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10.

Now You See It, Now You Don't: *h*-dropping in the Early History of English[1]

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1. Introduction

The paper investigates how the intermediate, diachronic stages as well as the present-day dialectal variation of consonant /h/ in English can be modelled through the representations of linguistic structure, that is, in autosegmental phonology. Revealed is a complex diachronic path toward segmental effacement, where crucially there are intermediate stages of deletion, leading to latent, 'phantom consonants': sounds exhibiting contradictory phonological behaviour whereby now you see them, now you don't.

The chart in (1) depicts the complex interactions of two such latent segments: the etymological underlying /n/ of the indefinite article on the one hand, and the /h/ English varieties inherited from Old English (OE) at the beginning of a lexical set. The indefinite article's /n/ appeared in all phonological contexts when it emerged as a development of OE's numeral *ān* 'one' (see (1a) below). However, in present-day Standard Southern British English (SSBE) and General American (GA) as well as a number of other varieties, we witness that the /n/ is only found in a subset of phonological environments, specifically in contexts where the morpheme juncture is prevocalic (1b–c). In pre-consonantal contexts the /n/ does not appear, and this includes before the lexical set of words that start with /h/, which is treated like any other consonant.[2] Since a rule of /n/ insertion/deletion cannot be generalised, traditionally one has to assume two competing variants of the indefinite article: *a* and *an*.

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[1] The paper reports part of the results of an ongoing project pertaining to the historical development and present-day patterning of English (i) indefinite article (*a/an*) and its final /n/; (ii) word-initial /h/, focussing on the diachronic enigma that surrounds the latter. We are grateful to the audience of the *Nyelvelmélet és diakrónia 5* [Language theory and diachrony 5] workshop at PPCU in Budapest in 2022 and the *Crossing borders between countries, scholars, and genres* conference at the Catholic University in Ružomberok in 2024 for commenting on the first drafts of this study, as well as to our reviewers. BBK's contribution to this project was in part supported by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Pázmány Péter Catholic University in the frame of project no. PPKE-BTK-KUT-23-2.

[2] This despite some speakers using *an* with certain *h*-initial words, which we discuss in Balogné Bérces and Ulfsbjorninn (in prep.).

As can be seen in (1d), in a number of English English varieties including, most famously, Cockney English, there is no phonemic or phonetic /h/ anywhere in the phonological system. No synchronic rule of *h*-dropping can be realistically posited, and thus the conclusion is that Cockney has no underlying /h/ at all. Consequently, it is straightforward that the *h*-initial lexical set has fully merged with the vowel-initial set, and both uniformly take the *an* variant of the indefinite article.

In addition to the systems in (1a–d), there was a form of Cockney prior to the 'classic' variety in (1d), described by Hurford (1971; 1972), who referred to it as 'an archaic pronunciation found mainly in older speakers' (1971, 144). In this variety, though there was also no /h/ and no reasonable synchronic rule of *h*-dropping, the lexical set of *h*-initial words used the same variant as the consonant-initial set. Meanwhile, the *an* variant was obligatory before all other vowel-initial words. This is shown in (1e).

(1) Indefinite article shape by phonological context over time

	_ + C *cat*	**_ + V** *apple*	**_ + h** *heart*
a. Early Middle English[3] (cf. Old English *ān* 'one')	an-kat	an-apːəl	an-hɛrt(ə)
b. Older Standard Southern British English	ə-kæt	ən-æpl̩	ə-hɑːt
c. Modern Standard Southern British English	ə-kaʔ	ən-apu	ə-hɑːʔ
d. Cockney English	ə-kæʔ	ən-æpu	ən-ɑːʔ
e. Older Cockney	ə-kæʔ	ən-æpu	ə-ɑːʔ
f. MLE	ə-kaʔ	ə-ʔapu	ə-h/ħɑːʔ

Lastly, and quite interestingly, Modern London English (referred to in the literature as 'Multicultural London English' – henceforth MLE) uses the variant /ə/ in all contexts,

[3] The exact timing of when the present-day use of the article was first fully developed is a secondary issue in this paper. As Crisma and Pintzuk (2016) show, this was a gradual process of syntactico-semantic change going hand-in-hand with the elision of the /n/, which eventually led to the allomorphy. The first forms of *a~an* alternation are already attested in late Old English, but the system remains variable well into the Middle English period. Therefore, what we depict in (1a) characterises a relatively long time span from late(r) Old English till early Middle English. Consequently, the forms of the example words, too, are only meant as approximate representatives of Old English *catt*, *æppel*, *heorte*, and Middle English *cat*/*catte*, *appel*, *herte*, respectively, and their dialectal variants.

thereby having no allomorphy, like OE, but this time having lost /n/ entirely (see 1f). Interestingly, however, MLE has restored the *h*-initial lexical set, presumably having recovered its pattern from Modern Standard Southern British (1c), with which it is contemporaneous, and/or the orthography.

