

RADICAL PRO DROP AND
FUSIONAL PRONOMINAL
MORPHOLOGY IN COLLOQUIAL
SINGAPORE ENGLISH: REPLY TO
NEELEMAN AND SZENDRŐI

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**1 Neeleman and Szendrői's (2007) Radical-Pro-Drop
Generalization**

Neeleman and Szendrői (2007) (N&S) propose that *radical pro drop* (RPD), namely, the liberal omission of any grammatical argument in languages like Chinese, requires agglutinating morphology on pronouns. N&S derive this generalization from three assumptions: (a) null arguments are zero spell-outs of regular pronouns (Perlmutter 1971); (b) spell-out rules for pronouns may target nonterminal nodes in the syntax (Weerman and Evers-Vermeul 2002); and (c) the Elsewhere Principle (Kiparsky 1973) obtains, with its three notable features shown in (1a–c).

- (1) 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 2007:687)

Using English and Japanese, I illustrate here how the RPD generalization is derived. Suppose that RPD is due to the spell-out rule in (2). English pronouns are fusional for case, while Japanese pronouns are agglutinating. This difference is captured by rules for *him* and *kare* in (3) and (4a–b), respectively.¹ N&S use the features [+p(ronominal), –a(naphoric)] to indicate that K(ase)P is a pronoun (p. 682).

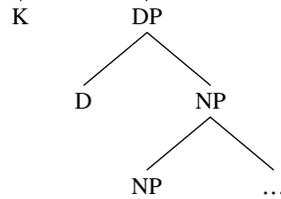
- (2) $[_{KP} +p, -a] \Leftrightarrow \emptyset$
(N&S 2007:682)
- (3) $[_{KP} +p, -a, 3, SG, M, ACC] \Leftrightarrow /him/$
(cf. N&S 2007:687)
- (4) a. $[_{NP} +p, -a, 3, SG, M] \Leftrightarrow /kare/$
b. $[_{K} ACC] \Leftrightarrow /o/$
(N&S 2007:688)

RPD is unavailable in English because the Elsewhere Principle always prefers overt spell-out rules such as (3) over the zero spell-out rule in (2). Consider (5) for English pronouns.

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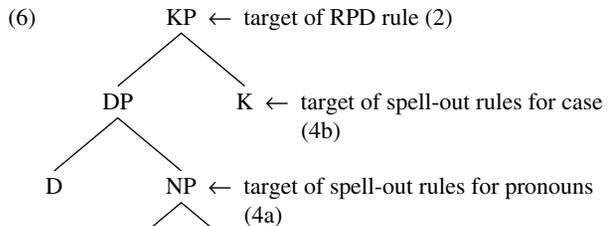
¹ The following abbreviations are used in this squib: 1/3 = first/third person; –a = –anaphoric; ACC = accusative; M = masculine; +p = +pronominal; PL = plural; SG = singular.

(5) target of spell-out rules → KP ← target of RPD rule (2)
for pronouns (3)



(cf. N&S 2007:688)

(2) and (3) both target the KP. (3) blocks (2) due to (1b) because (3) realizes more features (i.e., Case and ϕ -features) than (2). Now, compare (5) with (6) for Japanese pronouns.



(cf. N&S 2007:688)

(2) and (4a) do not compete in (6). (2) is more compliant with (1a) than (4a), but (4a) is more compliant with (1b) than (2). As a result, neither rule blocks the other. Thus, Japanese emerges as an RPD language. Two notes are in order. First, N&S's analysis allows for the possibility that languages with fusional pronominal morphology have *some* version of the pro-drop option. Spanish and Italian allow (subject) drop. This is captured by the context-sensitive rule in (7).

(7) $[_{KP} +p, -a, \phi_i] \Leftrightarrow \emptyset / _ [\phi_i]$
(N&S 2007:687)

(7) is not in an elsewhere relation with rules like (3): (7) contains agreement that (3) lacks, whereas (3) mentions particular ϕ -features that (7) is insensitive to. Second, N&S's analysis predicts that RPD is possible in a language as long as its pronominal paradigm has *some* KP-internal agglutinating morphology (case, number, or some other nominal features). Thus, Chinese allows RPD, N&S argue, because plural pronouns are derived from singular variants by the plural morpheme *men*, as illustrated in (8a–b).

