Patterns of Macrofunctionality in Singlish Noun Phrases: A Questionnaire Survey

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1. INTRODUCTION
This paper presents the results of a questionnaire survey designed to elicit selected aspects of the NP syntax of Singlish.\(^1\)

The survey reported on herein constitutes one small part of a broader ongoing study, to be reported on in Gil (in preparation). (An outline of the study, and some preliminary results, were presented at the SEALs meeting, but are not included here, for lack of space.) This broader study is cross-linguistic in scope, based on a sample of some 20 languages each from two linguistic areas: Europe and East Asia. The above-mentioned study involves the elicitation of data from native speakers of the respective languages, guided by a Questionnaire on Noun-Phrase Structure. This questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix 1.\(^2\)

The focus of the cross-linguistic study is on the internal syntax of NPs, with particular emphasis on constructions involving various types of modification. The study is meaning based, taking as its starting point a set of twelve semantically-defined functions, and examining the ways in which these functions are expressed in various languages. These twelve functions involve the association of six types of modifiers, \textit{possessor}, \textit{numeral}, \textit{demonstrative}, \textit{colour}, \textit{locative} and \textit{event}, with two kinds of things, \textit{overt} and \textit{covert}. The twelve functions are listed in (1) and (2) below; opposite each function is an example of an English NP in which it is expressed:\(^3\)

(1) (pt) \textit{overt} thing modified by a \textit{possessor} "John's apple"
(nt) \textit{overt} thing modified by a \textit{numeral} "three apples"
(dt) \textit{overt} thing modified by a \textit{demonstrative} "this apple"
(ct) \textit{overt} thing modified by a \textit{colour} "red apple"
(lt) \textit{overt} thing modified by a \textit{locative} "apple on the table"
(et) \textit{overt} thing modified by an \textit{event} "apple John bought"

(2) (p) \textit{covert} thing modified by a \textit{possessor} "John's"
(n) \textit{covert} thing modified by a \textit{numeral} "three"
(d) \textit{covert} thing modified by a \textit{demonstrative} "this one"
(c) \textit{covert} thing modified by a \textit{colour} "red one"
(l) \textit{covert} thing modified by a \textit{locative} "one on the table"
(e) \textit{covert} thing modified by an \textit{event} "one John bought"
Constructions expressing the functions in (1) may be characterized as *modifications*, while those expressing the functions in (2) may be referred to as *reifications*. Similarly, grammatical markers contributing to the formation of modifier constructions may be characterized as *markers of modification*, while those assisting in the formation of objective constructions may be characterized as *markers of reification*, or, simply, *reifiers*.4

In the case of Singlish, the elicitation of data from native speakers poses certain methodological difficulties. Due to its basilectal nature, speakers often find it more difficult to provide robust and reliable judgements than is usually the case for languages and dialects with more established norms and a broader range of registers. Perhaps because of this, the judgements provided frequently display a substantial and potentially bewildering degree of variation, with different speakers offering different constructions while rejecting those of their fellow speakers. Thus, in order to obtain reliable data, facilitating the incorporation of Singlish into the cross-linguistic study described in the preceding paragraph, an alternative methodology was chosen, involving the administering of a written questionnaire to a large population of native speakers.5

At the initial stage, elicitation from native speakers provided a large variety of constructions, many of which were offered by one or more speakers but rejected by one or more others. (Some of the relevant data is discussed and analyzed in Gil 1995a.) Based on this preliminary data, a number of pilot questionnaires were constructed, and administered to large populations of native speakers, numbering several dozen. (One such questionnaire, on a related topic, is presented and discussed in Gil 1994b.) The results of the pilot questionnaires subsequently formed the basis for the formulation of the Singlish Noun-Phrase Questionnaire. This questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix 2.

The remainder of this paper is concerned with the Singlish Noun-Phrase Questionnaire, providing a description of the questionnaire, a summary of the results, and some preliminary discussion of their significance.

