

# The Use of Colloquial Singaporean English in ‘Speaking Singlish’ Comic Strips: A Syntactic Analysis

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This study explores the sentence structure of Colloquial Singaporean English (CSE) and how it differs from Standard English (SE). A descriptive qualitative method is employed as the research design. The data source is the dialogue of five comic strips which are purposively chosen from Speaking Singlish comic strips. Data is in the form of sentences totalling 34 declaratives, 20 wh- interrogatives, 14 yes-no interrogatives, 3 imperatives and 1 exclamative. The results present the sentence structure of CSE found in the data generally constructed by one subject, one predicate, and occasionally one discourse element. The subject is a noun phrase while the predicate varies amongst noun, adjective, adverb, and verb phrases— particularly in copula deletion. On the other hand, there are several differences between the sentence structure of CSE and SE in the data including the use of copula, topic sentence, discourse elements, adverbs, unmarked plural noun and past tense.

**Key words:** *Colloquial Singaporean English (CSE), Speaking Singlish, sentence structure.*

## Introduction

Standard English (SE) is a variety of the English language. This view is perhaps more acceptable in the case of Non-Standard English (NSE). The classification of SE being a dialect goes against the lay understanding that a dialect is a subset of a language, usually with a geographical restriction regarding its distribution (Kerswill, 2006). Additionally, SE is used in printed form, spoken by educated native speakers and normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language (Jalalpour & Tabrizi, 2017).

In Singapore, English is used as one of the national languages and regarded as Singlish (SgE). It is utilised as inter-ethnic communication and a dominant language in the work field

(Talif & Hie, 1994). It also has two varieties, Singapore Standard English (SSE) which refers to British English (BrE) and colloquial Singaporean English (CSE) (Wulandari, 2016). In daily life, CSE plays a role representing multiculturalism in Singapore. It also shows that ethnic groups have their own role in society including the development of language. Therefore, Singaporean English the superstrate and others such as Chinese, Malay, and Tamil are its substrates (Perotte, 2014). These three languages are the major contributors which have conditioned its development.

In English, the formation of a sentence is marked by its SVO (subject-verb-object) structure as the most basic pattern (Wren & Martin, 2013). Such a case is often found in CSE, heavily influenced by its substrates. In SgE, the verbs usually appear in an uninflected form where the singular present and past tense are not morphologically marked (Tan, 2005) which occurs due to Malay and Chinese effect. CSE also has five features including copula deletion, subject drop, articles, wh- interrogative construction, and topic prominence.

The use of CSE is observable in many areas including art works such as comics. Meskin (2009) argues that comics are a hybrid art form that evolved from literature and a number of other art forms and media. With reference to whether or not comics possess the kind of value found in great works of literature, *Speaking Singlish* is one of the famous comic strips and CSE is also utilised in this comic as explained below:

- (1) You guys sibeh kayu 'very stupid'!
- (2) Think you missed it liao 'already'

This example (1) shows that Copula – the connecting link in sentences or utterances (Chang, 2016) – works differently in CSE. It may appear, while in others it is omitted. This is possible due to sociolinguistic variation. The example in sentence (2) shows the phenomenon of *subject drop*. Perotte (2014) explains that in CSE, the majority of utterances have no subjects which is related to topic prominence.

Some researchers pay attention to discussing Singaporean English. In his study, Poole (2012) proves that Singaporean English has the characteristic of lexical choices through the exemplification of spoken and written English that appear in relatively formal condition in Singapore. Regarding other aspects, Wee (2008) explores two phonological patterns in the English spoken in Singapore and Hong Kong. He draws the conclusion that English is more likely to be considered a language of Singapore than of Hong Kong since English is more nativised in Singapore and vice versa, Singapore is also more Anglicised. The other research conducted by Wulandari (2016) examines the use of SCE specific discourse element in the media. She concludes that the use of discourse elements in SCE plays a syntactic and pragmatic role. In relation to the exploration of syntactic analysis in a certain language,

(Yaacob, 2019) shows the underlying inner structure providing dynamism and the process preceding production of verbal utterances intrinsic within the Arabic syntax. Examining the uniqueness of CSE, this study attempts to explore the sentence structure of CSE in the *Speaking Singlish* comic strips, and how it differs from SE.

## Literature Review

### *English in Singapore*

Singaporeans are expected to be proficient in English since it is employed as a common language in 23 percent of Singaporean homes. Together with Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, English is extensively used in Singapore, but it's also exclusive since it is portrayed in many situations in Singapore. This includes government and business documents that should be written in English, and it is the most frequently spoken language used for inter-racial communication (Norizam, 2014).