Of this intricate case of synchronic and diachronic variation, our paper focusses on *h*-initial words and their historical development, structured as follows. The next section, section 2, discusses the riddle of Middle English <h> – a sound whose controversial development suggests that for centuries, it was both present and absent at the same time. Section 3 then explains how autosegmental phonological theory actually *predicts* such cases of latent sounds, while section 4 brings further evidence of these 'phantoms' from older forms of today's varieties of English. Finally, section 5 briefly introduces the preliminary results of a study on latent /h/ in the speech of present-day 'standard' accents, and section 6 concludes the paper.

2. The riddle of Middle English <h>

Word-initial /h/ started undergoing gradual lenition most probably in OE already, and this process was accelerated by contact with Romance in Middle English (ME). Quite puzzlingly, however, most of these /h/'s (with just a few lexical exceptions like *hour*, *honest*, *heir*) were later fully recovered into most varieties including the current standard (see (1b-c)). The most convincing evidence of this full recovery between ME and Early Modern English is the oft-cited argument that the dialectal feature of *h*-dropping is virtually non-existent in American varieties – i.e., it was not transported overseas by British settlers at the time when the transatlantic forms of English were founded, and consequently, its prevalence in modern (traditional) dialects of English English must be the result of a later, separate (albeit not necessarily unrelated) internal development. This diachronic rehabilitation of /h/ seems to have happened in a period when literacy was not yet widespread enough to provide orthographic support, and, as we will see presently, there is controversial diachronic data from alliterative verse and other manuscript evidence on whether word-initial /h/ was pronounced or dropped.

Parallel to this development, an indefinite article was also emerging from OE's numeral for 'one', with the syntactico-semantic process accompanied by the phonological destabilisation of its final consonant. Since the ensuing allomorphy is conditioned by the class of the following phoneme, the form selected with a lexical item is indicative of speakers' assessment of the initial sound of that lexical item. The fact that late OE and early ME witness non-alternating *an*(*e*) with all three lexical sets represented by 'cat', 'apple' and 'heart' underpins the initial stability of the /n/ – and shows that the

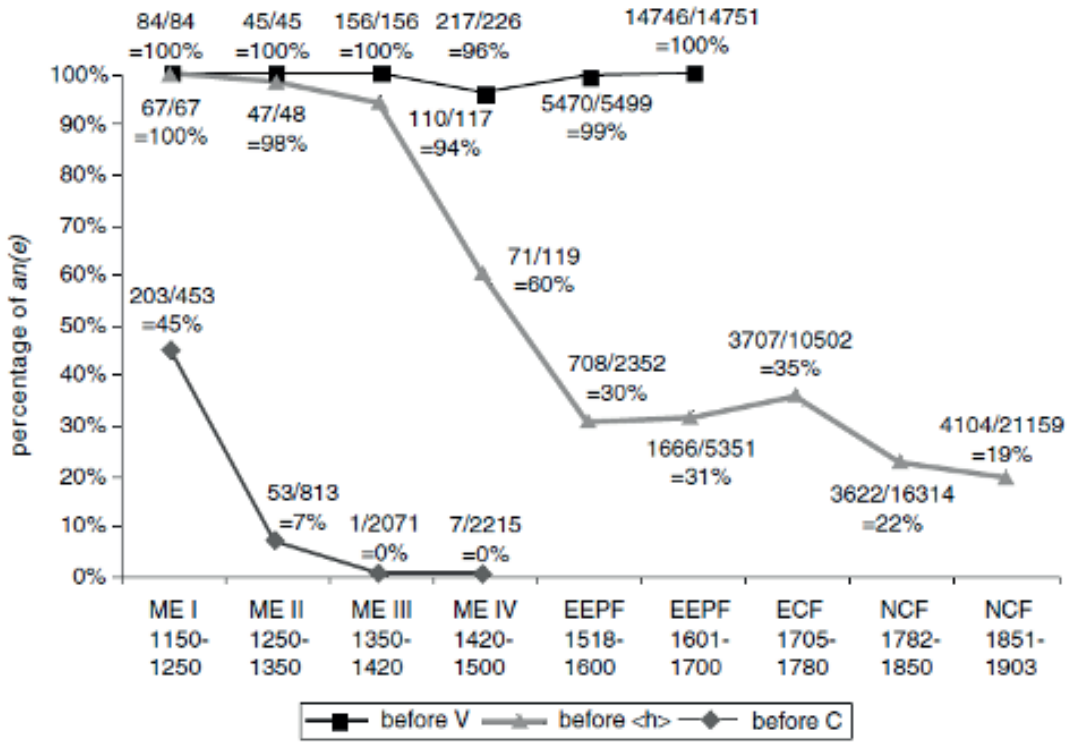
indefinite article cannot yet be used as a test to detect the pronunciation of *h*-initial words for this period.

