

# *Feng Chia University*

## *Outstanding Academic Paper by Students*

Title : How Serial Verb Constructions in Mandarin Chinese Affects Serial  
Verb Constructions in Singapore Colloquial English

中文遞繫句如何影響新加坡式英文的遞繫句

**Author(s):** Yih-Ruu Liu

Class: 4<sup>th</sup> year of Department of Foreign Languages and Literature

Student ID: D0773511

**Course:** Seminar

Instructor: Dr. Yu-Leng Lin

Department: Department of Foreign Languages and Literature

Academic Year: Semester 1, 2020



## Abstract

In Singapore, English not only serves as one of their official language, but it also serves as lingua franca to have a common language with other ethnic groups such as Chinese, Malays, and Indians. Because of the diverse culture and substrate languages that have been deeply rooted in Singapore, their English forms a unique variety, which is known as Singlish or Singapore Colloquial English (SCE). This paper aims to determine how Mandarin influences Singapore Colloquial English by focusing on Serial Verb Constructions (SVC). To find whether Mandarin's SVC associates with Singapore Colloquial English's SCE, the framework of SVC in Mandarin proposed by Li and Thompson (1989) and SVC framework of Singapore Colloquial English by Khoo (2015) are adopted to be cross-compared and analyzed. The result shows that three out of five categories of SVC in Singapore Colloquial English defined by Khoo are aligned with Mandarin. Furthermore, the result reveals Singapore Colloquial English does not fit some criterion of SVC in Mandarin despite the fact that Mandarin is the most dominant substrate language that shapes SCE.

**Keyword :** Serial Verb Constructions, Singapore Colloquial English, Singlish

## 摘要

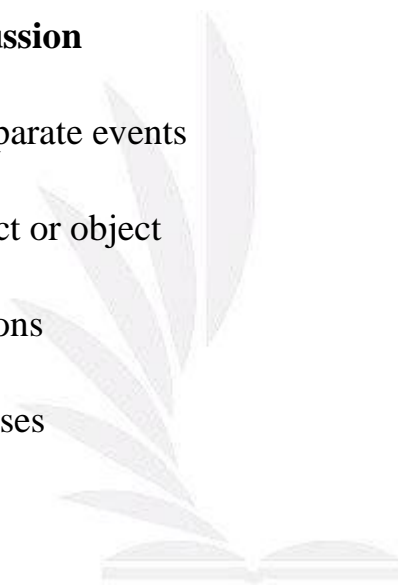
英文不僅是新加坡的官方語言之一，它也是在新加坡作為與其他種族（例如華人，馬來人和印第安人）的通用語言。由於新加坡被多元文化和語言深深影響，它們的英文形成了獨特的方言。這個方言被稱為 **Singlish**（星式英文）或是新加坡式英文（**SCE**）。本文旨藉由遞繫句（**SVC**）來探討中文是如何影響新加坡式英文。因此，為了研究中文的 **SVC** 是否與新加坡式英文的 **SVC** 相關性，本文採取 Li and Thompson（1989）提出的中文 **SVC** 的框架與 Khoo（2015）提出新加坡式英文 **SVC** 的框架進行交叉比較和分析。結果表明，新加坡式英文的五類別的 **SVC** 中有三類與中文相符。同時，結果顯出儘管中文是主要影響的語言，但新加坡式英文並不符合每個中文 **SVC** 規範。

**關鍵字：**新加坡式英文、星式英文、遞繫句、連動結構



## Table of Content

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>P.1</b>
摘要	<b>P.2</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>P.4</b>
<b>2. Literature Review</b>	<b>P.5</b>
2.1 The syntax of Singaporean Colloquial English	
2.2 Serial Verb Constructions in Singaporean Colloquial English	
<b>3. Analysis and Discussion</b>	<b>P.11</b>
3.1 Two or more separate events	
3.2 Sentential subject or object	
3.3 Pivot constructions	
3.4 Descriptive clauses	
<b>4. Conclusion</b>	<b>P.16</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>P.18</b>



## 1. Introduction

English is undoubtedly the most widely-spoken language since it can be understood all over the world. Being a universal language, English branches out and creates a variety of English that have distinguishable accents, vocabularies, and grammar by different countries. One of the most well-known examples of English variety is Singaporean English.

