

To 't' or not to 't'? Tha's a Norfolk question

PETER TRUDGILL

email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk



Most people in this country know what a glottal stop is. Our schools don't teach much about phonetics, the scientific study of speech sounds – they ought to. But the glottal stop is famous because lots of people (Gillian Shepherd for one) say they don't like it – even though they use it themselves. They hate it particularly in words like “better”, “city” – ‘be'er, ci'y'. If you say “Po'er Heigham” they call that “dropping your t's”.

The glottal stop is a perfectly normal consonant. Lots of the world's languages – have it – Arabic, Danish, Persian, Mohawk, Hebrew, Maltese, Tahitian.... There's no letter for it in our alphabet because Latin didn't have the sound. In Polynesian languages it's written as a backward apostrophe, as in Hawai'i.

A “stop” is a consonant made by totally

blocking off the flow of air from the mouth – ‘p’ is a “bilabial stop” because the block is formed by the two lips. With the glottal stop, the block is made in the larynx by closing the vocal cords – and the larynx is part of the glottis.

In English, the glottal stop is not a consonant in its own right. It's a way of pronouncing the consonant ‘t’ – though according to rather strict rules.

In Norfolk we use it as the way of pronouncing ‘t’ before another consonant, like in “Scotland” – try saying it! But you can't use it at the beginning of a word, unless the first syllable is unstressed. So you can't pronounce “cup of tea” with a glottal stop, but you can say “see you 'omorra!”.



It's increasingly common before a vowel, as in “about eleven”. But it's quite wrong to claim that that's “dropping your t's”. If you drop the ‘t’ from “beating”, you get “being”, not “bea'ing”!

It's not “lazy” either – it probably actually requires more energy.

So what's to dislike? Nothing, actually. But languages change all the time, especially their phonetics. And there are always people around who don't like anything new. The glottal stop as a way of pronouncing ‘t’ is an innovation dating back about 150 years. It probably started in Norfolk – studies of rural dialects spoken by people born in the 1870s showed that it was more prevalent here than anywhere else.

The change is a fascinating development for language scientists to observe – and here we are in the vanguard! So much for the idea that Norfolk speech is “a bi' yesterday”...

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