



AN OVERVIEW OF DEFINITE ARTICLE REDUCTION IN NORTHERN VARIETIES OF ENGLISH¹

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Certain vernacular varieties of Northern British English (and in particular Yorkshire English) exhibit vowel-less forms of the definite article *the* which have no equivalent elsewhere in the English-speaking world. These phonetically reduced forms have long been sufficiently salient to arouse general interest and gain prominence in literary representations of dialect speech. Within the breadth of present-day publications on language variation in the North of England, the phenomenon has come to be recognised as truly original, and is now generically designated under the heading of “Definite Article Reduction” (DAR).

1. The origins of the Definite Article

As a preliminary to describing the specific characteristics of contemporary Northern usage, a brief historical survey² will help set the general picture. There were two demonstrative pronouns in Old English: *sē* (*that*) for distal reference, and *þes* (*this*), for proximal reference. The former far outnumbered the latter in terms of usage.

In Early West Saxon the declensions of *sē* and *þes* were as shown in Tables 1 & 2:

Case	Singular			Plural
	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	All genders
Nominative	sē, se	sēo	þæt	þā
Accusative	þone	þā	þæt	þā
Genitive	þæs	þære, þāre	þæs	þāra, þāra

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² See Wyld [1914 : 161-165] for an historical overview.

Dative	þǣm, þām	þære, þāre	þǣm, þām	þǣm, þām
Instrumental	þȳ, þon			--

Table 1: Declension of *sē* [Hogg, 1992 : 143, adapted]

Case	Singular			Plural
	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	All genders
Nominative	þes	þeos	þis	þās
Accusative	þisne	þās	þis	þās
Genitive	þisses	þisse	þisses	þissa
Dative	þissum	þisse	þissum	þissum
Instrumental	þȳs			--

Table 2: Declension of *þes* [Hogg, 1992 : 143, adapted]

In Middle English, the trend was towards simplification³ and singular forms of *sē*, *sēo* were thus progressively⁴ replaced by a new invariable form *þe*, for reasons of economy. Concurrently, *þat* ceased to be used as the grammatical Neuter form and took on the role of a singular caseless and genderless demonstrative, with *þās~þōs* as corresponding plural forms.

The *þes* forms remained more or less intact until the end of the 12th century, with subsequent levelling of the paradigm into *þes* or *þis*, for the singular, and *þise* or *þese*, for the plural. It is generally agreed that, among the various grammatical roles played by the *distal* paradigm, *sē* also served as an all-purpose determiner more or less equivalent to PDE *the*.

McColl Millar [2000b] describes the emergence in Middle English of a split⁵ in the *distal* paradigm, whereby the often unstressed form *þe* took on *article* function while the old Neuter *þæt* form retained *demonstrative* force. His contention is that the way for such a split may have been paved by Norse influence over Northern English (where the evolution is indeed first recorded) as “Scandinavian dialects had *already* developed a formal distinction between *definer* and *distal* demonstrative.”⁶

³ See Mossé [1952 : 60-61].

⁴ See Mossé [*ibid* : 60] for concurrent forms in the 12th and 13th centuries in the South West, South East and Kentish dialects.

⁵ The term he uses is ‘fissure’.

⁶ McColl Millar [2000a:336]. See also Stévanovitch [2001].

2. Allographs and allophones of the Definite Article in the history of English

Old English initial *þ* (sometimes also written *ð*) was realised as a voiceless fricative /θ/. Voicing of initial fricatives before vowels started in Middle English, but the phenomenon was reversed towards the end of the period, except for the whole class of words derived from the Indo-European demonstrative root (*the, there, then, thence*, etc.) whose high lexical frequency probably motivated the preservation of their voiced characteristics.

It is assumed that voicing started in the South West and that its northward ascent was somehow bogged down in the Northern Midlands.

Besides the fricative realisations, assimilation of /θ/ to /t/ was not rare in Middle English.⁷

When considering such sound changes, one ought to keep in mind the various changes that took place in the history of Indo-European languages, and notably those which are broadly described as the *First Germanic Sound Shift*, or *Grimm's Law*. In the present context, one's attention should be drawn to the voiceless Germanic fricative /θ/, which originally derives from the voiceless stop /t/, as is confirmed by examples such as: Ancient Greek: *τριτος* (*tritos*), Latin *tertius*, cf. O.E. *þridda*.

