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## Online Only - Singlish is a "cultural bridge"

**Letter from Chia Hem Keng**

07:50 PM Oct 13, 2009

Lately, there have been so many letters in the press on the subject of Singlish. Is Singlish acceptable as English? The moment this line of thinking is taken then of course the answer is clear: No.

But Singlish is not English! Otherwise why is it called Singlish and not English? Just take it that Singlish and English are two distinct languages. Then there won't be any controversy.

Singlish and English are like Teochew and Hokkien -- there are similarities but you cannot say they are the same thing. Does one attempt to kill Teochew or Hokkien because of their dissimilarities?

So please understand Singlish is a spontaneous cultural creation unique to Singapore. Please do not attempt to kill it through pure logic. In Singlish there are many words and phrases that are derived from Chinese and even Malay language. It is a melting pot of our local cultures.

For instance there is no proper grammar in sentences or rather phrases like : "You free or not?", "Apa then", "Don't play, play", "Lets go, lah".

So Singlish is a cultural invention spontaneously evolved from our own society, highly influenced by our local languages where English grammar like present/past tenses is non-existent.

When Singaporeans speak Singlish to each other they are more able to connect with each other. And most Singaporeans like myself know how to switch effectively from Singlish and English and vice versa. To us, these are separate languages.

In fact I sometimes make it a point to sprinkle some Singlish even during business conversation for the purpose of connecting better with my Singaporeans interlocutors.

But if you encounter someone who speak Singlish but cannot speak proper English, well that may not be due to the fact that he or she speaks Singlish. It is that he or she has not mastered English. Simple as that.

The argument against Singlish is I fear, similar to the argument against dialects decades back. Now many baby boomers' children do not speak dialects anymore because of this policy. But some baby boomers have also now come to realize a bit late that their own dialect has a special way of endearing and connecting family members.

Why do people of the same dialect like to speak to each other in dialect? This is instinctive. It creates a certain deep emotional bond between them.

So Singlish is a common emotional or cultural bridge among Singaporeans. Those who refuse to see this are free to do so but do not coerce others to abandon Singlish. And do not presume those who speak Singlish are therefore defective in their English. That's not necessarily

true.

Think Phua Chu Kang. No TV series ever has had such a long-lasting grip on the Singaporeans' psyche. And a big reason is because the characters in that show speak Singlish.

Speak and write good English by all means but there is no reason to kill Singlish. What is this talk about preserving local cultures when you cannot recognise Singlish as one of these?