

The ‘Arse that Jack Built: A Diachronic Study of h-dropping in English



“I BEG YOUR PARDON, MA’AM, BUT I THINK YOU DROPPED THIS?”

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1. Introduction

H-dropping is a feature that has characterised English for centuries up to the present day. The deletion of initial /h/ before a vowel is found in many present day dialects of English, with the most famous example being that of the London Cockney dialect. It is the “most powerful pronunciation shibboleth in England” (Wells 254), and is still considered a non-standard feature. H-loss is a feature that is not normally found in Germanic languages; it is notably absent from Dutch and German for example. Loss of /h/ does occur in other languages, such as French and Spanish. The Romance languages in general have a tendency to delete /h/, because they stem from Latin which had lost its /h/ by the first century BC (Trask). The deletion of the initial glottal fricative /h/ may be due to “[t]he principle of least effort [which] leads us to tend to pronounce words and sentences in a way which involves the minimum of articulatory effort consistent with the need to maintain intelligibility” (Wells 94). The difference between English and other h-deleting languages is that in English initial /h/ before a vowel has not been maximally simplified to the point of deletion, but has remained in stable variation. H-dropping in English is thus of particular interest because it is still used variably by modern day speakers. Scholars such as Wyld, Skeat and Milroy have studied h-dropping and have written about the source of this feature, how and when it appeared in English, and how long it has been a variable in the English language. Though many linguists have investigated h-dropping, there is still debate about the time-depth of h-dropping, and the geographical distribution in Middle English.

Up to this point there has been no attempt to trace the entire history of h-dropping in English. This thesis aims to present a clear history of h-dropping in English from Old English up to Present Day English and aims to contribute to the debate about the distribution of h-dropping in Middle English sources. To achieve this, a small case study was conducted into

the distribution of h-dropping in the Early Middle English text Layamon's *Brut*. The results of this study suggest that the geographical distribution of h-loss in Middle English extends further north than was previously assumed. The evidence of h-dropping in the Otho MS of Layamon's *Brut* suggests that h-dropping may have been a North Midland feature in Middle English, which would extend the h-dropping area further northwards than traditionally believed. This more widespread distribution in Middle English is in line with the state of h-dropping in Modern English dialect areas, and it may explain why h-dropping is now prevalent, not only in the South and Midland areas, but in all dialect areas with the exception of the extreme North. Chapter 2 of this thesis is concerned with h-dropping in Old and Middle English and details the case study of Layamon's *Brut*. Chapter 3 deals with h-dropping in Modern English and Present Day English. The thesis concludes with a summary of my results.

2. H-dropping in Old and Middle English

H-dropping is a feature that is currently still found in many dialects of English. The history of this h-loss is interesting to study because it sheds light on how patterns of variation behave throughout the history of the language up until the present day. The reason for h-loss can be found in phonology. The glottal fricative /h/ has always been an unstable sound; it is one of the weakest consonants and has consequently disappeared completely from languages such as Latin, Greek and Hawaiian. Languages derived from Latin (i.e. the Romance languages) have often partially or completely lost /h/, though not in their spelling systems (Trask).

In English, loss of /h/ in initial prevocalic position has been in stable variation for centuries. Two other forms of h-loss have gone to completion in English: /h/ in consonant clusters involving glides, such as /hw/ and /hj/, also called ‘Glide Cluster Reduction’ and witnessed in the initial cluster /hw/ in ‘where’ < OE *hwaer*. Loss of /h/ in clusters involving glides was lost much earlier on, though not in all dialects of English. This reduction process gradually spread from the South of England starting in the 12th century, but did not reach the North of England, Scotland or Ireland (López Murillo 158-159). Some American dialects pronounced the /hw/ cluster until the 1950s until it was reduced there as well (Trask). In medial position as in ‘light’ < OE *liht* [lixt], /h/ used to be pronounced as [x], a velar fricative, but this sound was lost during the 16th century, though not in some traditional Scottish dialects. These changes represent the English “. . . tendency to lose the sounds represented by the letter <h>” (López Murillo 159-160). This study focuses on h-loss in initial position before a vowel because this phenomenon has not gone to completion in all dialects of English, but remained in stable variation throughout the history of the language and thus has bearing on the distribution of the feature in Present Day English (Milroy, *Linguistic* 143).

Many historical linguists have regarded h-dropping briefly, and have refrained from pursuing it further as a subject of serious interest. This seems to be mainly because most evidence for h-loss is found in Middle English sources and these are, according to these linguists, unreliable due to Norman scribal influence. Skeat was one of the first to define h-loss as an “Anglo-Norman” feature, stating that the Norman scribes had difficulties with pronouncing English, which resulted in using “French symbols” to express English sounds (415). Many scholars followed Skeat’s assumption and explained any evidence of h-dropping or h-insertion as French influence, without looking further. Wyld distinguishes between words that are “pure English” and those that were borrowed from French (295). He talks of the “misplacement of the initial aspirate”, but does not relate the adding of unhistorical /h/ to the omission of historical /h/, though he finds more evidence of h-insertion than of h-dropping (144-296). It is now believed that h-dropping and h-insertion, or hypercorrection, are not separate phenomena but occur side by side and should be taken together when analysing evidence of h-dropping (Milroy, *Current Topics* 41). Wyld states that Norman scribes had so much influence on the addition or omission of initial /h/ in manuscripts that examples of h-dropping in texts from the thirteenth and fourteenth century are not to be considered reliable evidence for h-dropping (295). It is often argued that the reason for h-dropping in texts of the Middle English period is not only due to the fact that the scribes were Norman, but also because the feature was imported by scribes ‘from French or Latin’, since these languages have no initial /h/ before a vowel (Milroy, *Linguistic* 142). Wherever the origin of the written convention lies, the spelling of a language reflects the current language variables of the spoken variety (Milroy, *Linguistic* 142). When there is no standard orthographic system “it is extremely likely that current sound changes will be admitted into writing” (Milroy, *Linguistic* 141-2). Some scholars suggest that Norman scribes had a poor command of English, which influenced their writing. This is unlikely, as most ME sources that show variable /h/ were