A similar sound shift must, incidentally, be noted in several present-day varieties of English (Hiberno-English, Caribbean, for instance) where the feature is known as *TH-stopping*.⁸

Wright [1905 : 237] also cites several instances of 19th century dialectal /θ/ to /t/ assimilations, e.g. *canst thou come?* which he transcribes as [kan tə kum?]

That the phenomenon was attested in Middle English is beyond debate,⁹ though many such lexicalised assimilations now appear rather opaque, e.g.:

- M.E. *atte* : 'William atte Pathe', 'John atte Well'.¹⁰
- M.E. *atte laste*, now *at last* with an assimilated and later¹¹ elided determiner (*at the laste*); id. for *at least*, *at best*, and perhaps¹² also for *at church*, according to Jespersen [1949 : 406].

⁷ The phenomenon was not unknown in Old English, but was somewhat rarer than in Middle English; see Jones [2002 : 32].

⁸ See Wells [1982 : 565-566].

⁹ See Reaney [1927 : 146], Viereck [1995 : 303 *fn*18], etc.

¹⁰ Many of those later became lexicalised as opaque surnames: *Attwell* ('at the well'), *Attrill* ('at the hill'), *Attwood* ('at the wood').

¹¹ But see Sugden [1936 : 71-73] for examples of the definite article in Spenser.

¹² A surprising claim indeed, for one of our reviewers (J.-M. Gachelin)... In truth, although O. Jespersen does unequivocally dedicate several paragraphs to 'Zero in

Present-day standard usage is based on a tripartite division between a full form [ði:] unaffected by the following phonetic context, and two reduced forms, one before vowels [ði], and the other before consonants [ðə]. This system knows, however, a fair amount of variation with, in particular, the insertion of a glottal stop before vowels: [ðəʔ].¹³

Middle English did allow vowel deletion in the definite article, mostly before vowels. This is well attested in Chaucer, e.g. *in th'acts* [*Prologue*].

This usage still prevailed in Early Modern English. John Hart,¹⁴ for instance, the fourteenth-century language scholar (b.?-d. 1574), used both

- an orthographically explicit¹⁵ weak form of *ðe*,
- and vowel-elided allographs of *the*, which he transcribed either
 - as /ð'/ (e.g. *ð'artikl*¹⁶)
 - or as a proclitic /ð/ attached to the following vowel (e.g. *ðeksampl*¹⁷).

Those latter forms he used before both strong or weak vowels (e.g. *article* vs. *eksample*). He also used indiscriminately one or the other form before the /j/ and /w/ glides (e.g. *ð'iuse* [i.e. *the use*], *ð'Ualf* [i.e. *the Welsh*]), but only twice before true consonants: *ð'special māterz*, and *ð'Hebrius* [i.e. *the Hebrews*], with the reserve that in the latter case, the <h-> may well have been mute.

Shakespeare himself also showed a distinct predilection for the vowel-elided definite article, both before vowels:

- *Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame is lust in action* (*Sonnet CXXIX*)

but also before all kinds of consonants:

prepositional phrases' [1949 : 459-463], e.g. '*from beginning to end, at heart, etc.*', he also appears, less justifiably, tempted to see a possible 'contributory factor' in the case of <at [?the] church> [1949 : 406].

¹³ See, *inter alii* Ash & Myhill [1986] for African American Vernacular English, Anderson *et al* [2004] for New Zealand English, Britain & Fox [2007] for London and the East Midlands.

¹⁴ See Danielsson [1955, 1963].

¹⁵ For a description of John Hart's sophisticated spelling system, see Danielsson [1955, 1963].

¹⁶ Danielsson [1955:203].

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

- *Fortune, that arrant whore,*
Ne'er turns the key to th' poor (*Lear*, II, iv)

- *Take heed o' th' foul fiend* (*Lear*, Act III, iv)

- *Come out o' th' storm.* (*Lear*, II,iii)

Note that partial or even complete devoicing of *th'* is likely to have occurred in the three instances quoted here. Note too, that syllable deletion in Middle and Early Modern English literary production was frequently motivated by considerations of meter.

3. Definite Article Reduction in Northern Varieties of English

3.1 Literary representations

Fortunately for the contemporary linguist intent on studying the evolution of definite article use in Northern England, there is an abundance of regional literature in which, over the centuries, authors have striven to mirror the language to which they were dearly attached and that they heard spoken by ordinary folk around them.

