**T'best place in t'world: Definite Article Reduction and the enregisterment of “Yorkshire” dialect**

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**1. Introduction**

When language features such as dialect words or pronunciations come to be overtly and explicitly commented on by speakers they can become linked with particular social values such as regional location, class, correctness, or more abstract concepts like ‘authenticity’ and ‘friendliness’. When this happens, features are said to be ‘enregistered’ in that ‘a linguistic repertoire’, or a set of features, has become ‘differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms’ (Agha 2003:231). When used, this register indicates or suggests a particular language variety, group of speakers, or both, depending on the social values associated with the features in the repertoire.

A rather well-known language feature commonly associated with Yorkshire dialect is definite article reduction [DAR]. This is the tendency in Yorkshire to drop the definite article ‘the’, or to reduce it to a glottal stop. My research has shown that there is a distinct “Yorkshire” repertoire and that this feature is enregistered as “Yorkshire”. We can see evidence of awareness of DAR as a “Yorkshire” feature in the form of dialect ‘commentary’, dialect literature and literary dialect (discussed in more detail below). Additionally, the enregisterment of this feature as “Yorkshire” dialect can be seen in its use on commodities. Representations of DAR can be found on coffee mugs, tea pots, coasters, and the like, many of which also include specific reference to Yorkshire. This reinforces the link between the use of DAR and Yorkshire and shows us that certain features have social value to such an extent that people will pay money to have them represented on items. I will also discuss examples of commodified Yorkshire dialect below.

**2. Indexicality and Enregisterment**

In sociolinguistics the term ‘register’ refers to ‘variation in language according to the context in which it is being used’ (Mesthrie 2004b:72). This variation can take the form of a group of linguistic features which are particular to that context. When an ideological link is made between these features and the context, we describe those features as ‘enregistered’, as their use will invoke the context in question. Barbara Johnstone gives an example of this:‘“lawyerese” is a set of forms that have been enregistered according to the ideological scheme that makes us expect a profession to have a professional argot’ (2010:4). So, in ‘lawyerese’, we might expect constructions such as the following:

The party of the first part hereinafter known as Jack, and the party of the second part hereinafter known as Jill, ascended or caused to be ascended an elevation of undetermined height and degree of slope, hereinafter referred to as ‘hill’

(Sandburg 1978 cited in Mesthrie 2004b:73)

In non-specialist terms the above paragraph would read: ‘Jack and Jill went up the hill’. However, because it has been written in a legal register, the language used is deliberately unambiguous; there is no room for misinterpretation of the information being conveyed here; there are terms such as ‘party’, which have specific meanings in a legal context – ‘party’ in this context is defined as: ‘A person or entity that enters into an agreement with another person or entity; a participant in a transaction or in legal actions or proceedings’ (Eades 2010:267). We can therefore state that the use of these features indexes a legal context, where an index is defined as ‘a logical relation between sign and object’ (Mesthrie 2004a:2).

In the following sections, I will discuss definite article reduction in terms of linguistic studies of the feature in Yorkshire before moving on to consider evidence for its enregisterment.

**3. Linguistic studies of DAR**

There have been several studies by linguists which have either focused on or included discussion of DAR. For instance, Wolfgang Viereck’s study on the pronunciation of the definite article in dialectal English involves data from the Survey of English Dialects [SED], rendered as a linguistic atlas by computer (1995:295), and also deals with reduced articles. The data he presents shows that there are 3 main forms of the definite article in the SED: *the*, *th’* and *t’*. These data are variable across the whole country, although there is a definite pattern showing that the use of *t’* constructions is very much a northern feature (ibid. p.296-7).

The SED makes specific reference to DAR in two locations of its Northern Counties division; in Sheffield in South Yorkshire, they state that informants render the definite article as ‘unexploded [t]’ (Orton & Halliday 1962-3:38), whereas in Nafferton, which is in the East Riding of Yorkshire, they state that the definite article is ‘regularly omitted…in conversation, but [t] occurs in careful speech’ (ibid. p.33). The notation [t] here refers to a sounded pronunciation of *t* – as in the first consonant sound of the word *two*. The description of an ‘unexploded [t]’ could therefore refer to a glottal stop pronunciation of the definite article. Despite the ‘unexploded’ or ‘omitted’ pronunciations in the two specific locations listed above, though, the SED records predominantly [t] pronunciations for DAR in their Yorkshire locations.

