

# Sure thing, Shirley and surely are pronounced the same

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A friend of mine who doesn't have a Norfolk accent confesses to sometimes wondering for a split second, when she's talking to people here, why they seem to be calling her Shirley. Her name is Sue.

The explanation is that in Norfolk we pronounce Shirley and surely the same. In our accent, sure rhymes with fur. So do pure, endure and mature. And mural, plural and rural rhyme with referral. People with true Norfolk accents pronounce the Ber in Ber Street in Norwich and the Bure in the River Bure the same, and even those of us who put a "y" sound in "Byure" still make the two names rhyme.

Norfolk people who have moved away and lost much of their Norfolk accent are generally still recognisable as Norfolk Dumplings from the way they say "Are you sure?". It's a very good diagnostic feature for detecting Norfolkness.

Our pronunciation is distinctive because elsewhere in the country people pronounce sure and surely as "shore" and "shorely"; and those who don't do that pronounce sure as "shoo-er" and surely as "shoo-er-ly".

But if we look beyond England, it's good to see that Norfolk is not alone in the world in having this pronunciation. There are very large numbers of Americans and



■ 'Surely you can't be serious?' - a memorable moment with Leslie Nielsen and Peter Graves in the classic 1980 comedy Airplane! Picture: PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Canadians who also rhyme fur and sure, as you can tell from the famous piece of dialogue in the American film Airplane! which goes: "Surely you can't be serious?" - "I am serious, and don't call me Shirley!". The two people who live in our house grew up 4,000 miles apart, but we both agree that surely and Shirley are pronounced exactly the same.

I have been wondering which Americans do and don't have surely and Shirley as homophones - pairs of words which sound the same - and an American linguist colleague put a query on Facebook asking

about this. Fascinatingly, it turns out that there is a geographical pattern over there as well, but it's exactly the reverse of what we find here. In America and Canada, most people pronounce these two words identically, except in the east! A majority of people who report that they do make a difference in the pronunciation come from eastern areas such as Newfoundland, New York City, New Jersey, Philadelphia, and North Carolina.

If Sue decides to make a trip to the USA some time, she should stay on the east coast if she wants to avoid being called Shirley.