Nor, for that matter, does it provide evidence whether the forms corresponding to 'an apple' are truly different from the other combinations, with consonant-initial following words, in this period. As a side issue, we note here that Minkova (2000; 2003) has some arguments, based on data from vowel alliteration, (the absence of) vowel elision in apparent hiatus contexts, and orthography, that there were no vowel-initial words in OE yet. This would mean that the language had systematic hard attack (*harter Einsatz*) as present-day German, Dutch and Czech – much the same way as, allegedly, MLE as well as contemporary, progressive forms of SSBE and Cockney English. Since the issue is only tangentially relevant to the present discussion (regarding the chronology of the emergence of article allomorphy), we plainly add this comment here, referring the reader to Minkova (2000; 2003) for the claim and Okazaki (2006) for a few counterarguments.

The diagram in (2) below (from Schlüter 2010, 173) shows the later development of both *an* and the treatment of *h*-initial words, between early ME and Modern English. Before vowel-initial words, *an*(*e*) has been stably at 100%, and in the first historical phase it is also used, at a cca. 50% variability, before consonant-initial words. This, then, drastically and rather swiftly drops to (near) zero. Before <h>, however, it only starts its decrease in the final ME phase, when it has already become extinct before other consonants, and it only plunges to no more than around 20% in the nineteenth century, and never disappears fully (at least before a close set of lexical items – see section 5). That is, in ME texts, words beginning with <h> are predominantly treated as words beginning with a vowel.[4]

[4] Similarly to *a*/*an*, the loss of the final nasal in the possessive determiners *mine* and *thine* was also a gradual process that went through an intermediate stage where the choice between *my*/*mine* and *thy*/*thine* was phonologically determined. Intriguingly, this final consonant erosion before *h*-initial words lagged behind other pre-consonantal contexts, making the pattern of the change mirror that of *an*(*e*). The *my*/*thy* forms appeared well before the 1400s and the whole process was fully completed by 1680, but corpus data from between 1410 and 1460 still records only around 50% occurrence of *my*/*thy* with *h*-words, which does not reach 100% before a hundred years later (see Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2016, Nevalainen 2018).

(2) The distribution of *a* and *an*(*e*) in a series of corpora from ME to nineteenth-century English according to the initial letter of the following lexeme (Schlüter 2010, 173)



What is not clear, however, is how this selection of *an* is to be interpreted: whether the initial <h> is not pronounced, or it is not *felt* as a consonant. The historical data is unfortunately inconsistent and contradictory, providing no conclusive evidence. For instance, there even are cases when *a* is chosen with a word-initial <h> but at the same time, that <h> alliterates with vowels (see Crisma 2010). Schlüter (2010) assumes an internal change, unrelated to but accelerated by the Norman French influence, whereby the /h/-sound undergoes progressive (phonetic) weakening and disappearance (or at least achieving minimum phonetic salience) in early ME, which is later reversed through its gradual strengthening, leading to its re-introduction. Crucially to the present discussion, both Crisma (2010) and Schlüter (2010) make the claim that throughout, some kind of continued representation of /h/ has to be posited. Schlüter (2010) even mentions that early ME weak initial /h/ can be conceived of as (part of) a vowel. Based on a close investigation of the relevant data, she concludes that '[…] the phonetic realization of these lexemes may well have preserved traces of the earlier [h]-onset, even though language users were not aware of this, and these traces may have been the

germs of the renewed strengthening of the sound from later Middle English onwards' (Schlüter 2010, 188).

