

**ANALYSING LINGUISTIC ATLAS DATA:  
THE (SOCIO-) LINGUISTIC CONTEXT OF H-DROPPING**

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**Abstract**

This presentation will seek to illustrate how linguistic atlas data can be employed to obtain a better understanding of the mechanisms of linguistic variation and change. For this purpose, I will take a closer look at ‘H-dropping’ – a feature commonly found in various European languages and also widely used in varieties of British English. H-dropping refers to the non-realization of /h/ in initial position in stressed syllables before vowels, as for example, in *hand on heart* [ˈænd ɒn ˈɑ:t] or *my head* [mɪ ˈɛd]. It is one of the best-known nonstandard features in British English, extremely widespread, but also heavily stigmatised and commonly regarded as ‘uneducated’, ‘sloppy’, ‘lazy’, etc. It prominently appears in descriptions of urban accents in Britain (cf. Foulkes/Docherty 1999) and according to Wells (1982: 254), it is “the single most powerful pronunciation shibboleth in England”. H-dropping has frequently been analysed in sociolinguistic studies of British English and it can indeed be regarded as a typical feature of working-class speech. Moreover, H-dropping is often cited as one of the features that differentiate ‘Estuary English’ from Cockney, with speakers of the former variety avoiding ‘to drop their aitches’. The term ‘Estuary English’ is used as a label for an intermediate variety between the most localised form of London speech (Cockney) and a standard form of pronunciation in the Greater London area.

After briefly discussing the history of H-dropping, the main emphasis will be put on geolinguistic aspects of the feature. 25 items from the *Survey of English Dialects* were analysed from a qualitative and quantitative point of view. Modern, urban dialects will also be examined. In spite of its sociolinguistic significance, there is relatively little information on the actual phonological process of H-dropping. My research results indicate that H-dropping is not necessarily such a straightforward, binary feature as is suggested by some textbooks or by single-item maps in linguistic atlases. At least in some varieties, the data reveal a more complex picture with variable realisations, including the use of semivowels. It is particularly relevant to analyse the geographical distribution of these realisations and to consider the relationship between rural and urban varieties. Finally, H-dropping can serve as a further example that geolinguistic data frequently provide interesting insights into the variation and history of a language and can advance our knowledge of (socio-) linguistic change.

## Key words

H-dropping as a sociolinguistic feature in British English, H-dropping in Cockney and Estuary English, history of H-dropping, H-dropping in the *Survey of English Dialects* (SED), quantification of H-dropping (25 SED items), geographical spread of H-dropping, occurrence of semivowels [j, w]

## 1. Introduction

In this presentation I will be concerned with H-dropping in varieties of English - that is the non-realization of /h/ in initial position in stressed syllables before vowels, as for example, in *hand on heart* ['ænd ɒn 'ɑ:t] or *my head* [mɪ 'ɛd]. H-dropping is a well-known nonstandard feature that has achieved a high level of public awareness. 'Dropping your aitches' is generally stigmatised and regarded as 'uneducated', 'sloppy' or 'lazy'. For Wells (1982: 254), H-dropping is even "the single most powerful pronunciation shibboleth in England".

Despite this public attention, H-dropping is extremely common. As there is a close correlation between H-dropping and social characteristics, the feature has frequently been analysed in sociolinguistic studies of British English and it can indeed be regarded as a typical marker of working-class speech. Moreover, H-dropping is one of the features often mentioned in connection with 'Estuary English'. This term is used by linguists as a label for an intermediate variety between the most localised form of London speech (Cockney) and a standard form of pronunciation in the Greater London area. It is suggested that speakers of Estuary English avoid H-dropping simply because it is regarded as uneducated. The reasoning is that one's pronunciation should be in line with the spelling of English and by using [h-] correctly the speaker's level of education is made obvious.

It could be assumed that H-dropping is rather straightforward and unproblematic from a purely linguistic point of view. As the name 'H-dropping' implies the /h/ in a word such as *house* is just not pronounced, whereas it is present in the standard accent. But by taking a closer look at individual regional varieties of English it will become apparent that H-dropping as a linguistic process is more complex and certainly not always that regular.

