

Wh-also constructions in Singlish*

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1 Introduction

- **Singlish** is a contact language spoken in Singapore
 - Main lexifier: English
 - Grammar likely influenced by Hokkien (Min Nan) and Baba Malay
 - Lexical items from other local languages
(Bao and Lye, 2005; Platt, 1975; Gupta, 2006; Low and Brown, 2005)
- The phenomenon: fronted *wh*-words combine with the focus-sensitive operator *also* to express universal indefinite readings

- (1)
- Who also** like to eat chocolate.
'Everyone likes to eat chocolate.' (subject)
 - What also** Mary like to eat.
'Mary likes to eat everything/anything.' (direct object)
 - About what also** he know a lot.
'He knows a lot about everything.' (PP complement)

- Three possible surface configurations:

(2)

 - What also** Mary like to eat. (FRONTED)
 - What** Mary **also** like to eat. (SPLIT)
 - Mary **what also** like to eat. (LOW)
'Mary likes to eat anything/everything.'

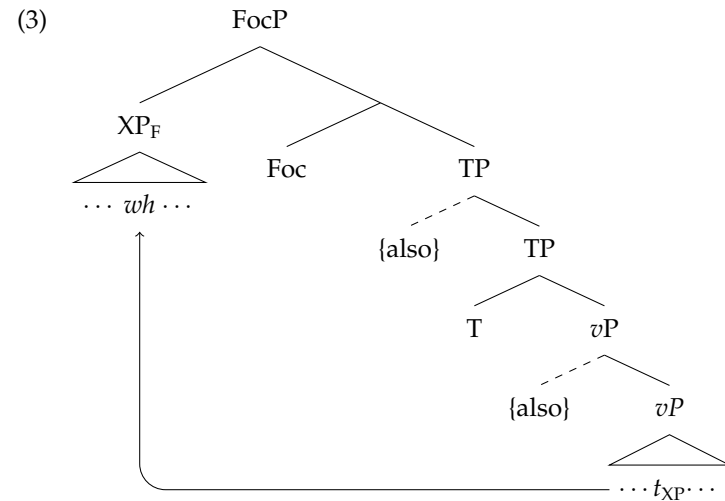
- Henceforth, I adopt the following terminology:

Wh-also	A construction in which a <i>wh</i> -element, with <i>also</i> , has an indefinite universal meaning
Wh-element	The <i>wh</i> -word or phrase in <i>wh-also</i>
Wh-fronting	The movement of the <i>wh</i> -element in <i>wh-also</i> structures (as distinct from <i>wh</i> -movement in questions)

Objectives

- Sketch a syntactic analysis of *wh-also* constructions
- Discuss the source of *wh-also* within Singapore's contact ecology

Analysis in a nutshell



*I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Filipe de Salles Kobayashi and the Spring 2024 class of LING 5520 at the University of Pennsylvania for many fruitful discussions of this paper. I am also immensely thankful to the consultants who contributed to this project. Singlish data in this paper is based on online elicitation sessions with native speakers and on my own judgments as a native speaker. I consulted seven other speakers, all of whom also speak English (two in 60s, also speak Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, Baba Malay; three in 20s, speak Mandarin, Hokkien; two in 20s, speak Malay.) Any and all errors remain my own.

2 Wh-also involves A'-movement

Wh-also constructions show properties consistent with A'-movement, e.g.:

- They can involve long-distance dependencies crossing CPs, DPs

(4) a. **What fruit** also John say [CP Mary don like to eat _k]. (∀ > say)
 'For any fruit *x*, John says that Mary does not like *x*.'

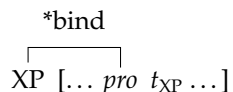
b. John say [CP **what fruit** also Mary don like to eat _k]. (say > ∀)
 'John says that for any fruit *x*, Mary does not like *x*.'

- The *wh*-element need not be nominal:

- (5) a. **When** also Anne available.
 'Anne is always available.'
 b. **Where** also Marcus will go.
 'Marcus will go anywhere.'
 c. **You give him what** also he happy.
 'He's happy with whatever you give him.'

