'I AM THE UMBLEST PERSON GOING': THE USE OF /H/-DROPPING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH WRITINGS

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on /h/-dropping in nineteenth-century English fiction not as a linguistic record of spoken usage, but as an orthographic and semiotic resource through which class difference and social attitudes are rendered. Drawing on sociolinguistics and historical studies of language ideology, it considers nonstandard spelling as a selective and meaningful authorial practice shaped by contemporary prescriptive discourse. The analysis relies on a small corpus consisting of speech samples from different nineteenth-century English literary characters whose speech is rendered as dialectal. The analysis is supplemented by reference to nineteenth-century elocutionary guides and other educational materials in order to offer a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic correctness and social legitimacy.*

Keywords: *literary dialect, /h/-dropping, social class, legitimacy, nineteenth century, orthography*, *British English*.

1. /H/- dropping as a symbol of social divide in nineteenth century England

The nineteenth century in England brought massive social change. Increased urbanization, especially in cities like London, Birmingham, Manchester, as well as the expansion of the industrial revolution led to the emergence of a self-conscious middle class. The growth of mass education and literacy led to a certain degree of anxiety about how to signal class identity. The prescriptivist attitude to language use and the rapid expansion of compulsory education brought pronunciation correction into the classrooms. Children were explicitly taught to pronounce their aitches and if they did not comply, they were corrected[1]. Therefore, nineteenth century England was a class-conscious society, and language, especially pronunciation, became a key marker. This is reflected in the impressive publication of prescriptive manuals on language, many of which attained notable popularity. Elocution guides and etiquette books portrayed /h/-dropping[2] as careless, vulgar and lazy, contributing to the transformation of a phonetic feature into a social judgement.

Among the books that tackled language use and elocution, it is worth mentioning Mudie's (1841) *A Grammar of the English Language Truly Made*

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[1] This obsession is parodied later on by playwright George Bernand Shaw in the play *Pygmalion* (1912).

[2] /H/-dropping is a phonological feature which refers to words which are spelt with initial *h*, but pronounced without it. For example, a noun like *hill* is pronounced /ɪl/.

Easy and Amusing, by the Invention of Three Hundred Moveable Parts of Speech, or the sterner *Standard English*, published by Oxford scholar Thomas Kington-Oliphant in 1873. Oliphant notes that the educated class produces all that is lofty, while the middle class is blamed for "day by day pouring more sewage into the well of what can no longer be called English undefiled" (quoted in Johnson, 2021: 43). It can therefore be assumed that in the Victorian Age, the main linguistic signifier of one's social standing was accent.

Oliphant (1873: 226) criticizes the English for dropping their aitches, but praises the Americans for correctly pronouncing the letter *h*:

> 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.

This well-known quotation is also used by Wyld (1936: 296) as an argument in favour of his view that /h/-dropping is a relatively recent phenomenon, that "was not widespread much before the end of the eighteenth century." The lack of this feature in American English indicates that it had not achieved widespread use at the time of British colonization, and that its diffusion in British English occurred only subsequently during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Ramisch, 2010: 177).

Lollar (1999: 7) notes that there are three important accent issues that were seen as the main markers of social class in nineteenth century England: H-dropping; R-dropping and the long A/short A crisis. In *The vulgarities of speech corrected: with elegant expressions for provincial and vulgar English, Scots, and Irish; for the use of those who are unacquainted with grammar*, published in 1826 and considered one of the most important grammar guides of the era, the anonymous writer notes that the most common mistake among the nouveau-riche was H-dropping. The omission of the *h*-sound from the beginning of words was a lower-class behaviour. This vulgarity was so dominant that there was even a book devoted to it: *Poor Letter H: Its Use and Abuse*. The book became an important addition to the library of any parvenu. The situation was so intense, that it gave rise to another peculiarity: /h/-insertion. Many speakers began inserting *h*'s where they were not required, in a desperate attempt to sound 'correct' and be associated with the upper class.

In 1869, Alexander Ellis, wrote that "at the present day great strictness in pronouncing *h* is demanded as a test of education and position" (quoted in Mugglestone, 2003: 95) and later, in 1890, the phonetician Henry Sweet comments on the role of /h/ as "an almost infallible test of education and refinement" (quoted in Mugglestone, 2003: 95). This pressing issue was also included in encyclopaedias published in the second half of the nineteenth century. For instance, the new edition of Chambers's *Encyclopaedia*,

published in 1888, devoted an entire section to the description and use of /h/, writing that "the correct pronunciation of this difficult letter is one of the most delicate tests of good breeding" (quoted in Mugglestone, 2003: 96). Surrounded by social stigma, the dropping of /h/ is considered, to quote John Wells (1982: 254), to be "the single most powerful pronunciation shibboleth in England," a powerful symbol of the social divide. Mugglestone (2003: 97) further adds that "the forces of respectability and emulation, the patterns of cultural and social cohesion, the social (and linguistic) stereotypes of the 'lady' and the 'gentleman', or the 'Cockney' and the parvenu, were all to have their correlates in the use, and misuse, of /h/."

