

Publication :	Straits Times
Date :	08 October 2006
Headline:	English as it is broken

Oct 8, 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 weekly series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.



A matter of time

IN SINGAPORE, we tend to confuse 'between...and' with 'from...to'.

When we want to indicate an interval of time, we use the former, as in 'I arranged to meet him between 9am and 10am'.

In other words, our meeting could be at any time between 9am and 10am.

When we want to highlight the start and end times of something, it is better to use 'from' and 'to'. For example, 'The shop will be open from 9am to 9pm every day, including Sundays and public holidays'.

Don't revert, just get back to us

IN LOCAL usage, it is common to have people asking others to 'revert' to them, as in: 'Please revert on the matter at your earliest convenience.'

A reader wrote in to ask if this is correct.

'Doesn't 'revert' actually mean to 'return to a former state or type of behaviour'?'

Our reader is absolutely correct. So you could say that a struggling business will revert to its original healthy state, or that someone has reverted to his old ways. This has the meaning of 'going back', though this is not quite what we mean when we ask someone to 'revert' to us.

Perhaps we could say instead: 'Please get back to us on the matter as soon as possible.'

A crash course in prefixes

WE RECEIVED some queries about the difference between 'emigrants' and 'immigrants' and whether 'irregardless' is acceptable in Standard English.

Perhaps some knowledge about how words are formed can help us to clarify the meanings of words and even expand our vocabulary.

For instance, the word 'migrant' refers to a person who moves from one place to another, usually in search of work.

Now, if we know that the prefix 'e' or 'ex' means 'out' or 'from' (for example, emit, explode and exit), then it is easy to remember that an 'emigrant' is someone who leaves the country to settle in another place.

The word 'immigrant' has the prefix 'im' which can either mean 'not' (as in impossible or impractical) or 'into', as in this case and in words like import and immerse. So an 'immigrant' is someone who comes into a country.

Thus I would say that my Singaporean cousin emigrated to the United States last year but my foreign national neighbour is an immigrant to Singapore.

Irregardless or regardless?

NOW, we know the IR is making the news a lot lately, but as a prefix, it is not required in the word 'regardless'. Many Singaporeans use the word 'irregardless' when the correct form is either 'regardless' or 'irrespective'.

For example, in our Pledge, we say that we are one united people regardless of race, language or religion.

We can also say that anyone, irrespective of his educational background, can sign up for the programme, or despite a knee injury, Jason continued with the race regardless.

More questions answered in the online edition of English As It Is Broken at www.stomp.com.sg