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

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).

Roadmap

Roadmap

The semantics of Singlish *already*

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.)

Already according to Bao (2005)

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) Women dao-da   shan-ding **le**.
     we   go.to-reach mountain-top ʟᴇ
     '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. <u>asserts:</u> p is true at the reference time R
     b. <u>presupposes:</u> 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 = it is raining (state)

        i.   *already(p)* <u>asserts:</u> 'It is raining' is true now

        ii.   *already(p)* <u>presupposes:</u> 'It is raining' was false before

      ⇒   'It has started to rain.'   (inchoative)

    b. p = PERF(rain) = it has rained (event)

        i.   *already(p)* <u>asserts:</u> 'It has rained' is true now

        ii.   *already(p)* <u>presupposes:</u> 'It has rained' was false before

      ⇒   'It rained / has rained.'   (completive)

A simpler relexification

☞ 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*.

(Mandarin) Chinese:		Singlish:		English:

$$
\begin{bmatrix} \text{SYN} & \text{SFP} \\ \text{SEM} & \text{(5)} \\ \text{PHON} & \textit{le/liao/laa} \end{bmatrix} \begin{matrix} \rightarrow \\ \rightarrow \\ \ \end{matrix} \begin{bmatrix} \text{SYN} & \text{SFP} \\ \text{SEM} & \text{(5)} \\ \text{PHON} & \textit{already} \end{bmatrix} \begin{matrix} \ \\ \ \\ \leftarrow \end{matrix} \begin{bmatrix} \text{SYN} & \text{adverb} \\ \text{SEM} & \ldots \\ \text{PHON} & \textit{already} \end{bmatrix}
$$

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.
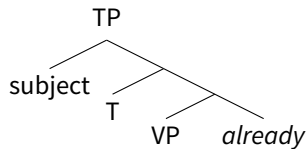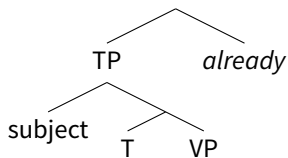
Roadmap

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) shows that ***already* unambiguously scopes over the entire clause**.

Evidence from semantic scope (Cheong, 2016)

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

(7) I **don't** wash hand **already**.   *already > not*

    a. <u>asserts:</u> I do not wash my hands now.

    b. <u>presupposes:</u> 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. <u>asserts:</u> It's false that I have washed my hands.

    b. <u>presupposes:</u> 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. <u>asserts:</u> No one goes to school (now).

   b. <u>presupposes:</u> Someone used to go to school before.
      = 'No one goes to school' was false before.

Evidence from semantic scope (Cheong, 2016)

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):
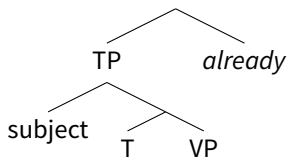
(10) No student knows that he's lucky.   (Chemla, 2009)
      <u>Presupposition:</u> Every student is lucky.

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).
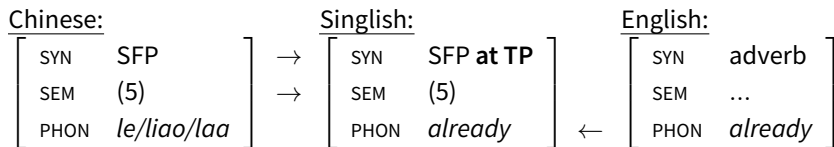
The syntax of Singlish *already*

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

Roadmap

The story of Singlish *already*

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

Chinese: Singlish: English:

$$
\begin{bmatrix} \text{SYN} & \text{SFP} \\ \text{SEM} & (5) \\ \text{PHON} & \textit{le/liao/laa} \end{bmatrix}
\begin{matrix} \rightarrow \\ \rightarrow \\ {} \end{matrix}
\begin{bmatrix} \text{SYN} & \text{SFP at TP} \\ \text{SEM} & (5) \\ \text{PHON} & \textit{already} \end{bmatrix}
\begin{matrix} {} \\ {} \\ \leftarrow \end{matrix}
\begin{bmatrix} \text{SYN} & \text{adverb} \\ \text{SEM} & \dots \\ \text{PHON} & \textit{already} \end{bmatrix}
$$

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.
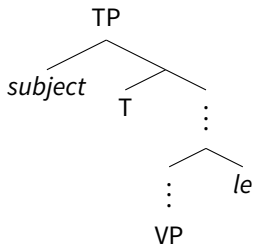
The syntax of Mandarin SFP *le*

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

      <u>asserts:</u> 'I do not miss home now.'
      <u>presupposes:</u> 'I did miss home before.'   LE > NEG

      b. Wǒ **búshì** xiǎng jiā **le**.
          I   NEG   miss home LE

      <u>asserts:</u> 'I do not miss home now.'
      <u>presupposes:</u> '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.

The syntax of Southern Chinese SFP *liao/laa*

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
        <u>asserts:</u> 'I do not like him now.'
        <u>presupposes:</u> 'I liked him before.'   LIAO > NEG

    b. Gua **msi** guanliong i   **liao**.
        I   NEG forgive   him LIAO
        <u>asserts:</u> 'I have not forgiven him.'
        <u>presupposes:</u> 'I did not forgive him before.'   NEG > LIAO

Chinese:

$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{SYN} & \textbf{SFP at vP} \\ \text{SEM} & (5) \\ \text{PHON} & \textit{le/liao/laa} \end{bmatrix}$$

$\rightarrow$
$\rightarrow$

Singlish:

$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{SYN} & \textbf{SFP at TP} \\ \text{SEM} & (5) \\ \text{PHON} & \textit{already} \end{bmatrix}$$

$\leftarrow$

English:

$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{SYN} & \text{adverb} \\ \text{SEM} & \dots \\ \text{PHON} & \textit{already} \end{bmatrix}$$
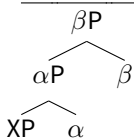
How did this happen?

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 α is head-initial, then the phrase β immediately dominating α is head-initial. If α is head-final, β can be head-final or head-initial.
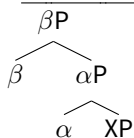
(14) **Predictions of the Final-over-Final Constraint:**

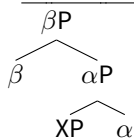$^\checkmark$<u>HF over HF:</u> $^\checkmark$<u>HI over HI:</u> $^\checkmark$<u>HI over HF:</u>   *<u>HF over HI:</u>

βP βP βP βP

αP β β αP β αP αP β

XP α α XP   XP α α XP
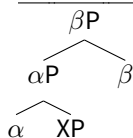
The Final-over-Final Constraint

(15) **Word orders in Finnish *wh*-questions (Holmberg, 2000, p. 128):**

    a.   <u>Aux-V-O:</u>
        ✓ Milloin Jussi olisi   kirjoittanut romaanin?
          when   Jussi would.have written   a novel
         'When would Jussi have written a novel?'

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

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

    d.   <u>V-O-Aux:</u>
        * 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 counteexemplify 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.**

FOFC domains

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.

(17)   Wait lah, John say [∅ 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 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 *already* unambiguously adjoins to the clause periphery, not clause-medially.

Conclusion

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* 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) and the presence of inflection in Singlish, unlike in Chinese.

Thank you!

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