



SPEECH BY PROFESSOR KOH TAI ANN, CHAIRMAN, SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT, AT THE MEDIA BRIEFING FOR THE SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT 2007 ON 24 JULY 2007, AT 10.30 AM, AT TIMBRE MUSIC BISTRO

Members of the press, our SGEM partners, SGEM Committee Members, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the media briefing for the Speak Good English Movement 2007.

This is the 7th year since the Speak Good English Movement was launched. We have come a long way in our efforts to promote and encourage good spoken English among Singaporeans and continue this year with our mission to encourage Singaporeans to speak good English confidently at work, at home and at play – so as to be understood by other English speakers, whether locally or abroad. Our main target groups have usually been teachers, parents, workers and young people, and we will continue our efforts on all these fronts. But this year we will be focusing particularly on youth. Attitudes and good speech habits tend to be acquired at this age, and significantly, from among them will come the teachers, parents and workers of tomorrow. The emphasis on this group will be reflected in our programmes and initiatives for the year.

We are often asked what we mean when we say “speak good English” or “standard English”. I would like to reiterate that it is not about a “correct” accent or about “Singlish”: it is about pronunciation and using grammatically correct English that is generally acceptable as “standard”, and is thus intelligible to other speakers of English, both locally and

internationally. We cannot escape the fact that we now function in a world where English is the dominant global language and *lingua franca* for cross-cultural and international communication. Furthermore, Singlish need not be, as is often claimed, the only linguistic marker of national identity. We can also claim ownership to *Singapore Standard English*, which like other varieties of Standard English, such as those from Britain, the USA, Australia and India, is spoken in a local accent, and contains accepted words, phrases and idioms, some of them words for local concepts, and some of them informal. Singapore has HDB estates, the UK has council houses. Where the British have mobiles and the Americans cells, Singaporeans have handphones. Some concepts may become locally acculturated, e.g., “heartland” in Singapore is taken to mean HDB estates collectively. (Eg in a recent *Sunday Times* feature, “Fun in the Heartland”, 22 July, 2007) It was SM Goh (who first mooted the idea of a Speak Good English Movement) no less, who further confirmed this local meaning by using the term “heartlanders” in 1999, to describe specifically, HDB residents, who form the vast majority of Singaporeans. This term was then popularized by a local television series, “Heartlanders”, with a public housing backdrop and first aired in 2002.

SGEM hopes that in time, through continuing practice and through exposure to an environment where Standard English is the norm, it will become commonly used among Singaporeans, especially the young. This should not be difficult as all Singaporeans, 30 and younger who had attended school from 1987 when English became the medium of instruction nationally, and all other Singaporeans who had attended English-medium schools or learned English as a second language, will have been taught standard English. Speaking good English among younger and all English-speaking Singaporeans therefore becomes

mainly a matter of attitude, conscious effort and attentiveness to the language that we have all learned at school. It is too easy to slip into inattentive, sloppy usage, which then becomes habitual.

Because English has become a world language and has even been described as “the turbine engine of globalization”, Singaporeans who speak standard English should be able to communicate effectively with a whole spectrum of people locally from fellow citizens to tourists and expatriates, and internationally with that call center agent based in India, associates and acquaintances in Hong Kong, the Philippines or China or the friend from Prague or Peru encountered online.

Standard English can be found everywhere and Singaporeans wishing to acquire the habit of using good English can immerse themselves in a variety of supportive media where it will be found – in the lyrics of all kinds of music, talk shows, news and other programmes over radio and television, and in print, online media and films -- and for the very young, when books are read aloud to them -- and so on. Practice makes perfect and it is good to start young.

We have therefore put together, alongside our usual established programmes, new youth-oriented programmes this year in conjunction with our partners Timbre Music Bistro, Stomp!, and MediaCorp 987FM to promote the use of good English. We kick off with our annual official SGEM launch next Tuesday on 31 July, with weekly programmes every Wednesday, which will last for a year. We hope that the regularly-held programmes will create an environment which promotes the use of good English through music and performance. Here

at Timbre on Wednesdays, there will be live band performances, drama performances and oratorical contests called *The Art of Persuasion*, among other programmes. Students of the NUS Theatre Studies programme will also be contributing to the fun, by creating and performing skits at Timbre, and participating in *The Art of Persuasion* contest.

In addition to the excitement we hope to generate during our official SGEM 07 launch next week, we will be launching two books. We'd like to emphasize that these are the results of our collaboration with our strategic partners – “strategic” because they help us extend the reach of the Movement in promoting good English. The first is a compilation of items from our regular “English as It Is Broken” column in *The Straits Times* and STOMP!, which addresses with wit and humour, queries from the public on the correct forms of English. Pan Pacific Publishing, MOE and The Straits Times have kindly agreed to donate a part of the proceeds from the sale of this book to The Straits Times’ School Pocket Money Fund.

The second book to be launched is a book that we have collaborated with the Workforce Development Agency on. Titled, “Speak Well, Sell Well: A Retailer’s Guide to Good English”, it is an easy-to-use guide book designed to help retail staff in Singapore use proper and effective English phrases when serving customers. It thus functions as a self-remedial and self-learning guide, as reference material for sales supervisors and managers, and serves as a resource for sales trainers.



The Movement would not have been able to carry out its mission without a host of institutional, voluntary and private sector partners who have worked with us through the years to support the Movement either through joint or independent activities. In addition, new partners have come on board to enhance our efforts to encourage good spoken English amongst Singaporeans. Besides contributing to our year-long and continuing efforts to raise awareness among Singaporeans about the importance of speaking good English, they have provided us with supplementary resources to take the Movement all the way from consciousness-raising to implementation. I would thus like to acknowledge -- in no particular order as all are valued partners -- the contributions of Comfort DelGro, SMRT Corporation Pte Ltd, The National Library Board, Timbre Music Bistro, The Straits Times and STOMP!, MediaCorp Radio 938LIVE and 987FM (our Official Radio Station), the Ministry of Education, the National Institute of Education, Pan Pacific Education, the Workforce Development Agency, the Singapore Retailers Association, and other supporting partners.

Last but not least, I wish to acknowledge the contributions and the support of the Movement's Resource Panel and the members of my Speak Good English Movement Steering Committee for their continuous hard work and generous offering of ideas, time and energy over the years, as well as to this year's programmes and initiatives.

Thank you.