

Qualitative and Quantitative Changes of Vowels in the NE period

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.

System of Vowels in Late Middle English

To sum up the results of Early ME vowel changes the system of vowels in Late ME is given in the Table below.

Middle English Vowels (the Age of Chaucer, Late 14th c.)

Monophthongs					Diphthongs
Short	i e	a	o	u	ei ai oi au
Long	i: e: ε:	a: ɔ:	o:	u:	au ou

As seen from the table, the system of vowels in Late ME was no longer symmetrical. The OE balance of long and short vowels had been disrupted and was never restored again. Correlation through quantity can no more be regarded as the basis of phonemic oppositions in the vowel system.

Qualitative Changes of Vowels in NE

As compared to the Great Vowel Shift other vowel changes of the NE period seem few and insignificant. Yet, like all the sound changes of that time, they account for the modern system of vowels and clarify certain points in modern spelling.

The short vowels in Early NE were on the whole more stable than the long vowels: only two short vowels out of five underwent certain alterations: [a] and [u].

1. ME [a] is reflected as [æ] in NE, e.g. ME *that* [θat] > NE *that* [θæt]; ME *man* [man] > NE *man* [mæn]. It has been suggested, however, that in ME the sound [æ] existed as well; it was an allophone, or variant of [a]; both allophones [a] and [æ] were indicated by the letter *a* in ME.

2. ME *wa* [wa] develops into [wo] in NE. This change was probably caused by the influence of the labialized sound **w**.

OE *wæs* > ME *was* [was] > NE *was* [woz]

OE *wæter* > ME *water* [water] > NE *water* [woter]

3. The other change in the set of short vowels was a case of de-labialisation: ME short [u] lost its labial character and became [ʌ], except in some dialectal forms or when preceded by some labials, e.g. ME *hut* [hut] > NE *hut* [hʌt], ME *comen* [kumen] > NE *come* [kʌm], but ME *putten* [puten] > NE *put* [put], ME *pullen* [pulen] > NE *pull* [pul].

This development may have been tied up with the loss of ME [a] described above, as the new [ʌ] in a way filled the position of ME [a], which had shifted to [æ].

4. ME sound [X] changed into semivowel [j], later it developed into [i]. Thus, the pronunciation of the words: *light*, *night*, *right* changed from [lixt], [rixt], [nixt] into NE [liit], [niit], [riit].

Quantitative Changes of Vowels in NE

In addition to the main sources of long monophthongs and diphthongs in Early NE, such as the Great Vowel Shift and the vocalisation of the sonorant [r], there were a few other instances of the growth of long vowels from short ones in some phonetic conditions. These lengthenings resemble Early ME quantitative vowel changes before consonant groups; only this time the consonant sequences which brought about the lengthening were different: *ss*, *nt*, *ft*, *st*; the sequences mainly affected the vowel [a], e.g. ME *plant* [plant] > NE *plant* [pla:nt], ME *after* [after] > NE *after* [a:fter].

The reverse quantitative change – shortening of vowels – occurred in Early NE before single dental and velar consonants [θ, d, t, k]. The long vowels subjected to this shortening were [e:] and [u:] which were changing, or had already changed under the Great Vowel Shift, e. g. ME *breeth* [bre:θ] became [breθ]; likewise, ME *deed* [de:d] was shortened to NE *dead* [ded].

The long [u:] became short before [k], and sometimes also before [t] and was a product of the shift; this is evidenced by the spelling of such words as *book*, *foot*, where long ME [o:] changed into [u:] as a result of the Great Vowel Shift and then was shortened to [u].

