

spelling of English words has changed very little, so that it is hardly a problem for modern readers to read Early Modern English texts.

5.4.3 The Great Vowel Shift

The Great Vowel Shift radically altered most of the English long vowel system, and although spelling had been pretty much fixed by Johnson's time, more recent phases of the Great Vowel Shift have rendered the spelling system of English less phonetic in character. This change is one of the many reasons why the Great Vowel Shift should be looked at in detail at this point.

The Great Vowel Shift can be studied purely from the structural point of view, that is, without recourse to social issues. In the following treatment of this important set of changes in the English language, however, the purely linguistic or phonological discussion inevitably leads on to the sociolinguistic, as our discussion will show.

5.4.3.1 Phonological Change

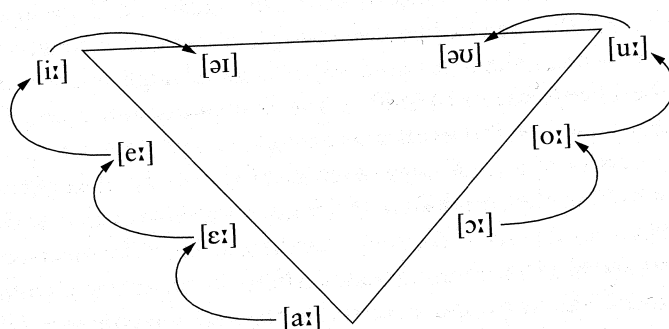
From the point of view of the structure of English alone it is very interesting to view the radical changes in the long vowels since Chaucer's time, most of which changed dramatically in the late Middle and Early Modern English period and some of which are still changing in the present day.

As we saw in the previous chapter there was little change in the quality of vowels from Old to Middle English in accented syllables. The most important change in the long vowels was from *a* to *o* – for example, *ba:n* > *bo:n* (bone), *ba:t* > *bo:t* (boat). The long *æ* in Old English spelling represented two sounds: in certain words it stood for /a:/ in West Germanic. It represents a close /e:/ outside the West Saxon area and remains /e:/ in ME (North-West Saxon *ded* > *ded*; *slepan* > *slepen*). In many words OE /æ/ resulted from the i-umlaut of /a/. This was a more open vowel and appears as /ɛ:/ in Middle English (OE *clæne* > *clene*; *dælan* > *delen*). The two sounds have now become identical: *deed*, *clean*).

Other long vowels of OE preserved their original quality in ME (*med* > *mede*; *win* > *wine*; *boc* > *bok*; *hus* > *hus*). OE diphthongs were all simplified and all ME diphthongs are new formations, resulting chiefly from the combination of a simple vowel with a following /j/ or /w/, which vocalized.

In most instances, while the quality of vowels did not change, their quantity, or length, did. OE long vowels were shortened late in the OE period or early in ME, when followed by a double consonant or by most combinations of consonants (OE *great* > *gretter*; OE *axian* > *asken*; OE *bacan* > *baken*; OE *etan* > *eten*). While they are not particularly noticeable changes in themselves, they nevertheless determined the subsequent development of the English vowel system.

The Great Vowel Shift began in about the fifteenth century and was largely completed by the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. One interpretation of this shift has it that in the first stage the phoneme /i:/ as in *wine* and *tide* developed a series of 'slurred' pronunciations with the preceding on-glide [iɪ] and [əi]. Similar on-glides developed for the long close back vowel [u:]: [uɪ] and [əu]. During the second stage the mid-close vowels /e:/ and /o:/ raised to /i:/ and /u:/, and [iɪ] and [əu] became phonemes. Middle English /e:/ and /ɔ:/ raised to /e:/ and /o:/, and /a:/ was raised to /e:/:



(Compare this diagram with Aitcheson, 1991: 153.)

This system-wide set of related shifts is known as a chain shift (the First and Second Germanic Consonant Shifts discussed in chapter 2 are further examples of chain shifts in English, though these are in the consonant system). Each non-high vowel rises one height, and the high vowels, which are unable to rise any further, become diphthongs. The 'chain' aspect is the systematic interconnection: it does not imply that one change preceded another directly (in time), but that there is a system-wide coordinated movement in which each chain triggers or implies another.

In the usual terminology (coined by André Martinet) there is a mixture here of a **push chain** and a **drag chain**. This all began with the raising of the mid vowels /e:/, /o:/, which had two effects: it 'pushed' up the high vowels /i:/, /u:/ and left a space, which dragged up the lower vowels /ɛ:/ and /ɔ:/ to fill the empty /e:/, /o:/ positions. And when /e:/ raised to /e:/, this left the slot open for /a:/ to move into. Everything except the raising of /a:/ was complete by the mid-sixteenth century. The developments can be charted as follows:

	ME	1550	1600
bite	i:	ei	ai
beet	e:	i:	i:
beat	e:	e:	e:
mate	a:	a:	e:
out	u:	ou	au

boot	o:	u	u:
boat	ɔ:	o:	o:

Later developments brought the vowels more in line with PDE. Thus, /ai/ monophthongized to /a:/, so *weight* and *mate* fell together as /ɛ:/, then /e:/. Before this /e:/ in *beat* raised to /i:/ so that *beat* and *beet* fell together. These developments began in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century and were not completed until the eighteenth century.

