

Be careful which experts you believe to tell the facts

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Michael Gove famously said during his Brexit campaign that this country “has had enough of experts”. This was an extraordinary thing for a former education secretary to say on national television and, happily, most people don’t agree with him. We tend to prefer our surgeons and GPs to be experts at what they do. We would like our airline pilots to be experts, please. And we think it would be really good if our teachers were experts on their subjects as well.

Millions of us watch the expert physicist Professor Brian Cox talking on television about cosmology and other fascinating topics, and we respect and believe what he says. Millions of us follow the TV programmes presented by Professor Alice Roberts, where she talks about archaeology, palaeontology and human evolution. Once again, we listen to what she says and accept it as informed expert opinion. Most of us do not make a habit of disagreeing with these erudite academics – we don’t generally sit there saying “well, I think you might be wrong there, Brian”.

Sadly, however, there are some academic subjects where experts are not guaranteed such a respectful hearing. One of them is linguistics. There are plenty of academic



■ TV presenter Professor Brian Cox is one of those experts we need to have around.

Picture: IAN WEST/PA

linguistic scientists who have spent decades studying human language and languages. But that does not prevent some people, at least in this country, from giving us no credit for knowing more about this subject than lay-people do.

For instance, it is not always the first instinct of BBC producers needing someone to discuss language issues to turn to one of the UK’s excellent university linguistic departments. They are just as likely to consult a poet or a novelist or a journalist. After all, these people are skilled in using language, aren’t they? Well, yes, but that is not at all the

same thing as being an expert about language.

All of us are highly competent at speaking our native language, but that seems to lead many people to believe that they are experts on other aspects of language as well. One thing that most linguists have experienced is that, when it comes to language, some people have a bad habit of presenting their personal likes and dislikes – which of course one can’t argue with – as if these preferences were objective facts. They don’t say “I really don’t like that way of speaking”, but “that way of speaking is bad and wrong”.