A Challenge to the Anti-Agreement Hypothesis:

Argument Ellipsis in Colloquial Singapore English

Recent work (Oku 1998; Kim 1999; Saito 2007; Takahashi 2007, 2008a, b, 2013a, b, 2014) has amassed considerable evidence that languages such as Japanese allow argument ellipsis (AE) as an independently available grammatical option. One primary argument for this AE theory is based on the sloppy interpretation of the null object in (1b) in Japanese.

(1) a. John-wa   [NP zibun-no   tegami-o]   sute-ta.

　　　　John-TOP   self-GEN   letter-ACC   discard-PAST

　　　　'John threw out his letter.'

　　b. Mary-mo   *e*   sute-ta.   (strict/sloppy)

　　　　Mary-also   discard-PAST

　　　　'*Lit*. Mary also threw *e* out.'

　　c. Mary-mo   *sore-o*   sute-ta.   (strict/*sloppy)

　　　　Mary-also   it-ACC   discard-PAST

　　　　 'Mary also threw it out.'   ((1a, b) adopted from Otani and Whitman (1991:346 –347))

The uniform *pro*-analysis (Kuroda 1965; Ohso 1976; Hoji 1985; Saito 1985) cannot account for the sloppy interpretation of the null object, for the overt pronoun blocks this interpretation, as shown in (1c). Oku (1998) proposes that the null argument in (1b) is derived by copying the overt antecedent object in (1a) onto the elliptical object position at LF. The same analysis carries over to the subject ellipsis case shown in (2b), which similarly exhibits the sloppy interpretation.

(2) a. Mary-wa [$_{CP}$ zibun-no   teian-ga   saiyoo-sare-ru-to]   omotteiru.

Mary-TOP   self-GEN   proposal-NOM   accept-PASS-PRES-COMP   think

'Mary thinks that her proposal will be accepted.'

   b. John-mo [$_{CP}$ e   saiyoo-sare-ru-to]   omotteiru.   (strict/sloppy)

John-also   accept-PASS-PRES-COMP   think

'*Lit*. John also thinks that *e* will be accepted.'

   c. John-mo [$_{CP}$ *sore-ga*   saiyoo-sare-ru-to]   omotteiru.   (strict/*sloppy)

John-also   it-NOM   accept-PASS-PRES-COMP   think

'*Lit*. John also thinks that *e* will be accepted.'   ((2a, b) from Oku (1998: 165))

Adopting Oku's LF-Copy theory of AE, Saito (2007) develops a new hypothesis within Chomsky's (2000) framework which restricts LF-Copy to positions not associated with agreement. Within this framework, the probe agrees with the goal DP to have its φ-features valued only when the latter has its unvalued Case feature; the Case feature is valued as nominative/accusative by T/*v* as reflex of this agreement. This system blocks AE in English ((3)).

(3) a. * John brought his wife to the party. Bill also brought *e* to the concert. (*e* = Bill's wife)

   b. * John thinks that his wife speaks English. Bill thinks that *e* speaks French. (*e* = Bill's wife)

To see how this is so, consider the three steps of the derivation involving LF-Copy in (4).

(4) a.   F$_1$ {~~φ-features~~} … DP$_1$ {φ-features, ~~Case~~}

   b.   F$_2$ {φ-features} … *e* …

   c.   F$_2$ {*φ-features}… DP$_1$ {φ-features, Case} …

The probe F_1 agrees with the goal DP_1 activated by its unvalued Case feature; the φ-features of the F_1 and the Case feature of DP_1 are valued by this agreement relation, as shown in (4a). Suppose that the DP_1 is then copied at LF onto the empty argument position, as shown in (4b). The derivation crashes; the φ-features of the new probe F_2 remain unvalued because the DP_1, now without the unvalued Case feature, can no longer agree with any other probe, as shown in (4c).

This anti-agreement hypothesis also correctly predicts the AE pattern in Japanese noted above because this language lacks the φ-agreement system altogether (Fukui 1986; Kuroda 1988). Şener and Takahashi (2010) show that the same hypothesis receives support from their observation that in Turkish, null objects, but not null subjects, permit AE, as shown in (5–6).

