



The Great Vowel Shift

Prof. Dr. Teuta Agaj Avdiu, First author¹

Institution: Public University "Kadri Zeka ", nn. 60000, Gjilan, Republic of Kosovo

E-mail: teuta.agaj@uni-gjilan.net

Prof. Dr. Shprese Qamili, Corresponding author²

Institution: Public University "Kadri Zeka ", nn. 60000, Gjilan, Republic of Kosovo

E-mail: shpresa.qamili@uni-gjilan.net

Arta Mula, Corresponding author³

Institution: Public University "Ukshin Hoti ", nn. 20000, Prizren, Republic of Kosovo

E-mail: mulaarta98@gmail.com

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Abstract*

The Great Vowel Shift or GVS refers to a period of radical change in how the English language is spoken. It is a process of systematic changes in the pronunciation of all Middle English long vowels in their transition to Modern English. All the long vowels came to be pronounced with a greater elevation of the tongue and closing of the mouth. The effect of the shift was that vowels were either raised or became diphthongs. The purpose of this paper is to show the pronunciation differences between Middle English and Modern English in the value of the long vowels as well as to discuss the criticisms brought forward against the Great Vowel Shift illustrated with examples. The results show that the Great Vowel Shift was no uniform process, but a series of local developments over time. Moreover, there are some words that show irregularities, i.e. their pronunciation of long vowels is still similar to that of Middle English. The critiques help us conclude that the reason why it is hard to non-native English speakers to learn the correct English pronunciation occurs as a consequence of the shift.

1. Introduction

A learner of English or a young native speaker seeing the word 'indict' for the first time might read it as /in.dɪkt/*, but it is actually /in.dɑɪt/. Or another instance, once they learn the word rough as /rʌf/, they might pronounce the word thorough as /θou.rʌf/ when actually is /θour.ə/. So, the question why is English spelling like this when so many other languages have a systematic spelling that corresponds with pronunciation arouses. The English language underwent a dramatic change in pronunciation between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, so much so that Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare likely would not have

understood each other's speech. The period of the rapid transformation of the pronunciation of English that was called the Great Vowel Shift. The Great Vowel Shift is the most significant vowel shift in the history of English language which indicates a very important phonological development in the language, and the period which extends from the late Middle English period to the Early Modern English period. By the term it is understood that it is called a vowel shift because it affected mostly the vowels of the English language.

2. What is understood by the term “Great Vowel Shift?”

The Great Vowel Shift has been a very important topic to be discussed for many authors, especially in the recent years, and each of them composed their definitions related to the Great Vowel Shift.

According to Verba (2004) the Great Vowel Shift is a change that has occurred in the whole system of English language long vowels. Short vowels have not been affected by this shift because they are almost the same in Modern English as they were in Middle English. It is important to stress out that this Middle English period affected the whole long English vowels where all of them were shifted and had to be pronounced in a higher tone, whereas the two English vowels [i:] and [u:] that were already high vowels could not be raised so instead they became diphthongs.

According to another author Kristó (2016) the Great Vowel Shift is “a chain shift and it is quite similar on the way it happened to Grimm Law (in the first millennium BC), but now it affects the vowels” (pg.104). He mentions the Grimm Law because it is also a shift that has happened earlier in the history of English language known also as the “First Consonant Shift”, which was a shift that affected the consonances of the English language, whereas the same phenomenon happened later to English vowels and it is known in the history as the “Great Vowel Shift”.

Xenia (2015) stated that in the English language the grammar has changed through years as well but the Great Vowel Shift left more obvious results in the language than other small changes that occurred within the language, and the biggest result is seen in the differentiation of pronunciation between the Middle and Modern English.

The exact date of the beginning and the ending of Great Vowel Shift is not known because different authors provide different dates for this period.

According to Baugh and Cable (2002) the Great Vowel Shift occurred only in the fifteenth century, whereas according to Gelderen (2014) it began around the year 1400 and continued until after 1600.

According to Stenbrenden (2012) the Great Vowel Shift had started earlier than when the handbooks and textbooks claim and “it overlaps with some vowel changes that probably had been done before the Great Vowel Shift period began” (as cited in Gelderen,2014, pg.167)

During this period English people had to get accustomed to the new method of pronouncing the English words because they had to pronounce words from one place in the mouth to a higher place in the mouth.

Baugh and Cable (2002) explained that the long vowels had to be pronounced differently with a greater altitude of the tongue so that the vowels were raised, whereas the vowels that could not be raised as mentioned earlier became diphthongs. The shift of these vowels is explained by dividing the process of shift that happened to the high long vowels, mid long vowels, low mid long vowels, and low long vowels. Before the Great Vowel Shift occurred, in the Middle Ages were totally seven vowels where two of them were considered high vowels [i:] and [u:], then two mid vowels [e:] and [o:], and two lower mid vowels [ɛ:] and [ɔ:], and one low vowel [a:]

Algeo (2010) stated that the mid vowels [ɛ:] and [ɔ:] were raised to [i] and [u], then lower mid vowels were raised from the [ɛ:] and [ɔ:] to [e] and [o], the high vowels [i:] and [u:] became diphthongs through two steps, firstly to [əi] and [əu], and then to [aɪ] and [aʊ], whereas the low vowel [a:] was raised to [æ:] and then raised in two steps to [ɛ:] and [e].

