

“SHORT O” IN EAST ANGLIA AND NEW ENGLAND

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The New England “short o” has been discussed in the literature on American dialects a number of times (see Avis 1961; Kurath – McDavid 1961: 12). Kurath (1964: 150) introduces this phenomenon as follows. He discusses the loss in American English of the original Middle English distinction between monophthongal  $\phi$ : and diphthongal *ou*, and writes:

Only New England [in the USA] preserves the original [ME] distinction, though to a limited extent. Here the old monophthong survives in checked position as a short and fronted mid-back vowel /ə/ as in *stone, road, coat* /stən, rəd, kət/, contrasting with up-gliding /o/, as in *know, grown* (but also, e.g., in *no, rode*). This so-called “New England short o” is somehow related to regional English folk speech.

Avis (1961) further tells us that the heartland of this phenomenon in North America lies, for the USA, in eastern Vermont, New Hampshire, northeastern Massachusetts, and Maine, and in Canada in southwestern New Brunswick.

Kurath (1965 [1971]) asks the interesting question: “Is the survival of contrasting vowels in New England to be attributed to English folk speech?” and answers it as follows: “New England usage in this matter probably derives from English folk speech or from a regional type of Standard British English reflecting folk usage.” In a much earlier publication (1928 [1971]) he actually appears to give a more geographically detailed answer to the question when he says: “The population of the seaboard of New England had come for the most part from southeastern counties of England”; and “the shortened vowel of *coat, whole, and home* is recorded for East Anglia.” It is definitely tempting to see a connection. This was certainly also the link I was suggesting myself when I wrote (1974) that there was a “clear resemblance” between the two phenomena in East Anglia and New England.

Further linguistic evidence in favour of Kurath's linkage to northern East Anglia is as follows. In the case of both East Anglia and New England, the phenomenon of shortening is confined to items descended from Middle English *ɔ:*; it never occurs in either area in words such as *grown*, *soul*. Both features, moreover, are recessive, and both vary widely in their incidence from word to word, style to style, and speaker to speaker.

The East Anglian facts are as follows. The vowel of English labelled by Wells (1982) as the GOAT vowel has, as in New England, maintained two counterparts in the vowel system of the dialects of northern East Anglia, that is Norfolk and northern Suffolk. Paralleling a now vestigial distinction in the front vowel system between the sets of *made* and *maid*, corresponding to the distinction between the Middle English monophthong and diphthong, there is in northern East Anglia a similar contrast in the back vowel system which, however, is by no means vestigial (see Trudgill 1998 on why the one distinction has survived longer than the other). The distinction is between /u:/ = [ʊu], descended from ME *ɔ:*, and /ou/ = [əu], descended from ME *ou*. Thus pairs such as *moan–mown*, *road–rowed*, *nose–knows*, *sole–soul* are not homophonous.

The important thing to notice for our purposes is that the FOOT vowel /ʊ/ was much more frequent in the older East Anglian dialect than in General English (in the sense of Wells 1982). There has been a strong tendency in East Anglia for the /u:/ descended from ME *ɔ:* to be shortened to /ʊ/ in closed syllables. Thus *road* can rhyme with *good*, and we find pronunciations such as *toad*, *home*, *stone*, *whole*, *coat* /tʊd, hʊm, stʊn, kʊt/. Distribution is unpredictable: /ʊ/ does not occur, at least in current dialects, in *foam*, *load*, *moan*, *coal*, *vote*, for example.

The extent of this East Anglian "short o" phenomenon is indicated in the work of a number of writers. Kökeritz (1932), for example, writing about the dialects of northern Suffolk, lists the following items as having the same vowel as *pull*:

*boast*, *boat*, *bone*, *choke*, *cloak*, *clover*, *coach*, *coast*, *coat*, *don't*, *folk*, *goat*, *hole*,  
*home*, *hope*, *load*, *loaf*, *moat*, *most*, *oak*, *oath*, *oats*, *over*, *poach*, *pole*, *post*,  
*road*, *rope*, *smoke*, *stone*, *toad*, *whole*, *wholly*

Lowman's records (see Trudgill 1974) also show a large number of examples of the "short o", although (possibly incorrect) transcriptions such as [stɒn] *stone* make it unclear as to whether he regards such words as having a vowel identical to that of *foot*. Words in his records that have the "short o" are:

*froze*, *posts*, *comb*, *bone*, *oats*, *whole*, *home*, *boat*, *stone*, *yolk*, *poached*, *hotel*,  
*ghosts*, *don't*, *won't*, *woke*, *wrote*, *over*, *toad*

It is difficult to judge, but the usage of "short o" in East Anglia seems to have declined by the 1950s, as revealed by the Survey of English Dialect records. The field worker, W. Nelson Francis, shows the following items with some form of short vowel in the Norfolk localities:

*both*, *broke*, *comb*, *road*, *spoke*, *stone*, *throat*, *whole*

In his field notes, Francis mentions the occurrence of short forms, and writes of Pulham, Norfolk: "Evidence of shortened lax forms, apparently much more prevalent in the dialect 50-75 years ago, was rather plentiful in the speech ... of the oldest informant; thus [ɹʊd, stʊn, kʊm, spʊk, tʊt] [= *road*, *stone*, *comb*, *spoke*, *throat*]."

Trudgill (1974) showed that by 1968 it was only the working class for whom the "short o" was a characteristic feature of the urban dialect of Norwich. Items on my tapes with "short o" are:

*aerodrome*, *alone*, *bloke*, *both*, *broke*, *Close*, *coats*, *comb*, *combed*, *don't*, *drove*,  
*Holmes*, *home*, *most*, *notice*, *only*, *over*, *photo*, *post*, *road*, *spoke*, *stone*, *suppose*,  
*whole*, *woke*, *won't*

Note that even the lower working class used only 42 percent of possible forms with "short o", which suggests that this had now become something of a relic form. This is stressed by the fact that this figure is largely made up of a relatively small number of common lexical items, notably *don't*, *home*, *suppose*, *only*. On the other hand, the shortening process has clearly been a productive one, suggesting that knowledge of the stylistic relationship between /u:/ and /ʊ/ has continued to be part of competence of local speakers: Norwich, for example, until the 1960s had a theatre known as *The Hippodrome* /hɪpədɹʊm/, and trade names such as *Kodachrome* can be heard with pronunciations such as /kʊdækɹʊm/. The feature thus survives in modern speech, but a number of words appear to have been changed permanently to the /u:/ set as a result of lexical transfer.

It would therefore be very easy to look favourably on an answer to Kurath's question which focusses on the role of East Anglian English in the formation of the English of New England. We can suppose, that is, that the New England "short o" phenomenon was transplanted to the United States from East Anglia.

There are, however, a number of problems with this interpretation. One is that, while it is certainly clear that the northern East Anglian "short o" is of some antiquity, it is not at all clear that it is of sufficient antiquity for it to have been taken to North America. Forby (1830 [1970]: 90) writes:

The long o ... has also in some words the common short sound of the diphthong oo (in foot), or that of the vowel u in pull: Ex. Bone–stone–whole.

He was, however, writing about the dialect of northern East Anglia as it was spoken in the late 1700s, and we will need to push the date of East Anglian "short o" further back than that if we are to accept it as the progenitor of the New England form.

This is, moreover, not the only problem. There is an additional East Anglian complication. The first concerns the GOOSE vowel. This vowel, /u:/, is a central diphthong [ɥu] with more lip-rounding on the second element than on the first. Since northern East Anglian English demonstrates total yod-dropping (see Trudgill 1974), there is complete homophony between pairs of words which have this vowel, such as *dew-do*, *Hugh-who*, *cute-coot*. However, many words from the set of GOOSE which are descended from ME *ȝ*: may have /u:/ rather than /u:/. That is, words such as *boot* may be pronounced either /bʊ:t/ or /bu:t/. In the latter case, they are of course then homophonous with words such as *boat*. Thus *rood* may be homophonous either with *rude* or with *road* which, however, will not be homophonous with *rowed*. Note that this alternation never occurs in the case of those items such as *rule*, *tune*, *new* etc. which have historical sources other than ME *ȝ*: – for very many speakers, then, *rule* and *school* do not rhyme.