Victorian literature strongly reinforced these associations. Authors such as Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, used /h/ dropping to portray their characters as working class, uneducated, comic, morally suspect, vulgar, rural, etc. Writers also exaggerated on the use of /h/-dropping in spelling to signal inferiority, despite the fact that real speech was more nuanced. Among the factors that have turned /h/-dropping into such a powerful symbol it is worth mentioning: visibility, learnability and hypercorrection (the insertion of /h/ where it did not belong).

By the end of the nineteenth century, /h/-dropping had become a symbol of class exclusion, and a piece of evidence showcasing that Standard English was defined socially, not linguistically. Thus, language stigma reflects social inequality not communicative inadequacy (Trudgill, 2000).

Map 1 offers some insight regarding the pronunciation of the noun *house*, as either /haʊs/ or /aʊs/ across England, in the twenty-first century. This map reveals the fact that /h/-dropping is quite widespread in England at present, yet it still retains its nineteenth century social associations.
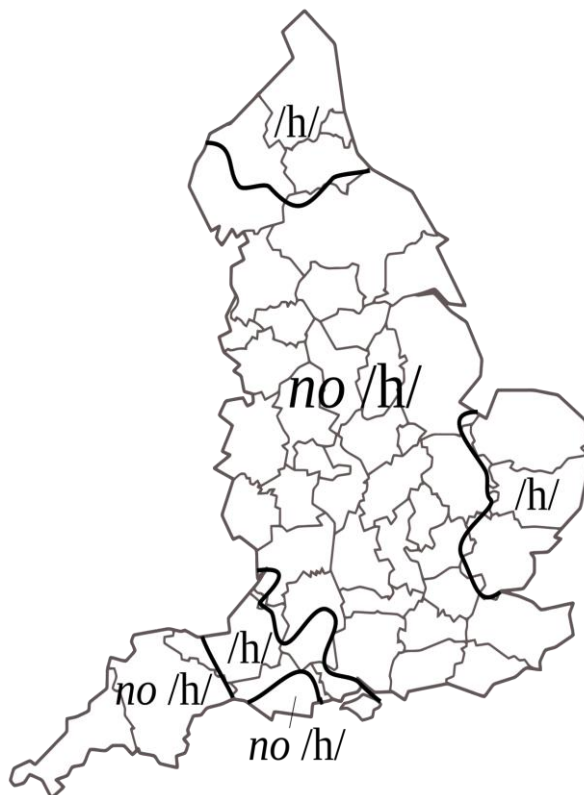
Map 1. *The pronunciation of 'house'* (Source: Upton and Widdowson, 2006: 46)

Upton and Widdowson (2006: 47) note that this map shows /h/-deletion and that it is obvious from the map that "there are areas of northern, eastern, and south-western England where *h-* has traditionally been retained by most, if not all speakers." The researchers further note that that despite the fact that /h/-less distinction was originally important geographically, nowadays there are other factors more important than region in establishing if a speaker drops initial *h-* or not. They exemplify this by mentioning the situation found in the city of Norwich, which although situated in a historically *h-* area (the eastern part of England), it "has in fact been h-less for the last 70 years at least (Trudgill, 1983: 77). Trudgill (1983) also adds that /h/-dropping occurs in the speech of the working-class.

2. /H/-dropping as a literary dialect in nineteenth century British fiction
In nineteenth-century English fiction, /h/-dropping operates less as a phonetic record of speech and more as an orthographic symbol through which class difference is rendered legible. The literary representation of /h/-dropping is not a phonetically accurate transcription, but rather a semiotic resource used

to signal social standing. Orthographic deviation should, therefore, be deemed a deliberate narrative act that depicts contemporary attitudes toward speech. Hence, the use of /h/-dropping by Victorian novelists aligns with the views that circulated in nineteenth century British society and mirrors the attitudes and beliefs regarding the importance of accent and language use.