(8) a. $[_{NP} +p, -a, 1, SG] \Leftrightarrow /w\check{o}/$
b. $[_{PL}] \Leftrightarrow /men/$
(N&S 2007:689)

N&S show that the RPD generalization is crosslinguistically robust by testing it against a sample of twenty languages and *The World*

Atlas of Language Structures (Haspelmath et al. 2005). In this squib, I present data from Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) that question the robustness of the RPD generalization. In section 2, I provide examples showing that CSE is an RPD language and point out that this variety has fusional pronominal morphology, just like Standard English. These results indicate that the RPD option is not necessarily conditioned by the agglutinative morphology on pronouns. I also review Saito's (2007) generalization that RPD is made possible by lack of agreement and Caseless pro and show that the CSE facts still present a challenge to this generalization. In section 3, I suggest a different analysis of RPD, which draws on the base-generated topic structure in CSE and its substrate Chinese language(s). In section 4, I discuss implications of the CSE facts for the pluralistic etiology of RPD. Section 5 is the conclusion.

2 Radical Pro Drop and Fusional Pronominal Paradigms in Colloquial Singapore English

CSE is a variety of English spoken in Singapore that has emerged as a result of intense language contact between Standard English and local varieties of Malay and Chinese (and to a lesser extent, Tamil). Some linguists, notably Platt (1975), have termed CSE a "creoloid," a contact variety that has many creolelike features but lacks the usual pidgin stage required in a traditional creole continuum. As extensively documented in the literature on Singapore English (Bao 2001, 2005, Bao and Lye 2005, Deterding, Low, and Brown 2003, Ho and Platt 1993, Pakir 1991, Platt and Ho 1983, 1989, Platt and Weber 1980, Ritchie 1986), this variety shows a spectacular range of syntactic differences from Standard English that can be traced back to the systemic substrate influences of Chinese. As observed by Alsagoff and Ho (1998), Bao (2001), Gupta (1994), Platt and Weber (1980), Tan (2003, 2007, 2009), and Tay (1979), CSE allows liberal omission of subjects, objects, and possessors, as shown in (9a–c). (Omitted pronouns are italicized.)

- (9) a. After \emptyset get some sickness, \emptyset can't help it.
'After *one* falls ill, *one* can't help it.'
- b. I never try \emptyset before.
'I've never tried *it* before.'
- c. \emptyset Head very pain.
'*My* head is very painful.'
- ((9a–b) from Tan 2003:1; (9c) from Liangcai Chan, pers. comm.)

Thus, N&S predict that the pronominal system in CSE should have some KP-internal agglutinating morphology. This prediction is false because pronouns in CSE are fusional in every sense that pronouns in Standard English are; the form each pronoun takes is based on case and number, 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). Examples (10a–b) show that nominative pronouns are possible in subject position but not in object position and that accusative pronouns are possible in object position but not in subject position. Thus, CSE pronouns are fusional for case.

- (10) a. *He/*Him* like Cindy a lot.
 b. Cindy like *him/*he*, meh? (*meh* = discourse particle)
 (Lionel Wee, pers. comm.)

Recall that a language with otherwise fusional morphology could still have some version of pro drop under N&S's analysis if it exhibits syntactic agreement. Platt and Ho (1983) and Tan (2003, 2007, 2009), however, provide evidence that the ending *-s*, the reflex of the obligatory third person singular present agreement in Standard English, is not a mandatory exponent of the same feature set in CSE. This point is illustrated in (11a–b) (see also (10a–b)).