While these structuralist and functionalist descriptions (Lass, 1987) are interesting in themselves, in that they tell us how the changes proceeded through the linguistic system, they do not enlighten us as to why the change might have begun, that is, *why* the vowels began to shift in the first place, and *how* they spread to be gradually adopted by more and more people.

Such a discussion necessitates a brief consideration of the study of linguistic variation, which is involved in the correlation of linguistic variables (such as the choice amongst a number of variants of the same vowel) and social factors (such as the age, gender and social class of the speaker). If we look at correlations between linguistic and social features, and assume that they are not constant, but shifting, we may be able to pinpoint the source and mechanism of spread of an innovation throughout the members of a speech community. There are two important issues to bear in mind here, which (after Labov, 1972) sociolinguists refer to as the *actuation problem* (How does a language change start?), and the *implementation problem* (How does a language change spread?).

There is evidence in the dialects around London in the early sixteenth century that the vowels in the words *mate* and *meet* merged, so that these two words became homophones. In the seventeenth century, however, it is documented that, instead of the merger of *mate* and *meet*, the vowels in *meat* and *meet* merged and the word *mate* was distinct. If it were the case that the second option replaced the first, then a situation would have existed in EME where a vowel merger was being reversed. This is a theoretical impossibility, and so another explanation has to be found.

It would appear that, rather than replacing the *mate/meet* merger, the merger of *meat* and *meet* actually occurred alongside it. In other words, two separate systems were operating at the same time. We have here a classic case of variation: there are two alternating realizations of English sounds, or linguistic variables, and we need to consider on what principle they were distributed. Where they apparently differed was in their *social* distribution: that is, there seems to be a correlation here between linguistic choice and social class. Evidence from sources such as Shakespeare's plays suggests that in the dialects around London, especially Kent and East Anglia, there was a tendency in the lower classes to substitute higher, long mid-close vowels in words where long mid-open vowels would be expected in London Middle English, i.e., /e:/ and /o:/ instead of /ɛ:/ and /ɔ:/

(Dobson, 1968: 608–18, 674–8). In other words, the lower classes were merging *meat* and *meet*. Since these lower-class dialects surrounding the capital were stigmatized, speakers with social aspirations opted to distance themselves from them by means of their speech. They did not manipulate their language consciously, however: we would argue that their sensitivity to this marker was below the level of consciousness – what sociolinguists would call ‘change from below’. People whose social status was not in question maintained the distinction between ME /e:/ and /ɛ:/ words. This seems to have caused the social climbers to adopt even higher vowels in Middle English /e:/ words in order to maintain their social difference from the lower class (Samuels, 1972: 41–2). Eventually, a redistribution of words with long vowels would take place in the system and the shift would have begun. Subsequently, Middle English /a:/ would move to /e:/, through a drag chain mechanism. Later sound changes have obscured the distinction, but it is still marked in our spelling system. Words pronounced in London with the Middle English /e:/ are generally spelled with *ee* while London Middle English /ɛ:/ words are often spelled with *ea*. The system that the lower class had first adopted eventually developed into the preferred, prestige system, while the system that originally carried prestige became stigmatized. (This in itself is proof that no linguistic token is inherently prestigious or stigmatized, but rather becomes so by convention, which may change over time.)

Thus we can see that the Great Vowel Shift is indeed a mixture of push and pull or drag factors, as described in the discussion of the structural aspects of the changes above. However, we also are able to hypothesize that the change is motivated by social stratification. That is to say, it was caused by the increase in social differentiation typical of the swelling urban population in and around the capital at the time (compare the discussion in Leith, 1983).

It is important to note that the entire chain shift was not caused by these social factors, however. Further internal changes in the English vowel system as a whole resulted from the vowel shift, and can be seen as a structural adjustment of the system as a result of the initial changes. Phonologists point out that the Great Vowel Shift produced a very unbalanced system of three front vowels, two back vowels and no low vowel. The system readjusted to compensate for this uneven distribution. Short /a/ was lengthened in a few words like *father*, providing a new source of /a:/. Certain dialects developed *l*-deletion in words such as *almond* and *palm*, the accompanying lengthening also producing long /a:/. In other dialects of English, such as in the United States and Canada, short /ɔ/ in words like *not*, *hot* and *got* was also lowered and unrounded, and eventually lengthened to produce more instances of /a:/. The consonant /r/ was lost except prevocally in parts of England, Wales, the eastern and southern United States, Australia and other parts of the world, causing compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel, and thereby providing another source of long /a:/. In words like *park* and *garden*.