LINGUISTICS

MORE ON THE HISTORY OF SHIT AND SHUT

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1. Introduction

This paper presents some data which supports Lass (1980) and Platzner (1996) in their contention that taboo cannot be the reason for the resolution of the supposed homophonic clash between the reflexes of OE *scītan* 'to shit' and OE *scyttan* 'to shut'.

The topic was discussed by Samuels (1972: 142ff), refuted by Lass (1980: 75ff), and taken up again by McMahon (1994: 333). Platzner (1996: 76) demonstrates that the merger between the Middle English and Early Modern English reflexes of OE *scītan* and *scyttan* (both spelled <shit> and, it has been assumed, pronounced [ʃɪt]) "was firmly established for 250 years, without it causing any embarrassment." He shows, with data taken from the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts, the Oxford English Dictionary, the Middle English Dictionary and the English Poetry Full-text Database, that SHUT was spelled with an <i> graph in texts dating from the 1360s to the early 1600s, and that it occurred variably with other spellings (not given in his appendix). He concludes that homophony of <shit> SHIT and <shite> SHUT cannot have caused speakers to unscramble the merger about 250 years later.

1.1. Objections to taboo as an explanation for demerging

a. According to traditional Middle English dialectology, the Northern and East Midlands reflex of OE /y/ was spelled <i>, the South Western and South West Midlands spelling was <u> and the South Eastern spelling was <e> (Lass 1992: 54). Thus we could expect the North, East Midlands variant of SHUT, <i>, to

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1 See Lass (1980: 76-79) and McMahon (1994: 333) for further objections.
have an underlying /i/. But, as Platzer (1996: 70) points out, this would still not be homophonous with the Middle English reflex of OE scytan SHIT, as that would have a long vowel, /iːː/, as opposed to the Middle English reflex of OE scytan /ɪt/.²

b. How would speakers have known to add backing to the by-then-unbacked reflex of OE scytan ([ɪt] > [uɪt] > [jæɪl]), unless they had a memory of about 250 years? In other words, why does SHUT have a back vowel, rather than, say, a mid front vowel? If taboo were the only motive for ‘inventing’ a new pronunciation it seems fortuitous, at least, that an older pronunciation should be chosen. It could be argued that [jæɪt] was borrowed from nearby South Western dialects, but then why not borrow [jæɪt] for SHIT and leave SHUT as it was?⁴

c. How can we tell how taboo a word had become at any point in time? Platzer (1996: 76) argues that as SHUT had been spelled <shit> for a couple of centuries in the most prestigious written texts (such as two translations of the Bible, Chaucer), <shit> had become, by the Early Modern period, a codified spelling for SHUT.

I agree with Lass and Platzer’s view that taboo is not a sufficiently powerful motive for ceasing to write <shit> and starting to write <shut>. I give here some data from a London archive 1479-1535, in order to demonstrate that the switchover between <i> and <u> was in fact rather more complicated, and the spoken reality behind the <i> and <u> spellings may always have been more varied than the interpretation of those graphs would lead us to believe. I conclude that one possible interpretation is that SHIT/SHUT never merged in spoken London English.

2. The data: vowel-graphs in SHUT 1479-1535

London Bridge was an inhabited bridge during the relevant period, and halfway along it was a chapel, dedicated to St Thomas the Martyr. Maintenance of the bridge and the buildings upon it was (and still is) under the care of the Bridge House Estate, which employed a large workforce. The accounts of this workforce survive, and one of the tasks of one of the chapel clerics was to open and shut the doors of the chapel, for which he was paid, and payment duly noted in the accounts. Thus each year, from 1479 until 1535, there is an entry ‘for the opening and shutting of the chapel doors’. Prior to this date the entry is in Medieval Latin; after this date the entry becomes less specific. See Section 4 for the relevant extracts, and Table 1 for the vowel-graphs in SHUT:

Table 1: The vowel-graphs in SHUT 1479-1535 in the Bridge House Accounts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Vowel-graph</th>
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<tr>
<td>1479</td>
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<td>1480</td>
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<td>1495</td>
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<td>1508</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1509</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² That SHIT did have a long vowel in some dialects, at least, is confirmed by those Scottish and Northern dialects that pronounce SHIT as [ʃait] in P-DE, showing that scytan underwent the Great Vowel Shift. That SHIT was pronounced [ɪt] in the South is evidenced by P-DE [ʃɪt]. The usual explanation for the transition /ʃiːt > [ɪt] in the South is derivation from other parts of the paradigm, especially the past participle, or the noun (see Platzer 1996: 73 fn. 7).

