

# Vowels in Motion

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# Overview of today's lecture

- 1 Introduction
- 2 What's a vowel?
- 3 Vowels in English today
- 4 Other vowels systems you may know
- 5 The Great Vowel Shift
- 6 The Northern Cities Vowel Shift
- 7 Conclusion: vowels in motion

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## Change

All languages change, but all the changes happened in front of some people's eyes. What did that look like?

## ...is in the present

What does language look like today? All change is in the present: not all people speak the same language the same way.

## What changes?

Changes can occur in vocabulary, in pronunciation, and in grammar (syntax).

In the 15th and 16th centuries, spoken English changed dramatically, with vowels changing pronunciation and moving upwards in the mouth. Before it, we all sounded like ye olde-fashioned chumps. Afterwards, we all sounded hip and modern!



It was a century of kids outcooling their parents!



Before, "boots" was pronounced "boats", and feet like "fate". PRETTY OLD FASHIONED, dudes! But what's amazing is that the printing press was invented just before this started, and it was at that point that the spellings of words really got fixed. That's why English has so many oddly-spelt words! They show the pronunciation of words as they were, just before we underwent the Great Vowel Shift and decided to, you know, say everything differently.



And nobody knows why it happened!

I know! It's so amazing!



Linguists are like, "Maybe immigration from the Black Death caused regional accents to be absorbed?" and then another says, "Maybe the English wanted to distinguish their language from the hated French?" and then they both shrug at each other!

I don't think -

I saw it!!



### 15TH CENTURY ENGLAND:

Hey peasants! Tell all your friends to pronounce "boner" like "bone-air", okay? It'll make the future HILARIOUS.

No way! However, maybe we WILL tell them to diphthongize their highest long vowels.

Guys! So not as cool!!



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## Vowels?

What is a vowel, and what is a consonant?

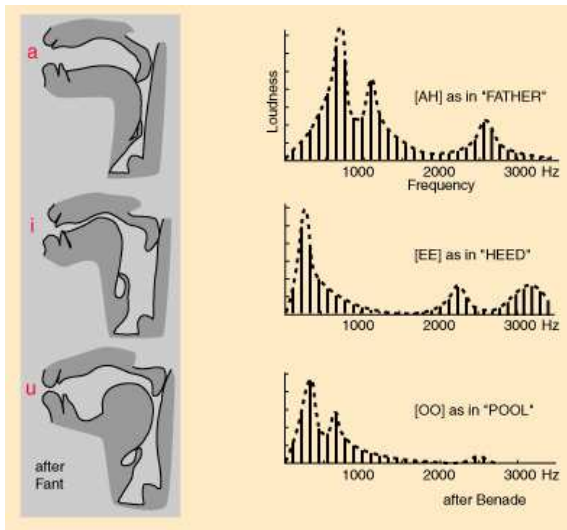
A **vowel** is a sound in which the hum from the larynx resonates in the chambers of the mouth.

A **consonant** is produced by blocking airflow in the mouth and producing turbulence.

# Vowels

- Jaw position
- Tongue position
- Lip rounding
- Length
- movement (diphthongs move!)

# Vowels: positions and formants



# Vowels: formants





# Front vowels in English

Short vowels			Long vowels		
pit	ĭ	[ɪ]	by	ī	[aj]
pet	ĕ	[ɛ]	Pete	ē	[ij]
pat	ă	[æ]	pate	ā	[ej]

# Back vowels in English

Short vowels			Long vowels		
put	ɔ̃	[ʊ]	boot	ō	[u]
putt	ʊ̃	[ʌ]	bound	ou	[æ]
bought	ô	[ɔ]	boat	ō	[o]
pot	ɔ̃	[a]			

