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Benchmarking our English

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For The Straits Times

WHILE in Langkawi last month, I decided to check out the new Four Seasons Resort there. Visiting upmarket hotels to savour their ambience - and food, of course - is my favourite holiday activity.

As I strolled around the grounds, I ran into a bell-hop. We exchanged pleasantries and I asked him if the Malaysian prime minister would be opening the hotel that Friday - information I had been given when I arrived on the island.

'Yes, ma'am, the prime minister will be doing that,' he replied.

We walked on, chatting about various aspects of the new resort, till we reached a fork in the path. In the politest of tones, he said: 'Now if you'll excuse me ma'am,' bowed slightly and went on his way.

I was thoroughly impressed. He answered most of my questions in complete sentences. He spoke clearly. He gave just the right amount of information. If he were in Singapore, he would have made the perfect poster boy for Singapore's current Speak Good English campaign.

But guess what? While his command of English was remarkable, I was more struck by his service-orientated attitude and product knowledge. That he also spoke good English was a bonus. It may be politically incorrect to declare - in the face of our SGE campaign - that I really do not care if service staff, in Singapore or elsewhere, speak good or bad English.

Yet in all honesty, I have to state just that. Whatever brand of English they speak is fine with me so long as they understand what I say. After all, I have no wish to discuss eternal verities with the shop attendant.

What I care about and demand is prompt, courteous and thoughtful service, with good eye contact. An occasional smile would be a plus. If these basic expectations are met, then service staff and other front-line people can use fake American or British accents with fractured syntax to boot and utter as many 'lahs' and 'leh's' as they like.

In any case, 'lahs' and 'mehs' at the end of sentences are not any more irritating than those who speak impeccable English but have this tendency to end practically every utterance they make with 'you know?'

What I found truly appalling about the salesgirl with the inimitable 'You see there got, got. Not there, no got' - a story told by Professor Koh Tai Ann to show why service staff need to speak better English - was not her English, awful though it was, but her attitude. She needs training in good service more than she needs to improve her grammar.

Instead of dissipating their efforts by including service people in their net, I think our SGE campaigners should concentrate their efforts on people who hold positions where they should speak or write better English - but, alas, do not always. A few examples come to mind.

- Singaporean movers and shakers who, speaking on radio, TV and other public rostrums, pronounce the definite article as if every noun started with a vowel. I wince every time I hear them say 'thee' or 'dee' country, library, school, car, taxes and so on. Someone should tell them that, with a few distinct exceptions, 'the' is pronounced as 'thee' only when used with words starting with the letters a, e, i, o and u.
- Those who provide our radio or TV announcers with scripts which say 'between this TO that'. Are editors or producers not taught that 'between' is always followed by 'AND'? Like between the devil you know and the devil you don't.
- Our English dailies which blithely report about people who go 'marketing' or 'grocery marketing', when the activity in question is in fact shopping, not selling. Furthermore, non-countable nouns are often given an 's' to signal the plural form so that it has become common to see furniture rendered as furnitures and advice as advices.
- Noun and verb agreements are more often ignored than observed, especially when the sentence is long and has several qualifying clauses.
- Malaprops who write or say 'assert' when they mean exert and vice versa. Other pairs of words which suffer the same confused use include excess and access, affective and effective and so on.

Putting pressure on this influential coterie to clean up their act will likely yield better results than a shotgun approach of trying to get everyone who has a passing acquaintance with English to speak an acceptable form of English.

This is because, given their visibility, VIPs are intuitively our role models. If this group could be persuaded to use English closer to the ideal Singapore model, then the rest of us stand a better chance of improving our English too.

And who is the ideal Singapore model?

No, not someone who could, at the drop of a hat, recite the complete set of grammar rules. For that, we can learn all we ever want to know about conjugation, gerunds, infinitives, conditional tenses, prepositions and the whole caboodle with a click of the mouse to this excellent grammar site called Grammar Bytes - www.chompchomp.com

'Both teaching methodology and the curriculum reflected this approach. Teacher trainees were even told it was all right to use Singlish if it enabled them to relate to and communicate better with their pupils. Then, came a realisation that Singlish was becoming very widespread.'

Students didn't know enough English grammar to be able to tell when a formation borrowed from some other language was inappropriate in English. 'Hence, the dynamic and creative nature of Singlish, which is constantly borrowing words from the languages around us, or creating new form,' Prof Koh said.

Teaching grammar is one way to make students conscious again. In Singapore, grammar would be nothing less than a consciousness-raising tool. But the trouble is we may not have enough consciousness-raisers among us. The late Mrs Lau, my teacher, belonged to a generation that learnt grammar from young. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes* - who are going to teach the teachers now?

The Speak Good English Movement has a massive task before it.