Scholars, therefore, seem to conclude that /h/ has to be assigned some kind of representation throughout: one that may correlate with its 'minimum phonetic salience' and its ambiguous patterning as (part of) a vowel, one that involves its 'traces' that may later serve as the basis for its reconstruction. This takes us to the issue of phonological representations and their potential to express such controversial and contradictory linguistic objects.

3. How can a sound be present and absent at the same time?

The theory of phonological representations, autosegmental phonology, is in fact able to handle such enigmatic situations with ease: since its fundamental claim is that phonological objects are multidimensional constructs, with the different dimensions (levels or tiers) functioning autonomously and being connected by associations only, it does not only have the ability to conceive of but it potentially *predicts* structural configurations in which there is some incongruency on two separate levels attached to the same segment. It is indeed possible for a sound to be present and absent at the same time if it comprises some phonological substance on some tier(s) but not on others.

We contend, therefore, that the intermediate diachronic stages in the development of /h/ (and, incidentally, of the /n/ of *an*, too) emerge from the various levels of phonological representation, and the fact that representations can lack an underlying association line at any of these levels. In this way, underlying representations differ from pattern to pattern, and overall we observe the full gamut of representational possibilities given by the theory: (3a) fixed (diachronically/synchronically stably associated) segments; (3b) empty skeletal slots; (3c) skeletal slots associated only to an empty root node (for the reason why we use the label '*h* aspiré', see later); and unlinked/unfixed/floating segments (with a root node) (3d), or segmental material (features) without a root node (3e) (see below).[5] Empty skeletal slots (3b) are generally accepted in autosegmental representations (more traditionally depicted as an empty 'x' dominated by an Onset node), and there has been some prior research that argues for the distinction between (3b) and (3c) (Charette 1991). Floating segments and floating features (3d–e) also belong to the established vocabulary of autosegmental models. In what follows, the configurations in (3c–d) are in the focus of our attention since they represent structures including a root node (shown by the dot), i.e., they are *segments*; however, they

[5] In (3), 'C' stands for a consonantal skeletal slot, the dots are root nodes, and 'α' represents some phonetic/melodic material. For a remark on the root node, see below.

are *empty* on the tier either below or above. Consequently, their constructions predict ambiguous, ambivalent phonological behaviour: they derive surface/phonetic latent consonants.

(3)

a. fixed	b. empty	c. *h* aspiré	d. floating segment	e. floating segmental material/feature
C	C	C		
|		|		
•		•	•	
|			|	
α			α	α

On the prosodic tier, the assumption that the syllable rhyme always comes with a preceding onset (i.e., syllables are onset–rhyme pairs) adds the prediction that syllable-initial latent consonants will typically be of type (3c) (followed by full nuclei), whereas syllable-final instances thereof will typically be of type (3d). Syllable-initial ones will be hiatus enforcers, 'phantom consonants': invisible prosodic demarcators exhibiting similar effects to those of certain empty categories observed in syntax (e.g., *wh*-traces – denoted by **Ø** in (4) – blocking *wanna*-contraction).

(4) *wanna*-contraction (Radford 1988, 475–76)

a) I *want to* win
b) I *wanna* win
c) You *want to* beat who(m)?
d) Who do you *wanna* beat **Ø**?
e) I *want* Jim *to* win
f) You *want* who *to* win?
g) Who do you *want* **Ø** *to* win?
h) *Who do you *wanna* win?

In (4), (a) and (b) show that *want* and *to*, when juxtaposed, can be contracted in spoken/colloquial English. When the sentence structure also involves *wh*-movement, however, the contraction is only possible when the *wh*-trace (indicated by **Ø**) does not intervene between the two words (4d) – otherwise it is blocked (4h). This syntactic example is similar in effect to hard attack (see the previous section) in languages like German (and, arguably, in OE, too), blocking the emergence of cross-word linking, including *r*-linking, cf. English *summe*/r/*evening* versus German *Sommer*[ʔ]*abend*. The difference is that, unlike the zero in (4), the glottal stop does have a phonetic manifestation. Below

we will see that French *h* aspiré serves as a more perfect phonological counterpart, as the intervening empty category does not appear in any phonetic form in that case.