# Ah! ...awe

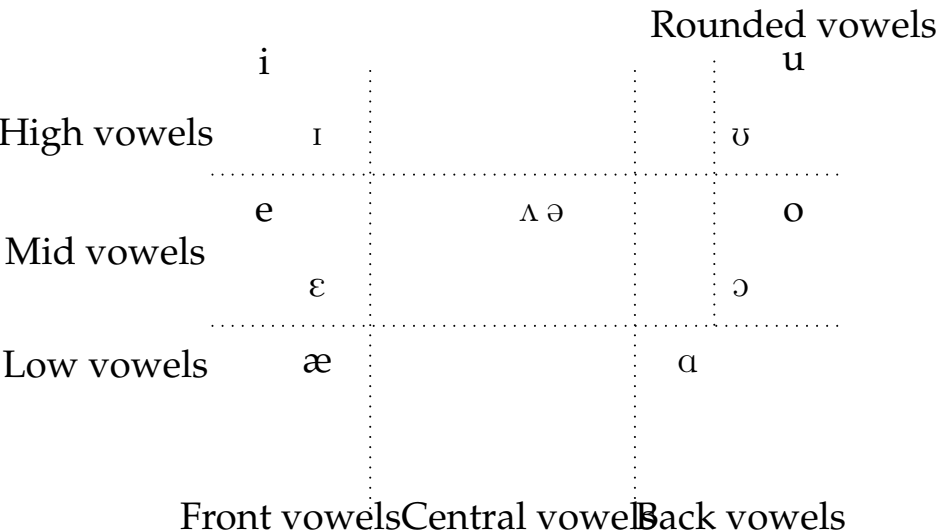
a	ɔ
Don	dawn
cot	caught
Connery	Sean
	coffee
	off

## Diphthong?

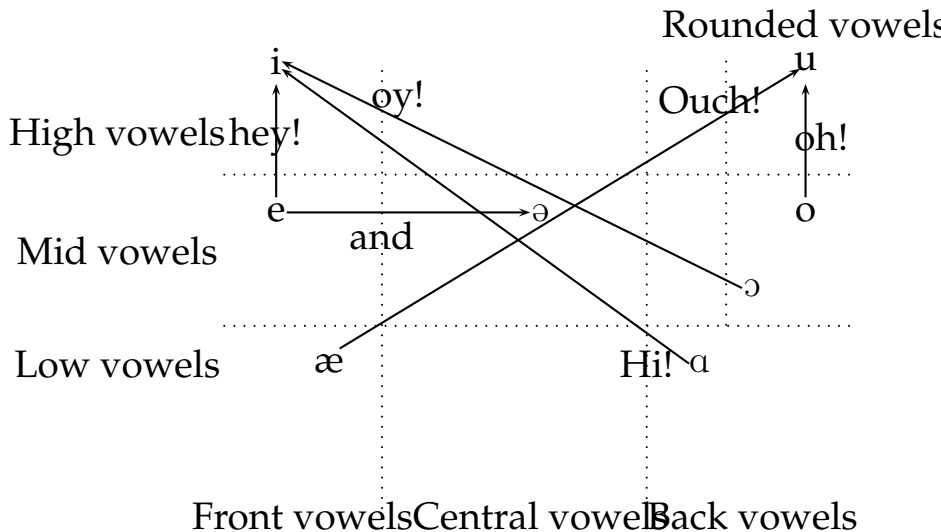
New Yorkers often make this vowel (in *awe*, *off*...) a diphthong. Listen to me...

American	h—d	h—	b—d	h—t	k—d
ij	heed	he	bead	heat	keyed
ɪ	hid		bid	hit	kid
ej	hayed	hay	bayed	hate	Cade
ɛ	head		bed		
æ	had		bad	hat	cad
a	hod	ha!	bod	hot	cod
ɔ	hawed	haw	bawd	haughty	cawed
ʊ	hood				could
ow	hoed	hoe	abode	Hoat	code
uw	who'd	who	booed	hoot	
ʌ	Hudd		bud	hut	cud
ɚ	herd	her	bird	hurt	curd
aj	hide	high	bide	height	
æw		how <sub>1,2</sub>	bowed		cowed