In Singapore, there are, in fact, two varieties of English. One is Standard Singapore English (SSE), which is no different than normal Standard English, but Singaporeans use SSE in formal setting, like school and workplaces. Another Singaporean English variety that this paper will cover is Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), which is also known as Singlish. While SSE is used in formal situation, SCE is a vernacular that Singaporeans commonly used in informal settings. Even though SCE has the basis of Standard English, it is far from its linguistic form and grammar. Owing to the fact that SCE has a huge difference from Standard English, SCE has been seen as a form of poor and ungrammatical English for the Singaporean authorities. The reason SCE have a bad reputation is because SCE was influenced by multi-ethnicity in Singapore, including Chinese, Malays, and Indians. Thus, SCE can be difficult for native speaker of English to comprehend because some sentences in SCE are translated directly from substrate languages such as Chinese, Malays, and Indians.

While many scholars have studied the linguistics features of Singaporean English that was influenced by substrate languages, there is not so much research about how Mandarin influences the grammar of SCE, especially Serial Verb Construction (SVC) in SCE. Supposing that SCE was influenced by Chinese, the Serial Verb Construction of SCE must have a relation to Mandarin, considering that Mandarin has the high

frequency of using Serial Verb Construction according to the data from the Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (Yin, 2007) In order to investigate to what extent Mandarin comes into plain Singaporean English, this paper will focus on analyze SCE's Serial Verb Construction from the perspective of Serial Verb Construction in Mandarin to see how SCE's Serial Verb Construction is profoundly similar to that of Mandarin.

## **2. Literature Review**

As previously mentioned, the multi-ethnicity in Singapore influences SCE. Therefore, SCE has evolved into a creole language. Holmes (2008) indicates that the superstrate and the substrate of pidgin languages or creoles languages have varying influences to different extents in linguistic. Generally, a superstrate provides the words of the languages while a substrate creates the grammar. According to Gupta (1994), she notes that SCE, the substrate, is syntactically different from Standard English, and the superstrate is dominated by Standard English. Aligning Holmes's statement with Gupta (1994), SCE fits the profile perfectly. On top of that, Ho & Platt (1993) and Bao (2010) indicate that ethnic groups living in Singapore shapes SCE. Hence, SCE is a creole language that comprises of the substrate influences from three diverse ethnics, Chinese, Malays, and Indians.

However, this has led to one question, how can we identify which language is the main substrate language in SCE among these substrate languages? Gupta (1994) and Alsagoff & Ho (1998) state that Chinese dialects and Malays greatly affect SCE in contrast to Tamil. Additionally, Ho & Platt (1993) suggest that the dominant source is Chinese dialect while the secondary source is Malay. In search of substrate language in SCE, Ho and Platt discover that the Malays community is the second large ethnic

group in Singapore and that similar sentence pattern in Mandarin can be found in Malay. Based on the foundation set by these previous studies, the paper explores the resemblance between SCE and Mandarin by looking at Serial Verb Constructions.

The next section will conclude two parts in order to have a general knowledge about SCE. For a start, the first part will be discussing several syntaxes that make SCE different and unique from Standard English, and it will strengthen the statement that Mandarin is the main substrate language. Next, the concept of Serial Verb Constructions in SCE will present for the purpose of further analysis in chapter 3.

## 2.1 The syntax of Singaporean Colloquial English (SCE)

To begin with, this section will briefly discuss the syntax of Singaporean Colloquial English (SCE). The following features highlight the syntactic difference between Standard English and SCE.

### 1.1.1 Lack of Inflection Verb

(1) She eat rice. (Tan, 2005: pp. 162)

She eats rice.

