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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.

### NOTICE

To: All Changing Room Users

This is to inform you that the cleaning management has been trying their best to keep up with the cleanliness of this changing rooms.

Hence, we would be most appreciate it if user(s) could co-operate by keeping the area clean and tidy as a courtesy to the next user(s).

### One body, many parts

REMEMBER our little note on collective nouns like "equipment" in last week's column?

Here, "management" refers to the collective body of people managing or directing an enterprise. Since the people doing the cleaning are regarded as one body, the sign should read "trying its best".

Some of you may have come across a sentence where a collective noun is paired with a plural verb. One example: "The public are tired of demonstrations."

A basic rule of thumb: When referring to the group as a whole, we use the singular verb, but if we are referring to different members comprising the group, we can use the plural verb.

So, we say that "The jury is ready to present its decision" because they are all in agreement as a group. But if they can't agree, then we can say "The jury are unable to come to a consensus".

By this argument, collectives like "equipment" and "furniture" shouldn't take the plural verb because they don't disagree with each other!

### Right context matters

THE phrase "keep up with" has also been used incorrectly. To keep up with something is to move at the same speed. Very often, the phrase is used in situations which are constantly changing and require one to learn or work quickly, such as keeping up with the latest developments in research.

Perhaps the writer of the sign was trying to convey his exasperation at having to "keep up with" the rate at which people were dirtying the changing rooms, but it would have been better to say that the cleaning crew is "trying its best to keep the changing rooms clean".

We could either say "We would be most appreciative if users could cooperate..." or "We would appreciate it if users could cooperate..."

### 'Verbing' a noun

WE RECEIVED a query on whether it's acceptable to make a verb out of a noun. Our reader heard the following in a television interview. Responding to the announcement of North Korea's testing of a nuclear device, a weapons expert said: "I am not sure they have the capability to 'weaponise' their technology."

Right or wrong? Well, you wouldn't find the word in a dictionary, for sure. But, as we have mentioned before, language is always evolving.

Take "text" for instance. It is listed as a noun in dictionaries, but it has become increasingly common to hear people say they are going to "text" somebody, meaning to send them a text message.

It's hard to prevent words from acquiring a new usage over time as they try to meet the changing needs of language users.

### When gas is not the same as petrol

ONE of our readers pointed out that while we may use "gas" and "petrol" interchangeably when talking about "running out of gas/petrol", such a simple substitution is not always idiomatic in some expressions.

For instance, you say "step on the gas" to ask someone to drive faster, not "step on the petrol".

### HOW TO SEND IN YOUR QUERIES

Please use the keyword

<english> SMS/MMS: 75557

Email: 75557@stomp.com.sg



OUR LANGUAGE TEACHERS are (from left): 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.

► More questions answered in the online edition of English As It Is Broken at [www.stomp.com.sg](http://www.stomp.com.sg)

