

Rodica Calciu

University Charles de Gaulle-Lille 3

An Historical Novel or a Historical Novel? A Case of Variation in Spelling

Summary

The form of the indefinite article before *h* is not an easy matter, as mentioned among others, by Jespersen, in *A Modern English Grammar*.

The existence today of written corpora and other online resources allows for a wider and, hopefully, a more reliable examination of variants. The present paper presents the results obtained from an analysis of the forms of the indefinite article before words beginning with *h* found in the Gutenberg corpus, therefore, in literature, and in The British National Corpus (BNC). Quantitative data are presented and accounted for in a synchronic and diachronic perspective.

Key words: variants, loss of [h], synchrony, diachrony

“An Historical Novel” ali “a Historical Novel”? Primer razlikovanja v pisavi

Povzetek

Katero obliko nedoločnega člena uporabiti pred *h* ni preprosta odločitev, kar poleg drugih avtorjev omenja že Jespersen v *A Modern English Grammar*.

Danes številni korpusi pisnega jezika in ostali elektronski viri dopuščajo zelo široko in verjetno tudi bolj zanesljivo analizo variant. V tem članku so predstavljeni rezultati analize rabe oblik nedoločnega člena pred besedami, ki se začenjajo s *h* in se nahajajo v Gutenbergovem korpusu, torej v književnosti, in v britanskem narodnem korpusu (The British National Corpus). Kvantitativni podatki so predstavljeni in utemeljeni tako s sinhronega kot diahronega vidika.

Ključne besede: variante, izguba [h], sinhronija, diahronija

An Historical Novel or a Historical Novel?

A Case of Variation in Spelling

1. Introduction

For an English teacher in France, the problem of the form of the indefinite article before words beginning with *h* is not an unimportant one. Otto Jespersen in *A Modern English Grammar* (part VII, p 407) qualifies it as “not quite simple”.

The indefinite article, he adds, has two forms: “an” before a vowel and “a” before a consonant. But from Chaucer to Kipling, the form “an” has been used not only before vowels but also before *h*. And then Jespersen gives an impressive list of authors (unfortunately without the exact indication of the particular passage and the work) who have used “an” before about 33 English words beginning with *h* in stressed syllables and 19 before *h* in unstressed syllables. As he confesses “for years I took the harmless trouble of noting down all the examples I came across of *an* before *h* but probably left out many instances I found in which *a* was used before *h*.”

To my knowledge the first person interested in the form of the indefinite article before *h* and before initial [ju] spelt *u* or *eu* was Louis Feipel. In 1929 he undertook the counting of the occurrences of *an* and *a* before *h* in about 300 recently published books or translations (most of them published between 1921 and 1927) by authors of repute, equally divided between American and British ones, and presented the results in an article entitled “*A*” and “*AN*” before “*H*” and *Certain Vowels*. The paper was written in response to a statement made by Professor J.T. Hillhouse which led one to believe that there was a high degree of uniformity in the use of *a* before words beginning with an aspirated *h*, before words beginning with the long sound of <u>, and before words beginning with the <w> sound of <o> and <ou>. Professor Hillhouse quotes Fowler’s *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) which purports to represent the prevailing usage among present-day writers, to this effect:

“*An* was formally used before the unaccented syllable beginning with ‘h’, but now that the ‘h’ in such words is pronounced, the distinction has become pedantic, and *a historical* should be said and written; similarly, *an humble* is now meaningless and undesirable. *A* is now usual also before vowels preceded in fact, though not in appearance, by the sound of ‘y’ or ‘w’ (a unit, a eulogy, a one)”.

2. Feipel analysis

First, Feipel analyses words beginning with *h* (the form of the indefinite article in front of words beginning with initial initial [ju] spelt *u* or *eu* will be dealt with in another paper) according to whether the syllable containing it is accented or not. Thus, he divides the words into two classes. He mentions that there is unanimity in the use of the form *an* before the four

words containing a silent *h*: (borrowed in ME from French with no *h* in spelling) an *heir*, an *hour*, an *honour* and an *honest*. Their pronunciation without [h] was long prevalent. And he concludes that the occurrence of an *a* form is practically unthinkable.

