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NEWS comment

Denyse Tessensohn

DURING this time of heightened awareness of the importance of being able to speak good standard English when required, we need to consider something that might officially border on sacrilege: The active preservation of one aspect of Singapore Colloquial English commonly spoken as "Singlish".

These are the words and phrases taken from local languages like Malay, Tamil and dialects or originally coined — such as *ta pau*, half-past-six, *obuang* and *Alamak!*

As Singaporeans of all ethnic derivations can and do use them with each other, they obviously bond. And these days, this gift of cohesiveness is a psychologically precious weapon.

When I was doing research on this subject early last year, I wrote to Sharon Ismail, spokesperson for the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM). She replied that it is "not unexpected" as part of natural evolution that our brand of spoken English has absorbed words from other language vocabularies.

She continued: "SGEM does not have a stand against this, only that it hopes

SAVE OUR SHIOK!

Singlish, standard English can co-exist and work together

Singaporeans are aware of the importance of being able to speak grammatically when the occasion calls for it, and are sufficiently adept at it when they need to be."

Singaporeans should also remember to translate for foreign friends listening in. But why do we want to preserve these terms now? Because my research has shown that we are losing those very words and phrases as the younger generation becomes less familiar with them.

In part, this is due to the extensive use of English and Mandarin. Teenagers have a lower recognition rate for such terms as *bungkus*, *angkat* and *gagak buta*. While *gagak* appears in some dictionaries that are trying to cater to this region, it too has a diminished recognition.

Teenagers have a limited understanding of what *sayang* means, when they know it at all. Very few know what a *dhoby* was, and even Hokkien teenagers do not know the term *luan hoot*.

On the other hand, even though academic publications describe *gostan* and half-past-six as archaic, these terms are still familiar and in use. And everyone knows *Alamak!*, a direct translation from Kristang, the Portuguese creole of the Eurasians, meaning "Mother of God".

How more intimate with another culture can you get, when you have examples of blending, say, Hokkien and Malay, to get *buay tahan*? Or when a children's rhyme combines Malay and Cantonese, as in "*Sar cham kap some mang, yau ho we'chook, chook salong*" (Arrogant and proud, you have pants and are still wearing a sarong).

The question is whether these words and phrases — which do not necessarily contain morally uplifting meanings — should be proactively preserved and promoted with the younger generation. I would argue, our history is reflected in these multi-cultural terms.

The concept of "shared subjective knowledge", developed by American Professor Brutt-Grüffler, is about the uniting of a community in many ways, one of them through linguistic identity. We can all feel like "insiders" when we talk to each other about certain Singaporean matters (the Five Cs, National Day Parade tickets, MRT stations), even on first meeting. The lexicon of colloquial English, too, is part of this binding identity.

Remember Sars? Within a day of the start of intense media coverage of the outbreak in March 2003, variations of the following SMS were sent by email: "Doctors advise you to stay home if you have any contact with Sars. But also:

Don't drink SARsai, don't wear SARi, don't wear SARong, don't SARkar people and don't SARbo people."

This simpatico can also be extended

to our neighbours up north, with whom we have shared the same language terms for centuries. When such terms are used by a fellow Singaporean or a Malaysian, a warm feeling of familiarity ensues.

This is fast eroding because our young people are not hearing those terms and will not be using them. A rich cultural heritage will be lost if steps are not taken now. We cannot afford to be *chin chye* about this.

As for whether such imported words and phrases will erode levels of standard English, of all the aspects of our colloquial English that the language doctors are trying to deal with, this is the easiest to counter — you simply teach a standard English replacement term, like "eat" in place of "yahok". These familiar terms do not arouse the same loathing that bad grammar or incorrect pronunciation tend to. No doubt, some terms will cause controversy.

Take for example, "buy home", a short form of "to buy something and to take it home with you" (a phrase used by Professor Tommy Koh to Dick Lee on a televised interview). How homely the phrase is, well understood and often used — and well deserving of preservation.

Plus, there is a certain sophistication that users of good standard Singapore English display, when weaving in such imported words and phrases in perfect grammatical order — in, for example: "If it is too *susah* for you, please don't *pai seh* about it. We have already *mahroed* enough. You have *blainsaed* us so generously."

Frankly, how could we possibly substitute "delicious" for *Shiok!* And what single word could ever replace the loss of *Alamak!*?

The writer is an English teacher and the author of *1,000 Most Mispronounced English Words*. To comment on her views, email news@newstoday.com.sg

LEXICON

- **Alamak!**: (Malay) Expression of surprise, annoyance or incredulity
- **Angkat**: (Malay) To carry favour
- **Belanja**: (Malay) Give a treat; past tense — *belinjaoed*
- **Buay tahan**: (Hokkien/Malay) Cannot be endured
- **Bungkus**: (Malay) Take away; wrap up; bundle
- **Buy home**: (Original Singaporean coinage) Take away
- **Chiak**: (Hokkien) Eat heartily
- **Chin chye**: (Hokkien) Sipshod; wesy-going
- **Gagak buta**: (Malay) Fighting or hitting out blindly
- **Half-past-six**: (Original Singaporean coinage) Sipshod
- **Luan hoot**: (Hokkien) To hit out at random, rather like *gagak buta*
- **Makan**: (Malay) Eat; past tense — *makanod*
- **Obiang**: (Original Singaporean coinage) Excruciatingly tasteless
- **Pai seh**: (Hokkien) Sry
- **Sars!**: A brand of root beer
- **Sar kar**: (Hokkien) Curry favour
- **Sar bo**: (Original Singaporean coinage) Short form for sabotage
- **Shiok!**: (Malay) Inexpressible delicious or enjoyable
- **Susah**: (Malay) Difficult
- **To pau**: (Cantonese) Take away
- **Wayang**: (Malay) Drama; to put on an emotional display