Baugh and Cable (2002) emphasized that this period that signed the change of sounds is just as important as the changes in the grammar and in the vocabulary are in the history of the English language. The shift of the middle English mid vowels [ɛ:] and [ɔ:] which were raised to [i] and [u] is best seen in the words like “three”, “see”, “deep” which before the Great Vowel Shift were pronounced like /θre:/:, /se:/: and /de:p/, they changed their pronunciation to /θri:/, /si:/ and /dip/, also the words like “tool”, “do”, “room”, and “good” which before the Great Vowel Shift were pronounced like /to:l/, /do:/:, /ro:m/, and /go:d/, after the Great Vowel Shift they changed their pronunciation to /tu:l/, /du:/, /rum/, and /ɡud/. The shift of the middle English lower mid vowels from [ɛ:] and [ɔ:] to [e] and [o] is best seen in the words like “heath” and “beast” which before the Great Vowel Shift were pronounced like /hɛ:θ/ and /bɛ:st/ after being raised they changed their pronunciation to /heth/ and /best/, in the other side the word “broken” changed its low mid vowel pronunciation from /brɔ:kən/ to /brækən/.

According to Algeo (2010) when the Great Vowel Shift occurred there were some areas that pronounced the words “heath” and “beast” still with the lower mid vowel [ɛ:], so it should be pointed out that in the late Middle English these words had two ways of pronunciation with two vowels [ɛ] and [e]. After the Great Vowel Shift period the [ɛ:] vowel was not utilized in the pronunciation anymore, instead the [e] vowel was raised into the [i] vowel and from the early Modern English era until the eighteenth century two pronunciations were used for the words “heath”, “beast”, and “grease”, either with the [e] vowel or with the [i] vowel. From the eighteenth century until now these words are pronounced only with the [i] vowel like /hiθ/, /bi:st/, and /ɡri:s/. The vowels [i:] and [u] in the period of the Great Vowel Shift could not be raised higher because they were already high vowels, so instead of being raised they became diphthongs through two steps. In the first step they were changed from [i:] and [u] to [əi] and [əu], then in the second step to [aɪ] and [aʊ]. Example if we analyze the words like “rise”, “bite” and “time” in the Old English they were pronounced like /ri:s/, /bi:t/ and /ti:m/, then in the Middle English after the first step changed their pronunciation to /rɛ:is/, /bɛ:it/, and /tɛ:im/, and after the second step they were pronounced like /raɪz/, /baɪt/, and /taɪm/. In the other side the words like “house”, “mouse”, and “noun” in the Old English were pronounced like /hus/, /mus/, and /nun/, then they changed their pronunciation in the first step to /hɔ:ʊs/, /mɔ:ʊs/ and /nɔ:ʊn/, and after the second step they were pronounced like /haʊs/, /maʊs/ and /naʊn/. The low vowel during the Great Vowel Shift was raised from [a:] to [æ:], and later it was raised again from [ɛ:] to [e]. The word “glass” in Old English was pronounced as /ɡla:s/ and then in the Middle English as /glæs/, or the word “name” in the Old English was pronounced like /na:m/, then in 1500 it was raised to /næ:m/, in 1600 to /nɛ:m/, in 1700 to /ne:m/ and it arrived in the Modern English as diphthong /neɪm/. The short [e] has not changed from the Middle English except when it is placed before the consonant “n” example in the words “streng” and “wenge” which arrived in the Modern English as “string” and “wing”.

Verba (2004) explained that alongside with the qualitative changes of vowels in the Great Vowel Shift period there are some vowels that were changed in their length as well, example the vowel [u:] was shortened to [ʊ] when placed before the consonant [k] such as in the words “book”, “cook” and “took” which were pronounced from /bu:k/, /ku:k/, and /tu:k/ to /bʊk/, /kʊk/, and /tʊk/, and when placed before the consonants [d] and [f] such as in the words “good” and “foot” their pronunciation was changed from /ɡu:d/ and /fu:t/ to /ɡʊd/ and /fʊt/. The short vowel [u] was shifted into [ʌ], and the words “come”, “sun”, “love”, “buddy”, “but”, “pub”

which in the Old English were pronounced like /kum/, /sun/, /luv/, /budi/, /but/, and /pub/ and after the Great Vowel shift changed into /kʌm/, /sʌn/, /lʌv/, /bʌdi/, /bʌt/, and /pʌb/. So, this period affected a little short vowel as well, but the greatest vowel shift effects are seen in the long vowels.