Since the SED linguistic studies have shown that this predominant [t] pronunciation has changed over time. For example, Tidholm notes that the definite article is reduced to [t] in Egton in North Yorkshire. But, he states that the actual pronunciation of [t] is only heard in two out of his three age groups: Old (aged 69-83) and Mid (aged 66-50). The speakers in his Young group (aged 15-33) only rarely sound the [t] when pronouncing a reduced definite article. This happens to such an extent that it leads Tidholm to opine that pronouncing the definite article with a [t] ‘will have disappeared in two generations’ (1979:125). Indeed, Tagliamonte and Roeder state that their study, based on the York English Corpus (1997), showed that Tidholm’s prediction was accurate, as [t] for DAR was not recorded (2009:462). Further evidence for this shift away from [t] is also given by Petyt, who states that: ‘the commonest form after the glottal stop was [t]’ and that the only people to pronounce [t] were mostly ‘from informants aged over 70’ and that younger speakers were mostly pronouncing a reduced definite article as a glottal stop (1985:197). In addition, Jones notes that when this glottal pronunciation happens, speakers can tell when it is a glottal article and not a [t] at the end of a word which has been ‘dropped’ or glottalised (2007:74). Essentially, Yorkshire speakers would be able tell the difference between ‘print button’ (i.e. the button one would press on a computer or photocopier to make it print) and ‘print t’ button’ (print *the* button). This tendency has also been overtly commented on in some dialect dictionaries and is discussed further below.

More recent studies on contemporary use of DAR, however, have noted that this phenomenon has apparently become specifically associated with Yorkshire. In her discussion of the dialect of Morley in Leeds, Richards discusses ‘the stereotypical nature of DAR as a distinctly ‘Yorkshire’ feature...in spite of its more widespread distribution in other Northern regions such as Lancashire and parts of the North-Midlands’ (2008:87-8). Roeder also notes the relationship between DAR and local identity, as she states that in York younger speakers are ‘recycling older features for the purposes of maintaining local identity’ (2009:117), such as the ‘recycling’ of DAR. Additionally, in my own research I conducted an online survey where respondents were asked to list features they perceived to be “Yorkshire” dialect (see also Cooper 2013). Of the 120 respondents analysed (60 were from Yorkshire, 60 were not), DAR was the most frequently listed feature for non-Yorkshire respondents; it was the second-most frequently listed for Yorkshire respondents. The survey also asked respondents to rate features of Yorkshire dialect on several criteria. Figure 1 shows the results of this for DAR.



**Figure 1** *Online survey results for DAR showing non-Yorkshire versus Yorkshire respondents*

Two of the most commonly selected criteria here ‘I have heard of this’ and ‘This is current, modern Yorkshire dialect’ for both groups of respondents. This illustrates that speakers are aware of DAR and strongly associate it with Yorkshire.

**4. The enregisterment of DAR as “Yorkshire”**

Based on the linguistic studies I have discussed so far, we can see that there is a strong association of DAR with “Yorkshire” dialect. But there are additional sources of evidence which can tell us about the social values associated with this feature. This evidence comes from what I am calling ‘commentary material’ which features explicit discussion of “Yorkshire” dialect; this can predominantly be seen in folk texts like dialect dictionaries. Similar data can also been found in two types of dialect writing: dialect literature, defined by Shorrocks as ‘works composed wholly (sometimes partly) in a non-standard dialect, and aimed essentially, though not exclusively, at a non-standard-dialect-speaking readership’ (1996:386); and literary dialect, which is defined as ‘the representation of non-standard speech in literature that is otherwise written in standard English…and aimed at a general readership’ (ibid.).

*4.1 DAR in dialect ‘commentary’*

This feature is extremely common in commentary material and in many cases is discussed at length in its own dedicated section. For example, Kellett devotes a paragraph to DAR in his Yorkshire dialect dictionary: ‘**t’** (the) which is not actually sounded, but replaced by a brisk opening and shutting of the glottis at the top of the windpipe’ (2002:xxviii). Explicit comments like this are important in marking DAR as a distinctly “Yorkshire” feature. Table 1 below lists the texts I studied in the course of my research; the commentary included in these texts takes the form of introductory material in dialect dictionaries; illustrative examples of “Yorkshire” dialect; glossaries of “Yorkshire” features; and alphabetised word lists with definitions.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Author | Year | Title |
| Markham | 2010 | *Ee Up Lad! A Salute to the Yorkshire Dialect* |
| Collins | 2009 | *The Northern Monkey Survival Guide* |
| McMillan | 2007 | *Chelp and Chunter How to talk Tyke* |
| Battye | 2007 | *Sheffield Dialect and Folklore since the Second World War: a Dying Tradition* |
| Johnson | 2006 | *Yorkshire-English* |
| Kellett | 2002 | *The Yorkshire Dictionary of Dialect, Tradition and Folklore* |
| Whomersley | 1981 | *Sheffieldish A Beginners Phrase-Book* |