- (11) a. I got very kind mother. (She) *Look* after the kids.
 b. So (he) *have* to go there?
 ((11a) from Platt and Ho 1983:39; (11b) from Tan 2003: 5)

In (11a–b), *-s* is absent in CSE in the environments under which it is obligatory in Standard English. Thus, agreement is generally syntactically irrelevant in CSE, unlike in classical pro-drop languages (Rizzi 1982, Taraldsen 1978). It is not that CSE lacks subject-verb agreement altogether; more formal varieties of Singapore English do have such agreement, just like Standard English. Most likely, the optionality/free variation of agreement documented in current CSE is the result of ongoing grammatical competition between the substrate (Chinese: no agreement) and superstrate (English: forced agreement) influences. Recall that, under N&S's analysis, it suffices for a language to have at least *one* recognizable instance of agglutinating morphology on personal pronouns to trigger the RPD option. It is difficult to prove that CSE has *no* agglutinating morphology on any feature of the pronouns. However, there is by now a relatively established inventory of morpho-syntactic features within the (extended) 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 like that in the superstrate Standard English in all relevant respects. Therefore, CSE presents a genuine challenge to the RPD generalization.

In a different vein, Saito (2007) argues that RPD languages (a) lack (forced) agreement *and* (b) have Caseless pro. In these languages, a Caseless pro may be freely inserted at LF because it has no uninterpretable features that must be checked and deleted, giving rise to RPD. Japanese has both of these features (Kuno 1973, Kuroda 1988, Perlmutter 1972). Italian and Spanish have neither of these properties: they have agreement and pro has Case. As an *LI* referee notes, it is

tempting to connect Saito's proposal to the link between case-agglutinating pronouns and RPD: overt pronouns in Italian and Spanish are fusional for case while those in Japanese are agglutinative. However, the facts in CSE still present a challenge to Saito's generalization because CSE allows RPD even though its pronouns are fusional for case (recall (10a–b)). In other words, to the extent that the morphological structure of overt pronouns mirrors that of silent pronouns, the CSE facts further indicate that RPD is not conditioned by agglutinating pronominal morphology.

3 Topic Prominence, Base-Generated Topic Structure, and Predication

In this section, I suggest an alternative analysis of RPD in CSE that draws on the base-generated topic structure independently available in this variety and its substrate Chinese language(s). N&S (pp. 674–676) point out that Huang's (1984) classical attempt to unify RPD and topic drop is difficult to sustain. Huang argues that zero topics in Chinese obey conditions on movement, but RPD is not always so constrained. For example, null arguments in Japanese are island-insensitive even though extraction out of relative clauses results in ungrammaticality (Nakamura 1991, Saito 1985). However, evidence from hanging topics in CSE suggests an alternative analysis, which still allows us to maintain the link between topic prominence and RPD but which does not involve movement. Tan (2007, 2009) observes that CSE has the topic construction illustrated in (12a–b), in which the sentence-initial topic does not properly relate to either a subject or an object within the clause.

- (12) a. *Australia*, I've been to Perth.
 b. *Local food*, you must try chicken rice.
 (Tan 2009:26, 27)

In these examples, it is hard to imagine the derivation in which the italicized topic is displaced from a position within the clause to the sentence-initial position by movement. Bao (2001) and Tan (2003, 2007, 2009) propose that RPD in CSE is possible because of the interpretive strategy in (13a), which hinges on the specific phrase structure configuration shown in (13b).

- (13) a. [_{TP} α [_{TP} . . . β . . .]], where α is a major category and β , possibly empty, is related to α .
 (Xu and Langendoen 1985:20)
 b. [_{TopP} Top [_{TP} . . .]]
 (Bao 2001:291, with a minor modification)

According to this analysis, a null argument construction is base-generated with a topic element in the α position linked to the null argument in the β position by a movement-free interpretive rule (see also discussion below). This analysis is hardly surprising given the systemic grammatical influence on the grammar of CSE from Chinese, which is by now

widely acknowledged to be a topic-prominent language (Li and Thompson 1976, Tsao 1977). As noted by an *LI* referee, an important question remains about how the availability of the topic-prominent configuration in (13b) explains the possibility of having null arguments. For example, Italian, a non-RPD language, allows hanging topics as shown in (13b), but precisely these DPs must be resumed by an overt pronoun sentence-internally (see Frascarelli 2007). Clearly, then, what is responsible for the emergence of the RPD property is the overall topic-prominent nature of the language in question. Though a full-fledged explanation for the link between the two properties cannot be worked out for reasons of space, I hypothesize that the link may well be established by predication (see Sato and Kim 2010 for further development of this hypothesis). Suppose that, because of its robust topic-prominent structure, a language *L* has developed a distinct semantic interface mechanism of predication holding between a base-generated topic and the TP. This mechanism satisfies all the selectional and structural requirements within the TP. As a result, *L* has no need to insert anything in the apparent argument positions within the TP because the syntactic roles served by these positions are satisfied instead by the base-generated topic through predication. This suggestion has the far-reaching implication that many of the licensing processes that have been hypothesized to take place in the narrow syntax of English and other similar languages (e.g., movement, configurational argument structure, selection) may instead apply in a different form at the semantic interface in topic-prominent languages (Fukui and Sakai 2003:366–368).