### *Syntax and sentence structure*

Syntax deals with how sentences are constructed and users of human languages employ a great variety of possible arrangements of elements in sentences (Van Valin Jr, 2001). There are three main purposes in the analysis of sentence structure, to reveal the hierarchy in the ordering of elements, to explain how surface ambiguities come about, and to demonstrate the relatedness of certain sentences. Furthermore, Wren & Martin (2013) state that 'a faulty arrangement of words may cause a sentence to turn into utter nonsense.' O'Grady (1997) explains that Phrase Structure (PS) views sentences as having a hierarchical design in which words are grouped together into successively larger structural units. These are built around lexical syntactic categories and known as 'phrases.'

### *Colloquial Singaporean English (CSE)*

The varieties of English in Singapore are divided into two parts which are Standard Singapore English (SSE) and Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) also widely known as *Singlish* (SgE). There are a lot of features of CSE that presents a marked resemblance to Chinese (Ho, 1999). As one of the variations of English, Singlish is a stable, relatively homogeneous, highly entrenched variety of English (Brunner, 2014). SSE is a Standard English version adapted to the local Singaporean context. It possesses minimal distinctions when compared to the SE version used around the world. Diversely, CSE has major differences when compared to SE (Leimgruber, 2011). This event leads to the sociolinguistic phenomenon called *diglossia*. This term is used to illustrate the connection between CSE and SSE. SSE is normally used in contexts where high formality is involved whereas CSE is

commonly used in all other situations. CSE is also a variety of SE used as a result of a choice by speakers in informal situations but not due to inability or lack of competence to speak English properly (Norizam, 2014) .

CSE possesses five features namely copula deletion, subject drop, articles, wh- interrogative construction and topic prominence. Copula, the connecting link in sentences or utterances works differently in CSE (Chang, 2016). It may appear in certain sentences while it is omitted in others. Ho (1999) further argues that ‘be’-omission is subjected to sociolinguistic variation. The dominant utterances in CSE have no subjects (subject drop). (Perotte, 2014) proposes that this is related to topic prominence. In CSE, there is a striking tendency to place any of the most important elements (topics) of a sentence in the initial position. This placement depends on ‘the speaker’s decision and the focus or approach he or she wants to take.’ Unlike SE, which has a set of articles used along with particular nouns, Chinese and Malay do not. Therefore, in CSE, the use of articles is often wrong, omitted or added unnecessarily. Unlike SE in which wh- movement occurs when transforming a sentence, interrogative pronoun can remain in situ due to Chinese (Tan, 2005).

## Methodology

This study uses qualitative descriptive research. Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun (1993) state that qualitative research ‘investigate(s) the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials.’ The comic strip *Speaking Singlish: a companion to how Singaporeans communicate* is employed as the data source. Each comic strip accompanies a chapter of this book. In total, there are forty-five comic strips describing the use of CSE by natives. English and non-English vocabularies can be found in each of these comic strips. Similarly, the structure (grammar) of SE and CSE are scattered throughout the dialogues. In terms of vocabulary and structure, Data is in the form of sentences which are written in either CSE or SE. To maintain study objectives , the researcher selected dialogues which consist of simple, complete sentences written in CSE with either copula deletion or topic prominence.

From the forty-five comic strips in *Speaking Singlish*, the researcher excluded five comic strips for failing to meet the criteria set in the above procedure above, reducing the number to forty comic strips. The remaining comic strips contain sixty-eight sentences which fulfil the criteria. Specifically, there are 34 declaratives, 20 wh- interrogatives, 14 yes-no interrogatives, 3 imperatives and 1 exclamative. As the number of each imperative and exclamative sentence is low, the researcher also excluded in case they fail to accurately represent their own category. Instead, declaratives and interrogatives are the priorities. Apart from a sufficient number of sentences to be studied, declaratives and interrogatives have also been chosen for their diversity in structure. Data analysis needs to be well documented for the purpose of learning. Miles & Huberman (1994) divide the process of data analysis into three

parts: 1) data condensation, 2) data display, and 3) drawing conclusion /verification.

