

NE Phonetic Changes: the Great Vowel Shift

The Great Vowel Shift is the major event in the historical development of English vowels. The Great Vowel Shift involved the change of **all ME long monophthongs and some of the diphthongs.**

The Great Vowel Shift is the **series of changes** of vowels between **the 14-th and 18-th** centuries. *All long vowels became closer or were diphthongized.*

These changes can be called **“independent”** because they were not caused by definite phonetic conditions in the syllable or in the word. These changes affected **regularly** every stressed long vowel in any position.

The Great Vowel Shift

Change illustrated	Examples	
ME (intermediate stage) NE	ME	NE
J aI	time /'tJmq/ finden /'fJndqn/	time find
e: J	kepen /'ke:pqn/ field /'fe:ld/	keep field
F: e: J	street /strF:t/ east /F:st/ stelen /'stF:lqn/	street east steal

R	eI	maken /'mRkqn/ table /'tRblq/	make table
L	o: oV	stone /'stLn/ open /'Lpqn/ soo /sL/	stone open so
o:	H	moon /mo:n/ goos /go:s/	moon goose
H	aV	mous /mHs/ founden /'fHndqn/ now /nH/	mouse found now
aV	L	cause /'kQVz(q)/ drawen /'drQVqn/	cause draw

Thus the essence of the shift is the narrowing of all the long vowels and diphthongization of the narrow long ones.

The Great Vowel Shift was not followed by any regular spelling changes which contribute greatly to the present discrepancy between the spoken and written English.

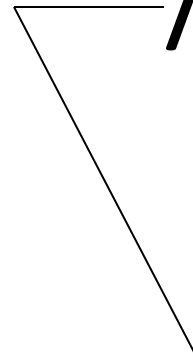
During the shift even **the names**
of some English **letters** were
changed.

ME a / R/

e /e:/

NE /e/

/J/



ME o / o:/
NE /EV/

A diagram illustrating the phonetic evolution of the letter 'o'. On the left, the word 'ME' is written in bold. To its right is the letter 'o'. A horizontal line extends from the 'o' to the right, ending at the phonetic symbol '/ o:/' (long o). A diagonal line descends from the 'o' to the phonetic symbol '/EV/' (long E with V).

i /J/
QI/

A diagram illustrating the phonetic evolution of the letter 'i'. On the left, the letter 'i' is written. A horizontal line extends from the 'i' to the right, ending at the phonetic symbol '/J/'. A diagonal line descends from the 'i' to the phonetic symbol '/QI/'.

The Great Vowel Shift didn't add any new sounds to the vowel system. But it was **the most profound and comprehensive** change in the history of English vowels:

every long vowel and some
diphthongs were “shifted” and
the pronunciation of all the
words with these sounds changed

Changes of Short Vowels in Early NE

The short vowels were more stable than the long vowels. Only two short vowels (out of 5) underwent certain changes. These are /a/ and /u/

ME /a/ normally changed into /x/

ME cat /kat/ - NE cat /kxt/

ME glad /glɑd/ - NE glad /glxd/

ME man /mɑn/ - NE man /mɣn/

After /w/ sound /a/ was rounded
and coincided with /O/

OE wXs > ME was > NE was /wOz/

Short /V/ was delabialized in the 17-th century and it developed into a new sound /A/

e.g. *cup, son, sun, up*

The same sound is observed in “blood, flood, mother” in which /H/ was shortened (before the 17-th century).

ME blod > NE /blHd/ > /blud/ > /blAd/

A preceding labial consonant usually presented the delabialization of /u/ as in: *full, pull, bull.*

Diphthongs

ME diphthongs /aI/ and /eI/ were gradually levelled under /eI/, the spelling was *ay/ai*

ME day – NE day

ME wey – NE way

ME seil – NE sail

ME /aV/ was monophthongised and became /L/ as in “*paw, law, cause, pause*”. ME /eV/ > /IV/ which soon became /jH/ as in “*new, dew, view*”.

The sound /u/ in French loan-words was usually replaced by /lu/, later /jH/. This is the reason why letter u is called /jH/, the letter q - /kjH/.

Consonants

One of the most important changes of the 15-th century was the voicing of /f/, /s/, /T/, /C/ and /ks/ in weakly stressed words and syllables.

This phenomenon is somewhat similar to that discovered by K. Verner in the old Germanic languages.

ME /f/ > /v/ “of”, active (ME *actif*)

ME /s/ > /z/ is, his, comes

ME /T/ > /D/ with, the, they

ME /C/ > /G/ knowledge

(ME knowlenche), Greenwich /'grɪnɪŋ/

ME /ks/ > /gz/ examine, exhibit,
exact

ME /x/ (written as *gh*) has either been lost (mostly before /t/) or it has changed to /f/ (mostly when final)

ME daughter /dɑːvɛtɔr/ - E /dɒtɔr/

eight /eɪt/ - E /eɪt/

ME laugh /lɑːf/ > /lɑːf/ > /lɪf/

Short /l/ preceding /x/ was usually lengthened when the latter was lost

ME night /nlxt/ > /nJt/ > /nalt/

Final /b/ has been lost after /m/:
climb, dumb, comb

Final /ng/ has been reduced to /N/
ME thing /Ting/ > NE /TIN/

Initial /k/ or /g/ before /n/ and /w/
before /r/ has been lost: *knife*,
wrong

In the 15-th century /d/ before /r/
often changed into /D/:

ME fader > E father

ME weder > E weather

New sibilants developed in the
17-th century from the combinations

s + j > **S**

z + j > **Z**

t + j > **S**

d + j > **G**

*ME /nQsjon/ > /nelsjqn/ >
/neISn/*