## 1. Diachronic aspects

Linguists have looked at the history of the feature and indeed different views have been expressed on the historical development of H-dropping. According to the traditional view H-dropping is a relatively recent phenomenon. Wyld in his *History of Modern Colloquial English* states: “[...] it would appear that the present-day vulgarism [H-dropping] was not widespread much before the end of the eighteenth century.” (Wyld 1936: 296) As for the omission of /h/ in Middle English texts he says: “Norman scribes are very erratic in their use of *h*- in copying English manuscripts, and we therefore cannot attach much importance to thirteenth- or even to early fourteenth-century omissions of the letter which occur here and there.” (Wyld 1936: 295)

One major reason for regarding H-dropping as fairly recent is connected with the fact that the feature is not normally found in American English. It is therefore assumed that H-dropping only became widely used in British English after the establishment of English on the American continent in the 17th and 18th centuries. Accordingly, Wells (1982) describes H-dropping in a chapter called “British innovations”. The fact that H-dropping does not occur in American English is also at the background of the well-known quotation from the Oxford scholar, T.K. Oliphant. He praises the Americans for not making any mistakes with “the letter *h*” but criticizes the English:

I ought in all fairness to acknowledge that 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. [...] Few things will the English youth find in after-life more profitable than the right use of the aforesaid letter. (Oliphant 1873: 226)

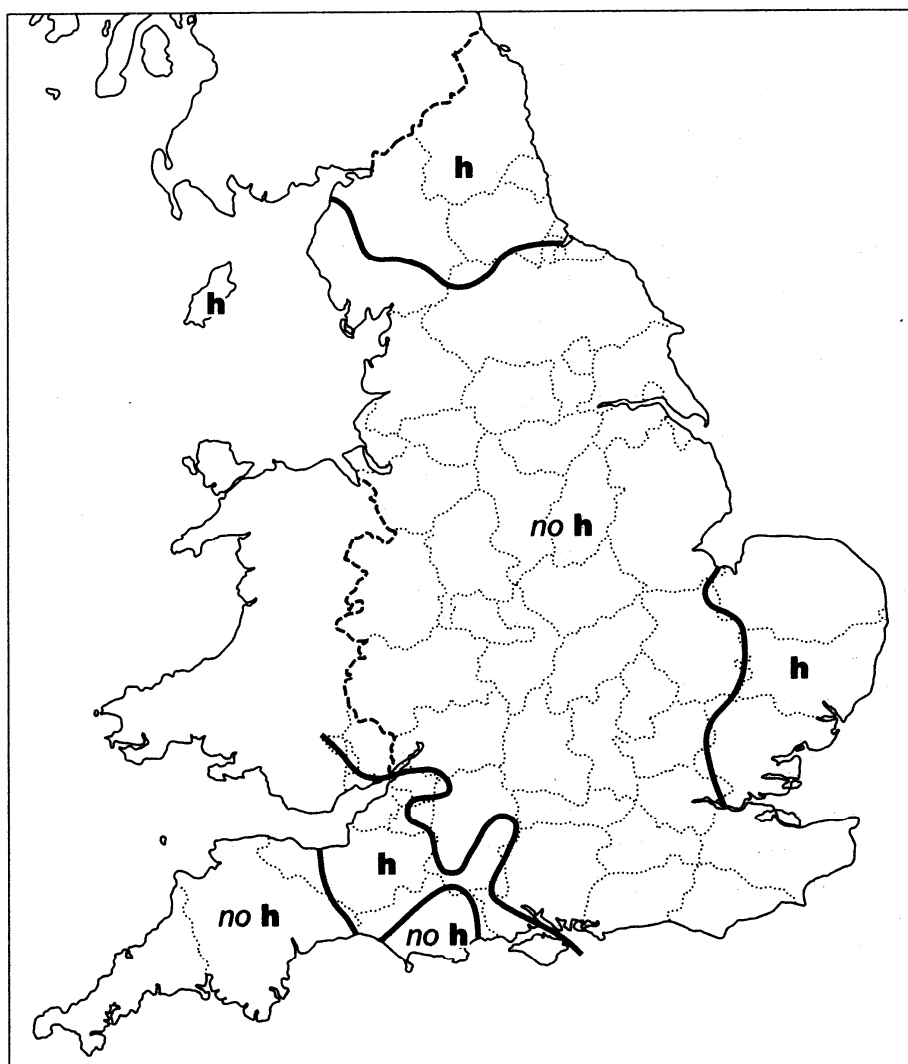
Wyld points out that H-dropping only became more widespread from the late 18th century onwards, but he nevertheless gives examples that are much earlier. His earliest examples of H-dropping date from the late 14th century. But it seems that for him this evidence is not substantial enough. The traditional view on the history of H-dropping has been questioned in particular by Milroy. In his contribution to *The Cambridge History of the English Language* entitled “Middle English Dialectology” he holds the view that H-dropping in English as a social and stylistic marker is much older.

