

If 'my little one' is acceptable, why not 'my one'?

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In Singapore, every school-going child, even at kindergarten level, learns English. He may be learning it in an English-medium school where all the subjects are taught in English except another language like Chinese, Malay or Tamil, or as a second language¹ where Chinese, Malay or Tamil is used as a medium of instruction. This means every child of school-going age has the opportunity to learn English, right up to Pre-University II or 12th grade.

Whether every learner does well in the learning of English is another matter. In the English-medium environment, the learner is exposed to the language for 7 out of 8 periods of 35/40 minutes every school day which adds up to 5 days a week. His counterpart in the other-medium school has only 1 period a day of English lessons making a total of 200 hours a year. The first category of learners also uses English in the school canteen, on the sports field and in the shops, and they have plenty of opportunities to communicate with others in social activities. All these pursuits expose the learners to more varieties of English and should help them to have a good command of the language.

The fact is that some Singaporeans lapse into Singlish² as soon as they feel that they are not being observed. They allow source language patterns to 'take over' English ones. For example,

1. A: Whose pen is this?
2. B: My/His one. Or, A Zhu³ one.

Sometimes, one hears this among young speakers:

3. C: My's/I's.

As we know, the correct response to (1) is

4. B: Mine/His. Or, A Zhu's.

¹ English as a second language in Singapore is strictly speaking English as a foreign language in terms of exposure time in school.

² a variety of English used in Singapore with some peculiarities transferred from any one of its ethnic languages, especially Malay and Hokien.

³ 'A Zhu' (is roughly/a: dzu/.) Singapore now uses pinyin, a system of romanising Mandarin which is gaining popularity.

These are very short answers and they are not difficult to master. Yet, the most popular ones are those found in (2) where 'one' is included. The built-in possessiveness in the pronouns 'mine', 'his' and 'A Zhu's' is apparently insufficient for the speakers who prefer to add 'one' to their possessive adjectives. Why is this so?

My attempt at solving this riddle is from the point of view of the Chinese language. Possession in Mandarin Chinese is marked by the particle 'de' and which follows the owner or its equivalent. Hence, the response to 'Whose pen is this?' is

5. B: Wo³ de/Ta¹ de/A¹ Zhu¹/de.⁴

There is no change in the form for 'wo', 'ta' and 'A Zhu' whether they function as subjects or objects. Possession is indicated by the obligatory 'de'. There are equivalents in some Chinese dialects as well:⁵

6. Hokien: Gua:⁴ ε²
7. Teochew: Gua:¹ gai¹.
8. Cantonese: Ngo² ge².
9. Hakka: Ngai³ gei⁴.
10. Hainanese: Gua:³ gai².

All these final particles denote ownership.

In another context, however, 'de' and its dialectal counterparts perform a different function, likewise in final position. For example, in Mandarin,

11. Hui⁴ xia⁴ yü³ ma¹? (Possible drop rain, yes or no?)
12. Hui⁴ de. (Possible, yes.)

'Hui' answers the question 'Hui xia yü' and 'ma' is the interrogative marker usually affixed at the end of the utterance. 'De' confirms 'hui'.

Question

13. Hokien: ε³ lok³ ho³ bei³?
14. Teochew: ɔi³ lok³ hou² buei²?
15. Cantonese: Wui¹ lok³ yü² ma:²
16. Hakka: Voi⁴ lok⁴ yi³ ma:³?
17. Hainanese: ɔi² lok³ o² bo³?

Answer

- ε³. or ε³, ε².
 ɔi² or ɔi² gai¹.
 Wui¹ or Wui¹ ge².
 Voi⁴ or Voi⁴ gei⁴.
 ɔi² or ɔi² gai³.

All the second alternatives intensify the first ones by confirming the answers whereas the single-word replies tend to be abrupt sometimes.

Yet another use of 'de' in Mandarin is as follows:

18. Q: Ni³ shi⁴ bu² shi⁴ Li³ yi¹-sheng¹?

You be not be Li doctor? (Are you Dr. Lee?)

⁴ romanised very loosely with the 4 tones of Mandarin: ¹level, ²rising, ³falling-rising and ⁴falling; and some IPA symbols.

⁵ These dialects influenced the speech of EL2 learners just as Mandarin does and will.

19. A : Shi⁴ de. (Wo³ shi⁴ de.)

Be particle.

Or, 20. A : Bu² shi⁴ de. (Wo³ bu² shi⁴ de.)

