

“RESEARCH-BASED TRANSFORMATION OF TEACHER EDUCATION: TRADITION AS A BASIS FOR INNOVATION” International Conference on Teacher Education

THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH PHONETICS IN THE PERIODIZATION OF ENGLISH HISTORY

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Abstract. *This article delves into the intriguing evolution of English phonetics across different eras of English history. Phonetics, a field within linguistics, is essential for comprehending a language's sounds and their historical development. The evolution of English phonetics, and the development of sounds and pronunciation patterns from the past to the current day will be explored with the help of this article. The journey of English phonetics also shows the intricate changes in pronunciation and sound patterns of today's English language. English itself came from the Germanic language that has been heavily affected by Latin, French, and other languages over the centuries. That's why today English sounds are the complex mixtures of different languages and their traditions. Studying the phonetic shifts in English over various historical epochs provides a significant understanding of the linguistic changes that have influenced the Modern English language.*

Key words: *Phonetics, Received Pronunciation, Great Vowel Shift, diphthongs, vowel, consonant, rhotic, non-rhotic, unstressed vowels.*

One of the dynamic aspects of language evolution is the study of phonetics, the branch of linguistics. The evolution of phonetics over the years makes the language, more clear and easier than past. There is a series of transformative shifts that reflect the dynamic nature of linguistic evolution from the root – the Old English – to the Modern English period. The phonetic transition period from Old English to Middle English is marked as an era in which certain vowel sounds were lost in speeches. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, the Great Vowel Shift took place in the evolution of English phonetics. This shift had a profound impact on the phonetic structure of English and helped to shape the language as we know it. The Great Vowel Shift – the momentous event – began in the late Middle English period and lasted into the early beginning of Modern English. The Great Vowel Shift played a significant role in the pronunciation of long vowel sounds, reshaping the phonetic landscape of the English language. Another important part of English phonetics is the effect of dialects and regional accents. English is spoken in many different countries around the world, each with its unique pronunciation patterns and speech sounds. The

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Modern English period brought new consonant sounds into the language, including the loss of final unstressed vowels. The evolution of English phonetics continues to change with the influence of new phrases, technology, and urbanization, there is being created new dialects, pronunciation rules, and process of shifts which will appear as the evolution history of the English language in the future. From the Received Pronunciation of British English to the diverse accents of American English, and Australian English, the phonetic landscape of the language is rich and varied.

English history is divided into 4 periods and there were several changes in phonetics as other accidents happened during those periods. The Old English period is known as Anglo-Saxon because that tribe lived there from the 5th to the 11th centuries. There was a big role of the Anglo-Saxon tribe in the English language in that period. Anglo-Saxons used West Germanic language, which is a sister dialect to Old High German, Old Frisian, Old Low German, Low Saxon, and Old Low Franconian.

There were many differences between the Old English phonetics system and the Modern English phonetic system. Most complex systems of vowels and consonants are no longer used in the present English language. The pronunciation of sounds /h/ and /g/ were also different in Old English compared to today. Surrounding sounds and the position of the sound within a word influenced the pronunciation of vowels and consonants in Old English. In the Old English period, the length of vowels was very important to understand words clearly, and at that time vowels could be long or short in the words.

	Short vowel	Long vowel
o.	fæt	fætt
.	cū (cow)	cū̄ (to know)

Various sounds like “o:” or “ɔ:” were evolved by the long vowel “ā.”

Diphthongs were very common in the Old English period, Proto-Germanic closing diphthongs /ai, au, eu/ were developed as diphthongs in that period. Height-harmonic diphthongs are generally a less common type in which both elements are of the same height and this process is named diphthong height harmonization.

	Proto-Germanic closing diphthong	Height-harmonic diphthongs	Spelled
o.			

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	/au/ [au]	/æu/ > /æ:ɑ/	ea
	/eu/ [eu]	/e:o/	eo
	[iu]	/i:u/	io

In the Old English period, there was the loss of some consonant sounds, because certain early Germanic language sounds were lost or transformed to another similar sound, not identical during that period.

Middle English was spoken from the 11th to the 15th centuries and new sounds and spellings were added to the English language by French in the Middle English period. Because the Norman Conquest in 1066 came with the French language, and as a result, it led to shifts in the pronunciation and vocabulary system of Middle English. This effect was also the reason for the development of Middle English phonetics. For example, the letter “c” was pronounced as /s/ before vowels like /i:/ and /ɪ/, leading to spellings like “cities” and “circle.”

The Great Vowel Shift was a notable change in the Middle English period. This shift was the changing of the pronunciation of the long vowels which nowadays some of them seem in Modern English. The long and short vowels of the Old English period began to disappear in that era, and it led to the reduction of vowels. The Middle English period is also called a period of transition in the phonetic system of English. There was a system that underwent major changes, eliminating the diphthongs when it enriched the English language. Some diphthongs were simplified or merged into central vowels to make the language easier than ever.

Diphthong or monophthong	Changed version	Diphthong or monophthong	Changed version
/æɑ/	/æ/	/ø/	/e/
/æ:ɑ/	/æ:/	/ø:/	/e:/
/æ/	/a/	/y/	/i/
/ɑ/		/y:/	/i:/
/æ:/	/ɛ:/		
/ɑ:/	/ɔ:/		
/eo/	/ø/		
/e:ɔ/	/ø:/		

An asymmetric system of the West Saxon area consists of 5 short vowels /a/ /e/ /i/ /o/ /u/, 6 long vowels /ɛ:/ /e:/ /i:/ /ɔ:/ /o:/ /u:/ and 2 front-rounded front-rounded vowels /ø(:)/ /y(:)/.

