

Publication :	The New Paper
Date :	25 February 2007
Page:	Online
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Headline:	MIND YOUR Zs & Qs

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Analyse or analyze? Cheque or check? With US English worming its way into Queen's English, which should S'porean use?

SO, American or British English?

It's like choosing between a rock and a hard place, say educators and those in the literary circle.

We read Americanisms on cereal boxes, listen to the accent on CSI, and get corrected by writing software set to American English.

The last, says Professor Koh Tai Ann of NTU's Division of English at its School of Humanities and Social Sciences, is one of the biggest influences on the way we spell.

'Computer programs, often originating from the US, are set to 'US English' by default. If you were to set your PC to auto-correct and then use British spelling, your spelling would be considered wrong.

'The system is such that when I set my computer to 'UK English', I found that I couldn't type certain symbols, like '@' and '\$'. For users of British English, even the technology works against you.

'With the widespread use of the PC, I can see more Singaporeans using American English by default and it could thus become standard.'

Prof Koh, who is also chairman of the Speak Good English Movement, feels the lack of clear guidelines contributes to the muddle.

'With regard to correct spelling, someone has to provide the lead. If the English teacher or some other authority is not providing guidance, there's clearly going to be some confusion among students.'

Official statements and documents, the older universities, and professions like law use British English. But MTV and media content in American spelling are what we are more exposed to.

Prof Koh says a decision should be made on a preferred system if we are to achieve 'national consistency'.

'With regards to spelling, if one is using British spelling, then it should be consistently used. If one works in an American company or is addressing American readers, then you should adapt. But be consistent.'

A head of the department for English at a secondary school shares Prof Koh's views.

We cannot name the teachers because they did not seek authorisation to give their views.

'Pronunciation, as long as it's consistent, is okay if it's understood here in Singapore.

'But I would continue to teach writing in the British style, which is part of our culture and heritage. To switch to an American style would be artificial and disruptive,' he says.

Another English teacher offered a more practical reason for sticking strictly to British spelling in schools.

'American English is more prevalent and I feel it's okay to use it, but our constraint is the O- and A-Level examinations, which are marked by Cambridge.'

Consistency also seems to be the bottomline for writers here.

Author Catherine Lim, 64, who uses British English, doesn't think it matters either way because 'consistency is more important'.

She resisted American spelling about 30 years ago when she was a teacher, but has since learnt to be more flexible.

'Language changes with the times. If it changes to meet contemporary needs, why not?' says Ms Lim.

Ms Eleanor Wong, 44, playwright and associate professor at the law faculty in the National University of Singapore, prefers the American version because she used to work for an American law firm.

'Either way, there's no real deficit in meaning. My guess is neither will triumph and both will co-exist for a while. But what is sloppy is to slip and slide between the two. In any given piece, you should stick to one.'

Author and former journalist David Kraal, 70, says the difference between British and American spelling, 'matters tremendously'.

'I think American spelling is incorrect. It's against my upbringing.'

However, he foresees that the winds of change will eventually see the American way becoming the dominant mode of spelling used.

'I'm afraid that with Hollywood and reality TV shows, there will be a day when the whole world will speak and spell in the American style.'

'Thankfully that will not be in my life time. I hope.'