In the first class containing words with a stressed first syllable he investigates the words *humble* and *hundred/hundredfold* :

Word	Article	British English	American English
<i>humble</i>	a	2	0
	an	0	4

Table 1

You can see the results of the investigation of the word *humble* in the table above. He considered that the regular form *a* before *h* was only found in British English while in American English the “abnormal *an* form” was found. But as in the rest of his article he never asks himself questions as to why this is so. We are actually told by Wells (1986) that a *h*-less form of the word *humble* is still found in the American south so that this is exactly what one would expect to find here.

Word	Article	British English	American English
<i>hundred/hundredfold</i>	a	0	0
	an	5	2

Table 2

In the case of *hundred/hundredfold* the prevailing form *an* may have the explanation given by Jespersen who admits to it being “especially tenacious”.

In the second class the syllable containing *h* is not accented. And the first word he analyses is *hotel*, which if we are to be accurate has the first syllable stressed with secondary stress.

The investigation of this word revealed another “anomalous” situation, to use Feipel’s words. It is mainly the British authors who use “an hotel” – only one example was found in an American author. He says: “In the 300 volumes examined ‘an hotel’ preponderated markedly over ‘a hotel’.” But no figures are given. This is, in a way, what one would expect, given that according to D. Jones’s Dictionary “some British speakers use the form without *h* always, others when it is preceded by *an*”. The form in American English reflects probably the preference of the Americans for spelling pronunciation.

In the same class he analyses *historic(al)* and *historian*.

Word	Article	British English	American English	Remarks
<i>historic(al)</i>	a	7	4	2 authors use both
	an	4	4	
<i>historian</i>	a	0	2	
	an	1	0	

Table 3

The use of the two forms of the indefinite article has an explanation in the pronunciation of these words. In British English the word *historic(al)* is sometimes pronounced without *h*, though only after *an* according to D. Jones and Wells. We are told that some RP speakers treat *h* in unstressed syllables as in *historical* as if it belonged to the group *hour, heir, honour*, eg *an historical novel*. But Gimson mentions that such pronunciations, as well as *humour* as /ju:m<</, are used by a minority only. In its turn the word *historian* is sometimes without *h* when after the indefinite article *an* according to Wells.

In the following 16 examples the *an* form seems to be “preponderant”.

Word	Article	British English	American English
<i>hallucination</i>	An	6	2
	A	3	0
<i>hysterical</i>	An	5	1
	A	1	3
<i>horizon</i> ¹	An	4	1
	A	2	0
<i>hypothesis</i>	An	1	2
	A	1	0
<i>habitué</i>	An	1	1
	A	1	0
<i>hereditary</i>	An	2	0
	A	1	0
<i>hermaphrodite</i>	An	2	0
	A	0	0
<i>hermetical(ly)</i>	An	2	0
	A	0	0
<i>herbaceous</i> ²	An	1	0
	A	0	0
<i>hieratic</i>	An	1	0
	A	0	0
<i>hydraulic</i>	An	1	0
	A	0	0
Hellenic	An	1	0
	A	0	0
<i>hypertrophy</i>	An	1	0
	A	0	0
Hidalgo	An	0	1
	A	0	0
Hungarian	An	0	1
	A	0	0
<i>histrionic</i>	An	0	1
	A	0	0

Table 4

1 It is pronounced sometimes without [h] after the indefinite article an (Wells).

2 It is sometimes pronounced with silent h in British as well as in American English.

We find it difficult to follow his analysis for some of the words as to my knowledge “*preponderant*” means “larger in number or more important than other people or things in a group” and these words occur in only one form (from *hieratic* to the end).

In the table below the *a* form is preponderant:

Word	Article	British English	American English
harmonious	a	5	0
	an	1	0
hypnotic	a	3	1
	an	3	0
harangue	a	1	0
	an	0	0
hyena	a	1	0
	an	0	0
Herculean	a	0	1
	an	0	0
Havana	a	2	1
	an	0	0

Table 5

Here again some of the words are found only preceded by *a* such as: *a harangue*, *a hyena*, *a Herculean*, *a Havana*.

