

Norfolk dialect could make English grammar clearer

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk



■ Education secretary Michael Gove wants civil servants to improve their grammar.

Mr Gove wants all civil servants to read what a certain Mr Gwynne – the Telegraph calls him a “a self-taught schoolteacher” – has to say about grammar, in his book Gwynne’s Grammar.

I quite agree that there is a deficiency of knowledge about grammar in this country. We should all know what nouns, verbs, and adjectives are. We should know about subjects and objects. We should even know what adverbs are, although they are rather difficult to define. And everybody, including Mr Gove, should know what complements, aspects, copulas, and conjuncts are too. I wonder if he actually does.

Mr Gwynne – I heard him on the radio – wants people to be able to write clearly. Of course we have to agree. But knowing what a noun is won’t actually help you with that very much. Knowing about grammar is important; and writing coherently is important. But they are very different things, and the one won’t assist you much with the other.

Mr Gwynne is one of those people who link what they call “good grammar” to “clear thinking”. I heard him say that

unless you get your grammar right and make the right grammatical distinctions, you won’t be able to think straight, you won’t make the right decisions, and you will end up being, er, unhappy. (I’ve probably omitted some stages in his argument, but not many.)

So I have a proposal to make to the two Mr Gs. In English there is an important difference between subject pronouns such as ‘I, he, she, we, they’; and object pronouns such as ‘me, him, her, us, them’. We say “I like him, he likes me, we like them, they like us”. But most English speakers have a problem here. They – carelessly, it could be argued – don’t bother to

make this subject-object distinction with the third-person singular neuter pronoun. They say “I like it – it tastes good”. Two ‘its’! No distinction! Is there some potential unhappiness lurking here?

In Norfolk we are given to thinking much more clearly than that. We say “I like it”, but “that taste good”. What a superb, elegant and very precise grammatical distinction between the subject ‘that’ and the object ‘it’! So here’s how Mr Gove could achieve greater happiness. Next time he looks out of the window and sees a little precipitation, he could try saying, as we do in this part of the world: “That’s raining!”