# Simple vowels in English



# Diphthongs in English



## Related words

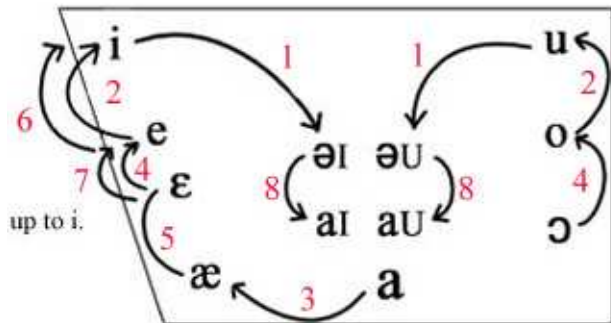
long	short	long	short
serene	serenity	[ij]	[ɛ]
please	pleasant	[ij]	[ɛ]
crime	criminal	[aj]	[ɪ]
divine	divinity	[aj]	[ɪ]
profane	profanity	[ej]	[æ]
abound	abundant	[æw]	[ʌ]
goose	gosling	[uw]	[a]

# Spanish diphthongs: stressed mid vowels

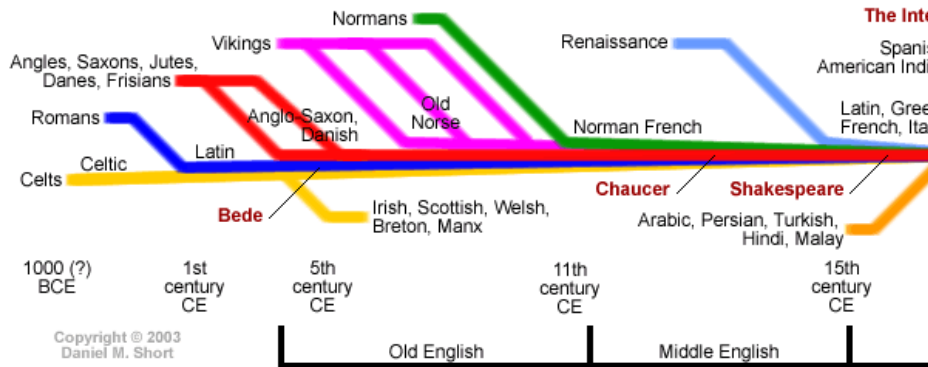
	cantar sing	llamar call	pensar think
1st Sg	canto	llamo	pienso
2nd Sg	cantas	llamas	piensas (pensás)
3rd Sg	canta	llamo	piensa
1st Pl	cantamos	llamamos	pensamos
2nd Pl	cantáis	llamáis	pensáis
3rd Pl	cantan	llaman	piensan



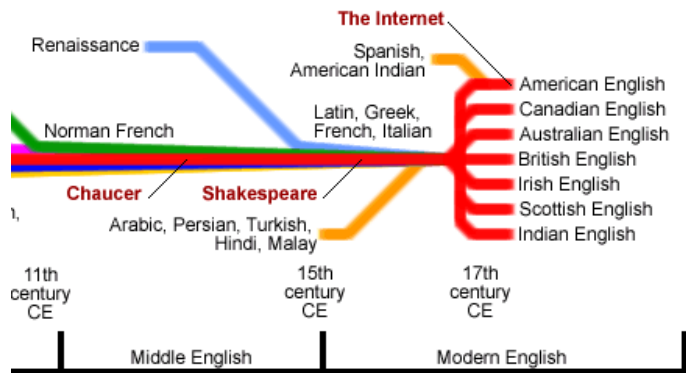
# The Great Vowel Shift in English



# The Great Vowel Shift in English



# The Great Vowel Shift in English



# The Great Vowel Shift

- Before the Great Vowel Shift, English speakers used to pronounce the vowels of the words that they shared with speakers of other European languages in much the same way.
- The GVS affected the long vowels of Middle English, and began around 1400.
- So the Great Vowel Shift began well *before* Shakespeare's time, and continued during his lifetime (1564-1616).

# The Great Vowel Shift

- When did the GVS begin? Some time after the Black Death, the great plague that killed somewhere around half the population of Europe in the middle of the 14th century. But we really don't know what the social factors were that gave rise to it.

