

/h/-dropping in early New Zealand English

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Introduction¹

This paper examines the /h/-dropping habits of some of the early New Zealanders whose speech is held in an archive of recorded speech at the University of Canterbury to investigate the following points:

- Whether /h/-dropping was present in early New Zealand English.
- If it was present, how common it was.
- What social significance, if any, was associated with this linguistic feature.

Background

Before the beginning of the nineteenth century, the presence or absence of word-initial /h/ was apparently not a significant marker for social status. The debate among those interested in the English language was not whether or not one ought properly to pronounce 'the aspirate', but whether it should be afforded the dignity of the status of letter (Muggleton 1995)

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, 'the correct treatment of initial "h" in speech [had] come to be regarded as a kind of shibboleth of social position' (Phillipps 1987:137)

Today, popular culture serves forth a stereotype of /h/-dropping as a mark of someone of the lower classes, typically Cockney or from the north of England. However, this association of /h/-dropping with the lower classes was not always so strict (if indeed it is so today).

There existed at the end of the nineteenth century two distinct varieties of /h/-dropping, with radically different social implications for their speakers. To some extent these two varieties still exist today. The varieties do not differ phonetically: both were and are simply the non-realisation of an orthographically present word initial or syllable initial /h/. Rather, they vary with regard to the area of the lexicon this /h/-deletion is applied to.

One variety involves the removal of the initial /h/ from a relatively narrow set of words: *humour*, *hospital*, *humble*, *hotel*, *herb*, and a few others. This variety was associated with those of high social status, and was thus a relatively prestigious form. Some commentators have speculated that it is a connection with French that resulted in these particular words, which I refer to in this paper as the 'prestige set', being affected (Phillipps 1984). The other variety is characterised by a much more widespread loss of the aspirate, frequently coupled with hyper-correction that adds an initial /h/ to words

where it is not orthographically present. This variety carried with it no small amount of social opprobrium.

Although speakers of both variants will drop initial /h/ when using words from the 'prestige set', distinction between them may be made on the grounds of the variability in their use of these words. A prestige speaker will drop the initial /h/ from these words with a high degree of reliability, whereas a speaker of the stigmatised variety will be less consistent in their /h/-dropping on these words, as well as dropping /h/s on words outside the prestige group and hyper-correcting by adding /h/ to words which do not have /h/s present in their spelling.

Methodology

The data analysed came from the Mobile Unit archive (MUA) held by the Origins of New Zealand English (ONZE) project of the Linguistics Department of the University of Canterbury. The MUA is a collection of a large number of recordings produced by the New Zealand Broadcasting Service Mobile Recording Unit in the late 1940s. The Mobile Recording Unit comprised equipment and personnel capable of cutting records and also capable of being transported relatively easily from place to place. Following the Second World War, the Mobile unit moved around New Zealand, visiting various of the older provincial towns, interviewing the older residents of the towns and collecting reminiscences of the early pioneering days (Lewis 1996).

These recordings have been transferred from their original records onto analogue tape, (and also to Digital Audio Tape), and copies are held by ONZE. These tapes have, in the vast majority, been transcribed by ONZE personnel.²

Thirty-seven speakers from this archive were chosen for this investigation. All were born between the years 1857 and 1898, with most being born in the 1860s and 1870s and all but three being born in New Zealand. Electronic copies of the transcripts of the interviews of these speakers were searched, seeking suitable tokens of syllable initial /h/.

These /h/-initial words were divided into two categories — lexical words were placed in one, while grammatical words (*have, had*, etc.) and pronouns were placed into another. The reasoning behind this division was that, because grammatical words and pronouns tend to receive less stress than lexical words, they could well present a less accurate picture of /h/-dropping speakers' habits than lexical words. One would expect normal conversational elision processes to result in a lower rate of /h/ pronunciation in relatively unstressed words, regardless of the speaker's behaviour in stressed locations.

