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English up with which I will not put

ON WORDS

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EVERY language has its islands of conservatism. English, as she's spoke in many parts, is no exception.

The language mutates, establishes varieties of alliterations and misalliances, changes from generation to generation. But amidst the flux, there are always a few islands which remain unchanged, the linguistic equivalents of fossils.

Some years ago, when I heard myself on radio, I was shocked to realise I was one of those fossils. My spoken English is different from my contemporaries. My intonation and pronunciation, the rhythms of my speech, belong to a different generation. I speak the English my father, aunts and uncles learnt in rural Malaya. For want of a better phrase, one might call that English "Straits English" — the English taught in the better English schools in the Straits Settlement.

The English-educated constituted a tiny pool then. Their teachers were Englishmen, or locals taught by Englishmen. As a result, spoken English in Singapore and Malaya was more "correct" or closer to the "norm" (whatever that was) than it is now.

It was inevitable. For how is it possible to keep English unchanged in Singapore when so many varieties of people speak it now? Even English is no longer singular. The English of the English-educated is different from the English of the Chinese-educated. I can't comprehend the Chinese-inflected English of today, for the Singlish I grew up with in the 1950s was Malay-inflected.

In this context, what would constitute "good English" now, in Singapore? Beside the advice to drop Singlish and use "simple words" — both sensible courses — the no-going "Speak Good English Movement" doesn't offer a fulsome answer. This has not stopped some "Forum" letter writers from offering emphatic or total linguistic reform.

Consider, for instance, the recommendations of Mr Tay Kwan Sun (ST, July 26). He has sensible things to say on the pronunciation of local names on radio and television.

I too think anyone who pronounces "Kallang" as "Carelang" should have his tongue pinned to the roof of his mouth. But Mr Tay's notions of correct usage go beyond this.

"Even local journalists and editors do not seem to know the meaning of 'wanting'," he complains. "'Wanting' means lacking of or in need of. I have been wanting to come to your home' is wrong usage. It should be 'I want to come to your house'."

This is simply incorrect. The latest edition of Fowler's Modern English Usage says "wanting" meaning "not having" has become somewhat antiquated. For example, in R.L. Stevenson's novel Kidnapped (1886), a character says "I would not go wanting sword and gun." Would anyone say that now?

On the other hand, Fowler says, "The notion of lacking or needing (as 'wanting') leads easily enough to the notion of desiring or wishing to have" — precisely the meanings Mr Tay finds objectionable. Though recent, such meanings are now "routine + indeed dominant".

Next we be more English than the English.

Another Mr Tay bromide: "You have must also stop perpetuating wrong usage by saying 'Who sends you to school?' when they mean 'Who takes you to school?'."

Wrong again: "Who sends you to school" is indeed awkward, but it is by no means a hanging offence. Other Caselangs. In any case, "Who takes you to school" is not exactly right either. If one wants to be constipated, it should be "Who does you to school?". If it is the teacher taking a student, the question is "Who will bring you here? Who will take you there?"

What makes the cake is Mr Tay's observation that "A visitor to Singapore will be very amused when his 'How do you do?' is answered with a 'I'm fine, thank you'. The correct response is 'How do you do?'."

Gosh! Really? I have heard any number of Americans and Englishmen reply "I'm fine, thank you. And how are you?" to my "How do you do?".

STILL, I confess I am sympathetic to the likes of Mr Tay. For I too am a fossil. But we learn should beware of forcing our notions of "correctness" on others. At any rate, let's not confuse Singaporeans with impossible standards of usage. If people become so nervous about usage they become tongue-tied, the whole purpose of encouraging them to speak reasonable good English will be defeated.

Like pornography, we will know "bad English" when we see it. But like art, "good English" is serious and subject (within broad limits) to the eye of the beholder. As a practical matter, an attitude of acceptability on questions of usage is the only realistic option.

In schools, let there be benign neglect of minutiae. Should it be "bring" or "take"? "in to" or "into"? "toward" or "towards"? "surprise" or "despite"? "fall" or "trail"? "Britons never shall be slaves" or "Britons never will be slaves"? Let's focus, instead, on the broad structures: Above all lessons, subject-verb agreement, and writing logically connected sentences and paragraphs. Do those first, and then (if there is time and motivation) tackle the rest.

I don't count the number of times I have corrected essays that meander from Timbuktu to Jupiter and right across the Milky Way before plumbing for planet Earth but missing it and landing on Mars. Professors and editors will know precisely what I mean. They would forgive any number of "Who sends you to school" for a scintilla of sense.

The best response I have to the command that one should be absolutely correct in usage is Winston Churchill's. When someone dared tell him he must not end sentences with prepositions, he replied: "This is the sort of English up with which I will not put."

Why English is so difficult to learn

- The bandage was wound around the wound.
- The farm was used to produce produce.
- The dump was so full that it had to refuse more refuse.
- The people decided to desert to desert in the desert.
- Since there's no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present.
- When dove at the dove cover into the bushes.
- I did not object to the object.
- The insurance was invalid for the invalid.
- There was a row among the women about how to row.
- They were too close to the door to close it.
- A seamstress and a sewer fell into a sewer.
- The wind was too strong to wind the sail.
- After a number of injections my injury got number.
- Upon seeing the tear in the painting she shed a tear.
- I live to subject the subject to a series of tests.
- How can I intimate this to my most intimate friend?

Let's face it — English is a crazy language. There's no apple in pineapple, nor ham in hamburger, and neither apple nor pine in pineapple. English muffins weren't invented in England or French fries in France.

And why is it that writers write but fingers don't fing, preachers don't preach and hammers don't ham? If teachers taught, why don't preachers preaught? And if Dad is Pop, how come Mum isn't Mop?

The plural of tree is trees, and the plural of cow is cows and ones. One hen is a pullet, but two are called geese. And the plural of moose should never be meese. You may find a loose moose or a red full of moose, yet the plural of house is houses, not hice.

If the plural of man is always men, why shouldn't the plural of pan be pen? If I spoke of my foot and show you my feet, and I give you a boot, would a pair be called beet? If one is a tooth and a whole lot are teeth, why shouldn't the plural of booth be beeth?

We speak of a brother and also of brethren, but though we say mother, we never say methren. If the masculine pronouns are he, his and him, why aren't the feminine she, shis and shim?

Doesn't it seem crazy that you can make amends but not one amend, that you can comb through records of history but not a single comb?

Sometimes I think all English spellers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane. What other reason could there be for doing things like these? Why do we say that people recite at a play and play at a recital? Or to pack up a pack and safely carry by shoe? Or have noses that run and feet that smell?

How can a slow chance and a fair chance be the same, while a wise man and a wise guy opposites? How can overlook and oversee be opposites, while quite a lot and quite a few are alike? How can the weather be hot in hell one day and cold in hell another?

Have you ever seen a fearful carriage or a careful queen? Or met a sure hero or experienced recruiting love? Have you ever run into someone who was combobulated, gruntled, ready or peeved? And where are all those people who are indeed raising chickens or who would action a hint only?

You have to marvel at the unique history of a language in which your house can burn up as it burns down, in which you'll fax a form by filling it out and in which an alarm goes off by going on. English was invented by people, not computers, and it reflects the muddle of the human race (which, of course, isn't a nice at all).

That is why, when the stars are out, they are visible, but when the lights are out, they are invisible. And why, when I wake up my watch, I start it, but when I wake up this essay, I finish.

* Versions of the column have been circulating via e-mail for more than a year. The author is unknown.