Indeed, such romantic endeavours have, occasionally, been felicitously complemented by truly remarkable observational gifts and elaborate transcription methods. This is certainly the case with Joseph's rendition of Yorkshire English in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1847, and one can imagine that the author must have had intimate knowledge of literary material produced by talented 17th or 18th-century dialect-minded precursors. The quotations given below for illustration of this paper's main topic are just a few representative samples extracted from a wealth of valuable material:

- *An' teuk [took] a mell [mallet] fra t' top o' t' wharns [hand-mill]*¹⁸
- *All t' day a wild hurricane wuther'd [roared] throo t' glen*
- *T' last bite i' t' cupboard wi' thee I could share't*¹⁹
- *Th'owd windmill tall on Lytham Green, Fact'ries and th'ouses in between, Clanging trams and cobbled streets, T'Market lit wi'flares at neets, Gracie when hoo's singing "Sally", Rivington, or t'Ribble Valley, Mill lodges thick wi'newts ond frogs, Mem'ries flood back wi't ring o'clogs.*²⁰

¹⁸ Bulkby, Stephen [1673]. *A Yorkshire Dialogue between an Awd Wife a Lass and a butcher*. This lesser-known broadside predates George Meriton's [1683] much-acclaimed *A Yorkshire Dialogue*.

¹⁹ Preston, Ben (1819-1902), no date.

²⁰ Traditional Lancashire poetry, no date.

The first three examples are illustrative of Yorkshire English (Bulkby (17th c., and Preston, 18th c.), while the fourth extract is an unattributed fragment of (?19th c.) Lancashire English.

One's attention should be drawn, in these examples, to the use of naïve phonetic transcription devices and, among those, to the abundant use of apostrophes, obviously indicative of phonetic elisions. As regards the definite article, the two Yorkshire extracts show the form <t'> before consonants, and the Lancashire extract shows <t'> before consonants, and <th'> before vowels. Ascertaining the exact phonetic correlates of these approximations at their respective times of writing is of course a near impossible task but one may at least get a fair idea of how things stand from the middle of the 19th century onwards by turning to available field surveys carried out by trained professionals.

3.2 *Field surveys*

One crucial source of evidence is the monumental sum produced by Alexander J. Ellis in his treatise entitled *On Early English Pronunciation*, published by instalments between 1869 and 1889. Ellis was a man of considerable knowledge and his publications covered a vast array of topics. His initial endeavour was to study the pronunciation of English at the times of Chaucer and Shakespeare and its evolution thereafter. The result was a sum of six volumes, with the last two devoted to the study of contemporary (late 19th c.) pronunciation. To that end, Ellis called on a network of learned correspondents across the country, but he also hired the services of a team of field-workers. Prominent among them, was Thomas Hallam, a man considered to be 'highly gifted' by the great philologist Henry Sweet himself.²¹ Hallam, as all other field-workers, had been thoroughly trained by Ellis in the mastery of his own 'palaeotype',²² an elaborate phonetic alphabet. As Ellis recounts it, Thomas Hallam, a native speaker of North Derbyshire, whose professional connection with the railways 'gave him facilities for travelling over these regions', proceeded in the following fashion:

On arriving at a station he would inquire where he could find old and if possible illiterate peasants, whom he would 'interview', gaining their confidence, and then noting their peculiarities of pron.[unciation] in his note books (...), using palaeotype, which he wrote most accurately.²³

The set of guidelines written by Ellis, with which every field-worker was furnished, was extremely detailed for a number of lexical items deemed to be of key importance as dialectal differentiators. Within the list of some seventy-four words one finds the likes of 'you, now, that, she, there, down, about', etc. and also, quite fortunately, 'the'. It is interesting to quote at length from paragraph 17, which is devoted to this particular word:

²¹ MacMahon [1983 : 19].

²² See Ellis [1889 : 76-88].

²³ See Ellis [1889 : 4].

The definite article is very characteristic. Note whether *th* remains as usual, or becomes *d*, or is omitted altogether. In each case, note the sound of *e* like *a* in *China*, or *y* in *pithy*, or *ee* in *pritheer*; and note especially if the latter vowels are used when *th* is omitted. Note particularly whether the vowel is omitted altogether, and then whether *th* keeps its usual [= [ð]] sound before a following vowel as in *th-arm* for *the arm*, or becomes *th'* [= [θ]] in *th'in* (as it is convenient to write the acute sound), forming a hiss, before consonants, as in *th'man*, in one word. In these latter cases note whether the *th* or *th'* is not assimilated to *d* or *t* after a word ending in *d* or *t*, causing a *suspension* of the *d* or *t*, by the tongue remaining a sensible time against the palate, which may be conveniently written *d'* or *t'*, as *at t' door*. Note also particularly whether *the* does not always become a suspended *t'* when it is possible, as when it follows another word, *from-t'school*, or, when this is not possible, whether it becomes just perceptible by a dull kind of minute thud, due to trying to speak without moving the tongue from the palate, as in *t'man*, *t'ass* (not *tass*) = *the ass*. This is the regular form in Cumberland, Westmorland, Durham and Yorkshire. (...) **The proper marking of the definite article is important.**²⁴