copied nearly two centuries after the Norman Conquest by which time Norman scribes would have been competent speakers of English. Milroy argues that scribal influence would not have been purely French because the speech of Norman scribes would have been simultaneously influenced by French and English, as is to be expected in a language contact situation (*Current Topics* 44). The variable spelling of /h/ in ME manuscripts “shows only that the orthographic tradition had not yet been standardized” (Milroy, *Current Topics* 42). Moreover, a strong argument against French influence is the fact that there is evidence of h-dropping in OE texts that were never in contact with French.

Wyld comes to the conclusion that h-dropping must have started during the eighteenth century as it does not occur in colonial English (*Short History* 220). However, as Milroy points out; “language is variable at all times; thus it could be the case that modern [h]-ful and [h]-less varieties are each equally derived from varieties in which [h]-loss was variable – not categorically absent or ... present” (*Variation* 138-139). He refutes the assumption that “English was categorically /h/-ful in the sixteenth century” as a reason for the lack of h-dropping in areas that were colonised during this period, such as Ireland and America (Milroy, *Current Topics* 9). It is more logical to assume that the lack or occurrence of h-dropping depended on the “regions and social groups from which the majority of the settlers came”, bearing in mind that many eighteenth century settlers came from h-retaining areas such as Scotland and Northern Ireland (Milroy, *Current Topics* 49). Moreover, there is evidence of h-dropping in several colonial varieties of English. Nineteenth century Australian English had h-dropping which might be due to the immigration of speakers of Cockney; a dialect renowned for its h-dropping (Trask). Wells states that h-dropping does occur in Jamaican, Bahamian and “Guyanese” English varieties (256). As Milroy points out, it is improbable for a variable to become so geographically widespread if its history only goes back to the eighteenth century. Sources from scholars in the late nineteenth century show that

h-dropping was already stigmatised by that time, which suggests that the feature occurred long before the nineteenth century. In fact, it is more probable to conclude that the early nineteenth century was the point at which it became stigmatised, and not the starting point of the variation itself (*Cambridge History* 198).

The strongest argument against the assertion that h-dropping is an 18th-century phenomenon and that h-dropping in English is due to French influence, is that h-loss was already present in Old English. The distribution of initial /h/ in the interlinear OE glosses to the *Rushworth Gospels* suggests that at least from the tenth century onwards, h-dropping was used variably. The OE glosses to the *Rushworth Gospels* are believed to have been written in the late tenth century. They are divided into Rushworth¹, which is glossed in what is believed to be a Mercian dialect by Farmon and Rushworth² which is glossed in a Northumbrian dialect by Orwun (see Johannesson for discussion). Nils-Lennart Johannesson states that Farmon's glosses show variable loss of /h/, while Orwun's glosses do not show h-dropping at all (11). He cites the spelling of "eorta" for *heorta* and "æfdon" for *hæfdon* as examples (Johannesson 11). This supports the general absence of h-loss in the Northern dialects and, if Farmon's glosses are indeed written in Mercian, the distribution of h-dropping in the West Midlands area. Overall, this evidence of h-loss in the *Rushworth Gospels* dates h-dropping back to the tenth century, long before the Norman Conquest (Johannesson 13).

A later example of the distribution of h-dropping is the Early Middle English text the *Ormulum*. The *Ormulum* was probably written between 1160 and 1180 in the East Midlands (Johannesson 1), which again marks the East Midlands as a traditional h-dropping area. On first sight, it seems as if no h-dropping occurred in the manuscripts because "not a single syllable-initial <h> is missing in the only complete edition of the text . . ." (Johannesson 1). However, Johannesson shows that Orm corrected his own h-dropping in the *Ormulum* by scraping and adding letters after the manuscript was copied to hide his variable use of initial

/h/ (1). This is especially interesting because Orm tried to create a spelling system that represented the pronunciation of the time (Milroy, *Cambridge History* 205). If the spelling system reflected Orm's pronunciation that indicates that Orm's dialect featured h-dropping. The fact that he altered the manuscript later on means that he was conscious of his own h-dropping and of the fact that though it was present in his dialect, it was not in others and proceeded to erase the feature from the manuscript.

