

The Great Vowel Shift

Early NE witnessed the greatest event in the history of English vowels – the Great Vowel Shift, – which involved the change of all ME long monophthongs, and probably some of the diphthongs.

The Great Vowel Shift is the name given to a series of changes of long vowels between the 14th and the 18th c. During this period all the long vowels became closer or were diphthongized. The changes can be defined as “independent”, as they were not caused by any apparent phonetic conditions in the syllable or in the word, but affected regularly every stressed long vowel in any position.

As seen from the discussion in the previous chapters, there were the following long vowels in ME: **i: e: ε: a: ɔ: o: u:**

1. ME Long i [**i:**] developed into the diphthong **ai**.

ME *time* [ti:me] – NE *time* [taim]

ME *finden* [fi:nden] – NE *find* [faind].

2. ME Long e [**e:**] changed into long i: [**i:**].

ME *kepen* [ke:pen] – NE *keep* [ki:p]

ME *street* [stre:t] – NE *street* [stri:t]

3. ME long ε: which was more open, first coincided with the more closed long e: and then developed in the long i: [**i:**].

ME *east* [ε:st] – [e:st] – NE *east* [i:st].

4. ME long a [**a:**] broke into the diphthong **ei**.

ME *table* [ta:ble] – NE *table* [teible]

ME *maken* [ma:ken] – NE *make* [meik]

5. ME long o [o:] changed into long u [**u:**]

ME *moon* [mo:n] – NE *moon* [mu:n]

ME *goos* [go:s] – NE *goose* [gu:s]

6. ME more open long o [ɔ:] broke into the diphthong **ou**.

ME *stone* [stɔ:ne] – NE *stone* [stoun]

ME *open* [ɔ:pen] – NE *open* [oupen]

7. ME long u [**u:**] underwent diphthongization and developed into **au**.

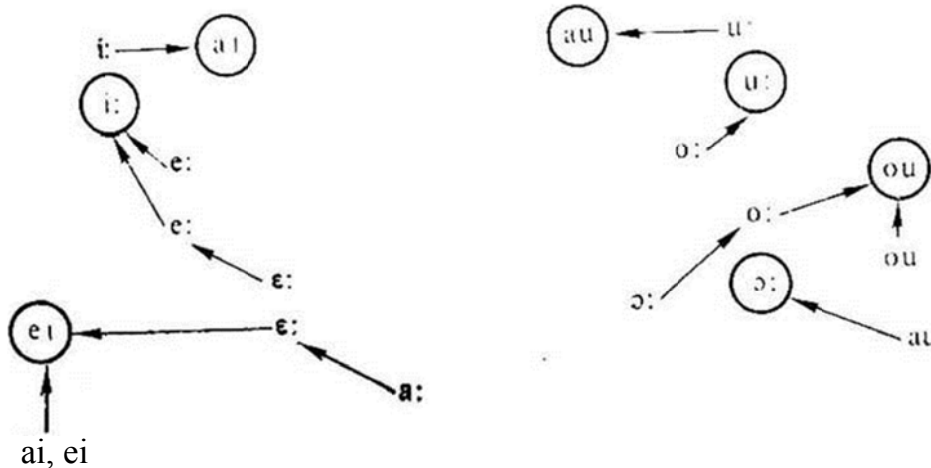
ME *now* [nu:] – NE *now* [nau]

ME *mous* [mu:s] – NE *mouse* [maus].

As seen from the discussion above, all long vowels became closer and some of the vowels occupied the place of the next vowel in the column: thus [e:] > [i:], while the more open [ɛ:] took the place of [e:], and later moved one step further in the same direction and merged with the former [e:] in [i:]. Likewise, the long [o:] was shifted one step, to become [u:], while ME [u:] changed to [au]. Some long vowels – [u:], [i:] and [a:] – broke into diphthongs, the first element being contrasted to the second as a more open sound: [au], [ai] and [ei], respectively.

It must be noted that some of the diphthongs which arose during the Great Vowel Shift could also appear from other sources. The diphthong [ou] was preserved from ME without modification; [ei] could descend from ME [ei] and [ai] which had merged into one diphthong. Those were the diphthongs with *i-* and *-u* glides going back to Early ME vowel and consonant changes.

The following graphic presentation of the Great Vowel Shift shows the consistent character of the changes.



It should be obvious that the Great Vowel Shift did not add any new sounds to the vowel system; in fact, every vowel which developed under the Shift can be found in Late ME. And nevertheless the Great Vowel Shift was the most profound and comprehensive change in the history of English vowels: every long vowel, as well as some diphthongs, were “shifted”, and the pronunciation of all the words with these sounds was altered.