## Before the Great Vowel Shift

- The long vowel spelled *i* (e.g., *time*) was pronounced [i:]. *like* was pronounced [li:k], much like English *leak* today.
- The long vowel spelled *ee* was pronounced [e:]. *feet* was pronounced [fe:t], a *little* like English *fate* today.
- The long vowel spelled *ea* was pronounced [ɛ]. *break* was pronounced [brɛ:k], a *little* like English *Breck* today, but with the vowel drawn out purely in length.

# 1400s: the 15th century



Battle of Agincourt, Joan of Arc, the fall of Constantinople, Leonardo da Vinci, and 1492.

## 1400s: the 15th century

- Battle of Agincourt, Joan of Arc, the fall of Constantinople, Leonardo da Vinci, and 1492.
- / [i:/] as in *crime* became a diphthong, probably [ɪy]: *like, time, crime*. The first part of this diphthong would become lower over the following centuries.
- At around the same time, [e:] (as in *feet*) became a long [i:] (but it did not get confused with the old [i:], which was no longer pronounced that way); and [ɛ:] was also raised, to take the place of [e:]. So the old *east*, which had been [ɛ:st], was now [e:st].



## 1500s: the 16th century

- The century of Henry VIII, Martin Luther, and Queen Elizabeth, and most of Shakespeare's life.
- The long vowel [a:], as in *name* [na:mə], now became [æ:]. In the 1600s, around the time of the English Revolution, it kept on moving, and became [ɛ:]. Around the time of the American Revolution, it became [e:], and by the time of our Civil War, it shifted to become a diphthong: [ej].

## 1500s: the 16th century

- In the 1600s, English Revolutionary time, [ɪy], as in *crime*, kept on changing – to become [əj]. That is a *lowering* of the first part of the vowel, and that lowering has continued up to modern times; the pronunciation now begins with a very low vowel: [aj].

# Chaucer



# Chaucer: The Friar's Tale (end of 14 century)

*This worthy lymytour, this noble Frere,  
This worthy licensed beggar, this noble  
Friar*

*He made alwey a maner louryng chiere  
He always made a kind of scowling face*

*Upon the Somonour, but for honestee*

*At the Summoner, but for propriety*

*No vileyns word as yet to hym spak he.*

*No churlish word as yet to him spoke he.*

*source: Larry Benson.*

# Chaucer: The Friar's Tale (end of 14 century)

*But atte laste he seyde unto the wyf,*

*But at the last he said to the wife,*

*"Dame," quod he, "God yeve yow right  
good lyf!*

*"My lady," said he, "God give you a right  
good life!*

*Ye han heer touched, also moot I thee,*

*You have here touched, as I may prosper,*

*In scole-matere greet difficultee.*

*On academic problems of great difficulty.*

*source: Larry Benson.*

## Chaucer: The Friar's Tale

*Ye han seyde muche thyng right wel, I seye;  
You have said many things right well, I  
say;*

*But, dame, heere as we ryde by the weye,  
But, my lady, here as we ride by the way,  
Us nedeth nat to speken but of game,  
We need not speak of anything but  
pleasant matters,*

# Chaucer: The Friar's Tale

*And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,  
And leave authoritative texts, in God's  
name,  
To prechyng and to scoles of clergye.  
To preaching and to the universities.*

## Shakespeare: Troilus (1602)

*Troilus: Call here my varlet, I'll unarm again,  
Why should I war without the walls of Troy:*

*That find such cruel battle here within?*

*Each Trojan that is master of his heart,  
Let him to field, Troilus alas, hath none.*

*Pandarus: Will this gear ne'er be mended?*

*Troilus: The Greeks are strong and skillful to  
their strength*

*Fierce to their skill, and to their fierceness  
valiant,*

*But I am weaker then a woman's tear;*

*Tamer then sleep; fonder then ignorance,*



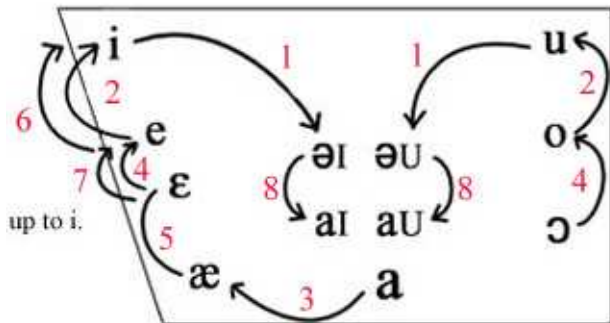
# Shakespeare: Troilus

*Troilus: Less valiant then the virgin in the  
night,*

*And skillless as unpractised infancy:*

*Pandarus: Well, I have told you enough of this;  
for my part I'll not meddle nor make no  
farther; he that will have a cake out of the  
wheat must needs tarry the grinding.*

