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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 master teachers to answer your queries. This is a weekly series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.

To prevent your EZ Link cards from getting jam in the machines, please do not insert cards with bent edges. Kindly proceed to the Passenger Service Centre for assistance. Thank you.



'Jammed', not 'jam'

THE MRT staff are not talking about spreading jam on our cards like we do with bread though it does sound that way. The word here should be "jammed" since the focus is on what is happening to the card, rather than who the doer is.

Bear with us as we get a little technical here to explain the active voice and the passive voice.

The passive voice is commonly used when the doer is not as important as what is happening to the object, or recipient of the action.

Hence, we usually use the passive, "She was murdered" rather than, "Somebody murdered her" when the subject (in this case, the murderer) has not been identified. But once the murderer is caught, we would say, "The butler did it" which is in the active voice.

The use of the passive form is also required in another commonly uttered phrase. We frequently hear Singaporeans saying, "first-come, first-serve" but since the person who comes first is a recipient of an action, the passive "served" should be used. You may be able to think of more examples of your own.

Going to the market or workplace?

WHEN we visit the shops to make a purchase, we say we are going shopping. So if we are going to the market to buy something, we say we are going marketing? While this may sound logical, English, as we know, isn't always so.

The word "marketing" is actually used in business circles to refer to the process of selling a product, for example, how to price it, where it should be distributed, and how to advertise it. So while a marketing executive can rightly say that he or she is going to market a product, those of us who are merely intending to pick up some groceries should stick to "I'm going to the market".

More courtesy please

A LETTER from a reader, Mrs Kim England, suggests injecting more courtesy in signboards.

"I refer to the sign you ran in the Sept 3 issue of The Sunday Times where you recommended amending the awkward signboard from 'Sorry is not allow washing hand here. Thank you' to 'You are not allowed to wash your hands here' or 'Hand washing not allowed here'.

"Chances are the managers of the supermarket in question would amend it accordingly. While it is grammatically correct, I feel it would help if we inject a little courtesy when making recommendations of this nature," she suggests in her e-mail.

"Let us support the Courtesy Campaign with this little gesture. Dare I say, a better version would be: Please do not wash your hands here?"

"It comes across a little gentler and persuasive and less intolerant and authoritative."

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 Davamoni, Ms Connie Seng and Ms Jeyalaxmy Ayaduray. All four are master teachers in English language – experts who help teachers develop good teaching practices and programmes.