

English pronunciation across  
time and space:  
from Middle English to World  
Englishes

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# The aims of the lecture

- To discuss variability in the pronunciation of English around the world from the perspective of changes of English in England and the dispersion of English around the world.
- To examine the relationship between speech and writing across time and space: how first speech affected writing, then writing affected speech, and now speech is affecting writing in a new way.

# Lecture plan

1. It all starts in Middle English – the beginning of new conventions for writing: writing reflects speech.
2. English in print – Middle English conventions remain, pronunciation changes.
3. The spread of English beyond the British Isles begins – Early Modern English is on travel
4. The Age of Enlightenment – science rules: writing reflects word origin, spelling pronunciations develop.
5. The spread of English continues – more oceans are crossed: the second and third dispersion.
6. Speech can be heard over the distance – standard pronunciation moves from Public Schools in England to the schools of English around the world.
7. Non-native speakers of English have a say – English as a Lingua Franca: we share spelling, not sounds.
8. Sounds in World Englishes – pronunciation is important if English is to be used effectively for global, inter-cultural communication.

# It all starts in Middle English...

Middle English – A dialect Age

(Crystal, D. *'The Stories of English'* (2005: 190-191).

*The medieval age in Britain allows us to get in writing as close as possible to the 'natural state' of a group of English dialects. It was an age before printing and before one of these dialects had grown in prestige and become the language's 'standard dialect'. (...)*

*Standard English, as we know it today, did not emerge in a recognizable form until the very end of the Middle English period. For a glorious 300 years people could write as they wanted to, and nobody could say they were wrong.*

McCrum, R., R. MacNeil & W. Cran *'The story of English'* (1986: 80)

*(...) with the development of written English, [English] had developed strong local forms, written and spoken.*

# Middle English dialects

*Spoken English differed from county to county as it does in rural districts to his day. The five main speech areas – Northern, West and East Midlands, Southern and Kentish – are strikingly similar to contemporary English speech areas. Within the East Midland, one small nucleus of power – the triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London – shared the same kind of English, which may be said to have become the basis for Standard English in the twentieth century.*

*The career and achievement of one man, Geoffrey Chaucer [1340-1400], exemplifies the triumph of London English.*

McCrum, R., R. MacNeil & W. Cran 'The story of English' (1986: 80)

# Some Middle English spelling conventions

- Orrm, an English monk, who wrote around 1200 in an East Midland dialect was one of the first to introduce a system for speech-writing correspondence.
  - Problem: long – short vowel:
    - (i) Long vowels represented by a double letter (*seat, feet, room, etc.*)
    - (ii) When a syllable ends in a consonant and a vowel is short, a consonant doubles, as in *sitting (sitt)*. This convention was widely adopted when short vowels began to lengthen in open syllables, e.g. *bake, sit vs. site, hop vs. hope, rid vs. ride*  
*sitting – siting, hopping – hoping, ridding – riding, stagger – stager*
- Compare
- run – running, bet – betting, swim – swimming etc.*

# Middle English: speech reflects writing

## G. Chaucer *Canterbury Tales: Prologue*

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
/hwan θat a:prɪl wɪθ hɪs ʃu:rəs so:tə/

The droghte of March hath perced to the rote  
/θə dru:xt ɔf mɑrʃ hɑθ pɛ:rsəd to: θə ro:tə/

And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
/and bɑ:ðəd ɛvəri væɪn ɪn swɪʃ lɪku:r /

Thanne longen folkes to goon on pilgrimages  
/ θan lɔŋən fɔlk to: go:n ɔn pɪlgrɪmɑ:dʒəs/

# English in print

- The view that a writing system is a way of representing a speech system became steadily less relevant as standard evolved.(...) The written language (..) was taking a life of its own - speech developing in one way; writing in another (Crystal 2005:255).
- One of the initial reasons: print (introduced in England in 1476 by William Caxton).
- Caxton reproduced the English of London and South-East originally with a lot of variability in spelling conventions , e.g. *egg* (northern) vs. *eyren* (southern ).
- Print had a strong stabilising / standardising effect
- Spelling reflected Middle English pronunciation to a large extent.



