

Headline	'Misuse' of usage		
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'Misuse' of usage

The use of good English begins with the role models

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WHEN the motorcar was invented, it made sense to invent the car park, or, as the Americans preferred it, the parking lot. Both the British and the Americans understood that individual cars went into parking spaces in such facilities.

But, peculiarly in Singapore, a parking lot – and its variant, a car park lot – has come to be understood as a parking space! Most Singaporeans will not bat an eyelid if a building developer were to boast that his latest project has 450 parking lots.

But I bet an American in transit will be impressed (overawed even and somewhat bemused) that land-scarce Singapore (that little red dot) seemingly has many, many more vehicles than people.

Welcome to English as she is spoken or written in Singapore. As

this year's Speak Good English Movement campaign gets underway, I make here a modest proposal to the very people who have the power to set a good example – educators, print and broadcast journalists, copywriters, politicians and other opinion makers. For better or worse, we are role models.

Let's examine how we use and often unintentionally abuse the English language. I call this a modest proposal because this is not an exercise in imposing stifling grammar rule observance on readers. In trotting out my small list of words below to reflect upon, I will intentionally avoid technical explanations but use common sense logic instead.

My own experience as a former copydesk editor is that the William Safire style of reasoning (although he does invoke rules) is more interesting and less "off-putting" to the typical reader. Leave it to the cunning linguists (okay, I mean grammarians) to split hairs over split infinitives.

On this note, I now go forth to my sample list of words Singaporean users – including role models – tend to abuse.

PARKING LOT/ CAR PARK LOT/PARKING SPACE: The

Singapore variant is surprising, given that many of us (role models) have been to Britain and the United States where such a mix-up just does not occur. We also read widely British and American books which again use the appropriate terms. So why this "misuse" of usage in Singapore?

Role models must take a stand

... That's why there is an afternoon and while there is no aftermidnight, we all know it's the wee hours of the morning, after midnight.

on this. If we insist that Singaporeans have a right to call a parking space a parking lot – so there! – then we should be aware of its proper use elsewhere.

FREE GIFT: I must admit that I have seen this redundancy used in other countries. But I find it flagrantly displayed in local advertise-

ments and in spoken and written usage by, yes, we role models. Think about it.

A gift is a gift, period.

12 MIDNIGHT/12 NOON: I'm not sure if I should label this usage a redundancy. Let's reflect on these terms logically. "Noon" and "midnight" are precise terms, the one meaning the minute just after 11.59am and the other the minute just after 11.59pm.

That's why there is an afternoon and while there is no aftermidnight, we all know that it's the wee hours of the morning after midnight.

All is not lost.

I was cheered by a local news-reader declaring, "It's midnight, 12 o'clock."

I can live with that.

SINGAPORE is the **SECOND RICHEST COUNTRY** in Asia after Japan. Samples of this usage can be gleaned daily in the press and I get really worked up about it.

In this example, the correct usage should be: Singapore is the richest country in Asia after Japan.

The problem here is one of ranking. Singapore is indeed No 2 and is, therefore, the second richest country in Asia.

But just as there is a logical

precision in the terms midnight and noon, this sentence form cannot be misused to suit one's illogical preference!

Again, I could live with variations like "Singapore is the second richest country in Asia (after Japan)" or "Singapore is the second richest country in Asia; Japan is the richest".

I hope I have made my point with this small list. Perhaps readers can come up with many more.

But I must reiterate that this is not an exercise in ridiculing anyone.

Rather, it would be wonderful if the man and woman in the street begin to see the English language as a "fun" means of communication and thirst to learn more – without falling early into the pitfalls of incorrect usage of common terms.

Perhaps, teachers at the primary level can consciously take care to use terms like midnight and noon correctly to their young charges.

Finally, we who are role models must reflect on why we use or abuse everyday words and correct ourselves.

The writer is an independent strategic analyst but his first love has always been the English language.