The geographical distribution of h-dropping in the mediaeval period is believed to be confined to the West Midlands and South of England. H-dropping is generally not found in dialects from the Northern areas, or in Scotland and Ireland (Milroy, *Linguistic* 137). The following maps from the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English (LALME)* show the distribution of initial /h/ before vowels in the Middle English period. Figure 1 shows the omission of etymological initial /h/ is mainly found in the East Midlands, the South and the West Midlands. Figure 2 shows hypercorrection, which occurs in texts from the same areas.

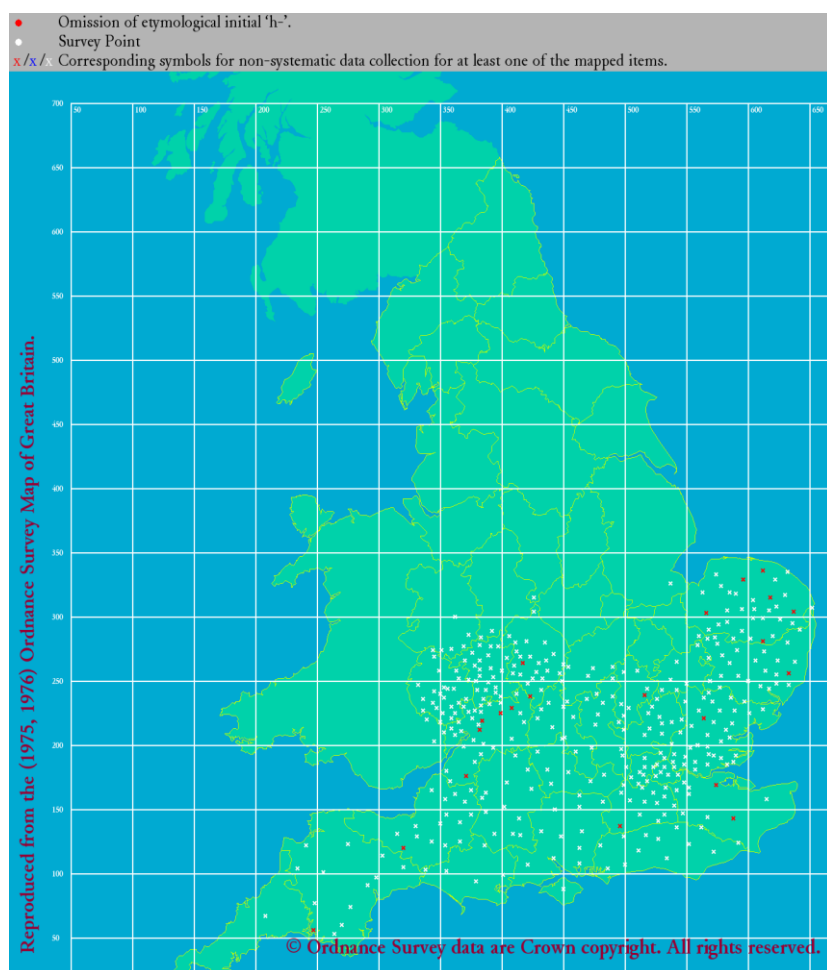


Figure 1. Omission of etymological initial /h/ (*LALME*, McIntosh *et al.*, 1986).

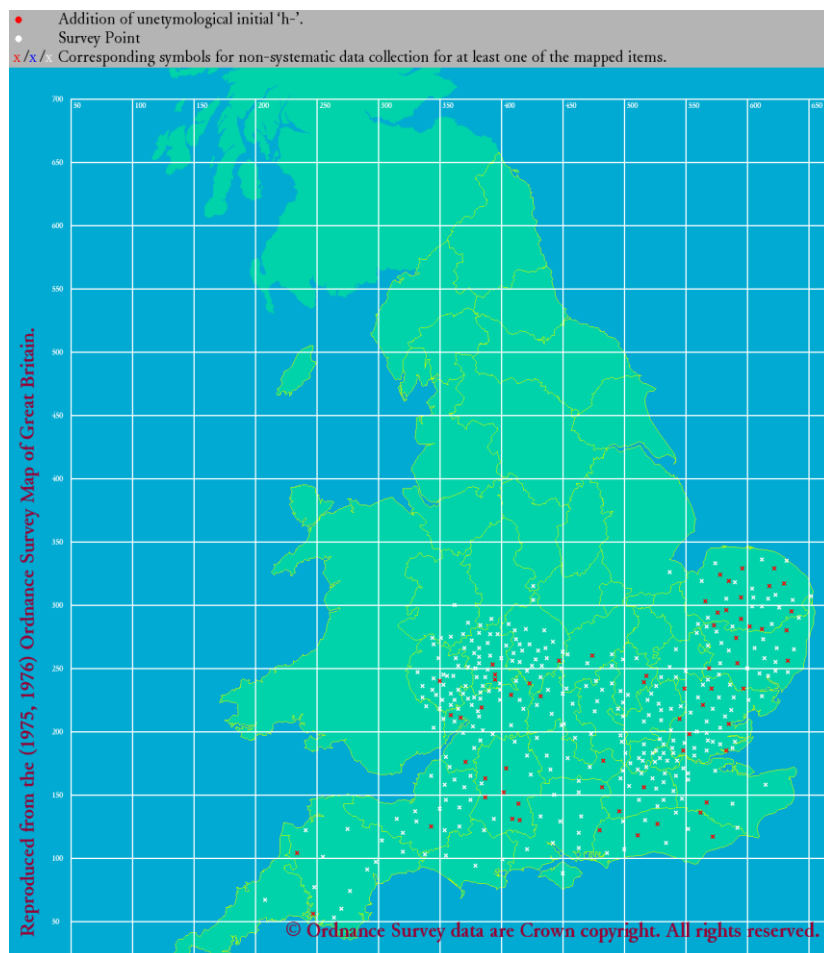


Figure 2. Addition of unetymological initial /h/ (LALME, McIntosh *et al.*, 1986).

