

# A syntactic universal in a contact language: The story of Singlish *already*

Michael Yoshitaka ERLEWINE (mitcho)

National University of Singapore, mitcho@nus.edu.sg

Linguistic Society of America, January 2018

Today

I investigate the syntax/semantics of **Singlish sentence-final *already***.

- (1) Mary live in New Orleans **already**. (Bao, 2005:240)  
'Mary lives in New Orleans (now) but didn't before.'

Bao (2005) proposes that *already* is a relexification that combines the functions of Chinese perfective *-le* and sentence-final particle (SFP) *le*.

- 1 Singlish *already* can given a unified semantics equivalent to that of Chinese SFP *le/liao/laa*. Chinese SFP *le/liao/laa* can be the sole substrate source for *already*.
- 2 **The syntax of Singlish *already* (subtly) differs from the behavior of cognate SFP *le/liao/laa* in substrate Chinese languages.**
  - Lessons for the *Final-over-Final Constraint* (FOFC), a proposed universal on structure-building and linearization: FOFC is enforced *within Spell-out domains* (Erlewine, 2017), which may vary with the presence or absence of verbal inflection.

**Singlish** (Colloquial Singapore English; CSE) refers to the basilectal variety spoken in Singapore, resulting from contact between English, Chinese languages, Malay, a.o. See e.g. Platt and Weber (1980); Lim (2004).

Singlish has been hypothesized to be a *creoloid* with a dominantly Chinese substrate syntax (Platt, 1975), but this characterization remains controversial.

Data here comes from native speaker elicitations, in part previously reported in Phoebe Cheong's honors thesis (Cheong, 2016).

Roadmap

§1 Semantics

§2 Syntax

§3 Comparison

§4 FOFC

# 1 The semantics of Singlish *already*

Bao (2005) observes that the semantics of *already* differs descriptively based on the aspectual class of the predicate: (I do not discuss Bao's "inceptive" uses here.)

- (2) **Event 'wash my hand' ⇒ completive *already*:**

I wash my hand **already**.

'I washed / have washed my hand.'

- (3) **State 'white' ⇒ inchoative *already*:**

The wall white **already**.

'The wall turned / has turned white.'

Bao (2005) observes that these functions overlap with Mandarin Chinese verbal *-le* (completive) and sentence-final particle (SFP) *le* (inchoative).

He proposes that Singlish *already* is the **relexification** (Lefebvre, 1998) of both (Mandarin) Chinese verbal *-le* and SFP *le*, using the English surface form *already* and with a uniform sentence-final position.

Mandarin SFP *le* can also ensure completion given a telic event predicate, for example with compound verbs which encode an end state:

- (4) Women dao-da shan-ding **le**.

we go.to-reach mountain-top LE

'We have reached the top of the mountain.' (Soh and Gao, 2006)

We can therefore give Singlish *already* a uniform semantics based on the semantics for Mandarin SFP *le* from Soh and Gao (2006, 2008); Soh (2009):

- (5) *already/le(p)*

a. asserts: *p* is true at the reference time *R*

b. presupposes: *p* is false before the reference time *R*

The interaction of aspect with *already* can be demonstrated with aspectually underspecified predicates:

- (6) It rain **already**. (ambiguous)

- a.  $p =$  it is raining (state)
  - i. *already(p)* asserts: ‘It is raining’ is true now
  - ii. *already(p)* presupposes: ‘It is raining’ was false before  
 $\Rightarrow$  ‘It has started to rain.’ (inchoative)
- b.  $p =$  PERF(rain) = it has rained (event)
  - i. *already(p)* asserts: ‘It has rained’ is true now
  - ii. *already(p)* presupposes: ‘It has rained’ was false before  
 $\Rightarrow$  ‘It rained / has rained.’ (completive)

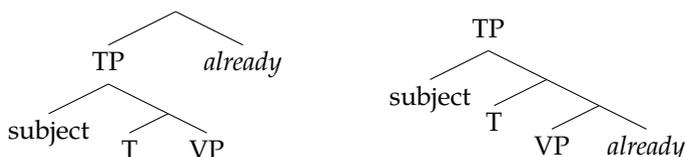
► Given the unified semantics for *already* based on that of SFP *le* in (5), we can simplify Bao’s proposal by identifying **Chinese SFP *le* as the single substrate source** for the semantics of Singlish *already*.

