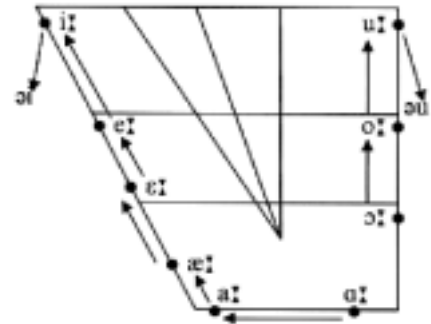


Activities 17.1 & 17.2 – Evidence of 17th C pronunciation changes from occasional spellings

Vowels

The vowel chart diagrams the Great Vowel Shift and helps to illustrate the changes that had taken place during the period from the 14th to the early 17th centuries. The shifting occurred in the Midlands and South of England and affected the long vowels only.

Because the spelling system was becoming standardised, especially in printed books and pamphlets, it tended to preserve the older ME spellings, and so failed to take account of the long vowel shifts. Consequently, handwritten letters provide a source of spellings which sometimes match the changed pronunciations.



Vowel chart 17

<i>ME</i>	<i>17th C</i>	<i>MnE reflex</i>
[a:]		[eɪ]
came	came	came
cradel	credyll	cradle
take	teke	take

- Spelling with <e> indicates a shift of ME [a:] to [ɛ:] or [e:]. MnE diphthongisation in RP and other dialects is a later development, but standard spelling retains the older <a>.

[e:]		[i:]
semed	symed	seemed
stepel	stypylle	steeple

- Spelling with <y> (an alternative to <i>) shows that ME [e:] has raised to [i:].

[ɛ:]		[i:]
discrete	discrate	discreet
retrete	retrate	retreat

- Spelling with <a-e> probably represents the long half close mid-front vowel [ɛ:].

[ʊɪ] ~ [ɔɪ]		[ɔɪ]
joinen	gine	join
puisun/poisoun	pyson	poison
rejoissen	regis	rejoice

- The pronunciation of <oi> words (all from French) is somewhat confusing, and varied in ME. The 17th century spellings suggest a pronunciation similar to that of words spelt <i-e>, with a diphthong between [ɜɪ] and [aɪ] perhaps.

[i:]		[aɪ]
defiled/defyled	defoyled	defiled

- Pronunciation similar to that of the preceding set of <oi> words.

[ɛr]		[ɜr]
certein	sarten	certain
derþe	darth	dearth
diuert	divart	divert
lernen	larne	learn
merci	marcy	mercy
persoun	parson	person/parson

- The ME pronunciation changed to [ar] or [ʌr] before the loss of post-vocalic <r> and the centralising of the vowel in RP and some other dialects. In the case of *person/parson*, two lexical items were created, with different meanings.

Consonants

<i>ME</i>	<i>17th C writing</i>	<i>MnE reflex</i>
doughter	dafter	daughter
boght	boft	bought

- The ME consonant spelt <gh> was originally a velar fricative [ɣ] and underwent different changes in the dialects, including [f]. Today's irregular spelling of <-gh> words reflects the variable dialectal changes in EMnE and later, so that *cough* and *trough* retain the pronunciation with [f] but not *daughter* or *bought*.. There is occasional evidence for the changes in 18th century novels and plays.

fasoun	fessychen	fashion
instruccion	instrocshen	instruction
issu/issue	ishu	issue
suspicious	suspishious	suspicious
seute/siute	sheute	suit

- The spellings with <sh> or <ch> show that the shift from [s] to [ʃ] has taken place, and been retained in MnE except for the word *suit*.

morsel	mosselle	morsel
persoun	passon	person/parson
portion	posshene	portion
scarsliche	skasely	scarcely

- The 17th century spellings suggest the loss of post-vocalic <r> in pronunciations similar to those of MnE.

excepte	excep	except
often	offen	often
wascotte	wascote	waistcoat

- Loss of final [t] in a double consonant cluster. The pronunciation of MnE *often* as [ɒftən] and *waistcoat* as [weɪstkəʊt] is the result of the influence of the spelling.

lennene	lynand	linen
los	loste	loss
syns	synst	since
vermine	varment	vermin/varmint

- The reverse of the preceding group - an added dental stop [t] or [d], retained in *varmint* to create a new word (marked as “dialectal” and “USA”, with “excrescent t” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*).