

'Hair it is' - all you need to know about word merging

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In Christchurch in New Zealand, there's a hairdressers - I hope it's still there, after the terrible earthquake - with a sign outside announcing "Hair It Is!". Here - or should I say hair - in Norfolk, we understand what's going on in this advert. In NZ, words like here and hair, beer and bare, fear and fare are pronounced the same, which is why the hairdresser could come up with this pun.

The EDP sub-editors could use puns like this too, but I don't think they do - perhaps they're not from Norfolk - because we don't make a difference between words such as really and rarely, dear and dare, peer and pair either: We used to, just as the Kiwis did. But in the last century and a half or so - it's more recent in New Zealand - we have, as linguists say, merged the two originally different vowels. We have merged them on the vowel of hair, so we say "hair and there". The Kiwis have gone the other way and say "here and there".

There's nothing surprising about two vowels merging - it happens all the time. Pairs of words like meet and meat, see and



■ What's going on here? A bad hair day...

sea, team and team, used to be pronounced differently - Shakespeare would have done that - which is why they have different spellings. Mergers are not good or bad, they just happen. In this part of the world we haven't merged moan and mown like most English speakers have, but that doesn't make us better than them. And the fact that we have merged beer and bear, while they haven't, doesn't make us worse than them either.

This interesting innovation in Norfolk English is one which has also taken place quite independently in NZ and other places, such as Newfoundland. There's no

surprise about this. The vowels of here and hair are both rather infrequent and the difference is therefore relatively unimportant. And it's very hard to think of a situation where the merger could lead to misunderstanding. If a Kiwi says "I'm going to get my here cut", no one will misunderstand. And if I say "Norwich City are rarely good", you should be able to tell from my tone of voice what I mean.

Anyway, it was rarely kind of you to read this. As I used to say to the sadly-missed Tony Sheridan when I got off the bus on our way home from school, 'hair goo'.

Picture: PA