<u>(Mandarin) Chinese:</u>	$\rightarrow$	<u>Singlish:</u>	$\leftarrow$	<u>English:</u>																		
<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SYN</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SFP</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SEM</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">(5)</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">PHON</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><i>le/liao/laa</i></td></tr> </table>	SYN	SFP	SEM	(5)	PHON	<i>le/liao/laa</i>		<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SYN</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SFP</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SEM</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">(5)</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">PHON</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><i>already</i></td></tr> </table>	SYN	SFP	SEM	(5)	PHON	<i>already</i>		<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SYN</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">adverb</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SEM</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">...</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">PHON</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><i>already</i></td></tr> </table>	SYN	adverb	SEM	...	PHON	<i>already</i>
SYN	SFP																					
SEM	(5)																					
PHON	<i>le/liao/laa</i>																					
SYN	SFP																					
SEM	(5)																					
PHON	<i>already</i>																					
SYN	adverb																					
SEM	...																					
PHON	<i>already</i>																					

The Chinese substrate influences of Singlish are a range of Southern Chinese languages, *not* Mandarin Chinese (see e.g. Wong, 2014). But relevant Southern Chinese languages have cognates of Mandarin SFP *le* with equivalent semantics: *liao* in Southern Min and *laa* in Cantonese.

## 2 The syntax of Singlish *already*

Singlish *already* is a *sentence-final particle* (SFP) like its substrate cognates *le/liao/laa*. A SFP is a **right-adjoining adjunct** or **head-final head** on the clausal spine. **But where exactly is *already*?** The linear position of *already* does not tell us about its syntactic position. For example, *already* could be adjoined to the entire clause (TP) or to the VP:



► Cheong (2016): *already* unambiguously scopes over the entire clause.

Consider the scope of *already* with respect to negation:

- (7) I **don't** wash hand **already**. *already > not*
- a. asserts: I do not wash my hands now.
  - b. presupposes: I used to wash my hands before.  
= 'I do not wash my hands' was false before.

*not > already* would raise the presupposition that 'I wash my hands' was false before, as presuppositions project through negation. This meaning is possible with a biclausal negation:

- (8) Is **not** [that I wash hand **already**]. *not > already*
- a. asserts: It's false that I have washed my hands.
  - b. presupposes: I did not wash my hands before.

Consider the scope of *already* with respect to subject quantifiers:

- (9) **No one** go school **already**. *already > no one*
- a. asserts: No one goes to school (now).
  - b. presupposes: Someone used to go to school before.  
= 'No one goes to school' was false before.

If *no one > already*, we would have a presupposition trigger (*already*) within the scope of a quantifier.

We know that presuppositions under negative quantifiers "project" over the entire domain of quantification (Heim, 1983; Chemla, 2009):

- (10) No student knows that he's lucky. (Chemla, 2009)  
Presupposition: Every student is lucky.

Similarly, if *no one > already* in (9), we would predict it to presuppose that *everyone* went to school before, which is not a possible reading of (9).

**Summary:** Singlish *already* always adjoins to the entire clause (TP), not to a lower position on the clausal spine.

( It's not simply the case that Singlish disallows modifiers to the right, lower )  
in the clause (Cheong, 2016).

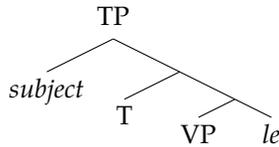
### 3 The syntax of Chinese *le/liao/laa*

Recall the relexification theory of *already*, modified from Bao (2005):

Chinese:		→	Singlish:		←	English:																		
<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SYN</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SFP</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SEM</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">(5)</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">PHON</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><i>le/liao/laa</i></td></tr> </table>	SYN	SFP	SEM	(5)	PHON	<i>le/liao/laa</i>		→	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SYN</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SFP at TP</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SEM</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">(5)</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">PHON</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><i>already</i></td></tr> </table>	SYN	SFP at TP	SEM	(5)	PHON	<i>already</i>		←	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SYN</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">adverb</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">SEM</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">...</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 10px;">PHON</td><td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><i>already</i></td></tr> </table>	SYN	adverb	SEM	...	PHON	<i>already</i>
SYN	SFP																							
SEM	(5)																							
PHON	<i>le/liao/laa</i>																							
SYN	SFP at TP																							
SEM	(5)																							
PHON	<i>already</i>																							
SYN	adverb																							
SEM	...																							
PHON	<i>already</i>																							