# Major pronunciation changes after print had been established

- Great Vowel Shift – All long vowels change pronunciation: /i:/ & /u:/ diphthongise, mid vowels rise, e.g. mice, mouse, foot, feet, tooth, teeth; later changes shortened /u:/ in many one-syllabic words ending in a single consonant.
- The FOOT-STRUT split – short /u/ split into two distinct categories /ʌ/ and /ʊ/ in the south but not the north of England. It was caused by unrounding and lowering in many contexts, but not before /l/ or when preceded by /w/, /p/, /b/, /f/, e.g. pull, full, put, wolf.

Notice: the two processes interacted, notice BLOOD vs. LOOK:

the original /o:/ changed to /u:/ in GVS; when a shortening took place, if it happened in the 16th c, short /u/ underwent the lowering, giving /bʌd/; if it happened later – the shortening produced /bʊk/

- A gradual loss of post-vocalic /r/ (1700)
- ‘-ng’ sequence produced as a velar nasal at the end of words.

# Early Modern English re-modelling of words

The influence of Latin: new words borrowed, existing words re-shaped in accordance with their real or supposed etymology.

1. Spelling changes, pronunciation remains the same, e.g. *dette* – *debt*, *doute* – *doubt*, *receit* – *receipt*, *indit*- *indict*
2. The change in spelling affects pronunciation, e.g. *Assaut*- *assault*, *aventure* – *adventure*, *describe* – *describe*, *verdit* – *verdict*.
3. False etymology, e.g. *avance*-*advance*, *avantage* – *advantage*, *amiral* – *admiral*, (a- vs. ad- prefix confusion)

# The spread of English beyond the British Isles begins – Early Modern English is on travel

- Early Modern English is a spoken and written language, with 20,000 books published in England in English between 1500 and 1640.
- Early Modern English, the language of Shakespeare, is taken across the Atlantic Ocean to Jamestown (1607) and with the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620.
- American English roots: with 30 different communities on the Mayflower, East Anglia was best represented.
- In the next 30 years there about 250,000 residents in the north-east, mainly from London and East Anglia. Towards the south, Jamestown and other settlements flourished, with adventurers from all over England (McCrum et al.1986:128)

# The Age of Enlightenment – the standardisation of the spelling system

- The spelling system standardised by the beginning of the 18thc. but it reflected pronunciation from before the Great Vowel Shift:
  - spelling does not correspond to the quality of long vowels,
  - no FOOT-STRUT split,
  - no consonant cluster simplification (*knight, night, knee etc.*)
  - no *-ng* simplification, e.g. *singer vs. Finger.*
- The Renaissance etymologising ‘silent letters’ in *receipt, subtle*

# Science rules: writing reflects word origin, spelling pronunciations develop

- Introduction of initial 'h', e.g. *habit, harmony, hemisphere, herbs, heritage, host, humble, humour* – the spelling pronunciation of these words not common until 19th c (e.g. American vs. British pronunciation of *herbs*).
- Re-introduction of consonants in *often, waistcoat, forehead, clothes, Ralph, towards* (notice the difference between RP and GA in preferences).

# The consequences of the loss of 'r'

- The weakening of /r/ before a consonant and before a pause had started by the 16th c. but its loss was gradual, completed in most of England around mid 18th c.
- The loss of post-vocalic /r/ turns English accents into Rhotic vs. Non-rhotic
- Before it disappeared, /r/ had some important consequences on the sound system:
  - (i) in short vowels, lengthening and change of quality of the preceding vowels, e.g.  
*arm, card, cord, storm;*  
*bitch, herb, curse;*
  - (ii) in long vowels – centering diphthongs developed, as in  
*here, fire, pear, poor, more* (with a long vowel preference today)
- RHOTICITY - the main differentiating factor in accents

# The spread of English continues – more oceans are crossed: the second and third dispersion.

- The spread of English across the world in the 17th-18th c: the colonists take their language with them.
- Second dispersal: other English-speaking countries emerge: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa.
- Third dispersal: British rule in Singapore, Hong-Kong, the Falkland Islands, Africa, e. g. Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana , where the English do not settle.
- The result: English spoken as the first and second language.
- National varieties emerge, speech clearly differentiates the Americans, Australians or South Africans from each other; the written system remains stable.

