SYSTEMIC TRANSFER, TOPIC PROMINENCE, AND THE BARE CONDITIONAL IN SINGAPORE ENGLISH

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Colloquial Singapore English has a novel conditional construction in which the conditional clause is not marked morphosyntactically, and must precede the consequent clause. We show that Singapore English, like Chinese, the main substrate language, is topic prominent, and the novel conditional construction is a direct consequence of this new typological status. We analyze the unmarked conditional clause as topic, a basic syntactic position in topic prominent languages. Our analysis shows that substrate influence is systemic: the entire cluster of properties associated with topic prominence is transferred from Chinese to Singapore English.

**KEYWORDS:** Singapore English, Chinese, language contact, pidgin and creole, conditional clause, substrate influence, topic prominence, relexification

**Introduction**

In English, conditional clauses are typically introduced by *if*. Three specimens are given in (1) (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 738).

(1)  
\begin{enumerate}
    \item a. If you touch that wire, you will get an electric shock.
    \item b. If she earns $1000 a week, she is better off than me.
    \item c. If she bought it at that price, she got a bargain.
\end{enumerate}

Typically, the *if*-clause is analyzed as an adverbial modifying the main clause. Like other adverbial clauses, the *if*-clause may follow the main clause, cf. (2).

(2)  
\begin{enumerate}
    \item a. You will get an electric shock, if you touch that wire.
    \item b. She is better off than me, if she earns $1000 a week.
    \item c. She got a bargain, if she bought it at that price.
\end{enumerate}
Of course, the conditional clause can also be introduced by expressions like
unless, as long as, and so on; see Huddleston and Pullum (2002). For con-     
venience we will call these expressions if-words. In vernacular Singapore English,\(^1\) conditionals introduced by if-words are commonplace, and require no further comment. Alongside the English-style conditional construction, however, we find in Singapore English a conditional construction in which the conditional clause is not subordinated by if or any of the other subordinating conjunctions. Two specimens are shown in (3).

(3) a. Don’t want egg, please inform first.
   ‘If you don’t want egg, please inform us first.’

b. You jump, I jump.
   ‘If you jump, I’ll jump.’

(3a) is taken from the sign posted at a small diner which serves fried noodles, in which egg is an optional ingredient, and (3b) from a local television comedy skit parodying a scene in the movie Titanic. These two sentences are interpreted in the same way as regular conditional sentences are interpreted, even though the conditional clause, set in italic in (3), is not preceded by subordinators such as if. For ease of reference we will call this type of conditional clause BARE CONDITIONAL. As in Chinese, the bare conditional construction is highly productive in Singapore English, and can be readily observed in all sorts of informal context. This is especially striking, given the fact that English, the lexifier, disallows bare conditionals of the type exemplified in (3a). We will return to conditionals in Section 3.

\(^1\) A brief note on terminology. The term ‘English’ refers to scholastic English, as described in grammar books such as Biber et al. (1999) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002). Since English serves only as a heuristic tool for illustrative purposes, we will ignore its regional, social, and registral differences. ‘Singapore English’ refers to the vernacular variety of English spoken in Singapore, which is classified as a creoloid in Platt (1975) and as the L variety in diglossic opposition to scholastic English in Gupta (1994). Bao (2001) regards it as an endogenous creole which developed in a contact ecology with a linguistically homogeneous immigrant population in permanent or semi-permanent settlement. The term ‘creole’ is used in the socioeconomic sense of Alleyne (1971), Chaudenson (1977, 2001), and Mufwene (1991, 2001). Readers who are interested in the general situation of the English language in Singapore may consult Platt and Weber (1980), Platt and Ho (1993), Pakir (1991), Gupta (1994), Ziegeler (2000), and Bao (2001), among many others.
Singapore English\textsuperscript{2} emerges and develops in a contact ecology that includes Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English. These four are now designated as the official languages of Singapore, with English having the additional role of a ‘working’ language. This language mix has been constant in Singapore’s short history. Although Malay and Tamil (and other South Asian languages) are part of the contact ecology, their influence on the grammar of Singapore English has been negligible. Some scholars, notably Gupta (1994), see influence from Bazaar Malay, the Malay-lexified pidgin that preceded English as the lingua franca of early Singapore, and from Baba Malay, the Malay-lexified patois with a Minnan substrate that is the native tongue of a small but economically and politically important segment of the Chinese community. While this view is historically plausible, there has been a dearth of hard linguistic evidence from Singapore English in support of it. With the possible exception of the adversary passive marker \textit{kena} (\textit{I kena scold} ‘I was scolded’), none of the features of Baba Malay discussed in Shellabear (1913), Pakir (1986), and Ansaldo and Matthews (1999) has been re-relexified into Singapore English. Even in the case of \textit{kena}, which means ‘strike, suffer’ in Malay and Baba Malay, it needs to be argued that it is derived from Baba Malay, instead of Malay directly. Chinese influence on Singapore English has been profound. We will therefore look to Chinese for the origin of the bare conditional in Singapore English.