## Results

There are 25 sentences selected sentences from the dialogue. The details of the data are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** CSE sentence data

No.	Sentence	Labels
1.	You the only <i>ang moh</i> here <i>mah!</i>	S1
2.	Why you think something happened?	S2
3.	Which side you <i>sarpork ah?</i>	S3
4.	We just here to <i>destress!</i>	S4
5.	This lecture <i>sibeh sian.</i>	S5
6.	Why you scared?	S6
7.	Why you so PAP?	S7
8.	You <i>sibeh goondu leh.</i>	S8
9.	You finish the report yet <i>anot?</i>	S9
10.	Baby hungry <i>lah!</i>	S10
11.	Last time <i>neh</i> so crowded!	S11
12.	Why last time <i>neh</i> plan for more people and breakdowns?	S12
13.	You watched I-IV <i>liao!</i>	S13
14.	What you say you learnt so far?	S14
15.	You smart <i>mah!</i>	S15
16.	I smart <i>meh?</i>	S16
17.	<i>Ah Kong's</i> house near <i>meh?</i>	S17
18.	The boyfriend <i>chio anot?</i>	S18
19.	You need my help <i>anot?</i>	S19
20.	Why you smile so much?	S20
21.	I scared.	S21
22.	Here got some <i>sum seng</i> guy walking around almost naked!	S22
23.	What you mean it's ok?	S23
24.	Meow-meow <i>uplorryliao!</i>	S24
25.	You drafting your will?	S25

The sentences in table 1 show the use of CSE in *Speaking Singlish* comic strips. These sentences are classified based of CSE features as presented in table 2 while the sentences in Table 1 are classified into Table 2 as follows:

**Table 2:** Sentence classification based on CSE features

No.	Characteristics		Sentences (Labels)	Total
	CSE Features	Sentence Type		
1.	Copula Deletion	Declaratives	S1, S4, S5, S8, S10, S13, S15, S21, S24	9
		Yes-No Interrogatives	S9, S16, S17, S18, S19, S25	6
		Wh- Interrogatives	S2, S3, S6, S7, S14, S20, S23	7

### *Copula deletion of CSE*

Copula refers to the connecting link in sentences or utterances. Chang (2016) states that in SE, a copula has five properties: 1) it has a linking function which connects the subject of a proposition to its predicate, 2) it has the function of a syntactic 'hitching post' where tense and agreement features are morphologically realised, 3) it is semantically empty, 4) it cannot be deleted, and 5) contraction of the copula is possible in a certain environment. However, in the data regarding the structure of CSE obtained by the researcher copula was found to be missing in the majority of sentences – thus the feature 'copula deletion'.

It was observed that the declarative in copula deletion can be divided into four categories. The sentences are differentiated by the constitution of their predicates, that is, the predicates are constituted by 1) noun phrase, 2) adjective phrase, 3) adverb phrase and 4) verb phrase as presented in the following figures.

- (3) You the only *ang moh* heremah! (CSE)  
'You are the only Caucasian here!' (SE)

**Figure 1.** The copula deletion of CSE containing a noun phrase

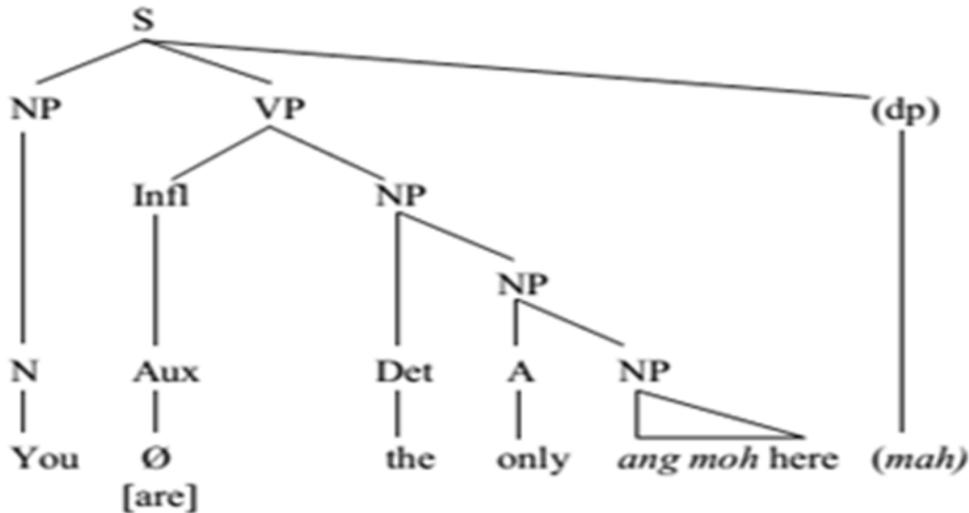
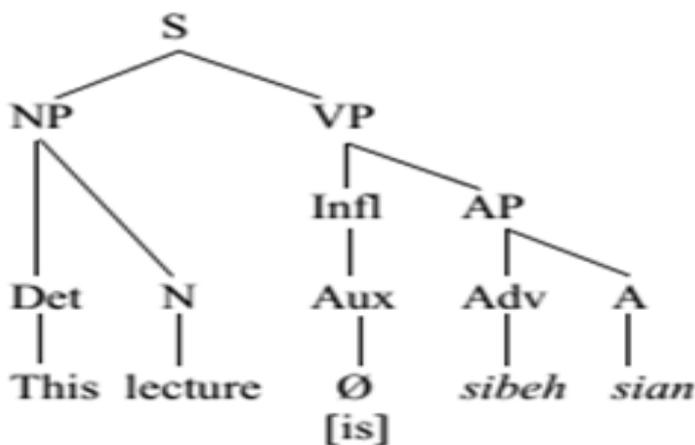


