

Rules of pronunciation taught at Urt School

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All languages have rules. And I don't mean foolish rules invented by self-appointed experts like "you mustn't end a sentence with a preposition". (If someone tells you that, the only correct response is "why not?").

I mean the real linguistic rules that we're all clever enough to acquire as small children without realising it. No one ever told you there was an English rule "adjectives come before nouns" – when you got to school you knew that already, without knowing you knew it. You had also worked out why the negative of "I will" is "I will not" but the negative of "I sing" is not "I sing not". (To know exactly how this rule works, ask a foreigner who learnt it in English lessons at school.)

And there are pronunciation rules too. Think of how to achieve the true Norwich pronunciation of the name of the local school named after the 17th-century Norwich benefactor Mordecai Hewett.

The first thing to notice is you have to omit the 'y' sound after the 'h' in 'hoo-wit'. In Norfolk we pronounce "view" as 'voo' and "music" as 'moosic'. Its called "yod-dropping". So you have to say 'hoo-wit'.

You also have to drop the 'h', as city people do. This will give you 'oo-wit'. But then you have to be sure, too, not to pronounce the second syllable of Hewett like "it".

Unlike Londoners, Norfolk people



WHAT'S IN A NAME? A class from 1962 at the Hewett (or 'Urt') School.

pronounce "roses" and "Rosa's" the same – "ros-uhs". So you have to say 'oo-wuht', not 'oo-witt'. "Hewett School" rhymes with "do at school".

And finally there comes the most important Norwich rule – it's the same rule that sees "Heigham" pronounced "Ham".

One Christmas, years ago, when I was working as a temporary postman, I noticed a lot of cards going to the bakery on Unthank Road which weren't addressed to "Sewells" but "Searles".

In Norwich these words sound the same. The rule is that if an 'oo' vowel, like in "soon", comes before an unstressed 'uh'

vowel – as in "do it" – they combine to give an 'ur' vowel instead. So "do it" and "dirt" are pronounced the same. "Sewer" and "sir" sound the same too. "Chewing" is the same as "churn; and "pure" is the identical with "purr". In linguistics we call this rule "smoothing".

Jake Humphrey, and lots of other good Norwich people – and by the way, don't forget to pronounce the 't' as a glottal stop – went to the Urt School.

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