

Does Influencer Grammar Matter?

In Southeast Asia, watchdog accounts call out misspelled and otherwise muddled English-language captions.



Ingo Fast

By Stanley Widianto
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Cindy Cendana, an Indonesian beauty influencer, just wanted to know if any of her followers had been to the Japanese city of Himeji. So she posted the question — “Hand’s up, who’s been to #Himeji, Japan?” — on Instagram, along with a photo of herself in a blue dress.

Ms. Cendana could have anticipated a number of comments — restaurant recommendations, tips about visiting the feudal castle there — but certainly not this [one](#): “If you put an apostrophe after ‘hand,’ it either means ‘hand is’ or something that belongs to the hand. In this case, it

should be ‘hands’ as you’re referring to multiple hands.” (The post no longer appears in Ms. Cendana’s [feed](#).)

She wrote in a text message that she still remembers when she first saw the comment in February: “I was surprised, but happy at the same time because I had my clumsiness corrected for me.”

The comment came from the anonymous Instagram account [@englishbusters](#), which calls out Indonesian influencers for bungling English grammar on social media. Its provocative posts — which include forensic, crass dissections of captions like “[wanna coffee?](#)” and “[Why choosing between yoga and fashion when you can have them both?](#)” — have divided Indonesian social media and [press](#). Its followers appreciate its direct, confrontational tone; its [detractors](#) lament its snark, and feel that its very premise borders on public shaming.

[@englishbusters](#) follows a broader trend of calling out influencers for their antics, whether it’s desecrating American [public lands](#) or displaying general social [entitlement](#). The account also has a lexicological precedent: It opened up shop a couple of years after a notorious Facebook [page](#) called “Singaporean Influencers and Bloggers Write _____ English and are Annoying AF” [lit up](#) Singapore, Indonesia’s neighboring country.

Just as on other continents, the business of influence has flourished in Asia. The social media marketing company Socialbakers stated in a 2019 [report](#) that Instagram #sponcon in Asia had increased by 189 percent since last year. But does anyone really care whether those posts include spelling and grammatical errors?

Dennis Toh, a marketing and design lecturer at the Management Development Institute of Singapore and a founder of the Influencer Network, an agency with offices in Singapore, argues that the language does indeed matter. “When you are linguistically strong, that is an advantage,” he said. “To put a point across, good grammar is a basic requirement.”

The Influencer Network, Mr. Toh said, does not strictly review the syntax of influencer posts upon receiving briefs from brands; most of them write well anyway. But Okto Rohyadi, the account manager of the Jakarta-based marketing company Glitzmedia, said that grammar doesn’t matter as much as voice, be it in English or Indonesian. “It does come down to how the influencers usually talk,” he said.

Nelly Martin-Anatias, a lecturer at the School of Language and Culture, Auckland University of Technology, said that Indonesians still treat English as a foreign language, instead of a second language. “There is a tendency for Indonesians in big cities to code-switch between Indonesian and English,” she said. “There is an ideology baked in the English language that it’s the cool language, the successful language.”

Why is English common among Indonesian influencers, though? “Language is the primary marked code to show or manipulate our identities. That’s why English is common in the marketing world here,” Ms. Martin-Anatias said.

Ms. Cendana, when asked whether she feels responsible to educate her followers, gave a short answer: “Yes.”

The long answer?

“Much like actors, politicians, entrepreneurs, what they say should have positive ramifications. Everyone is capable of influencing everybody. Gone are the days you put someone on a pedestal,” Mr. Toh said.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/18/style/influencer-grammar-watchdog-accounts-southeast-asia.html>