It is reasonable to assume that if a linguistic variant is so widespread and strongly established, it probably has quite a long history in the language. The late-eighteenth-century evidence adduced by Wyld and others is therefore likely to indicate the date at which it had become stigmatised as a ‘vulgarism’, rather than its date of origin. (Milroy 1992: 198).

Before actually taking a closer look at the geolinguistic data, it is noteworthy that at the turn of the century it was assumed that H-dropping generally occurred all over England except for some northern areas. Joseph Wright in his *English Dialect Grammar* writes that “initial **h** has remained before vowels in the Shetland & Orkney Isles, Scotland, Ireland, Northumberland and perhaps also in portions of north Durham and north Cumberland. In the remaining parts of England it has disappeared [...]” (Wright 1905: 254).

## 2. Geolinguistic aspects

When the material of the *Survey of English Dialects* [SED] was published it became clear that H-dropping had not yet reached such a general spread. The SED still recorded the presence of [h-] not just in the north but also in East Anglia and in various southern areas, at least in the traditional dialects. The maps that have been published on H-dropping in dialect atlases or textbooks suggest that the feature is really straightforward from a linguistic point of view. Basically, there is a binary opposition, either the [h-] is present or absent, thus there are H-retaining and H-dropping areas. Moreover, the areas in which initial [h-] is still retained is clearly limited. Map 1 from the *Atlas of English Dialects* by Upton/Widdowson shows such a clear distribution of H-dropping/H-retaining for the item ‘house’. One can see that [h-] is still present in the north (Northumberland, Cumberland and Durham), but also in East Anglia (Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex) and in some southwestern counties (Somerset, Wiltshire, Dorset).



Map 1. *house* (Upton/Widdowson 2006: 58)

As part of my own research, more items for H-dropping from the SED were analysed as well as quantified. The 25 items that were examined are listed in the following table.

SED item	total number	[Ø]	[h-]	[h≠-+V] [hj-+V]	[j-]	[w-]	Maps
hand (VI.7.1)	325	248	77				LAE Ph220
horses (I.6.5)	329	264	65				
harvest (II.6.1)	307	258	49				
houses (V.1.1.1)	309	237	72				
hundred (VII.1.15)	320	239	81				
holly-bush (IV.10.9)	311	236	75				
half (VII.5.4)	311	256	55				
hammer (I.7.13)	309	234	75				
hames (I.5.4)	311	229	36	12	34		AES M114
heifer (III.1.5)	302	220	65		17		
hair (VI.2.1)	323	218	81		24		AES M308
herrings (IV.9.11)	316	203	71	3	39		
(too) hot (V.6.8)	311	208	85	1	13	4	
hear (VI.4.2)	326	195	7	55	69		AES M307
hearse (VIII.5.9)	309	223	57	18	11		LAE Ph221
home (VIII.5.2)	328	210	14	9	27	68	AES M97
halter (I.3.17)	301	231	70				
hay (II.9.1.2)	323	238	85				
hoof (III.4.10.1)	302	225	66	9	2		
hare (IV.5.10)	317	223	89	2	3		AES M318
hive (IV.8.8.1)	313	239	73				
head (VI.1.1)	364	208	86	1	69		AES M54
height (VI.10.9)	315	245	70				
how (many) (VII.8.11)	307	255	52				AES M22
holiday (VIII.6.3)	303	229	74				

Table 1: H-Dropping in the *Survey of English Dialects*.

