

Sorry, Anne, but you were muddled on this too

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Anne Atkins is not very popular in this part of the world. She is the woman who infamously said on Radio 4 “No more chestnut trees lining the streets of Norwich in case the conkers fall on your head – as if that would make a difference in Norfolk”. She said it was “a joke” and refused to apologise to us, the people of Norfolk.

Now she has been talking nonsense again, on the Thought for the Day programme, about language. She said that “good grammar helps you think clearly”. Anne has no background of research, as far as I know, in psycholinguistics. Fancy addressing that piece of wisdom to the nation when you actually have no idea what you are talking about.

Unfortunately when people like Anne say “good grammar”, they mean the grammar of Standard English, as if there was something “bad” about Norfolk grammar and the grammar of other dialects. Anne’s father was headmaster of a boarding school, and she was educated privately and at Oxford. I think we can assume that Standard English is her native dialect. So when she says “good grammar” she means “my grammar”.

I would be glad if one day Anne could



■ She stooped to conker jibe: Anne Atkins (not by a horse chestnut).

explain how saying “I did it” helps you think more clearly than saying “I done it”. Certainly she herself is not thinking very clearly. She admitted on Thought for the Day that her family, having received an invitation ending “please let us know if you can come”, didn’t reply because they couldn’t go. She claimed that the wording should have had “whether”, not “if”.

Unless this is another bad joke, this was surely a rather impolite and supercilious thing to do. It was also based on a faulty analysis of English grammar. “Let us know if you can come (or not)” is a perfectly normal English grammatical

construction and is totally equivalent to “...whether you can come (or not)”. The two conjunctions “if” and “whether” do behave differently in some grammatical contexts. No native English speaker would normally say “he didn’t know if to go”; we would say “whether”. And we wouldn’t say “please pop in whether you have time” – we’d always say “if”. But in indirect questions with “or” (implied or not) both are equally normal.

Being a native speaker of Standard English hasn’t helped Anne to achieve very much clarity of thought. Maybe there are lots of chestnut trees on her street.