Undoubtedly, the proper analysis of the bare conditional construction will shed light on the nature of substrate transfer in contact ecologies with an active and accessible homogeneous substratum. The ready access to the linguistic substratum creates a sociolinguistic matrix which is conducive for substrate transfer to target entire grammatical subsystems, instead of random individual features. How a grammatical subsystem is defined crucially

\textsuperscript{2} The term ‘Chinese’ is used as a cover term for the various dialects spoken in Singapore, some of which are mutually unintelligible. The majority of the early immigrants to Singapore speak Cantonese and the Minnan dialects of Hokkien and Teochew. Although Mandarin is not an indigenous dialect, it is the medium of instruction in schools established by the Chinese civic societies, especially after the Chinese Revolution of 1911. Efforts to popularize Mandarin within the Chinese community started in the late 19th century, and have continued since independence in 1965 (Turnbull, 1977). Now, it is the dominant dialect, especially among young Chinese Singaporeans. Mandarin should not be dismissed as an irrelevant dialect in the ecology of Singapore English. Although they are mutually unintelligible, the dialects share a common grammatical core (Chao, 1968), which includes topic prominence. For this reason we will cite Mandarin data only.
depends on one’s theoretical orientation. Since the tenor and conclusion of our argument will not be affected by theoretically-informed definition, we will not attempt one here. For our purpose, a grammatical subsystem consists of properties that cluster together. By systemic transfer, we mean that when one substrate feature transfers, the other features in the cluster – the grammatical subsystem – also transfer, provided that the superstratum has the morphosyntactic means to relexify them. Following Muysken (1981) and Lefebvre (1998), we assume that relexification is the basic generative mechanism of substrate transfer. A creole word is created by combining the semantic and morphosyntactic properties of its substrate source with the sound of its lexifier counterpart. For detailed exposition of relexification theory, see Lefebvre (1998) and references cited therein. Like the substrate languages, English is also a constant and readily accessible language in the ecology of Singapore English. Here, substrate transfer is not only systemic, but also subject to the normative circumscription by the superstratum language.

In this paper, we investigate the syntax of the bare conditional, and argue that it is a result of the typological status of Singapore English as a topic prominent language. Our analysis of the bare conditional builds on Bao’s (2001) study of empty categories in Singapore English, which establishes the typological convergence in relation to topic prominence between Singapore English and Chinese, its main substrate language. However, Bao (2001) only deals with grammatical constructions that relate to empty categories, and does not discuss the bare conditional construction. By analyzing the bare conditional as topic, we aim to demonstrate that the entire cluster of Chinese topics is transferred. Singapore English topic structures are not a random mixture of topic structures from the languages in its ecology.

Topic structures of Chinese and Singapore English

Chinese-like topic sentences in Singapore English have long been observed in the literature; see, among others, Tay (1979), Platt and Weber (1980), Platt and Ho (1993), Gupta (1994), Ziegeler (2000), and Bao (2001). We will not review the arguments for substrate influence that have been proposed; interested readers should consult the references just cited. The views put forth in these works are not monolithic, but their differences do not affect our line of reasoning. Here we present the salient topic structures of Chinese
and Singapore English. The point-by-point similarity in topic structure between the two languages, as we shall see shortly, leaves no doubt that the topic prominence of Singapore English is derived from Chinese.

Broadly speaking, the terms ‘topic’ and ‘comment’ are used in two different senses in the literature. Chao (1968) uses them as semantic terms, whereas Li and Thompson (1976, 1981) and Xu and Langendoen (1985), among others, use them as grammatical terms. We use the term ‘topic’ to refer to grammatical topic, which in many languages is marked differently from grammatical subject (Shibatani, 1991). In Chinese and Singapore English, grammatical topic occupies sentence-initial position, and has no morphosyntactic marking, except for a small set of optional particles (see below). The topic position is encoded in the basic phrase-structure rule displayed in (4), proposed by Xu and Langendoen (1985).

(4) \[ S' \rightarrow \text{TOPIC } S \]

Here, TOPIC is the syntactic position for the topic that provides the “given” information, and S the clause – the comment – that says something “new” about the topic (Chao, 1968; Chafe, 1976; Li & Thompson, 1976). In this paper we will use (4) as a descriptive tool, but will not be concerned with the details of Xu and Langendoen’s (1985) arguments motivating the rule. What is important for our purpose is the range of phrases that occupy the TOPIC position in Chinese and in Singapore English, which we now proceed to examine.