As the maps show, most texts that show h-dropping are from the East Midlands, East Anglia and the South. Some evidence of h-dropping in an East Anglian text is offered by Milroy who compiled a list of forms with h-dropping and hypercorrection from *Genesis and Exodus*. Forms include: “*adden*” (form of ‘to have’) and “*aligen*” (‘hallow’) for h-dropping, and “*ham*” (‘am’) and “*hinke*” (‘dread’) for hypercorrection (*Cambridge History* 199). He states, however, that h-dropping is not common in West Midland texts, which he supports with the claim that while h-dropping occurs in Layamon’s *Brut*, it does so only in the Otho manuscript (British Library, Cotton Otho C xiii) and not in the Caligula MS (British Library, Cotton Caligula A ix) which is believed to be from the Southwest Midlands (*Cambridge History* 199). Milroy’s assertion that h-dropping does not occur in the Southwest Midlands suggests

that he regards h-dropping as a purely Eastern and Southern phenomenon and disregards a South-western distribution. As no quantitative study of h-dropping in either the Otho or Caligula manuscript exists, and in order to get a clearer picture of how h-dropping is distributed in these Southwest Midland texts, I carried out a small case study. This case study is discussed in the following section.

2.1 Case study on Layamon's *Brut* Otho and Caligula manuscripts

The aim of this case study of h-dropping in Layamon's *Brut* is to investigate if, and in what measure, h-dropping occurs in texts from the Southwest Midlands. According to the distribution of h-dropping in *LALME* maps, most of the texts that are found to have h-dropping originate either in the East Midlands, East Anglia, the South or the West Midlands. The distribution of h-dropping in West Midlands text has been disputed by Milroy who claims that while the Otho manuscript of Layamon's *Brut* has h-dropping, h-dropping does not occur in the Caligula manuscript (*Cambridge History* 199). The Caligula MS has been dated to the early thirteenth century, but the Otho MS is believed to have copied somewhat later, probably during Henry III's reign, between 1216 and 1272 (Madden 34-37). Madden states that overall both texts seem to be written in a Western dialect, but that there is an "infusion of an Anglian or Northern element" (31), in the Otho MS. The *LALME* locates the Otho MS in the Southwest Midlands, as does Milroy for the Caligula MS. Madden suggests that the Otho manuscript was composed or copied in a county close to "the Anglian border", specifically east of Leicestershire, which would suggest a more North Midlands location (31).

The present study relied on Frederic Madden's edition of Layamon's *Brut*, as preserved in British Library, Cotton Otho C xiii and British Library, Cotton Caligula A ix. I carried out a search for three forms of the verb 'to have', namely (*h*)*abbe*, (*h*)*adde* and

(h)abbeð. The number of contexts was calculated and then the instances of h-dropping were counted. Secondly, since h-dropping and the addition of unetymological /h/ are directly related to one another, a search was carried out for hypercorrection in the instance of ‘old’ and ‘elder’. The searches were carried out in the entire text.

Results for the three forms of ‘to have’:

1. The infinitive form:

(h)abbe

There were a total of 168 instances of the word in the Otho MS.

There were two tokens of h-dropping: $N = 2 / 168$ (1.2%). There was one instance of h-dropping in the Caligula MS, namely line 462 ‘*abbe*’.

2. The past tense:

(h)adde

There were a total of 251 instances of the word in the Otho MS. Of these, 20 were tokens of h-dropping: $N = 20 / 251$ (8.0%). There were no instances of h-dropping in the Caligula MS.

3. The present tense, singular and plural

(h)abbeð

There were a total of 23 instances of the word in the Otho manuscript. There was one token of h-dropping present: $N = 1 / 23$ (4.3%). This was one instance in line 354 of the Otho MS. There were no instances of h-dropping in the Caligula MS.

Results for hypercorrection:

1. old > *hold, holde, halde, hol, heolde, heoldre, holdede*.

There were 22 instances in the Otho MS and two instances in the Caligula MS.

2. elder > *heldre, heldefte*.

Two instances of unetymological h were found in the Otho MS. There were no instances of unetymological h in the Caligula MS.

The following lists are from the Otho MS and the Caligula MS of Layamon's *Brut*. The first list includes instances of h-dropping and hypercorrection in the Otho MS and the second includes h-dropping and hypercorrection found in the Caligula MS:

British Library, Cotton Otho C xiii

1 *abbe* (l. 823, l. 13096), *adde* (l. 323, l. 1588, l. 2456, l. 2608, l. 2617, l. 2783, l. 2898, l. 3400, l. 3785, l. 4081, l. 4903, l. 5535), *abbeð* (l. 354).