(2) She always say try to be punctual. (SCE)

She always says try to be punctual

(“88.3jia.” YouTube, 2017)

In (1) and (2), the sentences lack subject-verb agreement, which is the basis of Standard English. Yet, Singaporeans often dismiss the correct verb agreement corresponding to its singular and plural subjects since it is not obligatory in SCE.

### 1.1.2 Perfective Aspect

(3) She eat here yesterday. (SCE)

She ate here yesterday.

(4) After it rain already, we can go out. (SCE)

After it has already rained, we can go out.

(5) I eat already. (SCE)

I have eaten.

(“Our Grandfather Story.” YouTube, 2019)

In SCE, the verbs tend not to change their forms according to tense no matter it is past tense or present tense, as shown in example (1) to (5). When a sentence is set in past tense, other aspect markers such as “*yesterday*” and “*already*” as shown in (3) and (4) are usually presents in lexicon.

Comparing “*yesterday*” and “*already*”, Ho (1995), Bao (1995) have mentioned “*Already*” in their studies, which makes “*already*” the most prevalent aspect marker in SCE. Moreover, it is said that the use of “*already*” shows resemblance to Chinese dialects. Take (5) for an example. In Standard English, this sentence would be ungrammatical regarding the sentence structure and tense. Yet, According to Bao (1995), it would be grammatical to say “我吃了” or “Wao Jia Liao” in Mandarin or in Hokkien. Hence, the use of “*already*” seems to mirrors “了” in Mandarin or “*Liao*” in Hokkien as either of them serves as a perfective aspect marker.

### 1.1.3 Zero-Copula (Alsagoff & Ho, 1998: pp. 139)

(5) *Adjective phrase*

This coffee house very cheap.

This coffee house is very cheap.

(6) *Noun phrase*

My sister in the garden.

My sister is in the garden.

(7) *Prepositional phrase*



John my teacher.

John is my teacher.

The absence of the copula occurs when the supposed copula is followed by adjective phrase, noun phrase, and prepositional phrase (Ho & Platt 1980). However, Ho and Platt noted that even though zero-copula is possible in SCE, the usage of copula is not mandatory. As stated in Chang (2009), the distribution and usage of copula in SCE are often random or optional. In order to discover the nature of this phenomenon in SCE, Chang (2009) compares it with African- American English and Mandarin. The result shows that zero-copula in SCE cannot be clarified in terms of phonological rules of copula deletion in African- American English. On the contrary, he found that Topic prominence, one of the common syntactic features in Mandarin, should be the reason why zero-copula is not mandatory in SCE. Topic prominence refers that the topic determines whether there is a subject in a target sentence. The function of topics serves differently than subject because a topic does not need a verb to fulfill its action or description of the target sentence. As a result, topic prominence in Mandarin could be the reason for zero-copula in SCE.

#### 1.1.4 Reduplication

(8) *N-N for intimacy*

- This my girl-girl. (Ansaldo, 2010: pp. 510)  
This is my little girl.
- We buddy-buddy. (SCE)  
We're best friends.
- I'm looking for Ry-Ry (Wee, 2004: pp. 106)  
I'm looking for Henry.

(9) *V-V for attenuation/continuation*

- Just eat-eat. (Ansaldo, 2010: pp. 510)  
Eat a little.
- We all eat-eat-eat. (Khoo, 2015: pp. 7)  
We keep eating/eat a lot.
- I tink tink tink, until I get answer lor.  
I thought, thought and thought, until I understood.  
(Ansaldo, 2004: pp. 127-129)

(10) *Adj-adj for intensification* (Ansaldo, 2010: pp. 510)

- His face red-red.  
His face is quite red.
- I show you nice nice.  
I show you something very nice.
- The teh hot-hot eh.  
The tea is very hot.

