

# Radical Pro Drop and Fusional Pronominal Morphology in Colloquial Singaporean English: Reply to Neeleman and Szendrői

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## 1. Neeleman and Szendrői's (2007) Radical-Dro-Drop Generalization

In a recent article that investigates the cross-linguistic distribution of the so-called *radical pro drop* phenomenon, Neeleman and Szendrői (2007) (henceforth N&S) propose a new generalization that this option is available only in those languages whose personal pronouns are agglutinating for case, number or some other nominal feature. This generalization, which they dub the *Radical-Pro-Drop Generalization*, is defined in (1).

### (1) *Radical-Pro-Drop Generalization*

Radical pro drop requires agglutinating morphology on pronouns. (N&S: 673)

N&S derive this generalization from three independently motivated assumptions: a) null arguments are zero spell-outs of regular pronouns (Perlmutter 1971), b) spell-out rules for pronouns may target non-terminal nodes in the syntax (Weerman and Evers-Vermeul 2002), and c) the Elsewhere Principle (Kiparsky 1973) with its three notable features defined in (2a-c).

- (2)a. All else being equal, a phonological realization of a category C takes priority over a phonological realization of the categories contained in C.
- b. All else being equal, a phonological realization of a category C that spells out more of C's features takes priority over a phonological realization that spells-out fewer features.
- c. Optionality results if the phonological realization of a category C spells out fewer of C's features than the phonological realization of the categories contained in C.

(N&S: 687)

Let us illustrate how the generalization is derived with English and Japanese examples. Suppose that radical pro drop is the result of the spell-out rule in (3).

### (3) $[_{KP} + p, - a] \leftrightarrow \emptyset$ (N&S: 682)

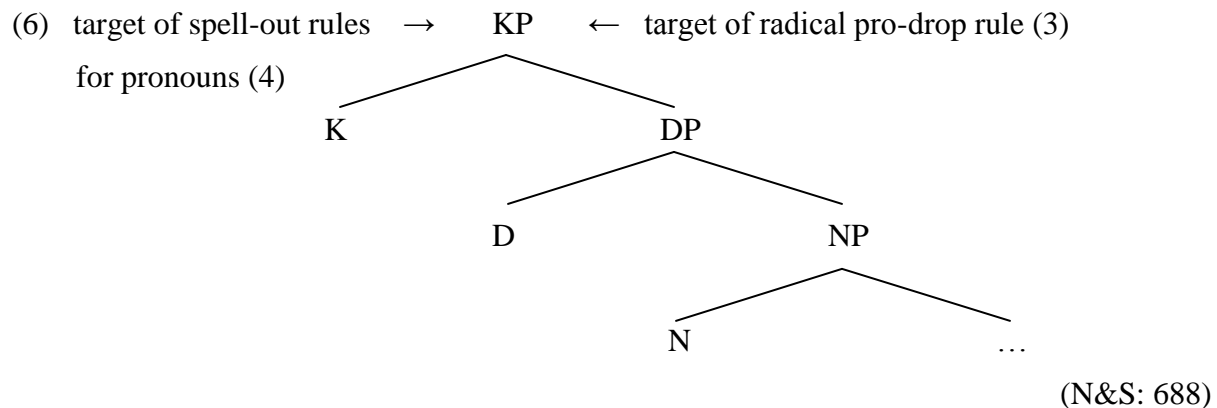
English pronouns are fusional for case whereas Japanese pronouns are agglutinating. This difference is captured by two different spell-out rules for *him* and *kare* such as (4) and (5a, b).