(5) a. Can   [*pro* anne-si]-ni   eleştir-di.

    John   his   mother-3SG-ACC   criticize-PAST

    'John criticized his mother.'

  b. Mete-yse   *e*   öv-dü.   (strict/sloppy)

    Mete-however   praise-PAST

    '*Lit*. Meter, however, praised *e*.'   (Şener and Takahashi (2010: 87))

(6) a. Can   [CP [*pro* oğl-u]   İnglizce   öğren-iyor   diye]   bil-iyor.

    John   his son-3SG   English   learn-PRES   COMP   know-PRES

    'John knows that his son learns English.'

  b. Filiz-se   [CP *e*   Fransızca   öğren-iyor   diye]   bil-iyor.   (strict/*sloppy)

    Phylis-however   French   learn-PRES   COMP   know-PRES

    '*Lit*. Phylis, however, knows that *e* learns French.'   (Şener and Takahashi (2010: 91))

The subject-object asymmetry in Turkish straightforwardly follows from the anti-agreement theory since this language has subject-verb agreement, but not object-verb agreement.

(7) a. (Ben) bu makale-yi yavaşyavaş oku-yacağ-**ım**.

    I DEM article-ACC slowly read-FUT-1SG

    'I will read this article slowly.'

  b. (Biz) her hafta sinema-ya gid-er-**iz**.

    we every week movie-DAT go-AOR-1PL

    'We go to the movies every week.' (Şener and Takahashi (2010: 91))

Takahashi (2013a, b, 2014), Miyagawa (2013), and Otaki et al. (2013) show that the same hypothesis derives the position-sensitive distribution of AE in many other languages, including Malayalam, Chinese, Portuguese, and Kaqchikel. Given the empirical success amply documented in the literature, the blocking effect of φ-agreement in AE seems indisputable.

In this squib, I shall present an empirical challenge to the anti-agreement hypothesis from Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), an English-lexified colloquial variety of English spoken in Singapore. This variety has the same Case system like its lexifier, an observation independently supported by data based on VP-ellipsis, C-selection and Case morphology. Given Chomsky's system, the anti-agreement hypothesis predicts that object AE should be blocked in CSE. This prediction is incorrect. I also introduce novel data regarding verb-identity and adverbial interpretations to reject the alternative analysis of CSE object ellipsis in terms of V-stranding VP-ellipsis (Huang 1987, 1991; Otani and Whitman 1991). I put forth an alternative analysis of AE in CSE which crucially builds on its definite subject restriction.

Assuming that this restriction is derived by an operator-variable relation between [Spec, TopP] and [Spec, TP], I propose that it is this relation which governs the availability of AE in CSE.

1. Evidence against the Anti-Agreement Hypothesis from Argument Ellipsis in CSE

In CSE, the morphological forms of the pronouns are determined on the basis of Case as well as φ-features just like Standard English. Examples (8) show that nominative pronouns such as *he* are possible in subject position, but not in object position, whereas accusative pronouns such as *him* are possible in object position, but not in subject position.

(8) a. {He/*him} like(s) Cindy a lot.

    b. Cindy like(s) {*he/him} meh?　　　　　(CSE)

Within Chomsky's (2000) system, the presence of Case morphology on DPs entails abstract φ-features on Ts/*v*'s in CSE. The idea that CSE manifests Case/agreement at Ts/*v*'s is also independently supported by data bearing on VP-ellipsis and C-selection. First, Lobeck (1990) and Saito and Murasugi (1990) establish the generalization that functional heads such as [+Tensed] Ts license ellipsis of their complements only when they enter into a Spec-Head agreement relation with its specifier. Thus, (9a) is fine because the finite T allows its VP-complement to be elided due to its agreement relationship with the subject whereas (9b) is out because the non-finite T heading the ECM complement does not agree with the subject.

(9)　a.　Sam [$_{VP}$ likes soccer] and Mary [$_T$ does] [$_{VP}$ *e*], too.

    b.* I consider Sam to [$_{VP}$ to like soccer] and you believe Mary [$_T$ to] [$_{VP}$ *e*] as well.

