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The Great Vowel Shift: Conflicts and solutions

Abstract

The main issues touched upon in the present paper

- (i) the push – drag conflict Luick (1896) vs Jespersen (1909) and their followers), recent attempts at a compromise;
- (ii) the total refusal of its unity (Stockwell & Minkova 1988a, 1988b) or its revision as pan-dialectal rather than “great” (Lass 1997, Guzmán-González 2003);
- (iii) the sociolinguistic approach (Smith 1996)
- (iv) the university instructor’s dilemma: what is to be taught?

Keywords: push and drag, vocabulary refill from Old French

1 Introduction

I will start this survey with a commonplace statement: no other topic of English historical phonology has excited so extensive a debate, no other topic of English historical phonology has received so wide a coverage as the Great Vowel Shift (GVS). It is again obvious – another commonplace – that the amount of discussion that deals with it would fill a small, or even not such a small library or, in terms of modern conveyors of information, innumerable gigabytes of computer memory. This circumstance, one could say, raises an almost insurmountable barrier to attempts at comprehensive summaries. On the other hand, looking back on the really tremendous amount of research and the effort that has been put into the description and interpretation of this unique phenomenon – if it ever existed as a reality – since Luick’s definitive work appeared in 1894, one could also argue that the modern researcher is at a considerable advantage, because there are certain tendencies, intersections of different paths and approaches that are capable of being grouped and classified. Needless to say – commonplace number three – there have always been heavy, at times insolvable, conflicts between the different aspects of discussion, from which it follows that the conflicting views can also be described from a historical perspective. What I would like to do in my paper is to touch upon only two or three of the many controversial issues, one characterising mainly the initial period of research, although having regularly come up ever since, the other having been typical – to my best knowledge, at least – of the last 20-30 years.¹

¹ At the beginning of his excellent survey Giancarlo (2001: 3) notes the following: “... it might come as a surprise that, in its technical and traditional understanding, the Great Vowel Shift ... has been the subject of an increasing debate, and at times wholesale rejection, in the last fifteen years or so. And while the familiar

2 Conflict I: Push, drag or push-and-drag?

The search for language- or, we should say, phonology-internal impetuses of the GVS crystallized around two extremes. It is generally known that the first classic, Luick advocated the push-theory, postulating Late Middle English (LME) long and mid vowels moving upwards and pushing long high vowels out of their positions, which, in turn, began to diphthongize.

Almost simultaneously with Luick's hypothesis, Sweet (1900) and Jespersen (1909), two other classics, put forward the drag-theory, arguing that the shift started at the top level, with /i:/ and /u:/ diphthongizing first and dragging the mid vowels into the slots that remained empty.

The compromise, push-and-drag, is primarily linked to the name of Sieberer, who holds that a general tendency of jaw-narrowing and tongue-raising was accompanied by secondary movements of dragging and pushing. (For a more detailed discussion see any textbook, e.g. Rot 1992: 328).

It would not be worth the trouble to repeat all this for the nth time if all this were history, that is, if these views did not appear again and again in more recent treatments of the topic either in a covert or overt way. To illustrate a covert argumentation for the push theory, I would like to mention Wełna's paper (2004) In it, the author discusses early instances of *i-/y-spellings* „which may indicate the narrowing of the long mid close vowel [e: > i:] even before the 15th c.” (75), which is the traditional dating of the beginning of the GVS. It seems undoubtedly striking that forms like *spiche* (Old English [OE] *sp(r)ēche*) or *sichinde* (pres. part. of OE *sēcan*) occur as early as OE, in which forms with <y> are fairly frequent, cf. *fyt*, *slypton*, *scip* (*fēt*, pret. plur. of *slēpan*, *scēp*), all testifying to a tendency to sporadically raise [e:], but Wełna is probably right in stating that none of these can be considered to have been forerunners of the GVS, as they were short-lived. The bulk of his corpus showing early [e:] > [i:] is taken from the *OED*, in which ample material testifies to this process being quite common as early as the late 13th-early 14th c.: *squiers*, *dys*, *require*, *friars*, *enquyred*, *contrive*, etc. These and other examples on Wełna's list are, however, almost exclusively of French origin, leaving open the following questions:

- (i) Could such spellings have been imitations of Old French (OF) spelling variants, in which, especially in those ending in *-quere* the insertion of an <i> is also detectable: OF *requer-*, *requier-* etc.? For more examples see the corresponding entries of the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology;
- (ii) Could such spellings be the reflections of the imitation by the ([linguistically] inferior) ME speaker of the very narrow pronunciation of [e:] in these words by the ([linguistically] superior) OF speaker?

