

Our vowel habits set us apart from the rest

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You can tell that some of the sub editors at the EDP don't have local accents.

It's easy to see that from the punning headlines they come up with.

The newspaper recently ran a nice series of articles on the long, hard winter of 1962-3, with photographs that brought back memories to me of walking to school because buses couldn't get up Kett's Hill.

One of the pieces had the headline "White-out was snow joke".

For most people that's quite amusing, I suppose – but if you have a Norfolk accent, it doesn't work. It's not a pun. 'Was no joke' and 'was snow joke' don't sound at all the same, the way I say them. 'No' and 'snow' don't rhyme.

For people with real Norfolk accents, there are lots of pairs of words which are not the same even though people elsewhere say them identically. We 'do different'. We have two different 'long o' sounds. Take pairs like: moan-mown, nose-knows, road-rowed, sole-soul, flo-flow, doe-dough, so-sew, toe-tow. For us, they're different. That's because, originally, all English speakers pronounced them differently. And that's why they're spelt differently – one set with 'ow' or 'ou', the other set with 'oa' or 'oe' – modern English spelling represents mediaeval English pronunciation. That headline would not have been a pun for Shakespeare either.

During the last 400 years, in most of the



NO NUANCE:
Puns about snow in headlines fell on deaf ears among Norfolk dialect speakers for whom snow and no are pronounced very differently.

English-speaking world the distinction between those two vowel sounds has been lost.

Not by us, though. We proudly maintain a difference which goes way back, into the ancient history of our language.

In my accent, and yours too if you speak like me, we have preserved a difference between two vowels that dates from the very beginning of the English language, 1,500 years ago. I'm quite pleased about that. Sadly, nowadays this doesn't necessarily apply to all of the younger people in Norfolk. Maybe – after you and me and Shakespeare managing to preserve this venerable distinction for many

hundreds of years – we are going to be members of one of the last generations to keep it alive.

In the meantime, puns like the Beatles' Rubber Soul, and respellings like Baby Gro and donut, don't work for me – it took me a very long time, as a child, to work out what IOU meant. And there's a clothing repair and alteration shop in the city – obviously run by people without local accents – called "Sew Fast". Shakespeare wouldn't have got that either.

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■ What do you think? Email: EDPletters@archant.co.uk