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## High cost of Singlish

**O***H why can't the English learn to speak...English? That was the question Professor Henry Higgins posed in My Fair Lady. If it could be directed at the English — whose native tongue, after all, is rumoured to be English — it can also be directed at others who allegedly speak the language. Where Singaporeans*

are concerned, the question goes beyond accent. It does not matter whether one speaks English like Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong or one speaks it like others in his Cabinet. Higgins might have been correct to believe that if an English flower-girl spoke like a Duchess, she might pass for a Duchess, but no Singaporean who spoke like an Englishman or an American would become one. The aim of Singapore's Prof Higgins, as represented by the Speak Good English Movement, is altogether more modest: It is not to encourage Singaporeans to speak English with any particular accent, but to speak it intelligibly; it is not so as to pass for an English Duchess, but to pass for an English-speaker.

Defenders of Singlish would argue that pidgin is part of our Singapore identity. The argument is juvenile for two reasons. First, Singlish negates the whole purpose of language, which is communication. What's the use of speaking a demotic tongue that nobody but Singaporeans — and that too, not all Singaporeans — can comprehend? Second, there are usable identities and there are crippling ones. For example, addiction is a part of the identity of drug-addicts, but that doesn't make addiction a valuable trait. Similarly, just because Singlish is identifiably Singaporean doesn't mean Singaporeans ought to value it. Spitting was once identifiably Singaporean too, but Singaporeans haven't clung to it as though their ICs depended on it. A fine of \$500 sufficed to consign that sputum of useless identity to history.

Unfortunately perhaps, it is not possible to fine Singlish out of existence. The organisers of SGEM have wisely taken an educational approach. They aim to convince Singaporeans that good English is an economic necessity. Globalisation is a fact and English is its medium. Not to speak it well will disadvantage Singaporeans against other English-speakers. "You see there, got, got. Not there, no-got" is not only comical, it can also be very costly. One can lose billion-dollar contracts if foreigners are convinced "not here, no got" English.