There are also cases of even break:

Word	Article	British English	American English
habitual	a	2	0
	an	2	0
heraldic	a	1	0
	an	0	1
hiatus	a	1	0
	an	0	1
hilarious	a	0	1
	an	1	0
hypocrisy	a	1	0
	an	1	0

Table 6

3. The Gutenberg corpus

In my turn I investigated the usage of the indefinite article before words beginning with *h*, both synchronically and diachronically. Nowadays, such an investigation is facilitated by the existence of a considerable number of computer corpora.

I began by investigating the electronic texts available on the internet (part of the Project Gutenberg). I, like Feipen, focused my investigation on texts of literature, but unlike him I

did not analyse translations for the obvious reason that the author's choice of one or the other form may be intentional, reflecting a different dialect be it regional or social.

I found a number³ of works of literature in the corpus where the form *an* of the indefinite article in front of words beginning with *h* was not used except with the 4 words containing the silent *h* mentioned above. The number of authors whose work I have investigated and who include variation in the use of the indefinite article is observed is 15:

Author	Work	an+h	a+h	Remarks
D. Defoe 1660 - 1731	Robinson Crusoe 1719	an humble		British English
	Moll Flanders 1722		a hundred	
	From London to Land's End 1724	an hundred (3) ⁴	a hundred	both forms occur
S. Johnson 1709 - 1784	Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland 1773	an hereditary, an humble	a habitation, a historian, a hundred	British English
J. Austin 1775 - 1817	Love and Friendship 1790	an happiness, an historian, an horrible, an horrid an humble		British English
	Sense and sensibility 1811	an habitual, an heavy, an heightened an hysterical	a happy(10), a happier, a horrid, a hurried, a husband, a hurry, a happiness	
	Pride and Prejudice 1813	an hopeless an hurried , an husband		
	Emma 1815	an hesitation an hundred (2)		
Ch. Darwin 1809 - 1882	On the Origin of Species 1859	an hermaphrodite, an hexagonal, an herbaceous, an hereditary, an homopterous		British English
	The Voyage of the Beagle, 1909	an herbarium, an horizon, an humble(2)		
E.A.Poe 1809 - 1849	The Fall of the House of Usher 1839	an habitual		American English
R. H. Dana 1815 - 1882	Two Years before the Mast 1840	an hermaphrodite		American English
Ch. Dickens 1812 - 1870	A Tale of Two Cities 1859	an hotel	a honest (3) (Mr. Cruncher), a honouring (Mr. Cruncher)	British English
	Great Expectations 1860-1	An hotel	a honour (Joe)	
	Oliver Twist 1837-8	an habitual, an habitual, an hysterical	a honour (Charley), a honour (Mr. Sikes)	

3 11 works ranging from Goldsmith to Huxley.

4 The number in brackets indicates the number of occurrences.

H. Melville 1819 - 1891	Moby Dick 1850	an hypothesis		American English
G. B. Shaw 1856 - 1950	An Unsocial Socialist 1883		a honest (2)	British English
K. Grahame 1859- 1932	The Wind in the Willows 1908	an hysterical		British English
J. K. Jerome 1859-1927	Three Men in a Boat 1889	an hotel (2)	a hotel(1)	British English Both forms
A. C. Doyle 1859 - 1930	The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes 1894	an historical, an Havana	a history	British English
E. F. Benson 1867 - 1940	Michael 1916	an hallucination	a happy a hurry a hundred (12)	British English
B. Russell 1872 - 1970	Proposed Roads to Freedom 1918	an historical	a history	British English
J. Buchan 1875 - 1940	The Thirty – Nine Steps 1915		a history, a hotel a hundred (4)	British English
	Greenmantle 1916	an hotel (2), an hydraulic, an hysterical	A hotel, a hideous life, a hundred	Both forms

Table 7

The first conclusion to draw is that in the works of authors such as Defoe or Jane Austen there is vacillation in the form of the indefinite article before words beginning with *h* in stressed syllables (e.g. *hundred, happy, horrid, husband, hurry*). They seem to be in free variation. But later, with Darwin, the form *an* is used in front of words beginning with *h* if the syllable is unstressed. Words with a stressed syllable preceded by *an* (besides an *a* form) are reduced to *humble* and *hotel* both with an earlier *h*-less form.

