

## C5

**PRONUNCIATION CHANGE: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE****Pronunciation change in the past**

Speech habits vary not only geographically but also chronologically. Changes take place not only from one area to another but also from one generation to another. You are probably aware that you don't speak in quite the same way as your parents do and that your grandparents speak or spoke differently again. And you may have noticed that if you watch old films, or see extracts from newsreels on TV, the pronunciation of, say, fifty or sixty years ago is in many ways different from that used today.

If we move further back in time, then the differences become much more obvious. When reading Shakespeare (sixteenth century) you have undoubtedly noticed the changes that have taken place in grammar and vocabulary between his English and ours. But it is not perhaps as immediately apparent that Elizabethan pronunciation would also have been quite different from ours. The English of Chaucer's time (fourteenth century) strikes us as being very far removed from modern English, while Old English (sometimes called Anglo-Saxon), which was spoken in England before the Norman Conquest in 1066, looks like – and certainly would have sounded like – a totally alien language, as just a couple of lines from a famous poem, *The Battle of Maldon*, will indicate:

**Old English: *The Battle of Maldon* (anon., tenth century) © Track 61**

*Hiȝe sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,  
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mæȝen lytlað*

'hi:jə fæl ðə 'hæ:rdra, 'he:rtəðə 'ke:nrə.  
'mo:d fæl ðə 'ma:rə, ðe: urə 'mæ:jən 'li:tləθ

(Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,  
courage the greater, as our might lessens.)

Although, obviously, we can't dig up our ancestors and get them talking, nevertheless it's possible to reconstruct their pronunciation from the historical evidence that's available. We can do this in a number of ways. For instance, we can derive a great deal of information from the orthography: the current spelling of *knight* indicates that this word was probably originally pronounced as [kniçt]. In addition, we can examine poetry to see how certain words in previous eras rhymed where they don't rhyme today (for example, Shakespeare rhymed *love* and *prove* while Pope rhymed *tea* and *obey*). In some cases, present-day regional accents still preserve older pronunciation forms which have been lost in the majority of English varieties. And, finally, a very important source of information are books written by the phoneticians of previous eras, who published either works on elocution for native speakers or books to help non-natives acquire English (one of the earliest and best examples was produced in 1550 by a Welshman, William Salesbury, in an attempt to persuade the Welsh to learn English, and the English to learn Welsh). Assembling and analysing information from these various sources has enabled historical linguists to construct patterns of sound change and apply these to many areas of pronunciation.

Let's now have a look at the changes which took place in English over a period of several centuries from about 1350 to 1750 by examining the reconstructed English pronunciations of three famous writers – Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare and Alexander Pope.