A grammatical investigation of Definite Article Reduction

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This paper reports on a study of Definite Article Reduction (DAR), a feature that characterizes northern British dialects. DAR reduces the definite article to a vowelless form, as illustrated with the data (1a-c).

(1)  a. They had a baby, and as soon as t’baby arrived he got jealous.
     b. It’s in t’ kitchen, did you not see it?
     c. You thought they were going to chop you up and shove you in t’lake!

While previous research has largely addressed the phonology of DAR (for example, Barry 1972, Jones 1999), the present study examined whether DAR might be grammatically conditioned. The study was based on a corpus of spontaneous data obtained from tape-recorded conversations with eight speakers at the North Yorkshire/Lancashire border. The pattern emerging from the data is that DAR is most frequent when speakers refer to something (i) just mentioned in the conversation (anaphoric reference, as in (1a)); (ii) in the immediate environment (situational reference, as in (1b)); (iii) that constitutes knowledge shared with the hearer (as in (1c)). Noting that these contexts seem to concern notions of ‘near’ and ‘given’, the paper speculates on the emergence of DAR, drawing on the historical development of the definite article.