<div align="right">(Standard English)</div>

Keeping this generalization in mind, consider cases of CSE VP-ellipsis illustrated in (10a, b). (10a) receives the same account as (9a). Notably, (10b) shows that VP-deletion may apply even though there is no overt agreement on finite T heads. This example thus supports the existence of the abstract subject agreement and nominative Case in CSE grammar (cf. (14)).

(10) a. Sunadi [$_{VP}$ play(s) soccer] and Peter also [$_T$ {can/does/may}] [$_{VP}$ *e*].

  b. Sunadi [$_{VP}$ play(s) soccer] and Peter also [$_T$ {have/got}] [$_{VP}$ *e*].   (CSE)

Second, Li (2005, 2007, 2014) proposes the generalization shown in (11a, b), based on the distribution of elliptic arguments in Chinese, to the effect that the possibility of the ellipsis of the direct object is tied to the Case-assigning ability of the verb which selects it.

(11)   Li's (2005, 2007, 2014) Generalization (Li (2014: 61))

  a. If a verb is subcategorized for a clausal as well as a nominal object, the object can be empty.

  b. If a verb is subcategorized only for a clausal object, the object cannot be empty.

This generalization also holds true in CSE. In (12), the verb *hear* allows its object (DP or CP) to be elided because it is subcategorized for DPs as well as CPs. In (13), on the other hand, the verb *think* blocks object ellipsis because it can only take CPs. The generalization illustrated here follows if the null object is Case-marked. Under Chomsky's system, this result also means that transitive *v* in CSE bears abstract object agreement.

(12) a. I heard that rumor, but he didn't hear *e*.

    b.? I heard that she is very smart, but he didn't hear *e*.   (CSE)

(13) a.* I thought that matter, but he didn't think *e*.

    b. I thought that she is very smart, but he didn't think so/**e*.   (CSE)

The evidence discussed thus far show that CSE has φ-agreement and Case in subject and object positions – hardly a surprising result given that Standard English provides CSE with its lexis/morphology as the lexifier/superstrate language. With this result in mind, let us consider now how the anti-agreement hypothesis plays out in CSE argument ellipsis. It has been widely acknowledged in the CSE literature (Platt et al. 1983; Alsagoff and Ho 1998; Wee and Ansaldo 2004; Tan 2003, 2007, 2009) that the inflection –*s*, the reflex of the obligatory third-person singular present agreement in Standard English, is not a mandatory exponent of the same feature matrix in CSE. This observation is illustrated in (14).

(14) I got very kind mother. (She) **look** after the kids.

    'I have a very kind mother. She looks after the kids.' (Platt et al. (1983: 39))

However, based on the evidence from Case inflections and VP-ellipsis, we may assume that Ts in CSE are uniformly associated with abstract φ-agreement irrespective of its morphological manifestations. The anti-agreement analysis thus correctly predicts that the null subject position should block AE, as in (15b, c). The same analysis, however, predicts that CSE should also block AE in object position. (16b) shows that this prediction is false.

(15) a. David say [$_{CP}$ his mother speak Teochew].

    b. Wait lah, John say [$_{CP}$ *e* speak Hokkien].   (strict/*sloppy without –*s*)

    c. Wait lah, John say [$_{CP}$ *e* speaks Hokkien].   (strict/*sloppy with –*s*)   (CSE)

(16) a. David like(s) his school.

    b. John also like(s) *e*.   (strict/sloppy)

    c. John also like(s) *it*.   (strict/*sloppy)   (CSE)

Let us make sure that (16b) involves AE. The *pro*-analysis won't work since the null object allows sloppy interpretations: compare (16b) and (16c). The ellipsis here also cannot be derived by V-raising followed by VP-ellipsis – the so-called V-stranding VP-ellipsis (Huang 1987, 1991; Otani and Whitman 1991) – on two grounds. First, Goldberg (2005) observes that in V-stranding languages such as Irish, Hebrew and Swahili, VP-ellipsis is subject to the condition that the verbs in the antecedent and elliptical clauses must be identical. (17a, b) show that CSE allows object ellipsis even though the verbs in the two clauses are not identical.