- They are sensitive to weak crossover effects:

(6) Weak crossover constraint:

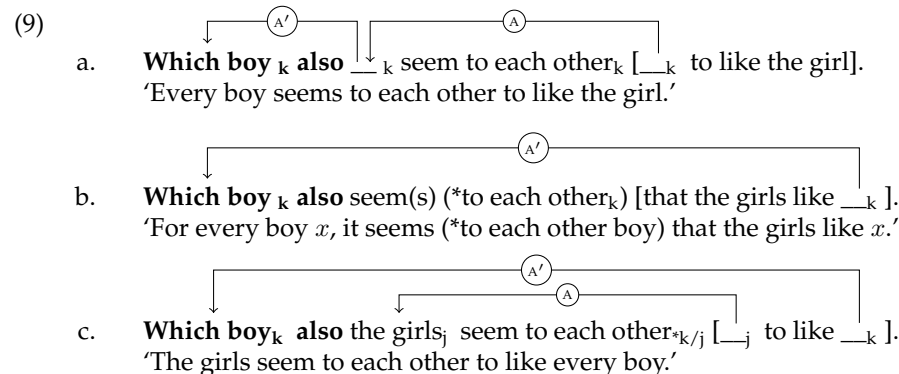


- (7) a. Which_k boy also his_{*k/j} mother punish _k.
 'His_{*k/j} mother punishes every_k boy.'
 b. Which_k boy also _k love his_{k/j} mother.
 'Every_k boy loves his_{k/j} mother.'

- The moved *wh*-element cannot license anaphors

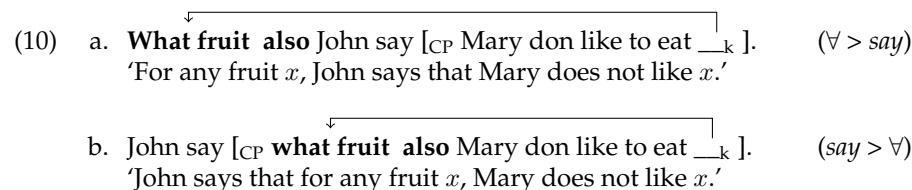
- (8) Baseline: (A-)moved DPs can license anaphors from surface position
 a. (It) seem(s) (*to each other_k) [that the boys_k like the girl].
 b. The boys_k seem (to each other_k) [_k to _k like the girl].
 'The boys seem (to each other) to like the girl.'

- (9a): *which boy* licenses *each other* – but from Spec,TP or higher A'-position?
- (9b): *which boy* is the theme of *like* and so never occupies Spec,TP. Here, it does not license *each other*.
- (9c): *the girls* raises to be subject of *seems*, becoming the only possible antecedent for *each other*, confirming that *which boy* does not occupy Spec,TP.



3 The landing site of the wh-element

- Wh-fronting targets CP boundaries, as shown in (10), a copy of (4):



- The *wh*-element cannot land within a non-finite clause (11), consistent with a CP landing site, assuming that non-finite clauses are only as large as TP.

- (11) a. [CP **What** also John like [TP to eat]].
 b. * [CP John like [TP **what** also to eat]].
 c. * [CP John like [TP to **what** also eat]].
 'John likes to eat everything.'

- Convergetly, *wh*-elements cannot land below negation (12)...

- (12) a. **What kind of fruit** John **also** don/never eat.
 b. John **what kind of fruit also** don/never eat.
 c. * John don/never **what kind of fruit also** eat.
 'John doesn't/didn't eat any kind of fruit.'

- ... or below modals (13). *Also*, and only *also*, can appear below the modal:

- (13) a. **What kind of fruit** John {**also**} can/should/must {**also**} eat.
 b. John **what kind of fruit also** {**also**} can/should/must {**also**} eat.
 c. * John can/should/must **what kind of fruit also** eat.
 'John can/should/must eat any kind of fruit.'

Takeaway

- *Wh*-movement in *wh*-constructions target the CP boundary
- *Also* is flexible in its positioning
- Q: What is the exact status of the *wh*-element?

4 Singlish *also*

4.1 *Also* as a focus operator

- Focus “indicates the presence of alternatives that are relevant for the interpretation of linguistic expressions” (Krifka, 2008, p.247)
- *Also* marks both scalar and non-scalar additive focus:

- (14) **Her name also** Marcus don know.
 'Marcus doesn't know her name, and...'
 a. '... there's at least one other thing he doesn't know about her.'
 (NON-SCALAR)
 b. '... her name was the least likely thing for him to not know about her.'
 (SCALAR)
- (15) Her name **Marcus also** don know.
 'Marcus doesn't know her name, and...'
 a. '... there's at least one other person who doesn't know her name.'
 (NON-SCALAR)
 b. '... he was the person least likely to not know her name.'
 (SCALAR)

- Sentence-final *also* can express additive focus (16a) and/or modality (16b)

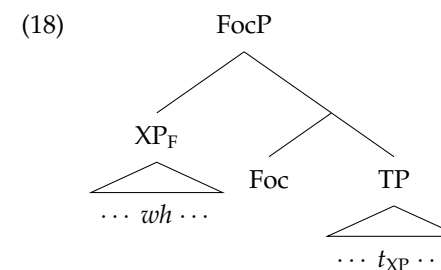
- (16) Her name Marcus don know also.
 a. Same readings as (14–15)
 b. 'Marcus doesn't know her name anyway.'