⁴ It would be possible to adduce other parts of the paradigm here, and then invoke analogy (ie. backing and rounding was ‘borrowed’ from the past participle). But it would still be a post hoc argument.
The following clerks were paid\textsuperscript{6} for writing and copying out the accounts for the following periods:

- William Bouchier 1479-1481
- John Pees 1482-1487
- John Normavyle 1488-1501
- Walter Smyth 1502-1521
- John Halmer 1522-1535

Under the tenure of William Bouchier, only $<i>$ was used in three tokens of SHUT; under the tenure of John Pees, $<i>$ was used in 5 tokens and $<o>$ in 1; John Normavyle used $<o>$ (12), $<o>$ (1); Walter Smyth used $<o>$ (3), $<e>$ (14), $<i>$ (3); and John Halmer used $<e>$ (5), $<i>$ (6), $<y>$ (3).

Platzer (1996: 72) accepts that the many $<i>$ spellings for both SHIT and SHUT must indicate a spoken merger: "homophony must be accepted as a matter of course from c. 1500 onwards". The problem with this view is that there are only five vowel graphs: $<i>$, $<y>$, $<e>$, $<o>$, $<u>$ for a possible multiplicity of realisations, and it is generally believed that $<i>$, $<y>$ held the same value by this date. Hence, for example, $[i]$ and $[u]$ couldn't be visually distinguished, nor $[e]$ and $[e]$, nor $[i]$ and $[i]$, nor $[o]$. Yet in London 1300-1600 it is possible that there was some movement from generation to generation of the high and mid short vowels. The underlying phonetic reality of a short stressed vowel spelled, say, with an $<e>$ in London in 1400, 1500 and 1600 was not necessarily static, although we tend to interpret it as though it was.

The point I'm driving at is that a temporary graphic merger, that had two separate Old English inputs, and that has two separate Present-Day English outputs, doesn't have to indicate a temporary phonemic merger for all speakers. It is possible that there was always a distinction between SHIT and SHUT, and that this was not maintained in writing, anymore than $<lead>$ visually indicates a distinction between $[li:di]$ and $[led]$ today, or $<th>$ between $[0]$ and $[8]$. As the Bridge House Accounts show $<i>$, $<y>$, $<o>$, $<u>$, $<e>$ for the vowel in SHUT 1479-1535, we can conclude that either the clerks all came from different parts of the country,\textsuperscript{7} the vowel in question changed position several times, ranging from front–back, high–mid; or that the vowel in question

\textsuperscript{6} This does not mean that these individuals certainly wrote the relevant years' accounts, as they could have delegated, but over the 56 years of SHUT appearing in the accounts, five clerks were at least responsible for five spellings between them.

\textsuperscript{7} The traditional dialectal view would probably be something like the entries 1479-1500 were written by a clerk from the North or East Midlands, that perhaps a Western clerk did a stint 1501-1507, a South Eastern clerk took over from 1508 until about 1524, and then a clerk who had been raised, say, in the North, but who had moved to the South East had a go. I have discussed elsewhere (Wright 1996a: 112) why I do not find this to be a satisfactory explanation. The argument is circular: because there is a $<u>$ spelling, therefore the clerk is from the West; rather than an acceptance that the progression over real time from $<i>$

\footnote{Guildhall, Corporation of London Record Office, MS Bridge House Accounts Volume 3, fo 320v 1479x80. The 'x' notation means that the documents are dated internally.}
did not have a single settled graphic representation (for example, [u, e, o]) and any one of <i>, <e>, <o>, <u> or <e> would do the job equally well. It should be noted that SHUT is not the only OE /u/-derived word to make it into RP as [ʌ], so we know that OE /u/ did not necessarily runround in the South. If it is felt necessary to 'explain' the [ʌ] in SHUT, then surely it is also necessary to 'explain' the [ʌ] in all the other OE /u/-derived words too.8

Present-Day RP has three reflexes of OE /u/: /ʌ/ (busy), /ə/ (shed), /ʌ/ (cudgel). I suggest that some speakers in Early Modern London used the /u/ vowel in SHUT, some the /u/ vowel, and some the /u/ vowel. As time went on, the three vowels became lexically marked in OE /u/-derived words, and so nowadays they are not in free variation. This scenario posits a merger of SHIT and SHUT for some speakers in London, but not all. It accounts for the etymologically 'correct' P-DE /ʌ/ in SHUT. If a scenario of variation is accepted, then it is no longer necessary to explain the vowels in SHIT and SHUT, anymore than in any other OE /u/-derived words. They can all be expected to show variation between the graphs which represent /u/ (<i>, <e>), /e/ (<e>), /u/ (<u>, <e>) in the Early Modern period, and to have one established spelling post-standardisation.9

4. Extracts from Guildhall, Corporation of London Records Office MS Bridge House Accounts volumes 3-6, 1479-1535

3, fo 318, 1479x80
And to the same Robert Tye for Reward to hym allowid for kepyng of the Organes and attendance in Openynge and shittynge the Chapell dores and kepyng the Jewelles & ornamentes of the same Chapell this yere xxs.