**Chinese**

There are two basic types of topic structure in Chinese, depending on whether the topic originates in the comment or not. These are exemplified in (5).

3 In Cantonese and Hokkien, sentences in (5) are rendered as (i) and (ii).

(i) a. san-go, ngo zongyi 
   fruit I like
   b. san-go, ngo zongyi lei
   fruit I like pear

(ii) a. gezi, gua suka 
   fruit I like
   b. gezi, gua suka lai
   fruit, I like pear
(5) a. shuiguo, wo xihuan e
   fruit, I like
   ‘Fruits, I like’

b. shuiguo, wo xihuan li
   fruit, I like pear
   ‘As for fruits, I like pear (lit. Fruits, I like pear)’

In (5a), e is the place-holder for shuiguo ‘fruit,’ which is the object of the main verb even though it occurs in the TOPIC position. Through e in the object position, the topic enters into selectional relationship with the main verb in the comment (Li & Thompson, 1981). In (5b), shuiguo has no obvious place-holder in the comment, since the main verb already has the object li ‘pear.’ Chafe (1976) calls the topic structure exemplified in (5a) English-style, and that in (5b), Chinese-style. As the glosses indicate, English disallows the Chinese-style topic structure. Although it is possible to relate the topic and the place-holder e in English-style topic structure through movement, i.e. topicalization, this analysis can not be extended to Chinese-style topic structure, for the simple reason that there is no obvious place-holder in the comment (Xu & Langendoen, 1985). Schematically, the two topic structures can be represented as follows:

(6) a. English-style: TOPIC [s . . . e . . . ]

b. Chinese-style: TOPIC [s . . . ]

The place-holder e may be phonologically null, or a resumptive pronoun, as we shall see shortly.

In Chinese, the TOPIC position accommodates phrases of all major grammatical categories, although the noun phrase is the most common phrasal category, given the semantics and pragmatics of the topic construction. Relevant data are given in (7) (TOP, TOPIC; ASP, aspect marker; CL, classifier).

(7) a. [TOP=NP Zhangsan], wo bu rensi ta/e
   Zhangsan I not know he/e
   ‘Zhangsan, I don’t know (him).’

b. [TOP=VP De-le yin-pai], Zhangsan bu manyi e
   obtain-ASP silver-medal Zhangsan not satisfy e

As can be seen, the dialects differ in phonology and lexicon (Mandarin shui-guo, Cantonese san-go, and Minnan ge-zi), but not in topic prominent structure.
‘Having won the silver medal, Zhangsan is not satisfied.’

c. \[TOP=PP\] Zai qiang shang, ta \[e\] gua-le liang-fu on wall on he \[e\] hang-ASP two-CL
tu-hua paintings
‘On the wall, he hung two paintings’

d. \[TOP=S\] Ni xihan liulian, dajia dou zhidao \[e\].
you like durian everyone all know
‘That you like durian, everyone knows’

Note that \(e\) is the “original” position of the topic. In generative analysis, this is the trace left behind after topicalization. It may be replaced by a suitable resumptive pronoun coreferential with the topic, especially if the topic is animate, cf. (7a). Compared with English, even the English-style topic construction is more versatile in Chinese than it is in English. According to Biber et al. (1999, p. 909), English-style topicalization, or fronting, is rare, especially in spoken English.

We now consider Chinese-style topic sentences, shown in (8).4

(8) a. \[TOP=NP\] Zhe-jian fangzi wuding hen biezh
this-CL house roof very unique
‘This house, the roof is unique.’

b. \[TOP=NP\] Zhangsan che huai-le
Zhangsan car broken-ASP
‘Zhangsan, his car broke down.’

c. \[TOP=NP\] renjia shi feng nian (Chao, 1968, p. 71)
others be bumper year
‘As for those people, they have had a bumper year.’

In these sentences, the semantic relationship between the topic and the comment is varied: part-whole in (8a) (the roof is part of the house), possession in (8b) (the car belongs to Zhangsan), and some other loose relation in (8c).

4 The translation of Chinese-style topics is a bit tricky. A common translation in the literature is to use as for to introduce the topic (cf. Li & Thompson, 1976), so (8a) may be glossed as As for this house, the roof is unique. One reviewer suggests that informal English be used instead of the more formal as for. We will follow this suggestion to the extent that it does not obscure construction-related meanings. When the data are taken from a published source, we will stick to the original translation as closely as possible.
Clearly, the topic provides the domain for the interpretation of the comment. In this type of topic structure, there is no place-holder $e$ in the comment. The topic does not enter into selectional relationship with the main verb. See the schemata displayed in (6).