(4)  $[\text{KP} + \text{p}, - \text{a}, 3, \text{SG}, \text{M}, \text{ACC}] \leftrightarrow / \text{him} /$  (cf. N&S: 687)

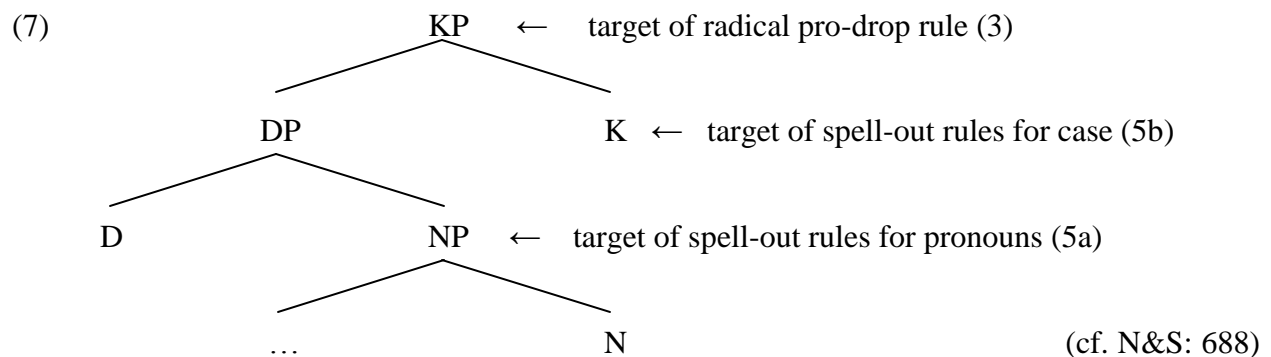
(5)a.  $[\text{NP} + \text{p}, - \text{a}, 3, \text{SG}, \text{M}] \leftrightarrow / \text{kare} /$

b.  $[\text{K ACC}] \leftrightarrow / \text{o} /$  (N&S: 688)

Radical pro drop is unavailable in English, N&S argue, because the Elsewhere Principle always prefers overt spell-out rules such as (4) over (3). To see why, consider (6).



Rules (3) and (4) target the same constituent KP. (4) blocks (3) due to (2b) because (4) realizes more features (i.e. particular case and  $\phi$ -features) than (3). As a result, radical pro drop is unavailable in English. Now, compare (6) with (7), a derivation for Japanese pronouns.



Rules (3) and (5a) do not compete in (7). On one hand, (3) is more specific than (5a) in terms of (2a) in that (3) realizes a larger constituent than (5a) (KP vs. NP). On the other hand, (5a) is more specific than (3) in terms of (2b) in that (5a) realizes more features (particular  $\phi$ -features) than (3). As a result, neither rule blocks the other. Thus, Japanese emerges as a radical pro-drop language.

Two notes are in order. First, N&S's analysis does not exclude the possibility that languages with fusional pronominal morphology lack the (radical) pro-drop option altogether.

Languages like Spanish and Italian allow (subject) pro-drop. This observation is captured by the context-sensitive rule in (8), which mentions syntactic agreement in its structural description.

$$(8) \quad [\text{KP} + \text{p}, - \text{a}, \varphi_i] \leftrightarrow \emptyset / \text{ \_\_\_\_\_\_ } [\varphi_i] \quad (\text{N\&S 687})$$

This rule is not in an elsewhere relation with rules like (4). Neither rule blocks the other: (8) contains agreement that (4) lacks as the part of the structural description while (4) mentions particular  $\varphi$ -features that (8) is insensitive to. This way, N&S's analysis maintains the traditional insight that pro drop is conditioned by agreement (Taraldsen 1978; Rizzi 1982). Second, N&S's analysis predicts that radical pro drop is available in a language as long as the pronominal paradigm in that language has *some* KP-internal agglutinating morphology (case, number, or some other nominal features such as determiners and classifiers). Thus, Chinese allows radical pro drop because plural pronouns are derived from singular variants by the plural morpheme *men*, as illustrated in (9a, b).

$$(9)a. \quad [\text{NP} + \text{p}, - \text{a}, 1, \text{SG}] \leftrightarrow /w\ddot{o}/$$

$$b. \quad [\text{PL}] \leftrightarrow /men/ \quad (\text{N\&S: 689})$$

N&S show that the generalization in (1) is cross-linguistically robust by testing it against a sample of twenty languages and *The World Atlas of Language Structures* (Haspelmath et al. 2005). To the extent that this generalization holds, their analysis has uncovered a new link between two phenomena that have hitherto been considered unrelated: radical pro drop and analytic pronominal morphology.