Beginning with the works of Dickens we find the form *a* in front of the words containing a silent *h*. Here we are, fittingly, in the 19th century, when concern about a “correct” form of speech became more marked than before. People became increasingly aware of forms of speech different from those of their immediate circle.

It is in the 19th century that London became a favourite setting for fiction and with Dickens the Cockney speaker entered English literature. He was the most extensive and successful depicter of Cockney speech. Convinced that people are their behaviour, are their words, are their gestures, Dickens uses visual suggestions of non-standard speech rather than phonemic transcription of speech. Of the 6 salient phonemic features which characterise Cockney speech, *h*-insertion and *h*-dropping are the most constant signals. Dickens makes use of the apostrophe for slurred speech (e.g. *unnat’ral*), and because it is difficult to signal *h* insertion he uses the form *a* in front of the words with silent *h* such as *honest* and *honour*. He does not exploit the Cockney for comic purposes. He saw the Londoners as individuals with their own culture. He uses the *a* form of the indefinite

article to represent the speech of Mr. Cruncher the uneducated and superstitious odd-job-man in the Tale of Two Cities.

“It’s enough for you,” retorted Mr. Cruncher, “to be the wife of a honest tradesman, and not to occupy your female mind with calculations when he took to his trade or when he didn’t. A honouring and obeying wife would let his trade alone altogether.”

The form *a* instead of *an* is also found in the speech of Joe the uneducated blacksmith in *Great Expectations*, and of the two thieves Mr. Sikes and Charley Bates in *Oliver Twist*:

“Which you have that growed,” said Joe, “and that swelled, and that gentle-folked;” Joe considered a little before he discovered this word; “as to be sure you are a honour to your king and country.”

‘She’s a honour to her sex,’ said Mr. Sikes, filling his glass, and smiting the table with his enormous fist. ‘Here’s her health, and wishing they was all like her!’

‘Well, it is a honour that is!’ said Charley, a little consoled.”

It is extremely difficult to represent in writing the addition of [h] before a word spelt with a mute *h* (the consequence of the unphonetic character of the English spelling); this is why Thackery used “Hhonour”.

Elizabethan, and even 18th century, authors, who represented vulgarisms so frequently, do not seem to use omissions and misplacing of *h*’s as characteristic of low class speech. After Dickens, G. B. Shaw also uses the form *a* instead of *an* before the word *honest* as a means of denoting non-standard English (in the put-on accent of Jeff Smilash alias Sidney Trefusis in *An Unsocial Socialist*). As a matter of fact Shaw had some knowledge of phonetics (as seen from the preface to *Pygmalion*), so his Cockney reflects better the contemporary reality than Dickens’s.

“The young lady’s hi,” he said suddenly, holding out the umbrella, “is fixed on this here. I am well aware that it is not for the lowest of the low to carry a gentleman’s broolly, and I ask your ladyship’s pardon for the liberty. I come by it accidental-like, and should be glad of a reasonable offer from any gentleman in want of a honest article.”

4. The BNC

I continued my research investigating another corpus – this time a synchronic one, namely the BNC. The British National Corpus (BNC) is a very large corpus (100 million word collection of samples) of written (90%) and spoken (10%) language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of current British English, both spoken and written. I checked all English words beginning with *h* investigated by Feipel and this is what I obtained. I did not include the words which were preceded by the *a* form of the article only.

