

Why is 'on' used for 'of' in Norfolk and Suffolk dialect?

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A letter-writer to the EDP tells us that she overheard someone on a bus saying "I was only told on it yesterday – I suppose you heard on it ages ago". She asked why "on" was used here instead of "about".

One answer to this question is: why not? It's what people say in these parts.

You might as well ask: why do Americans say "elevator" instead of "lift"? Well, they just do. That's what Americans say.

I also think we should be careful with the phrase "instead of", which makes it seem like there's something strange or wrong about using "on" in these contexts.

There isn't. It's entirely normal in Norfolk and Suffolk to say "What do you think on it?", or "There were two on 'em", or "What are you a-doin' on?"

And these examples make it clear that the word "on" was not being used on that bus as the equivalent of "about".

Our local usage of "on" corresponds to "of". Older people may remember hearing the request, when someone wanted a cigarette: "Any on yuh any on yuh?" = "Have any of you any on you?"

But the question this correspondent asked really is an interesting one. How did it come about that we use "on" in this



■ 'Any on yuh any on yuh?' - an old-style request for a cigarette.

way? The answer lies in the common linguistic process of reinterpretation.

There's a clue to this in another question she also posed in the same letter: why did someone else she overheard say "He reckoned he could get a top of that there hill"?

Well, here, "a top" is being used rather than "on top"; and in fact "atop" is a perfectly good English word, where the *a-* is historically derived from "on", as in many other words like *alive*, *asleep*, *abroad*, *afoot*. The full form "on" has been reduced to the weakened, unstressed *a-*.

Now, it so happens that the same reduction to *a-* occurs with "of".

We don't normally say "a cup ovv tea" but "a cupp a-tea". So *a-* can be a weak form corresponding both to *of* and *on*. Because of that, the *a-* in "what do you think a-that?" became reinterpreted as the weak form of "on" rather than the weak form of "of".

At some stage in our language history, when a full form was called for, "on" started being used where "of" had been used before.

And that's what I think a-that.