Figure 1 shows a structure built by a subject and a predicate. The subject of the sentence contains a noun phrase, the sub-head under which a construction of a noun can be found. On the other hand, the predicate of the sentence is built by a noun phrase with a discourse element (dp) followed at the end of the sentence. In the structure pertaining to CSE, a discourse element pragmatically modifies the whole structure instead of only part of the sentence. Therefore, it is placed in a separate category on its own. However, the sentence structure (3) differs from SE as indicated by the empty category under 'Infl → Aux.'

- (4) This lecture *sibehsian*. (CSE)  
'This lecture is very boring' (SE)

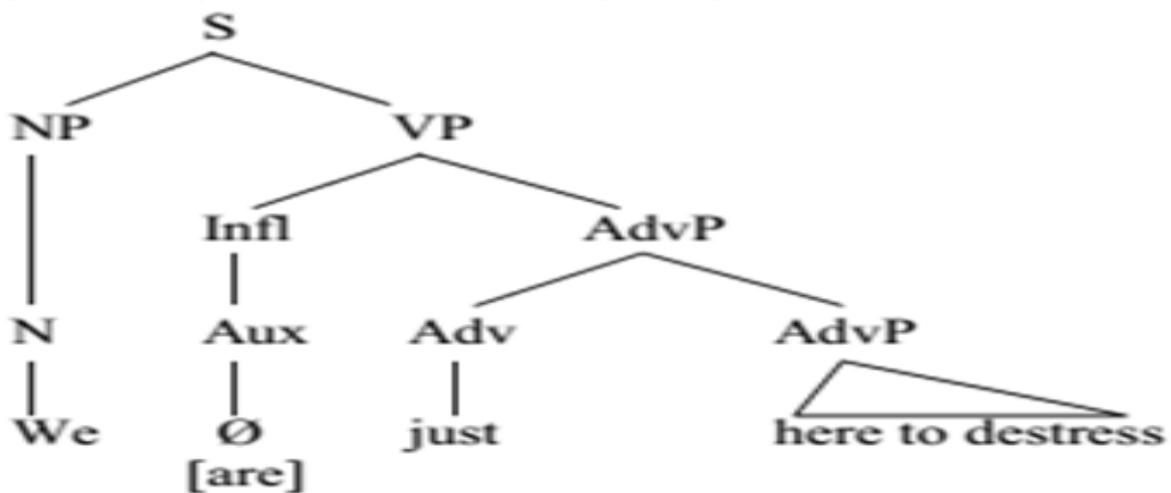
**Figure 2.** The copula deletion of CSE containing an adjective phrase



The above sentence structure (4), is constructed by a noun phrase filling the position of subject and an adjective phrase standing for the predicative position. The subject is built by a determiner and a noun. The standardised version of English has differs in structure as the predicative position is filled by a verb phrase initiated by a verb or an auxiliary verb when necessary. Sentence 4 has no verb. Therefore, an auxiliary initiates the predicate in the standardised version of the language. Like the previous section, here we can see that all ‘dp’ –s are bracketed. This indicates the non-existence of such discourse elements in SE.

- (5) We just here to destress! (CSE)  
‘We are just here to de-stress!’ (SE)

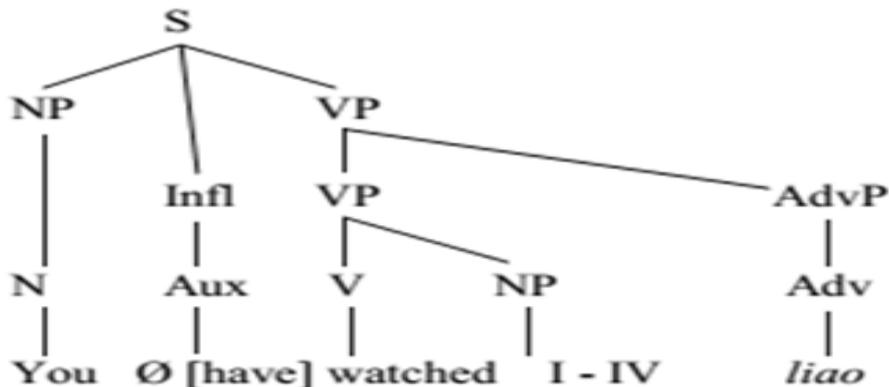
**Figure 3.** The copula deletion of CSE containing adverb phrase



Likewise, the structure of sentence (5) is constructed by a subject and a predicate. The difference from SE is the predicate is an adverb phrase.