an+ Word	Number	Domain ⁵	a+ Word	Number	Domain
habitual	12 ⁶ /11 ⁷	I2, BT2, WA3, L3, SS2	habitual	17 / 15	A,L3, BT2, SS5, I2, WA3, Sk
<i>habitué</i> ⁸	3 / 3	A2, C	<i>habitué</i>	1	I
<i>hallucination</i>	9 / 9	SS, I5, A, Sk2	<i>hallucination</i>	9 / 9	A4, I 5
harangue	1	I	harangue	4 / 4	I3, BT
<i>Hellenic</i>	3 / 2	A1, Sk 2	Hellenic	1	BT
herald	1	Sk	herald	8	I5, BT3, WA3
<i>heraldic</i>	5 / 3	L, WA3, BT	heraldic	3 / 3	L2, WA1
herbaceous	1	L	herbaceous	5 / 3	I, L3, NS
hereditary	18 / 12	WA4, NS, SS2,L	hereditary	30 / 28	L3, C2, NS15, WA15, I, AS2, Sk 1
hermaphrodite	2 / 2	A, I	hermaphrodite	7 / 7	
heuristic	3 / 2	AS3	heuristic	11 / 8	NS6, A,SS2, C, AS
hiatus	1	A	hiatus	27 / 27	
hierarchical	7 / 7	AS2, SS3, WA2	hierarchical	102 / 69	
hilarious	6 / 5	L, A3, SS2	hilarious	29 / 28	
historian	42 / 33		historian	87 / 65	
<i>historic</i>	159/ 130		historic	129 / 95	
historical	191 / 135		historical	293 / 161	
historically	13 / 3		historically	18 / 15	
history	2 / 2	BT, I	history	820 / 481	
histrionic	1	A	histrionic	4 / 4	I3, WA
holistic	5 / 5	BT, L, SS3	holistic	52 / 43	
holy	1	I	holy	100 / 75	
homogeneous	4 / 4	AS, C, SS, NS,	homogeneous	100 / 72	
Horatian	1	A	Horatian	2 / 2	A2
horizon	2 / 1	A	horizon	40 / 24	
hospital	3 / 3	WA, SS, Sk	hospital	823 / 435	
hotel	80 / 61	I2, WA12, SS12; L7, A5, AS, BT3, C4, Sk8	hotel	764 / 423	
human	1	C	human	1242	
humble	5 / 2	WA	humble	85 / 72	
hundred	10 / 10	A, WA2, SS2, Sk4, I	hundred	4721 / 1375	
Hungarian	1	A	Hungarian	64 / 55	
hydraulic	2 / 2	L, AS	hydraulic	42 / 30	
hypnotic	6 / 5	A, BT, SS, I, WA	hypnotic	15 / 12	
hypothesis	27 / 12	BT7, AS3, SS9, NS9	hypothesis	75 / 50	
hysterical	17 / 16	SS6, A2, L1, I6, WA2	hysterical	27 / 25	A, I, SS, L, WA

Table 8

If we compare the data obtained from the BNC and the data found by Feipel, we realise the differences are slight even if 100 years have passed between them. On one hand, three

5 The domains given in the corpus are: A=Arts, AS=Applied Sciences, BT=Belief and thought, C=Commerce, I=Imaginative, L=Leisure, NS=Natural Sciences, Sk=Spoken, SS=Social Sciences, WA=World Affairs. When the occurrences were very many I did not count all the domains as, in the end, it did not seem to be relevant.

6 Shows the number of occurrences.

7 Shows the number of texts in which they are found.

8 The words in italics are those more often preceded by the form an or equally used with both.

words (*hidalo*, *Havana* and *hermetic*) were not found in the BNC; on the other, there is a tendency to use a preponderant *a* instead of a preponderant *an* in the words beginning with *h* in unaccented syllables: *hereditary*, *herbaceous*, *hermaphrodite*, *histrionic*, *hydraulic*, *hypothesis*, *hysterical*.

So there are 35 words in Present-day British English beginning with *h* which are used with the two forms of the indefinite article. In the majority of cases the form *a* is, however, preponderant. The form *an* is preponderant in *habitué*, *Hellenic* and *historic*. There is an even split in *hallucination* and *heraldic*.

Feipel considered that *historic* and *historical* were evenly divided between *an* and *a*; According to the BNC the word *historic* seems to take more *an* and *historical* more *a*. A more thorough investigation is probably needed in this case.