Also due to this tendency of /h/s to disappear in unstressed locations, only those examples of syllable initial /h/ which had at least secondary sentence stress were analysed. In judging this stress, grammatical words were judged somewhat more conservatively than lexical ones, with the result

that there are substantially fewer grammatical than lexical tokens in the database.

In each case, once I had located a token of /h/ in a transcript and on tape, I listened to the token and noted the context in which it occurred, and whether or not the /h/ was pronounced³. Thus I built up a database of excerpts of transcripts for all the speakers who were examined. An example of this is given in table 1. From this I counted the number of instances, for each speaker, where a word-initial /h/ was dropped, distinguishing between the normal and the prestige sets of words.

Table 1: Sample of /h/-dropping data base for Mr D

1	only two and a half years old
1	we first came here me uncle come down with the bullock dray
0	and he took us . home to his place at
1	nothing . only hills and fern

- Here the bolded word is the one in question, and the number on the left indicates the pronunciation or non pronunciation of the initial /h/ — 1 = /h/ pronounced, 0 = /h/ not pronounced
- On the second line 'we first came here...' Mr D hyper-corrects on *uncle*

At various points in this paper I refer to speakers who use 'hyper-correct' forms in their speech — who introduce syllable initial /h/s to words where it is not present orthographically. The detection of tokens of this type was less rigorous than the detection of tokens that were /h/-dropped — they were not actively searched for, but were rather simply noted when observed during the checking of the orthographically /h/-initial tokens.

ONZE maintains databases which contain background information on the speakers in the MUA. These were consulted in an attempt to extract as much information as possible on the origins and socio-economic status of the speakers and, where possible, their parents or spouse. This information was then correlated with the /h/-dropping information for the speakers to establish any socio-economic patterns present in the /h/-dropping habits of these early NZE speakers.

Analysis

Figure 1 presents the percentage of /h/ dropped by each of the 37 speakers studied. It shows clear patterning in the /h/-dropping habits of these speakers. The most obvious point to be made from this graph is that the vast majority of speakers under study drop very few, if any, of their /h/s. The blanks to the extreme right of figure 1 indicate those speakers who did not /h/-drop at all during their interviews. The /h/-dropping behaviour of those speakers in the tail can also be considered to be insignificant, most of them being recorded as dropping the /h/ on only three or four tokens out of

forty or fifty. Given the vagaries of auditory analysis and the variable quality of the recordings worked from, this level of appearance is quite plausibly within the margin for error of the analysis.

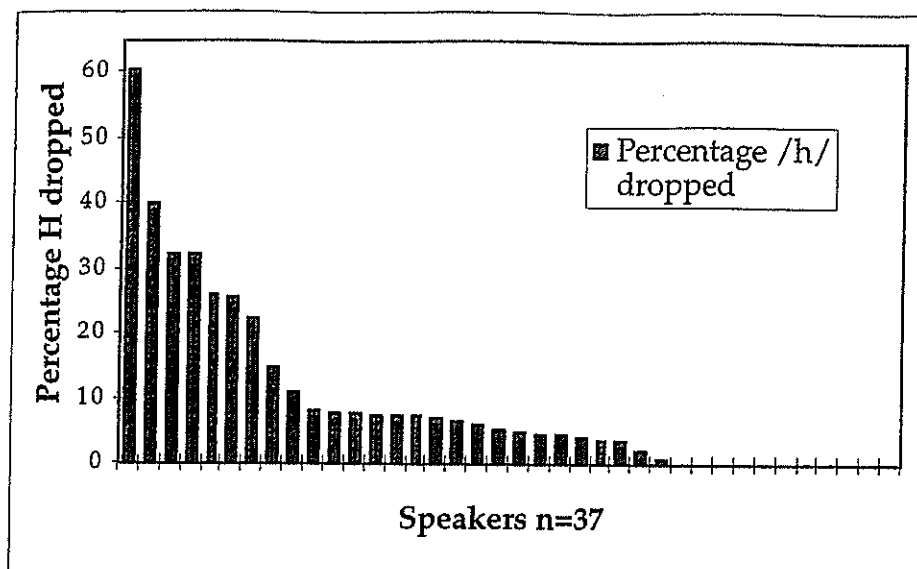


Figure 1: the percentage of lexical syllable initial /h/s dropped, by speaker, in decreasing order, from highest percentage to lowest.