Our problem is that in northern East Anglia a shortening process similar to that which produced "short o" has also been rather extensively operative in the case of GOOSE words. That is, the FOOT vowel is usual as a result of shortening not only in *foot*, *look*, *soot*, *good* etc. but also in the lexical sets of *hoof*, *roof*, *proof* and *room*, *groom*, *broom*. Crucially, it also occurred in the older dialect in large numbers of other words such as *boot*, *goose*, *moon*, *move*, *noon*, *root*, *soon*, *spoon*, *tooth* as well as in compounds such as *afternoon* /a:ɪnʊn/. The question then is, given the convergence in pronunciation on /u:/ of items from both the GOOSE and GOAT sets, whether the northern East Anglian "short o" has any connection with the complicated shortening process which led to short /ʊ/ in *good*, *foot*, and, variously in different accents, in *look*, *tooth*, *room* etc. That is, does the change from /u:/ to /ʊ/ in *boot* represent the same phenomenon as (a putative) change from /u:/ to /ʊ/ in *boat*? This situation appears to have no parallel in the USA. In order to rescue our hypothesis, however, we could perhaps quite legitimately argue that it represents a complication which post-dates the emigration of East Anglians to New England.

Turning now to the American evidence, we have to observe that another difficulty is that items listed by Avis (1961) as occurring with the New England "short o" include the following, which also demonstrate "short o" in East Anglia:

*boat*, *bone*, *broke*, *coat*, *goat*, *home*, *most*, *oats*, *post*, *road*, *stone*, *toad*, *toast*,  
*suppose*, *whole*

Avis, however, also cites a number of words which do not have "short o" in New England but which I know to have it in East Anglia:

*coast*, *drove*, *froze*, *over*, *rode*, *yolk*

This can perhaps be explained away in terms of dedialectalisation and the loss of this recessive feature in New England in these words. We can suppose that these items formerly had "short o" in New England, but had lost them by the time the research on which Avis' paper was based was carried out in the 1930s – or, more prosaically, that the field worker simply failed to elicit this (stigmatised) pronunciation.

However, there are also two further issues which are problematic if we wish to establish any connexion. First is the fact that, while in neither dialect can shortening occur, for obvious phonotactic reasons, in open syllables, East Anglia retains a distinction in such syllables between the two original Middle English lexical sets, while New England does not:

	<i>hood</i>	<i>road</i>	<i>go</i>	<i>low</i>
East Anglia	/ʊ/	/ʊ/	/u:/	/ou/
New England	/ʊ/	/ə/	/ou/	/ou/

The number of problematical words involved here is rather small. GOAT items which in northern East Anglian English have stressed syllable final /u:/ are few:

*Coe*, *foe*, *go*, *Joe*, *no*, *roe*, *so*, *toe*, *woe*

Again, perhaps, we can therefore argue that this difference between East Anglia and New England can be accounted for by dedialectalisation. We could hypothesise that New England English formerly had a distinct vowel also in open syllables, but that it has lost it under the influence of more mainstream forms of English.

Secondly, and more damagingly for this thesis, there is the perplexing fact that the New England "short o" contrasts with the FOOT vowel as [ə] versus [ʊ], while in northern East Anglia it is identical and *road* and *hood* rhyme. Here one could argue that it is in this case in East Anglia that dedialectalisation has taken place. This would have to have happened some considerable time ago, however, since we have seen above in the quotation from Forby (1830 [1970]) that *road* and *hood* already rhymed at the period when he was writing. Moreover, the putative East Anglian replacement of /ə/ by /ʊ/ is not the kind of development that is to be expected during dedialectalisation: a dialect vowel which does not exist in the prestige variety is usually replaced by another dialect vowel which bears a closer phonetic resemblance to that which occurs in the

prestige variety, as when for example /ie/ in *home* changes to /uo/ in dialectal English in northeastern England under the influence of RP /ou/. The vowel /ʊ/, however, can hardly be said to bear a greater phonetic resemblance to RP /ou/ than does /e/. We could, alternatively, simply argue for a merger in East Anglia of two phonetically rather similar vowels as a sound change which occurred after the emigration to North America had taken place and which did not take place in New England, but there is as yet no evidence at all of this.

The conclusion has to be that the resemblance between the two different forms of "short o" is indeed striking, but that we still have quite a bit of explaining to do if we are to argue convincingly for a common origin.

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