

# Perhaps what we need is more local dialect, not less!

**PETER TRUDGILL,** president of Friends of Norfolk Dialect



(FOND), takes issue with EDP columnist Ken Hurst's suggestion that "the sooner we give up this dialect the better."

It's amazing how often people who don't know anything at all about language still feel free to pontificate about it in public. Language professionals like me – I've been a university teacher of linguistics for 40 years – are constantly being surprised by these pontificators – people like Ken Hurst. But Ken's column – where he tells Norfolk people that "the sooner we give up this dialect the better it will be" – is a particularly surprising example.

And not just surprising. Telling Norfolk people how we ought to speak seems like arrogance to me, especially when you start from a position of profound linguistic ignorance. And when I say ignorance, I do mean ignorance. Look at what Ken says: "there's an argument to be had", he reckons, about accent and dialect. No there isn't! Any first-year linguistics student will tell you that accent is about pronunciation, while dialect is about grammar and vocabulary as well as pronunciation. There's nothing to argue about.

And "you see", Ken writes patronisingly, "regional dialects are a bit yesterday". No, they are not. And never will be. Dialects do change through time, but it isn't true that "the day of regional dialects is done". Even if you started with a total absence of regionally distinctive speech, dialects would develop – this is happening in Australia right now. Everybody in the world gives away some information about their regional origins as soon as they start speaking. It's true that there is a very small group of people in this country – people educated at Eton and the other Public Schools, including the ones who are running the country at the moment – who don't betray anything about their origins except that they're from England, and upper class, but this is very unusual on a world-wide scale.

Ken also seems to think that "regional speech serves to accentuate narrow economic horizons". You are wrong again, Ken. The European countries where regional dialects are most strongly favoured, nurtured and promoted are Norway, Switzerland and Luxembourg. In Norway, people speak their local dialect all the time, whether they are giving a speech in parliament, lecturing at a university, or commenting on a football match.



Picture: SUBMITTED

**ONWARDS AND UPWARDS:** Norfolk and proud was the order of the day for these Canaries supporters in 1959. And, says Peter Trudgill, we should be just as proud of our local dialect today.

**“ Even if you started with a total absence of regionally distinctive speech, dialects would develop – this is happening in Australia right now. ”**

Peter Trudgill

In German-speaking Switzerland and Luxembourg, most people speak their local dialect all the time too – even politicians taking part in Newsnight-type discussions on TV. And do you know what the three richest countries in Europe are? Norway, Switzerland and Luxembourg. Luxembourg is the richest country in the world and Norway is second, in terms of per capita GNP. So perhaps what we need in this country is more local dialect, not less – the non-dialect speaking people who are running things right now don't seem to be making too good a job of it.

Over the last 50 years, we have managed to do quite a lot in the way of removing the bigotry associated with racism, sexism and homophobia from our society. We haven't entirely got rid of it. But at least it's no longer respectable in this country to be seen to discriminate against somebody on



**FLASHBACK:** Ken Hurst's column.

the grounds of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. Sadly, what Ken Hurst illustrates very vividly is the dismal truth that we have made very little progress in getting rid of the bigotry associated with linguicism – yes, that's a real word, just as the prejudices it refers to are only too real.

And in case you think "bigotry" is too strong a word, just look at what Ken has written, on the subject of regional dialects in the country's biggest-selling regional morning newspaper. He describes the speech of people here in Norfolk – people like me who he knew were likely to read his column – as "mangled language". He delights in descriptions suggesting that we "jabber". And he says that "thank goodness" he doesn't have a local accent himself. I think we can assume that, when Ken tells us to get rid of our way of speaking,

he reckons we should all speak like him instead – he certainly seems to believe that he knows how English "should be spoken".

Ken also seems to think that getting rid of the local dialect would make our region a more "open-minded", forward-looking place. But Ken himself is a very poor advert for this idea. We have a tradition here in Norwich of being pretty open-minded about most things – we even let people like Ken write in our newspapers. But if I want to go to a place which is even more open-minded and forward-looking, I'll go to Norway, where they believe that an open society is characterised by tolerance of other peoples' ways, including their ways of speaking, and where Ken's column would never have been written because everyone would have found such views ridiculous. What could be more close-minded and backward than denigrating and ridiculing people for the way they speak?

All dialects are equally complex and expressive and valid as ways of speaking. If Ken doesn't like our dialect, that tells us nothing about our dialect – what it does tell us about Ken. Happily, Ken is totally without influence over the way future generations of Norfolk people are going to speak. A distinctive way of speaking English in Norfolk is not going to disappear. Don't you worry, together.

**■ Peter Trudgill is a Fellow of the British Academy, Professor of Linguistics at UEA and the Universities of Agder in Norway and Fribourg in Switzerland, President of FOND, and a supporter of Norwich City.**

## GREAT YARMOUTH

### Police hunt for robber after crime spree

Police are hunting for a woman who they believe robbed a pensioner and assaulted two taxi drivers in a crime spree in Great Yarmouth.

Detectives believe the incidents were all carried out by a lone woman between 3.15pm and 7pm in the town centre on Thursday and are now appealing for information.

The first incident happened at around 3.15pm in the Pasteur Road area when two women, both in their 70s, were approached by a woman who demanded they hand over a handbag.

Both the elderly victims were left shaken.

A short time later a male taxi driver picked up a woman in the Market Gates area and during the journey she assaulted the cabbie, leaving him with facial injuries and also stole cash.

Later, at about 6.50pm, a second male taxi driver picked up a female passenger, again in the Market Gates area, and he was also assaulted and had cash stolen.

Due to the time and location of the incidents, officers believe the same person may be responsible for each crime.

The woman is described as white, aged in her 30s with brown/auburn hair and of scruffy appearance.

Detective Inspector Sarah Pettengell said it was "very unusual" to get "lone female robbery assailants".

**■ Call police on 101 or Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.**

## NORWICH

### Singer denies assault charges

Singer Dane Bowers has been charged with racially aggravated assault, after a stag party in the city.

The DJ, who topped the charts with boyband Another Level in the late nineties, stands accused of two counts of assault and one of racially aggravated harassment.

The 32-year-old pleaded not guilty to the three charges, dating from Saturday, June 2, and was released on unconditional bail at Norwich Magistrates' Court yesterday.

According to his Twitter page, Bowers from Ambercroft Way, Coulsdon, Surrey, was in Norfolk for a stag weekend, when he allegedly got involved in the incident on Prince of Wales Road at 5am.

## CARBROOKE

### Man airlifted after car crash

An 18-year-old man was airlifted to Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge with serious injuries after a car hit a tree near Watton.

The crash involved a grey Volkswagen Polo and it happened on the B1108 Norwich Road in Carbrooke, near the B1077 junction, at around 11.20am yesterday.

Any witnesses should call PC Matt Gouldsmith on 101.