

The present as a broken window on the past: Investigating /h/ insertion in English, 1050-1950

The insertion of /h/ before syllables beginning with (stressed) vowels, e.g. *h+engine*, *h+apple*, etc., is well known, yet not systematically studied to date. The feature is reported historically and commonly reported. Milroy (1992) has shown that the *Norfolk Gilds* (late 14th century) or the *Paston Letters* (late 15th century) exhibit variable use of <h> spellings, namely both absence (in <*alpenie*> ‘halfpenny’) and un-etymological insertion (in <*hoke lewes*> ‘oak leaves’), it is frequently used as a stylistic device in Charles Dickens’ renderings of Working Class London English (“gas microscopes with hextra power”, in the *Pickwick Papers*), and historical corpora (such as the *Linguistic Atlas of Early and Middle English*) provide evidence also. Notwithstanding, inserted /h/ has been lost from 20th century British English (only surviving in cases of occasional hypercorrection, such as in the letter <h>, pronounced /heitʃ/). It has been maintained in several post-colonial English varieties around the world, so I would like to show here that these provide an ideal opportunity to quantitatively study variation and reconstruct its usage in former British varieties. I will map and discuss reports of the feature where it has survived (e.g. in Caribbean and South Atlantic Englishes), and report some first findings from a quantitative historical study, with the aim of discussing whether present-day evidence can indeed be used to further our understanding of language change in English.