(17) a. John like(s) his teacher.

    b. Hmm… but Tom dislike(s) *e*.   (strict/sloppy)   (CSE)

Second, if VP-ellipsis were at stake, we would predict that VP-internal adverbs such as *quickly* should be interpreted together with the elided object in the argument ellipsis site, as both phrases are contained within the VP (Oku 1998), a prediction falsified in (18b).

(18) a. John can [$_{VP}$ solve his syntax problem quickly]!

    b. But Mary cannot solve *e* leh!   (sloppy)

        = 'But Mary cannot solve her syntax problem.'

        ≠ 'But Mary cannot solve her syntax problem quickly.'   (CSE)

One might suspect that the CSE facts could be accommodated if we depart from Chomsky (2000) and divorce agreement from Case. This is the track purposed by Saito (2012). Saito suggests that in Japanese, Case is valued instead by Merger with appropriate functional heads (i.e., nominative with T-C, accusative with transitive V-*v*). This approach to Case/agreement does take care of object ellipsis in CSE, but it not only begs the question why subject ellipsis is out in CSE but also loses the original account of the impossibility of AE in Standard English, which crucially builds on the Case-driven system of agreement assumed in Chomsky (2000). I therefore conclude that AE in CSE presents a genuine challenge to the anti-agreement hypothesis.

2.   Topic-Prominence, the Definite Subject Restriction, and Operator-Variable Relations

In this section, I shall sketch the outline of an alternative analysis of AE in CSE. CSE is a topic-prominent language in the sense of Li and Thompson (1976, 1981), as evidenced by the lack of expletives, the presence of topic chains and English-based topic markers (e.g., *as for, wise, right)* as well as other discourse-oriented particles of Chinese/Malay origin (e.g., *meh, lah, ah, leh*) in the sentence-initial position, and frequent use of the Chinese-style hanging topic construction as the basic mode of predication (Bao 2001, 2015, Bao and Lye 2005; Deterding 2007; Bao and Aye 2010; Leimgurber 2011; Sato and Kim 2012). One of the well-known manifestations of the topic-prominent profile of CSE is the definite subject restriction, namely, that the subject tends strongly to be interpreted as definite. This restriction is illustrated in (19a). The object position is free from this constraint, as shown in (19b). To introduce an indefinite expression into the discourse, CSE speakers use *got*-existential constructions in (20)

(19) a. People come already. Come greet them!   (definite/*indefinite)

  b. I like guitar.   (definite/indefinite)

(20) a. Got problem. 'There is a problem.' (*definite/indefinite)

    b. Got a book on the table. 'There is a book on the table.' (*definite/indefinite)

                                             (CSE: Leimgruber (2009: 100))

The restriction naturally falls out if we assume there is an operator-variable relation between the subject and the topic positons in the manner shown in (21) (Yip 1995; Jiang 2012) as a syntactic manifestation of the CSE's overall topic-prominent character. This is because the topic, by definition, represents a discourse entity which is already established and manifest to all parties on the basis of the ongoing discourse and hence must invariably be definite in reference.