4.2 *Also* in *wh-also* constructions

- *Also* gives *wh*-elements universal quantificational force – entails that a property applies to all possible alternatives
- Scalarity: the property applies to even the **least likely alternative** on a contextual likelihood scale
- *Wh*-elements show the question-answer congruence associated with focused elements

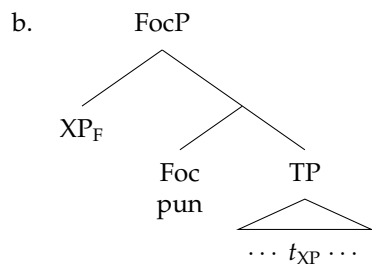
- (17) Q: John usually go **where** with Mary to take photo?
 'Where does John usually go with Mary to take photos?'
- a. A1: WHERE also John go with Mary to take photo.
 b. # A2: Where also JOHN go with Mary to take photo.
 c. # A3: Where also John go with MARY to take photo.
 d. # A4: Where also John go with Mary to take PHOTO.
 'John goes everywhere with Mary to take photos.'

- Adopting Rizzi's (1997) framework of a “split CP” composed of multiple functional projections, I propose that the focused *wh*-element lands in Spec,FocP (18).



- Is *also* the Foc head, such that the *wh*-element and *also* are in a Spec-Head relationship? Such an analysis would parallel Nomoto's (2023) analysis of Malay *pun* (19).

- (19) a. [Nama dia]_F pun saya tak tahu
 name 3SG PUN 1SG not know
 i. 'I also don't know his/her name.' (NON-SCALAR)
 ii. 'I don't even know his/her name.' (SCALAR)
 (Nomoto, 2023, p.149, ex. 6)



(Nomoto, 2023, p.149, ex. 10)

- Syntactically, *also* is flexible in its positioning (13,20) – not only occurring at a distance from the *wh*-element but even below modals, i.e., within a TP:

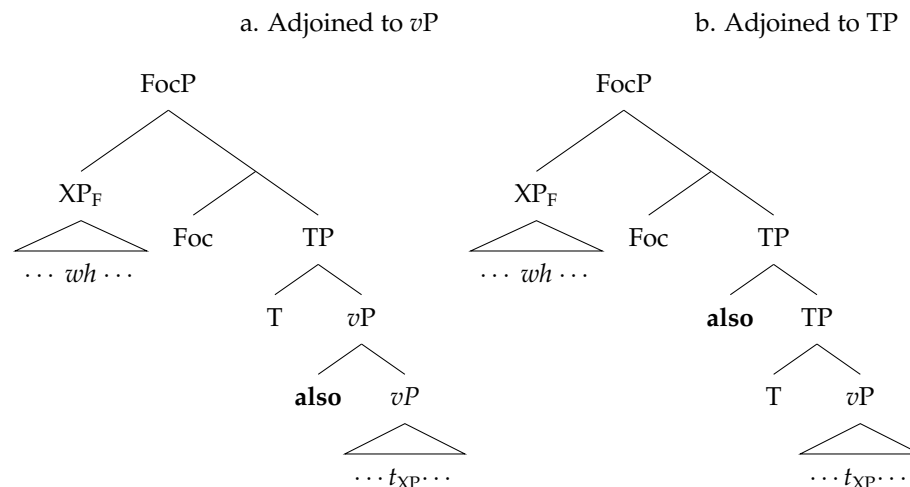
- (20) **What kind of fruit {also} John {also} can {also} eat {also}.**
 'John can eat any kind of fruit.'

- Despite this flexibility, a key constraint seems to be that *also* must occur to the right of the *wh*-element (21a) and within the same clause (21b):

- (21) a. *John **also** **what kind of fruit** can eat.
 Intended: 'John can eat any kind of fruit.'
 b. *John **also** say [_{CP} **what kind of fruit** Mary don like to eat _k].
 Intended: 'John says that for any fruit *x*, Mary does not like *x*.'

