

Dialect Matters

Based on Peter Trudgill's weekly column in the *Eastern Daily Press* newspaper, this book has two overall messages. The first is that language is a fascinating and enjoyable phenomenon, which not enough people know enough about. The second is that we should not discriminate negatively against individuals and groups because of their accent, dialect or native language. Linguistic prejudice, known as "linguicism", is more publicly and shamelessly demonstrated than racism and sexism, as is "prescriptivism", the practice of elevating one language or language variety as "better" than another. Written in an entertaining and accessible style, Trudgill's columns support the language of ordinary people. Exploring topics such as nonstandard versus standard dialects; vernacular (everyday) language as opposed to purist and politically correct language; informal vocabulary as opposed to business-school jargon; and minority versus majority languages, they will appeal to a wide audience. Each article is also accompanied by notes designed for students and those who are unfamiliar with the East Anglian setting.

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Respecting Vernacular Language

Columns from the *Eastern Daily Press*

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University of Agder, Norway

Pen and ink drawings by John Trudgill (1916–1986)



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In memory of my vernacular-speaking grandparents, Jane Fish, George Gooch,
May Carver and George Trudgill

The principle of error correction

“A scientist who becomes aware of a widespread idea or social practice with important consequences that is invalidated by her/his own data is obligated to bring this error to the attention of the widest possible audience.”

The principle of the debt incurred

“An investigator who has obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community has an obligation to use the knowledge based on that data for the benefit of the community when it has the need of it.”

William Labov (1982) “Objectivity and commitment in linguistic science”, *Language in Society* 11: 165–201

The principle of linguistic gratuity

“Investigators who have obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community should actively pursue positive ways in which they can return linguistic favors to the community.”

Walt Wolfram (1998) “Scrutinising linguistic gratuity: a view from the field”, *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 2: 271–9

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Foreword

Since 2012, I have been writing a weekly column on language and dialect for the *Eastern Daily Press*, the daily newspaper printed and published in the city of Norwich, which is in the county of Norfolk, in eastern England. The *EDP* is the biggest-selling regional morning newspaper in England, with a circulation of over 40,000, apparently implying a readership of over 100,000. It is the only newspaper in the country which outsells the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* in its circulation area, which consists of Norfolk, northern Suffolk and eastern Cambridgeshire.

This book is a collation of the first three years or so of my columns, which have been annotated and edited for this volume. The columns were obviously aimed first and foremost at a readership based in the circulation area, and so there are frequent references to the local dialects of East Anglia and to other regional features such as place-names. Some local knowledge on the part of the readership was assumed, so in this book *Background notes* have been added to many of the columns for the benefit of those readers who do not have this local knowledge. The *Background notes* to many of the columns also contain explanations aimed at readers from outside Britain, to help with any references to British places, people, institutions and history which may not be entirely clear to them.

All the columns are about language in some shape or form and contain linguistic information with, I hope, insights which will also be of interest to university students and teachers of linguistics, as well as to high-school English Language teachers and their classes. For the benefit of such readers, most of the columns in this book also have attached to them some brief *Linguistic notes* of a more technical nature, which general readers need not bother with unless they want to achieve a more academic understanding of the issues involved.

This book has two basic overall messages. The first is that language is a mysterious and fascinating and enjoyable phenomenon which not enough people know enough about: most of us can get great pleasure from finding out more about this most fundamental of human attributes.

The second message is one of anti-prescriptivism, anti-linguicism and respect for demotic linguistic practices. *Prescriptivism* is a form of negativity which is so widely accepted in the English-speaking world that it is taken by many people to be axiomatic. Prescriptivists believe that there is only one way in which English “ought” to be spoken and written, and that any deviation from this is “ignorant” or “wrong”. If you ask them what is their justification for claiming, for instance, that

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it is “wrong” to say *I done it*, they may well answer that “everybody knows” that it is. In this book, I try to show that this is not so; and I try to oppose such negative attitudes, which are sadly held even by many highly educated and otherwise thoughtful people, by proposing that we cultivate a positivity towards the multifarious ways in which English is spoken around the world.