3. Which aspects of the traditional account of Great Vowel Shift have been criticized in recent years?

The Great Vowel Shift has evoked a major debate related to its cause and it is a very criticized shift today. What caused disagreements for the Great Vowel Shift was because from the period this shift occurred until now the exact cause of it has not been determined yet. Fennell (2001) suggested that the start of this significant shift might have been because of people that were having struggles in the pronunciation of many words for example whether the word “sea” should be pronounced with the mid high vowel [e] as /se/ or with the high vowel [i:] as /si:/ (as cited in Gelderen,2014, pg.167).

Algeo (2010) claimed that the cause of a shift is often mysterious and the same case occurred to the Great Vowel Shift, and gives one theory named “superstratum theory” which stands for the possibility that when people traveled in the English areas they probably mixed their native language pronunciation with the English language because of their inability to acquire this new language perfectly.

The Great Vowel Shift as mentioned earlier has been criticized a lot through many years especially recently for the irregularities that it brought to English spelling system. It is important to remind that the Great Vowel Shift affected mostly the long English vowels whereas the short one more or less remained the same, and this shift is the main reason that some English spelling do not correspond to the way they sound.

For instance Gelderen (2014) demonstrated that before 1400 “name” was pronounced in the same way as it was pronounced in the Spanish, German, and French language, whereas starting from the Great Vowel Shift period until the present English the [a] of “name” sound more like the word “edición” in Spanish which means “edition” in the English language, and like the words “école” in French which means “school” in the English language. Also, the words “serene” and “serenity” are pronounced like /siri:n/ and /sɪrənəti/ because in the second one the second vowel is a short vowel and the short vowels have not been affected from the Great Vowel Shift, so this is the reason why the second one is not pronounced as [i:] but as [ɛ].

Another criticism for the Great Vowel Shift is that it left the English language without the vowel [a:], and this is the most universal vowel used across the languages. So, according to Pereltsvaig (2011) the English language could not stay without the pronunciation of this vowel, so they arrived to fill the gap in different ways for example by lengthening this long vowel in some other words that had the short [a] vowel for example the word “father” which according to the shift rules was pronounced as /faəə/ but changed its pronunciation in the Modern English to /fa:əə/.

Another way of filling the gap of the vowel /a:/ was to lengthen this vowel by deleting or not pronouncing another sound, for example in the words “calm”, “half”, “calf”, and “half” which by lengthening the short vowel [a] they are now pronounced as /ka:m/, /pa:m/, /ka:f/, and /ha:f/,but mostly in the British accent. So, as can be seen the sound that was deleted from the pronunciation is the sound “l”, but it is important to know that this pronunciation varies from different accents as southern US speakers remained loyal to the Great Vowel Shift rules and still pronounce these words with the short vowel [a] and while using the sound “l”.

Another sound deletion that the Great Vowel Shift caused because of the need of [a:] vowel usage was the deletion of the sound “r” in the words such as “park”, “car”, “far” where the

short [a] pronunciation was lengthened to [a:] and the [r] sound was deleted from the pronunciation, so these words were pronounced like /pa:k/, /ka:/, and /fa:/ in the British accent, whereas in US the sound [r] is still used together with the short [a] which was not lengthened. These differences in the English accents because of the Great Vowel Shift lead to its critique.

The Great Vowel Shift according to Gelderen (2014) affected in addition the initial letters of some words also which lost their pronunciation within the word for example the loss of the sound [w] before the sound [r] which is best seen while pronouncing the words “write” and “wrong”. These words are pronounced as /raɪt/ and /rɒŋ/, whereas another initial letter which is not pronounced is the sound “k” before the sound “n” for example the word “knight” which is pronounced as /naɪ/.

Also, if taken into example the present and the past tense of the words “keep” and “kept”, and “hide” and “hid”, it is seen that they are pronounced as /ki:p/ and /haɪd/ in the present tense whereas as /kept/ and /hɪd/ in the past tense, and this as Kristó (2016) claimed happened because during the Great Vowel Shift the long vowels were raised but the short vowels were not affected, and this caused that the past tense of these words to be pronounced with the short vowels whereas the present tense with the long vowels.

4. Conclusions

The Great Vowel Shift is very significant for the users of English language, because it helps them understand and see how vowel sounds changed, and notice the differences between Middle English and Modern English pronunciation.

GVS has profoundly altered the long vowels but the spelling has remained the same as it was in the early 15th century. The highly conservative nature of English writing is one of the most important reasons why the English pronunciation causes so many problems to foreign learners of English and why learning to spell correctly takes so much time. Therefore, The Great Vowel Shift is also responsible for many irregularities in the spelling system.

The GVS aim was to bring the pronunciation that we use today and had a great impact for English language. First of all, it improved and enlarged the vocabulary, regulated the spelling, the pronunciation also became more fixed in a general way. Even though the phonetic description is very difficult, GVS gives us ideas how English language might have sound like and shows us the improvements that are made.

This process occurred only in English. In no other language a similar complex shift of vowels can be found. The Great Vowel Shift remains an artefact of the uniqueness of the English Language.

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