The purpose of this squib is to present new data from Colloquial Singaporean English (henceforth CSE) that questions the robustness of the generalization in (1). In section 2.1, I provide examples showing that CSE is a radical pro drop language. In section 2.2, I argue that this variety has fusional pronominal morphology just like Standard American/British English. These two sections thus show that radical pro drop is not necessarily conditioned by the agglutinating morphology on pronouns, contrary to the generalization in (1). In section 2.3, I suggest an alternative analysis of pronominal ellipsis that draws on a recent proposal (Saito 2007) that the lack of syntactic agreement conditions the availability of radical pro drop.

## 2. Radical Pro Drop and Fusional Pronominal Paradigm in CSE<sup>1</sup>

CSE is a variety of English spoken in Singapore that has emerged as a result of intense language contact between Standard English and the local varieties of Malay, Chinese, and Tamil, to a lesser extent. As extensively documented in the literature on Singaporean English (Platt and Weber 1980; Ritchie 1986; Platt and Ho 1983, 1989; Pakir 1991; Ho and Platt 1993; Deterding et al. 2003), this variety shows a spectacular range of differences from Standard English that can

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Liangcai Chan and Stella Leong for valuable discussions and comments on null arguments in Colloquial Singaporean English as native speakers of CSE. All the examples from this variety in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are provided by Chan or Leong. I also thank Ludwig Tan for making his 2007 dissertation available to me.

be traced to the substrate influences of Chinese. I show in this section that CSE presents an important testing ground for the cross-linguistic validity of N&S's generalization.

### 2.1. *CSE as a Pro-Drop Language*

As observed by Tan (1999, 2003, 2007, 2009), one of the most noticeable differences between CSE and Standard English is the liberal omission of grammatical arguments, i.e., subjects, objects and possessors, as in (10-12), respectively. (Omitted pronouns in (10-12) are underlined.)

- (10) After get some sickness, can't help it.  
'After one falls ill, *one* can't help it.' (Tan 2003: 1)
- (11) I never try before.  
'I've never tried it before.' (Tan 2003: 1)
- (12) Head very pain.  
'My head is very painful.'

These examples, thus, suggest that CSE is a radical pro drop language on a par with other Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Thai and Indonesian. This feature comes as no surprise given the substantial substrate influence of Chinese (or Malay) on the syntax of CSE.

### 2.2. *Fusional Pronominal Morphology in CSE*

The generalization in (1) predicts that the pronominal system in CSE should have some KP-internal agglutinating morphology. It is clear that this prediction is false because pronouns in CSE are fusional in every sense that pronouns in Standard English are. More specifically, the form that each pronoun takes in CSE is based on case assignment and number (singular vs. plural), as in Standard English (i.e. *I/me/my*, *you/you/your*, *he/him/his*, *she/her/her*, *we/us/our*, *you/you/your* and *they/them/their*). Recall that a language with the otherwise fusional morphology could have the pro-drop option if it exhibits syntactic agreement (see (8)). Tan (1999, 2003, 2007, 2009), however, provides convincing evidence that the inflectional ending *-s*, the reflex of the obligatory third person singular present agreement in Standard English, is not a mandatory exponent in CSE but should be better analyzed as an hypercorrection inflection (which, of course, is neither required nor possible in Standard English). Consider examples (13a-d).

- (13)a. I got very kind mother. (She) Look after the kids.  
b. So (he) have to go there?  
c. (I) Likes badminton very much.

