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Bad language

The problem with Singlish is not *lah* but poor grammar

I FELT both gladdened and somewhat disturbed when I read your report, "No more *lahs*, please." (TODAY, July 3)

I was glad to learn there is an organisation, the Speak Good English Movement, spearheading the push to promote "good" spoken English.

The report brought to mind an embarrassing encounter I had two years ago while on holiday in Sydney. My family and I met a taxi driver who was an immigrant from

Shanghai. Having lived in Australia for 20 years, he spoke like an Australian.

When he found out we were from Singapore, he said he sometimes had difficulty understanding Singaporeans when they spoke English.

As the conversation continued, I realised it is not



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so much the accent that makes it difficult for others to understand us but the way Singaporeans tend to mutilate their sentences.

It was embarrassing to hear such a remark because it is well known that English is used widely in Singapore.

The use of *lah* is not the biggest problem. Rather, it is the way Singaporeans construct their sentences. For instance, they say "wait you lost it, how?" instead of "what happens if you lose it?".

It disturbs me that this year's campaign uses the tagline, "Speak Well. Be Understood", because the

problem of bad English is so deep-rooted that Singaporeans understand each other in Singlish.

So what is there to change if they have no difficulty being understood by their peers? How often do they encounter foreigners?

In my experience, even teachers, doctors and dentists use bad English, albeit to different degrees. I cringe each time my child's dentist asks him "pain or not?".

So, instead of telling Singaporeans to speak to be understood, they should be reminded not to translate directly from Chinese when they speak English.

I agree it is fun to use Singlish in casual conversation. The problem is that young people have difficulty switching to proper English when the situation calls for it.

I am tired of hearing people say that Singlish is unique to us and that it should be tolerated.

I am pleased that the authorities recognise that we are steering way off course and are taking steps to solve the problem.

Susan Foo