

Growth of Long Monophthongs and Diphthongs in Early New English due to Vocalisation of Consonants

The history of English vowels would be incomplete if we did not mention the development of new long monophthongs and diphthongs, resulting from the vocalisation of some consonants, though these changes pertain to the history of consonants no less than to that of vowels.

The voiceless fricative [x] was vocalised towards the end of the ME period. The glide [u] had probably developed before the velar consonant [x] even before its vocalisation; it is regularly shown in ME spellings, e.g. ME *taughte*, *braughte* [tauxte], [brauxte]. Later [au] was contracted to [o:] in accordance with regular vowel changes and [x] was lost, which transformed the words into NE *taught*, *brought* [tɔ:t, brɔ:t].

The palatal fricative [ç] changed to [j] some time during the 15th c.; it changed into the vowel [i] and together with the preceding [i] yielded a long monophthong [i:], which participated in the Great Vowel Shift. Thus, words like *night*, since the age of Chaucer have passed through the following stages: [nixt]>[nijt]>[ni:t]> [naɪt].

The most important instance of vocalisation is the development of [r], which accounts for the appearance of many new long monophthongs and diphthongs.

The sonorant [r] began to produce a certain influence upon the preceding vowels in Late ME, long before it showed any signs of vocalisation.

The vocalisation of [r] took place in the 16th or 17th c. In ME [r] was a rolled or trilled sound. The modification of [r] in the early 17th c. was noticed and

commented upon by the contemporaries: Ben Jonson remarked that [r] began to sound “firm in the beginning of words and more liquid in the middle and ends”. The new variants of pronunciation gradually displaced the older ones.

In Early NE [r] was vocalised when it stood after vowels, either finally or followed by another consonant. Losing its consonantal character [r] changed into the neutral sound, which was added to the preceding vowel as a glide thus forming a diphthong; e.g. ME *there* [θe:re]> NE *there* [ðεə]. Sometimes the only trace left by the loss of [r] was the compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel, e.g. ME *arm* [arm]>NE *arm* [ɑ:m], ME *for* [for]>[fɔ:] (NE *for*). If the neutral e produced by the vocalisation of [r] was preceded by a diphthong, it was added to the diphthong to form a sequence of sounds named “triphthong”, e.g. ME *shour* [ʃu:r], NE *shower* [ʃaʊə]. ([r] was not vocalised when doubled, after consonants and initially, NE *errand*, *dry*, *read*).

Vocalisation of r and Associated Vowel Changes

| Change illustrated | | Examples | | |
|--------------------|-------|----------|---|----------------------------|
| | ME | NE | ME | NE |
| After short vowels | o + r | ɔ: | <i>for</i> [for] <i>thorn</i> [θorn] | <i>for</i> <i>thorn</i> |
| | a + r | a: | <i>bar</i> [bar] <i>dark</i> [dark] | <i>bar</i> <i>dark</i> |
| | i + r | | <i>first</i> [first] | <i>first</i> |
| | e + r | ɜ: | <i>serven</i> [servan] | <i>serve</i> |
| | u + r | | <i>fur</i> [fur] | <i>fur</i> |
| | e + r | ə | <i>brother</i> [broθer] | <i>brother</i> |

| | | | | |
|-------------------|--------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| After long vowels | i: + r | aɪə | <i>shire</i> [ʃi:re] | <i>shire</i> |
| | e: + r | ɪə | <i>beer</i> [be:r] | <i>beer</i> |
| | ɛ: + r | ɛə | <i>there</i> [θɛ:r] | <i>there</i> |
| | | | <i>beren</i> [bɛ:r] | <i>bear</i> |
| | a: + r | ɛə | <i>hare</i> [ha:re] | <i>hare</i> |
| | o: + r | ɔə / ɔ: | <i>floor</i> [flo:r] | <i>floor</i> |
| | | | <i>moor</i> [mo:r] | <i>moor</i> |
| u: + r | aʊə | <i>flour</i> [flu:r] | <i>flower</i> | |

The formation of monophthongs, diphthongs and triphthongs in the course of the vocalisation of [r] was a very complicated process, for [r] could occur practically after any vowel, and in the meantime the vowels underwent different alterations. The influence of [r] could sometimes slow down or prevent the changes of long vowels under the Great Vowel Shift, for [r] tended to make the vowel more open, while the shift made it closer. Various results of the changes are exemplified in the Table above. It is apparent that the vocalisation of [r] had a profound effect on the vowel system: there developed a new set of diphthongs, and also triphthongs.