All this said, we might also posit, however, the one-time reality of such raised pronunciations of OF [e:] and regard them, following in Wełna's footsteps, as instances of a prelude to the GVS. This being the case, the phenomenon could also be used as an argument for the push-theory: a growing number of instances of [i:]-realizations of /e:/ in words, even if these were of French origin, could have narrowed down the phonological space for the [i:]-realizations of /i:/, thereby enforcing its initial diphthongization and pushing it out of its original position.

GVS diagram is still a regular feature of textbooks and studies, its actual representational value has substantively shifted. The debate about the GVS has been professionally limited in scope, but the current controversy about its accuracy and value fits into a larger pattern of critical reevaluation that has been underway in historical linguistics during the same time. The debate has an obvious significance for the practice of teachers...” The present author has been guided by very similar considerations.

In the back set no such early raising of the contrastive /o:/ seems to have taken place at this, i.e. the mid-high, level, though Lass (1999: 79-83) quotes spellings like <doun, roude, bloude> from the early 14th c., which are more sporadic than <i>-spellings for the close /e:/. This, then, could be interpreted in the sense that pushing did not work in the back set and no prelude to the GVS, similar to the above-mentioned front type, was at work in this zone.

There is, however, a factor here that generally seems to have been left out of consideration. In the discussions of the preludes or antecedents to the GVS an early instance of raising is not paid enough attention to, at least to my mind. What I mean is the OE /a:/ → Early ME /ɔ:/ change in the *ac* /a:k/ 'oak'-type words, which, in its realization in the 12/13th centuries could have been audible enough for scribes to respell such words in <o>. This rather numerous group of words then was joined by those with the same /ɔ:/ vowel emerging as a result of ME Open Syllable Lengthening from the OE *hopian*-type words: OE [hopian] → EME [hɔ:pən], lowering into [hɔ:pən]. Thus, an EME (pre-GVS) long-vowel system (cca. early 13th c.) could have looked like this:

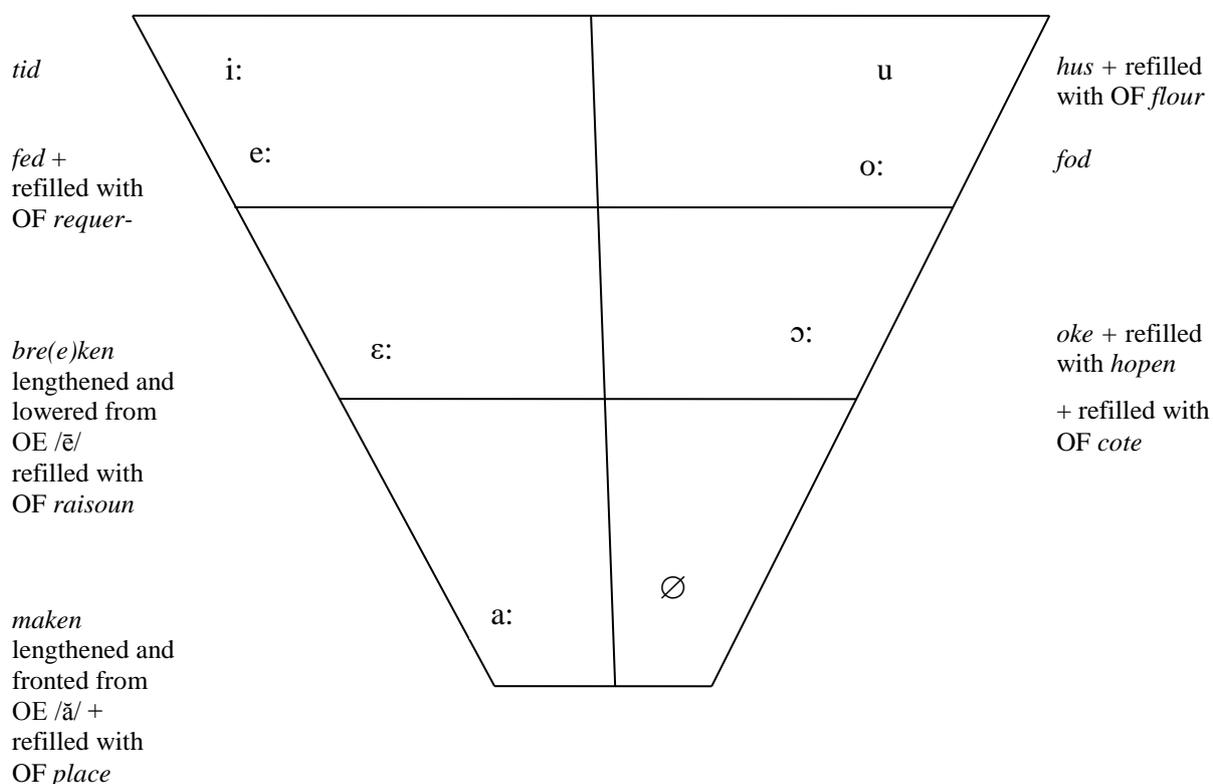


Figure 1: The pre-GVS system of ME long vowels with one OE and one OF word representing each level

So it was the front /e:/-height which was soon refilled with a considerable number of words of French origin, see Wehna's list in the Appendix. Let me immediately add that such a lexical refilling from a foreign source is not or is hardly observable at the /o:/-level, the relatively few instances being mostly of native descent (*food, foot, blood, etc.*). Similarly, genuine OE /a:/ had already risen to the /ɔ:/-level by the time the *place* /a:/-type words arrived from OF, so the /ɔ:/ group also contained native items in the first place.

Thus, there seem to have been 3 levels which became particularly overcharged lexically, i.e. the number of examples representing them suddenly multiplied after the influx of French words: /e:/ and /a:/ in the front set and /u:/ in the back one.

What could all this have meant in terms of push and drag? For the /e:/ → /i:/ movement, see above: the multiplication of /e:/-words with possible early [i:]-realisations could have begun to infiltrate the /i:/-zone and initiate diphthongisation by pushing. On the other hand, the sudden growth of /a:/-words could have made the group too „cumbersome” to begin to climb up the ladder. Guzmán-González (2003: 123) states that two „diastratic varieties” seem to be evidenced at least in London English: /a:/ → /æ:/ and the maintenance of the conservative /a:/ as late as the end of 16th c. For the latter, ample evidence can be found in John Hart’s description of „polite pronunciation” in contemporary, i.e. late 16th c., London, in Chapter VII of his 1569 *An Orthographie* (see Freeborn (1993: 126)). Guzmán-González dates the full merger of EME /a:/ with /ε:/ to the late 17th c. only.

Now, turning to the back zone, we have seen that the mass influx of French words affected the /u:/-level the most (see Appendix). This might lead us to conclude that this overcrowded section could have been made free by diphthongizing the occurrences of /u:/ one by one or simultaneously (an itemized chronology would be practically infeasible). This having happened or at least begun, we can resort to the good old drag-theory: the empty slot thus emerging sucked the /o:/ words up like a vacuum cleaner. In the back zone the *oke + hopen* type couldn’t have exerted an early pushing influence, see Guzmán-González (2003: 123) again: “for ME /ε:ɔ:/ sources do not point clearly to their raising to /e: o:/ until the mid 17th c.” The reason for this could again be sought in the bulkiness and resulting clumsiness of the /ɔ:/-group: the number of items representing it grew suddenly after its merger with the *hopen*-type together with several OF items of the *cote* (→ *coat*) type (see Appendix), so the movement upward was considerably delayed by about 100-150 years after the /o:/ → /u:/ raising. So, to sum up this section of my paper, I hypothesize that:

- (H1) In the front set, the relatively early [e:] → [i:] rise produced a push-effect, for which the items on Welna’s list and their affected [i:]-like pronunciation may also be held responsible;
- (H2) The late raising of the /a:/ may also have been due to the sudden enlargement of the group again by words of F origin, delaying the lexical diffusion of /a:/ → /æ:/ → /ε:/ by about 100-150 years (see Appendix);
- (H3) As mentioned above, the /u:/-words could have begun the diphthongization process because the mass influx of F /u:/-words made the space overcrowded. The relatively few /o:/ words could have been dragged up easily to fill in the vacuum;
- (H4) The ME /ɔ:/-set was again too numerous to promptly occupy the former /o:/-height. Thus, the *oke + hopen* type could have been raised only later because the new [o:]-realization spread slowly and covered all the instances in about 100-150 years after the /u:/ had begun to diphthongize and the /o:/ had risen to its position.

The weakness of this hypothesis is that it is a brainwave only and is based on intuition rather than firmly verified facts. It should be thoroughly tested, e.g., against the real phonetic nature of OF *e*:-like sounds, and it should be made absolutely clear that relatively few, if any, lexical penetrations from OF at the /o:/ level occurred. One could also have doubts about the same /e: o:/ level producing push in the front set and being subjected to dragging in the back one.

To round off the discussion of **Conflict I**: pushes and drags both seem to have been at work. They are the two sides of the same coin rather than processes mutually excluding each other. It is all the more striking that a highly authoritative scholar like Barber (1996: 105-6) should make such a categorical remark: “The process began with the close vowels. It was not a question of the open vowels becoming closer, and exerting pressure on those above. On the contrary, the first stage was that /i:/ and /u:/ became diphthongs, which happened in the 15th c. This left spaces at the top of the diagram, into which the half-close vowels /e:/ and /o:/ drifted:

this had happened by 1500. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the half-open and open vowels in their turn drifted into closer positions.” No doubt, however, that his is one of the most consistent and lucid, if traditional, presentations of the GVS, which he perceives, needless to say, as a unitary phenomenon or chain shift.

3 Conflict II: was there a GVS at all?

For the last 25 years or so, the reality of the GVS as a unitary phenomenon and/or a chain shift has been seriously questioned. Pioneers of this view, one should say, were Stockwell and Minkova (their two 1988 papers: a *The English Vowel Shift – problems of coherence and explanation*, b *A rejoinder to Lass*, are discussed in Lass 1997: 32-41). As far as Lass is concerned, he considers it a useful metaphor to work with, and his approach is what I should call amusingly ironic: the GVS is not much more or less of a problem than the Industrial Revolution or the Enlightenment, it is no more than a label to be attached to a series of phenomena, giving the opportunity to those well versed in the metalanguage to indulge in discussions about it. So, “there is a potential interrelation among items moving about in the vowel-space, in particular a ‘pressure’ which Luick himself seems to take as metaphorical, given the scare-quotes around *verdrängt*” (Lass 1997: 35). Furthermore, “if two objects can’t occupy the same space at the same time (a transfer from ordinary physical space to ‘vowel-space’) then pressure causing movement causing pressure is built in as a natural systemic possibility” (Lass 1997: 37). Anyway, “generating a dynamic image out of a set of static correspondences is a creative act, inventing a geometrical frame [...] is quite simply the creation of a new kind of entity, which is the subject matter of a new kind of discourse, and is justified by its fruitfulness.” Lass himself does not take sides either with the Luickian push-camp or the Jespersenian drag-camp, and does not claim that there was a GVS or there was not one, although he seems to acknowledge the chain-like character of the /e: o:/ rise and the subsequent diphthongization of the /i:/ and /u:/ (cf. the lack of /u:/-diphthongization in the North because of the early fronting of /o:/ to /ø:/ in that area and culminating in /i:/ [*out* is /u:t/ and *boot* is /bi:t/]). Nevertheless, Lass also acknowledges that the energy put into solving the question has not been wasted: “Whoever turns out to be (more or less) right, an enormous amount of enlightening scholarship has been produced in the past eighty-odd years, and English historical linguistics would be a lot poorer without it” (Lass 1997: 40).

