

Remember your vowels... that's a, e, i, o, u and schwa

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

When I first went to school, we were taught that English has five vowels, a, e, i, o, u. This wasn't very helpful – even if the teacher was just referring to letters, she was forgetting about the y in words like very, tryst, and rhythm. But as far as vowel sounds themselves are concerned, English has many more than five. One of the difficulties of English spelling is caused by the fact that we try to use these six letters to represent three times that number of sounds.

In my Norfolk accent I have 19 vowels: the sounds in bid, bed, bad, put, but, pot, bee, bay, buy, boy, lewd, load, low, loud, beard, bird, bard, board. This isn't the same number that people from outside Norfolk would have – we pronounce beard and bared the same, other people don't. An old-fashioned posh BBC accent has 21 vowels; many Scots have only 14.

Even in Norfolk there are differences. I pronounce are and hour the same; other people pronounce them differently and have an extra vowel in words like hour and flour:

Speakers who pronounce daze (dearz)



■ When Canaries fans are singing On The Ball City, they are using the schwa.

and days differently have an additional vowel. If you're good at arithmetic, you'll have noticed that I said I have 19 vowels – but my list only has 18. The 19th vowel, the one I didn't give an example for, is the most frequent and most important vowel in our language. There's no obvious single way of writing it. Take "vanilla". This word has three syllables. The middle one has the same vowel as "bid". But what about the first and last syllables? This is my 19th vowel. We can perhaps write it "uh" – "vuh-nill-uh". Linguists call it schwa, from a letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

You can see how frequent it is if you

take a perfectly ordinary phrase like "On the ball City – never mind the danger". This has 11 vowels, but four of them are "uh": the second vowel in never and danger, and the vowels in the two thes.

In Norfolk we use this vowel even more frequently than other people. We pronounce words like David and naked as Dayvuhd and naykuhd rather than Dayvidd and naykidd. Older dialect speakers say very as "verruh" and money as "munnuh". We pronounce Lowestoft as Lowss-tuhff, not Lowess-tofft. "Have you got any money?" has three schwas: "Ha' yuh got 'nuh munnuh?". We are world champions at schwa.