

Activity 18.3 - Christopher Cooper's *The English Teacher*

"Of the Vowel a"

"a short"

There has been little significant change in the pronunciation of short vowels from ME to MnE, except for the effect of post-vocalic [r] on preceding short vowels, as in *car* and *tar*. These changes did not begin until the 18th C.

<i>source</i>	<i>ME word</i>	<i>Cooper 1687</i>	<i>MnE</i>
OF barre	barre	Bar	
?	blabbe	blab	blab
OE cæppe	cappe	cap	cap
AF carre	carre	car	car
OE catt	cat	cat	cat
? fr ON	dashe	dash	dash
<i>onomatopoeic origin</i>	flashe	flash	flash
OF garce	garse	gash	gash
OF grant	grand	grand	grand
OE land	land	land	land
OE māsc	māshe	mash	mash
<i>onomatopoeic origin</i>	patte	pat	pat
OE teru	terr/tarr	tar	tar

"a long"

Post-vocalic [r] also caused the later changes in the pronunciation of *barge*, *carp*, *dart* and *tart*. The present-day RP pronunciation of *blast*, *cast*, *gasp*, *grant*, *lance*, *mask* and *path* with the low back vowel [ɑ:] also began in the 18th C. Northern, Western and Midland dialects retain the more fronted vowel [a:] or [æ:].

<i>source</i>	<i>ME word</i>	<i>Cooper 1687</i>	<i>MnE</i>
OF barge	barge	barge	barge
OE blæst	blast	blast	blast
ONF carkier	carken	carking	carking (<i>obs</i>)
OF carpe	carpe	carp	carp
ON kasta	casten	cast	cast
OF darz	dart	dart	dart
OF flasquet	flasket	flasket	<i>cf</i> flask
ON geispa	gasp	gasp	gasp
OF granter	grante	grant	grant
OF lance	lance	lance	lance
F masque (16 th C)	-	mask	mask
OE pæþ	path	path	path
OF tarte	tarte	tart	tart

"a slender"

Cooper described "a slender" as "lengthening of e short", so it was probably pronounced as an open mid-front vowel, [ɛ:] or perhaps [æ:], because he also refers to "e long" as a distinctive sound. This vowel has become a diphthong in present-day RP, [ɛɪ], but many of the dialects retain a single vowel, [e:] or [ɛ:].

<i>source</i>	<i>ME word</i>	<i>Cooper 1687</i>	<i>MnE</i>
OE bær	bar	Bare	bare
OF blason	blasoun	blazon	blazon
OF cape	cāpe	cape	cape
OE caru	cāre	care	care
OF cas	cas	case	case
OF date	dāte	date	date
ON flaki	flake	flake	flake
OE gæt/ON gata	gāte	gate	gate
OF grange	grange	grange	grange
OE lane	lāne	lane	lane
OF maçon	masoun	mason	mason
?	pāte	pate	pate
F tare	tares	tares	tares

<a> and <ai> spellings

Cooper's description of the distinctive vowels in this set of words is puzzling, because we would not expect words spelt with <ai>, derived from ME words with a diphthong, to be "pure" vowels, nor those from ME words with a pure vowel to sound like diphthongs - "u guttural is sounded after it", that is, the vowel is followed by [ə]. However, we have evidence here of a sound change taking place in Cooper's time, with pairs of words which have now become homophones in RP (though not in some dialects) being contrasted.

<i>source</i>	<i>ME word</i>	<i>Cooper 1687</i>	<i>MnE</i>
F bain	baine	Bain	bain (<i>obs</i>)
OE bana	bāne	banc	bane
OE hāgol/hægl	hāgel/hawel	Hail	hail
OE hālu	hāle	hale	hale
OE mægden	maide	Maid	maid
OE macode	māde	made	made
OE mægen	maine	main	(<i>might &</i>) main
OE manu	māne	mane	mane
OE legen	leien	lay'n	lain
OE lane	lāne	lane	lane
OF peine	peine	pain	pain
OF pan	pāne	pane	pane
OF plain	plain	plain	plain
OF plane	pāne	plane	plane

AF <i>espeier</i>	<i>spayed</i>	spaid	<i>spayed</i>
OE <i>spadu</i>	<i>spāde</i>	spade	<i>spade</i>
OE <i>tægl</i>	<i>taile</i>	tail	<i>tail</i>
OE <i>talū</i>	<i>tāle</i>	tale	<i>tale</i>

"Of the vowel o"

The spelling <oo> in MnE is pronounced [u:] or [ʊ], with variation between RP and dialectal pronunciations in some words eg, *look*, *book*. Cooper's list shows a change of pronunciation for some of the words. Those with post-vocalic [r] in the 1680s, pronounced [u:r] - *aboard*, *afford*, *boar*, *born*, *boorn*, *concourse*, *course*, *court*, *courtier*, *courtliness*, *courtship*, *force*, *mourn*, *scourse*, *sourse*, *sword*, *sworn*, *whore*, *worn* - have lost the [r] in RP and non-rhotic dialects, and the vowel has moved to [ɔ:].

Some of Cooper's words have not changed - *accoutred*, *move*, *tomb*, *two*, *uncouth*, *who*, *whom*, *whosoever*, *womb* - and are still pronounced with [u:]. The vowel of *would* and *should* has now shortened to [ʊ]. The archaic *behoves* has shifted to the lower [o:] or RP [ɜʊ].