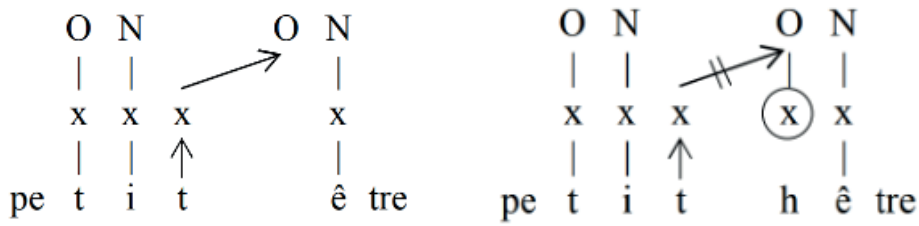
Syllable-final (in this case, morpheme-final) latent consonants will typically be of type (3d) and will therefore be the opposite: potential (aspiring?) hiatus fillers (or mechanisms to avoid OCP violations, as claimed in Scheer 2022). The most well-known such case in English is 'Intrusive *r*' in certain non-rhotic varieties, which turns up as a cross-morpheme linking consonant after a set of lexically marked roots, such as *law* in *law* /r/ *and order* (unless we accept the proposal that such /r/'s are not underlyingly present latent consonants but phonetic interpretations of vocalic material spreading from the root-final vowel – see Broadbent 1991).

Both types of latent consonant discussed above are straightforwardly exemplified by French: the former is a possible representation of what is called *h* aspiré, while the latter is showcased by what is called liaison (see below for illustration). However, we claim that these phonological configurations are more widely attested: in addition to French, it is possible to identify further cases of similar 'phantom consonants', even of the *h* aspiré type, in other languages, e.g., Ik (Ulfsbjorninn 2021); John (2014) provides a further list of Aranese Gascon, Onandaga, Seri, Turkish, Maltese Arabic and Tiwi (see references therein) as languages that seem to also exhibit the phenomenon. Even more relevantly to our present topic, we may also assume that both emerge diachronically as a stage in consonant lenition, i.e., a process pointing towards deletion: in this way, they are conserved/fossilised incomplete elisions, potentially triggering ambiguous phonological behaviours such as the one documented for ME /h/.

Of course, the most well-known such case is that of *h* aspiré in French, illustrated in (5) (from Scheer et al. 2015).[6] The final, floating consonant of words like *petit*, a /t/ this time, is normally 'resyllabified' into a following vowel-initial word (e.g., *être* /ɛtʁ/ 'being') and liaison happens (in *petit être* in (5a)); however, a set of lexically specified words which begin with an orthographic but phonetically unrealised *h* (e.g., *hêtre* /ɛtʁ/ 'beech') will systematically block cross-word linking (5b). Such *h*'s are called *h* aspiré 'aspirated *h*', and such words can be referred to as *h* aspiré words. The orthographic <h> is shown in the diagram in (5) but its actual representation is the x-slot itself.

[6] Note that this diagram is a bit misleading because the *h* is actually written under the initial onset slot for *hêtre* although the claim is that it is never pronounced anymore.

(5) a. *petit être* 'little being' b. *petit hêtre* 'small beech'



(5) shows the basic idea behind Charette (1991)'s analysis: *h* aspiré words start with an empty onset having a timing slot, whereas 'true' vowel-initial syllables (like *être*) lack any structure below the Onset node.

The French example, then, provides illustration of *h* aspiré (3c) as well as floating segments (3d), repeated below for convenience as (6a–b), respectively. We claim that both are exemplified by English, in the diachronic evolution of *an* and word-initial /h/. Drawing on support from the historical surveys, we contend that, on the one hand, the English *a*/*an* allomorphy is analysable as *n*-liaison (lexically unlinked floating melody), developing in the ME period and still present in certain varieties including older and modern Standard Southern British English (1b–c); on the other hand, conceiving of the intermediate stage of *h*-dropping as *h* aspiré (empty skeletal slot/root node) accounts for all the observed individual patterns in the diachrony.

