

We may speak with a Norfolk accent but we aren't stupid

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

A wonderfully revealing letter appeared in the EDP about my piece on the term "well-spoken". The correspondent wrote that it's "difficult enough to make one's way in the world without encumbering oneself with a local accent".

This is, apparently, because speaking with a Norfolk accent makes him, or at least certain other people, think that we sound "slow of brain". This tells us a lot about what's going on in the minds of these certain people: THEY think we sound "slow". So the problem isn't with us, but with the people who brazenly indulge in this... well, doesn't it feel rather like racism to you?

The only possible reason for thinking a Norfolk accent makes someone sound stupid is because you believe that Norfolk people ARE stupid. Which we are not. It's horrible to recall, but it's quite true that the 19th century conventional wisdom in Britain was that non-white people – and women – were "slow of brain" too, compared to white men. Which they were not, either.

What we need to do is not remove local accents, but rid our land of the highly unappealing mind-set this letter exemplifies, just as we have tried to rid the coun-



■ The Singing Postman Allan Smethurst was well known for his strong Norfolk accent.

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try of racism and sexism. People are not "encumbered" by their accents, but rather by irrational prejudices against them which hide behind false judgments about "slowness" and incomprehensibility.

The correspondent offers what he thinks is a solution: it is "better not to acquire the accent in the first place" – just as it would've been better not to have been born black or female, I suppose?

Apart from the 4pc of the UK population who speak RP, everybody grows up with a local accent, like normal people everywhere else in the world. We all grow up speaking like the people around us. The

only way to ensure a child won't acquire a local accent is to keep a check on who the people around them are – to segregate them from the locally-accented majority of the population.

The most efficient form of segregation is to send children to "pukka" (the correspondent's word) schools, which of course most people can't afford to do. Which is the point. This apartheid-type "solution" will work only for the small minority it already works for: It can't work for everybody.

What we must try to do is get rid of the prejudice. You can't abolish racism by turning everybody white.