By the term *linguicism* I refer to a phenomenon which is, in its way, every bit as pernicious as racism and sexism, and which is these days more publicly and shamelessly demonstrated than those other evil phenomena now are: linguicism consists of negative sentiments towards, and discrimination against, individuals and groups of human beings because of their accent, dialect or native language. My columns are intended to support and argue in favour of the language of ordinary people, in terms of nonstandard dialects versus standard dialects; vernacular usage as opposed to puristic and politically correct language; everyday vocabulary as opposed to business-school jargon; and minority languages versus majority languages.

I am very grateful to the *Eastern Daily Press* for granting me a platform for arguing the case against prescriptivism and the evil of linguicism, as well as giving me the opportunity to try to show that language is an extraordinarily interesting and thrilling phenomenon, especially when we do our best to think about it analytically, and positively, without preconceptions and prejudice. I hope that readers of the book will also think that the columns are enjoyable and informative, and that they will find them as interesting and entertaining as many of the readers of the newspaper have been kind enough to let me know that they have found them. Nothing is more important to human beings than language; and I hope that in these columns I have succeeded, at least to an extent, in illustrating the degree to which languages and dialects – all languages and dialects – are not only worthy of respect and preservation but, as fascinating creations of human societies and of the human mind, are also highly rewarding and pleasing to discover more about.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to all the Peters at the *Eastern Daily Press* – Pete Waters, Peter Hannam, Pete Kelley – and especially to my current editor Trevor Heaton for their help with the publication in their newspaper of the columns on which this book is based. Very many thanks also go to Keith Skipper, Ted Peachment, Rosemary Cooper and Ashley Grey at FOND (Friends of Norfolk Dialect) for their help and advice.

I am also indebted to the following people who have very kindly helped me with research towards the writing of the columns, as well as with ideas and advice: Dr Enam Al-Wer, Prof. Lars-Gunnar Andersson, Bernhard Bamberger, Prof. David Britain, Neil Brummage, Prof. Andy Butcher, Tom Carver, Prof. Magdalena Charzynska-Wojcik, Dr Jan Chromý, David Clayton, Prof. Piotr Gašiorowski, Carol Geddes, Marta Gruszecka, Prof. Ian Hancock, Prof. Ernst Håkon Jahr, Prof. Mark Janse, Prof. Brian Joseph, Prof. Geoffrey Khan, Prof. Agnieszka Kielkiewicz-Janowiak, David King, Dr Jacob King, Dr Stephen Laker, Prof. Eva Lehečková, Dr Mary Macmaster, Prof. Hans Frede Nielsen, Prof. Jan-Ola Östmann, Dr Lynn Preston, Janet Rees, Dr Ian Roe, Dr Alexander Rumble, Prof. John Sandford, Prof. Jürg Schwyter, Prof. Barbara Seidlhofer, Janet Smith, D. J. Taylor, Dr Stephen Trudgill, Prof. Wim Vandenbussche, Dr David Willis, Dr David Woodman and Angela Wynne. I am sure I have forgotten others who I ought to thank – I apologise, and thank them too. And special thanks go also to Prof. Lars-Gunnar Andersson, Arne Kjell Foldvik and Prof. Elizabeth Gordon, who showed the way in their own newspaper columns in Sweden, Norway and New Zealand respectively.

Last but not most: I am extremely grateful to my wife Jean Hannah, who advised on, read, helped with and edited every single one of these columns, and this book.

