The Great Vowel Shift

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 (Hanbury-King, D., 2000)

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.

Beowulf
- Old English epic poem.

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.

Indo-European
- Split into many language groups:
  - Celtic
  - Germanic
  - Italic
  - Greek
  - Indo-Iranian
  - Slavic

Germanic Family
- Northern Branch: Scandinavian
- Western Branch: English, German, Dutch
- Eastern Branch: Gothic

History of English
- 410 – 1150 AD
- 1150 - 1450 Early ME
- 1450 – 1750 ME
- 1750 – Present

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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

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
- Harald Godwinson
- Tostig Godwinson
- 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 500+ years
- More than ten thousand words came into the English language from Norman French

1066 The Norman Conquest
- Treaty of Agreement (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

Words Brought in by William, Duke of Normandy
| Medieval Latin | Norman French
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prophet</td>
<td>Prince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint</td>
<td>Dame</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bishop</td>
<td>Master</td>
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<td>Monk</td>
<td>Court</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parson</td>
<td>Poor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miracle</td>
<td>Rich</td>
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<td>Paradise</td>
<td>Prison</td>
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<td>sacrament</td>
<td>Crown</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>purple</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>Cattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warden</td>
<td>War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward</td>
<td>Beef</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>Veal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauf</td>
<td>Vernon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th Century</td>
<td>&quot;Middle English&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>street language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commoners</td>
<td>&amp; uneducated poems, imaginative expression,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>French (prestige language) court &amp; commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latin (prestige language) church, school is university learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Language Status

| English        | street language         |
| Commoners      | & uneducated poems, imaginative expression, French (prestige language) court & commerce Latin (prestige language) church, school is university learning |
**Geoffrey Chaucer**

English Poet

1380's & 1390'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 a in mate, but not like the ee in meet."

(Wolfe, 1972)

**Prologue of Canterbury Tales**

Geoffrey Chaucer

**Chaucer**

Before: GVS: Became:

lyf (leef) life
hus(hoos) house
ded deed
mon moon

(Hanbury-King, D., 2000)

**English Makes A Comeback**

1. French on the decline in the late Middle Ages.
2. King Henry V (reigned 1413 – 1422) established English as an official language.
3. English returns to England as prestige language (14th & 15th century).
4. Parliament's records were kept mostly in English by 1429.

(Lerer, S., 2008)

**In the Middle of the 15th Century**

A great change is underway

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

(Lerer, S., 2008)

**Beginning's of the Great Vowel Shift**

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

(Lerer, S., 2008)

**In the Middle of the 15th Century**

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

(Lerer, S., 2008)

**English Rises & French/Latin Decline**

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

(Caxton's Influence on the Great Vowel Shift)

Printing Chancery English
Standardizing English Spelling
Pronunciation Developing
The Great Vowel Shift was developing along with the rise of the standard forms of written English developed in Chancery being used by Caxton. (Lerer, S. 2008)

Caxton’s Influence on the Great Vowel Shift

Caxton

Otto Jespersen

Danish linguist specialized in English grammar
Professor of English at the University of Copenhagen from 1893 - 1925
Set studied the change in vowel pronunciation
Coined the term “The Great Vowel Shift”

What Is the Great Vowel Shift?

Otto Jespersen

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

Which Vowels Were Affected?

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)." (Lerer, S., 2008)

Monophthongs

Monophthongs

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

Examples of Monophthongs

Examples of Monophthongs

/æ/ see
/æ/ dough
/e/ bet
/i/ August
/ɔi/ boo
/ə/ as in mop

Diphthongs

Diphthongs

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

Examples of Diphthongs

Examples of Diphthongs

/ai/ nice
/ai/ cake
/ai/ oil
/ai/ out

Difference in Alphabet Names

Difference in Alphabet Names

We say
a, e, i, o, u

Before the Great Vowel Shift we said:
ə, ə, ɪ, ɒ, ʊ
In Old English the word “God” could be pronounced “Gode,” meaning God, or “gode,” meaning good. 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. Quantitative: measured by quantity. Qualitative: measured by quality instead of quantity.

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Pronounced Before GVS</th>
<th>1st Stage GVS</th>
<th>Final Stage GVS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>u</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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
The Mid Vowels Were Raised

- Represented by the letters:
  - a was pronounced as /ą/ before the GVS, so the modern word saw would have been pronounced as sore.
  - o was pronounced as /o/ before the GVS, so the modern word do would have been pronounced as dope.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before GVS</th>
<th>After GVS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>boke</td>
<td>bite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mote</td>
<td>moat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mote</td>
<td>moat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ogle</td>
<td>out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>toke</td>
<td>take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knob</td>
<td>knock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roke</td>
<td>roat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>okep</td>
<td>oap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dough</td>
<td>say</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Great Vowel Shift

- The Two High Vowels /u a// became Diphthongs:
  - The table shows the vowel shift:
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<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>/au/</td>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>/u/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>/i/</td>
<td>/i/</td>
<td>/i/</td>
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<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>/o/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>/u/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Low Back Vowel Rose

The low back vowel written in Middle English as a rose to fill the place left by the older Middle English.

The word bite would have transitioned from bite
- to bite
- The modern word bite would have transitioned from bite
- to bite
- The word bite would have transitioned from bite
- to bite
- The word bite would have transitioned from bite
- to bite
- The word bite would have transitioned from bite
- to bite
- The word bite would have transitioned from bite
- to bite
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).

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

Anomalies to the GVS:
- steak
- great
- break
- feet

Old Pronunciation that Accounts for Some Inconsistencies:
- goose/gosling
- sign/signal
- sane/sanity
- please/pleasant
- crime/criminal
- profane/profanity

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

Meaning:
- Person
- Peninsula
- Poem
- Poor
- Possible

Other Influences on English:
- The King James Version of the Bible
- Work of Shakespeare

William Tyndale:
- 1/3 of the King James New Testament is identical to William Tyndale's work
- He published his New Testament in 1526, but hid it.
- He was tried by the Inquisition in 1536, and was killed.
- The British Museum bought the only extant copy in 1994 for one million pounds.

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

Shakespeare:
- Barefaced
- Critical
- Castigate
- Countless
- Dislocate
- Dwindle
- Excellent
- Frugal
- Gust
- Hint
- Hurry
- Leapfrog
- Lonely
- Majestic
- Monumental
- Obscene
- Pronounced
- Submerged
- Summit
**Inkhorn/Inkwell Words**

During the 15th to 17th centuries, English vocabulary grew dramatically. Words from Latin or Greek, for “educated” effects:

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

**In Conclusion**

The Great Vowel Shift is what makes the English language different and 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**

- Hanbury King, D. (2000). English Isn't Crazy, Austin, TX, Pro Ed International Publisher

**Resources: Images**

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