

# Don't blame the Americans, this is all our own fault

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I was on the 25 bus in Norwich the other day, travelling from the University to the city. The students getting on at UEA asked to go to the train station. An old bloke at the stop on Bluebell Road asked for Thorpe Station – as I would have done.

And then some middle-aged people on Unthank Road wanted tickets for the railway station. So there we had, encapsulated in a just a few minutes and just a mile or so, visible and audible evidence of a change in speech. (The bus itself had “rail station” on the front but no one says that.)

The gradual disappearance of “Thorpe Station” from Norwich people’s usage is due to external factors. Since there’s only one railway station in the city now, it’s no longer necessary to specify which one you want, though it’s interesting that there’s been a time-lag of a good thirty years for this to even start taking effect.

It’s less easy, though, to explain why people have stopped saying “railway station” and started saying “train station”. I don’t recall hearing anybody in this country, apart from small children who didn’t know any better, calling it that until about twenty years ago.

But “train station” is what Americans



■ Norwich Railway Station, now the only one in the city.

Picture: LIBRARY

have always said, at least as far back as I remember (and that’s getting to be quite a long time now).

It’s true that Paul Simon is an American, and that his famous song, *Homeward Bound*, begins: “I’m sitting in the railway station.” But he did, supposedly, write it at Widnes station – and of course the two syllables of “railway” fit the melody. But in all the modern books which describe differences between US and British English, the opposition between ‘train station’ and ‘railway station’ is mentioned. And that’s my experience too.

So we can blame the Americans then?

Hardly. If we stop using our term and start using theirs, that’s our doing. It’s nothing to do with them. And the change can’t be explained in terms of young people casually throwing Americanisms into their speech in order to sound trendy. Some time in the past two decades older people in positions of authority have made the decision to take down old signs saying “railway station”, including expensive electronic signs, and replace them with new ones reading “train station” – at Gatwick Airport, for instance, and many other places. Don’t blame the Yanks. That was us what done it.