

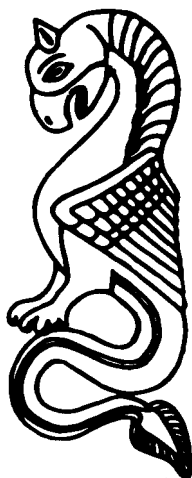
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Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
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WEAK SYLLABLES IN DIALECTAL USAGE

By STANLEY ELLIS

The concentration upon the speech of a largely rural population in the English Dialect Survey basic material (*Survey of English Dialects* (B) ed. H. Orton et al, E.J. Arnold 1962-71) has often been criticised by commentators. A recent example is the remark of Dr K.M. Petyt in *The Study of Dialect* (Deutsch, 1980) "it records the speech of only a small and unrepresentative sample of the population of England". Dr J.C. Wells in an article 'Local Accents in England and Wales' (in *Journal of Linguistics* Vol. 6, No. 2, September 1970) also comments that "dialectologists in England have concentrated on the speech of small and relatively isolated rural communities". Wells goes on "the vast mass of urban working-class and lower-middle-class speakers use a pronunciation nearer to RP, and lexical and grammatical forms much nearer to Standard English, than the archaic rural dialects recorded by dialectologists". In this "preliminary and tentative sketch" of the phonetic variables among mainly urban forms of English Dr Wells uses various evidence, some from *SED*, to define principal regional groups of dialects. One of his comments is (§6.5) that in RP /ə/ is gradually replacing /ɪ/ in unstressed syllables, both prefixes and suffixes.

The *SED* material relevant to dialectal usage of /ə/ and /ɪ/ and compared to varieties of RP would show however a greater relationship than suggested between the pronunciation of RP speakers and the dialect of the areas where they learned to talk. Observation of speakers who might be classified as more of the "upper-middle classes" mentioned in §8.2 of Dr Wells article, perhaps still retaining something of the "educated regional" speech of Professor A.C. Gimson (*An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*, London, 1962), but who certainly by education and profession have long moved away from, or never even had an urban dialect, let alone a rural one, shows that in respect of the unstressed syllables they may give away far more precise indication of their regional origins than they themselves would believe possible.

Using the information from a number of questions in the *SED* it is possible to arrive at three distinct groupings of areas where /ə/ is found as an alternative to /ɪ/. The published mapped material from the *SED* in the *Linguistic Atlas of English* (ed. H. Orton, S.F. Sanderson, J.D.A. Widdowson, Croom Helm, 1978) shows weak syllables as suffixes of *laces* and *bushes*, the unstressed final syllable in *pocket*, the unstressed *-ing* suffix in *cursing*, *doing laughing* and *writing*, and unstressed final *-ing* in *shilling*, *farthing*, *herring*. Material for *farthing* has been ignored because

in many areas the retention of the *-d-* form is followed by loss of the vowel and a syllabic *n*.

Further information was sought by using the index of the *SED* and considering nine more words: *horses* (I.6.5), *houses* (V.1.1), *boiling* (V.8.6), *right-* and *left-handed* (VI.7.13), *-footed* (VI.10.5), *lightning* (VII.6.22), *gossiping* (VIII.3.5), and *working* (VIII.4.8). *Bushes* and *laces* are already mapped in *LEA* (Ph 196 and Ph 197). *Hinges* at first seemed suitable but was discarded after showing lexical variation, later the compounds with *footed*, *gossiping* and *left-handed* proved to be confused because of lexical alternatives. Even *houses* proved too confused with its weak plural *housen* to be of any use in the Midlands and East Anglia, though it contributed to the information for Northern and Southern England.

One of the most widely observed occurrences of a contrast is in the verbal *-ed* suffix represented by *started* to *rain*. Again the lexical variety (usually *began*) made it impossible to take a verbal ending of this type from *SED* material, *right-handed* remains the only usable example from *SED* of an *-ed* suffix of any kind.

All the notions used from *SED* yielded three distinctive areas with the following groupings, A: *boiling, cursing, doing, laughing, working, writing*; B: *herring, lightning, morning, shilling*; C: *bushes, horses, houses, laces, right-handed*. Group A, all verbal *-ing* suffixes, produces a map with a distinctive Northern /ə/ area covering mostly the four northernmost English counties (pre 1974) of Cumberland, Westmorland, Northumberland and Durham, with a second definite area covering Suffolk and north Essex; a third area is basically the south coast of Hampshire and then on the coast westward to Cornwall. Very rare outliers occur on the coast of the Wash, and the situation in North Cornwall is somewhat fluid. However the three main areas are generally in agreement in all six words (see Map 1). *Pocket* is most similar to this group in the Northern part of England but introduces a new element of /ə/ quality in the central South Midlands (see Map 2).