Lefebvre’s (1998) relexification theory, adopted in Bao’s discussion of *already*, predicts that the syntactic specification of Singlish *already*, like its semantics, came from the specification of its substrate cognates *le/liao/laa*. **But Chinese SFP *le/liao/laa* are not adjoined to TP!**

**Erlewine (2017):** Mandarin SFP *le* is uniformly clause-medial, in a position between TP and VP.



Evidence again comes from semantic scope. For example, *le* scopes above the low negator *bù* but below *búshì* (Soh and Gao, 2006):

- (11) a. Wǒ **bù** xiǎng jiā **le**.  
 I NEG miss home LE  
asserts: ‘I do not miss home now.’  
presupposes: ‘I did miss home before.’ LE > NEG
- b. Wǒ **búshì** xiǎng jiā **le**.  
 I NEG miss home LE  
asserts: ‘I do not miss home now.’  
presupposes: ‘I did not miss home before.’ NEG > LE

See Erlewine (2017) for additional evidence from the scope of modals, subjects, and disjunction.

But recall that Mandarin Chinese was probably not a dominant substrate influence in the development of Singlish.

**Len & Erlewine (in prep):** SFP *liao/laa* take scope clause-medially in Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese (Southern Min) and Cantonese spoken in Singapore, just as Mandarin SFP *le* does.

For example, Len & Erlewine (in prep) show scope interactions with negation that parallel the behavior of Mandarin *le* (11):

(12) *Liao* in Hokkien (Southern Min) with two negators:

- a. Gua **bo** suka i **liao**.  
 I NEG like him LIAO  
asserts: 'I do not like him now.'  
presupposes: 'I liked him before.' LIAO > NEG
- b. Gua **msi** guanliong i **liao**.  
 I NEG forgive him LIAO  
asserts: 'I have not forgiven him.'  
presupposes: 'I did not forgive him before.' NEG > LIAO

<u>Chinese:</u>	→	<u>Singlish:</u>	←	<u>English:</u>																		
<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">SYN</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;"><b>SFP at vP</b></td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">SEM</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">(5)</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">PHON</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;"><i>le/liao/laa</i></td></tr> </table>	SYN	<b>SFP at vP</b>	SEM	(5)	PHON	<i>le/liao/laa</i>		<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">SYN</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;"><b>SFP at TP</b></td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">SEM</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">(5)</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">PHON</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;"><i>already</i></td></tr> </table>	SYN	<b>SFP at TP</b>	SEM	(5)	PHON	<i>already</i>		<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">SYN</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">adverb</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">SEM</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">...</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">PHON</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;"><i>already</i></td></tr> </table>	SYN	adverb	SEM	...	PHON	<i>already</i>
SYN	<b>SFP at vP</b>																					
SEM	(5)																					
PHON	<i>le/liao/laa</i>																					
SYN	<b>SFP at TP</b>																					
SEM	(5)																					
PHON	<i>already</i>																					
SYN	adverb																					
SEM	...																					
PHON	<i>already</i>																					

**How did this happen?**

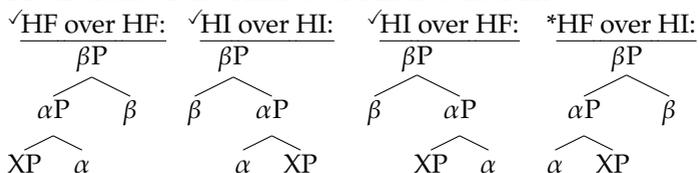
## 4 The syntax of Chinese *le/laa/liao*

Chinese SFPs have been important in the discussion of the *Final-over-Final Constraint* (FOFC; Holmberg 2000; Biberauer, Holmberg, and Roberts 2008, 2014; Biberauer, Newton, and Sheehan 2009; a.o.), a proposed universal on structure-building and linearization.