2. THE SINGLISH NOUN-PHRASE QUESTIONNAIRE
The Singlish Noun-Phrase Questionnaire presents 108 NPs, all occurring in direct-object position, in the template *I want ____*. The 108 NPs are arranged in twelve groups, expressing the twelve functions listed in (1) and (2) above. Within each group,
the NPs are arranged in a varying number of rows, and in two columns. Each row instantiates a different construction; within each row, the right-hand NP is obtained from the left-hand NP by addition of the definite article the. For each NP, speakers were asked to judge its grammaticality, and record their judgements by circling the appropriate sign: "✓" for grammatical, "?" for intermediate or dubious grammaticality, "*" for ungrammatical.

The questionnaire was administered to 33 native speakers of Singlish, all National University of Singapore students, in my 1995 second-year semantics (LG203) class. The somewhat cryptic written instructions were supplemented with more detailed oral instructions, ensuring that the subjects all understood the task.

The results of the questionnaire are tabulated in Appendix 3. Opposite each sentence, the numbers of subjects who circled "✓", "?" and "*" are indicated in the appropriate cells. The same results, converted to percentages, are presented again in Appendix 4.

In order for the results to be of use in the broader, cross-linguistic study, it was necessary to convert these figures into a single composite "✓" / "?" / "*" judgement of each NP, commensurate with data based on ordinary elicitation. This was done in two stages. In stage 1, each NP was assigned a score according to the following formula:

\[
(3) \quad 100/33 \cdot (N[✓] + 0.5N[?])
\]

In the above formula, "N[✓]" and "N[?]" stand for the numbers of subjects who circled "✓" and "?" respectively. What formula (3) does is to weigh "✓" and "?" judgements as 1 and 0.5 respectively, and then assign each NP accordingly a score ranging from 0 (all "*") to 100 (all "✓"). These scores are presented in Appendix 5. In stage 2, these 0-to-100 scores were reconverted back into the desired composite "✓" / "?" / "*" judgement associated with each NP. For this purpose, cognizance was taken of the distribution of 0-to-100 scores over all 108 NPs. This distribution is given in Table 1 below:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>score</th>
<th>0-4</th>
<th>5-9</th>
<th>10-14</th>
<th>15-19</th>
<th>20-24</th>
<th>25-29</th>
<th>30-34</th>
<th>35-39</th>
<th>40-44</th>
<th>45-49</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number of NPs</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

score | 50.54 | 55.59 | 60.64 | 65.69 | 70.74 | 75.79 | 80.84 | 85.89 | 90.94 | 95.100 |
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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number of NPs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Distribution of 0-to-100 Scores over the 108 NPs

As is evident from Table 1 above, the distribution of 0-to-100 scores over the 108 NPs exhibits a tri-modal pattern, with clear-cut peaks at both extremities of the range, plus an additional, tertiary peak, in the 30-39 score bracket. In converting the 0-to-100 scores back into composite judgements, these three peaks were thus taken as focal points for the three judgements, in accordance with the following key:

(4) 0-9. .......... *  
10-39. .......... ?  
40-100 ......... √

The outcome of the above reconversion, in composite "√" / "?" / "*" judgements, is given in Appendix 6. It is these data that are used in the cross-linguistic study, to be reported on in Gil (in preparation).

3. ASPECTS OF SINGLISH NOUN-PHRASE SYNTAX
The first salient result to emerge from the Singlish Noun-Phrase Questionnaire results is that NPs without the definite article the (in the left-hand column) are generally of greater acceptability than NPs with the (in the right-hand column). Comparing the respective "√" / "?" / "*" judgements, NPs without the are of higher grammaticality than their counterparts with the in 25 cases, of similar grammaticality in 27, and of lower grammaticality in only 2; moreover, in both of these two cases, the difference is between "?" for the former and "√" for the latter. These results suggest that the definite article the is not an intrinsic part of any of the constructions under investigation; that is to say, it does not function as a marker of reification or of modification, nor does it serve to license these constructions in any way. Thus, for the purpose of the cross-linguistic study, the definite article the can be safely ignored.

A second result is specific to constructions involving a numeral: in such constructions, the nominal plural suffix -s on