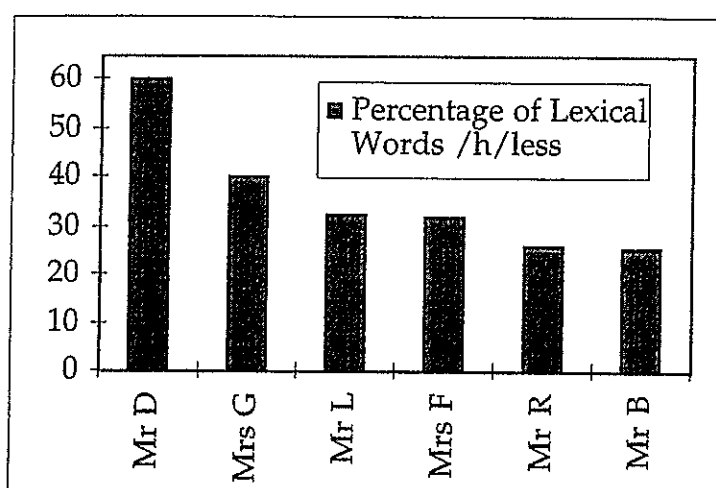


Figure 2: Detail of figure 1 — those speakers displaying a high level of lexical /h/ loss.

Figure 2 displays the 'head' of Figure 1 in more detail, showing those speakers whose level of /h/-dropping was definitely significant, i.e. those who dropped initial /h/s from 25% or more of the appropriate lexical words. Of interest when examining these six speakers is not only the quantitative level of /h/-dropping present in their speech, but also the qualitative level: whether /h/ is dropped from the prestige or the non-prestige word set. This is shown in figure 3.

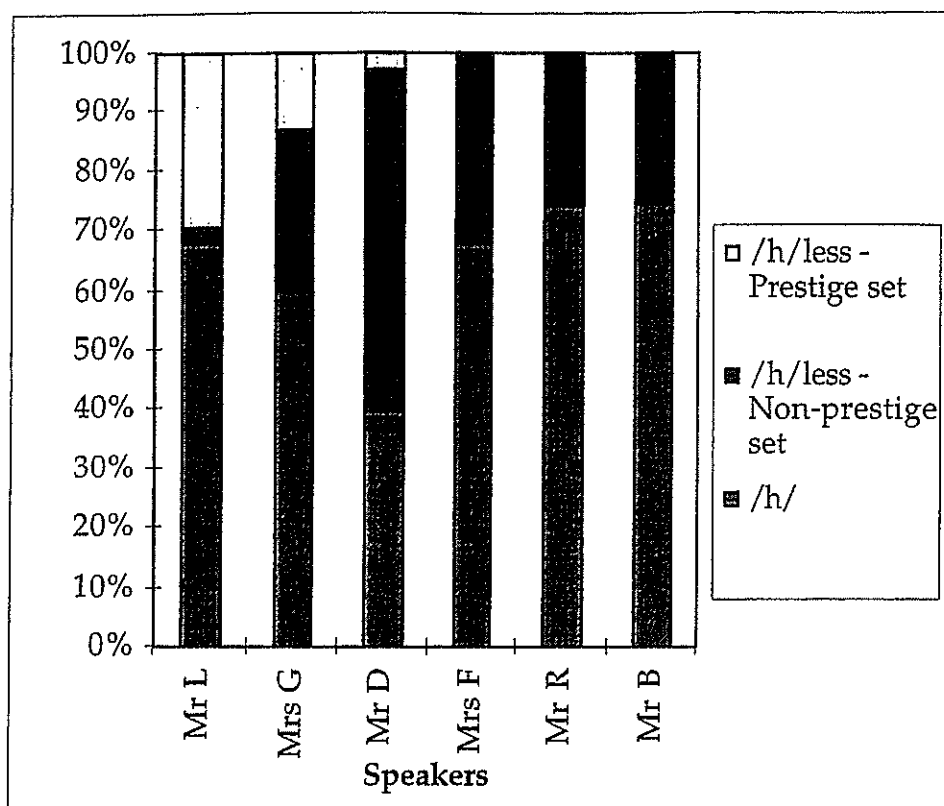


Figure 3: Distribution of /h/-fulness, distinguishing between prestige and non-prestige word sets for /h/-less words.