3, fo 334v, 1480x1481
To the same Robert Tye in Reward to hym allowid for kepyng of the Organs and attendance in Openynge and Shittynge the Chapell dores and kepyng the Jewelles & ornamentes of the same Chapell this yere xxs.

3, fo 353, 1481x82
To the same Robert Tye in Reward to hym allowid for kepyng of Organs & for his attendance in openyng & shittynge the Chapell dores & kepyng the Jewels & ornamentes of the same Chapell this yere xxs.

3, fo 372v, 1482x83
It is to Robt Tye in Reward to him allowid for keping of the Organs & for his gode attendance in openyng and shitting the Chapell dores & kepyng of the Juelles & ornamentes of the Chapelle this yere xxs.

3, fo 392v, 1483x84
To the same Robert Tye in re/ward [sic] of hym allowid for kepyng of the Organs and for his diligent attendances in openyng and shitting the Chapell dores and kepyng the dorres and Ornament [sic] of the said Chapell w/in the tyme of this Accompt xxs.

4, fo 14v, 1484x85
It is paid vnto the said Robert Tye to Reward to hym allowid for kepyng of the Organs and for his diligent attendance in openyng and shitting the Chapell dores and kepyng the dorres and Ornament [sic] of the said Chapell w/in the tyme of this Accompt xxs.

4, fo 34, 1485x86
It is paid vnto the said Robt Tye of Reward to hym allowid for kepyng of the Organs and for his diligent attendance in openyng and shitting the Chapell dores and kepyng the godes and ornament [sic] of the said Chapell w/in the tyme of this Accompt xxs.

4, fo 54, 1486x87
It is paid vnto the said Robert Tye of reward to hym allowid for kepyng of the organs and for his diligent attend'ence in openyng and shutting the Chapell doris and kepyng the goodes and ornament of the said Chapell w/in the tyme of this Accompt xxs.

4, fo 75v, 1487x88
It is to the said Robert Tye of Reward to him Allowed for kepyng of the Organs and for his Diligent Attend'ence in openyng and Shitting of the Chapell dores and kepyng the Jewelles and Ornamentes of the same Chapell this yere xxs.
To the same Robert ligh [sic] of Reward to him Allowed for openyng & shitting of the chapell dores/ kepyng of the Organche/ the Jewellis & ornamentis of the same Chapell this yere/ xxs/.

To the same Robert Rodmerige of reward to him allowed for openyng and shitting of the chapell dores/ kepyng of the organches and of the Jewellis and ornamentis of the same Chapell xxs/

To the same Robert Rodmerige of reward to him allowed for openyng and shitting of the chapell dores attending vpon the organche and kepyng of the Jewellis & ornamentis of the same chapell xxs/.

To the same Robert Rodmeridge of Reward to him allowed for openyng and shitting of the chapell dores/ attending vpon the organche/ and kepyng of the Jewellis & ornamentis of the same chapell this yere xxs/.

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the said iiij. clerk of Reward to him allowed for openyng and shitting of the chapell dores/ And kepyng of the Jewellis and ornamentis of the same chapell xxs/.

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the said iiiij, clerke of Reward to him allowed for openyng and shitting of the chapell dores/ kepyng of the Jewellis and ornamentis of the same chapell xxs.

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the said iiiij, clerk of reward to him allowid for openyng and shitting of the chapell dores/ kepyng of the Jewellis and ornamentis of the same chapell xxs.

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the said iiij clerke of reward to hyms allowed for kepyng of the Jewellis & ornamentis openyng & shitting of the said chapell dores. xxs

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the said iiiij Clerkis of Rewarde by cause there is cōmitted vnto hyms the kepyng of the Jewellis And ornamentis/ and also the openyng and shitting of the chapell dores xxs

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the said iiiij Clerkis of Rewarde by cause there is cōmitted vnto hyms the kepyng of the Jewellis & ornamentis openyng & shitting of the same chapell doores this yere xxs

To Robert Rudmarige oon of the same iiij clerk of rewarde/ by cause there is cōmitted vnto hym/ the openyng and shitting of the same Chapell dores/ kepyng the organche the Juelx and ornamentis there this yere xxs.