The topic prominence schematized in (6) provides an important tool for the analysis of conditionals. In Chinese, the conditional clause is typically introduced by words such as *yaoshi*, *ruguo*, *tangruo*, and so on, all of which may be glossed as ‘if’ despite subtle differences in meaning and usage. The consequent clause may contain the adverb *jiu* ‘then.’ The sentence in (9a) is typical, using *yaoshi* as the representative *if*-word:

(9) a. *Yaoshi* kaoshi yanqi, wo jiu bu neng qu Yingguo
    if exam postpone I then not able go England
    ‘If the exam postpones, then I won’t be able to go to England.’

b. Kaoshi *yaoshi* yanqi, wo jiu bu neng qu Yingguo
    exam if postpone I then not able go England

c. Kaoshi yanqi, wo jiu bu neng qu Yingguo
    exam postpone I then not able go England

(9b, c) have the same meaning as (9a). Both the *if*-word and *jiu* ‘then’ are optional. In Chinese, *yaoshi* (and the other *if*-words) may appear sentence-initially (9a), between the subject and main verb (9b), or not at all (9c) – behavior more characteristic of adverbs than the English *if* that glosses it. The bare conditional in (9c) is just as felicitous as the other two (9a,b). More specimens follow (Chao, 1968, pp. 116–117; PRT, particle).

5 Minnan and Cantonese have the same conditional construction, where the *if*-words need not be clause-initial, as they must in English. This is illustrated as follows, with the conditional ‘if I were you’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minnan</th>
<th>Cantonese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i) na gua si li</td>
<td>yuhgwo ngo hei lei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if I be you</td>
<td>if I be you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) gua na si li</td>
<td>ngo yuhgwo hei lei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I if be you</td>
<td>I if be you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) gua si li</td>
<td>ngo hei lei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I be you</td>
<td>I be you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Detailed exposition of the conditional construction in Minnan and Cantonese can be found in Bodman (1955) and Matthews and Yip (1994), respectively.
(10) a. ni da dianhua gei ta, wo jiu bu yong xie xin
   you hit phone give he I then not need write letter
   le
   PRT
   ‘If you telephone to him, I won’t need to write.’

b. ni bu lai, wo bu qu
   you not come I not go
   ‘If you don’t come, I don’t go.’

c. dongxi bu hao, ni bu yiding dei mai
   thing not good you not necessary must buy
   ‘If the thing is not good, you don’t necessarily have to buy it.’

When the *if*-word does not occur, the consequent clause often contains the
adverb *jiu* ‘then,’ or one or both clauses contain negatives (Chao, 1968,
p. 116). This is the case in (9c) and (10). But *jiu* and negatives are optional,
as the following examples illustrate.

(11) a. Wo si-le ni dinghao zai jia  (Chao, 1968, p. 117)
   I die-ASP you better again marry
   ‘If I die, you’d better marry again.’

b. Baba qu, wo gen ta qu  (Li & Thompson, 1981, p. 633)
   father go I with he go
   ‘If father goes, I’ll go with him.’

The lack of *if*-words in conditionals makes them formally indistinguishable
from topics. Chao (1968, pp. 113–119) analyzes the conditional clause as the
topic, regardless of whether it is marked by the *if*-word, and the consequent
clause as the comment. Four arguments are presented in support of this
analysis. First, like typical topics, conditional clauses canonically occur in
sentence-initial position. Second, the *if*-words in Chinese do not subordinate
the conditional clauses, as we have seen in (9). Third, the pause particles
that are usually associated with regular topics – topic markers for Li and
Thompson (1981) – may also occur with conditional clauses. Finally, the
conditional clause can be followed by the nominalizing *de-hua* ‘PRT-word,’
which Chao (1968) renders as ‘the supposition that.’ It turns the clause into
a nominal expression. The pause particle data are presented in (12), and the
*de-hua* data in (13).
(12) a. Ren ma, jiankang cai shi zui zhongyao de.
   ‘(As for) people, health is still the most important thing.’

   b. Bu xiang chi ma, jiu bie mianqiang ziji.
   ‘If you don’t want to eat, (then) don’t force yourself.’

   c. Xia-qi yu lai ne, women jiu beng chu-qu le.
   ‘If it starts to rain, we’d better not go out.’

   d. Yaoshi xia-qi yu lai ne, women jiu beng chu-qu le.
   ‘If it starts to rain, we’d better not go out.’

(13) a. Yaoshi xia-qi yu lai de-hua, women jiu beng chu-qu le.
   ‘If it starts to rain, we’d better not go out.’

   b. Xia-qi yu lai de-hua, women jiu beng chu-qu le.
   ‘If it starts to rain, we’d better not go out.’

