

Publication :	Straits Times
Date :	13 August 2006
Headline:	English As It Is Broken

gen y
thesundaytimes August 13 2006

ENGLISH
AS IT IS
BROKEN

Not sure what is good English and what is not? Write to The Sunday Times and we will get language experts to answer your queries. This is a new series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.



Familiar with this notice?

HAVE you seen this sign? Probably not. This was sent in by a reader who was in China recently.

The sign points the way to a toilet for the handicapped — but I think many of us would be uncomfortable with it on two counts.

First of all, the word “deformed” is an adjective, and such words help to describe things. In this instance, it seems to suggest that the toilet is unsightly and malfunctioning. This meaning is definitely not intended.

Secondly, and some might argue more importantly, “deformed” is not a word we want to use to refer to people who have physical disabilities. This is not just about political correctness but also about being sensitive to the feelings of others.

So how then should the sign read?

“Toilet for the handicapped” seems very long. One way could be to use the universally recognised symbol like those for male and female toilets with the image of a wheelchair.

What’s wrong?

John said: “Betty don’t want to friend me any more.”

This was sent by a parent whose children use it all the time.

Yes, children are fond of using these “don’t friend you/him/her” phrases. We hear them in the playground and in school, and they mean simply this — the end of the friendship.

► While the intention behind the phrase is unmistakable, “friend” cannot be used as a verb. We can say “I don’t want to be your friend” or “Can I be your friend?” but not “I don’t friend you” or “Can I friend you?”

► Also, “Betty don’t want...” should be “Betty doesn’t want...”

What the petulant child should have said is: “Betty doesn’t want to be my friend any more.”

Thanks for feedback

Thank you, readers, for the feedback we have been getting from you — some of you complimenting us on taking on this Herculean task of getting English right and others disagreeing with us.

One of our readers, Mr Jason Loh, pointed out in his letter that over and above the examples we cited last week on the use of the word “kindly”, it is also used when asking someone to do something, usually if you are annoyed with them but still want to be polite.

If you spot a sign with bad English, send an MMS to 75557 or e-mail 75557@stomp.com.sg

HOW TO SEND IN YOUR QUERIES
Please use the keyword
<english> SMS/MMS: 75557
Email: 75557@stomp.com.sg



OUR LANGUAGE EXPERTS are (left to right): Mrs Joy Lee, Mrs Regina Davamani, Ms Connie Seng and Ms Jeyalaxmy Ayadurai. All four are master teachers in English language — experts who help teachers develop good teaching practices and programmes.