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You speak only Singlish? You're in berry big trouble

Glenda Han
tnp@sph.com.sg



IN Singapore, when we speak poor or colloquial English, we are said to be speaking Singlish.

I basically divide Singlish into three broad categories. The first is unique to Singaporeans: Finishing our sentences off with lahs or lehhs so as to give them a slight oomph. When you say "Come lah?", it sounds more persuasive than just "Do you want to come?"

Secondly, we tend to cut our sentences short so as to get our message across faster. For example, we say "Have or not?" rather than "Do you have it or not?" I'm still trying to decide if we are just plain lazy or trying to divert those few nanoseconds saved into more constructive use.

Lastly, we churn out "rojak" sentences — not comprising fried dough, pineapples and peanut sauce — but English, Mandarin and Malay all within one sentence. For instance, "Let's go makan (eat in Malay)." Though not an excuse, it's no wonder, given our multi-racial society.

Speaking Singlish in those ways does not mean having a bad command of English. Sure, it isn't proper, but if you can switch to proper English if need be, you don't have a problem.

Bad command of English is more a poor grasp of grammar and mispronunciation. For example, when you say "This is more



better", or when someone pronounces lingerie as "lin-gir-ree".

The Speak Good English Movement emphasises the need to stop speaking Singlish. But I think Singlish is a problem only if one cannot get his or her tenses or pronunciation right.

Actors like Gurmit Singh speak Singlish in their sitcoms but can easily switch to proper English if need be. Yet, as much as I understand that our sitcoms need to have a local flavour, it irks me when words are intentionally mispronounced to inject humour. Using words like "par-kwet (parquet)" or, as a Chinese variety show host said, "I like it berry (very) much", is just brazenly bad English.

The young may grow up thinking they

are pronouncing these words correctly.

Every country has its own slang. Singlish helps identify us as Singaporeans, but don't confuse it with bad English.

And don't confuse it with having an accent either. An accent does not naturally mean your standard of English is higher. I was perplexed when someone was surprised that I did not have an accent even after living in Paris for two years.

I have known people who have lived in Anglophone countries for years, and though they do speak less Singlish, they do not simply adopt an accent after having spent their formative years in Singapore.

During a recent meal, I heard a girl who has spent all her life here speak in a quasi-local, quasi-American accent (with Singlish terms peppering her sentences!). It kept my appetite at bay.

I quote PM Lee Hsien Loong at the launch of the Speak Good English Movement last year: "Speaking good English does not mean using bombastic words or adopting an artificial English or American accent. We can speak in the normal Singapore tone, which is neutral and intelligible."

Perhaps teachers should pay more attention on highlighting the irregularities in pronunciation, like the word "presentation" (pronounced "PRARE-sen-tation" rather than "PRE-sen-tation").

Our standard of English will continue to spiral downwards if there is no conscious effort to address even the basic problems.

The writer owns a restaurant and was part of the Workers' Party team, which contested in Ang Mo Kio GRC in the recent General Election. For feedback, e-mail tnp@sph.com.sg