# The Great Vowel Shift

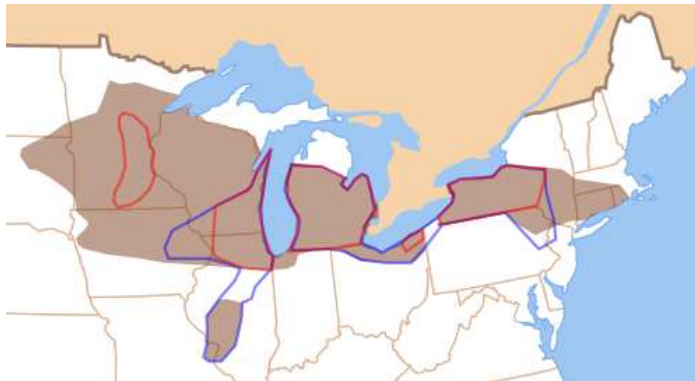


# Great Vowel Shift

1300	1400	1500	1600	1700	1800	present
driven	i:	ii	ei	ɛi	ʌi	ai
house	u:	ʊw	ow	ɔw	ʌw	aw
feet	e:		i:			
fool	o:		u:			
beat	ɛ:			e:	i:	
foal	ɔ:			o:		əu
take	a:		æ:	ɛ:	e:	ei
sail	ai		æi	ɛi	e:	ei
law	aw		ɔw	ɒ:		ɔ:

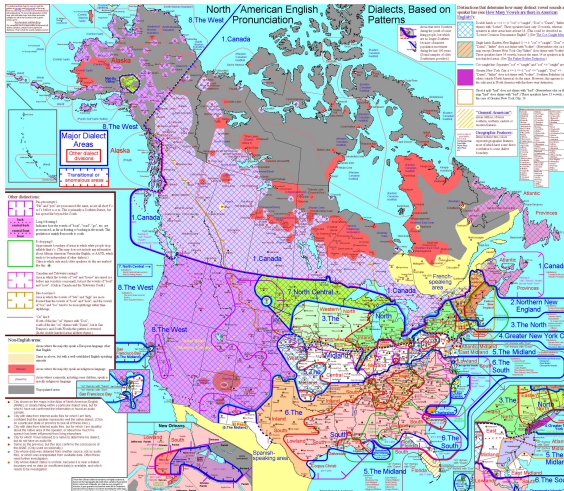
This nice graphic based on material from Raymond Hickey, at [www-uni-due.de](http://www-uni-due.de), on Studying The History of English.

