

# How's this for a Norfolk quadruple negative?

**PETER TRUDGILL**

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



By the end of the second world war there were 20,000 courageous Poles in the RAF, and quite a few of them were here in Norfolk. Probably, though, not many local people have ever learnt much Polish, so here's a little language lesson – I apologise if it's too early in the morning.

The Polish sentence “Nigdy nie mogłem nigdzie żadnego znaleźć” literally means “Never not could – I nowhere none find”. Or, as we say in Norfolk, “I couldn't never find none nowhere”. “Double negative” doesn't do it – in Polish and in Norfolk, these are quadruple negatives. In Polish, you have to say it like that – in a negative sentence, everything that can be negative must be negative. It's known as grammatical agreement.

Linguists call this agreement “multiple negation”. It's very common in the world's languages. You find it in French: “Je ne sais rien” ‘I not know nothing’. It's always been normal in English too. King Alfred used it. Chaucer used it. Shakespeare, pictured, used it. And most modern native English speakers all round the world use it: “You ain't seen nothin' yet”, “I can't get no satisfaction”, “Went to Swaffham to do some troshen – din't do nothin”. When that ol' Mrs W looked after Aunt Agatha's hens and they laid fewer eggs than usual, The Boy John reported that “Aunt Agatha she dornt suspect nobody o' nuthin”. So it's



Norfolk dialect all right. But it's not just Norfolk. It's Pan-world English.

For the last 250 years, though, it hasn't been part of Standard English: “I couldn't ever find any anywhere” is the Standard English version. So people who don't like local dialects have tried to invent reasons for why multiple negation is “wrong”.

They say if you could NOT find NONE, you must have been able to find SOME; and – as if English was algebra – “two negatives make a positive”. Which is nonsense. If two negatives don't make a positive in French or Polish, they don't make a positive in Norfolk – or America or Australia – either.

This is just a desperate attempt to rationalise prejudice against dialects.

Of course, if you're attempting to write Standard English, you should avoid multiple negation.

But there's absolutely nothing wrong about it as such, just as there's everything right about it in Polish.

Polish and Norfolk people, though, have a lot more in common than just their grammar, and to this day there's nothing negative about our regard for those brave Poles.

■ **What do you think? Email: [EDPletters@archant.co.uk](mailto:EDPletters@archant.co.uk)**