**Table 1** *Yorkshire ‘commentary’ texts*

The representation of DAR in many of these texts is very consistent. Johnson, for instance, uses a t-apostrophe construction (henceforth <t’>) for ‘the’ where the reduced form serves as a replacement for the full article; however, he also gives *int’* for ‘in the’, which is an example of an instance where the <t> is affixed to another word. The tendency to do this is not widespread, though; many dialect writers tend to prefer <t’> as an effective replacement for the definite article, rather than to use affixed variants. Johnson, though, seems to be inconsistent with his treatment of <t’> vis. affixation, as he uses *t’brush* for ‘the brush’ (2006:23), where <t’> is prefixed, but *t’ t’ corner* for ‘to the corner’ (2006:25), where <t’> is not affixed. This particular treatment of reduced definite articles can also be seen in McMillan, who also uses <t> to represent DAR but seems to prefer affixation as in the examples: ‘Watch out for’t boggarts in’t snug o’t Red Lion’ (2007:11), where *for’t*, *in’t*, and *o’t* represent ‘for the’, ‘in the’,and ‘of the’ respectively; and ‘Stop bunching t’ball agin’t wall’ (ibid. p.14), where we can observe *t’ball* and *agin’t wall* for ‘the ball’and ‘against the wall’. Overall, though, <t’> which is not affixed is the most common form of DAR.

Some writers attempt to address the issue of this largely consistent representation of DAR as <t’>. For instance, Battye states that he has: ‘selected t’ as the method I will use to represent the Northern ‘the’, frankly I do not believe that we have a suitable way of showing this in our alphabet’ (2007:3). However, although he does not explain what the ‘Northern ‘the’’ is, Battye later suggests that the use of <t> can lead speakers to misinterpret the pronunciation of reduced articles in the region. He lists what he labels a stereotypical Sheffield phrase: ‘Asta been dahn Twicker weear Twatter runs o’er Tweir’, meaning ‘have you been down to the Wicker where the water runs over the weir’, stating that this is ‘fake Sheffield dialect’, as it suggests that the <t> is pronounced as [t]. Battye replaces these constructions with his more ‘accurate’ renderings where constructions like ‘Twicker’ become ‘t’ Wicker’ (2007:51), where the <t’> constructions represent glottal realisations of reduced definite articles in Sheffield. Indeed, Battye describes this by stating that the glottal pronunciation of DAR can be observed when we consider the ‘difference…in the phrases ‘In-house’ and ‘In t’house’. To say the second properly requires a definite break in the throat which is audible’ (ibid.).

Battye’s above reference to ‘The Wicker’ here is a reference to an iconic Sheffield railway aqueduct system which runs through the city centre. One of its main features is its system of arched bridges, as shown in Figure 2. And, although The Wicker is now mainly blocked from view by houses, when it was opened in 1845 before the existence of these houses, this arch was ‘merely the main feature in a 41-arch viaduct’ (Rennison 1996:200), hence the above reference to water running over the weir at the Wicker.