# The Northern Cities region

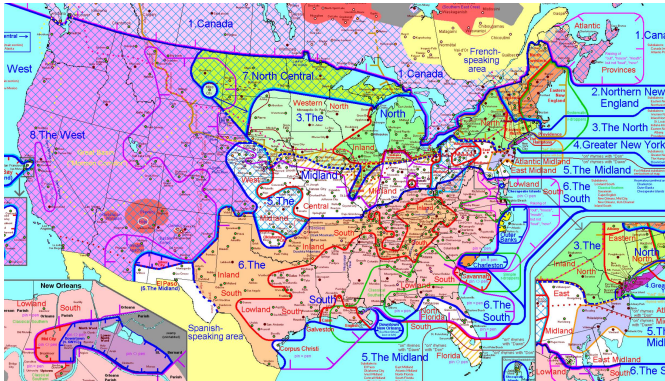


# North America

## North American English Dialects



# The United States

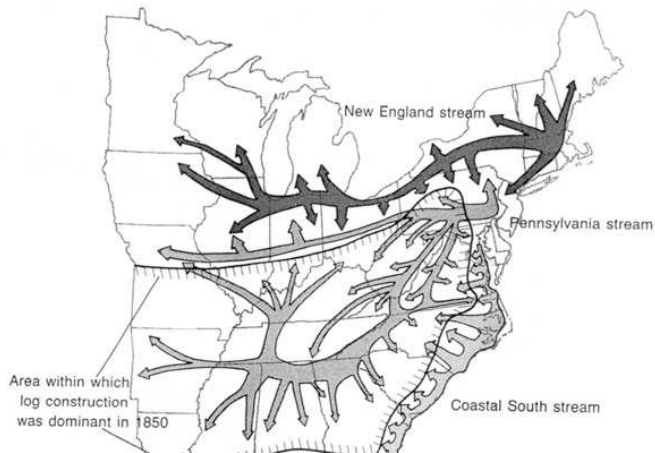


# The Northern Cities region

Also known as the Inland North

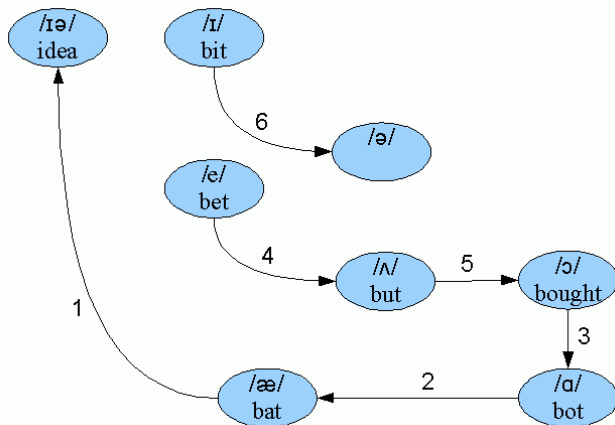


# History of migration





# Northern Cities vowel shift



# The Northern Cities vowel shift

- A major shift in the vowel quality of several short vowels in American English.
- Became more distinct after World War II, in the Northern inland cities: Chicago, Detroit, Rochester, Cleveland.
- Its antecedents already existed further east, in New York, for example.
- William Labov, the dean of sociolinguists in the 20th century, has studied this system in great detail.

## Tense æ

- It started with two slightly different pronunciations of the vowel in *cat* and *Sam*. Instead of pronouncing them both with the same vowel ( $c[\text{æ}]t$ ,  $S[\text{æ}]m$ ), many speakers throughout the United States used a slightly raised and slightly diphthongized form in *Sam*. This vowel is often described as *tense*, and is  $[e^{\text{ə}}]$

# Tense æ

- In fact, there was a phonological principle determining where they used this vowel:  $e^{\circ}$  is used when followed by an  $m$  or  $n$  (but not  $[ŋ] = \text{'ng'}$ ) *in the same syllable*. The consonant that *precedes* is of no importance.

Sam	sand	sang
$se^{\circ}m$	$se^{\circ}nd$	sæng

Different syllables:

Pamela	Canada
$pæm\acute{e}l\acute{a}$	$kæn\acute{e}d\acute{a}$

## Tense æ

- But then things started changing. In the Inland area—and this includes Chicago—æ changed unconditionally: everywhere there had been an æ, a tense  $e^{\circ}$  was now used by many speakers, including in words like *hat*, *cat*, *that*, and *at* where this would not happen on the East Coast.
- The other big change was that the vowel /a/ (as in *block*, *top*) started to move *forward*, and took over the phonetic pronunciation [æ], which was no longer being used for *cat* and *hat*.

# Conclusion 1

- Linguists do not know much about the *causes* of the great changes in pronunciation of English, and other languages, over the decades.
- But for the last 200 years, linguists have been able to document and infer an enormous amount of change, in both vowels and consonants.
- The one great constancy in language is **change**.
- Each generation and each social group has the opportunity to add its particular twist to the way its language is pronounced, and often one group's twist is adopted by all, or almost all, of the rest of the speakers.

## Conclusion 2

- You can open your ears and hear vowels as they really are.
- We hear and ignore a great deal of difference in the way others speak our language. As those differences add up, languages as a whole change and evolve.