Dialect speakers in the North of England use vowel-less forms of the definite article (the) which are unattested in English varieties elsewhere and have been termed Definite Article Reduction (DAR). Contemporary studies (like Jones 1999) have largely focused on the phonology of DAR. They have provided valuable analyses of the different realizations that occur. These range between supralaryngeal [t, ə] and laryngeal [ʔ] forms. In writing, DAR is usually represented as t'. Here are some data for illustration:

(1) a. It's in t' kitchen, did you not see it? My little Delft dish. (KF)
    b. They had a baby, and as soon as t' baby arrived he got jealous. (LL)

Insight into aspects of DAR other than phonological (for example, the emergence of DAR and the northern English pattern of occurrence) has been less advanced. I demonstrate that a more complete understanding of DAR may be obtained if we combine evidence from dialect geography and pragmatic, diachronic and sociolinguistic studies. These cumulative findings are, most notably:

- the definite article first emerged in the North of England (McColl Millar 2000);
- DAR forms show greater differentiation across different geographical locations than across different phonological environments (Barry 1972);
- older generations use DAR for a pragmatic function comparable to that of the distal demonstrative (that) (Rupp & Page-Verhoeff 2005);
- younger speakers favour glottal forms over [t] and use DAR as a social marker (Tagliamonte & Roeder, in prep.)

Contrary to common assumption (as reflected in the naming), I extrapolate from this that DAR might not have derived from the definite article. Rather, I suspect that the definite article and DAR each derived from separate forms of the Old English simple demonstrative paradigm (sē/sæo > Pe and þæ > t, respectively) in an internal development in the North of England. On this analysis, the range of attested DAR forms may all be considered lenited realizations of [t]. I argue that the linguistic cycle of DAR is currently extending into a sociolinguistic cycle, and I note that competition between forms (DAR and the) with weakening of form [t > ʔ] and linguistic (pragmatic) function seems a condition for this. In this way, the individual case of DAR may further our understanding of the broader issue of what the conditions are for grammatical variables to develop into social markers.