- (6) You watched I-IV *liao!* (CSE)  
'You have watched I-IV already!' (SE)

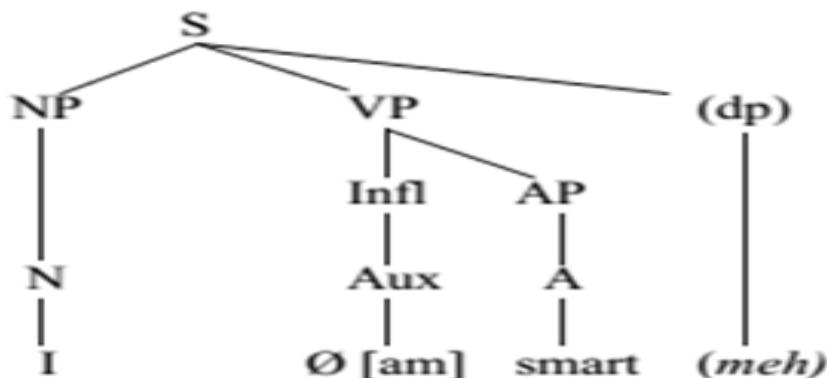
**Figure 4.** The copula deletion of CSE containing a verb phrase



The construction of the above sentence follows the subject and predicate rule in Standard English. The subject consists of a noun phrase (noun) and the predicate of a verb phrase. However, if observed more closely, we see that the adverb *liao* 'already' does not match its counterpart in SE. Meanwhile, three categories of yes-no interrogatives based on the constitution of predicate are found, including a constitution by a/an: 1) adjective, 2) adverb, or 3) verb phrase. Phrase Structure Grammar analysis regarding representative sentences can be found as follows:

- (7) I smart *meh?* (CSE)  
'Am I smart?' (SE)

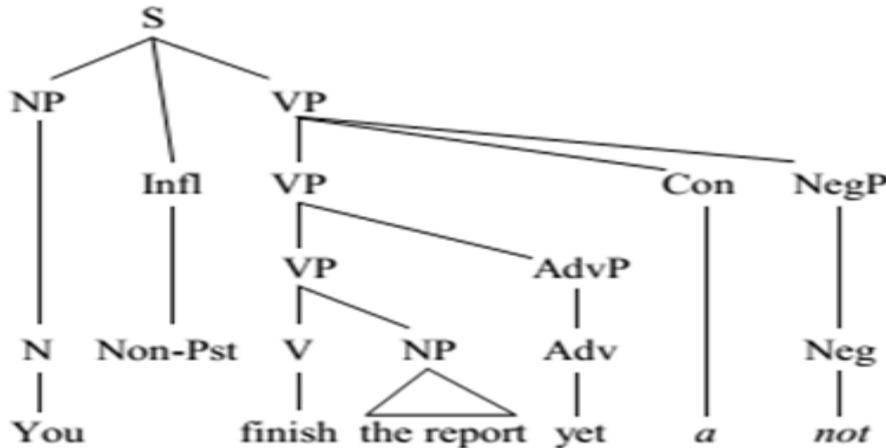
**Figure 5.** The copula deletion of CSE containing adjective phrase constituting predicate



Sentence (7) represents the yes-no interrogatives found in the comic strips. They are all constructed as declarative questions. The declarative question depends on the context to convey the speaker's intention to question but most importantly, this construct exists in SE.

- (8) You finish the report yet *anot*? (CSE)  
'Have you finished the report yet or not?' (SE)

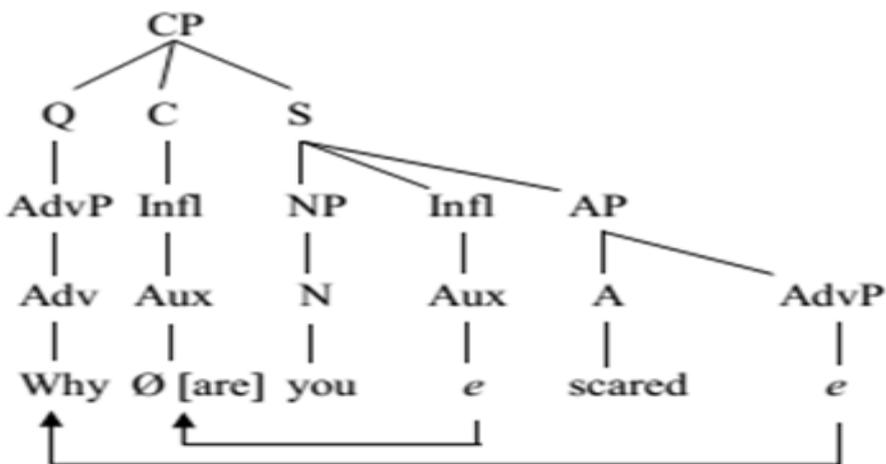
**Figure 6.** The copula deletion of CSE containing verb phrase constituting predicate