The Ellis survey remained unmatched in terms of scope and phonological detail until the mid 1940s, when Eugen Dieth and Harold Orton and their team of colleagues and field workers started collecting with the help of sound recorders the data later to be transcribed and published [1962-1969] as the *Survey of English Dialects* (SED).²⁵

Seen from a modern perspective, neither the Ellis nor the SED set of data is entirely flawless. Criticism against the Ellis data was meted out generously, for instance, by SED main protagonist Eugen Dieth, who considered the work a '*tragedy*'.²⁶ Martyn Wakelin, who also worked with H.Orton, criticised Ellis's transcription system as '*tortuous and imprecise*'.²⁷ But other, no less able linguists (Trudgill, *inter alii*), only have praise to sing for Ellis's pioneering work.²⁸

Besides, appraisal of the SED's more modern transcription principles has not always been so unanimously favourable. Hans Kurath [1963 : 127], for one, contends that the only purpose of '*phonic recordings*' (his phrase) is to approach '*all audibly different sounds*', a task for which he considers the International Phonetic Alphabet to be '*perfectly suited*', and this leads him to regret that '*the investigators have not always taken full advantage of the potentials of [the IPA] system; that is, their notation strikes me as rather "broad" '.*

²⁴ See Ellis [*ibid* : 10] for the complete text.

²⁵ See Orton *et al.* [1962-69].

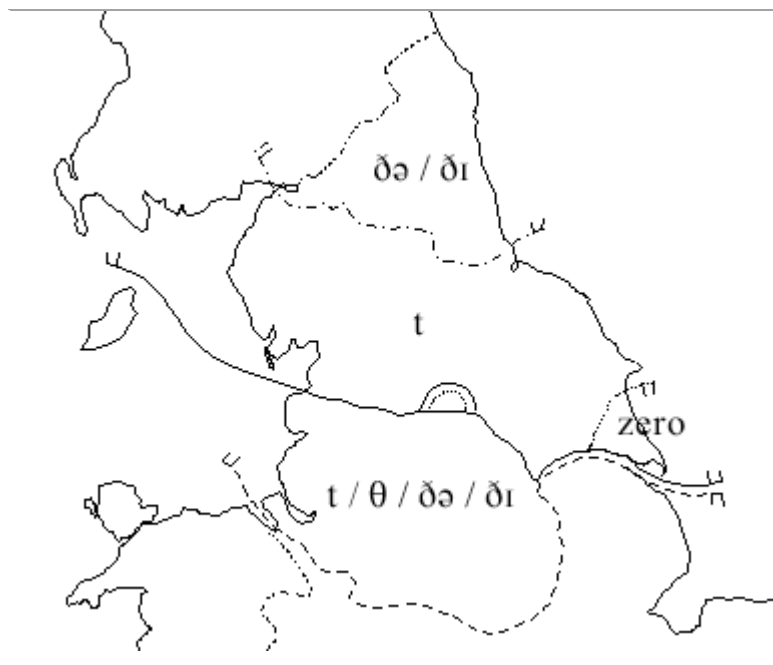
²⁶ Dieth [1946 : 76], quoted in Jones [2002 : 331].

²⁷ Wakelin [1972 : 50].

²⁸ Such as Trudgill, in a personal communication quoted by Jones [*ibid* : 332], or Anderson [1977] in his evaluation of Ellis's work.

Imperfect though they may be, let us now turn to the two sets of data themselves in order to evaluate what can be learnt as regards production of the definite article over the Northern counties.

Map 1 below is a blow-up of the Northern region alone, extracted out of Barry's [1972:168] own map, in which he plots Ellis's data on the definite article over a silent map of *the whole* of England.



