

Publication :	Sunday Times
Date :	01 October 2006
Headline:	English As It Is Broken

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thesundaytimes October 1 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 master teachers to answer your queries. This is a weekly series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.



Sitting and seating

A READER spotted this sign plastered on pillars in a coffee shop in Tanjong Pagar.

By using the verb "sitting", the sign seems to suggest that there are more people sitting at the rear. This may be unnerving for customers if they see no one sitting at the back of the coffee shop, especially if it is late at night!

What the sign really means, we know, is that there are more seats at the back of the coffee shop.

The confusion is probably between the use of "sitting", a verb, and "seating", which is a noun.

The former is always used to describe an action, while the latter refers to the seats provided or the formal arrangement of the seats.

In a nutshell, you can say that there are people sitting according to the seating arrangement at a wedding dinner, and that extra seats are available for those who want to bring their children along.

Why didn't you call me?

AN ANECDOTE sent in by one of our readers recounting her experience when she had just arrived in Singapore from Australia illustrates how using words differently from what they mean in Standard English can sometimes cause misunderstanding.

Apparently, one of her Singaporean friends asked her five-year-old daughter: "Why didn't you call me?" The little girl innocently replied: "Well, I don't have your phone number."

We know the adult had only wanted the little girl to greet him, but all too often we hear local parents reminding their children to "call Uncle or Auntie".

Our reader suggested that we can simply tell them to "say hello to...".

The word "call" can be used in many contexts. You can call someone in the sense of making a telephone call to them, or call out someone's name, which is usually done in a loud voice to attract attention. If you call people names, you're insulting them. These are just some examples.

Live or stay?

ANOTHER example of a word used Singapore-style is "stay".

We often hear someone say "Where do you stay?" when asking for a person's address.

However, "stay" usually connotes something temporary. For example, you stay in a hotel or hospital, or you stay the weekend at someone's place.

When asking where someone's home is, it is better to ask: "Where do you live?"

However, since both words do not refer to different things and are not likely to cause confusion to the listener, some might argue that it is acceptable to use either in the above context.

In fact, some dictionaries note that in Scotland, India and South Africa, "stay" is often used to refer to one's dwelling.

We would love to hear what you think. Send us your thoughts and queries.

HOW TO SEND IN YOUR QUERIES

Please use the keyword
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OUR LANGUAGE TEACHERS are (left to right): Ms Connie Seng, Mrs Joy Lee, Ms Jeyalaxmy Ayaduray and Mrs Regina Davamani. All four are master teachers in English language – experts who help teachers develop good teaching practices and programmes. Styling and grooming: Ashburn Eng (www.ashburneng.com). Make-up: Elaine Liu using Guerlain cosmetics and Evian Brumisateur. Hair: Jonal Chong and Alson Lim for Savoir Fair using L'Oreal Professional. Wardrobe: Models' own. Accessories: Quintessential.