4 Toward a Pluralistic View of the Etiology of Radical Pro Drop

As an *LI* referee points out, the results of this squib raise important questions. Among others, is CSE an isolated counterexample to N&S's generalization or are there more languages of this type that would falsify it? This question is important because N&S observe that certain creole languages (Jamaican Creole, Tok Pisin, and Papiamentu) support, rather than contradict, the RPD generalization. In principle, a creole language should be able to allow RPD if its grammar has borrowed and stabilized the robust topic-prominent structure from its substrate languages, as is the case with CSE. Further examination might reveal that Chinese Pidgin English, a now extinct pidgin language between English and Chinese languages, exhibits the same pattern as CSE because it allows null subjects and objects and its pronouns are fusional or invariant for case but its grammar has received substrate influences from Cantonese, a topic-prominent language (see Smith and Matthews 2005). What makes CSE unique, then, is its unique contact ecology: it is one of the few languages whose syntax has systematically integrated the grammar of a topic-prominent language. Then it is not surprising that the three creole languages discussed

by N&S do not allow RPD because none of these varieties is topic-prominent.

My analysis suggests a reconsideration of the etiology of RPD: the reason that Chinese and Japanese permit RPD may be due not to their agglutinating structure for pronouns, as argued by N&S, but to their topic-prominent structure. My analysis can be extended to cover many other (families of) languages in Asia—including Korean (Kim 2007); Turkish (Kılıçaslan 1998); Thai (Goddard 2005); Lisu (Li and Thompson 1976); Indonesian, Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Madurese, and the Sasak languages of Lombok (Soemartono 2007); and Dravidian/Indo-Aryan languages (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam; Hindi-Urdu, Assamese, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi; Junghare 1985, 1990, Mohanan 1983)—because they are all topic-prominent languages (albeit to varying degrees) and allow RPD. American Sign Language, which is known to permit pro drop, is also topic-prominent (Friedman 1976, Li and Thompson 1976, Lillo-Martin 1991).

This squib indicates that there is more than one grammatical source for the liberal omission of grammatical elements in the syntax. Classical pro-drop languages like Spanish, Greek, Italian, Occitan, Pashto, and Catalan allow agreement-based drop because their inflectional morphology is rich enough to recover the missing element from agreement. Agreementless, topic-prominent languages allow RPD because of the distinct topic structure underlain by topic prominence. Languages such as English, Dutch, and Swedish do not permit RPD because they are not topic-prominent and their agreement morphology is meager. Given space limitations and the unavailability of data sources, however, I must leave a wide-ranging investigation of whether or not this view of the typology of RPD can cover other languages discussed by N&S (e.g., Kokota, Cheke Holo, Maybrat, and all other languages in their large-scale survey) for another occasion.

5 Conclusions

CSE challenges N&S's (2007) generalization that RPD requires agglutinative morphology on pronouns because it permits RPD but its pronominal paradigm is fusional for case and all other nominal features, as in Standard English. The true nature of RPD in CSE lies in the topic structure borrowed from its superstrate language(s), in which a null argument is licensed by a sentence-initial topic through predication. This analysis not only is consistent with N&S's observation that other creoles like Jamaican Creole, Tok Pisin, and Papiamentu lack RPD but also can be generalized to many other topic-prominent languages with RPD. CSE presents a unique testing ground for the predictions of the RPD generalization because it is thus far the only well-documented creoloid whose syntax has experienced a systemic substratist transfer from Chinese. The most important implication of the squib is that RPD may have more than one grammatical source: (a) very rich agreement and (b) overall topic prominence.

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