

How our Norfolk dialect makes grammar clearer

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■ Well-known author Lynne Truss has made a lot of money out of her book based on the phrase 'it eats shoots and leaves'.

Picture: LIBRARY

Lynne Truss is a well-known English author and journalist. She has been described as a "professional pedant". And she has made a lot of money out of writing a book which is based on the observation that the phrase "it eats shoots and leaves" is ambiguous.

She says, quite rightly, that the phrase represents a very good example of how important punctuation can be for making meaning clear in the written language. "A panda eats shoots and leaves" means something very different from "It eats, shoots, and leaves".

This is a joke, of course. It's quite a good joke, I suppose. But there is no way this phrase would actually have led to any ambiguity or misunderstanding in real life, even without any punctuation.

The particular scenario conjured up by Truss as the background for her sentence involves a café, and a talking panda in possession of a firearm – not something one would expect to encounter in real life, even in the United States.

As readers of this column will know, I agree very much with Lynne Truss that

punctuation is vitally important in writing. But notice there is something very interesting for Norfolk and Suffolk people about the ambiguity of her sentence.

It's the grammar. We are often told that grammar is very important for making meaning clear. It is. But it doesn't have to be the grammar of Standard English, as some teachers would have us believe. All dialects have their own grammatical structures and rules. And it is precisely the grammar of Standard English which makes Lynne's sentence ambiguous.

Her illustrative phrase represents a case where the grammar of the Standard English dialect is not as clear as the

grammar of the Norfolk dialect. In Norfolk, even without punctuation, there would be absolutely no ambiguity. This is because we would have different sentences for each of the meanings. In fact, we can translate Lynne's sentence in as many as three different ways.

Of any normal real-life, unarmed panda in the wild, we would say "That eat shoots and leaves". If a particular one of these wild animals was known for its frequent departures, we could say "That eat shoots and leave". But of the rather scary, even if imaginary, armed panda in the café, we would have to say "That eat, shoot, and leave".

Three chairs for our Norfolk dialect!