(12c, d) are adapted from Chao (1968, p. 118). The syntactic parallel between
the nominal topic in (12a) and the conditional clauses in (12b, c, d) is obvious.
In (12a), the noun phrase ren ‘people’ is marked by the particle ma, and in
(12b, c, d), the conditional clauses are marked by the particles ma and ne.
(The difference in meaning between the two particles does not concern us
here.) The de-hua data in (13) are synonymous with (12c, d). Although topic
and comment are semantic terms for Chao, it is easy to re-cast the analysis
along the line of the schemata (6), in which topic and comment are structural
positions in a clause.

Chao’s (1968) analysis of Chinese conditionals provides the inspiration
for our analysis of the bare conditional in Singapore English. But before we
proceed, let’s first establish Singapore English as a topic prominent language.
Singapore English

It has long been observed in the literature that Singapore English, unlike its lexifier, is topic prominent, and the topic prominence is attributable to Chinese influence (cf. Platt & Ho, 1993; Bao, 2001). Two main salient syntactic properties support this view. First, all major phrasal types can function as topic in Singapore English, as can be seen in (14), where topic-structure includes the noun phrase (14a, b), verb phrase (14c, d), prepositional phrase (14e, f), adjectival phrase (14h), and clause (14g).6

(14)  
\begin{itemize}
  \item a. Japanese, they use the yellow type of Japanese pickles. (ICE)
  \item b. (on piece of chicken in the fridge for too long)
    Chicken cannot eat e already.
    ‘Chicken cannot be eaten anymore.’
  \item c. Park here, e illegal one.
    ‘Parking here is illegal.’
  \item d. Study in Singapore nowadays, e really not easy ah.
    ‘Studying in Singapore nowadays, it is really not easy.’
  \item e. In China, where got people go to English school e? (PWH)
    ‘In China, where do you find people who go to English school?’
  \item f. Under the bed got a lot of ants e.
    ‘Under the bed, there are a lot of ants.’
  \item g. Too slow lah, I find that printer e.
  \item h. Your son is naughty, you know e or not?
\end{itemize}

In (14a) we see the resumptive pronoun they in the comment. In terms of grammatical function, the range is diverse as well: subject (14a, c, d), object (14b, h), adjunct (14e, f), and complement (14g). The robustness of topic structure in Singapore English sets it apart from English topicalization, which is rarely used in spoken English (Biber et al., 1999, p. 909). Although the

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6 Unless otherwise stated, Singapore English data are cited from our own field notes and from local writings, mainly novels and plays. They will not be glossed when the meanings are transparent. One and lah in (14c, g) are clause-final emphatic particles, and where got in (14e) is a set phrase for rhetorical questions. The abbreviations are as follows: PWH, Platt, Weber, and Ho (1983); ICE, International Corpus of English-Singapore; NIE, National Institute of Education Corpus of Spoken Singapore English. We thank Vincent Ooi for his help with the ICE-Singapore corpus, and David Deterding for generously making the NIE corpus available to us.

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sentences in (14) are by and large intelligible in English, not all of them are felicitous.

Second, Singapore English topic structure includes Chinese-style topics, where the comment lacks a pronominal form, as shown in (15):

(15)  

a. Jogging shoes, I prefer lighter ones.  

b. (On opera costumes) Cantonese one, all owned by ourselves. (PWH)  

‘Cantonese costumes, they are all owned by us.’  
c. One test, I got zero. (PWH)  
d. This bottle, the cap too small.  
e. (on school experience) Trouble-makers, I have a lot actually. (NIE)  
f. The NUS courses, they are only three year for some of the courses. (NIE)  

In (15), the topic sets up the framework for the interpretation of the comment, and functions to restrict the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain. In (15a), the preference for lighter ones applies within the domain of jogging shoes. In (15b), what is owned by ourselves is restricted to the domain of Cantonese opera costumes. Similarly for (15c–f). In all these examples, the comment lacks a pronominal form; see schema (6b). In (15f), the comment contains the resumptive pronoun they, which is coreferential with the topic, the NUS courses. The relevant structure for the present purpose is that some of the courses must be interpreted against the courses offered at NUS.

From the Chinese and Singapore English data discussed above, we see that the two languages have the same topic structures: both allow English-style and Chinese-style topic structures and neither imposes categorical and functional constraint on the phrase that can occupy the TOPIC position. The structural and functional congruity provides the empirical basis in support of the claim that Singapore English derives its topic structures from Chinese, the main substrate language. We summarize the cluster of syntactic properties associated with topic prominence in (16).
If Singapore English becomes topic prominent under the influence of Chinese, we would expect to find the same cluster of properties associated with topic prominence in the two languages. We shall now proceed to show that the bare conditionals of the kind we have seen in (3) are indeed attributable to topic prominence.