“Don't play-play” is a popular Singlish slang that reduplicates ‘play’ and it means ‘do not fool around or do not mess with somebody’. Ansaldo and Wee (2004) also found some typical patterns of reduplication in SCE and identify the function of each pattern. The features can be found in nouns, verbs, and adjectives. As the example above shown in (8)-(10). Normally, reduplication of nouns indicates intimacy one has for someone. For example, “Ry-Ry” is derived from the name of Henry. It basically takes the last syllables and doubles it in order to sound more friendly with the person whose name is Henry. Next, reduplication of verbs serves as attenuation and continuation. It shows how long or short the action being carried out by reduplicating the verbs twice or thrice. Lastly, when an adjective is reduplicated, the adjective appears to intensify. Take (10) for example. Instead using ‘very’ or ‘quite’, reduplication of adjective can also be used as an emphasis to the adjective.

## 2.2 Serial Verb Constructions in Singaporean Colloquial English

According to Khoo 2015, the types of SCE's Serial Verb Constructions can be sorted into four categories, namely: Directional/ Motion SVCs, Positional SVCs, Resultative/ Causative SVCs, and Benefactive SVCs.

### 1) Directional/Motion SVCs

This SVC will contain a motion verb and a verb that indicate the direction of the action.

(11) Let's go out eat. (Ng, 2014: pp. 32)

Let's go out and eat.

### 2) Positional SVCs

It describes a situation where the Agent was doing the action for some time in a specific positional place. The first verb in positional Serial Verb Constructions is often intransitive and the second verb refers to the main event, but this kind of Serial Verb Constructions usually states the positional stance of the Agent between the verbs.

(12) We sit here talk. (Khoo, 2015: pp. 43)

We sit here talking.

### 3) Resultative/ Causative SVCs:

In order to describe a resulting or caused event, the sentence includes a verb that causes the action and a verb that indicates the result.

(13) I wipe dry my car. (Khoo, 2015: pp. 49)

I wiped my car dry.

(14) You cannot make me fall down! (Khoo, 2015: pp. 62)

You cannot make me fall!

#### 4) Benefactive SVCs

It indicates the patient in the sentence receives the benefit from the action of the Agent.

(15) I buy Chok give you. (Khoo, 2015: pp. 54)

I buy you congee.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

The goal of this paper is to study SCE's Serial Verb Constructions from the perspective of Serial Verb Construction in Mandarin in order to find the similarities of Serial Verb Construction between Mandarin and SCE. This paper will apply the framework of Serial Verb Construction in Mandarin written by Li and Thompson (1989).

Li and Thompson (1989) refer that a sentence that has two or more verb phrases or clauses compared without markers indicating their connection is Serial Verb Constructions. They state that the form of Serial Verb Constructions can be decomposed as follows:

(NP) V (NP) (NP) V (NP)

They further suggest that Mandarin's Serial Verb Constructions could be divided into four groups based on the semantic of the sentence:

- (1) Two or more separate events
- (2) Sentential subject or object

- (3) Pivot constructions
- (4) Descriptive clauses

The next section will explain these four groups and see how it will fulfill the norm of SCE's Serial Verb Constructions.

### 3.1 Two or more separate events

It describes that one subject does two or more separate events, but the events are related to each other in some way. In this kind of Serial Verb Constructions, the relationship of the separate events can be understood in four ways, which is consecutive, purpose, alternating, and circumstance. Many Serial Verb Constructions can belong to more than one way.

(16) 我 買 票 進 去

I buy ticket enter go

- Consecutive: I buy ticket and go in.
- Purpose: I buy a ticket to go in.

(Li & Thompson, 1989: pp. 595)

This type of Serial Verb Construction can fit in most of SCE's Serial Verb Construction. For example, (12) can be purpose or circumstance.

(12) We sit here talk.

- Purpose & Circumstance: We sit here to talk.

(Khoo, 2015: pp. 43)

(17) He take go already. / He bring go already.

- Consecutive: He has taken it with him.

