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## Mother tongue hurdle to spoken English

I REFER to Ms Liu I-Chun's suggestion of listing out the common errors in English that Singaporeans commit (TODAY, April 26).

It is a commendable suggestion, but one I fear that will come to no avail as the majority of Singaporeans face one overwhelming hurdle – their supposed “mother tongue”.

Be it Mandarin (and its dialects), Malay or Tamil (or other Indian languages), they all influence heavily the way we speak English; most of the time, badly.

Take, for instance, the many times Singaporean Chinese “spick” English. They “emphasie” the wrong syllables. When it is supposed to be long, it becomes “shot”.

This can be traced to the fact that Mandarin and – indeed – the dialects spoken do not differentiate between long and short sounds, or at least emphasise them in the same way.

Also, everyone assumes that the longer word forms are just extensions of “pronounce-iations” of the basic word. So, instead of saying “maintenance” it is pronounced as “main-tain-nance”, a longer form of “maintain”.

Malay lends itself to influence the way we lilt our overall sentential enunciation, so what should be “I CANnot go to aNOther CONcert” becomes “I canNOT go to anoTHER conCERT”.

Of course, the noted inversion of “Vs” and “Ws” by Tamil speakers affects the sentence thus: “A wery vet day”; or words – with “develop” becoming, literally, “devlop”.

I fear that as long as we have four official languages, making a list will make no difference to the vast majority of Singaporeans. After all, everyone gets along fine and dandy. So, why speak like a true-blue potato eater?

Sadly, it will be left to the likes of Ms Liu and myself to correct our staff or our children constantly whenever such mistakes happen which, unfortunately, is almost every day.

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