

# It's what you know and what you say, not how you say it

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Social commentators sometimes write about “everyday sexism” and “casual racism”. By this they mean situations where people who do not want to be – and not believe they are – sexist or racist still behave in ways that are.

The commentators are thinking about situations such as where the office manager unthinkingly always asks one of the female staff to get the coffee; or where someone naively expresses surprise that an Afro-Caribbean friend is not good at dancing.

This same sort of heedlessness can also be seen in the case of linguicism, when people are unthinkingly stereotyped or discriminated against on the grounds of their accent, dialect or language.

Casual, everyday linguicism appears in many guises.

For example, the casual use of the term “well-spoken” in this country to refer only to the small minority of English speakers who have public-school accents implies that the rest of us, the vast majority, do not “speak well”, which of course is not true.

There is also often an unthinking assumption that people with certain local accents are stupid or uncivilised, or not fit



■ Steph McGovern (centre in red) pictured with her fellow presenters, has unfairly come under fire for her accent.

to hold positions of responsibility and authority or to make public announcements. We don't have to look far to see examples of this in Norfolk.

The BBC TV Breakfast's presenter Steph McGovern has also recently suffered from this same kind of attitude.

No matter that she is an award-winning journalist; that as a teenager she won the Young Engineer for Britain award; that she has a degree in science communication and policy; or that she has had 10 years of experience in top-level financial journalism.

None of this seems to be of any signifi-

cance to the people who have complained about her Middlesbrough accent. One gentleman even sent her £20 to put towards what he astonishingly called “correction therapy” for her accent; he said it was a terrible affliction.

I can see only one thing which needs correction here, and that is this gentleman's attitude.

And I can see only one person who is suffering from a terrible affliction: him.

He is the one who is very badly afflicted – by a form of linguicism which in this case, come to think of it, is so deliberate that it isn't even casual.