Bare Conditional as Topic


(17)  a. (on taxi fares) You go by meter, you got to pay more.  
     ‘If you go by meter, you have got to pay more.’
  b. You put there, then how to go up?  
     ‘If you put it there, then how could anyone go up?’
  c. You take pink flower, is nicer7  
     ‘If you take the pink flower, it is nicer.’
  d. (on Chinese characters) Leave out one stroke, wrong already.  
     ‘Leave out one stroke, and it is wrong.’
  e. Disturb him again, I call Daddy come down  
     ‘Disturb him again, and I’ll call Daddy to come down.’

7 An alternative analysis of (17c) is to treat you take pink flower as the subject, and is nicer the predicate. So the sentence can be assigned the structure in (i), and be translated as (ii):

i. [S [S You take pink flower] is nicer]
ii. That you take the pink flower is nicer

Under this analysis, that you take the pink flower is no longer given a conditional interpretation. Here, we focus on the conditional reading in case the data are ambiguous.
For the sake of perspicuity, in (17) and subsequent displays of data, conditionals will be set in italic.

For Platt and Weber (1980) and Gupta (1994), these are examples of conditionals with missing conjunctions, “missing” as compared with their respective English translations. Although the bare conditional construction has been documented in the literature, no systematic analysis of the phenomenon has been proposed. To explain the origin of the bare conditional, we can appeal to linguistic universals, or to the languages in the contact ecology. Given the current state of linguistic theorizing, it is hard to see which linguistic universal or universals are responsible for the structure of conditionals. From the perspective of markedness, whether it is understood as a universal or ecology-dependent condition, one would expect that conditionals with *if*-words are unmarked, and the bare conditional the marked option. Under the assumption that the unmarked prevails over the marked in feature competition (Mufwene, 1991, 2001), the productivity of the bare conditional remains a mystery.

Equally untenable is the superstratist explanation, which comes in two forms: through the deletion of *if*-words, or through the direct transfer of the English ‘bare’ conditional of the type *say that again, and you’re fired* (see (20) below).\(^8\) Prima facie, if the bare conditional takes the clausal form, which is the most common type, it is not unreasonable to assume that it is derived through the deletion of *if* (or some other conjunctions). But when we examine more sentences with bare conditionals, the deletion analysis becomes untenable for the simple reason that in many cases, we simply do not know what to delete. Consider (18).

(18) a. *If you go by meter*, you pay more.
   b. *You go by meter*, you pay more.
   c. *Go by meter*, you pay more.
   d. *By meter*, you pay more.

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\(^8\)Prima facie, the conditional construction with *if*-words is derived from English, as one reviewer remarks. This, however, need not be a case of superstrate transfer. English and Chinese are congruent in the *if*-marked conditional construction, even though the *if*-words have different morphosyntactic properties in their respective languages. Structural congruence facilitates substrate transfer (Weinreich, 1964; Siegel, 1999). It is not surprising that the *if*-marked conditionals in Singapore English behave like those in English; see Mühlhäusler (1986) and Lefebvre (1998). On these considerations, we will not include in our discussion conditionals with *if*-words.
The italicized portions can all be interpreted as expressing the same condition. It is entirely ad hoc to assume (18a) as the underlying representation to which various deletion rules apply to yield (18b–d). Such rules lack independent motivation. We will see shortly that the direct transfer analysis fares no better.

The analysis we propose here attributes the robustness of the bare conditional to topic prominence, and therefore to substrate influence. The structural diversity in the range of bare conditionals one finds in Singapore English provides the decisive empirical evidence in support of our analysis, which recognizes the bare conditional as a basic phrasal type, and places it in the TOPIC position, as provided for by phrase-structure rule (4). More data are shown in (19).

(19) S as conditional
   a. (on ticket reservation) You want, you better book early.
      ‘If you want it, you’d better book early.’
   b. These not cooked yet. You eat already you can die one. (ICE)
      ‘These are not cooked yet. Eat them, and you’ll die.’
   c. Army ask you go driver course, you go
      ‘If the Army asks you to go on a drivers’ course, you go.’

VP as conditional
   d. (picking up pen from floor) Drop, will spoil one.
      ‘Drop it and it will break.’
   e. (on future career paths) Become minister, even better.
      ‘If (you) become Minister, (it is) even better.’
   f. (sisters talking about a dish) Don’t care lah. Want to eat, eat;
      don’t want to eat, then don’t eat.
      ‘Don’t worry. If you want to eat it, eat it; if you don’t want to
eat it, then don’t eat it.’