Sentence structure (8) is constituted by a noun phrase (noun) as the subject and a verb phrase as the predicate. However, there is a slight difference between them regarding their SE structure in SE. This difference is caused by the adverb 'yet' in the sentence. Another grammatical aspect noted is the use of auxiliary with the adverb 'yet', whereas an adaptation into SE would require the use of the auxiliary 'have' which is not yet emphasised in CSE. This case is similar to the use of the adverbs 'yet', 'never', and 'already' in the rest of the data. It was also found that wh- interrogatives were constructed by either an initial question as an adverb phrase or a noun phrase. Similarly, no copula is used here.

- (9) Why you scared? (CSE)  
'Why are you scared?' (SE)

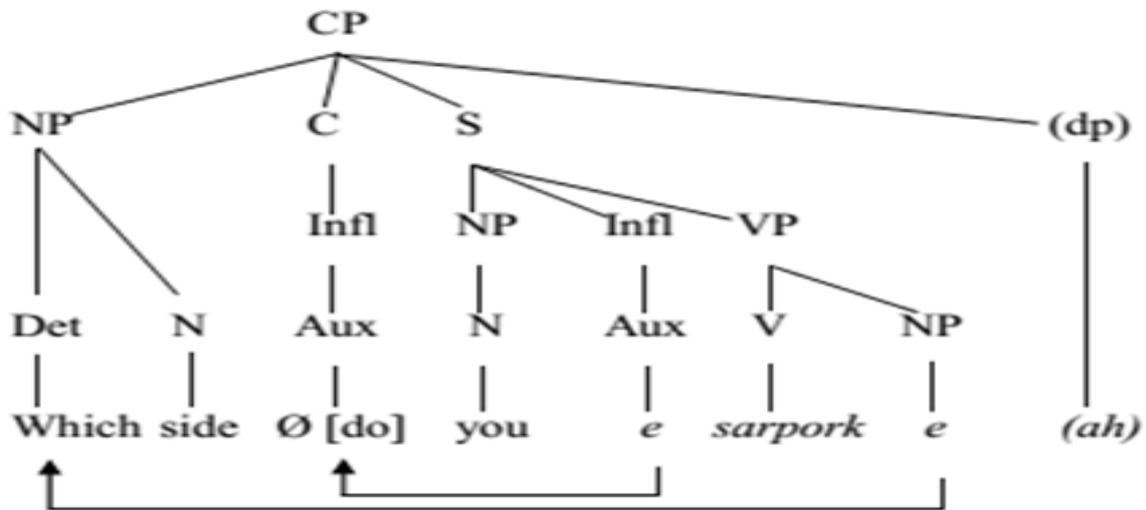
**Figure 7.** The copula deletion of CSE containing a question as an adverb phrase



The sentence above is close to proper wh- interrogatives in SE, initialised by the question ‘why’. This is how the difference of the structure of CSE and SE is presented in transformative grammar.

- (10) Which side you *sarpork ah?* (CSE)  
‘Which side do you support?’ (SE)

**Figure 8.** The copula deletion of CSE containing a question as a noun phrase



Unlike sentence (9), sentence (10) uses a noun phrase as a question, therefore a noun phrase functions as a subject and a verb phrase as a predicate. Additionally, the above figures indicate that in SE, in sentence (10), the discourse element ‘ah’ does not exist, and that the empty category under the head of ‘C’ is occupied by an auxiliary. This auxiliary is supposed to be inserted in the ‘e’ position of the deep structure of the sentence before it is inverted.

### *Sentences structure with copula deletion of CSE*

Copula deletion occurs in 88% of the data. This count consists of individual occurrence. It does not include the occurrence of copula deletion with other CSE features in the data. Table 3 – 5 shows the range of structure in sentences with copula deletion.

