



The Facts and Controversies of The Great Vowel Shift



Mary Klopccic

Introduction

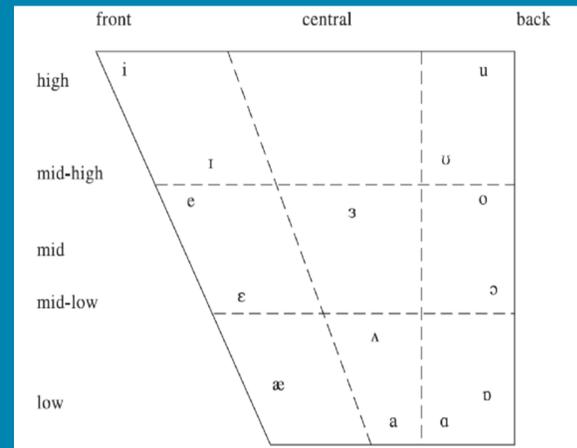
The great vowel shift was a linguistic shift of middle English. The majority of vowels that occur within the English language shifted up in the vowel space, changing the way they were pronounced.

Debate One

The Push Vs. Pull Debate

There is a strong debate within the linguistic community whether the movement of the vowels is the result of the vowels being “Pulled” up or “Pushed” up. Jespersen, the linguist who first gave name to the Great Vowel Shift, originally based it on a pull-chain model where the creation of the diphthongs (the “eye” and “ow” sounds) caused all of the lower vowels to be successively pulled up into the empty spaces left by those that had moved up ahead of them. However, another early commenter on the phenomenon, Karl Luick, interpreted the shift through the lens of Mid Vowel Raising, where the middle vowels moved up pushing those above them up until eventually the high vowels were pushed off the top.

Vowel Quadrilateral



Conclusion

- As can be seen by comparing the table with the Vowel Quadrilateral, the shift happened with two separate categories of vowels, the front vowels and the back vowels.
- The vowels that had no vowel higher in the vowel space than them, /u/ and /i/ became diphthongs, blends of two separate vowels.
- The cause of the Great Vowel Shift, and the manner in which it happened, are in great contention amongst the linguistic community.

Background Information

The Vowel Quadrilateral is a visual representation of where in the mouth the tongue is positioned to produce different vowels. It can be in the front, central, or back position and then, as well, it can range in height. When the vowel shift occurred, sounds moved up in the vowel chart; these changes are shown in the table on the right.

Original Vowel	Vowel Post Shift
/a/ “ah”	/ɛ/ “eh”
/ɛ/ “eh”	/e/ “ay”
/e/ “ay”	/i/ “ee”
/i/ “ee”	/aɪ/ “Eye”
/ɔ/ “au” (As in caught)	/o/ “oh”
/o/ “oh”	/u/ “oo”
/u/ “oo”	/aʊ/ “ow”

Debate Two

One Big Shift Vs. Many Small Shifts

The second, perhaps even greater, point of contention between linguists on this topic is whether the Great Vowel Shift was, indeed, “Great.” As previously stated, the linguist who coined the term was Otto Jespersen. However, there are scholars within the community who, upon examining current shifts happening in some dialects, believe that the GVS was simply a chain of smaller shifts that happened over a longer period of time as opposed to a complete shift that happened all at once. The first to propose this viewpoint in the 1980s were Stockwell and Minkova who pointed out that not all dialects of English underwent all changes and used this as the basis for the argument that each shift may have been distinct and not part of one cohesive event.

References

Almomany, Ibrahim & Rasheed, Shayan. (2018). Effects of Age and Gender on Emphasis Production in Jordanian Arabic: A Socio-phonetic Study. 10.13140/RG.2.2.34313.49766.

“Clock Tower Wordmark - 3 Lines.” *Download Logos*. California University of Pennsylvania, 2017. www.calu.edu/calu-difference/brand/downloads.aspx.

Dinkin, A. J. (2012). Toward a Unified Theory of Chain Shifting. In Nevalainen & E. C. Traugott (Authors), *The Oxford handbook of the history of English*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Giancarlo, M. (2001). The Rise and Fall of the Great Vowel Shift? The Changing Ideological Intersections of Philology, Historical Linguistics, and Literary History. *Representations*, 76(1), 27-60. doi:10.1525/rep.2001.76.1.27

Lass, R. (1992). What, if Anything, Was the Great Vowel Shift? In Rissanen (Ed.), *History of Englishes: New methods and interpretations in historical linguistics*. Berlin: M. de Gruyter.

Prichard, H. (2014). Northern dialect evidence for the chronology of the Great Vowel Shift. *Journal of Linguistic Geography*, 2(2), 87-102. doi:https://doi.org/10.1017/jlg.2014.9

Smith, J. (1993). DIALECTAL VARIATION IN MIDDLE ENGLISH AND THE ACTUATION OF THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT. *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 94(3/4), 259-277. Retrieved December 10, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43345950>

Watts, R. J. (2011). *Language myths and the history of English*. Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195327601.001.0001

Yamane, Noriko. (2002). What is Great about the Great Vowel Shift? An Optimality-Theoretic View. *ENGLISH LINGUISTICS*. 19. 392-416. 10.9793/elsj1984.19.392.