In particular, conceiving '*h*-dropping' in the early history of English as a case of *h* aspiré (rather than one of dropping proper) solves the long riddle: /h/ was neither deleted nor pronounced – hence the controversial data from poetry, and its mysterious easy, quick, full reconstruction. Besides, we cannot exclude the possibility of a scenario in which speakers' grammar got so unstable during this transitional period that a kind of random vacillation was brought about between *h* aspiré (6a) and floating *h* (6b), with speakers varying in terms of the URs stored for different items, leading to both inter- and intraspeaker variation. This would explain even more of the observed discrepancy in the diachronic data and the almost perfect rehabilitation of *h* in later ME.

(6) a. *h* aspiré b. floating

The careful reader may have noticed that there is a systematic theoretical difference between the representations in (5) and ours in (6): the prosodic tier (the 'O–x' pair in (5) and 'C' in (6)) and phonetic structure (abbreviated to phonetic symbols) are mediated in our model by root nodes (the dots). This issue is beyond the scope of the present discussion – suffice it to say that the investigation of the two latent consonants in the history of English contributes valuable arguments to yet another aspect of phonological representations, namely, the role of skeletal positions versus that of root nodes. For Charette (1991) (and the research that follows in that vein), the formal difference between *h* aspiré words and vowel-initial words lies in the presence of a timing slot in the initial empty onset in the former, and the absence thereof in the latter. We, however, argue in Balogné Bérces and Ulfsbjorninn (in prep.), together with others like John (2014), that the skeletal slot is present in either case, and what they differ in is the availability of a root node.[7]

You may also notice that the French data above do not require the presence of the melody of /h/ in the UR (see our footnote 6), whereas here we suppose the potential historical reconstruction of initial /h/ due to its phonetic trace being retained in the exponents (lexical forms) – hence the /h/ in (6a).

Intriguingly, an additional option for a possible diachronic explanation reveals itself if we assume that the phonetic form of word-initial /h/ was [ɦ] at the time. In her study of (older) Cockney, Häcker (2005) finds that that pronunciation was firmly established in 19th-century English, and due to its phonetic properties, it may have given the auditory impression of a dropped /h/. If it was among the pronunciation variants in earlier periods, too, that could have contributed to the contradictory nature of the phenomenon.

[7] Our representations are closest in theoretical taste to those of Strict CV (or CVCV) phonology (Lowenstamm 1996; Scheer 2004). Although Strict CV does not usually show the root node, they are understood to be there often implicitly (Kula 2008) and explicitly (Ulfsbjorninn 2021; Scheer 2022; Lahrouchi and Ulfsbjorninn 2024; Faust 2025; etc.). The root node layer introduces other possible configurations, just a floating root node, or features and just a root node but no association line between them. These possibilities have not been analytically used so they are not listed in (3). There has also been the use of an underlying association line (Ziková and Faltýnková 2021; Fortuna 2022) – these are not relevant to our work here so we do not include them.

Nevertheless, we maintain that the autosegmental solution in (6) provides a better insight through its special tier associations. Its structural configuration integrates the continued representation of /h/ proposed by the diachronic studies, and explains its almost complete rehabilitation between 1400 and 1600, witnessed by many varieties of the language. Certain non-standard accents, however, end up as fully *h*-less, which is even apparent in the interaction of *h* (or more precisely, its absence) with the /n/ of *an* (e.g., Cockney – see (1d)). The following section turns to these varieties and a possible reconstruction of their development.

4. Further evidence: The 'phantom *h*' in older forms of today's *h*-less varieties

Many present-day varieties of English English have historically eliminated their *h*-initial words. Most probably, this gradual process started with the simplification of /hw/ sequences in words like *which*, *whine* (homophonous with words like *witch*, *wine* in varieties that have introduced this change: most of England, but not, notoriously, in Scotland and parts of Ireland, and North American varieties are divided still today whether they merge or split the two lexical sets), and spread afterwards to all other instances of initial /h/, too (only really happening in forms of English in England, becoming a forceful local identity marker as well as perhaps the most heavily stigmatised non-standard pronunciation feature there, but remaining unable to affect varieties beyond). These are the so-called *h*-dropping, or *h*-less accents of English, the most well-known of which being Cockney in London.

