

With dialect it's not what you say - it's how you say it

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

My column last week was written in our local dialect. The point of my article was to show that "whatever can be written in Standard English can be written in dialect too".

Keith Spink kindly wrote a letter to the EDP saying he wasn't convinced.

I suspect this was because I didn't explain properly what the terms Standard English and dialect mean. Mr Spink wrote that the vocabulary of our dialect is "pathetically small" - that the words *chiroprapist* and *consultation* don't exist in the Norfolk dialect - and that our syntax lacks "vital nuances".

He was also worried about problems with communication, citing the "baffle-ment" caused when London evacuees arrived here during the war.

I understand this concern, but the aim of my article was to show that any word used in Standard English can also be used in all other dialects. Norfolk dialect speakers can, if they want, use all the words employed by Standard English speakers and still be speaking Norfolk dialect, so long as they use Norfolk dialect grammar and pronunciation.

Standard English is a matter of grammar, not vocabulary. "My dad was pretty



■ Evacuees to Norfolk had no problem making themselves understood in the mix of Cockney and Norfolk dialects.

knackered after his long trip" is Standard English, while "My father were somewhat fatigued after his lengthy journey" isn't. My piece was clearly in the Norfolk dialect because I wrote "that make" and not "it makes". The fact that I used words such as "medium", "representation", and "uniformity" did not mean that I had suddenly switched over to Standard English, nor that I was writing an "attenuated form" of the dialect.

The syntax of our dialect varies little from that of Standard English, but where it does differ, it sometimes expresses nuances that Standard English doesn't. We can say "You done it, did you?" using distinct forms for the past tense of *do* as a

main verb and auxiliary verb. And we say "thass no good, I don't like it" making a distinction between the subject "that" and the object "it" which isn't available in Standard English.

And, as to the evacuees: a number of Cockney children thrived under the care of my Norfolk grandmother during the Second World War, with dialect differences causing not bafflement but amusement and interest.

Where there were difficulties, this was due to pronunciation, something which isn't relevant in discussions about writing.

It really is true that anything that can be written in Standard English could also be written in the Norfolk dialect.