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A WAG with the caustic wit of a Simon Cowell once declared that giving English to the Americans is like teaching sex to a 6-year-old - they know it's important, but they don't know what the hell to do with it.

One can safely assume that he comes from the Queen's side of the Atlantic.

This is not a tirade against the usage of Americanisms, or the way they choose to spell.

Americans, intrinsically innovative, probably couldn't resist looking at the English language, turning each word upside down and sideways up, and wondering if there were some way they could - to use an Americanism - screw it up.

So -ises become -izes, -tres turn into -ters, -logues into -logs. And, utterly intolerably, lyrics into rap.

You say po-tay-to and I say po-tah-to and the whole world goes grammatically potty.

Perhaps there's no escaping the confusion, the schizophrenia, the corruption.

Caught between the colonial masters of our past and the cultural colonialists of the present, what is Singapore to do?

We sit for Cambridge-based exams, but process our words on American spellcheck software.

We study in the Queen's English but are smitten by all things Hollywood.

Our brightest are bedrocked on British English but spend their most critical tertiary years at Ivy League universities.

And when they return to join the elite Admin service, what form of spelling do they perpetuate?

Marks and Spencer versus Gap and the result ain't cricket.

We spend so much time and effort promoting good spoken English; we decry Singlish as if it is the language of linguistic lepers.

And yet, when it comes to the very basic building blocks of syllabification, we become slipshod.

Should you bother?

You should because it is about carelessness. It's about consistency. It's about caring.

One another dimension, it's the difference between a William Shakespeare and a William Safire.

SPELLING DILEMMA

For too long, editors and those who care about the language have had to unnecessarily edit what is necessarily basic: Spelling.

As someone whose job it is to scrutinise the use and abuse of the written word, I'd be a millionaire if I got a milligramme of gold each time I've had to add the me to program (except for computer programs which, both sides of the pond agree, should be spelt the way it's spelt).

Editors now have to be constantly alert for slipshod copy from rookie reporters and press release writers who view the world according to Microsoft Word.

Our message is simple: If you don't care about how you write, what right do you have to be read?

If you're careless about what you write, can you be careful with your facts?

If you're inconsistent in the way you spell, how can you be credible in the way you think?

Ours is a precarious profession.

A missing or misplaced letter, a word spelt wrongly or left out, and your rhythm is ruined, your reputation shattered.

Merely a misplaced finger on the keyboard can, by miracle of the modern printing press, render the error magnified, the reader mortified, and the author crucified.

'The English language,' wrote George Orwell in *Politics And The English Language*, 'becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish.

'But the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.'

So please, for the sake of consistency (and our sanity) spellcheck the program and get on with the programme.