**Table 3:** The range of structure of copula deletion found in declarative data

No.	Sentence (in CSE)	Structure		
		Subj	Pred	dp
1.	You the only <i>ang moh</i> here <i>mah!</i>	NP	NP	✓
2.	This lecture <i>sibeh sian</i>	NP	AP	✗
3.	We just here to destress!	NP	AdvP	✗
4.	You watched I-IV <i>liao!</i>	NP	VP	✗

The declarative sentences illustrate the construction of subject and predicate. Each subject is composed of a noun phrase while the predicate ranges from a noun , adjective and adverb phrase to a verb phrase. Occasionally, the sentences are completed by a discourse element.

**Table 4:** The range of structure of copula deletion found in yes-no interrogative data

No.	Sentence (in CSE)	Structure		
		Subj	Pred	dp
1.	I smart <i>meh</i> ?	NP	AP	✓
2.	You finish the report yet <i>anot</i> ?	NP	VP	✗

Meanwhile, the yes-no interrogatives are constructed as declarative questions. Therefore, the sentence structure does not differ from previous declaratives with copula deletion. Each sentence has a subject, a predicate, and occasionally a discourse element. While a noun phrase acts as the subject, an adjective or a verb phrase is the predicate.

**Table 5:** The range of structure of copula deletion found in wh- interrogative data

No.	Sentence (in CSE)	Structure			
		Q (Wh-)	Subj	Pred	dp
1.	Why you scared?	AdvP	NP	AP	✗
2.	Which side you <i>sarpork ah</i> ?	NP	NP	VP	✓

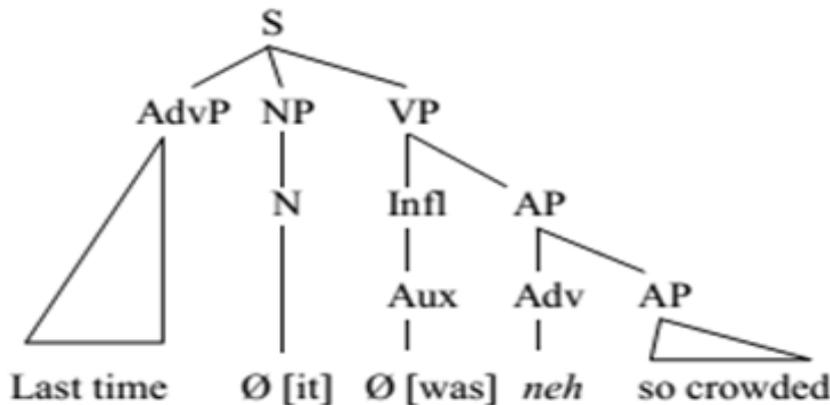
Finally, the wh- interrogatives with copula deletion are constructed by a question , followed by a subject, then a predicate and an occasional discourse element. The questions consist of either an adverb or noun phrase, while the subject is a noun phrase. However, the predicate varies in the same way as in previous types of sentences.

### **Prominence of CSE**

Perotte (2014) argues that in English the term 'topic' expresses given or old information and usually placed in the initial position whereas the part of the sentence which follows functions as the 'comment' provides the recipient with new information.

- (11) Last time *neh* so crowded! (CSE)  
       'Last time, it was not so crowded!' (SE)

**Figure 9.** Topic prominence in a declarative sentence



Sentence structure (11) is initiated by an adverb: the adverb of time. Regarding the matter of SE structure, the analysis shows a number of empty categories, particularly under the head of ‘NP’ as the subject and then missing inflexion. Another difference is the use of the word *neh* ‘never’ in the accompaniment of past tense.

#### ***Sentence Structure with CSE Prominence***

Topic prominent sentences occupy the remaining percentage data, including up to 12%. Meanwhile, wh- interrogative data was found to have the topic after the question. Tables 6 and 7 show the range of sentence structures including topic prominence.

**Table 6:** The range of structure of topic prominence found in declarative data

No.	Sentence (in CSE)	Structure	
		Topic	Pred
1.	Last time <i>neh</i> so crowded!	AdvP	AP
2.	Here got some <i>sum seng</i> guy walking around almost naked!	AdvP	VP

The declarative sentences with this feature are constructed by a topic in the initial position, followed by a predicate. While the topic is composed of adverbial, the predicate is either an adverb phrase or a verb phrase. No discourse element was found for this section in the data.

**Table 7:** The range of structure of topic prominence found in wh- interrogative data

No.	Sentence (in CSE)	Structure		
		Q (Wh-)	Topic	Pred
1.	Why last time <i>neh</i> plan for more people and breakdowns?	AdvP	AdvP	VP

Similar to the declarative type, the sentence here was found to be constructed by a question , followed by a topic then a predicate without a discourse element. The question functions as an adverb phrase while the topic also consists of an adverb phrase. Meanwhile, the predicate is a verb phrase.

