

# Ignoring foibles of speech would make us happier

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Norway is one of the most democratic, egalitarian countries in the world. It is also one of the happiest and most successful – many commentators believe that this isn't a coincidence.

Norway is the top country in the world on the United Nation's Human Development Index (Britain is 14th).

It is second on the worldwide Happiness Index (Britain is 22nd).

It is also the second richest, after Luxembourg, in terms of GDP by population (Britain is 23rd).

It comes third on the Quality of Life index (Britain is 27th). And it has the fifth lowest murder rate in the world (Britain is 30th, USA 117th).

Norway is also an enormously tolerant place.

Its philosophy manifests itself in attitudes to the way people speak. In England, speakers can be criticised for "speaking badly", or for their "bad English".

There's nothing like that in Norway: if you started talking about "bad Norwegian", no one would understand what you meant – they would be baffled.

As far as Norwegians are concerned, there are no dialects and accents of their language which are "bad".



■ Norway is one of the happiest countries in the world.

There's a long history of English children being told that the way they speak is incorrect: "Don't say 'I ain't got none' – it's wrong". In Norway, that would not happen. No Norwegian educator would want to say things like that, but even if they did, they would not be allowed to. It's against the law there to try to "correct" the way children speak.

In 1917 the Oslo Parliament approved a passage in the School Law which read: "Pupils are to use their own spoken variety, and teachers shall as far as possible adapt their natural spoken variety to the dialect of their pupils".

Teachers were not allowed to try to make children speak like them: if

anything, it was to be the other way round.

Today Norwegians still accept that pupils should use their local dialect in school. The current school law says: "For spoken language in the classroom, pupils and teaching staff decide for themselves which variety they will use. Staff and school managers, in their own choice of vocabulary and expression, shall also take into consideration as much as possible the local dialect of the pupils."

Achieving a more respectful and less hostile attitude to local accents and dialects in England might not make us as rich or successful as Norway. But it would surely make this country a fairer and happier place.