The Great Vowel Shift

Joe Pater, Ling 370, 10/28/13

The last few classes, we have been discussing the currently ongoing “Northern Cities Shift”, which is affecting the lax vowels.

Today, we’ll step back in time and look at the “Great Vowel Shift”, which affected the long vowels in the relatively recent history of English.

It started in about Chaucer’s time (Middle English, about 1400) and continued through to Shakespeare’s (Early Modern English, around 1600).

This sound change is responsible for much of the opacity of the English spelling system, as the orthography was being standardized at the same time as it was taking place (the printing press was invented by Gutenberg in 1439).

To give you a sense of how English sounded at these times, we'll listen to a scholar pronouncing the prologue to the Canterbury Tales:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXMypzdWxsc

And to the linguist David Crystal, and his son Ben Crystal, an actor, pronouncing Shakespeare in its original pronunciation:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPlpphT7n9s

How do we know the pronunciations of the vowels in Chaucer and Shakespeare's time?[1]

Rhyming and word games – another example from Shakespeare – at his time *on* and *one* were homophonous (probably [ɔn]):

Speed:	Sir, your glove.
Valentine:	Not mine. My gloves are on.
Speed:	Why then, this may be yours, for this is but one.

Two Gentlemen of Verona (Act 2)

[1] This is from Charles Jones (1989) *History of English Phonology*, Longman 1989.

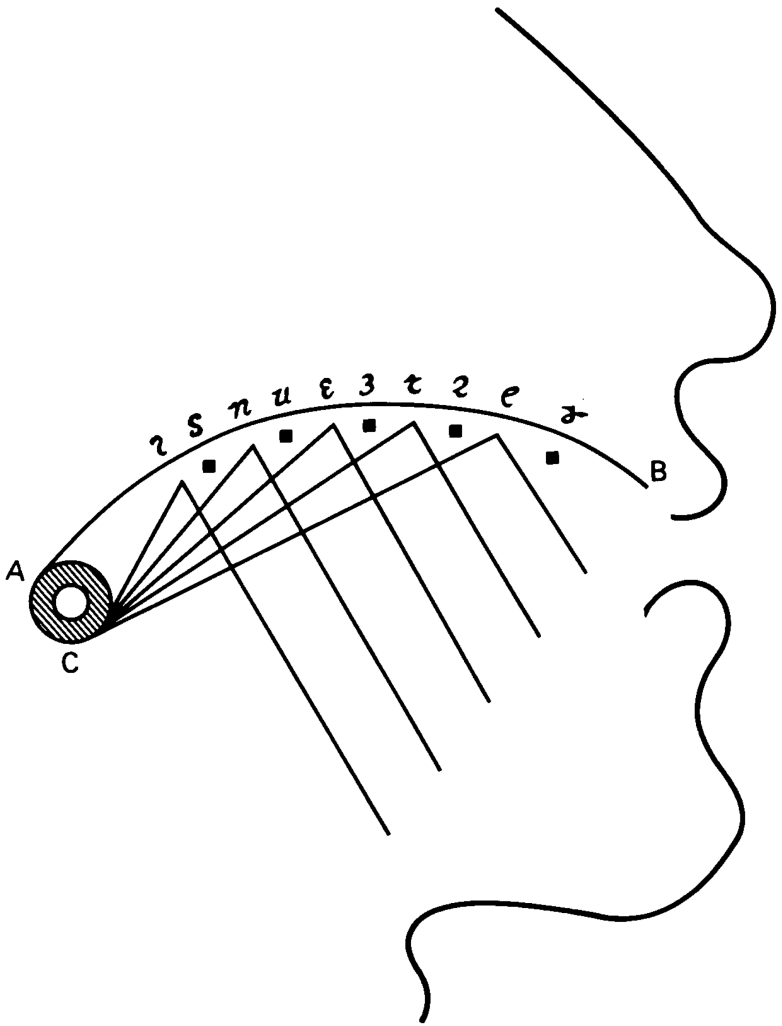
We also can draw inferences from the phonologies of the modern varieties of English, using standard practices of historical reconstruction.

But the most direct evidence is the testimony of spelling reformers and phoneticians, some of which is extremely sophisticated.

John Hart's general comment about the spelling of his day (in his 1569 *An Orthographie*):

> But in the moderne and present maner of writing . . . there is such confusion and disorder, as it may be accounted rather a kind of ciphring, or such a darke kinde of writing, as the best and readiest wit . . . can . . . attaine to the ready and perfite reading thereof, without a long and tedious labour, for that it is vnfit and wrong shapen for the proportion of the voice.

“Scale of Vowelles” in *Art of Pronunciation* (Robinson 1617)



Chronology of vowel shift[2]

	ca. 1400	ca. 1500	ca. 1600	present
'bite'	bi:tə	bəit	bəit	baɪt
'beet'	be:t	bi:t	bi:t	bi:t
'beat'	bɛ:tə	be:t	be:t ~ bi:t	bi:t
'abate'	aba:tə	aba:t > abɛ:t	əbe:t	əbeɪt
'boat'	bɔ:t	bo:t	bo:t	boʊt
'boot'	bo:t	bu:t	bu:t	bu:t
'about'	abu:tə	abəut	əbəut	əbaʊt

Note "A, B, C, D" in English *vs*. French (from which the English names were derived)

[2] From a handout by Don Ringe (http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~kroch/courses/lx310/ringe-handouts-09/gvs-revised.pdf)

Hart on orthographic “i” and “e” in 1551 (*The Opening of the Unreasonable Writing of our English Toung*)

the *i*, we abuse in two wais: the first is in that we geve it a brode sound (contrary to all people but the skotts): as in this sentence. he borowed a swerd from bi a mans side to save thie life: where we sound the *i* in bi, side, thie and life as we shuld doo the *ei* dipthong . . .