I also investigated the 4 words beginning with a mute *h* in the corpus and collected the following data:

an+word	Number	Domain	a+word	Number	Domain
heir	83 / 83		Heir	0	
honest	312 / 242		Honest	2 / 2	I, Sk 1
honour	122 / 122		Honour	0	
hour	5967 / 1648		Hour	21 / 21	A3, WA2, SS2,I3, L2,Sk 8,C1

Table 9

As can be seen from the table above, two of the words show variation in the form of the indefinite article: *honest* and *hour*. *Honest* preceded by *a* was found in the spoken data and once in the Imaginative domain; there were 8 occurrences of *a* in front of *hour* in the spoken data too. Unlike the examples found in the Gutenberg corpus the examples from the BNC are not examples of Cockney speech.

So there seems to be great variation in the form of the indefinite article before *h* in present-day English, as there was also variation in the past. It is true that terms like “variability”, “variation” and “variety” are terms which have always held negative connotations. According to a large number of dictionary definitions they have been associated with some degree of unreliability, lowering of standards, or as falling wide of the accepted norm in many walks of life.

We must admit that human nature has a strong tendency to favour conformity to standards, uniformity and conservatism, and to disfavour non-conformity, diversity, change. But as linguists we accept the widely-held view that language variation and change are natural processes rather than symptoms of degeneration and decay.

In order to account for the variation of the form of the indefinite article in front of words beginning with *h* we investigated the history of /h/ in English. We analysed first the etymology of the words examined (found in OED on CDROM), and put down the date of their entry into the language, as can be seen in the following table:

Noun	Etymology	Date of entry	Pronunciation
habitual	Ad.med.L <i>habitual-is</i> , from OF <i>habit</i> , <i>abit</i>	16 th	h↔ɔbɪtSY↔λ
<i>habitué</i>	F <i>habitué</i> , L <i>habituat</i>	19 th	h↔ɔbɪtφueɪ ⁹
<i>hallucination</i>	late L <i>alucination-em</i> , F <i>hallucination</i>	17 th	h↔,lu :sɪʊveɪΣ↔ v
harangue	OF <i>arenge</i> , <i>harangue</i> , OHG <i>bring</i>	17 th	h↔ɔpθN
<i>Hellenic</i>	L <i>Hellenicus</i>	17 th	heɪli:nɪk
herald	OF <i>herault</i> but Germanic origin, OHG <i>haren</i>	14 th	ɪher↔λδ
<i>heraldic</i>	F <i>héraldique</i>	18 th	h↔ɔpθλδɪk
herbaceous	L <i>herbace-us</i> , F <i>herbacé</i>	17 th	h↔ɔbeɪΣ↔σ
hereditary	L <i>hereditari-us</i>	17 th	h↔ɔpeδ↔τρɪ
hermaphrodite	Ad L <i>hermaphroditus</i> , a Gr	14 th	hɛ:ɪμθφρ↔δαɪ τ
heuristic	Gr, cf. Ger. <i>heuristik</i>	19 th	hɹ↔ɔpɪstɪk
hiatus	L <i>hiatus</i>	16 th	haɪueɪt↔σ
hierarchical	Gr, cf F <i>hiérarchique</i>	17 th	,ηαɪ↔ɔpA:kɪkλ
hilarious	L <i>hilari</i>	19 th	hɪɪle↔pɪ↔σ
historian	F <i>historien</i> , L <i>historia</i>	16 th	hɪʊstɪ:prɪ↔v ¹⁰
<i>historic</i>	Ad L <i>historic-us</i> , a Gr	17 th	hɪʊstɪpɪk ¹¹
historical	Ad L <i>histori-cus</i> , a Gr	16 th	hɪʊstɪpɪk↔λ ¹²
historically	Ad L <i>histori-cus</i> , a Gr	16 th	hɪʊstɪpɪk↔li ¹³
history	L <i>historia</i>	14 th	ɪhɪstrɪ
histrionic	L <i>histrionic-us</i> , cf. F	18 th	,hɪstrɪɪvɪk
holistic	Gr.	20 th	h↔ɹɪɪstɪk
holy	OE, OHG	11 th	ɪh↔ɹli
homogeneous	L <i>homogene-us</i>	17 th	,hɪδzɪ:vi↔σ
Horatian	L <i>Horatian-us</i>	18 th	h↔ɔpeɪΣ↔v
horizon	OF <i>orizonte</i> , L <i>horizont-em</i>	14 th	h↔ɔpαɪz↔v ¹⁴
hospital	OF <i>hospital</i> , L <i>hospitale</i>	14 th	ɪhɪspɪt↔λ
hotel	F <i>hôtel</i>	17 th	h↔ɹuteɪ ¹⁵
human	F <i>humain</i> , L <i>humanus</i>	14 th	ɪhju:m↔v
humble	OF <i>umble</i> , <i>humble</i> , L <i>humil-em</i>	13 th	ɪhɪmbl
hundred	OE	10 th	ɪhɪndrɪδ
Hungarian	L <i>Hungaria</i>	17 th	hɪŋgɛ↔pɪ↔v
hydraulic	Ad.L <i>hydraulic-us</i> , a Gr.	17 th	haɪɪδrɪ:ɪk
hypnotic	F <i>hynotique</i> , L <i>hypnoticus</i>	17 th	hɪpɪvɪtɪk
hypothesis	Gr, cf. F <i>hypothèse</i>	16 th	haɪɪpɪt↔σɪs
hysterical	L <i>hysteri-cus</i> from Gr, cf F <i>hystérique</i>	17 th	hɪʊstɛpɪk