(21)
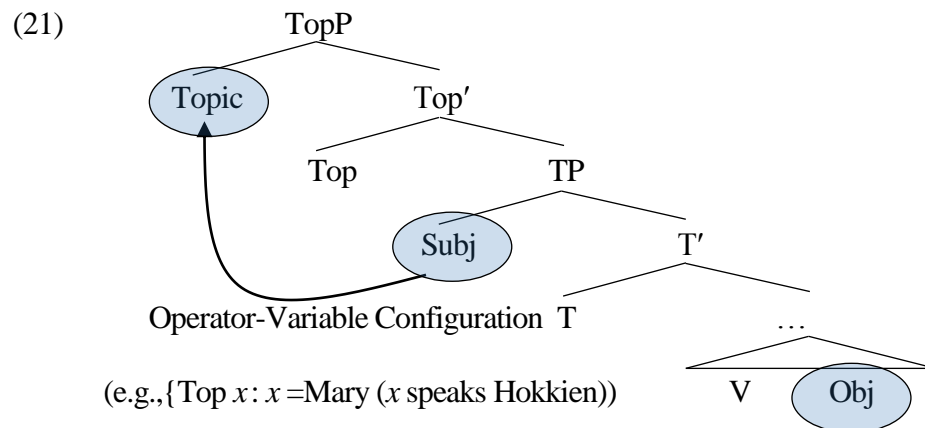
I propose, developing the idea explored by Saito (2015) in Japanese AE, that it is this topic-subject chain which blocks AE in subject position in CSE. Let us assume, following Huang (1984), that the null subject is a variable which is thereby bound to the topic in [Spec, TopP]; see Sato and Kim (2012) for independent evidence for the Huang-style variable analysis of the null subject in CSE. If we copied an LF object onto the operator position, we would end up with the ill-formed LF-representation where the variable would remain unbound. Similarly, if we copied an LF object onto the variable position, we would end up with the vacuous quantification

structure at LF. This way, AE is blocked in [Spec, TP] by the operator-variable configuration behind the topic-subject chain. On the other hand, (19b) shows that objects do not manifest the definiteness restriction. This means that the object position is not involved in an operator-variable chain. Consequently, LF-Copy can target the empty object position, yielding object ellipsis.

Note that my current analysis makes the rather important prediction that even the subject position should in principle permit AE in CSE as long as it is not linked to [Spec, TopP] by the operator-variable relation. As stated above, CSE makes extensive use of the Chinese-style hanging topic construction where the initial DP serves as the topic of the sentence, followed by the logical subject in [Spec, TP] and the predicate. Example (22) exemplifies this construction.

(22) My family, everybody is educated in English.   (Platt et al. (1983: 47))

It is hard to imagine the syntactic derivation for this gapless topic construction in which the topic DP is moved to the sentence-initial position by English-style topicalization because there is no suitable argument position within the TP domain from which the DP could have moved (Bao 2001). Thus, the logical subject is not linked to the topic DP through an operator-variable chain. Our analysis predicts then that the null subject should allow AE in this context. (23b) show that this prediction is indeed borne out. Suppose that two graduate students are talking about the journal outlets for the latest papers by Chomsky and Lasnik. Given this context, the null subject readily allows a sloppy interpretation.

(23) a. Speaker A: Where they publish their papers these days ah?

                        'Where do they publish their papers these days?

b. Speaker B: Chomsky, his paper published in LI. Lasnik, *e* published in Lingua. (sloppy)

'Chomsky, his paper got published in LI. Lasnik, *e* got published in Lingua.'

Importantly, this observation proves problematic for the agreement-based theory of AE. The theory predicts that the sloppy interpretation should be out in (23b), for it assumes that the T head is uniformly associated with abstract φ-agreement regardless of the type of constructions involved ((15) vs. (23)). The examples in (23), thus, speak critically in favor of my topic-prominence-based analysis of AE in CSE over the anti-agreement theory.

3. Conclusions

This squib has presented new data from AE in CSE against the anti-agreement hypothesis, which has received a good deal of empirical support in the recent investigations into the distribution of this phenomenon in typologically different languages including Japanese, English, Turkish, Chinese, Malayalam, and Portuguese. Taking the topic-prominent nature of CSE as its central analytical starting point, I have proposed instead that the subject ellipsis in this variety is blocked by the operator-variable configuration which is established between the subject and topic positions. The analysis makes the interesting prediction that the AE option should emerge in the subject position if it is not linked to the topic position, a prediction which I have shown to be borne out in the hanging topic construction. The relevant example, by contrast, proves problematic for the anti-agreement hypothesis, which assumes that the T head is invariably associated with φ-feature agreement regardless of the construction types. It remains to be seen whether the proposed alternative yields better empirical coverage of AE in many other languages which possess this process than the anti-agreement hypothesis, an important research question which I need to leave for another occasion.

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