We abuse . . . the *ee*, which most communely we use properli: as in theis wordes *better* and *ever*: but often we change his sound making yt to usurp the power of the *i*, as in *we*, *be*, and *he*.

Hymn to the Virgin. Despite its name, this poem is written in English but according to the metrical, prosodic conventions of writers in the Welsh language of its period. In all probability it was composed by a Welshman at the beginning of the sixteenth century or perhaps even a little earlier (Dobson 1954; Forster 1926; Holthausen 1920). Its importance for the student of historical English phonology lies in the fact that it appears to show an attempt by a native Welsh speaker to represent the sounds of his English contemporaries using an orthography which was partly Welsh, partly English based. An approximate and rather literal translation of Verse xii might be: '*O trustworthy queen, who wears a crown, before we die ready prepared to thank you at the cross. Then may all we, thine own, go to the light. Agree to grant, with me, that I may see thee with my sight.*'

The Welsh Hymn

O trysti *kreist* tat werst a *kroun*
er *wi* dei *down*, a redi dicht
tw thank tw thi
at te *rwt-tri*
Dden went awl *wi*
ddein own, tw licht
Tw grawnt agri
amen, wy *mi*,
ddat *ei* mae *si*,
ddi tw *mei* sicht!

Diphtongizations of long high vowels

Welsh Hymn	*15th-century Middle English*	
(a)		
[ei]	[ii]	
⟨kreist⟩	⟨crist⟩	*'Christ'*
⟨dein⟩	⟨ðin⟩	*'thy/thine'*
⟨mei⟩	⟨min⟩	*'my/mine'*
⟨ei⟩	⟨i(c)⟩	*'I'*
[ou]	[uu]	
⟨kroun⟩	⟨krun⟩	*'crown'*
⟨down⟩	⟨dun⟩	*'down'*

Raising of long mid vowels:

(b)

[ii]	[ee]	
⟨wi⟩	⟨we⟩	*'we'*
⟨mi⟩	⟨me⟩	*'me'*
⟨si⟩	⟨se⟩	*'se'*
[uu]	[oo]	
⟨rwt⟩	⟨rode/roode⟩	*'rood(tree)'*

Two more changes in the front vowels:

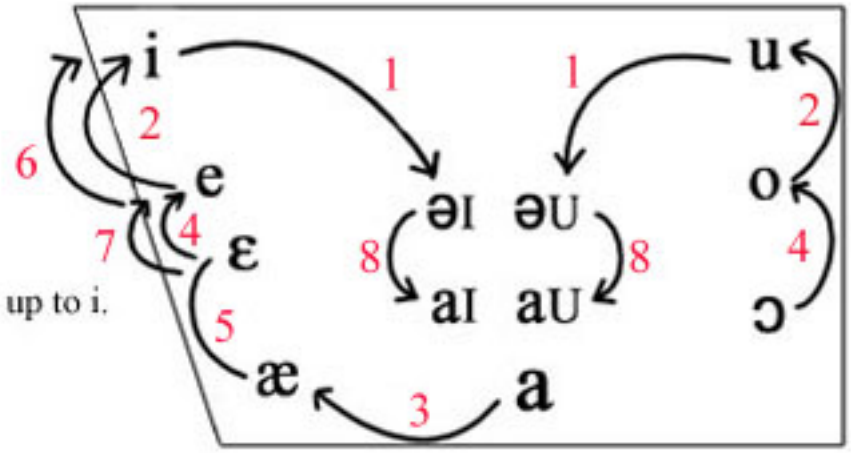
- Long [a] from Middle English became [e] ([eɪ]) (e.g. *abate*)

- The long [ɛ] from ME became [e], then [i], merging with original [e] (e.g. *beat*, though there are well-known exceptions, like *break*)

The ME back [o]/[ɔ] contrast was preserved, with [ɔ] raising only as high as [o] (e.g. *boat*)

Much of the controversy over the GVS has to do with whether it is a “Pull” or “Push” chain shift – did the high vowels first diphthongize, pulling the other vowels along, or did the low vowels raise, pushing the other vowels higher? There are also questions about whether any “pushing” or “pulling” is really happening – see Jones (1989) cited above for discussion.

Step 1: i and u drop and become əɪ and əʊ
Step 2: e and o move up, becoming i and u
Step 3: a moves forward to æ
Step 4: ɛ becomes e, ɔ becomes o
Step 5: æ moves up to ɛ
Step 6: e moves up to i
A new e was created in Step 4; now that e moves up to i.
Step 7: ɛ moves up to e
The new ɛ created in Step 5 now moves up.
Step 8: əɪ and əʊ drop to aɪ and aʊ



We'll be listening to a dialogue written to illustrate the changes. There are two speakers, "Cole" and "Alice". In the mid parts of the change, Cole is a conservative speaker, and Alice a more advanced one.

The dialogues, and the above depiction of the changes, are due to Melinda Menzer (http://eweb.furman.edu/~mmenzer/gvs/index.htm)

Transcribe the vowels from this set of words in these dialogues, in Middle English, and Shakespearean English (1550-1650)

name

speak

she

child

holy

soon

loud