

# Most of us go with the flow when it comes to pronunciation

Peter  
Trudgill



email: [newsdesk@archant.co.uk](mailto:newsdesk@archant.co.uk)

A correspondent has written an interesting letter to the EDP about my column on pronunciations such as “fing” and “bovver”. I wrote that when it comes to natural language changes of this type, we’ve got no choice but to – as another correspondent put it – “go with the flow”. Her response was “er, no actually”.

I’m afraid she’s wrong, though, because she already has – gone with the flow, I mean.

I have never met this correspondent. But I know for a fact that her own speech demonstrates very clearly the truth of what I say. Does she pronounce meet and meat, see and sea, team and team the same? Of course she does. She has gone with the flow. Pairs of words such as these were originally pronounced differently, which is why they’re not spelt the same. But then the two vowels merged, like th and f are doing now. And all English speakers went with the flow.

Does she pronounce the k in know? Of course she doesn’t. All English speakers used to pronounce it, which is why there is a k in the spelling, but now no one does.



■ ‘Am I bovvered?’ Catherine Tate’s comic catchphrase reflects a change in the way many of us speak.

Do people in this part of the world have the original hard g at the end of words such as long and tongue, like people from Liverpool and Manchester? No we don’t. People from the north west haven’t gone with that particular flow yet, but we have.

Do you pronounce Wales and whales the same? Fur and fir? Moor and more? Many Scottish people haven’t gone with these flows, but most of the rest of us have, including even those East Anglians who dislike “fing” and “bovver”.

Does our letter writer pronounce the r in car and cart, as Americans do? I’d be surprised. If she doesn’t pronounce

farther and father differently, she has gone along with everybody else in the south-east of England in accepting this change. No doubt when the r-sound in these words was being lost by younger people, older people complained that they weren’t “enunciating” clearly. But that made no difference.

Old English used to have an h-sound at the beginning of words such as ring and roof. If you feel your ancestors were remiss in going with the flow and not enunciating these hs, you are of course free to start saying hring and hroof if you want to. But I think you’ll be on your own.