The B group is generally less widespread, largely restricted to the Eastern part of the North. The area it covers is less in both East Anglia and the South and West (see Map 3).

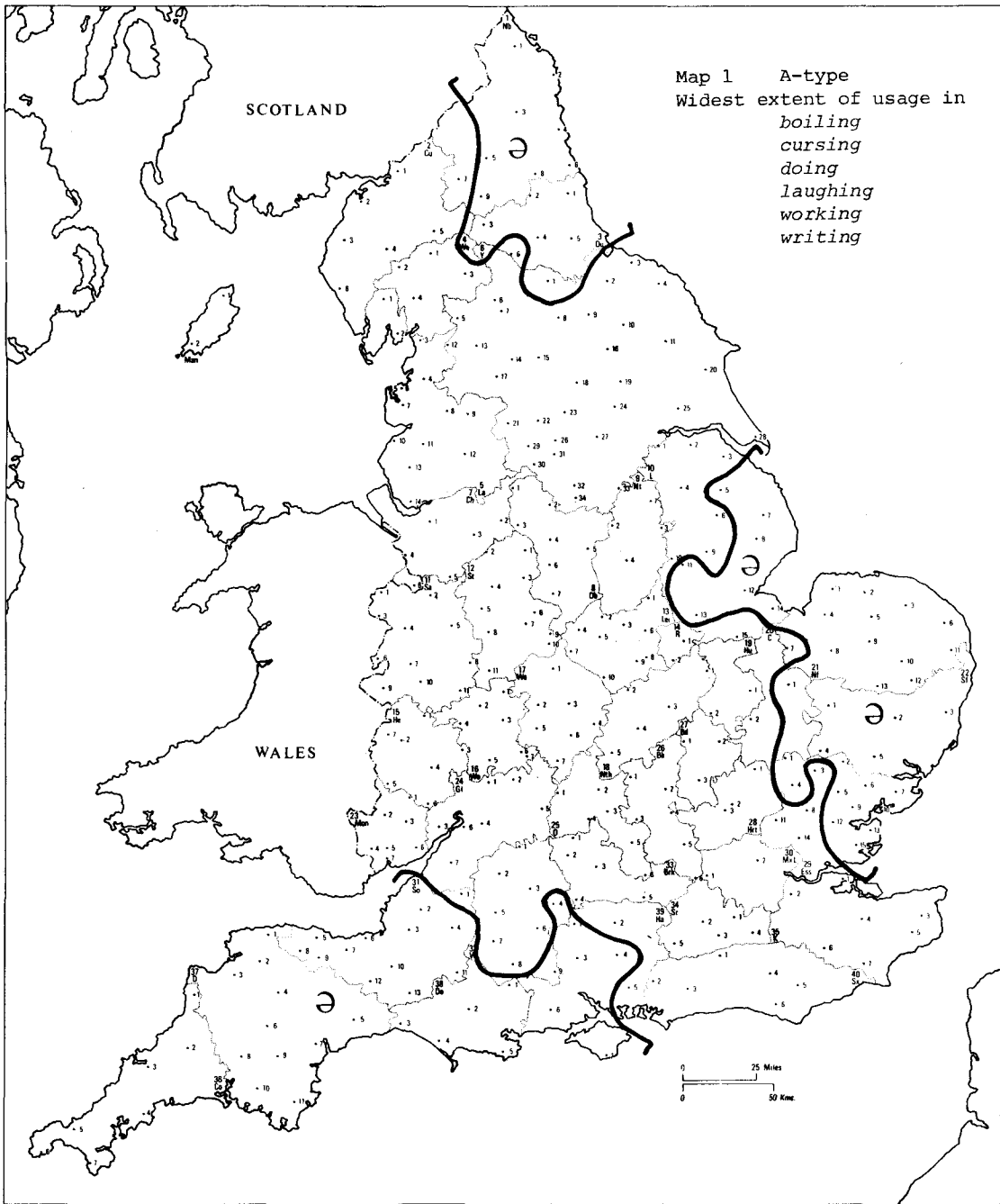
With the C group there is in the north an area of /ə/ firmly restricted to Tyneside and we see a completely new area for this /ə/ in the south of Yorkshire, north Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. Suffolk and North Essex again are an area with a firm /ə/ pronunciation. Hampshire and Dorset are again firm /ə/ areas but the picture further west and in the West Midlands is rather obscure (see Map 4). *Houses*, too, gives the same clear pattern in Tyneside and Yorkshire (see Map 5).