Table 10

9 In British English pronounced without [h] (D. Jones)
 10 Sometimes without *h* when after *an* (Wells)
 11 Sometimes without *h* when after *an* in British English (D. Jones and Wells)
 12 Sometimes without *h* when after *an* in British English (D. Jones and Wells)
 13 Sometimes without *h* when after *an* in British English (D. Jones and Wells)
 14 Sometimes without *h* when after *an* (Wells)
 15 Some people use the *h* less pronunciation (D. Jones)

An investigation of their etymology shows that most of them are words borrowed from French or via French from Latin. The only 2 exceptions are *holy* and *hundred* which are OE words. All these words begin with what is conventionally referred to as a voiceless glottal fricative. These are the two sources of the Present day English /h/ in initial position.

First, it is the OE sound *h* which in initial position was similar to the Mod. E. sound – e.g. *habban* (have) – and it is represented by the letter *h*.

Then, a new initial /h/ was introduced in English in words borrowed from French having an initial letter *h*. But the letter *h* in French has two values: a) a mute *h* in words of Latin origin : *l'homme, un homme ανδ*, b) a so called aspirated value which hinders elision and liaison: *le homard, un homard*. The “h aspirée” comes from words of Germanic origin and is now mute too.

In Latin the letter *h* represented an aspirated sound in word-initial position. But apparently in the classical period a weakening of the aspirated sound took place in non-onomatopoeic words, which explains the recommendation of Quintilian in the 1st century AD to keep *h* both in spelling and pronunciation. But the tendency among the “pseudo-cultivated” to insert *h* before words beginning with a vowel¹⁶ was known to arouse the irony of contemporary writers in the 1st century BC.

The spelling of French words of Latin origin beginning with *h* was erratic in OF and ME, probably representing an *h*-less pronunciation. AN scribes whose command of English was incomplete often vary in their treatment of initial *h* – both omitting and inserting it incorrectly. It was common for different areas to have even different spelling conventions for the same sounds and these conventions had to be reconciled when a standardised spelling arose.

In the 4 words already mentioned (*heir, honour, honest, hour*) the *h*-less pronunciation had been retained in spite of the spelling (the explanation lies in their frequent use); but in most cases the letter *h* began to be pronounced in late ME and early Modern English – a phenomenon that continued well into the 19th century. The words: *herb, humble, hospital, and humour* are examples of late sounding of *h*. So writing affected speech. V. Fromkin (1993) considers that spelling influences the pronunciation of infrequently used words and gives the example of <h> not pronounced in *hour* and *honest* but pronounced elsewhere. For example *herb* is undergoing sounding of *h* now. It is pronounced in Standard British English but not in Standard American English.

16 This is similar to hypercorrect /h/ insertion.

5. Conclusions

The use of the form *an* of the indefinite article in front of a word beginning with *h* may reflect the loss of [h] in pronunciation. Lack of [h] in words adopted through French from Latin does not depend on English sound change, but on French pronunciation.