Before embarking on the discussion proper and analyse /h/-dropping as a class shibboleth in various nineteenth century British writings, the concept of *literary dialect* should be defined and exemplified, in comparison with that of *dialect literature*. The term *literary dialect* is applied to a work of fiction where most of the text is written in Standard English, but the speech of certain characters is represented as dialectal. On the other hand, *dialect literature* is used to describe a work of fiction where the entire text or at least most of it is written in dialect (Beal, 2006: 82; Oancea, 2018: 113). In the case of the Victorian writers aforementioned, they write in Standard English, but make use of certain dialects to portray the speech of different characters in an attempt to make them sound illiterate, rustic, vulgar, lower-class, etc. Readers find themselves attracted to the dialect character who, under the garb of uncouth speech, might be considered relatable, witty, entertaining, etc.

In an article published in 1926, Krapp (1926: 523), in an attempt to provide an account of the psychology that lies beneath the concept of *dialect writing*, notes that:

> For it may safely be put down as a general rule that the more faithful a dialect is to folklore, the more completely it represents the actual speech of a group of people, the less effective it will be from the literary point of view. A genuinely adequate representation of a living dialect could be made only with the help of a phonetic alphabet, and such a record would contain an enormous amount of detail which would merely distract and often puzzle the literary reader. The writer of a literary dialect is not concerned with giving an exact picture of the folklore of speech. As an artist he must always keep his eye on the effect, and must select and reject what the scientific observation of his material reveals to him according as it suits or does not suit his purpose.

Krapp's paper extrapolates the relevance of literary dialect and concentrates on the artistry of dialect writing by highlighting its functional purpose. He further notes that "the purpose of literary dialect is not so much to arouse wonder as to secure sympathetic attention" (Krapp, 1926: 524). The scholar stresses the fact that literary dialect exposes social divisions in society, and draws attention to the diversity of the language. When a word is spelt differently (from the standard), this immediately triggers associations in the reader's mind, as far as dialect character is concerned.

Building on Krapp's pioneering work, Ives (1950) attempts to provide a theoretical framework for the study of literary dialect. He tackles the relationship between the writer and the reader (two people who have probably

never met) by considering the comprehension of the dialect portrayed and identifying the features used. Ives brings to the fore the idea of *authenticity* and highlights that writers using literary dialect need to strive for authenticity. Coupland (2003: 417) reinforces this view and notes that "Authenticity matters. It remains a quality of experience we actively seek out, in most domains of life, material and social." However, this train of thought is not in alignment with Beal's (2006: 82) view that an author who wishes to represent a nonstandard dialect has to keep a balance between *accuracy* and *accessibility*. She argues that if too many nonstandard features are used, then the text might pose difficulties in understanding it, especially if the reader is not familiar with the dialect portrayed.

In a similar vein, Ferguson (1998) dismisses the importance of authenticity and advocates for separating dialect from any discussions concerning authenticity. She considers that the main function of literary dialect is to create a fiction of language which supports the narrative. Ferguson (1998: 1) coins the term *ficto-linguistics* to depict the way dialect operates within the text. She defines *ficto-linguistics* as "the systems of language that appear in novels and both deviate from accepted or expected sociolinguistic patterns and indicate identifiable alternative patterns congruent to other aspects of the fictional world" (Ferguson, 1998: 2). The function of dialect in novels, according to Ferguson, is more intricate than simply attempting to create a sense of authenticity.

More recent studies have taken a post-authenticity stance (Hodson, 2016) and claimed that the dialect of servants in nineteenth-century English literature offers information about social attitudes. These include suggestions of what was considered to be servant speech in society in that era and how these reflect attitudes towards speech and social class (Hodson, 2016: 27). Hodson (2016: 33) further writes that:

> Literary dialects must be understood as complex statements that take place within complex linguistic ecologies. We need to dig deeply into understanding literary dialects both in terms of ficto-linguistic systems established within the literary work, and in terms of how those ficto-linguistic systems respond to the folklinguistic expectations that contemporary readers brought to the texts.

Other approaches to the study of literary dialect include Eckert's (2003) view, who considers that the authentic speaker is an "ideological construct" (Eckert, 2003: 392) or Agha's (2003: 231) theory of *enregisterment*, which refers to "processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms."