### ***Structure Differences between CSE and SE***

CSE sentences which were previously analysed are shown along with their adaption into SE where marked differences appear. Regarding copula deletion, CSE shows the construction of structure by a noun phrase as subject and a range of phrases (adjective, adverb,...) functioning as a predicate. This contradicts SE, where a sentence is generally constructed in the SV(O) model, 'S' being the subject is a noun phrase while unlike CSE, 'V' being the verb acts as the predicate. In case no verb is found, SE maintains that a linking verb – copula – should be used, completing the SV model. There are other cases where verbs like 'be' are used alongside the main verb, here being an auxiliary – also a copula, e.g. in continuous and perfect tenses.

Adverbs such as 'yet', 'never', and 'already' are not used with perfect tense like they are supposed to in SE. In the data of CSE sentences, they are used with simple tenses instead. Unlike SE, they are also used in past contexts without being marked as one. The unmarked is also found in plural verbs. The noun 'guy' is found to be that of plural – being accompanied by 'some', but is left unmarked.

Finally, a difference is found in the structure of sentences which are topic prominent. In CSE, the word order starts from the topic, regardless of being adverbial. Even in the interrogative form, the topic is placed immediately after the question word, while in declarative this arrangement could be found in SE. According to Perotte the incidence in CSE is up to 87.5% (2014). In addition, the use of subject and copula also differs. Neither can be found in CSE data: the topic is immediately followed by a predicate. However, in SE, a subject and a copula should be clarified, whether in declarative or interrogative, with a certain structure for its type of sentence.

### **Discussion**

These findings regarding copula deletion agree with the result of Chang's study. Chang (2016) points out the asymmetric nature of the lack of morphological realisations of features concerning verbal elements in CSE. He argues that the loss of the morphological hitching post function of the copula in CSE leads to a higher tendency for it to be deleted. This is particularly observed 'when the copula does not perform any other significant function.' This phenomenon is different from SE in which the copula bears many responsibilities: it satisfies

the requirement that every English sentence must have a verb, it links the subject to the rest of the sentence, and it is a morphological hitching post for features such as number, person and tense .

However, in CSE there is a striking tendency to place the topic of a sentence at the beginning. This placement depends on 'the speaker's decision and the focus or approach he or she wants to take. This tendency causes a number of sentences in CSE to have adverbs/adverbials before the verb, or in the initial position. Another trait of this version of language is 'the frequent use of adverbials such as "already" and "always" to express the perfective aspect in English' without the auxiliary 'has' (Tan, 2005).

The finding of adverbs functioning as topics being placed in the initial position coincides with Perotte's study (2014). In his study, the majority of each sentence which has an adjunct (adverb) of time shares a certain particularity, that is that the adjunct (adverb) has been placed at the front. He explains that the incidence of this phenomenon is 87.5 %. It is also revealed, that it is not only the adverb of time but also of place which undergoes this 'fronting' phenomenon. The number of occurrences is beyond normal if observed from SE patterns.

## **Conclusion**

After analysing the data, it is found that the sentence structure of CSE is generally constructed by one subject, one predicate, and occasionally one discourse element. The subject is a noun phrase while the predicate varies amongst noun, adjective, adverb and verb phrases – particularly in copula deletion. However, the exceptions in sentences where topic prominence occurred is also revealed. The sentences were initially constructed with their topic (adverb of place/time) or after the wh- question word.

There are several differences between the sentence structure of CSE found in the comic strips '*Speaking Singlish*' and that of SE. Firstly, a variation was found in the use of copula which is compulsory in SE but may be dismissed under certain conditions in CSE. Secondly, the topic of sentences usually subject in SE was commonly adverbials in the data pertaining to CSE, and placed at or around the initial position. Third, the use of discourse elements which did not exist in SE. Fourth, the use of the adverb 'yet', 'never' and 'already' with simple tense in CSE but perfect tense in SE. Lastly, the unmarked plural noun and past tense verb in CSE which usually marked in SE.

These differences, especially concerning tenses and plurality, may cause ambiguity in CSE. Hence, when non-natives are exposed to CSE, they may have a harder time comprehending the timeline and plurality in particular, when numbers were not included in conversations. There were also cases where the subject was dropped, as seen in topic prominent sentences,



and listeners have to be able to conclude to whom or what was being talked about. All these characteristics point to CSE being a heavily context-based language. Unlike SE where sentences have to maintain a certain structure, the use of CSE amongst 'people in the same boat' appears to be much more efficient than amongst strangers where aspects like subject and timeline have to be elucidated. Hence, when speaking with strangers, CSE may become inefficient. On the contrary, SE is efficient in this case as its detailed structure provides necessary information.

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