

## The Great Vowel Shift

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## What Is the Great Vowel Shift?

- People started pronouncing vowels farther forward in the mouth
- Existing front vowels were diphthongized.
- Happened from about 1400 - 1600

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## History of English

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## Proto-Indo-European language

- Proto-Indo-European (PIE) refers to a linguistic reconstruction of the common ancestor of the Indo-European languages.
- PIE goes back to 4500 BC in the late Neolithic Age
- Indo-European assumes a group of dialects from the Western & Eastern European, Indian, and Iranian languages

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## Indo-European

Split into many language groups:

- Celtic
- Germanic
- Italic
- Greek
- Indo-Iranian
- Slavic

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## Germanic Family

**Northern Branch:** Scandinavian

**Western Branch:** English  
German  
Dutch

**Eastern Branch:** Gothic *(dead out)*

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## The Beginnings of English

- English emerged from Germanic languages and dialects around the 6th and 7th centuries.
- The earliest recorded documents in the British Isles are in the 7th and 8th centuries. The early English was known as Old English.

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## Beowulf

Old English epic poem.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdvD4D10VgE>

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### Old English (Anglo-Saxon) 5th Century - 11th/12th Century

- Old English was spoken & written by settlers known as the Anglo-Saxons who were:
  - Angles
  - Saxons
  - Jutes

### Old English 5th Century - 11th/12th Century

The map illustrates the migration routes of Anglo-Saxons from the continent (Angles, Saxons, Jutes) to Britain and Ireland. It shows the movement of these groups across the North Sea and into the British Isles.

### Old English 5th Century - 11th/12th Century

- Next to arrive were the Vikings
- Collectively known as Danes
  - From Norway, Sweden, Denmark

### Transition from Old English to Middle English

- King Edward the Confessor
  - Last Anglo-Saxon King
  - Childless
  - Dies in January 1066

### Claimants to King Edward throne

William Duke of Normandy	King Harold Godwinson	Tostig Godwinson	King Harald Hardrada

### 1066 The Norman Conquest

- Tostig Godwinson (defeated by Godwinson in the Battle of Fulford on Sept 1066)
- Norwegian King Harald Hardrada (defeated by Godwinson in the Battle of Fulford on Sept 1066)
- Harald Godwinson (crowned king after Edwards death, but was defeated by William in the Battle of Hastings)
- William, Duke of Normandy became the new King

### Middle English 11th Century - 15th Century

- Old English transitions to Middle English after Norman Conquest
- French - prestige language
- French was the spoken language 300+ years
- More than ten thousand words came into the English language from Norman French.

### Words Brought in by William, Duke of Normandy

Prophet	Prince	Castle
Saint	Dame	Cattle
Baptist	Master	Warden
Miracle	Court	Ward
Paradise	Rent	War
sacrament	poor	Beef
	rich	Veal
	Prison	Venison
	Crown	mutton
	Purple	
	prove	

### Language Status

English: street language (commoners & uneducated, poems, imaginative expression,  
 French (prestige language) court & commerce  
 Latin (prestige language) church, school & university learning

## Geoffrey Chaucer English Poet 1340's & 1370's



"In Chaucer's pronunciation, the long vowels still had their 'continental value' - i.e., a was pronounced like the a in father and not like the a in name, e was pronounced either like the e in there or the e in mate, but not like the ee in meet."

Waller, 1972

## Prologue of Canterbury Tales Geoffrey Chaucer

When that April with his shoures soote  
When April with its sweet showers  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
Has soaked the roots, dry from the March drought,  
And bathed every vein (sap vessel) in the moisture  
Of which vertu engendered is the flour:  
Which brings on the flower:  
When Zepherus eek with his sweete breeth  
When the west wind's sweet breath  
<http://www.usu.edu/~english/canv/>

Shelburne King, D., 2003

## Chaucer

Before GVS:	Became:
lyf (leef)	life
hus (hoos)	house
ded	deed
mon	moon

Shelburne King, D., 2003

## English Makes A Comeback

- French on the decline in the late Middle Ages.
- King Henry V (reigned 1413 - 1422) established English as an official language.
- English: returns to England as prestige language (14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> century).
- Parliament's records were kept mostly in English by 1423.

Shelburne King, D., 2003

## In the Middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century

A great change is underway

Gradually all long vowels are pronounced with a greater elevation of the tongue and closing of the mouth.