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the same iiij. Clerkis of Rewarde/ by cause there is cōmytted vnto hym/ the openyng & shitting of of [sic] the same Chapell dores/ kepyng of thorgaunce the Jewellis & ornamentis there this yere. Sm* xxs/.

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the same iiij Clerkis of Reward to hym allowid by cause there is committid vnto hym the openyng And shitting of the same Chapell dore. Playng at the organche and kepyng of the Jewellis and ornamentis the this yere [sic] Sm* xxs

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the same. iiiij clerk of reward to him allowed. for openyng & shitting of the chapell dores. Playng at the organche. kepyng of the jewellis & ornamentis there. xx.s./

To Robert Rudmarige oon of the same iiij clerkis of Reward by cause there is cōmytted vnto hym the openyng and shitting of the dores of the said Chapell kepyng the Organs Juelx and ornamentis there this yere xxss.

To Robert Rodmeridge oon of the same iiijj clerkis of Reward by cause there is cōmitted vnto hym the openyng and shitting of the dores of the said chapell kepyng the Organs Juelx and ornamentis there/ this yere xxss.

To Robert Rudmarige oon of the same iiiij clerkis of rewarde by cause there is cōmytted vnto hym the openyng and shitting of the dores of the said Chapell kepyng the Organs Juellis and ornamentis there/ this yere xxss

To Robert Rudmarige oon of the same iiiij clerk of rewarde by cause there is cōmytted vnto hym the openyng and shitting of the dores of the same Chapell kepyng the Organs Juellis and ornamentis there this yere xxs
to Robt. Rudmarige oon of the same iiij clerkys of rewarde by cause there is cōmytted vnnto hym the openyng and shettyng of the dores of the same Chapell keping the organs Juexl and ornamente there/ this yere xxs

To Robert Rudmarige of rewarde to hym allowed for openyng and shettyng of the Chapell dores/ attending vpōn the organs/ and keping of the Juellis and ornamentes of the same Chapell this yere xxs

To Robert Rudmarige oon of the same iiij Clerke of rewarde to hym allowed for openyng and shettyng of the dores of the sayd Chapell/ attending vpōn the Organs/ and keping of the Juellis and ornamente of the same Chapell this yere xxs.

To Robert Rudmarige oon of the same iiij Clerkys of Rewarde to hym allowed for openyng and shettyng of the dores of the sayd Chapell/ attending vpōn the thorgans and kepyng of the Juellis and ornamentes of the same Chapell this yere xxs (sic)

To Robert Rudmarige oon of the same iiij clerkes of Rewarde to hym allowed/ for openyng and shettyng of the dores of the sayd chapell/ attending vpōn thorgans and kepyng of the Juexl and ornamentes of the same Chapell thus yere xxs

To John fferrys oon of the sayd iiij clerkys of Rewarde to hym allowed for openyng and shettyng of the dores of the sayd chapell/ attending vpōn thorgans/ and kepyng of the Juexl and ornamentes of the same chapell thys yere xxs

To John fferrys oon of the same thre Clerke of Rewarde to hym allowed/ for openyng and shettyng of the dores of the sayd Chapell/ attending vpōn thorgans/ and kepyng of the Juexl and Ornamente of the same Chapell this yere xxs

To hym [John fferrys] for a Rewarde for openyng and shettyng of the dores of the sayd Chapell/ attending vpōn thorgans/ and kepyng of the Juexl and ornamente of the same chapell by the sayd fyrst half yere xxs

To the sayd Raynolde Blake of Rewarde for openlyng and shettyng of the dores of the sayd [fo 86v] Chapell/ attending vpōn thorgans kepyng of the sayd Juexl and ornamente of the same Chapell/ and fyndeng of alle maner of syngeng brede/ wyne/ waxe lampe lighte/ and wasshyng of the sayd chapell stuf from the sayd fest of the Annunciation of o' lady. vnto the sayd fest of seint Mighef by the sayd half yere xxs

To the sayd Raynolde Blake for openlyng and shettyng of the dores of the sayd chapell attendyng vpōn thorgans kepyng of the Juexl and ornamentys of the sayd Chapell/ And for fyndeng of syngeng brede/ [fo 104] wyne waxe lampe light wyth wasshyng of the sayd Chapell stuf by alle the sayd yere Sm't xxs

To the said Reynold Blake for opennyng and shettyng of the dores of the said Chapell/ attendyng vpōn the organs kepyng of the Juellis and ornamentes of the said Chapell/ and for fynding of syngeng brede wynej waxe lampelighting wyth wasshing of al the said Chapell stuf by al the said yere xxs