# The emergence and spread of a (super) standard in speech

- The Education Act (1870) established the Public Schools system: they function as ‘melting pots’, preparing for civil service.
- Received Pronunciation becomes one of the attributes of the professional middle class.
- ‘The Queens English expected to be spoken with a specific accent and intonation’ from undergraduates in Oxford.



Speech can be heard over the distance – standard pronunciation moves from Public Schools in England to the schools of English around the world.

- The spread of English makes it used increasingly not only as L1, L2 but also as a foreign language, taught formally in schools in countries, where English has no internal function (EFL).
- The rapidly growing number of people from different languages and cultures who use English leads to the recognition of a global role of English and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

# Non-native speakers of English have a say

- ESL / EFL / EIL / ELF ?
- About 80% of English users are non-native speakers and they will have a growing impact on English (Jenkins 2008).
- Of this 80% the largest number is represented by speakers in the expanding circle.
- These speakers use English to communicate with other non-native speakers more often than with native speakers, they use English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).
- Point of reference: a native language and culture

# EFL for International Communication

1. The main purpose for the use of the Lingua Franca is to ensure communication.
2. Across the English speaking world, we share writing, not speech.
3. Accents, language varieties are crucial for identity and make the English speaking world fascinating; non-native varieties add to the richness , but they may make communication ACROSS accents even more difficult.
4. The intelligibility of a language variety IN SPEECH strongly depends on familiarity, e.g. Polish and Czech learners of English may have no problem with a strong Polish / Czech influence on English, but e.g. Turkish speakers of English may have a different view!

# Learning English for International Communication: problems

EFL speakers (Jenkins):

- use English in a creative way, making use of multilingual resources
- code switch, use accommodation strategies
- prioritise communicative effectiveness over narrow (native-norm based) correctness.

BUT

- The creativity and the extent to which languages / cultures are mixed may lead to a different level of communicative effectiveness
- Linguistic and cultural closeness may play an important role in solving intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability problems.

# Aims in learning English for International Communication

The aim: To be prepared to communicate using English in all contexts and through different media: native and non-native, in speech and writing.

The most likely context: communication with other non-native speakers.

The most likely medium: Computer Mediated Communication

Speech and writing take a new dimension with CMC: as the new media create new reality, writing is transformed, 4U 2, BTW.

# English as a Lingua Franca: we share spelling, not sounds.

Speaking remains crucial, and with speaking:  
PRONUNCIATION.

Pronunciation learning priorities: the elements crucial for communication in speech—intelligibility.

KEY Problem: HOW do we know which elements of our speech in English can interfere with being comfortably understood?????

# Sounds in World Englishes

- Pronunciation is important if English is to be used effectively for global, inter-cultural communication.
- Priorities need to be based on well-designed research into the way we, non-native speakers of English speak.
- Sounds in World Englishes – pronunciation is important if English is to be used effectively for global, inter-cultural communication.

# From Middle English to World Englishes

Middle English (1100-1500): the time of dialects, speech matters, writing follows.

Early Modern English (1500-1650): the time of creativity – the spread of English begins, speech flourishes, writing slows down and does not catch up with speech.

The Age of Enlightenment (1650-1800): science rules, writing matters, speech follows, standard spelling and grammar, the spread of English continues.

Modern English (1800-1990): writing matters, standard spelling, standard speech, the spread of English speeds up.

The 21st century: the time of dialects, speech matters writing follows; the unprecedented opportunities for direct contact and communication with speech and writing reflecting the wealth of our language and culture experience.

The time of creativity....

The time of standardisation...



Thank you 😊

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