"Improper diphthongs"

It is well known that today, the spelling <ee> is always pronounced [i:], but that there is a lot of variation in the pronunciation of words with the <ea> digraph. Cooper's list in Text 152 illustrates what is, for us, an interesting stage in the realisation and movement of the mid-front long vowels [e:] and [ɛ:] from Middle English to Modern English, and helps to account for the inconsistencies of this digraph in modern spelling.

"Ea is put for e short"

The short vowel [e] in the words listed from *Already* to *Wealth* remains in MnE pronunciation, with the exception of *dearth* and *earth* (affected by the post-vocalic [r] in a later sound change), *leaver* (raised to [i:]) and *pageant* (reduced to [ə], presumably as a result of a shift of stress).

The pairing of *shred* (which is out of place in a list of <ea> spellings) and *shread* appears to indicate alternative spellings for the same word. cf the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry,

1661 A fair suit of Arras, of which..a **shread** may assure you of the fineness of the colours, and richness of the stuff.

"Ea is put for e long"

Most of the words with the mid-front vowel [ɛ:] in Cooper's 1680s pronunciation have now raised to [i:] in MnE. The exceptions are: *break*, *forswear*, *great*, *steak*, *sweat*.

"Ea is put for ee"

The vowels of these words had already raised to [i:] by the 1680s in Cooper's pronunciation. The raising of both long mid-front vowels, [ɛ:] and [e:] to [i:] is clearly a long-term process, and the differences of pronunciation in Cooper's lists illustrate the way in which such a change does not affect all words in the same way at the same time.

Notice that the vowels followed by [r] (ie post-vocalic r) have now become the diphthong [ɪʒ] in RP and other MnE accents, while the [r] has been lost.

"Ea is put for a"

The interpretation of the sounds indicated by writers like Cooper is confusing, because there was no recognised phonetic alphabet available, and we have no way ourselves of discovering the exact phonetic realisation of any of the vowels. Cooper used letter <a> to represent what he called "a slender - the lengthening of *e* short", so it must have been an open front vowel, but as he classified it differently from "*e* long", we assume that the pronunciation was distinctive - perhaps [æ:] rather than [ɛ:]?

Cooper's pronunciation of *Earl*, *early*, *earn*, *earnest*, *learn*, *rehearse* and *search* seems to have been similar to the present-day Scots pronunciation of these words. *Bear*, *swear*, *tear* (*rend*) and *wear* have only changed slightly, apart from the diphthongisation to [ɛə] resulting from the influence of post-vocalic [r] in RP. *Beard* has raised and diphthongised to [ɪə]; in *earl*, *early*, *earn*, *earnest*, *learn*, *rehearse* and *search*, the loss of post-vocalic [r] in RP has caused the lengthening and centring of the vowel to [ɜ:].

"Ea is put for a"

The vowel indicated is probably a long low front vowel [a:], and therefore more or less identical to MnE pronunciation.

<ea> spellings today

What is clear from Cooper's book is that there was still a distinction between two mid-front long vowels which we no longer have. There are still differences in realisation, but they are not contrastive, and indicate dialectal differences only. The Great Vowel Shift was not yet complete in the 1680s, as is clear from Cooper's recommendation of the spellings *breſt*, *bever*, *ech*, *eger* for *breast*, *beaver*, *each*, *eager*, four words then pronounced with the same mid-front vowel, and *appeer*, *beeſh*, *cleer* and *cheer* for the contemporary spellings *appear*, *beach*, *clear* and *cheer*, all pronounced with the high front vowel [i:].

The phonetic realisation of <ea> spellings is highly inconsistent in MnE as a result of the somewhat haphazard choices of pronunciation resulting from hundreds of years of slow change. Children learning to read can be safely taught that "<ee> says [i:]", but what rules are there for the pronunciation of *leaf*, *dead*, *heart*, *heard*, *great* and *ear*?

The archaic words and spellings in Cooper's list of <ea> spellings

Archaic words

[ɛ:]

reachles	= <i>that cannot be reached</i>
ean	= (of a ewe) <i>to give birth</i>
greav	= <i>1 a thicket, 2 leg armour</i>
implead	= <i>to sue, accuse</i>
leach	= <i>1 a dish of meat etc, 2 to water, wet</i>
leam	= <i>flame, a gleam of light</i>
reav	= <i>1 to plunder, rob, 2 to split</i>
sheat	= <i>a young pig (cf shoat)</i>
wheal	= <i>1 a pimple, 2 misspelt form of weal</i>

[i:]

sear	= <i>to wither</i>
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[ɛ:] or [æ:]

searce	= <i>a sieve, strainer</i>
sheard	= <i>cut, torn</i>
wearish	= <i>tasteless, sickly</i>

Archaic spellings**[ɛ:]**

extream	= <i>extreme</i>
heav	= <i>heave</i>
weav	= <i>weave</i>
leannes	= <i>leanness</i>
weaknes	= <i>weakness</i>
greazy	= <i>greasy</i>

[i:]

sphear	= <i>sphere</i>
chear	= <i>obsolete spelling of 1 chair, 2 cheer</i>
