

Headline	A sibling tongue		
Date	24 July 2003		
Media Title	Today	Section	Comment
Page No		Size	4colx

NEWS COMMENT/ TENG QIAN XI

A sibling tongue

English, not as a father language but as a playmate

THERE are some things you don't inherit from your parents.

My mother can speak Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and English. My father can speak Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, English, and once used to be fluent enough in Japanese to spend eight months working in Japan.

Both were Chinese-educated. Yet my father teaches in English at a polytechnic while my mother uses whatever language that will best persuade her real estate clients.

I, on the other hand, speak only English and Mandarin. Perhaps I can understand the works of T.S. and George Eliot better than my parents, but my parents' command of English is certainly good enough for them to do their jobs well.

And like many of their generation, their multilingualism helps them interact at a more personal level with people of different races in Singapore — which is why I take issue with the Government when it pushes good English at us for all it is worth.

I am not a rabid fan of Singlish, except perhaps when I am overseas and it becomes a method of rebellion above the mishmash of languages in Singlish — *jalat, sei, kena, lah, lor, leh*, and so on.

I probably spoke less proper English in my one year at Columbia University than during my entire period in junior college. And now that I am back in

Singapore, I would never dream of going to Maxwell hawker centre and saying anything other than: "Uncle, one *teh peng*".

Of course, I know that unlike many others, I can speak like a BBC presenter any time I choose.

I also agree with sociologist Dr Nirmala PuruShotam's reservations against Singlish.

In an interview with the critical arts journal *focaz* in July 2001, she said: "I enjoy speaking Singlish, but if I want to talk about certain issues and concepts, then Singlish does not give me the tools with which to do this."

But is the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) really the best way to give more people another linguistic register to choose from?

The tone of the campaign is undilutedly pragmatic. Its tagline might as well be: "Speak Well, Be Understood By Foreigners".

At the recent launch of the SGEM, Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts Dr Lee Boon Yang's speech focused on our duty to save foreigners the effort of understanding our local slang and to tap into the global economy by speaking "proper, grammatical English".

This is reflected in the very practical nature of the SGEM's projects, such as newsletters that offer tips on how to speak and sound better.

The Government's wish for

improved access to economic opportunities is completely understandable.

People will do what they have to do. If they need proper and grammatical English to do well in their jobs, they will learn it, at least enough to be understood.

Therefore, I question the need for national language campaigns, simply because efficient communication is only one aspect of English.

Australian sociolinguist Dr Joseph Lo Bianco has argued that in Asian countries, "multiple Englishes have emerged that ... clearly constitute a language of local cultural affiliation, a language of identity, as much as a language of mere communicative efficiency".

Whatever omnious hopes harboured by the SGEM's organisers that Singaporeans will "switch less" to Singlish, it will continue as a code signifying familiarity and perhaps a certain level of trust.

In Singapore, learning correct English is still very much linked to the acquisition of social or economic power.

Yet, a commonly-used language is one that can best express the range of emotions experienced daily by people. Appealing purely to pragmatism as a reason to speak good English will thus be self-defeating.

People should be encouraged from childhood not to see English — or languages in general — as a "father language".

A father language is one whose rules you have to remember in order to

access the power and authority that confers. Attempts to strengthen Singaporeans' grasp of English by putting it as a father language can only go far.

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Perhaps, we could adopt the alternative attitude suggested by Dr PuruShotam, which is to see language as a "sibling tongue" — an equal and a playmate instead of something that regiments and expresses.

Of course, the rule of the language still has to be learnt, but only so that its speakers can make it their own.

My parents use Mandarin when they think, complain and joke.

Perhaps the group (including tertiary students and skilled blue-collar employees) at

which the SGEM is aimed at feel the way about Singlish.

For English to fulfil such a function or even for genuine multilingualism in Singapore, the teaching of language should not focus on its functional aspects.

The more important thing is, through exposure to literature and other texts, give people the sense that when they want to enjoy and express themselves, English can also be a choice medium.

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