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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 weekly series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.

Can't make head or tail of this?

QUITE often, we tend to be careless in our use of words because we feel that so long as we are understood, there shouldn't be a fuss. But sometimes, a careless use of words could convey a meaning totally different from what is intended.

This sign above is an example. When we tell people to "beware", we're asking them to be very careful about something, and to avoid it because it is likely to pose some kind of danger to us. What are we telling the reader to avoid here? Surely not his own head but the low-hanging and protruding signs which he may bump his head into!

What the sign should say is "Watch your head" or "Beware of low ceiling".



Youth or youths?

A READER wrote in to say that The Sunday Times, in an article headlined "Why youths prefer Singlish", should have used "Youth" instead of "Youths". "Youth", he said, is used as a collective noun to describe a section of society.

We do agree that in Standard English, it is more proper to use the singular form when referring to young people collectively. However, most dictionaries do allow the plural form to be used when referring to young persons in general. Pardon the cliché, but the English language is always evolving.

A quick aside: In July, Merriam-Webster added 100 new words or expressions to the latest version of its Collegiate Dictionary. One of the words was "google". People now say to one another, "I googled that restaurant", even if they had used a Yahoo search engine. In everyone's mind, "googling" has become the generic term.

HOW TO SEND IN YOUR QUERIES

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