Such *h*-dropping accents of English typically only drop *h*'s word-initially, hence the most frequently used keyword in dialectal studies, *house*. Investigations of native intuitions about the word-internal site (in words like *ahead*, *behave*, *mahogany* or *Sahara*) are sparse, probably because of the low frequency of most such words and their scarcity in corpora. Baranowski and Turton (2015, 298) report *h*-dropping in Manchester English in, e.g., *behind*, and state that the process feeds 'Linking *r*' (e.g., *Harpurhey* may be pronounced /ˌɑːpəˈɹeɪ/). Informal, introspective reflections either suggest no medial deletion, or some interaction with the preceding vowel's quality (see, e.g., the comments below Smith 2012). This may indicate some diversity in the precise structural description of the diachronic rule of *h*-dropping in different varieties, but because we are primarily concerned with the representation of the outcome (irrespective of word position), and because the word-initial site is shared by all *h*-less subsystems, we will continue to focus on the more frequent, better-documented case of the beginning of the word.

We therefore turn our attention to the gradual diachronic development of these *h*-less varieties. There is evidence from their older forms (e.g., Older Cockney in the

south of England, or Older Hartlepool in the north) of an intermediate stage with no *n*-liaison with dropped /h/ (1e). For instance, Hurford (1971; 1972), talking about phrases like *a half* in Cockney, explains: 'I have the impression that [əɑːf] is an archaic pronunciation found mainly in older speakers and that [ənɑːf] is now predominant, especially in speakers of middle age or younger' (Hurford 1971, 144), and 'we find, for example, *a half* [əɑːf], and *a heart* [əɑːʔ], but never (in adult speech) **a apple* *[əæpʰʊ], or **a office* *[əɔfɪs]' (Hurford 1972, 294).

Dialect writing provides further proof of the pattern. Reg Smythe's Andy Capp cartoons, for example, produced for the *Daily Mirror* and the *Sunday Mirror* since 1957 and depicting then-middle-aged characters from Hartlepool, Durham, put into the characters' mouths phrases written as *a 'ook* 'a hook', *a 'elluva* … 'a hell of a …', *a 'and* 'a hand', *in a 'urry* 'in a hurry', alongside *an*+V- sequences such as *an idiot*, *an ash-tray*, *an early night*, etc. This seems to suggest dropped *h*'s word initially (indicated by the apostrophes) but consonant-initial allomorph selection for the indefinite article with those same words, while the allomorph triggered by vowel-initial stems is also part of the system. Sporadic instances of *an* + *h*-less item (e.g., *an 'alf-back*, *an 'usband*) indicate that the system is on the way towards the Cockney type (1d), and, since the same apostrophe is applied, that all these pronunciations uniformly involve the plain absence of /h/ rather than, e.g., hard attack. The fact that the present-day form of this dialect is indeed (1d) with no (systematic) hard attack also suggests that the apostrophe in *a 'ook* and the like denotes an unfilled hiatus and not a glottal stop – it is difficult to believe that speakers would have abandoned the strategy of glottal stop insertion later if it had been part of their phonological system.

The examples above identify a transitional, hybrid phase in the historical evolution of the elision of /h/ in these accents, in which the consonant acts like a 'phantom': it is present in some way (blocking the appearance of the /n/ of *an*) and (felt) absent in another (phonetically) at the same time. We claim that this kind of behaviour is due to its patterning as *h* aspiré, stemming from its structure which we show in (6a). It may well be the case that ME /h/ underwent the same intermediate phase in the course of its change but, unlike the later wave of *h*-dropping that eventually produced today's *h*-less varieties, this earlier diachronic process did not reach its terminal stage and got reversed from a melody-preserving *h* aspiré before it could lead to complete deletion.

5. The special case of certain *h*-words in present-day English

A final issue pertaining to the Janus-faced /h/ of English concerns present-day varieties of the 'standard' type (1b–c), i.e., in which the well-known *a*/*an* allomorphy is accompanied by stable /h/ in words like *heart* that – normally – grants consonant-initial

behaviour to its lexical set. A closed set of words, however, e.g., *historic*, have both an *h*-initial and an *h*-less pronunciation that alternate: both *a* /h/*istoric* (*moment*) and *a*/n/*istoric* (*moment*) occur. Furthermore, certain speakers systematically (albeit variably) use pronunciations composed of the *an* variant combined with the *h*-ful form: *a*/n h/*istoric*. Balogné Bérces and Ulfsbjorninn (in prep.) reports the results of a small-scale survey whose goal is to discover the details of the phenomenon, which we briefly summarise here.

