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English as it is broken

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WITH Singaporeans spending so much time and money at shopping centres, as recent sales figures show, we were not surprised when a reader alerted us to this sign in a store - a common- enough sight in shops selling underwear or swimwear. Let's get our usual weekly practice by tweaking this sign.

The act of trying on clothes for their size is singular and hence that part of the sign should read: Trying is not allowed.

In the next sentence, the verb 'purchased' is mistakenly used instead of the noun 'purchase', which refers to the item bought.

The last sentence is a reminder to shoppers to check that the item they intend to buy is of the desired size before making payment. So, coming back to this sign, we would go with:

Trying of undergarments is not allowed. All purchases cannot be returned or exchanged, for hygiene reasons.

Please check that your item is of the correct size before paying.

Getting 'lie' and 'lay' right

CAN you spot any errors in the following sentences?

- 1.If you are tired, lie your head on the pillow for a rest.
- 2.He was so tired that he fell asleep the moment he laid on the bed.
- 3.Lay here if you need a short nap.
- 4.There was a child laying on the ground.
- 5.She had lain her head on the pillow.

The distinction between 'lie' and 'lay' is often confusing and this is not helped by the fact that both words have other meanings, like in the following:

(i)Don't lie to me.

(ii) Hens lay eggs.

In the original lie/lay pair, when you lie somewhere, you are in a horizontal position. Here, 'lie' is typically followed by a word indicating place (where), as in 'they lie on the bed' or 'they lie here every day'.

It can also be followed by a descriptive word indicating manner (how), as in 'they lie motionless on the bed'.

On the other hand, to 'lay' something somewhere means to put it there in a careful, gentle or neat way (often in a horizontal position). Here, 'lay' is always followed by an object, as in 'lay the carpet' or 'lay your head'.

It is rather coincidental that this 'lay' is also spelt the same way as the past tense of 'lie (down)', adding to the confusion between 'lie' and 'lay'.

So the five sentences presented earlier should read:

- 1.If you are tired, lay your head on the pillow for a rest.
- 2.He was so tired that he fell asleep the moment he lay on the bed.
- 3.Lie here if you need a short nap.
- 4.There was a child lying on the ground.
- 5.She had laid her head on the pillow.

Try the following to test your understanding:

- a) She had _____ here to watch the stars.
- b) He _____ his head on the pillow and fell asleep immediately.
- c) The nurse is responsible for _____ the babies on their back to sleep. (Answers below)

Do check up the other meanings or uses of 'lie' and 'lay' from dictionaries for yourself.

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