Let us now take a closer look at instances of /h/-dropping in different nineteenth-century English writings and delve into the speech of those characters who make use of this phonological feature. The examples were

manually selected from different nineteenth century novels renowned for the use of /h/-dropping. The first edition of the novels under scrutiny were employed to a large extent, but in some cases, this was not possible. The main problem in using subsequent editions is that different features originally employed by the author in the first edition of the novel may not be found in later editions. All the instances of /h/-dropping and /h/-insertion in the examples below are written in bold:

(1) 'I don't know much about that '**ere**,' said Sam.
        (Charles Dickens – *The Pickwick Papers*, 1836-7 [1986], p. 609)

(2) 'That '**ere** young lady,' replied Sam.
        (Charles Dickens – *The Pickwick Papers*, 1836-7 [1986], p. 613)

(3) 'I'll mention that '**ere**, sir,' rejoined Sam.
        (Charles Dickens – *The Pickwick Papers*, 1836-7 [1986], p. 619)

(4) 'I am well aware that I am the **umblest** person going,' said Uriah Heep, modestly; 'let the other be where he may. My mother is likewise a very **umble** person.'
                (Charles Dickens – *David Copperfield*, 1880, p. 233)

(5) 'ᴍI ᴅᴇEʀ JO i **opE** U ʀ ᴋʀWɪᴛE wEʟʟ i **opE** i sʜAL soN B **ʜᴀBᴇʟʟ** 4 2 TᴇᴇDɢᴇ U JO…'
                (Charles Dickens – *Great Expectations*, 1860-1 [2008], p. 45)

(6) '…wot a spree I've '**ed** ter be shaw! Sitch larks! Aout on the loose ivvery naht. Moosic '**alls** shempine seppers – thet's the wy ter mike the menny flah! Bah Jowve! I ev mide it flah!"[3]
(Andrew White Tuer – *Thenks Awf'lly! Sketched in Cockney and Hung on Twelve Pegs*, 1890: 12)

(7) 'I went into a public-'**ouse** to get a pint o' beer, / The publican '**e** up and' sez, "We serve no red-coats here."
                (Rudyard Kipling – *Tommy*, 1890)

(8) 'Whutt be 'bout, lad? cried John Fry; 'hutt un again, Jan, wull '**e**?'
                (R. D. Blackmore – *Lorna Doone*, 1869, p. 19)

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[3] The translation: "what a spree I've had to be sure! Such larks! Out on the loose every night. Music Halls, champagne suppers – that's the way to make the money fly!" This is an example of dialect literature, where the entire text is written in dialect, in this case in Cockney.

(9) 'Oh, dash, my vig!' exclaimed Mr Jorrocks, hurrying out, 'that counfounded young carpenter's been here again! That's the way they **hair** one's **'ouse**.'

<div align="right">(Robert Smith Surtees – Handley Cross, 1843, p. 293)</div>

(10) 'I daresay he'd think me a **hodd** talker, as you Loamshire folks allays does **hany** wonn as talks the right language.'

<div align="right">(George Eliot – Adam Bede, 1859, p. 324)</div>

(11) 'I've been tellin' Jowey, Grace, as I **'ope** he may turn out such another as Godwin **'ere**. **'E**'ll go to Collige, will Jowey. Godwin, jest arst the bo-oy a question or two, will you? **'E** ain't been doin' bad at **'is** school. Jest put **'im** through **'is** pyces, as yer may sye.'

<div align="right">(George Gissing – Born in Exile, 1892, p. 127)</div>

All these examples (1) – (11) contain instances of /h/-dropping, however, they fulfill different functions, in the sense that not all of them carry stigma. The first three examples are taken from Charles Dickens's novel *The Pickwick Papers*, from the speech of Sam Well. Forms such as '*'ere*' (here) exemplify Cockney speech, a London accent characterized by /h/-dropping. Sam Weller's speech indexes working-class London identity, identifying him as a Cockney speaker.

The example provided in (4), taken from the speech of the contemptible character Uriah Heep, reveals another instance of /h/-dropping. Uriah Heep intentionally drops his aitches to appear humble and status-less but he is by no means an illiterate speaker, as is the case with other characters found in Dickens's novels. Interestingly, Uriah Heep's speech does not contain any other orthographic alterations, thus turning /h/-dropping into a powerful symbol, which becomes a characteristic of his 'humble' speech, inasmuch that "using umble and not humble was afterwards far too often associated with the name of Heep as his infamy came to extend even here" (Mugglestone, 2003: 127). This is also mirrored in Leach's (1881: 57-8) comment on the subject: "The H of Humble has of recent years been reinstated in public favour by the late Mr Charles Dickens, whose 'Uriah Heep' remains a warning to evil-doers and H-droppers. It would be a boon to all speakers of English if a series of 'Uriah's' could contrive to eliminate every otiose H from the language."