((13a) from Platt and Ho 1983: 39, as cited in Tan 2003: 5, (13b, c) from Tan 2003: 5)

(13a, b) show that the agreement marker *-s* is absent in CSE in the environment under which it is obligatory in Standard English. More importantly, (13c) shows that the same marker could appear in a syntactic context that would make the sentence ungrammatical in Standard English. These examples, thus, suggest that inflections in CSE are syntactically irrelevant and cannot play a role in licensing a null argument, unlike in classical pro-drop language such as Italian, Spanish, and Greek.

Recall that, under N&S's analysis, it suffices for a language to have *at least one* recognizable agglutinating morphology on pronouns for it to trigger radical pro drop. It is very difficult to prove that CSE has *no* agglutinating morphology on any feature of the pronouns. However, there is a relatively established inventory of features within the nominal projection (case, number, gender, classifier, and determiner) and in none of these regards are pronouns in CSE agglutinating. More importantly, the pronominal paradigm in CSE is fusional as that in the superstrate Standard English, a non radical pro drop language, for all relevant respects. Based on these considerations, I conclude that CSE presents a counterexample to the generalization in (1).

### 2.3. *Two Alternative Analyses: Topic Prominence vs. the Absence of Syntactic Agreement*

In this section, I consider a possible source for the cross-linguistic radical pro drop phenomenon with special reference to the syntax of the ellipsis of CSE and East Asian languages. Tan (1999, 2003, 2007, 2009) argues that the null argument option in CSE is due to the topic-prominent nature of this variety. Under his analysis, subject and null objects are topic chains in the sense of Huang (1984). This analysis is illustrated in (14) in Chinese.

(14) Wo zai hua-yuan li zhong-le yi-xie hua    [Ø]<sub>Top</sub>                      Ø    zhang de    hen hao.

I    at garden    in plant-PFV    some flower (they=some flowers) (they) grow    PRT very well.

'I planted some flowers in the garden. They grow very well.'

(Yuan 1995: 472, as cited in Tan 2009: 24)

In (14), *yi-xie hua* 'some flowers' is introduced in the first sentence as the topic of the discourse. Once the topic is established, this serves as the antecedent for the null subject in the second sentence through a topic chain (head= zero topic [Ø]<sub>Top</sub>, tail = null subject). Tan provides arguments based on topic markers, hanging topics, and multiple topics in favor of the topic-prominent status of CSE to show that the topic chain analysis is applicable to this variety. This analysis also receives independent support given the contact ecology of CSE mentioned above: its grammar is heavily influenced by Chinese.

However, N&S already pointed out clear contrasts between topic drop and radical pro drop suggesting that the two phenomena cannot be given a unified treatment. Huang argues that zero topics in Chinese are subject to conditions on movement. However, radical pro drop is not so constrained. This point is illustrated in (15a-b) in Japanese, which show that null arguments in Japanese are island-insensitive (Nakamura 1991). Note that extraction out of relative clauses are impossible in Japanese (Saito 1985; Takezawa 1987), as shown in (16b).

- (15)a. Watasi-wa [[moo Ø yonda] hito]-ni aimasita yo.  
 I-Top already read person-Dat met PRT  
 ‘I already met someone who read pro.’
- b. John-ga mada [[Mary-ga Ø okutta] tegami]-o yonde-inai.  
 John-Nom yet Mary-Nom sent letter-Acc read-has.not  
 ‘John hasn’t yet read a letter that Mary sent pro.’ (N&S: 675)
- (16)a. John-ga mada [[Mary-ga Taroo-ni okutta]tegami]-o yonde-inai.  
 John-Nom yet Mary-Nom Taro-Dat sent letter-Acc read-has.not  
 ‘John hasn’t yet read a letter that Mary had sent to Taro.’
- b. \* **Taroo<sub>i</sub>-ni** John-ga mada [[Mary-ga *t<sub>i</sub>* okutta]tegami]-o yonde-inai.  
 Taro-Dat John-Nom yet Mary-Nom sent letter-Acc read-has.not  
 ‘same as (16a)’

Furthermore, Tan’s/Huang’s (1984) analysis of CSE/Chinese does not really explain why these languages allow radical pro-drop. In particular, it does not succeed in establishing the discourse-oriented nature of these languages and radical pro drop. In view of these problems, I seek an alternative analysis that draws on the recent theory of argument ellipsis presented by Saito (2007).

