

People here in Norfolk know their English phonotactics

Peter Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

A letter-writer to the EDP has wondered why people in Norfolk say chimney instead of chiminey. (And this is not just in Norfolk. It happens all over Britain and Ireland.)

I don't know.

But I can make what I hope is an intelligent guess. The question is: why should an 'l' have been substituted for the 'n' in chimney? The word came into English from Old French cheminee – as a consequence, perhaps, of the greater architectural sophistication of the Normans. So there was an 'n' there originally.

My guess is that it has to do with what linguistic scientists call phonotactics. This just means rules about what sequences of vowels and consonants can and can't occur in particular languages. English has a 'd' sound, and a 'v' sound; but we can't put them together at the beginning of a word, as the Czechs can, to make words like the name of the composer Dvorak.

English has 'b' and 'n' and 'l' sounds. You can start a word with 'bl' – there is no word blick, but there could be. But you can't start a word with 'bn' – there is no



■ Wojciech Szczesny, of Arsenal, in action at Carrow Road, Norwich.

Picture: PAUL CHESTERTON/ FOCUS IMAGES

word bnick, and there couldn't ever be.

Not so long ago, Norwich City scored a goal against Arsenal because of a mistake by their goalkeeper Szczesny. 'Sz' and 'cz' are just the Polish ways of writing two sounds we also have in English, 'sh' and 'ch'. But in the English language you can't start a word with 'sh-ch'. In Polish you can. That's phonotactics.

In English you can actually have an 'm' sound followed by an 'n' sound. But think about the words, apart from chimney, where this happens: alumnus, amnesty, amniocentesis, calumny, hymnal, insomnia, limnetic, omnivorous, somnolent. These aren't ordinary words. They all come from Latin or Greek, and they're rather rare and learned. We normally say

hymn book and sleepy, not hymnal and somnolent. And I don't know what limnetic means – perhaps you do.

So the combination 'mn' is rather marginal in English. The combination 'ml', on the other hand, is much more usual and occurs in several everyday English words: harmless, hemline, farmland, aimless, streamline, hamlet, seemly, calmly, firmly. And 'n' and 'l' are very similar sounds.

So it's not at all surprising if Norfolk and other dialect speakers have replaced something abnormal with something normal. People here in Norfolk may not know all the terminology of linguistics, but they do know their English phonotactics.