To the said Raynold Blake for Openyng and shetting of the Dores of the said Chapell attending vpōn thorgans kepyng of the Juellis and ornamentes of the said Chapell by all the tyme of this Accōmpt xxs

To the said Raynold Blake for openlyng and shetting of the Dores of the said Chapell attendyng vpōn the Organys kepyng of the Juellis and ornamentes of the said Chapell by all the tyme of this Accōmpt xxs

To the said Raynolde Blake for openyng and shetting of the Dores of the said Chapell Attending vpōn thorgans kepīg of the Juellis and ornamentes of the said Chapell by all the tyme of this Accōmpt xxs viijd

To the said Raynold Blake for openlyng and shetting of the dores of the said Chapell attendyng vpōn the Organys kepyng of the Juellis and Ornamentys of the said Chapell by all the tyme of this Accōmpt xxs viijd
5, fo 228, 1520x21
To the saide Raynolde Blake for openyng and shetting of the dores of the sayde Chapell attendyng vpon the organis kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the saide Chapell by all the tyme of this accompte Sm× xxvjs viijd

5, fo 252v, 1521x22
To the seide Raynolde Blake for openyng and shetting of the Dores of the seide Chapell attending vpon thorganys kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the seide Chapell from Mighelmis vnto Candelms wthin this accompte Sm× vjs viijd To the seide John Heywarde of rewardes for openyng and shetting of the seide Dores and kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the seide Chapell from the seide Candelms vnto Mighelmis nexte ensueng Sm× iijs iiijd

5, fo 271, 1522x23
To the seide Raynolde Blake for openyng and shetting of the Dores of the seide Chapell attendyng vpon thorganys kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the seide chapell by all this yere xxs

5, fo 294, 1523x24
To the seide Raynolde Blake for openyng and shetting of the Dores of the seide Chapell attending upôn thorganys kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the seide Chapell by all this yere xxs

5, fo 315, 1524x25
To the seide Raynolde Blake for openyng and shetting of the Dores of the seide Chapell attending upôn thorganys kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the seide Chapell by all this yere xxs

6, fo 16v, 1525x26
To the said Raynold Blake for openyng and shittung of the doores of the said Chapell Attendyng vpon the organs kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the said Chapell by all this yere xxs

6, fo 37, 1526x27
To the said Raynold Blake for openyng and shyttung of the doores of the said Chapell attendyng vpon the organs kepyng of the Jewellys and ornamentys of the said Chapell by all thys yere xxs

6, fo 55v, 1527x28
To the said Raynold Blake for openyng and shetting of the doores of the said Chapell attendyng vpon the organs kepyng of the Juellis & ornament of the said Chapell by all thys yere xxs

6, fo 74, 1528x29
To the said John ffferys for openyng and shittung of the dores of the Chapell attendyng vpon the organs kepyng of the Juellis & ornament of the said chapell by all this yere xxs

6, fo 95v, 1529x30
To the said John ffferys for openluyng and shyttyng the dores of the said Chapell attendyng vpon the organs kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the said Chapell by all thys yere Sm× xxs

6, fo 115, 1530x31
To the said John ffferys for openyng and shetting of the doores of the said Chapell attendyng vpon the organs kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the same Chapell by all thys yere xxs

6, fo 136, 1531x32
To the said John ffferys for openyng and shityng the dores of the said chapell attendyng vpon the organs kepyng of the Jewellys & ornament of the said Chapell by all this yere xxs

6, fo 155, 1532x33
To the said John ffferys for openyng and shittung the dores of the said Chapell attendyng vpon the organs kepyng of the Juellis and ornament of the said Chapell by all thys yere Sm× xxs cx° cū Jo'nnalī (nb probably examinant cum jornali 'examined with the journal')

6, fo 176v, 1533x34
To the said John ffferys for openyng and shittyng the dores of the said Chapell attending vpon the organs kepyng of the Jewellys and ornament of the said chapell by all thys yere xxs

6, fo 197, 1534x35
To the said John ffferys for openyng and shittung the dores of the said Chapell attending vpon the organs kepyng of the Jewellys and ornamentys of the said Chapell by all this yere Sm× xxs

6, fo 215, 1535x36
To the said John ffferys for openyng and shyttunge the dores of the saide Chapell/ attending vpon the organs kepyng of the Jewellys and ornamentys of the said Chapell by all this yere xxs

6, fo 230v, 1536x37
This year the entry is forgotten, and then squashed in at the end in abbreviated form (thereafter the word SHUT no longer appears):
To John fferres for kepyng of the said Chapel & y[e] good[e] & ornam[e] w[i]n y[e] same by y[e] space of one hole yere w[i] y[e] time of this present acçpt/ xxs

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