First, native speakers' reflections on such pronunciations point out that most of those who use *an* with words like *historic* do not drop the *h* but pronounce /-nh-/ (Smith 2012). The process is item-specific, and the *h*-words involved are both phonologically and etymologically constrained. The most frequent such words include *habítual*, *históric*(*al*), *hotél* and *heróic* – they all are French/Latinate words with second-syllable stress (marked with the accents). Hypothetical **an hístory*, i.e., the *an* form combined with an *h*-ful pronunciation of an initial-stressed word, is deemed downright ungrammatical by native speakers, which indicates that stress is indeed a factor.

Second, an acoustic analysis of a corpus containing actual instances of such sequences in spontaneous speech reveals a number of different phonetic strategies that the speakers resort to: most frequently, the /nh/ sequence is pronounced with a smooth transition, but some speakers hold a very brief pause inbetween, and some fully merge the two consonants into a devoiced nasal [n̥]. It is very important to bear in mind that these options are available only after *an* and only with these specific *h*-words, and these speakers are otherwise non-*h*-dropping speakers; therefore, it is obvious that this variation arises as a result of the combination of two lexically marked items.

Our interpretation is that these speakers seem to be aware of two variants for both words (the two allomorphs of *an* and the *h*-ful and *h*-less forms of the *h*-words) as they store both with URs with latent consonants. The juxtaposition of two latent segments creates a phonological conflict that can be resolved in a variety of ways depending on how the floating melodies are associated to the prosody. As a result, with the exclusion of *a 'istoric* (which would not surface either of the floating consonants and thus would create cross-word hiatus in this accent), all the available structural configurations enter into a competition, leading to a huge amount of interspeaker (and perhaps also intraspeaker) variation. The representations and the derivations are explicated in Balogné Bérces and Ulfsbjorninn (in prep.) in detail.

The true relevance of this case to our present discussion is that it unveils an array of configurational alternatives that speakers have access to at a synchronic stage in the flow of diachronic development. This way, it opens up the possibility that a similar (or the same) kind of vacillation characterised the treatment of *h*-initial words in Mid-

dle English, with an ensuing complex situation of inter- and intraspeaker variation very much like what we witness about the phenomenon of clashing latent consonants above.

6. Conclusion

We hope to have shown that representational phonology offers well-supported solutions to the riddle of '*h*-dropping' in the early history of English: it may not have been complete deletion at any of the stages of its development, but instead, a process producing intermediate forms of the *h* aspiré type. These latent, 'phantom', or 'ghost' consonants may have resembled their counterparts identifiable in older forms of present-day *h*-less varieties (like Cockney, or Hartlepool English), or they may have produced phonetic patterns similar to the ones that still exist for *historic* and a few other words in accents that are 'standard' otherwise. Or there may have been a mixture of both.

In any event, we are led to conclude that /h/ was neither deleted nor pronounced, in a phonological setting which brought with it a great deal of inter- and intraspeaker variation, but which also guaranteed a simple, quick, and full reconstruction for the destabilised consonant. This approach to this issue is in line with the results of diachronic studies, quoted above, that suggest 'some kind of continued representation of /h/ during its obscurity in late Old and early Middle English' (Schlüter 2010, 188). Without doubt, the toolkit of representational phonology is available to account for such puzzling observations.

In addition, we propose that the current sociolinguistic variation found in extant Southern British English with regard to indefinite article allomorphy and initial /h/ can be entirely modelled phonologically by different speakers having established different underlying forms for these items. In modern SSBE, *n*-liaison stays maintained with no *h*-dropping or *h* aspiré. In MLE, another prominent southern variety, *a*/*an*-allomorphy cannot survive (a well-known feature of urban language contact – see Britain and Fox 2009), the /n/ having been finally and completely extirpated from the UR of the indefinite article, and neither can *h*-dropping/*h* aspiré as *h*'s are restored.

Nevertheless, still today, in present-day 'standard' varieties, /h/ continues to work in mysterious ways, even if in a limited set of words (like *historic*) only, as shown in our last section above. It keeps puzzling us, as it did in Middle English and later periods. It remains the most whimsical sound: now you see it, now you don't.

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