PP as conditional
   g. (on hanging a picture) On this wall, not suitable.
      ‘If you hang it on this wall, it is not suitable.’
   h. (taxi driver to passenger) In the wrong lane, sure kena book by
      police one.
      ‘If in the wrong lane, you are sure to be booked by the police.’
AP as conditional
i. My little sister very hard to please. Too hot, she complain; too cold, she also complain.
   ‘My little sister is very hard to please. If it is too hot, and she complains. If it is too cold and she also complains.’

j. (on shopping trip) Too expensive, then don’t buy.
   ‘If too expensive, then don’t buy it.’

NP as conditional
k. (on raising children) Too much freedom, you will spoil them.
   (PWH)
   ‘Too much freedom and you spoil them.’
l. No use, then I boil some herbs.
   ‘If it is no use, then I will boil some herbs.’

On the surface, the bare conditional may be expressed by all phrasal categories: the clause (19a, b, c), VP (19d, e, f), PP (19g, h), AP (19i, j), and NP (19k, l). Given the right context, the italicized phrases in (19) are all interpreted as conditionals. The “truncated” syntax of the conditionals reflects an important syntactic property of Singapore English, namely the arguments – subjects and objects – are often optional if they can be determined from the context (Tay, 1979; Platt & Weber, 1980; Bao, 2001). Like the if-marked conditional, the bare conditional is robust in the language, faces no special restriction, and is frequently used by native speakers in informal contexts. It contrasts sharply with the English conditional construction, which imposes severe restriction on conditionals which are not marked morphosyntactically. The construction English has that is closest to the bare conditional takes the coordinate or juxtaposed form which is given conditional interpretations. Relevant examples follow (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 759).

(20) a. Say that again and you’re fired.
    b. Ask them to stay after five, they’ll demand 50% overtime.
    c. Hurry up or we’ll miss the train.

According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002), the conditional takes the form of an imperative, but conveys a threat instead of a directive. These restrictions explain why the sentences in (21) are infelicitous:

(21) a. ?Say that again and you’re promoted.
    b. ?Say that again and John is fired.
c. *John says that again and he is fired/promoted.

Pragmatically, this construction carries negative connotations. The bare conditional in Singapore English does not face the same restrictions. Crucially, it is not an imperative. Most bare conditionals in (17) and (19) can not be rendered felicitously as the English coordinate conditional, as illustrated below.

(22) a. *Want to eat, and eat. (19f)
b. *No use, and I boil some herbs. (191)

It is clear that the bare conditional in Singapore English is not the same construction as the English coordinate conditional. Superstratist explanations are untenable.9

Two consequences of our analysis are worth noting. First, the bare conditional clause must precede the consequent clause. The order, fixed by phrase-structure rule (4), matches the natural order of condition and consequence. This is also true of the Chinese conditional construction (Bodman, 1955; Chao, 1968; Matthews & Yip, 1994). Reversing the conditional and consequent clauses in the sentences in (18b–d), we get infelicitous results (23).

(23) a. *You pay more, you go by meter
b. *You pay more, go by meter.
c. *You pay more, by meter.

In other words, the bare conditional construction is iconic. By contrast, if the conditional is marked by if-words, the order is free:

(24) a. If they close at five then maybe I can drop it there you see. (ICE)
b. I'll watch it if there's nothing better to do. (ICE)

9 One caveat must be mentioned here. As Chaudenson (2001) and Mufwene (2001) would remind us, we can only conclude that the Singapore English bare conditional is not the same construction as the coordinate or juxtaposed conditional in modern English, which may not be the same as the vernacular, nonnative, or otherwise non-standard varieties of English that might have served as the target for the creator-developer of Singapore English. This scenario is not likely, for two reasons. First, there was no permanent European settlement in Singapore. Unlike the European colonists in New World settlement colonies, many of whom spoke non-standard or non-native English (Mufwene, 2001), the English-speaking Europeans who came to Singapore were the educated elite: government officials, soldiers, merchants, and teachers. They were in Singapore for occupational or professional reasons. Second, the English-medium school played a role in the development of Singapore English (Platt & Weber, 1980; Gupta, 1994; Ziegeler, 2000), although the extent of that role is debatable (Bao, 2001).
Second, since they occupy the topic position, bare conditionals are formally indistinguishable from regular topics, especially when they are S, VP, AP or PP. In cases such as (19f), *don’t want to eat, then don’t eat*, the presence of *then* in the second clause forces a conditional reading of the first clause. In the absence of such lexical cues, conditional interpretation, as opposed to other possible interpretations, of a major-category phrase in TOPIC relies on the context of use, on our commonsense knowledge of the world, and on the semantic or syntactic relationship between the phrase (in TOPIC) and the consequent clause (now interpreted as the comment). In (18b), for example, the two clauses, *you go by meter* and *you pay more* can not be interpreted as two independent events, and the condition-consequence interpretation is the most felicitous among all the possible interpretations. In (3b), repeated below, the condition-consequence interpretation of the two events is obvious from the comedy skit parodying the scene in the movie *Titanic* in which the male and female leads stand at the stern of the ill-fated ship. (The line in the movie takes the coordinate form: *You let go and I’m gonna have to jump in there after you*.) Without such background and contextual information, (3b) could be interpreted as two independent events (translatable as *you jump first, I jump next*), as temporally related events (translatable as *when you jump, I’ll jump*), or as causally-related events (translatable as *since you have jumped, I jumped*). This degree of indeterminacy is not surprising, given the lack of morphosyntactic marking for condition (*if*), time (*when*), or reason (*since*). More examples follow.