Saito argues that the LF copying process for argument ellipsis (Oku 1998; Kim 1999) is made available by the lack of syntactic agreement, when coupled with Chomsky’s (2000) theory of agreement. In Chomsky’s theory, the uninterpretable  $\phi$ -features of the  $\nu$  are deleted through agreement with the interpretable  $\phi$ -features of the object NP. This agreement must be activated by the uninterpretable Case feature of the DP. The agreement operation then removes the  $\phi$ -features of the  $\nu$  and the Case feature of the DP. Assuming that LF Copy is a universally available process, Saito argues that the presence of syntactic agreement blocks the radical pro drop option in English. To illustrate, consider (17a, b) and (18a, b).

- (17)a. John bought a book.  
 b. \*Mary bought Ø, too.
- (18)a. John-ga hon-o katta.  
 John-Nom book-Acc bought  
 ‘John bought a book.’
- b. Mary-mo Ø katta.  
 Mary-also bought  
 ‘Mary also bought (a book).’

Under the LF Copy Theory, *a book* in (17a) is copied at LF into the object position in (17b). Note, however, that the DP in (17a) has had its uninterpretable Case feature checked and erased due to its agreement with the *v*. This means that the DP, after being copied, cannot serve as a goal to delete the uninterpretable  $\phi$ -features of another *v* in (17b) because the Case feature is no longer available to trigger the agreement operation. As a result, (17b) crashes. The grammaticality of (18b) indicates, however, that the LF Copy operation is available in Japanese. This result directly falls out from the traditional observation, traced back to Kuroda (1988) (see also Fukui 1986), that Japanese does not have syntactically relevant  $\phi$ -features.

Now, suppose that *pro* as a discourse entity is always available for copying. Then, radical pro drop results from the lack of syntactic agreement. This gives rise to a new generalization (19).

(19) Saito's (2007) Generalization on Radical Pro Drop

Radical pro drop requires the absence of syntactic agreement.

The pattern of CSE now follows. As we saw in section 2.2, this language does not have syntactic agreement, unlike its superstrate Standard English. Thus, this specification opens a way for the LF Copy process to apply. Since *pro* is a specific instance of linguistic objects that are independently available for copying, the process applies to this element to yield the radical pro drop phenomenon. This analysis may also hold for other Asian languages, including Korean, Malay, Chinese, Indonesian, Javanese, and Thai, since these languages allow radical pro drop and lack syntactic agreement.

It may well be that *pro* serves as a topic due to the fact that it always remains in the discourse storage for potential copying once its antecedent is introduced overtly in the syntax. If so, Saito's (2007) analysis can also capture the insight behind Huang's (1984)/Tan's (1999, 2003, 2007, 2009) analysis that radical pro drop is tightly linked to topic-prominence.

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that Colloquial Singaporean English presents a real challenge to Neeleman and Szendrői's (2007) generalization that radical pro drop requires agglutinating morphology on personal pronouns because it allows radical pro drop and nonetheless its pronominal paradigm is clearly fusional like that in Standard English. I have suggested instead that this apparently peculiar feature of CSE directly falls out from Saito's (2007) recent theory of the LF Copy and radical pro drop as tied to Chomsky's (2000) theory of syntactic agreement. This analysis argues that the real source for radical pro drop is not the agglutinative morphology but rather *the absence of syntactic agreement*. It remains an important empirical issue to see how far this generalization goes, a task I would like to leave for another occasion.

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