Shelburne King, D., 2003

## In the Middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century

The long vowels that could be raised were raised, and those that could not be raised became diphthongs.

Shelburne King, D., 2003

## Beginnings of the Great Vowel Shift

- The Great Vowel Shift (GVS) marks the transition from the Middle English to Modern English.
- The Great Vowel Shift (GVS) began in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and continued to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and some believe beyond.

Shelburne King, D., 2003

## English Rises & French/Latin Decline



- William Caxton - Sets up his print shop and is the 1st printer in England

Shelburne King, D., 2003

## Caxton's Influence on the Great Vowel Shift

- Printing Chancery English
- Standardizing English Spelling
- Pronunciation Developing

Shelburne King, D., 2003

### Caxton's Influence on the Great Vowel Shift

"The GVS was developing along with the rise of the standard forms of written English developed in Chancery being used by Caxton."

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### Otto Jespersen

- Danish linguist specialized in English grammar
- Professor of English at the University of Copenhagen from 1895 - 1925
- 1st studied the change in vowel pronunciation
- Coined the term "The Great Vowel Shift"

### What Is the Great Vowel Shift?

Pronunciation change in long, stressed monophthongs  
 Single most important change to English language  
 Separates current English language from modern day European languages.

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### Which Vowels Were Affected?

"Only 6 vowels were affected. These are long, stressed monophthongs – vowels in stressed positions in the word that were held long in pronunciation and that had a pure sound (that is, were not made up of groups of sounds)."

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### Monophthongs

"A monophthong is a single sound made by keeping the mouth in the same position."

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### Examples of Monophthongs

/ē/ see	/ō/ dough
/ē/ bet	/au/ August
/ōō/ boo	/ō/ as in mop

### Diphthongs

"A sound made up of two sounds, and when this sound is spoken the mouth moves from one position to another."

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### Examples of Diphthongs

/i/ mice  
 /ā/ cake  
 /oi/ oil  
 /ou/ out

### Difference in Alphabet Names

- We say:  
a, e, i, o, u
- Before the Great Vowel Shift we said:  
ah, eh, ih, oh, oo

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### Vowel Characteristics

Vowels are described according to their height and position in the mouth:

Height:	Position in the mouth:
Low	Back
Middle	Mid
High	Front

Quinn, S., 2008

### Vowel Circle Tongue Height & Placement

A diagram of the vowel circle with boxes for each vowel. The boxes are labeled with their height and placement: High Front (e, i), High Back (oo, u), Middle (a, e, a, i, o, u), and Low (ou/ow, ow/ow, a, i, o, u, aw, Low open). A note says 'about lesson sheet definition page'.

### Vowel Circle Tongue Height & Placement

A diagram of the vowel circle with a sagittal cross-section of the mouth. The tongue is shown in various positions corresponding to the vowels: High Front (e, i), High Back (oo, u), Middle (a, e, a, i, o, u), and Low (ou/ow, ow/ow, a, i, o, u, aw, Low open).

### Long & Short Vowel Sounds

Qualitative: measured by quality instead of quantity  
Quantitative: measured by quantity.

"Linguists do not use the terms long and short to describe a qualitative difference in vowel sounds, the terms long and short relate to quantitative vowel length.

For Example:  
In Old English the word "God" could be pronounced "Gode" meaning God, or "goode," meaning good." Quinn, S., 2008

### Long & Short Vowel Sounds

"The length of time the vowel was held signaled a different Meaning for the word.

This distinction was lost to Modern English during the GVS. There is no difference in meaning if sat is pronounced "sat" or "saat." Quinn, S., 2008

### Great Vowel Shift Summary

Only Six Vowels Were Affected, but essentially:

- High vowels were made into diphthongs
- Front vowels were raised & fronted
- Back vowels were raised & retracted

Quinn, S., 2008

### The Great Vowel Shift

A diagram of the vowel chart showing the Great Vowel Shift. Red arrows indicate the upward and backward movement of vowels: i to e, e to i, a to e, e to a, o to u, u to o, and o to u. A note says 'i and u become diphthongs first as /ai/ and /ou/ then /i/ and /ou/'.

