

Qualitative and Quantitative Changes of Vowels in ME

No other part of the English sound system has undergone such sweeping changes as the vowels in stressed syllables. They changed both in quality and quantity, under the influence of the environment and independently, alone and together with the surrounding sounds. As a matter of fact, not a single OE long monophthong or diphthong has remained unaltered in the course of history; only a few short vowels were not changed, unless they were lengthened and then shared the fate of long vowels. The system of vowel phonemes has undergone drastic changes in the course of English linguistic history. Though the total number of phonemes has practically remained the same, their distinctive features and the principles of their opposition in the system, have altered.

Strictly speaking we can observe all kinds of vowel changes in all historical periods. And yet some prevailing trends of evolution can be singled out for certain groups of vowels at certain periods.

Long vowels were the most changeable and historically unstable group of English sounds. At all times they displayed a strong tendency to become narrower and to diphthongise, whereas short vowels displayed a reverse trend – towards greater openness, though this trend was less obvious and less consistent. Qualitative and quantitative changes were intertwined and often proceeded together.

Qualitative Changes of Vowels in ME

As compared with quantitative changes, qualitative vowel changes in Early ME were less important. They affected several monophthongs and displayed considerable dialectal diversity. On the whole they were independent of phonetic environment.

1. The OE close labialised vowels [y] and [y:] disappeared in Early ME, merging with various sounds in different dialectal areas. The treatment of [y] and [y:] in ME can be regarded as evidence of growing dialectal divergence. At the same time it is a relatively rare instance of similar alterations of a short and a long vowel.

E.g. OE *cyninȝ* – ME *king*
OE *fyrst* – ME *first*
OE *mȳs* – ME *mīce*

2. In Early ME the long OE [a:] was narrowed to [ɔ:]. The resulting ME [ɔ:] was a more open vowel than the long [o:] inherited from OE, e.g. OE *fōt*, ME *foot* [fɔ:t] (NE *foot*). Judging by their earlier and later history the two phonemes [o:] and [ɔ:] were well distinguished in ME. The more closed **o** was spelt by double o - **oo**, the more open one [ɔ:] was often spelt with the digraph **oa** or **o** in an open syllable.

OE *bāt* – ME *boat* [bɔ:t]
OE *āc* – ME *oak* [ɔ:k]
OE *wrāt* – ME *wrote* [wrɔ:t]

The open [ɔ:] also developed from the short [o] due to lengthening in open syllables.

Thus, as a result of this qualitative change, there appeared two long Os in ME [o:] spelling *oo*

[ɔ:] spelling *oa*, or **o** in an open syllable.

3. The short OE [æ] was replaced in ME by the back vowel [a].

OE *wæs* – ME *was* [was]
OE *hwæt* – ME *what* [hwat].

4. One more qualitative change in ME was the monophthongisation of the OE long diphthong *ēa* [ǣa]. This diphthong developed into long e [ɛ:]. This vowel was more open than the **long e** [e:] inherited from the OE **long e**, e.g. OE *fēt* – ME *feet* [fe:t] (NE *feet*). The more closed **e** was spelt by double e – **ee**, the other one, more open by **ea**, or **e** in an open syllable.

OE ēa [ǣa] – ME [ɛ:] spelling ea

OE *east* [ǣast] - ME *east* [ɛ:st].

The open [ɛ:] also developed from the short [e] due to lengthening in open syllables.

Thus, as a result of this qualitative change, there appeared two long Es in ME

[e:] spelling *ee*

[ɛ:] spelling *ea*, or **e** in an open syllable.

Quantitative Changes of Vowels in ME

At the end of OE and in the immediately succeeding centuries accented vowels underwent a number of quantitative changes which affected the employment and the phonological status of short and long vowels in the language. It should be recalled that in OE quantity was the main basis of correlation in the vowel system: short vowels were phonemically opposed to long ones, roughly identical in quality. In later OE and in Early ME vowel length began to depend on phonetic conditions.

The earliest of positional quantitative changes was the readjustment of quantity before some consonant clusters; it occurred in Early ME or perhaps even in Late OE.

1. Short vowels were lengthened before two homorganic consonants, a sonorant and a plosive; consequently, all vowels occurring in this position remained or became long, e.g.

OE cild – ME child [tʃi:ld]

OE findan – ME finden [fi:ndən]

OE climban – ME climben [kli:mbən].

2. All other groups of two or more consonants produced the reverse effect: they made the preceding long vowels short, and henceforth all vowels in this position became or remained short, e.g.

OE fiftig - ME fifty [fifti]

OE fēdde – ME fedde [feddə].

3. Short vowels became long in open syllables.

OE nama – ME name [na:mə]

OE mete – ME mete [me:tə].