2 *hold* (l. 11386, l. 18707, l. 19282, l. 24885), *holde* (l. 775, l. 2959, l. 3001, l. 3037, l. 3101, l. 3223, l. 7031, l. 11784, l. 18249, l. 19899, l. 19937, l. 24125, l. 28444), *halde* (l. 3392), *hol* (l. 3575), *heolde* (l. 29890), *heoldre* (l. 14158), *holdede* (l. 2937), *heldre* (l. 4290), *heldefte* (l. 3292).

British Library, Cotton Caligula A ix

1 *abbe* (l. 462).

2 *holde* (l. 2916), *halde* (l. 3173).

The results show that there is certainly h-dropping in the Otho MS, with some examples of hypercorrection. Though few, there are also some instances of h-dropping in the Caligula MS where the corresponding form in the Otho MS does not have h-dropping. These results suggest that there is variable loss of initial /h/ in both manuscripts. There are strong indications that h-dropping occurs in the Otho MS. The evidence of h-dropping in the Caligula MS is present, but is not great enough to completely dispute Milroy's claim that there is only evidence of h-dropping in the Otho MS (*Cambridge History*, 199). The scarcity of h-dropping in the Caligula MS, which Milroy states as "certainly south-west Midland", and the fact that the Otho MS appears to exhibit a mixture of northern and western features appears to corroborate Milroy's suggestion that h-dropping might not have been a strong characteristic of the West Midlands dialect (*Linguistic* 140). However, it does indicate that h-dropping might have been a feature of the northern Midlands region, if the Otho MS was indeed copied near Leicestershire, which would extend the distribution of h-loss further north than the *LALME* maps show and ties in with the possible OE Mercian distribution of initial /h/ in the *Rushworth Gospels*.

3. H-dropping in Modern English and Present Day English

Moving into the Late Middle English and Early Modern English periods, there is plenty of evidence for h-dropping in sources such as the *Paston Letters* and the *Norfolk Gilds*. Some forms found by Wyld in the *Paston Letters* include; “*astely*” and “*erafty*”, and “*erefter*” and “*oulde*” (‘hold’) in a letter from Mary of Scotland dated 1503 (295). These are clear examples of middle and higher class sources that show h-dropping (Milroy, *Current Topics* 48). In the Early Modern English period there are examples of h-loss in the *Diary of Henry Machyn* such as; “*ede*” (‘head’), “*alff*” (‘half’) and “*yr*” (‘hit’) (Wyld 295). Milroy states that; “. . . it is quite clear that his speech must have been /h/-less. The letter h could have had no direct one-to-one correspondence with the phonological segment: his use of h shows much the same pattern as the thirteenth century *Genesis and Exodus . . .*” (*Current Topics* 48). H-dropping is used in plays by Shakespeare and Marlowe as well, “. . . to pun on series like *air, heir, hair . . .*” (Milroy, *Linguistic* 142). The fact that Shakespeare made puns using words with initial /h/ and without initial /h/, and that it was a feature of middle and upper class speech, suggests h-dropping was not regarded as “vulgar” in this period as it would become in the 18th century (Milroy, *Current Topics* 49).

Somewhere near the eighteenth century h-dropping becomes heavily stigmatised as can be gathered from Wyld’s remark on h-dropping as “the present day vulgarism” (296). Wyld also states that when he was young even “fairly well educated” people engaged in h-dropping which shows that he considered h-dropping as something that only lower class, uneducated people used (296). Milroy quotes the 19th century scholar Oliphant who makes the following remarks on h-dropping: “. . . no American fault comes up to the revolting habit . . . of dropping or wrongly inserting the letter h. Those whom we call ‘self-made men’ are much given to this hideous barbarism . . .” (*Current Topics* 40). Even in the 18th century it was