The next example, taken from Dickens's *Great Expectations*, where the word '*hope'* is spelt '*'ope*' highlights illiteracy, not accent. This spelling signals the level of education of the character in question. Mugglestone (2003:123) notes that the approximate versions of *hope* and *able* used by Dickens to portray the speech of young Pip "unambiguously indicate the

intended social affinities (and social meanings) in this context." In Dickens's *Great Expectations*, /h/-dropping and even /h/-insertion (as in the case of the word *able* spelt *habell*) act as an index of social status and social mobility and, as the novel progresses, of the increasing social discrepancy between Pip (who travels to London and becomes a gentleman) and Joe (who is a blacksmith).

The example in (6) is taken from a sketch written entirely in Cockney (example of dialect literature), which has a humorous purpose. /H/-dropping becomes commodified, in the sense that it is easily recognizable, seen as a marker of urban identity ascribed to the Cockney accent. The main function is, therefore, to entertain the audience/readership.

The excerpt provided in (7), taken from the poem *Tommy* by Rudyard Kipling, contains two instances of /h/-dropping: '*'ouse*' (for *house*) and '*'e*' (instead of *he*). A plausible explanation might be that Kipling tries to contrast the speech of a low-ranking soldier with that of the publican who uses Standard English and does not drop /h/ (e.g. '*We serve no red-coats **here***'), in an attempt to show that the soldier is an outcast and is therefore marginalized and excluded from civilian respectability.

In the novel *Lorna Doone*, the speech of John Fry displays instances of /h/-dropping alongside morphosyntactic features of the West Country dialect. In this particular situation, /h/-dropping is used to highlight regional belonging, it does not carry stigma. This phonological feature, which characterizes the speech of John Fry, is used to construct local authenticity and marks solidarity. The example provided in (9), taken from the novel *Handley Cross* by Robert Smith Surtees depicts the speech a speaker who is socially upper-class and who displays instances of /h/-dropping alongside hypercorrection, i.e. **hair** instead of *air*.

The example taken from George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede*, published in 1859, offers a glimpse into the speech of Mr Casson, the innkeeper, whose speech is characterized by /h/-insertion, meaning that he uses /h/ in words that do not require it, in "an attempt to suggest identity with the gentry" (Mugglestone, 2003: 124).

The last example, from the novel *Born in Exile* by George Gissing, conveys Andrew Peak's status as a Cockney speaker. Gissing's use of /h/-dropping to portray the speech of Andrew Peak places the speaker both geographically and socially without explicitly mentioning his social class. The character talks about education ("*'E'll go to Collige", "put 'im through 'is pyces*), but his speech renders him as illiterate and uneducated. The character strives for social advancement but finds himself constrained by his humble and modest origins. Andrew Peak is portrayed as sincere and proud ("*I 'ope he may turn out such another as Godwin 'ere*") but not as a caricature.

Table 1 below summarizes the main function of /h/-dropping as displayed in examples (1) to (9) above:

Example	Author	Year of publication	Function of /h/-dropping
(1) – (3)	Charles Dickens	1836-7	Signals social class (working-class)
(4)	Charles Dickens	1880	Signals false humility (morally suspect)
(5)	Charles Dickens	1860-1	Level of education – low literacy/illiteracy
(6)	Andrew White Tuer	1890	Shows Cockney identity (comic)
(7)	Rudyard Kipling	1890	Highlights exclusion
(8)	R. D. Blackmore	1869	Regional identity (rural)
(9)	Robert Smith Surtees	1843	Upper-class affectation
(10)	George Eliot	1859	Showcases identity and gentry
(11)	George Gissing	1892	Signals social class

Table 1. *The main functions of /h/-dropping in the examples analysed*

These examples offer some insight into how /h/-dropping functions in nineteenth-century writings, not necessarily as a phonological process, but as a socially loaded semiotic resource, indexing social class, education, geographical location, morality, identity and power relations which reflects certain ideologies as far as language and social order are concerned.

3. Conclusion

This paper has explored the different functions of /h/-dropping in nineteenth-century England, as illustrated in different novels. It has been shown that /h/-dropping functioned less as a phonological feature and more as a powerful social symbol reinforced by the prescriptive ideologies of the era and by class anxieties. All the elocutionary manuals, grammar books and guides published in that period turned the pronunciation of /h/, or the lack of it, into a social and moral judgement, making it a marker of education, literacy, respectability and morality. Victorian writers such as Dickens, Eliot, Gissing, Blackmore and others drew on these social values and beliefs, weaponizing /h/-dropping and using it as an orthographic and valuable semiotic resource through which social class, education, regional belonging, upper-class affectation, and identity were presented to readers. The analysis also pinpointed that /h/-dropping and /h/-insertion were context-dependent and that Standard English in the nineteenth century was socially defined. From this point of view, the

use of literary dialect provides valuable insight into how language ideologies reflected but also reinforced social inequality.

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