

There's ple'y to like about the way we pronounce words

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A correspondent has written to the EDP asserting that the Norwich pronunciation of the word twenty is ugly.

I would like to assert that the Norwich pronunciation of the word twenty isn't ugly, but I don't think I'll bother. I mean – where would that get us? Beauty is in the eye – or ear – of the beholder. One person's ugly is another person's not-ugly.

But it's really interesting to wonder where that "ugly" judgement comes from. The correspondent obviously has some problem with the vowels and consonants which make up our local rendering of this word, but I can't for the life of me think what it is.

In words like plenty and twenty, 320 million American and Canadian speakers typically use a pronunciation which merges the t with the n, to give something like "plenny, twenny".

They do the same thing with words like hunter and winter = "hunner, winner."

In Norwich, the process goes the other way, so that the n is merged with t, giving "pletty, twetty". The phrase "didn't he" is subject to the same procedure: He played very well, ditty?.

Then, in the Norwich accent, after the n and the t have been merged as t, another



■ The Norwich pronunciation has been described as ugly by some, but not by Peter Trudgill.

pronunciation rule clicks in: a t between two vowels is pronounced as a glottal stop, as in better, city = "be'er, ci'y". So this rule gives us "ple'y, twe'y, di'y".

These pronunciations are the result of complex, sophisticated, rule-governed articulation habits. But what is it about the pronunciation that could possibly be ugly?

The way Norwich people say it, twenty rhymes with jetty.

Is jetty an ugly word? Or petty? Surely not.

Perhaps it's the glottal stop which is aesthetically displeasing? But that is rather difficult to comprehend, too. The

vast majority of people in this country, not least EDP readers, use glottal stops in their everyday pronunciation of English. I wouldn't mind betting that you have a glottal stop before the l in the words atlas and Scotland.

If you listen carefully, you'll hear that you use one before the k in "weeks" as well. Does that sound ugly? Well, as I say, I don't find it so.

But if you do, well, you do.

I think we might be the only people in the English-speaking world to pronounce twenty as "twe'y".

If that is the case, I'm rather proud of it. Pity not everyone is.