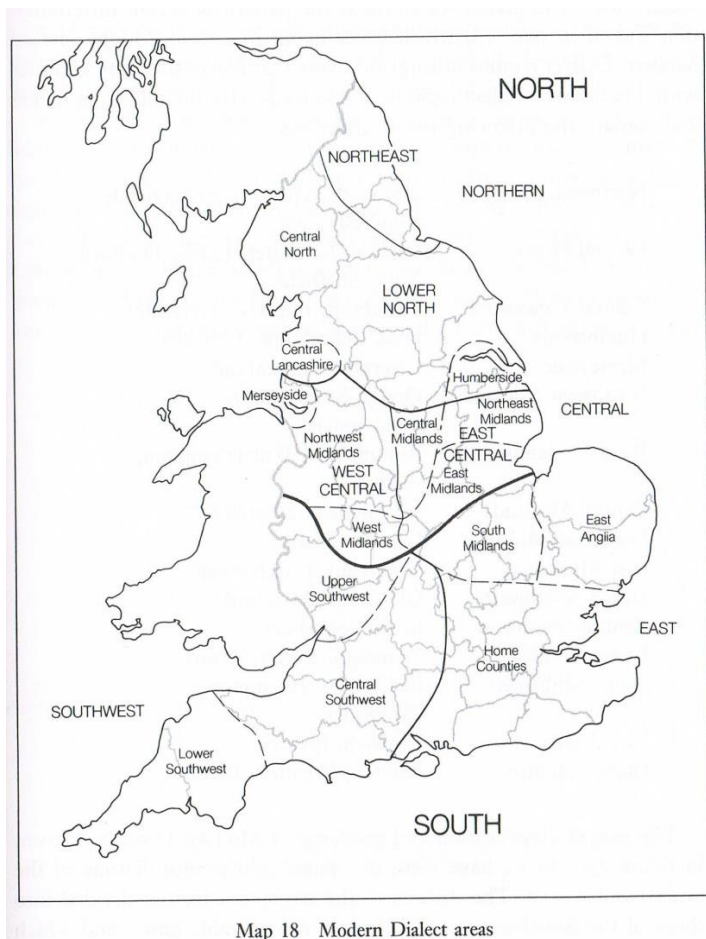
known as a characteristic of the London Cockney dialect as noted by scholar Walker: “A still worse habit than the last prevails, chiefly among the people of London, that of sinking the *h* at the beginning of words where it ought to be sounded, and of sounding it, either where it is not seen, or where it ought to be sunk” (Gordon 32). Another indication of the strong stigmatisation attached to h-dropping is the evidence in letters from the 19th century corpus *The Letters of Artisans and the Labouring Poor (LALP)*. The *LALP* includes letters from 1750 until 1835 written by lower class labourers (Gordon 35). One letter is written by a lower class speaker whose spelling reflects her pronunciation. This letter shows h-dropping as well as hypercorrection, such as; “*ad*” for ‘had’ and “*hame*” for ‘am’. A second letter is written by a more highly educated speaker who adheres to the standard spelling, and consequently does not show any evidence of h-dropping (Gordon 36-7). This suggests that during this period h-dropping was socially stratified, and that though lower class speakers certainly dropped initial /h/ in their speech, it was seen as vulgar and non-standard and was therefore either not used by higher classes or not reflected in their writing because they used the standard spelling. Another indication that h-dropping was stigmatised as lower working class speech is its appearance in 19th century literature. Charles Dickens’ lower class characters often exhibit h-dropping, whereas other higher class characters do not (Gordon 33). In Present Day English, h-dropping is still considered a non-standard feature, since it does not occur in Received Pronunciation. Milroy points out that “social evaluation” is the reason for the stigmatisation of h-dropping because the “loss of pre-consonantal [r]” is a similar linguistic change that is not stigmatised at all because it is part of RP (*Linguistic* 143). However, the attitude towards h-dropping is not as strongly negative as it used to be. The fact that attitudes towards h-dropping may be changing is connected to the rise of the feature in, not only working class, but also middle class speech, which can be seen in the following sections.

The distribution of h-dropping in the dialects of English in Present Day English (PDE)

is far more widespread than in the Middle English period or the Late Modern English period. H-dropping has become a feature in most of the dialect areas of England with the exception of a few distinct areas. Since the traditional dialect surveys from the 1960s onwards, such as the *Survey of English Dialects (SED, Orton et al.)*, dialects have been changing and mixing with one another and have consequently divided the country into new dialect areas. Peter Trudgill labels these as “the Modern Dialects” to set them apart from the “Traditional Dialects” (5-52). Trudgill defines Traditional Dialects as “spoken by a . . . shrinking minority of the English-speaking population . . . They are most easily found, as far as England is concerned, in the more remote and peripheral rural areas of the country . . .” (5) Modern Dialects “represent more recent developments in the English language” (52). Figure 3 and 4 show the differences between Traditional Dialect areas and Modern Dialect areas as defined by Trudgill.



Figure 3. Traditional dialect areas (Trudgill, 1999).



Map 18 Modern Dialect areas

Figure 4. Modern dialect areas (Trudgill, 1999).

Trudgill characterises pronouncing the initial /h/ before a vowel as a feature of the Traditional Dialects but not as a feature of the Modern Dialects because it is disappearing from the language and not found in the majority of dialects (52). According to these data, of the Modern Dialects, the following areas are attested to have h-dropping; Central North, Central Lancashire, Humberside, Merseyside, Northwest Midlands, West Midlands, Central Midlands, Northeast Midlands, East Midlands, Upper Southwest, Central Southwest, Lower Southwest, South Midlands and Home Counties (68). Of the Modern Dialects, only two areas retain /h/; East Anglia and the Northeast, though Trudgill states that “[t]he pronunciation of *hill* as ‘hill’ can still be found, but as a feature of local dialect it is dying out very rapidly in East Anglia and is really therefore a distinctive characteristic of only the northeastern region” (52). See figure 5 for the distribution of initial /h/ in Modern British English varieties. The

North-eastern lack of h-dropping is explained by the fact that “Scotland and the northernmost part of England have always been /h/-ful” (Milroy, *Current Topics* 49). J.C. Wells states that “H [d]ropping is prevalent in popular accents of the midlands and middle north, but not of the far north. Newcastle-upon-Tyne is the only large English city with an accent not characterised by H [d]ropping” (371).

