

English pronunciation in the early modern period

Eighteenth-century English: Alexander Pope (1688–1744) ☉ **Track 64**

*True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learnt to dance.
'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense.*

(from *An Essay on Criticism*)

tru: 'eɪz ɪn 'ræɪtɪŋ 'kʌmz frəm 'ɑ:t | nɒt 'tʃæ:ns |
əz 'ðo:z mu:v 'eɪzɪəst | hu əv 'lɜ:nt tə 'dæ:ns ||
tɪz 'nɒt ɪ'nʌf | 'no: 'hæ:ʃnɪs 'gɪvz ɔ'fens |
ðə 'saʊnd məst 'si:m ən 'eko: tə ðə 'sens ||

By the eighteenth century the pace of change slowed down somewhat. This was the result of greater literacy and a new respect for spelling forms. The efforts of lexicographers (culminating in 1755 with Dr Samuel Johnson's dictionary) had by now fixed the modern English spelling system with all its shortcomings and inconsistencies.

Pope's English had both the consonant and the vowel systems much as we have them today. London speech was by now non-rhotic (☉ *art*), and few people bothered to say /r/ in *wh*-words. Final *-ing* was said as [ɪŋ] (☉ *writing*) – a feature (sometimes loosely called *g*-dropping) still found today in non-standard English worldwide. In educated pronunciation, /h/ was dropped in many words, not just as today in *hour* and *honour*, but also in, for example, *hospital*, *humble*, *herb* (the last word is still h-less in American English).

The modern NURSE words spelt *er*, *ear* (☉ *learn*) at this point contained [æɪ], not [ɜɪ]. Certain FLEECE words, e.g. ☉ *ease*, had the vowel [eɪ] (as they still do today in some southern Irish varieties).

Vowels differed from modern English mainly in terms of realisation. Much had been retained from Shakespeare's time: FACE and GOAT (☉ *those*) were still steady-state vowels, and MOUTH (☉ *sound*) and PRICE (☉ *writing*) retained their central starting-points, but STRUT (☉ *comes*) was now moving towards its modern central open quality. Perhaps the most significant change was taking place with the TRAP vowel, which was lengthening before certain consonants. This had already affected TRAP before /r/ (as in *harsh*). The final /r/ was then dropped leaving a lengthened vowel [æɪ] as its only trace. In many words, a similar change was now taking place before fortis fricatives /f θ s/ (e.g. *draft*, *pass*, *path*) and nasal + consonant (e.g. ☉ *dance*, *chant*, *demand*, *branch*). During the nineteenth century, the new long front vowel [æɪ] then retracted to become the modern back [ɑɪ], thus giving rise to the complex vowel distribution in the BATH words in southern British varieties. But this process was not completed in the Midlands or north of England nor, crucially, in the USA and Canada.

A corresponding effect took place with LOT words before fricative consonants, where a long vowel similar to present-day THOUGHT developed in words like *cost*, *off*, *cloth*, giving /kɔ:st ɔ:f klɔ:θ/. It survives in much American English (see Section C1) and was until recently also a feature of traditional RP and certain southern regional varieties (notably Cockney). See below for the current situation.