

Notes on the Norwich Dialect

The Norfolk accent and dialect are very distinctive – though not very well known outside the area. Norfolk speech is typically rather badly imitated by actors, who outrage local people by putting on a West Country accent to indicate that they are meant to be in Yarmouth. The Norwich dialect itself is rather distinctive within Norfolk, and of course this is the variety most likely to be encountered by people at UEA.

Typical features of the English of Norwich are:

- in the Norwich accent, pairs of words like *here* and *hair*, *beer* and *bare*, *really* and *rarely* are pronounced the same – with the vowel of *hair*. If you ask in the pub what sort of *bare* they have, they will tell you.
 - while rural East Anglians typically do not “drop their ‘h’s”, truly local speakers in the City of Norwich do say *'ammer* and *'ouse*.
 - Norwich English is characterised by “yod-dropping”. This means that there is no “y”, phonetically [j], in words like *music*, *few* – as famously in the word *beautiful*, which sounds to outsiders like “bootiful” – so that *who* and *Hugh* are pronounced the same.
 - words like *sure* and *pure* are pronounced with the same vowel as *nurse* – so *surely* and *Shirley* are identical. Combined with the feature of “yod-dropping”, this has the consequence that *pure* is pronounced the same as *purr*, and *fury* and *furry* are identical.
 - the local accent is also characterised by “smoothing” – technically, triphthongs become monophthongs. This is what turns *Heigham* in to *Ham*. It also produces pronunciations like *do it = dirt*, *goin' > 'gawn'*.
 - Local accents also have a feature which linguists call the Weak Vowel Merger. This means that unstressed vowels in words like *David* and *naked* are pronounced *'Dayvuhd'*, and *'naykuhd'* (technically the *shwa* vowel), as in Australian English: *Lenin* is pronounced the same as *Lennon*.
- It is the combined effects of h-dropping, yod-dropping, smoothing and the weak vowel merger that produce the pronunciation of the name of the local school, The *Hewett School*, as *'The Urt'*.
- as in most of Norfolk, words like *moan*, *groan*, *sole*, *nose* are pronounced differently in Norwich from words like *mown*, *grown*, *soul*, *knows*, preserving a Middle English distinction that is still reflected in the spelling. Words with *ow* and *ou* do not sound very different from in other areas of southern England. The *oa*, *o-e* words, however, have a vowel very much like the French *ou* in *boule* – outsiders often interpret Norwich *road* as *rude*, though they are not actually pronounced the same.

– there is a further complication in that many *oa,o-e* words can also be pronounced with the vowel of *foot*: *road* can rhyme with *good*, for example. You are most likely to hear this in the word *home*.

A number of grammatical features are also typical of the Norwich dialect: the use of *that* rather than *it* as a subject pronoun – “*That’s raining*”; and the absence of third-person singular *-s* in present-tense verb forms: *He say, She go, That look nice, He like her very much - Oh, do he?* Outsiders also notice how Norfolk people say *I’m now coming* rather than *I’m just coming*.

Up to the 1970s, everybody who had been brought up in Norwich had a local accent, apart from obvious aristocrats and products of posh boarding schools. Because of the influx of large numbers of professional people from outside Norfolk, however, if you want to be sure of hearing Norwich accents these days, it is best to talk to working class people – there are plenty of such local people working at UEA of course – and to visit bastions of working class culture such as Norwich Market and pubs on council estates. Carrow Road football ground is also good – and you get to watch good football too.

Reading

Peter Trudgill. *The Norfolk Dialect*. Cromer: Poppyland Publishing.