It is important to note that the Great Vowel Shift (unlike most of the earlier phonetic changes) was not followed by any regular spelling changes: as seen from the examples the modification in the pronunciation of words was not reflected in their written forms.

During the shift even the names of some English letters were changed, for they contained long vowels. Cf. the names of some English letters before and after the shift:

ME: *A* [a:], *E* [e:], *O* [o:], *I* [i:], *B* [be:], *K* [ka:]
NE: *A* [ei], *E* [i:], *O* [ou], *I* [ai], *B* [bi:], *K* [kei], etc.

Some Interpretations of the Great Vowel Shift

The Great Vowel Shift has attracted the attention of many linguists (K. Luick, O. Jespersen, F. Mosse, A. Martinet, V. Plotkin and others).

There are certainly many remarkable aspects in the shift. As we have seen it left no long vowel unaltered. All the vowels were changed in a single direction. The changes formed a sort of series or chain, as many vowels took the place of the adjoining closer vowels. The distances between the vowels were on the whole carefully preserved, the only exception being the merging of [ɛ:] and [e:] into [i:] in the 18th c.

The changes have been interpreted as starting at one end of each set of vowels – front and back, – the initial change stimulating the movement of the other sounds. If the changes started at the more open vowels, [a:] and [o:], every step “pushed” the adjoining vowel away to avoid coincidence, so that finally the closest vowels, which could not possibly become narrower were “pushed” out of the set of monophthongs into diphthongs: [i:] > [ai] and [u:] > [au]. This interpretation of the shift is known as the “push-chain” (K. Luick).

The opposite view is held by the exponents of the theory of “drag-chain” (O. Jespersen); according to this theory the changes started at the two closest vowels, [i:] and [u:]; these close vowels became diphthongs, “dragging” after themselves their neighbours, [e:] and [o:], which occupied the vacant positions; every vowel made one step in this direction, except [ɛ:] which made two steps, became [e:] and then [i:].

It springs to the eye that all these changes went on in conformity with the general tendency of long vowels to become closer and to diphthongise, which was determined by their physical properties: the relatively high pitch and tension. This tendency, as well as the necessity of filling the empty boxes in the vowel system, may account for the general direction of the shift and for the uninterrupted chain of changes. However, it fails to explain why at that particular period of history – Early NE – the changes became particularly intensive, and what was the initial impetus that started the process.

In some recently advanced theories the beginning of the Great Vowel Shift is tied up with some properties of the ME phonological system. As was shown in the preceding paragraphs the Early ME redistribution of vowel quantity according to position

restricted the use of vowel quantity as a phonological distinctive feature, differentiating between morphemes and words. It has been suggested that the Great Vowel Shift was an aftereffect of these restrictions: it introduced new qualitative differences between vowels formerly distinguished through length alone. Thus the short [o] and the long [o:], which, prior to the shift, differed mainly in quantity, began to be contrasted primarily through quality, as [o] and [ou]. Similarly the difference between [a] and [a:] was emphasised when [a:] was narrowed and was followed by a diphthongal glide. Cf. ME *fat* [a] and *fate* [a:] which became [fæt] and [feit]; *rod* [o] and *rood* [ɔ:] which became [rod] and [roud].

The new qualitative differences between the vowel phonemes in a way made up for the loss of differences in quantity which had been largely de-phonologised.

Another theory attributes the intensification of changes in Late ME not only to phonological but also to morphological factors (V. Plotkin). The shift may have been stimulated by the loss of the final [e] in the 15th c., which transformed disyllabic words into monosyllables. The difference between such monosyllabic words as ME *fat* [fat] and *fate* [fa:t] or ME *bit* [bit] and *bite* [bi:t] was not sufficient. The Great Vowel Shift emphasised this difference by changing the quality of the long vowels and by adding new distinctive features in order to maintain the essential contrasts.

It must be concluded that the problem of the Great Vowel Shift remains unresolved. If we take into account not only the development of vowels in Standard English, but also the vowel changes in the local British dialects, it will appear that the consistency of the changes has been somewhat exaggerated. In many dialects some vowels were not subjected to the Great Vowel Shift or were modified differently. Since the system of Standard English has absorbed various dialectal features at all levels, we may surmise that the Great Vowel Shift, which chronologically coincides with the formation of the nation-wide Standard, was to a certain extent merely a final choice from dialectal variants in pronunciation accepted in literary English and recognised as correct by grammarians and phoneticians. This choice was conditioned not only by intralinguistic systemic factors but also by the linguistic situation, especially the relationship between the coexisting varieties of the language, which they represented.