(Gupta, 1991)

### 3.2 Sentential subject or object

In this type of Mandarin Serial Verb Constructions, the first and the second

verbs or clauses can serve different roles. This will lead to two possibilities. One, the first verb can make the following verb phrases or clauses be seen as a direct object. Second, the second verb allows the first verb phrase or clause to work as a subject. Consider (18) and (19) below.

3.2.1 The second verb/clause is the direct object of the first verb

(18) 他 告訴 我 (說) 你 頭痛

He tell I (say) you headache

He told that you had a headache.

3.2.2 The first verb phrase/clause is the subject of the second verb

(19) 大聲 念 課文 可以 幫助 發音

Big voice read lesson can help pronunciation

Reading the lesson aloud can help one's pronunciation.

(Li & Thompson, 1989: pp. 602-603)

When it comes to sentential subject or object, the subject of using the second verb/clause as the direct object in SCE's Serial Verb Constructions occurs more frequently than sentential subject.

In the sentential object of Serial Verb Constructions, Lian (1999) found that the structure of "V+(NP)+ Verb of communication" appears in Mandarin and SCE. Comparing (19) and (17), it shows the parallel of the two sentences. The first verb in both sentences is verb of communication, but at the same time both sentences express indirect of speaking. Li and Thompson indicate that the structure of "V+(NP)+ Verb of communication" often expresses indirect discourse rather than direct discourse. Yet, the difference between SCE and Mandarin is that the structure of "V+(NP) + Verb of communication" in Mandarin only appears in indirect speech whereas SCE can be used both in direct and indirect speech. The example of direct discourse is shown in

(20).

(20) She always scold me say why I never study hard.

She always told me off for not studying hard.

(21) I told her say, "My boss wants the whole series."

I told her that my boss wanted the whole series.

(Lian ,1999: pp. 25-29)

### 3.3 Pivot constructions

NP V1 NP V2 (NP)

The characteristic of pivot construction is that there is a noun phrase between the first verb and the second verb. Moreover, the noun phrase can serve as a direct object to the first verb and serve as a subject to the second verb.

(22) 我 勸 他 念 書

I advise him study book

I advised him/her to study.

(Li & Thompson, 1989: pp. 607)

Comparing the benefactive Serial Verb Constructions and pivot constructions, it has a similar structure because it contains an Agent and a patient. As you can see from the previous example (15) which I repeated the example below, Chok is a direct object to the first verb, and Chok is a subject to second verb, meaning the congee is for the patient.

(15) I buy Chok give you. (Khoo, 2015: pp. 54)

I buy you congee.

### 3.4 Descriptive clauses

NP V NP (NP)V2 (NP)

To easily understand descriptive clauses, the Serial Verb Constructions can be separate into two cores. One is the main event, and another core is to complement the first core. To go into detail, descriptive clauses have realis descriptive clauses and irrealis descriptive clauses. Three ways are provided to identify which Serial Verb Constructions is realis and which is irrealis.

- (1) The direct object in realis descriptive clauses is always an indefinite noun phrase whereas the direct object in irrealis descriptive clauses is more flexible.
- (2) In irrealis descriptive clauses, the second core always indicates an activity. As for realis descriptive clauses, the second core is likely to add detail to the direct object.
- (3) To see whether the second core is realized or not. If it expresses a realized event, it belongs to realis descriptive clauses. If not, it belongs to irrealis descriptive clauses.

(23) *Irrealis*

我 有 錢 買 書

I exist money buy book

I have money for buying books.

(Li & Thompson, 1989: pp. 613)

(24) *Realis*

我 有 一 個 妹 妹 很 喜 歡 看 電 影

I exist one young sister very like see movie

I have a younger sister who likes to see movie.

(Li & Thompson, 1989: pp. 619)

It can be confusing to find descriptive clauses in SCE's Serial Verb Constructions.