The summary map (Map 2) of these 25 items from the SED shows that there are no clear dividing lines between the H-dropping/H-retaining areas. The three core areas of H-retaining in the North, East and South are clearly noticeable, but at the same time it



Moreover, the quantification of the SED data has revealed that H-dropping may in fact be more complex from a purely linguistic point of view. It is certainly true that a binary opposition (simple presence/absence of [h-]) can be found with a majority of the items, namely 14. But at the same time there are 11 items in which a semivowel, mostly [j-], sometimes [w-] is used in the structural position of [h-] as an initial sound. At least in some cases the occurrence of [j-] seems to be connected with a following front vowel. The semivowel [j-] may be based on an original combination of [h] plus a short [ɪ] or [h] plus [j]. This applies to the item *hearse*, for example.

Consequently, one could argue that there is a close relationship between H-retaining, the occurrence of [j-] as an initial sound and H-dropping. With most of the items one can indeed see that [j-] occurs in areas that are adjacent to the [h]-retaining areas. At least in these cases, the [j-] realisations could be regarded as a transitional phenomenon between H-retaining and H-dropping. The same process can be assumed to be true in an historical sense, namely that at least for some items the [j-]-realisations represent an intermediate step towards H-dropping. Thus, it may well be that initial [j-] is a compromise form for potential H-droppers to mark the onset of a word by a semivowel. In other words, they try to compensate for the omission of the [h-]. The phonological rule seems to be that [j-] is used primarily in combination with front vowels, whereas [w-] is likely to occur with back vowels (cf. the item *home* in Table 1). The pronunciation of *old* as [wəʊld] in English dialects represents a parallel case. Comments by SED informants indicate that the items with the semivowel [j-] in initial position are perceived as separate forms and described as the older, more localised form: IV.9.11 *herrings* (So3, So8, So10 and Gl7 [jəriŋz] “older”); VI.1.1 *head* (La14, Ch2, O3 [jɛd] “older”); VI.2.1 *hair* (La14 [jʊər] “older”); Sa2 [jar] “older”); VI.4.2 *hear* (So 12 [jɛr:] “older”).

Finally, it should be added that the occurrence of [j-] for [h-] in initial position is equally found in modern, urban dialects. The local pronunciation for *my head* in Sheffield is [miː jɛd] (Foulkes/Docherty 1999: 77). In Cardiff English the words *here* and *hear* are pronounced [jɔː] (Foulkes/Docherty 1999: 192) and in Guernsey English *here* may be realised as [jɪə], usually spelt ‘yer’ (cf. Ramisch 1989: 105). The same spelling convention (y- for initial [j-]) and more evidence for the feature can be found in



the glossaries of the ‘BBC Voices Project’ (cf. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/>): Birmingham/Black Country: *y’ed* ‘head’; Devon: *yaffer and yaws* ‘heifers and ewes’, *yerd tell* ‘heard, heard tell’; Gloucestershire: *yud* ‘head’; Lancashire: *yedmoster* ‘the headmaster’; North Yorkshire: *yam* ‘home’, *yat* ‘hot’; Somerset: *yer* ‘here’, *yer tiz* ‘here it is’, *yer uz be* ‘here we are’; Tyneside: *gannin yem* ‘I’m going home’.

### **3. Conclusion**

The analysis of H-dropping in varieties of English has shown that this feature is noteworthy in various ways. It is certainly possible to examine the regional distribution of the feature by looking at single-item maps and to distinguish between H-retaining and H-dropping areas. But a quantification of a larger number of items demonstrates that the boundaries are far less clear, even in the traditional dialects. The whole geolinguistic picture is evidently complicated by the fact that H-dropping is not just a regional feature, but also a sociolinguistic one. As is frequently the case in English dialects, there is a close interrelationship between geographical and social factors. Additionally, the quantitative analysis has shown that the feature itself is not that straightforward from a purely linguistic point of view. The research results demonstrate that H-dropping is not necessarily just a binary feature (absence or presence of [h-]). In many varieties, the situation is more complex with variable realisations, especially the use of semivowels ([j-], [w-]) filling the slot of the [h-] in initial position. On the basis of these findings, H-dropping may serve as a further example that geolinguistic data frequently provide remarkable insights into the variation and history of a language and can advance our knowledge of (socio-) linguistic change.

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