

# Talking diff'rent: why Peter is so

Professor Peter Trudgill's columns on language and accent have become a popular feature of the EDP. As a collection of them is published, **TREVOR HEATON** meets a passionate advocate of treasuring the way we speak.

It's no accident that Peter Trudgill's new book is called *Dialect Matters: Respecting Vernacular Language*. For that, in a nutshell, is exactly what he feels about the subject. If you have ever felt self-conscious about your Norfolk accent, his message couldn't be simpler: don't be. Prof Trudgill is here to tell you that it is perfectly all right to speak with a local accent. In fact, it's more than 'all right'.

"When Norfolk people feel embarrassed about their dialect and accent [it's important to realise that] they are taught to do that," he insists.

There is absolutely no need to do ourselves down, "especially when you think about Norwich being the second city in the country for so many centuries."

It's a typically forthright opinion from the city-born academic, who has provoked a lively correspondence in the four years he has been writing columns for the EDP.

In his Monday features he looks at every aspect of the spoken and written word, from origins to how place names should be pronounced (more on that later), and from the history of language to dialect.

He is unlikely to run out of subjects in this endlessly-changing field. "People are fascinated by the subject," he says. "Everybody is interested in language."

And that is as true for Peter as it is for any of his readers. From his earliest days, he can recall being aware of the subtle nuances of accent. It all stems from having two sets of grandparents where one set was from the city, and one from the county.

His mother, born Hettie Gooch, came from Wiveton and grew up in the villages around Holt. His father, John, was very much a city boy. They met in Jarrold's, where they both worked.

"She used to relate how the first time he took to see her parents at New Catton they laughed at her for the way she spoke." They thought it was strange the way she put a 't' at the end of words (saying 'hundrut' for 'hundred', for example). For her part, Hettie took some getting used to the way John's family dropped their 'h's.

A family trip to Wales opened up his eyes to language still further. "We went when I was about 12. I remember being very interested in the fact that only a few miles away there was a whole different language that people used in their daily lives."

But his interest really took off in his second year at CNS grammar school when he took German as well as Latin and French. "German is so obviously related to English – I really start wondering about that," he said.

As well as his inspirational school (no fewer than five of Peter and his contemporaries became professors), Peter also pays tribute to Janet Smith, who in the mid-1950s ran the new library at St William's Way at Thorpe ("definitely not Thorpe St Andrew in those days!").

"I used to borrow language books, things like 'A Grammar of Burmese'. I used to take notes. Looking back, I was always interested in linguistics but didn't know what it was called."

Another big influence were his parents

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– “They were both intellectual, readers, thinkers...” – so no wonder both Peter and his brother Stephen (Emeritus Fellow in Geography at Robinson College, Cambridge) went on to distinguished academic careers.

But his parents' influence shows in a more emotional way too. Peter wrote movingly in 2014 how his father John, an immensely talented man both in business (he took Jarrold's Publication department to a £1 million-plus turnover by the mid-1950s) and art (he was a co-founder of the Norwich 20 Group), felt awkward because of his strong working-class city accent.

Here's what Peter had to say in that article:

"He originally spoken with a real Norwich accent, as his parents did all their lives. He didn't speak like that in later life, though – you could tell he came from Norwich, but he'd modified his accent considerably.

"That modification came at a cost. Dad knew that some people in business circles would look down on him if he spoke in the way that came most naturally to a young man from a terraced house in New Catton, and that opportunities might be denied to him.

"So throughout his adult life, on important and formal occasions, he suffered the anxiety that goes with having to think, not only about what you're saying, but about how you're pronouncing it.

"No one should have to do that. No one should have to feel, because of the bigotry of others, that they can make progress in life only if they abandon their native dialect.

"We're doing our best to stamp out the scourge of sexism – we don't tell women it's their fault if they're discriminated against. Equally, if people with truly local accents are dismissed as not being worthy, we shouldn't say it's their fault, but do our best to stamp out this linguisticism – which is even now often

overtly and shamelessly expressed."

He concluded: "People are at their most relaxed and articulate and expressive when they're speaking in their own natural accent. In creating his paintings, Dad felt free to express himself as he wished, in spite of the prejudice that existed against modern art in the 1940s. It's a pity he couldn't do the same when he was speaking."

Powerful stuff, and it is easy to see why Peter – himself a proud possessor of a rich Norwich accent – is determined to speak up for diversity of accent at every opportunity.

From CNS, Prof Trudgill went to King's College Cambridge in 1963 to study *Modern Languages* "...until I discovered that there was this subject called 'linguistics'. In those days it was not very well known."

After graduating, he continued with the subject with a MA at Edinburgh University, then on to a doctorate. For his thesis he didn't have to look far from home for inspiration: "The social differentiation of English in Norwich."

"The study of urban dialects was very new at the time," he recalled. "I took a random sample of 60 people. I went round talking to them, and recorded most of them. I discovered that there were very fine-grained correlations between social class and area."

