

Language changes around us - there is no right or wrong

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk



■ I lit the fire or I lighted the fire...? Both are right in Peter Trudgill's book.

If you mention to English people that there are two versions of the past tense of the verb "to light", some are likely to want to know which one is right.

Is it wrong to say "I lighted the fire"; or is it a mistake to say "I lit the fire"?

I have a different question. Why does one of them have to be wrong and one of them right? How about: they are both right? Why can't they both be perfectly legitimate alternatives? Americans say "sidewalk" and we say "pavement", but we don't claim that we are right and they are wrong, do we?

It would be foolish if we did. Variation in language is normal. We should accept this for the fascinating fact that it is, and not keep trying to make judgements about "correctness".

But we can't blame people if they're worried about whether to say "burnt" or "burned".

They've been made nervous about it by their schoolteachers.

And you can't blame the teachers either: They were made nervous about whether they should say "in the circumstances" or "under the circumstances" by the people who taught them.

For the last 300 years we have been

browbeaten by a gang of interfering pedants who think they know how to speak our language better than we do, even if we have been speaking it all our lives!

Their problem is that these pedants are offended by variation.

Alternatives make them uneasy – it must be a kind of neurosis they are suffering from. Variability upsets their sense of order, perhaps.

They try to deal with this by employing one of two strategies.

One is to announce that all the variants except one are 'wrong'. Well, we didn't authorise them to tell us what was right and wrong, did we?

Their other strategy is to claim that, if there are two variants, they must mean different things.

American pedants are even worse at this than ours are.

Believe it or not, they have invented a "further-farther" rule. They declare that "further down the road" is wrong because – well, I won't bore you with the details, it's not worth it.

Let's worry about something important – there are children starving out there. If anyone wants to know which is right out of 'this is different from that', 'this is different to that', or 'this is different than that', we have a good Norfolk answer for them: all on'em.