms of the type of materials which have been analyzed, as deciding to concentrate on written sources which constitute a form of expression (and due to its structure are consequently pieces of literature) provides the scientific evidence which certifies that the particularities of Singlish also occur in a few – but growing – number of written texts and materials.

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Annexes

1) Malaysian in Space

Dr. Mahatir was about to send the first Malaysian rocket into space. 3 potential astronauts were called for an interview – one Indian, one Malay, and one Chinese.

Dr. M interviews the Indian first: "So, Muthu, this is a dangerous mission, how much do you think you should be paid for it?"

Muthu thinks to himself and says, "1 million ringgit."

"Why so much?" asks Dr. M.

" Nowadays, toddy wery expensive, Datuk…" replies Muthu.

"I see," said Dr. M. "Thank you… please ask the Malay guy to come here."

So the Malay walks up, and is asked the same question.

"Uh… 2 million boleh lah," replies the Malay applicant.

"2 million? That's a lot of money! Even the aneh before you only asked for one million!"

"You see, Datuk," explained Mat. "I have 4 wives and 15 children… so, 20 of us in the family, we need a lot of money to support ourselves…"

"I see," said Dr. M. "Okay, can you ask the Chinese guy to come up here now?"

The Chinese guy comes in and Dr. M. asks, "Ah, Chong, this is a dangerous mission… how much do you think you should be paid"

Ah Chong thinks for a while, and suddenly says, "3 million."

Mahathir is shocked. "WHAT?!?! 3 million? Why so much?!"

Ah Chong beckons Dr. M to come closer, and whispers, "One million you keep, one million I keep, and then one more million to send the aneh into space"

2) Auntie Goes to the Travel Fair

Yesterday my travel agent at Ken Brothers Reliant Air Travel call me and tell me I should go to the NATAS Travel Fair, because got a lot of good deals.

He say, now got recession, some more travel agents all kam tiam, so must get rid of tickets.

I tell him, wah lau, don'ch talk cock, lah. NATAS spell backwards is SATAN, mah! How to believe?

At the last fair, I bought a package tour to Turkey and kena con! Because, hor, the whole bloody tour also got no turkey to eat! How can like that? At least the Iceland tour got plenty ice.

But he say, tolong-tolong, now business damn condemn, come and support a bit a bit.

So I see him small, go to the Travel Fair and looksee-looksee.

But everywhere like damn sian, like that.

Got one company try to sell me a spa package.

So I scold the, "Si gi nah! I look like a spas, meh? Try to sell me tour for spas people!" Nowadays, people got not respect.

And then got another agent try to sell me a Nepal tour.

Piang eh! I look like some cheekopek, meh?

But I told them to go and find my neighbor Mr. Lim Peh instead.

When he go on tour, hor, he only look for nepals, one.

The most wurf deals are to America, but then there now got a lot of terrorists. Not good. Anyway, here also got plenty terrorists, so why waste money to go there and see?

I look, look, look, but like nothing very the interesting like that.

Then I went to my travel agent's booth. When he saw me that time, he say, "Auntie! I got the perfect tour for you! Very cheap!"

Then he show me a package for Afghanistan: 7D5N, Kandahar, Kabul, and Konduz.

I say, "This place where one, ha? I ne'er go before."

He say, "There very esciting one. Every night got fireworks."

But I like not sure like that.

"Eh, Auntie," he say. "Some more, there the man all very macho one, leh. You sure like! All, hwah, hairy-hairy one."

I scold him. "Si gin nah! Why I want man to be like kiwifruit like that?"

Then he say, "Aiyah, neh'mine, lah. Go, lah! This time special for you. If you go, I give you free Ken Bros. Reliant Air Travel bag, with free airplane socks some more!"

Hwah! Like that is on, lah!