

**CLASS 8: The Great Vowel Shift**

**Revision: The Phonetics of Vowels**

The articulation of vowels can be described in terms of **three dimensions**:

- backness
- height
- roundedness

**Backness** relates to the position of the body of the tongue in the oral cavity.

- /u, o, ɔ, ɑ/ are **back** vowels pronounced with the body of the tongue bunched *back towards the velum (soft palate)*
- /i, e, ε, æ/ are **front** vowels pronounced with the body of the tongue bunched *forwards towards the hard palate*

**Height** also relates to the position of the tongue in the oral cavity, and also to the degree of lowering of the jaw.

- /i, u/ are **high** vowels pronounced with the tongue *close to the palate*
- /e, o/ are **high-mid** vowels pronounced with the tongue *slightly less raised* than for /i, u/
- /ɔ, ε/ are **low-mid** vowels pronounced with a *slight lowering of the lower jaw* and also the *tongue in a position a little lower* than its neutral position
- /ɑ, æ/ are **low** vowels pronounced with a *lowering of the tongue and of the lower jaw*

**Rounding** refers to the position of the lips.

- /u, o, ɔ/ are **rounded** vowels pronounced with *rounding (or pursing) of the lips*
- /i, e, ε, æ, ɑ/ are **unrounded** vowels pronounced with the *lips in neutral, spread position*

Any **pure English vowel** can be defined in terms of these three dimensions (*Table 1*).

	Front	Back
<b>High</b>	i	u
<b>Mid-High</b>	e	o
<b>Low-High</b>	ε	ɔ
<b>Low</b>	æ	ɑ

Table 1

NB: In *ME* and *NE*, *all and only high, mid-high, and mid-low back vowels are rounded*.

**The Great Vowel Shift**

The *Great Vowel Shift* (aka *Tudor Vowel Shift*, c. 1450-1700) involved a change which affected **all the long vowels and diphthongs** of late *ME* (*LME*).

(Late EMid) ME	NE (IPA)	(Usual) spelling	Examples
i:	ai:	i, y, iCe, ie	child, fly, tide, pie
e:	i:	ee, ie	seed, field
ε:	i:	ea, ei, eCe	heath, conceit, complete
ɑ:	ei	aCe	make
ɔ:	əu	oa, oCe, o, oe	boat, hope, so, foe
o:	u:	oo, oCe	food, move
ui:	au	ou, ow	house, how

Table 2

So the **Great Vowel Shift** involves:

- *raising of all non-high long vowels* (to different degrees; *ME* /e:/ and /ε:/ coalesce — an instance of **phonemic merger**)
- *diphthongization of first high vowels and then of all but ME /e:/ and /o:/*

If *ME* /ε:/ and /ɔ:/ were *NE* /e:/ and /o:/, then the system would be symmetric. This is similar to some *modern Northern Scots dialects*, and might have been the *ENE situation in the South East*. **Centralization** of /ɔ:/ to /əu:/ is very recent, c. 1900 in the *South East*.

**Another logical thing** would have been /ɑ:/ raising to /ε:/. This was probably the *first step*, followed by *further raising* to /e:/ and **diphthongization** to /ei/ (again, much later: c. 1800 and only in the South). There was *some confusion* with words with *ME* /ε:/, giving with spelled with *ea* pronounced with /ei/, e.g. *great*.

**Reading**

- Barber 1993: ch. 8 — Baugh & Cable 2002: ch. 8
- Görlach 1991: ch. 6 — Pyles & Algeo 1982: ch. 7