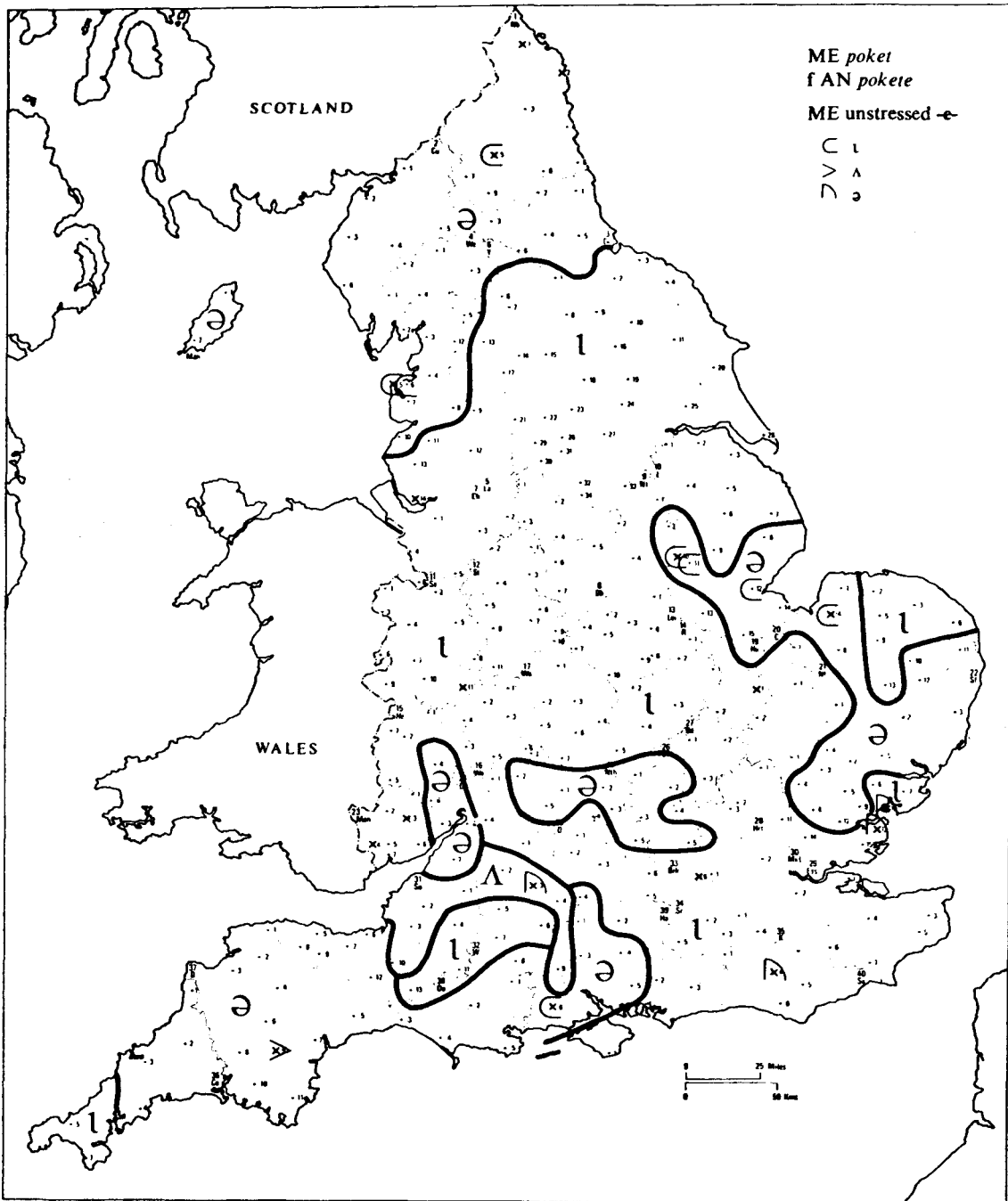
For all the confusion of the B type in the south-west of England the pattern that emerges of the groups is one that gives impressive results in identifying the regional provenance of urban speakers from the geographical areas having the /ə/ types, and conversely aiding an identification for speakers with overall characteristics of the same type but from nearby /ʌ/ areas.