Map 1: data from Ellis 1889 (adapted from Barry, 1972 : 168)

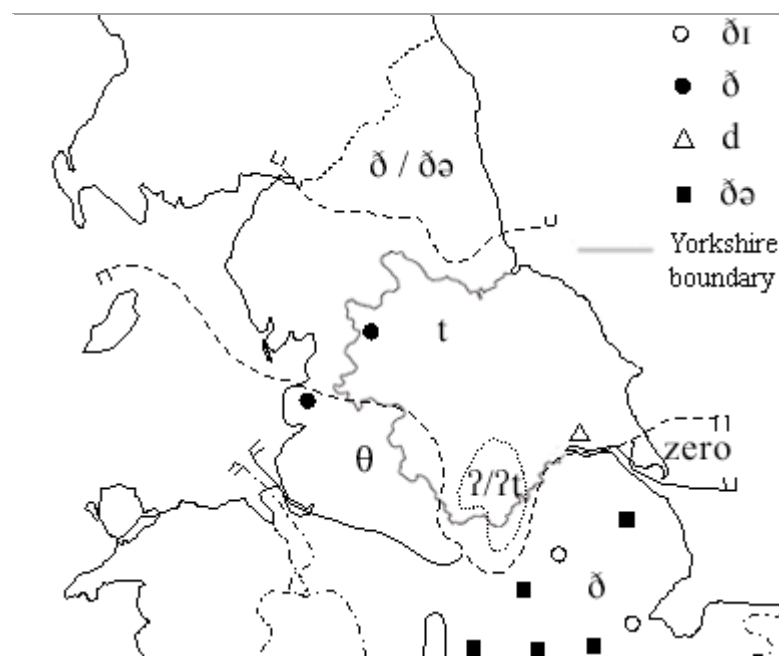
Map 1 shows standard English [ðə] – [ðɪ] forms for the northernmost part of North Yorkshire, [t] realisation for the central part of North Yorkshire, and most of the East Riding²⁹, and [t] ~ [θ] – [ðə] ~ [ðɪ] fluctuation over West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Lancashire. It also shows a 'zero' realisation narrowly located in the Holderness peninsula of the East Riding of Yorkshire.

A clearer picture may be attained with the help of *Maps 2* and *3* below, established out of SED material this time, and where focus is placed on the immediate rightmost context.

²⁹ One of the reviewers for this paper, J.-M. Gachelin, points out that [t] is also predominant in Cumbria, and that *Maps 1, 2 & 3* should be expanded accordingly.

Map 2 concerns answers provided nationwide to the question 'Where do you bake the bread?' (Expected answer: *In the oven*).

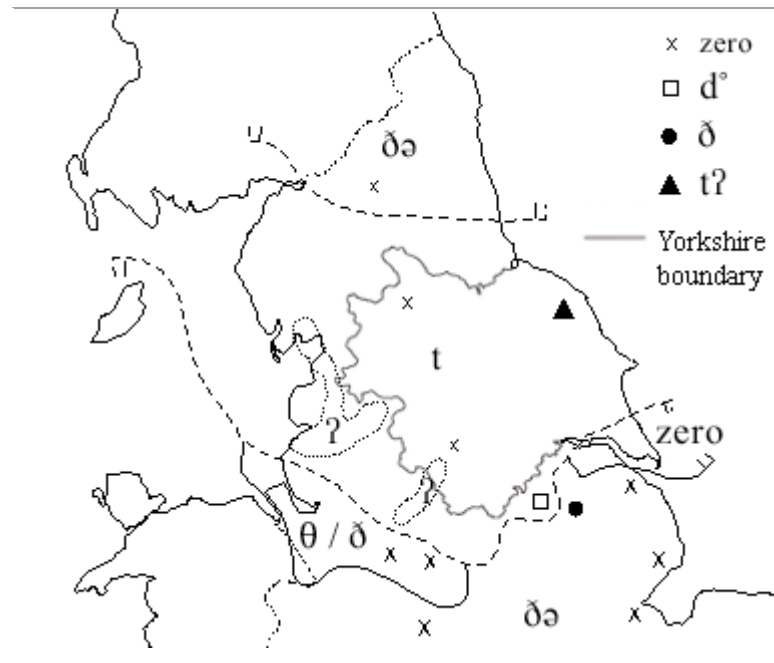
Map 3 concerns occurrences of 'the' before a consonant, and more precisely answers provided to the following SED question: 'In summer you don't water your garden in the middle of the day; you wait [cue: 'the sun going down']... till the sun goes down'.