(13) **The Final-over-Final Constraint (FOFC) (Holmberg, 2000, p. 124):**

If a phrase  $\alpha$  is head-initial, then the phrase  $\beta$  immediately dominating  $\alpha$  is head-initial. If  $\alpha$  is head-final,  $\beta$  can be head-final or head-initial.

(14) **Predictions of the Final-over-Final Constraint:**



For example, this gap is observed across possible orders of verb, object, and auxiliary across modern and historical Germanic languages (Biberauer, Holmberg, and Roberts, 2008, 2014).

At the same time, we know FOFC does not hold over entire utterances:

(15) **Head-final VP over head-initial DP in German (BHR 2008):**

Johann hat [<sub>VP</sub> [<sub>DP</sub> den Mann] gesehen].  
 John has the man seen  
 ‘John has seen the man.’

A common intuition for accounting for such data is that *FOFC holds only over certain domains*.

Biberauer, Newton, and Sheehan (2009); Biberauer and Sheehan (2012); Biberauer, Holmberg, and Roberts (2014) propose that FOFC holds over the entire clausal extended projection.

- **But clause-medial Chinese SFPs like *lelliao/laa* seem to countelexemplify this.**

**Erlewine (2017):** FOFC is enforced over Spell-out domains. Morphological dependencies can suspend Spell-out, causing FOFC to be enforced over lower (*v*P) and higher (CP) phasal material together.<sup>1</sup> Chinese languages have no inflectional dependencies between the higher and lower phase.

<sup>1</sup>Richards (2016) also discusses FOFC as being enforced within but not across Spell-out domains or phases. See also Den Dikken (2007) and Gallego (2007, 2010) for the idea that phase boundaries can be extended or merged.

**Prediction:** (Apparent) FOFC violations might be more likely in isolating/analytic languages and less likely in agglutinating/synthetic languages.

- Philip (2013, p. 206) cites Matthew Dryer (p.c.) in stating that “for many of the VO languages exhibiting final uninflected tense or aspect particles, there is simply no verbal inflection in the language at all.”
- The FOFC-violating V-O-Aux order is attested by an ability modal in Middle Chinese and in a number of Southeast Asian languages (Simpson, 2001), with are indeed very analytic.

---

Following work on Chinese SFPs, I consider the hypothesis that *already* is a head-final head in the clausal spine—a potential FOFC violation. Ask me about the alternative in the question period.

(16) Wait lah, John say [ $\emptyset$  speak(s) Hokkien]. (Sato, 2014)

Many previous works note the optionality of Singlish past tense *-ed* and third singular *-s* (Ho and Platt, 1993; Gupta, 1994; Lai et al., 2013, a.o.), but what’s relevant here is that **Singlish has (the option of) verbal inflection from T**.

- ▶ The inflectional link between T and V blocks the availability of FOFC-violating head-final heads (SFPs) in the middle of the clause.

Therefore Singlish *already* unambiguously appears at the clause periphery, not clause-medially.

## 5 Conclusion

- ① Singlish *already* can be given a unified semantics equivalent to that of Chinese SFP *le/liao/laa*. Chinese SFP *le/liao/laa* can be the sole substrate source for *already*.
- ② The syntax of Singlish *already* differs from the behavior of cognate SFP *le/liao/laa* in substrate Chinese languages:
  - Singlish *already* scopes over the entire clause (Cheong, 2016)
  - Chinese *le/liao/laa* are clause-medial (Erlewine, 2017, Len & Erlewine, in prep)

- ③ Singlish *already* derives from relexification of Chinese *le/liao/laa* (following Bao, 2005), but was **reanalyzed under pressure from a syntactic universal, the Final-over-Final Constraint (FOFC)**, and the presence of verbal inflection in Singlish, unlike in Chinese languages.
- ▶ This difference between Singlish *already* and its cognate Chinese *le/liao/laa* offers new support for FOFC enforcement over Spell-out domains.