**Figure 2** *The Wicker Arches, Sheffield*

*(P. Cantrell 2009, www.flickr.com/photos/starquake/3886835097/)*

Some writers give no explanation at all as to the pronunciation of reduced definite articles, though. Whomersley, for instance, makes use of <t> forms of DAR throughout his text, displaying a tendency to use compounded sentences like: ‘lerrer gerrontbus’, which he translates as ‘kindly make way for the lady to board the bus’ (1981:29). This type of sentence displays a unique way of representing DAR, as ‘get’, ‘on’, ‘the’, and ‘bus’ are compounded to form one word. However, Whomersley also makes use of <t’> constructions, where the reduced article is both affixed and not affixed. This lack of explanation of the pronunciation of DAR in Whomersley’s text is noteworthy when we consider some of the reasons behind its publication. Beal states that ‘Whomersley’s dictionary was published as a humorous guide to incomers when the relocation of National Health Service (NHS) jobs to Sheffield created an influx of white-collar workers’ (2009:151) in the 1980s. Indeed, the text was officially produced by Sheffield City Council and presented as a phrase-book to enable speakers from outside of the region to speak ‘Sheffieldish’. The front cover to this text features a cartoon image of a stereotypical tourist, complete with camera and ‘Guide to Sheffield’, obviously flummoxed by the pronunciation of a Sheffield area called Beauchief, and has assumed it is pronounced ‘bow chief’. Standing with this tourist is a stereotypical Sheffield woman who gives the tourist the accurate local pronunciation of the place, which is rendered in the cartoon as ‘BEECHIFF’. With images such as this one where the specific issue of Sheffield pronunciation is dealt with, one might expect some discussion of definite article reduction. However, some explanation for the lack of discussion is observed in Whomersley’s description of the Sheffield dialect as a separate ‘language’, stating that ‘to fully develop the true accent, you must reside for 40 years in the Sheffield district, preferably starting before the age of 2 years’ (1981:1). This suggests that discussion of the pronunciation of DAR in Sheffield would be fruitless due to Whomersley’s statement regarding the apparent long-term nature of ‘true’ acquisition of a command of the dialect.

Finally, discussions of DAR are not limited to texts which focus solely on Yorkshire. Collins’ *The Northern Monkey Survival Guide* (2009) is a humorous text which discusses notions of the north-south divide in England. The titular ‘Northern Monkey’ is a knitted monkey depicted on the cover of this text as an apparently stereotypical ‘northerner’ complete with flat cap, cigarette, and pint of ale. Stereotypes such as these are presented throughout this text for comedic purposes.

At various points in his text, Collins discusses language use; however, he presents his discussion as though certain language features occur across the entire North of England. In a section designed to be advice for Southerners travelling to the North, he states:

And for pity’s sake don’t ask for a lager top. You’ve got more chance of finding the letters ‘h’ and ‘e’ in the definite article than lime cordial in lager in most northern pubs (2009:40)

The statement that ‘h’ and ‘e’ would be missing from the definite article in ‘northern’ speech is again a reference to the rendering of the definite article as <t’>. Collins’ final chapter is entitled ‘Northern Accents’ in which he celebrates the variety of accent and dialect in the North of England. DAR and Yorkshire in general are specifically discussed, as he states that one will ‘hear t’definite article begin to contract as you head for the Yorkshire border’(ibid. p.135). Collins uses the common representation of <t’> to represent DAR, illustrating this by affixing the reduced article to ‘definite article’ so as to highlight the feature.

*4.2 DAR in dialect literature*

In addition to the dialect dictionaries discussed in the previous section, some writers use written representations of Yorkshire dialect instead of Standard English. This involves using non-standard spellings designed to represent specific “Yorkshire” pronunciations or grammatical features. In my research I studied many such writers; the texts used are listed in Table 2 below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Author | Date | Title |
| Kellett | 2007 | *Ee By Gum, Lord! The Gospels in Broad Yorkshire* |
| Hague | 1976 | *Totley Tom: Tales of a Yorkshire Miner* |
| Hirst | [2011] | *A Coil Fire; Adam An’ Eve An’ T’ Apple; A Deep Grave; A Mucky November Neet; A Pain I’ T’ Neck* (http://www.yorkshire-dialect.org/authors/fred\_hirst.htm) |
| Greensmith | [2011] | *Christmas Party; Len Wilde; Mi Secret Luv; Robin Hood Wor a Yorkshireman* (http://www.yorkshire-dialect.org/authors/bert\_greensmith.htm) |
| Alden | [1933] 2011 | *T’ Concert Party Ride* (http://www.yorkshire-dialect.org/authors/gertie\_alden.htm) |

**Table 2** *Yorkshire dialect literature texts*

Several of the dialect literature texts are from the website www.yorkshire-dialect.org which proclaims to be dedicated to ‘Yorkshire verse’ as dialect poetry is prominently featured; contributors are also encouraged to submit their own.

