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Don't be dismissive of Singlish. Be careful when making value judgments

I agree with Dr Ong Siew Chey's letter (ST, June 9) about how emphasis on English grammar is useful in acquiring Standard English.

However, I take issue with the views on the unacceptability of Singlish and the virtues of Standard English.

First, linguistically speaking, Singlish has its unique syntactic structure and it cannot be dismissed as ungrammatical.

Despite semblances of syntactic structures with other languages like Chinese, Malay, Hokkien and Cantonese, Singlish retains its own fixed rules.

For example, while many Asiatic languages have expressive particles such as 'lah', they are never used in the same manner as in Singlish.

Singlish can be considered a language in its own right because it has its unique syntax, semantics, phonetics and lexicology.

Calling Singlish ungrammatical by the standards of English is akin to claiming that Chinese is ungrammatical because it does not follow English grammatical rules.

Second, although I agree that there is great benefit in teaching Standard English, I would like to point out the relativity of what constitutes the yardstick of 'standard'.

Today's Standard English is a recent phenomenon arising from the efforts at standardisation with the rise of British nationalism and the Renaissance around the 1600s.

Historically, English was seen as a bastard language and any educated man would speak in French and write in Latin. The Standard English we advocate today is spoken only by a very small population of English speakers around the world.

Even today, most native English speakers do not speak Standard English. Instead, they speak their localised English dialects which are often a far cry from Standard English in grammar and lexis. Therefore, let us be cautious about demonising Singlish.

Third, disconnecting the link between Standard English and issues of prestige or class would enhance its

teaching.

My experiences in teaching Standard English tell me that a chief reason why many students are averse to learning it is that they do not see themselves as the 'ang moh' type, or are not 'high class' enough to learn it.

Learning to appreciate Standard English for its inherent beauty without feeling not good enough makes the learning process less stressful.

Moreover, teaching a student that he must learn Standard English because it marks him out as educated limits the definition of education.

Those who fail to acquire Standard English are then automatically branded as unsophisticated, less educated and unfit to work in the global community.

Those who vehemently oppose Singlish and champion English seem to miss the cultural complexities of learning a language.

I do not oppose Standard English in favour of Singlish. I only ask that we be careful about our value judgments on languages.

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