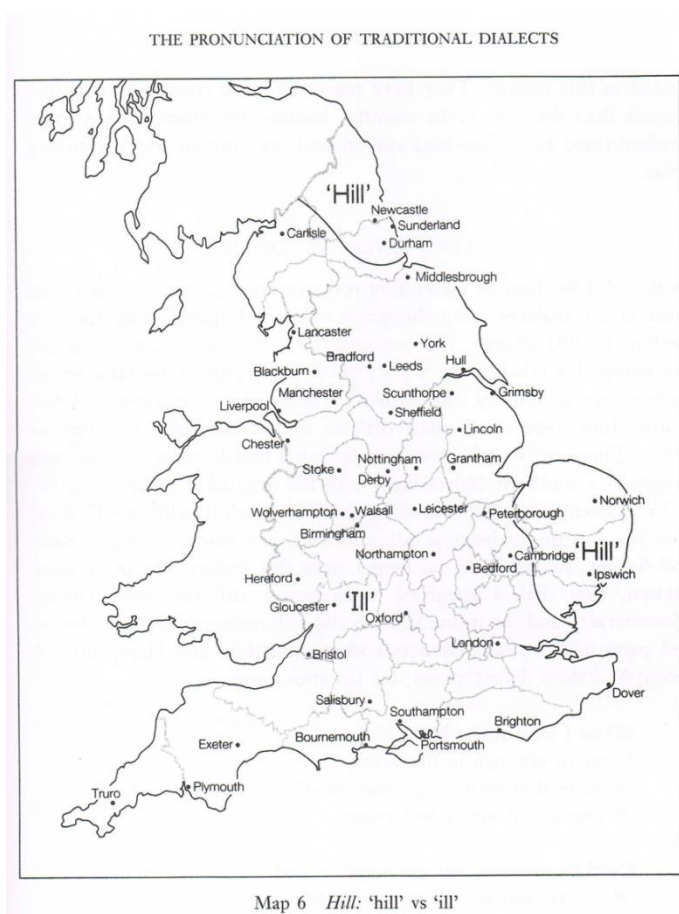


Figure 5. 'hill' versus 'ill' (Trudgill, 1999).

According to an older survey of h-dropping by Orton et al of “h-pronouncing areas of England”, East Anglia, the Northeast and the West Country dialects retain initial /h/. This map, cited by Milroy, seems to suggest that around the 1960s there were more h-pronouncing areas than Trudgill mentions in his Traditional Dialect maps, but Milroy remarks that the map

“probably understates the extent of [h]-loss” (*Linguistic* 137). Moreover, Milroy cites Trudgill’s Norwich study which proves that h-dropping does occur in East Anglia. Trudgill’s study shows that h-dropping is socially stratified in the city of Norwich; lower and middle working class speakers use h-dropping the most in casual speech styles (*Linguistic* 137). Wells supports this by stating that “in urban Norwich it is clear that H dropping has long been a sociolinguistic variable just as in most other parts of England” (341). This seems to contradict the results of the map which has East Anglia as an h-retaining area (Milroy, *Linguistic* 137). However, though traditional rural dialects around the city of Norwich do retain /h/, in Modern Dialects h-dropping has begun to be a rising feature in urban vernaculars (Trudgill 79). The data upon which the SED distribution of h-dropping is based are limited since they only used the word ‘hammer’ as a test word for h-dropping. Another point to keep in mind is that this dialect survey used older male speakers, who would have had more rural dialectal features which traditionally did not have h-loss, whereas the urban dialects did already have h-dropping at that time, which can be seen in Trudgill’s Norwich study (Gordon 46). Overall, it can be concluded that even in the 1960s, but certainly in the period since then, there has been a decline in h-retaining areas.

On the Time-depth of Variability in English



Figure 7. ‘*h*-pronouncing areas of England, adapted from Orton *et al.* 1963-9’ (Milroy, 1992).

The fact that East Anglia is characterised in the Late Modern English to PDE period as an *h*-pronouncing area is surprising since in the Middle English period it is this region and the neighbouring East Midlands area in which most *h*-dropping is found, as discussed in chapter 2. The history of the East Anglian area may be of importance when considering its distribution of initial /*h*/ before a vowel. During the mid 16th century there was an influx of Dutch and Belgian immigrants to East Anglia. The immigrants were mainly weavers who settled in the area to form a weaving community (Britain, *East Anglian* 38). Dutch and Flemish retain initial /*h*/ before a vowel in all cases and this may indicate that foreign language contact influenced the traditional East Anglian dialect to become fully *h*-pronouncing. However, the more likely conclusion is that the East Anglian dialect area

remained characteristically divergent throughout the history and development of the English dialects and that “East Anglian English has always been . . . a distinctive variety . . .”

(Trudgill, ‘Modern’ 1). Milroy points out that the ME sources of h-dropping in East Anglia were examples that came from the higher social classes of society, which presumably dropped initial /h/, whereas the lower classes did not at that time (*Linguistic* 145). This would explain the fact that the rural dialects of East Anglia were, and still are, h-ful.