In Figure 3 there can be seen four distinct patterns of /h/-dropping:

a) **/h/-dropping mainly from the prestige lexical set:** Mr L /h/-drops on 32% of the lexical words in his sample (22 of the 68). Of these /h/less words, 20 come from the prestige set. He is also highly consistent in his treatment of these words: in only one case have I noted him pronouncing an initial /h/ on a prestige set word. Thus he can quite safely be considered to be a speaker of the prestige variety, at least with regard to /h/-dropping.

b) **/h/-dropping from both lexical sets:** Mrs G drops /h/s from 40% of her lexical words (34 of 85). Eleven of these /h/less tokens come from the prestige set and 23 from outside this set. However, the majority of the non-prestige /h/less words are place names and could simply represent alternative pronunciations of the place names that are now extinct. Also, there are no cases where she pronounces initial /h/s on prestige set words. The only variability in her speech is the word *horse*, from which the initial /h/ is sometimes dropped, and sometimes not. I would also consider her to be a speaker of the prestige variety.

c) **/h/-dropping mainly from the non-prestige lexical set:** Mr D drops /h/s from 60% of his /h/-initial lexical words (70 of 116). These /h/-less tokens include a handful from the prestige set but the vast majority of the /h/-dropping occurs on non-prestige words. Also, there is a high degree of variability in Mr D's pronunciation of the prestige set, with some tokens /h/-dropped and others not. Further, on several occasions he hyper-corrects, adding /h/ to non-/h/-initial words:

we first came here me [h]uncle come down with the bullock dray
and one time there . he [h]ordered his own

Thus Mr D can quite safely be considered not to be a prestige speaker.

d) /h/-dropping only from the non-prestige lexical set: Mrs F, Mr R and Mr B all /h/-drop between 25% and 30% of their lexical words. Unfortunately, no tokens from the prestige word set occur in any of their interviews, so this check is unavailable. However, all of them drop /h/s from outside the prestige set, and Mrs Fuller hyper-corrects on more than one occasion:

e.g. the Maori [h]oven you know .

So it may fairly safely be concluded that these three are also not prestige speakers.

Thus the four apparent patterns can be condensed into two groups: those who /h/-drop on the prestige set and those who /h/-drop on the non-prestige set and who also hyper-correct and add /h/s where none appear in the spelling. That is to say those who use the prestigious form of /h/-dropping and those who use the stigmatised form, parallel to the traditional British patterns.

Table 2: Background information on speakers

Speaker	Place of birth / upbringing	Occupation	Education	Father's Occupation
Mr L	Waipori / Alexandra	School Teacher	At least secondary	Schoolmaster
Mrs G	Otahuhu, Auckland / Hamilton	Domestic servant, wife	Primary school	Carpenter for a Te Aroha Mining company
Mr D	Fitzroy, NSW raised in Thames	Butcher, Labourer	Primary school	Milk vendor, labourer, miner
Mrs F	Herefordshire, England	Farmer	?	Farmer
Mr R	?	Blacksmith	?	?
Mr B	Ballarat, Victoria, raised in Arrowtown	Labourer, farmer, jockey	?	Goldminer, hotel keeper, farmer

- The question marks in table 2 indicate information that is currently unknown.
- Mr L's father was a graduate of the University of New Zealand.
- Mrs F did not arrive in New Zealand until the age of about fourteen, so how accurately she represents the 'true' speech of New Zealand at the time is somewhat questionable.