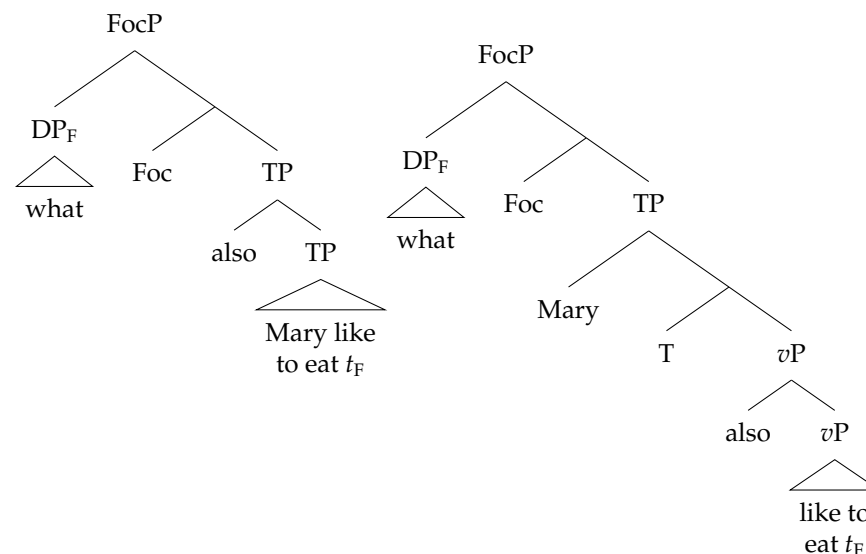
- Rather than being a Foc head, *also* seems to adjoin rather freely to elements no smaller than *vP* and no larger than TP (22)
 - Foc is instead a null head
 - Assuming no strict linearisation of adjoined elements, this treatment can further account for sentence-final *also*

- (22) Possible positions of *also*:



- This treatment accounts for two of the three basic surface configurations presented in (2):

- (23) a. FRONTED configuration (*also* adjoined to TP) b. SPLIT configuration (*also* adjoined to *vP*)



- The LOW configuration remains puzzling as the *wh*-element, being below the subject, seems to be within TP:

(24) [TP Mary **what also** like to eat.]
 'Mary likes to eat anything/everything.'

- To account for the LOW type, we might posit "low focus", where a FocP occurs between TP and *vP*, as proposed by [Badan \(2008\)](#) for Mandarin (25):

(25) hua a, [TP Zhangsan [FocP meiguihua [*vP* hen xihuan]]]
 flowers TOP Zhangsan roses very like
 'Among flowers, Zhangsan likes roses very much.'
 (Badan, 2008:5, ex. 10b)

- Yet, focused elements in Singlish cannot be fronted to a pre-verbal position (26), discounting the idea that there is a low focus position in this language.

(26) Q: Your father can eat what kind of seafood?
 a. A1: [Seafood]_{TOP}, my father can eat [crab]_F.
 b. * A2: [Seafood]_{TOP}, my father can [crab]_F eat.
 c. * A3: [Seafood]_{TOP}, my father [crab]_F can eat.

- Instead, I argue that the LOW configuration is a topic-comment structure, established as a basic sentence type in Singlish ([Bao, 2001](#); [Bao and Lye, 2005](#))

5 Singlish topic-comment & empty categories

- Singlish has inherited, from Chinese languages:
 - **topic-comment structures** ([Bao and Lye, 2005](#); [Gupta, 1991](#); [Platt and Webber, 1980](#); [Tay, 1979](#))
 - **empty categories** – arguments and topics ([Bao, 2001](#))
- Singlish null subjects behave identically to Chinese ones ([Bao, 2001](#)): they may be pronominals bound to a DP (27) or variables bound to a topic (28).

(27) Haikal_k say *pro*_k want to go supermarket.
 'Haikal says he wants to go to the supermarket.' (pro bound to DP)

(28) A: Xinyi_k know how to drive?
 'Does Xinyi know how to drive?'
 B: [_{TOPP} ∅_k] [∅_k know].
 'Yes, she does.' (var bound to topic)

- [Bao \(2001\)](#) argues that pronominal subjects can also be bound to a topic, and may be overt (29a) or null (29b):