### The Two High Vowels: i, u Became Diphthongs

Letter	Pronounced Before GVS	1 <sup>st</sup> Stage GVS	Final Stage GVS
i	ee	oi	ɪ
u	oo	ou	ʊ

### The Two High Vowels Became Diphthongs

Represented by the letters:

i was pronounced as /e/ before the GVS, so the modern word meese would have been pronounced as meese.

u was pronounced as /oo/ before the GVS, so the modern word house would be pronounced as hoose.

Quinn, S., 2008



### Pirate English

by Dr. Seth Lerer

There is evidence that the GVS was still working its way out into the early 18th century.

Alexander Pope's writings show he rhymed words join (joyn) and line (loyn).

Lerer, S., 2008

### Personal Letters Showing the Changing Sounds in the 15th & 16th Century

M-e-e-t spelled m-a-i-t-e or m-i-t-e to signal it is not pronounced "maut"

H-e-a-r spelled h-u-r-e to signal it is not pronounced "hare"

H-o-u-s-e spelled h-o-w-s to signal it is not pronounced "hoos"

Lerer, S., 2008

### Anomalies to the GVS

- These words did not undergo the Great Vowel Shift:
  - steak
  - great
  - break
  - yea

Lerer, S., 2008

### Old Pronunciation That Account For Some Inconsistencies

goose/gosling  
sign/signal  
sane/sanity  
please/pleasant  
crime/criminal  
profane/profanity

Chaffetz, J., 2008

### Other Influences on English

- The King James Version of the Bible
- Work of Shakespeare

Chaffetz, J., 2008

### Possible Explanations for the GVS

15th and 16th Century: different dialects in England were in contact.

- Migrations into London
- Loss of French as a prestige language
- Social pressure for a new social status through language
- Need to fill social gap

Lerer, S., 2008

### William Tyndale

- 1/3 of the King James New Testament is identical to William Tyndale's work
- The scholars that produced the King James Bible did not acknowledge William Tyndale
- He published his New Testament in 1526, but hid it.
- The British Museum bought the only extant copy in 1934 for one million pounds.
- Church officials killed William Tyndale in 1536.

Chaffetz, J., 2008

### Shakespeare

Parting is such sweet sorrow  
A rose by any other name  
White as driven snow  
A pound of flesh  
The green eyed monster  
A plague on both your houses  
Into thin air  
Give the devil his due  
Too much of a good thing  
Tongue-tied



Chaffetz, J., 2008

### Shakespeare

barefaced	Frugal	Monumental
Critical	Gust	Obscene
Castigate	Hint	
Countless	Hurry	Premeditated
Dislocate	Leapfrog	Submerged
Dwindle	Lonely	Summit
Excellent	Majestic	

Chaffetz, J., 2008

## Punctuation

Early Punctuation: Ear Punctuation  
 Caxton Time: Eye Punctuation

## Inkhorn/Inkwell Words

Between 1500 – 1700 English vocabulary grew dramatically

Words from Latin or Greek for "educated" effect:  
 Allurement  
 Autograph  
 Capsule  
 Dexterous  
 Disregard  
 Erupt  
 meditate

## Words from European Countries through Commerce

France: alloy, duel, entrance, equip, explore, progress, mustache, tomato, volunteer

Italy: argosy, balcony, granite, stanza, violin, volcano

Spain and Portugal: anchovy, banana, cannibal, cocoa, embargo, maize, potato, tobacco, yam

Dutch: smuggler, cruise, jib, schooner, reef, walrus, tattoo, knapsack

## Words from non-European Countries through Travel

Arabic: sash, hashish, mohair, sherbet, sofa, henna

Turkish: dolman, coffee, caftan, kiosk

Chinese: ketchup

African: zebra

## In Conclusion

- The Great Vowel Shift is what makes the English language different & unique from all other modern European languages.
- One way in which we can think about the Great Vowel Shift is a scholarly reconstruction of the pronunciation of long stressed vowels in English.

## Resources:

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## Resources: Images

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Hardrada, Harald Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/abstract/doi/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780191615471.003.0004>

## Resources: Images

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Indo-European languages images. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/abstract/doi/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780191615471.003.0007>

King Richard the Confessor. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/abstract/doi/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780191615471.003.0008>

## Resources: Images

Map of Europe Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/abstract/doi/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780191615471.003.0009>

Phonological Awareness vowel and consonants Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/abstract/doi/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780191615471.003.0010>

Shakespeare Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/abstract/doi/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780191615471.003.0011>

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