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As a result, the Middle English period could be the foundation for the pronunciation of the Modern English period.

During the Early Modern English period, which roughly spanned from the late 15th to the late 17th century, it is called the period of England’s two prominent poets – William Shakespeare and John Milton. As the researcher sums up, "English linguistics research from 17th century Europe had already started during the Renaissance, the famous writer Shakespeare's drama literature, got unprecedented progress, which makes English linguistics greatly enriched the English language pronunciation and vocabulary" [Kong Li, 2018]

Chronologically, Early Modern English ended in 1700 when John Dryden died in the same year. The reduction of the final unstressed vowel started in the late Middle English era and it continued in Early Modern English. That’s why many of the final unstressed vowels of the English words were lost in the pronunciation of the Modern English period. For example, the vowel “e” was no longer pronounced in words like “care” and “more.”

There were different shifts in the pronunciation of certain consonants and there are samples of some shifts from the Early Modern English period:

o.	Old pronunciation	Changed pronunciation	Example word from the Modern English period
.	/hw/	“wh”	“what” “when”
.	/w/		
.	/k/	“kn” > /n/	“knight” “knock”
.	/wr/	“r”	“wrap”
.	double consonant	single consonant	fætt > fæt (container)

Several shifts in the English language also occurred during the Early Modern period:

o.	The old form of sounds	The new form of sounds
.	/a:, ε:, e:/	/ε:, e:, i:/
.	/ɔ:, o:/	/o:, u:/
.	/i:, u:/	/əi, əu/

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.		/ei, ou/
.	/əi, əu/ /ei, ou/	/ai/ and /au/
.	/ɔ:/	/au/
.	/ɛ:, e:/	/e:, i:/

The loss process of diphthongs was seen in the Early Modern English period, basically most of the diphthongs were merged with another one or changed totally in the pronunciation of the Early Modern English words. /ɛi, əu/ are raised to /ei, ou/ and merged with /e:, o:/. the words dew, duke, and new are similar to each other, because /y, ɛu, iu/ merged to [ɪʊ] in the Early Modern English period. Apart from those, there were different borrowings from Latin and Greek languages and those borrowings brought new sounds and pronunciations from other languages.

In the Modern English period, which began in the late 17th century and continues to the present day, several significant phonetic changes have taken place in the English language. During this era, there was much research by scientists to make the language more understandable and standard. "By the end of the nineteenth century, phonetics was increasingly recognized as a valid scientific discipline. While early experimental and instrumental research in speech science was concentrated in Germany, France, and the USA, in Britain—thanks to the pioneering work of scholars such as Alexander Melville Bell, Isaac Pitman, Alexander J. Ellis, and Henry Sweet—the emphasis was on what is now known as articulatory phonetics," shows that scientists started to research the development of the English phonetics in the 20th century. [M. Mees, B. Collins, P. Carley, 2013]

This period is seen as the starting line of Received Pronunciation as the standard and prestigious form of spoken British English. As there is the standardization of the English language, a variety of regional dialects and accents also are had in the language evolution, but they also play a crucial role in contributing to the diversity of phonetic features in the language. Apart from that the International Phonetic Alphabet was discovered in 1888, and one scientist defined the International Phonetic Alphabet, "The International Phonetic Alphabet, or IPA, is among the oldest and most fundamental tools of modern linguistic description and analysis. Established by the International Phonetic Association in the late nineteenth century, the IPA serves as a universal, standardized system for representing human speech, regardless of the language(s) of the speaker or the transcriber". [Lal Zimman, 2020]

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Modern English is divided into 3 dialects: 1) non-rhotic; 2) rhotic; 3) non-rhotic and rhotic accents. Non-rhotic dialect speakers live in Britain, New York, Boston, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, rhotic speakers are from America and there are non-rhotic and rhotic accents in English of England. Whether the letter "r" is pronounced or not, depends on dialect.

English	Dialect	Letter “r”
British English	Non-rhotic	often dropped at the end of syllables
American English	Rhotic	pronounced more consistently
English of England	Non-rhotic and rhotic accents	lost at the end of syllables

Modern English gives differences in the pronunciation of the consonants like the sound “th” gives the sounds of the dental fricatives /θ, ð/ in words “thin” and “this”.

There is an evolution table of some words which were changed period by period:

Periods	one	mother	heart
Proto-Indo-European	óynos	méh ₂ tēr	kér
Proto-Germanic spelling	ainaz	mōðēr	hertô
Old English Spelling	ain	mōdar	herts
Middle English spelling	oon	mother	herte
Modern English pronunciation	wʌn	mʌðə(r)	hart/ha:t

The globalization and technological era affect the English language, because of modern advances of the world. For example, just social media is spreading dialects and pronunciation patterns around the world and it will cause changes in Received Pronunciation in the future.

Several significant changes became more and more visible in the English language in the Middle English era. In both the Old English and the Early Modern English periods, borrowing words was very common and it made significant changes in pronunciation and sound patterns of those period’s English language. After Shakespeare’s period – the Early Modern English era – the standard language system was developed and named Received Pronunciation. It means literature and past

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changes in language shaped the original English language. In the Old English era, there was difficult pronunciation, spelling, and a system of vowels and consonants, but over the centuries English language developed with the help of influences of the periods.

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