## References

- Bao, Zhiming. 2005. The aspectual system of Singapore English and the systemic substratist explanation. *Journal of Linguistics* 41:237–267.
- Biberauer, Theresa, Anders Holmberg, and Ian Roberts. 2008. Structure and linearization in disharmonic word orders. In *Proceedings of WCCFL 26*, 96–104.
- Biberauer, Theresa, Anders Holmberg, and Ian Roberts. 2014. A syntactic universal and its consequences. *Linguistic Inquiry* 45:169–225.
- Biberauer, Theresa, Glenda Newton, and Michelle Sheehan. 2009. Limiting synchronic and diachronic variation and change: The Final-over-Final Constraint. *Language and Linguistics* 10:701–743.
- Biberauer, Theresa, and Michelle Sheehan. 2012. Disharmony, antisymmetry, and the Final-over-Final Constraint. In *Ways of structure building*, ed. Myriam Uribe-Etxebarria and Vidal Valmala, 206–244. Oxford University Press.
- Chemla, Emmanuel. 2009. Presuppositions of quantified sentences: experimental data. *Natural Language Semantics* 17:299–340.
- Cheong, Phoebe Si En. 2016. Sentence-final *already* and *only* in Singapore English. BA Honors thesis, National University of Singapore.
- Den Dikken, Marcel. 2007. Phase extension: Contours of a theory of the role of head movement in phrasal extraction. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33:1–41.
- Erlewine, Michael Yoshitaka. 2017. Low sentence-final particles in Mandarin Chinese and the Final-over-Final Constraint. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 26:37–75.
- Gallego, Ángel. 2007. Phase theory and parametric variation. Doctoral Dissertation, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.
- Gallego, Ángel. 2010. *Phase theory*. John Benjamins.
- Gupta, Anthea Fraser. 1994. *The step-tongue: Children's English in Singapore*. Multilingual Matters.
- Heim, Irene. 1983. On the projection problem for presuppositions. In *Pro-*

- ceedings of WCCFL 2*, ed. Michael Barlow, Daniel P. Flickenger, and Nancy Wiegand, 114–125.
- Ho, Mian-Lian, and John T. Platt. 1993. *Dynamics of a contact continuum: Singapore English*. Oxford.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2000. Deriving OV order in Finnish. In *The derivation of VO and OV*, ed. Peter Svenonius, number 31 in *Linguistic Aktuell*, 123–152. John Benjamins.
- Lai, Eric Yong Ming, Liling Tan, Vincent Wong, Lenny Teng Tao Loke, and Francis Bond. 2013. The OPT-ional phenomenon in Singapore English: A corpus-based approach using time annotated corpora. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 95:431–441.
- Lefebvre, Claire. 1998. *Creole genesis and the acquisition of grammar: The case of Haitian creole*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lim, Lisa, ed. 2004. *Singapore English: A grammatical description*. John Benjamins.
- Philip, Joy. 2013. (Dis)harmony, the Head-Proximate filter, and linkers. *Journal of Linguistics* 49:165–213.
- Platt, John, and Heidi Weber. 1980. *English in singapore and malaysia: status, features, functions*. Oxford University Press.
- Platt, John T. 1975. The Singapore English speech continuum and its basilect ‘Singlish’ as a ‘creoloid’. *Anthropological Linguistics* 17:363–374.
- Richards, Norvin. 2016. *Contiguity theory*. MIT Press.
- Sato, Yosuke. 2014. Argument ellipsis in Colloquial Singapore English and the Anti-Agreement Hypothesis. *Journal of Linguistics* .
- Simpson, Andrew. 2001. Focus, presupposition and light predicate raising in Southeast Asian languages and Chinese. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 10:89–128.
- Soh, Hooi Ling. 2009. Speaker presupposition and Mandarin Chinese sentence-final *-le*: a unified analysis of the “change of state” and the “contrary to expectation” reading. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 27:623–657.
- Soh, Hooi Ling, and Meijia Gao. 2006. Perfective aspect and transition in Mandarin Chinese: an analysis of double *-le* sentences. In *Proceedings of the 2004 Texas Linguistics Society conference*, 107–122.
- Soh, Hooi Ling, and Meijia Gao. 2008. Mandarin sentential *-le*, perfect and english *already*. In *Event structures in linguistic form and interpretation*, ed. Johannes Dölling, Tatjana Heyde-Zybatow, and Martin Schäfer, 447–473. Walter de Gruyter.
- Wong, Jock O. 2014. *The culture of Singapore English*. Cambridge University Press.