In those days 'uptalk' was a very common part of Norwich speech – that habit of raising the voices at the end of sentences so that everything sounds like a question (which was a bit baffling to a Lynn boy like me when I first encountered it in the late 1970s).

In January 1970 he became a lecturer in socio-linguistics at Reading University. Once again, he was very much a trail-blazer for the subject. "I was a pioneer without knowing it," he said.

His academic career since then has seen numerous books and articles, 13 years living in Switzerland, lectures and posts all over the world, and much more. He



■ John Trudgill: Peter's father felt he had to moderate his Norwich accent in later life.



■ Hettie Trudgill: Peter's mother came from North Norfolk.

# proud to speak up for Norfolk

## Column controversies

The biggest discussion points from Peter's columns have tended to fall into three categories:

1 Artificial rules of grammar, for example not using a conjunction [a word like 'and' or 'but'] at the start of sentences. "When I say, 'why not?' then the response is usually 'Because we were always taught like that...' I think people get upset because they don't want to thing they things they might have struggled hard to learn at school were actually wrong."

2 Another bugbear is dialect. "To say 'I done it' is not actually wrong. It's something that is common usage worldwide. In fact it's more common than saying 'I did it'. It's not a mistake."

3 The third is pronunciation of place names. "People get very aereated!" For example, whether the first syllable of Sprowston should rhyme with 'cow'



or 'tow'. Heigham Street in Norwich is another one. "It should be Hayum or Ham - but not Hi'um."

Problems are caused mainly caused by lack of knowledge. "They don't know that they don't know..."

has held professorships at the Universities of Reading, Essex, Lausanne and Fribourg, and is currently Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway, and Honorary Professor of Sociolinguistics at UEA. He knows his stuff - REALLY knows his stuff.

In all his travels, Peter has never lost his love of his home city, though, introducing his American wife Jean Hannah - who specialises in copy editing and Plain English - to the joys of fortnightly visits to 'Carra Rud'.

And it was back at his Norwich home that he started his columns, by accident, in 2012. A (now ex-) EDP columnist had written a piece attacking the Norfolk accent, a view which caused consternation in breakfast tables across the county.

"I read it by chance when I was at the doctors... about to have my blood pressure checked!" he laughed

Keith Skipper and others suggested he write a riposte. Peter, as President of Fond - the Friends Of Norfolk Dialect - was the perfect person to reply. That in turn led to his columns, now a regular and popular feature of Monday's paper.

One thing that hasn't changed over the years is his strong belief that accents are important, and should be treasured. "It's a matter of respect," he says. Indeed, research indicates that accents perform a valuable sociological function of helping people gain acceptance within a group.

As for the future, Peter sees two forces at play.

"There are the 'centralising' people, who want to get rid of accents. That is never going to happen.

"And then there's the 'panickers' who worry about local dialect and accent disappearing.

"[It's true that] the East Anglia accent is being pushed back geographically, but also socially. When I was growing up in Norwich everyone spoke in a Norwich accent, unless they were very posh.

"But people speaking in the distinctively Norfolk way will continue. And if you want to hear pure Norwich, then go down to Norwich market."

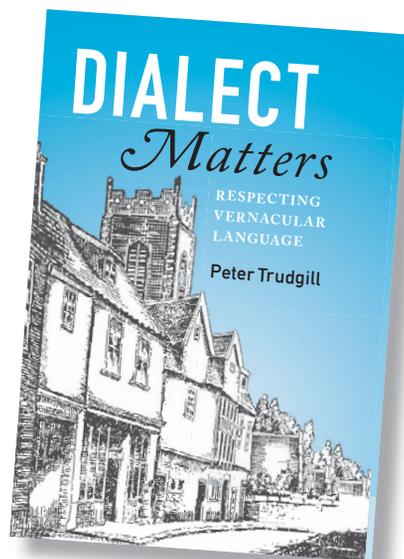
There is no reason for people from Norfolk to feel inferior about their accent.

Quite the opposite: the very first written word ever found in what was to become English was discovered in Caistor St Edmund, scratched on a deer bone and dating from around AD400. "I think you can make a very good case for saying the English language started in Norfolk," Peter said. "It was one of the earliest and heaviest areas of Germanic settlement."

So when we talk Norfolk we connect not just with our village, our town, our city, our ancestors, but also a 1,500-year history. In short: our home. Now, who wouldn't be proud to do that?

■ **Dialect Matters: Respecting Vernacular Language is published by Cambridge University Press. It features 150 columns, with John Trudgill's pen and ink drawings. The book is available for £17.99 in paperback, and £44.99 in hardback.**

■ **The book will be launched at 'An Evening With...' in Jarrold's books department on Thursday August 11 (6 for 6.30pm). Tickets £5, available from Customer Services (01603 660661). The price includes a glass of wine and £3 off the book.**



■ Prof Peter Trudgill, EDP columnist and language expert. 'If you want to hear pure Norwich, then go down to Norwich market,' he says. Picture: DENISE BRADLEY