- Messrs D and B were both also born outside New Zealand, but both arrived here at a very young age (under two years), and so the concerns that might be raised about Mrs F are not applicable to them.
- Mother's occupation is not included in this table as, in all but a couple of instances it is unknown, and for those for whom it is known it is listed as 'domestic duties' or similar — a description that gives little or no information about the mother's social background.

Social explanations for variety

One might expect to be able to locate some kind of connection between the social status and background of a speaker and the variety they spoke. To this end I searched through the database that ONZE maintains on the MUA speakers, examining the occupations of the speakers I covered.

The information obtained on the speakers covered above is shown in Table 2. Mr L's background is certainly compatible with relatively high social status, or at least a position where he would be expected to project the prestige forms, for the betterment of his pupils. Given his father's educational background and his position as a school master, one might also expect that Mr L's father would have modelled these more prestigious forms for his son. Thus it is unsurprising that Mr L uses the more prestigious variety of the language.

Mr D, in contrast, was a butcher, son of a miner and labourer. None of these jobs traditionally carry a high degree of social status. Similarly, Messrs R and B, who above are characterised as users of the stigmatised variety of /h/-dropping, also come from backgrounds and work in occupations that are not indicative of high socio-economic status. Thus their usage of the stigmatised, lower status forms is unsurprising

The non-/h/-dropping majority

As can be seen from Figure 1, the vast majority of the speakers analysed /h/-dropped an absolute minimum of times — in general no more than three or four tokens of /h/-dropping were recorded per speaker (with many having none). I would contend that, even for those who had three or four tokens, these occurrences are not significant, for the reasons stated earlier.

The amount of /h/-dropping occurring in contemporary New Zealand English is not completely clear. Trudgill (1986) characterised NZE as 'devoid of h-dropping' (1986: 138) and Wells (1982) does not even mention it in his discussion of NZE, whereas he does mention '(variable) H Dropping' in Australian English (1982: 594). In contrast, Bell and Holmes (1992) found in Porirua higher levels of /h/-dropping than this study found in the MUA. However, they do not mention anything similar to the 'prestige /h/-dropping' found in this study, so it would seem likely that prestige h-dropping is not a feature of modern NZE. With regard to the stigmatised variety, it would seem clear that, regardless of which analysis of modern NZE is correct, the majority of speakers born in New Zealand in the later part of the nineteenth century did not drop syllable initial /h/ to any greater extent than do speakers today.

Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed /h/-dropping in early New Zealand English, and considered its social significance.

From the 37 speakers analysed, I concluded:

- The dropping of syllable initial /h/ occurred in early New Zealand English.
- This /h/-dropping is not very common, (at least not in the Mobile Unit tapes that I reviewed) insofar as there were few speakers who exhibited significant levels of /h/-dropping. However, among those who did drop /h/ significantly, up to 60% of their relevant tokens were /h/-less.
- Among those who /h/-dropped significantly, two different varieties could be identified, one which displays similarities to the prestige /h/-dropping symptomatic of upper class usage of late nineteenth century Britain, and another which is much more similar to the usage associated with lower class speakers, both of that time period and today.
- There is some evidence to suggest a link between the social status of the speaker and the variety of /h/-dropping they employ, should they /h/-drop at all. Those from higher social classes appear to drop syllable initial /h/ only from words in the prestige set, while those from lower social classes /h/-drop irregularly from both prestige and non-prestige words and sometimes add /h/ to words where it does not occur in spelling.

References

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Notes

¹This paper is based on an assignment prepared for the New Zealand English course at the University of Canterbury, using materials produced by the Origins of New Zealand English Project, a project partly funded by a FORST grant.

²For a more detailed discussion of ONZE's methodology, see Using historical recordings in a study of early New Zealand English, Lewis, Quick & MacLagan in prep.

³Note: I did not analyse words that are spelt with an initial *h* in modern orthography, but in which the *h* is conventionally not pronounced. These words are *hour*, *honour*, *honest* and *heir*.