

Has English become a vowel shifting language, and if so why?

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A large number of post-medieval varieties of English seem to have undergone vowel shifts, i.e. changes which alter the phonetic expression of vowel qualities while leaving phonological contrasts largely intact. In this talk I will propose an answer to the question of why this has been the case.

Vowel shifts have been posited for the emerging Modern English standard (e.g. Luick 1921/1940, Lass 1988, Schendl & Ritt 2002), for the Inland North of the United States (Labov & Yaeger 1972), New Zealand (Bauer 1979, Southern United States – where two shifts are under way, namely the Southern Shift (Labov 1994 [2010]) and the Back Uplide shift (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006: 127), Canada (Clarke, Elms & Youssef 1995), Australia (Cox 1999), South-East England (Torgersen & Kerswill 2004), Pittsburgh (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006: 271) and Northern California (<http://www.stanford.edu/~eckert/vowels.html>, Eckert & Mendoza-Denton 2006) among others.

Although the number of documented Modern English vowel shifts is suggestive, however, it remains to be established whether vowel shifts do indeed represent a shared typological feature of Modern Englishes (Donegan 1985), or whether their apparent frequency merely reflects the attention which they have received in linguistic research and the relatively scarce evidence we have of earlier varieties. A review and a statistical interpretation of documented vowel changes in one lineage of English shows that the increase in the number of shifts in the course of the history of English is indeed significant.

It will be proposed that the tendency of ModE vowel systems to undergo shifts was caused by earlier changes in the status of vowel quantity. Specifically, the faithfulness with which phonological quantity contrasts were expressed had been diminished by rhythmically induced adjustments of vowel duration. This also reduced the correlation between the phonetic expressions of quantity and quality and thereby made the inferability of intended quality targets more difficult. Thus, inevitable surface variation in vowel quality was frequently re-interpreted as socially significant and exploited for marking the identities of diversifying social groups.

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