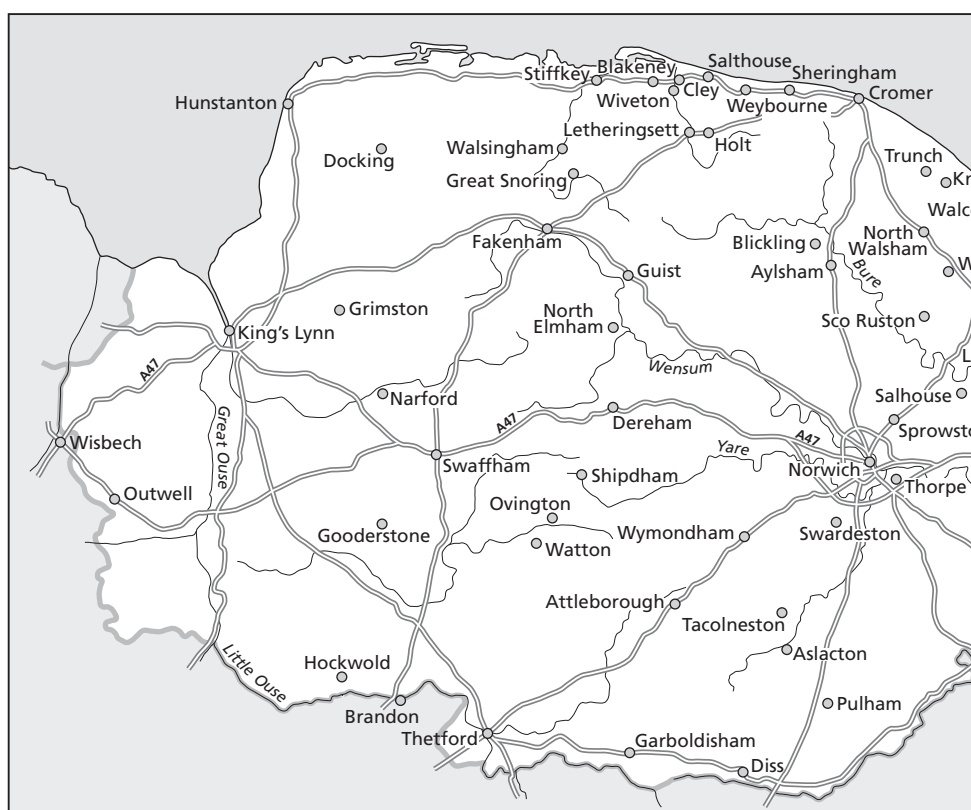
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Norfolk

Themes

I often refer in these columns to the following local Norfolk themes and topics.

Norwich City Football Club makes frequent appearances: the club and the team are supported in the *EDP* circulation area by very many more than the 27,000 or so spectators who turn out to watch them at every home game at the **Carrow Road** ground, and who represent just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to local interest and concern about how “City” are getting on. I mention **Norwich Market** rather often: this is said to be the largest permanent open-air market in England (it runs six days a week), and has been on the present site, in the heart of the city, since the eleventh century; I always think of the market as being the heart of working-class Norwich. See www.visitnorwich.co.uk/shopping/shops/listing/norwich-market.

Radio Norfolk also makes several appearances: this is our local BBC Radio Station, one of the most successful in England, with a weekly listenership of about 200,000.

FOND is the **Friends of Norfolk Dialect** organisation, which was founded in 1999, with Keith Skipper as one of the prime movers: the society is dedicated to conserving and recording Norfolk’s priceless linguistic heritage, to engendering positive attitudes to the dialect and to keeping the dialect alive. See www.norfolk-dialect.com/index.htm.

The “**Boy John**” letters, which are cited a number of times, were written to and published in the *EDP* between 1946 and 1958. Sidney Grapes, their author, was the proprietor of a bicycle shop, later a garage and motor business, in Potter Heigham, in the Broads area of eastern Norfolk. In the years before World War II, he acquired a reputation as an amateur Norfolk dialect comedian, performing at social functions in many parts of the county and on the radio. His highly entertaining letters appeared in the newspaper at irregular intervals – Grapes would simply write them when he felt like it – and they were always signed “The Boy John”. They are a work of not a little genius, and are a brilliant and accurate representation of the Norfolk dialect of his time.

Thorpe is the eastern Norwich suburb where I was born and grew up. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thorpe_St_Andrew.

Jarrold & Sons Ltd is the local family firm where my father and mother both worked. Jarrolds have a large department store in central Norwich, which was where my parents were both working when they met – I still always shop there out

of gratitude (though not only for that reason!). And the firm used to have a highly successful printing works, plus a publishing department which my father became manager of in the late 1940s. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jarrold_Group. The company were always very good to my father and to our family, and I am very grateful to them.

The admonition to “**do different**”, which turns up frequently in these pieces, is traditional in Norfolk, and has been made the official motto of the University of East Anglia in Norwich.