No wonder then that recent “enlightening scholarship” has been subjecting the GVS to serious doubt. I have already referred to Guzmán-González (2003: 121-131), who rather categorically rejects the idea of the GVS having ever been a unitary process and sets up two phases: in Phase I /e: o:/ were raised and /i: u:/ were diphthongised. This was completed by the early 16th c. „No contemporary evidence particularly favours an earlier date for one or the other”, though most scholars tend to accept a push mechanism. In Phase II /ε:ɔ:→e: o:/ and /a: → ε:/, „in complex and variable ways,... after the 17th c.” (126). Although Guzmán-González (2003 124-125) states that „long-time spans might not perhaps represent a theoretical problem in principle...in my view, the time gap is perhaps still too long for a *drag chain*; finally, I have certain difficulties in accepting that this front/back asymmetry² is not crucial for the general coherence of a *Great shift*” [my italics].

Push, drag, push-drag, or, somewhat modifying Guzmán-González’ question, shall we do without the GVS from now on? Is there a way out, or can any solution be found to these

² I.e. early /ε:→ e: → i:/, late /ɔ: → o:/

conflicts? Is there a way out of this apparent dead end? There seems to be one, if we take a closer look at how Smith (1996: 99-111) presents the problem. Although he also speaks about shift in the North and South, he leaves the debate over the issues touched upon above out of consideration and sets the whole phenomenon in a historical socio-linguistic framework. What he claims and concentrates on is that we have to do with “a series of minor individual choices which have interacted diachronically, diatopically and sociolinguistically, resulting in a set of phonological realignments” (Smith 1996: 111). In Smith’s treatment, it was the speech habits of the “upwardly mobile” (the so-called Mopsae) that made or, I should say, elbowed its way to becoming the accepted (London) standard in the late 17th/early 18th c. As put by Smith, “it is therefore no coincidence that the pronunciation favoured by them became more widespread after the Civil Wars of the mid-17th c. and the rise to political power of a vigorously self-confident bourgeoisie” (Smith 1996: 107-108). Let’s add that all this is particularly conspicuous in merging ME /ɛ: a: ai/ in /e:/, as in *mead, made, maid* respectively. (Conservative speakers of the early post-Civil War period used /e: → i:/ in *meed*, /ɛ: → e:/ in *mead* and /a:, ai → ε:/ in *made, maid*.) What is strange, however, about the subsequent developments is that it was not this “Mopsae” pronunciation that seems to have got firmly rooted in “polite society” (see Swift rhyming *speak : awake*), which was to become the present-day standard but a non-prestigious variety of East Anglian origin (rhyming *meet* and *meat*) and which also seems to have been current in London for some time. As Smith remarks, its final success may lie in the fewer homophonic clashes (excluding, e.g., *mate* from the above rhyme, all the three having /e:/ in Mopsae descendants’ speech) as well as in the coexistence of the old and the brand new pronunciations in London, so it was possible for Londoners to choose between them.

4 Conflict III: What shall we teach?

So here we are in a world of confusion, in which all old norms seem to be coming to be done away with and the poor teacher of the history of English is left with at least four questions to answer:

- (i) Shall we press on with the teaching of the old never failing symmetric scheme of long standing as having been put forward in hundreds of manuals since Luick (1896) and Jespersen (1909) (see Figure 2)?

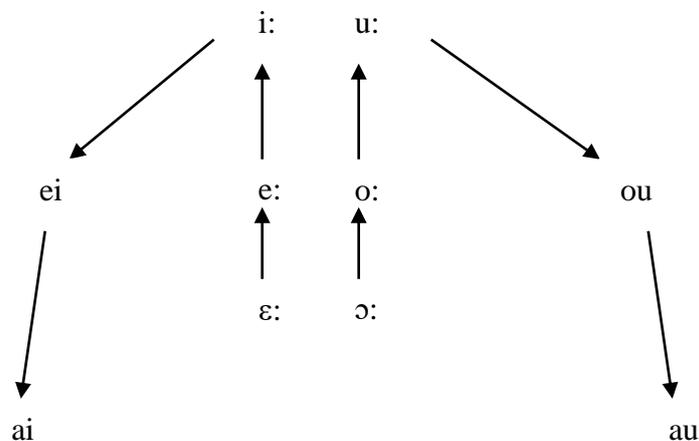


Figure 2: The traditional schematic representation of the GVS

- (ii) Shall we teach, as Lass puts it, “a set of atomistic correspondences” (1997: 34), i.e. shall we not call a spade a spade (Figure 3)?

