The limits of relexification: The story of Singlish already

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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.
Singlish (Colloquial Singapore English; CSE) refers to the basilectal variety spoken in Singapore, resulting from contact between English, Chinese languages, and 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, et seq), but this characterization remains controversial.

Data here comes from native speaker elicitations, in part previously reported in Phoebe Cheong’s honors thesis (Cheong, 2016).
§1  The semantics of Singlish *already*
§2  The syntax of Singlish *already*
§3  The limits of relexification
§1 The semantics of Singlish \textit{already}

§2 The syntax of Singlish \textit{already}

§3 The limits of relexification
Bao (2005) observes that the semantics of *already* differs descriptively based on the aspectual class of the predicate:

(2) **Event** ‘wash my hand’ $\Rightarrow$ **completive** *already*:
I wash my hand *already*.
‘I washed / have washed my hand.’

(3) **State** ‘white’ $\Rightarrow$ **inchoative** *already*:
The wall white *already*.
‘The wall turned / has turned white.’

(I do not discuss Bao’s “inceptive” uses here.)
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* of both (Mandarin) Chinese verbal -le and SFP le, using the English surface form *already* and with a uniform sentence-final position.
A uniform semantics for *already*

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

(4)  
\[
\text{Women dao-da shan-ding le.} \\
\text{we go.to-reach mountain-top le} \\
\text{‘We have reached the top of the mountain.’} \quad \text{(Soh and Gao, 2006)}
\]

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)  
\[
\textit{already/le}(p)
\]

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

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

(Note that *already/le* is not an aspect under this view, but simply presupposes a previous state, enforcing a transition.)
A uniform semantics for *already*

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

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

a.  \( p = \text{it is raining} \) (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.  \( p = \text{PERF(rain)} = \text{it has rained} \) (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*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Mandarin) Chinese:</th>
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<th>English:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SYN SFP</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEM (5)</td>
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<td>SEM …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHON <em>le/liao/laa</em></td>
<td>PHON <em>already</em></td>
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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.
Roadmap

§1  The semantics of Singlish *already*

§2  The syntax of Singlish *already*

§3  The limits of relexification
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:

![Diagram]

Cheong (2016) shows that *already* unambiguously scopes over the entire clause.
Consider the scope of *already* with respect to negation:

(7) I *don’t* wash hand *already*.  
    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 biclusal negation:

(8) Is *not* [that I wash hand *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*. \hspace{1cm} 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.  
Presupposition: Every student is lucky.  

(Chemla, 2009)

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

§1  The semantics of Singlish *already*
§2  The syntax of Singlish *already*
§3  The limits of relexification
The story of Singlish *already*

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

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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):

\[
(11) \quad \begin{align*}
\text{a. } & Wǒ bù xiǎng jiā le. \\
& I \quad \text{NEG miss } \text{home le} \\
& \text{asserts: ‘I do not miss home now.’} \\
& \text{presupposes: ‘I did miss home before.’} \\
& \text{LE > NEG}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{b. } & Wǒ búshì xiǎng jiā le. \\
& I \quad \text{NEG miss } \text{home le} \\
& \text{asserts: ‘I do not miss home now.’} \\
& \text{presupposes: ‘I did not miss home before.’} \\
& \text{NEG > LE}
\end{align*}
\]

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.’

b. Gua **msi** guanliong i **liao**.
   
   I NEG forgive him LIAO
   
   asserts: ‘I have not forgiven him.’
   
   presupposes: ‘I did not forgive him before.’
The story of Singlish revised again

How did this happen?

Chinese:

\[
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{SYN} & \text{SFP at vP} \\
\text{SEM} & (5) \\
\text{PHON} & \text{le/liao/laa}
\end{bmatrix}
\rightarrow
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{SYN} & \text{SFP at TP} \\
\text{SEM} & (5) \\
\text{PHON} & \text{already}
\end{bmatrix}
\]

Singlish:

English:

\[
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{SYN} & \text{adverb} \\
\text{SEM} & \ldots \\
\text{PHON} & \text{already}
\end{bmatrix}
\]
Chinese SFPs have been important in the discussion of the *Final-over-Final Constraint* (FOFC), 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.
The Final-over-Final Constraint

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

\[ \begin{align*}
\sqrt{\text{HF over HF:}} & \quad \sqrt{\text{HI over HI:}} & \sqrt{\text{HI over HF:}} & *\text{HF over HI:} \\
\beta P & & \beta P & \beta P \\
\alpha P & & \alpha P & \alpha P \\
\beta & & \alpha & \beta \\
\alpha P & & XP & \alpha P \\
XP & & \alpha & XP \\
\end{align*} \]
(15) **Word orders in Finnish *wh*-questions (Holmberg, 2000, p. 128):**

a. **Aux-V-O:**
   ✓ Milloin Jussi olisi kirjoittanut romaanin?
   when Jussi would.have written a novel
   ‘When would Jussi have written a novel?’

b. **Aux-O-V:**
   ✓ Milloin Jussi olisi romaanin kirjoittanut?
   when Jussi would.have a novel written

c. **O-V-Aux:**
   ✓ Milloin Jussi romaanin kirjoittanut olisi?
   when Jussi a novel written would.have

d. **V-O-Aux:**
   * Milloin Jussi kirjoittanut romaanin olisi?
   when Jussi written a novel would.have

*V-O-Aux also holds across modern and historical Germanic languages Biberauer, Holmberg, and Roberts (2008, 2014), and at many other levels of syntactic structure.
At the same time, we know FOFC does not hold over entire utterances:

(16) A potential exception to FOFC, in German (Biberauer, Holmberg, and Roberts, 2008):

Johann hat [vp [dp 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. I call these FOFC 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 le/liao/laa seem to countexemplify this.

Erlewine (2017): Mandarin allows for a “break point” for FOFC enforcement between lower and higher domains (phases) of the clause. Inflectionally rich languages do not allow this.
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.
Many previous works note the optionality of Singlish past tense \textit{-ed} and third singular \textit{-s} (Ho and Platt, 1993; Gupta, 1994; Lai et al., 2013, a.o.), but what’s relevant for our purposes 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 \textit{already} unambiguously joins to the clause periphery, not clause-medially.
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*.

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)

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) and the presence of inflection in Singlish, unlike in Chinese.
Thank you!

This project grew out of joint work with Phoebe Cheong, which also resulted in her honors thesis, Cheong 2016. I thank her as well as Rebecca Starr, Bao Zhiming, and students in the Singapore Language Lab for discussion. Errors are mine.


Cheong, Phoebe Si En. 2016. Sentence-final *already* and *only* in Singapore English. BA Honors thesis, National University of Singapore.
References II


