Indeterminate determiners: a case study of Singlish prenominal relative clauses

Background Singlish, a contact language spoken in Singapore, is also known as Colloquial Singaporean English in the literature, in directly reflection of the fact that the bulk of the Singlish lexical inventory is drawn from English. Despite historically having been labelled a type of English, the intelligibility of Singlish to speakers of other standard English dialects is limited, due in large part to the fact that the syntactic configuration of Singlish patterns much more closely with its Chinese substrate varieties of Southern Min, Cantonese, and Mandarin, than English (for an overview, see Bao 2015). The structural similarity between Singlish and Chinese has been well-documented particularly in the clausal domain (see, e.g. Gupta 1992; Sato and Kim 2012; Lee 2022), but the same cannot be said of the nominal domain. Indeed, Alsagoff and Ho (1998) argue that the influence of Chinese on relativisation structures in Singlish is much more limited than we might expect, given the otherwise rampant manifestation of Chinese-like structures elsewhere throughout Singlish; one of their key claims is that Singlish, like English and unlike Chinese, only allows for postnominal relative clauses (RCs) and not prenominal ones, on the basis of contrasts such as the following:

(1) [$_{\text{DP}}$ the man [$_{\text{RC}}$ sell ice cream one]]

(2) * [$_{\text{DP}}$ [$_{\text{RC}}$ one sell ice cream] the man]

More recently, however, Lee (2023) has demonstrated that Singlish does in fact have prenominal relative clauses; furthermore, the basic Singlish relativisation strategy does not involve the use of *one* within the RC, *pace* Alsagoff and Ho (1998); this is exemplified in (3). That is, in addition to the English-like postnominal relative clause construction, as in (3a), Singlish also allows for the relative clause to precede the head noun which it modifies, as in (3b). Interestingly, the prenominal RC (PreRC) in Singlish can also optionally be preceded by a definite determiner *the*.

(3) [$_{\text{HEAD}}$ that man] that sells ice cream

a. [$_{\text{HEAD}}$ that **man**] that sell ice cream

b. (the) sell ice cream [$_{\text{HEAD}}$ that **man**]

The overall paradigm depicted in Lee (2023) is one in which PreRCs are subject to additional constraints relative to the postnominal English-style RCs, such as being amenable only to a restrictive interpretation. At the same time, no differences are observed between the so-called Chinese-style RCs and the determiner-doubling RCs (which are characterised by the absence/presence of the left-edge *the* respectively). Consequently, Lee (2023) offers an analysis of this paradigm wherein the interpretational content of both types of PreRC are fully established prior to the optional insertion of the left-edge determiner (henceforth Det_{RC}).

The puzzle However, the distributional pattern of Det_{RC} is much more complex than the sketch portrayed in Lee (2023), and the added empirical coverage afforded by an enriched data set will allow us to more accurately discern the structures associated with PreRCs in Singlish, which will in turn further our understanding of the potential outcomes of contact between disparate nominal structures from different languages. The primary desideratum of the present discussion is to present additional data pertaining to the distribution of the seemingly extraneous Det_{RC}, in view of developing an analysis which is able to account for the intricate distributional pattern that emerges from the enriched data set.

The data The first empirical observation (observation I) relates to the non-availability of Det_{RC} when the PreRC contains an object gap and not a subject gap. That is, while Det_{RC} is (at least sometimes) available in subject relatives such as (3b), where the head noun corresponds to the subject of the relative clause, object relatives, where the head noun corresponds to the direct object of the relative clause, disallow the instantiation of Det_{RC} altogether.

(4) [$_{\text{DP}}$ (the) [$_{\text{RC}}$ t_i sell ice cream] [$_{\text{HEAD}}$ that **man**]$_i$]

(5) [$_{\text{DP}}$ (*the) [$_{\text{RC}}$ John help t_i] [$_{\text{HEAD}}$ that **man**]$_i$]

The second empirical observation (observation II) relates to the sensitivity of the PreRC to the grammatical role of the containing DP when determining whether Det_{RC} can be dropped. In other words, when the PreRC is instantiated as a clausal subject, Det_{RC} is entirely optional. Conversely, when the PreRC serves as the verbal complement, the elision of Det_{RC} results in mild degradation.

(6) I meeting [??(the) sell ice cream that man] later.

(7) [(The) sell ice that man] retire already.

Interestingly, this contrast is preserved even for speakers who generally disprefer PreRCs containing Det_{RC}: Det_{RC} is attested to be more acceptable when the containing PreRC is in object position.

In sum, then, we have seen that the distribution of the lexical item *the* within the Singlish PreRC is unexpected if it were a simple definite determiner as Lee (2023) argues. In light of the new empirical observations presented here, I now propose a more nuanced treatment of the lexical item *the* in the Singlish PreRC.

Analysis Observation I indicates that Det_{RC} does not function as a genuine determiner that heads the entire relativised nominal, as it instead appears to collocate with the subject gap that arises at the left edge of a subject relative PreRC. Instead, I propose that Det_{RC} is a genuine determiner which heads the subject of the relative clause. First, consider that Singlish PreRCs are obligatorily interpreted restrictively, as Lee (2023) notes. Now, consider that Cinque (2020) proposes an analysis of restrictive RCs which is derived by having two heads within the same RC, an external head, which is the one which is pronounced, and a matching internal head which, in English, comprises a relative pronoun which covaries with the human/non-human distinction and a corresponding silent functional noun. Of particular interest to the present analysis is a footnote in which Cinque (2020) observes that historically, this internal head used to co-occur with an overt *the* to form a *the-which* sequence (fn. 21; see also Bianchi 2000 for a proposal that the relative pronoun *which* in Modern English is itself also preceded by a silent determiner). Singlish, as a *pro*-drop language (Sato and Kim 2012), thus allows for the appearance of *the* without an overt relative pronoun. The contrast between subject and object relatives can also be captured since Cinque's analysis allows for the internal head to remain in-situ (e.g. for Chinese; p. 65). Since Singlish patterns with Chinese in that it allows for *wh*-elements to be left in-situ, the same long-distance licensing mechanism can also account for why we do not see Det_{RC} with object relatives, since it never moves to the left edge of the RC, and thus, the DP. This raises the question: is there an analogue to Det_{RC} in the head-adjacent position for object relatives? An initial observation is that there might be:

(8) John buy the that book

However, this analysis of the head-adjacent instance of *the* is tempered by the fact that this *the* may also occur with subject relatives:

(9) (the) sell ice cream (the) that man

The head-adjacent *the* may be better analysed as a calque of the Mandarin linker *de*, which is homophonous with *the* in Singlish. The coincidence of *de* and *the* is also reminiscent of Simpson's (2001) analysis of Mandarin RCs, where the obligatory instantiation of *de* is treated as an instance of a (bleached) determiner; however, for reasons of space, I leave further discussion of this intriguing overlap for the presentation proper.

Turning to observation II: I suggest that it follows from a prosodic requirement that applies to *pro* when it is used as a relative pronoun, where its instantiation at the left edge of a clausal boundary forces a prosodic break. If, however, there is additional material to its left, this prosodic break is not required; the optionally silent *the* which appears at the left edge of the RC can thus be externalised to fulfill this prosodic requirement, as corroborated by the fact that the elision of *the* in the object PreRC is fully ameliorated if there is a prosodic break in its place, represented using an em-dash as follows (cf. 6):

(10) I meeting– sell ice cream that man later.

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