Again, 'de' in both (19) and (20) confirm the information conveyed in the question. Nevertheless, while it is customary to use the negative to contradict something in English—as one would do in (20)—in Mandarin Chinese one would use the affirmative 'de'.

21. Dui⁴, Wo³ bu² shi⁴ Li³ yi¹-sheng¹ (de)

Correct, I no be Dr. Li (yes/indeed.)

With longer sentences, it is also possible to use 'de' in final position to inject emotion.

22. ni⁸ zhe⁴ yang⁴ zuo⁴ shi⁴ bu² dui⁴ de.

23. You this manner do be not right particle.

24. Your way of doing is not right, yes/indeed.

25. Your way of doing is not right, you know.

Less
formally
in
Singlish

26. Your way of doing is not right, man.

27. Your way of doing is not right, what.

28. Your way of doing is not right, la.

The last three examples are definitely carried over from the mother tongue, including Malay.

In English, learners are often advised not to repeat identical vocabulary items but to use substitutes:

'An adjective cannot stand alone in English in place of a countable noun. It must be followed by a noun or a pronoun, either singular or plural. Generally 'one' (singular) or 'ones' (plural) stand for countable nouns.⁶ In other words, users of English are not expected to say

29. Are these cherries sweet *cherries*? Yes, madam, try a ripe *cherry* and buy some [cherries.]⁷

Instead, he should say

30. Are these cherries sweet *ones*? Yes, madam, try a ripe *one* and buy some.

The following is not acceptable by native-speakers' standard either:

31. John doesn't wear his new slippers. He says his old *slippers* are more comfortable than the new *slippers*.⁸

It should be

⁶ G M Spankie, *English in Use*, Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1975, p. 7.

⁷ Ibid. It is interesting to note that the author has omitted the third repetition of 'cherries' because 'some' and 'ones' do not collate.

⁸ Ibid. p. 8.

32. John doesn't wear his new slippers. He says his old *ones* are more comfortable than the new *ones*.

From (29) and (31), it can be seen that the nouns 'cherries' and 'slippers' are preceded by epithets:

'sweet cherries', 'a ripe cherry', 'the old slippers' and 'the new slippers', and that they can be replaced by 'sweet *ones*', 'a sweet *one*', 'the old *ones*' and 'the new *ones*' respectively: but not 'some ones'.

So far, I have tried to trace the source of 'My one' or 'A Zhu one'. What about 'my's' (my + 's) and 'I's' (I + 's) in (2) and (3) above?

I would like to suggest it is related to transfer of incomplete learning. Since in Chinese, there is no distinction between the first-person pronominal and its objective counterpart, the learner who has had exposure to 'I' and 'my' merely affixes the possessive marker 's to them. Similarly, after hearing 'a new one', 'his old one' as well as 'Sleep, my little one, sleep',¹⁰ it is quite natural for an L2 learner to add 'one' to 'my', 'his', 'their', 'A Zhu', etc.

However, to teachers of English—be it first, second or nth—'my one', 'A Zhu one' and other aberrations are not acceptable, and they must be put right through constant correction and practice. There should be no excuse or compromise at any level of learning for it is through the weakening of classroom discipline that mistakes are compounded and almost impossible to eradicate later. In time, the standard of English will drop even further, perhaps to that of pidgin. Therefore, 'my little one' is acceptable because it is standard English while 'my one' or 'his one' is not because no native-speaker will use it and all learners must be taught to follow correct norm.

Already, such queer expressions are quite prevalent in Singapore:¹¹

33. Give me the small small packet one.

34. This book no good one.

35. That one better one.

36. I like the red red one one.

37. She say she don't want this one one.

38. You cannot cut like that one one.

And the speakers are not all children either. While some adults may think it is fun to indulge in such substandard code-switching, unhealthy flowerings of English do go a long way to infect more vulnerable learners and they should be nipped in the bud.

⁹ Scott, et al, *English Grammar*, pp. 77–83.

¹⁰ From nursery rhyme "Sweet and Low".

¹¹ Even fairly well-educated speakers have been heard saying them.

REFERENCES

1. Scott, Bowley, Brockett, Brown, Goddard, *English Grammar*, The ELBS and Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1973.
2. G M Spankie, *English in Use*, Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1975, p. 7.
3. Various papers presented at the 17th RELC Seminar on 'Interlanguage Transfer Processes in Language Learning and Communication in Multilingual Societies', 1982.