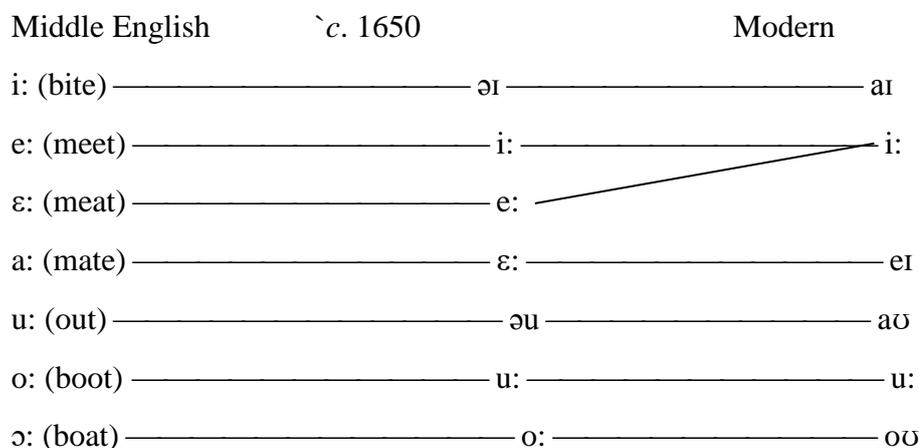


Figure 3: Lass' "set of atomistic correspondences"

- (iii) Shall we teach isolated phases, like Guzmán-González' (2003) Phase I /e: o:/ raising, /i: u:/ diphthongisation and Phase II /ɛ:ɔ:→e: o:/ and /a: → ɛ:/ change, reverberations of Stockwell and Minkova's (1988) rejection of the GVS as one unit?
- (iv) Shall we put this set of changes in a social framework rather than treat it intraphonologically?

These questions of methodological character remain unanswered. The university instructor should, perhaps, come to a modest compromise between the conflicting views.

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Appendix

The following word lists are meant to support the idea that the stock of native ME /i:/ and /u:/ words, after having been refilled with a fair number of French-derived items and thus becoming “top-heavy”, could have accelerated the diphthongisation of these vowels. At lower levels, however, the sudden multiplication of instances of /ɔ:/ and /a:/ could have slowed down the raising process.

/e:/-words in ME from OF with relatively early <i>-spellings in Welna’s list (2004: 78-9)

acquire
aisle
brier
contrive
dice
entire
friar
inquire
quire
require
squire
umpire

A random sample of /u:/-words in ME from OF (sources: ODEE, Word List Supplement to Freeborn (1992))

brown (cca. 1000)
couch (1340)
council (1300)
count (n. 1292)
court (1300)
crown (1325)
doubt (1225)
flour (1250)
flower (1225)
hour (1250)
noun (1398)
ounce (1330)
rouncy (1338)
stout (1315)
tower (897-1100)
 + all items ending in *-our*, either with the stress dragged to(wards) the first syllable (*liquor*) or retained on the last (*devour*)

A random sample of /ɛ:/-words in ME from OF (sources: Mossé (1952), OED CD-ROM (2002), Word List Supplement to Freeborn (1992))

complete (1374)
frail (1382)
pain (1297)
reason (1225)

seize (1290)
season (1300)
treason (1225)

A random sample of /ɔː/-words in ME from OF (sources: ODEE (1966), OED CD-ROM (2002), Word List Supplement to Freeborn (1992))

approach (1325)
boast (1300)
broach(1305)
coast (1300)
coat (1300)
cloak (1275)
host (1290)
loach (1357)
poach (1390)
roach (1314)
roast (1290)
soar (1374)
toast (1398)

A random sample of /aː/-words in ME from OF (sources: ODEE (1966), Word List Supplement to Freeborn (1992))

(a)bate (1270)
able (1325)
ace (1300)
age (1297)
bacon (1330)
case (1225)
dame (1225)
date (1290)
embrace (1300)
paper (1341-2)
place (950)
plague (1382)
rage (1300)
safe (1297)
save (1225)
slave (1290)
stable (1250)
state (1225)
taste (1290)
trace (1300)
waste (1200)
wage (1183)