

Local dialect can overcome communication problems

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There's a place by the side of Ipswich Road, just after the junction with Hall Road, which has a special importance for certain Norwich people of my age. At one time, it was our gateway to the world.

These days, it seems that jetting off with your children to foreign holidays in the sun is a basic human right that no one should be denied, least of all by petty annoyances like the kids having to go to school.

In the 1960s, things were very different. Our only way to go on foreign trips, as teenagers, was to pack a rucksack and stand by the side of the road with our thumbs out. And that's what we did – hitch-hiking was a brilliant and exciting way to travel and explore the European continent. From that Ipswich Road starting point, we found our way to Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Venice – even Athens. Our route lay through Ipswich, Colchester, Brentwood, the Tilbury ferry, along the A2 to Dover, and then by cross-channel ferry to France or Belgium.

It was a fascinating and educational series of experiences we had, and as Norfolk youngsters encountering the world on the other side of the North Sea, we were on a series of steep learning



■ A trip on the ferry offered a world of adventure to Norfolk youngsters in the 1960s.

Picture: PA

curves. Not the least of these curves was linguistic. We would make terrible gaffes, like getting off the ferry in Ostend and speaking French to everyone, and then wondering why they didn't reply. It's embarrassing to think of how little we knew about the language situation on the European continent. Shouldn't it have been obvious that a place with a name like Oostende was Dutch speaking?

It was fascinating, too, to observe the changes of language as we travelled. As hitch-hikers, it was important in Belgium to know that Liege was called Luik in Dutch (and Lüttich in German); and that Mons and Bergen were the same place.

Stopping at the passport control between Holland and Germany, in those pre-Schengen days, we watched the German and Dutch border officials talking. How did they understand one another? Which language were they speaking? We gradually realised they were speaking their local dialects, and that the dialects on either side of the border were so similar that communication was no problem at all.

If they'd been speaking Standard German and Dutch, communication would have been much more problematical.

Often, speaking your local dialect is the best thing to do.