Map 2. 'the' + Vowel [SED answer: 'in the oven', adapted from Barry, 1972 : 168]

Map 2. shows:

- [ð] ~ [ðə] for the eastern part of County Durham, extending upwards to Tyne and Wear and southern Northumberland;
- [t] for most of North Yorkshire;
- a glottal stop [ʔ] or a glottalised [t] for the lower part of South Yorkshire;
- 'zero' realisation in the Holderness peninsula of the East Riding;
- [θ] for Lancashire and bordering West Yorkshire.



Map 3. 'the' + Consonant [SED answer: 'the sun', adapted from Barry, 1972 : 175]

Map 3. shows:

- [ðə] for the eastern part of County Durham, extending over to Tyne and Wear and southern Northumberland;
- [t] for most of North Yorkshire;
- a glottal stop [ʔ] for Lancashire, and extending southwards;
- 'zero' realisation in the Holderness peninsula of the East Riding;
- [θ] ~ [ð] for Merseyside, Greater Manchester and northern Cheshire.

According to the SED statistics³⁰ [t] is in fact largely prevalent and other realisations are only incidental.

4. Conclusion

A clearer picture now emerges from the SED contextualised realisations (Maps 2 & 3), in which the unvoiced initial fricative [θ]+consonant (Lancashire, bordering West Yorkshire) may be assumed to be a trace of Northern resistance to Middle English fricative voicing. By the same token, the presence of 'standardised' [ðə] in the zones North and South of the

³⁰ See Barry [1972 : 173].

Yorkshire area better illustrates Yorkshire's contrary nature and staunch resistance to Southern influence.

The question of cliticisation of the various definite article allophones, though interesting, is not directly relevant to the study of Northern usage as the phenomenon is largely pan-dialectal and is, as we have shown, well attested throughout the history of English. It is besides a topic which should more profitably be addressed within the study of Ø among language universals.

One key feature remains however, which stands out as truly original, namely the overwhelming presence of [t] or [ʔ] across the whole of Yorkshire. One must remember at this point, that the prevalent representation of DAR allographs in dialect-inspired literature (see examples above) takes the form of the letter <t> followed by an apostrophe. In keeping with tradition, Ellis retains this mode of notation for which he provides the following commentary:

Before (t,d) as in *t'tongue*, *t'dog* it [i.e. *the suspended consonant*] intensifies the (t,d) in a remarkable manner. It never properly runs on to the following vowel, *t'old chap* and *told t'chap* have different effects as well as meanings. (...) In no case must voice or flatus³¹ intervene. (...) It is almost hopeless to understand (t') without studying its effects from native lips.³²

Wright [1905 : 259] mostly retains the <t'> notation, but also introduces an interesting variant, which he illustrates with the following pair of examples: *dlium (gloom) / d'lium (the gloom)*. Wright's notation is particularly telling in that it helps highlight contextual dependence on assimilation rules ([td]→[dd]), and posits implicitly a geminate simplification rule [dd]→[ɖd], on which, however, he fails to elaborate.

The term '*suspended*' is also used in W.E. Jones [1952 : 87], where it is impressionistically described as an '*audible suspension of breath*'. Translated into articulatory gestures, the compounded indications of '*suspension*', and of a sound which does not '*run on to the following vowel*' (Ellis) speak in favour of some kind of glottal constriction.

A sequence such as '*in the road*', liable to be produced as [ɪntʔro:d] or as [ɪnʔro:d] in Yorkshire English may therefore be analysed as exhibiting two levels of increasing glottalisation. In this respect, the zero form attested in the Holderness region may be surmised to be nothing more than the manifestation of a supplementary level of lenition, a feature already at play in mainstream Yorkshire dialect, but taken here to its extremes:

[θ] → [t] → [tʔ] → [ʔ] → [ø]

This, however, is only a theoretical construct begging confirmation from detailed fieldwork in the area under consideration.

³¹ i.e. 'aspiration'.

³² Ellis [*ibid* : 317].

Vigilant observers of the language situation in Great Britain concur on the observation that regional varieties are gaining prestige.³³ Far from being threatened with extinction, Definite Article Reduction in Northern England is actually thriving, and fast becoming a sign of cultural pride and recognition. Bearing in mind Wright's [1905] observation on DAR usage, in which he distinguishes between a reduced form such as *t'lord*, and a non-reduceable counterpart such as *The Lord*, one may conjecture that discursive or otherwise non-phonological factors may also be at play in the selection of Reduced *vs* Standard forms of the definite article in Northern England, a conjecture offering, without doubt, ample room for further investigation into the subject.

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³³ See Beal [2004].

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