(25)  

a. *You go around flouting your SARS order, you’ll have to face the police.*

b. (on decision to punish one from a group for mischief)

   *Want to beat, beat all.*

   ‘If you want to punish one, (you should) punish all.’

c. (child trying to reach light switch)

   *Tiptoe, can!*

   ‘If (I) tiptoe, (I) can (reach it)’
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(26) a. (advice to foreign visitor) You buy things, they charge you expensive. (PWH)
   ‘When you buy things, they charge you higher price.’
   b. *Come here at night*, can see many colorful stalls selling either
   Malaysian or Thai durians. (ICE)
   c. *They come*, you say sorry lah.

In our analysis, the italicized expressions in (25) and (26) occupy the TOPIC
position. Under felicitous interpretation, the topics in (25) are conditional,
and those in (26) temporal, as reflected in the English translations.

The indeterminacy in the interpretation of the topic is not unique to
Singapore English; it is also attested in Chinese, as one would expect. Li
and Thompson (1981) use the following sentence to illustrate the multiple
readings of the two component clauses that lack overt “linking” element
(pp. 641–642):

(27) Ren lei huo zai shi shang, bu neng bu laodong
human kind live at world on not able not labor
   ‘Since/If/As long as human beings live in this world, they have to
   work hard.’

The interlocutors infer the intended meaning of the sentence by appealing to
world knowledge, to the content of the clauses, and to the context.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, we wish to make three remarks. First, our analysis of the
bare conditional completes the table in (16), repeated below for convenience.

(16) English Chinese Singapore English
    a. English-style yes yes yes
    b. Chinese-style no yes yes
    c. Bare conditional no yes yes

It is clear from the table that the entire cluster of properties associated with
topic prominence is transferred from Chinese to Singapore English.

Second, our analysis recognizes the bare conditional as a basic con-
struction type in the grammar of Singapore English. Given the frequency of
usage in speech, the diversity in structure and grammatical function, and the
intuitive feel of native speakers, it is highly unlikely that the construction is derived from the English conditional construction through the deletion of the *if*-words, or from the coordinate and juxtaposed conditional construction. We argue that it originates in the topic prominence that Singapore English has inherited from Chinese. The topic analysis is consistent with Chinese conditionals (Chao, 1968) and with cross-linguistic evidence (Haiman, 1978; Shibatani, 1991). It must be emphasized that for Chao (1968) and Haiman (1978), all conditionals, bare or otherwise, are topics. However, there is a crucial difference between English and Chinese in the *if*-marked conditionals: English *if*-words are subordinators, but their Chinese counterparts are not. In this paper, we remain uncommitted as to the proper treatment of the Singapore English conditionals which contain *if*-words.

Third, our analysis shows that substrate influence is not unsystematic and unstructured. By rejecting the Principle of Cafeteria in our substratist explanation, we avoid the analytical and theoretical pitfalls that are commonly associated with substrate theories (Dillard, 1971; Bickerton, 1981). Singapore English originates and develops in an endogenous ecology in which all languages, mainly English, Chinese, and to a lesser extent Malay, are in constant and intense contact. Like Chinese, Singapore English is topic prominent, and exhibits the same range of topic structures as Chinese, including the bare conditional. Substrate transfer targets the entire cluster of properties associated with topic prominence. Our analysis rules out the accidental mixing of competing features from typologically distinct languages. We should not expect to find a contact language which contains topic structures from English and bare conditionals from Chinese, but not topic structures from Chinese.

The substratum features discussed in this paper – English- and Chinese-style topics and the bare conditional – transfer *qua* system.

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