

The Story of English 7: The Great Vowel Shift

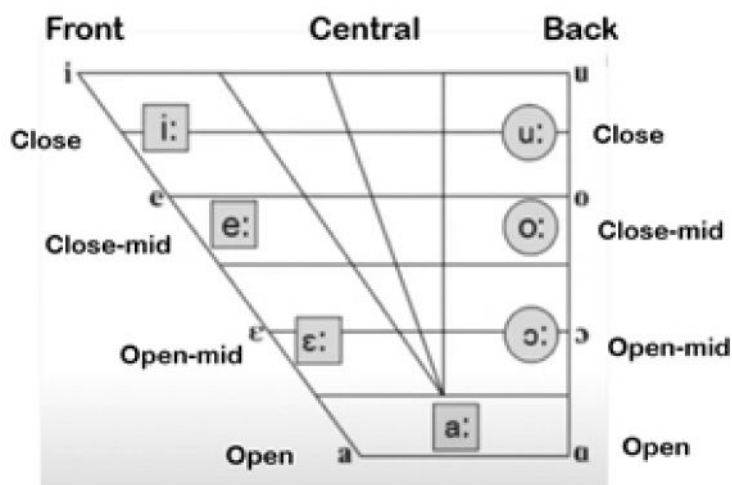
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A few significant sound changes took place in the period of transition from Middle English to Early Modern English starting around 1350 CE. The most significant of this was the Great Vowel Shift, a process which went on till around 1700 CE, which marks the end of Early Modern English. The Great Vowel Shift affected the English sound system so much that the English of Chaucer is very much different from that of Shakespeare, whereas the differences between Elizabethan English and Modern English are far fewer. This change was called the Great Vowel Shift (GVS) because of the fundamental manner in which the ME vowel system was altered by it.

We do not have definite information about what caused the GVS, though the changes

in English phonology that began in the Old English period itself and augmented to a very high degree by the Norman Conquest, might be held accountable on a basic level. The GVS caused ME long vowels to be pronounced with a greater elevation of the tongue and closing of the mouth. All the seven ME long vowels became closer in quality, and those already as close as they could be became diphthongs. Changes took place both among the back and front vowels. This is considered to be an isolative change, though ongoing linguistic research might throw up new clues that indicate otherwise.

The seven long vowels of Middle English, which were particularly affected by the GVS, are described in the diagram below.



ME long front vowels: close - /i:/, close-mid - /e:/, open-mid - /ɛ:/, open central - /a:/

ME long back vowels: close - /u:/, close-mid - /o:/, open-mid - /ɔ:/

For those who are not familiar with vowel positions, here is a note that will help them understand the figure better. The geometric figure represents the space available in the oral cavity for the human tongue to move while producing vowel sounds, with Front, Central and Back indicating the front, central and back parts of the tongue. In 'open' position, the tongue is as low as it can be in the production of vowel sounds, and in the 'close' position it is as high as it can be towards the roof of the mouth, leaving minimal space for the air from the lungs to flow freely. 'Open-mid' position is a little above the 'Open' position, and 'Close-mid' is a bit below the 'Close' position. The diagram shows the Cardinal Vowel positions, which helps us describe the position of articulation of any vowel sound. The seven long ME vowels are represented here and their quality is different from their Modern English equivalents in varying degrees.

The changes of these ME vowel sounds under the GVS can be summarised as follows with examples. The changes happened very slowly, over several centuries from say 1350 to 1700 CE, not necessarily in any particular sequence.

1. The half open /ɔ:/ sound, found in ME words like *goat* and *hope* became a close /o:/ sound. The /o:/ later evolved into the diphthong /ou/, which has since become /əʊ/ as used now. **Change - ɔ: > o: > ou > əʊ.**

2. The ME /o:/, on the other hand, became the /u:/ sound heard in words like *hu:s* and *mu:s*. M.E /u:/ evolved into a diphthong;

probably /əʊ/ at first and by the seventeenth century reached its present day quality /au/ as in *house*. **Change - o: > u: > əʊ > au.**