Perhaps the main point of interest that emerges is that the North Midland of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and South Yorkshire has the /ə/ form only in group C words. Unfortunately very little evidence of the past tense *-ed* can be found in *SED* to give an overall picture. However it is observable that an area to the south of Leeds (6Y23) not only produces an /ə/ type in the plurals like *horses* and also in *chicken* but also past tense pronunciations like *started* with /əd/. This area includes Morley, some four miles south of Leeds, Halifax, Huddersfield and Sheffield, Buxton in Derbyshire and Mansfield in Nottinghamshire and the pronunciations can be heard from native speakers from the area at all social levels.

In the context of this Festschrift number of *LSE*, it may interest readers to learn that Emeritus Professor Cawley is an /ɪ/ type from the South East of England, his wife an /ə/ type from Tyneside.

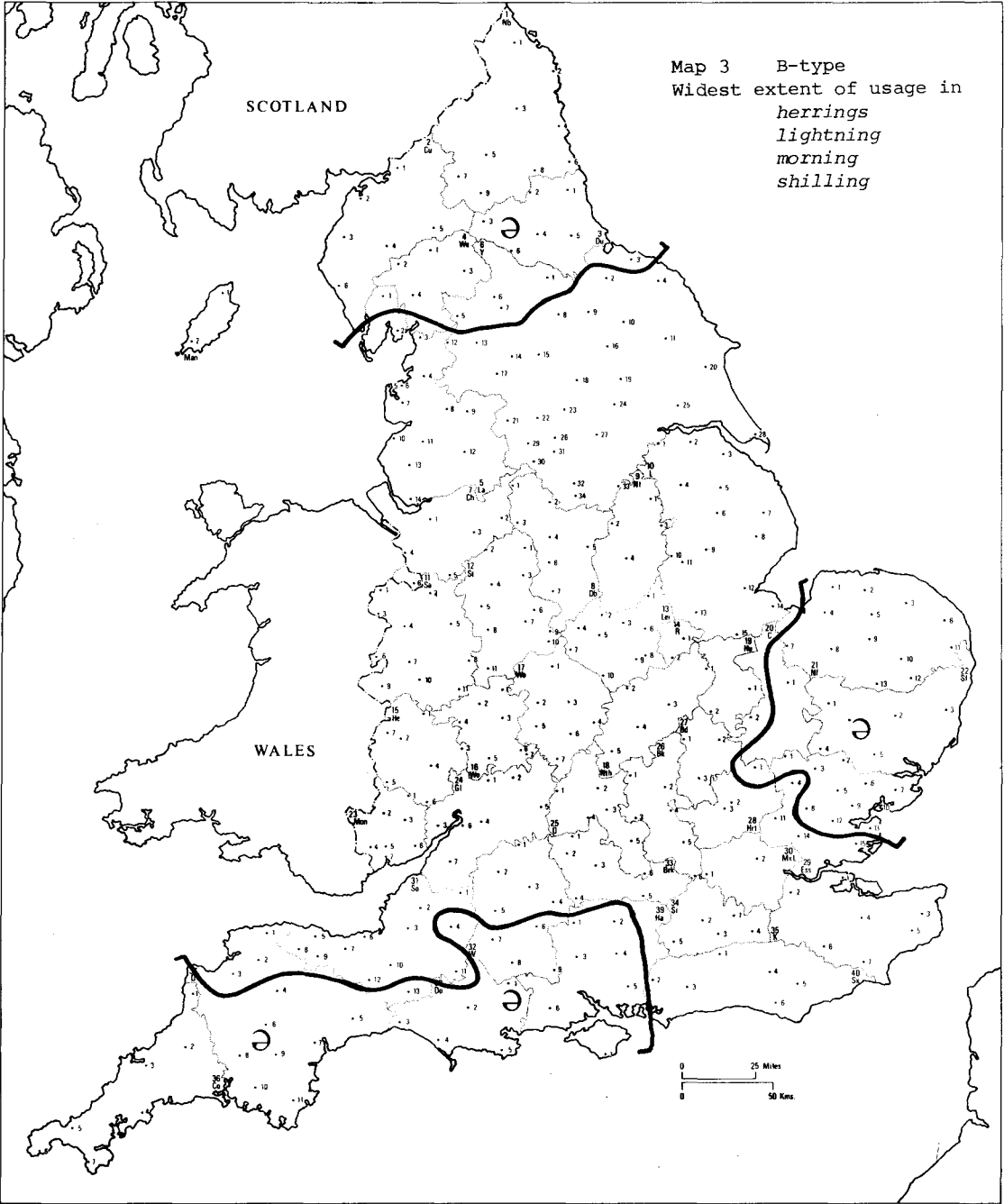






Map 2

Reproduced from the *Linguistic Atlas of England*



Map 4 C-type
Widest extent of usage in
bushes
horses
laces

