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## Keeping Singlish at bay

Speak well but don't feel too bad if a temporary surrender is called for

By John Lui



The funny thing about peer pressure is that it comes from people who would hate to think of you as one of their peers.

That is the whole point, really. The pressure is to change you so you can be allowed into the group.

□As much as people mock Miss Singapore World Ris Low - the young woman who caused an online uproar with her mangled pronunciation - they are outnumbered.

People who speak like her are in our schools and workplaces and I have lived among her kind - the kind who say 'crips' for crisp - during the various periods of my life when I lived as an exile in the Land Of The Lost Consonant.

Delicate reader, you may gasp and tremble at the tale to follow, but verily did I walk among people for whom 'hor' was like a comma or full-stop for the rest of us.

I broke bread around the lunch table with those who felt the vowel in 'there' was plastic, meant to be stretched for pointing out items far away and shortened for things nearby.

I remember one person telling me to go look 'over there' for a form, to be found behind some papers at the end of the hall. The vowel in that word rattled about in her nasal cavity for so long that I swear I heard it nest and raise offspring. Oh, and there was that ever-helpful chin-point too.

Like a messiah bringing news of the wonders of grammar and diction, I arrived at one small publishing company as editor six years ago. As I entered, I tsk-tsked over the noticeboard proclaiming a 'mixed volleyballs finals' and that staff should not 'disturbed the servers in the computer room'.

The sheriff just rode into town, I thought. Time to clean up. Time to send some grammar bandits to jail. Sorry, gaol.

As it turned out, my plans did not take into account my arch-nemesis, Julia. Every office has a Julia. She is the alpha female, the leader of the pack, the loudest of the loud. She is the namer and the shamer. She anoints and she condemns. She giveth and she taketh away.

She was a graphic artist, but her soft power in the lunch room far exceeded that of the vice-presidents. Julia's speech was Singlish and she was damned proud of it. She declared that anyone who did not speak it and who did not have the excuse of being born outside Singapore was pretending to be above his station. I was, at first, accepted into her circle and I was grateful that through her, I could get access to people who mattered.

But little did I know that her operation was like that of a cult. It starts with gentle ribbing ('Wah, why must take so long to say?') then it escalates into outright scolding ('Eh! Can talk faster or not?'). I imagine this is what Maoist re-education and self-criticism must be like. I began to doubt myself. After all, the president and all the vice-presidents of the company, presumably an outpost of an American multinational, used Cantonese among themselves when they were bonding and in high spirits, and a self-conscious, mumbled English when they were sombre and about to break bad news at town hall meetings.

Good English, or rather, the effort made to use it, was associated with bad times. Bad English was for friends.

The four years I spent there were a strange period in my life when there was pressure to dumb-down, or rather, friend-up, my speech. Like a ham radio operator, I carefully dialled in the correct diction frequency so I could communicate with the tribe and therefore belong. On Survivor Island, everyone does it to win a million bucks. I did it so Julia and her pack would not turn me into the butt of communal jokes.

Deep inside, I shrivelled up a little every time I used 'nor', 'nuuu' and 'nah' to assign ownership of pens and staplers to various persons. If one did not know how to use these three vocal sound effects properly, Julia's suspicions would be aroused. Lunchtime could be awkward time.

Now that I have safely escaped Stalag Julia, I can say that I was only pretending to speak Singlish. Take that!

I am not alone in being an undercover Good English speaker. In national service, using the incorrect lingo to one's trainers could turn you from an anonymous recruit to 'marked man'. Using long words is not as bad as not knowing your left foot from your right on the parade square, or not being able to field-strip a rifle in under a minute, but it is unwise to flaunt one's enunciation to someone who could make you do enough push-ups to shift the Earth from its orbit.

So kudos to the freaks who let their linguistic flags fly high. A colleague told me of a classmate at the Anglo-Chinese School who was hit on the head by a rugby player for speaking in a manner the player deemed too posh and prissy. In spite of being threatened with more beatings, he did not drop his manner of speech. That, ladies and gentlemen, is courage.

I sought the advice of Mr Goh Eck Kheng, the chairman of the Speak Good English Movement, to ask him the best way to resist the Singlish nazis. When the Ris Lows of Singapore gang up on you, what do you do?

'Look at it in a bigger context,' he said. Young people, for example, are pressured to go to the right clubs and wear the right clothes. It is not just a speech issue but an issue of overall conformity.

'If you want to belong to the in-group you will succumb. But it means giving up your identity to be an anonymous digit in a larger group,' he said.

Wise words.

So stop the race to the bottom. As the tide of slurred speech and rushed vocalisations rushes in, be the rock and stand fast, he said.

But this is what I say: Be the you that you want to be, even if it means being an outcast. But if you see Julia coming, make a temporary surrender. Good English is nice, but lunchtime is a meal.

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