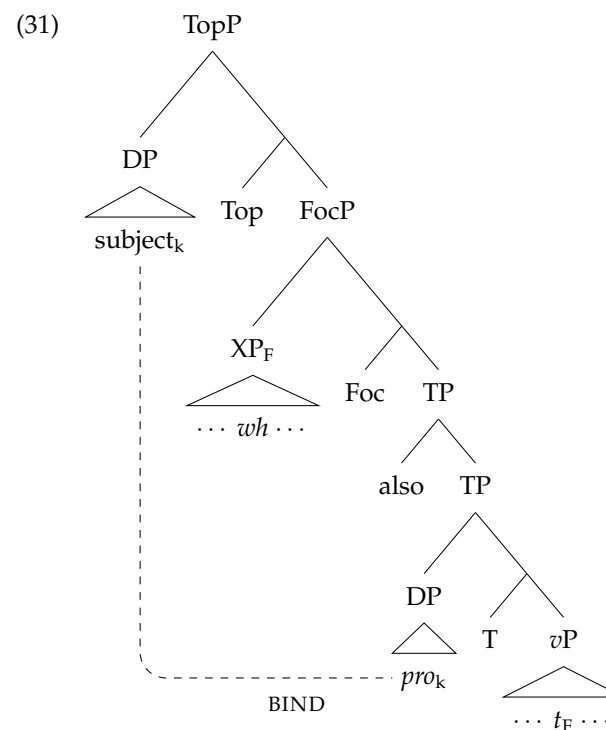
(29) a. [_{TOPP} Xinyi_k (ah/hor)] [she_k know how to drive leh]!
 b. [_{TOPP} Xinyi_k (ah/hor)] [∅_k know how to drive leh]!
 'Xinyi, she knows how to drive!'

- The subject in the LOW *wh-also* configuration is a topic, and Spec,TP is occupied by a null *pro* (30)

- The position of *also* is opaque: it may be adjoined to TP (30a) or *vP* (30b)

(30) a. [_{TOPP} Mary_k][_{FocP} what also [_{TP} *pro*_k like to eat.]] (TopP+FRONTED)
 b. [_{TOPP} Mary_k][_{FocP} what *pro*_k also [_{vP} like to eat.]] (TopP+SPLIT)

- Under this analysis, the LOW configuration is epiphenomenal: it is either the FRONTED or SPLIT configuration in a topic-comment structure:



- Predictions under this analysis:
 - (i) Overt pronouns should be possible in place of null *pro*
 - (ii) Topicalised “subject” can be marked by topic markers *ah/hor*

- These predictions are borne out:

- (32) a. Mary_k (ah/hor), what also she_k/*pro*_k like to eat. (TopP+FRONTED)
 b. Mary_k (ah/hor), what she_k/*pro*_k also like to eat. (TopP+SPLIT)
 c. What also Mary_k (*she_k) like to eat. (FRONTED)
 d. What Mary_k also (*she_k) like to eat. (SPLIT)

6 Contact and the evolution of *wh-also*

- Phenomena similar to Singlish *wh-also* can be found in several other languages in Singapore’s contact ecology:

- (33) Mandarin *wh + dou/ye* (Yun, 2018; Li, 1995; Cheng, 1995)

- a. shenme dongxi ta dou/ye bu xihuan chi
 what thing 3SG DOU/YE NEG like eat
 b. ta shenme dongxi dou/ye bu xihuan chi
 3SG what thing DOU/YE NEG like eat
 ‘He/She doesn’t like to eat anything.’

- (34) Hokkien *wh + ma*

- a. simi? mikiã i? ma tsia?
 what thing 3SG MA eat
 b. i? simi? mikiã ma tsia?
 3SG what thing MA eat
 ‘He/She eats anything.’

- (35) Malay *wh + pun* (Nomoto, 2023; Chambert-Loir, 2019; Goddard, 2001)

- a. apa pun dia makan
 what PUN 3SG eat
 ‘He/She eats anything.’

- Singlish *wh-also* orders are the union of possible orders in these languages:

Order	Mandarin	Hokkien	Malay	Singlish
FRONTED			✓	✓
SPLIT	✓	✓		✓
“LOW”	✓	✓		✓
sentence-final operator			✓	✓

- According to the congruence hypothesis of language contact (Mufwene, 2002; Ansaldo, 2004), alignment in the form and function of these phenomena in the “input” languages may explain their uptake in the “output” contact language, i.e., Singlish

- Speakers only have access to surface forms – not underlying structures – they draw generalisations over the input patterns to “create” a broader structure in the contact variety

7 Conclusion

- Singlish *wh-also* structures have not received prior attention in the literature. This work therefore contributes to our understanding of focus phenomena, and A’ phenomena more broadly, in Singlish.

- Contact appears to have played an important role in the evolution of *wh-also* constructions. Future work will address the exact evolutionary history of this phenomenon.

- Other focus operators in Singlish (e.g., *then, only*) also invite further study from both formal and contact perspectives.

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