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Time to stop `manglish' and return to English

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SINGAPORE Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew spoke out about the bad English used on his side of the Causeway.

Our own Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, (Malaysia's envoy to the United Nations), as well as other prominent citizens have commented on the poor English this side of the Causeway.

It is not just Messrs Lee and Ahmad, but anyone who appreciates the language will be appalled at how badly it is spoken and written in Malaysia.

I am not referring to the use of the Malaysian enclitic "lah" which is rather charming if not over used. Neither am I referring to the use of colloquialisms or the vernaculars in our English.

What I am referring to is simply, bad English.

I used to get a few chuckles from reading the advertising copy of Taiwanese and Chinese products. Not anymore.

Today most of them are very well written. On the other hand I cringe at my fellow Malaysians' butchery of the English language.

A company, which has no doubt spent millions to bring out a line of excellent products, proclaims to the world at large that they are "Made With Proud".

If you are considering this product, and that made by, say, a company which has a well written copy, which would you choose?

The normal reaction would be, if they can't write simple copy or get someone fluent in the language to write it, can their product be any good?

Just over three weeks ago, a cafe in Ipoh spent a not inconsiderable sum in a half-page advertorial telling would-be customers about this new "in" place. I quote:

"Glimpsed from the outside... blah, blah, blah..., cannot fail to mesmerize one's attention. The statusque aquarium of live corals has elaborated its name."

One gets the impression of shapely (as in female) corals. If that were the case then perhaps one would be `mesmerized'.

The advertorial goes on to offer `trade-mark' chicken. I suppose each chicken comes with a special stamp which distinguishes it from some other brands? Is it really possible to trademark a chicken?

Further on, the advertorial tempts us with "twelve varieties of cookies specially made by selected Ipoh personalities".

I wonder which cookie is made by the Menteri Besar and which the Datuk Bandar? Perhaps there are some made by sports personalities?

I know an ex-Olympic swimmer who might like to contribute.

It is obvious that whoever wrote this copy does not understand the nuances which words convey. One cannot just piece together words and hope to write good copy.

It is mind boggling that someone should spend so much money on setting up what is probably a pleasant cafe, employ qualified chefs on high wages and yet be loathe to spend money on getting good copy written.

If you think bad English is confined to certain sectors, think again.

Our local newspapers are as guilty in their abuse of the English language. One of the local tabloids had the headline "A film by an Iranian woman on Iranian feminism is raising shackles in Iran."

You either break the shackles or raise hackles but you cannot raise shackles.

Then the same paper ran another headline: "Sun to challenge chore Microsoft business".

Really? I wonder which business of Microsoft's is a chore? I am sure the poor reporter meant "core".

`But then how are we poor readers to know? After all, these guys are supposed to be professionals and they are supposed to write good English.

"After hearing the announcements that majority has voted..." is what a reporter wrote in one of his pieces.

Where is the article "the"? (...that the majority...).

This alas, is a mistake that is so common one wonders if this is standard English as written by the local papers.

Television and radio have their share of minglish. A female sports presenter on radio, spoke of "Juninho being selected despite failing to establish". Establish what?

And what about "... raising the status of the people's living..." as a television newscaster put it. I am sure she meant "standard".

The Press, television and radio have a duty to their readers and listeners to write and speak proper English.

We are not talking about style, substance or accents here, - just simple, properly constructed English.

When one doesn't know a noun from an adjective, or thinks an article is an item of goods you get in the shop (and thus can be left out); or when so-called professionals do not appreciate the subtle differences between two similar words, it is an indication of how bad our English is.

The blame for this poor standard of English lies with the Government which some years back decided to de-emphasise English.

When the authorities eventually realised their mistake, feeble attempts were then made to reinstate English to its previous position.

But alas, the damage has been done. We are now seeing the results of the Government's earlier education policies - TV presenters who speak an approximation of the English language, journalists who cannot construct proper sentences and copy writers who join words together as if they are Lego blocks.

Notwithstanding the Government's recent anti-West, anti-colonial rhetoric, I am sure our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad accepts that English is the lingua franca of the world.

If we want to make our way seriously in the world we need to be proficient in the language.

Often we have heard it said that certain investors chose Malaysia, say, over Thailand, because of our pool of labour which is English speaking.

However, unless the Government does something about it, this edge which we have over some of our neighbours will disappear.

Except for certain elite schools where there are specialist English teachers, the teaching of English in schools in general still leaves a lot to be desired.

It is time the Government reconsidered the position of English in the school curriculum.