

Time to put a full stop to language mistakes

From the Speak Mandarin Campaign launch to signage in public places, errors in language use are becoming pervasive. Language councils and others can help monitor and address the problem.

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Singapore as a nation is one that has paid more attention to language and language-related issues than most other societies that I know.

Language, together with ethnicity and religion, is one area treated with much sensitivity in this multi-ethnic society. Bilingualism has long been considered a cornerstone of the education system.

Promotion of language has been constant. The annual Speak Mandarin Campaign has been running for 37 years. In addition, there is the Malay Language Council which organises Malay Language Month, and the Tamil Language Council that runs Tamil Language Festival – both annually – to promote their respective mother tongues. And that is not all. There is also the Speak Good English Movement, responsible for promotion of the “correct” use of English.

To promote bilingualism, the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism was set up in 2011 with an endowment of more than \$100 million to support projects and programmes that promote the learning of mother tongues and English.

To upgrade the quality of translation, universities offer



degree programmes in translation and interpretation. Nanyang Technological University just graduated its inaugural batch of Master in Translation and Interpretation students; Singapore University of Social Sciences (formerly SIM University) also celebrated the 10th anniversary of its BA in Translation and Interpretation programme.

All things considered, Singapore as a society seems to be obsessed

with language, language standards and language-related issues.

And yet, mistakes in translation and language use still occur. The latest example is the use of the wrong Chinese character prominently displayed at the launch of the 2017 Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC). The Chinese character *du* (to read) was wrongly replaced by another character also pronounced *du* but which unfortunately means “disrespect”

or “contempt”. While the two characters may look confusingly similar, the mistake was inexcusable to the Chinese community. It caused an uproar and derision as it happened with the very campaign purporting to promote the correct use of the Chinese language.

It was especially embarrassing as the annual SMC was launched by Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu, from the rostrum that prominently displayed the wrong character.

This recent case involved a mistake in language, not translation. There are many more examples of the latter. One case that has been highlighted is a mistranslation of “Christmas Celebration Party”, turning the joyous festive event into a political party. And then there was the case of the Falls Awareness Campaign being translated into the Chinese equivalent of a campaign to promote falling awareness.

Such mistakes can be found on posters, banners, signs and notices in public places. They also appear on websites of public and private organisations. Typos and errors are also found in newspapers, in print or online. The truth is that mistakes in the use of language, while not overwhelming, are not exceptions. I call them “Language Pollution”.

MISTAKES BECOMING MORE COMMON

Incidents of language pollution have become so pervasive that people seem to have become desensitised to them. The danger is that when such “pollution” becomes a part of daily experience, there is a risk that people may become immune to it. Such pollution then becomes much harder to clean up.

If anything good is to come from the unfortunate SMC incident, it would be that it reminds the community once again of the sorry state of language proficiency in Singapore, and sounds an alert that something has to be done.

As a start, there needs to be a system to monitor the extent of the problem, or the level of language pollution. With an understanding of the extent, and the types and the sources of such errors, measures to address problems effectively can be explored.

But how can such a system of monitoring be implemented? One option is to rely on the existing language councils under the National Heritage Board’s

Language Council Secretariat. Of the three mother tongues, problems with Malay and Tamil hopefully can be managed by the Malay Language Council and Tamil Language Council, respectively.

The Chinese language involves a much larger pool of material and is way beyond the scope of the Promote Mandarin Council. For Chinese, one potential organisation that can take up the challenge is the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, whose mission is to conduct research on matters related to Chinese-language learning and teaching.

All these agencies will require human and financial resources to play an effective role in monitoring misuse and abuse of the respective languages. Funding can come from the Government, these being issues of national concern.

Given the popularity of new media, such projects may invite input from the public using blogs. Schools may encourage students to be vigilant and take part in such exercises, as “language scouts”.

As it is now, comments and criticisms of language misuse and translation errors are often aired in the virtual world of social media. Some may be well-intentioned. Most are critical and cynical, as can be expected.

What needs to be done is to channel such observations to the right pools for constructive use and professional treatment. The objective is to identify the sources of common errors so that they can be rectified and avoided in the future.

As for the SMC incident, apparently the mistake occurred due to an oversight in the process of planning and preparation. Presumably it could have been avoided if there had been a system of checking and (linguistic) auditing as a part of its standard operating procedures.

There must be constant vigilance. Somewhere, somehow, somebody must be accountable. This is one lesson that should be learnt by all organisations that regularly produce language materials, translated or otherwise.

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