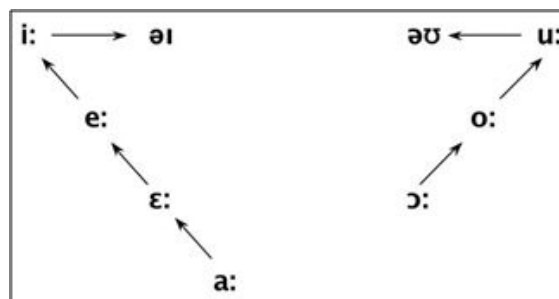
3. Middle English /a:/ used in *bake* and *dame* became closer, to /ɛ:/ and then it got further close and became /e:/ and later got diphthongized to modern /eɪ/. **Change - a: > ɛ: > e: > eɪ.**

4. Middle English /e:/ used in *meet*, *green* and *deed* had become /i:/ as we hear it now. **Change - e: > i:.**

5. M.E /i:/ used in *mice*, *five* became diphthongized to /ɪɪ/ and then to /aɪ/. **Change i: > ɪɪ > aɪ.**

6. Middle English open vowel /ɛ:/, (which was similar to modern /e/ sound, only a bit more open and long in quality), probably became /e:/, (which is similar to modern /i:/, only a little less close in quality.)

This image shows all the changes, except the later developments of /aɪ/ from /ɪɪ/, and /au/ from /əʊ/.



Changes other than the GVS

There are comparatively fewer changes in the ME short vowels and consonants. One notable change in the former was the

deviation of the phoneme /ʌ/ from /u/. In ME, there was no /ʌ/ sound, so *cut* was pronounced as /kut/. In the seventeenth century, there developed /ʌ/, which took over /u/ except in certain words where the /ʊ/ sound was retained due to the influence of neighbouring labial consonants or /l/: *full, bull*, etc.

In consonants, /w/ sound was lost in words like *sword* and *two*; the final /b/ sound was lost in words like *climb, comb, and lamb*. ME words like *fader* and *hider* became *father* and *hither*; the /h/ sound was lost in words like *light, eight, and height*. Also, the initial 'k' sound was lost in *knee* and *knight*, and the /t/ sound was lost in words like

castle, bristle, Christmas, and soften.

All these changes resulted in the total loss of the phonetic quality of the English language. The spelling of English had become generally fixed before these changes operated to the full, and was not modified when the quality of the sounds discussed above changed. In the following part in this series, we will look at the impact of Renaissance on the English language.

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[**Editor's Note:** *This is part of a series of articles tracing the history of the English language, to be continued in this column.*]

SOME USEFUL WEB TOOLS FOR SPEAKING SKILLS

English Central (<http://www.englishcentral.com/>)

English Central is a video site bringing voice to learners. It makes use of both speech recognition and text-to-speech facilities for language learning.

Online Voice Recording Tools

Audiopal (<http://www.audiopal.com>)

Vocaroo (<http://vocaroo.com/>)

Both Audiopal and Vocaroo are very simple voice recording tools. You don't need to sign up in these sites. You can record your speech and download it as an mp3 file from these sites. You can preview your recording and can email it to anyone right from these sites. Additionally, Audiopal offers some more facilities. You can record your speech by making phone calls to the numbers given in Audiopal.

Podcasting Tools

Podomatic (<http://www.podomatic.com>)

Spreaker (<http://www.spreaker.com>)

Audioboom (<https://audioboom.com>)

A podcast is an audio broadcast over the web. It is broken up into parts or episodes. Most podcasts are similar to news radio programs and deliver information on a regular basis, but they can also be comedy shows, special music broadcasts or talks. You as a teacher can set up a podcasting channel in Podomatic, Spreaker, or Audioboom.

Voki (<http://www.voki.com>)

Voki lets you create customized speaking characters. Voki can be an effective tool to practise speaking skills in literature classes. It encourages creativity and interactivity in your classes.

WhatsApp groups

Whatsapp offers another opportunity for language learners to practise their speaking skills. Teachers can create a WhatsApp group for their classes. Learners can record their speeches (up to 1 minute) and can share them in the group. This allows interactivity and peer support in your speaking skills class.

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