

# So, Mr Gove, do you really know what an adverb is?

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I'm sorry to keep going on about Mr Gove, but his less-than-well-informed views on language really are very tiresome.

It wouldn't matter so much if he wasn't the secretary of state for education but, as you've probably noticed, he is.

Mr Gove has got a thing about adverbs. He thinks pupils in our schools don't know what an adverb is. I'm not at all sure he knows what an adverb is either. It's a tricky issue.

The magnificent 1,800-page Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language says that "the adverb class is the most nebulous and puzzling of the traditional word classes". I'd be very surprised if Mr Gove could help with this puzzle.

When we were at school, we were told that an adverb is a word which modifies a verb, as with "quickly" in "she runs quickly". This may be what Mr Gove believes too. But as the Comprehensive Grammar suggests, adverbs are a lot more complicated than that. Adverbs can also modify adjectives, clauses, sentences and other adverbs. An example of an adverb modifying a sentence is "naturally" in "Naturally the sea's warm - this is August in Lowestoft"; and an example of an adverb modifying another adverb is "very"



■ Does secretary of state for education Michael Gove know what an adverb is, asks Peter Trudgill.

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as in "Lowestoft Town played very well".

But I think I know what Mr Gove is obsessing about. He's not interested in adverbs like aboard, about, abroad, afterwards, almost, already, always, anyway, around, aside, away. He is fixated on adverbs which are derived from adjectives by adding -ly, such as accidental-ly, active-ly, annoying-ly.

This can only be because he has a deep and irrational prejudice against local dialects. He is terribly irritated by the fact that, unlike Standard English, English local dialects generally don't construct adverbs from adjectives in this way. Dialect speakers typically use the same

form for adjectives and adverbs: she's a quick runner, she run quick; he's a nice speaker, he speak nice.

And why shouldn't they? It's not a mistake. It doesn't mean that dialect speakers don't know what an adverb is. It just means that in the grammar of, say, the Norfolk dialect, we make no formal distinction between this particular type of adverb and the corresponding adjective. And we are not alone - this is exactly what happens in many other languages too, such as Dutch, German and Norwegian.

So Norfolk dialect speakers should not fear Mr Gove, even if he do talk very fierce.