Definite article reduction is prominent in written Yorkshire dialect. In all instances where an article is reduced it is rendered as <t’>. We see constructions like:

* ‘thru t’door’ (Greensmith 2011)
* ‘For t’thing was mare an horf full then’ (Alden 2011)
* ‘Its wahrm glow penetrated all t’corners o’ t’room’ (Hirst 2011)
* ‘All t’ pleasure went frum aht o’ t’ day’ (Hague 1976)
* ‘T’ Babby Born in a Mistal’ (Kellett 2007)

Wales discusses the use of <t> for the reduction of the definite article, stating that it is one of the most ‘salient features of traditional Northern English…conventionally represented in writing and stereotypes as <t>’ (2006:187). However, instances of the full article *the* can be seen in the modern dialect literature; although it appears to be used for the purposes of rhythm in poetry:

‘An’ me an’ Bennett gans ti’ ‘elp
An’ sort o’ taks the lead,
An’ we enjoys oorsens an’ all
An’ gets a rare good feed’

(Alden 2011)

The rhythm of the second line of this stanza would not scan properly were the definite article reduced, potentially explaining why <t’> was not used here. Examples like this are infrequent, though, suggesting that <t’> is enregistered as being the general form of the definite article in written Yorkshire dialect unless the rhythm of the poem demands otherwise.

*4.3 DAR in literary dialect*

When compared to dialect literature, the use of DAR is similarly consistent in literary dialect – the dialect represented in novels and plays. This is in spite of the fact that in many cases, literary dialect is intended for a wider audience than the immediate dialect region featured in their texts. The literary dialect texts discussed here are listed in Table 3.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Author | Date | Title |
| Smith | 1998 | *Plaintiffs, Plonkers and Pleas* |
| Taylor-Bradford | 1981 | *A Woman of Substance* |
| Herriot  | 1977 | *Vet in a Spin* |
| Hines  | [1967] 2000 | *A Kestrel for a Knave* |
| Holtby | [1935] 2011 | *South Riding* |

**Table 3** *Yorkshire dialect literature texts*

The common <t’> construction is also consistently used in the literary dialect as it is in the dialect literature. For instance, we can see examples like:

When I was courting Annie we used to meet in chapel and walk home together and her ma would put a lamp in t’window, and if blind was up, I’d come right in for a cuddle in t’parlour (Holtby [1935] 2011:155)

We can see here three separate instances of definite article reduction: two which are marked by <t’>; the third is a zero-realisation in ‘if blind was up’, which although rare, can be observed in some written representations of Yorkshire dialect. Kellett, for instance, notes that in some parts of Yorkshire, notably in the East Riding, the definite article is not pronounced at all, even as a glottal stop (2002:180).

*4.4 Commodification of DAR*

As Johnstone states, a ‘linguistic variety or a set of varieties is commodified when it is available for purchase and people will pay for it’ (2009:161). Commodified language features can also be seen as evidence for their enregisterment (Beal 2009:148) as the fact that people are willing to pay for commodities displaying language features highlights those features’ social value. DAR can be seen on “Yorkshire” commodities; for example, the website www.moorlandpottery.co.uk features a section called ‘Yorkie Ware’, where one can buy coffee mugs, coasters, teapots, and also a small selection of bags and aprons. The majority of these products feature examples of Yorkshire dialect; an example featuring DAR is shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** *‘Yorkshire T’ Best Place in t’World’ logo (http://www.moorlandpottery.co.uk/t-best-place-in-t-world-p-233.html?zenid=0dbb1c893824c43e6fac08451622739c)*

We can also see the association with language features and place as the examples of DAR displayed here appear with “Yorkshire”; this forms an explicit link between these dialectal variants and geographical location. The commodities subsequently serve to reinforce the enregistered status of the features thereupon (see also Beal 2009; Johnstone 2009).

**5. Conclusions**

By looking at Yorkshire dialect dictionaries, dialect writing, and dialect commodities, we can see that use of DAR is explicitly linked with “Yorkshire” dialect. It is frequently and consistently discussed in texts which provide overt commentary on the dialect; it is also frequent and consistently employed in written representations of “Yorkshire” dialect. Additionally, when I asked respondents to my online survey to list features they thought of as “Yorkshire” dialect, one of the most frequent to occur was DAR. This suggests that speakers are aware of DAR and associate the feature with the region. Moreover, examples of commodified “Yorkshire” features highlight a ‘celebratory’ attitude towards both Yorkshire and its dialect; this can be seen in the logo declaring Yorkshire ‘t’ best place in t’ world’ illustrated in Figure 3 above. DAR features as the only “Yorkshire” dialect feature in this example. DAR is therefore enregistered as “Yorkshire” dialect and its use both explicitly suggests the region and can be used to create the context of “Yorkshire”.

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