But we can talk about pre-vocalic *h*-loss¹⁷ as an English sound change. Pre-vocalic [h] loss refers actually to two¹⁸ different phenomena: one that belongs to vulgar or dialectal speech confined to stressed syllables, and one a normal process that belongs to educated speech and is confined to unstressed syllables. Milroy, who studied the history of *h* loss in stressed syllables, reached the conclusion that the phenomenon started in Early ME about the 14th century and had a certain amount of prestige before then spreading to the lower orders of society, and from urban to rural regions. But there seems to have been a period in the 16th century when *h*-dropping must have been associated with ignorance and lack of education, and therefore avoided (mainly by the middle class). It seems that the upper and middle classes would treat *h* as a stylistic variable, omitting the etymological *h* in informal speech and restoring it in more careful and public speech. By the 18th century /h/ dropping was certainly recognised as vulgarity.

Then there was the second [h] loss phenomenon in unstressed syllables, which is viewed by linguists as a “more normal process” but, as mentioned by Dobson, there is very little evidence of it. This phenomenon accounts for the variant pronunciation of 7 words in our corpus in the two up-to-date pronunciation dictionaries used and for the variation in the form of the indefinite article.

But one thing is normally neglected in the presentation of the history of *h*, namely that it is a weak segment in English (it is regarded as a strong, voiceless onset of the vowel that follows), and therefore it is a candidate for spontaneous loss. Linguists have looked for evidence of *h*-loss in OE but have not found any, although there may have been some loss in OE according to Milroy.

H-loss in Germanic languages does not seem natural – probably because of the heavy stress on initial syllable. Anyway, what is sure is that the French-English contact was the single most important influence on the rapid progress of *h*-loss in ME.

As far as the history of polite “Received” English is concerned it seems to have been one of slow restoration of a segment that had been lost in many dialects and was variable in some others. This explains why words beginning with *h* before a weakly stressed vowels, as in *historic*, *Hungarian*, *hysteria*, etc., are pronounced now with a restored [h], while the literary convention persists of writing *an*, and even pronouncing it, before the following *h*.

17 According to Milroy the history of *h*-loss in stressed position knew 3 forms: loss before sonorants in such combinations as: /hl, hn, hr/, loss before glides /w/ and loss before vowels.

18 This is the view shared by Jespersen and Dobson.

So we can view *h* as a variable with a long and fluctuating history characterised by a general tendency to progressive and conscious stigmatisation of *h*-loss.

And in conclusion, as an explanation for the two existing forms *a historical* or *an historical* (novel) has been given, it seems that these two variant forms can be tolerated for a long period without discernible movement toward reduction of variants. This phenomenon is called in the literature “personal - pattern variation” as opposed to geographical variation, stylistic variation, etc.

As for the variant forms of the indefinite article in front of *hour* and *honest* found in the BNC I wonder if this is not to be considered as hypercorrection on the part of some middle-class speakers who are afraid of dropping the [h] and insist on pronouncing it even when it should not be pronounced just because it exists in spelling.

Bibliography

- Dobson, E.J. 1968. *English Pronunciation 1500–1700*. 2 volumes. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Feipel, L.N. 1929. “A” and “AN” before “H” and Certain Vowels. *American Speech* 5, no. 6: 442–54.
- Fromkin, V., and R. Rodman. 1993. *An Introduction to Language*. Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.
- Jespersen, O. 1949. *A Modern English Grammar*. Part I, Part VII, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. London.
- Milroy, J. 1983. On the sociolinguistic history of /h / dropping in English. In *Current Topics in English Historical Linguistics*, M. Davenport et al., 37–54. Odense: Odense University Press.
- Taillé, M. 1995. *Histoire de la langue anglaise*. Armand Colin.
- Wells, J.C. 1996. *Accents of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dictionaries

- Jones, D. 1997. *English Pronouncing Dictionary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, J.C. 1990. *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*. Longman.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. 1994. Second Edition on compact disk by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1994.

Corpora

- British National Corpus. <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk>
- The Gutenberg project. <http://www.gutenberg.net>