The spread of h-dropping in the dialects of England may be due in part to the development of a dialect region called the Home Counties, which include the areas surrounding London and “parts of Hampshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire” (Trudgill 79). This area is growing larger, its influence is spreading upwards fast and it is expected to bring “London” features even “further afield” (Trudgill 79). One of these London speech features is h-dropping, traditionally found, as stated before, in the Cockney dialect. According to Trudgill, the East Anglian dialect area is being minimised due to influence from the Home Counties area (‘Modern’ 1). Parts of Essex now fall under the Home Counties dialect continuum, and its inhabitants are “speakers of a London based dialect” (‘Modern’ 1). Since the 1990s a new term has been coined for a particular variant of the Home Counties dialect, named “Estuary English”. The author of this term calls it; “a variety of modified regional speech” (Rosewarne 29). Others have stated that it lies midway between “Received Pronunciation and Cockney” and is used by different social classes to replace traditional dialects in the Southeast area (Coggle). The most reliable definition is given by Trudgill, who states that Estuary English “refers to the lower middle-class accents, as opposed to [the] working-class accents of the Home Counties . . . dialect area” (80). It is therefore less socially stratified than either RP on one side or Cockney on the other. Estuary English has spread so quickly because the South Eastern area is the most densely populated area of England, and that region is where most of the national media are based (Trudgill 81). A result of the spread

of this variety is that a growing number of speakers across England exhibit h-loss. H-dropping has “spread out . . . to its present predominance throughout all urban England except the Tyneside area” (Wells 105). Considering the results of Trudgill’s Norwich study, h-dropping has changed from being a predominantly working class feature towards characterising middle and upper class speech as well (Britain, *Innovation* 998). Not only is h-loss now found in larger groups of ‘rural’ dialect speakers, it is also used by more social classes. The spread of Estuary English as a popular new standard is reason for the media to coin it a less affected kind of Received Pronunciation. Whether or not this will prove to be the case, Estuary English is probably one of the main reasons for the decline of pronouncing initial /h/ in East Anglia and in general.

The rise of Estuary English accounts for the fact that h-dropping has become more widespread from the Modern English period to Present Day English. The stigmatisation that has been attached to h-dropping since the start of the 18th century does not seem to affect the spread of the feature. The attitude towards h-dropping in PDE is not as negative as when compared to earlier times, but it is still seen as “sloppy” by most teachers and language purists (Britain, *Innovation* 998). The prediction is that even areas that are still h-pronouncing now will most likely join the h-dropping tendency. According to Trudgill, “East Anglia will probably also contract . . . in the face of the continuing expansion of the Home Counties area based on London” (84). It seems that in due time initial /h/ before a vowel will completely disappear from all Modern Dialects of England, though it is likely to remain in traditionally h-pronouncing areas such as Scotland and Ireland.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to carry out a diachronic study of h-dropping throughout the history of English; from the Old English period up to the present day. H-dropping is a variable that is of interest to modern linguists because it has characterised English since Old English and is still present in the language today. The study of how initial /h/ before a vowel varies, and which factors influence its distribution in English, may provide clues as to how and why stable variation occurs in the language in general. The decision to study only the variation of initial /h/ before a vowel reflects the fact that this particular variable has been in stable variation for a long time, as opposed to other forms of h-loss that have gone to completion in most varieties of English and are no longer found in speech today. Another reason for investigating the history of h-dropping in the language is to see what relation the changing distribution throughout history has to the rise and spread of the feature that is so prevalent in Present Day English. A small case study of the Early Middle English text Layamon's *Brut* was conducted to see if h-dropping was indeed lacking in West Midland dialect despite *LALME* claims to the contrary and if so, what this might tell us about the geographical distribution of h-dropping in the Early Middle English period.

As h-dropping is very prevalent in Middle English sources, linguists have argued that the feature was introduced by Anglo Norman scribes who copied these manuscripts and have on that basis rejected the idea of h-loss as an English feature. However, the evidence of h-loss in Old English sources like the *Ormulum* and the interlinear glosses in the *Rushworth Gospels* suggest that h-loss was a feature of English before the Norman Conquest and the resulting language contact with French occurred. The results of the case study on Layamon's *Brut* show that there is evidence of h-dropping in the Otho MS, and there is slight evidence for h-loss in the Caligula MS, however these results are not extensive enough to state with certainty that h-

loss characterised the Caligula MS, as it does the Otho MS. The fact that the Caligula MS is located in the Southwest Midlands means that it cannot be proven that h-dropping was a West Midland feature in Early Middle English. However, the fact that the Otho MS exhibits a mixture of northern and western features suggests that h-dropping had a more Northern Midlands distribution than previously thought. This extension of the distribution of h-dropping into the northern parts of the Midlands region ties in with the possibly Mercian distribution of the *Rushworth Gospels*.

The stigmatisation of h-dropping found in sources from the 18th and 19th century suggests that from that moment onwards, h-dropping was on the rise. The spread of h-dropping in modern speech is influenced by the change in the dialect areas in England. The influence of a new dialect area called the Home Counties, with its popular vernacular Estuary English, is one of the reasons that h-dropping is now no longer socially stratified, i.e., mostly used by rural speakers or the working classes, but also by the middle and upper levels of the social continuum. This variety of English can be held accountable for the introduction of h-dropping in dialect areas that were historically h-retaining and it is expected to reduce these areas even further in the future. As Milroy points out, determining the time depth of h-loss is an important factor because it can explain the quick rise and geographical spread of a feature (*Linguistic* 139). In the case of h-dropping; marking the Old English period as the starting point of variation explains why it has become such a widespread phenomenon in English speech of the 21st century.

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