If a sentence that has a similar pattern of descriptive clause in SCE, the sentence is far from being a descriptive clause, like example (25) and (26). Example (25) and (26) express the same semantic meaning, and their structure reflect that of descriptive clauses. Yet, (25) is seen as relative clauses because of the use of *one*, and (26) is ungrammatical in SCE once *one* is removed. The use of *one* functions as a relative pronoun that modifies the subject. Similarly, “*who*” in English and “*的*” in Mandarin are also treated as a relative pronoun. In English and Mandarin, if a relative clause does not include a relative pronoun, the attributive clause will not link the description to the subject, making the sentence ungrammatical; the same goes with SCE.

(25) The man sell ice-kacang one is my uncle

The man who sells ice-kacang is my uncle

(26) \*The man sell ice-kacang is my uncle

(Alsagoff, 1998: pp. 131)

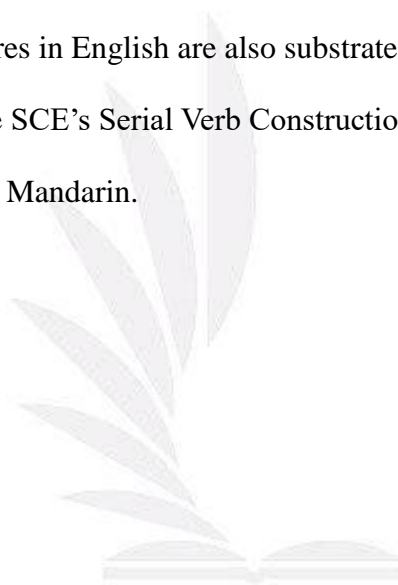
#### 4. Conclusion

Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), a creole language, which comprises different elements of Chinese dialect, Malay, English, and Tamil. Ho & Platt (1993) confirmed that those substrate languages have influenced SCE in great extent, and it is said that Chinese is the most dominant language that shapes SCE. Therefore, this paper aims to examine how Mandarin influences the syntax in SCE by looking at Serial Verb Constructions.

After checking the five criteria of Serial Verb Constructions in SCE proposed by Khoo (2015) and the types of Serial Verb Constructions in Mandarin proposed by Li and Thompson (1989), it shows that not all Serial Verb Constructions in SCE align with Serial Verb Constructions in Mandarin. Aside from two or more separate events,

sentential object, and pivot constructions, the criterion of sentential subject and descriptive clauses are not fulfilled. This is because the sentential subject rarely appears in SCE, and the similar pattern of descriptive clauses in SCE is actually relative clauses instead of descriptive clauses. From what it can be seen in the descriptive clauses section, it is likely that Mandarin and English had impact on this type of Serial Verb Constructions in SCE.

To conclude, Mandarin is indeed one of the main substrate languages, but it does not mean that the sentence structure or syntax is entirely the same as Mandarin. While Serial Verb Constructions has similar SCE's structure to Mandarin's Serial Verb Constructions, some structures in English are also substrate languages in Serial Verb Constructions, making some SCE's Serial Verb Constructions violate the properties of Serial Verb Constructions in Mandarin.



## References

- Khoo, W.L. (2015) Serial Verb Constructions in Singapore Colloquial English.
- Alsagoff, L & Ho, C.L. (1998) The Grammar of Singapore English.
- Lin, L. (2015) The V+V Constructions in Singaporean English.
- Li & Thompson. (1989) Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar.
- Alsagoff, L & Ho, C.L. (1998) The Relative Clauses in Colloquial Singapore English.
- Yin, H. (2007) Serial Verb Constructions in English and Chinese.
- Ho Mian Lian. (1999) Verbs of Communication in Colloquial Singaporean English, Asian English, 2:2, 25-35.
- Chang Qi Zhong. (2009) Copula Deletion in Colloquial Singapore English.
- “Our Grandfather Story”. (2019) What is Singlish?, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlbw7Lj6vkg&t=150s>
- “88.3jia”. (2017) 88.3jia FM Speak Good English Movement Video 1,, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-13nHHBJDAU&t=5s>
- Wikipedia: Singlish- reduplication, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singlish>

